

Raising the bar in the bush

Going on holiday these days is pretty much like hitting the McDonald's drive-thru. There's a standard that luxury resorts, hotels and lodges stick to and either they outperform or underperform, depending on the alignment of your stars. So, heading for a luxury game reserve in Zambia recently, I thought I knew what to expect.



wbwolfgang via [pixabay](#)

Yet, my four days at a camp in the Kafue National Park was to be nothing like a drive-thru experience, literally or figuratively. The trip to Wilderness Safaris' Busanga Bush Camp starts with a two-hour flight from Joburg to Lusaka, then a 45-minute flight on a private plane to a landing strip in the north of the park.

Busanga is inaccessible due to flooding between October and March. My trip was one of the last few before the end of the season but, given the drought this year, the floods still looked very far off. So the roads weren't muddy but they were rough. Well, they are also used by hippo."

An easy target

On the bumpy drive, I pondered the importance of reading the fine print. Had I done so, I would have known not to wear blue. Tsetse flies (not the disease-carrying variant here, but they still pack quite a sting) are particularly attracted to it - and, of course, I was wearing a blue T-shirt and blue jeans. Suffice it to say, I was an easy target. Luckily, the flies tend to stay near the treeline and our camp was out in the open. So, after an uncomfortable few minutes, I escaped the carnage.

The other thing I would have known, though, is that the camp, whose name translates as "place of the lion" is not fenced. My senses, which were already on hyper-drive, ratcheted even higher as I let this truth settle in. As we edged closer to the camp, I hoped I might glimpse some sort of laser beam that could serve as a security precaution. But there was none.

We were greeted at reception by Daniel, who immediately ushered me towards the most remarkable open deck I've ever seen (and I've seen a few). Spread out before me was a golden field, where grazed some lechwe. It's an uninterrupted view for a great many kilometres, to a distant treeline - breathtaking. While I was taking this in, Daniel briefed me about camp life: dinner times and so on - then something about lions. The camp, I came to understand, lies in the middle of the territory of a pride of lions. They've been known to climb onto the decks from time to time - the very deck I was standing on! However, I'd be fine, Daniel assured me, as one of the all-male staff would be accompanying me to and from my tent - or at least give me an all clear to go back on my own.

I knew then there was nothing standard about this place.

I didn't sleep a wink on my first night, knowing that most of the big five were out there, wandering freely. Every noise startled me. I swear I heard something moving about under my tent. I'd never been so alive.

The first real meeting

The staff arrived at 5am to fetch me for a hot-air balloon ride. Disclaimer form signed, we headed out to the launch spot but there would be no ballooning that morning because of high winds.

Instead, Robert, my guide, took us out on an early game drive. On this, I had my first viewing of two lionesses and a cub, who had just had a meal. They were part of the dominant pride of the territory. The brothers - who had just kicked out their father - weren't close by.

Before this moment, I had only seen a lion lying about in a moat beneath me - much like the ones at the Pretoria and Johannesburg zoos. This was my first real meeting. As excited and as intimidated as I was, the lionesses seemed unfazed.

A mock charge

As we drove on, Robert asked what I would like to see. An elephant sprang to mind. In the heat of the day, these creatures congregate around the tree lines of the plains - along with the tsetse flies. But I had learnt my lesson the day before and was better kitted out this time. Just on the periphery of the treeline, we found them, two bulls raiding the trees. We were about 50m away, which, given their size, I was pleased with. Robert crept closer until one of the bulls noticed our presence. He wasn't particularly pleased.

Actually, he mock charged - then stopped some 30m away before returning to his station. It was a charge that had my heart racing, palms sweating. Instead of taking the hint, we continued following the pair. In the course of about 20 minutes, we were mock charged a few more times. It was edge-of-the-seat stuff but as long as the ears flapped and the elephant trumpeted its warnings, I was quick to hold on to my truth: "It's a mock charge."

After lunch at camp, another game drive - on which we spotted two male cheetahs lazing about under a tree, as well as a near-impossible sighting of three leopards, a mother and two cubs, feeding. In one day, I had seen lion, elephant, cheetah, buffalo - no longer with a herd because of its age - and leopard. This was certainly no run-of-the-mill experience.

Last day thrills

That night, sheer exhaustion helped me to fall asleep. The next day, the winds were in our favour. Along with seven US tourists, I got into the basket and up we went. We flew roughly 100m above the ground. Underneath us, set against the rising sun, the African plains looked as magical as a Disney-inspired backdrop. But then a wind came up and we had to land for fear of floating away.

In the afternoon, we went out for our final drive. It proved a fitting end, as we stopped by a stream where animals congregate in the late afternoon for a drink. As we sat there, we were joined by a lioness and I spotted, through a set of binoculars, a herd of about 30 elephant nearing the very spot I was having a beer. Robert assured me that by the time they arrived, we'd be long gone. We left a few minutes later. But as we crossed a stream, the 4x4 - which had been entirely reliable up to that point - got stuck.

This was after 5pm, the sun was setting - to my mind, too quickly - the elephant herd was heading our way, and just 100m back we had passed a lioness. You can imagine what was running through my mind. You certainly would have known about my heartbeat as it was making itself heard. Robert was as calm as ever and I was openly panicking. After all, I had since discovered that a "mock" charge and a real one aren't really all that different; and lions are fine as long as there's no sudden movement in the car. Of course, there was some of this now as Robert was putting wood behind the back tyres so that they could grip and we could get out of the stream.

It was 20 or maybe 30 minutes before we were towed out but not before one of the lionesses crossed the stream - just a few metres from my side of the vehicle. It was quite the thrill, or should I say, chills.

It's no McDonald's

The camp is now closed for the season. Next year, the staff and management will return to clear out all the muck and dirt that will gather in the months to come. In preparation for its reopening, the decks will be sanded down once again and revarnished, rooms refreshed until the camp can welcome its next batch of visitors. It takes about a full month to get operational again.

Busanga is certainly no McDonald's. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

While I, like many other Africans, may still roll my eyes when I hear tourists talk of "Africa's beautiful plains", I can now say with authority that they are something to behold. - Derby was a guest of Wilderness Safaris.

Source: Sunday Times

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