

Zambia



Coming face-to-face with the jungle king

Breathtaking scenes make South Luangwa National Park an unforgettable getaway, **Rachel Smith** writes.

HE WANTS to eat me for dinner. That was my first thought when the magnificent leader of the lion pride rose to his feet and padded over to the open-topped LandCruiser. He had THAT LOOK: the one domestic cats get just prior to performing the death wiggle, pouncing and biting off the head off an unsuspecting noisy mynah.

It's chow time, I thought worriedly, and the females in the pride haven't brought home the bacon. (Or, if there were no warthogs handy, a tasty impala).

He was pacing, too, and this was not a good sign.

It is sobering to realise that a lion, close up, is far from cute and cuddly; rather, you are opposite a deadly predator famous for devouring its prey alive. And while guides swear blind that lions (and other big animals found in Africa's game parks) see the car as a silhouette and that if you stay still, you are safe, I am somewhat dubious. How can you not be, when most guides end wild animal pep talks with the caveat: "Yeah, you SHOULD be all right, I suppose."

As for staying still, I challenge any safari first-timer to make like a tree when faced with a lion's hairy eyeball - particularly when the car in question is just a metre or so from your bare foot. Personally, I decided to throw myself in my seatmate's lap and wail "Patriiick!" to our guide in the hopes he would accelerate. Obviously well versed in night-drive hysterics, Pat hit the gas.

Essentially, my first lion interlude taught me the one tool required by anyone on safari: respect.

And respect is a lesson learned quickly at Shenton Safaris' Kaingo Camp in South Luangwa National Park. Unlike at several other lodges in the area, there are no fences at Kaingo, so it's not uncommon to find a hippo by the dining room or an elephant herd in the bushes next to your cabin. Cheeky baboons bounce in the trees above and crocs circle lazily in the wide, muddy river alongside the camp. In fact, this part of Zambia is so rich in wildlife, at times it all feels as though we are holidaying in a huge open zoo.

Given that hippos kill more humans in

Explorer David Livingstone wrote about his captivation upon visiting the valley in 1866 and, despite the LandCruisers, you would think you were back in Livingstone's era, so untouched is the area.

At Kaingo, days start at 5.30am when the staff (who have been up an hour already stoking the fire, brewing tea and laying out homemade bikkies) sound the drums, which thump gently into your consciousness. Miss a morning drive and you could pass up the highlight of your trip: the spotted flash of a leopard's coat as it lopes off into the bush; a pride of lions, yawning in the morning chill - or a majestic fish eagle, perched proudly on a tree's tallest

branch, as it scans the landscape for a spot of breakfast.

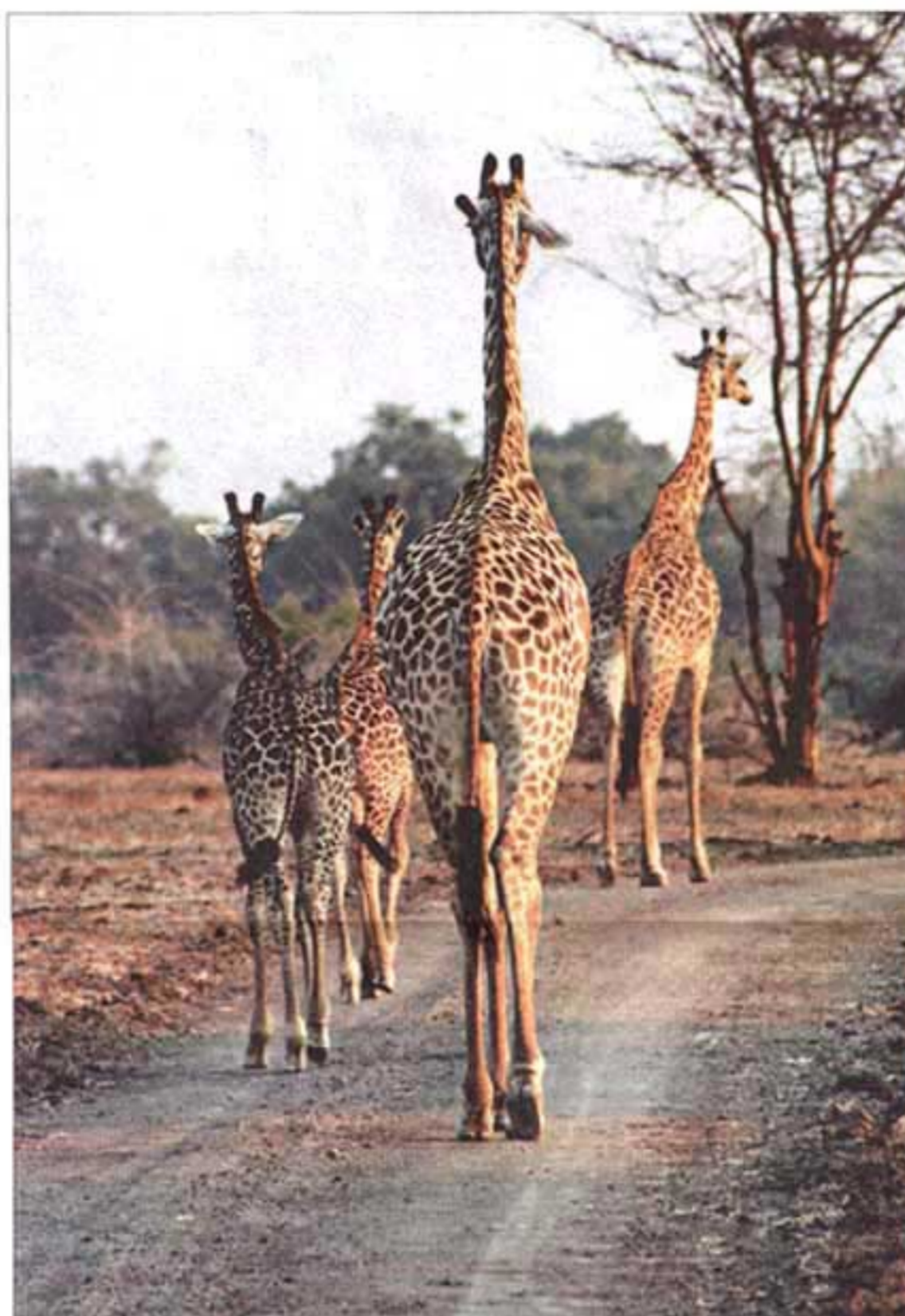
Speaking of which, it's full English fry-ups back at camp, where it quickly becomes apparent that going hungry (or losing weight) just isn't an option.

