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Tour Report

Zambia – Walking in the Heart of Africa

11 to 22 September 2026

Tour Leaders: Chris Breen & Simon Barnes

African elephant



Leopard



Verreaux's eagle owl



Lion



Written and illustrated by Chris Breen

Day 1: London Heathrow to Lusaka ***Friday 11 September 2026***

Chris and Simon were already in Zambia as the group departed for the heart of Africa on their overnight flight.

Day 2: Lusaka to Lukuzi, Tafika, South Luangwa ***Saturday 12 September 2026***

Today was 'landing in Lusaka' day and although everyone was coming in on different flights they were all arriving at around the same time and Chris was at arrivals to meet them all. The last of the three landed at 1445 and following a walk through to the domestic departure terminal, it wasn't long before we were walking out on the tarmac to our Cessna Caravan for the flight to the Luangwa Valley. We waited for a couple of planes to land and one to take off and then it was our turn - airborne a little later than planned at 1555. Just under two hours after taking off from Lusaka we landed as the sun was setting. It was a pleasant enough flight which, once you get out of the surrounds of Lusaka is simply over '*Africa*' – there is almost no evidence of human habitation at all. We were flying over some of Africa's most pristine countryside for the entire duration of the flight. And coming into land over the Luangwa River is an exciting conclusion too as there were plenty of hippos visible on the Luangwa's sandy islands.

The group was met on the ground by Simon who was waiting at the airstrip with Stephen and Amon, two of Tafika's most senior guides. There were a few onlookers as the group got out of the plane who seemed delighted to see us. And, after 10 minutes or so we boarded the two safari vehicles that were there waiting for us, with Simon in one and Chris in the other, and we headed off on our first game-viewing excursion of the trip. Our bags were being transferred directly to Tafika and we would be reunited with them later in the evening. Right now it was important to see some animals and have a sundowner (even though the sun had already gone down!).

Everyone was exhausted after an extended journey but they really appreciated being in an open vehicle and starting to see and hear wildlife. We didn't need to go far for sundowners and made a stop by the river – it was almost dark! – but a beer for some, a G&T or a glass of red wine for others really hit the spot.

We didn't pause for long because we wanted to get to camp, see the rooms and have dinner, but within 15 minutes of continuing our journey back to camp we had a leopard in our sights. Pretty good going as we had only landed just over an hour previously. A 'Luangwa Starter'! Next was bushy-tailed mongoose and then a most friendly pair of thick-tailed bushbabies the like of which I have never seen previously. They didn't climb quickly out of sight or disappear in the thick bush, they stayed and posed! Then it was time to get back to camp for a drink, dinner and bed… but not before one of the vehicles saw a second leopard.



We were greeted on our arrival by John and Carol, Vel, Nick and various of the other camp crew and a few minutes later an elephant came to join us – eating the fruits of a tree that sits between the bar and the toilets.

Other than the presence of the elephant, our delicious dinner passed without significant note and at dessert Chris read a piece about the Luangwa Valley from a book by Brian Jackman published earlier this year. Then finally, it was time for bed.

A nice drink by the river

Nothing is real. Certainly nothing seems so after uncountable hours of aeroplanes and airports. How can you bridge the interstellar gap between travelling and arriving? A nice drink by the river, obviously. And maybe an elephant or two.

It helps if the river is the Luangwa: long, winding and untamed. We drove from the airstrip to the riverbank in the last scraps of daylight, nobody quite sure whose name belonged to whom, including your own.

Stand here. Meet the river, for this is why you're here. Have a nice drink. Mosi, the beer of Zambia? Gin and tonic? Glass of wine? But it comes with a warning: nothing in the world is more inebriating than the river itself: and there on the far side a group of fellow-drinkers was coming to join us.

Five elephants were standing on the bank in a tight grey knot, shoulder to shoulder, for elephants love solidarity. Trunks in the water, the world's best drinking straw: and then trunks to mouths in an elegant curve and a good ten litres of pure Luangwa were going straight to the place where it would do most good.

The sun had gone down, always in a desperate hurry in the tropical latitudes. The elephants were turning darker by the minute. A smallish crocodile, maybe six feet long, was suddenly and belatedly aware of this gigantic company and slithered urgently into the water with a lack of dignity you seldom see in a croc.

The elephants paid him no mind and continued their drinking session, aware of the company across the river but untroubled by it. After all, we humans were in the public bar, they were very much in the saloon, relaxed and confident in their privileges.

Quite dark now. The elephants had gone, off for a little night-time foraging. As for the new arrivals, still in their aeroplane clothes and longing for a shower and bed – well this was just the first taste of a new reality. This was just the first moment of intoxication. And I'm not talking about the Mosi.

Simon Barnes

Day 3: Tafika, South Luangwa ***Sunday 13 September 2026***

This morning the curtains opened! Arriving in the dark yesterday gave little sense of the space and scale of Tafika and its association with the Luangwa River, but this morning it was a very different story. With the number of elephants that hang around Tafika everyone was instructed not to walk between their chalets and the dining room but instead to wait for one of the night watchmen who would be an escort. Our wakeup call was at 0515 and breakfast was at 0545 and it was already plenty light enough to see hippos and crocs, in the river.

As we arrived at the riverside breakfast spot down the bank a short distance from Tafika's dining room there were calling African harrier hawks that had been roosting in the trees near the camp staff quarters. Breakfast complete, everyone was eager to get going and we all piled onto the two vehicles – one driven by Stephen and one by Amon.



We drove slowly out of camp, stopping to look at everything from calling birds to warning squirrels as we went. Lilac-breasted roller, blue waxbill, grey and striated heron, giant kingfisher, wire-tailed and lesser striped swallow, along with bushbuck, impala, and our first (non-camp) elephants. One of the elephants seemed to be a bit feisty so we neither got too close, nor stayed too long with this particular group.

We stopped at Kawere Lagoon to see saddle-billed stork, African jacana, sacred ibis, a spectacular African fish eagle and a distant Egyptian goose, and all of this was before even arriving at the national park. In fact it was an hour or so after we left Tafika that we

finally rolled over the tiny gully that marks the boundary between Tafika's private land and the park.

Lions had been seen the previous afternoon relatively close to the park boundary, and there were a number of white-backed vultures roosting in the trees so we thought it was sensible to drive over and see if the vultures were marking a kill. They weren't, but a radio call from Amon who was fairly close by, told us that he was with the lions. So Stephen drove the short distance towards Amon and before we could see Amon's vehicle we saw four lions walking purposefully towards the shade of a nearby tree. They were followed by two other lions and then Amon's vehicle. The group of six lions was an even split between male and female, and whilst all of the males had manes of sorts, one was clearly older and more mature than the others and he appeared to be courting the older of the three females – who didn't seem especially interested in his advances! At one point one of the females – jumped up and spun around as if she had been stung by a wasp, or perhaps been bitten by fire ants, and then moved off to another less 'problematic' part of the shade.

The lions were doing as lions do in the heat of the day, which is very little, so it was soon time for us to find our own shady place for our mid-morning coffee and cake. From our vantage point in the shade of an mchenja tree we could see impalas, puku and baboons on the grasslands and a yellow-billed kite and a brown snake eagle overhead.



Of course, it was soon time to leave the tranquillity of the shade and head out into the ever-hotter sun to head back to camp – passing the lions on the way. Back at Tafika we were greeted with refreshing ice-cold towels, we had a soft drink, had time for a quick shower and then returned to the dining room for lunch. We weren't the only ones at lunch of course because this is the land of the elephants and whilst we were eating, they were working their way along the trees near the toilet and behind the chalets, carefully picking the tastiest seeds and the most succulent branches to eat.

Lunch over, there was time for an afternoon siesta before compulsory tea and cake at 1530 and then our afternoon game-drive at 1600. Before we set out, we could hear vervet monkeys making a warning call. It was continuous which made us think that there was a good chance there was a leopard nearby. We bundled into the vehicles and set off in the direction of the calls – Stephen and Amon taking slightly different roads but heading the same way. And it wasn't long… we had been gone for no more than ten minutes when a leopard came out from a tree, down the trunk and then sauntered off into the long grass – setting the impalas and pukus off!

The overwhelming scent in this part of the Valley at this time of the year is 'sweet', it is a heady mix of the flowering Natal mahogany trees and the flowering woolly caper bush. It is distinctive.



We crossed into the park and went towards the river because we had seen that a large group of elephants had crossed over from the other side. We wondered if there might be more, which of course there were. Amon stopped a good distance away from where he anticipated the ele's would walk up the bank and we silently watched and waited. They organised themselves into a close-knit group, found a safe place to cross and began walking over. When they got to our side of the river they walked through tall grass feeding as they went, and all the time they had a fork-tailed drongo with them that was feeding on the insects they were disturbing.

The sun was setting and the red fireball in the sky was turned into a long red reflection on the Luangwa. A little further south there was a group of seven lions on the beach – the collection of lions we had seen earlier in the day, but this time with a collared female that is also part of the group.

