

The Chikoko Trails Walking Safari *South Luangwa National Park, Zambia*



Crocodile River Camp at Chikoko Trails (Photos: Angus Maclaren, Walks in Africa)

Chikoko Trails is a unique walking safari operated from two refreshingly simple bush camps, named Chikoko Tree Camp and Crocodile River Camp, located in an un-spoiled, game-rich, walking-only concession of the South Luangwa National Park. This truly means no vehicles – you cross the Luangwa river in a canoe and then walk in to the first camp on foot, with your luggage portered ahead of you. The camps are built from natural grasses laid and tied on to wooden frames, refreshed each season, and reed mats are spread on compacted earth floors. This is bush living in the style of Tarzan and Jane, bolstered by good, fresh food, comfy cushions to flop on, cold drinks from the gas fridge, *en suite* hot bucket showers and flushing loos. Each camp accommodates a maximum of 6, ensuring intimacy and flexibility, and guiding and camp hosting is of a high standard. A far cry from image-conscious lodges located further downstream!

Highlights

- A pure walking safari – no vehicles and no vehicle tracks
- Two simple-yet-delightful “grass, wood and reed” camps offering an authentic bush experience
- A superb area for game and a beautiful walking environment, with exclusive access, well away from the busier central area of the park
- One of the few family-run safari operations in the Luangwa valley
- Excellent guiding and hosting focused on just 6 guests in camp
- Wholesome, fresh and imaginative food from a bush kitchen
- Combine with the excellent Tafika Camp, the home of John and Carol Coppinger
- Extend easily to the remoter North Luangwa National Park, where Remote Africa Safaris have two further camps, Mwaleshi (another walking camp) and Takwela

The trails concession area

The Chikoko Trails camps are located in an exclusive concession area that has been designated for walking – a quiet section of the park right up in the north-east, beyond the Nsefu sector. It's completely unspoiled, with no man-made infrastructure or vehicle tracks save for the site of an old national park's camp that has fallen to ruin up in one corner, which you may stumble upon on one of your walks. The concession contains large stands of Cathedral Mopane and beautiful groves of majestic African trees, peppered with lagoons, *dambos* and seasonal streams, which, along with the Luangwa River on its eastern border, provide a draw to wildlife. It's a superb area for walking.



The camps

The Chikoko Trails camps are pure walking camps, sited very close to where David Livingstone first crossed the Luangwa River in 1866 and noted in his diary "I will make this land better known to men that it may become one of their haunts. It is impossible to describe its luxuriance." In Livingstone's day there were of course no roads or vehicles up here, and this continues to be the case - you spend your days traversing a beautiful, unspoiled wilderness area that's rich in wildlife. Each camp is unique and special in its own way and refreshingly simple - the very essence of proper a bush camp that blends with its environment.

Before heading to the trails camps we recommend that you spend two or three nights at Tafika Camp first, enjoying what the Nsefu sector has to offer on game drives – this makes a nice contrast to the walking as you tend to see different things, get closer to large animals and are more likely to see predators. Tafika is an extremely pleasant and welcoming camp to spend time in and it has a spectacular location on the Luangwa river. Having been ferried across the river by boat to the trails area, you should ideally spend a minimum of two nights in each of the trails camps to get the most from the area and not feel rushed. There is just so much to absorb here.



Chikoko Tree Camp is situated 8km upstream of Tafika, beside a small, seasonal channel that's a 10-minute walk away from the Luangwa river. As the name suggests the three wood and thatch chalets are raised above the ground, with open-fronted bedrooms on the first floor, up in the tree canopy – this enhances the view of the acacia grove and small plain in front of camp where a constant array of wildlife activity unfolds throughout the day.

Crocodile River Camp is similarly constructed of thatch and wood, this time on one level – chalets are again delightfully simple yet perfectly comfortable, with open fronts that are screened off at night and hot showers that are open to the stars. The camp is in a beautiful setting, strung along the bank of the usually dry Crocodile river, shaded by a line of magnificent ebony trees – the river is a corridor for wildlife and there is a small water hole that tempts animals close to camp.



Although not luxurious, **Tafika Camp** is a very high quality, authentic-feeling camp, and is one of the smallest permanent camps on the Luangwa River, accommodating a maximum of just 14 guests in 6 chalets (which includes a family room and a honeymoon suite), spread over a large rambling site shaded by tall leadwood trees and featuring a large lawn at its centre. It has one of the most enviable positions on the Luangwa river, over-looking a beautiful, sweeping bend which affords far-reaching

views filled with light and which is a focus of almost constant wildlife activity during the dry season. It's also the home of the Coppinger family and is genuinely friendly, relaxed and unpretentious, with a home-from-home feeling about it.

Further extensions are encouraged to the North Luangwa National Park, where Remote Africa Safaris have two further camps, **Takwela** and **Mwaleshi**. Takwela is modelled on Tafika, whereas Mwaleshi is another pure walking camp, sited 9kms up the Mwaleshi river (one can walk between the two). Remote Africa Safaris operate a Cessna which shuttles guests between their private airstrip at Tafika and an airstrip at Mwaleshi, a scenic 30-minute hop that follows the meandering course of the Luangwa river.

Walking and Safari Format at Chikoko Trails

Morning walks normally last a leisurely 4 hours, with a mid-morning break for refreshments, and a shorter afternoon walk takes place after siesta time and tea. When out walking, you'll be led by an experienced walking guide, accompanied by a Zambia National Parks' scout who will be armed. A tea bearer will bring up the rear. You'll pursue walks on the maze of animal footpaths that cover the area, frequently linking lagoons, *dambos* and small floodplains that provide a draw to wildlife, spending time at vantage points to observe quietly. When transferring between the two camps, all luggage is portered ahead by camp staff whilst guests enjoy a 3 to 4 hour walking safari between the two – *en route*, you'll pass through an extensive stretch of beautiful Cathedral Mopane woodland.

Safari style and ethos

The Chikoko Trails camps are operated by Remote Africa Safaris, which is owned by the Coppinger family, who are well-respected, long-time residents of the Luangwa valley. This is one of the few owner-operated safari outfits in the valley and Tafika Camp, which one naturally chooses to spend a few nights at before moving to Chikoko Trails, is located just

across the river, on the edge of the Nsefu sector – Tafika is John and Carol Coppinger’s home as well as being the base for their operations. John has retired from guiding and the camp operations are now run by their daughter Jenny and husband Nick, but he and Carol still sit with guests at dinner each night. This is as close to home-from-home as safari camps get.

There’s a strong feeling of tradition and authenticity running through their operation, with emphasis placed on conservation, the use of natural materials, and the involvement and support of local communities. Although there is much more to Tafika than the Trails Camps, which are more simple, all of the camps are built from local materials, with grass thatch being placed on and tied to wooden frames – the frames have to be re-clad in fresh grass before the start of each season, as soon as the rains have finished, an operation that takes about a month and which provides work for teams from the local villages.

When to go

Chikoko Tree camp opens on 25th May whereas Crocodile River camp opens on 1st June. Both stay open until 31st October.

Tafika camp is open between 1st May and 15th November.

Mwaleshi and Takwela camps in North Luangwa are open between 15th June and 31st October.

