

Contributors

Adventurous travellers



Dolf Els

Southern Ethiopia, p 44

Dolf explored places in the Ethiopian Rift Valley that are far from the regular tourist routes.

Why this part of Africa?

For me, the Great Rift Valley has always conjured up images of a beautiful, mysterious valley where tribes live who practise age-old customs. I wanted to see if it were true. And it is.

High- and lowlights of the trip?

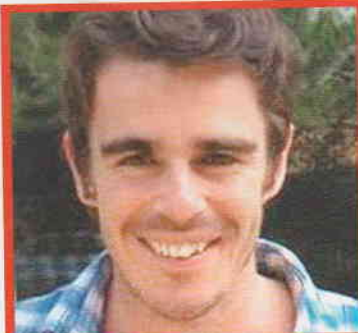
Visiting tribal communities in the secluded Omo and Mago national parks was the highlight; centuries-old traditions are still being observed there. It's just a pity that nearly everyone wants money for having their photograph taken. And then they pose for the camera, which makes it difficult to get spontaneous photos.

Would you do things differently on a second visit?

I'd like to spend more time there and experience more of the traditions. And I'd be more cautious of running water! I walked through a river to see if our vehicles would make it and to take photos when I stepped in a hole and fell in the water.

Where to next?

I'd like to visit Liuwa Plains National Park in Zambia.



Christopher Clark

Northern Zambia, p 50

Christopher blames his trip to northern Zambia on a few too many beers. We didn't ask, but we did enjoy reading about his travels.

Your earliest travel memory?

A family holiday to Cyprus when I was about five years old, I think. I remember spending most of the holiday trying to catch lizards.

Your number-one travel tip?

Always travel with patience and an open mind.

Do you plan your trips in detail or just go with the flow?

If it's left up to me, I like to go with the flow as much as possible. I love the freedom. But for work trips you have to plan.

Your favourite travel writer?

Ryszard Kapuściński, a travel writer whose passionate and incisive writing about Africa has had a significant influence on the way I travel and write.

Any favourite road music?

Nothing, actually. I like to drive with the window down and take in all the sights and sounds of a place.

Bucket-list destination?

Virunga National Park in the DRC – I want to see mountain gorillas and the live lava lake of the Nyiragongo Volcano. In Southern Africa, I'd like to visit Mozambique, particularly the wilder northern reaches, and see more of Zimbabwe than the Victoria Falls area.

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Where few dare to go

Far northern Zambia seems an empty place on travel maps. A group of South Africans drove to Lake Tanganyika to find out why.

