

Introduction

The opportunity for the African Safari just came as a chance. A friend of mine, Kallol from Kolkata, who I used to know through a Project I worked on some time back, suddenly appeared in our office at Mecon, Ranchi (my previous employer) for technical discussions. I came to know that after leaving his previous organization, he joined an American company and was posted at Scotland. After working for a few years in Scotland, a business opportunity opened up for their company in Eastern Africa.

Zambia was rich in Copper and Nickel and the Copper business was going through a downward trend because of poor production and marketing management. The Zambian Copper industry was taken over by an Indian company with major controlling share and they revived the Copper business. When the business became brisk, expansion and modernization programmes were taken up and that's how the American company came in to Zambia.

Kallol was given the responsibility of establishing an office in Zambia. Strangely, Kallol doesn't speak very good English. But he has a very good quality. He is absolutely fearless in business dealings. Within a span of two months, he set up a business office at Zambia along with trading licenses. Within a few months of that, he arranged for work permits for Indian engineers and workmen to work at Zambia for his company. He took up office space along with guest house facility in Western Zambian town of Chingola, which is about 130 kms from the nearest international airport, Ndola, bordering Congo.

The invitation

The old friendship was revived when Kallol visited in the early March, 2011. We had a long dinner and the plans were chalked out about the safari. He had already made visits in Masai Mara in Kenya, Serengeti in Tanzania and Kruger NP in South Africa. He advised me to take a trip to the Zambian jungles as these jungles have lesser number of visitors and little crowd. He told me that he will arrange for a paper visa for me, which can be regularized on arrival at Zambia. The paper visa came in the first week of September 2011.

Planning

As the visa was being organized, Kallol and I were in touch almost on daily basis. I bought a return trip ticket Mumbai-Nairobi-Lubumbashi(Congo)-Ndola(Zambia) on line through Kenyan airways. The cost of the return ticket was roughly about Rs. 50,000/-.

I had 50D, Sigma 70-300mm (Non VC), Canon 400mm f/5.6L, 50mm f/1.8II and Tamron 10-24mm UWA. Meanwhile, I also bought a 60D to use as a second body.

With all the equipment ready, I then planned for the money. Since I always carry debit cards & credit cards with international transactions enabled, money was not that much of an issue. Nevertheless, Kallol arranged for US Dollars and Zambian Kwacha for emergencies. The deal was I will deposit an equivalent amount after the trip to his Indian account. This appeared to be a better option for me.

Journey to the Dark Continent

I started from Kolkata on the 11th of September 2011 by the evening flight to Mumbai with lot of apprehensions as I have never travelled abroad without a stamp of visa in my passport. But the thrill was too much also. I have travelled to US, Europe and Asian countries including Iran on official business where I never travelled alone. But Africa was the first time for me, and all alone with lot of unknowns.

Moving through to the international airport, checking in with Kenyan Airways went very smooth. But the problem started at Customs. They started troubling me looking at the equipment and quoting some funny rules. When nothing worked, I started playing a game. I started shouting at the top of my voice. I told them that I am a senior citizen (almost) and being a photographer, I have connections with the media. If you keep troubling me, I will cancel my ticket, go back and publish all these stories with emphasis on demand of money to pass me through. It worked like magic, at least on that day, and let me through without any more fuss.

With my temper running high, I was a bit disturbed and it took two pegs of blue labels to cool my nerves.

The flight to Nairobi took off about an hour late. The aircraft was a Boeing 767. Since the flight started at about 2:30 in the morning, there was nothing to do, only sleep. I took a short nap after a welcome drink. After about 3 hours in the air, lights came on and refreshments were served along with drinks. After some time, the eastern sky started lighting up. The sight was mesmerizing as the peaks of Mount Kilimanjaro became visible above the rain clouds. It was a wonderful sight and I was no more tired. From then on I kept my eyes fixed on the sky and I will never forget what I saw. The color of the sky, the color of the land, the trees everything was wonderful.

We hit the land at about 7.00 AM local time (about 09:30 IST). The airport at Nairobi is not big. But just sit there in one corner and you will see all tribes and races of Africa travelling from North to South and East to West.

My next flight was at 10:00 local time. I just took a light breakfast and boarded the flight for Lubumbashi. The aircraft was an Embraer 195 and was a very comfortable aircraft. I changed aircraft at Lubumbashi for Ndola. The flight reached Ndola at 1:30 PM local time.