As we stopped for sundowners overlooking the river and Simon and Amon said they had just seen a bat hawk whizzing past. This wonderful raptor is rarely seen as it is only active for about 40 minutes a day – 20 minutes in the morning and 20 in the evening. It was all so quick they didn't even have the chance to draw anyone's attention to it.

With our sundowners complete we turned on the spotlights and began returning to camp. Genets, white-tailed and bushy-tailed mongooses, giant eagle owl, three-banded courser and the same pair of bush babies that we saw yesterday evening were all on the viewing menu for this evening. And, as we came back into Tafika territory we saw a female leopard walking along the riverbank. At first glance she looked good, but on closer inspection she had a recent, and fairly deep puncture wound on her right side, and a similar wound on her left under her left front 'armpit'. The shape of the wounds suggested that an antelope she was trying to catch had successfully fought back, rather than that she had been in a fight with another cat.

It had been quite a busy night and we finally got back to camp at 2030 (dinner is normally at 2000), and after a necessary lubrication of the throat, we sat down for a delicious dinner at 2100. Over dessert Simon read his story about a close lion encounter and then a few of the group headed to bed. The naughty ones (!) stayed up for a relaxing post-dinner drink and chatted about the day. But, dropping eyelids got the better of us and we finally went to bed- it was going to be an even earlier start tomorrow.

Best of the century

Ah! There were lions on the first morning of the trip and it felt like the first morning of the world. There was Stephen, one of the top guides in the Luangwa Valley, explaining the complex politics of the Nsefu Pride: stuff that makes the intrigues of the Borgias and the Medicis look like a kindergarten spat.

A sleek lioness walked away from the group to seek better shade, for the sun was getting warmer by the minute. She paused and peed copiously. A male with a fine mane followed her and got all romantic. He sniffed the puddle of urine and then tasted it lovingly. I know that doesn't sound romantic, but that's how it always begins: not with eyes meeting across a crowded room but with a sweet and subtle addition to the everyday taste of urine.

Having lapped he opened his mouth about halfway, showing those four ferocious canine teeth, and wrinkled up his nose, his eyes turning inward, going all thoughtful. He was trying to sense if the female was in oestrus and therefore available for one of those long, luxurious leonine honeymoons.

He looked like a connoisseur of fine wine determined to get the last ounce of taste from his mouthful: ah yes! A good little one. Good nose, splendid finish. Can only be... Chateau Margaux '53, best of the century.

The lion didn't spit it out into a silver bucket. He tasted again, just to make sure, but she wasn't ready. Still, never a bad idea to check. Maybe next time. Philosophically, he walked onto the shade and relaxed. Lions have many talents, but relaxation is perhaps their greatest accomplishment.

Simon Barnes

Day 4: Chikoko Tree Camp, South Luangwa ***Monday 14 September 2026***

In order to make the very best use of the light, and our day, our wake-up call was at 0445 (half an hour earlier than yesterday) and breakfast was at 0515. It was quite dark as the early arrivals came for breakfast, but in this part of Africa it doesn't take long for the lights to be 'full on', and by 0545 daylight had taken over. The first group was ready to go so they boarded the vehicle with Chris and Amon and headed off. There were elephants trumpeting and running towards the river – not just one or two but perhaps 30, perhaps 40, perhaps 50. All of them agitated and in a mad panic to get out of the area. Had they had a recent encounter with lions, or with villagers from nearby Mkasanga, or was it simply a 'bad day'? We will never know, but we do know that there were a lot of them and they were in a rush. They trumpeted and ran all the way to the river and continued trumpeting as they crossed and whilst they were on the national park side. It really was quite a commotion!

As we drove along the riverbank Amon spotted the deep red wings of purple-crested turaco – a first for the trip, then we were looking at red-necked spurfowl, and following a radio call from Nick we change our direction slightly as the group of lions that we had seen yesterday were close by so we went to see them in the peachy morning light. These lions really aren't the most active of cats, and whilst it wasn't even 0700, and it certainly wasn't hot, by looking at the lions you would be forgiven for thinking that it was the hottest day of the world. They were flat out, sound asleep, and weren't going to be disturbed by anyone or anything.



Amon and Chris suggested that it would be good to try to find Mutima, one of the very well-known leopards in the area, and one of the stars of the BBC's 'Kingdom' programme that was recently shown on BBC1 in the UK. But because she has a large and fairly elongated territory we may have quite a bit of driving to do in order to see her. The idea was mooted to the group and everyone agreed that it was a good idea to at least give it a go. Well, it was a fairly long drive, the day was getting significantly warmer and we were already quite a long way south before we started to hear both impala and puku calling. We searched for five or ten minutes, all the time looking where the antelope were looking and not finding her, but she was given away by a giraffe that was staring almost directly at her as she lay out on the large horizontal branch high in a tree. She was high enough up that the antelope were unlikely to have seen her which suggested that she has just walked along the branch drawing herself to their attention. We were with Mutima for a lovely long period of time- 30 minutes plus – as she rested, adjusted her position, rested again.



Having had our fill – without question the best leopard sighting of the trip so far – we moved off and found somewhere for a shady coffee after which we began heading back to Tafika. By now it really was pretty hot but at Kawere Lagoon we stopped for a pair of fish eagles (one of which was eating) and as we left the lagoon, we came across a huge herd of buffalo 500 or more strong that were heading in the direction of the lagoon itself.

[The forthcoming days are only representative of what Chris and his group saw during the course of their safari from Chikoko Tree Camp as Simon was based at Big Lagoon.]

We had a quick pitstop at Tafika for a Malawi shandy and a freshen up and then drove the 20 minutes to the crossing point to the north of Tafika. After a short walk across the sandy beach to the riverside three of the group got into a canoe and were paddled across, the second small group followed on a few minutes later. Bazwell was waiting with a vehicle to load everyone up and drive the 25 minutes into Chikoko. We were greeted by Kelvin and the team who took our cameras and bags and walked us the final few minutes into camp. No sooner had we arrived when Amon suggested we walk upstairs to the 'top deck' as a small group of Cookson's wildebeest were drinking from a nearby waterhole. A new mammal for the safari.

There was time to freshen up before a delicious 3-course lunch after which there were a couple of hours of downtime before tea at 1530. At tea, from the top deck, we were able to see a lion in the distance so as soon as tea was finished Amon did a 'walking safety' briefing and we went in the direction of the lion – European bee-eaters calling overhead. Well, one lion turned into three – two females that moved off as soon as they saw us, and a beautiful big, ginger-maned male that wasn't especially happy about us but who stayed to watch us (much as we were watching him!). We were with him from a distance of 40-50 metres for half an hour or more and then decided to change our position to get a different view of him. We picked up the two females again too. We continued looping back round from where we had come and then saw six lions – including the two females from earlier, together with a couple of sub adults. Seeing lions whilst on foot, and at eye level, with no vehicle nearby is one of the greatest treats that a walking safari can hold and here we were on the second full day of the safari having exactly that experience.



We continued looping round and looked at a few of the birds on the nearby watery channel – that included a male painted snipe – and then returned to camp for a well-earned sundowner a mere 1.5 kilometres of 'exercise' further on.

Sundowners by the fire – G&T, beer and wine – was followed by yet another wonderful 3-course dinner, a bedtime story by Chris and then an 'early to bed'.

Everyone agreed that it had been a cracking day on safari.

Buffalo soldiers

There was still a little water in Big Lagoon: and at Big Lagoon Bush Camp it was time for cup of tea. With it came a slice of cake and a sight of such wonder and splendour that we could hardly speak. We were there to witness a massive and uncompromising celebration of togetherness.

The lagoon stretched away for a good mile to our left: and on it was a bold black line. Moving in our direction. Buffalos.

They were advancing on a front 40 buffs wide: ahead of them all was a comparatively slight, rather careworn dark brown pathfinder cow. It was as if she was towing a black wall of bulls. They too believed it was time for refreshment.

The first buffalos reached what was left of the water by quarter to four; an hour later they were still arriving. It was an astonishing revelation of bio-abundance: and also of biomass. So many and so big: so much muscle, so many well-armed heads, so much blood flowing in all those veins: and so much thirst.

Rhys, being a scientist and aware that God dwells in the details, counted 1,300 of them: grunting bulls, lowing cows and bleating calves. The dust of their arrival hung above their heads like smoke. Their feet squelched in the mud and splashed in the water. The fine farmyard of their rich presence filled the air. And still they came.

Safety in numbers is a fine principle, especially for the calves that stay in the middle. Here was a sense of solidarity: of mutual reliance: 2,600 eyes. Not quite as many horns, for the calves had yet to develop them, and among the adults, the odd horn occasionally gets knocked off by the stresses of life. But you get the idea.

The Luangwa Valley is full of lions but not a single one of them would dare to approach a herd like this: alert, awake and shoulder to shoulder to shoulder. Stick together then: drink, rest and then move on to better grazing. Rhys summed up: "If every buffalo drank 10 litres the level of the lagoon will have dropped 22 centimetres." You can't argue with facts like that.

