



The slow pleasure of

Mukwa

Something's cooking in Zambia. It's emerging from its cocoon to offer outstanding food, lodges and camps, and the wildest bush you're likely to find anywhere in Africa

by LORRAINE KEARNEY

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Dining at Mukwa River Lodge is as much a visual feast as it is a culinary one.

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Mukwa is right on the banks of the mighty Zambezi.

There is a place, tucked into the trees on a wide bend in the Zambezi River, that in the wet season becomes part of the river. No, not like that; it doesn't float. The full river, instead, fills the channel running through the grounds, almost turning it into an island.

Driving into Mukwa River Lodge, off the Kazungula Road from Livingstone in Zambia to Kasane in Botswana, was an adventure all of its own. You see, the river was filling rapidly, and the entrance was, well, underwater.

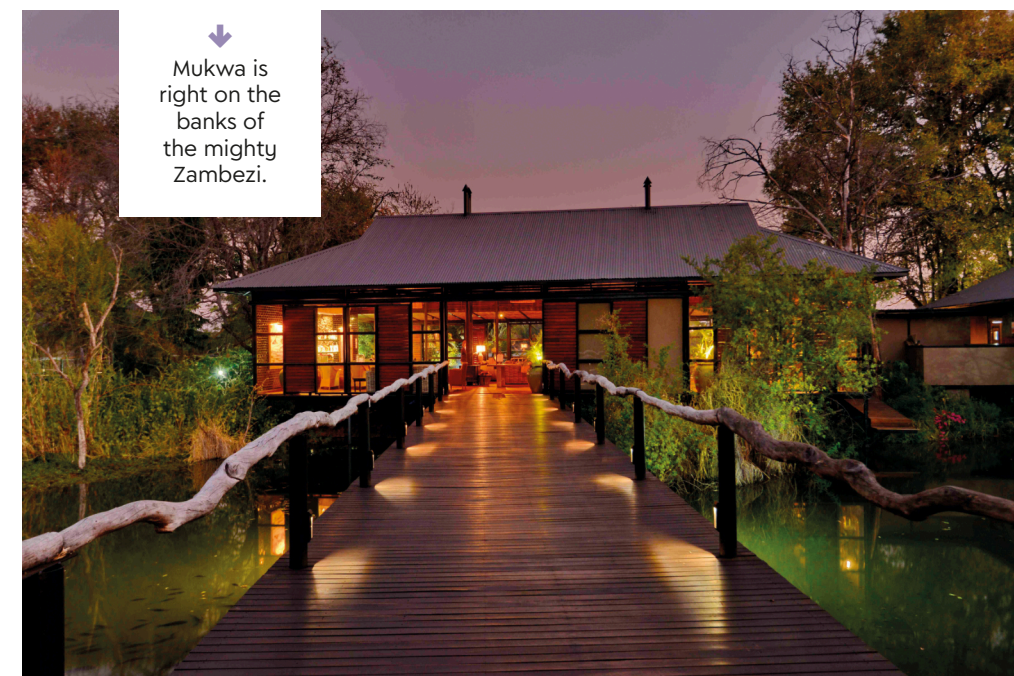
My driver, in a minibus, was hesitant to cross. But on the other side, Linda Preston, the general manager – a no-nonsense Yorkshire woman – was waving us in. And so we drove gingerly through the water, which came up to the wheel well, washing the axle.

It was an excellent decision. Mukwa is the refined kind of space that pillows you in luxury. Not opulence, mind; quiet elegance, the architecture airy and modern, the décor a glorious mix of regal and safari. Rich Persian carpets, plush seating upholstered in jewel colours, reed ceilings, woven chandeliers, repurposed *mokoros* (dugout canoes) and well-chosen pieces of art scattered here and there. Very easy on the eye.

Mukwa is gorgeous on all sorts of levels, but for me, it was the swoon-worthy food. Aaron Menezes, based in Johannesburg, is the head chef and has taught the on-site chefs extraordinary skills.

And I do mean extraordinary. Several were not chefs at all before stepping into the kitchen with Aaron. 'Many were part of the construction team,' he says. 'Most of them have actually never had any training.'

