

Bev & PC – 2012 Africa Safari 3

Shoebill

The trip from McBride's to Lusaka was uneventful, we did our shopping at Arcades – a very good Spar, stocking all one requires – refueled and headed for Fringilla Lodge some 45min north. There we treated ourselves to a campsite chalet, saving the hassle of erecting the tent, but more so having to pack it away in the morning. Dinner at the lodge was a good buffet, next morning Bev went to the butchery. Big disappointment was that they had no T bones – stock might arrive later in the day. In 2010 we bought the best T bones we'd ever eaten here. It is a very adequate campsite albeit that you do get some traffic noise from the great north road.

Forrest Inn near Mkushi is some 4 hours north east and we got there without any trouble – just ahead of the Austrian invasion. Three Toyotas with two rooftops each and nine people. They proceeded to light an enormous fire – why is impossible to tell as they all seem to eat either out of cans or had some prepared meals out of plastic containers. Interesting thing is that they were driving Zambian registered hire vehicles – not seen this before – which they picked up in Livingstone. They were on a whistle-stop tour – been to Lower Zambezi, south and north Luangwa were going on to McBride's, Itezhi and then back to Livingstone..

Our next stop was Shoebill Island – I'd got an e-mail from Kasanka Trust who operate the site that the road was passable. Refueled at Mkushi – you can see the place is prospering. The attendant told me things have improved greatly since the Zimbabwe farmers moved into the area. There are centre pivots wherever you look – there is even a sign that says – 'This is centre pivot country' – and wheat being grown that looks superb. Reminded me of my short time of living in Zimbabwe where on the road to Chirundu, just south of Chennoi, we saw three crops a year – wheat, maize and paprika being grown. Incidentally, just before we left Zim in 2002 the same farm had been invaded, the centre pivot gone and the land was being worked by one man, an ox and a furrow plough. Good to know that somebody is benefitting from the stupidity of those just north of the Limpopo. I do not think SA has benefitted from this stupidity – other than an influx of well educated people that has unfortunately exacerbated our unemployment problem.

Back to Shoebill. The Road to the Kasanka NP is good tar, we got the directions to Shoebill at the gate and headed off. The e-mail had informed me it takes six hours to get the campsite. T4A told me it was 2 600kms and I'd get there the next day at 23.00. The turn off, not signposted, takes you on the road to the Livingstone memorial, which you follow for about 10k's before getting on a track that is good for the next 15k's where after it deteriorates rapidly after another 10k's the villages thin out and you're into fabulous woodland areas. We crossed a river that had some water in it, went past a sign that said Lake Waka-Waka Community camp. At around 14.00 we stopped for some lunch, just after having encountered a man walking in the direction of the Campsite. He confirmed we were on the road to Shoebill, told us it will take a long time to get there and suggested we spend the night at Waka-Waka. T4A told me it was still 105k's to the next junction point en-route to Shoebill. We were still over 2 500

km's away! The first 35k's since turning off the tar had taken 1.5hrs. So, discretion ruled and we headed to Lake Waka – Waka community Camp.



Lake Waka-Waka Community Camp
Shower at Waka-Waka

What a fantastic place. Very basic facilities. A bucket shower with plentiful hot water, the cleanest long-drop toilet after those in Namaqua NP and this fantastic setting on the dambo. The staff – Oscar is the

manager -were attentive to our every need – plentiful fire wood, water collected from the lake, and hot water for your morning ablutions. Highly recommended at ZK50k p/p (+/-US\$10).

The road from Waka-Waka continues through the woodland for around 5 k's, then you get to the first village, immediately followed by the next and so it continued for the next 80km's. The villages are all neatly swept with many children in each – we were told that the average number of children born to a Zambian women is 8.5. All the adults were busy doing something – cycling or walking somewhere, sweeping, washing or minding children. There is very little livestock – chickens, a few goats and the odd pigs – and fields of cassava. So it looks like the people in this part of Zambia get very little protein. You do not see one person who is overweight. Being quite early lots of kids on their way to school – seems like there is a school every 10k's. The condition of the track varies from poor to very poor, but even if it was good, the number of villages and pedestrians and cyclists make it impossible to average much more than 20k/h. T4A took us down one cul-de-sac just after Chiudaponde. We ended up at a log bridge that was not able to support any vehicle. We met a very helpful man who gave us the best route to follow. By this stage we were surrounded by hundreds of kids on their way to school. Reversing the trailer through the crowds and finding a safe place to turn was tricky, but with the help of the one adult we were soon on our way again.

