

Three's a charm

Central Zambian lodges offer intimacy
with wildlife and wilderness



Old Mondoro, Lower Zambezi National Park

It was mid-November, and we were deep into a seasonal heatwave. We lay with damp *kikois* spread over us and the fan on full blast. At some point a malachite kingfisher had flown into our room and now sat above our mosquito net, panting, beak slightly ajar.

With no fences anywhere in camp, Old Mondoro is a study in honouring boundaries. The wild animals that live here – waterbuck, baboons, buffalo and elephant being the most common – occupy the space just as much as the camp and guests do. Each chalet has a bath that doubles as a plunge-pool – and occasionally, a drinking hole – as well as an outdoor shower. Sleeping only 10, the camp sits alongside the Zambian side of the Zambezi River. An open-sided *sitenje* (dining area) looks out across the full-bodied grey river – over snorting, sunbaking hippos, and elephant crossing between river islands – towards the far bank and Zimbabwe.

We could neither see our neighbouring country nor hear the vocal hippos from where we lay, but the view through our chalet's wide reed windows was just as captivating: a movie-worthy backdrop of lean winter thorn trees that slipped into a distant blue monochromatic haze. From this setting, a swell of hulking elephant made their way through to the camp, passing the buffalos wallowing in the water hyacinth-filled channel just in front of us.

One large bull continued onwards, disturbing an African jacana as he climbed the bank to reach our

chalet. There, eye-level with our roof, he gently lifted his trunk and searched for fallen seed pods, studiously ignoring our silent elation less than 2m away.

Down below, the rest of the herd moved about with sucking squelches and splashes until, content and mud-caked, they retired back to the shadowed treeline. The atmosphere once again became thick and slow. Activities would begin again towards the late afternoon – animals would start moving about and guests would head out for boat cruises. From game drives, accounts would come in of big cats and even a few aardvarks.

But for now, they – along with us – happily rested in the shade and pressed 'snooze'.

Chiawa Camp, Lower Zambezi National Park

Zambia is home to Africa's largest population of hippos – and at least 3,000 of those can be found in the Lower Zambezi National Park. Meeting them in a canoe, however, delivers a somewhat stressful experience.

"Is it dead?" my friend Emma whispered agitatedly. "Why isn't it moving?" The channel curved snugly around the hippo's prone form, leaving little room for us to pass.

"It'll move when we get closer, and duck down under the tree roots," said Daniel Susiko, our guide, placatingly. Seeing as the guiding team at Chiawa Safaris were twice voted best in Africa, I had waived all sense of personal responsibility for my life and was floating along relatively unperturbed. That was until we got closer; less than 15m away. I started to sit up in my seat a bit.

Game viewing is excellent throughout the seasons. Camps are closed during the rainy season (mid-November to April). Go to chiawa.com for more information.

How to get there



*Airlink connects
Johannesburg and
Lusaka. Go to page
75 for flight schedules.
www.flyairlink.com*

“If you like, you can walk around via the bank. I’ll take the canoes through myself.”

Somewhat guilty at abandoning brave Daniel to his fate, we stepped onto shore and snuck along the bank with hearts in our throats, keeping him and the canoes between us and the hippo. It twitched – the first sign of life – and vanished with a half-hearted shrug into a swirl of water and bubbles. Straight under the tree roots, just as predicted. Shamefacedly, we re-boarded the canoes and resumed our journey past white-fronted bee-eater colonies and buffalos’ curious stares. Calmly drifting by, we felt sagely in tune with our surroundings.

Chiawa was the first camp to open in the Lower Zambezi National Park in an ongoing visionary effort of dedication by the Cumings family, who founded Chiawa Safaris. Over the years, the original camp has been upgraded – more renovations are underway to afford the nine tents extra privacy and modern amenities – yet, it remains the core inspiration of the brand. Backdropped by the Muchinga escarpment and set adjacent to the Chowe riverbed, its terrain of water, grassland and riverine forests routinely delivers phenomenal game sightings, some of which are best found after dark.