Words: Christopher Clark
Photos: Simon Cox

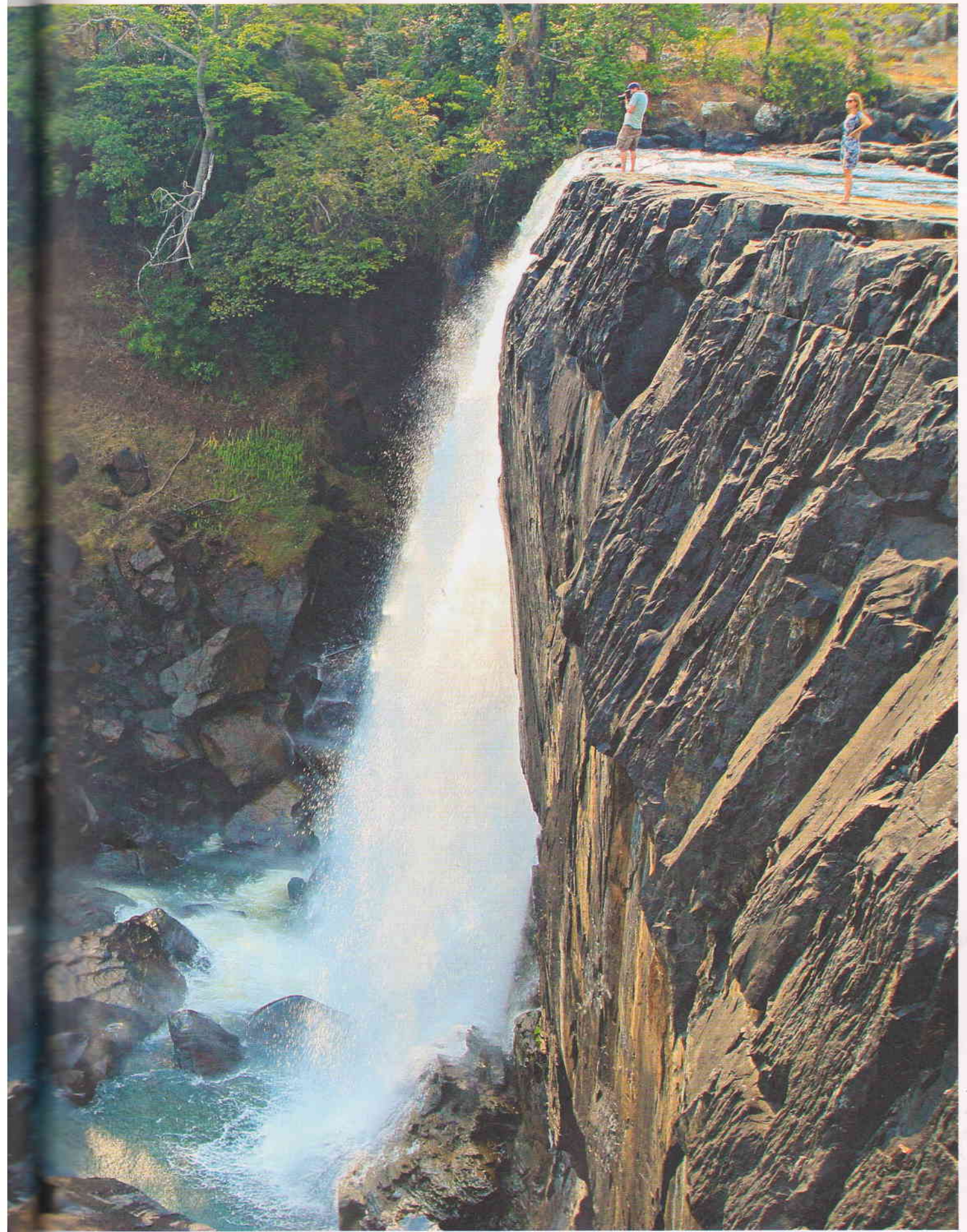
If I hadn't had one too many beers that night, it might never have happened. Then again, the same could be said for so many of my greatest adventures. The man buying the beers on the night in question was Robert Bernatzeder, an old friend I hadn't seen since returning from a dreary six-month stint in London not long before. He'd invited me to his place in Constantia for a catch-up and, once our brains were sufficiently addled by liquor, he hit me with his plan: a 10 000 km, seven-week trip from Cape Town to Lake Tanganyika in far northern Zambia. We were to be back before the rains set in.

Rob's idea was to "hire" me for the trip, and for me to help drive one of two Toyota Fortuners – the chariots for our pioneering team of travel and online tourism marketing "experts". I said yes before he'd even finished telling me what the point of it all was.

Filling in the gaps

Have a quick glance through most of the "reputable" international travel guides and magazines and it quickly becomes apparent that when Zambia features in these publications at all, it's generally reduced to little more than Livingstone and Victoria Falls. Even the more intrepid adventurers don't seem willing to stray too far from this trend. Instead, they stick to the safety of the more explored – and for the most part more developed – southern parts of Zambia.

Though I'd never been to Zambia myself, I knew enough to feel fairly sure that this had to be a terrible injustice to the rest of the country further north. I have always been the kind of traveller – and travel writer – who likes to explore the emptier parts of the map, to find out what people were missing (and why) and to try and fill in some of the blank spaces. Accordingly, I've often planned my trips precisely to the places that weren't in the travel guides and magazines.



GOING OUTBACK

Suffice it to say that when Rob laid his cards on the table that night, there was no way, with a few beers already down my neck, that I was going to say no.

