KAFUE NATIONAL PARK: A VAST AND DIVERSE SANCTUARY
Karen Blixen, the author of Out of Africa, once said, “If there were one more thing I could do, it would be to go on safari once again”. Well here I was, indeed on safari again, reclining in my bathtub, luxuriously located on the verandah of our room just metres above the Kafue River at Mukambi Safari Lodge.

I sat up and moved to the other end of the bath to watch a minuscule malachite kingfisher perched on a twig swaying in the breeze, half a metre above the water below the room. The bejewelled hunter watched the water attentively, clearly on a fishing trip.
Suddenly my husband, who was seated at the other end of the verandah, said: “It’s back!”

For a minute I didn’t know what he was talking about. He repeated himself, but being a little more specific this time: “The snake is back.”

Knowing both his loathing of snakes and his love of practical jokes, I initially didn’t believe him. But then out of the corner of my eye I saw the emerald green body of a green grass snake slithering along the side of the tub. I was transfixed, with combined fear and fascination. For the next ten minutes I watched intently from the tub. First it
lapped, like a dog, at a puddle of water on the floor, left behind by my earlier ‘removal’ of an errant bug from my tub. Then finally, contorting itself around the legs of the bath and plumbing, it smoothly and stealthily slithered up the verandah railings and out of sight.

A MORNING OF MISCHIEF

There is something about being on safari that really brings life down to basics. To put it bluntly, we woke one morning to find poo in our bathtub. The trees above our verandah were teeming with baboons, who were clearly the ‘poopetrators’. They were busy doing baboon things… eating, squabbling, playing, chasing one another and,
apparently, defecating! Whilst the ‘deposit’ was (I’m sure) not malicious, and fortunately the bath was vacant at the time, it did somewhat set the theme for the rest of our morning.

Interestingly on the previous evening while out on a game drive, we had admired the ingenious metal box attached to the back of our safari vehicle. Specifically designed for burning dried up balls of elephant dung as we drove along, the not unpleasant smelling smoke acted as a deterrent to the aggressive and ever-present tsetse flies.

Then, on that particular morning our guide, Felison, seemed keen to give us an ‘up close and personal’ lesson on the numerous and various types of animal faeces (also referred to as scat, dung, or droppings depending on the type of animal) that we would encounter... and believe me we would encounter a lot! Among seeing many different shapes and sizes, we passed deposits of bleached white hyena skat comprised of ground-up bones, and learnt about the germination of seeds passing through the digestive tracts of elephants and emerging in, you guessed it, their dung.

**KAFUE’S DIVERSITY OF WILDLIFE**

The forests of Kafue are poor in nutrients; they don’t support the huge herds of game that can be found elsewhere in Africa, but what the park may lack in animal density, it more than makes up for in diversity.

An astonishing array of species lives among the park’s varied habitats. There are at least 161 species of mammals, 22 of which are antelope. Kafue actually boasts the highest antelope assortment of any African park, with everything from the tiny blue duiker to the
massive eland – with reedbuck, sable, hartebeest, puku, defassa waterbuck and numerous others in between – to thousands of red lechwe as far as the eye can see, often in the company of herds of roan and buffalo. There are six cat species in the park: lion, leopard, cheetah, caracal, serval and African wildcat. Elephant, buffalo, zebra, hippo, hyena, wild dog and warthog can also be added to the mammal list.

Clockwise from left: 1) Red-billed oxpecker and buffalo in south Kafue National Park © Konkamoya Lodge; 2) Elephant by the shore of Lake Itezhi-Tezhi © Konkamoya Lodge; 3) ‘Suspended animation’– a leaping baboon in central Kafue National Park ©
Lions are a true highlight on any safari, and as we arrived at Mukambi’s Fig Tree Bush Camp we were informed that eight lions had passed through the camp the previous evening. Fresh lion spoor on the sandy path to our room showed us how very close they had been!

