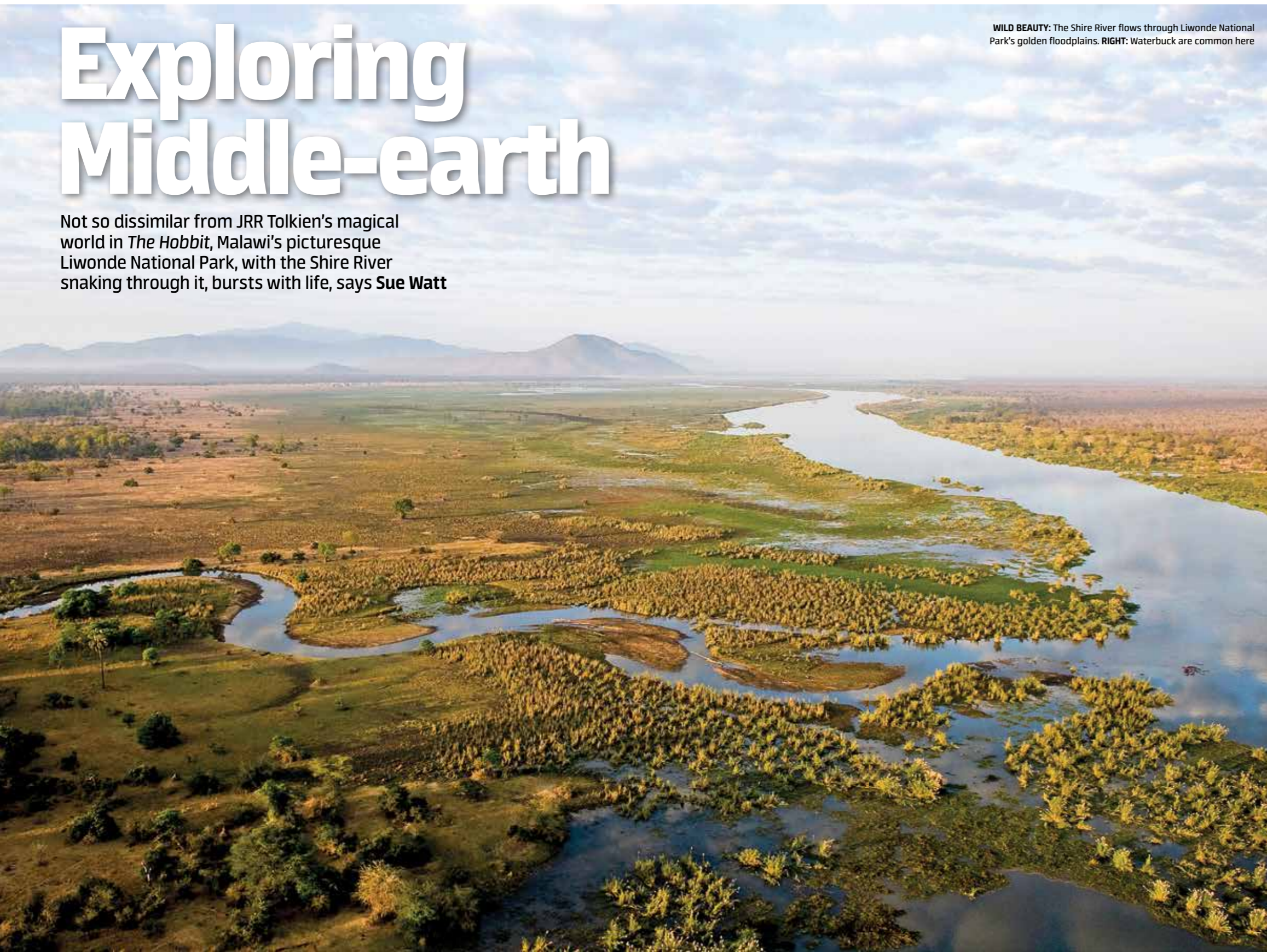


Exploring Middle-earth

Not so dissimilar from JRR Tolkien's magical world in *The Hobbit*, Malawi's picturesque Liwonde National Park, with the Shire River snaking through it, bursts with life, says **Sue Watt**

WILD BEAUTY: The Shire River flows through Liwonde National Park's golden floodplains. **RIGHT:** Waterbuck are common here



WILL WHITFORD

Matthews Matewere has been guiding in Liwonde for 18 years and you'd think he'd have seen it all by now. But even he was mesmerised as our boat bobbed silently in the water right alongside a dozen elephants. For half an hour we stayed there, watching in hushed excitement as they drank from the riverbank just a metre or two away. The baby elephant played with cattle egrets, sweeping at them with a trunk he could barely control: we were so close I could almost count his long and luscious eyelashes.

