

Trip Report Zambia August 2005

Ours was a carefully and well in advance planned trip to Western Zambia, starting and ending in Lusaka, 16 days. We four participants flew in from different continents. Meeting point was Lusaka Intercontinental Hotel for one good night rest after the long flight before the camping trip.

Day 1 - 4

For 08.00 a.m. we had arranged delivery of the two rented vehicles. One of them a fully equipped Land Rover Defender 110 with all the camping equipment for 4 people plus good recovery equipment from **Livingstone 4x4Hire** (Foleys). The other vehicle was a non-equipped 4x4 from **Zambian Safari Company**, a hefty 60% cheaper than the equipped one. The purpose of renting both vehicles was the security in remote areas we were going to and for the sanity of the two couples. One first look at the vehicle from **Zambian Safari Company**, a very old model Toyota Land Cruiser, with two obvious oil leaks, a shattered windscreen - but still in place- , a suspicious looking rear suspension as well as totally worn tires made our faces go sour. The delivery guy from **Zambian Safari Company** agreed to let us have a look under the vehicle at the **Livingstone 4x4Hire** yard before making a final decision. Once we did that we knew that this car would give us only problems, so we refused it. An even worse replacement was offered to us some 2 hours later. We cancelled this operation all together and agreed with the guy in charge that we would be refunded our prepayment at a later moment. In the meantime the mechanics at **Livingstone's** were replacing a broken rear door from a LR 110 in record time, since the owners swiftly offered us another Defender as a last minute solution, and at the same low rate. (we should have booked both vehicles with them from the beginning we realized later) The car had just been returned by other clients, (bloody Americans we were told) and was still very dirty. We took it gladly just as it was. Kirsten from **Livingstone's** had done all our shopping as per previous agreement and shopping list. Plus she had put all the vacuum packed meat packs in her freezer to pre-freeze them. Superb service! So we proceeded to load the tons of goodies into the vehicles and were finally off at noon. Had five to six hours drive ahead of us to reach pit stop number one at **Kafue National Park North, Mc Brides Camp**.



Total driving time to Mc Brides from Lusaka is five hours including a short petrol/diesel stop in **Mumbwa**, the last three hours are on regular gravel road and about two hours are thru a heavily infested Tse Tse belt where we had to close our windows and where we found out that the last- minute Defender had a broken A/C. It got very hot inside our car. Got bitten about four times despite special potion of Dettol in water solution applied every 30 minutes.

The last sunray fell as we turned into the path leading from Hippo airstrip to Mc Brides camp, a huge elephant bull crossed our path but was not given proper attention since we wanted to set up camp for the first time before nightfall. The Tse Tse disappeared only a few kms before camp.

There are only two bush camp sites, each with its own lovely bush ablutions. A camp help showed us the way and we settled in. There was nobody else on site no. 2. Our swiss friends got familiar with their spacious dome tent and sleeping mats as Max and I opened our rooftop tent. I must say cooking the first night was a bit unorganized since we still didn't know where all the utensils were, but we managed to braai nicely. Sometime after dinner a tall man in his pijamas but a hunters jacket over it and armed with a huge rifle arrived on foot. He was in the company of a night watchman, they both startled us big time. It turned out to be Chris Mc Bride himself and he was very happy to get a cold Coca Cola, we learned later that this is his very addiction. We arranged to meet at a quarter to seven next morning to go for a lion walk with him. The night was filled with the sounds of two roaring lions and plenty of hippos.

We extended our stay at Mc Bride's and still did not get enough of the place. We never actually saw the lions, but following the new tracks the lions left during nights every morning for a couple of hours with Chris was a thrill. We also went on a boat cruise on a large double decked boat with a sunroof. We saw a leopard mum with two cubs and plenty of birds and hippos.

From the campsite itself one does not see the Kafue River, so doing the cruise was a nice change. There were no guests at the lodge and Chris' wife had left for Lusaka for a few days, he seemed a bit lonely and suffered from a bad flu. Chris offered us to use the open living room at the lodge and to cook in the large camp kitchen with the help of his cooks. That was so much fun! We enjoyed his hospitality immensely and had a wonderful time with him, let alone all we learned firsthand about his many years as a researcher studying lions in Timbavati and Savuti.