A short distance from camp we found five lions feasting on a warthog kill. Four disappeared quickly into the undergrowth with the bulk of the carcass, leaving one female camouflaged some distance away. We actually would not have seen her if not for the faint sound of her crunching on the head of the dismembered warthog. This sighting was just a taste of what was to come.
A magnificent male lion in central Kafue National Park © Mukambi Safari Lodge
Later that afternoon we had a wonderful encounter with two lionesses and four cubs. We sat and watched while they relaxed, played and groomed one another. While we sat watching, our guide, Richard, told us a story of a three-legged lioness who had been seen in this part of the park regularly for the last year. He didn’t know how she had been injured, though most likely by a poacher’s snare, but he said what was remarkable to note was that she was often seen with a male, possibly her brother, who would share his food with her – quite uncharacteristic behaviour for lions.

It seemed that the lioness had also developed a technique of ambushing the entrance to warthog dens, catching her unsuspecting
victims as they emerged. To all of our surprise, just as Richard finished talking, the lionesses stood up and started walking away, revealing that one of her legs was missing a foot... she was the very lioness we had just been hearing about! The cubs she had been grooming were most likely not her own, and yet despite her disability, she had not only survived, but was clearly an integral part of that lion ‘family’. Back at camp that night, having started our day with lion pawprints, we fell asleep to the sound of lions roaring not far away.

Lions were not our only carnivore encounter in Kafue, though we did see and hear them regularly, including an impressive pride of 11 that surrounded our car, further south at Lake Itezhi-Tezhi. Driving north through the park, on our five-hour journey to Busanga Plains and just after crossing an extremely rickety bridge, a beautiful leopard crossed our path. Passing a few metres in front of the car, she quickly crossed the road and climbed a nearby anthill, where she marked her territory before disappearing out of sight. We would see other leopards on our journey through the park, one lying on a riverbank near KaingU Safari Lodge and another on a night drive at Konkamoya Lodge in the south, but that first sighting was really special as we had ‘found’ her all by ourselves.

Hyenas, caracals, and genets were to become regulars on our night drives, indeed we were serenaded at dinner one night by hyenas at Busanga Bush Camp on the Busanga Plains.
Clockwise from left: 1) Two solitary leopards in central Kafue National Park © Mukambi Safari Lodge; 2) A side-striped jackal in south Kafue National Park © Konkamoya Lodge; 3) A cheetah near Lake Itezhi-Tezhi in south Kafue National Park © Konkamoya Lodge
BUSANGA PLAINS... BY HOT AIR BALLOON!

The Busanga Plains, in the far northwest of the park is probably the best known area of Kafue. The wide open spaces, veined by rivers, seasonally floods, generating a vast expanse of lush grazing, irresistible to the array of wildlife found here, including large herds of red lechwe and puku, as well as buffalo, zebra, blue wildebeest and many other antelope.
It’s 5:00 am and the alarm sounds. Never one to leap willingly out of bed at that time of day without a very strong coffee close at hand, my husband is surprisingly up and dressed in record time. We are off to float above the Busanga Plains in a hot air balloon to watch the sunrise – what better way to see this vast expanse than from above. Moving with the wind we drift across the plains, sometimes coming down low enough to ‘trim the lawn’, other times passing close enough to wild fig trees that we could have reached out to pluck the fruit. Soaring above the ground like an eagle, we watched herds of red lechwe splash and leap through water and over channels to reach dry land.
Clockwise from left: 1) What a sensational scene! The hot air balloon flight is a thrilling experience.

- The vibrant colors of the balloon against the clear blue sky create a stunning visual display.
- Below, the reflection of the balloon in the water adds an extra layer of beauty.
- In the distance, a group of antelopes can be seen, perhaps enjoying the same breathtaking view.
balloon at Busanga Plains on the banks of the Kafue River; 2) Kafue from a different perspective at sunrise; 3) A spectacular and dramatic shot of a pod of hippos running through the Kafue River. All photos © Namib Sky Balloon Safaris

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ANIMALS OF SKY, LAKE AND LAND

We were not the only creatures soaring above the Busanga Plains. Kafue is home to approximately 500 species of birds and has the most extensive bird list of any of Zambia’s parks.

Special sightings for us included the iconic grey-crowned cranes and wattled cranes (the Busanga Plains being one of the few known breeding sites for this endangered bird), as well as the Fülleborn’s and rosy-throated longclaws.

