

# Why Zambian Walking Safaris Deliver the Ultimate Adrenaline Rush



**Lauren Mowery** Contributor @

ForbesLife

*I cover drinks, travel and food, and the intersection of all three.*



Cubs post-repast, playing and napping in South Luangwa. LAUREN MOWERY

"I don't walk. That's slow and boring." This statement, delivered with fact-like conviction, came from the square jaw of a tall, dark-haired, surly guest at Shenton Safari's remote bush camp Mwamba. "I go on safari several times per year. It's the ultimate rush; you know, chasing lions, trying to get the shot. I've taken thousands of photos." "Do you ever print and hang your work?" I asked. Five of us were tucking into a starter comprised of vegetables from the camp's garden. Though strangers, we bonded over the day's sightings at group meals. "Nah. I've not even had time to review photos from my last 8 trips."

Bemused, each morning I watched the macho Texan suit up in his armor of lenses; gear fit for rapid-fire sports photography or, in his eyes, stalking wildlife in Zambia's [South Luangwa National Park](#). Then he climbed in a truck, safe behind its metal doors, and was whisked off for fresh thrills.

As a fellow photographer, I understand the desire to score *the* shot, but the real rush comes not from following a pride of lions aloft in a truck but on foot. While a walking safari sounds dangerous, guides have undergone extensive training to keep guests safe. In fact, walking safaris are the trademark experience in Zambia. What better way to see Africa than with the dirt beneath your boots, the parched air in your nose, and eyes level with the tusks of an elephant.



Each walking safari is led by an armed watchman and a trained guide. LAUREN MOWERY

I experienced my first walking safari at Mwamba. The camp was comprised of four rustic chalets positioned along the namesake river, accommodating an intimate group of guests. It was the end of dry season. The camp had turned hot and dusty, on the precipice of drought. Or as one guest described it: the collective wilderness holding its breath, waiting for the seasonal explosion of rains, was palpable. Late October was prime game viewing, but it would end



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When you safari on foot, you traverse less ground, but you experience the thrill of wildlife without a protective barrier. Because of safety concerns, you're forced to engage all your senses, as opposed to the passive experience of a vehicle. You'll drink in the tiniest details of flora and fauna, like inspecting calcium-rich hyena scat or spotting the "little five."



Local guide. LAUREN NOWERY

Guides provide instruction prior to departure. “Keep your voices low. Walk in single file. If we encounter an elephant, we’ll move out of a downwind. If we encounter a lion, don’t run.” In addition to a trained guide, you walk with a good guy with a gun. To be frank, the gun is for emergencies, though my guide at Mwamba said they’d never used it and if they did, it would be to shoot a warning into the sky. Noise and standing one’s ground while “looking fierce” typically worked.

Mwamba, part of the Shenton Safaris Family of lodging, was founded by Derek Shenton. He built it in 1995 on a poachers’ site, hoping to push the illegal activity out of the surrounding area. This conservation-driven ethos mirrors the premise behind walking safaris. In the 1980s, Norman Carr pioneered the singular experience in Zambia at a time when hunters spotted wildlife from the sight of a gun. He hoped to encourage more travelers to shoot with cameras. Indeed, his efforts were so successful that today, most visitors come saddled with jumbo lenses and multiple bodies. As a result, they prefer the stability and comfort of a Land Rover.



A quartet of long-necks. LAUREN MOWERY



Slow walking may be, but boring, it was anything but. On my first morning out, we saw two lions parked in the shade of a tree, watching us. We stopped and stared back. I held my breath. Nervous, tingling energy zipped through my arms and legs. It was same anxious feeling I had at high school swim meets, frozen on the starting block waiting for the shot of the pistol.

The game with the lions continued for ten minutes before they loped off, slipping into the low brush.

Thirty minutes later, we quietly skirted a pack of elephants. A baby leaned against its mother's rear legs, its wrinkled trunk swatting playfully at her rump. The group snacked on mopani trees, a favorite food.



