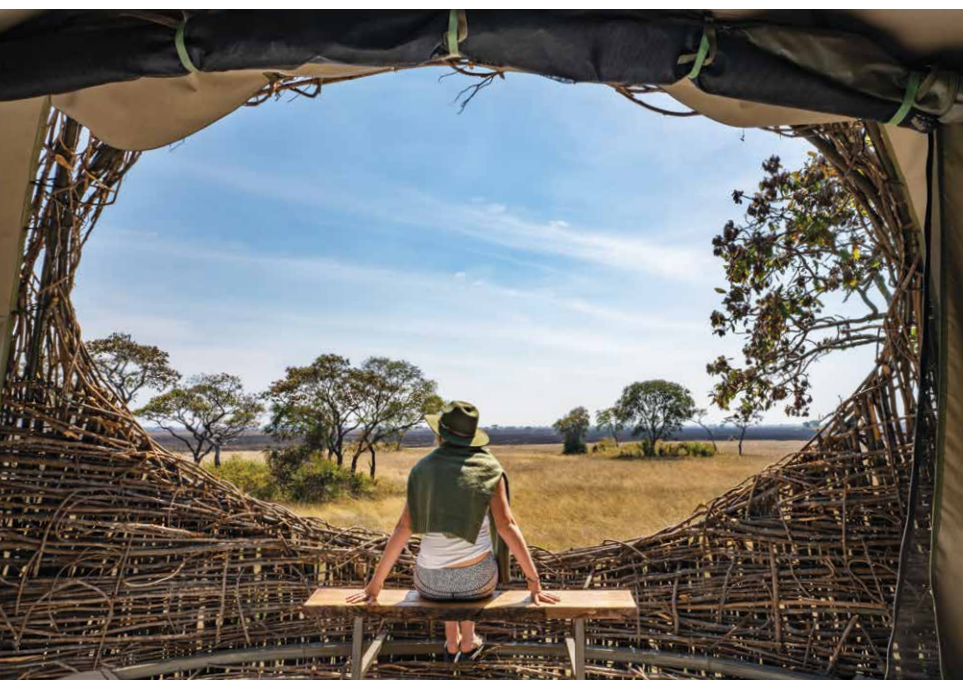


## Changing Its Game

With a new crop of luxury lodges, Zambia may finally be coming into the safari spotlight.

— by Devanshi Mody



**I**T IS NOVEMBER, and the animals of South Luangwa National Park are as parched as the rain-starved landscape. I watch as a thirsty puku antelope flits defiantly past half a dozen lazing lionesses on its way to the shriveled Luangwa River. Tempted by the prospect of an easy meal, the big cats arch their backs, then collapse, sapped by the heat.

South Luangwa, a 9,000-square-kilometer swath of woodland and savanna that harbors Africa's biggest concentrations of hippos and leopards, is the first stop on a monthlong trip through Zambia with my mother and brother, Samir. We arrive in what is technically the wet season, but the rains are late, as they have been for several years now in this drought-prone nation. Still, the wildlife is as abundant as I've seen anywhere. Even before checking in to our first camp, we witness lions mating (a rather mechanical affair) and a giraffe stooping to drink water, its front legs splayed wide. Carmine bee-eaters zip around us like little fireballs.

This is by no means my first African safari, but it is my first visit to Zambia, which, like so many other

visitors to the continent, I've long bypassed in favor of its more famous neighbors — Tanzania, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe. My loss. Roughly the size of France and threaded by three of Africa's greatest rivers, Zambia is home to diverse landscapes and prolific wildlife, with national parks covering a third of its territory. This is also where the walking safari

was pioneered back in the 1950s, which helped pave the way for conservation-led tourism throughout southern Africa. When I learned last year of a new generation of Zambian lodges that were continuing that legacy while amping up the luxury factor, I knew it was time for me to finally visit.

Our journey begins with Green Safaris, the company behind a string of off-grid lodges that utilize solar power, biogas systems, and a fleet of electric vehicles for "silent safaris." First up is **Shawa Luangwa Camp** ([greensafaris.com](http://greensafaris.com); from US\$550 per person, all-inclusive), which debuted in July 2021 on the eastern bank of the Luangwa River. It's named for the legendary safari guide Jacob Shawa, who grew up in the area and personally chose the site's location. We arrive to see an elephant slaking its thirst from the camp's swimming pool.

There are just five pyramid-shaped tents here, which open up on three sides for 270-degree views of the surrounding wilderness. Raised above the ground on wooden stilts to lessen their

impact on the environment, they are also devoid of air-conditioning, which, admittedly, would have been welcomed in this ferocious heat. Our river-facing outdoor shower provides a measure of relief.

As pearls of sweat stream down my face on the camp's lounge deck, general manager Kilian Syalyabonga shrewdly extends a glass of crisp chardonnay. Is it the wine, or is this the first time I'm seeing a native African run a high-end camp? (It is, and he won't be the last.) Killian, with his disarming ease and sharp discretion, proves the perfect host, which shows in the thoughtful guest experiences. Wildlife excursions are guided by Shawa himself, and our most memorable meal in the country comes after a morning game drive, when, instead of heading back to the lodge, Shawa takes us to the shores of an oxbow lagoon for an unexpected lunch banquet.

