

TRAVEL

EXPLORING VICTORIA FALLS

Mpala Jena Safari Retreat

It's an impressive start. Our skipper, Wellington, is manoeuvring the six-seater, canopy-covered speedboat away from the jetty, and with a can of ice-cold Zambezi beer in hand, we sit back on the swivel chairs to marvel at the stunning scenery as we move upstream on the mighty Zambezi River.

Text by Fransje van Riel / Photography © Kerry De Bruyn | Fransje van Riel







A huge crocodile is sunning itself on the riverbank, and not far off, a group of impalas are trekking down from beneath the shade of a tall riverine tree to drink from the water. Hippos are diving and snorting; on an island, two young elephant bulls are feeding on the vegetation.

As we approach the shoreline of the boutique Mpala Jena safari retreat, four members of staff are standing on the banks, waving us into paradise. There are shaded thatched parasols on the white sandy beach, while majestic sausage and jackalberry trees form the canvas against which the camp is built.

Located within a private concession of the Zambezi National Park, just sixteen kilometres upstream of Victoria Falls, the intimate camp offers three luxury tented double suites and two family suites under flowing canvas, ensuring exceptional tranquillity and privacy.

The public area comprises four thatched pavilions built on wooden decks, including a lounge, bar, pool pavilion with changing rooms, and a small shop. Interiors are casually stylish with soft, natural materials in various shades of sage green and deep teal, offset by magnificent stone walls constructed throughout the camp. Woven floor mats, reed finishings, contemporary furniture and comfortable sofas reflect a décor designed for luxurious yet understated comfort. A scattering of cream-coloured sit-cushions slouches in the sand in front of the bar for total relaxation. There are also hammocks and suspended swing chairs as bar seats. This is barefoot luxury at its best.

Every detail of the camp is superfluous, with lines and shapes that mimic the flowing course of the deep blue Zambezi River. The use of screens, shutters and curtains in each of the pavilions make provisions for cool summer breezes or to ward off the chill in winter.

We indulge in cocktails before lunch. Our table is strewn with bowls and platters, a basket with still oven-warm bread rolls,



various salads, pickles, olives, triangularly-cut sandwiches, a hot dish, and a beautifully presented fresh fruit platter on black slate.

Traversing the wooden boardwalk across the Mpala Jena spring line that runs off the river, we are escorted to our exquisitely appointed tented suite. Shaded by the camp's indigenous trees, the tented suites ooze pared-down luxury. The king-size bed, with soft-blue scatter cushions, is draped in stone mosquito netting and looks out onto the private deck through floor-to-ceiling netted sliding doors with canvas flaps on the outside that are rolled down at night. A wood and rattan vanity desk also holds the bar fridge with complimentary drinks, as a traditionally-woven tray carries tall drink glasses, a bottle of Bombay gin, coffee plungers, and a large thermos flask that provides hot water for tea and coffee.

The deck, with views over the river, has a sitting area consisting of comfy cushions, day beds and sun loungers.

The bathroom provides ample cupboard space, toilet, shower and basins with luxury Charlotte Rhys amenities, while the outdoor bathroom boasts a wooden deck with a Victorian-style slipper bath, shower towel rack with fluffy white towels, and several paraffin lamps.

Our afternoon game drive, conducted by our excellent guide Blessed Mpfu, commences at 4 pm. Exiting the camp into the national park, we travel across winding gravel roads with burly baobabs left and right. We come across a trio of giraffes browsing on acacia trees, impalas, a large congregation of banded mongoose and a very active troop of baboons.

As the sun slowly sets, Blessed reverses the vehicle towards the riverbank beneath a stand of tall trees and invites us to alight on a pristine white sandy beach where he sets up a table with tablecloth, director chairs and a large green trunk with soft drinks, wines, and a selection of spirits. There's no one else around. A crocodile, lying seemingly lifeless nearby, is our sole companion.

As we sit and marvel at the serenity, the sky slowly turns a soft salmon colour, before exploding into a vibrant crimson red. The sounds of gently lapping water against the shore and the imitable bush orchestra of crickets and cicadas soothe the soul.

It is pitch dark when we arrive back at the camp. A blazing fire roars in the large oval pit where chairs are placed to enjoy a glass of wine before dinner. The red bushwillow that bows over the sand is aglow with copious paraffin lamps. It is there, in that magical, fairy-tale setting, that we sit down for dinner.

Just before we retire for the night, the trampling of hooves and a reverberation of the earth indicates visitors coming through the camp; a herd of buffalo moving back into the bush after having drunk from the river.

It couldn't be more perfect.

For more info, visit www.greatplainsconservation.com.

