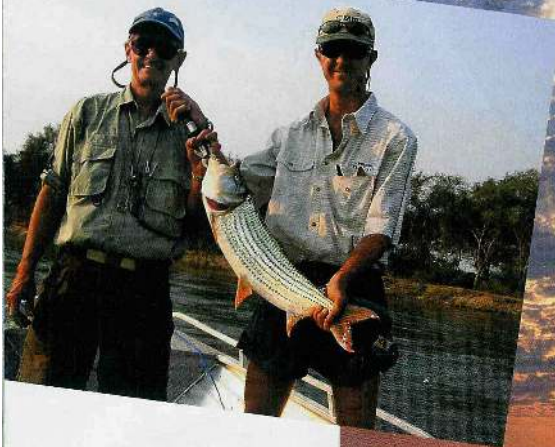
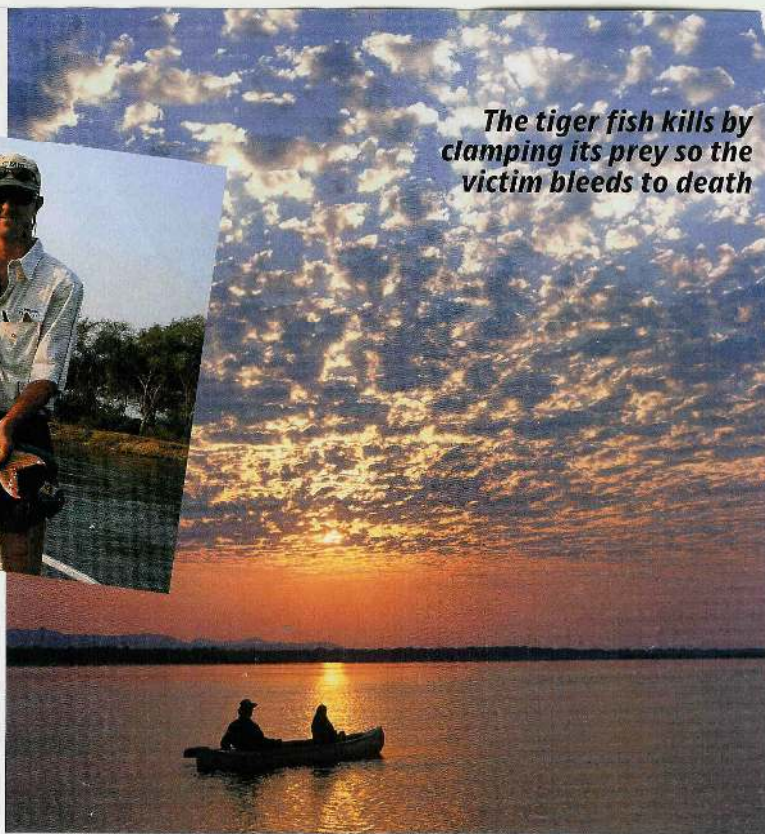


travel



**The tiger fish kills by clamping its prey so the victim bleeds to death**



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apa Hemingway may have dubbed them the green hills of Africa, but they look distinctly brownish as our light aircraft flits over them towards the Zambezi valley. A chap in a Manchester United T-shirt emerges from a tin shack and gives a friendly wave; this is air-traffic control *Zambian-style*. By the time I'm installed in the Sausage Tree Bar built out over the river, I already feel like an old Africa hand. Most folks fly to the Royal Zambezi Lodge for the game-viewing, and quite right too. This is a grande luxe camp on the Zim-Zam border, with good tiffin and plenty of wildlife, but our group of four was there to tackle something more elusive – the fabled tiger fish.

