Zambia & Malawi - The Best of Africa

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

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Departs
October

Focus
Birds and mammals.

Grading
Grade A/B (see Page 6 for additional information)

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code ZMB04) or Naturetrek brochure

Highlights
- Combine Zambia & Malawi in one holiday.
- Look for Böhm's Bee-eater & Pel's Fishing Owl in Liwonde National Park.
- Snorkel in the clear waters of Lake Malawi.
- 4 nights in the South Luangwa National Park including 2 nights in a remote bushcamp.
- Explore the South Luangwa on night-time spotlighting drives in search of Leopard, civets & Honey Badgers.
- Maximum of 8 participants.
- Abundant mammals including African Elephant, Lion, Thornicroft's Giraffe, Hippo, Spotted Hyena & Buffalo
- Enjoy colonies of the exquisite Carmine Bee-eaters.
- Led by expert local naturalist guides.

Images from top: Leopard & Böhm’s Bee-eaters & Elephants. Images courtesy of Chris Badger, V Steyn & Eric Esselee
Introduction

The southern African countries of Zambia and Malawi lie adjacent to one another, yet they could hardly be more different. Malawi is a country of great scenic splendour, with its mountains, marshes and lakes – in particular Lake Malawi, the third largest lake in Africa. Zambia, by contrast, is a flat country where extensive floodplains and bush support large concentrations of classic African ‘big game’. Both, however, are well known for their walking opportunities, whether in the hills and mountains of Malawi or in the bush of Zambia where ‘walking safaris’ were originally pioneered by the late Norman Carr. Both, too, are home to some of the friendliest people in Africa; Malawi, in particular, being known as “the warm heart of Africa”. With such variety spanning two countries, it makes sense to combine the two to offer, what we consider to be, the very best of Africa. Indeed, all the more so because Malawi’s capital, Lilongwe, is so much closer to Zambia’s top game reserve (South Luangwa National Park) than Zambia’s own capital, Lusaka.

So, on this holiday, we offer an irresistible 14-day itinerary combining the wetland wildlife of Malawi’s beautiful Liwonde National Park, the mountain habitats on the Zomba Plateau, the idyllic islands and enticing waters (teeming with tropical fish) of Lake Malawi, and magnificent game in Zambia’s South Luangwa National Park.

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

We depart London’s Heathrow Airport this evening on our scheduled British Airways or South African Airways flight to Johannesburg, in South Africa.

Day 2

Reaching Johannesburg Airport early in the morning we will transfer to an onward flight to Lilongwe’s Kamuzu International Airport, arriving there in the early afternoon. From here we will drive for four hours to Liwonde National Park, situated on the banks of the Shire River, the only outlet of Lake Malawi. Our journey will take us through the beautiful escarpment region at the southern end of the Great African Rift Valley, before we leave the vehicles at the Liwonde Barrage and complete the journey by boat. We will arrive at Mvuu Wilderness Camp, a beautiful tented camp set on the banks of the river, in time for 'sundowners'. From here we will be able to watch our first wildlife as the Hippos come out to graze on the lawns of the Camp and hundreds of herons and egrets fly past en route to their night-time roosts. In the days to come we will explore the park on foot, by landrover and by boat.

Days 3 & 4

By African standards Liwonde is not a large National Park (a mere 58,000 hectares!), but it must rank as one of southern Africa’s most beautiful. Straddling the banks of the lush Shire River, Liwonde encompasses a wide...
range of habitats from quiet backwater lagoons and marshes to open savannah and wooded hills. As a result, this small park is home to a wide variety of animal and plant life including over 600 Elephants and one of Africa's densest populations of Hippos (nearly 3,000 live along a mere 40 kilometres of river!). Birdlife is especially abundant and incredibly diverse; indeed past Naturetrek tours have recorded over 250 species in under three days! The plaintive call of the African Fish Eagle is a common riverbank sound whilst from the overhanging branches kingfishers range in size from the mighty Giant Kingfisher to the tiny iridescent Malachite Kingfisher. In addition to the very localised Böhm's Bee-eater, the park also supports Little, Swallowtail, Southern Carmine and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters along with numerous weavers, bishops and whydahs.

We have two full days to explore the heart of Liwonde National Park on foot, by boat and by vehicle. Here we will enjoy the extensive floodplains dotted with clumps of Borassus trees, fine stands of Mopane trees and mixed deciduous woodland. Game viewing can be excellent here, with the chance of good views of Elephant, Waterbuck, Sable Antelope and Greater Kudu. Numerous raptors soar above the skyline, including Palm-nut Vultures, Western Banded and Brown Snake Eagles and majestic Bateleurs. Collared Palm Thrushes announce their presence with their whistling calls, and Long-tailed Glossy Starlings and White-browed Sparrow Weavers abound. In this habitat we may see the bizarre-looking Racket-tailed Roller, the clown-like Crested Barbet and Arnot's Chats.

