



A landscape photograph of a savanna. In the foreground, a wooden boardwalk made of weathered planks leads from the left towards a body of water. The water is surrounded by tall, dry grasses and reeds. In the background, there is a line of trees under a clear blue sky. The overall scene is bright and natural.

TO THE FAR SIDE OF KAFUE

Slap-bang in the centre of Zambia is one of Africa's more remote wilderness delights. Morgan Trimble goes bush in a shorty Pajero

WORDS & PICTURES **MORGAN TRIMBLE**



We were still a day's drive from our dream destination: Busanga Plains. Hidden away in the far-flung north-western corner of Kafue National Park, this is one of the more remote, secret and fabled features on the continent.

We were already hours into the journey before my companion, Ashley, and I stopped for mid-morning coffee. This was at one of the few places where the dirt track through the miombo woodlands breaks into a clearing and offers a glimpse of the Kafue River, and our arrival at the riverbank sent an African Finfoot splashing for safety. Usually a rare, secretive bird, a Finfoot is a twitcher's prize; but their sudden, startling lunge from bank to water had become familiar during our two-week trip.

Using the Pajero's rear wheel as shelter from the wind, I fired up the camping stove for coffee. Afterwards, when I closed off the gas, I could still hear some hissing, and closer inspection revealed that this was not coming from the stove. There was a small puncture in the tyre...

Irritating, we agreed, but not a major problem. After all, we had a compressor, a puncture repair kit, and a spare on hand. We were prepared, as anyone planning to explore remote Kafue should be.

KAFUE NATIONAL PARK

Kafue is a huge tract of wilderness sprawling over 22 400km². It is Zambia's largest park – one of Africa's biggest – and home to 480 bird species, an astounding mammal diversity and the highest number of ungulate species in southern Africa. Kafue is slightly larger than Kruger National Park, and while they share an acronym and an elongated shape, the wilder Kafue differs in several ways – it doesn't have Kruger's mob of tourists, extensive road network, mobile reception or well-developed infrastructure. Self-drive visitors need to be totally independent, and to carry ample fuel, water and food. In Kafue, help can be a long way off.

Our goal was to meet up with a colleague, Dr Kim Young-Overtun, about an ongoing ecological research project. Kim had recently moved her family to

a permanent camp on the eastern bank of an oxbow in the wide, slow-flowing Kafue River near Hook Bridge, and from that base, in the heart of the last stronghold of Zambia's cheetah, she and her husband were researching the cats for the conservation NGO Panthera.

THROUGH THE SOUTH

We wanted to see as much of the park as possible, so we opted for a two-day route up to Hook Bridge from Kafue's southern gate, Dundumwezi. This is 200km from Livingstone via the village of Kalomo, and the last call for fuel.

When we arrived at Dundumwezi at 11am, the Zambian Wildlife Authority (ZAWA) officers greeted us enthusiastically and ushered us into their dimly lit office to pay our permits. The office décor was Spartan — a desk, filing cabinet, crooked wall clock and gold frame proudly displaying its original "Document Frame 21x28cm" label. As we signed the entry log, we noted that the last visitors had been five days before.

Our destination for the evening was Musa Gate, halfway to Hook Bridge on



Opposite page Sunrise over Lake Itezhi-Tezhi. **Above** Saddle-billed Stork, Female Puku at alert in the grasslands. **Below** Pearl Spotted Owl does its camouflage routine, elephant hitting the day's dietary quota. Kafue is bigger than Kruger, home to 480 bird species and the highest number of ungulate species in Africa.



the southern shore of Lake Itezhi-Tezhi, and we'd hoped to travel the seasonal bush road up through the plains. However, as it still needed maintenance work after the rains, we opted for our alternative – to head west along the park's southern boundary before turning northeast onto the Cordon Road, from where it was a long straight shot to the lake.

Bumping along the Cordon Road, we passed about a million miombo woodland trees. In terms of wildlife, we saw... absolutely nothing. Not even tracks in the sandy road. And it hadn't seen traffic in nearly a week. We passed the turnoff for Nanzhila Plains, a camp I'd visited previously and where I thought the wildlife might be hiding, but we didn't

have time for the 13km detour to find out. I had experienced great birding in the area before, including Black-cheeked Lovebirds.

Signs of life, in the form of copious elephant dung, finally appeared as we passed the Ngoma teak forest and approached Lake Itezhi-Tezhi. The lake is the result of the 1970s-era Itezhi-Tezhi Dam on the Kafue River, which provides consistent flow to the power station downstream. The 370km² lake is also a huge draw for wildlife.