Day 5 and 6

Now we faced two problems, first there was no diesel available in Mumbwa, but we had already checked out the black market on our way up. Secondly the really bad news was that the Lubungu Ferry was broken. Our initial plan was to exit Kafue up north, along the old Kasempa road and do a loop via Kabompo and Zambezi to enter Liuwa from the north, but with the ferry broken we had to return to Mumbwa and from there travel on the paved Lusaka-Mongu road to the West where we would enter the **Liuwa Plains National Park** from the south, this being the more commonly used access from Kalabo. Bargaining with the diesel guy went sosolala and we bought only 20 litres each at the black market, both vehicles had about 100 liters in their double tanks left and we also had 3 full jerry cans. Early afternoon we pull up at **Mukambi Safari Lodge** conveniently located only 2km off the M9 near Kafue Hook Bridge and outside the park so no park fees would apply. The spacious campsite overlooks the Kafue, there were few other visitors and we had a quiet evening. Apart from the monkeys!



The following day went easy along the paved road where repairs are almost completed, there are only a few km left with potholes, average speed of 90km/h is ok. Along this road we were lucky to get another 20 litres of Diesel each from the BP in Kaoma, I think out of pity and because we bought some of their freshly baked bread. We reached the laid back city of **Mongu** early afternoon and got a few more veggies at the fairly well stocked Shoprite on the edge of town. There was no diesel available anywhere not at BP, nor Caltex, nor Total. So we again had to buy from the black market, some guys had us drive into a back alley and we bought

another 40 litres each. We painstakingly filtered the fuel thru a pair of my stockings. Why the trouble? We will need enough fuel for Liuwa, since consumption will be entirely different in deep sand.

The colorful fish market on the banks of town and the edge of the Barotse flatlands is the starting point of the 67km of deep sand track to Kalabo. We waited endlessly at the Zambezi ferry and daylight was getting less. The local children enjoyed blowing up air-balloons with us. We did not want to travel by night and pulled into a very small village, merely a cluster of huts, just a few kilometers later. As we approached the track leading to their huts several elder women and men exchanged a few words before we were granted permission to camp near the village, but in a reasonable distance, in the middle of the bush. We were even given firewood and then left alone. As soon as the night was pitch dark many female voices joined in chanting and many hands were beating different drums. We guessed they had a party of some sort. The spectacle did not stop for one minute and lasted the whole long night. I had to put earplugs in my ears or I wouldn't have slept at all. Comes morning and the sun rises we knew that there was something else going on, not a party, since the singing and drumming went on and on and had turned into a long lamenting tune. As we started to break up camp we discovered that we were being observed by an elder and his entourage. The men stood in respectful distance. After a while we engaged in a talk and eventually enquired about the music and the drums. We learned that the witchdoctors had organized a ritual for a "certain sick lady" of the community. The elder first defended the tradition fiercely but as we continued to talk he let slip thru his own doubts, perhaps the white man's medicine would be better for her, he said. We did not dare to offer any help, just uttered our agreement that both worlds present different solutions and that we truly wished her well.

The remaining stretch to **Kalabo** was a bit over an hour, the monster trucks from the construction company which is building the new dam road never stop and we had to dodge out of the deep single sand track with shaking tails in order not to be run over by them.



Days 6 – 9

The Luanginga crossing at Kalabo to access Liuwa is by hand pulled ferry, but first we had to pay our admission fees. The one officer on duty at the AP office (**African Parks**) near the ferry was obviously nervous about our arrival on a Sunday and suggested that we should get Bwana David at the church, since he is in charge of collecting the entrance fees. The worst sand tracks are those inside the village of Kalabo, but we reached the church where service was just over and Bwana David and the rest of the flock came out. Since we needed some mats (to sleep siesta in the shade during the hot midday hours) and bread, he himself escorted us first to the market. A very colorful local market indeed! Then we returned to the AP office to do the

paperwork. One hundred US dollars poorer each, we now could stay inside the **Liuwa Plains National Park** for two days. The ferry guy was anxious to finally get his customers at 40'000 Kwachas each vehicle. As soon as we pulled out, the rope broke and his cargo, two Defenders and four wazunguns with big eyes started to drift downstream the Luanginga river. Immediate reflex from a dozen or so locals on shore saved us from a unwanted river cruise, we were somehow hauled back and had to get off the ferry at the steep shore in rear shift. A man then rowed with a canoe to the other shore and attached the end of the rope again to the wooden pole. Finally and after almost two hours we got to the other side of the river safely. David had given us the waypoints for the two brand new official campsites inside Liuwa. One is 20km and the other one 50km away. We headed for the second camp called Katoyana, it took us three and a half hours to get there. **Katoyana Camp** has five well separated sites, each under a large tree and scattered around a basic ablution block. We again were the only visitors here. Camp attendants Nyambe and Kameme were very happy to receive us, and even happier for the cigarettes and Coca Cola we gave them.