One of the highlights of this Park is the opportunity to explore its waterways by boat, visiting the numerous creeks and lagoons of the Shire River, once a major route into the interior of Africa for the early explorers, missionaries and traders. Here, it is as though nothing has changed since those early days. Numerous Hippos wallow at every bend in the river, Elephants and Waterbuck graze the riverine grasslands, and huge colonies of White-breasted Cormorants nest in the trees along the banks. Alongside Nile Crocodiles we will also see a great variety of waterbirds, ranging from the tiny Malachite Kingfisher to the immense Goliath Heron. No less than 17 species of herons and egrets can be found here, whilst overhead there is a constant passage of White-breasted Cormorants moving between their colonies and feeding areas along the river. Long-toed Plovers, Lesser Jacanas and Fulvous Tree Ducks will watch our progress and, as the day warms up, Elephants and Waterbuck emerge from the woodlands to feed on the floodplains. In the heat of the afternoon, some Elephants even take a swim! In the evening we will search for Pel's Fishing Owl which is sometimes seen on the river near Mvuu Camp. During early morning and evening game drives by vehicle, we will look for many of the birds and mammals outlined above. Lilian's Lovebirds are so ubiquitous that it is hard to believe that they are found nowhere else in the country! The sky is often full of vultures; Lappet-faced, African White-backed and Hooded Vultures all occur in the park. Even in the midday heat birding can be good around the Camp, with confiding Böhm's Bee-eaters sitting almost unnoticed in the cool shade of the trees. In the evening we can perhaps take a night drive to search for elusive nocturnal mammals such as Spotted Hyena, Rusty-spotted Genet, White-tailed Mongoose, African Civet, Crested Porcupine and Lesser Bushbaby. As we drive, we will keep a sharp lookout for the birds that we might surprise in the headlights of our vehicle, perhaps a Spotted Eagle Owl, African Scops Owl or even a splendid male Pennant-winged Nightjar sitting along the track.

Day 5 & 6

This morning we will drive on to Zomba Mountain, stopping first in Zomba's colourful marketplace before winding our way up to the Zomba Plateau at 1,800 metres: a challenging walk if anyone should feel so inclined! For the next two nights we will be based at Ku Chawe Inn, an excellent spot from which to explore both the
plateau and its birds and other wildlife. Following mountain streams and the many trails in this attractive region we will look for Green Louries, Long-tailed Wagtails, White-tailed Crested Flycatchers and Saw-wing Swallows.

Day 7 & 8  Lake Malawi

This morning we must leave Zomba National Park and drive north to the shores of Lake Malawi. Nearly 600 kilometres long and up to 100 kilometres wide, Lake Malawi is the third largest lake in Africa and dominates the Malawian sector of the African Rift Valley. Palm-fringed sandy beaches and soaring mountains surround its warm crystal clear waters and picturesque fishing villages dot the shoreline.

The white sandy beaches of Lake Malawi, and its idyllic off-shore islands where we shall be staying for two nights, provide an opportunity for rest and relaxation. We can also enjoy the wildlife here, either by kayaking quietly around the islands, or by exploring on their network of trails. Beneath the surface of the lake’s warm and clear blue waters exists another world, which you may choose to explore by donning a mask and snorkel. Indeed this national park was first set aside specifically to protect its brightly coloured freshwater fish species (many of which are endemic to the lake) of which more species occur than in any other lake in the world. Snorkelling in the unbelievably clear waters here is a quite unique experience – there being no better place on Earth to enjoy freshwater snorkeling.

For our two nights on Lake Malawi we will be staying on Mumbo Island. Mumbo is a rustic yet luxurious minimal-impact tented camp on an exquisite and uninhabited island (within the Park). Located within an exclusive concession area, Mumbo offer us privacy in paradise, for we should have this island to ourselves (group size permitting). Constructed entirely of timber, thatch and canvas, this 10-bedded camp adheres to the strictest principles of eco-architecture. Accommodation is in large safari tents situated on thatched, wooden decks that perch on boulders overlooking the lake. Nearby hot ‘bucket showers’ and environmentally friendly eco-loos are shared (between two tents).

Wildlife - apart from that beneath the surface of the lake - is fairly limited here, although, both Water Monitors and otters occur around the island from time to time. There is also a limited variety of resident birds on the island which may often be seen at very close quarters from the balconies of each tent – amongst them such species as Trumpeter Hornbill, Terrestrial Bulbul, Puffback, African Red-wing Starling, White-bellied Sunbird, Southern Masked and Red-headed Weavers, Red-throated Twin-spot plus a variety of waterbirds, raptors and kingfishers.