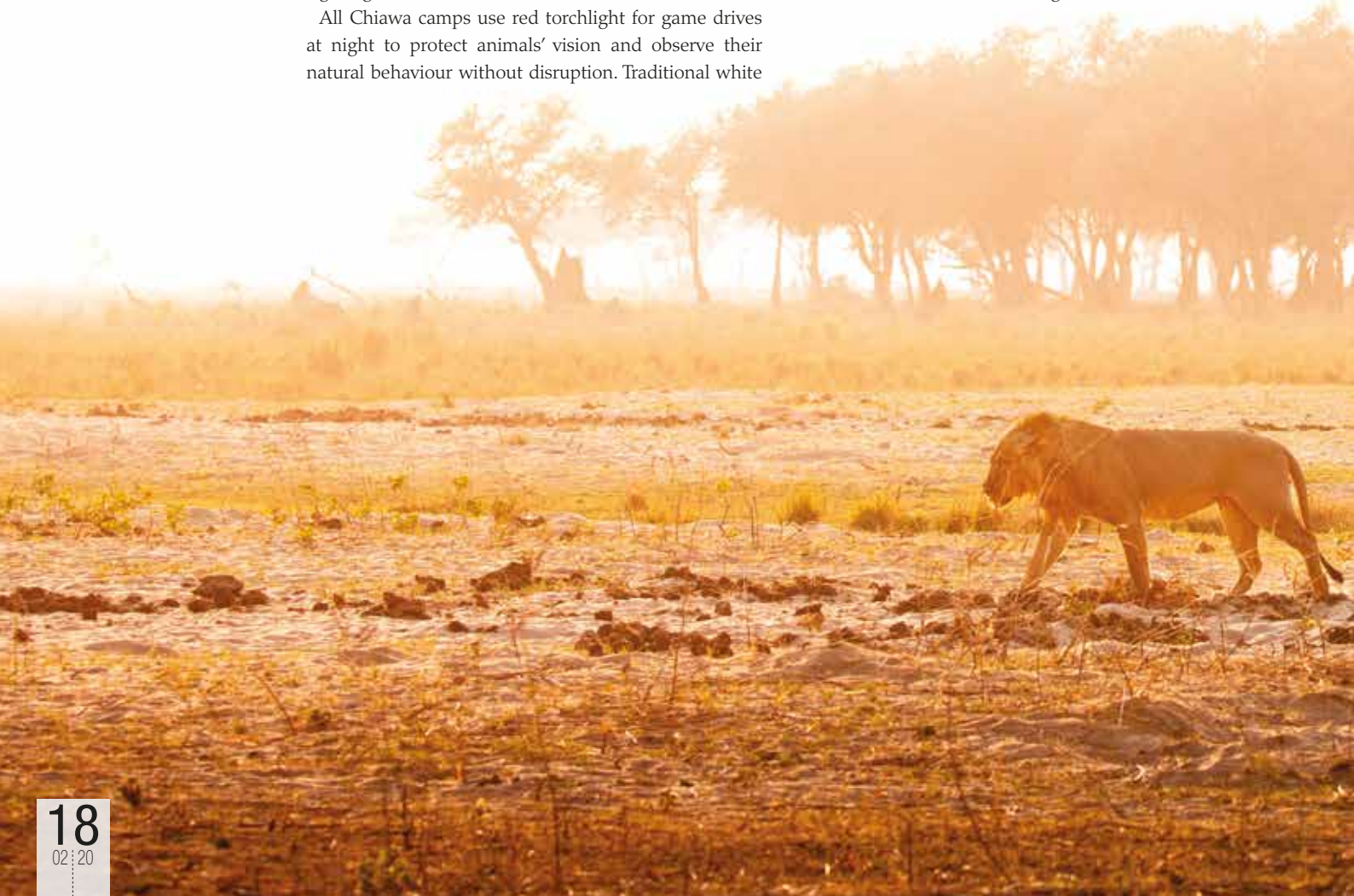
All Chiawa camps use red torchlight for game drives at night to protect animals’ vision and observe their natural behaviour without disruption. Traditional white

torchlight, used even for a few seconds, can temporarily blind animals. We watched as a leopard began the slow, imperceptible stalk toward impala, a young porcupine wandered about, rooting in the ground, and two male lions snored, lying gracelessly prone on the ground. Despite our vehicle and red light, the animals were every bit as relaxed as we were.

Puku Ridge, South Luangwa National Park

“I could live in a place like this,” breathed Emma as she walked into her expansive chalet. The 17-year-old Puku Ridge has recently undergone a major collaborative refurbishment between new owners, Chichele Safaris, and Chiawa Safaris. Effortlessly styled and supremely comfortable throughout, modern architecture enhances and directs guests’ attention to the view of the puku-dotted valley in front of the camp. This antelope, the namesake of the lodge, is related to the waterbuck and shares the same long, coarse coat and heart-shaped nose.

Each of the nine chalets has a king-sized bed, coffee station, aircon, a private plunge pool, open-air shower and a rooftop bed for stargazing. And we made sure to make the most of it all, swanning about in our robes and





ploughing into the lemon-and-mint ice water left in our fridge. It's tempting, in a place like this, to stay closeted away and watch passing wildlife from within.

But that's not the way to experience this vast area of towering baobabs, mopane forests and silver leadwood trees. We were on the search for wild dog, walking in single file, along with the owners of Chiawa, Grant and Lynsey Cumings, and their children. Grant is one of those tireless, constantly moving folk, who makes his luck. And his luck was certainly coming into play.

"There," he whispered, pointing toward some sticks in the distance, which turned out to be ears pricked in our direction. Nine dogs got up so as to see us better, and then burst in a skittering, joyful ceremonial greeting. Grant motioned for us to sit down and we revelled in the privilege of seeing these endangered creatures, completely at ease with our distance, on foot.

Later that night, I stepped into my plunge pool. The water was warm and illuminated, the sky above was clear and the moon was full. What a blissful way to experience this wilderness.

Many cats make lighting work.

Text and photography | **Teagan Cunniffe**

