



THERE'S A WHIFF OF NOSTALGIA IN THE AIR AT THE MOMENT, MIXED WITH A DASH OF OPTIMISM...

...As some of Africa's greatest safari destinations re-emerge in the sunlight after years in the shadows.

Chief among these is Zimbabwe, once known as the pinnacle of excellence for its exacting guiding standards and superb wildlife. Because of the diligence of many of the individuals on the ground Zim's wildlife fared relatively well during Mugabe's regime.

But with the announcement of serious investment in tourism infrastructure, there's renewed hope that the country will be reinstalled in its rightful place at the top of the safari league table. We take a look at three parks to experience the best of wild Zimbabwe.

Along side Zim, we focus on Uganda. For a while The Pearl of Africa seemed to be losing its lustre, with little attention given to anything

other than the country's Great Apes. But Rod's recent visit reminds us of the cornucopia of wildlife to be found in many of the country's other national parks. Queen Elizabeth National Park, Murchison Falls, Kidepo and Semliki offer exceptional wildlife, few other tourists and the chance to combine seamlessly with Uganda's Gorillas and Chimps.

In this edition we also review our trip with the Financial Times to Zambia's Kafue National Park – in our opinion massively underrated and somewhat forgotten since its heyday in the 70s. Catherine returns from Ethiopia's deep south, Andrea takes a look at Bhutan's wild expanses and Vanessa takes a look at a trip combining Galapagos, Peru and - last but not least Ecuador - a place close to her heart as this is where she got engaged...speaking of nostalgia.

Alex

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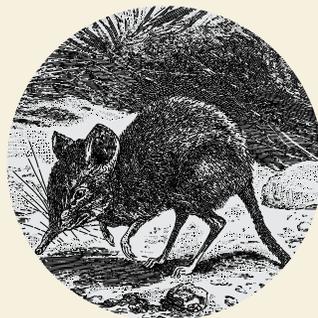
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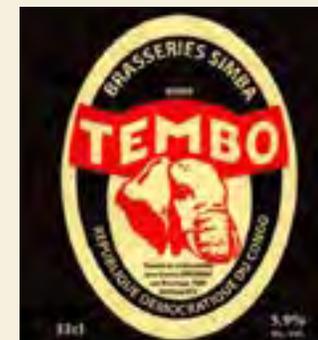
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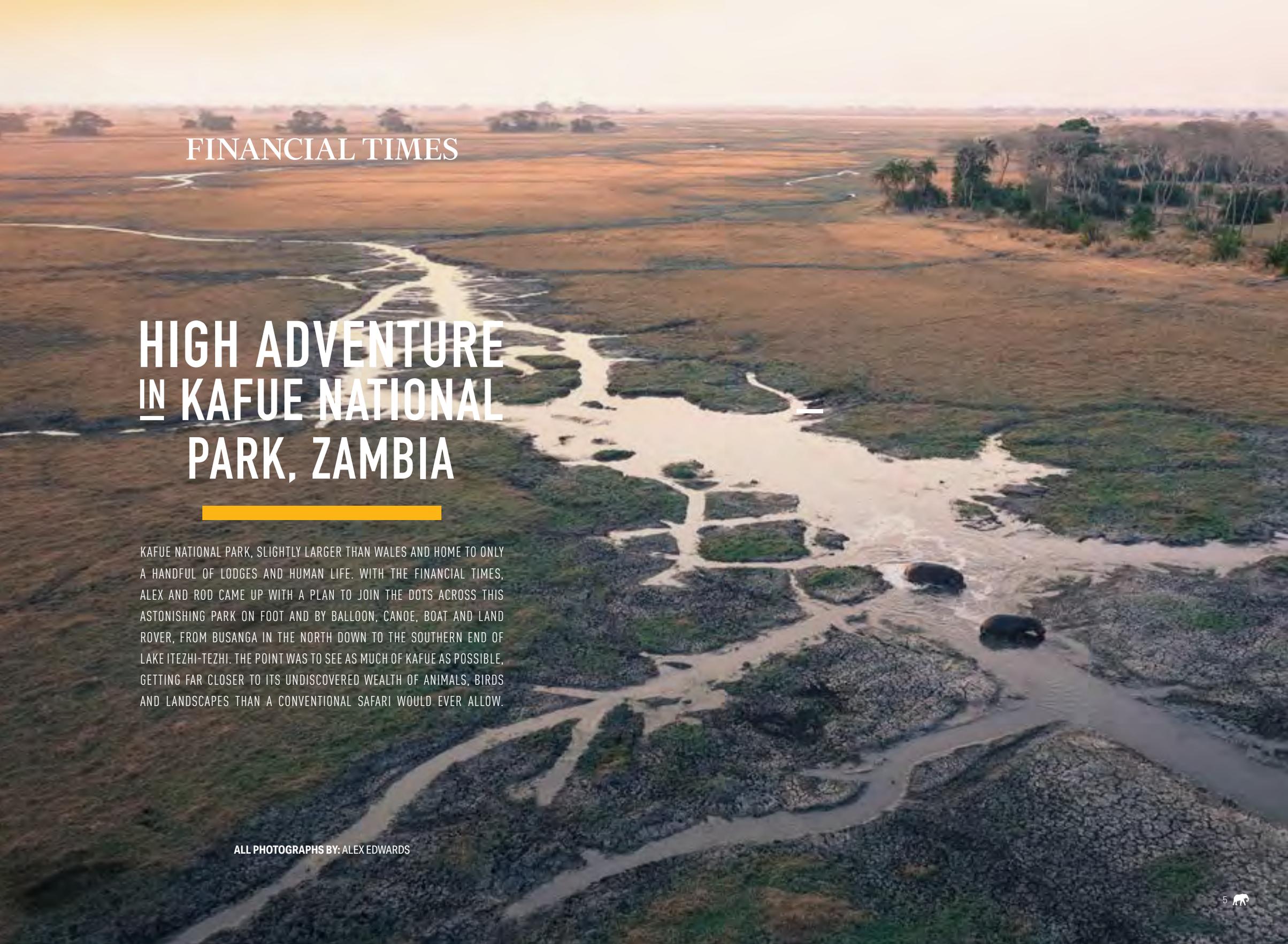
NEVER STANDING STILL FOR TOO LONG, ROD IS SET TO EXPLORE A LARGE AMOUNT OF AFRICA IN THE COMING MONTHS WITH SPOTS UP FOR GRABS SHOULD YOU FANCY JOINING HIM.

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THE HIMALAYAN KINGDOM OF BHUTAN:

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An aerial photograph of a wide, winding river in a savanna landscape. The river flows from the top left towards the bottom right, with several smaller tributaries branching off. The surrounding land is a mix of brown and green, with scattered trees and bushes. The sky is a soft, hazy orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall scene is a vast, open natural environment.