Most overnight options in the area are outside the park boundary, and we headed for Musungwa Lodge, perched on a hill above the lake. Musungwa's heyday was long ago, but new management is trying

to restore its popularity. The sprawling compound, featuring expansive views and a beautiful, deserted swimming pool, was a little eerie in its emptiness, but we enjoyed a tasty chicken dinner in the restaurant with Musungwa's only other guest, a lone truck driver.

THE SPINAL ROAD

In the morning, we headed excitedly back into Kafue to explore the newly constructed Spinal Road, which runs up along the western lakeshore and continues along the river to Hook Bridge. This road represents a huge improvement for self-drive visitors – there was no access to central Kafue before, and the northern and southern sectors had been cut off from one another.



The Spinal Road didn't disappoint. Hippos and fishermen looked like apparitions in the pre-dawn mist on the lake and herds of puku milled around the shore. The sun breaking over the horizon was an orange ball of fire silhouetting the skeletons of once-great trees, now submerged in the still water. Soon after that, we spotted a mother cheetah and her four nearly-grown cubs lazing in the long grass.

The road was in great condition, and we covered the central part of the park more quickly than we'd expected to. Unfortunately, the Spinal Road only rarely comes close enough to see the lake or the river, so, after the first stretch on the lakeshore, wildlife viewing wasn't great. Most of our sightings were of the persistent plague of tsetse flies—Kafue's most

obnoxious residents—trailing the car. On the plus side, we didn't encounter another vehicle until we got to Hook Bridge.

HOOK BRIDGE

If any part of Kafue can be considered a "hub of activity", it's Hook Bridge, where the Great West Road from Lusaka crosses the Kafue River to enter the park. Kafue headquarters is nearby, and many lodges are clustered outside the gate in the Mumbwa Game Management Area. Nine GMAs surround the national park, intended to create a buffer and allow people controlled access to resources. These GMAs nearly triple the area of semi-protected land.

Here, we met our research colleague and her family, and enjoyed a pleasant week's

work at their camp on the riverbank. Despite the human activity, and probably because of it, Hook Bridge hosts one of the densest concentrations of wildlife in the park, according to aerial surveys. That said, Kafue is not known for abundant game, and both ecology and history play a role in this: Miombo woodlands are nutrient-poor and just don't support huge numbers of animals, and historically, high poaching levels have taken their toll... some bushmeat and ivory poaching continues. Mayukuyuku Lodge's website puts it nicely: "The animals are sometimes more elusive than in other, more commercialised, parks, but this makes your sightings all the more special."

Our experience echoed that sentiment. Although we didn't see much in the



Opposite page Sunrise mists in remote Busanga (top) and Pajero at home birding along the Lafupa River; accessible only during the dry season. **Above left** Tracking Leopard near Hook Bridge. **Above right** Driving through Miombo woodland on the Cordon Road. **Right** Fire over the Kafue River





Left Male lion in Busanga. **Below** Fishing on the Kafue river, and windows closed to guard against the Testse fly menace. **Opposite page** Splashing Lechwe, and a Hippo at sunrise – the best time for game sightings.



woodlands, we saw some specialties: serval, Lichtenstein’s hartebeest, Defassa waterbuck, and a few great birds. These included Half-collared Kingfishers, Wattled Cranes and an African Barred Owllet.

Game Rangers International (GRI), perhaps the park’s most important NGO, maintains an outpost at Hook Bridge. GRI orchestrates outreach and education for local communities and ZAWA staff, conducts research, and (very importantly) provides training and resources for, and logistics to, the recently-formed Special Anti-poaching Unit. (We had the pleasure of meeting Sport Beattie, GRI’s founder and honorary park warden, over Mosi beers at the Friday night sundowners at Mukambi Lodge. Sport is a dynamic, charismatic man with a passion for conservation. He promotes inclusivity, and leverages skills and resources to get things done.)

Because of its remoteness, the people who call Kafue home foster a helpful, small-town vibe that seems to place the common goal of conserving and promoting the park above building individual egos. Sport kindly introduced us to Edjan van der Heide, owner of Mukambi Lodge; the riverbank restaurant not only caters to its guests but also welcomes visitors from other camps and the local conservation community. After hearing about our dream of seeing the legendary Busanga, Edjan graciously agreed to let us visit his seasonal Mukambi Plains Camp – at that stage, still a month from opening for the year.

