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by Bekah Wright

"You've caught it." The words startled me awake from a siesta slumber. Hot from the Zambian heat, my mind searched for the meaning of the utterance, first thoughts turning to bodily appendages, wondering if a malaria-carrying insect had bitten me. Later, the reality of the words would take on a whole different essence.

Arriving in Mfuwe

After almost 48 hours of travel, our small group of journalists (three counting me, plus one publicist) stepped off yet a fourth plane and onto the tarmac of Zambia's Mfuwe International Airport. The tiny building also houses the village's bank and post boxes, along with several papier-maché creatures signifying the wildlife to be encountered in the bush. Despite lack of sleep, I perked up as we climbed into the vehicle that would curry us into

The drive through Mfuwe held magic of its own. Post sunset, the sky was darkening with dramatic clouds, the result of brush fires throughout the countryside. The smell of wood fires was everywhere, from front yards where neighbors were gathering, to a bare-chested, elderly man keeping the blaze of a brush fire under control; a mighty struggle between he and the element

A multitude of bicycles whizzed past our Land Rover, most carrying more than one person. Impressive were the passengers on these two-wheeled vehicles, many balancing large vessels of water atop their heads, not a drop spilled in transport. Other travelers along the road ferried firewood over one shoulder or babies slung across their bellies in a sling.

interspersed between cinderblock storefronts with names like Peace & Love Pharmacy, Taonga Hair Saloon and Gideon's Blessings, Fashions and Music Center, were small huts that looked as though their structure could blow away at the slightest wind, yet had maintained their residence for decades.

Soon, signs of villagers gave away to pure nature, a barely perceivable shift from "town" to "bush." Upon arriving at the gate of South Luangwa National Park, a rifle-bedecked security guard approached our Land Rover, asking about our origins. Blurrybrained, I turned to our driver, searching for an answer. "Where are you from?" Suddenly, my hometown of Los Angeles seemed an unlikely dream from which I'd just awoken.

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Mfuwe Lodge

Smiles, wet towels and Juice were proffered upon arrival at The Bushcamp Company's Mfuwe Lodge. Stepping forward with outstretched hand was Manda Chisanga, our group's guide for the next 10 days. Overtaken by a rush of excitement, I introduced myself twice. Sleep was definitely necessary after our journey, but first... a night drive.

Fatigue? What fatigue? Our induction into the bush came under the light of the Zambian moon, which was edging towards fullness. A second guide shone a spotlight into fields, receiving back the reflective glare of resident eyes. "impalas," Manda relayed. Our thrill over these creatures elicited a laugh from Manda. "You'll see a lot more of those before this trip is over." Indeed, the local joke was these graceful creatures with a natural M on their hindquarters were considered the McDonald's of the wild - fast meals for carnivores

The spotlight swept over a tree branch, catching a Verraux's Eagle Owl batting its pink eyelids. A pair of young honey badgers contemplated the beam, curious. And then, amidst tall brush were several figures that looked like veritable mounds of land. The smaller "mound," a baby elephant, sent up a bellow, giving us what-for and defending his herd.

Too quickly, the fun came to an end. Curfew/dinner time was calling back at Mfuwe Lodge. Eyelids propped open over a candlelit dinner, we listened with rapt attention as Manda outlined the day ahead. But first, to sleep. Security led each of us to our chalets. Inside, "turndown" service had taken place mosquito netting draped around the bed and a hot water bottle tucked between the sheets.

Sleep was beckoning, but still, I resisted. There were night sounds to take in. Some, I'd already been told, were hippos who were making the gully just outside my chalet their accommodations for the evening. Others noises were emitted by baboons playing in the trees and throwing things on the chalet deck. And, much like me, Zambia's birds seemed unable to sleep, their chorus of calls eventually becoming a lullaby, sending me to slumber.

NEXT WEEK — Close encounters with lions at Bilimungwe Camp

Part 1 - Mfuwe and The Bushcamp Company's Mfuwe Lodge

Part 2 - Falling Into Zambia: Bilimungwe's Sleeping Lions Part 3 - The Long Walk to Chindeni

Part 4 - Zungulila, Champagne and Floating on Water

Part 5 - Goodbyes and Welcomes

About the Author: Travel writer Bekah Wright spans the globe experiencing everything from fly fishing to sheep herding. Upcoming articles from her on First to Know include being dropped off in Edinburgh by Sir Richard Branson, spending a night at an observatory, and night finds in Carmel, CA. Her writing has been featured in GOOD, Bon Appetit, National Geographic Kids, Los Angeles magazine and TV Guide.



