

Captivated by Kafue

This extraordinary national park's raw and diverse landscapes make it geologically enthralling. **Morgan Trimble** examines its natural history, ecology and wildlife, as well as revealing plenty of useful tips from the experts to help you plan your next trip.

Just outside the camp, we're tracking a leopard through sandy soil in Kafue. The previous night, the cat's sawing roar pierced the stillness along the river, briefly quieting the hippos' grunts and fiery-necked nightjars' trill. We had woken before sunrise to search for the elusive creature. But after following its spoor for 100 metres along the road, the paw prints veer into the grassy undergrowth, and we give up. The leopard is hiding amid, literally, millions of trees.

This is the miombo — an immense swath of woodlands that blanket southern-central Africa from Angola in the west to Tanzania and Mozambique in the east. In the middle, in southern Zambia, is Kafue National Park. It's one of the continent's oldest and largest parks but remains one of the wildest.

Scientists rate Africa's miombo high on the shortlist of Earth's remaining large, biodiverse wilderness areas. Thanks to its high species richness and endemism and sparse human population, it ranks up there with the rainforests of the Congo Basin, New Guinea and Amazonia.

Across Kafue's 22,400sq km, an area about as big as Wales or New Jersey, an astonishing variety of species lives among the various habitats. I've returned

here several times, and whether sleeping under canvas in the southern plains, the central woodlands or the far northern swamps, the quiet, the vastness and the sheer adventure of it all makes my wilderness-loving heart sing. The feeling of remoteness here is unmatched.

While Kafue's diversity is remarkable, the trade-off is abundance. The forests are poor in nutrients and don't support huge herds of game like the East African plains. This is not the kind of place to see the Big Five in an afternoon. In fact, Zambia lost its last black rhino in the late 20th century in a wave of poaching that hammered other wildlife, too. But recent conservation efforts are turning the tide.

Exploring this enormous reserve today, it feels that nothing much has changed since its founding in the 1920s or its official proclamation as a national park in 1950. Infrastructure is sparse and visitor numbers low. Since 2012, new lodges, a new road linking the south and north of the park and new management initiatives have provided a healthy boost that have more than doubled visitor numbers. Still, Kafue attracts just a quarter of the traffic of South Luangwa. And that's a good thing because what keeps wilderness connoisseurs like me coming back is the opportunity to explore in peace. →



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Landscapes and regions

Miombo is a collective name for plants in the *Brachystegia* genus – beautiful, semi-deciduous trees that dominate these lands. At the end of the dry season, they lose their leaves and flush red with new growth. The woodlands dominate in Kafue, but a patchwork of other habitats interrupts them, supporting the park's heightened diversity.

Chief among these is the riverine forest surrounding the reserve's eponymous river, along with its tributaries – the Lufupa and Lunga. The Kafue River flows 250km through the park before reaching Lake Itzhi-Tezhi on the eastern border. The lagoon is a relatively new feature, created in the 1970s after the river was dammed for hydroelectric power, but it provides unique habitat within the park.

The miombo is also interspersed with dambos – low-lying, grassy depressions that flood in the wet season. They occur throughout the region but are particularly

prominent in the south around Nanzhila Plains. Nearby, the Ngoma teak forest and mopane woodlands host many species. The south is also known for its termitaria – marvels of insect architecture that provide high ground for trees and homes for a variety of burrow-loving guests such as snakes, birds, small mammals, hyena and warthog.

The north of the park harbours Kafue's most stunning and remote landscape: Busanga Plains. Here, the seasonal floods of the Lufupa River create a rich network of wetlands, grasslands and papyrus swamps punctuated by treed islands and home to the most abundant wildlife and birdlife in the park.

