



Mpala Jena

Tropical Bliss On the Zambezi

Article | **Rudo Nhamoinesu - NZiRA Magazine**

Images | **Mpala Jena Zambezi River Camp**

As you step off the boat, onto the Mpala Jena sands, there is a sense of tranquility that overtakes you; the white sand, the river flowing gently, a warm breeze hitting against your skin makes you feel like you are in a tropical paradise. You are quickly offered a refresher towel and a welcome cocktail, all this combined puts you in a breezy carefree mood, city blues are soon forgotten as you kick off your shoes. A “Tropics in the Zambezi” feeling upon arrival is what you are promised, shoes off, sand under your feet, and a beach right in front of you makes it all the better! This was our first experience at the new luxury camp - Mpala Jena Zambezi River Camp, set along the majestic Zambezi River marketed by Great Plains and owned by the Lang family.

The camp is located within the Zambezi National Park, on a private concession, and it can be accessed by road using a 4x4 vehicle or by boat transfer. For this particular trip, we drove from Harare via Bulawayo

to Vic Falls. As we arrived at the A'Zambezi dock in Victoria Falls after a long journey, we were grateful to find Wellington, the Mpala Jena boat captain waiting to ferry us off to our next adventure. A quick bag transfer and a forewarning of 2 rapids later, we were ready to set sail! The Mpala Jena speedboat is modern, comfortable and it came with a fully stocked cooler box of courtesy drinks to keep us hydrated throughout our 30-minute transfer.

Being on the Zambezi, on this lovely summer's day was spectacular- light blue skies with delicate clouds, sun glitter reflecting on the water's waves, beautiful green landscapes all around, and an ice-cold drink in hand, perfection! Crossing the rapids was a thrilling and adrenalin-pumping adventure, while bird and wildlife sightings along the way made this a marvelous boat ride. Who knew a transfer could be this glamorous! As we drew nearer to the camp, the scenery began to change into a dazzling beachfront with white sand shimmering under the sun. The Mpala



Jena team, who we later knew as Rabbon and Blessed were waving to us with smiles from ear to ear ready to welcome us.

Mpala Jena means "white Impala" in the Batonka dialect, a name derived from albino impala sightings by guides in 1979. A fitting name to describe this rare gem- Zimbabwe's White Impala.

The camp prides itself in providing its visitor a fresh alternative to most traditional camps, challenging the safari scene with a brand new offering “barefoot luxury.” This intimate camp consists of 3 guest tents and 2 family tents that were built in 2021. Owners Kevin and Shannon, the architect team of Craig Hayman and Hannah Charlton, and Zimbabwe-born interior designer Tracy Kelly took time to plan, and create a camp that is eco-friendly, creative, luxurious, playful, and ensured that their design had a green footprint. The team worked remotely on this project, Craig's knowledge of the Zambezi River and its landscape came in handy during the planning process, each building built with its own unique aspect and purpose, and in their distinctiveness blends well together. Craig worked with skilled local artisans to bring to life his hand-drawn designs of the stonework and buildings. Aspects such as the river weighed in on his design, its movement, the landscape, curved textures of the rocks, and the Great Zimbabwe which inspired the stonework. The team's belief in handcrafted products allowed for many charming imperfections around the camp such as the fireplace in the main lounge, it also allowed the artisans to be creative while sticking to his guide. The buildings are all river facing and offer incredible views, each view is presented differently and provides a different experience based on where you are in camp.

To ensure sustainability and reduce energy use, they created open and inviting spaces promoting natural light and cross breezes, and solar power to run the camp. For their cooling system thatch roofing and fans are used throughout the main area keeping the guests cool during a hot summer's day.

Walking to the camp was a very special experience, the uniqueness of the camp stops you in your tracks and for a moment you are mesmerised by what is before you and you can see the thought and effort the team has put in. Rabbon, the Camp manager, who I am sure is now very used to guests' excitement ushered us to the main area for check-in and understood our multiple "photographic stops" along the way. The main camp area includes the main lounge, bar, restrooms, and pool area. The infrastructure is complemented by the great efforts of Tracy, a renowned South African designer who worked with the architects to bring the lodge design to life through its interiors and finishings. Going off the barefoot, kick-off your shoes relaxed theme, Tracy has created a design that calls for instant relaxation. The use of woven baskets, light-coloured woods, shapes and curves, versatile fabrics, and a blue-teal cool palette have helped in achieving the look of this lavish tropical camp.

The bar is one I had never seen before in Zimbabwe- natural elements were used to achieve this design. The light woods continues here, there is a break in decking allowing for a sandy floor, thatch roofing, swing sets that have replaced bar stools, hammocks, the Zambezi in the background, and Lloyd your ever-ready bartender – a truly magnificent experience. The bar area, with its various seating options, calls for a relaxed afternoon with a refreshing beverage and a book in hand. Using earthy tones this bar blends well with the surroundings. A stone throw from the bar is the pool area, an area that was designed with tranquility in mind and almost looks like a scene out of a movie! The teal blue pool has a unique curved shape, overlooking the Zambezi, with state-of-the-art changing rooms.

These earthy tones seen around the camp are reassuring

and settling, and they have been inspired by the sandy textures of the sandbanks. A calm cool palette of blue-teal and greys complement these textures and calm you down instantly on a hot summer's day. These have been cleverly included in cushions, rugs, and accessories around the camp. This colour palette has been inspired by the different shades of the Zambezi at different times of the year, while the lala palm has inspired the thatch and the shade of green found on the doors.

