

## **Liuwa Plain National Park**

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**A** shimmering haze, the handiwork

of a midday African sun, had made the great Zambezi flood plain, over which we were driving, a furnace of heat. Flies buzzed in through the car window, and airborne dust covered us from head to toe.

“But this is Africa,” said Frank Carlisle, my guide and proprietor of the Bhejane.com adventure company. “And one must expect at least a few discomforts.”

And with that, our eight-car convoy continued off road in single file across the faceless plain in search of the spotted hyena.

The Liuwa Plain National Park, a remote and scarcely visited section of the great Zambezi floodplain in western Zambia, is a Mecca for wildlife fans, and although there are no elephants, rhinos or giraffes there, there are plenty of special things to see, including the second largest wildebeest migration on Earth.

For much of the year, this enormous flat landscape is submerged \ all 5,000-plus square kilometers of it. But this annual inundation is not a catastrophe. Far from it, and the animals, plants and people who call this place their home have come to depend upon this constant ebb and flow.

When the waters rise from the great Zambezi River during January, the low-lying areas become inundated, and fish swim where antelope would normally roam. Then, come May, the aquatic denizens retreat to the many permanent but shallow waterholes that are left behind when the floods recede. This is when the Liuwa plains become a birder’s paradise: a landscape teeming with cranes, storks, waterfowl, raptors and kingfishers. It’s also a fisherman’s paradise too \ and it is not uncommon to see crowds of local tribesmen wading through waterholes armed with fish traps, casting

nets and long, thin wooden spears. There are some 20,000 people from the Lozi tribe living in Liuwa Plain National Park, sharing the resources with the wildlife in a sustainable manner as decreed by their king. Trundling slowly across the now dry open landscape, Carlisle and I passed flocks of beautiful crowned cranes patrolling the margins of perfectly circular waterholes. Pinkbacked pelicans floated serenely, as did ducks and geese and other water birds. And above us, eagles and vultures soared overhead with the elegance of kites.

It was November when I was there, and the rainy season had begun with daily thunderstorms, but thankfully it takes a while for the floodplains to fill. The majority of locals migrate to higher ground when the inundation occurs, but many stay behind, moving around on precariously balanced canoes in search of fish. I have been told that the Lozi people of Zambia eat five times more fish than any other African tribe.

One animal that doesn’t eat fish, though, is the wildebeest \ instead, they come here for the succulent new grass that grows from the November rains, and wherever we drove, we could see them grunting and mewing and chewing their cud. Scientists estimate that each year about 33,000 of them make the trek down from Angola. Eventually after a further 20 minutes of slow driving among the herds, we reached a waterhole where a clan of spotted hyenas were resting in the shallows. Some of them lifted their heads languidly, showing a slight interest at our approach, but the majority continued to snooze away in the cool shallow water.

Unlike most hyenas elsewhere in Africa, the Liuwa Plain clans do not scavenge from other predators (such as lions, leopards and cheetahs); and that’s because there aren’t many big cats there. Instead they must hunt and kill for themselves, and this they do by forming up into enormous gangs, sometimes 25 strong.

We stayed with the waterhole clan for many hours that day, watching them socialize and play as the afternoon heat diminished, but eventually the sun faded, and we were forced to return to the safety of our camp.

At night, I lay in my tent, listening to the patter of rain and the rumble of thunder, but above it all, sometime in the early hours, I heard the sound of hyenas.

They sniffed and pawed at the zipper of my tent and although hyenas are not known to attack humans, nonetheless, I failed to sleep well that night.

However, at first light when the hyenas had assuredly gone, I emerged from my nylon fortress once more to the sight of beautiful cranes and harmless wildebeest. Sadly, this was to be my last day in Liuwa Plain National Park, but the journey back to “civilization” was at least a very pleasant one. The roads were bad, but the scenery along the Zambezi River more than made up for the slow bumpy drive \ and besides, the snail fs pace allowed us to meet local people, who were among the most friendly I have ever met.

Eventually, though, we ended our journey at the magnificent Victoria Falls. And here I boarded my plane, and bid farewell to the wonderful people, hyenas, landscapes and wilderness of the great untamed Africa. Well, at least until next year, that is. ...



**All pictures by Dale R. Morris**

More pictures at the Liuwa Plain photo gallery