FINANCIAL TIMES

HIGH ADVENTURE IN KAFUE NATIONAL PARK, ZAMBIA

KAFUE NATIONAL PARK, SLIGHTLY LARGER THAN WALES AND HOME TO ONLY A HANDFUL OF LODGES AND HUMAN LIFE. WITH THE FINANCIAL TIMES, ALEX AND ROD CAME UP WITH A PLAN TO JOIN THE DOTS ACROSS THIS ASTONISHING PARK ON FOOT AND BY BALLOON, CANOE, BOAT AND LAND ROVER, FROM BUSANGA IN THE NORTH DOWN TO THE SOUTHERN END OF LAKE ITEZHI-TEZHI. THE POINT WAS TO SEE AS MUCH OF KAFUE AS POSSIBLE, GETTING FAR CLOSER TO ITS UNDISCOVERED WEALTH OF ANIMALS, BIRDS AND LANDSCAPES THAN A CONVENTIONAL SAFARI WOULD EVER ALLOW.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY: ALEX EDWARDS

KAFUE FROM NORTH TO SOUTH

Spending time in Kafue is akin to visiting four separate national parks without ever leaving one. Less than an hour by air from Lusaka, there is consistently great game viewing, including impressively dark-maned lions and their tree climbing mates, big elephants as well as more esoteric species such as Lechwe and Serval.

Working your way through the park from north to south is long but interesting, with many opportunities to stretch the legs with a first-class walking experience in Musekese – all expertly guided with passion and substance. Heading down to the middle of the park, the river changes character in to a land of channels and countless islands. This is a great spot to relax and take in the cornucopia of beautiful birds.

For those fortunate enough to have experienced a few safaris, an increasing fear that we hear is the gentrification of the genre - the smoothing off of the rough edges and the demise of the characterful in favour of the formulaic. There may be some truth of this in some places, but certainly not Kafue. This is old style-safaring taken back to its routes where a significant journey can be made and thoroughly enjoyed, with a lot of the pleasure derived from the travelling itself.



“On our first full day, Sunday, we saw lazing cheetah, and hippo, and elephant browsing the trees, and lion – two yellow-eyed males padding over the plain, oblivious to the thousand puku and lechwe antelope watching them.”



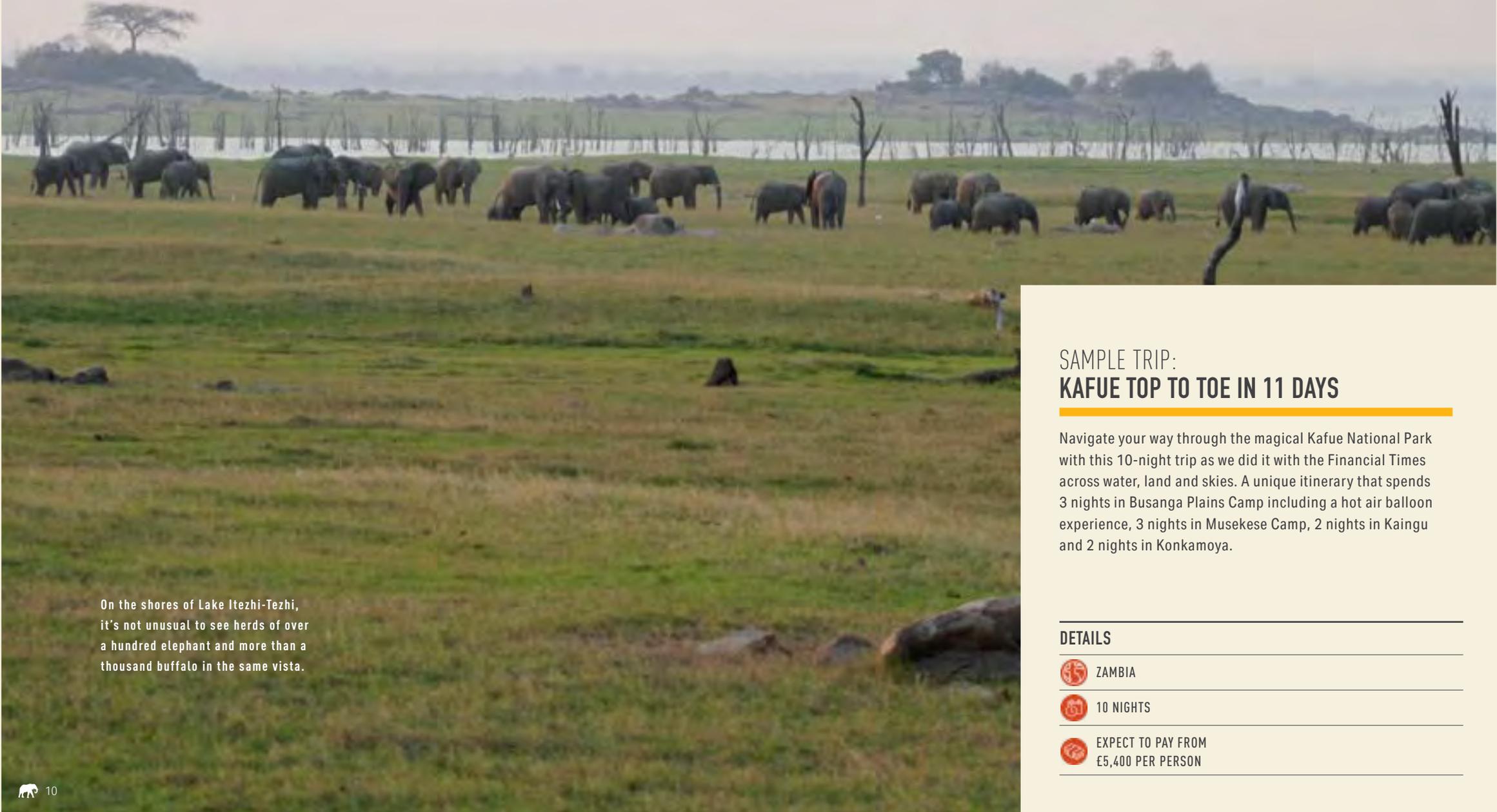


Zambia's only ballooning experience takes you at low level across the Busanga Plains - a real magic carpet ride.



"The stars and nightjars came out, we stoked the fire and the lions' roars silenced the night. Out came the stories."

“In nudging family groups they paced, clustered like friends, all ages together. The giant parade grazed side by side and I felt invisible, insubstantial, delighted.”



On the shores of Lake Itzhi-Tezhi, it's not unusual to see herds of over a hundred elephant and more than a thousand buffalo in the same vista.

SAMPLE TRIP: KAFUE TOP TO TOE IN 11 DAYS

Navigate your way through the magical Kafue National Park with this 10-night trip as we did it with the Financial Times across water, land and skies. A unique itinerary that spends 3 nights in Busanga Plains Camp including a hot air balloon experience, 3 nights in Musekese Camp, 2 nights in Kaingu and 2 nights in Konkamoya.

DETAILS

 ZAMBIA

 10 NIGHTS

 EXPECT TO PAY FROM
£5,400 PER PERSON



ELEPHANT SHREW

Named for its mobile elephant-like proboscis, the Four-toed Elephant Shrew, also known as the Four-toed Sengi, is widely distributed across East and Southern Africa, but seeing one takes luck.

The most obvious evidence of their presence is a loud drumming produced by stamping their hind-legs. But look carefully and you may see signs of the remarkable survival strategy this diminutive creature has developed.

