



ON A SAFARI THROUGH ZAMBIA STAYING AT LUXURY LODGES, THE LAW OF NATURE IS ON FULL DISPLAY AS ELEPHANTS MAKE THEMSELVES KNOWN TO VISITORS.

Words by CATHERINE MARSHALL

ANIMAL KINGDOM

The great circle of life begins with a tempest and ends with a shower of light. Storm clouds are gathering on the drive from Mfuwe Airport to Zambia’s South Luangwa National Park; against a backdrop of mottled skies and crackling bushveld, shopfronts declare their purpose: Captain Biggie General Dealers, God Is Able Grocery, Auntie Share One Stop Shop, housed in a hot pink concrete block that stands flamboyantly in a clearing.

A visit to Mfuwe is an important part of the journey, for it contextualises the symbiotic relationship between humans and wildlife, and reinforces the importance of tourism in this region. Sustainability is embedded in the ethos of the lodges I’m visiting; their educational, employment and conservation programs aim to uplift this community and the environment in which it lives.

The town is separated from the park by the Luangwa River, but it’s a fluid barrier easily breached by wildlife; elephants regularly plunder farmers’ mango plantations. The incursions

aren’t confined to populated communities – elephants are also known to conduct raids on Mfuwe Lodge’s wild mango tree. In order to reach it, they must barge through the reception area. The storm is still threatening when we arrive at the lodge, and the clouds finally break as we set off on our first game drive. Lightning flashes in the distance, dousing a herd of zebras in celestial light.

“They’re not thirsty anymore,” says my guide, Mulenga Phiri. “This will make them very happy.” Water is the very lifeblood of this wilderness. A hot summer is fast approaching, the trees are budding, the wildlife is fattening, babies are being born. Life’s circular nature is embodied in the tiny impala atremble on its wiry legs; it’s only a few days old, Phiri says.

“We will start to see more and more of them – soon this place will be filled. And then the predators will come – leopards, wild dogs, hyenas, lions.” It’s an unthinkable thought, but such is the nature of nature; this is indeed a place of reckoning. Further along, one of those feared predators – a spotted hyena – slouches beneath a perfumed woolly caper bush. Unperturbed, a waterbuck gazes back at us in the fading light.

“They put all their worries behind them,” Phiri says. Cocooned in my lagoon-side suite that night, I fall asleep to the sound of hyenas whooping and unknown creatures echoing the exclamations in a communal symphony. In the morning, I open my shutters to find a sleep-deprived hippo yawning in a tremendous arc; frogs hop between the waterlogged depressions left by elephants’ feet.

At breakfast, one of these behemoths makes his much-anticipated appearance, turning from the lagoon and lumbering towards the lodge.

OPENING PAGE An elephant splashes past Chindeni Bush Camp on the Luangwa River.

LEFT Bedding down at Chindeni Bush Camp.

RIGHT, TOP Spotting leopard on a game drive.

FAR RIGHT The Chindeni Bush Camp lounge overlooks the life and tides of Luangwa River.

RIGHT Beneath a blanket of stars at Chindeni Bush Camp.

PHOTOGRAPHY: BUSHCAMP COMPANY





“We pause during the evening game drive to sit in a dry riverbed and sip G&Ts as the setting sun scorches the treetops. The flame is smothered by nightfall.”

“Shh, shh!” say the staff, ushering guests to safety. It’s hardly a malevolent intrusion. The bull is simply following his instinct in pursuit of the wild mango tree, which fruits between October and December on the opposite site of the lodge – built, unwittingly, along an ancient elephant path. He climbs the steps of the open-sided lobby, strolls through reception and halts at the counter, behind which I am standing. He swishes his trunk as though seeking a pen with which to sign the guest book, holds my gaze for an interminable minute, and glides off, descending the opposite set of stairs in the direction of the mangoes. It will be hours before my heart stills.

The world is freshly washed this morning, the sky clear, the black cotton soil turned sticky on the road to Kapamba, a remote bush camp a few hours’ drive south from here. The soil is turned to concrete by heat and liquefied by rain. Animals avoid it – except for the wallowing types, like the warthog family now splashing about in the molasses.

“From a human perspective we can say they’re dirtying themselves, but 100 per cent they’re cleaning themselves,” says guide Elijah Ngoma. “It’s happy time for all the animals that wallow – the elephants, buffaloes, warthogs, hippos, of course. For all the browsers and grazers there is food – it’s going to become tough times for the carnivores, because their prey will become stronger.”

A dark cloud shifts overhead – a flock of red-billed queleas, their colour will intensify with the coming rains, streaking the skies red and yellow. Only the baobabs are lush with leaves now. Soon, the leadwoods and mopanes – lined up like burnt matchsticks – will manifest their shaggy cloaks, and the flame trees will erupt with colour.

“In two to three weeks this will be a thick bush with just a road in the middle,” Ngoma says.

Such colour is already in evidence at Kapamba, a solar-powered camp sitting on the riverbank beneath sausage and matumu trees. My thatched chalet is one of just four; wrought iron shutters open onto the river, keeping out the animals but admitting their sonorous laments. The muted décor is vivified with bright streaks – kikoy throws on the bed and the deck loungers. It’s a space designed, it seems, to mimic the bush.

We pause during the evening game drive to sit in a dry riverbed and sip G&Ts as the setting sun scorches the treetops. The flame is smothered by nightfall. Heading back to camp,



LEFT Sundowners in a dry river bed during a game drive with Kapamba Bush Camp.

ABOVE Bathe while overlooking the elements at Kapamba Bush Camp.

BELOW Fresh, seasonal dishes at Kapamba.





Ngoma strafes the bush with torchlight and there, in the pool of light, is a lion stretched back, mane splashed like a halo around him, stomach exposed as though bidding us to stroke it.

