



Signpostings en route

## IMPRESSIONS

### ON A JOURNEY THROUGH THE VALLEY

A journey through the villages of the Luangwa Valley offers a plethora of impressions, which are like a plunge into the past. The villages, rivers and roadblocks with tollgates bear evocative, melodious names such as Chipuka Gate, Chikwinda Gate and Milyoti Gate; the rivers are called Lupamadzi, Munyamadzi and Mupamadzi and the villages have names like Chifungulu, Chifunda and Katangalika.

Actually, it should read: "Mopani spur"



**Signposting** within the Luangwa Valleys is more than sparse. Right up to the start of the 21st century leaflets were still painted by insiders and routes drawn up on the basis of notable landmarks, such as schools and mosques. These days maps and navigational devices help, yet it remains exciting nonetheless. Freshly erected signposts usually fall victim (if they are made of wood) to seasonal forest fires after just one season, are stolen (if they are made of metal), fall down (in the case of blocks of stone) or just moulder away (animal skulls or horns). There are no town signs in any case.



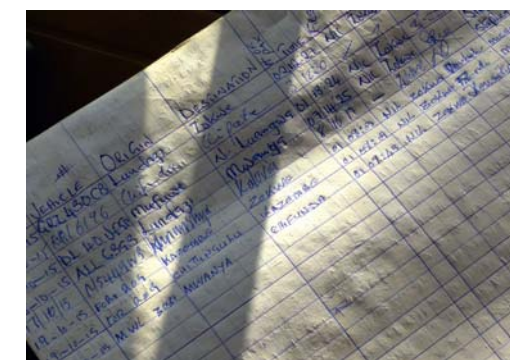
Zokwe gate, one of the GMA gates in the valley

Serving as landmarks are schools, missions and GMA or park gates. Such **road barriers** are a relic from the colonial past and lie everywhere on the borders of the hunting and conservation areas. At these gates wildlife scouts are stationed, entering all of the vehicles that drive through onto lists in tattered and crumpled exercise books. Such a GMA gate will not announce its presence, however, you rather approach a few sparse buildings unawares, and the track leads directly up to a barrier. On both sides high grass fences create a privacy shield for the dwellings in the background. A scout ambles up and presents the book for entering the 'Where from?' and 'Where to?', the registration number and type of car, the number of passengers, time of day and the name of the driver. Meanwhile inquisitive, mostly raggedly clothed children gather in the background, but are as a rule brusquely sent packing by the scouts. They shyly beg for pencils, sweets or empty bottles, to make toys out of. Women stay in the background, not

daring to come closer. Once all of the columns have been diligently filled in and a signature obtained, the scout opens the barrier and you are allowed to pass.

These endless lists have not been checked and evaluated for a long time; the multitude of exercise books are piled up in some offices or other and are forgotten witnesses to the sparse traffic in the Luangwa Valley.

A register for transit traffic







School lessons under the mango trees

**Schools** are valuable orientation aids because their nameplates betray the district they find themselves in. They mostly also have original mottos, such as 'No Sweat no Sweet'. A typical Zambian school consists of a main building, painted white and blue, with several simple classrooms; in the background there is a line of tiny toilet blocks, painted in the same colours. Behind these stands the teachers' accommodation. The school playground is always swept in exemplary fashion; this is one of the duties of the schoolchildren, to be done in the morning before lessons. Most often a few

Every school has its motto



huge mango trees provide shade, and on one of the branches a truck's wheel rim hangs, serving as a school bell. Schools always have a football field for the boys and usually a deep well to fetch water (all the wells with three poles, tapering upwards, one on top of another, were erected by a German foreign aid project). Even more than in the rest of the country the schools in the Luangwa Valley are notoriously undersupplied. They lack teaching materials and trained teachers, so class sizes often reach 50 to 60 pupils, and sometimes several large classes such as this must be taught by a single teacher. Many teachers have not even received a basic education themselves. Sometimes teachers are absent even during schooltime because they (have to) collect their salary in person from the provincial capitals or settle administrative technicalities there.

If you as a foreigner pass by a school it can happen that suddenly nearly a hundred curious children's faces will appear at the windows. Sometimes the teachers hold lessons right outside in the open air. For the children teachers are people who command absolute respect; among the adult villagers, however, they are more likely to be regarded as outsiders, because most of them have been shifted here from remote areas of Zambia. So they live in the valley without the collective protection of their families and clans, rendering them vulnerable and assailable in everyone's eyes to witchcraft.

The dry **mopane forests** that predominate on any journey through the Luangwa Valley may be viewed as extremely monotonous. Yet they are like fairy-tale forests, creating a bizarrely nice atmosphere when they are lit up by the setting sun in late afternoons. You repeatedly have to cross sandy riverbeds; the fords are often laid out with wooden planks, so that even cotton transporters without 4-wheel drive capability can get through. In the middle of the riverbed you can sometimes see deeply dug holes, with a little ground water collected in them, which local travellers have created for drinking purposes. Wherever is a little water standing or flowing, small children will be bathing while women bend to wash their laundry, subsequently spreading it out over dorn bushes to dry.

Unfortunately because of the poaching it gets harder from year to year to see zebras, kudus and buffaloes along the road through the

expanded mopane forests in the GMAs. Fairly hidden in picturesque bends of the river in such places lie the **hunting camps**, including those for trophy hunters. There is no sign to indicate their presence; at best a set of horns on the side of the road serves as a marker. These days hunting camps are almost as beautifully designed and located as bush camps for photography tourists: mostly they provide fenced-in facilities, protected from sight, with tent chalets for the clients, kitchen and provision huts, places for sitting in the shade of mighty riverside trees and a small open-air workshop for the fleet of safari vehicles, which is notoriously prone to breakdown.

