

Come rain or shine

Looking at how the weather influences our safari experience, **Morgan Trimble** explores the seasonal changes in some of southern Africa's major attractions, including Botswana's Linyanti Wildlife Reserve and the Okavango Delta, the Victoria Falls and Namibia's Etosha National Park, emphasising the importance of considered planning

EMERALD SEASON: A herd of elephant returns to the Luangwa Valley's floodplains to feast on fresh grass following the rains

ANDY HOGG / THE BUSHCAMP COMPANY

The scorching sun and dry air bake much of what remains. Dust hangs in the air and mutes the colour of animals and plants. By the end of the dry season, a plein air artist could get by with a single tube of brown paint were it not for the leafy evergreen treetops that escape elephant trunks and giraffe tongues



DANA ALLEN / THE BUSHCAMP COMPANY

Hundreds of hooves beat against parched earth, throwing a cloud of dust two storeys high as a huge herd of buffalo arrives at the water to drink. The thirsty buffalo join a family of elephants already cooling off with showers of muddy water. A group of zebra glare at the others, agitated but waiting their turn while a lone hippo basks at the waterline. In the distance, lion with full bellies laze in the meagre shade of a scraggly bush. They're still digesting their last meal and don't even glance up at the commotion. It's the end of the dry season in southern Africa, a time of fighting for survival, and this scene plays out daily at thousands of waterholes across the region.

But just one week later, this pool is nearly deserted. The lone hippo sounds off with a booming chuckle, revelling in his newfound solitude. What's the difference? Practically speaking, deciding when to go on safari is as important as choosing where to go, so it pays to get a handle on the weather.

In southern Africa, the rains delineate the seasons – the annual cycles of vegetation, water availability, and, importantly for safari-goers, the distribution and behaviour of wildlife. While the swing in temperature between the seasons isn't as drastic as elsewhere in the world, changes in the landscape are every bit as dramatic.

Seasonality comes down to just two notions – wet and dry – a pattern that is consistent across the entire region except for some coastal and high-altitude outliers. In summer, it's hot and it rains, and in winter, it's cooler and dry. The former lasts from November to April, give or take a month, and the latter spans the rest of the year – roughly May to October. Of course, the seasons are reversed from those in the northern hemisphere. When Londoners step out to enjoy a summer's day, the people of Maun, Botswana, layer up to survive the mid-winter chill (never mind that July daytime temperatures in these two cities might not be far apart). There's no easy correlate to spring or autumn, but beyond simply rainy summer or dry winter, the sights, sounds and smells of the bush paint a canvas of seasonal nuance.

When the rains end around April, the lush, thick, green growth of the summer begins to wear away. As the months pass, much of the green succumbs to the appetites of the savannah's hungry herbivores. Every elephant chows hundreds of pounds of vegetation each day. Hippo chomp the grass around their pools into manicured lawns. Buffalo herds mow through the landscape. Every plant eater, from grasshopper to rhinoceros, eats its fill. The scorching sun

and dry air bake much of what remains, and often, wildfires claim a share too. Dust hangs in the air and mutes the colour of animals and plants. By the end of the dry season, a plein air artist could get by with a single tube of brown paint were it not for the occasional colourful bird and the leafy evergreen treetops that escape elephant trunks and giraffe tongues.

But when the rains start again in November, nature's palette explodes with colour. Trees in the miombo and mopane woodlands flush with the fiery red and yellow of new leaf buds. Animals' coats are washed clean from dust, and the flowers, butterflies, beetles and migrant birds dazzle in a rainbow of hues. Newborn animals shelter amid thriving grasses, shrubs and trees displaying every shade of green imaginable. Yet contrary to the richness of life during the greenest period of the rainy summer, safari guides overwhelmingly recommend the end of the dry season for visitors who want to see animals in abundance. Because all the ephemeral pools in the landscape dry up, wildlife gathers at permanent water – rivers, springs and pumped waterholes. Predators know this and enjoy easy pickings. Safari guides find sightings with ease, both because they know where to look and because visibility is better when the undergrowth and grass cover is minimal.

