Let me return with part 2 of our African adventure.

When last we spoke we were driving around the Mala Mala game reserve in South Africa. This reserve, one of a large number in the Somi-Sand area that borders Kruger National Park, was originally a hunting lodge. (Somi-Sand refers to the two main rivers in the region.) In consequence, the main room of the lodge would make a perfect movie prop. A lion skin (replete with head) is on one wall, a mounted cape buffalo head on another along with numerous other hunting trophies. About 25 years ago the previous owner decided to switch to renewable hunting (that is with photographs rather than guns), but the initial switch was problematic economically. Shortly thereafter our Mr. Rattray, who lived on a smaller preserve nearby that his father owned, purchased Mala Mala. He combined the preserves and, moreover, began the successful lobbying to have the fences brought down that separated the preserves from the national park. (Obviously, the elimination of hunting on the preserves was the key to this step.) Now the animals roam over the entire area encompassing Kruger (which is truly huge) and the Somi-Sands area (with about 35 preserves). To provide some idea of scale, Mala Mala itself is about 40,000 square acres.

On our next-to-last morning at Mala Mala, we had quite the four-wheel drive adventure. Our morning ranger, who had earlier heard about a leopard spotting, had us race over to join the "nearby" jeep. As we drive into an area with very thick trees and bushes, there is no sign of either a leopard or a jeep. After a few moments, we spot a jeep apparently wedged in amongst some trees. We can't join the jeep, as the wedge spot is much too small for one jeep, let alone two, so we wait for the other jeep to leave. In a short while, it extricates itself and we wedge in. As we peer through thick brush, we see a small sandy wash. In the mottled shadows, there indeed is not one leopard but two. It appears we have come upon a mother leopard and her teenage son (for leopards the teenage years start at 2). The mother leopard is pregnant and feels it is time for the teenager to move on, so she is acting quite aggressive in an effort to encourage him to go. He doesn't want to go and keeps following his mom around. (This whole interaction bothered our eleven year old son, Greg, quite a bit.) Soon the two leopards head into even thicker bush. While we all are sorry we didn't get to view the leopards a bit longer, we are glad to have seen what we did.

As we appear to be exiting the thick brush surrounding the wash, our vehicle takes a sudden lurching turn down into even thicker brush. It appears we are on some out-of-control amusement park ride as we duck to avoid thrashing trees. Frantically, the spotter tries to steer branches out of our way as they come crashing into the vehicle. I speculate that our driver has suddenly lost control of the vehicle, which he has, although from the look on his face it is intentional. It appears he has been overcome with leopard illness. We begin to drive through areas that I think would be too thick to walk through. The leopards, beautifully camouflaged for the spotted sunlight and shadows, move silently ahead. We move somewhat less than silently before settling some way down the wash. Eventually the leopards move into the deeper bush and we wonder how we will get out. The wash is about the width of the jeep, we have descended a steep and overgrown bank and we cannot move forward. Luckily, our ranger's four-wheel driving skill is multidirectional. Unfortunately, we now need to prevent limbs from coming in over the back of the jeep, which turns out to be much more troublesome as they come sweeping down the
stadium seats with the obvious intent of clobbering each one of the people who have been driving over their brethren trees. The ranger’s branch guiding stick shatters, everyone gets whacked at least once and Julia asks the ranger "What type of tree is the one you are destroying now?" as we rev up and over the fallen denizen of the forest.

Amazingly, shortly after extricating ourselves we spot a third leopard. It is a female who is also an offspring of the mom with the teenage son. As she is a bit older and ready to start her own family, she is definitely trespassing. As we watch her move cautiously (or is that gingerly?) into the area, it seems clear that she is aware her mom might not give her a great reception. At this point, Greg looked a bit nervously at Julia, hoping there was no real link between leopard behavior and our family.

The following morning we boarded our plane to head for Zambia. As we drive to the landing strip, we see a pair of rhinos. Then a warthog mom and her four offspring, running at full speed with their hair literally standing on end. A predator is about! But we have miles to go before we fly, so we cannot watch this particular drama. As I converse with our ranger (the only Shangan ranger) I learn that when the first airplane arrived in this area about 70 years ago, a Shangan elder remarked "When that bird has a baby, can I have it?" What a great cross-cultural remark.

This might be a good time to tell you a bit about our plane. We fare flying on a DC-4 made in 1957. The plane is absolutely beautiful and when we take-off or land you have the feeling that every pilot in the airport is watching this classic go by. For those with enough knowledge or memory, you will know that the DC-4 is not pressurized. This has two interesting features. First, we are never more than about 5,000 feet above the ground, so we can actually see things as we fly. Second, the windows are quite large, so you really have the feeling of flying as a luxury experience. As the plane is chartered for our group, we are invited into the cockpit. The view as we glide over Southern Africa is quite remarkable (as, I am sure, is the view of the cockpit instrumentation to anyone used to modern avionics).