In the rains, Busanga is a water world navigable only by boat. But in the dry season, three high-end lodges offer visitors a taste of paradise. While the weather is still cool, the early morning mists lit-up fiery orange by sunrise is the best view in Africa. →

PREVIOUS PAGES: A herd of red lechwe navigates the flooded grasslands of Busanga Plains. **ABOVE:** Kafue's diverse landscapes include woodland areas inhabited by Wahlberg's epauletted fruit bats. **RIGHT:** Lion can be spotted in the trees here too



MICHAEL POLEZA

Wildlife highlights

Kafue has more mammals than the average person can name. There are at least 161 species, 65 of which are bigger than a bush baby and 20 of which are antelope. Kafue boasts the highest antelope diversity of any African park. This ranges from the diminutive blue duiker, which weighs in at 4kg, to the massive eland, topping the scales at a tonne. Sable and roan are relatively common in the southern plains. Red lechwe and puku are prominent in Busanga, where the shy sitatunga prowls the swamps. Lichtenstein's hartebeest, Defassa waterbuck and yellow-backed duiker are among the rare antelope present. Six cat species inhabit Kafue, namely lion, leopard, cheetah, caracal, African wildcat and serval. Servals, which are generally uncommon, are relatively easily seen here. Elephant, buffalo, zebra, hippo, hyena, warthog and wild dog round out the mammal list.

The bird list features nearly 500 species, the most extensive for any Zambian park. Kafue edges out its next closest competitor,

South Luangwa, by 36 species. Besides safari favourites such as bee-eaters, owls and eagles, Kafue is well known for exceptional birds. The endemic black-cheeked lovebird is best seen in the southern mopane woodlands. Waterbirds and crested and wattled cranes are most abundant in the north. Along the rivers, keep an eye out for the African finfoot, Pel's fishing owl, Ross's turaco, black-backed barbet, rock pratincole and Böhm's bee-eater; and in the grasslands, look for Fülleborn's and rosy-throated longclaws. Miombo specials include the Böhm's flycatcher, pale-billed hornbill, miombo scrub-robin and Souza's shrike.

The least welcome sighting in Kafue is the maligned tsetse fly. Swarms of these pests target moving subjects in the woodlands and can deliver a stinging bite. Game-drive vehicles employ an ingenious solution to keep them away. They burn a ball of dried elephant dung in a pail attached to the car. The theory goes that the smouldering manure smells enough like wildfire to keep the flies away, and the scent is quite pleasant. Call it incense of the bush. →



SILVERY DAWN: A hippo looks for good grass on higher ground in the early morning mists of the Busanga Plains

TIPS FROM THE EXPERTS

Why Kafue?

Nick Aslin, Zambia Ground Handlers

"Variety — a single word that encapsulates Kafue National Park. A journey through one of the continent's largest national parks — from Nanzhila in the south to the Busanga Plains in the north — will expose a visitor to an array of different habitats as well as bird and mammal species. People used to say that this place wasn't for the first-time safari-goer, but then again they used to say that about Zambia as a whole — how wrong people could be. For anyone with a real interest in what an African safari can offer, Kafue is one of those treats that, once discovered, is never forgotten."



Take to the skies

Graham Simmonds, Wilderness Safaris

"The Busanga Plains is one of my happy places — wild, open space, where you can watch wildlife in their natural environment with nobody around. A favourite experience of Busanga — besides the diversity and abundance of animals, luxury of the camps and the amazing staff — is going in a hot-air balloon. The feeling of floating silently above this magnificent landscape at sunrise cannot be put into words... Simply spectacular."



When to go

Linda van Heerden, Ila Safari Lodge

"It's so easy to fall in love with Kafue. Besides the great sightings, it's the peace and quiet that captures you. Rarely do you share sightings or find such total aloneness. The best time of year is October and November, the driest months, but every month surprises. The soft lighting and blinding greenness of the wet season are also awe-inspiring and shouldn't be missed."



Experience diverse habitats

Edjan van der Heide, Mukambi Safari Lodge

"Kafue is an off-the-beaten-track wilderness experience. Our lodge and two bush camps are located in different habitats within the park: Mukambi is in the centre, on the Kafue River. Fig Tree Bush Camp lies in a remote part of Shishamba, one of the richest areas for game. And Mukambi Plains Camp is in the heart of the Busanga Plains, where large herds of antelope reside, as well as hippo, lion and diverse birdlife. A combination of all three of these places is recommended — to experience all that Kafue has to offer."



Factor in the south

Steve and Cindy Smith, Nanzhila Plains Safari Camp

"We're the only lodge in southern Kafue, which gives us freedom to explore a truly wild area of nearly 3000sq km. The game viewing, especially from mid-June onwards, has rebounded amazingly in the last few years. Guests can see up to 12 different antelope species and stand a chance at seeing four of the Big Five, wild dog, cheetah and a huge variety of birds, including the black-cheeked lovebird."