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Falling Into Zambia: Bilimungwe's Sleeping Lions



AUG 5

2013

"Good morning." The whispered wake-up call from outside my chalet brought back childhood memories of my grandmother rousing me on school days. The mosquito netting around my bed spoke of a different time and place, though. Zambia. Mfuwe Lodge to be exact.

Mornings at The Bushcamp Company camps begin at 5:45 a.m.. Guests convene around a wood fire, nodding over cups of chicorylaced Zambian coffee, waiting for the caffeine to kick in. Once it does, continental breakfast lures. No boxed pastries here. Fresh baked bread is toasted over a small grate, hot porridge waits to warm bellies, muffins still not from the oven tempt in a basket. As will occur every day, there's the urge to linger over breakfast, when our guide, Manda Chisanga alerts, "Time to go!" As if the caffeine hits at just that moment, senses tune in. Adventure is guaranteed in the day ahead. Are we beginning with a walking tour? Climbing into a Land Rover to tackle rough terrain? "Grab your bags, we're heading to the airport." What?! Hadn't we just landed the night before after almost two days of flying? The thought of seat-belting in yet again - not appealing.

The hint of a smile was noted on the face of Andy Hogg, owner of The Bushcamp Company. This did not dissipate grumbles.

Back we drove to Mfuwe International Airport, where we climbed into an airplane with exactly enough seats for our party of five. "I'm taking you to Bilimungwe, your next camp," the pilot notified. "Andy thought you'd like to see South Luangwa National Park from above instead of taking the three-hour drive." The reason behind Andy's smile was revealed. And now, smiles were breaking across our faces as we took in a birds-eye view of the 9,050 square kilometers of the park

All too soon, the flight ended with a bumpy landing in a field. Upon disembarking, Manda pointed to the plane's tire, now flat. The pilot would be accompanying us to Bilimungwe. There were no mechanics to come to the rescue. This was the bush, after all. The true bush. We were now in the thick of it. Speaking to this was the fact that we passed no villagers or vehicles en route to Bilimungwe. Instead, the field leading to the camp's entrance was filled with impalas, warthogs and baboons. An urge to hop from the vehicle and participate in what was surely nature's recess came over me. Alas, we continued over a crest and under a giant mahogany tree, where Bilimungwe's staff waited to greet us.

[Show as slideshow]



we were hydrated with elixirs from the bar. A former park ranger from Yellowstone, Tom excitedly gave Manda a report of the wildlife that had been spotted in the past 24 hours. My eyes remained trained on the field we'd just passed through. The baboons were still inviting for a game of tag. The sighs of my fellow travelers turned my attention in the opposite direction. There, in the watering hole that serves as the heart of the camp, nine elephants were taking an afternoon dip.

Camp manager Tom Mazzarisi ushered us to cushy chairs, where

Manda let us marvel in our surrounds for a bit before announcing, "Let's walk." Tom tugged at the fleece he was wearing, "This brings lion energy," he assured. Our questioning looks were followed by a story about a male lion grabbing the fleece from Tom's hand and running away with it into the bush. A guide recovered the fleece two days later. Said fleece, which now bore tooth holes, was said to hold lion mojo.

Our first walking safari commenced. Manda instructed us to tread in a single line so as not to frighten/challenge any wildlife we might happen upon. Leading the way was a gun-toting guide name Priest, followed by Manda. Bringing up the rear was a third guide, whom I will call Angel, as he helped my airplane swollen, chronically injured knees traverse cliffs and uneven mud fields cratered by elephants. Tracks in the dirt were pondered. Various types of dung inspected. The calls of birds deciphered. All these clues from nature determined a course to the Luangwa River. Waiting just across the shore were a pair of giraffes.

We encountered other creatures on our walk, including a herd of elephants. Our silent march quickly retreated in the opposite direction. Manda's whispered wisdom, "You're aware of the danger that's behind you. Keep your eyes open for what lays

Soon, we stumbled into an open field. Waiting there was a welcome sight - sundowners. This nightly occurrence is an observance of the sunset complete with cocktails. We settled into chairs that the Bilimungwe staff had set out for just this purpose. At the ready for a night safari was a Land Rover, which whisked us off into the twilight.

As night fell, there was the now familiar glittering of eyes in the dark — a group of impala here, a genet there. A call on the radio informed, "Manda, a group of four lionesses are at the camp entrance." The Land Rover pulled a 360 and headed back towards Bilimungwe. There, in the dark, two lionesses and two teenage lions were napping directly in the driveway. We sat in the truck and watched for a while, awestruck by their magnificence.