Simon Barnes

Day 5: Chikoko Tree Camp, South Luangwa ***Tuesday 15 September 2026***

It's one thing knowing that there are lions out on the plain, it's quite another being woken up every 15 or 20 minutes by lions calling either individually or calling to one another. They were very close by last night and from about 0230 in the morning they were calling loudly and repeatedly. An 0500 wake-up was the order of the day today, with breakfast by the fire and freshly cooked toast over open mopane coals at 0530. It was actually a cooler morning than we've had before so being by the fire with a hot cup of tea or coffee was very welcome!

Everyone was ready to go shortly before 0600 and once Pitson our scout arrived and Justin was there with his backpack of tea, coffee and cold water we headed out of camp. Our first pause to look at wildlife was in actual fact only 20 metres or so further on from where we began our walk and Amon was pointing out the traps made by ant lions (one of the small five).

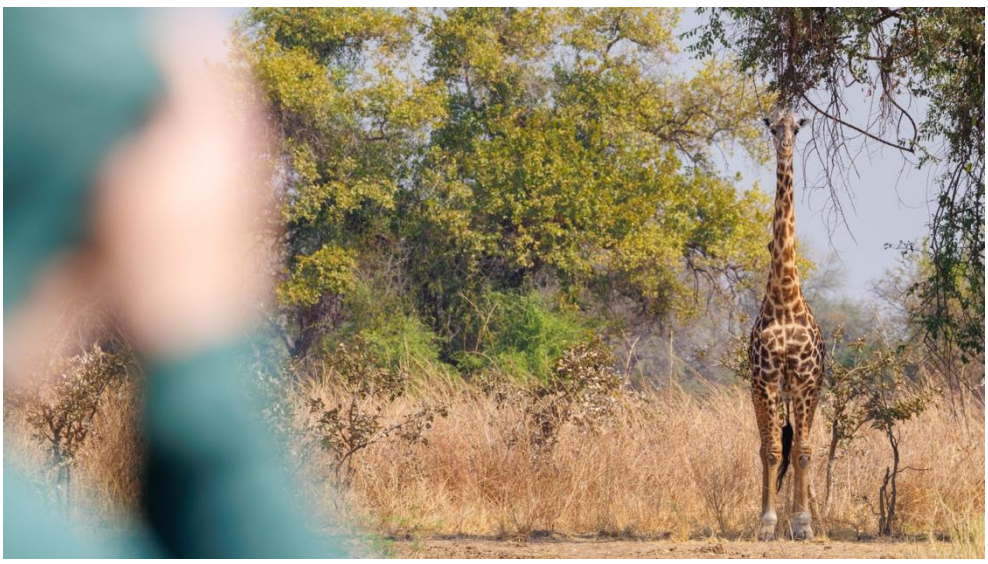
A short distance further on we stopped to look at an impala midden and then a bit further on from that a civet midden. Then we went down to 'the river' although over the course of the last rains what was the main Luangwa River is now a drying oxbow lagoon because the Luangwa has created a shorter course. We looked at the fried eggplant (the scientific name for which is *Oncoba spinoza*) and Amon was telling us that as a youngster he would go out into the bush at this time of year together with his friends and find the ripened fruits of the plant in order to take them home and mix them with his maize meal for dinner. We also looked at purple pan weed, squeezed the flowers and smelt what some people thought was the scent of lavender and others felt was in actual fact the smell of wild sage.

A little further on there were two waterbuck (the first waterbuck we've seen on the trip so far) one female and one very young male that was just beginning to develop horns, and then we stopped at the sausage tree and we spoke about how the sausage tree is really the tree of life in the Luangwa Valley. The beautiful flowers (once thought to be bat-pollinated but now known not to be in the Luangwa Valley at least) are filled with a sweet nectar in the early mornings that the baboons enjoy drinking, and then once the flowers have fallen the impala will come past the tree and eat them. The giraffe enjoy eating the young green sausage flowers, and as hippos' preferred grasses become harder and harder to find late in the dry season, they come to feed on the fallen sausage fruits.



Next it was porcupine droppings, and then hippo droppings on the hippo highway which we chatted about and how the use of these dropping posts was in fact to create markers for male hippos to ensure that not only did they go the right way and end up in the right place in the river, but that they don't go the wrong way and end up having a big fight with the wrong group in the river. We saw a marula tree and looked at the fruit and then heard carmine bee-eaters calling so we went down to the nearby river bank which was home to a beautiful colony. How many there were it's almost impossible to say, but there were 100s at the very least so we spent some time observing, photographing and enjoying the beautiful spectacle of these remarkably colourful pink, blue, and green birds flying over the river and hawking insects before returning to their nests in the sandbank.

In the background we could hear lions calling but they were distant and we didn't feel the need to go and find them. Anyway, there was a coffee stop calling (!) on what Amon refers to as Chikoko Paradise - a beautiful large and flat wilderness area that still has a narrow channel of water and has outlying winterthorn trees the shade from which was being used by impala and baboons to shelter from the sun.



From our shady outlook we were able to count seven mammal species – waterbuck, giraffe, warthog, puku, zebra, impala and baboon. There was also an African harrier hawk perched in a tree almost directly opposite where we were sitting.

We gathered our cameras and binoculars and continued our walk ,working our way through some long grass in order to get a better view of the inquisitive tall male giraffe that was staring in our direction. There was a young marshal eagle in the air as well as hooded and white-backed vulture, and a pair of fish eagles, one fully grown adult and one juvenile.

We continued and Amon pointed out a sleeping male lion in the shade of a small bush just ahead of where we were. It was the same male lion we had seen yesterday afternoon. It wasn't disturbed at all and was completely unaware of our presence, not moving a muscle as we slowly and quietly walked past at a distance

of about 50 metres. We walked past another lagoon and as we approached a large male elephant appeared from the other end of the lagoon. He paused at the water and took a drink and then sprayed himself liberally with a combination of water and mud. He went down on his front knees and appeared to bury his head in the mud. This was obviously nice and cool and soothing so then folded his back legs and rolled down so the entire left-hand side of his body was in the muddy wallow. Observing from the shade we must have been there for 30 minutes or more. There was a troop of baboons near the elephant and we counted nine hamerkops that were presumably feeding on frogs and other goodies that had been disturbed by the elephant.

By now it was getting pretty hot so we made our way across the parched dry plain - where there was a pair of roan antelope and 20 or 30 zebra - back to camp where we had a welcome and refreshing cold drink before lunch. Lunch was at 12 after which there was plenty of time to siesta and get ready for this afternoon's walking safari.

Afternoon tea on the deck overlooking the plain is a lovely way to begin the second activity of the day. Over tea we watched zebras coming to drink and a big male elephant begin to dismantle a rather large woolly caper bush. With tea and cake complete it was time to head off with Pitson our scout, Amon, and Jaston who brings up the rear. The plan was to head north and wend our way through the riverine forest with a view to seeing if we could find Pel's fishing owl. In that quest we were unsuccessful, but we saw a sycamore (strangler) fig, looked at civet middens and got some lovely sightings of both puku and impala. To be fair it was a pretty quiet afternoon walk, but no less enjoyable as a result. The light was magical, the temperature almost perfect and… we were on foot in the Luangwa.

We arrived back at camp at about 1745 and enjoyed a couple of pre-dinner drinks. Over another excellent dinner we chatted about a multitude of things (almost all Zambia related) and by 2100 it was time to retire – tomorrow is 'transferring camps – there's another adventure ahead' day ☺.

An untidy sort of place

How messy! When you're not looking around for elephants in the Luangwa Valley in Zambia – always make a generous loop around them – and lions – why not follow them? – you're likely to be a little bemused by the sheer messiness of the bush.

The bushes look uncared for, with most of the leaves up to about three feet from the ground removed. There are fallen sprigs and ripped off branches lying around any old how. There are trees stumps standing up, often with rotting bits of tree all around them.

And there's shit everywhere. No one cleans it up. Massive great loaves left all over the place by the elephants, neat little piles of pellets from the impalas, generous scatterings from hippos and here, as we pass through the place where a herd of buffalos rested up for the night, a great farmyard of cowpats.

We are accustomed to think of a nice outdoor place as a garden or a park: places where a discreet human hand has set the landscape off to its best advantage: the lawnmower, the secateurs and the wheelbarrow are out of sight but their evidence is everywhere, giving us a reassuring feeling of nature totally under control.

