

# The Reawakening of Kafue

WORDS LORRAINE KEARNEY | PICS MARCUS WESTBERG



Africa's oldest and least-known national park is reclaiming its place among the continent's great wilderness destinations, writes Lorraine Kearney.

It was dark by the time the game vehicle spluttered into camp, its lights winking through the trees. The day's bruised purple sky had deepened into tar, indistinguishable from the treacherous black cotton soil that had held us fast for the past few hours. And then held the help fast until a third vehicle, a tractor, had been dispatched. It was early November and the rains had come unexpectedly

early, and unexpectedly heavily, to Zambia, which had been parched by drought for several years. Our plan had been to fly from Lusaka to Busanga Plain, but that morning we'd got word that Busanga was flooded. African Parks' Kafue National Park team sprung into action – not for the last time – and found us beds at the supremely welcoming Mozhi Bush Camp, at the confluence of the Lufupa and Moshi rivers.



Kafue has a limited season, because the heavy rains, the lack of infrastructure and the sticky black cotton soil mean roads are impassable for at least three months of the year. Camps and lodges generally close from the end of November until April.

The insects at the start of the wet season are also relentless, but interesting. The next morning guide Chris introduced us to vivid red velvet mites (*Dinothrombium tinctorum*) happily crawling through the grass, their soft coats blotches of scarlet on the peat-coloured soil. Hippos scuffling about and splashing through the puddles outside our tents had woken us before dawn, the sky slowly turning lavender and the air thick with humidity and promise.

Turns out the promise was for more rain and another rescue – this time African Parks sent a helicopter to ferry us to their headquarters in Chunga as the rivers rose perilously close to the camp.

I had come to Kafue National Park for adventure; adventure is what

I got. At 22,400km<sup>2</sup> it is one of the biggest parks in Africa and is the oldest in Zambia. In the north, Busanga Plain is the very definition of remote. It's also here that the wildlife is richest. But Chunga is just four hours from Lusaka by car, and in the south, it's about four hours from Livingstone to the park. Perfect for quick trips from the cities.

Craig Reid, African Parks' Kafue manager, is based at Chunga. He tells me there are about 45 camps and lodges in Kafue, run by almost 25 operators. African Parks works mainly with camps rather than lodges, attracting a more local traveller than the high-end and high-priced lodges. They concentrate on fly camping and wilderness trails, which are particularly good for photographic safaris.

## Walk on the Wild Side

This year, South Africa's Lowveld Trails Co teamed up with Greater Kafue Landscape Limited, the collaboration between Zambia's Department of National Parks and Wildlife and African Parks, to set

up the Malala Wilderness Trail, a three-night, fully unsupported backpacking journey through one of Africa's largest designated wilderness zones. Lowveld Trails calls it "a deliberate return to simplicity – moving slowly, carrying everything you need, and leaving no trace behind."

The trail unfolds west of Lake Itzhi-Tezhi, in a designated area of more than 436,000 hectares covering miombo and mopane woodland, seasonal dambos, and the Musa and Luangandu rivers. It's Kafue's wildness and explored landscapes that allow trails like this.

## Number Crunching

"Tourism has increased since the 20-year partnership between the government of Zambia and African Parks was signed in July 2022," says Craig. "Things are looking pretty good."

Infrastructure is being upgraded, which in turn has prompted the government to invest in airstrips and access roads. All five of

the airstrips in the park are in excellent condition, licensed and manned. Chunga and Ngoma have their own receptions with power, water, and Starlink communications. Improved roads will extend the tourist season.

Animal numbers are also recovering. "When you provide a safe environment, you get natural growth. Translocation of animals is part of active recovery," says Craig. Already, 400 Kafue lechwe, 1,600 wildebeest and 190 zebras have been translocated. "Black rhinos will be brought to Kafue in November, and we are setting up a 150,000ha rhino protection zone south of Mozhi." The rhinos will make Kafue a Big 5 destination.

Cheetah numbers are good, with more than 100 adults in the park; wild dog packs are also returning – at present there are 200, in 17 breeding packs. There are more than 150 lions in 18 prides. Craig points out that these are anecdotal numbers; an aerial



survey is planned for this year that will give definitive data. A new monitoring programme is on the cards. Already, 35 elephants are collared, and five buffalo herds are being monitored.

External partners such as Panthera and the Zambian Carnivore Programme monitor carnivores.

Poaching has decreased significantly, too, while anti-poaching patrol teams have risen, from 20 to 38 since

2021, and the number of illegal incidents is dropping. "There are now 300 law enforcement officers in the park and will soon be recruiting another 50."

*Already, 35 elephants are collared, and five buffalo herds are being monitored.*





Tourism numbers are also rising on the back of strong management. 2024 was one of the best game-viewing seasons, earning a then record-breaking \$1.828 million in revenue off 23,828 unique visitors – a steep 25% revenue climb off a 42% jump in visitors over 2023.