So it was that a month or so later, our motley crew of *wazungu** were on our way from Cape Town in Rob's Toyota Fortuner (aka *Honey Badger*), towing a trailer. Both were practically overflowing with biltong, steaks, beer, mosquito repellent and camera equipment. Rob's brother Marcus and the other team members in the second Fortuner were travelling from Johannesburg and we'd meet in Zambia.

Back in the bush

After a few days on other business in the Madikwe and Welgevonden game reserves in South Africa, and a final check-up and stock-up in Joburg, we headed north, making our way to Martin's Drift Border Post and enjoying the beautiful, undulating landscape of Limpopo's Waterberg region.

We slept over near the border on our first night and crossed early the next day. Any time I approach a border post anywhere in Africa, I do so with a certain amount of fear and trepidation. But our crossing into Botswana that morning was so swift, quiet and painless that I felt like I must have been dreaming.

The road on the other side, like most in Botswana, was also quiet and we kept up a good speed towards Nxai Pan National Park, spotting far more donkeys and elephants en route than humans or cars. As a bit of a lentil-loving Cape Town hippy, I never thought I'd say the following: A Wimpy can be a real saviour. I'm sure most other South Africans have rejoiced at seeing the familiar red sign when driving these roads.

We reached Nxai Pan by late afternoon and had surprisingly little trouble navigating the 50 km of deep sand to the camp site, despite the receptionist warning that we would "never make it" in one go with our trailer. We set up camp, lit the fire and sat down for a couple of beers before dinner.

I thought to myself that after this warm-up we would be ready to tackle whatever Zambia could throw at us. With the benefit of hindsight, that prediction was certainly a little premature. Maybe the beer had just gone to my head again.

RIVER WILD (top). Marcus's Fortuner makes light work of one of the river crossings encountered on the way out of South Luangwa National Park.

LIFE ON THE EDGE (right). Micha and the writer horse around on the prettier (and quieter) Zim side of Victoria Falls.



* *Wazungu* is a Swahili term for white people; *mzungu* is the singular.

After a braai and a visit from the resident camp elephant Mr Nxai, we turned in for the night. It had been a while since I had been in the bush, and the sounds of hyenas and roaring lions kept me up most of the night. But there would be plenty more of that to come!

Driving towards the town of Kasane, the destruction caused by elephants along the road was staggering. With no culling and no hunting anywhere in Botswana, elephant populations are spiralling out of control and the resulting human-animal conflicts are becoming an ever more pressing issue.

The Smoke that Thunders

After another couple of beer-and-braai nights at a friend's house in Kasane, we crossed into Zimbabwe. We did a quick walk around the town of Victoria Falls, got roped into buying trillions of Zimbabwean dollars as souvenirs and had a look at the Zimbabwean side of the falls. For all the superlatives that people have exhausted in their attempts to describe this amazing natural wonder, none do it justice, so I won't even bother trying. You have to see it for yourself.

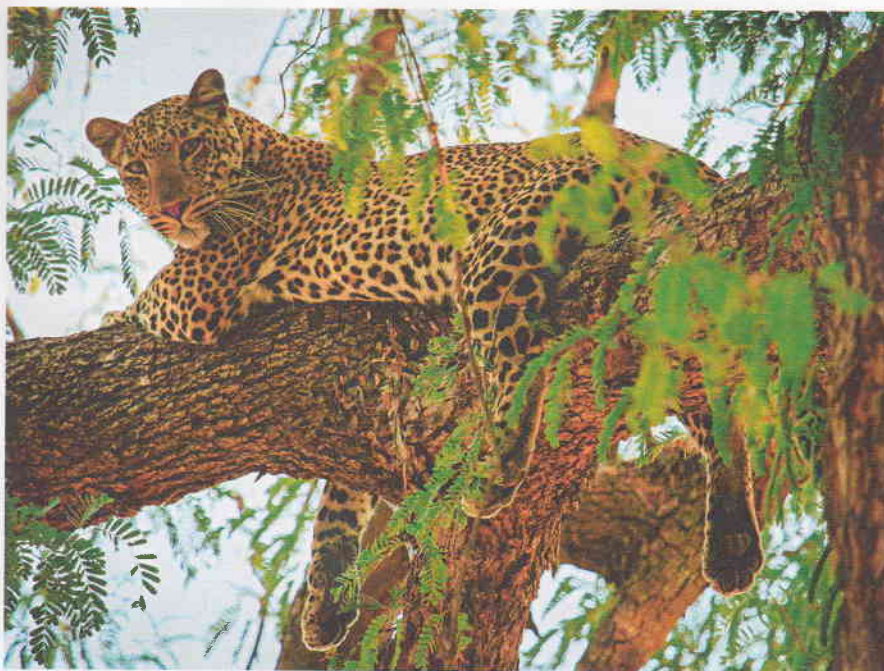
We crossed into Livingstone later that afternoon. I quickly began to feel a little nauseated by all the decadence and colonial nostalgia that characterised so many of the hotels and lodges in the area, and by the whole "show" that the place seemed so willing to put on for the international tourists, seemingly at the expense of its own integrity at times. There was something very false about much of it.

