



Monday, June 14, 2010

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1. Shenton Safaris - Newsletters

1.1. Greetings all

I can hardly believe August is upon us! It has been a busy, busy season and once again the wonders of nature have kept me away from my newsletter updates. So, here we are in the middle of another busy safari season – the 14th since I opened Kaingo back in 1992.



Comparing 1992 to 2005 things have certainly changed - :

Communications: in '92 reservations were taken by a travel agent in Lusaka and faxed to Mfuwe airport. I even had one booking arrive via a note on a cleft stick from our kind neighbours across the river. Comms back then were slow and not exactly efficient.

Now in 2005 we have a “V” Satellite dish, which means we can be on-line all the time and take bookings and arrange flights right here at camp in real time. Well, so I’m told - that’s Jules’ arena.

Supplies: in the early days we struggled. There were plenty of long car journeys to Lusaka and Chipata, but the shops and availability of goods were poor as there was no trade between Zambia and South Africa at the time. We even had to resort to smuggling Cokes, beer and other essentials across the border from Malawi on a semi-regular basis.

Currently though – we can order all our supplies by email on a Monday and have them delivered to our vegetable “plot” near the airport by the following week. A great improvement considering the Lusaka/Mfuwe road is in no better shape.

Our vehicles too have been up-graded over the years; having started with just two old” Cruisers” we now have six game-viewing vehicles including two very new Land Cruisers.

Occupancy: in 1992 Shenton Safaris had eight beds at Kaingo to offer and by 1994 we had a very low occupancy; we now offer ten beds at Kaingo , six at Mwamba and also as the option of four on a “camp-out” all with very high occupancy rates.

At the beginning of the season, Kaingo and Mwamba camps were both refurbished, all masterminded by the ever-creative Jules. The camps are looking really great (please see room photos in website)!

Back in '92, I was the only guide back then which made it a long day. We now have four guides in total:

Patrick - started with us as a waiter in 1992 and has developed into a brilliant guide and is frequently voted to be the best Zambian guide in the valley.

Ian – a veteran valley guide with 20 years experience guiding in Zambia and a wealth of knowledge and entertaining guiding stories to share.

Alec – another story weaver and a superb and passionate guide with an excellent sense of humour.

And of course I also love taking guests out on walks or drives. It's definitely the best guiding team we've ever had and probably one of the best all round teams in the valley.

As for the rest of the team, **Jules** is full time on reservations and comms – and doing a great job in a very busy role. **Robin Hinz** from Vegas is our resident chef/caterer/hostess and has taken our cuisine to unparalleled heights.

Amongst the junior staff, most of the same guys are with us still - loyally providing excellent service with their friendly Zambian smiles.

How times have changed... but thankfully some things still remain constant. The Luangwa river still flows past the deck (river platform) at Kaingo at its own relaxed life giving pace; 95% of our guests still see leopard during their stay; the elephants still wander through camp and feed on the ebony trees around the chitenge (providing wonderful photo opportunities – game viewing from the breakfast table!) and the lions still wake us up at 3am virtually every morning.

The ebony forest close to camp is still our cathedral and in coming news, Jules and I will be getting married there next month.

The best news of all for us is that the wildlife in the area seems to be flourishing. It seems our privately funded anti-poaching patrols are really starting to pay off. Many species have been increasing in numbers over the last few years – notably Cookson's wildebeest (the herd at Mwamba is up to 112) and waterbuck.

We have also noticed an increase in the numbers of leopard in the area (and some successful breeding with one, 1-year old cub around and a very young 1-month old cub) with the number now in the region of 9-10 different cats between the two camps.

As for Lions, the “Lion pride” is still in the exactly the same territory as it was 13 years ago (although the males have changed twice in that period whilst the females have continued to maintain the pride land). Currently this pride has two small cubs. The Mwamba pride of lions is also doing extremely well with six cubs at the moment.

The hippo hide or blind at the mouth of the Mwamba river still overlooks 150 of these huge amphibious mammals basking on the sand bars below and this is a favourite midday activity for most of our guests.