Ndola, though an international airport with lot of UN personnel movement, is a very small airport with very meager facilities. My luggage didn't arrive with my flight. But based on my previous international flight experiences, I always keep a change of clothing in my handbag, in this case my camera bag and it helped. They assured me that my luggage will be brought the next day to my place of stay.

I paid USD 50 and got a 6 month's visa for Zambia at the Ndola airport. Kallol had already arrived and we went to Chingola, his office-cum-guest house in about one hour. Reaching at Chingola, I took rest for the day. It was moderately cold and the evening light was wonderful. You see such beautiful golden orange lights only in Africa, they say. I felt it to be true. May be I was a bit biased, a bit overwhelmed at being able to come to Africa.

Day-1: Trip to Chimfunshi

Zambian jungles do not have big apes like Gorillas, Chimpanzees. They are found in Congo. But lot of Chimpanzees drift into Zambia in search of food. Chimfunshi is a small village town about 75 kms west of Chingola and 1 km south of Congo border. Mrs. Siddle, a British Septuagenarian runs an orphanage for sick and orphaned Chimpanzees there with a special permission from the Zambian government. However, Chimpanzees being generally violent in nature, the routes for human movements are protected with wire fences. The Chimpanzees are fed two times a day, generally a cornmeal popular with the people in Africa.

I met Mrs. Siddle and had a small discussion about how she is operating there. Her daughter was living in South Africa. She gave up her South African house property and came and settled with her mother in Chimfunshi.

We came back in the late afternoon and went for a rest. Because day 2 onwards, I would be having to travel almost non-stop.

Day-2 on: The long journey begins

We woke up early, at about 5:00 AM had an early bath and a heavy breakfast. I took quite a few changes of clothes and my camera equipment. My friend Kallol keeps two cars for the company, a Mitsubishi SUV and a Mazda hatchback. We took the Mazda for ease of travel. Kallol's trusted companion Frederick Swana, Freddie, took the wheel.

Nsobe Bush Camp

The Nsobe Bush camp was about 3 hours drive from Chingola. We reached Nsobe at about 10:30 AM. We booked tickets for the local safari, which was about USD 30 for 3 hours. Our car was parked in the safe zone and we took the safari vehicle for the bush camp drive. We crossed a river Luapula on the way. The river looks very peaceful as long as you are quite a good distance away from its banks. Warning signs have been put up everywhere. The river is full of crocodiles and no one is supposed to go near the water's edge.

In the bush camp areas we saw, Sable Antelopes, Giraffes and Zebras in abundance. We also saw a few birds. But shooting the birds was not possible as it had become very bright and the birds have mostly gone into hiding.

We had a lunch with Kudu meat, salad and rice. Kudu is a large African Antelope and sale of Kudu meat is legalized as the antelope does not come under endangered category.

After lunch, we started at about 3:00 PM for Lusaka. The highways in Zambia are very well guarded by police check posts every 50 kms or so. The vehicle has to slow down, the papers are checked and then allowed to go on if everything is ok. The policemen are quite well behaved and we didn't face any harassment. Kallol is also very friendly and he would immediately strike up a personal discussion with the policemen which would end in handshakes and polite good byes.

On the way to Lusaka, we crossed the point where Uncle Tom was sold as a slave. The place is a memorial on a traffic island on the highway. But cars are not allowed to stop there and I could not take a photo of the place.

Because of election rallies we got delayed on the way. We stopped at a place called Mazabuka which is located near the Mozambique border. We stayed overnight there and had good fish fries and whisky.

Livingstone: Victoria falls and Mosi-Oa-Tuniya

We started again very early in the morning after coffee and freshening up at 4:30 AM. The journey from Mazabuka to Livingstone was a straight un-eventful journey. We checked in at Protea Hotel in Livingstone at about 9:00 AM. The Hotel has 4-star rating and is very good. Its run by the South African Protea Group. We had a very heavy breakfast and went to visit the Victoria falls.

As it was a dry season, the falls was not in its full force. Nevertheless, we could see the waterfall at about 50% of its capacity from the Zambian side. We also crossed the border into Zimbabwe and saw a part of the falls from there too.

After lunch we went for a safari to Mosi-Oa-Tuniya and could spot a few birds, Giraffes and Zebras. We saw the Red billed Hornbill and Bradfield's Hornbills there. In the evening we took the Zambezi cruise in a ship called "African Princess". They charge about USD 45 and you get plenty of Mosi beer, one of the best of that region. They also serve you plenty of snacks and dinner in the end. We could see crocodiles, Hippos and elephants in the river banks.