Unable to enter camp, we headed to a nearby field where a barbecue was being prepared. Tom was buzzing with stories about the lions' arrival. The romance of the starlit barbecue was enchanting, but a thought kept nagging: Were the lions still back

Finally, we piled back into the Land Rover and headed home.

Indeed, the lions remained in camp, though they'd found a cozier spot to sleep, just outside of Tom's chalet. Were they waiting for the return of that polar fleece? It's possible hours passed as we watched the lions slumber. I

imagine our wonder at observing them was much like that of the parents of newborns watching their children sip each new breath. It was a moment that required being frozen in time. Alas, Manda broke the spell. "I'll have to drive each of you to your chalet," he said, a break from the normal on foot escort. "What

about Tom? Can he slip past the lions?" we asked, the gentle creatures looking too lost in dreams to note footsteps. "They would grab him in an instant," Manda said, bringing back nature's Tucked in my own bed, I thought of the four lions, just a few feet away. At some point during the night, I imagined them under my

own chalet, having been drawn by my magnetic wishes for communal dreaming. Upon waking in the morning, I stepped outside to see something I recognized from Manda's schooling lion tracks, leading directly under my floorboards.

Part 1 - Mfuwe and The Bushcamp Company's Mfuwe Lodge

Part 2 - Falling Into Zambia: Bilimungwe's Sleeping Lions Part 3 - The Long Walk to Chindeni

About the Author: Travel writer Bekan Wright

NEXT WEEK - Singing hippos in Chindeni

spans the globe experiencing everything from fly fishing to sheep herding. Upcoming articles from her on First to Know include being dropped off in Edinburgh by Sir Richard Branson, spending a night at an observatory, and night finds in Carmel, CA. Her writing has been featured in



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Falling Into Zambia: The Long Walk to Chindeni



by Bekah Wright

AUG 12

2013

Another morning dawned in Zambia with mumbled hellos over coffee by the fire. All too soon, packed duffels were dutifully waiting by the Land Rover. This day, our guide, Manda Chisanga, surprised us. "Throw your bags in, but don't climb onboard. We're walking to our next camp, Chindeni."

Remembering the airplane that had brought us from Mfuwe Lodge to Bilimungwe Camp, saving us from a grueling three-hour drive, I inwardly gulped. Should I have doubled up my socks? Eaten a little extra breakfast for fuel? There was another changeup, too. "We'll be saying goodbye to our guides." Priest and Angel weren't coming with us? Of course, they were staff at Bilimungwe Camp, but in the short time we'd been there, they'd become like family members. We clung to the time we'd have with them on what turned out would be a two-hour walk to Chindeni.

Photos were taken with our Bill Camp family before setting off into the bush. How had this intimacy been formed in such a short time? Was it due to lack of distractions? After all, The Bushcamp Company camps run on solar power alone, so there are no televisions, computers or cell phones to distract from the surroundings, or human company for that matter. Then there was the ever-growing lack of shyness when it came to situations like dropping trou during safari when "nature calls." Funny how the gentlemen in our group never seemed to have the urgency we ladies did in this department.

The other thing our group was finally embracing - silence. The bush, as it turns out, isn't really all that quiet. Once human chatter dies down, there's a lot to listen to. There was one sound, though, that did plague me - the call of the turtle dove proclaiming, "Work harder!" Really? How about zip it! I'm trying to commune with nature here, and work is the last thing I want to think about. Though I was fascinated to discover shards of sharpening tools from bygone days when a portion of the park had been a village going through the motions of day-to-day activities.

This particular morning, the wild, like our group, also seemed to be in laid-back mode. Grazing in a field was a herd of buffalo. Preening from a branch were stunningly colored birds. Gracefully loping in the distance were a handful of giraffes, which I swear were yawning.

After an hour of trekking, a fallen tree presented itself as the perfect perch for morning tea. Out of a backpack came tins with the mixings of chicory coffee, tea and freshly baked shortbread. This was generally a time we'd break from our silence and ply Manda with questions we'd accumulated along our walk. What is the life expectancy of certain animals? Do any animals mate for fun? What's the difference between dung and scat?

In short order, we were back on course. Our path took us alongside the Luangwa River. A loud whooshing noise broke the lazy reverie. A pod of hippos appeared to be racing in the water. It was truly something to behold as loud waves crested with their impressive efforts. These mammals, which can weigh up to nine tons and run as fast as 19 miles per hour, looked as though they could give Michael Phelps a run for his money. Indeed, we picked up our own pace after the display.