*Hydrocymus vittatus* (striped water-dog) is a kissing cousin of the piranha clan and derives its name from the black accents that stripe its chrome fuselage. It is also sabre-toothed. The hellish dentition consists of jaws with a unique front hinge that allows the aperture to adjust like a nutcracker and 14 teeth that fit into slots outside the mouth. The tiger fish kills by clamping its prey; its saliva contains an anticoagulant, so the victim bleeds to death. (It works on humans too.) Larger specimens – mostly females, wouldn't you know? – are said to eat baby crocodiles. In the Congo, where a Goliath species dwells, the word is that they attack swimmers and have 'a predilection for biting off their genitals'. Talk about nutcrackers.

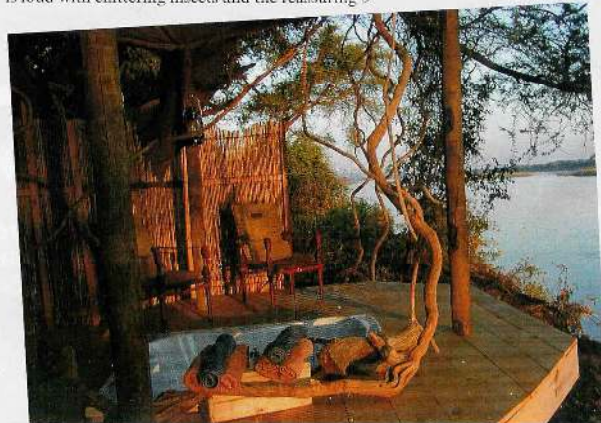
The alfresco rod rack at the lodge is merely a row of buffalo and crocodile skulls. My hands are quaking

as I string up my tackle, while an elderly baboon gives me the same contemptuous gaze that I normally get from the gillies of Speyside. I'm a tackle tart, and have brought along loads of tony gear – a new Sage fly rod and a whopper-stopper to use for spinning – but I wonder if it will be strong enough. Douglas, the guide, takes me and my host, Adrian Dangar, out for our first session aboard his big pontoon boat, while the renowned American angler Tat Starr and his wife Maysie head upstream.

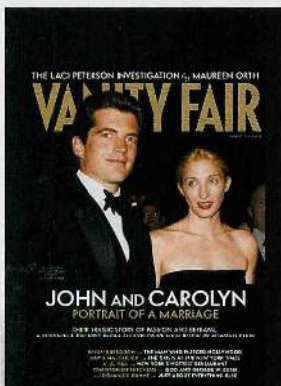
The river here is low and meanders rapidly. There is an agreeable breeze that keeps the bugs away, the heat of early afternoon has gone, and the shoreline is loud with chittering insects and the reassuring ▷

**Top left, Tat Starr and Garth Hovell (with tiger fish). Above, canoeing at sunrise on the Zambezi.**

**Below, Chiawa camp, in the Lower Zambezi National Park**







GLOSSY ON THE OUTSIDE  
GRITTY ON THE INSIDE



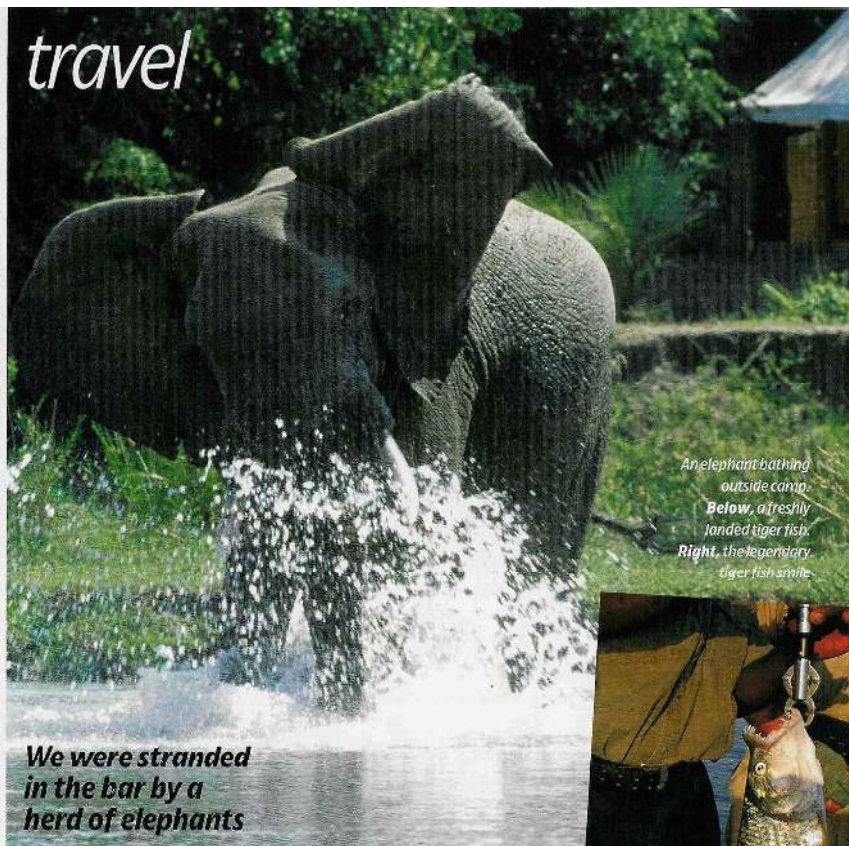
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# travel