This is nearly double the numbers in 2021, when the government of Zambia and African Parks joined forces. And the trajectory is strong. Ian Pollard, African Parks’ regional commercial manager Zambia and Zimbabwe, says more than 25 000 people visited Kafue last year, and the park earned \$1.95 million.

There is a plan to boost these numbers further, and Craig

talks about the commercial development plan devised with tourism operators. “Kafue’s size is its competitive advantage. We can at the least double the number of lodges, but increasing the occupancy at the existing lodges is a quicker win.” In line with this, park management has graded more than 2,000km of tracks in the past 12 months, extending the seasons of several lodges.

**Adventure Central**

Those operators are coming to the party, adding alluring activities, but all within a strict environmentally conscious framework.

Kasabushi Camp, for example, offers yoga retreats and plans to

start sleeping safaris – the idea is, you go out with a guide during the day, find a shady tree and string up your hammock, where you nap to the sounds of the wild while your guide keeps watch. At neighbouring Kaingu Safari Lodge, I happily whiled away the afternoon from the hammock on the private deck outside my tent overlooking the mighty Kafue River, snorting hippos the soundtrack to my snooze.

The launch of the General Management Plan 2025–2035 triggered a wave of high-end and eco-conscious developments. At the very high end, Anantara Kafue River Tented Camp is opening in June. It’s the park’s most anticipated ultra-luxury entry and signals Kafue’s shift

towards the global elite safari market.

Older sites are being revitalised with a focus on year-round accessibility and silent safaris. Among them, Mawimbi Bush Camp reopened in April following a total refurbishment under new ownership; Classic Zambia’s Lwenge River Camp opens in August in the Musekese region; and Chisa Busanga Camp upgraded its Silent Safari fleet – it operates entirely off-grid with solar-powered e-Cruisers. Several new community-managed campsites are being developed in the 15 surrounding chiefdoms to ensure the \$24.1-million investment benefits local residents.

**A New Model**

Zambia is a rising star in the safari world. Tourism numbers are up, accommodation offerings are improving, animal numbers are increasing.

At Kasabushi, owner Quintin Smit talks about opportunity. He is passionate about Zambia’s potential to build a safari model that doesn’t make the same mistakes that have been made in other safari destinations. It comes down to training and retraining, to keeping things simple, to having a single-minded focus on quality, to putting conservation and the environment first, always.

The next day, he drives us down the Spinal Road that goes from one end of Kafue to the other, to Konkamoya on the shores of Lake Itezhi-Tezhi. The road is in good nick, professionally graded, re-shaped, drainage improved and widened through African Parks and the Department of National Parks and Wildlife, and the drive is smooth. We stop to watch a leopard majestically scanning its territory from its lookout post; a short while later we stop to let a leopard tortoise amble across the road. In those two sightings lies the core of Kafue: the big, bucket-list predators and the small, fascinating creatures, all wrapped up in one of the most beguiling places on Earth.

**Why Visit Kafue**

Kafue has a diversity of landscapes, including open savannahs and riverine forests, which means diverse wildlife. Sightings include elephant, lion, leopard, cheetah, wild dog, hippo, and crocodile. There are 158 mammal species, of which 21 are antelope, and 70 reptile, 71 fish and 36 amphibian species.

For twitchers, Kafue’s 515 bird species include the black-cheeked lovebird, African finfoot, Pel’s fishing-owl, wattled and crowned cranes, and many of the large raptors and vultures.

There is plenty of boating and fishing. Rivers in the park include the namesake Kafue and the remote Lunga River. In the south, there is Lake Itezhi-Tezhi. Floodplains like Nanzhila and Busanga are good for game drives and safari walks.

Game Rangers International rehabilitates orphaned elephants at its nursery in Lusaka, before releasing them back into the wild at its Kafue Release Facility in the south of the park – which you can visit and watch from a distance (there is no public wildlife interaction).

Visitors can also dive into the local culture of the area by interacting with nearby communities.

- Dry season (May to October)**
- Peak tourist season: wildlife is more concentrated around water sources and is easier to spot.
  - It’s dry and warm (20°C-30°C in the day), and vegetation is less dense, improving visibility.
  - October is extremely hot, with daytime temperatures going over 35°C.

- Wet season (November to April)**
- The park is lush and green, and it’s the birthing season for many animals.
  - Birdwatching is excellent, with many migratory birds present.
  - There are fewer tourists.
  - It’s hot and humid: daytime temperatures range from 25°C-35°C.

- Rainy season (December to March)**
- It’s warm, temperatures ranging from 20°C-30°C during the day, and the rain can be heavy.
  - Many lodges and camps close because the roads are impassable and some parts of the park are inaccessible.
  - Because water is so abundant, animals disperse and are more difficult to spot.

