



The Last Real Africa

OLD-STYLE SAFARI TRADITIONS LIVE ON IN ZAMBIA'S LIGHTLY
VISITED, WILDLIFE-RICH LUANGWA VALLEY.

By Christine K. Eckstrom Photographs by Frans Lanting



If the lions come bounding toward us, don't move," Robin Pope whispered to me. "Just wait for my instructions." He turned to the lions, three females and six cubs, about 20 yards in front of us. We were on foot, far from any climbable tree. The lions rarely took their eyes off us, ears perked, tail tips twitching. One frisky older cub took a few steps our way; his mother rose up. I mentally counted the bounds. Robin turned to me again. "Let's go behind this bush and see if we can get closer." I nodded, eyes wide. We edged around a thicket and stepped into the open. Two bounds closer. The lions all sat up. We froze. One by one they stood, eyes fixed on us. Then suddenly they turned and walked away, tails flicking, cubs bounding alongside, until they all disappeared into a dense thicket. "Lovely," said Robin.

Getting close to lions on foot may seem counterintuitive, but in Zambia's Luangwa Valley, it's part of a unique safari tradition that was pioneered here half a century ago, and Robin Pope, one of the best known guides in Africa, is a master of that tradition. With three companions, I joined him for a three-day walking safari along the Luangwa, a 500-mile-long river that loops through a remote wilderness valley that stretches across some 20,000 square miles in the heart of south-central Africa. Lying between the great plains of East Africa and the thiristlands of the Kalahari, Luangwa has been overlooked for many years, bypassed on travelers' maps. That is changing rapidly, and I came here to explore what sets Luangwa apart. Beneath its low-key anonymity is a place some have called "the

last real Africa," a place with a powerful safari personality shaped by several generations of strong-willed and farsighted individuals and families living and guiding in one of Africa's great wildlife strongholds.

Robin Pope is one of those individuals. Born in South Africa and raised in the Zambian bush, he has an illustrious guiding history that includes joining the legendary Sand Rivers Safari in 1979 with writer Peter Matthiessen and filmmaker Hugo van Lawick on a journey to bring attention and protection to the vast but little-known wilds of Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve. Three years before that celebrated adventure, Robin was hired as a walking safari guide in Zambia by Norman Carr, the visionary game ranger turned conservationist and ecotourism pioneer whose influence is still reflected in every lodge and camp in Luangwa Valley. Carr invented the idea of walking safaris, and its code of ethics, and then trained a generation of guides who carry on the tradition and continue to shape the distinct style that characterizes Luangwa Valley walking safaris.

Intimate encounters with animals on their own terms is one of the hallmarks—and thrills—of a walking safari, and Robin likes to get close, where the adrenaline pumps. But he doesn't take foolish risks. "You must walk in constant anticipation, with every sense cocked for the unexpected," he says as we set out one morning at dawn, "and always listen to your sixth sense."

Walking on foot in the African bush sets every sense on high alert. Sounds and scents amplify—the too-loud crunch of footsteps through dry sausage tree leaves, the overpowering gardenia-scent of holarrhena blossoms. Everything seems important—a cracking branch, an impala's alarm bark, the faint smell of death, somewhere, blowing in on a soft wind—what does it mean? Are the lions near? As we walk, my mind races to process the rush of sensations and decipher the new language of bush signs.

Robin is a relaxing companion, confident and cheerful, who imparts constant delight mingled with superb natural history. Wearing binoculars and an old felt hat, he moves at a steady pace as we wind through groves of leadwood and mahogany trees, through

Elephants cross Zambia's Luangwa River, in the heart of south-central Africa. "In the dry season, wildlife hugs the river, the lifeline for the valley," says writer Christine Eckstrom. Opening pages: Derek Shenton gives guests close-up views of lions near his camp, Kaingo.



rattle-dry mopani woodlands and tangled thickets of capparid bush, stopping for anything interesting: a pile of polka-dot guinea fowl feathers (all that's left), a few porcupine quills (looks like he got away), hyena scat (white as the bones they eat), lion spoor (fresh). "He passed by last night," says Robin, sketching a life-size outline in the dirt, based on the tracks and the big cat's stride.