An elephant bathing outside camp. Below, a freshly landed tiger fish. Right, the legendary tiger fish smile.

**We were stranded in the bar by a herd of elephants**

< voice of the red-eyed dove, seeming to call: 'Drink lager, work harder.' As the boat drifts rapidly with the current, you have to fire your big, flashy fly into the nooks and crannies where lurks your ferocious quarry. It is surprisingly hard, because there are lots of overhanging branches and grabby thorns, but it's precisely such 'structure' that make an ideal tiger motel.

The fly sinks fast, so your retrieve must be speedy too – by the end of the week, you'll have biceps like cantaloupes. I am just admiring a wallow full of hippos when it seems that my lure has been struck with a steam hammer. The rod wrenches round. A silvery missile erupts, rattles its head in a demented slam-dance and bolts for cover. With some effort, I hustle it to the boat after five minutes of ballistic aggression and find he weighs just three pounds. What a 20-pounder would be like, I can't imagine. But I am thrilled. There he lies, burning bright on the deck, my first tiger.

Up close, he is undoubtedly a handsome brute, with a fearful symmetry that combines thick muscle, fins of singed orange and a dramatically forked tail. He strikes like stored lightning and when you realise that the inside of that mouth is as hard as a saucepan (selflessly, I let Douglas handle him), it's small wonder you land only one in six that strike your lure. We are lucky and manage several more before the dashing Dangar decides to cool off in the

nearby shallows. Call me Caspar Milquetoast, but I stay safely aboard.

The dangers are quite real. When bank-fishing, I was several times warned not to venture too close to the edge because of crocs. Only a month ago, on the far side of the river, a woman had been torn from her canoe; she was never found. After dark you are escorted to and from your tent, and more than once we were stranded in the bar by interloping elephants. The organised game drives and foot safaris are quite safe, however – it's the stuff in the water you can't be sure of.

From an angler's point of view, this is paradise. We cast worms for chessa, nkupe and tilapia, and there's a hundred or more species here (it's best to avoid the electric barbel). One night, after a fine four-course dinner, Steve, the camp manager, suggested we try our luck for a mighty catfish called the vundu, a creature so big it deserves its own





postcode. I lobbed out some weighted bacon, put my feet up under the blooming stars and took a swig from the Paddy flask. Soon a sizzling run came off my reel. It felt as if I had snagged a passing jet-ski. I could barely hang on. Eventually I pumped it into the torchlight and there thrashed a vundu. 'That's a good fish,' said Steve laconically, opening a little gate in the boat and grasping the creature. At 45 pounds – my largest freshwater fish ever – it was returned alive and the capture duly toasted until we succumbed to the sandman.