Shapes have also played a significant role in the design. From shaping the thatch roofing, the round baskets on the wall, and the curved chairs that mimic the form of most objects in nature, creating a design that is functional and pleasing to the eye. I found it interesting to note that each of the furniture pieces except for a few have been designed by Tracy herself guaranteeing you a unique experience that goes as far as the furniture itself. Certain pieces such as the desk calendars and tote bags found in the rooms have been made from recycled plastic- carrying on the sustainability train throughout.

THE LUXURY SUITES

After our check-in, Rabbon took us along a wooden decked path through the luscious green bush, to our suites. As we meandered down this path, we couldn't help but think of the many reasons to visit a camp in the green season, for us at this moment was the rich green spaces and the prolific birdlife. The tents are set apart in a private bush area, offering guests the privacy of their own secluded paradise. Each tent is river facing with a private deck, offering you glorious views of the magnificent river. You are promised magical sunrises and sunsets from your deck that comes with a built-in comfortable and cozy daybed, a great place to relax and unwind at any point during the day. I was almost tempted to cross the rest of my day out and lie watching the Zambezi flow by, an avian highway for some majestic birds. From the deck, you go through glass sliding doors entering into your luxury suite. Keeping with the natural, relaxed theme and combining it with luxury, the team at Mpala Jena and Tracy have created a room that is functional, comfortable, luxurious capturing

the true essence of glamping without being too pretentious.

The suite comes with a Kingsized bed (extra length), with the finest linen that keeps you cool and feels wonderful against your skin. There is a tea station and mini-fridge that is always stocked up for you and a workstation.

The room represents safari chic with a Mpala Jena touch, a stone wall divides the room from the bathroom with black and white artwork by botanical artist Sarah Kelly hanging above the bed. Light-coloured woods give it a clean, airy aesthetic, while the woven baskets, lampshades, and chairs add an artistic tropical feel to the room. The use of grays and teal has a calming effect on the human mind, which we all need on holiday!

From the room you walk into the opulent bathroom with a double sink and two wardrobes allowing for two people to share easily, making the room feel a lot more like home. There is a full-width mirror that adds light and gives the impression of a larger space. The mirror is also great for Instagram-worthy pictures- I must add! There is a choice of an indoor/ outdoor shower and bath. A great addition to the room, for me, a luxuriating candle-lit bath under the stars makes for a great end to the day as you listen to the hippos and watch the bright stars- perfect for a romantic escape.

ACTIVITIES

Mpala Jena encourages relaxation, an opportunity to switch off yourself from the world and find peace and happiness in your surroundings. You are welcome to sit in camp all day reading a book, swinging by the bar, or taking a stroll down to the bank with a guide where I was fortunate to find elephants drinking on one occasion. Being at the camp itself is an activity! There are however other activities you can participate in, tailored to your needs- sunset or sunrise cruise, game drives, game walks, and fishing.

On our first day, Wellington took us for a sunset cruise, an intimate experience of just us and the Zambezi with no other boats. The river's vastness, gentle flows, and the life it holds bring a sense of intrigue and excitement. There is a pull I believe this river has on the human spirit that promotes a



sense of positivity, peace, and mindfulness. We had great sightings of birds- the birdlife here is incredible, as a newbie in the birding world I appreciated Wellington's guidance, other wildlife included large crocodiles, hippos, and elephants. Wellington found us a perfect sundowner spot, ending our first day's adventure. On the river under a tree, drinks in hand, we had front row tickets to the most magnificent sunset, blazing with a festival of colours marking the end of our day. We couldn't help but admire how marvelous and life-changing mother nature can be!

GAME DRIVES

The morning of our second day, I woke up early to watch the golden rays of the sun. Day dawning softly with fluffy white clouds drifting in the breeze. A beautiful day in formation. After a quick and delicious breakfast by Chef Tasara, Jason (the General Manager) and I were off. Visiting camps in the green season is special- "The secret season", a time when nature leaps into vitality. The rains feed the teeming biodiversity and forest floors. On our very informative drive, we went round the concession and Park, there is so much to learn of the different bird species and the old baobabs seemed to have stories to tell. Jason stopped at a few banks, and he shared the history of the area (an article for another day!). Of interest during our drive was the work being done by the Mpala Jena

for the National Park which Jason shared.

CONSERVATION

Conservation is an important aspect of Great Plains and Mpala Jena. Kevin and Shannon believe in not just conserving Mpala Jena but the Park itself. They have ventured into projects such as signage and road construction and bridge reconstruction. This project is to create accessibility to the Park, which will make self-drives easier. This is in a bid to encourage the public to use the Park and the various camping sites available. In working with Parks and the community, they are creating employment opportunities and allowing the locals and rangers to take ownership and pride in this Park. There is a strong belief shared by Jason, Kevin and Shannon that these Parks are the people's heritage and they need to be conserved for generations to come. Their work in conserving the park is redefining what safari means and challenging what operators should be offering.

There is an array of wildlife from giraffes, zebra, kudu, buffalo, elephant, bushbuck, lion, hyena that we had the pleasure of seeing during our trip. All the more reason to conserve this park.

There is so much to write about, Mpala Jena is truly a gem, not to mention Chef Tasara's incredible culinary skills providing us with delicious meals from breakfast to high tea in the pool lounge, to dinner at a different spot every night, the food delectable and full of flavour! The team and service offered is incredible, from reservations down to the camp itself, it is full of people passionate about their work.

I hope you feel inspired to travel and visit Mpala Jena. See you on the road!