BUSANGA PLAINS

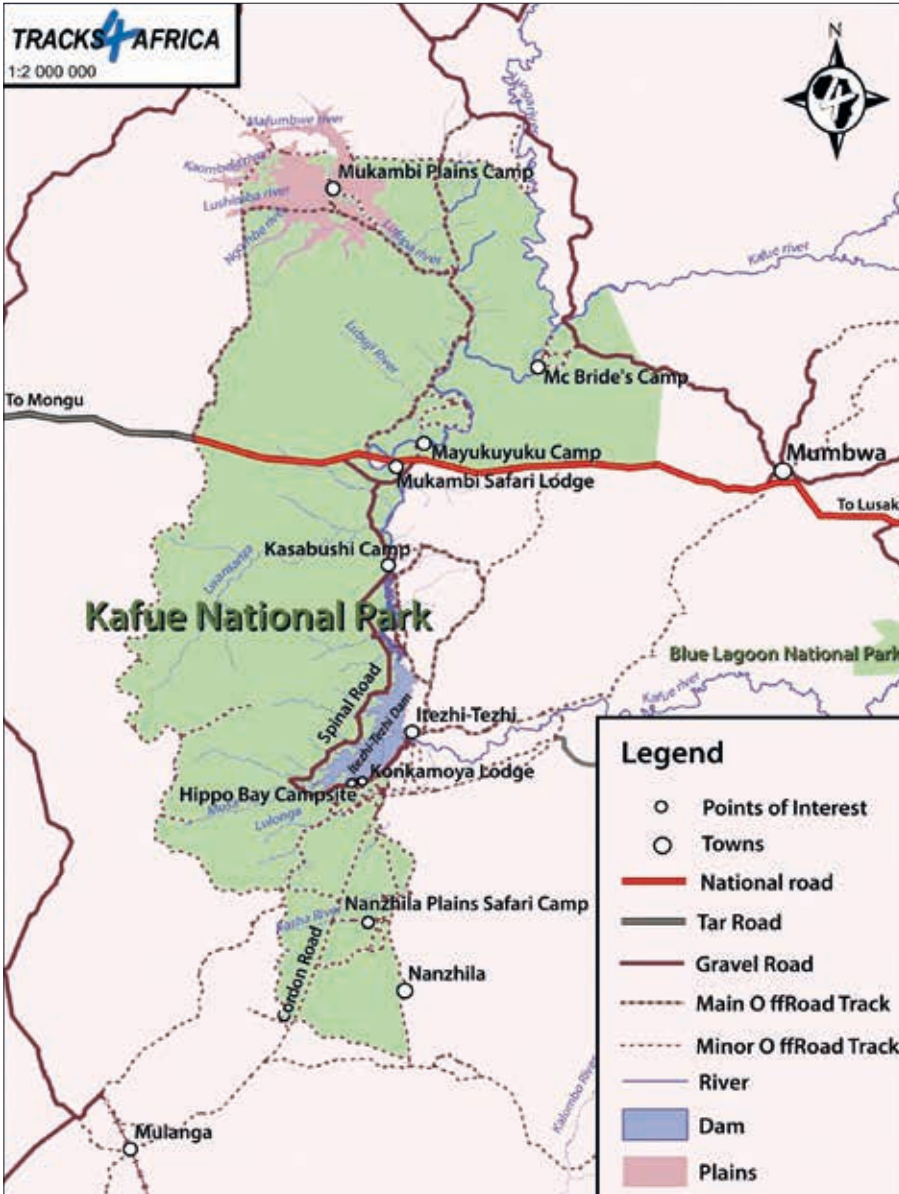
That’s how we found ourselves on the roadside, about to deal with our slow puncture. I dug out our borrowed puncture-repair kit and admitted, though I’d seen it

done, I’d never actually plugged a tyre.

Luckily, there were instructions. But, just when you think you’ve got things figured out, 4x4ing has a way of catching you unprepared. These instructions clearly showed that we needed to coat the plug with “vulcanizing fluid”, and our tube was all dried up. Hesitant about persevering without the gloop, and alarmed at the size of the reaming tool relative to the tiny puncture, we decided just to re-inflate with the compressor. Then, we realised that the plastic tubing on our borrowed compressor was faulty – as pressure built, the hose kept bursting.

It took fifteen rounds of cutting off the shredded hose, reciting some magic words and reattaching the nozzle before we finally got some air into the tyre. As we were headed for uncharted territory, we debated turning back: but, as our once-in-





a-lifetime shot at seeing Busanga hung in the balance, we opted to continue. We still had a good spare, an iffy compressor, a freezer of delicious rations and a satellite phone in case of emergency.

A short while on, we were again rewarded by Kafue's small-town hospitality when we ran into a safari guide returning from a remote airstrip. He organised us some of that magic vulcanizing fluid which we later found out was "optional".

Back on track and with our entourage of tsetse flies, we eventually left the miombos and entered a vast, empty plain of long, swaying grass. "Is this Busanga Plains? Where are the rumoured vast herds of animals?" we asked one another. We were worried that people had been overhyping Busanga; but it wasn't, and they weren't. We still had more than an hour's drive before we arrived at the real deal.