Walking with Robin is so absorbing that I sometimes forget about danger. But there is a fifth person with us, without whom no walking safari would be possible (and without whom we would never have approached the lions), and that is an armed

scout from the Zambian Wildlife Authority. On every walking safari a scout joins the guide to lead the party, carrying a rifle with firepower enough to stop an elephant, if he must. Scout and guide are a tight team, always in touch, sometimes wordlessly, keenly tuned to each other.

Our scout, Ison Simwanza, lifts his brow, and Robin stares ahead. Leaves move in a grove of trees far off. A big bull elephant emerges. "Let's see if he'll let us get close," says Robin, as we walk in file between trees, letting him see us. As we near, the bull lifts his trunk and trumpets. We stop short, eyes fixed on the bull. He's annoyed and he's in

musth, a heightened sexual state indicated by secretions oozing from his temporal glands, making dark liquid streaks on each side of his head. Musth can make elephants unpredictable. "It drips into the corners of his mouth and rubs off on plants while he's feeding," Robin says softly. "It's full of messages, as you can imagine." Suddenly the bull wheels to face us and shakes his head hard, ears slapping, as we all ease back together, our collective sixth senses in synchrony.

Before returning to camp for a midday break, Robin leads us down a steep gully to the river, where dozens of hippos loll in a pool near shore, up to their eyes. We creep low in a line to approach them, and then Robin and Ison quickly turn and nod to a billowing cloud of dust on the opposite bank, as a big herd of Cape buffalo spreads across the sandy flats in an ever widening brown wall, heading down to the river to drink.

Buffalo are, at once, notoriously skittish and mean-tempered—and can be hard to approach. But the wind is in our favor today, and Robin says, "Let's try a tactic." Robin and Ison stoop side by side in the lead; behind them, our other two companions bend over low, heads tucked, and hold the leaders by their waists. I crouch in the center and all together we move as a unit, shuffling along the edge of the river, showing a profile, we hope, like that of a single buffalo. The herd doesn't notice. We reach a point directly opposite them, 20 to 30 yards away, and we all lower down to our bellies and watch them drink, huffing and sloshing at the water's edge—so close we can smell their musky bovine scent and see the raw muscular power under their skin. We watch, stock still, hearts beating against the sand, eye-to-eye with a hundred tons of buffalo, until they finish drinking and move back into the bush, silent as a cloud, leaving only dust in their wake.

Tea with Giraffes

May I pour your tea?" asks Babette Alfieri, holding a steaming thermos above a neat row of teacups. Over her shoulder some 15 yards away, a group of nine giraffes stares languidly at our group of six, seated on a picnic cloth beneath an old sausage tree, having tea in the bush in the company of the animals we've been following on foot all morning.



A young Thornicroft's giraffe looks up to its mother. The animals were observed on a walking safari led by Phil Berry, one of Luangwa Valley's most respected wildlife experts. Berry began his career as a game ranger in 1960. "I was eventually responsible for 19 parks in Zambia," he says. At Kaingo camp (right), evening is the time for lingering over alfresco meals. "Like many valley camps, Kaingo is small and intimate," says Eckstrom.





Getting eye-to-eye with animals like this curious hippo is one of the thrills of a Luangwa Valley walking safari. For another perspective on the hippo-packed river, Eckstrom took off from Tafika camp in a microlight flown by safari guide John Coppinger (left). "It was pure exhilaration," she says. "Tafika lies along a bend in the river in a remote part of the valley."

Since sunrise, photographer Frans Lanting and I have been tracking giraffes with Phil Berry, a man who knows more about the natural history of Luangwa Valley and has probably covered more of this landscape on foot than anyone else alive. He is also an authority on the endemic Thornicroft's giraffe, found only in the valley. Phil has been following giraffes here for more than 40 years, in what's likely the longest continuous study of individual giraffes in the wild. "I've recorded them up and down the river," Phil tells me. He has been guiding for nearly 30 years, and is a legend in the valley. When I asked Robin Pope about Phil he said: "When Norman Carr was alive, he was the *fundu*, the expert—now it is Phil Berry. He is the grand old man of the valley."