Next day we went on a early morning game drive with only one vehicle, (since the other one had the Roof Top Tent open) and headed to 9km distant **Matamanene** scout camp area where we found plenty of different waterholes within a short distance and observed lots of game. Even though the main migration of wildebeest had not started yet we managed to see quite a large number of animals, lots of birds, mainly crested cranes and plenty of spotted hyenas. We were very confident and left the tracks to find the cheetahs the three out-of-nowhere-motorcycle-riding anti poaching rangers had told us about earlier. And we did the one thing we should never have done, we drove into deep grass. We got stuck. Hi-lift jack was back in camp some 15km away inside the other vehicle, so was the shovel. Handwork and 40 minutes later we had managed to place the two sand blades under each rear wheel and got the vehicle out, but only for 10 meters and then we were really stuck, both wheels on the left side were deep in water and mud. So Max and Paul went off on foot with the GPS in one hand and a heavy wrench in the other hand each (they felt so much safer from any predator attack!). The plan was to get back to camp to get the second vehicle and hopefully find us again. In a distance we could see the antenna at Matamanene scout camp, they went in this direction first in pursuit of help. My friend and I started to get comfy in our car seats away from the melting midday sun with our empty stomachs since we only had had early morning tea...this was supposed to be our game drive before breakfast. Not long and the guys brought help in the form of a very young AP employee in a Land Cruiser with a winch attached to his bullbar, but as he approached the rim of the swamp he also got stuck. Only about two hours later we all sat under a shady tree laughing about our stupidity.



The total flatness of the Liuwa Plains touches the soul, I have spent the next day sitting on the roof taking it all in while spotting game. From a fellow forum member www.dt800.de we had a GPS track leading from Matamanene towards the West and then up north along the limit of Liuwa park and ending at Lukulu ferry. This was the route we had wanted to do initially on our way in. We now realized that it would take us two days to complete with at least one overnight along the route and our timeframe did not allow it, although we had enough diesel to go for it. So we backtracked the same way we came in and did Katoyana – Mongu in one easy day. In Kalabo we made a lunch break to eat our sandwiches under the shady straw-umbrellas at the “beach bar” with a view over the river and the coming and going at the ferry. Bwana David in full uniform came to greet us off. We had seen some scars on his arm and asked him if they were bite marks. No, he said it’s a bullet from a AK-47. Realizing he now had our full attention he took his shirt off and showed us some more AK-47 bullet holes, in 2003 he had survived a poachers ambush while patrolling Liuwa, another officer had died on the spot. David now works in the office, no more patrols.

In Mongu there is no decent accommodation, let alone safe camping. Apparently there is quite a lot of car theft, too. So we went to one of the mediocre hotels and promptly there was no water in the showers, how we missed our bush camping facilities! But the Zambezi bream for dinner was quite good, especially washed down with an ice cold Mosi. We celebrated having gotten a full tank of Diesel at the BP station at a regular price.



Days 9 – 11

We had made reservations for one of the two **rapids campsites** at **Kaingu Safari Lodge** in the Game Management Area next to **Kafue South National Park** for the next three days. If it would not have been for a puncture on the tar road we would have had lots of time to spare for this day’s leg from Mongu to Kaingu including the stop at the Shoprite. From the turnoff from the M9 to the ZAWA checkpoint on the road to the Ithezi Thezi dam it’s a 45 minute’s drive, and it’s about here where the Tse Tse start again. For the last 37 km to the camp we needed a good two hours. We were received by camp help Willard and once again were told to be the only guests, nobody else camping nor staying at the lodge. The camp sites are the most beautiful sites we have ever seen, right on the bank of Kafue River under lush vegetation including palm trees and in front of huge round rocks where one can swim in natural jacuzzis at the rapids, safe from crocs. The ablutions

are simply perfect, very nice carpenter work combined with good taste and love for details. We soon learned that owners and managers Tom and Vivienne Heineken are personally in charge of all the details. Some Tse Tse now get to the lodge and the owners are thinking of building cloth traps since the flies have become a nuisance in the past few months. Biologist Tom took us on a boat ride on the hippo infested river and on a walk in the bush, we learned lots about plants and trees and fruits. We also got to know the carpenter's workshop where all the furniture for the lodge was made with a pitsaw. The couple truly reflects the spirit of pioneers. For those who wish to get really pampered I can highly recommend the six very well appointed tented safari chalets with private verandahs onto the river that go for usd190 per person all inclusive.



