

Zambia. -- With Naturetrek in February 1999.

A couple I had met in Ethiopia had spoken enthusiastically about Naturetrek's £990 trip to Zambia's South Luangwa National Park so I had to try it.

So it came to pass:-

Friday 12th saw me at Ronaldsway at 10 to check in for the Manx Airlines flight to Luton where I arrive at 11.40. After a coffee and catch up with cousin Geoffrey I set off for LHR on 13.50 train to St. Pancras where I switch to the 'airbus' to LHR. Check In opens at 18.45 where I meet up with tour leader Paul Stanbury and other travelers. We are told that our route has changed due to the war in Eritrea and we will now land at NBO not ADD. Wrong. We are in ADD with the airport bristling with AA missiles and military kit. We are told to sit tight as the plane is going on to NBO after all and then told to get off anyway. Met by a locked door which opens after several attempts by folks who did not believe it was really locked and the handle came off. Given new boarding cards for NBO flight and onward flight to Lilongwe. Due to leave at 11am but don't board until 11.45 and get airborne at 12.00. Ten minutes into the climb the engine note quiets and the nose goes down. I tell Mary, my seat companion, that we are going back. She shakes her head and says not. Then Captain comes on and confirms our return to ADD due 'technical problems'. And we make our 2nd approach with the PA playing Tammy Wynette and "We believe in miracles!"

We stay on plane while steps are brought, then taken away again and then brought back. Many suits around before a little guy in green overalls arrives with WD40 and a lump hammer. He sprays and bangs the leading edge slats a fair bit and it is 'fixed'. So off we go to NBO, again, with a nice view of Lake Turkana before landing. Our next plane is waiting, no it isn't, yes it is. Gate 4. We get to Gate 4. No plane. Ask again. It is delayed. Well we could work that out ourselves thanks! We go birding on the balcony and nearly get arrested! The plane arrives and we board at 16.40. Looking hopeful! We sit on plane until 17.20 with new pax still boarding. We have obviously been held back for them. Then more luggage goes in the hold but we get airborne at 18.00 and head south. Looking good this time.

We land in Lilongwe just as it is getting dark and are taken to our overnight lodgings at Heuglin's Robin Lodge where we arrive at 20.00 or so. After an excellent dinner I get to bed after some 36 hours on the move.

Next morning my room mate rises to go birding, there's keen, but I stay in bed. Then conscience kicks in and I get up only to find him asleep in the lounge as he had not changed his watch! It is ONLY 05.00. I return to bed until breakfast and then we all get aboard the mini bus that will take us to Zambia. We travel through lovely scenery with some of the company calling the birds first and thinking later. We get through the border into Zambia where the road condition worsens and after a stop for a picnic we arrive at Kafunta River Lodge, upgraded from Wildlife Camp, where after a good meal we go to our cabins at 21.30.

This is to prove the first of our many visits to Kafunta over the next few years. It really is lovely.

Our daily routine was to rise at 05.30 for tea and biscuits before setting out on game drives at 06.00. I won't give a day by day account but they were anything but boring. Mainly daylight viewing and back for brunch followed by a snooze or a tour of the grounds. Or both. Then after more tea and bics we would leave for another drive which included a sundowner before we switched on the Spotlight to loom for leopards and other night creatures. Occasionally we went for afternoon walks but it was always very hot and there were too many people around. Highlights of these trips were punctures in the dark and some close encounters with both leopard and lions. Lots of birds around and one encounter with a large rock Python as we changed yet another flat tyre.

By now we had settled into the same party in each car. My companions being Fiona and Mary and Bill North. Bill North and I did not take long to establish a rapport and we were to take further trips together over the years until his untimely death in 2010. I am still in touch with Fiona too.

As I did not yet have a digital camera my photos were rationed ("Not another Giraffe photo?" was often heard on my return home.) but here are few that I did keep. The White-fronted BeeEater is

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especially worthy as Bill asked for a copy and this led to our friendship. A copy hangs on my wall to this day as does a mock charge by an ellie that we came to know as 'Mr Kafunta' as he was always around camp most days.



Then began the somewhat erratic trip home. We drove to Lilongwe OK but then it all went to pot. We checked in OK but there was no plane. Then it arrived and we clambered aboard and on take-off are surprised to hear we are bound for Bujumbura. Eh? This was fun as it was quite a primitive strip and they used ladders to get passengers on and off. I remember a large lady being manhandled up clutching piglet under her arm. We have nice views of Lake Victoria on our way to NBO. The fun is not yet over and after a delayed start we learn that we are not going to Frankfurt but landing in Cairo for more 'technical reasons'! We start to take bets as to where next. Thankfully it WAS Frankfurt where a scheduled 45 min stop stretches to 90. Finally into LHR at 23.15 and by the time the luggage turns up, yes it did make it, all the trains and buses had stopped running. My trip to Bedford was 'off' so we all spent the night in the arrivals hall. After a restless night on benches we all departed for our homes. I took the train and tube to KingsX and then the train to Luton and my flight home.

I visited IOM-UK-Italy-Ethiopia twice-Kenya-Malawi-Zambia outbound and Burundi-Egypt and Germany inbound. Ten countries in ten days.

That certainly put the "Trek" in Naturetrek in a big way.