Small, crepuscular and secretive, the Elephant-shrew favours dense, leaf strewn thickets in riparian woodland. But like a man who opens a bag of crisps in the cinema, the Four-toed Elephant Shrew is painfully aware of how rustling sounds carry in the darkness. For the Shrew, however, the penalties for shattering the silence go some way beyond the opprobrium of its neighbours. Many owls have slightly offset ears, allowing them to precisely locate their prey

without any ambient light - and such woodland is also home to the Verreaux's Eagle-Owl, a predator known for its exceptional visual acuity, razor sharp hearing...and weakness for Four-toed Elephant Shrews.

Living cheek by jowl with a mortal enemy has no doubt done much to encourage shrew resourcefulness, but the solution it has come up with goes beyond ingenious. By day the shrew patrols its routes through the leaf litter, fastidiously clearing landing zones, each a few inches across, and a few feet apart.

Once you know what you're looking for the dot-to-dot of landing zones is quite visible. The result is that - when threatened - the Elephant-shrew is able to pogo at high speed down any one of a number of pre-determined escape routes.

All without so much as a rustle.

SURVIVAL IN THE WORLD BENEATH YOUR FEET



GALAPAGOS, PERU & ECUADOR

SENSATIONAL MARINE WILDLIFE COMBINES WITH PRIMARY CLOUD FOREST, WILD MOUNTAIN SCENERY AND RICH CULTURE TO MAKE AN UNFORGETTABLE SOUTH AMERICAN SAFARI. VANESSA HAS BEEN PLANNING TRIPS TO SOUTH AMERICA FOR 20 YEARS AND SHARES SOME OF HER HIGHLIGHTS FOR A TRIP COMBINING ALL THREE OF THESE EXTRAORDINARY COUNTRIES.



I've been planning trips to South America for over 20 years and I have visited each country numerous times. I actually got engaged in Ecuador so it will always hold a special place in my heart.

If you've done Africa where mind blowing wildlife is on tap, you would absolutely love the Galapagos where it is 100% wildlife. This is a year-round destination that is outstanding for the whole family – speaking from personal experience, you will never forget snorkelling with dolphins and sea-lions.

The mainland destinations offer something completely different to the wildlife of Galapagos, but it works really nicely, combining the intriguing history, wonderful rainforests and the cloud forests of Ecuador is something really special.

If you are going to do a trip to South America make sure you take enough time to do it. It is a long way so invest the time. For a Galapagos cruise you need at least 7 nights and a couple travelling either side, so when you add on the time in Peru and Ecuador I would say you need at least 2-3 weeks to make sure you do it right."



Thanks to Jane Wilson-Lee for this magnificent photo, taken on a recent trip with Natural High.

PERU

Peru is often best known for Machu Picchu and somewhat unfairly, as the country has so much more to offer. The ancient history is only one part of a country full of breathtaking scenery, pristine wilderness and dense Amazonian rainforest - all of which can be crafted into a magnificent trip not to be missed.



ECUADOR

The perfect gateway into the Galapagos, Ecuador is a magical mix of cloud forest, inspirational eco-lodges and jungle wildlife.



GALAPAGOS

No place on earth will match the intense wildlife experience you find in the Galapagos. This remote archipelago, lying 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, is home to countless species who have evolved without fear of mankind. A sailing boat charter around the islands will be an unforgettable experience and the perfect tie up with the mainland.

SAMPLE TRIP : THE VARIED LANDSCAPE OF GALAPAGOS, PERU AND ECUADOR

Fly into Quito and onto Cuzco for five nights before heading to The Galapagos for a seven night cruise aboard The Beagle, exploring the wild coastline and stunning wildlife that comes with it. After your cruise, you'll head back to Quito. You may wish to bolt on a couple of nights exploring the cloud forest from a stunning forest ecolodge.

DETAILS

GALAPAGOS, PERU & ECUADOR

15 DAYS

EXPECT TO PAY FROM £5,800 PER PERSON



BIG LIFE UPDATE:



“They have patrolled nearly 29,000km on foot, that's the equivalent of walking from New York to San Francisco seven times!”

IMAGES: JEREMY GOSS



The first few months of 2018 have kept everyone at Big Life Foundation busy, including our rangers. They have patrolled nearly 29,000 km on foot, that's equivalent to walking from New York to San Francisco seven times! During this time, they arrested 89 suspects for illegal activities, including bushmeat and trophy poaching, habitat destruction and community crimes. They confiscated 138 kg ivory, removing it from the illegal market, helped treat five elephants for injuries, stopped two retaliatory lion hunts, and so much more.

But rangers are just one part of Big Life's work, we are looking forward to finalizing a livestock grazing plan in one area of the ecosystem that will reduce overgrazing and ensure that grass, a finite resource, lasts longer and benefits more wildlife and livestock throughout the year. In addition, we are beginning Phase 2 of the crop-protection fence. Another 60 km of electric fence will go a long way to help keep elephants out of farms—and out of harm's way—and saving farmers hundreds of thousands of dollars in crop damage. A win-win!

And we can't forget about the predators. Big Life is expanding its successful livestock compensation programme, which protects predators from retaliatory killing by reimbursing livestock owners for a portion of the value of their animal killed, on condition they don't kill predators in retaliation.

Last but not least - 2018 is a Maasai Olympic year and we're counting down the days to our colourful event in December. The Olympics Final, where four Maasai warrior teams come together, to compete for medals, prizes and prestige in six events based on traditional warrior skills, replaces a long-held tradition of competing against each other by killing lions.

As usual, there is not a dull moment here. What we are doing is vitally important, and time is of the essence. Thanks to all of you who support us in our efforts.

A person is sitting on a log by a campfire at night. The fire is bright and illuminates the person and the surrounding area. The person is wearing a light-colored shirt and pants. The background is dark, suggesting a night setting in a natural environment.

“The less-is-more formula Natural High advocates makes complete sense. Luxury lies in stripping away the conscious thought that controls our busy lives, and exposing the sensory, instinctive self to the scents and sounds of the wild.”

The Daily Beast

SAMPLE TRIP : **OFF-GRID IN NORTHERN TANZANIA**

Get off the beaten track with a safari exploring little visited areas of Northern Tanzania. Stay in light tented camps with a private guide and vehicle throughout with the chance to walk and fly-camp as you go.

DETAILS

 NORTHERN TANZANIA

 7 NIGHTS

 EXPECT TO PAY FROM
£2,995 PER PERSON



A JOURNEY INTO THE OMO BASIN, ETHIOPIA

Catherine is recently back from exploring some of Ethiopia's wilder corners. Beginning in the northern Tigray region she travelled off-grid with a lightweight mobile camp in the little-visited south of the country.

From the remote region of Kibish, famous for early hominid remains, and home to the Surmi and Suri people, Catherine headed down the Omo River by boat and into the Omo Valley National Park, on Kenya's northern border.

The Omo Valley is home to a plethora of tribes that amazingly still manage to exist largely in isolation from the outside world. These include the Kara - expert body painters who use clays and locally sourced vegetable pigments; the Hamar, whose women wear their hair in dense ringlets topped off with head-dresses of aluminium and the Mursi - one of the oldest tribes in Africa, best known for the heavy clay lip-plates worn by women.

