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Falling Into Zambia: Mfuwe and The Bushcamp Company's Mfuwe Lodge



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-mâché 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 carry us into the wild.

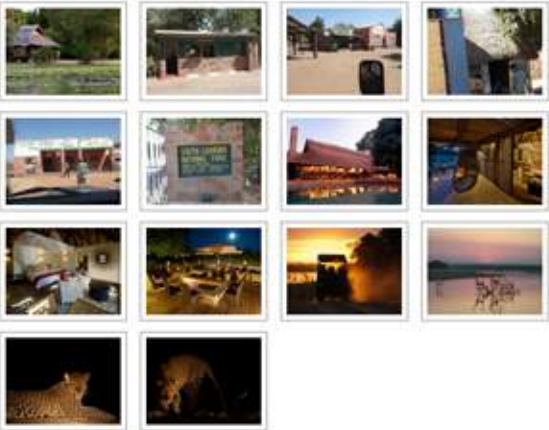
The drive through Mfuwe held magic of its own. Post sunset, the sky was darkening with dramatic clouds, the result of brush fires throughout the countryside. The smell of wood fires was everywhere, from front yards where neighbors were gathering, to a bare-chested, elderly man keeping the blaze of a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

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. Blurry-brained, 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 battling 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

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- 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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AUG 19 2013

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, Zungulila'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 open-air 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 Nchinden 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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