After three idyllic days, we were transferred downriver to the sister

camp at Mwambashi, in the Lower Zambezi National Park. If your notion of life in the bush is the rough kiss of a military blanket at night, avoid these lodges with their comfortable Meru-style tents, tiled bathrooms and robust cuisine (faddists who batten on aubergine sorbet and free-range profiteroles should stay home in north London).

The day begins at half-past daft when a voice says 'Knoek, knock, *bwana*' at the flap of your tent and a nice chap calls you with a tray of tea. Soon the sun will rise with an absurdly nectarine brilliance, but for now you have the pre-dawn muttering and crunching of the riverine twilight. Hippos arc grunting like aldermen in a lap-dancing club and there's the reek of hyena in the air. Later there will be brunch and a welcome siesta, but now it's time to hunt the tiger again. (The place is a twitcher's delight as well, with a checklist of more than 380 birds, from the the painted snipe to the arrow-marked babbler.)

If anything, the sport was even better down here. I had two red-letter days, catching dozens of fish, including several double-figure trophies. My first was with Garth Hovell, the head guide, an expert and charismatic companion who took me to an island run known as the Triangle that hadn't been touched for a week. For half an hour I struck fish after fish until the water-dogs got wise. Anyway, I had to retire my fly to the clinic. As angling experiences go,

this was beyond excellent. Next morning, my local guide, Simba (yet another charming and knowledgeable boatman), took me down for a session with bait. To be honest, the fingers on my old Africa hand were by then so grooved from strikes on the flyline that I welcomed a spell of sitting soft. But I wasn't on my backside for long. I doubt I made more than six casts that session when a fish did not mouth the bait and, while lots of them threw the iron, I did boat three of 12 pounds and caught one weighing nine, fly-fishing from the bank. This was the Fish I Had Come For, and I settled in the bows to sup a snowbroth of chilled beer. It was time to head home.

My safari was rounded off by some dedicated game-viewing at Chaminuka, a remarkable lodge near Lusaka set in the largest private game reserve in the country. The home of Andrew Sardanis (who was closely involved in the independence movement) and his wife Danae, it offers modern creature comforts as well as the chance to see every kind of wildlife, from pythons to giraffes. Their collection of African art is world-class, and the ambience is a mixture of cosmopolitan and truly native. You should definitely include this as a stopover on your itinerary. It would make an ideal family base for the non-angler too.

I will certainly come back to Zambia before I am fitted for my wooden kimono. Until then, I have only to close my eyes to see his after-image burning brightly in my mind's eye. Oh tiger, my tiger. □



## Bite on

**Way to go** Wild & Exotic specialises in putting together parties for fishing and game-viewing. Ring 01439 748401.

**When to go** September and October are the best months for fishing.

**What to take** Light, neutral-coloured clothing, long and short sleeves, boots for on-foot game viewing, deck shoes or sandals for fishing; compact binoculars; a Leatherman or similar in belt pouch; insect repellent; sunscreen; twice as much camera film as you think you will need; anti-malaria tablets; US dollars.

**Fishing kit** At least two single-handed fly rods, rated for lines nine or 10, with fast-sink tips; reels holding 100-plus yards of backing, and tippet wire such as Tyger. For spinning

or baitcasting, a stout barracuda-class rod of around nine feet with a large-capacity fixed-spool reel (preferably with Baitrunner override lever or multiplier), loaded with 18-pound test. Bait, hooks and sinkers are provided, but you should take your own flies – Lefty's Deceiver or Clouser Minnow-style variants, dumbbell eyes, hooks 2/0–6/0 in white and blue with tinsel. Stripping guards or gloves and polarising glasses. Haemostats for unhooking fish and a Bogagrip landing tool with scales would be an advantage.

**What to read** *Somewhere Down the Crazy River*, by Paul Boote and Jeremy Wade. *Zambezi: River of the Gods*, by Jan and Fiona Teede. *Zambezi Tiger*, by Malcolm Meintjes. *Africa: Another Side of the Coin*, by Andrew Sardanis.



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