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SPOT ON

How safaris are safeguarding Africa's precious wildlife

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COVER STORY

Playing a bigger game



The sun is sinking into the Shire River and we're headed back to camp. Deep into the darkness we go, lighting the tracks tunnelled into forests of mopane, picking out the fluorescence of candelabra trees; they're misplaced, it seems, borrowed artefacts exuding serenity in this tangled setting. Behind us, the knotted sedge of Chikarongo Plain recedes in the twilight. Two vultures rest high in a tree, their silhouettes inked on a sky of gentian; slumped in the tarry soil below them is a juvenile baboon.

"He thinks we can't see him," says my guide, Patrick Mhone. The baboon doesn't escape my gaze, but I see him – and the uncommon habitat in which he's coiled – with new eyes. Far from the sprawling savannahs of East Africa, Malawi's Liwonde National Park is hardly a renowned safari destination. It is surpassed in the collective imagination by those luminary landscapes conjured by such writers as Laurens van der Post, Karen Blixen and Ernest Hemingway: Kenya's Maasai Mara, Tanzania's Serengeti, Botswana's Okavango Delta and Kalahari and South Africa's Kruger National Park.



Malawi's wildlife and ecosystems are being restored, aided by an influx of safari visitors. By Catherine Marshall

These legendary wildlife reserves have earned their reputation thanks also to effective conservation practices, socio-political stability and the endorsement of "great white hunters" and the many famous people drawn here by those writings.

FORGING NEW FRONTIERS Like many other unfamiliar safari destinations, Malawi is no less beguiling than its big game, big-name counterparts. Squeezed into the Great Rift Valley between Mozambique, Zambia and Tanzania, the country's once diminished ecosystems are being steadily restored. But a low profile means it risks losing out on the tourism revenue so critical to the success of conservation-led economies. This

predicament reflects an unhappy paradox in regions that fly beneath the popularity radar: in the absence of tourism, they struggle to advance conservation goals; without conservation, they battle to attract tourists. This vicious cycle can only be disrupted by a comprehensive, multi-pronged resolution – one in which tourists must serve a vital role.

"The most effective way to safeguard the future of Africa's precious wildlife is to support conservation through tourism," says Julie De Palo, groups and operations manager at Bench Africa.

"By opting to get off the well-trodden tourist trails, to areas often overlooked and underfunded, you are not only choosing to protect precious wildlife in these areas, but

tourism activity often brings to under-served regions a host of infrastructure, including healthcare and education. Tourism not only protects the wildlife but also supports local communities where one income earner can support up to 12 family members."

This symbiotic relationship is self-evident here at Liwonde and the contiguous Mangochi Forest Reserve in southern Malawi. When non-profit conservation organisation African Parks assumed management in partnership with Malawi's Department of National Parks and Wildlife in 2015, poaching, deforestation and human-wildlife conflict were rife. Seven years on, wildlife enthusiasts are predicting this biodiverse region will become one of Africa's standout safari destinations.

What does it take, then, to underwrite a wildlife tourism sensation? Community uplift is inseparable from biodiversity conservation, as African Parks' management model attests. In Liwonde, these issues are being addressed through employment and agricultural schemes that mitigate the loss of community resources on protected land, the provision of health



and educational facilities and the re-introduction of key species in a region once teeming with wildlife: lions, leopards, African wild dogs, black rhinos and, after a century-long absence, cheetahs. The result? The biosphere is buzzing, employment is rising, tourism facilities are expanding and the visitors are coming.

IN THE STEPS OF LIVINGSTONE My own journey to Liwonde begins in Malawi's capital city, Lilongwe and proceeds southwards through countryside amassed with mountain chains and threaded with plots of cabbages, sweet potatoes, maize and beans. The day's sunny demeanour has dimmed by the time I reach the village of Kalembo four hours later; filaments of sunlight escape the gathering storm clouds and turn the settlement into a contradiction of shadow and heat: dirt roads glow bronze; flowering coral trees are lit with flame; bicycle spokes flash silver beneath the burden of maize bales and muscular cyclists. Overhead, the great lid of cloud is fast turning black.

Those heavens split open as I approach the banks of the Shire River. Raindrops

collide with hot dirt, alchemising Africa's most melancholy scent: petrichor. Mhone waits for me at the pier; swaddled in raincoats, we motor north along a waterway ruffled by wind and rainfall and the occasional hippopotamus ear. We're soon delivered into Lake Malombe, a yawning washbowl mistaken for Lake Nyassa (now Lake Malawi) by missionary and explorer David Livingstone when he passed through here in the early 1860s.