Livingstone itself, once Zambia's capital, was largely run-down, loud and dirty. A number of the oldest and most historical buildings in Zambia can be found there, but most of them had been left in a state of terrible disrepair.

We were soon itching to be on our way again, and after a quick stopover in Lusaka and a couple of days in the beautiful Lower Zambezi National Park, we were finally on our way to South Luangwa National Park. The park's northern escarpment road would be our entry point to the more remote northern reaches of Zambia.

The Valley of the Leopard

In many ways, we all felt that our adventure would truly begin once we'd arrived in South Luangwa. Looking back at our trip up to that point, we agreed things had been pretty easy. For the most part the roads had been okay, the trailer hadn't fallen off, we'd had no rain and I still had clean



NOT-SO-ELUSIVE CAT. Although leopards are notoriously shy and hard to spot in many African parks, in South Luangwa they are abundant and generally very relaxed around people.

underwear. But none of us were under any illusion that things weren't going to get a whole lot tougher at some point or other. We all had enough "experience" to be sure of that. And I for one was looking forward to it.

In the meantime, we had a few days to enjoy the park and wait for Marcus and the other Fortuner to show up. They were supposed to meet us in Lusaka but had decided to go on their own little adventure further north – skirting the Congolese border and Lavushi Manda National Park. We hadn't heard anything since and all their cellphones had been going straight to voicemail for some days.

Feeling fairly sure that they could handle themselves, we left them to it and made the most of having a bit of time in one spot and relishing the opportunity to really get to know this incredible park. The density of big game in South Luangwa was unlike anything I had ever seen. Kruger, Etosha and the Maasai Mara all paled in comparison. In particular, the park certainly lived up to its nickname as The Valley of the Leopard. If you come to South Luangwa and don't see leopard, you seriously need your eyes tested.

We had set up camp just on the other side of the Luangwa River, outside the park, and were visited almost daily by hippo, giraffe and a big elephant herd. One night, I got a little bit too close to a frisky young bull that had suddenly materialised out of the darkness close to the camp's bar

area. I made a mad dash for the ablation block with him in hot pursuit and the sound of my so-called friends dying with laughter in the background. I was left shaken and newly reminded of this fact: Around here the wild still rules and you forget this at your peril.

After four days, Marcus finally showed up looking like his adventure had taken its toll on his usually high spirits. He and his crew looked like they'd just come back from a war zone. When we asked Marcus what had happened, he just shook his head and said he didn't want to talk about it. We asked his passengers and the message was clear: "Just. Don't. Ask."

We would soon see for ourselves that a number of the roads and general lack of infrastructure further north in Zambia could easily have this effect on the uninitiated. For now we decided to let the new arrivals be and began to ready ourselves for the "big push" north to Tanganyika.

Due north

When we told some knowledgeable people that we were going to be leaving South Luangwa National Park via the northern escarpment, we got one of two reactions: They either got delirious with excitement and said we were in for the time of our lives, or they solemnly hung their heads as if we were headed for certain death. Neither side seemed to have attempted it with a trailer, as we were about to do. Either way, we chose to put our faith in >

the first sentiment and set off on our long road north with our tails up.

The day started well. We took the drive through the southern sections of the park at a leisurely pace, spotting lots of game en route – including elephant, giraffe, hippo, hyena and lion – both along the river bank and as we cut further inland. To cap it all off we found a beautiful male leopard lounging about in a big sausage tree.

