

like mother, like daughter...

When **Sue Watt** decided to take her 74-year-old mother to Africa for the very first time, she didn't just want her to see it for herself, she also wanted her to feel its majesty. Here is the story of their journey to South Luangwa National Park.



Sue Watt fell in love with Africa on a gap year in 2004 and became a freelance travel writer soon after. She is a regular contributor to *Travel Africa* and newspapers such as *The Independent*.

Still half-asleep just after dawn, I stood on the banks of the Luangwa River not quite believing my eyes. My 74-year-old mother was flying past me in a microlight, just metres above the water where crocodiles were bathing. Crouched behind the pilot and looking tiny, she was far too nervous to wave. But I swear I could see her glowing with excitement, wide-eyed at the beauty unfurling beneath her.

John Coppinger, the owner of Tafika camp and Mum's pilot, flies every morning to remind would-be poachers of his presence and to give his guests this unique perspective of South Luangwa National Park. On landing, Mum beamed at me like an excited child: "That was fantastic! You really see the scale of the park, how the river dominates it. We saw

everything: giraffe, elephant, buffalo, hippo, puku, crocodile... we even flew above a giant fish eagle."



All photographs: Sue Watt

With its tradition of walking safaris and night drives, South Luangwa National Park seemed the perfect destination for Mum's first trip to Africa. I hadn't imagined she would fly over the park, but I did want her to truly experience the bush, to hear it, to see it, to smell it, to touch it in a way that game drives alone simply do not permit. And I wanted her to love it as much as I do.

I had been slightly concerned prior to our departure, as Mum's experience of Africa had been gained vicariously through David Attenborough's documentaries. How would day-to-day reality compare? I needn't have worried. Minutes into our first wildlife drive she spotted a young elephant – her dream sighting – even before our guide did. Clutching my hand, she stared in disbelief at the infant hiding under trees a few paces away. As the tears welled up she whispered, "I never thought we'd get so close to them." ▸





Main image: Buffalo served for breakfast

Opposite, top: Like mother, like daughter, Sue Watt and her Mum

Opposite bottom: Elephants strolling along the banks of the Luangwa River



Top: Students at Kawaza

Above: The guest rondavels in Kawaza Village

Right: More young smiles in Kawaza Village

Below: Ready to head up and away in a microlight

Opposite: Some strides are longer than others



“This is Stumpy,” our guide Keyala explained. “He’s lost his tail, maybe in a fight.” Whatever his imperfections, to my mother he was – and still is – the most beautiful elephant in the world.

