

How to Run Your Own Safari Lodge: from Sheikh Zayed Road to Zambia

Jenny Waterhouse is ten minutes late for our appointment at Marula Lodge. "Sorry to keep you waiting," Jenny says, glancing at her watch. "I had to wait for Wonky Tusk and the herd to move on." Wonky Tusk is an ancient matriarch elephant, named after one of her tusks which is very wonky indeed. Wonky Tusk's herd is about seven elephant strong including a baby that is less than a year old, and while they wonder through the camp (which they do frequently), no one moves. "I had to familiarise myself very quickly with correct elephant etiquette – they are generally passive animals, and mean no harm, but everyone still needs to be very careful. If you just keep still, they'll just treat you as part of the scenery, and you get to watch them close-up, which is something I don't think I'll ever get tired of."

Before us slowly flows the Luangwa River, its surface serene in the morning sunlight but teeming below with crocodiles and hippos, some of whom are sunning themselves on the opposite bank. Just beyond the river lies the reason for Marula Lodge's existence: the South Luangwa National Park, Zambia's largest conservation area and home to four of the Big Five. "We are so lucky here," says Jenny. "South Luangwa park is the biggest in Zambia, and there is such a high concentration of animals. Even if you never leave the camp you see things – just last week I saw a leopard strolling along the other side of the river."



It's a quite remarkable place, and Jenny is here because of a quite remarkable decision. Long-term Dubai expats, she spent more than a decade living and working in the Emirate as a teacher. Her circumstances were comfortable, and she enjoyed Dubai, but she always had the lingering feeling that she wanted something more out of life. Two years ago, she took a holiday to rural Zambia and realised that this was actually where she wanted to be; somewhere far away from the traffic jams and temperature of Dubai, removed from the hundred daily stresses of city life. It's not an unusual feeling to have on holiday. Who hasn't lain on a beach and thought 'This is the life'? Far more unusual is actually making it happen, which is exactly what Jenny did next.

It wasn't easy. There was money to be raised, an available (and potentially profitable) lodge to be identified, administrative issues to be sorted out (made all the more difficult by patchy internet in rural Zambia); and, of course, she had to make the final decision as to whether this was the right thing to do. "In the end, it wasn't a difficult choice," said Jenny. "I needed to see the stars! I needed a complete change in lifestyle, to step off the treadmill of city life; after 13 years in Dubai, I was beginning to look like a camel."

Having made the decision, she then had to persuade her friends and family that she wasn't mad. "My family know that I am completely crazy. But they also know that I'm very determined. I'm very lucky to have all their support."



The lodge she finally settled on is a beauty. Marula is a cluster of rustic but beautifully appointed bungalows arranged in a rough semi-circle along the Luangwa River. There's an open-air restaurant, serving tasty meals expertly prepared by Wiseman and Douglas, the resident chefs. The well-stocked bar is tended by David and Pius, who are perhaps the two most knowledgeable bartenders you'll ever come across. They're both in the final stages of training to be a guide in the national park, and they're full of information for all the curious guests. At night, they also pick out the interesting stars from the vast array above our heads. It is an easy place to fall in love with, and as I crawl into bed, pull the mosquito net over my head, and listen to the sounds of grazing hippo in the distance, I do.

Not that it has all been plain sailing. Jenny explains: "My favourite saying is every day there are 100 problems and every day there are exactly 100 solutions. There's a way around everything. When diesel runs out at the pumps, someone drives 120 kms to get more; shopping has to be done a week in advance by phone, but you discover that you can live without anything you

forget; meals are prepared in advance in case of power failure. I was once a Dubai teacher with every convenience, but I've become a bushwhacker just grateful for a pair of scissors!"

But ultimately, working at Marula Lodge is very different from the everyday stresses of life and work in Dubai; and it brings different rewards. "Living in Zambia is not about money, it is about lifestyle. The environment is amazing, with humans and animals co-existing in harmony; everything is organic, the air is fresh, the sky is clear, the people are peaceful, there is a calmness that you cannot explain. Dubai has been very good to me and for me, and gave my children access to a world that they probably never would have known had we stayed in South Africa, but to really live you need to experience a place like Zambia," says Jenny.

"But I haven't left Dubai completely behind," she adds. "We're organising visits here from Dubai school groups. I'm still a teacher at heart, so I need to get my fix! Of course, teaching out here is somewhat different; you don't find any of the modern conveniences that teachers in Dubai are used to. However, what conveniences do you need when sitting here by the river in rural Zambia? Dubai feels very far away. So, if ever you are feeling that you need a complete change of scenery; that life has ground you down; that you are sick of the rat race; and that you want to stop slaving away for the Man, then remember Jenny. She saw an opportunity, was brave enough to take it, and has now swapped the congestion of Sheikh Zayed for cocktails on the South Luangwa (she can recommend the Malawi Shandy). And if you're not quite ready to take the leap, where better to recharge your batteries than a week in Africa amongst the animals at Marula Lodge? For more information, see www.marulalodgezambia.com