The further north we headed, the wilder the park became. At times we lost the road altogether and had to retrace our steps. Our Tracks4Africa map began to struggle a little – many of these routes in the more remote parts of the park have to be marked out every year after the rain and can never be recreated exactly as they were the previous year. Nevertheless, we plodded along with relative ease for the first few hours of the day.

After negotiating two relatively tame rivers (before the rains, at least), we were finally at the foot of the escarpment. We could see the track cutting through the dense ebony forest up towards the sky. We let our tyres down a little more for good measure and then began the climb.

After about an hour, we'd only covered 10km and both Rob and Marcus, the two brave drivers on duty that morning, had ordered most of their passengers, women included, out of the vehicles to lighten the load for the poor Fortuners (suddenly not so fortunate), and to move rocks and shovel

sand to make the going a little bit easier for the vehicles. In places, the vehicles moved as if they were about to tip over backwards and the trailer was bouncing over rocks like a kangaroo. I looked at the GPS map and saw it said we were on a "main road".

A little further on there was a loud bang and we stopped to find that the spare tyre under Robert's car had burst – the first casualty of the trip. Luckily, we had none more on the roof. It was only 10.30am and the temperature was already 45°C.

It had been at least two hours since we'd seen any other sign of life. And why the hell would we have done? You'd have to be crazy to be out on this road in this heat. I thought to myself. I kept expecting to look up and see vultures circling overhead. Nevertheless, we ploughed on – like insects towards the light.

After about six hours we had finally made it through the 60 km or so to the top. With the benefit of hindsight, the view back over the Luangwa Valley was well worth the tough climb. A little way beyond, we could see the Great North Road ahead of us, its tarred surface shimmering like a mirage in the heat. When we arrived at the tar road, Robert got out of his vehicle, crouched down and kissed it. We pumped our tyres back up, swapped drivers and we were off.

With me behind the wheel, Rob could do nothing more except lie in the back while his girlfriend Ro stroked his hair and told him it would be okay.

Between rocks and a hard place

With so much of the day gone there was no way we were going to make it to Lake Tanganyika in one go, so we took a short detour off the main road to Kapishya Hot Springs Lodge. It proved to be well worth it. I had the best hot bath of my life in the amazing hot spring in the shade of giant palm leaves. We were then treated to a huge meal, plenty of wine and some great bush tales by the eccentric owners.

After a leisurely breakfast we were on our way. The road soon became little more than one big construction site and a lot of the time we couldn't see more than a few yards in any direction for all the dust being kicked up by the trucks. We bumped our way through the potholes painfully slowly.

A great tip for these kinds of roads if you are in a convoy is to take walkie-talkies. With radios, you can at least warn the vehicle behind you when to slow down or get out of harm's way.

We stopped at the beautiful Chishimba Falls for a quick lunch and I marvelled at the sheer amount of water in this country. (Zambia has more bodies of water than any other country in Africa).

By sunset, we were still a couple of hundred kilometres from Lake Tanganyika and at the rate we were going we weren't going to make it before midnight. We passed through a small town called Mpika and decided to look for a camp. Tracks4Africa gave us a place called Friendly's Resthouse, but this turned out to be little more than a squatter camp. We headed on a little further and then pulled off the road, down a short track into a small clearing that looked like it might serve as a makeshift camp site. There were a number of small rock piles close to where we parked. I was concerned that we were camping on some kind of burial ground, but no one else seemed to share my concern.

Then, just after we had set up camp and got our fire going, we heard raised voices and saw men with torches running down the track towards us. We approached them and it turned out the rocks were their livelihood – they would be sold at local markets for construction. The men had been worried we were going to steal the rocks, and when we told them we were just camping they laughed. Then we laughed. Then they laughed. Then we shook hands and they said goodbye.

I wasn't sure who was more relieved at how the situation had panned out. I turned around and saw that Simon, who'd remained standing at the back, had drawn his large samurai knife as soon as he heard



THE END OF THE ROAD. Marcus and Ro sit by the campfire at Ndole Bay Lodge on the shore of the vast and beautiful Lake Tanganyika.