While peak game viewing may be exciting, every month has its charms, and there are plenty of other aspects to consider when planning a safari. Cooler weather early in the dry season certainly has its benefits. Lush backgrounds and spectacular skies in the rainy season delight photographers, and some animal lovers prefer the joy of calving season to the hardships on display in the dry season. Many lodges offer fantastic savings during their less busy times. Though the seasons are similar across southern Africa, each area is unique in how the experience changes throughout the year. Even if school breaks or work schedules constrain your holiday to a specific time of year, understanding the weather can help you pick a winning destination. Here's the scoop on some of the region's most popular destinations from a range of ecosystem types – from river-dependent systems and wetlands to environments dominated by waterholes and pans. →

TOP: Bite the dust. At the height of dry season in Zambia's South Luangwa National Park, buffalo herds travel far and wide in search of water and grazing
OPPOSITE: Nile crocs bask in a parched riverbed during the park's winter – temperatures rise from August onwards until the rains fall in November



BOTSWANA

Linyanti Wildlife Reserve

North of the Okavango, the great Kwando River cuts through the Caprivi Strip and flows south-east, forming a jagged border between Botswana and Namibia. When the Kwando meets slightly higher ground, it becomes the Linyanti River. The main channel makes an abrupt elbow bend to the north-east and water splays out into the myriad tangled channels of the Linyanti Swamps.

Animals flock here during the dry winter season for its permanent water and the green grasses and leafy trees of the swamp and riverine woodlands. Vast groups of buffalo, zebra and elephant – part of the enormous Chobe population – congregate here, awaiting the November rains that will open up the rest of northern

Animals flock here during the dry winter season for its permanent water and the green grasses and leafy trees of the swamp and riverine woodlands

MORGAN TRIMBLE (4)

ABOVE: Year-round water in the Linyanti River is a safe haven for hippo both young and old **LEFT:** Wild dogs search for easy prey in dry pans among the reserve's mopane woodlands; almost fossilized tyre tracks recall a much wetter time

Botswana to them. When the downpours come, the significant herds head out for fresher forage, but resident predators, baby animals and migrant birds, including a fascinating nesting colony of southern carmine bee-eaters, provide plenty of entertainment.

Linyanti is a great example that there is more at play in controlling the distribution of wildlife than the changing of the seasons. Take, for example, the mysterious Savuti Channel, which connects the Linyanti Swamps in the west to the Savuti Marsh in the east. After both the Channel and the Marsh had been dry for nearly three decades, the Channel unexpectedly began flowing again in 2008. The newly flourishing Channel enticed aquatic life such as hippo, crocodile and abundant water birds to what was previously grassland.

But by February last year, the Channel had nearly dried out completely once more. Very limited water in an area that was previously thriving meant hugely concentrated wildlife – herds of 1000 buffalo, antelope and zebra, elephant by the hundreds and plenty of predators. The crocodile and hippo were left to fight for shrinking territory. Scientists attribute the sporadic flow of the Channel to a combination of shifting tectonic plates and flood levels – currently no one can predict its fate.

