



# Do hippos ever sleep?

Jazz Kuschke and a convoy of *Getaway* readers returned from an 18-day overland trip through northern Zambia with the answer.



**ABOVE:** terfic faciam diis ineque conscer ine fac rem imperfeconum non-duciorum conum publicum. **LEFT:** terfic conscer ine fac audet gravess sicasdam. Castina vigna, rudemus.



**Hippos.** Yes, we'll get to them, but let's start with another, much less abundant, equally prehistoric-looking creature that also calls Zambia home.

It's a water bird that resembles a dodo, is distantly related to the pelican, yet is usually classed with the storks. It's cobalt blue, stands more than a metre tall, walks like a judge and spends most of its time motionless next to water waiting for fish to swim by.

Beyond strange, really, and, to round off the caricature, it uses an ungainly, very bulky-looking bill to catch those poor fish. Some ornithologist with a sense of humour named it the shoebill (*Balaeniceps rex*, also known as the whalehead).

According to some reports, there are less than 15 000 left in the wild – victims of the usual suspects: habitat destruction and hunting for the pot. Today, most are concentrated in Sudan, but a significant population holds out in the swampy papyrus marshes of the Bangweulu wetlands in northern Zambia.

That's where we were, hushed but thrilled as we snapped photos of a very rare blue blur among the green reeds about 70 metres away. I couldn't help feeling as though I'd stepped into a chapter of the late, great Douglas Adams's book, *Last Chance to See*. In this ironic travel masterpiece, Adams (famous for *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) comically detailed his misadventures in search of the world's most



*'Seven days into a three-week Zambian expedition, we'd travelled about 2 500 kilometres and these strange birds were just another tick.'*

endangered animals. Nearly every trip turns into an epic and the animal becomes almost an afterthought. Usually, he ended up just as our little crew was – soaked and smelly, knee-deep in a leech-invested bog, but lucky enough to see a species on the brink of extinction.

Comparatively speaking, the Bangweulu shoebills are easy to see. During the season (late May to early August), it usually doesn't take more than an hour's boat ride, plus another hour or three's swamp-slog from Shoebill Island Camp to find them. Birders from all over the globe flock there to do just that.

Seven days into a three-week Zambian expedition, we'd travelled about 2 500 kilometres and these strange birds were just another tick (albeit a big one) on our itinerary.

### The long road

A week previously, we'd assembled in Livingstone on the Zambezi River. A crew of 11: five very well-kitted *Getaway* readers' 4x4s; guides Chris and Karen Schlimper from Navigators Four-Wheel-Drive Adventures and me, the tag-along-cum-scribe-and-taker-of-pictures.

Talk by the campfire that first night revolved around trips travelled and the merits of particular vehicle set-ups. A sentiment that was to be echoed throughout the journey was, 'Of course, what we're doing is accessible to anyone with a 4x4, camping gear and plenty of time. But going with a guide on a carefully planned, itinerised trip takes so much of the



stress out of it. Just makes the whole thing much simpler.'

Chris knows the area, knows what to expect of the roads (quite simply: the worst), the campsites and where to get fuel and supplies. But, and probably crucial to the success of a guided-convoy tour, Chris was a traveller before he became a guide, so he knows that besides the proverbial getting there – the adventure of overland travelling, driving 4x4

**TOP:** terfic faciam diis ineque conscer dam. Castina diis ineque conscer duciorum conum publicquam. **ABOVE:** terfic faciam diis ineque conscer audet gravess conum publicquam. **OPPOSITE:** terfic faciam diis ineque conscer ine fac rem conum publicquam.



## Personal highlights



*Searching for the shoebill.  
Seeing both North and South Luangwa  
National Parks.  
The hippos (of course).*

tracks and bad roads – it's the special sights along the way that are most important.

Such as seeing the magnificent, rare shoebill. Or coming in (very) close contact with elephants while on foot in Kasanka National Park. Or spending three unforgettable (and what most of the crew would no doubt refer to as spa) days soaking in the hot springs at Kapishya.

Imagine 35°C sulphur-free water bubbling from deep within the earth to form a swimming pool-sized piece of heaven hugged by lush riverine greenery. Or wandering the halls of Sir Steward Gore-Brown's manor house at Shiwa Ng'andu (lake of the royal crocodiles), considering how beautiful (and wild) that part of Zambia must've been in the 1920s when this Brit first fell in love with the area while on an assignment for the Anglo-Belgian Congo Boundary Commission.

Chris knows that the quality of the places where you pitch your tent is pretty damn critical to keeping up group morale. Such as camping at spectacular Lake Waka Waka (no crocs, no hippos, no bilharzia) or next to the Luangwa River – the river of hippos.

### Insomniac hippos

Which brings me back to the hippos. We've all seen *Hippopotamus amphibius*: those near-rectangular pieces of flab with pink underbellies, massive nostrils and even bigger teeth which spend most of their time in the water. They only venture onto land to graze (usually at night), where they can carry their half-tonne frames at up to

40 kilometres an hour. Even though they're herbivores, they're highly unpredictable and feared by many for the fact that (barring the malaria-carrying anopheles mosquito) they're responsible for more deaths in Africa than any other mammal. All this you know, but have you any idea how it feels to have a hippopotamus choir travel with you?