The elephant shrew makes up part of the "little five" that you see on foot. LAUREN MOWERY

Later in the morning, we encountered a gang of buffalo. Emboldened with encouragement from my guide, I approached with deliberate, slow steps, eyes scanning the lead animal's gnarled black face. This was normally a no-no. Solo animals, especially males, were violent and unpredictable. But a herd acted like a herd. With a few cautious steps in their direction, nearly a hundred simultaneously turned

away, churning dirt to flee. Then as quickly as they had spun off, they stopped, motionless. As the plumes of dust settled, they turned back to see if I'd followed.

Hooked on the rush of the walk, I spent the rest of the trip peregrinating across the flat open brush in the cool of early mornings. In the late afternoons, I opted for the drive. The guides packed beers, gin, and tonic, selecting different spots each day for sundowners. You couldn't drink on foot for the obvious reasons of keeping one's wits and the possibility of running.



A richly hued sunsets over the Luangwa River. LAUREN MOWERY

Zambia's famous pink sunsets, emblazoned across the sky in rich ombré thanks to microscopic dust particles, couldn't be replicated for Instagram. So, I didn't try. Lightly plied with booze, I climbed back into the truck's stadium seating for a passive search to find leopards stalking prey at night. Once the search ended, we would head back to camp for aperitifs and dinner.

On that last stretch home, I developed a routine. I'd lay back in the rear row, all to myself, and look up. Night unfurled its inky wings



in depths unknowable in urban settings. Light from a million moons ago unraveled across the infinite stretch in scattered glittering points. The warm air swirled over my face, no wall, no ceiling, no barrier between me and this wilderness of sky. My hometown of New York City is lively, but here, living in this moment, I felt both alive and immaterial.



I opted for drives in the evening so I could drink, stalk leopards, and ogle the night sky.

LAUREN MOWERY

## How to Book

Book a trip through Zambia's best lodges and landscapes with [Black Tomato](#). Though Zambia was long on my list, once I saw Black Tomato had included Zambia's South Luangwa National Park in their newest destinations list, I knew they were the outfit I wanted to work with. Black Tomato engaged local partners to organize airfare, transfers, and lodging inside the park's best and most unique properties including Shenton Safaris and [Time + Tide Camps](#), co-founded by Norman Carr. Before departure, they sent me a kit with a hard copy itinerary in a beautiful keepsake book, plus luxe Le Labo toiletries for the flight. On the ground, the pre-loaded app had every trip detail recorded, from flight numbers to emergency contacts. I could flip through the app each day to follow my itinerary until landing on the last page, sadly, urging me to the airport to head home.

# An Island Resort for Travelers, Not Tourists: Kaya Mawa Lodge, Malawi



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Sunset over Lake Malawi at Kaya Mawa. LAUREN MOWERY

We sat in a semi-circle facing the lake. Dusk settled gently around our shoulders. Someone lit a torch. Then another. I leaned back, repositioning my bottom in the slouch of the taffy-hued beanbag chair. Soft sand filtered through my toes. A few people spread sarongs on the beach and stretched out. Before us gathered a small group. Mostly kids from the nearby village; girls in cotton dresses, slender boys in shorts. Two of the boys looked about eight. Their walnut eyes flickered in the light as they addressed each other with unfettered smiles and fist bumps, eager to put on a show. A few minutes later, the band arrived toting homemade instruments. Then a voice rang out – the first note of a four-part harmony.



For the next hour, guests of [Kaya Mawa Lodge](#) watched, clapped, sang and twirled as the local kids choir belted hymns and Malawian classics. It's the sort of impromptu, uplifting vocal experience that makes your hair raise and scalp tingle. Voices calling, responding; joyful, hopeful, singing to the sky. Singing to the heavens. At times, incongruous with the poverty beyond the hotel boundaries. But knowledge of dilapidated homes roofed in tin was temporarily suspended as the duo of young showmen took turns breakdancing between verses, falling over in fits of laughter.