Day 9 & 10  Kapani Lodge, South Luangwa National Park

We will depart early this morning by boat for the hour-long voyage back to Cape Maclear. From there we must drive back to Lilongwe Airport in time to catch our flight to Mfuwe in Zambia, the small airport which services South Luangwa National Park. On arrival we will be met by our local guides and transferred to Kapani Lodge (a drive of around 30 minutes) for 'brunch' and our first two nights in the Luangwa Valley. This delightful and very comfortable thatched lodge lies at the edge of the park, close to the Luangwa River, and overlooks a lagoon teeming with birdlife, Nile Crocodiles, Hippos and much other wildlife. Above all, accommodating just 20 guests in stone-built thatched cottages, each room with private facilities and a private verandah, Kapani provides the ideal level of comfort and facilities amongst which to relax and unwind. A thatched, open-plan bar and dining...
room provides meals and service to an excellent standard, its dining terrace overlooking the lagoon. There is a shady viewing platform, a lovely secluded swimming pool and two thatched chitenges where guests can relax overlooking the lagoon. Being close to the main gates of South Luangwa National Park, it is also the ideal place from which to begin an exploration of the park on morning and evening safari drives. The latter are completed in the dark, when our guides will attempt to spotlight such nocturnal mammals as Crested Porcupine, Honey Badger, Large-spotted Genet, African Civet, White-tailed Mongoose, Lesser Bushbaby and, above all, Leopard, which is seen in South Luangwa more frequently than in any other park in the world.

These nightly opportunities for spot-lighting from our safari vehicles generally begin around 4pm, when we take an evening safari drive into the park. As the sun sets, we traditionally stop to enjoy ‘sundowners’ in the park, stretching our legs to enjoy the sights and sounds of the bush at this busy and evocative time of day. Then, as darkness sets in, and the night-time sounds become more mysterious, we enjoy the second half of the drive using a spotlight to view the nocturnal species which would not normally be seen on a day-time safari. It is in these first hours of darkness that the cats are most active, patrolling their territories, looking for prey. With luck, we may have sighted a Leopard before we head back for dinner at 7.30 or 8.00 p.m., or perhaps a pride of hunting Lions. Nocturnal birds may also be seen, including various nightjars, Spotted and Giant Eagle Owls and the occasionally the rare Pel’s Fishing Owl.

During each day, while we are at Kapani, we will receive an early morning wake-up call and by 6am will be heading into the national park with our guides on a game drive in search of its abundant animals and birds. We are unlikely to be back before 10am or 11am, after which we may retreat to the cooler and relaxing ambience of the lodge to enjoy ‘brunch’. We may then choose to take a siesta, relax or swim in the pool, walk in the gardens, or relax on the terrace of the lodge’s thatched bar to enjoy the birds and game spread before us on the oxbow lagoon. African Skimmers are occasionally seen from here whilst Elephant, Bushbuck and Impala are common visitors to the lagoon in which Hippos and Nile Crocodiles wallow. Photographers and arm-chair birdwatchers will be in their element!

The South Luangwa National Park comprises 9,050 square miles of unspoiled wilderness that makes up one of Africa’s finest national parks. Herds of Elephant, Plains (Crawshay’s) Zebra, Thornicroft’s Giraffe, Puku and Impala dot the open savannahs whilst Bushbuck and troops of Olive Baboon tend to stay within the acacia scrub, or amongst the woodlands of Strangler Figs, Sausage Trees and Combretums. Groups of Hippo laze in the waters of the Luangwa River and careful searching along the river banks may yield a group or Kudu, Waterbuck or perhaps a herd of Buffalo. With such a large population of game, it is not surprising that the South Luangwa holds good numbers of predators such as Lion and Hyena and one of the world’s highest densities of Leopard.

Birdlife is equally abundant in South Luangwa. Species include Saddlebill, Abdim’s, Yellow-billed, Woolly-necked and Openbill Storks, Tawny, Wahlberg’s and Martial Eagles, Gymnogene, Lizard Buzzard, Allen’s Gallinule, Three-banded Courser, White-crowned Plover, Lilian’s Lovebird, Grey and Purple-crested Louries, various cuckoos such as Jacobin, Striped, Black, and the beautiful Emerald Cuckoo, Woodland Kingfisher, White-fronted Bee-eater, Paradise and Broad-tailed Paradise Whydahs, Spotted-backed Weaver and many more. Carmine Bee-eaters arrive to breed in August and September and will be busily nesting in huge colonies in the exposed river banks, whilst around camp it is possible to find Collared Palm Thrush, Heuglin’s Robin and Terrestrial Bulbul.
Day 11 & 12  
**Luwi Bush Camp, South Luangwa National Park**

After two nights based close to the Luangwa River at Kapani Lodge, you will now drive for 30 kilometres, deep into the bush of the national park, to Luwi Bush Camp. This is a wonderfully rustic camp set in the shade of large trees close to a permanent lagoon. The rooms at Luwi have grass walls and thatched roofs, with bathrooms that are open to the trees and stars above. It is simple and idyllic; utterly peaceful… except for the noises of the night, as lions, leopards, honey badgers and others hunt in the vicinity of – or even through – the camp!

