

A PLACE OF MAGIC

The tall dry elephant grass formed an almost impenetrable wall each side of the dirt track and one expected at any moment that some large wild animal might suddenly break cover before us, challenging our vehicle's progress. We passed through an electrified security fence and were soon alighting, without incident, at the reception office to be welcomed by the manager.

We had arrived at Tongabezi.

Situated on the banks of the mighty Zambezi river in Zambia, Tongabezi Lodge faces towards the sunset, looking out over a magnificent sweeping bend in the river where its waters eddy and run according to the mood of the day and season before making its glorious debut twenty-five kilometres downriver at Victoria Falls. The owners, two Englishmen, have created an impressive safari camp and its enveloping intimacy quickly draws the traveller away from the worries and responsibilities of the outside world.

The thatched roof, open dining room and five tented cottages are surrounded by lawn and set in the cooling shade of the camp's ebony and acacia trees. Home for myself, wife and daughter for the next few days was the Bird House, one of three grass-roofed houses tastefully set amongst the trees on a stoney cliff face. Our house was open at the front, taking in the marvellous panorama of the Zambezi which becomes a powerful extension of the living area. Each of the houses has its own distinct character and is constructed in such a way as to have no need for partitions or doors, adding charm and uniqueness, yet retaining complete privacy.

Once unpacked we went down to relax in chairs under the spreading shade of a large acacia tree beside the swimming pool which was fed by a small waterfall from the rock face above. With the soothing sound of falling water in the background, we gazed out over the commanding sweep of the Zambezi to become captivated by the magnificent setting around us.

Late afternoon the three of us with Moya, our native boatman, set off to explore upriver in one of the Lodge's sturdily built banana boats propelled by an outboard motor, powerful enough to travel upstream against the strong flow of the Zambezi. It was May and due to the lateness of the long rains the river was still running at a high level. We crossed the thousand odd metres of open water to the Zimbabwe side of the river of the Zambezi National Park. Game were boldly coming down to drink and we sighted impala, waterbuck, hippos, warthog, a small crocodile and a herd of elephant. The scenes before us were stimulating and with the boat's engine quietly feathered we were able to observe the animals at very close quarters as they sipped the waters of the Zambezi or stood among the shadows of the trees and thornbush scrub along the river's edge.

It was a glorious sight when the sun began to sink behind the tallest trees on the far bank, its rich dying glow transformed into a myriad of dancing flaming red lights as it bathed the choppy surface of the Zambezi. A grey hornbill, silhouetted by the setting sun and its over-size bill distinguishing it clearly from other bush birds, flapped slowly across the water ahead of us from the Zimbabwe side towards Zambia, its plaintive notes heralding its intended change of residency.

Moya cut the motor and we drifted slowly downstream, absorbing the magic of the moment. Only the gentle slapping of the water against the fibreglass hull and the distant cry of a baboon, punctuated the African silence.

That evening, under a sparkling ceiling of stars, we dined by candlelight beside the pool with

the manager and several other guests, our conversations shared sometimes with the tuba sounding utterances of hippopotamuses as they left the daytime safety of the water to seek the belly filling grasses in the National Park opposite. After a delightful dinner served with a superb South African wine we retired wearily to bed. A few sheep later we were sound asleep.

We awoke early the next morning well before sunrise and lay back in bed gazing out over our toes at the silvery expanse of the Zambezi, bathed in the light of the moon, swirling past. From across the water the grunts and grievances of squabbling hippopotamuses were borne by the cool night air. The eerie cry of a jackal disturbed the stillness together with the occasional calls of unknown animals of the African night.

First light was the stimulus for the many small bush birds that began saturating the air with a melodious and constant chattering in the trees about us. At 6.20am this delightful symphony of nature was rudely polluted by the harsh mechanical sound of the banana boat as we set off in the mild early morning temperature with Moya for a sunrise trip up river.

The water was like glass, broken only in places by the eddies of the current's force and the long spreading bow waves streaming out like attached ribbons behind the boat. When the sun came up, its light cast some marvellous pastel pink and orange reflections on the waters silvery surface, highlighted in the translucent turquoise green of the boat's wake. Close to the Zambian bank, mist was slowly rising off the water giving an unbelievable side effect to this display of nature's infinite beauty. Later on in the morning when the wind gets up, the river's peaceful mood will abruptly change and her choppy surface will reveal her more aggressive spirit.

Moya cut the boat's motor so that we could appreciate the new day in silence.

Africa had woken and her humble audience was experiencing the tantalizing sights, smells and sounds of a land claiming the origins of mankind.

We continued on upriver, sensibly giving wide berth to a scuttled cow hippopotamus and her calf, sighting a variety of animals and birds along the riverbank. Our photography was being done in the kaleidoscopic and lovely soft light phases of early morning. Animals were often partly in shadow and highlighted by probing shafts of yellow sunlight. Family groups of baboon and vervet monkeys sat motionless on branches by the water's edge, absorbing the warmth of the sun's first rays. A huge male, yellow baboon gave us a look of disdain as it strode resolutely through the grass, having dared to approach its territory.

Slender and exquisite with its pretty white vertical body stripes subdued by the shadows of its cover, a shy kudu doe on the riverbank gazed at us with alertness tempered by curiosity in the company and security of a group of waterbuck.

We stopped off at Chunda Island in the middle of the Zambezi, sitting down on some dry grass where the sunlight struggled down through the dense canopy of a nearby sausage tree. The steam from the hot Thermos of tea that Moya was pouring, hung in the still early morning air which was filled with the chirping of numerous birds. The scene was mesmerizing and we had time to dream a little. We were soon on our feet again, following on foot in single file through light scrub amongst the acacia trees. There was game everywhere and most allowed you to get quite close before darting off and melting into cover. Helmeted guinea fowl hurried and scurried about feeding in the shadows and new patches of sunlight. Bushbuck and impala were grazing the tops of small shrubs or seeking the few remaining shoots of green grass amongst the dry overgrowth. A spotted eagle owl looked back over its shoulder to give us a scornful look from its perch high up in the safety of a sausage tree. The

bountiful spread of fresh elephant dung wherever we walked caused us a little apprehension but our guide assured us that these giants had since swum back the several hundred metres to the mainland.

We arrived back at the Tongabezi landing around 8.30am and sat down to a hearty breakfast under the spreading canopy of the acacia tree in the pleasant coolness near the pool beside the river, waited on by attentive and friendly staff. A troop of chattering and playful vervet monkeys suddenly appeared in the branches above us. Their contempt for those below was delivered with a loud 'splat' as wet dung hit the pavement beside us, narrowly missing the breakfast table!

Later in the day we would enjoy the silent travel of a canoe trip downriver to the Lodge's Sindabezi Island camp. This is a delightful spot overlooking a floodplain of the Zambezi National Park where elephant, buffalo and antelope can be observed feeding most evenings. Sometimes lions can be heard across the water from the camp.

Tongabezi is a very special place and for those travellers wishing to just relax in comfort after the rigours of a safari into the interior, then this is the camp to unwind in. For us, taking our first sip of Africa, it was a unique and exciting introduction to this fascinating continent before journeying on through East Africa.

The following day as we drove back through the elephant grass and out onto the bitumen road to Livingstone and Victoria Falls, we reluctantly left behind the magic of Tongabezi.

THE END