



GOLDEN SAFARIS

December 2010

Into and out of the blue

October in Mana Pools is not for the feint-hearted, or for that matter, even the kind-hearted. Celsius temperatures that start in the 40's and nudge the 50's don't lend themselves to offers of 'let me do it for you'. They slow down brains and bodies to levels of activity and thought that are only absolutely necessary. One simply cannot and should not rush around. It's essential to be up long before the sun turns the oven on and it's vital to stop often, stay close to water, wallow in it, and swallow rivers of it. And if you do all of the above, you will have the safari of a lifetime. October, or suicide month as it's known locally, is one of the hidden gems of the season.

Like Picasso, the late season floodplain has it's Blue period. A cloak of dust and smoke veils the landscape with a soft refracted blue haze, blurring all visual contrasts and muffling any loud sounds. The total lack of shrubbery or ground cover together with the high browse line of the mahogany's and albidia's allow for a line of sight through the trees that stretches deep into the future. This is indeed the quintessential Mana moodscape,- soft light, serene silence and endless vistas.



And just when you think you can't improve on perfection, your bush eyes will pick out the various focal points of this magnificent canvas. An old elephant bull stretching up to pull down a pod-laden branch, a couple of buffalo daggas chewing the cud, an eland or kudu's statuesque silhouette against the haze, symbiotic groups of impala and baboons under shady kigelias, and always and forever, the ubiquitous waterbuck. Storks, herons and

egrets stalk the muddy leftover ground water whilst overhead the raptors fly higher and higher. Every now and then a brilliant bee-eater will dash across the stage and snatch up any insect with the energy to fly whilst deep in the viteria the coucals call softly for the rain.

But these are just the added extras. The main players, the predators, usually furtive and shy, now remain close to the river and it's ready food supply. Pups and cubs are no longer hidden in dens and have been brought onto the floodplain feeding table at just the right time to hone their hunting skills. Lying in the dappled shade they casually survey their menu. With many new mouths to feed, the Nyamepi pride doesn't even give the impala a passing glance. Only eland, kudu or buffalo steaks will do. The wild-dogs however still keep the impala at the top of their list; they just have to reel in more than one at a time. With their pack number well into the twenties, one will not go far. Peeling off in twos and threes in their hunts, it's not uncommon for them to kill three or four impala simultaneously. The pups now run with them and having no den to rush back to, they hastily devour their dawn snack, flop down under a tree and settle in for their day long siesta before the dusk hunt. Their food policy is to eat small amounts often and quickly. Conversely the lions like to take things a little easier. Bring down something big occasionally, drag it into the shade and then lie around and feed off it for days. Either way they provide some wonderful photographic moments. Whether your camera is a Nikon, Canon, Nokia or still the best, your mind's eye, October will not disappoint you.



Towards the end of the month however, everything including time stands still, the air pregnant with expectation. The great build-up has begun. Something is about to change- it has to. The heat is insufferable, the dust interminable and the animals irritable. And just when it seems humanly unbearable, a deep dark indigo cavalry of storm clouds gather in the north east. Within minutes the wind picks up, the mood changes and it charges in, raindrops like liquid diamonds transforming the floodplain from desiccated to delighted. November has arrived, clutching the hand of it's friend the rain. You can hear the leaves on the trees breathe freely again, their veil of dust settled back on the ground where it belongs. Every piece of fur shed, every feather dropped and every piece of leaf litter in the soil soaks up the falling moisture and the resultant aroma is the

call of Africa. It's a scent that touches our hearts and evokes emotions within our souls that are primeval, powerful and priceless. It smells of home.

Within days of the first rains the floodplain is transformed into a luxurious wonderland. Out of the blue, Mana becomes green. Animals drop their young, birds breed, seeds shoot and the endless cycle of life starts all over again.



Every season is special but this one somehow outdid them all. Despite hellishly hot temperatures, some nerve-racking moments and a mid-season town office move, the twenty ten season will be hard to beat. The Spice Girls and Backstreet Boys resurrected the Nyamepi pride with a bucketful of new cubs, nine wild-dog pups were successfully raised by the Ellis Robbins gang, four young lion males formed a coalition with the Mane Man and a new colony of Carmines moved into camp. Slot, JP, JD, Boswell and Big Vic were elephantine in the moments they gave us and through it all Stumpy- Tail remained serenely pregnant. Her twenty two months must surely be up soon!

We've only just got all of the dust out of our eyes and the birds out of Stretch's beard but the laughter still rings in our ears from so many special moments around the dinner table and camp fire. Like you, when we think of Stretch's walks, adrenaline surges and feelings of utter peace and harmony sit side by side in our memory banks. Every safari seemed like a family holiday and we thank you all for keeping in contact and coming back each year. You are indeed our extended family and Mana's true friends.

With that in mind we'd like to finish the year off with a story to make all our hearts smile. With the permission of National Parks and the help of the Zambezi Society and the Aware trust, Stretch was able to assist in the removal of the radio collar from Granny lioness. The old girl had developed a huge abscess on her cheek which obviously needed attention and although it is not policy to interfere with nature, this proved a perfect opportunity to remove the collar and allow her to live her last years out in relative comfort. With her daughter and tiny grand -daughter watching from just metres away, she was darted, the abscess treated and her collar cut off.



When last sighted, her coat was gleaming and her gait less ponderous. Reunited with her family, she has resumed her seat at the head of the table of Mana's legends. She is one of the surviving great grandmothers of Mana and we salute her.



And on that happy note, may we wish you a festive season filled with love and laughter and if you're truly blessed, with a great grandmother at your table too.

Kindest regards
Flo Coughlan



P.S. Many of you have been asked to 'see me in my office' by Stretch. Please note that we have a wonderful new town office together with a new telephone number. Please pop in at the address below for a cup of tea and a chat if you're in the area.

However our favourite 'office', and I'm sure yours too, is the one on the banks of the Zambezi. We can't wait to see you there again next year. Stretch says don't be late, he's excited!

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