They joined the trip at Pontoon Camp in the 390-square-kilometre Kasanka National Park. As the name suggests, we were camped near water and, wherever there's water in Zambia, you're likely to find hippos. We didn't see them that night, but sitting round the cooking fire, their snorts, grunts and nasal *hub-hub-hub-hubs* dominated the night air. We tried to estimate how close they were – sound travels at night and hippo sound really travels. But unless you've

**OPPOSITE:** terfic faciam diis ineque conscer ine fac rem sicasdam. Castina duciorum conum publiquam. **BELOW:** terfic faciam diis ineque sicasdam. conum publiquam. **BOTTOM:** terfic faciam sicasdam diis ineque conscer sicasdam ine fac rem audet gravess imperfeconum.

actually laid eyes on the animal, you can never be too sure.

The following morning, some of the crew grumbled about not having had much sleep because, well, neither had the hippos. They had to have slept, surely? But even Richard Estes's bush bible, *The Safari Companion* makes no direct mention of it, so you've got to wonder.

Their routine seemed to consist of day-long grunt-and-snort socialising



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*One night, we heard two bulls in a roaring tussle. If it weren't for our spotlight, we'd have mistaken them for lions*

wooden bridge over the river to Chifunda Community Campsite on the southeastern edge of North Luangwa National Park. They seemed to grunt comments on our driving skills or the state of the bridge – which wasn't much more than lashed-together mopani logs.

At Chifunda, they were never far. As we lounged in camp chairs under the towering river trees, our eyes would trace their feeding paths from the shrubbery, across the sandbanks to the river – small, well-travelled Jeep-like tracks complete with middel-mannetjies. One night, we heard two bulls in a roaring tussle. If it wasn't for our spotlight, we'd have mistaken them for lions.

A drive along the river the following day revealed the cause of their fight: territory. There are so many hippos in that stretch that the dominant males have to battle

constantly for their piece of water and 30-odd cows.

We made our way south through cathedral mopani woodland buzzed by tsetse fly. At Luangwa Wilderness Lodge in Luambe National Park (a beautiful little piece of wilderness sandwiched between, and to the east of, North and South Luangwa National Parks), the rangers told us that the 70-plus animals lounging in the river immediately in front of the lodge swells to over 200 in the dry season, as it's one of the only pools still carrying sufficient water.

That afternoon, the sky was burned to a deep amber as the smoke of a far away bush fire filtered the sunset. Cameras big and small came out and memorable images were made. If not the climax, then it definitely epitomised the trip.

Three days and many dusty kilometres further south at Flatdogs

sessions, which, you'd think, would build up an appetite, forcing them into the bush at night to fill those bellies. But some stay behind in the water and keep *hub-hub-hubing* and blowing bubbles and, when those that did go off chomping come back, they have a pre-dawn welcoming party. Which, of course, involves much grunting and guffawing.

When they do eventually settle into some sort of resting mode (this seems to be in a rotation system much like the feeding), they rest their chins on each other's backs. Very cute for something that weighs as much as our 4x4.

Everyone slept better after that night and the sounds became an almost ever-present background white noise as the hippos seemed to follow us.

After Kasanka and Bangweulu (they weren't far-off when we found the shoebill), more hippos joined us on the Luangwa River. There they were, a pod about 30 strong, watching as we crossed the precarious

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## Notes from the crew

I found the language quaint, as in helon spotting. 'That is the leed col-molant' our guide pointed out while poling the boat through the shallow canals of the Bangweulu marshland. 'It rikes to sit on the leeds whilst spleading its wings for the sun to dly.' The transposition of 'r' and 'l' is common in Zambia (as in central Africa) and you need to pay close attention when listening to your guide. But don't answer him in the same way, or he'll gaze at you with a complete lack of comprehension when you respond: 'Oh my, is that a brack helon ovelthele?' – *Hartwig von Durckheim, Hartbeespoort.*

The border into Zambia at Kazangula was disappointing. What a pity the charges to cross it are in the vacinity of R1000. Hopefully the powers that be will soon realise they're not making entry into Zambia a financially attractive prospect.' – *John and Sally Cloran, Kloof.*

Camp on the edge of South Luangwa, it was time to say our goodbyes as this was where the convoy split up and people made their respective ways home.

After so many days in the bush, it was a bit of a shock to be in a lodge environment again – crowds, a bar, a pool, satellite television. And yes, the hippos were there too. In fact, they're so prolific in the area that wooden platforms had to be built in the trees so tents could be pitched out of their way.