The main house at Kaya Mawa. The vibe is Morocco meets Malawi. LAUREN MOWERY

Kaya Mawa Lodge on Lake Malawi is a paradox. Located at the head of a crescent-shaped bay on Likoma Island, the Instagram-pretty property of whitewashed villas draped in pastel pinks and blues, sits on a lush landscape. Mango trees, old baobabs, ancient boulders – all frame the postcard-pretty lake famous for its clear, Caribbean-blue waters. Guests who make the trek to the property – a flight to Lilongwe, a charter to Likoma, a truck to the hotel – are not tourists. It's no small feat to get here. These are travelers, through and through.



Getting to Likoma Island is not small feat and requires a charter flight from Lilongwe.

LAUREN MOWERY

But this remote island is home to a small community that's built a relationship with the property owners. Where resorts in Tulum and Cancun raise high walls of concrete with aid from people they're meant to keep out, Kaya Mawa is borderless. Walk its curve of beach in the morning and meet women gathered to wash clothes and float in the water. Take a quad bike up the rugged road, and in a few minutes you're in full view of impoverished island life; though, you're always greeted with a wave and a smile.



Another beach on the island. A backpacker lodge is located there, reachable by the slow lake boat. | LAUREN MOWERY

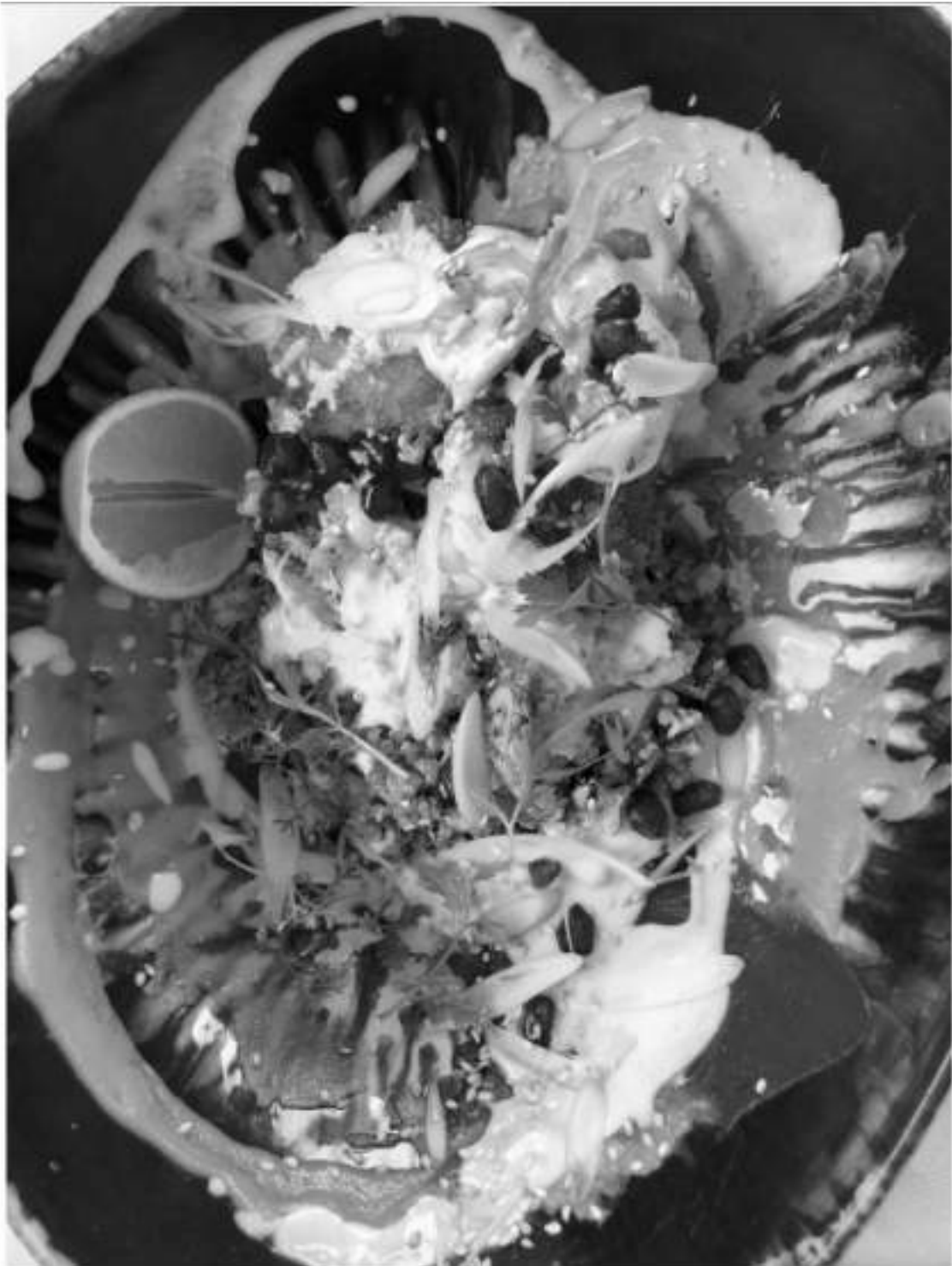


Seeing the stark reality of the local economy is probably off-putting to a lot of people. People with money who wish to be ensconced in luxury in private. But that person is as much a tourist as the families lining up for discount cruise fares for all-you-can-eat sailing buffets, featuring island pit stops for all-you-can-drink, watered down rum and sodas, on pseudo-Caribbean beaches owned by Disney and Royal Caribbean. And that's why Kaya Mawa is for travelers.



Breakfast with a view. LAUREN MOWERY

That's not to say a life of leisure can't be led at the property. In fact, most travelers tack Lake Malawi on as an adventurous version of "beach" following a week of "bush." Resort activities include snorkeling, scuba diving, and sailing on the glassy waters of the lake, or heading inland on a mountain or quad bike.



For the middle of nowhere, food is excellent. . . LAUREN MOWERY