I noticed clumps of dirt encrusted on the older elephants' tusks, the tears and holes in their ears, the wrinkles on the matriarch's face, her wisdom etched within them. The only sounds disturbing the silence were their contented rumblings, their slurping and gurgling, and the occasional click of the camera shutter. "That was awesome," Matthews whispered, as they eventually moved away. "The elephant were chilled; you were chilled. That truly touched my heart."

Special moments such as this are what Liwonde is all about. Spanning 548sq km of southern Malawi, the park is dominated by the Shire River snaking through golden floodplains on its journey from Lake Malawi to the Zambezi: it's positively bursting with life. More than 1600 hippos live here, bobbing up and down in the water, keeping a cautious eye on you. Fat old crocs and lithe younger ones doze on the riverbank but they're watching you too, and fish eagles soar overhead looking for food.

They're not alone: the Shire's birdlife, with 400 different species, reminded me of Uganda's Kazinga Channel. Within a few minutes, we spotted a giant kingfisher fighting a freshly caught fish, three pied kingfishers squabbling in the reeds and a tiny malachite kingfisher, almost too small for its riotously colourful plumage. African jacanas strayed perilously close to a baby croc while a gigantic Goliath heron stood motionless in the water and a handsome saddle-billed stork seemed to walk on tiptoes, trying not to disturb his breakfast of frogs and fish.

Mvuu Lodge, where we were staying, makes the most of the Shire too. Along with its neighbour, Mvuu Camp, the lodge embodies the park's sense of peace and calm, and you don't need to venture far for the wildlife. Its relaxing thatch lounge and eight en-suite tented rooms all overlook the river and nearby lagoon, attracting hippo, elephant, bushbuck →

CENTRAL AFRICAN WILDERNESS SAFARIS

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Cattle egrets often perch on hippos, pecking at the parasites on their backs; women dance at Njobvu Cultural Village near Liwonde; the park is well known for its river safaris, during which you can get up close to wildlife such as elephant; a pair of Böhm's bee-eaters

and baboons aplenty, as well as a family of warthogs with three little piglets that sleep under the boardwalk to the jetty.

But Liwonde isn't just about the river. On a morning nature walk, we wandered through a landscape of candelabra euphorbia, borassus palms and sausage trees with fruits resembling butternut squash hanging on thin threads. The pink post-dawn glow turned huge baobabs a shimmering purple, while fever trees glowed neon yellow. "These walks aren't usually much to write about," Matthews said. "But when you come back, your heart feels you've been in the bush, you feel part of it."

In fact, there was plenty to write about. Matthews explained the night's events, from genets' footprints in the sand to a hippo's 'bedroom' with indented grasses for a pillow and a pile of fresh dung nearby. "They always use their bedrooms as a toilet," he said, disapprovingly.

As we walked through mopane woodland, impala scurried away but relaxed warthogs carried on foraging, and a bushbuck came so close I could have touched her. In the distance, around 80 elephants rushed through the trees, spooked by a helicopter flying overhead. "That's African Parks doing a recce to see what's around," Matthews commented, explaining how the conservation organisation was embarking on Africa's biggest ever translocation of elephants.

The non-profit organisation took over management

of Liwonde in August 2015. Moving 250 elephants to Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve in central Malawi is one of many initiatives it is implementing to protect the park. We took a game drive around the expansive Mwalasi Plains dotted with termite mounds, palms and fever trees; they were brimming with warthog, bushbuck, impala, waterbuck, hippo, elephant and buffalo. But further north we saw nothing, not even an impala or baboon: the area had been completely poached out.

Hence African Parks is erecting electric fencing around Liwonde's perimeter. It's removed more than 15,000 snares, sent rangers deep into the bush to catch poachers and is working closely with communities to reduce human-wildlife conflict, support education and improve employment opportunities.

The nine black rhinos living within the reserve's 40sq-km fenced sanctuary also draw poachers. Over recent years, 43 per cent of the rhino population has been lost. Researchers track them daily and visitors can take part, too. Before setting off, Black Rhino Monitor Frank Weitzer explained the five rules of tracking them: "Move in single file; stay behind the rifle; never talk; obey all signals; and never, ever run."