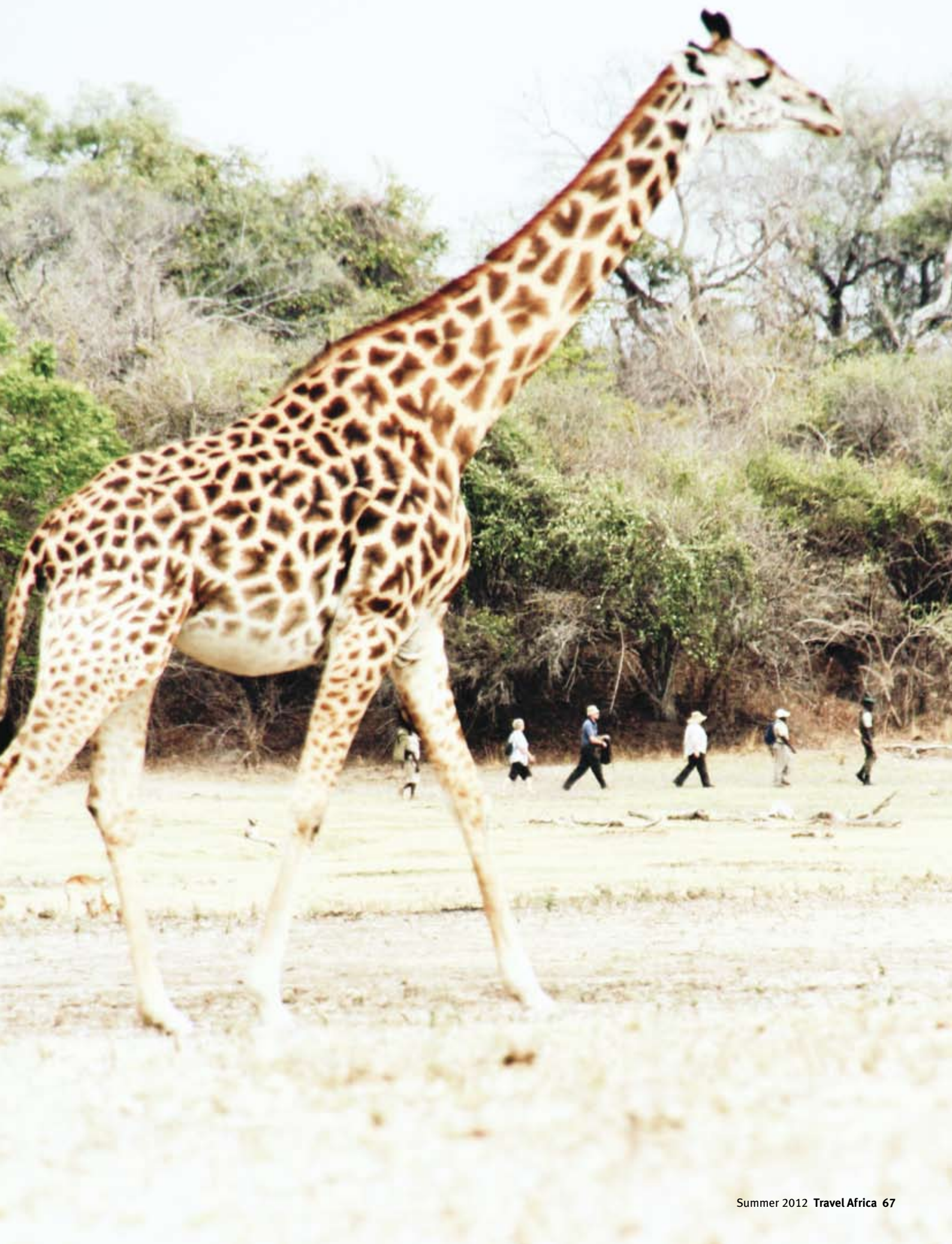
That first drive passed in a dream for Mum. Luangwa’s wildlife, which includes 60 mammal species and 400 types of birds, was clearly out to impress her. Two graceful Thornicroft’s giraffes tenderly greeted each other by curving their necks into a perfect heart. Brightly plumaged lilac-breasted rollers and pink carmine bee-eaters showed off their dazzling colours. Two lions, lying pot-bellied and motionless in the shade, replete from a buffalo they’d shared for breakfast, even added some comedy value, as did one elephant who played the fool by dancing and reversing his way towards the river. We ended by watching three other elephants – a matriarch, an elder daughter and a baby – all dipping their trunks into the water in perfect synchrony.

“I hadn’t expected to see so much in one day!” she told me. Neither had I, and I couldn’t help but wonder whether the rest of the trip could live up to it.

But each day brought new experiences, and Mum absorbed everything she learnt about life – and death – in the bush. She watched with horrified fascination as a lion revealed the anatomy of a young buffalo, pulling out and eating its intestines, stomach, liver, kidneys and bowels amid a stench of fresh flesh and excrement. Later, with the plains illuminated by a full moon, she sat motionless for ages, captivated by a leopard silently stalking an impala (she was secretly relieved when it failed to capture its prey).

I wanted Mum to experience Africa’s village life as well, to meet the people who call this place home. When I expressed this desire while arranging my itinerary with Chris McIntyre of Expert Africa, he’d informed me of Kawaza Village, a community tourism project just outside the park. Supported by Robin Pope Safaris and Project Luangwa, it offers guests overnight accommodation living alongside local people. Worried this might be a bit extreme for Mum, I chose a day visit instead. ▸

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“Why aren’t we staying here tonight?” she asked, surprising me once again, as we were shown around

the simple but spotless mud-and-thatch rondavels. I felt a twinge of regret at my earlier decision. During our visit Mum addressed a classroom of 15-year-olds (they were fascinated by her age), discussed health issues with the village medical officer and ate *nshima*, pumpkin leaves and chicken with her fingers. The only thing she declined – understandably – was dancing with women who gyrated their hips and buttocks to a throbbing drumbeat in a way that seemed physically impossible.