Our pilot must have been hired by the same casting company that found Mr. Rattray (the Mala Mala game preserve owner). He emerges from the cockpit before take-off to welcome us, give us a trip report and generally exude bonhomie. I joke with another passenger that he is the same vintage as the aircraft, and his British ex-pat accent and slang are truly wonderful. "Today we'll be flying up to Zambia and you should have a good view of Vic Falls. No doubt you'll see flat dogs while we are there." Flat dogs are, indeed, crocodiles.

As we head north north-west to Zambia we are taking a route to Victoria Falls that has been greatly influenced by recent politics. South Africa’s northern border is ringed by Namibia on the west, then Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique (on the eastern edge). In years past, most travelers searching for Victoria Falls headed to Zimbabwe. The rule of Robert Mugabe has so thoroughly infected the country that Zambia has now become the destination of choice for Victoria Falls travelers. (While we were in Southern Africa, Mugabe decided to reduce inflation in his country by passing a law that all shopkeepers had to reduce prices by 50%. Those who did not comply were then put in jail. I have no doubt that there are far fewer shopkeepers in Zimbabwe this week then there were just a few months
As we flew in, we saw great clouds of mist that marked the site of the falls. The falls are on the Zambezi river, which at this point serves as the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe. We landed in Livingstone Town. Our hotel was right on the river in the midst of a national park. As a result, animals freely moved from the bushlands of the park across the grounds of the hotel. Vervet monkeys are quite common here and we were warned not to leave our room doors open. It turns out that open does not mean ajar, it means unlocked. One morning Julia spotted a monkey hanging on a door handle and pulling down. Luckily that door was locked. In addition to the monkeys, giraffe would sometimes graze very close to the road and zebra would often stroll through. To emphasize the point, when we checked into our room we found a letter for us. It very formally welcomed us as guests and then cautioned us that the zebra, monkeys and other animals were wild and should be treated appropriately. It went on: "Please be advised that a python has also been seen on the property. We are making every effort to ensure that it is removed. Kindly refrain from approaching it and report immediately to our staff if you sight it."

The Zambezi flows right in front of the hotel and it is quite wide at this point and rapidly flowing. As we are roughly one kilometer from the falls, it would be a bad idea to go for a swim here. But of course, this is Africa, so it is a bad idea to go for a swim anywhere. As one friend noted, if you went in you'd likely die before you got to the falls. Why? Well, let me point out that there is a very serious fence separating the hotel grounds from the river bank. I'll bet you have guessed that the fence keeps out crocodiles. Correct. Early one morning the three of us were strolling the grounds looking for all sorts of interesting animals and we spotted a flat dog just outside the fence. We also noted some rather large tracks in the sand bank. They were roundish and deeply imprinted. Got any guesses?

To set the stage for our track (or spoor) answer, let me return to our arrival in Livingstone Town. Shortly after arriving, we went for a sunset cruise on the Zambezi. This was as cool as it sounds. We were in a modified paddlewheel steamer called the African Princess. I looked for, but did not find, Humphrey Bogart. As we traveled up the river we scanned the water near the islands in the middle of the river. And what to our wondering eyes should appear but miniature ears. Wiggling. As we got closer the ears grew in size, became attached to heads and yawning open mouths appeared. Hippos. Large numbers of them swimming in the water near the banks. Small hippos riding along with moms or dads, large hippos, hippos of all sizes. Wow.

As I studied the hippos through my binoculars I heard "You know, they're nocturnal." I turned and found Fausto, our resident naturalist. Now I have not yet mentioned Fausto, as he deserves special treatment. Every camp one visits has their own, resident, rangers. They drive you around and provide information on the natural history of the area. Fausto was a guide that accompanied (and led) our group. As I spoke more with Fausto, I realized that he had a depth of knowledge and experience that was truly remarkable. "Yes, the hippos graze at night when it is cooler and spend the hot part of the days in the water. In fact they sleep under water." OK, I'm in. How on earth do they sleep UNDER WATER? "Their bodies trigger a breathing response that does not wake them, so they actually surface and submerge subconsciously."
Doesn't a chubby, snoozing hippo seem like an ideal meal for a crocodile? The fact that the animals have evolved this way indicates that things might not work out so well for the crocs. I remembered an interesting sight I had seen at Mala Mala. On the entrance porch there were a collection of four skulls. The first was easy to recognize, cape buffalo. Now, we all know how large a bison skull is and the cape buffalo is certainly equal in size. So I was a bit surprised when I realized that the cape buffalo skull was by far the smallest of the four. One had to be an elephant, but what were the other two enormous skulls. Closer inspection revealed a hole for a horn in one, ah ha, rhinoceros. But what was the other? It had enormous incisors. The base of each of the two lower incisors was about 3 inches in circumference and they curved to a very sharp tip some 8 inches away from the base. Boy, those are big teeth. I asked, what is that? "Hippo." Wow. The Shangan spotter I was talking with remarked that there are indeed a matching pair of incisors in the top jaw to complete the set. So, the next time you watch Fantasia and see the dancing hippos with little blunt teeth you should know that they have taken a few liberties with the facts. These four teeth mean that crocodiles leave hippos alone. "The only animal that kills a male hippo is another male hippo." It seems that lions aren't the only animals that sit atop the predator chain.