So all in all whilst some things have changed drastically during our fleeting human occupation here in The Valley, other things have not changed at all.

Zambia had fairly low rainfall this last year with the majority of the rain falling by January, with only scant rain in Feb, March and April. This has put a lot of pressure on the water holes inland and even on the Luangwa river itself. Whilst it is only late July the conditions are very similar to that in late September last year.

The game is now migrating towards the main river putting further pressure on the riverine vegetation. Already we have seen the results of this dryness in the spectacular game viewing – particularly the number of kills we are witnessing! This will only continue throughout the dry season and it is going to be a phenomenal August, September and October from a game viewing perspective.

These conditions will be hard on the animals; however – unless this is permanent due to global warming – then the valley and its inhabitants will recover, having brushed off these hardships many times over the last 100 million years.

Game-viewing highlights since May 20 this season:

Three ‘double-kills’ have been witnessed i.e. on the one evening drive guests have witnessed 2 kills in close proximity – THREE times so far this year.

We have already had upwards of 60 leopard sightings since opening on May 19th.

Our drives have witnessed nine kills made by either lion or leopard already this season.

Alec’s car watched five lionesses chase and kill a baby Puku on the beach, only to have one of the males of the pride arrive, chase off all the hard working females and sit roaring like the king of the jungle: as though it was his hard work that had ensured the meal. Leaving him to it the lionesses went back to the hunt and brought down a male impala. They only managed to eat a little before the very same greedy male came to claim this kill as well! He sat for quite some time roaring at his own magnificence.

On another drive Pat found a young female leopard in an area we call the shelf. They followed her whilst she used the gully to stalk a group of 10 Puku. The car turned out their lights so as not to interfere with the kill. They heard her running into the group and the puku scattering and turned on the lights. Just as they turned on the lights she took down a puku which means everyone saw the actual catch/kill, which is an extremely rare thing to sight! Being so young she is quite inexperienced so it took her a long time to kill it and the Puku made quite a bit of noise.

The noise attracted two hyenas, which came in and drove the leopard off. One of the Hyena launched straight into feeding on the belly of the Puku and tore out the liver. The second hyena was running around trying to locate the kill. Instead it stumbled across a baby puku about 15-20 metres from the kill. This second hyena saw the baby chased it about 100m before making the second kill of the evening.

Seeing a kill in action like this (the actual moment of the catch and kill) is extremely rare. Even the BBC -who came to the Valley some years back with special night vision film equipment – didn’t managed to catch this kind of action on film.

Ian took a drive where guests watched a male and female leopard having a full scale, tree height, fight over an impala kill. Moments after they’d made their peace and settled in to feed, a lioness climbed the tree, chased off the female leopard and stole part of the kill. Anticipating food from above, hyena scabbled beneath for scraps.

On another drive we witnessed a Zebra staring down three lionesses (with 2 cubs in tow). This zebra was enjoying a patch of shade on the Plain and in spite of seeing the lions coming right towards him he had no intention of giving up his spot. Instead he snorted and stamped his legs. It wasn’t until the lions actually charged him that he gave way and bolted. As he ran we saw a scar on his rump. Clearly this isn’t the first time he’s taunted a dangerous predator.

We have also been blessed to see an extremely young leopard cub (about 1 month) in the grass just near Kaingo. This little feline bravely approached our vehicle whilst we were on an evening drive. We hope to see much more of it as the season progresses.

Other highlights have included:

A hippo kill in the river opposite Kaingo that attracted over 200 crocodiles

Huge pelican and yellow-billed stork” fishing parties” on Fish-Eagle lagoon with at least 35 Fish Eagles as part of the party.

A Pearl Spotted owl killing and eating a Little Bee-eater.

800 head of buffalo regularly grazing out on Lion Plain.

Alec stroking an elephant shrew that seemed dazed by the spotlight on a night drive.

Baby porcupines, a 4metre python, honeybadger, and a Pel’s Fishing owl chick.

We are looking forward to the amazing sights and wonders of nature over the rest of the season.

Wherever you are: “Mwende bwino”(take care)

Derek Shenton



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