Staff arrange visits to local communities, giving guests the chance to see Malawian culture and the various projects Kaya Mawa supports. For example: Katundu factory, though “factory” is a misnomer. It’s an open-air operation of women working on textiles and intricate glass chandeliers made from tumbled, recycled wine bottles recovered from the resort. Their wares, however, have made the glossy pages of marketing materials for high-end hotels who’ve hung their designs and sheathed pillows in their hand-beaded chenilles, linens, and velvets. You can buy in-stock designs or have your wishes made-to-order and shipped back home. That includes dresses and jewelry, also available in the shop at the hotel. In fact, you’ll preview their talents in your room – beds are adorned in Katundu shams.



Guest rooms feature textiles from the local women's factory. LAUREN MOWERY

Yes, Kaya Mawa is for the intrepid. But the caveat is that most of the intrepid have money. It's an expensive visit, about a thousand a night for a couple in high season, including meals, though some of the best food in southern Africa. But gathered around the cozy bar after sunset, sipping South African Chenin Blanc, you'll forget it's the moneyed class on the stool next to you. "We hiked Madagascar last year; next year, we're visiting coffee farms in Tanzania. Where are you headed next?" Fortunately, it's okay to respond: "I'm only thinking about today."

## Logistics

As with all travel in remote African destinations, hiring an experienced company to arrange lodging, timetables, and transfers makes life a lot easier. Luxury adventure company [Black Tomato](#), in tandem with local operator [Malawian Style](#), organized my program, including travel through the [Zambian bush](#) before Malawi. Black Tomato is unparalleled in their reception to client wishes, attention to detail, and 24-hour availability for clients on the ground. A hard copy program is mailed prior to departure with hour-by-hour itinerary details uploaded into their proprietary app, operational without Wi-Fi on your phone.



Sunset over Lake Malawi from Kaya Mawa



# The Best Zambian Lodges For Walking Safaris



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From my tent deck, I could watch elephants wander the parched riverbed below Mchenga.

LAUREN MOWERY

A walking safari sounds just as described -- scouting for animals on your feet, not in a truck. It also has the potential to be as dangerous as it sounds, but for the extensive training guides who lead treks undergo. Here's [why a walking safari is the ultimate adrenaline rush](#). Now that you're committed in concept, consider your lodging options.