These funky platforms were all taken, so we were forced to camp on the ground. If I was disappointed at the time, then I'm glad now. If we hadn't, I'd never have had the pleasure of a hungry hippo rub against my canvas on its grazing route sometime around 03h00 that morning. Do they sleep? Not a chance! ■



## footnotes

### About the trip

*Getaway* went on a guided self-drive tour with **Navigators Four-Wheel-Drive Adventures** through northern Zambia. This 18-day trip starts in Kasane and ends at Mfuwe near South Luangwa. The basic itinerary looks like this: **day one and two:** Kasane, Botswana, to Lusaka, with time allocated for shopping for supplies. **Day three:** Lusaka to Mkushi River area. **Day four:** to Kasanka National Park, with a detour to Kundaila Falls en route. **Day five and six:** in Kasanka National Park, with organised activities, including a guided nature walk and canoe trip. **Day seven and eight:** at Lake Waka Waka, with a detour to the Livingstone memorial en route. **Day nine, 10 and 11:** at Shoebill Island, including a guided expedition to find the shoebill stork. **Day 12 and 13:** at Kapishya Hot Springs, travelling

through Lavushi Manda National Park en route. **Day 14:** guided tour of Shiwa Ng'andu House in the morning, then to Natwange Community Camp on the western edge of North Luangwa. **Day 15:** relaxed game-drive through North Luangwa and across the Luangwa River to Chifunda Community Camp on the eastern fringe of the Park. **Days 16 and 17:** Luambe National Park for two nights. **Day 18:** through the Nsefu Sector of South Luangwa to Flatdogs Camp.

### Highlights

**Kasanka National Park** encompasses a wide range of habitats, including miombo woodland, riparian fringe and swamp forest, dambos (swampy wetlands), plains, lakes and rivers. The birdlife is always rewarding, with specials including Pel's fishing owl, Böhms bee-eater and Ross's turaco.



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# footnotes

Sightings of the shy, semi-aquatic sitatunga are virtually guaranteed.

**Shoebill Island** lies on the southern fringes of Bangweulu, a wetland area of open water, swamps and seasonally flooded grass plains. This wilderness area is home to elephant, buffalo, tsesebe, sitatunga, jackal and huge herds of black lechwe. The wetlands also support an abundance of birdlife, including specials such as wattled cranes and rosy- or pink-throated longclaws, but it's the opportunity to see the rare shoebill stork that's the main attraction.

**Kapishya Hot Springs** are 35°C sulphur-free springs and the northern-most point of the trip. While there, visit nearby **Shiwa Ng'andu**, an impressive estate and manor built by an eccentric Englishman, Sir Stuart Gore-Brown. Shiwa's history is fairly intricate, but to very sweepingly paraphrase what author Christina Lamb describes in *The Africa House*: Gore-Brown borrowed money from a wealthy aunt and established his dream farm here. It included a magnificent British manor, complete with a shingle roof and heavy wooden furniture; even the workers' cottages were European-style.

Travelling through the remote northern zone of **North Luangwa National Park** is rewarding for its changing landscapes; the route winds down from the semi-evergreen and lightly closed canopy of tall trees of the escarpment, through miombo woodlands, to the valley floor. Wildlife includes elephant, lion, buffalo, black rhino as well as birding specials such as Lilian's lovebird and yellow-throated longclaw.

**Luambe** is a small park of mostly cathedral mopani woodland, situated between North and South Luangwa and has prolific wild- and birdlife, including a resident population of hippos.

## Who to contact

This Northern Zambia Explorer Tour is offered by Navigators Four-Wheel-Drive Adventures. Tel 021-689-1825, cell 083-6753484, e-mail info@navigators4wd.co.za or web www.navigators4wd.co.za.



Navigators specialises in small-group tours to less-visited wilderness and wildlife areas in Southern Africa. It also offers off-road training and a range of shorter, local tours to help you gear up for a longer overland adventure. Tour itineraries can be customised to suit individual needs and some are also available on an all-inclusive and fully catered basis, either in your own or a hired 4x4 vehicle, or guests can travel in one of Navigators' vehicles.

## What it costs

The 18-day Zambian package costs R12900 a person. This includes tour leader/guide, all park fees, camping costs (19 nights), five specified activities, plus four dinners catered by Navigators. It excludes border crossing fees, optional activities, meals and drinks, as well as medical and travel insurance.

## Money matters

Zambia's currency is the kwacha (R1 = K536), but US dollars are accepted in certain areas. You can use credit cards in the larger, urban areas, but you'll need cash (kwacha) for provisions and fuel up north. Garage cards are not accepted.

A litre of fuel costs roughly twice that in South Africa.

## What to take

All campsites on the trip are well established, mostly sand or sparsely grassed spots with good shade and (usually) warm showers.

Up to eight days at a time are spent without access to shops and fuel supplies, so participants must be completely self-sufficient for the duration of the tour, including fuel (for at least a 1 000-kilometre range), water (for drinking and washing), food, tents, bedding and general camping equipment.

A sturdy 4x4 vehicle with high ground clearance is required for this terrain. Participants must have their own recovery equipment and basic vehicle spares.

## Malaria

Zambia is a malaria-risk area. Consult your doctor or travel clinic on the appropriate prophylactics. Remember to also cover up morning and evening, and use anti-bug spray.