This was a truly remarkable opportunity to visit one of Africa's last unexplored frontiers; the Omo basin is a kaleidoscope of culture, tradition and terrain and tourists are still a rarity in these parts.

ALL PHOTOS YOU SEE WERE TAKEN BY CATHERINE ON LOCATION.



Men of the Kara Tribe, one of the smallest tribes in the Omo Valley - expert body painters and known for their 'Bula' or 'Pilla' initiation, a coming of age ceremony requiring the initiate to leap over rows of cattle without falling.



A young girl of the Kara Tribe, her hair is greased with red clay and cut into a skull cap and her face decorated with white chalk, all done for self-pleasure and pride



The Kara men decorate their face and body with ash mixed with fat and create incredibly intricate designs, a symbol of virility for important festivals



Friday night in Duss village - Catherine enjoyed an evening of music and dancing with the Kara tribe .

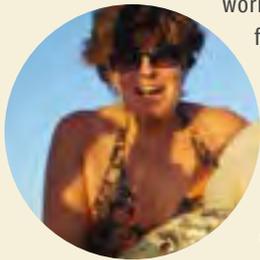


Whenever I go back to Ethiopia I'm struck more than anything by the people; their poise and their hospitality above all. But also by the country's dramatic scenery and its remarkable history.

It's truly unique and quite unlike the rest of Africa so I'd highly recommend that all Africa-lovers go there at least once.

I'd recommend heading north first. Take in the history and experience the culture in the Simien Mountains. This is where you'll find extraordinary rock-hewn churches built into the mountainside with relics dating back thousands of years, but it's also an area with some wonderful trekking in the mountains.

When you're ready for something highly unusual, head south deep into the Omo Valley as I did. The chance to spend time with tribes that have little or no contact with the outside world is a great privilege. Meeting the lip-plated Mursi tribe was an unforgettable few days; many of these tribes still live as they did in biblical times and when you're interacting with people that have never come across a camera, iPad or even mirror - you know you're in a very special place. Exploring with a private mobile camp adds hugely to the flexibility of the trip as well as making this a real luxury. As always, the chance to fly-camp under the stars tops it all. You're deep in the wilderness so it's not for the faint hearted, but in our experience it's always a major highlight.



We use mobile camps in Ethiopia to open up the most remote parts of the country such as the Bale Mountains, Danakil Depression, Chebera Churchura National Park and The Omo Valley.



MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS:
 ● NILO-SAHARAN
 ● OMOTIC
 ● CUSHITIC

SAMPLE TRIP: ETHIOPIA - NORTH & SOUTH

Start your intrepid adventure in the north of the country with a private guide in the Tigray region viewing the historical hill churches and dramatic scenery. Then it's time to get off-grid in the Omo Valley spending time with the tribes people across the valley. This includes a spectacular two nights fly camping on the banks of the Omo River under the stars.

DETAILS

-  ETHIOPIA
-  8 NIGHTS
-  EXPECT TO PAY FROM £5,975 PER PERSON (BASED ON FOUR PEOPLE TRAVELLING TOGETHER)

ZIMBABWE IS BACK ON THE SAFARI MAP

WITH MUGABE OUT AND THE RECENT ANNOUNCEMENT OF \$1.2 BILLION TO BE INVESTED IN TOURISM, ZIMBABWE MAY BE ABOUT TO SEE THE CHANGE IN ITS FORTUNES IT SO RICHLY DESERVES.



It's easy to forget that Zim was once the bread-basket of Africa, not to mention the country that set the bar on guiding standards for the rest of Africa. Amazingly, despite years of economic hardship it's still blessed with some of the most rewarding parks on the continent.

HWANGE NATIONAL PARK

Zimbabwe's largest national park is arguably the best location if you want to see the Big 5. Only two hours' drive from Victoria Falls means Hwange is a smooth dove-tail into any Zimbabwe itinerary in the north of the country. Known for its expansive plains and wide horizons, Hwange carries a sizeable reputation that it wholeheartedly deserves.



MANA POOLS

The high canopy of Acacia Albida trees and wide floodplain of the Zambezi make prime walking territory. For the ultimate in tented safaris, stay at John's Camp from where you can expect to find the wildlife gathering en-masse at the rich alluvial feast on the banks of the Zambezi. Mana is one of the few true wildernesses in the world where you can encounter elephant, lion and wild dog in such close proximity, and on foot.

GONAREZHOU

In the far south of the country, Gonarezhou offers probably the wildest and least visited national park in Zimbabwe. Auspiciously named “place of elephants” in Shona, the park is true to the word in this respect with incredible scenes of frolicking elephants a regular occurrence. The park is relatively inaccessible with only a few roads and the best way to see it is on foot along the many ancient elephant tracks. So, if what you are looking for is a great big chunk of wild Africa to yourself, this is your place.

SAMPLE TRIP: ZIMBABWE IS BACK ON THE SAFARI MAP

Ultimate Zimbabwe: Hwange, Gonarezhou and Mana Pools.

To experience the best of Zimbabwe’s game-rich wilderness areas far from other tourists combine three of Zim’s stunning parks with the chance for some exceptional walking. Begin with a couple of nights at Vic Falls to recover after the flight, then strike out for Hwange, Gonarezhou and Mana Pools using a mixture of traditional tented and mobile safari camps

DETAILS

 ZIMBABWE

 11 NIGHTS

 EXPECT TO PAY FROM
£5,150 PER PERSON



1. CONGO-BRAZZAVILLE: NGOK

Definitely a contender for the World's Best Beer Label



2. ETHIOPIA: ST GEORGE'S BEER

Named after the country's patron saint and brewed in Addis Ababa since 1922



3. KENYA: TUSKER

"Tusker" honours one of the co-founders George Hurst who was trampled to death by a rogue elephant in 1923



