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An African adventure: Six safari lodges, two countries, 16 days

A safari lodge is a thousand times better than any zoo, but you — not the animals — are the one in the cage.



By Anne Z. Cooke|Tribune News Service
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MFUWE, Zambia — Alex Stewart, waiting on the steps of **Bilimungwe Lodge**, deep in the Zambian bush, likes nothing better than surprising first-time visitors to this wilderness outpost with an introduction to the next-door neighbors.

"Come in, come in, you're just in time," she urges, a twinkle in her eye, leading me to the rear deck of the lodge, one of six Bushcamp Co. lodges in South Luangwa National Park. When she points to the backyard waterhole, I get it.

There they are, two female elephants and a baby, splashing each other, cooling off on this hot October day.



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Assuming the "waterhole bend" yoga pose, this giraffe gets a drink near the Bilimungwe Lodge in Zambia. (Steve Haggerty / Tribune News Service)

"Junior is a year old now," says Stewart, beaming as the little guy rolls over and over in a bathtub-shaped hole, smacking the water with his trunk and feet.

"And that's Harry," adds Stewart, as a hefty hippopotamus rises up in the water, blinks at the commotion and sinks back down. "He walks over from the Luangwa River to get away from the other males," she says. "He likes it here, where he's top dog."

I'd forgotten how it feels on your first day in the bush. Exhilarated and wide-eyed. Over the moon. And then, sobering up, eager but cautious. A safari lodge is a thousand times better than any zoo, but you — not the animals — are the one in the cage.

"You need to be aware, to look around you, and especially, never go out at night without an escort," says Bushcamp manager Amy Alderman. The safe way to watch lions is from an off-road vehicle, which the big cats ignore.

Monsters stalk a North Texas family in Arlington native Shaun Hamill's debut novel



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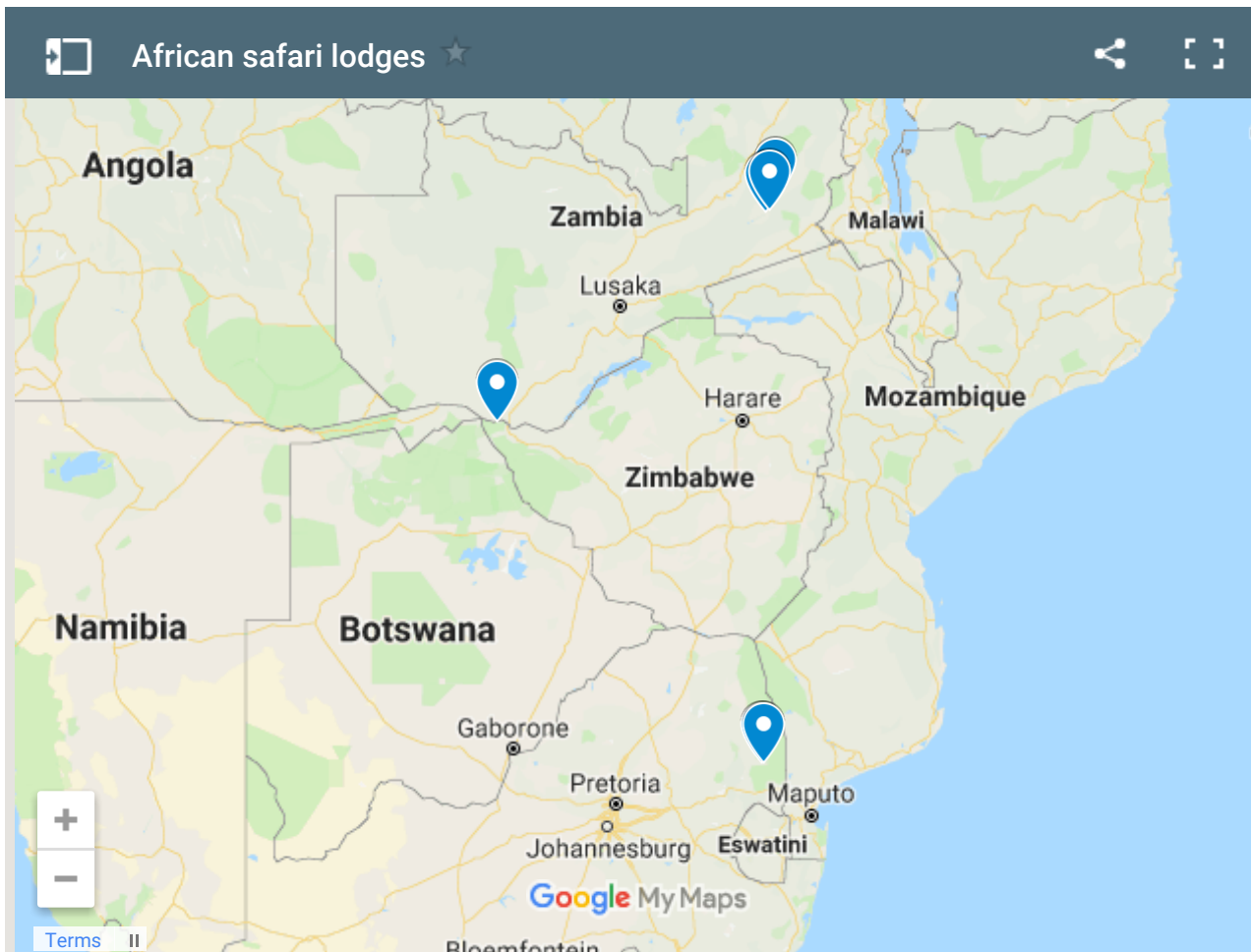