MALAWI

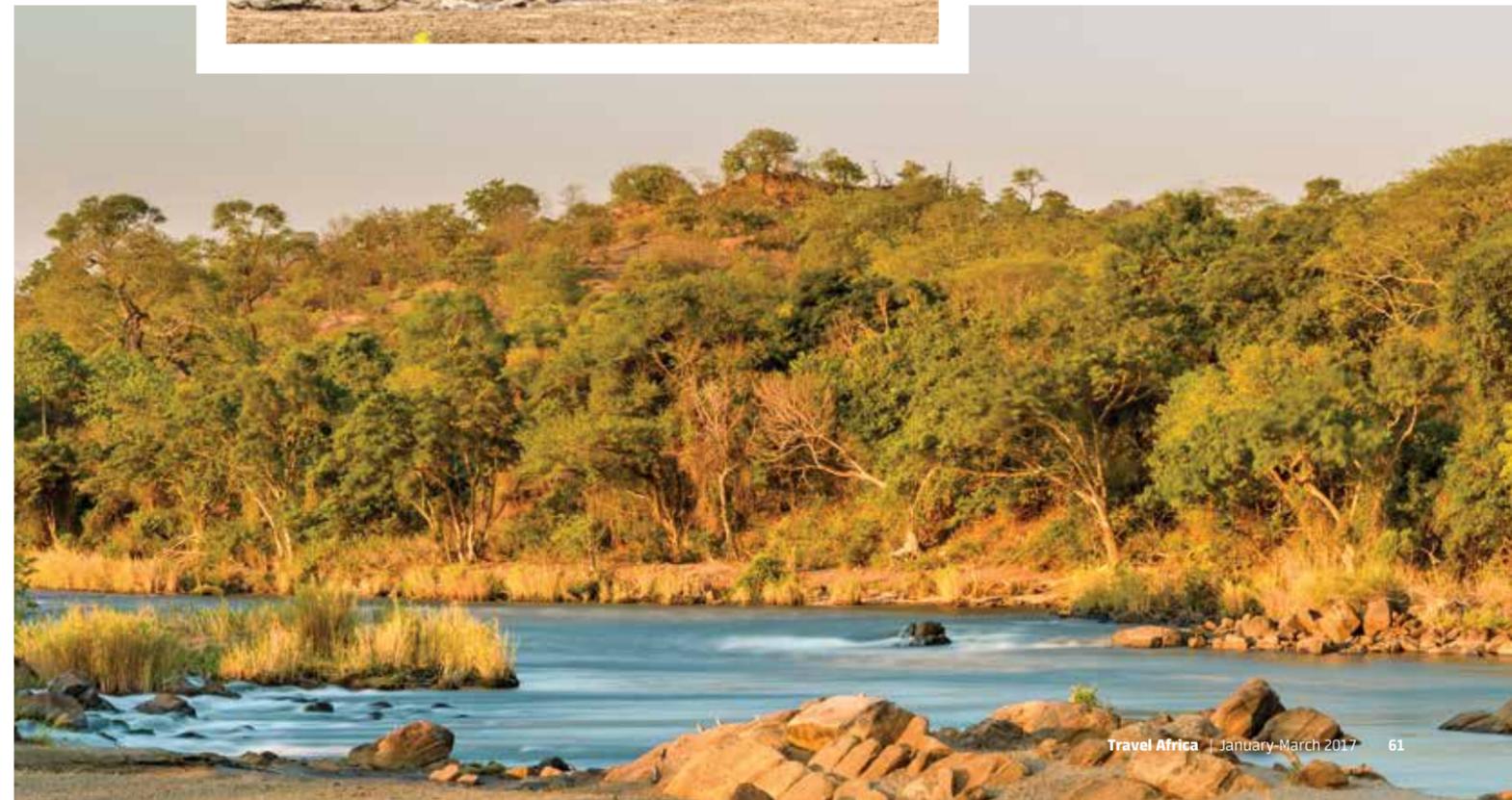
Majete Wildlife Reserve

Malawi's only Big Five reserve is nestled in the hottest area of Malawi: the Shire Valley. The seasons here follow the classic dichotomy of rainy and dry; and they're the perfect example of boom and bust for the resident wildlife. Showers are frequent in summer, often every day. The bush is vibrant and green, which makes for stunning photos, but it can be difficult to spot animals.

The rains let up in April and comfortable daytime temperatures and chilly nights follow. The vast miombo woodlands dry out with only a few pumped waterholes catering for resident animals in the west. The Shire and Mkulumadzi rivers cutting through the east of the park provide a ribbon of evergreen respite for thirsty animals. Come October and November, temperatures soar, sometimes reaching an oppressive 45°C. The landscape can be incredibly parched, especially if the rains hold off until December. It's a great time for game viewing, but drought-sensitive animals such as warthog and waterbuck can really suffer. Life at the edge of survival can be difficult to watch, but it's all part of the natural cycle. →



LEFT: Desperate times. A dazzle of zebra quench their thirst at Majete's Thawale waterhole during a particularly dry November **BELOW:** The Shire River flows swiftly amid the reserve's green riparian trees and bushes





ZAMBIA & ZIMBABWE

Victoria Falls

The water flowing over Victoria Falls varies dramatically throughout the year. So, beyond the usual considerations of rainy versus dry, the flow and water level of the Zambezi River has a massive impact on the visitor experience.