"There was a slave trade at Nkhotakota, and he wanted to end that and spread Christianity," Mhone says.

But Nkhotakota lies far north of here, on the western shore of Lake Malawi. If we continued upriver we'd reach it eventually – as Livingstone did, in blessed deliverance from his fraught expedition up the Zambezi and its Shire River tributary. Here on Liwonde's floodplains he sheltered for several nights inside an enormous baobab tree; by day he consulted the people living here and mapped their river's complex topography.

Centuries of incursions, conflict, habitat loss and poaching separate Livingstone's experience from my own; but the

wilderness unspooling beside the boat is slowly returning to its prehistoric glory. African jacanas appear to walk on water as they tiptoe along hippos' submerged heads; pied kingfishers plunge their bayonet beaks into the water; palm swifts float in great veils over the Borassus palms implanted here by Arab slave traders.

"This was their trading route," Mhone says. "They would eat their fruit and discard the seeds."

A SPICY SOLUTION

The nomadism of such expeditions is recalled at Kuthengo Camp, a clutch of tented rooms and open-air living rooms set among baobabs and fever trees on the Shire floodplain. All the luxuries denied Livingstone and those slave traders – steaming bathtub, dreamy bed, private deck, piping hot outdoor shower – are installed here, though I'm separated from the river by a mere strip of canvas. At dusk I watch the sun bleeding into cloud and water; and baboons eyeing me through the tent's flyscreen; they're not so timid after all, it seems. At dawn, Mhone and I drift downriver in the direction from which ▶



Clockwise from main: An elephant in Liwonde National Park; Kuthengo Camp; the rural landscape of Malawi; an African fish eagle in flight; and on safari from Kuthengo Camp. Photos: iStock

Five under-the-radar safari destinations

MATUSADONA NATIONAL PARK, ZIMBABWE

This is the place to go if you want to be alone: just 140 international guests and 1851 domestic visitors were recorded in African Park's 2021 annual report. Lodged between a line of hills and Lake Kariba in the far north of Zimbabwe, Matusadona once supported Africa's highest density of lions; you can still see these big cats here, plus leopards, elephant, buffalo, Burchill's zebra and hundreds of bird species. Plans are afoot to transform the park into Zimbabwe's premier elephant and rhino sanctuary. Check into the tented camp on Fothergill Island, cruise through on a houseboat or stay in a mainland camp (some are now under construction). See benchafrika.com; africanparks.org

GORONGOSA NATIONAL PARK, MOZAMBIQUE

"The place where Noah left his Ark", as this central Mozambican park was known in the 1950s, has staged a remarkable comeback following a 15-year-long civil war which devastated wildlife, infrastructure and communities. The biosphere is flush with life following the establishment of the Gorongosa Restoration Project, a 2008 partnership between the Mozambican government and US-based Carr Foundation. You'll see the usual suspects including elephants, lions and African wild dogs on a safari through mountainous montane forests, dense woodlands and wetlands. See gorongosa.org

TSAVO NATIONAL PARK, KENYA

The world's last "big tuskers" – elephants with tusks so immense they can drag on the ground – inhabit the vast conservation area encompassing Tsavo East and Tsavo West national parks in southern Kenya. Fewer than 30 big tuskers remain; so prized were their ancestors, hunters almost wiped out their gene pool. But opportunities abound for sightings of their kin – Kenya's largest elephant population is found here. See kws.go.ke

LIUWA PLAIN, ZAMBIA

Keeper of one of Africa's oldest conservation histories, this park in western Zambia is host to the continent's second-largest wildebeest migration (after the Maasai Mara/Serengeti) and is a model for the coexistence of humans and wildlife with around 10,000 people living legally living within its boundaries. One lone lioness remained here when African Parks assumed management of the park in 2003; today it is home to a flourishing pride along with cheetahs, hyenas, buffaloes and a staggering 30,000 wildebeest. Claim your bragging rights with a stay at Time + Tide's magnificent King Lewanika Lodge. See africanparks.org

KGALAGADI TRANSFRONTIER PARK

You have to travel far off the beaten path to see South Africa's sporting emblem, the springbok; this antelope inhabits the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, straddling the Northern Cape, Botswana and Namibia to form a vast transnational conservation region. Other mammal species inhabit this Kalahari Desert expanse, including black-maned lions, leopards, cheetahs and giraffes. The Khomani San and Mier communities, owners of Xaus Lodge, interpret the landscape for guests with stargazing excursions, bird-watching and game drives. See sanparks.org; xauslodge.co.za