The lonely forested passages between the villages can ordinarily be traversed quickly on a narrow track. If a track suddenly becomes uneven, rutted and crumbling, this indicates a river and village. Bicycle tracks increase and the thinning out forests make way for high grasses

Fortunate for the driver: this road has been freshly prepared







Cotton field and cotton plant



Cotton gets caught in the bushes at the roadside



Below: Fully loaded cotton transport



on marshy subsoil. Almost all of the villages are ranged along the tributaries from the mountains. From far off the crowns of the mango trees, lush and green all the year round, are the only things that strike you at first. Alongside them the grass-covered roofs of the hut dwellings can be discerned, and you see the first maize and cotton fields. After the **cotton harvest**, gathered up by overladen small pick-up trucks at the end of the dry season and transported out of the valley to the uplands, ragged strands of cotton can be seen hanging everywhere along the side of the road in the thorny bushes, skimmed off during the journey.

**Mango trees** are the early sign betraying village settlements, because in the Luangwa Valley are no natural stocks of these useful fruit trees, and they always have to be planted. Sometimes mango trees are grouped together, but are abandoned in the high grass; these are then mute witnesses of former villages that have been deserted when the farmers moved on in their nomadic hoe-farming. Mangos ripen in November/December, yet weeks before that the children pick the unripe fruits from the trees and chew at them. Later on the ripe fruits hang so plentifully and low down on the trees that, when driving through the villages, you regularly pluck them off with your vehicle's roof, getting them wedged in the roof rack. This often goes unnoticed. Many a traveller has later seen elephants taking great trouble in the attempt to harvest such wedged fruits from the rack with their trunks.

Many of the nameless **villages** and hamlets along the road are in such isolated locations that the people immediately listen intently when they hear the sounds of an engine. Women interrupt their pounding of maize, men lift their heads and small children run expectantly onto the road. Calls of '*Sweet, sweet*' ring out in high children's voices, and one is tempted to believe that small children think of this begging for sweets as a typical form of greeting among the *Azungu*, Europeans.

In the villages a mishmash of everyday objects is on show: fishing nets, being mended by the men, and special fish-traps, which the



Chicken coop in a Chewa village

women use for fishing in the sandy flat Luangwa riverbed. Troughs for pounding maize and raffia mats, on which fragmented cassava roots are drying. On elevated raffia wickerwork pans and enamel bowls are stored, protected from ants. Under open roof-stands the typical Zambian cooking fire glimmers quietly all day and is never extinguished. There is a special skill in keeping the thick tree trunk glowing through just two small branches.

The track cuts through the villages, and the hut dwellings, food stores and chicken cages are strung out on both sides. Old huts still show the traditional house construction, consisting of a wooden frame, plastered with clay and covered with dried grass. The modern style is square brick buildings, at times even with corrugated iron roofs. In front of some huts these days stands a solar panel, with a car battery, mobile phone and portable radio connected to it for charging. In some regions villagers decorate their houses with artistic scenes from everyday life and write witty puns on the house walls. The women sweep the area around their huts, and a few lovingly plant out front gardens with flowering

plants. In contrast are only a few trees in a village, primarily useful ones like mango trees, kapok and papaya shrubs, or distinctive specimens such as baobab and African star chestnut. All others must make way for these.

Decoration on a house wall





In the lonely forests you will again and again see individual **cyclists** with all kinds of *Katundu* (luggage), fat bundles of cloth and sacks of dried fish, on the very top of which, as a rule, a plastic water bottle also hangs. With an old cloth rag the sweating men fan bothersome flies away from their exhausted faces as they push their overladen bicycles on the sandy tracks.

Sometimes the cycle paths follow the car tracks; at other times they take detours and just cross the track. Zambia is criss-crossed with such endlessly long bicycle routes, along which fishermen transport their goods from rivers and marshy areas to the main roads, where they will be taken by buses and trucks and carried to the markets in Lusaka and the Copperbelt. This transport system is conducted inconspicuously and effectively. In the same way poached *bush*

*meat* and other illegal animal products make their way out of the valley.

The lot of people who **travel on foot** is even more marked by deprivation, particularly for women: on their head they carry a heavy bundle or small suitcase, on their back a baby and by the hand they hold on to the baby's next older sibling. Thus heavily laden they may travel for days to visit their families, search for a doctor, present themselves to the authorities or attend a funeral. They hardly have anything to eat as they walk, dig in riverbeds for drinking water and rest once in a while directly at the side of the track in the sparse shade of arid trees when they are exhausted.

It is beyond description how dangerous this could be, should they encounter lions and elephants on this lonely odyssey through the wilderness.

The bicycle is predominantly used by men



Today the Luangwa Valley is among the few areas of Zambia where **drinks cans** should not be crushed underfoot and thrown into the bin, but placed at the side of the road, as women and children avidly collect them.

Screw-top bottles and sealable containers are desirable treasures as well. A Coca Cola or beer can becomes a drinking cup, once its sharp edge has been smoothed a few times with a stone; while plastic bags and cardboard boxes in their turn are valuable aids for transportation and storage.



Women are used to long walks  
Some houses even have floral decoration