So, as you have no doubt figured out, the round tracks near our hotel were made by a hippo. And everyone I encountered, from a jeep driving ranger to a canoe guide agreed, hippos are far more dangerous than crocodiles. That would explain why the fence between our hotel and the Zambezi river was far higher than would be needed to keep out flat dogs.

After a beautiful sunset on the Zambezi, we headed to a park along the river. As the sky darkened, torches and fires were lit and a group of Zambian drummers, replete with a large number of extra drums appeared. We all had a chance to join them in an impromptu drum circle, a very fun event. (This actually worked, unlike say, an impromptu violin circle.)

In addition to the drum circle, I got a brief language lesson. I had learned to say thank you in Shangan (in-ko-moo). The principal dialect across Zambia is Nyanja, in which thank you very much is (zee-ko-moo kwam-beelie). Well, these two are sufficiently close that I wondered if I could master thank you in all the local dialects. No. You'll see why with a quick glance at the table of the seven major dialects of Zambia:

- Nyanja - zikomo (zee-ko-moo) kwambili
- Lozi - litumezi
- Tonga - twalumba
- Bemba - twatasha
- Kaonde - twasanta-mwane
- Lunda - tunasakiliku
- Luvale - tunasakwiliku

Needless to say, with such fractionalization of local languages, the language brought by European colonists soon served as the common means of communication. Throughout Southern Africa, English plays this role. Swahili is a bit like Bahasa Indonesia; a simplified language designed to allow for common
communication across different language groups. Swahili appears to have made little or no inroads in the areas we visited.

The next day we walked to Victoria Falls. The origin of the falls is quite interesting. About 10,000 years ago a vast geologic uplift diverted the course of the major rivers in Southern Africa. The Zambezi was diverted across large lava plain. As the river crossed the plane it encountered a crack, not far from the edge of the plane. Over the course of a thousand years, the river eroded the crack into a chasm, creating a waterfall. This has happened eight times thus far, so Victoria Falls cascades into a system of narrow gorges and cataracts. If one measures the size of a waterfall by area (height times width), then Victoria Falls is the largest in the world. And it is quite a sight. As we watched the water thundering over the falls from the side of the river, we learned that earlier in the month an elephant had been swept to its death over the falls. "Only baby crocodiles have been known to survive the drop", someone is telling me as I gaze out. I am tempted to ask how they check.

Keeping in mind that the falls head down into a large crack, you can imagine the footpath we found ourselves on. Rather than simply looking at the waterfall from the edge of the river, there is a path along the lava wall that faces the waterfall. As the crack/chasm is no more than 200 feet wide, all the spray that accompanies a waterfall of this size is forced up into the air by the wall of lava that we were now on top of. Hence a very serious need for rain gear. We walked through a perpetual rainbow, glimpsing the brink of the falls through clouds of mist while the noise of the falling water eliminated conversation. Almost on cue a wind came up, billowing the clouds higher into the air and away from our walk, revealing a panoramic of waterfalls surrounding us on all sides. Awesome.

The next day began an adventure of a very different sort. Each of the families on the trip shared three things in common: a desire to travel with three generations (grandparents, parents, children), an interest in nature and an interest in "social help" in Africa. It turned out that these three factors created a large common ground and I found that I very much enjoyed all of our fellow travelers. Our social help on this trip was in the form of classrooms for a school in Livingstone Town. On previous trips, the group that coordinated our trip had built classrooms at a primary school in this town. Further, some of our fellow travelers had also paid for classrooms or other forms of school support. Our destination on this Sunday was a different school, a school for HIV/Aids orphans in Livingstone Town. Each of the children in our group had a penpal from the orphanage. Greg had communicated with his penpal David, several times beginning last fall. When we arrived, Greg and David met and found the sort of connections that children around the world often experience. It was hard to fathom the emotional trauma David must have gone through, but on this day there was joy and happiness. Greg's prized soccer shirt is now happily worn by an 11 year old in Zambia and David's picture is front and center on Greg's corkboard.

As we left the school, I departed with Zikomo Kwambili on my tongue and tears in my eyes.

Stay tuned for part 3 and the road to Botswana.