Later we visited Mkasanga village, which is home to many of Tafika’s staff. Here the Tafika Fund, run by John Coppinger’s wife Carol, supports the health clinic and school, and provides sponsorship for higher education. It was a different world to ours, with mud-and-thatch houses, dirt roads, no electricity or running water, yet Mum was overwhelmed by the warm welcome we received, evidence of the village’s intimate connection with Tafika. She listened intently as the children recited poems on issues ranging from gender equality and HIV/Aids to conservation, and loved the melodic, uplifting singing of the young church choir.

Mum soon grew accustomed to safari life, with its gentle morning walks, its sultry afternoons lazing by the river and its leisurely night drives after sunset gin and tonics (strangely, her favourite time of the day). After time at Robin Pope Safaris’ elegant Nkwali and Nsefu camps, we visited Zebra Plains,

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Sanctuary’s new ‘walking safari only’ tented camp. This brought Mum some new adventures, such as having to cross the river by canoe upon arrival.

“Don’t put your hands in the water, please,” our guide requested. “There are crocodiles in there.” Mum looked horrified. “You didn’t tell me about this!” she whispered sharply, before reaching the opposite shore in one piece.

In the relative cool of the early mornings and late afternoons we walked for around four hours with our guide Garth Hovell, an armed ranger and a tea-bearer. We watched as eland, zebra, puku and impala watched us. We tiptoed quietly, avoiding a sleeping hippo on the riverbank, and tracked elephant on foot. Mum adored a baby elephant that was so tiny it fitted underneath its mother’s tummy as it suckled. ▽

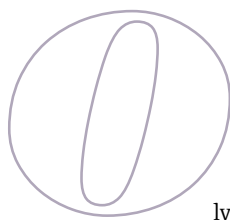
Above: Sue’s Mum showing some of her images to the people of Mkasanga

Below: The village of Mkasanga

Following page: Hippos are a regular sight along the Luangwa’s banks

Following page, inset: The relatively cool temperatures in the morning are ideal for walking safaris





In our last day we decided to wait patiently for a leopard to return to a sausage tree where we'd spotted a half-eaten puku lying in its boughs. However, it wasn't long before we discovered that the leopard was actually dozing beside a bush about ten metres away. We crouched down behind some tall grass in complete silence. The expression on Mum's face said it all. It was a look of complete astonishment, as if she couldn't quite believe she was here, a leopard was just over there, and that no vehicle or hide was available for refuge. When the leopard awoke it sensed us immediately and bolted. It was so quick that Mum missed seeing it altogether.

"It doesn't matter," she said afterwards.

"I saw other leopards and they were beautiful. You can't predict the wildlife, can you? That's what being in the bush is all about."

Mum isn't normally an adventurous soul, but there's something about Africa that pushes your boundaries. After leaving South Luangwa she continued to roll with the new experiences in Victoria Falls, where she enjoyed the 'flight of angels' in a helicopter and even stroked lions at the Lion Encounter project in Masuwe.

But it was the African bush she really fell in love with, just as I'd hoped she would. She can't wait to get back there, and I can't wait to take her. ★



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* Sue Watt and her mother Jean Bowen travelled with special thanks to Expert Africa (www.expertafrika.com)

Plan your trip

Getting there

British Airways (www.ba.com) has direct flights between London and Lusaka, Zambia's capital, while Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com), Ethiopian Airlines (www.ethiopianairlines.com) and South African Airways (www.flysaa.com) link the two cities with a respective stop in Nairobi, Addis Ababa or Johannesburg/Cape Town. Proflight Zambia (www.proflight-zambia.com) flies from Lusaka to Mfuwe for South Luangwa National Park.

When to visit

The dry season in South Luangwa runs from May to October, with the rains at their peak from December through March. Nkwali is open all year, while Nsefu and Tafika are open from May to November. Zebra Plains opens its doors from June to October. Kawaza Village is open to visitors from April to November.

Visas

Visas are needed for most visitors to Zambia. They are available from Zambian embassies abroad or at Lusaka Airport and other points of entry. Single-/double-entry visas for most nationalities cost US\$50/80 respectively.

Books

Bradt's *Zambia* (5th ed, 2011) by Chris McIntyre is a comprehensive guide to Zambia and its national parks.

Find out more

Zambia National Tourist Board (www.zambiatourism.com)

Author tip

Although walks start in the cool early mornings, the sun heats up surprisingly quickly so wear thin layers and a hat, and drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration.