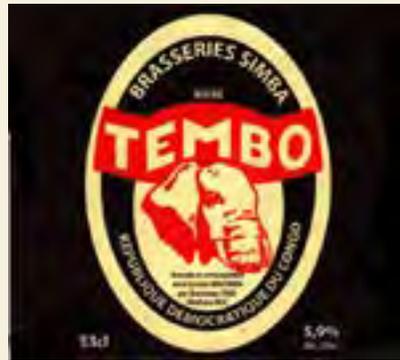
4. ZAMBIA: MOSI

Mosi Oa Tunya (The Smoke that Thunders) - named after the Victoria Falls



5. TANZANIA: KILIMANJARO

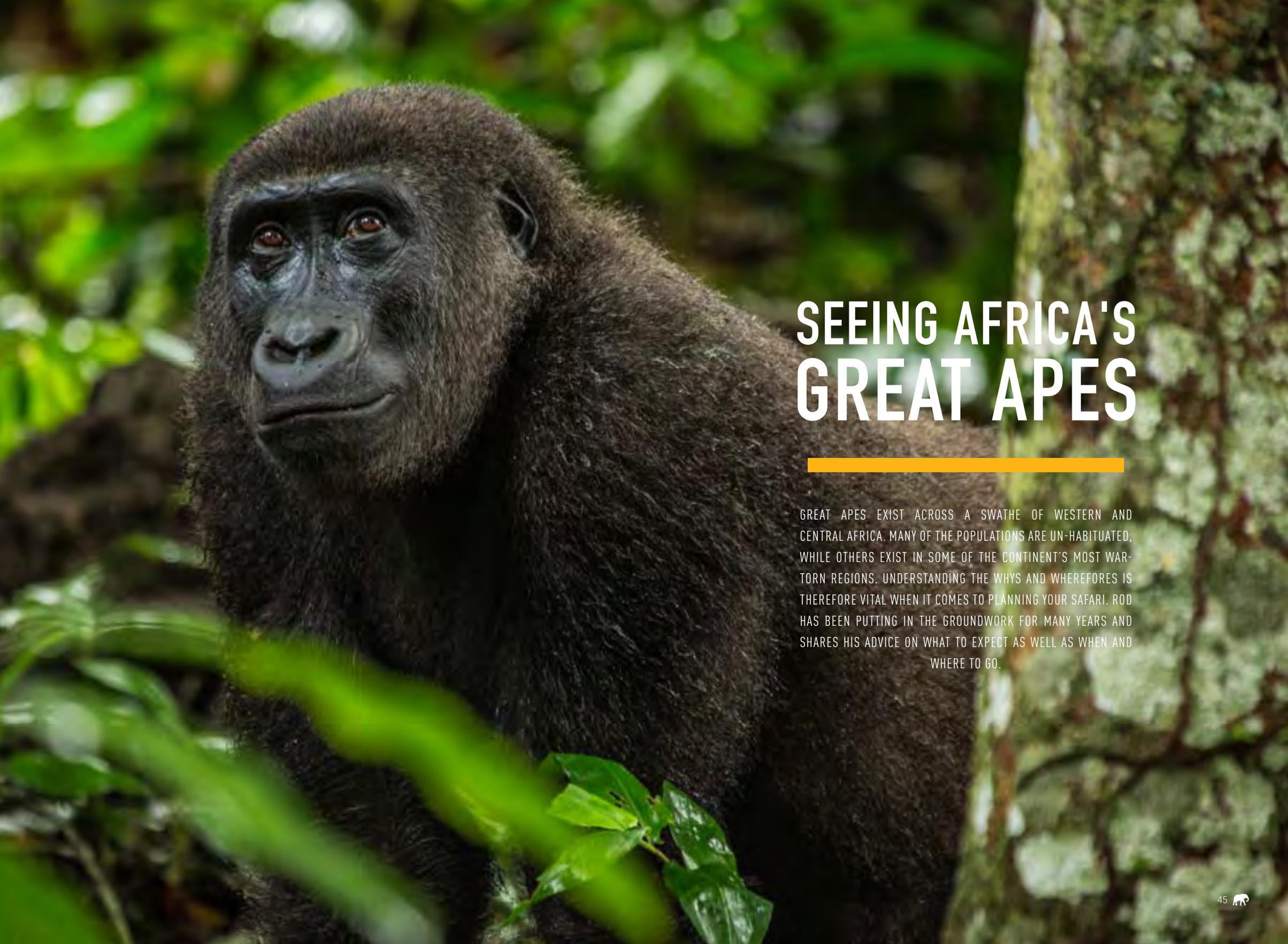
Named after Africa's highest mountain which Queen Victoria bequeathed to her nephew, the future Kaiser Wilhelm II of Prussia as a birthday present.



6. THE DR CONGO: TEMBO

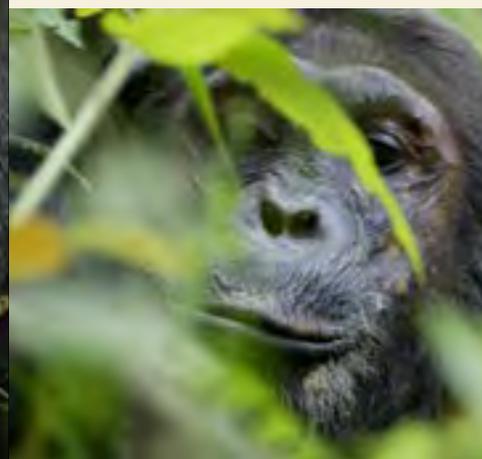
Throughout all of Zaire/the DR Congo's darkest days Brasseries Simba has continued to produce the highly esteemed Tembo and Simba beers in 65cl bottles. A perfect example of the old adage that the more troubled the country the better the beer.

6 BEERS TO SEEK OUT IN AFRICA



SEEING AFRICA'S GREAT APES

GREAT APES EXIST ACROSS A SWATHE OF WESTERN AND CENTRAL AFRICA. MANY OF THE POPULATIONS ARE UN-HABITUATED, WHILE OTHERS EXIST IN SOME OF THE CONTINENT'S MOST WAR-TORN REGIONS. UNDERSTANDING THE WHYS AND WHEREFORES IS THEREFORE VITAL WHEN IT COMES TO PLANNING YOUR SAFARI. ROD HAS BEEN PUTTING IN THE GROUNDWORK FOR MANY YEARS AND SHARES HIS ADVICE ON WHAT TO EXPECT AS WELL AS WHEN AND WHERE TO GO.



MOUNTAIN GORILLA

The most famous of the Great Apes is the Mountain Gorilla - an estimated 900 individuals live in family groups (averaging 10 members but up to 37) on the slopes of the mountains bordering the eastern DR Congo, Rwanda and Uganda. Silverbacks weigh in at over 200kg and spend most of their time on the ground making them perfect candidates for portraiture. It's possible to track Gorilla in all three countries, trekking in a small group to a habituated family and spending an hour amongst them.

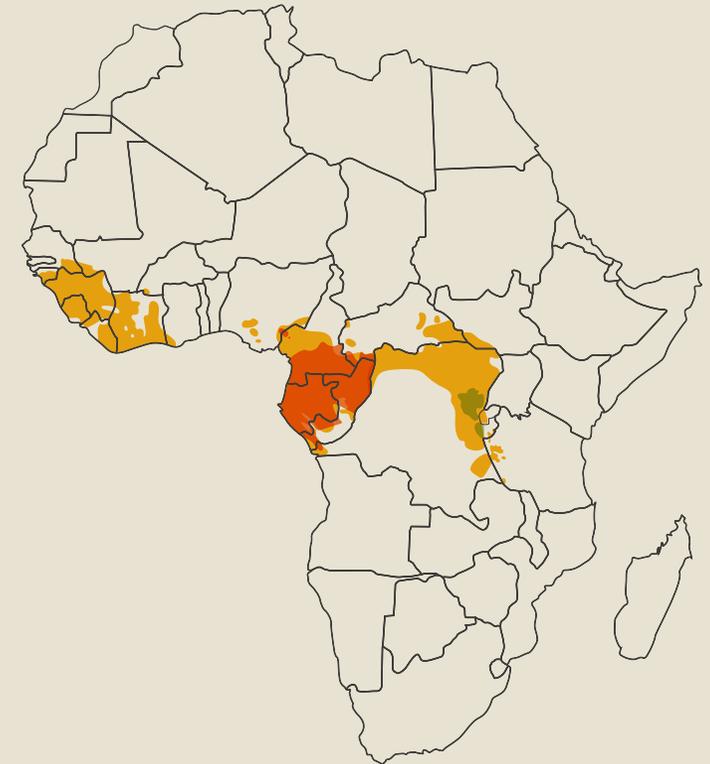
WHEN: January to March and June to September.