Conservation

As obnoxious as the tsetse flies can be, Kafue is still wild thanks to them. The insects transmit livestock diseases and have always deterred agricultural expansion into the park and surrounding regions. Game-management areas, which create a buffer of semi-protected land and triple the area under conservation, surround the reserve itself.

Dr Kim Young-Overton, director of the Cheetah Program for conservation NGO Panthera, says, "The Kafue ecosystem provides habitat for several threatened and endangered species. It is home to Zambia's largest cheetah population; significant populations of lions, leopards and African wild dogs; and several thousand elephants. It also hosts rare and geographically restricted ungulate species such as puku, red lechwe and roan antelope."

However, poaching, uncontrolled fires and woodcutting continue to threaten Kafue's wildlife. Zambia's Department of National Parks and Wildlife is relatively underfunded to protect one of Africa's biggest parks. In 2013, conservation NGO Game Rangers International stepped in, with backing from Panthera, to provide training and funding for law enforcement here. "We support 125 frontline rangers," explained founder and CEO Sport Beattie, at a meeting of conservation

leaders last year. "We need 500 if we really want to secure the park. But with 125 rangers, we've managed in five years to at least stop the decline of elephant."

One of the biggest issues is snares. In order to catch animals for food, local people set wire traps, which are indiscriminate killers, often subjecting unintended targets such as lion or cheetah to excruciating deaths. Dr Young-Overton reports they've recovered 288 snares since 2015 through their partnership and intend to create large snare-free zones and work with local communities to reduce the demand for bushmeat.

Despite the challenges, the park is a conservation success. To give just one example, in 1950 only 100 red lechwe remained in the Busanga Plains. Today, there are more than 9000. The lodges across the park are reporting greatly improved sightings over the past few years. Brad Leontsinis, a former guide in Busanga who recently returned, wrote, "To return years later and find relaxed animals with a higher diversity of species is extremely satisfying. Both the communities and the wildlife have benefited hugely thanks to the presence of active tourism." Visitors to the park play a direct role in securing its future — so come and see Kafue's extraordinary diversity for yourself. 🦋

PAINTED SKIES: The sun rises over Lake Itezhi-Tezhi, silhouetting dead trees that drowned when the Kafue River was dammed



ABOVE: A half-collared kingfisher perches on a low branch over the Lufupa River, ready to catch a fish

DANA ALLEN

SAFARI PLANNER

■ **Getting there** Many international carriers fly into Lusaka, from where you book a charter flight into Kafue. In 2018, Proflight will start scheduled flights. Alternatively, it's a 270km drive from Lusaka to Hook Bridge. Access to Kafue by road has been greatly improved since the opening of the Spinal Road through the central region of the park, allowing easy links between the north and south. Visitors from Livingstone/Victoria Falls can enter the southern reaches via the Dundemwezi Gate, but a 4WD is required.

■ **Where to stay** Nanzhila Plains Safari Camp is a good base from which to explore the south. Kasabushi Camp provides

a fantastic campsite on the Kafue River with a few permanent chalets. There are several lodges just outside the park gate at Hook Bridge. Mukambi Safari Lodge is a great option with river views. Combine your stay there with a visit to the company's excellent Mukambi Plains Camp in the remote north, at Busanga. Also in Busanga are Wilderness Safaris' Shumba and Busanga Bush camps.

■ **When to go** Dry season from June to November is the best time to visit, although temperatures in October and November can get hot. December to May is the wet season when some areas flood, many lodges close and all but the main roads become impassable.

Several lodges near Hook Bridge stay open all year, offering the chance to explore in the green season, but Busanga lodges are open only from June or July to October when the waters recede.

■ **Health** Kafue is in a malaria area. Be sure to check with your local travel clinic for recommended vaccinations and antimalarials. Tsetse flies occur in the park and are vectors of the parasites that cause sleeping sickness, but only one case has been reported in the past 50 years.

■ **Further reading** *The Kafue National Park, Zambia* by Nikki Ashley; *A Visitor's Guide to Kafue National Park, Zambia* by Peter de Vere Moss.