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ZAMBIA'S WILD WEST

Not many 'mzungus' make it all the way to Liuwa Plains, Zambia's most remote national park. Christopher Clark and his small convoy from Cape Town, on a six-week tour of the country, decided to buck the trend





It had been a long old road, there was no denying it: about 8000 kilometres of Zambian tar, gravel, dust and soil over the course of the previous six weeks, with plenty of highlights along the way. There had been a few low points as well, but they always make for the best stories once you're back home again.

We were now down to our last week in Zambia, with Liuwa Plains National Park set to be our last destination – before we came full circle back to where we'd crossed the border into the country at Victoria Falls. I had been looking forward to this last leg of the trip for some time. From the few reports I'd heard and the pictures I had seen, Liuwa Plains (Zambia's most remote national park) was certainly unlike anywhere I

had ever been before, and a great place to end our trip on a high before heading back to Cape Town.

Our small convoy of two Toyota Fortuners was making its way west from Kafue National Park. We'd been told by some other intrepid South Africans we'd met at our camp that morning that the drive would take us only a few hours – a rare occurrence pretty much anywhere in Zambia – so we had set off with our tails up. This despite the fact that we had been kept up half the previous night by lions roaring a little too close to our flimsy ground tent for comfort.

Not for the first time on this trip, our early morning optimism would prove ill-founded. Four hours after leaving Kafue, we had made it only as far as the town of Mongu, and still had a long way to go.

Those South Africans must have been pulling our leg, I thought to myself. Well, we should have known better by now. But, with the end of our trip in sight, we did our best to enjoy every step of the way, and as the tar road vanished (as it so often did in Zambia) and we were on the dirt once more, we marvelled at the beautiful flat plains that stretched away on either side of us, seemingly forever; punctuated only by occasional marshes and wetlands where local women washed their clothes, and men fished with hand nets.

In the rainy season, pretty much everything we saw would be under water. The Chinese were busy building a long bridge across the plains from Mongu and over the mighty Zambezi. It was a huge project, but we'd been told



by some locals in Mongu that they did this almost every year, and that as soon as the rains came and the Zambezi burst its banks, the bridge would be washed away again; then the Chinese would come back the next year and begin it all again.

Just when we were beginning to wonder if we had somehow crossed all the way into neighbouring Angola without realising it, and with day almost over, we finally came to the small town of Kalabo and a sign that said, 'Welcome to Liuwa Plains National Park'. Ahead of us was a short river crossing with a very small hand-pulled ferry that would take us across to the other side and into the park proper.

We let down our tyres in preparation for the deep sand on the other side of the crossing. As we did so, another Fortuner full of South Africans pulled up behind us (the first other whiteys we had seen all

day) and, on seeing that one of our two Fortuners had a Gauteng number plate, just as theirs did, came to ask where we were from. We said 'Cape Town.' They looked disappointed, said nothing, and left us to it. We drove down the small slope and carefully eased our way onto the ferry.

After about twenty minutes, both our cars had made it across the river and we'd managed to pull our way up the short hill and out of the deep sand in one go, despite the ranger we'd met in reception saying that there was "no way" we'd do it with the trailer. We continued along the sandy track towards our camp, about 20 kilometres further on. The trailer was slipping around a bit at certain points, but, for the most part, the going was fairly easy. (Bear in mind that we were told that all trailers were going to be banned in Liuwa Plains from the start of 2015).

Left Crossing on the ferry over the Luanginga River to Liuwa Plains. **Top** Fish drying on racks in a Liuwa village, and local farmers transporting goods through the park using time-honoured methods. **Above** Fishermen on the Zambezi River, which regularly breaks its banks and flows into the Barotse Flood Plain to render the road to Mongu impassable – despite the efforts of Chinese road construction crews.

There are no lodges or luxury campsites anywhere in Liuwa. It's all just good-old-fashioned bush camping, with basic donkey boilers for hot water in the thatched ablutions, and no electricity anywhere. The sites themselves were among the prettiest and wildest I had seen anywhere in Zambia. We found a beautiful spot beneath a thick canopy of trees (shade is a must anywhere in Zambia at the start of November) and set up camp with the sun just beginning to set. There was not another soul to be seen, apart from a local who suddenly appeared out of nowhere carrying a huge bundle of firewood for our campsite (this service seems to be included pretty much everywhere in Zambia), who then disappeared just as swiftly as he had arrived.

That night we made pizzas on the braai – if there was one thing the trip taught me, it was just how many different types of food you could make on a braai if needs must – and set our minds to the difficult task of trying to finish all the alcohol we still had left before the end of the trip. We made a decent dent in the beers, gin and Amarula, then stumbled to our tents to the sounds of hyena not too far away. Later, one of the guys told us he had woken up in the middle of the night and

seen three hyenas sniffing around the edge of my tent.

The next morning, we were up at sunrise (no alarm clock necessary by this stage), despite a slight hangover, and set off to explore the park. The vast, open plains were unlike anything I had ever seen in other parts of Zambia, or anywhere else in Africa for that matter.