The Zambezi's water level is, of course, dependent on the rains, but the effect is cumulative and delayed. The river doesn't reach peak flow until the end of the rainy season: March to May. Counterintuitively, peak flow isn't generally the best time to visit. The incredible power of Victoria Falls in full flood creates massive clouds of spray that obstruct views and shut down close-up viewing areas.

When the water level is lowest from October to November and in the surrounding months, visitors can appreciate the falls from much closer. The adventurous can visit the Boiling Pot at the base of the falls for close-up views, or head to Livingstone Island perched in the middle of the Zambezi, just upriver from the precipice. Whitewater rafting and jet boating on the Zambezi are at their most exciting when the river is low, too.

OVER THE RAINBOW: Although the majestic Victoria Falls is in full flood at the end of the wet season (March to May), this is not the best time to view it due to the spray. **LEFT:** The contrast in dry season (October to November) is startling

DRY VERSUS WET: October is the height of the dry season in the Okavango Delta. After a poor flood last year, tributaries ran dry, vegetation became threadbare and plains turned into dust bowls
OPPOSITE: In March, the landscape turns emerald as a result of local rainfall. The impact of the flood's arrival a few months later is even more dramatic, causing rivers to burst their banks and seep into the myriad channels for which the Delta is famous

JAMES GIFFORD (2)



BOTSWANA

Okavango Delta

Each month truly offers something different in the Delta, where the annual flood dominates the seasonal calendar, complicating the otherwise simple rainy summer versus dry winter pattern. The Okavango Delta is a massive 15,000sq-km inland wetland in the centre of the Kalahari Basin. Here, the Okavango River dumps water collected from rains on the highlands of Angola 1000km away. Each May, the floodwaters arrive at the Panhandle and begin their slow infiltration of the rest of the Delta, filling lagoons and channels and spilling into floodplains.

Ironically, as the rest of the landscape is drying out, peak flood comes to the Delta between June and August, depending on location. This mismatch between Botswana's dry season and the arrival of the flood makes the Okavango a wildlife magnet. Elephant and buffalo congregate in huge herds on the fringes of the Delta while the submerged regions support water-adapted wildlife such as sitatunga, red lechwe, water birds and frogs. Land dwellers seek refuge on islands. Many areas of the Delta can only be explored by boat at this time.

As the flood begins to recede, the Okavango's unique catfish run is a highlight. Small fish hatched in the floodplains retreat to deeper channels where the water boils with predators on a feeding frenzy.

Then, beginning in November, the summer rains renew the landscape and signal many animals to give birth. Calls of the migrant kingfishers and cuckoos fill the air. Herons and storks nest in great numbers. But some of the wildlife leaves the Delta to take advantage of bountiful grazing in the hinterland. Rich growth and stormy skies make for striking photographs, but spotting animals can be more difficult. →

ZAMBIA

South Luangwa National Park

Rainy or dry – by now it is becoming familiar – and Luangwa is no exception. Expect a dry, dusty winter that intensifies from May to October. Days will be pleasant with cool evenings, but the temperature starts to climb by August. As the lagoons dry up, marooned fish entice birds. Visiting pelicans join resident storks and herons in fishing parties that flock between lagoons, gorging on a buffet of easy pickings. The little remaining grass cover is golden and parched, and animals gather around scarce water making for great wildlife viewing. The park’s lifeline – the Luangwa River – is a hotbed of activity as hippo jostle for limited real estate. Smaller buffalo herds join together into 300- to 1000-strong super-herds. Luangwa’s famous big cats – leopard and lion – are frequently sighted as they take advantage of struggling prey in this season of survival. The migratory carmine bee-eaters arrive ahead of the rains to excavate deep horizontal nest holes in the banks of the river.

Finally, sometime around November, the first rains joyously break the uncomfortably hot temperatures. The relief is palpable, and the bush is totally renewed. The carmines put on an impressive show, hunting insects for their chicks. Migrant birds delight twitchers, and baby animals wobble through their first steps. Cloud formations decorate remarkable skies as short-lived downpours punctuate the afternoons. Lightning storms electrify the night.