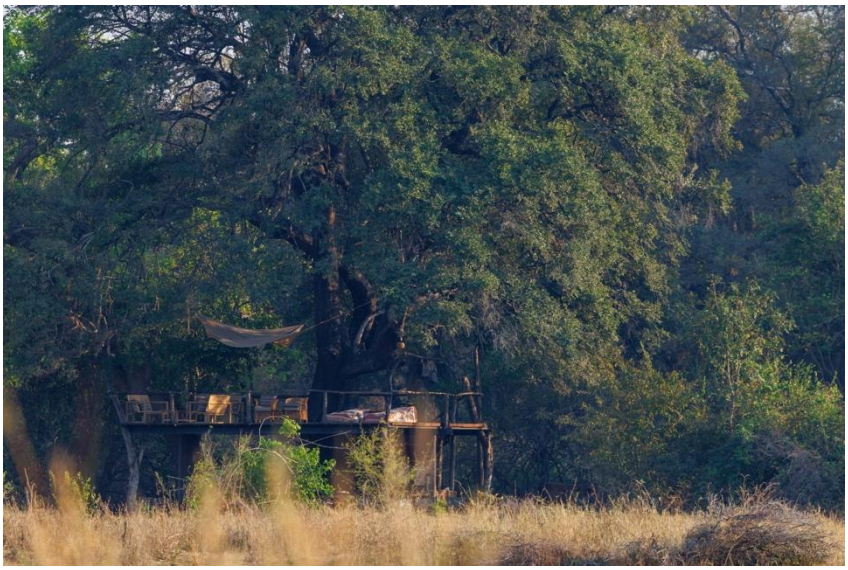
But when you have a few miles in your boots from foot safaris in the Valley you begin to see the world in a different way. Untidiness is life. You have left control behind and strayed into the real. The bushes and the trees are food, and there is shit everywhere because everywhere there are large mammals. These sandy beans come from aardvarks, these white turds from hyenas and that great mound was made by a civet.

And sorry about the paths. They're not swept and tidy: instead, they're covered in footprints: these soup-plates were made by an elephant, the giant twin-sugared almonds by giraffes, and that massive pussy-paw belongs to a male lion. Yes indeed, it really is the most frightful mess. It's called life: life in all its diversity and abundance.

Simon Barnes

Day 6: Chikoko Tree Camp South Luangwa ***Wednesday 16 September 2026***

Today is transfer day and that means that after our relaxing breakfast by the fire we are walking out to meet the other group somewhere in the bush. It had been another busy night for the lions nearby and everyone's sleep had been disturbed but once again, it was a good disturbance! It was another cool morning and despite the interruptions everyone arrived at breakfast bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.



We began by walking west to get to a small lagoon that had some of the waterbirds on it – four young saddle-billed storks, spoonbills, a couple of hamerkops and a wood sandpiper - but we had to walk through some thickets in order to get there. As we were walking we could hear impalas complaining and then guineafowl and we made the assumption that there was possibly either lion or leopard nearby. A short walk further on and sure enough there was a female lion walking up from the water at the lagoon – this was the collared female that we had seen yesterday and the day before (and possibly one of the noisy ones from last night!). She was closely followed by another female that stopped and lay down in the magical morning light. We stopped 50 metres away and had our fill of binocular and camera views.

We carried on our walk to Chikoko Paradise, the light was still magnificent, and we spent time looking at puku, impala, waterbuck and three elephants walking across the plain whilst a pair of saddle-billed storks came into land. Looking in the other direction away from the plain we could see a solitary giraffe looking in our direction from his lofty view of the world. It was clear that he could see us from quite a distance. Between us and the giraffe there were some very large trees and there was a significantly sized stump at the base of one of them on which a large baboon (presumably a male) was sitting.



From here we walked almost non-stop to the place where we would have tea and coffee and meet the other group. We exchanged stories of the past couple of days and had our tea and coffee. There were some nice things to see in our tea break, including a pair of fish eagles in a nearby tree, baboons of all sizes playing

near the water, a black-headed heron, and a family of elephants that came to drink. At a certain point we said it was time to move on and the group that had been at Big Lagoon went with Chris and Amon to Chikoko and Chris's group from Chikoko went with Simon and Stephen across to Big Lagoon.

Passing the river on the way to Chikoko there was a kudu hiding in the tall grass. There were also ground hornbills and a pied kingfisher. Further on back at Paradise we saw a large group of buffalo - almost certainly the group that Stephen and Simon had seen the previous day at Big Lagoon. This was a huge herd of around 1,200 to 1,300 animals. We paused in the shade of a tree in a cooling breeze to watch them. In addition to the buffalos, we could see elephants on the plain, zebra, impala, puku, warthog… and saddle-billed stork circling overhead.

It was hot now, but there were two more treats for us before we arrived at Chikoko – firstly a young brown snake eagle circling on a thermal, and finally a distant lion sitting near the lagoon – just where we left him earlier this morning.



At camp there was time for a refreshment before everyone went to their rooms and cooled off. And as per the daily plan, a delicious lunch was served at noon and siesta-time followed.

We had tea on the top deck overlooking the plain and the waterhole and then gathered ourselves together for our short afternoon walk. To me, the afternoon walk is arguably the most enjoyable because for the two hours of the walk the light is getting continuously better and the temperature is getting cooler. We headed west as this was where we had seen a couple of lions earlier in the day with the other group and we were hoping that they would still be there – it had been a hot day and the likelihood was that they had just holed up under a shady bush for the day. And we were right. One of the adult females was lying under a mopane tree – as we got a bit closer, she opened her eyes raised her head, saw it was us and flopped back down to sleep. Under a nearby bush was the collared female who was a little bit more curious but spent quite a bit of time upside down showing us her creamy-white tummy with her legs in the air. Behind her was the ginger-maned male sound asleep under a woolly caper bush. We were with them for 30 minutes or more and they weren't even slightly concerned about us, and when the time came, we turned and went back in the direction that we had come, leaving them exactly as we found them.

A couple of the group were keen to spend some time looking at zebra so we walked out to the plain where there was a group of 30 or so. Lovely positive black and white stripes unlike some of their cousins that show a shadow stripe, and markings that not only go down to their ankles but under their bellies. Are these the most beautiful zebra of them all?

In the distance the buffalo were beginning to make their way onto the fringes of the plain while warthogs, puku, impala, vervet monkey were already feeding there.

A very dark coloured Wahlberg's eagle swept overhead which prompted a discussion about both Wahlberg himself and Verreaux – Chris had some notes on them both and was able to read them out in situ which provided an interesting distraction!

And then it was back to camp for a sundowner, shower and dinner before everyone peeled off for bed… we have another early start tomorrow!

After you, sir

Elephants have priority. Theirs is the right of way in all circumstances. Politeness to elephants – politeness to the point of deference – is the first rule of walking in the Luangwa Valley. Here's an important truth about elephants: they're much bigger when you're on foot.

It had been a nice walk and a nice cup of tea in a nice glade. Now it was time to head back to Big Lagoon Bush Camp, but there was an elephant in the way. This was not exactly a surprise: there are elephants around an awful lot of corners and every single one of them demands respect.

It was a mature bull in his full strength. He had been feeding in that relaxed but unceasing way that elephants have, but he caught wind of us and that unsettled him. That was mostly because it was a day of swirling wind. An elephant's sense of smell is about twice as good as that of a dog and many times better than our own: he could whiff us but it bothered him that he could pinpoint us.

No drama. Felix the scout put himself between us and the elephant, his rifle casual in his hand, not required for immediate use. Stephen the guide led us out. And well, that was that really. We put a gully between ourselves and the elephant and – since elephants are not great at leaping gullies – we were all right. We walked on home.

But just that hint of excitement – well, it's not like taking a walk on Streatham Common, is it? And the majesty of an elephant is always good to see, even – or perhaps especially – when your heart is working a little harder than usual.

Walking in the bush is beautiful and revealing and filled with long moments of peace. Every now and then it delivers a peak experience of searing wonder. And there's always that little whiff of danger. Look at it as a bloody Mary. The peace is the tomato juice, the peak experiences are the vodka: but it's the Tabasco that pulls it all together. The Tabasco that comes from the whiff of danger and the eternal need to show deference to elephants.

Simon Barnes

Day 7: Chikoko Tree Camp, South Luangwa ***Thursday 17 September 2026***

It was a beautiful morning – whenever isn't it? And from the dining area we could just see a group of buffalo drinking from the small waterhole to the west of camp. The light was magical.

We began our walk heading in that direction and it wasn't long before we caught sight of the lions that were sitting in the tall grass nearby looking towards the waterhole. Unfortunately, they heard our voices even though we were speaking very softly, and after ten minutes or so they got up and moved off.

The smell of the Valley at this time of the year is a heady combination of wild gardenia, woolly caper bush and Natal mahogany, all of which are in flower right now. Stopping under a sausage tree (though careful not to be under any sausages) we discussed how they are pollinated; we looked the tracks of spotted hyenas and elephant shrews and then came to a carmine bee-eater colony lit perfectly by the early morning sun.

Our next stop was for tea and cake at Paradise Plain before arriving back at camp at around 1030.



Crikey, lunchtime was more than just the normal festival of food… From the dining area it is possible to see a waterhole that is used by all of the animals in the area. As we were settling down for lunch the large herd of buffalo (1,000+) was coming to the waterhole. A couple of us went to the deck above the dining area to watch them. Within a couple of minutes there was a growling sound and some of the buffalo at the waterhole began to turn away from the water and move back in the direction they had come. They were moving quickly. The growling (and now moaning) continued, and Amon caught sight of a lioness that was coming from the bushes just under room 3, and then a second one appeared from the bushes in front of room 2. With binoculars it was possible to see a lioness leap onto the back of a fully-grown buffalo and the buffalo start to fall. Amon called for everyone to run to room 2 to watch the action from there. Not everyone wanted to come.