(Show as slideshow)



A new bevy of smiles greeted us upon arrival at Chindeni. We drifted to the common area for lunch, an area overlooking the river. As if following a theme, lunchtime entertainment came by way of a pair of hippos, resident males famous for their love/hate relationship. A typical day would find them arguing, then eventually joining in beautiful duets. These musical trysts culminated in Yin/Yang napping positions curled against one another whilst being cooled by the river. The siesta mood was contagious, and we all drifted back to our luxury yurts on stilts, where hammocks with views of the river lured for naps of our

Later, our day of coziness would continue with snuggling under blankets for a chilly night drive. This particular evening, we stumbled upon a leopard stalking an impala. As if watching a movie, one impala from the herd was limping. This weak creature, of course, was the leopard's target. "No, no..." I whispered selfishly under my breath. Other Land Rovers had arrived on site, thwarting the young leopard's efforts. Relief washed over me. There would be no kill tonight.

We made our way back to Chindeni, where a Mongolian barbecue was waiting on the beach. Settling down at the table, my heart was conflicted as food was delivered directly in front of me. Over the past few days I'd felt so close to nature. Had I truly embraced it, though? Or understood what was required for its survival? I thought of an impala that was sleeping safe with its herd, and somewhere else in the bush, a young leopard going to bed

NEXT WEEK - Zungulila and Hyena Etiquette

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Falling Into Zambia: Zungulila, Champagne and Floating on Water



by Bekah Wright

Another morning in Zambia, another round of goodbyes. This was followed by hellos and smiles at a new camp, Zungulila. (A name I still can't pronounce.) Upon arriving, Zunguilila's staff filled in our guide, Manda Chisanga, on the shenanigans of a group of hyenas who'd visited the camp the night before. Apparently, they'd eaten the openair lobby's carpets, including a zebra hide.

"Zebra hide? I" asked quizzically? Said hide had been under a stack of trunks, part of the Zungulila's bygone, Old Africa theme. In fact, I'd already affected an accent like Meryl Streep in *Out of Africa* and was scouting around for Robert Redford. "That's nothing," Manda replied. "Hyenas eat anything, including car batteries. Of all the scat and dung in the bush, the only kind that's never eaten by another creature is that of the hyena. It's deadly."

Hyenas are very uncivilized, my inner Meryl thought.

In short order, lunch was served. To our utter shock, two other guests were at the table. This was the first time on safari we'd actually encountered other people, and Texans at that. It was a jolt, reminding us we'd be returning to Mfuwe the next day, and soon after that, "civilization." As it turned out, the Texans were in Zambia to learn about bush conservation practices they could implement on their ranch. The bush certainly was providing an education.

Post siesta, it was time for a walking safari. By now the Texans had departed and it was again just our small throng. We traipsed into our vast classroom, which was giving a lesson in botany this particular afternoon. Feeling particularly plucky, I inhaled African basil to check out its benefits for the lungs. Ahh... mine felt clear as a bell. I passed on trying another weed Manda identified as elephant chewing gum.

Further along the trail, Manda spotted what looked like mini marshmallows in the grass. He picked up a few. Could we guess what they were? Twice-digested desert brush hare poop. Um, okay. Why twice? Apparently, eating their first round of poop is good for the hare. Now here's the kicker. Eating the hare's second round of poop is good for humans. You read me right. It's supposed to be good for eye health. Did I mention I was feeling plucky in the paragraph above? Oh, yeah, I ate rabbit poop. And I liked it. Shared it, too.

Dearest hyenas, I realize I referred to you as uncivilized. My apologies. I'm sure those car batteries also tasted just like toasted wheat.

Soon after this snack, we passed a group of buffalo. The river they were standing in looked so cool and inviting on this particularly hot evening. Lucky for us, a surprise was just around the bend. A set of chairs and glasses of champagne were sitting directly in the Kapamba River.

In quick order, we dispatched our shoes, rolled up our pant legs and waded out for the perfect vantage point of the Nchindeni Hills. Cresting above them, the sun bid us goodnight and we wished what we considered the "true bush" a final farewell.

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NEXT WEEK - Saying goodbye, while meeting Mfuwe for the first time.