At some point, a clever marketer began referring to Luangwa’s rainy season as the “emerald season”, an apt description both for the verdant vegetation and the jewels of opportunity that come with a summer visit. The vegetation is thicker, but beautiful and vivid, the skies are cleared of dust and sunsets are spectacular. Though muddy conditions close some lodges and roads, game viewing along the passable roads can be fantastic – many animals use them as an easy alternative to navigating the thick undergrowth. The river floods, breaking its banks into lagoons and channels and submerging the ebony groves. Exploring these floodplains by boat is a unique experience and allows access to remote wilderness areas. →

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Vast colonies of carmine bee-eaters gather in South Luangwa between August and October; a pride of lions monopolise a dwindling pool; a lioness uses the taller grass to her advantage when hunting in emerald season



DANA ALLEN / THE BUSHCAMP COMPANY



ANDY HOGG / THE BUSHCAMP COMPANY



KANWAR DEEP JUNEJA

A YEAR IN SOUTH LUANGWA NATIONAL PARK

This series of photographs taken from the same spot on the Luangwa River over 2015-2016 illustrates the transformation of the landscape as the months go by. With special thanks to Rob Clifford of Robin Pope Safaris

July



ROBIN CLIFFORD / ROBIN POPE SAFARIS (4)

October



January



April



The Etosha Pan dries to an immense expanse of cracked clay mud – a dusty wasteland topped with shimmering mirages



JAMES GIFFORD

NAMIBIA

Etosha National Park

The rains arrive here between late October and April. The 400mm or so that falls across the park in an average rainy season has a huge impact on the arid ecosystem. The trees and bushes leaf out, flowers bloom, insects swarm, birds rejoice, the grass grows long and clouds build up through the day, bringing afternoon or evening showers. Animals disperse in search of fresh drinking spots and good grazing as water becomes plentiful in the area's waterholes, small pans and depressions, roadside puddles and, most impressively, in Fisher's Pan. When the rains are good, even the vast 4760sq-km Etosha Pan fills with water, becoming a shallow lake, which attracts flamingos in their thousands. In a very good year, they breed successfully.

By contrast, the park takes the dry season to the extreme. The Etosha Pan dries to an immense expanse of cracked clay mud – a dusty wasteland topped with shimmering mirages. Dust devils dance across the landscape. Trees begin to look like skeletal remains as they collect white powder thrown up by wind and passing vehicles. Despite the seemingly inhospitable landscape, animals congregate in incredible numbers around Etosha's numerous waterholes.

While the numbers are impressive, more remarkable is the mix of species rubbing shoulders to get a turn to drink – elephant, rhino, giraffe, oryx, impala, springbok, zebra, kudu, ostrich and more. The predators, of course, lie in wait.

RIGHT: In dry season, Etosha becomes a sunbaked desert, broken only by lifesaving waterholes **ABOVE:** It doesn't take long for the summer rains to work their restorative magic. Here, a black-faced impala, endemic to northern Namibia and south-western Angola, takes advantage of the dense vegetation that has bloomed by mid-February

ROY VAN DER MERWE / NWIR



SEASONAL FAVOURITES

Luangwa Valley

Keyala 'Kiki' Phiri, Robin Pope Safaris

"In Nsefu, there is a spectacular breeding colony of yellow-billed storks thought to be the largest in southern Africa. Between May and June, the youngsters are very hungry. The parents feed on the trapped fish in drying lagoons and return to feed their young – a great sight!"



Majete Wildlife Reserve

Craig Hays, African Parks

"Winter is an especially exciting time, when animals congregate around the shrinking water sources, and there is an atmosphere of heightened urgency and excitement in the bush. The backdrop of pale African star-chestnut trees stand out in a ghostly contrast to the winter landscape and set the stage for a magnificent wilderness waiting to be explored."



Okavango Delta

Sandy Wood, Pulse Africa

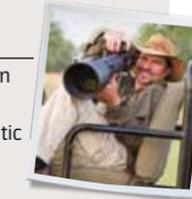
"Fishermen can enjoy fighting the tigerfish during the annual barbel run (September to October) while bream are more easily caught early in the year. A mokoro trip is best enjoyed when the flood waters arrive – usually July and August."