We climbed the stairs in room 2 and realised that room 3 was going to be better so we changed our tactics and went there instead. As we arrived, we could see that not just one buffalo, but two were on the ground. An adult buffalo that was being smothered at the front by the male lion, and being held down at the back by a female. And a young buffalo that was in the death grip of the collared lioness and not moving. The two buffalo were almost certainly mother and young – the mother trying to protect and help the young, but to no avail. The lions were panting heavily – they had hunted in the absolute heat of the day – one of them was clearly limping badly as she retreated to the shade of a nearby bush. The damage was on the rear left leg – which was presumably punctured by the buffalo attempting to defend itself.

We returned to the dining area for lunch – burger and chips, and rather easier to catch than a buffalo! After lunch, from the dining room deck we could see two of the females in the shade near to where they brought down the mother, and overlooking the carcass, and another female overlooking the young. The male had gone to sit by the edge of the lagoon, presumably after having had a drink, to rest and recover before eating when the sun and the heat were lower.



At tea the lions were still visible from the decking, but only one of the buffalo was visible. After tea (and compulsory cake) we set off for our walk in the opposite direction to the lions, walking past the kitchen and through the riverine woodland along the Chikoko River channel. The plan was to try to find an owl or two because the trees are great habitat for various owl species and we had heard one or two calling over the course of the past couple of days.

Whilst we were largely unsuccessful in that particular quest the bush held other delights for us as it always does. A bearded woodpecker for example that was obviously in a hole in a tree and probably nesting, and then a barred owlet calling which we tried to attract by playing its call… to no avail! We then saw a small flock of white-crested helmet-shrikes flying away but we thought we would try to attract them back by playing the call of a pearl-spotted owlet and that worked a treat. But it also attracted ashy flycatcher and African golden oriole too. By now the light was spectacular – a rosy-red sheen was being projected onto almost everything – and from the bank of the dry Chikoko River we could see a group of banded mongooses foraging in the leaf litter below. We counted ten, then 12, then 16 and then they got wind of us and 20 or more went charging up the opposite bank. It was the best view any of us had had of them on the trip.

It was now around 1720 and we wanted to get over to where we assumed the lions were still feeding but we were distracted by a pearl-spotted owlet that we saw in a nearby mopane tree.



The lions were where we were expecting them to be – a couple of hyenas moved away as we arrived 100 metres or so from the kill. The lions were making loud growling noises to begin with – it was difficult to tell if these were aimed at us - but they obviously weren't going to abandon their hard won kill for a small group of bi-peds, so while a couple of the females didn't let us out of their sight, the others carried on eating. The ones that were closely watching were continually growling and flicking their tails. Their faces were filthy as they had been tearing at the carcass and the youngsters' faces were red with blood. The big ginger-maned male was sitting 20 metres away from the rest of the group overlooking the entire scene presumably having already had his fill.

At 1755 the light was fading enough that the sensible thing to do was to return to camp and have a sundowner. And during our sundowner a bat hawk flew at low level directly overhead. What a way to end the day's wildlife viewing!

Going to the dogs

We were discussing the fascinating topic of the greatest beer of your life when we were interrupted by a fit of giggling: repeated loud bursts of hilarity on the far side of Big Lagoon. We were having a jolly time round the dinner table at Big Lagoon Bush Camp, but our neighbours seemed to be doing even better.

They were hyenas, of course. Hyenas are famous for laughing but they communicate across the distances with far-carrying whoops. It's one of great sounds of the African night and it means "I'm here" – and always implying the question "where are you?"

The giggling is reserved for moments of high excitement: and hyenas get excited when there's a mass feed in progress: a slash-and-swallow banquet. Sometimes it's something they've killed for themselves, sometimes they've stolen. Both experiences seem equally hilarious.

We went for a walk the following morning: all very peaceful and rich, with a giraffe on slightly higher ground looking a good 30 feet tall. And suddenly there were dogs.

African hunting dogs, in shades of black and tan and white: distant but quite unmistakable: a wagging tail, wafting like a feather above the grass, a pair of ears like radar-trackers, and then a whole dog briefly in sight in that loping stride they can keep up for hours. There's something wildly exuberant about wild dogs: they always seem to be having the best time, utterly delighted to be in such good company in such a fine place as the Luangwa Valley.

And then they were gone and we were walking on to the river to the sound of hippos and carmine bee-eaters. The dogs had been pretty restless: probably they killed last night but lost their prize to the clan of gigglers. So it goes. They're better in the daylight than most hunters and would be looking for something delicious for breakfast.

It was evening, back in camp, time for sundowners: drinks all round. The dogs had pleased us all very much. David had wanted all his life to see wild dogs, and this brief morning encounter had gone fathoms deep: the

waving tails, the vast ears, the graceful lope, the perpetual optimism.

"You know what we were saying about the best beer of your life?" David said. He held up his bottle of Mosi. "This is mine."

Simon Barnes

Day 8: Takwela, North Luangwa ***Friday 18 September 2026***

As they all tend to be, today was a slightly different day – we were heading from the bush camps in South Luangwa, to those in North Luangwa and there were some serious logistics required! Wake-up at Chikoko was at 0500 and another light, but delicious, breakfast was waiting for us at 0530. By breakfast everyone had got their bags ready and there was time for a shortened walk before leaving Chikoko.

And, I know I have said it before (many times) but… what a day it turned out to be!

A couple of us jumped up at breakfast because there were some bee-eaters overhead which turned out to be European bee-eaters. We started our walk a bit later than normal but only by 15 minutes or so and we walked out in a westerly direction to see the lions and vultures on or near the kills that we had identified yesterday. In fact as we arrived at the kill there were between 40 and 50 vultures on what remained of the carcass in brackets the vultures were mostly white backed and hooded vultures we spent a little time looking at the kill site which in itself was fascinating and right in the middle of an open stretch of grasslandland that we use for our walking safari. Before we began to walk to the kill site, we could see other animals walking past the buffalo kill which was a bit surprising because the lions were still lying nearby.

We walked along the edge of the Chikoko River channel and came across two sunbirds, both white-bellied sunbird and scarlet-chested sunbird and then we saw a tawny-flanked prinia. There was also brown-hooded kingfisher, Holub's golden weaver and collared sunbird nearby.

We stopped in a shady glade and had our tea and coffee and biscuits on the Chikoko River itself. As we began walking again – directly back to camp – we saw 20 roan antelope apparently coming to the water to drink, then there was a pause of a few minutes, and then there were 10 more. More than I have seen for many years! As we approached camp we could see three lions resting under a bush – there was no need for us to say 'hi' to these guys as we had seen them earlier, so we headed straight past them. They didn't bat an eyelid.

Back at camp there was time for a refreshing drink before we jumped into the vehicle for the transfer to the crossing point – which produced not only a black-shouldered kite but also a western band snake eagle with a snake! A short canoe ride, and another vehicle transfer and we were at the airstrip ready for our flight to Mwaleshi.



Our pilot Xander was waiting at the airstrip for us and while Simon and Chris were heading north in one plane, the group of four that came with Chris were in another. Chris and Simon went to their respective camps for lunch with each mini group before then embarking on an afternoon activity.

From Takwela, the afternoon activity was a roaring success our guide Alex first boated us across the river before some of the group spent a little bit of time photographing carmine bee-eaters and then we headed off to look at a pair

of spotted hyenas that was keeping cool by sleeping in the watery rivulets of the Mwaleshi river. We then drove up the course of the Luangwa River Lodge and encountered a number of groups of antelope and zebra but we stopped by an elephant crossing point because there was a male elephant coming from the other side of the river in order to cross, which he did. Our sundowners stop was in beautiful warm sunlight and as the evening got darker we switched on the spotlight in order to identify some of the night mammals.



We saw plenty more elephants, but we were more interested in seeing Verreaux's eagle owl with its sunburnt eyelids, large spotted genet and finally a beautiful sighting of a bushy-tailed mongoose. It was a fabulous way to end what has been a fantastic day.

Back at camp we had a sundowner drink followed by a delicious dinner and then it was time for bed. Another exceptional day.

Shall we go in?

There are certain choices that define us, for better or for worse. Perhaps they're not even choices: simply the inevitable result of being the kind of people we are. Shall we have another drink? Shall we go home now? Shall I ask her in? Or him? Or as our guide Moffat asked: shall we go in?

Getting close to lions in a vehicle is a powerful experience all right, but getting within the same postcode as lions on foot is on an entirely different scale. And there we were, in the long grass, and within it was an unknown number of lions – and we were walking.

It was then that Moffat asked his eternal question. "I'm prepared to go in, if you are. But if not, we could loop round to the vehicle, come back and look for the lions that way."

The question hung in the air for less than a second before there was hearty agreement among our guests: the loop and vehicle option had more appeal. Well, I'm more of a goer-inner myself and if you want to say "more fool you" I won't contradict. I've been lion-daft since I first encountered them in the Luangwa Valley 37 years ago.