Though many outfits in Zambia offer walking safaris, these four camps in South Luangwa National Park set the bar high due to the quality of the overall experience. From lodging, meals, to exceptional guides, look to [Shenton Safaris](#) and Norman Carr's [Time + Tide Camps](#) first.



Lion viewing is abundant in South Luangwa. LAUREN MOWERY

## Why South Luangwa?

South Luangwa National Park is the second largest of Zambia's parks and the most important wildlife destination in the country. It's been up-and-coming for a few years, especially amongst photographers and safari enthusiasts looking to get away from crowds and see the "real Africa," as guides on the ground like to say.

The park, occupying the mid-Luangwa Valley, is constrained by the Mchinga Escarpment on the west and the Luangwa River on the east. These natural delimitations have allowed wildlife to proliferate, undisturbed, as well as foster the evolution of unique species like the Thornicroft giraffe.

Notes from the Time + Tide website provide another interesting anthropological footnote: "Based on fossil evidence, the South Luangwa Valley is thought to have acted as a corridor for early humans moving between Eastern and Southern Africa, and it is believed that all Australopithecines (an extinct genus of hominins) originated from the Luangwa and Zambezi Valleys."





Proximity to wildlife is one reason people pick Shenton Safaris. LAUREN MOWERY

## Shenton Safari Camps

### Mwamba



Simple but comfortable chalet at Mwamba Bush Camp. Huts are torn down after every season. LAUREN MOWERY

The website notes that Mwamba means heaven in the local Nyanja language, though the bush camp experience is firmly rooted on land. Shenton Safaris are known around the world by photography junkies for their singular hides. A hide is a dugout that blends into the surrounding landscape in order to shield onlookers from animals, thus giving human voyeurs an unalloyed look at wildlife behavior. Though several Shenton-run hides are scattered around the area, the camp has one inside, a short walk from dwellings. Sightings include lions, zebra, elephants, kudu, birds and monkeys.

At Mwamba, each simple thatch chalet is comfortable though utilitarian. For the adventurous, book a night under the sky. The Numbu Star Bed is available for the exclusive use of Mwamba guests. It is a 15-minute drive from the camp and features a sleeping platform with a queen-sized bed draped in oh-so-romantic-yet-practical mosquito netting lit with lanterns. A guard stands watch throughout the night – just in case.

Shenton is unusual for safari camps in that most of their food is hyper-local, much of it plucked fresh from a garden tended nearby. One reason safari camps, in general, are expensive is due to the limitations in sourcing food and staff in remote locations. Despite the rustic nature of Mwamba's camp kitchen, the cook did an excellent job with bare bones resources, whipping up satisfying meals each day, including homemade breads, jams, and nut butters.



Rooms at Kaingo boast more comforts since the structures are permanent. LAUREN KOBETZ



## Kaingo

The comfort-driven sister to bush camp Mwamba, Kaingo was built in 1992 as the Shenton Safaris' flagship. It's not big; nothing in Luangwa is. There are only six chalets positioned along the Luangwa River. Kaingo means Leopard in the local Nyanja language; many guests boast sightings. In fact, the name derives from a former resident female leopard, Goldie, who resided in one of the chalets.

Meals are the same as in Mwamba. And all drives and activities, included, are similar though from a different starting point if taking a walking safari.

## Time + Tide Camps in South Luangwa

The Time + Tide Camps are considered the gold standard in walking safaris. Norman Carr, co-founder, was a pioneer of the safari-on-foot concept as well as game camps in general in Zambia. Back in the 50s, Carr encouraged Senior Chief Nsefu of the Kunda people in the Luangwa Valley, to preserve a swath of tribal land as a game reserve and "built the first game viewing camp open to the public in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia)." Guests who patronize [Time + Tide's network of camps](#) can opt to walk between them (walks range between 3 and 5 hours), having bags transferred via truck.