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The sky was enormous, and I was left feeling incredibly small.

Apart from the spectacular landscape, Liuwa is best known for the annual migration of blue wildebeest from late October through November, which arrive in their thousands from Angola just before the onset of the rains. With the exception of the annual Serengeti migration, this is the biggest migration of wildebeest in Africa. As we drove through the plains, we saw hundreds in all directions, many with young calves. These strange creatures looked particularly striking with their long hair

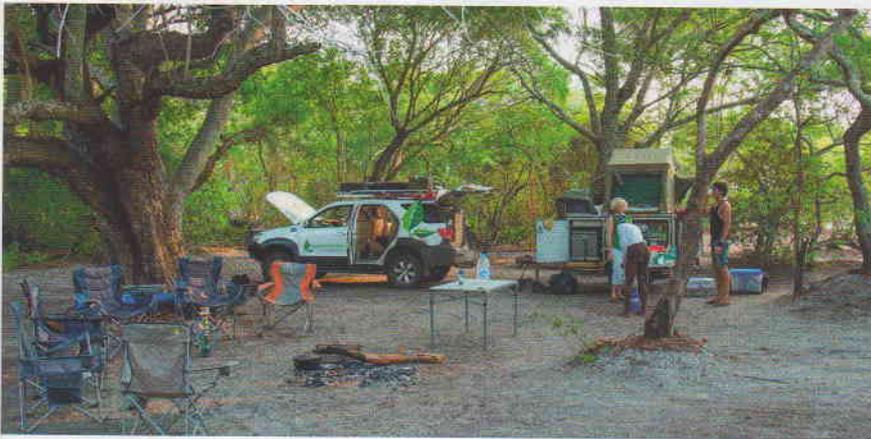
blowing in the wind while the long grass blew across the plains behind them.

We had been told that hyena and wild dog were particularly active at this time of year, with all the new-born wildebeest basically serving themselves up as a daily all-you-can-eat buffet. It wasn't long before we stumbled across a couple of very fat and lazy-looking hyena cooling off in a waterhole. There were no prizes for guessing what had been on their menu that day.

The next day, we headed into the even more remote northern reaches of the park; which, if one were to keep going, stretch far beyond the Angolan border. We were looking for Lady Liuwa, the star of the documentary, *The Last Lioness*. We had been told that she and her three cubs were somewhere in this area. Every so often, our Tracks4Africa would suddenly have a little hissy fit and we would lose our path through the grass and have to retrace our steps. After the annual flooding, the tracks through the park have to be retraced anew each year, so they are never quite the same. Though we had no luck finding Lady Liuwa, the landscape became ever more staggering and sparsely populated the further north we went.

We also passed a number of small villages comprising thatched houses surrounded by small farming plots.





Top Remarkable, wide-open landscapes are unlike anything else in Zambia. **Top right** Hyena cooling off in a waterhole after a wildebeest feast. **Above** Pizza on the braai at our bush-camp at Kwale in the south of the park.





Top A feature of the park is the annual migration of blue wildebeest, which head into the park from Angola in their thousands, just before the onset of the October rains. **Left** Fortuners make a perfect viewing platform for the team.



WILD WEST ROUTE

From Lusaka, the M9 heading west goes through the Kafue National Park, where we stayed in a camp called Mayukuyuku, on the park's eastern side. That was our point of departure for Liuwa Plains, following the M9 through the park to Kaoma and on to Mongu, just south-east of Liuwa Plains. From there we took the dirt road in a westerly direction across the Barotse Flood Plain to just below Kalenga, then headed up to Kalabo where we crossed over the Luangwa River by ferry. We camped at Kwale Camp in the south of the park.

Liuwa Plains is one of the few national parks in the world where the local communities continue to subsist within the boundaries of the park. In Liuwa, it isn't always a seamless relationship between the locals and the flora and fauna. There are infrequent incidences of poaching for bush meat, while Liuwa's only remaining male lion had recently died from what some speculated was intentional poisoning. But, for the most part, the villagers were warm and welcoming to us tourists, at least, though there was often a certain expectation of handouts. In many of the villages, children would excitedly flock to the side our cars, screaming

"SWEEEEEEETS!" as if our Fortuners were a couple of giant liquorice allsorts. For a bit of variety, in one village a young boy ran up to the side of the car and said, "Hello! We have ebola!" then laughed like a machine gun and slapped his thigh until we were out of sight.

After another day of exploring, and viewing another perfect sunset across the plains, it was time to be on our way again. Our food was pretty much finished, and, more importantly, so was our alcohol. As we got back to the ferry crossing, we saw another car waiting to cross and realised that it was the first vehicle, apart from our own, that we had seen for three days.

Back on the other side of the river, we made our way towards Livingstone. We were soon on a brand-new tar road — perhaps the best we had experienced anywhere in Zambia — and making good ground along the banks of the Zambezi. Suddenly, I found myself longing for some of the slow and difficult dirt roads we had traversed up to this point, or for anything that might help delay saying goodbye to this incredible country for just a little bit longer. ■