Walk in and the lions would scatter. Probably. Rather grumpily, but unlike elephants and hippos and lone buffalos, a pride of lions is inclined to back off. I've seen them do it. But no matter: we looped. That turned out to be the right decision, so perhaps I'd keep quiet about going in.

We drove carefully and tactfully back to the lions. The grass was head-high and lion-coloured, filled with enigmatic lion-coloured shapes shifting about restlessly. Lions are masters and mistresses of relaxation, but this lot were up to something: and when a pride of lions is up to something it's likely to involve hunger.

And it was a symphony of gold: golden beasts in golden grass, fleeting, subtle, supple shapes, never quite sure who was who or how many there were: a golden mystery of lions. But eventually they emerged in the open and walked halfway to the river. There were ten of them, the entire Kayuya Pride minus their two alpha males, who presumably had business elsewhere. There they stretched out to think things over. Not that hungry after all. Just peckish.

We stayed with the lions for a good hour: far more than we would have had 'going I'n. But when you go in, well, there's always that little moment of intimacy...

Simon Barnes

Day 9: Takwela, North Luangwa ***Saturday 19 September 2026***

Is it fair to start today by saying "It's just another day in paradise?" I'm not sure, but it was.

We gathered at breakfast as we do every morning. At Takwela which faces due north, the Luangwa River is in front of camp, the confluence of the Mwaleshi River is immediately in front of camp, and the sun comes up to our right and turns the river a pinkish hue.



After breakfast we hopped on the boat for a (very) short ride to the sandbank opposite so that a few of the group could photograph the small carmine colony there. It was the beginning of a beautiful Zambian day and the scent of Natal mahogany trees was hanging in the air. Overhead were our first knob-billed ducks and downstream along the Luangwa were striated herons, and three species of kingfisher – pied, giant and brown-hooded. We made our way along the bank to the vehicle and headed upstream along the Mwaleshi looking at puku and their attendant cattle egrets.

We had a relatively quiet, but lovely, drive seeing puku, impala, waterbuck, elephants and kudu, warthogs and hippos before driving into the winterthorn grove where the other half of our group had just arrived and the camp teams were setting up a beautiful brunch for us. Notable was our dessert which was (I thought) described to me as "Pears in AvGas" [AvGas is aviation fuel!], but actually turned out to be 'pears in Nescafe'. It was delicious!



Following lunch, we drove back to camp and for most of the group this meant having a siesta (which of course was followed by tea and compulsory cake).

The light as we headed out of camp for our afternoon drive was 'to die for' and the four buffalo that we saw along the Mwaleshi River, and the seven kudu on the opposite side of the Luangwa looked even more magnificent than ever as a result.

We stopped for sundowners on a sweeping bend of the Luangwa in fairly close proximity to a couple of large crocs that slithered into the river when they caught our scent or our vibrations. And our return to camp after dark produced a couple of very nice genets, the best sighting of a bushbaby of the whole trip, and the same Pel's fishing owl that we saw yesterday evening sat on the very same post – they are clearly creatures of habit!

Back at camp there was time for a drink before a stir-fry dinner and drinks by the fire.

Holy shit!

There are times when a small – well, smallish – scattering of faeces inspires awe to the point of reverence. That's how it was in North Luangwa National Park when a nice walk through the bush was all lit up with a thousand joys as we came across a little heap of holiness.

Though the heap in question had been spread about rather: its maker had worked hard to spread it about while infusing a pair of big back feet on them with personal odour. The next few hundred steps would tell the rest of the world precisely who had been walking here.

It was a rhino. A black rhino. A species that went extinct in the Luangwa Valley in the 1980s because of the poachers. But in 2003 they made an extraordinary return: back to the North Park, where you get very few visitors and the nearest human settlements are conveniently distant.

There were five pioneers, flown in from elsewhere. More were added in a series of small groups. These days the rhinos are increasing their population all by themselves: the organisers tell us cagily that there are between 50 and 100. And – please touch wood – there has been no poaching since the scheme began.

I've been coming to this valley since 1989 and I've never seen a rhino here. Knowing they're around is what matters, and seeing this irrefragable evidence of their existence goes very deep. Extinction itself can work backwards.

There's a stout low-slung rhino fence to keep the population in a confined space – a space that's small only in comparison with the valley itself. Within it you sometimes come across the signs they leave behind.

This heap of trampled shit gave a rather thoughtful tinge to the rest of the morning's walk. It made us all vividly aware of the fragility of life – and also of its quite extraordinary resilience. On the floor of this valley vast extinct beasts are swaggering about at their ease. I'd keep a sharp look out if I were you.

Simon Barnes

Day 10: North Luangwa & Tafika, South Luangwa ***Sunday 20 September 2026***

Yet another lovely start to the day with the smell of Natal mahogany hanging in the air. We went across the river by boat after breakfast and Alex decided that we would go on the tracks upstream from Takwela with a view to seeing if we could find elephants as there are one or two significant elephant crossing places. The drive began uneventfully enough although Alex saw tracks of a large male leopard on the road. We had some very good sightings of small groups of kudu both on our side of the river and also in beautiful light on the other side of the river.



We saw open-billed storks, kingfishers, fish eagles and bee-eaters, but then we heard an African harrier hawk calling. They make a fairly pitiful, plaintive call and we watched an adult harrier hawk mobbing (or at least attempting to mob) a Verreaux's eagle owl on a branch a short distance in front of the vehicle. The hawk seemed to be very unhappy about the owl, and the owl didn't seem even slightly bothered! That the hawk didn't really want to move away suggested that it may have had a nest nearby.

Our morning tea stop was at the exceptionally beautiful Namwela Lagoon where we were greeted by a pair of male kudu, three painted snipe, more openbills and a small collection of yellow-billed egrets.

As we returned to camp we noted the presence of some especially large crocodiles at one point, together with a pair of little sparrowhawks, some yellow-billed kites and an exceptionally brief sighting of a big male leopard (which neither Chris nor Alex saw as they were too low in the front seats!).



Then it was back to camp for lunch and a fairly complicated set of transfer arrangements that would eventually get everyone back down to Tafika which, after six nights in remote bush camps felt more like the city of London on arrival than the beautiful safari lodge that it really is. How privileged are we?

A few of the group went to the hide at Tafika after lunch as there was a large male elephant bathing at the waterhole. The elephant turned into three elephants that put on quite a display of drinking, spraying



themselves with the muddy water from the waterhole and then actually eating the hide that we were in, while we were in it!

There was time for a short siesta before we once again regrouped for tea and cake and then jumped in the vehicles with Steven and Amon for our afternoon game drive. Our first searching area was around Kawere Lagoon because wild dog had been seen there in the morning. We were unlucky with the wild dog, but they had killed a puku earlier and the skeleton was still nearby. There was a pair of fish eagles in a sausage tree, saddle-billed storks, a hamerkop and other water birds make use of this precious water resource.

We had only just passed through Chikwinda Gate when we had sight of a young male lion (outside the park) walking through the scrub. It was one we'd seen when we were here last week - a fairly weak-looking male with a large tumour on his left flank.

Into the park and amongst other lovely birds, a black-winged kite perched near the road and on top of a dead mopane was the bird of note for the afternoon. A bit further on we pulled in for our sundowners which had been set up by Vel and Xander from Tafika right in the edge of the Luangwa. The sun was a bright red fireball and after opening a couple of bottles of bubbly we toasted the magical Valley and the wonderful safari that we had all enjoyed.



Darkness fell and we left our beautiful sundowner spot this time with spotlights eliminated. We were all hoping for something wonderful on our last night drive and boy did we get it. Steven had a radio call to say that there was a leopard that had just killed an impala. We approached cautiously so as not to disturb her as she had literally just killed but she was too intent on feeding to be concerned by us. The impala she'd killed was an adult female and we watched as the leopard - which we later found out was Chibala, a leopard well known to the guides - began eating the soft parts at the back of the impala to get to the foetus that she was carrying.

The time came to leave her and we returned to Tafika, passing by Kawere again in case the dogs were there. Whilst there was no sign of the dogs, there was a hyena walking down the road with half of what remained of the wild dogs' kill from earlier.

Almost back in camp, we picked up another leopard, this time at the Tafika waterhole, hunting along the Tafika fence line. We only saw her briefly as we didn't want to disturb her hunt.

We had a beer to celebrate another wonderful game drive and then had dinner under the stars before Simon read a final piece from his book Rogue Lion Safaris, and Chris read a poem.

It had been a long and busy last full day on safari so some of the group headed off to bed, and a hardy few stayed at the bar for a drink.

Polite roaring

Leopards can roar all right. They're pretty good at it. It's just they're less strident than lions. When it comes to roaring, they're discreet and rather polite. None of this shattering-the-night nonsense. The roar of the leopard says: "Here I am – if that's quite all right with you."

I could hear a leopard roaring as I sat on the banks of the Mwaleshi River eating my breakfast. Toast and scrambled eggs, so far as I remember. I had heard lions in the night, and just after dawn a hyena had been whooping and howling.