That's rapper Post Malone's face on Bud Light cans in Texas



Ben Lerner's brilliant new novel, 'The Topeka School,' captures America's brutal divisions





When your tracker climbs up on the fender and your guide shifts gears, the adventure begins, a search for the legendary "Big Five," (lions, leopards, elephants, hippos and buffalo); and the "Lesser Eleven": hyenas, zebras, impalas, bushbucks, giraffe, wildebeest, rhinos, wild dogs, crocodiles, civets and genets.

Our plan was to start at [Mfuwe Lodge](#), then head to Bilimungwe and later to [Chamilandu](#). Next, fly south to Livingstone for a couple of days at the [Islands of Siankaba](#), the riverside resort in the Zambezi River.

Finally, a flight to Skukuza, in South Africa, for a visit to **Earth Lodge** and **Bush Lodge**, in the 160,000-acre Sabi Sabi Private Game Reserve, on the border of Kruger National Park. Sixteen days, six game-lodge destinations, and none of them alike.



Bush Lodge, a family-friendly spot with 25 luxury suites, is located in South Africa's 160,000-acre Sabi Sabi Private Game Reserve, on the border of Kruger National Park. (Sabi Sabi Private Game Reserve)

I picked Bilimungwe and Chamilandu for the location, in the wilderness and off the grid. With rustic cabins, six to eight guests, friendly staff, first-class guides and a

dedication to wildlife preservation, they sounded perfect.

Built of logs, planks, reeds and thatching, the cabins were a work of art. And with striped pillows, African colors, flush toilet, running water, screens and a single solar-powered nightlight, I felt right at home. But the lodges weren't identical.

Bilimungwe looked over a waterhole; Chamilandu had a river view and a "hide" above an elephant path. Chamilandu's dinners were served by the river; at Bilimungwe we ate on the deck by candlelight.

At the Islands of Siankaba, where the Zambezi River is wide and shallow, the lodge offers spectacular views, from the trees in the foreground to Zimbabwe, on the river's far side.





The Zambezi River is calm enough above Victoria Falls for guests of the Islands of Siankaba to take in a leisurely boat ride. (Steve Haggerty / Tribune News Service)

The patio was the gathering place. Our bedroom, one of seven tented cabins connected by swinging bridges, clung to the bank above the high-water mark.

Sleeping late, we relaxed, swam in the pool, took a sunset cruise, joined an off-island picnic and got into a mokoro (canoe) for a guided ride, launched from the dock. Dinner times were especially busy; the restaurant has a local following.

We spent our last week in South Africa at two very different safari lodges, the starkly minimalist Earth Lodge and its partner, Bush Lodge, a family-friendly resort.

Despite a day lost to rain, we didn't miss a drive, bouncing over the hills in comfortable vehicles. When our guide and tracker spotted paw prints in the dirt, they drove over every bush until they found the lions, asleep in the grass.





Earth Lodge's expert trackers Lazarus and Louis strike gold: a pride of lions sleeping off dinner. (Steve Haggerty / Tribune News Service)

But the lodges themselves couldn't have been more different. Channeling the Neanderthals, Earth Lodge's 13 luxury suites were caves, richly decorated dugouts in the side of a hill. We sat in our plunge pool outside the front windows and watched impalas graze in complete privacy.

The lounges, tidy rock gardens, weathered tree trunks, bar, wine cellar and dining room echoed the motif, fresh and inviting but spartan.

In contrast, Bush Lodge, with 25 luxury suites, popped with energy. Game drives mattered, but as part of the larger experience. The high school kids there celebrating a birthday said it best: "First person to see a rhino gets the prize."