COVER STORY



From far left: A pair of zebras emerge from the plains; around the campfire at Kuthengo Camp; and a black rhino in Liwonde National Park. Photos: iStock, Frank Weitzer/African Parks

Livingstone had come. The sun punches a pale hole in the blood-drenched sky; hippos bathe in a river of gold, the hair on their ears flaring like tiny coronas; on the riverbanks, open-mouthed crocodiles take big gulps of the rising sun.

"Two fish eagles, two yellow-billed storks, lots of sacred ibis," Mhone says, sweeping his binoculars across the shoreline.

"And listen, listen – here come the elephants."

From behind a curtain of reeds we watch the behemoths dipping their trunks into the shallows: calves, juveniles, mature females, her majesty the matriarch.

The herd is so dense I can't accurately enumerate it. Indeed, human-wildlife conflict arises from such abundance; one of the projects implemented by African Parks in an effort to mitigate human-wildlife conflict is the erection of barriers made with chilli plants, which dissuade chilli-averse elephants from plundering farmers' crops.

The chillies are also harvested and sold as part of the Spicy Farmers project, providing valuable income for communities living on the park's boundaries.

"African Parks' first-liners check when the elephants have breached a community fence, and try to herd them back in again," Mhone says.

So plentiful is Liwonde's elephant population, 263 individuals were recently

translocated to Kasungu National Park in western Malawi, along with species such as buffalo, waterbuck and sable antelope. This followed an earlier mission in which African Parks' president, Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, played an important part: the translocation of 500 elephants from Liwonde and Majete Wildlife Reserve to Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve, located near that slave trading post to which Livingstone was headed.

The redistribution will help to reduce conflict, alleviate pressure on habitat and repopulate depleted reserves so that they might similarly benefit from conservation and tourism.

OF FORESTS AND FLOODPLAINS

Late in the afternoon we set off by road for Chikarongo Plain, dodging an uprooted, phosphorescent-trunked fever tree, skirting baobabs and those noble candelabra euphorbias – "They used to poison fish with its latex," Mhone says – and sjambok trees, whose elongated seedpods were used to whip the slaves Livingstone had hoped to liberate.

The forest bristles with life – "Kudu coming through! Yellow baboon! Warthog piglets!" But it's the floodplain that best showcases this profligate wilderness: with just one sweep of the eye I see elephant, buffalo, sable, waterbuck, impala, hippo,

mongoose, that surly baboon slouching in the soil and, far off, a pair of lions concealed in folds of sedge. These predators are a particularly stirring sight: their pride was relocated here in 2018, a decade after the last lion was seen in Liwonde.

And even as we toast the sunset with Malawian-style gin and tonic, a top-secret operation is underway not far from where we linger: those endangered black rhinos from KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa are being released in one of the largest international translocations of its kind.

Nightfall draws close now, and a chilly gust plucks at our faces as we retrace our path through the mopane forest. Mhone drives while I paint the night with torchlight, willing it to divulge its secrets. My wish is granted: in a culvert up ahead, six pairs of eyes glow like pinprick coals in the darkness.

"Over there! Mhone says, steering the Landcruiser towards the spectre.

They've been waiting for us, it seems, a cheetah and her five cubs – among the first to be born to this new Liwonde dynasty. We cut the light and watch feline eyes smoulder and spotted coats distort in the gloom. There are no keepsakes from this encounter, no Livingstone's diary in which to record its significance. Only this snapshot preserved in my memory: a new generation, reclaiming its primordial territory. **T**

THE DETAILS

FLY

Qantas flies daily to Johannesburg from Sydney and Melbourne. See qantas.com/au. Ethiopian Airways operates regular connections to Blantyre and Lilongwe. See ethiopianairlines.com

STAY

Bench Africa's three-day Kuthengo Liwonde safari costs from \$3195 a person sharing and includes return road transfers from Blantyre or Lilongwe, all meals and local drinks and guided game drives, boat rides and walks. See benchafrika.com

VISIT

African Parks manages 19 parks in 11 countries and plans to increase its portfolio to 30 parks by 2030. See africanparks.org

MORE

See traveller.com.au/malawi visitmalawi.mw

Catherine Marshall was a guest of Bench Africa.

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