Whilst travelling further south in the park, we would find the African finfoot, Pel’s fishing owl, our favourite rock pratincole, pelicans (great white and pink-backed), saddle-billed storks, numerous species of egrets and large gatherings of open-billed storks spiralling
upwards in the late afternoons.

Clockwise from left: 1) *Trumpeter hornbill* © KaingU Lodge; 2) *Red-headed weaver* © Konkamoya Lodge; 3) © KaingU Lodge

Back in the centre of the park, we left our car on the riverbank and travelled the last stretch to *KaingU Safari Lodge* by boat. Here the river was not the wide, unhurried, quite waters we had encountered further north. Instead, it cascades over and around boulders and islands; the sound filling our room at night and lulling us to sleep.
This stretch of the river was the perfect location for a canoeing expedition and we spent a beautiful morning paddling downstream in light but warm rain, avoiding pods of hippos, spotting birds and getting an entirely different perspective of both the river and the park.

From KaingU we drove through miombo woodland, interspersed with huge granite hills, towards Lake Itezhi-Tezhi. This vast expanse of water (370 km²) has not always been here: the dam was built in the 1970s for hydro-electricity. In the morning, from my open-sided
shower at Konkomoya Lodge, I watched herds of puku grazing between our tent and the lake, and as I dried off and dressed, zebras came to join them.

Pelicans soaring overhead, we rounded the corner on our morning game drive. “Dogs” whispered, Arron, our spotter. Little by little we inched forward in the open-topped vehicle, gradually getting closer to the wild dogs. The morning was a little chilly and the dogs were snuggled up together, seemingly indifferent to our presence. We watched, silently, for half an hour, marvelling at how relaxed they were. Eventually leaving the dogs in peace we dragged ourselves away.
Clockwise from top left: 1) Wild dogs in south Kafue National Park © Konkamoya Lodge; 2) Wild dogs at play in south Kafue National Park © Konkamoya Lodge; 3) Someone’s been in the wars
THE ELEPHANT ORPHANAGE

Quite literally around the bend we found ourselves in the midst of a group of 11 lions, crossing the road in front and behind our vehicle. When they melted away into the undergrowth we moved on – we wanted to be on time for ‘lunch’ at the elephant orphanage.

Game Rangers International, assisted by funding from the David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation, set up the Kafue Release Facility, Camp Phoenix, in 2007, to rescue, rehabilitate and ultimately release
back into the wild orphaned elephants. These young elephants are orphaned mainly as a result of poaching, human-elephant conflict or abandonment.

Comprising ten acres of land, with ‘stables’ for the elephants at night and tents for the staff, the camp is surrounded by an electric fence, ostensibly as protection from lions. Camp Phoenix is currently home to 12 orphans and about 25 staff, and you can read more about these orphaned elephants in “The elephant orphans of Zambia“.

On our way to the camp we passed the orphans out with their minders, getting used to being in the bush. As they grow and become more independent they will gradually break away and find wild herds to join. We beat the group back to camp, arriving in time to watch their antics as they came in for a feed and rest.

As one of Africa’s oldest and largest parks, Kafue is a remote wonderland with spectacular rivers, vast open plains, woodlands, stunning scenery, wildlife and birds. The feeling of remoteness is palpable in this vast untouched wilderness – Kafue is truly a special place.
ABOUT KAFUE NATIONAL PARK

Kafue National Park is Zambia’s oldest and largest national park, covering a gigantic 22,400 km². It is named after the Kafue River, the largest tributary of the mighty Zambezi and the lifeblood of the park, which dissects it almost north to south. The river feeds the beautiful, relatively undeveloped, man-made Lake Itezhi-Tezhi, home to fish, otters and hippos.

FAUNA

Unlike many other national parks, Kafue is home to many elusive species of wildlife such as the blue and yellow-backed duiker, lechwe, roan and sable. If you want to see a leopard desperately, then this is where you need to be; the park is known as one of the best places to
on the continent to see this majestic big cat.

Interestingly, Kafue is one of only two areas that are home to cheetahs – the other being Liuwa Plains. They cannot be found in Luangwa or Zambezi National Park.