In the far northwest of Kafue, Busanga is a swamp formed by the floodwaters of the Lafupa River. In the wet season, it's a water-world navigable only in canoes. As the floodwaters recede, animals and birds concentrate in their thousands on the verdant flooded grasslands. The roads dry out, allowing guests of the region's three luxury camps (built on tree-covered islands) access to some of the most incredible wildlife and landscapes imaginable. Unfortunately, Busanga is inaccessible to the camping community because it's too far from any campsites. People who claim that they'd made it as a day trip had perhaps

Rough camping in remote Busanga; to get to the northern region, visitors must stay in one of three luxury camps built on tree-covered islands.



only got to that first part of the plains: a far cry from the real thing. Busanga is its greatest attraction – first light streams through the thick, early-morning mists, and silhouettes hippos, herds of red lechwe grazing knee-deep in the water and flocking ibises in an incredible orange glow. You really need to stay in the wetlands to experience this natural marvel. We had fantastic sightings at Busanga. Apart from the famed herds of water-

loving lechwe, we saw elephant, puku and abundant bird life – and, unnervingly, two huge male lions right outside our tiny pop-up tent.

Busanga is worth the splurge. It would be a shame to go all the way to Kafue and miss this most secret, soulful place. And, don't worry; we checked whether Busanga's residents share the rest of Kafue's helpful attitude. This was when we'd managed to peel back our steel

gearbox cover on a section of grass-concealed road which had a too-high middlemanneltjie of dried swamp mud the consistency of cement. After failing to remove the dragging piece of metal with the tools we had, we'd limped to the nearest Wilderness Safaris camp and found a smiling mechanic happy to help with the proper tool—a sturdy wooden plank to whack it loose. Thanks, good people of Kafue. ■

ROUTE GUIDE



Musungwa camp on Lake Itzhi-tezhi.

WHERE TO STAY

Many lodges in and around Kafue are of the expensive, luxury variety, but there are several camping options. One important consideration is whether to stay in the park or outside in a GMA. Lodges based outside the park benefit visitors on a budget by not charging daily ZAWA conservation and overnight fees unless guests take game drives or boat trips into the park. There's still plenty of wildlife around. We heard lions nightly and once even a leopard's harsh grunts at our camp near Hook Bridge. Elephant, puku, impala and flocks of Grey Crowned Cranes were frequent sightings. Mercifully, camps near the water don't struggle with tsetse flies. In the south, try Nanzhila Plains (www.nanzhila.com) from \$300 per person per night for the royal treatment, \$90 for accommodation only or \$20 for

camping plus ZAWA fees.

Along the Spinal Road, Kasabushi Camp offers a fantastic campsite on the Kafue River (www.kasabushi.wordpress.com) for about \$16 per person plus ZAWA fees.

At Hook Bridge, try Mukambi Safari Lodge (mukambisafaris.com) with full board from \$265 per person or Roy's Kafue Camp right on the river for camping (roymutelele@yahoo.com).

In Busanga, premium is the only option. Mukambi Plains Camp (www.mukambisafaris.com) starts at \$780 per night and Wilderness Safaris' (www.wilderness-safaris.com) Busanga Bush Camp charges \$839, but look out for specials.

ZAWA FEES

ZAWA park fees for SADC nationals and residents are \$15 per person per day and

\$15 per vehicle. Internationals pay \$20 per person. Camping is an extra \$5 per day, and an angling permit is \$30.

FLY OR DRIVE?

If you opt for an all-inclusive option, you won't need wheels, and charter flights to airstrips throughout the park can save you time getting to your destination. Flights can be booked directly through Proflight Zambia (www.proflight-zambia.com).

Exploring Kafue in your own 4x4 can be more exciting and rewarding. Follow our route up from Livingstone, or Hook Bridge, is an easy 270km drive from Lusaka on a good tar road. There's no fuel in the park, so come with an extended tank or jerry cans. Mumbwa, 130km east of Hook Bridge, has a petrol station and supplies. A GPS with Tracks4Africa is definitely recommended for navigating the park. We found the roads to be in surprisingly good condition, but be prepared. If you get stuck, it could be a long time before you see another vehicle. Good ground clearance is important to avoid tearing off underside protection. For the most part, there's no cell phone reception, so if you're not travelling in convoy, a satellite phone is a good idea.

WHEN TO GO?

The dry season is the best time to visit (June to November). Some of the park floods in the wet season, and all but the main roads become impassable. Many camps inside the park are closed. Camps in Busanga are open only when the floods recede—from June or July to October. Many lodges around Hook Bridge are open year round.