

Dear Allison,

You were right about Zimbabwe – I should have done this years ago! But if I had gone before, I might not have been on this particular trip, which was VERY Special!

Mana Pools and Nick Murray ~

Nick Murray and Little Vundu: On the plane to Little Vundu we met Marie, Nick's camp manager. She is very sweet and is glowing because she is 12 weeks' pregnant. I was wondering how she would handle that in a camp situation until we met Nick's wife, Desiree, and children, Tate and Jed. Nick and Desiree are the real deal. They are fighting for conservation every day in Zimbabwe. We were lucky that it was school break and the kids were in camp. It was like hanging out with favorite friends and their kids. Little Vundu is right on the river. Nick has now put in permanent tents and Tent One is at the end under an Albida tree where elies and hippos come by at night. The music of the bush is a wonderful lullaby.

Because the Albida trees were dropping pods, the elies would come straight up into camp. During our tea one afternoon an elephant walked up to within 10 feet of us at our table and ate all the pods on the ground. Being so close to a wild calm elie was very special. During walking safaris Nick carefully guided us to within feet of an individual feeding elies and within 50 feet of a feeding herd. Both experiences were exhilarating. We felt safe with Nick's leadership.

The canoeing safari worked out perfectly. Mo didn't want to canoe so he slept late and hung out with Desiree and the kids while Raj and I canoed with Nick and Kyle. Nick's approach to possibly aggressive wildlife is careful and if you follow his subtle cues, passing hippos works like clockwork. The canoeing was not difficult. We canoed for about 6 hours with a stop for a full cooked English breakfast and a walk. We had elies cross in front of us; hippos pop up around us and a croc jump into the water 3 feet in front of our canoe. It felt a bit like I was driving in moderate snow on an icy road for 6 hours. You know you can do it and that you'll be fine, but it can make you a bit nervous. I am glad I did it since it is really the best way to see the river. I am especially glad I did it with an expert like Nick.



When I read the itinerary there were two things that I think were not made clear enough. First: The BBC uses Vundu camp as its base for filming a documentary on wild dogs. The BBC is there because Nick is an expert on wild dog and works with the Painted Dog Conservation Unit. Nick knows the dogs and their histories. He has 6 years of data on the dogs, which he will be writing into a master's thesis. He has excellent relationships with people in the parks and they are all happy to see him and help him out.

Second: Nick has finally become frustrated with the lack of effective poaching control from the national parks. Nick has started his own patrol, employing local people and going out himself with Alex (Marie's husband and camp manager) on patrol. He provides a vehicle, petrol and food for his patrol members. When one of his guys catches a poacher Nick rewards him by feeding his entire village for a week. The local man now is a hero to his village that can see the benefits of conservation. Nick is the real deal; he is an excellent knowledgeable guide and really cares about Zimbabwe and is putting himself on the line everyday to make Zim a better place and to save the animals there.

The last night, Vundu was completely open so we decided to stay there. It is very lovely, less rustic. I loved the luxury but missed the animals outside my door. We all enjoyed the wifi.....

I would recommend that anyone spend time with Nick without hesitation. He is a gem.

Hwange and Dave Carson ~

Dave's enthusiasm and exuberance are infectious. If he could take you out at 5 am and stay out till midnight everyday, he would. He does not believe in sundowners- why waste the best light?! He does not give up. He says, "It's not talent, it's stubbornness!" I think that he is the best bush guide I have ever had.



We were picked up at the airstrip around 10:30 am and I expected a drive to the lodge and then down time before an afternoon game drive. I WAS SO WRONG! We got to a waterhole with 2 lionesses lazing around and a few zebra nearby. At first it looked like the girls were going to nap, and as we considered going to the lodge, one lifted her head and started to clean herself. "She's going to move! They always clean themselves right before they are thinking of moving!" said Dave. Well, we got to the lodge around 7:45 pm. The Linkwasha staff sent lunch out to us since we couldn't possibly leave the waterhole.

First the girls moved in on some warthogs. One did a classic cat army crawl as close as she could get and held that position for 45 minutes, waiting for the hogs to get close. They avoided detection from a herd of zebra and all looked good as the hogs got closer when we suddenly realized that 100 elies had come in silently from behind us. We were surrounded by a herd enroute to the water. It was magnificent. The lions tried to stay invisible and hold their ground but one finally had to move due to a nearby elie. She ran toward the warthogs that got away. The lions found another place to wait. Another warthog came along and they would have caught it but it ran through the legs of the second large herd of elies, avoiding the lions' claws. Oh, and there was a herd of 20 plus roans and 40 plus sable. The herds showed up back to back in a delightful succession as if professionally orchestrated to provide us a five star show. We were spoiled.

The daily game drives were wonderful. In Hwange they pump water into water holes and the herds come to the water. The viewing is great, as a result. We got to enjoy watching elies having mud baths and approached a big bull on foot. We saw one sleepy female cheetah and prints from a leopard who never

materialized. There was a pride of lions, 5 females, 7 cubs and a magnificent male, Xanda. The pride had an associated young male who had lost a back foot to a snare. He was following the pride, making cub noises, begging to be allowed back in. The females did not want him there. He would get within 50 feet and mew and the females would come running at him. He would cower and they would growl and swing at him but not attack him to kill. Watching this emaciated young male struggle was heart breaking.

Our last night there, a big bull came up to drink at the swimming pool before diner and the last morning the lion pride was in camp as id to see us off.

Linkwasha was lovely. The rooms are gorgeous and they have HEAT!! It is up to the usual Wilderness Standards, but frankly, I think this is the most accommodating set of Wilderness Safaris camps I have found. When we showed up midday at another nearby camp to use the loo, there was no fuss. Our camp brought us lunch in the field and when we asked for them to bring some coffee for us one afternoon, they arrived with the full tea spread. The camp staff was flexible and accommodating. When I asked them to add some hard-boiled eggs to our morning snack, there was no fuss and the eggs showed up everyday.

Amalinda and Paul Hubbard ~

But wait! There's more! The day with Paul Hubbard at Amalinda was truly special. It turned out that the anti-poaching team was going to be dehorning rhinos. We got out early in hopes of walking in to see some rhinos and the front gate at the park sent us over to some rangers to get directions. ALAS! As we were getting out to start walking, a plane flew over to find the very same rhinos. The team drove up headed by Verity Bowman of Dambari Wildlife Trust. She and Paul are friends and Paul asked if we could follow along and Verity kindly gave us permission. We really lucked out because the park vehicle broke down and so we gave the park director, Oscar, and some of his guys a ride. We had them in our clutches! They had 3 rhinos in the area that they wanted to dart and dehorn and we had the vehicle to get them there! WE WON! We watched them work gently and efficiently on 3 rhinos, (2 females and a male). The male was the last one and was about 4000 pounds and they were having a hard time rolling him. Paul and Mo and Raj and I were standing about 40 feet away watching when Paul handed me his binocs and ran in to help. Paul was so HAPPY! Paul is a happy guy anyhow and it was a delight watching him get to participate. All rhinos did well. In the afternoon we went off to see rock art. Paul is an expert and brought the art to life. And of course Amalinda was enchanting, built into the rocks with lovely meals and beautiful hiking opportunities.



So, it was amazing. The words “thank you” are not big enough to express my gratitude for your expertise, professionalism and ability to put together very special itineraries with very special guides. Nevertheless, thank you.

Ann Swinford, Aug 2016