

RUCKOMECHI

The engine surged with relief as the clinging surface of Lake Kariba released its tenuous grip and the floatplane climbed steeply above the township to clear the rugged escarpment above the dam wall. Then, with hearts in our mouth, the Cessna dropped like a stone into the narrow neck of the gorge to skim only metres above the rushing river, the pilot skilfully following the twists and turns of the imprisoned Zambezi as it snaked in the intimidating shadows of towering walls.

Suddenly the gorge was left far behind and we followed the river as it spread uninhibited onto the Zambezi Valley floodplains dividing the distant and opposing escarpments of Zambia and Zimbabwe. Fifteen minutes later, Margie and I had landed on the water amongst the bloated hulks of disgruntled hippo pods near the boundary of Mana Pools National Park. Drifting in the strong current, we anxiously awaited our transfer to the mainland.

This was our grand and unforgettable entrance to Ruckomechi, a camp now run by Wilderness Safaris and resting peacefully on the southern banks of the Zambezi River under the permanent shade of mahogany and magnificent *acacia albida's*. Set on the western side of the rich expansive floodplain of Mana Pools National Park - a world heritage site - it must be one of the loveliest spots in Africa.

After a short trip by power boat to the landing stage we were driven the remaining few kilometres to the camp and soon confined in its welcoming and homely late afternoon shadows.

We were shown to our spacious quarters, marvelling at the size of the double bed and comfortable facilities. This was one of ten thatched roof chalets with double or single beds and en-suite, catering for a maximum of twenty guests. Later we received the usual and important camp safety instructions from the chief guide Carl Nichols in the opened lounge, soothed by a cool drink from the bar. One could not help being rudely distracted by the broad waters of the Zambezi outside, bathed in a delicious pink and overlooked by the deep blue hues of the massive Zambian escarpment basking in the moods of a setting sun.

It was the mention of 'yesterday there were lions in the camp' that suddenly returned my attention to the chief guide. He was explaining to the more attentive audience that as wildlife are free to wander unimpeded over the closely trimmed lawns of the camp, guests should be alert at all times and must be walked to and from their chalets by a guide after dusk! Nowhere else in the world does the traveller have such a marvellous opportunity and privilege to closely experience Nature's diversity and to intrude a moment within the natural boundaries imposed by her wildlife.

That evening we sat down at the long dinner table under the soft glow of candlelight with staff and other guests, looking out through the open side of the thatched dining room onto bright moonlit waters of the Zambezi. It was a memorable evening with friendly conversation interrupted only by the staccato utterances and splashes of squabbling hippopotamuses venturing out of the water to compete with the elephants and waterbuck for the sweet grasses along the river bank below. Coffee was sipped in mute silence as the calls of two male lions close by asserted their authority. In time, the reverberating roar of the king of beasts becomes a wonderful and stimulating sound of the African night, awakening man's primitive instincts subdued by a modern lifestyle.

Before sunrise the next morning we were woken by drum beats and after a tentative inspection for lingering wildlife, we boldly crossed the shadows of the wide lawn under the majestic winterthorns (*Acacia albida*) to the dining room for coffee and a light breakfast. Our first activity for the day was a fascinating and instructive walk with an armed guide to observe the fauna and flora of this ancient and remote section of the Zambezi valley. It was also a chance to glimpse the magnificent bird population that can be found in this rich habitat. Later, after a substantial brunch, falsely justified by the light exercise, we opted for a late afternoon game drive. The extensive grassland along the river with stands of mahogany and acacia, give way to jessebush and mopane forest, making a unique blend of river terrace, forest and floodplain before the steep rise of the formidable Zimbabwean escarpment. Roaming unhindered in this idyllic place can be found herds of elephant, and a great variety of herbivores that attract the resident lions and other predators.

For those who do not wish to simply sit and relax about the camp, there are other activity options such as canoe trips, pontoon game viewing and the thrill and challenge of tiger fishing. A must for the romantic is to book the bath with a view. Perched in privacy on the high bank of the Zambezi and open at the front to reveal only the spectacular view across the water, a huge hot bath for two, foaming with bath salts and cooled by a bottle of wine, offers a unique and sensuous indulgence. Two bronze guinea fowls look on with inquisitive stare and tactful muteness!

Ruckomechi is four times winner of Zimbabwe's 'Best Safari Camp' and its achievements are reflected in the personalised attention, its home style cooking and friendly atmosphere under the management of Troy and Lesley Williamson.

All meals, beverages, laundry and activities are inclusive. Transfer from Kariba is by road/boat or air charter.

THE END