And then the leopard. It sounded like someone vigorously sawing wood. So, after breakfast we walked along the banks to see if we could learn any more. As we walked, he called again: interesting because leopards usually go for discretion. They don't want lions and hyenas to know where they are: that way kills get stolen and leopards get hurt.

But there are times when even a leopard needs to be seen and heard: there he was, a fine male on the far bank. He called again, several times. Leopards are not social cats; they leave sociability to the lions and live mainly solitary lives. But every now and then it's time to make more leopards: and for that, you need more than one.

And yes, there she was, slighter and more delicate than the burly fellow who'd been calling, though fearsome enough should you happen to be an impala. They were both in view for a fair old while, and then they slipped into the bush. Leopards have the trick of instant invisibility when they need it.

They weren't noticeably together, but they vanished in the same direction. These, then, were the preliminaries: the build-up to their honeymoon. There was no more roaring: contact had been established. The rest is action.

Good. The world can always do with a few more leopards. Though the impalas may disagree.

Simon Barnes

Day 11: Heading home ***Monday 21 September 2026***

Our flight from Lukuzi airstrip was departing at 0900 which meant that there was time for a couple of hours of game-viewing for anyone keen enough to get into the park again - which was almost the entire group!



We were eager to return to where Chibale had killed last night to see if she was still there. She was, although she'd dragged the kill about 75 metres from the kill site, through a steep gully and put it quite high in a leadwood tree. Chibale herself was in a different tree on a horizontal branch, her hind legs and her front right leg hanging down, her left leg under her head as a pillow. She was the master of all she surveyed. The light was beautiful for photography, and she was in no hurry to move. Until… a gaggle of guineafowl approached the tree, and it was as if she had been charged with electricity because in a split second she was down the tree and trying to catch one. There was never a chance that she'd succeed but it was a wonderful encounter after which she disappeared into the depths of a woolly caper bush not to be seen again!

It was time to return to Tafika and gather our bags but not before passing a corner of the Luangwa where a group of five elephants - two adult females and three youngsters - were taking a drink and then crossing over into the western half of the park.

At Tafika we said our goodbyes to the team and made our way to the airstrip. En-route we heard that our flight was delayed so we spent 45 minutes or so looking for the leopard that was hunting at camp last night – Kwere – before arriving at the airstrip. Our flight finally arrived at the strip at 1015 and 20 minutes or so later we were airborne for Lusaka.



We said our farewells at the airport as some of the group were staying in Lusaka for a few hours and others were departing via Addis Ababa and others via Johannesburg. It was a trip full of wonderful wildlife and wonderful memories for all… Luangwa is a truly magical place.

Luangwa farewell

On the last evening of the trip, we saw a female leopard with a freshly killed impala. It was a considerable achievement: she had a fine animal between her paws. Now all she had to do was make it safe: away from hyenas and lions who would be more than happy to take it over.

That means a tree: leopards climb well while lions and hyenas don't. The problem was that the nearest was a long way off. The hunt had clearly required a huge release of energy. It would take even more energy to drag the carcass 100 yards and still more to get it 20 feet off the ground: it was about twice her weight.

We left her eating frenziedly, trying to get as much down her as possible to ensure at least some kind of profit even if the scavengers arrived. It was one of a million unfinished tales of the bush: would we ever learn how it came out?

Next morning – our last morning in the Luangwa Valley – bags packed back, plane clothes ready, plane books in hand baggage, passports safe but handy – we paid our final visit to the park. And the story had a happy ending, at least for her: there she was, as relaxed a leopard as you could ever wish to see, lying on the stout horizontal branch of a sausage tree, all four paws a-dangle and her head pillowed on the bark. She looked ineffably pleased with life.

The reason for her satisfaction was in the next tree: the fine horned male impala was solidly wedged in a fork, in no danger of falling. She had eaten well last night, successfully secured her hard-won prize and retreated to a more comfortable tree to rest her full belly and her fine hunter's body.

After a long pause to congratulate her, we moved on. An elegiac mood of farewell was upon us: in her serene morning beauty this leopard summed up all the wonders of the past many days. When I used to train horses, I was always told how important it was to "finish on a good note".

Well, we did.

Simon Barnes

Day 12: Arrive home ***Tuesday 22 September 2026***

A note on weather: *Throughout the trip the weather was consistently hot and dry – generally between 32-35deg C. On some days there was a mid-afternoon wind that kept things cool.*

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Checklist for Walking in the Heart of Zambia

	Common name	*Scientific Name*	South Luangwa	North Luangwa
	BIRDS			
	Grebes, cormorants & darters			
1	Reed cormorant	*Phalacrocorax africanus*		✓
	Hamerkop, herons & egrets			
2	Hamerkop	*Scopus umbretta*	✓	✓
3	Goliath heron	*Ardea goliath*	✓	
4	Grey heron	*Ardea cinerea*	✓	✓
5	Black-headed heron	*Ardea melanocephala*	✓	✓
6	Yellow-billed (Intermediate) egret	*Egretta intermedia*		✓
7	Great white egret	*Egretta alba*	✓	
8	Cattle egret	*Bubulcus ibis*	✓	✓
9	Green-backed heron	*Butorides striata*	✓	✓
	Flamingos, spoonbills & ibises			
10	African spoonbill	*Platalea alba*	✓	✓
11	Sacred ibis	*Threskiornis aethiopicus*	✓	✓
12	Hadeda ibis	*Bostrychia hagedash*	✓	✓
	Pelicans & storks			
13	Marabou stork	*Leptoptilos crumenifer*	✓	✓
14	Saddlebill stork	*Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis*	✓	✓
15	Openbill stork	*Anastomus lamelligerus*	✓	✓
16	Yellow-billed stork	*Mycteria ibis*	✓	
	Ducks & geese			
17	Egyptian goose	*Alopochen aegyptiacus*	✓	✓
18	Knob-billed duck	*Sarkidiornis melanotos*		✓
	Kites, vultures, buzzards & eagles			
19	Black-winged kite	*Elanus caeruleus*	✓	✓
20	Yellow-billed kite	*Milvus aegyptius*	✓	✓

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01962 302086 sales@wildlifeworldwide.com www.wildlifeworldwide.com

21	African fish eagle	*Haliaeetus vocifer*	✓	✓
22	Hooded vulture	*Necrosyrtes monachus*	✓	✓
23	Lappet-faced vulture	*Torgos tracheliotos*	✓	
24	White-backed vulture	*Gyps africanus*	✓	✓
25	White-headed vulture	*Trigonoceps occipitalis*	✓	
26	Brown snake eagle	*Circaetus cinereus*	✓	
27	Western banded snake eagle	*Circaetus cinerascens*	✓	
28	Bateleur	*Terathopius ecaudatus*		✓
29	Bat hawk	*Macheiramphus alcinus*	✓	
30	African harrier hawk (gymnogene)	*Polyboroides typus*	✓	
31	Little sparrowhawk	*Accipiter minullus*		✓
32	Tawny eagle	*Aquila rapax*	✓	
33	Wahlberg's eagle	*Hieraaetus wahlbergi*	✓	
34	Martial eagle	*Polemaetus bellicosus*	✓	✓
	Guineafowl, francolin, quails & crakes			
35	Helmeted guineafowl	*Numida meleagris*	✓	✓
36	Swainson's Francolin	*Francolinus swainsonii*	✓	✓
37	Red-necked Francolin	*Francolinus afer*	✓	✓
	Cranes, Bustards & Thick-knees			
38	Grey (southern) crowned crane	*Balearica regulorum*	✓	
39	African jacana	*Actophilornis africanus*	✓	✓
40	Water thick-knee (Dikkop)	*Burhinus vermiculatus*	✓	✓
41	Temmincks courser	*Cursorius temminckii*	✓	
	Plovers, lapwings & snipes			
42	Caspian plover	*Charadrius asiaticus*	✓	
43	White-fronted plover	*Charadrius marginatus*		✓
44	Three-banded plover	*Charadrius tricollaris*	✓	✓
45	Blacksmith lapwing	*Vanellus armatus*	✓	✓
46	White-headed (White-crowned) lapwing	*Vanellus coronatus*	✓	✓
47	Painted snipe	*Rostratula benghalensis*	✓	✓
	Stilts, sandpipers & terns			
48	Black-winged stilt	*Himantopus himantopus*	✓	✓
49	Marsh sandpiper	*Tringa stagnatilis*		✓
50	Common greenshank	*Tringa nebularia*	✓	✓