The next morning we went for a Lion Walk. They charge about USD 35 for the Lion Walk. You get drinks and snacks and a training for about half an hour as to how to face and handle the lions, though trained handlers will be guiding you all the time. We waked with a one and half years old lioness and a two years old lioness. It was a memorable time there.

In the afternoon we travelled to the Zambezi banks in search of the elusive double horned Rhinos. After walking for about a kilometer we spotted a Bull, a Cow and calf. We were guided by armed guards since the area is vulnerable to poachers. We went quite close, may be a little close for comfort. But I could not resist myself.

Back to Lusaka and Then to South Luangwa

Early next morning we started back for Lusaka and reached Lusaka at around 11:30 AM. After a bit of rest and lunch in an India restaurant we went to the airport. The trip to South Luangwa includes air travel to Mfuwe to and from Lusaka, stay at Mfuwe lodge, the safari travels and food and drinks. The total package is about USD 800. But it is worth spending if you really plan for a safari.

We landed at Mfuwe late in the afternoon. The aircraft was a 10-seater single propeller driven Cessna with free beer cans for the one and half hour flight. You just sit behind the pilot and see how the aircraft is flown. You can see the Luangwa river from the aircraft.

We were welcomed with cold and refreshing fruit drinks at the lodge while the entry formalities were being carried out. They took our luggage to the hut we were assigned to in the jungle and we

went immediately for a ride in the safari vehicle. It was getting dark. We had the first sight of the majestic African Lion when we came across a Lion just lying on the trail with his lioness. We had to quietly cross them by taking a short detour but it was almost touching distance. The pair looked up and growled, but then we were let through.

In the evening there was a get-together with all the guests mingling with each other over drinks and snacks. I met a few South African and British wildlife photographers and exchanged notes about wildlife photography. Just before the dinner, they play the African drums to call everyone to the tables. The catering staff moves to each table to read out the menu. It was something that will make you feel very special. During the dinner, we saw a very large male elephant close to the dinner lounge. Everyone was advised to be quiet and not run after the elephant for photography. These elephants can turn violent anytime and things would go out of hand.

After the dinner we all were guided to our respective huts to see that there are no wild animals around and we are safely inside. Once inside we are supposed to lock all doors and open only when they come to call you in the early morning.

The morning safari started at 6:00 AM. The breakfast is normally over by 5:45 AM and the quality of breakfast is wonderful. The morning safari would continue up to about 12:00 noon. After coming back to the lodge you can freshen up, have lunch and have a siesta if you like. Else you sit in the hanging balcony overlooking the lagoon and watch animals and birds.

The afternoon safari would start at about 3:00 PM and continue up to about 7:00 PM, and then the same routine of get together and dinner.

During the safaris the Mfuwe operators take very good care of you. You get break once at around 9:30 AM with beer, light snacks and soft drinks. The same is repeated in the late afternoon. One of these days they also arrange for lunch in the jungle with guards all around. Overall experience is wonderful.

The best thing that happened during the South Luangwa trip is that we met with Lions many times. We had followed the Lions and saw mating of Lions. We had also seen Lions walking through the Dinner lounge. Of course, we all were taken to safety when a Lion pride walked through the dinner lounge. No amount of words can describe the thrilling experience. We could almost smell the Lions from close by.

After a wonderful stay at Mfuwe we went back to Lusaka. Kallol's car was waiting there. We drove straight to Chingola in one go and reached in the late night. I had a good night's rest and started back after spending a day and meeting some Indian families there.

Conclusion

The narrative may be a bit long. But I have tried to make it the way I would just describe it to my friends. I didn't try and write it like a travel story. Hope you will like it.

Do's and Don'ts

- Be careful about your wallet. Carry small change in your pocket always for small purchases in open stalls.
- Always have your passport with you. Its needed everywhere, also during road travels.
- Excepting for safari tours don't display your camera equipment in market places.
- Though police checkups are very stringent, risks are always there.
- Avoid moving alone in empty lanes after dark.
- Be polite and use thank you more than necessary. That will get you more friends than you can imagine. Please know that the Africans are a proud race and they have to be respected.

The photographs

I am adding the links to the photographs I have posted in PBASE.COM. Not many of them would qualify for a classy set of safari photos. But this is what I got with my best efforts.

The mammals and other animals

http://www.pbase.com/prabir2011/wild_buffaloes

The Birds

http://www.pbase.com/prabir2011/birds_of_africa