



### **In Support of Camping**

We are filling the open beds of the 4x4's with camp gear. The sun has just risen. I survey what is spread over the lawn – tents, mattresses, sleeping bags, pillows, lanterns, coolers, buckets, pots and pans, tables, wash basins, chairs - amassed over a few months of weekends for this one, do-it-yourself camp trip to Zimbabwe's Mana Pools National Park. As it happens, we have too much and must leave a table behind. I think, how much easier it is to book a safari lodge or camp, where upon arrival, smiling people offer refreshing towels, gin and tonics, and take your bags to your tent. Tonight, we must erect our own tents after first agreeing on their location away from hippos' nightly meanders. And then, we must cook!

I suspect using an established lodge and camp is less expensive too. Determining the dollar value of what you have spent in hours of preparation is impossible. As a safari operator, I encounter clients who associate camping with saving money. 'I don't mind camping to keep

my costs down,' they write. Granted, the kind of camping they have in mind may not be the glamping to which I have graduated – my mattresses are 15 centimetres thick and my wine supply takes up the entire back seat. (And, I might add, calculated very carefully per person per night.) I use private camp sites over public ones. But the truth of the matter is that we don't self-camp because it is less trouble or cheaper.

We find freedom in doing everything ourselves. We are not restricted by lodge schedules. We position our camp chairs with a view of river, spring, lagoon, or bush and observe what comes and goes on the wildlife channel. We identify birds and take photographs. There is no hurry. This is not to say that self-camping should replace safari lodges. It's better if you combine camping *with* lodges where excellent guides contribute immeasurably to the entire safari experience. Diversity is the key to a great safari. Self-camping is another way to add that diversity to the itinerary. It's guaranteed that you will end up with hilarious stories about the baboons which tried to break into the tents or the hyenas which stole shoes in the middle of the night. There comes the time in the safari when everyone needs a proper shower, and when even the most astutely assessed quantities of wine run out. This is a good time to relocate to a lodge. Otherwise, all you will have to live on is food and water. (I paraphrase W.C. Fields's quote: 'Reminds me of my safari in Africa. Somebody forgot the cork screw and for several days all we had to live on was food and water.')

In Zimbabwe's Mana Pools National Park, our private camp site is on a bluff overlooking the Zambezi River. Zambia lies on the opposite shore. Elephants cross the river in either direction at first light and at sunset. A lioness and two young male cubs jog through on a mission one day. A hyena steals two of our guests' shoes from outside their tents. We manage to retrieve one pair. That same hyena eats our camera trap

which is fastened to a nearby tree. We make a few game drives but mainly we stay in camp and watch wildlife television. At night, we stare into the fire fueled by aromatic mopane wood.

Such a magnificent private site is rare to obtain these days. Twenty years ago, I could arrive at the entrance gate of Tanzania's Serengeti National Park or the Selous Game Reserve and be given a private camp site. To be sure, this was before cell phones and computers, but my point is that private sites were available for do-it-yourself campers and not all reserved for seasonal operators as they tend to be today. Zambia doesn't permit camping inside its parks at all. Communal camp sites are on the grounds of accommodations outside South Luangwa and Kafue National Parks. Zimbabwe may be unique in that private camp sites remain inside its parks, which, if you start early enough (September/October of the previous year) and persevere with Zimparks, you can successfully book and enjoy the following dry season for as long as your wine and shoes last.

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