Dressed in kneesocks, shorts, and classic suede safari boots, Phil carries a bamboo cane topped with a vegetable ivory knob, and uses it to point to tracks and bush signs as we walk. Phil is tall and slender, with a stately bearing not unlike that of the elegant animals he studies. In fact, our walk has been delightfully giraffe-paced, with long, smooth strolls through dry grass at an oblique angle to the giraffes followed

by contemplative pauses a polite distance away as we watch them browse. We're walking through a storybook African landscape of tall grasses and majestic sausage trees with broad leafy boughs and dangling baguette-shaped fruits, which the giraffes like to nibble when the fruits are small. Phil and his partner, Babette, set a tone of mellow pleasure as we meander with the giraffes, accompanied by a tea bearer, Moses Zulu, a porter, Joseph Changachanga, and a scout, Isiaih Nyirenda, whose eyes never stop scanning.

When the wind shifts I think back to the buffalo and ask Phil, "Will the giraffes take off if they detect our scent?"

"Smell means little to a giraffe," Phil explains. "It relies on sight." Now beneath the tree he relaxes with tea and cake, eyeing female #F20, who is peering at us through the leaves of an adjacent sausage tree. "I first saw her five years ago," says Phil. "She was not part of my original study, but I'm still making notes on her and a number of other females." Phil recognizes individuals mostly by their unique neck and shoulder patterns, and is interested in females because of their interactions with offspring over time.

"I've recorded how offspring and their mothers come together again in the wild. In some cases I've seen as many as five offspring and one mother meet up, weeks after separating, and they travel together, wander off, and join up again," he continues. "We used to think that we were the only ones with emotions, but we know very well now that this isn't so—primates and elephants are prime examples. I'm sure that giraffes and lions and leopards all recognize each other long after they've been apart. There's no way to prove it, but it's what I believe."

The giraffes move off through the trees in a slow-motion ballet while we pack up to head back to camp. As we walk, I can't resist telling Phil about the tactic Robin Pope used to get us close to buffalo. He stops and turns around to tell me his technique. "You lie down on your belly and wave your arms and legs around," he says, "looking like nothing on Earth."

"It's true," says Babette. "I have pictures."

"I did it once with a herd of about 700," Phil says, perfectly serious. "Buffalo are inquisitive and they all came around me, looking at the big oaf rolling about on the ground."

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A Thornicroft's giraffe looms out of the night, lit by spotter Nashon Mwale as guide Derek Shenton drives. "The idea of going on night drives to spotlight for wildlife was started in the early 1970s," says Eckstrom. "Night spotting is now a specialty of Luangwa Valley safaris."

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“How do you get out of it?” I ask.
“You stand up and they all stampede,” says Phil, straight-faced, but smiling at the memory as he turns and continues walking. Then he looks back at me, anticipating my request, and laughs, “But if you ask, the answer is ‘no!’”

Flying the Landscape of Life

Ready?” asks John Coppinger, and a few seconds after my “Yes” he revs the engine and we race down a dirt runway in his microlight and lift up into the cool dawn air. We spiral up in big circles like a stork riding a thermal and then trace a route along the looping Luangwa River, and over the landmarks of John’s life.

I hang on, seated motorcycle-passenger style behind him, as we fly above Tafika, the lovely bush camp perched along a bend of the Luangwa River owned by John and his wife, Carol. Together, they have run camps in Luangwa Valley for 22 years, living there year-round while raising their two daughters. Consummate hosts and independent spirits, their personal style is a perfect expression of the pioneering character that makes Luangwa Valley safari camps unique.

I feel at ease flying with John, even though it seems like we’re buzzing up to the clouds on a lawnmower engine attached to a tricycle with gossamer wings. “Nonsense,” says John to any doubts about his microlight. “It’s safer than a small plane—even if the engine were to quit, the wings are so strong we’d just glide back down like a bird.”

His confidence in his flying—and his bush skills—is well earned. Born and raised in Zambia, John worked his way around the world, from the diamond mines of Namibia to the oil fields of the North Sea, before returning home to follow his passion for wildlife. Expert in bushcraft and animal behavior, practical, inventive, and just plain good company, John is always up for an adventure. He has trekked all over southern Africa, including up to the source of the Luangwa in far northeast Zambia, and he’s canoed the entire length of the river down to its confluence with the Zambezi, a croc-snapping journey he undertook with two companions and Carol—the first woman to paddle the Luangwa. And he’s the only one who offers a view of the valley from the shared seat of his microlight.