Victoria Falls

David Rogers, Photos 8 Africa

"I love the massive, towering plume the falls create in April and May when the river flows at full force. The mists can be seen from 15km away. It's most dramatic soon after sunrise when convection is lowest."



Linyanti Wildlife Reserve

Grant Woodrow, Wilderness Safaris

"The Savuti Channel ecosystem is once again changing, as the river water dries up and is replaced by lush savannah. This grassland is an important feeding ground for herbivores, which in turn attract predators. The drying of the Channel has influenced the movement of elephant and forced them to waterholes, evidenced by the high concentrations in Linyanti this year."



Etosha National Park

Fritz Vorster, Onguma Game Reserve

"Best time for me in Etosha? February. Sure, you don't see masses of game, but you do see a lot of baby animals. There is a freshness in the air and the sounds made by a crèche of young springbok are strangely comforting. You also see many birds and plenty of flowers. And then there are the clouds – those majestic African storm cells blooming up and erupting in thunderous noise and bucketing streams of water... jip, February, definitely February."





NATURE'S DIARY

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN IN SOUTHERN AFRICA?

Wet season

- **When** November to April
- **Where** Everywhere

Dry season

- **When** May to October
- **Where** Everywhere

Victoria Falls at high water

- **When** March to May
- **Where** Victoria Falls

Okavango Delta in peak flood

- **When** June to August
- **Where** Okavango Delta

Impala rut

- **When** February to May
- **Where** Everywhere

Barbel run

- **When** September to October
- **Where** Okavango Delta

Carmines nesting

- **When** September to November
- **Where** Okavango Delta, Linyanti, South Luangwa, Majete

Migrant birds present

- **When** November to April
- **Where** Everywhere

Birthing season

- **When** November to February
- **Where** Everywhere

Peak wildlife congregations at water sources

- **When** August to October
- **Where** Everywhere

Flamingos flock

- **When** February to June
- **Where** Etosha National Park

Storks and herons nesting

- **When** March to June (Luangwa); August to March (Okavango)
- **Where** Luangwa Valley and Okavango Delta