YOU'LL NEED TO HAVE THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS IN ORDER:

- Vehicle clearance, registration documents and insurance.
- Third-party insurance for Zambia and any other countries you are passing through en route.
- A road tax permit, which you can be buy at the border post. Technically, only the person whose name is on the permit is allowed to drive.
- A valid driving licence.
- A valid passport; make sure your passport is stamped and your visa is valid for at least a few days more than you plan to be in the country.
- Road blocks and speed traps are common throughout Zambia. Stick to the speed limit, particularly in and around towns and cities. When you're stopped at a police roadblock, kill officers with courtesy. Zambian officials are generally polite, but sometimes eager to find an excuse to make you cough up some money. Don't give them one. Also watch out for unmarked speed bumps near towns and cities.



THE RESILIENT HONEY BADGER. Rob's Fortuner, aka *Honey Badger*, emerges from another river crossing in South Luangwa. In the rainy season it might not have been as easy.



AN UNEXPECTED OASIS. Kapishya Hot Springs Lodge is a great halfway house for those heading to northern Zambia. Both the property and the area have an interesting colonial history.

I WANT TO GO TOO!

Best time to go: In the dry season, from June to late October.

Road conditions: The roads are mostly not in the best condition, though usually significantly better around big towns or cities. You'll encounter potholes in tarred roads and roadworks on many of the major roads (including sections of the Great North Road and the Great East Road).

Fuel: Always have a range of at least 1 000 km, as fuel may not be available in the remote parts. Many filling stations accept only cash.

Air: A compressor is a must. Tyre pressure has to be adjusted frequently and filling stations don't always have a compressor.

Food and water: Most major towns have a Shoprite supermarket, and in Lusaka and cities like Ndola and Kitwe you'll find a Pick n Pay and Woolworths, both of which sell alcohol. A number of farmers and local markets and stores along the roads sell fruit, vegetables and basic necessities like drinking water. Don't drink the tap water in Zambia. Bottled water is cheap and generally available. Some camp sites have boreholes, but carry enough water for washing and cooking.

Money: You can exchange at border posts, but usually at poor rates. ATMs are available in almost all major towns and cities. Carry some US dollars and Zambian kwachas.

Navigation: Take a Garmin with Tracks4 Africa maps uploaded. You'll struggle to get around many of the national parks without it, and it's useful for locating banks, petrol stations, accommodation and so on.

Health: You need to produce a yellow fever inoculation certificate when you return to South Africa from Zambia. It's advisable to use malaria prophylactics, especially in the wet season, and to have malaria testing kits.

Accommodation and contacts:

- **Mvuu Lodge:** 📧 info@mvuulodge.com (Nicole Subramunian)
- **Track and Trail River Camp:** 📧 info@trackandtrailrivercamp.com (Peter Geraerdt)
- **Kapishya Hot Springs Lodge:** 📧 info@shivasafaris.com (Mark and Meil Harvey)
- **Ndole Bay Lodge:** 📧 info@ndolebaylodge.com (Craig and Elise)
- Robert Bernatzeder of **Zambia Tourism** for comprehensive self-drive tips and general info on Zambia: 📧 robert@zambiatourism.com
- **Hemingways** for 4x4 vehicle rental in Zambia: 📧 info@hemingwayszambia.com

the guys approaching. You can take the Joburger out of Joburg...

As we came over the crest of a hill at 11 am the next morning, we saw Lake Tanganyika stretched before us like a great sea. We drove through the fishing village of Ndole as hundreds of children stampeded towards our cars. "Sweeets!" they shouted as we went by, as if our Fortuners were two giant bags of liquorice all sorts.

After another 10 km of bumpy dirt road we were finally at our destination, the

stunning Ndole Bay Lodge. We picked a great camping spot right on the beach, let the tyres down almost as far as they would go, and revved our way through the soft sand until we were as close to the water's edge as we could get. Then we sat on the sand with a cold beer in hand and looked across the water, tired but content.

Rob patted me on the back with a proud smile. We'd made it. The road had finally run out, for now at least. And what a road it had been. 📍