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Part 5 - Goodbyes and Welcomes

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Falling Into Zambia: Goodbyes and Welcomes



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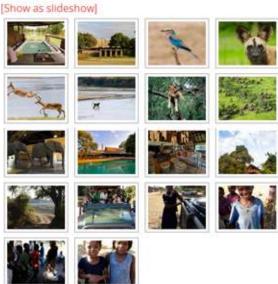
2013

Goodbye. The word catches in the throat. We'd said it a lot lately in the bush while moving between The Bushcamp Company's various camps. And now, we were making our way back to Mfuwe Lodge and, ultimately, out of the bush. Then home. Home. What a strange, faraway place that seemed.

The breathtaking, three-hour drive back to the lodge we'd heard so much about was just that. Yet, few words were spoken. The impalas went about their day. I'll admit, I was disappointed. Hadn't we bonded? Weren't they going to miss me as much as I them? The warthogs barely spared me a glance. The hyenas... Well, I'm pretty sure they were laughing hysterically over my rabbit poop escapade.

The terrain passed all too quickly and a familiar sign indicated we were back at Mfuwe Lodge. "After lunch..." Manda Chisanga, our guide began. We all nodded. Siesta. Yes, we knew the routine by heart now. "...You might want to visit the spa," he finished. Say what? Spa? It made perfect sense. The spa at Mfuwe Lodge was the perfect vehicle for midwifing us one step closer to civilization.

Later, whilst lying on a massage table in the open-air spa, I stared out at two hippos cooling off in the lagoon, my thoughts drifting to Chindeni Camp and the famous hippo duo there, Goodbye, Chindeni. Goodbye, hippos. Goodbye, Eden. "Miss..." a gentle pat alerted the massage was over. "You might want to take a nap back in your chalet. They've scheduled a visit to the schools en route to the airport this afternoon." Good idea, I thought, already halfway asleep. Back in the room, upon hitting the pillows, I was out.



"You've caught it." The words startled me awake from a siesta slumber. Hot from the Zambian heat, my mind searched for the meaning of the utterance, first thoughts turning to bodily appendages, wondering if a malaria-carrying insect had bitten me. Shaking the sleep from my head, I stumbled to the door. Had someone come to collect my luggage? Not yet. They were steps away from doing the honors. "Sorry to be late!" the publicist member of our throng both apologized and prodded simultaneously.

Still pondering the words that had awoken me, I was loaded into a Land Rover, watching, as in short order, the gate of South Luangwa National Park became a speck in the distance. The village of Mfuwe, which had been cast in twilight upon our arrival, was now full bustle in the afternoon sun. Roadside vegetable stands were hawking their wares, hair saloons were ushering in clients and Tribal Textile employees were wheeling their bicycles in from lunch. So this is what Mfuwe looked like during the day.

The Land Rover pulled down a dirt road, for a second reminding me of the bush and making my heart skip a beat. But no, we were visiting one of several schools The Bushcamp Company works closely with through its community and conservation programs. And then I heard it, much like the voice that had awoken me from my dream - angels singing. I glanced around the vehicle to see if anyone else noticed. "That's a local choir rehearsing," Lisa Gower explained as we passed the group gathered under a tree

Moments later, we were surrounded by children, many of them jumping up and down shouting, "Mama Lisa!" Gower, who'd come to Zambia for a visit several years ago, had ended up staying and devoting her life to the schools there. A laying-on of many little hands occurred as the students, on their lunch break, excitedly showed us their campus. Seeing photos of themselves on our digital cameras was like producing a bit of magic. Getting behind the wheel of the parked Land Rover - sheer heaven.

Standing away from the little ones was an older student, whose name I learned was Margaret. She appeared disinterested in the goings-on. Yet when I flashed her a smile, I noticed her hiding one of her own behind the palm of her hand. Later, I asked Mama Lisa, "Which authors do the girls here read to connect to as they're growing up?" Laughing as two boys swung from her arms she replied, "Whoever is on the curriculum."

It was time for lunch. Each student, who must bring their own bowl, stood in line at the steel drum for their serving of porridge. The scene reminded me of our mornings before safari around the fire. How I'd miss those, "We should go and let them eat lunch, Otherwise, they'll just want to hang out with you," Lisa said. And

As the Land Rover bumped down the dirt road I remained turned around in my seat, my eyes trained on the school. Just like the bush and Zambia's wildlife, in under an hour, the people of Mfuwe had caught a permanent place in my heart.

Welcome, Zambia, as I bring you home with me.

Next: Yes, the Falling Into Zambia series is complete. As an afterword - Bekan is sponsoring a student at the schools in Mfuwe. She's also starting a writing program for the girls there, so a new generation of Zambian storytellers' voices can be heard both there and in the US.

READ MORE

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