

# Beasts of the southern wild: On canoe safari in Malawi

All that lay between me and a reptilian killer was the flat-bottomed boat on which I sat. I knew, however, that the hippos frolicking on the opposite shore were the real danger...



BY HEATHER WALKER

“DON’T put your hands in the water – there are crocodiles in this river.”

With this warning, our local guide Eliam commenced our canoe safari in Liwonde National Park, Malawi. A less than reassuring start to what had promised to be an idyllic afternoon watching wildlife.

I sat behind my friend Rachelle and a Dutch couple in a blue flat-bottomed boat. Our guide punted us at a leisurely pace across the floodplain of the Shire River (pronounced Shirr-eh, not as in Lord of the Rings), a glassy expanse surrounded by lush green vegetation.

We navigated our way through reeds and water lilies, watched warily by statuesque storks and herons. It was incredibly peaceful; apart from the occasional bird call and the gentle lapping of water against the boat it was almost eerily quiet.

Just us and the big open sky. The air was still and heavy. Oppressive purple clouds gathering above us warned that a thunderstorm was heading our way later.

As we glided along, we spoke in whispers, afraid to spoil the tranquillity (or maybe we were just slightly petrified).

The idea of getting close to nature on a form of transport used by Malawians for centuries had earlier seemed the perfect adventure. Now I tried to erase the mental image of a leathery snout rising from the depths to snap at an unsuspecting tourist’s arm. All that lay between me and a reptilian killer was basically a plank.

I knew, however, that the creatures frolicking on the opposite shore were the real danger. Our guide pointed out a playful pod of hippos on the far bank but said we couldn’t get any closer to them than 200m away as they could attack if they felt threatened. I have watched enough wildlife documentaries to know that Africa’s most dangerous animal is not the lion or elephant, but the hippopotamus. Those massive jaws have been known to smash much bigger vessels than ours.

To add to my sense of terror,

Eliam casually informed us that lone hippos were known to run along the riverbed.

So even if we kept our distance from the hippo family, there was still a chance a stray member might come across us and topple us into croc-infested water.

‘Er, what if one runs under our boat and tips us over?’ I asked nervously. Eliam confidently assured us that it would be unlikely.

I wasn’t entirely convinced but tried not to think too hard about the list of perils that awaited. I felt rather vulnerable in our small fibreglass craft.

The other piece of advice we were given was not to rock the canoe or lean too much to one side as this could cause us to capsize.

Great! So even if we avoided the hippos, the slightest sudden movement could tip us all into the murky depths to be chomped by a hungry reptile. No pressure! Imagine being the one responsible for my fellow travellers’ last swim. Although we had each been handed a jaunty straw hat for sun protection, none of us were wearing life jackets – and of course we hadn’t been asked if we could swim. Ha! None of that tiresome Health and Safety malarkey!

I resolved to stop being such a coward and just enjoy the moment. After all, if it was my moment to go, at least it would be in one of the most beautiful places on earth...

Actually, it was a wonderful experience. Being out there, in the midst of unspoilt nature, taking it slow, was such a refreshing antidote to the pace of city life.

And just as I was starting to enjoy it, our safari came to end. In the nick of time too – as we disembarked on the edge of the lagoon, the heavens opened, a reminder of how water connects us all, predator and prey.

We had stared danger in the face and lived to tell the tale. Just another day in Africa. *Bushman’s Baobabs offers accommodation in Liwonde National Park as well as a number of excursions, including the canoe safari.* [www.bushmansbaobabs.com](http://www.bushmansbaobabs.com)



## Luxury Big Five Game Lodge

CO-OWNERSHIP OPPORTUNITY (NOT TIMESHARE)



Located in Dinokeng Big 5 Game Reserve, **only 40 mins from Johannesburg International Airport.**

Fantastic value from just R81,500 (appr £4,600) per week. Whole ownership also available, from R4.3mn (appr £245k)

- Ultra luxurious 3 or 4 bedroom Game Lodges
- Flexible usage – book when you want to use it
- Organised and guided game viewing
- Braai area, fire pit and plunge pool/jacuzzi
- Super low levies
- Malaria free zone
- Secure environment
- Fully managed, fully serviced and hassle free
- Rental income opportunities



Get in touch now!

Prices rising May 2014

Call FD Express on SA (011) 0838733

or UK 01252 724663

email [sales@fdexpress.co.uk](mailto:sales@fdexpress.co.uk)

Visit [www.fdexpress.co.uk](http://www.fdexpress.co.uk) for more details