WHERE: Uganda - superb if you want to combine with big game and incredible habitat variety in close proximity.

Rwanda - best for a quick, uncomplicated Gorilla sortie and also combining with the Serengeti, Tanzania.

DR Congo - best for combining with climbing an active volcano, Nyiragongo and camping above the world's largest lava lake. Political instability is an ongoing problem in the Congo as recent events have shown.

GREAT APE DISTRIBUTION:



- CHIMP
- WESTERN (LOWLAND) GORILLA DISTRIBUTION
- EASTERN (MOUNTAIN) GORILLA DISTRIBUTION

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Today most people accept that the Great Apes are our closest relatives, but as recently as the 1960's it was believed that baboons had made a Darwinian-leap, climbing down from the canopy for a life on the savannah. In an attempt to better understand how humans evolved, the eminent paleoanthropologist Louis Leakey selected three researchers - Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and Birute Galdikas to study chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans respectively. Through the 1970's their work became known around the world, popularizing the Great Apes and raising awareness of the many threats to their survival. Many of today's great ape experiences can be traced back to these early research projects.

LOWLAND GORILLA

On the other side of the great Central African rainforest the Western Gorilla (often known as Lowland Gorillas) live in the lowland forests of the DR Congo, the Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville and Gabon. A combination of political insecurity in the region and relative lack of scientific research means that although there are many more Western Gorilla than Mountain Gorilla (nobody knows for sure how many but there could be up to 200,000) there are in fact much fewer habituated groups and so the opportunities to see them are less. Slightly smaller than their montane cousins the Lowland Gorilla is more active and arboreal and a tracking activity to see them tends to be a more intimate affair and less about photography than observing behaviour.

WHEN: All year round.

WHERE: Congo-Brazzaville - enjoy Odzala National Park, excellent variety of forest mammal and bird species with extremely comfortable world-class camps to stay in.

The Central African Republic - more challenging than Odzala to get to and less comfortable, but the upside is access to species such as forest elephant, giant river hog and forest buffalo.

Gabon - logistically challenging but the potential rewards are huge - from mandrill to manatee; whale; world-class sport fishing and more protected rainforest than anywhere else.



CHIMPANZEE

Two species of chimpanzees occur - the common chimpanzee *Pan troglodytes* and the bonobo or gracile chimpanzee, *Pan paniscus*. The chimpanzee has a surprisingly wide although discontinuous distribution from Senegal in the far west of Africa to Tanzania in the east. From the perspective of spending time with them this is restricted to three countries - Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania - all of which currently offer excellent opportunities for Chimp tracking. A sortie in to chimpanzee-country can be relatively easily worked in to a conventional "big game" safari in East Africa.

As with gorilla tracking, the modus operandi is to trek through the forest to where a family group may be, generally with the assistance of an advance party of trackers who will have followed them from wherever they spent the night, you then spend an hour in close company, observing natural behaviour from fighting to play, grooming and feeding. Recently the option of a full-day tracking experience has become available in a couple of places for those wishing to immerse themselves further in to the daily lives of our most charismatic kin.

Without doubt much of the fascination in spending time with chimpanzees is in observing just how similar to us they are - chimps are in fact more closely related to humans than they are to gorillas - and the striking similarities in physical features, grimacing, posturing and, possibly most unnervingly, the endless political manoeuvring which can be brutal and terrifyingly familiar.

WHEN: January to March and June to September - take advantage of low season in Mahale when chimp trekking remains excellent.

WHERE: Uganda - combine as part of a Gorilla and big-game safari.

Rwanda - found in Nyungwe Forest which hosts an incredible variety of primates and superb forest birds. Exceedingly good infrastructure makes getting to and around the park a breeze.

Western Tanzania - Mahale is simply unlike anywhere else - only accessible by light aircraft and then boat. Best for combining with a "proper" off-piste safari.





UGANDA: GORILLAS, CHIMPS AND BIG GAME

UGANDA IS A COUNTRY WITH EVERYTHING UNDER ONE ROOF

In Uganda the eastern savannah meets the central African rainforest creating one of the most biodiverse regions in the world. Consequently, Uganda stands alone in being able to offer both gorilla, chimpanzee trekking and a first-class classic safari experience. Within its borders are several parks that offer excellent opportunities to see the major mammal species – lion, leopard, elephant, buffalo and more all within a few hours' drive of each other.

Over the last 20 years Uganda has emerged from obscurity, a land frequented predominantly by primatologists and specialist birders, and is fast becoming an attractive safari destination in its own right - and so it should, because the quality of the various experiences on offer here are right up amongst the best anywhere.

Remarkably as recently as the early 1990's there were no facilities to track gorillas within Uganda, no realistic opportunity to see chimpanzees and the 'big game' national parks such as Queen Elizabeth, Murchison Falls and Kidepo were still clearly suffering from the years of abuse that began in the Idi Amin era (1971-79) which continued through the 1980's.

Since then Uganda has gone through a remarkable renaissance with the country currently containing half the of the global population of mountain gorillas and an estimated 5,000 chimpanzees in its forests - while on the savannahs there have been staggering recoveries. These days you'd be unlucky not to see all the star attractions of elephant, lion and buffalo, with the added exhilarating prospect of also running in to the more esoteric species such as the giant forest hog or critically endangered Rothschild's giraffe. Concurrent with the progress in the wilderness, the infrastructure, such as roads, has vastly improved and high-quality lodges have been built, renovated or restored in or near all of the country's parks. Pleasingly however, Uganda is far from over-run with tourists and the disparate collection of highlights make it an ideal place to take the path less travelled.

Uganda's chimpanzee population is spread across a dozen sites, they've been habituated and are currently accessible to visitors in four places: Kibale National Park, Kyambura Gorge in Queen Elizabeth National Park, Kaniyo Pabidi near Murchison Falls National Park and Kalinzu Forest Reserve. Visitor group sizes are typically small (three participants) and success rates high (80-90%) - unlike the mountain gorilla which are primarily terrestrial and fairly sedentary, chimpanzees tend to be pretty mobile and spend considerable amounts of time in the forest canopy, therefore how close you can get can vary widely, from within a few metres if they are feeding or grooming on the forest floor, to considerable distances overhead. A standard chimpanzee trek includes an hour with the chimps but a good alternative for those who would like to spend longer with the chimps is the habituation experience which allows you to hang around all day while the researchers take notes and these are possible in both Kibale and Kaniyo Pabidi.

OTHER GREAT PRIMATES FOUND IN UGANDA

The striking Black-and-white Colobus is probably Uganda's most widespread forest monkey occurring in most sizeable forest patches and riverine woodland, an incredible gymnast, even by the high standards of a monkey, an adult is capable of leaping over 30 metres.