The Luangwa Valley may be the birthplace of the walking safari, but with the long-delayed rains withholding their grace, it's much too hot to be traipsing about on foot. Even the animals can't move. We see a mud-stuck buffalo, too weak from heat exhaustion to extract itself from the quagmire, beset by hyenas.

### NESTING INSTINCT

Above: Taking in the views of Zambia's Busanga Plains from a nest-like tree house at Chisa Busanga Camp.





**AFRICAN ODYSSEY**

*Clockwise from top left:* A picnic in the shade of giant fig trees at Chisa Busanga Camp; inside one of Puku Ridge's eight safari tents; a bird's-eye view of the floodplains near Chisa Busanga.

The next morning, only a carcass stares back at us. Which makes Green Safaris' conservation ethos all the more appealing. Its first property, **Ila Safari Lodge** ([greensafaris.com](http://greensafaris.com); from US\$450 per person, all-inclusive), which opened in western Zambia's Kafue National Park in 2016, lay down the template for those that followed, with an environmentally friendly design emphasizing minimal concrete and natural ventilation. Our night at the riverside camp includes sundowners on an electric boat.

The next day, we're driven across Kafue to **Chisa Busanga Camp** ([greensafaris.com](http://greensafaris.com); from US\$700 per person, all-inclusive) in the seasonally flooded grasslands of the Busanga Plains, often referred to as a "mini-Serengeti." A thunderstorm greets our arrival, sending fluorescent witch fingers of lightning crackling to the ground.

Chisa Busanga debuted a month before its sister property Shawa Luangwa and is superbly managed by a Zambian woman, Chipasha Mwamba. *Chisa* means "bird's nest" in the local Nyanja language; the story goes that Vincent Kouwenhoven, the Dutch founder of Green Safaris, saw a weaver bird's

nest upon waking up from a nap under a tree, and decided it would inspire his next camp.

Cue the innovative design: raised four meters off the ground in the shade of terminalia trees, Chisa's four ovoid-shaped accommodations are clad in twigs and grasses, like supersize nests. An elevated deck affords sweeping views of the emerald, antelope-specked plains through a single large opening. Down in the camp's main area, antiques and old rugs recreate the vintage safari experience with aplomb. The sofa-studded lounge opens onto a *boma* (enclosure) where breakfast is served at sunrise: think homemade granola and bread toasted over an open fire. Chisa offers culinary finery in the forest, with excellent lunches and gourmet suppers washed down by an impressive selection of wines.

After an indulgent afternoon tea session, our guide, Isaac Kapangila, acquaints us with Scarface, one of the biggest and most beautiful lions I've ever seen. I also learn about the lodge's conservation efforts: Chisa sponsors anti-poaching patrols and works closely with Panthera, an NGO that protects the world's wild cat species.

A failed attempt to track the so-called Busanga Boys — renegade lions Scarface banished to the area's fringes — ends in sightings of exotic birds and chestnut-red lechwe antelope. In Busanga's well-watered plains, everything appears amplified, from minivan-size hippos to giant crocodiles. Only impalas appear to be absent from the scene. "Lechwe have hooves like four-wheel drives," Isaac explains in his inimitable way. "Impalas just sink in the mud."

WE FLY BACK TO South Luangwa via the Zambian capital, Lusaka, to visit what is arguably the country's glitziest lodge, **Puku Ridge** ([chiawa.com](http://chiawa.com); from US\$960 per person, all-inclusive). First launched in 2003, the camp has been rebuilt by its new owners with a glamorous and eco-sensitive design that recalls the remarkable Sandibe Okavango in Botswana. The eight mercifully air-conditioned tents here are more like chalets, held up with solid walls and roofed in woven strips of recycled plastic. Noticeably, it's also the first camp on our circuit to employ expat managers, whose tedious 45-minute "initiation" in 40°C heat mystifies me; I can't imagine any

local manager subjecting guests to such a thing.

Still, the setting is magical. The main lodge, built entirely of biodegradable material, overlooks a water hole frequented by baboons, zebras, wildebeest, and more. While most safari camps have game-viewing hides, they're usually off site; at Puku Ridge, the hide is just below the restaurant terrace, meaning you can get eye-to-eye with a roaming elephant between lunch courses. Opening onto tiered timber decks fitted with built-in sofas and plunge pools, the tents come with lavish amenities such as spa-like bathrooms and individual rooftop "star beds" for sleeping under the night sky.

Beyond Puku Ridge, the plains and woodlands seem to be alive with baby animals. We spot newborn elephant calves and impala foals tottering about on toothpick-thin legs; on our last morning, a litter of squealing warthog piglets scampers to the water hole while we eat breakfast. It's all very raw and unspoiled and unlike any place else I've been in Africa. Why it took me so long to get to Zambia I can't say, but one thing's for sure: I'm in no hurry to leave. ☺

**GOING WILD**

*Clockwise from top left:* Accommodation at Chisa Busanga; stargazing at Puku Ridge; one of Shawa Luangwa's stilted guest tents; on a walking safari with guides from the same camp.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LINDA ROBBY; SCOTT RAMSAY; LUKE MASSEY; CHASE JOHNSON

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LINDA ROBBY; MARCEL VAN GOOSTEN; LINDA ROBBY (2)