Aaron tells me about Golden, who started as a manual labourer but expressed an interest in the food side of the business. He brought him into the kitchen as a sculler. Golden watched and learned, and today is one of the best chefs at Mukwa.



→ Each plate at Mukwa is a tapestry of colour and flavour.

↓ Ingredients are sourced locally, and tastes of Zambia are heroed.



ON THE MENU

Mukwa has a separate kosher kitchen. Ensure you book it when making reservations.

Local Knowledge

Staff mostly hail from the local villages of Simonga and Mukuni. 'They know all the ingredients, they know the local foraging ingredients we use, such as mongongo nuts (which only grow in the Zambezi Basin), because they grew up in the area.'

It's knowledge Mukwa has leaned into. Guests are able to take a cooking workshop, which starts with foraging for wild ingredients and visiting the local market for others, as well as harvesting from Mukwa's extensive garden, and then creating dishes using traditional Zambian methods and tastes in modern ways.

'My philosophy around the food is to be hyperlocal and give the guests an experience of products they'd never get to taste anywhere else in the world – things like pumpkin leaves, sweet potato leaves, stuff that people generally throw away, we use and turn into delicious dishes,' explains Aaron, who 'wanted to emphasise not doing the same food as everyone else'.

It all translates into a fine-dining experience for the guests. 'From cooking on fires to foraging to using a few basic ingredients that I know I can get year-round here, such as Zambezi bream and good chicken. It's not chop and change, but rather refine and improve the basic food we have here.'

“Seasonal drives the menu – if it's in season, it is used. If it's not in season, the chefs create something new from what's available

PHOTOS: COURTESY IMAGES; THE WRITER WAS HOSTED BY AFRICA'S EDEN; ACCOMMODATIONS WERE COURTESY THE RESIDENCE PORTFOLIO; FLIGHTS WERE COURTESY PROFLIGHT ZAMBIA; PRICES CORRECT AT TIME OF PRINT AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE



Working With The Seasons

It does mean seasonal drives the menu – if it's in season, it is used. If it's not in season, the chefs create something new from what is available.

Up to 80% of the vegetables, herbs and eggs come from the Mukwa garden – there are guinea fowl eggs, duck eggs and chicken eggs. Cheeses, meats and bakes come from the farmers in the area.

Only small amounts of niche ingredients, such as truffle oil, come from South Africa.

'We get to be super creative with just a few ingredients that we know we can get and that helped us to shape the menu and give the guests a really enjoyable experience.'

When I was there, the mushroom risotto was cooked to perfection, the right kind of firmness to the rice and creaminess of the mushrooms, with lashings of Parmesan bringing that tangy, almost sour bite to the tongue. So good. I rolled over the sturdy bridge to my room that evening.

The Menu

Highlights of the menu this spring are the Play on Sushi, made with soy sauce ice cream and a beetroot-infused Zambezi bream ceviche that looks a lot like tuna, served with cucumber caviar. For the less culinary adventurous, there is 'a beautiful mac and cheese with crispy bacon on top and a Mornay sauce'.

Zambia is known for its beef, and fillet is on the menu, as is chicken, another Zambian standout. Zambezi bream is served with a gazpacho sauce, and there is a smoked bean purée with a local tomato relish that is cooked over the fire.

That's dinner. For lunch, dishes range from bao buns to tacos to koftas and salads with a vinaigrette made with wild basil that grows in the bush around the lodge.

Breakfast is another standout, taken on the water, the Mukwa boat lazily putting along the river.

On the cards is a seven-course fine-dining tasting menu of entirely local ingredients.

'I'm busy creating a Thai green curry ice cream with ceviche – your palate is cold from the ice cream but hot from the Thai curry paste and then you get that beautiful fresh Zambezi bream. There are lots of fun things to come,' Aaron promises.

A second visit is definitely in my future.

MUKWA RIVER LODGE

From \$754 (around R13 323) pps pn sharing; there are several special offers, such as stay three, pay two.

You can also book Tanyati, the private villa, from \$3 916 (around R69 195), per night based on a minimum of four people sharing.

Again, there are special offers.

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