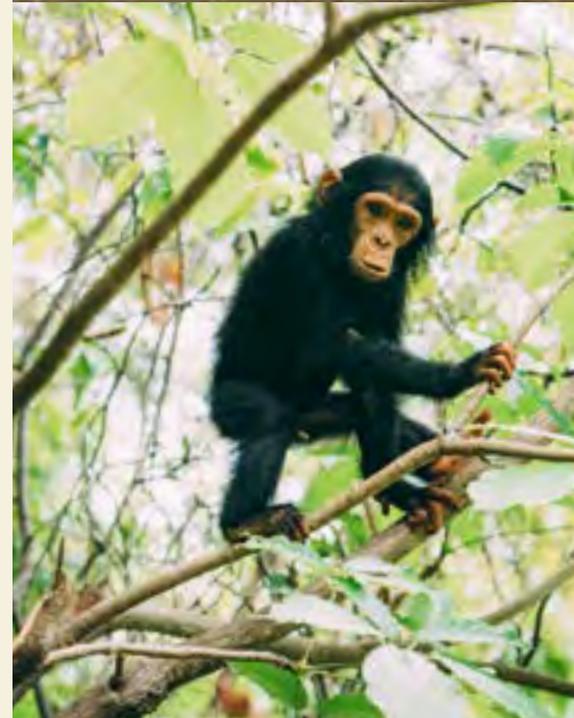
The patas monkey is terrestrial and restricted to the dry savannah of north-central Africa, with an attractive russet coat, relatively long legs and lanky appearance, it is believed to be the fastest runner of all the planet's 260 species of monkeys.

Uganda mangabey is a Ugandan endemic (i.e. found nowhere else - it was split from the grey-cheeked mangabey and given full species status in 2007) and resident, although tricky to find, in the lowland and mid-altitude forests and most likely to be seen in Mabira Forest or Kibale National Park.

AND WE CAN'T FORGET THE BIRDS

No account of Uganda should overlook its remarkable birdlife - Uganda is by far the smallest of the four African countries with more than 1,000 bird species (DR Congo 1,150; Kenya 1,110; Uganda and Tanzania 1,050) and this is all the more extraordinary given that it is landlocked so has no coastline. To further illustrate Uganda's avian wealth - South Africa is five times the size and has 20% less bird species at 830. Botswana, synonymous with safari for many but only holds a relatively paltry 590 species of bird, just 56% of Uganda's total despite being twice the size.

Of particular attraction to many birders is the opportunity to find western rainforest specials without having to enter the considerably more challenging central African region.



SAMPLE TRIP: DISCOVER THE PEARL OF AFRICA - UGANDA

Spend a week in western Uganda trekking up to mountain gorillas in Bwindi, seeking out Kibale's chimpanzees and traversing the Ishasha wilderness sector of the Queen Elizabeth NP in between. Nowhere else can you spend the morning in thick primordial forest amongst a family of critically endangered gorillas and a few hours later be searching for tree-climbing lions plus a number of other star attractions on the plains. With over one hundred mammal species recorded, nowhere is the incredible biodiversity of Uganda brought in to sharper focus than here where the central African rainforest meets the east African savanna. This exploration is undertaken on foot, by boat and with a private vehicle and guide.

DETAILS

 UGANDA

 7 NIGHTS

 EXPECT TO PAY FROM
£4,390 PER PERSON

"Rod is a very congenial and knowledgeable companion to travel with. I always felt safe and knew, together, we could get out of anything."

...muses J.W Hudleston following his recent adventure up Madagascar's wild east coast where they spent a day with their 4x4 marooned in a river



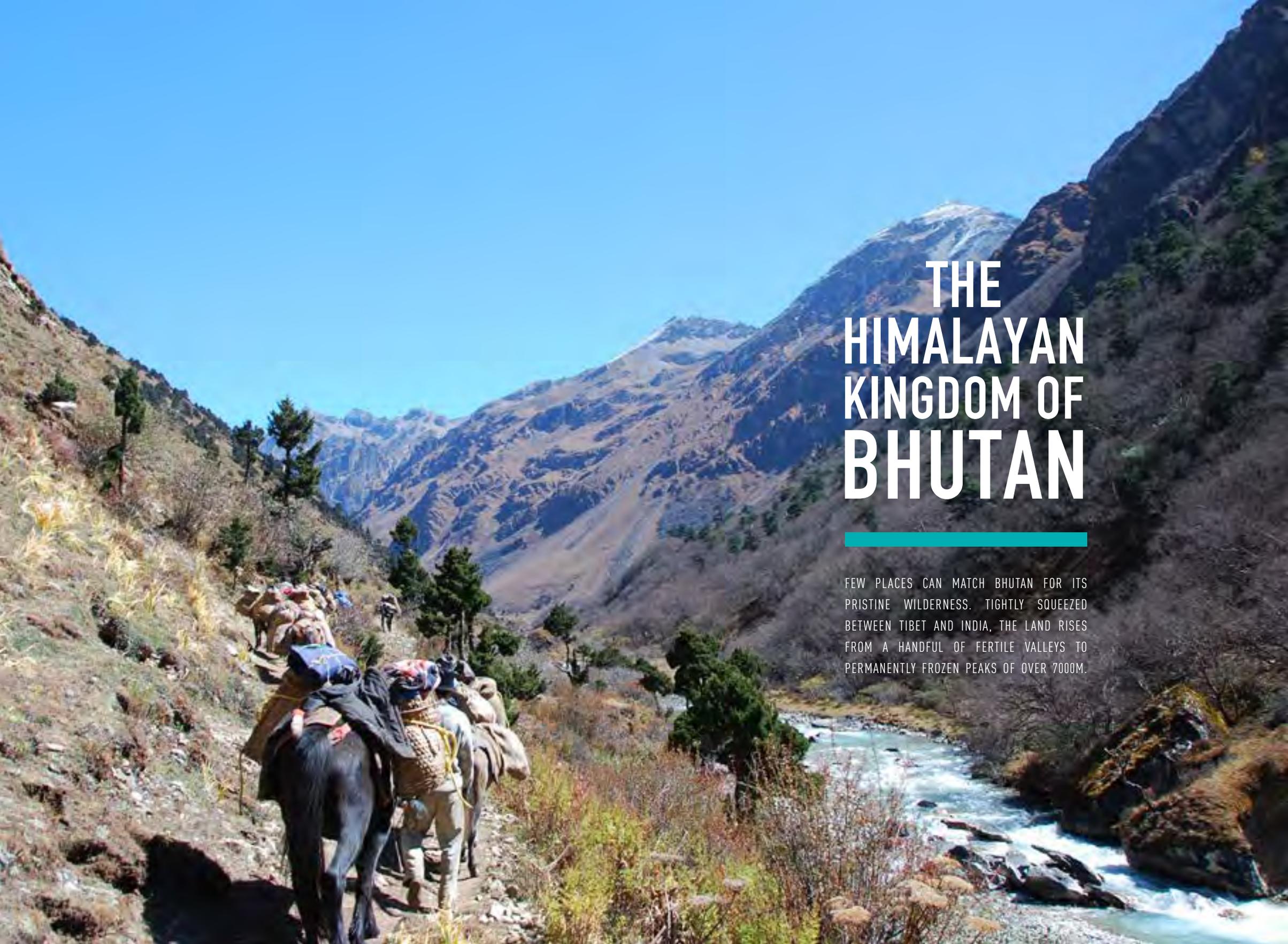
JOIN ROD ON A PRIVATE GUIDED SAFARI TO SOME OF AFRICA'S MORE REMOTE CORNERS

Always on the lookout for outstanding destinations, Rod is exploring a large amount of Central Africa over the coming months.