Now, as we lift higher, we fly over a line of people walking a trail, single file, heading to

Tafika from Mkasanga, a nearby village of perhaps 1,500 people—100 of whom work at Tafika, the main source of local employment. Mkasanga is the village that powers the camp, and it has a special place in exploration history, as the spot where Dr. David Livingstone crossed the Luangwa in 1866 to venture farther into the African interior.

We angle away from the village and head north along a meandering section of the Luangwa, past old oxbows cut off when the river changed course. Now isolated lagoons, they slowly dry out to become lush grazing areas for impala, puku, and other wildlife. “This is what makes this place so rich,” John says with excitement. “There’s so much variety in habitat—and because the valley floor is so flat, the river changes course easily. When it floods, it can cover this whole area with water, like a lake—and all the nutrients are distributed across these plains,” he explains, one hand on the microlight steering bar and the other sweeping an arc over a vast expanse of savanna woodlands, engraved with the lazy-looping bends of the Luangwa, winding north to the horizon.

The Luangwa has a climate regime as strong-willed as some of its inhabitants, and it keeps this valley wild—and sparsely settled. Ruled by extreme seasonal swings, the valley is virtually impassible by vehicle for half the year, when annual rains turn local “black cotton soils” to a gluey mud that swallows tires, and the river swells from a trickle to a torrent and spills over surrounding lands. Later, as the waters retreat, a rejuvenated landscape emerges, with a new geography of lagoons and river bends. “The wet season here wipes the whole slate clean,” John tells me. “But we have a healthy environment—I say, let the cycles take place!”

We continue north to reach a remote channel of the river, where we circle above one of the valley’s most spectacular concentrations of hippos—hundreds upon hundreds, packed together like gigantic cobblestones in a long pool along a bend in the river. It’s a classic scene of the late dry season here, when the river dries out and hippos are forced into the last waters deep enough to keep them cool. We turn and swoop low to see where crocs have nested on the riverbanks, leaving S-shaped imprints, and even lower to see a hippo carcass afloat in the river, ringed like spokes on a wheel with feeding crocs. It’s a grim fact that some hippos don’t survive the stress of the dry season, when food resources are scarce.

Heading back south to Tafika, we make a quick detour over lush riverine forest to the remains of Chibembe, the camp where

John and Carol lived for seven years. Chibembe thrived for nearly two decades, but over time the Luangwa slowly eroded the bank and swallowed the camp, chalet by chalet. John and Carol had left years earlier, but Chibembe still holds wonderful memories for them. As we buzz over the treetops John points to a tin roof straight below and says, “That was our house, where our daughter Jenny was born.”

When John and Carol left Chibembe in 1994 to start their own camp, they named it Tafika, a Nyanja word meaning “We have arrived.” “It’s what you say after a long journey,” Carol tells me, as we relax in chairs above the river, with long views up and down the Luangwa. We watch as a skein of storks coast down like white paper planes and gently land on a sandy isle in the river. “For me, it was a great thing raising the girls here,” she says. “So many people have such fear of death, but here, you see life and death every day. You see things that break your heart, and things that restore your soul.

“I don’t think we’ll ever leave,” says Carol. “We are here.”

“You have arrived,” I say, thinking of Tafika’s name.

“Yes,” says Carol, “and now we have stayed.”

Night Stalking

In the moonless blackness, all lights off, we hold still and listen. I hear only the blood beat in my ears, but Derek Shenton hears the leopard. He points a finger, head cocked, and from that direction, an impala barks. Alarm call: The leopard is near. “Let’s move,” says Derek, starting the engine. “Cats tend to stay on a straight-line course once they’ve started,” he explains, maneuvering the vehicle through the bush to a place where we might intersect the leopard’s path.

“She wants to hunt,” says Derek, “and there’s no moon—that’s ideal for leopards.” We stop to listen again. The cat’s movements are marked with more alarm calls that point to her like compass arrows: Pukus whistle, a hollow reedy sound, and farther off, a baboon makes a deep shout-bark, like a dog. The leopard is moving fast.

We go forward again, headlights bobbing on tree trunks and brush as we move in a big arc toward the calls. Suddenly Derek stops and flicks on his spotlight, its beam illuminating a cone-shaped tunnel of dust. He pans and picks up the leopard’s long tail as she disappears into a dark wall of thick bush. “I’m afraid we’ve lost her here,” he says. “She’s gone where we can’t go.”