Wild dogs denning

- **When** June to September
- **Where** Okavango Delta, Linyanti, South Luangwa

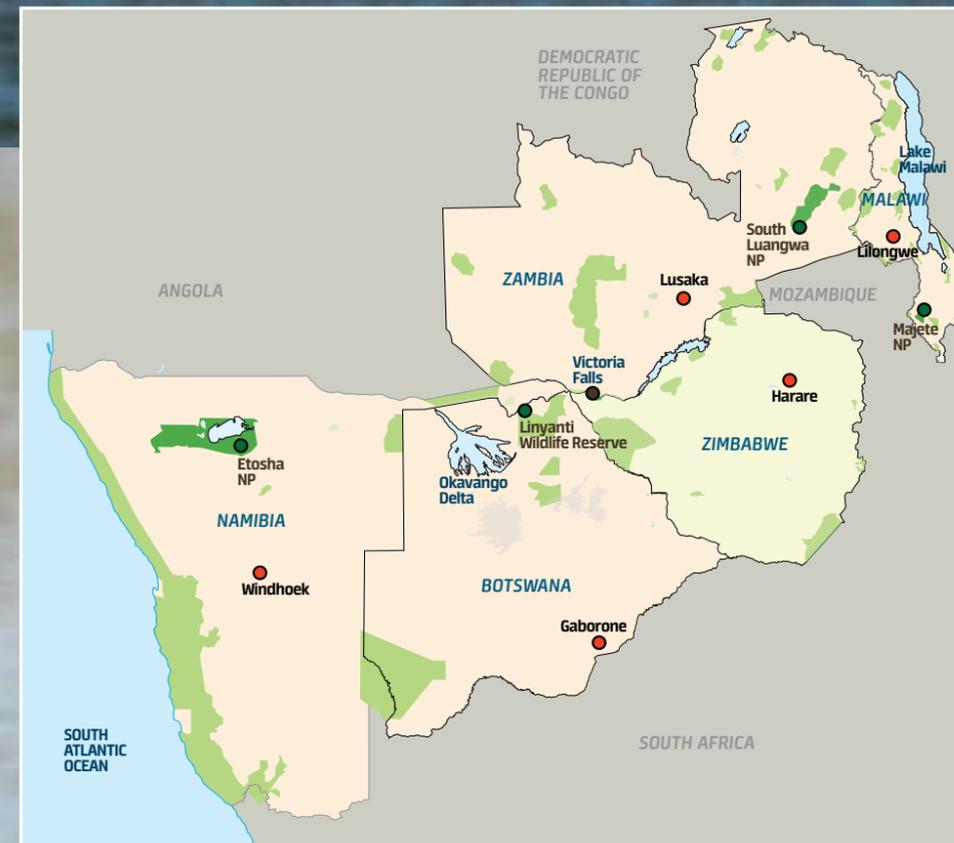
Figs, marulas and other trees in fruit

- **When** January to March
- **Where** Everywhere

Frogs active

- **When** November to April
- **Where** Everywhere. Giant African bullfrogs emerge from hibernation after heavy rains, and reed frogs, rain frogs and toads join the emerald season chorus.

PLEASE NOTE THAT THE TIMING OF SEASONAL EVENTS ISN'T PRECISE AND DEPENDS ON THE RAINS, SO CHECK BEFORE YOU TRAVEL.



SOUTHERN AFRICA'S CLIMATE CHARTED

We outline the monthly maximum and minimum temperatures and average rainfall in Majete Wildlife Reserve, South Luangwa National Park, Linyanti Wildlife Reserve, the Okavango Delta, Victoria Falls and Etosha National Park

MAJETE WILDLIFE RESERVE

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Max	32.9	33	32.1	31.7	29.5	27	27.5	29.5	32.6	36.1	35.3	34
Min	23.1	23	22.2	20.9	17.1	14.1	14.6	15.5	18.3	22.3	22.8	23.2
Rainfall	187	140	117	41	16	16	15	6	4	23	64	168

SOUTH LUANGWA NATIONAL PARK

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Max	31.4	30.9	31.4	31.1	30	28.4	28.8	30.7	34.4	36.2	35.7	32.4
Min	20.6	20.4	19.9	18	14.4	11.1	10.8	12.8	16.3	19.7	21	20.7
Rainfall	210	181	130	47	3	0	0	0	0	15	84	163

LINYANTI WILDLIFE RESERVE

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Max	30.6	30.5	30.3	30	27.9	25.3	25.7	28.8	32.7	35	32.5	30.9
Min	18.6	18.5	17.4	14.9	9.5	5.8	5.4	8	12.7	17.4	18.6	18.7
Rainfall	141	135	78	21	2	0	0	0	2	23	56	122

OKAVANGO DELTA

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Max	31.4	31.3	31	30.2	27.6	24.9	25	28.4	32.3	34.5	33.1	31.9
Min	19.3	18.9	17.9	15.4	9.8	6.5	6.4	9	13.6	17.6	18.8	19.2
Rainfall	108	106	60	25	2	1	0	0	4	21	49	86

VICTORIA FALLS

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Max	30.3	30.4	30.5	30.5	28.3	25.4	25.9	28.5	32.7	35	33.5	31
Min	19.1	18.9	17.8	15.2	10.4	6.9	6.3	9.1	14	18.2	19.2	18.9
Rainfall	173	141	79	22	4	1	0	0	2	21	70	171

ETOSHA NATIONAL PARK

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
max	35.5	31.7	31	30.4	27.4	25.5	25.7	28.8	33.1	34.6	34.8	35
min	18.7	18.3	17.3	14.8	9.7	6.7	6.1	8.3	13	16.2	17.8	18.1
Rainfall	85	103	77	25	2	1	0	0	2	6	37	50

PLEASE NOTE THAT ALL TEMPERATURES ARE RECORDED IN DEGREES CELSIUS AND RAINFALL IS IN MILLIMETRES.

WALKING ON WATER: Shallower rivers during South Luangwa National Park's dry season allow lion to ford streams in search of prey

DANA ALLEN / THE BUSHCAMP COMPANY