Kafue is a haven for a bird enthusiast. Over 500 species of bird call Kafue their home. Pel’s fishing owl, black-cheeked lovebird, Chaplin’s barbet (Zambia’s only endemic bird), wattled and crowned crane, African finfoot and Böhm’s bee-eaters are a mere taste of what you can expect to find here.

WHERE TO STAY IN KAFUE

Sarah was kindly hosted by these fabulous lodges

MUKAMBI SAFARI LODGE

Known as ‘The Gateway to the Kafue National Park’, Mukambi Safari Lodge is centrally located in the park on the banks of the Kafue River. The lodge has three different room types, which includes eight
chalets, a family villa, and four luxury safari tents. There is also an infinity pool for you to relax in between your animal sighting experiences.

**Fig Tree Bush Camp** is also part of Mukambi Safaris. The luxury bush camp is located in a previously undiscovered area of the Kafue National Park. The camp is named after the giant fig tree that grows next to a boma overlooking a sandy lagoon. The camp has four en-suite, luxury safari tents on three-metre high platforms.
Clockwise from top left: 1) Delectable dessert is served!; 2) Stunning accommodation to ensure that you have an unforgettable visit; 3) Charming lounge area overlooking the river; 4) Luxury
safari tent on three-metre high stilts. All photos © Mukambi Safari Lodges

WILDERNESS SAFARIS BUSANGA BUSH CAMP

Located in the centre of the phenomenal, expansive floodplains of the Busanga Plains, Busanga Bush Camp is a haven for wildlife and birds; complemented by the sensational sunrise and sunset, it’s an idyllic camp. The camp offers four en-suite tents – each have beautiful verandahs and picturesque, panoramic views.
Clockwise from top left: 1) The luxurious lounge overlooking the floodplains; 2) The rustic, yet elegant, style accommodation is equipped with everything that you need, including a verandah with
breathtaking views; 3) At night, the outdoor dining area is lit by a delightful lantern chandelier; 4) A special dining option is also available, giving you a unique game-viewing experience. All photos © Wilderness Safaris

KAINGU LODGE

KaingU Lodge is located in the Namwala Game Management Area (GMA), which is on a remote stretch of the Kafue River; the Kafue National Park is a mere 10-minute boat ride away as well. KaingU Lodge boasts six chalets and one family house. There are also three private campsites by the river rapids.
Clockwise from top left: 1) Luxury tent with verandah; 2) Enjoying the view from the verandah; 3) Reminisce the day’s activities around the fire in the evening; 4) The private campsite on
KONKAMOYA LODGE

In the Nianja language, ‘Konkamoya’ means ‘follow the wind’ – and from the wind-scoured bush in 2010 the lakeside lodge was born on the banks of Lake Itezhi-Tezhi. The lodge accommodates eight people in four luxurious tents, providing guests with an intimate safari escape.
Clockwise from top left: 1) A idyllic outdoor deck overlooking the Lake Itezhi-Tezhi; 2) The comfortable tented accommodation includes a sitting room and bathroom; 3) The main lapa where you
can relax after a busy day; 4) The lovely outdoor dining area allows you to enjoy views of the spectacular wildlife. All photos © Konkamoya Lodge

KAFUE RIVER LODGE

Kafue River Lodge is based in the Lunga Luswishi (Game Management Area) bordering Kafue National Park. The lodge is set on 143 hectares of private land and has a diverse range of biomes, from miombo woodland to plains, dambos and teak forests, each supporting great numbers of wildlife and excellent bird sightings.
Clockwise from top left: 1) An aerial view of Kafue River lodge right on the banks of the river; 2) The chalet under the starry sky, complemented by the lights, is a serene sight; 3) Enjoy your breakfast on the deck overlooking the river; 4) The interior has been
designed to ensure that you never lose the unique ‘safari’ ambiance.

All photos © Kafue River Lodge

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Sydney, Australia, before moving to Africa at the age of 21, Sarah Kingdom is a mountain guide, traveller, and mother of two. When she is not climbing, she also owns and operates a 3,000 hectare cattle ranch in central Zambia.
She guides and runs trips regularly in India, Nepal, Tibet, Russia, Turkey, Uganda, and takes travellers up Tanzania’s Mount Kilimanjaro numerous times a year.

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