Suddenly the road improved for about 600m, T4A said turn right and were at the gate to the Bengweulu wetlands. Signed in, were informed it was another 60kms to Shoebill and it would take 2 hours. The 40 to this point from Waka-Waka had taken 2 hours. I thought once we were in the park area there population density would decrease. Wishful thinking. The track continues to be bad. About 30kms further we met a vehicle on the way out. Driver informed us the road to Shoebill is under water, you have to park your vehicle at the harbor and then get transported to the island where you can stay. To add to our woes he said the security is not great as they'd had around 40l of fuel siphoned from their Landover. However, not all bad news – they'd seen THE SHOEBILL. To say I was less than charmed is an understatement. We however decided to push on arriving at the harbor around 13.30 – 5 hours driving from Waka-Waka for the just over 100k's. David Phiri – he seems to organize all the non-in-lodge activities tried to persuade us to leave our vehicles, ship to the island and even offered the self catering accommodation at half price ZK150k p/p. Bev would have none of this. Eventually as we were preparing to head back, David said there is a community camp nearby. We decided to go and have a look. It turned out to be very close, on T4A – Nsobe Safari Camp (I had not bothered to check what else was available (second mistake after thinking that we could get from Forrest Inn to Shoebill in a day) and was fine.



Road to Shoebill

Nsobe Safari Camp

We had arranged with David to do the Shoebill trip the next morning, so at sparrow we were up, after a lovely hot shower provided in very basic reed chalets the afternoon before, and headed across the plain

through thousands of grazing lechwe and hundreds of blackwinged pratincoles to the 'harbour'. Bev was not too sure whether she would be up for the trip as we'd been told that some walking might be involved in trying to find a shoebill. However, she said she up for the boat trip. Our boat duly arrived around 08.00 powered by 2 'polers'. These two men were our guides. Through the marshes we proceeded. Past the fishermen cottages (these are temporary dwellings that are flooded in the rainy season), the many fishermen and their traps. At times it required our boatmen to get out to push the boat as the water got too shallow. Plenty water birds – yellow billed stork, spoon bills, little egrets, black egrets, hottentot teal, African jacana, stilts, marsh harrier, fish eagle. After about 40 minutes there was a conversation between our guide and one of the fishermen. 5 minutes later he said "SHOEBILL" – very quietly. At first we could not see it. Then its head popped above the grass. A minute later we had the bird in full view. It is a large bird – almost a meter tall – and prehistoric looking (Dodo like?) It allowed us at least five minutes to gape, photograph, discuss its habits, breeding and then took off. Very, very special. The Shoebill Stork. Only found in this part of Zambia with an estimated population of 200.



Lechwe on Bengwela Plains

Our transport for Shoebill trip

Our guide wanted to know whether we were up for looking whether we could find another. Say no more! We were off through the papyrus reeds and after a while stopped at what looked like a very grassy patch. Our boatmen got out to go looking for another shoebill. Then we realized they were walking on water. There was this thick layer of grass growing on top of the water. They were soon back to say they've found one. In no time my shoes were off, being somewhat weightier than the boatmen they guided me along the denser grass areas. A weird sensation. Akin the walking on a water bed I'd imagine, other than you run the risk of penetrating this grass 'skin' so have to be extra cautious. 500 later there it was – our second shoebill!!!!!!!!!!!!!!



Shoebill Stork

What the day before had seemed like a futile trip turned out to be a great success.

Nsobe Safari Camp is really nice. If you can get the one shaded campsite, such as we did, it's even better. Jack is the manager, very ably assisted by Sedene who ensures there hot water in the shower and for your morning ablutions, washes your dishes and provides firewood. All for ZK80k p/p/d plus a

tip. Two RTT's arrived late the afternoon on our first day there – very happy I 'suffer the inconvenience' of towing a trailer. To get to their shoebill trip they have pack most things up and then come back and set up all over again!!!!!!!!!!!!



Walking on water

Shoebill II