The sign denotes the turnoff for Mchenja camp. LAUREN WILSON

## Mchenga

A highlight of the trip, the approach to Mchenga leads through a gorgeous ebony grove, often populated with elephants, before alighting on the riverside site. A small, newly debuted pool provides cool relief during warm afternoon breaks between lunch and evening drives. It's not unusual for elephants to swing by for a drink, so staff are always hovering to ensure guests hear the thud of their feet or crunch of branches, indicating their approach. One should always slip away before the pachyderms arrive, lest becoming trapped in the pool.

Room décor recalls the timelessness of Out of Africa. Classic safari tents, plush beds draped for mosquitoes, and outdoor showers replete with soaking tubs, comprise the effect. Porch chairs allow for fresh air pleasantries when the elephants aren't wandering across camp.



Small but effective. The pool at Mchenja. LAUREN MOWERY



Meals are based on standard set menus each day, as they are at most camps. The food, though touted as a strength, was hit or miss. Same for the wine selection, though again, one must temper expectations when on holiday in the middle of a wildlife park in Africa. You'll be happier that way.

Overall, the style, pool, and setting along with knowledgeable walking guides make Mchenga a recommended stop.

## Chinzombo



Private boat transfer to Chinzombo LAUREN MOWERY

If your cash resources are unlimited or you've saved up for the ultimate safari splurge, book a night or two at Chinzombo. The boat ride across the river to the property sets the scene for what is the finest stay in South Luangwa, nay, Zambia. Friendly greeters at the dock shepherd guests and bags up to the viewing deck and common space.

The attention to detail, from service to furnishings, is apparent from the first cool herbal refreshment or glass of South African wine offered at check in. Chic décor evokes how you'd imagine stylish Italians would design a safari experience. Indeed, Chinzombo is the jewel in the Time + Tide collection. Fortunately, nothing feels overwrought or overtly contemporary; rather, particulars like buckles for towel hooks help this exquisite lodge stand out from the competition.



Chinzombo had the best wine selection of all the camps, making this wine writer content to relax with the river view for awhile. LAUREN MOWERY

Of course, with high prices come higher standards and the highest of expectations. Though food at most camps wouldn't keep an NYC restaurant afloat for more than a week, Chinzombo creates dishes you'd seek out back home, from fresh fish in delicate sauces to a tender steak, and fresh greens for salads. The wine list was superb and by far the best seen on the trip. As to be expected for \$1000+/night/person rates.



The highlight, however, was the private plunge pool with which each tent comes equipped. I visited Chinzombo for one night at the end of my trip; I'd been walking the lengths of the park for several days and wanted an afternoon to lounge around. I even skipped the game drive to sit with my toes in the water and work (it's the only lodge with Wi-Fi) but instead, was treated to a wildlife show from my deck. Three elephants traipsed around my tent for 3 hours, sniffing, snorting, and eating tree branches mere trunk-lengths away from the canvas flaps. I zipped myself inside while peering through the vinyl windows, treated to views of broken twigs inside the vegetarians' mandibles. In the understatement of the year, the experience was extraordinary.



Elephant approaching a plunge pool at Chinzombo. LAUREN MOORE

## Logistics

Unless you're a knowledgeable DIYer who will remember to pack a sat phone on a self-drive from Lusaka, it's best to book all travel through an agency. They can help you navigate the flights, transfers, lodging, and visa fees in one packaged price. I worked with the excellent outfit [Black Tomato](#) who did all the heavy lifting in partnership with operators on the ground.

There are several ways to get to Zambia. I flew South African Airways out of JFK to Johannesburg, then caught a connecting flight to Lusaka. I had a five-hour layover in the tiny airport (bring books to read) before jumping on a small charter flight to Mfuwe, the gateway to the park. Another hour drive led me to my first camp, Mwamba. Fortunately, despite a tiring two days of travel, the transfer to the bush camp served double duty as a game drive.

From Malawi, Fly Ulendo provides a daily service from Lilongwe to Mfuwe International Airport. The flight from Lilongwe to Mfuwe takes around 1 hour.