During your first afternoon at Luwi, your guides will introduce you to the armed escort scout who will accompany you on your first real walking safari. Your guides and scout will take time to point out the tracks and signs that they use to interpret the bush that you are walking through; this first excursion being a taster for what is to come over the next couple of days.

Your first night in the bush camp is likely to be interrupted by the noises of animals around camp. You will perhaps lie awake, eager for dawn to come, and when it does your guides will interpret the calls that kept you awake as you head out together and pick up the fresh tracks of a pride of Lions or investigate the alarm calls of the local troop of Baboons. This is no nature trail, this is the real thing, you’ll be tracking big game through the African bush, on foot!

Your walks will be along the banks of the (usually) dried up Luwi river valley, and in the bush either side of the broad sandy river bed; also around the nearby lagoon. This generally holds water year-round, and is therefore filled to the brim with large Nile Crocodiles and Hippos, and also attracts many animals in to drink, amongst them Bushbuck, Greater Kudu, Impala, Puku and sometimes Lions. It also, of course, holds numerous waterbirds, including herons, egrets, storks, ibis, geese, ducks and waders. The area is also very good for birds of prey.

Watching the sun go down beside the log fire, and then taking dinner in the world’s best dining room – the bush! – will be amongst the highlights of this holiday, but the night-drives after dinner are also pretty good. Completely alone in the bush at night, your guides will interpret the sounds of the night, and hopefully show you some interesting nocturnal animals. Sharpe’s Grysbok and Southern Redbuck may be seen at night in this region of the park, whilst bushbabies (most likely the Southern African Galago), Honey Badgers, African Civets, Large-spotted Genets and mongoose species are all likely possibilities.

Finally tucked up in bed at night, we leave our bush camp site to scavenging Honey Badgers, and prowling Leopards and even Lions. Only in the morning do we learn, from the fresh tracks, who has visited in the night!

Day 13  
In flight

Depending on the time of our flight we may have a couple of hours to enjoy the South Luangwa National Park for the last time before making the two-hour drive out of the park and back to Mfuwe Airport. Here we will leave our guides, and take a domestic Proflight flight to Lusaka for our onward British Airways or South African Airways flight to Johannesburg and then home.
Day 14

We are due into London's Heathrow Airport around 0730 hours this morning.

NB - Please note that Proflight Zambia do not usually confirm their schedules until around 4 or so months before departure. Since their flight timings change from month to month, there is a chance that we may have to overnight the group in Lusaka on Day 13 if the Mfuwe to Lusaka flight does not tie in well with the onward flight to Johannesburg. The additional charge for this overnight is likely to be around £80 - £100 per person (sharing a twin room on a bed and breakfast basis and including return airport transfers). In the event of having to spend the night of Day 13 in Lusaka the tour would arrive back in the UK one day later than planned. Naturetrek will keep an eye on the timings of the Proflight flights and will notify group members should the additional night be necessary.

Grading

A/B. This is a traditional safari-style holiday that includes wildlife viewing by vehicle (on regular morning, evening and night-time safari drives) and by boat. It also includes some walking safaris from our bush camp in the South Luangwa National Park and whilst on the Zomba Plateau. As such an average level of fitness is all that is required to enjoy this holiday to the full.

Weather

In October the weather should be mostly dry and very hot (temperatures in the mid 30s°C) with the possibility of short afternoon showers, leading up to the arrival of the rains in mid November.

Food & accommodation

All accommodation and meals are included in the holiday cost with the exception of dinner on the final night in Lusaka. Drinks are included at the bush camps in Zambia (but not during your time in Malawi). We will be staying in a mixture of comfortable hotels and permanent tented camps in Malawi and a luxury bush camp and lodge within the South Luangwa National Park. All rooms have private facilities, with the exception of Lake Malawi where facilities are shared.

NB - Please note that the accommodation outlined above may, very occasionally, need to be amended. Replacement lodges and hotels will always be of the same standard as the ones outlined in the itinerary and will in no way affect your holiday. Should we have to implement any changes to the above we will notify you as soon as possible.

Guiding

This tour will be led by local Malawian and Zambian Naturalist guides; it will not be accompanied by a UK based tour leader.
Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Malawi and Zambia. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/ prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website.