



Hippo in the Luangwa River

Breakfast in an Ebony Grove



*Zambia's South Luangwa has been home to some of Africa's legendary guides – names such as Norman Carr, John Coppinger and Phil Berry are splashed throughout guide books and brochures on Africa. Probably the best known name though is that of Robin Pope. Once a walking guide, Robin bought his own camp, and then added another and another until he owned Zambia's most successful safari company – Robin Pope Safaris.*

## Twenty years in the



Carmine bee eaters in South Luangwa

Sundowners at Nkwali Safari Camp



As they say, behind every great man is a great woman and Robin's wife Jo is without doubt just this. Whilst Robin had the guiding skills, it was Jo who put not only his camps but the South Luangwa on the African and international map. Here is her account of some of the times they have had in the Luangwa Valley.

I arrived in Zambia over twenty years ago for a job that had landed in my lap; working for Robin Pope (who?) in Zambia (where?) helping at his safari camp Tena Tena (great!). Well I thought – why not? And, so with much shedding of tears, I flew out from the UK. Strangely it was not my mother shedding the tears; after all I was only going for six months. No, it was me. I was already well travelled but somehow this felt so permanent.

And so it turned out it was! Within two weeks I realised that I had found the place for me, where I fitted, was happy and could really be myself. It was only another couple of weeks before I realised that I had found my man. Yes – it took Robin another four years but then bush men are notoriously slow on the uptake! He was convinced I had “khaki fever” but an ultimatum persuaded

him otherwise. And so we were married, under a huge spreading fig tree near Tena Tena. Every young girl's dream (I assume!).

And here I am, twenty years on, with a wealth of abiding memories to look back over. During the first years we lived in a grass hut with a mud floor, managing a small camp deep in the park with a very close connection to the staff, game and the environment. It was a life of extremes. During the safari season we worked 18 hour days, then in the low season we were closed. Days would be manic, interspersed at other times with days that were slow and rhythmic. There was always some drama around the corner. We had lions roaring outside the flimsy grass hut all night and my heart would race as they ran through camp chasing their potential dinner as we were having drinks around the fire. Supply trucks breaking down 300 kilometres away when camp was full. One day a hippo died on the sandbank below camp and, as Robin left after breakfast, he asked me to try and remove it while he was gone. I naively grabbed the kitchen knives and chefs and clambered down to the hippo – the knives would not even make a mark! OK – let's try the axe. Nope – not a scratch.



The saw? Still no luck. We ended up having to burn the huge beast and it didn't matter how much sand we threw over it, it was impossible to keep the smell from wafting over. Every evening for a week the hyenas dug up the smelly mess which certainly detracted from the atmosphere at a few dinners!

Of course things changed as the company grew; we built Nkwali, opened Nsefu and then the Safari Houses. We now live in a wonderful house with electricity, a swimming pool and a wonderful view! I, of course, miss the "hands on" times of the past but I also love my life now. I am often asked what it is like living here. Well.....

Live in a wilderness and one of the great rewards is being in tune with the seasonal events. This particular wilderness is the right foot of the rift valley and is dominated by a dramatic snake-like river, both wide and deep. The Luangwa River is one of the few remaining African rivers that has no interference from man and so seasonally rises and falls dramatically. Towards the end of the dry season, October, the river flow is barely visible. At the shallow points we can certainly cross,

knee deep, although still with apprehension and a keen eye on the crocodiles! But three months later the 300 metre wide river will be rushing past, carrying with it huge tumbling trees. It will brim over into lagoons and fill the channels and of course this will be our play time as we boat over the only recently dusty parched land. We love this "time of plenty", soaked in emerald green, with the animals and birds breeding and in peak condition.

The rains abate at the end of March and it is another two months before we manage to access and build the bush camps. Opening at the start of the winter months (June to early August), the bush camps are remote and isolated. The cool days and chilly nights are perfect for many hours of game viewing. The bush dries, the lagoons shrink and the heat increases and by September, the bush is dusty and brown. With little water left but the river, the game is well concentrated and the game viewing spectacular. October is hot but the game is the reward. And soon the storms will build again and the river will rise. Another year has passed by.

**Jo Pope**

### FACT *file*



An 11-night trip to Zambia including time at the Robin Pope owned Nkwali Camp in the Luangwa Valley and Victoria Falls costs from **£3,500 per person**. For more information please contact our Zambia specialists on **01993 838 505**.

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