51	Wood sandpiper	*Tringa glareola*	✓	✓
52	Common sandpiper	*Actitis hypoleucos*	✓	✓
53	African skimmer	*Rynchops flavirostris*	✓	✓
54	Double-banded sandgrouse	*Pterocles bicinctus*	✓	
	Doves			
55	Red-eyed dove	*Streptopelia semitorquata*	✓	✓
56	African mourning dove	*Streptopelia decipiens*	✓	✓
57	Cape turtle (Ring-necked) dove	*Streptopelia capicola*	✓	✓
58	Laughing (palm) dove	*Spilopelia senegalensis*	✓	✓
59	African green pigeon	*Treron calva*	✓	
60	Emerald-spotted wood dove	*Turtur chalcospilos*	✓	✓
	Parrots & turacos			
61	Meyer's parrot	*Poicephalus meyeri*	✓	✓
62	Lilian's (nyasa) lovebird	*Agapornis lilianae*	✓	✓
63	Purple-crested turaco (Lourie)	*Gallirex porphyreolophus*	✓	
64	Grey go-away-bird (Lourie)	*Corythaixoides concolor*	✓	✓
	Cuckoos & coucals			
65	Senegal coucal	*Centropus senegalensis*	✓	
66	White-browed coucal	*Centropus superciliosus*	✓	✓
	Owls			
67	Wood owl	*Strix woodfordii*	✓	
68	Pel's fishing owl	*Scotopelia peli*		✓
69	Verreaux's (giant) eagle owl	*Bubo lacteus*	✓	✓
70	African scops owl	*Otus senegalensis*	✓	✓
71	Barred owlet	*Glaucidium capense*	✓	✓
	Nightjars			
72	Square-tailed (Mozambique) nightjar	*Caprimulgus fossii*	✓	✓
	Swifts			
73	Palm swift	*Cypsiurus parvus*	✓	✓
74	Horus swift	*Apus horus*	✓	✓
75	Bohm's (Bat-like) spinetail	*Neafrapus boehmi*	✓	
	Trogon & hoopoes			
76	African hoopoe	*Upupa africana*	✓	
77	Green (Red-billed) woodhoopoe	*Phoeniculus purpureus*	✓	

78	Common scimitarbill	*Rhinopomastus cyanomelas*	✓	
	Kingfishers & rollers			
79	Malachite kingfisher	*Corythornis cristatus*	✓	✓
80	Brown-hooded kingfisher	*Halcyon albiventris*	✓	✓
81	Giant kingfisher	*Megaceryle maximus*	✓	✓
82	Pied kingfisher	*Ceryle rudis*	✓	✓
83	Lilac-breasted roller	*Coracias caudata*	✓	✓
	Bee-eaters			
84	Southern carmine bee-eater	*Merops nubicoides*	✓	✓
85	Little bee-eater	*Merops pusillus*	✓	✓
86	White-fronted bee-eater	*Merops bullockoides*	✓	✓
87	European bee-eater	*Merops apiaster*	✓	
	Secretarybid & hornbills			
88	Ground hornbill	*Bucorvus leadbeateri*	✓	✓
89	Red-billed hornbill	*Tockus rufirostris*	✓	✓
90	Crowned hornbill	*Tockus alboterminatus*	✓	
91	Grey hornbill	*Tockus nasutus*	✓	✓
	Barbets & honeyguides			
92	Black-collared barbet	*Lybius torquatus*	✓	✓
93	Greater honeyguide	*Indicator indicator*	✓	✓
	Woodpeckers, pitta & broadbill			
94	Golden-tailed woodpecker	*Campethera abingoni*	✓	
	Swallows & martins			
95	Brown-throated (Plain) martin	*Riparia paludicola*	✓	✓
96	Wire-tailed swallow	*Hirundo smithii*	✓	✓
97	Lesser striped swallow	*Cecropis cucullata*	✓	✓
	Wagtails, longclaws & pipits			
98	African pied wagtail	*Motacilla aguimp*	✓	✓
	Cuckooshrikes, drongos & orioles			
99	Fork-tailed drongo	*Dicrurus adsimilis*	✓	✓
100	Black-headed oriole	*Oriolus larvatus*	✓	
	Tits, creepers & babblers			
101	Arrow-marked babbler	*Turdoides jardineii*		✓
	Bulbuls, nicator, thrush & robins			

102	Dark-capped (Black-eyed) bulbul	*Pycnonotus barbatus*	✓	✓
103	Terrestial brownbul	*Phyllastrephus terrestris*	✓	
104	White-browed (Heuglin's) robin-chat	*Cossypha heuglini*	✓	
	Apalis, eremomelas, prinia & hyliota			
105	Tawny-flanked prinia	*Prinia subflava*		✓
	Flycatchers & batis			
106	Ashy (Blue-grey) flycatcher	*Muscicapa caerulescens*	✓	✓
	Shrikes			
107	Black-backed puffback	*Dryoscopus cubla*	✓	✓
108	Tropical boubou	*Laniarius aethiopicus*	✓	✓
109	Orange-breasted bush-shrike	*Chlorophoneus sulfureopectus*	✓	
110	Grey-headed bush-shrike	*Malaconotus blanchoti*	✓	
111	White Helmet-shrike	*Prionops plumatus*	✓	
112	Retz's (Red-billed) helmet-shrike	*Prionops retzii*	✓	
	Starlings & oxpeckers			
113	Meve's starling	*Lamprotornis mevesii*	✓	✓
114	Wattled starling	*Creatophora cinerea*	✓	
115	Yellow-billed oxpecker	*Buphagus africanus*	✓	✓
116	Red-billed oxpecker	*Buphagus erythrorhynchus*	✓	✓
	Sunbirds			
117	Amethyst (black) sunbird	*Chalcomitra amethystina*	✓	
118	Scarlet-chested sunbird	*Chalcomitra senegalensis*	✓	
119	Collared sunbird	*Hedydipna collaris*	✓	
120	White-bellied sunbird	*Cinnyris talatala*	✓	
	White-eye, Sparrows & Weavers			
121	Southern grey-headed sparrow	*Passer diffusus*	✓	✓
122	White-browed sparrow-weaver	*Plocepasser mahali*	✓	
123	Golden (holub's golden) weaver	*Ploceus xanthops*	✓	✓
	Quelea & widowbirds			
124	Red-billed quelea	*Quelea quelea*	✓	✓
125	Southern red bishop	*Euplectes orix*	✓	
	Firefinches & waxbills			
126	Red-billed firefinch	*Lagonosticta senegala*	✓	✓
127	Blue waxbill (southern cordonbleu)	*Uraeginthus angolensis*	✓	✓

	Canaries & buntings			
128	Yellow-fronted canary	*Crithagra mozambica*	✓	
	MAMMALS			
	Elephant Shrews or sengi	*Order: Macroscelidea*		
1	Four-toed elephant shrew	*Petrodromus tetradactylus*	✓	✓
		Suborder: Sciurognathi		
2	Tree squirrel	*Pareaxerus cepapi*	✓	✓
	Hares	*Order: Lagomorpha*		
3	Scrub hare	*Lepus saxatilis*	✓	
	Elephants	*Order: Proboscidea*		
4	African elephant	*Loxodonta africana*	✓	✓
	Odd-toed ungulates	*Order: Perissodatyla*		
5	Crawshay's zebra	*Equus burchelli crawshayii*	✓	✓
	Hippopotamuses	*Order: Whippomorpha*		
6	Hippopotamus	*Hippopotamus amphibius*	✓	✓
	Pigs & hogs	*Order: Suriformes*		
7	Warthog	*Phacochoerus africanus*	✓	✓
	Ruminants	*Order: Ruminantia*		
	Giraffes			
8	Thornicroft's giraffe	*Giraffa tippelskirchi thornicrofti*	✓	
	Alcelaphines & allies			
9	Cookson's wildebeest	*Connochaetes taurinus cooksoni*	✓	
10	Impala	*Aepyceros melampus*	✓	✓
11	Roan antelope	*Hippotragus equinus*	✓	

	Reedbucks etc	*Reduncini*		
12	Puku	*Kobus verdani*	✓	✓
13	Common waterbuck	*Kobus ellipsiprymus*	✓	✓
	Buffaloes	*Bovini*		
14	African buffalo	*Syncerus caffer*	✓	✓
	Hoofed mammals: antelopes & other ruminants			
	Spiral-horned bovines			
15	Bushbuck	*Tragelophus scriptus*	✓	✓
16	Greater kudu	*Tragelophus strepsicerus*	✓	✓
	Carnivores	*Carnivora*		
	Hyaenids			
17	Spotted hyena	*Crocuta crocuta*	✓	
	Cats			
18	Leopard	*Panthera pardus*	✓	✓
19	Lion	*Panthera leo*	✓	✓
	Dogs etc	*Canidae*		
20	Wild dog	*Lycaon pictus*	✓	
	Genets & civets			
21	Large spotted Genet	*Genetta maculata*	✓	✓
22	African civet	*Civetticus civetta*	✓	
	Mongooses	*Viveridae*		
23	Slender mongoose	*Herpestes sanguinea*	✓	
24	Banded mongoose	*Mungos mungo*	✓	✓
25	White-tailed mongoose	*Ichneumia albicauda*	✓	
26	Bushy-tailed mongoose	*Bdeogale crassicauda*	✓	
	Primates	*Order: Primates*		

27	Thick-tailed bushbaby	*Otolemur crassicaudatus*	✓	✓
28	Yellow baboon	*Papio cynocephalus*	✓	✓
29	Vervet monkey	*Cercopithecus pygerythrus*	✓	✓