Using telemetry, we picked up signals from transmitters in the rhinos' horns and Francisco, one of the rangers, sat on the Land Cruiser's bonnet, looking for footprints. By the time we were close, however, the temperature was rising and he evaded us, hiding within dense, impenetrable thickets. Other animals

in the sanctuary are easier to spot. On a game drive, we saw around 40 buffalo and a grumpy lone bull, a dagga boy, rolling in mud; zebra stood calmly as we drove past and a handsome sable sauntered across the road with oxpeckers on its back.

Crocs and humans are the only predators here. The last lion was spotted around three years ago; leopards, although seldom seen, are believed to live in the rolling Chiguni Hills in the south; and there are no cheetah, despite the plains being perfect for them. Plans are afoot to bring them all back, making Liwonde a Big Five destination.

Mvuu Lodge offers the chance to encounter community life

as well as wildlife. We visited Njobvu Cultural Village, just outside the national park, where some 950 people live in neat compounds of terracotta-coloured mud-brick houses. Life isn't easy here – elephant damage crops and sometimes kill people; the village has 32 HIV/Aids orphans who need support; and 90 per cent of adults are illiterate. Visitors can stay here in a simple but spotless lodge with mattresses on the floor, and proceeds benefit the community fund.

At the local pre-school, built through donations, lively children sang the Alphabet Song for us in their classroom adorned with elephant murals. We visited the traditional healer in his small, dark house stuffed with piles of dried leaves, roots, twigs and bark. He revealed his remedies for diarrhoea, infertility, impotence, cramps and yellow fever, and even had a love potion to "make someone love you forever". With the local women, I tried pounding maize by bashing it with a heavy pole into a wooden drum, following their beat as they sang. Then they started dancing, gyrating their hips in a way that seemed humanly impossible and that I simply couldn't replicate.

On our last sundowner cruise on the Shire, Matthews told me about Nanthomba School, which he set up in 2001 with two other Mvuu employees: Dinara Kankhuni and Mike Mtwea. With the help of funding from Children in the Wilderness and HELP Malawi, it's become one of the region's best schools with around 900 pupils. "I'm very proud of the school," he told me. "Education is so important."

The river, Liwonde's soul, was calm like a mirror. We headed south, towards the Chiguni Hills, and arrived at a sandbank packed with rare African skimmers. On the ground, they seemed fairly ordinary birds, black and white with bright-orange beaks. But in the air they metamorphosed into elegant avian ballerinas, twisting and turning, almost dancing in formation as the sun transformed their wings into flashes of silver reflecting on the water. The sun set quickly, painting the ripples with touches of pink, purple and gold, and we reluctantly headed back as darkness

fell. Another memorable moment in this extraordinary place...
Sue Watt travelled with grateful thanks to African Parks, Expert Africa, Mvuu Lodge in Liwonde and Tongole Wilderness Lodge in Nkhotakota.



SAFARI PLANNER

■ **Getting there** Kenya Airways, Ethiopian Airlines and South African Airways fly to Lilongwe or Blantyre via Nairobi, Addis Ababa and Johannesburg. Expert Africa offers tailor-made trips to Liwonde National Park.

■ **Where to stay** Central Wilderness Safaris' Mvuu Lodge (doubles from US\$365, full board) and Mvuu Camp (doubles from US\$230, full board), suitable for families, are open all year. Liwonde Safari Camp (camping from US\$10) and Njobvu Cultural Village Lodge (B&B from US\$16) offer low-budget options.

■ **When to visit** Liwonde is open throughout the year. During the rainy season (November to April), the Shire swells and certain activities might be restricted.

■ **Things to do** Rhino tracking is an activity rarely available elsewhere, as is spending time with African Bat Conservation and Carnivore Research Malawi. Visits to Nanthomba School and Njobvu are worthwhile. And don't miss the exceptional boat trips on the Shire River.

■ **Visas** British visitors need a visa, costing US\$75 on arrival (or £65 from the Malawi High Commission). The FCO advises obtaining a visa before departure.

■ **Further reading** *The Bradt Guide to Malawi* (6th Edition) by Philip Briggs; african-parks.org; malawitourism.com.

To read Phil Clisby's blog on his time in Liwonde, visit travelfranciamag.com.



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