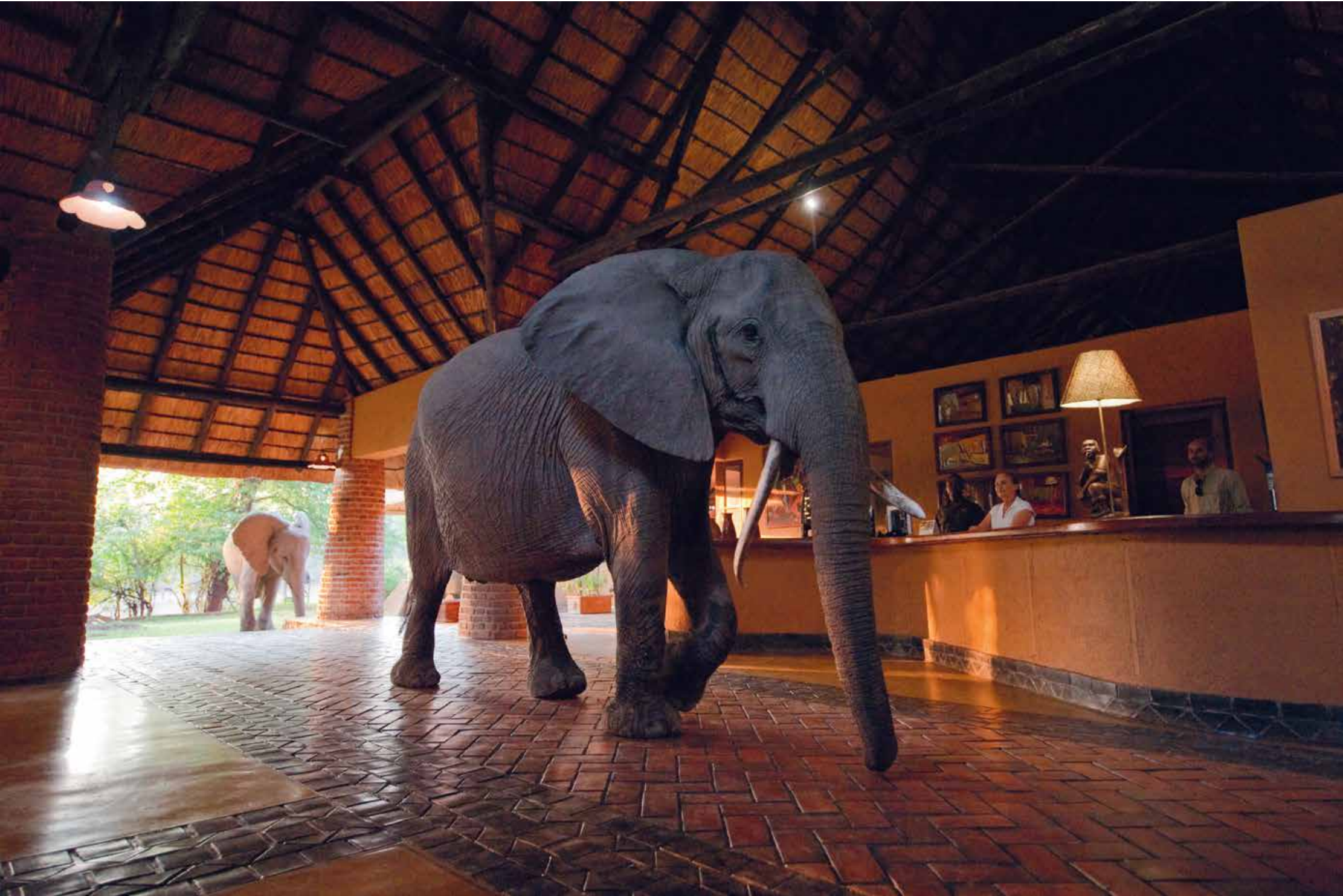
A squall sets in on the way to Chindeni bush camp next morning. Water drips from the leaves of the ordeal tree, raindrops coif the headdress of the white-browed coucal, a leopard sits out the storm on the forked branch of a mopane. Only the warthogs romp joyously. I retreat to my tent – one of four sumptuous, solar- and battery-powered suites set beside an oxbow lagoon – and listen to thunder reverberating off the N’Chindeni Hills.

When the skies have cleared, Ngoma leads us on a walk through riverine forest. He interprets the stories of fallen weaver nests, territorial butterflies and civet scat filled with ebony seeds and millipede exoskeletons. He tells of the many uses of wild basil and duiker berry twigs in his village (insect repellent, toothpaste, cough syrup, painkiller). As we picnic in a clearing, a caravan of Thornicroft giraffes glides into view, their feet encased in black cotton soil socks.

Life comes full circle next day as we make the return journey. The Luangwa River is flowing fast now beneath the bridge to Mfuwe. One corner of sky is sunlit, the other stormy. Luminous raindrops ping the tar. A rainbow spears the plain. The earth steams – a long, hot exhalation. Finally, the wilderness is emerging from its slumber.



Catherine Marshall travelled as a guest of Bench Africa.



ABOVE Elephants make their way through the reception at Mfuwe Lodge in serach of wild mango trees.

ABOVE, LEFT The swimming pool for cooling off at Mfuwe Lodge.

JOURNEY NOTES

Bench Africa is Australia’s oldest Africa travel specialist company. Their six-day South Luangwa safari costs from AUD\$7,825 per person sharing and includes return flights from Lusaka to Mfuwe, accommodation, all meals, local drinks (except at Mfuwe Lodge), professionally guided game viewing drives and walks and national park fees. Note: no children under 12 years.

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