Days 11 and 12

It's a five hour drive from Kaingu to **Lusaka**, we started early since we had to pass the Tse Tse belt with closed windows and no A/C again and didn't want to get roasted in the heat. The ride to Lusaka was eventless and we went straight to the busy main road, the Cairo Road, to find **Zambian Safaris** office to get our refund (remember the rented vehicle we didn't accept on day 1?). In the modern Farmer's house the inviting Italian coffee shop on the ground floor was ignored and later regretted. We were professionally received by an employee at the office and a refund Visa slip had already been prepared and issued for the amount of 350 dollars. Right then I didn't imagine that it would take me almost half a year of complaints and threats to get the refund back. In the meantime our husbands had a handful with street venders and by-passers at the roadside parking spot. We left busy downtown along Cairo Road and made our way to the Manda Hill shopping centre with no delay in order to stock up supplies, change money and get diesel. And even some time for shopping at the craft shop. All set we left Lusaka on the Great North Road heading south, for our next pit stop at the **Lilayi Lodge** about 14km outside town. Kirsten and John from Livingstone 4x4Hire came to collect the equipped Defender and joined us for a nice dinner at the lodge. We enjoyed the large bungalows and the large beds.

Days 12 – 16

We had previously made reservations for three days at **Mvu Lodge, Lower Zambezi** and had booked two self catering tents in anticipation of a nice chill-out after all the camping and driving. That's why we didn't need the equipped vehicle anymore and packed all our stuff in one Defender. Late morning we were off towards **Chirundu** after a full farm breakfast. We reached the turnoff in Chirundu two hours later. The escarpment road is adorned by broken, burnt out, crashed and rolled over trucks, but traffic was few (diesel shortage) and we had a nice ride. The landscape was as brown and yellow as elsewhere, everything dry dry dry. Zambians are waiting anxiously to get the first rains in October. The sand road from the Chirundu Junction to the park entrance is 77km long, but Mvu Lodge, as many other lodges, is located outside the park in the Game Management Area at km 60. We needed three hours to reach the camp including the hand-pulled ferry ride over the Kafue, this time smoothly and without waiting time. We soon realized that the Lower Zambezi is a much more visited park, since for the first time the children ran up to the car shouting sweetly. Just as in Mozambique when driving off the EN1 to Guinjata. Please do not hand out candies to those children unless you can also provide them with the necessary dental care afterwards! If you want to hand out something then consider balloons, pens, drawing books, toys, used clothes and shoes.

The first 50km were lined by one small cluster of huts after another, yet it's a GMA. Only about 8km before Mvu is a gate and beyond that no more settlements. Those last 8km were also the worst to drive and it took us 40 minutes. Mvu Lodge is located on the banks of the Zambezi, on the left of the restaurant and bar building are four well separated self catering safari-tents and the camping area, on the right there are another

four tents reserved for all inclusive guests. Managers Marcelle and John would both be much better off in a different profession, hospitality service provider in the tourism sector is clearly not their calling. The booked boat ride was supposed to be a highlight on the mighty Zambezi River, but it turned out to be a wet event because they overloaded the boat with passengers. We were offered soft drinks along the cruise and later charged for them.



If you open any Getaway magazine you will always see their advertisement for “the best camping along the Zambezi”, well they do have shade yes, but no view on the river since the sites are behind the self catering tents. But the tents for usd100 per night each turned out to be a really good choice, very good beds and nice bathrooms with plenty of water and a great view on the river and over to Mana Pools in Zimbabwe. All the cutlery and crockery was provided and we also could buy ice from the bar and leave food in the main freezer.

On our last day we all spoke very little during the ride back to Lusaka, each of us submerged in own thoughts and flashbacks of this incredible journey. I will miss Zambia. And will return.

Info

McBrides.Camp@uuplus.com

Liuwa@africanparks.co.zm

www.kaingu-lodge.com

www.4x4hireafrica.com

www.mukambi.com

lilayi@zamsaf.co.zm

www.dt800.de