1. July 2018 - Luangwa Valley and the Bangweulu Swamps - Zambia
2. September 2018 - Semliki and Murchison Falls - Uganda
3. February 2019 - Zakouma and the Ennedi Plateau - Chad
4. March 2019- Bale Mountains & the Omo River - Ethiopia
5. May 2019 - Virunga - DR Congo
6. June 2019 - Lopé and Loango NPs - Gabon
7. July 2019 - the Bangweulu Swamps and Luangwa Valley - Zambia
8. October 2019 - Dzangha-Sangha - the Central African Republic

If you are interested in learning more about any of these incredibly offbeat destinations or even joining him on his travels - please drop Rod a line on rod@naturalhighsafaris.com and he'd be delighted to talk you through the whys and wherefores.



A scenic view of a mountain trail in Bhutan. In the foreground, a line of pack animals, including mules and horses, are carrying heavy loads of supplies along a narrow dirt path. The path is flanked by dry, yellowish-brown vegetation and small evergreen trees. In the background, a wide valley opens up, showing a river with white water rapids flowing through it. The valley is surrounded by steep, rugged mountains with some snow-capped peaks under a clear blue sky.

THE HIMALAYAN KINGDOM OF BHUTAN

FEW PLACES CAN MATCH BHUTAN FOR ITS PRISTINE WILDERNESS. TIGHTLY SQUEEZED BETWEEN TIBET AND INDIA, THE LAND RISES FROM A HANDFUL OF FERTILE VALLEYS TO PERMANENTLY FROZEN PEAKS OF OVER 7000M.

The highest mountains are still largely unmapped, unnamed, unclimbed and unexplored; some are sacred and it's forbidden to climb them. While a trickle of tea and salt caravans slowly plied their way across Bhutan's rugged terrain between Bengal and Lhasa, for centuries the mountains otherwise made this tiny country almost impossible to reach.

These physical barriers together with a general preference for self-isolation helped Bhutan preserve its unique culture and to protect its pristine environment of forested hills, fast flowing snow fed rivers and over 5000 species of plants, all of which conspire to firmly conceal a rich diversity of wildlife from snow leopard and blue sheep at the highest altitudes, to elephant and even tiger at the lowest.

The kingdom's diminutive size belies its huge commitment to conservation, and it's enshrined in law that it will maintain at least 60% of its forest cover - forever. It's over 70% now, more than half in a network of national parks and other protected sanctuaries. For visitors this means being surrounded by stunning natural beauty and remote unspoilt landscapes – and for the environment a country that absorbs three times more CO² emissions than it creates, helping to make it the world's most 'carbon negative'.

Bashfully opening its doors to tourism only in the 1980s, Bhutan remains one of the least visited countries in the world. Today most arrive by flight into Paro,



one of few valleys long and wide enough to accommodate a runway. The final descent between tree covered ridges is one that few forget. As the pressurised cabin door opens, pine scented alpine air sends Buddhist prayer flags fluttering in the breeze sending thoughts to heaven on 'wind horses'.

Most of Bhutan's important cultural sites are located close to the few narrow roads that tortuously weave and climb, back track, descend and wind and climb again on their way between the hills and over high passes, often topped with chortens and prayer wheels that afford brief but far reaching views to distant snow-capped peaks. Leave the car behind and you'll very quickly find yourself in flower smothered alpine meadows, beneath giant rhododendrons clinging to vertical cliffs or deep in virgin forests of blue pine and oak festooned with garlands of lichen. Travelling on foot or horseback was, after all, the only way to get around Bhutan until the first roads were built in the 1960's, and it remains the best way to discover the kingdom's hidden treasures.

Accompanied by your private guide and carrying only what you need during the day, walks may be a stride through a scenic glacial river valley or perhaps a slow and meditative meander to hidden temples with walls covered in demons and dwarves, gilded thunderbolts and daggers illuminated by butter lamps, returning at night to the comfort of a homely lodge.



iconographic and spiritual paintings adorn walls both inside and out. In the last few years many of the formerly woeful places that accommodated the first visitors to Bhutan have seriously raised their game and our favourites are often owner-run.

Of the handful of more luxurious lodges the unpretentious COMO Uma Punakha with its excellent restaurant and setting above the Mo Chuu River, and Gangtey Lodge with roaring fires and enormous bath tubs overlooking the valley are recommended.

For those with a spirit of adventure a night or two at a family farmstay offers a first-hand insight into rural life. Electricity and running water may not always be available but it's the perfect opportunity to experience an authentic hot stone bath. Large, round river boulders are heated for hours in a fire and slowly dropped into a bath of mountain water and herbs. The combination is believed to produce medicinal benefits for joint pains, hypertension, stomach disorders and arthritis – even better if you've consulted an astrologer to select an auspicious bathing day for maximum effect.

For the more ambitious, we can arrange multi day treks. Trekking in Bhutan is a complete wilderness experience that sets it apart from walking anywhere else in the Himalaya - there are no lodges or tea houses to stay in and simple overnight camps are pitched by your crew in a scenic spot at the end of each day. Dinner is taken beneath a vast canopy of stars and sleep under canvas is accompanied by the sound of bells tied to your pack ponies.

WHEN TO GO

In general the best time to explore Bhutan on foot is from the end of September to November when the skies are clear, giving fantastic views of the mountains. Although views are not quite as clear from March to May this is the time to enjoy rhododendrons and magnolias in bloom in the mountains. Although it's generally dry at these times there is always the chance of a rain – or snow – shower. Nights are very cold but daytime temperatures are likely to reach the mid 20's C. The climate is affected by altitude so there are many local variations – for example, some lower altitude treks below 2000m are best in winter. Rare Black-necked cranes migrate to the Phobjikha Valley in late October and usually leave by mid-February.

WHERE TO STAY

Historically Bhutanese architecture was shaped by the topography and climate as well as cultural traditions and spiritual beliefs and government guidelines now ensure its conservation; hotel buildings emulate flying gable roofs above elevations of stone or rammed earth whitewashed in lime and colourful floral,



DETAILS

 BHUTAN

 12 DAYS

 EXPECT TO PAY FROM
£3,160 PER PERSON



COMING SOON ARCTIC DREAMS

25 years ago, working in the sweltering heat of Southern Tanzania, Alex read Barry Lopez's inspirational book Arctic Dreams. Ever since, he has harboured an obsession with this intensely remote wilderness and the species that live there. This year saw this obsession bear fruit as we conduct the third of our research trips above 80 degrees north. In the process we've identified some of the planet's most remarkable wildlife and forged a brand new partnership which brings some extraordinary additions to the Natural High stable. Standby for more news in the Autumn...and get your thermals ready.

“Natural High shines rays of adventurous light
into some of the least explored, most exciting
corners of the wider world”

FINANCIAL TIMES



ALEX EDWARDS



CATHERINE RONAN



VANESSA JANION



ANDREA HULME



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