We circle around a long swath of dense bush to an open grove of trees, where we discover what happened in a blink in the dark: High up in a sausage tree, we spot an impala, freshly killed and dragged up to a big bough, partly obscured by leaves. As I stare through binoculars, in awe of the cat’s chilling power, a big spotted paw reaches over the impala and grips, as if to say “Mine.”

Derek Shenton is uniquely qualified to guide me through the Luangwa night from his camp, Kaingo (which means “leopard”), perched above the river in an area exceptionally rich in wildlife, including big cats. This very spot is where Derek came as a boy on holidays with his family. Derek’s father, Barry Shenton, was a game ranger and chief warden at Kafue National Park. He worked with Norman Carr in 1950 to build the first private camp for photographic safaris at Nsefu, across the river from Kaingo. In the early 1990s, Derek was working as a freelance guide when he learned that the camp of his boyhood memories was available. He and his father won the lease and built a new camp that Derek runs with his new wife, Jules, a dark-haired beauty from Australia.

A night wind is tossing the trees, blowing gusts of dust, as I ride with Derek and Jules in an open vehicle. As Derek drives,

he spots animals with discreet bursts of light—long enough to have a good look, but short enough so that they are not overly disturbed. Derek uses red gels on his light if an animal is hunting; red light doesn’t blind them, or dazzle their prey.

While searching for the leopard we spot animals we’d never see in the day—two porcupines scuffling through leaf litter, looking like giant sea urchins; a civet, rushing into the brush, hunched like a raccoon; a Pel’s fishing owl, eyes electric with intensity, high in a tree by the river. We pass a cluster of hippos on land, gathered beneath a sausage tree looking for fruits, then round a bend and encounter seven giraffes, seated on the ground, grouped like ladies at a tea party—secret scenes, never imagined, hidden inside the African night.

Derek likes to find ways to enter the animals’ worlds unseen. At the beginning of each season, he builds a network of hides that make it easy to get close: a floating canvas blind in the Luangwa, just across from a riverbank colony of carmine bee-eaters; a tree platform in the ebony forest, where elephants pass below; a hippo hide set low in the riverbank, where I sit after dark—with only a thin wall of reeds separating me from 200 hippos—and watch them emerge

from the water to feed onshore, glistening wet, carrying the moon on their backs.

Sitting in Derek’s newest blind, above a muddy pool along a tributary of the Luangwa, we watch a family of elephants rush down the bank to mud-bathe. “Animals love mud,” says Derek, smiling at the elephants. The elephants fling big sloppy trunkfuls of mud over their backs; the young ones roll in it, and the tiniest baby almost can’t stand up he’s so slick with mud. Derek talks about the poaching of elephants. In the 1970s and ’80s, Luangwa was hit hard, and lost all its rhinos and perhaps 90 percent of its elephants. “It was a dark time,” he says softly. Protection, enforcement, and changes in attitude brought an end to that era, although some poaching will always occur, often in the wet season, when most safari camps are closed.

The elephants below us are chocolate-coated with mud; another group arrives and ambles down the bank to join in. “Elephants are special,” says Derek, in his understated style. “The way they look after each other—their social network is so strong. I know of a guy who’s an ex-elephant hunter, and when he was asked why he quit, he said that he stopped hunting the day he came across two bulls together, and he looked closer and saw that

the younger bull was leading the older one, and the old bull was blind. He couldn’t believe that sort of cooperation, of animals caring for each other,” Derek muses. “And he said, ‘I can’t shoot an animal that does that.’ And that was the end of it for him.”

That night I awaken to a rumble. I listen. Twigs snap right outside the window, and I ease over and peer out to see a wall of gray, as a female elephant munches on the tree shading the hut. In the moonlight I can see her tiny calf under her legs, who is still experimenting with how to use its trunk. She moves closer, bumping the hut, feeding on leaves. I hear her chew, hear her stomach groan, hear her breathe. Minutes later, they pad off on the sandy soil, silent. I watch them step through the moonlight, then close my eyes and they’re gone.

Writer Christine Eckstrom and photographer Frans Lanting are profiled on page 10.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about the safari camps in this article, go to www.robinpopesafaris.net or www.luangwa.net. For useful Web links on Zambia and Luangwa Valley, go to www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler/extras/toolbox/tripmarks.html. For our updated online Africa Travel Planner, go to <http://nationalgeographic.com/traveler/planner/africa/index.html>.

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