There is seemingly no end to the hearty fare at Kaingo. Quiches, salads, roasts, chunky soups, gourmet pizzas, curries and delectable desserts all made their way from paddock or market to our plates. Shenton Safaris has its own sizeable veggie patch and the rest is ordered in; but the fact that you're a good two hours' drive from town, or anything even resembling a corner store, makes the gourmet fare something to

write home about. It is prepared under the guidance of American chef and caterer Robin Hinz, who spends much of her time farewelling guests imploring them not to blame her for the extra kilos.

In between feasts, it's easy to flop into the hammock for a snooze, or grab the binoculars and a deck chair to watch elephant herds crossing the river or the Nile crocodiles sunbaking on the sandbanks. Because Kaingo claims arguably the best position in the valley, with national parks on both sides of the river, there's little time to contemplate your navel. When you are not on a morning or afternoon game drive or a game walk (with guide and armed scout), there are trips to the

safer's unique hides - specially constructed cubby holes for observing the animals close up. The hides are the only ones in the valley attracting documentary makers, professional wildlife photographers and amateur snappers, because good shots are pretty much guaranteed, especially if you have a decent zoom lens. The hippo hide, carved into the bank of the Luangwa River, is a particular favourite,



an ebony and a sausage tree and directly above an age-old elephant highway - and there is even a mattress in the hide if you fancy spending a night in the wilderness. The safari's carmine bee-eater hide, believed to be the only one of its kind in the world, is active at the beginning of September when the birds nest. The fourth hide is found at Kaingo's sister camp, Mwamba, a 20-minute drive for three hours'

Africa each year than any other animal, it's a buzz peeping at these creatures

with little stools to sit on and cool drinks to slot in the rustic cup holders fixed to the walls. Given that hippos kill more humans in Africa each year than any other animal, it's a buzz peeping out of the straw-covered spy-holes, just metres from up to 200 of these stout, sleepy creatures as they roll over in the mud, snorting and harrumphing, yawning and resting their hairy chins on each other's backs. When night falls, they lumber into the scrub en masse to chow down on their daily 50 kilos of grass - and with 19,000 of them believed to be in this part of the park, that is not a bad green veggie intake.

Shenton Safaris also has an elephant hide, positioned between

from what Jules calls the "gold tap safari operations" found in Botswana and Kenya, famous for minibuses full of point'n'click tourists. In Luangwa, it's rare to see another car during a game drive, so you are not sharing the wildlife with anyone.

After a few days kicking back in the bush, all thoughts of your other life just drift away. TV? Forget it. Email? (OK, you can check it if you're desperate, but

you won't be.) Traffic? Well, the only zebra crossings you will encounter are... well, real zebras cutting in front of your LandCruiser, baby elephants opting to stand in the middle of the road, and giraffes hitting the highway to save their hoofs from the uneven African savannah.

The afternoon drives can be even more memorable than the morning ones, as you can be privy to the event most safarigoers want to see: the hunt. The four-wheel-drives set out at 4pm and stop for sundowners - a safari ritual. One day you will be sipping a gin and tonic in a dry riverbed while baby baboons cavort nearby. The next, it will be white wine overlooking Lion Plain as a

sweeping land and its amazing animals, I found myself feeling a little sheepish about the first day and my not-so-near miss with the papa lion.

Perhaps it was my five-day crash course in wild animal respect, or maybe the 20 kilograms of food I had consumed, but by the end of my trip, making like a tree was a cinch.

After all, it may be the only time in my life that I would look so closely into a lion's golden eyes, and feel so humbled by this magical other world. But I certainly hope not.

Once seduced by the wild,

The writer was a guest of Shenton Safaris and the African Safari Company.

It's rare to see another car during a game drive in Luangwa

SCENES FROM A SAFARI: In Zambia's South Luangwa National Park, visitors and locals (top) are surrounded by wildlife - giraffes, hippos, zebras and even frogs on the table.

TRIP NOTES

■ **Getting there:** Fly to Johannesburg, then take a connecting flight to Lusaka, and from there another flight to Mfuwe, which is where Shenton Safaris pick you up. It's a two-hour drive to Kaingo, mostly through the park.

■ **Where to stay:** Shenton Safaris' Kaingo and Mwamba camps, South Luangwa National Park.

■ **Costs:** Return flights to Johannesburg, internal flights, accommodation, meals, full bar and laundry at both camps, all game drives, walking safaris and hides, national park fees and airport transfers for a five-day trip, around \$5390.

■ **For info:** Visit www.kaingo.com or phone the African Safari Company on 1800 659 270.

