

set beside the  
mighty and meandering  
zambezi

river,  
Mpala Jena feels as effortless and relaxed  
as its hippopotamus locals







Words, Photography & Styling by Emma Jude Jackson

‘The Zambezi River has always exerted a spell on me. It’s the awe-inspiring sight of the mighty falls, it’s observing massive 4m-long crocodiles basking in the sun along the river’s edge, it’s a memory of the fear I felt when I was brave enough to bungee jump off the Victoria Falls bridge, into the great abyss, with the roar of the river thundering in my ears.’

– Kevin Lang

**Previous spreads** Upstream from the mighty Victoria Falls, Mpala Jena lies along the winding Zambezi River. The river is a constant presence in the lodge, and buildings orientate and open up to her cooling breezes and calming vistas. The guest areas at Mpala Jena are layered with screens, shutters and curtains, that can be opened up on all sides to frame the river, or closed in for fireside comfort on cooler nights.

**Right** A baby crocodile basking on a fallen log along the edge of the river.







The hippos wading along the shores of the Zambezi River look more smug than any others I've ever seen on safari. This majestic, winding river offers them such an abundance of territory and so little disturbance that they appear to be permanently on holiday. Their contented grunts and groans become the exquisite soundtrack to a stay in this part of Southern Africa.

On one of my many blissful mornings at Mpala Jena, I sat on the wooden deck of my riverside suite, after first coaxing myself out of my extraordinarily comfortable bed with a freshly brewed cup of Zimbabwean coffee and homemade biscuits, and meditated to the sight of a hippo slowly flowing down the river in front of me. It was being carried by nothing more than the current and this sublime moment served as a wonderful example of just how impossible it is to carry tension, or the weight of anything from the outside world, when you find yourself at a place like this.

'The Zambezi River has always exerted a spell on me', shares lodge owner, South African Kevin Lang. 'It's the awe-inspiring sight of the mighty falls, it's observing massive 4m-long crocodiles basking in the sun along the river's edge, it's a memory of the fear I felt when I was brave enough to bungee jump off the Victoria Falls bridge, into the great abyss, with the roar of the river thundering in my ears.

'Once we had established our four unique lodges in the Okavango Delta, as well as Bumbusi, a little gem of a camp in Hwange National Park, I knew that my heart would not rest until I had completed a circuit that included a camp on the Zambezi River. My wife Shannon and I started collecting images of our dream camp long before we were fortunate enough to acquire the beautiful site that is Mpala Jena today,

so this is a project that I am extremely proud of,' says Kevin. Architects Hayman + Charlton and KZN-based interior designer Tracy Kelly worked together to gently interpret the couple's vision for the location, leaning into the vernacular building language of the region and working with highly skilled Zimbabwean thatchers, stoneworkers, carpenters and artisans to create an intimate, low-key hideaway.

While Mpala Jena has been designed and styled with all the comforts of a luxury safari lodge, and has a hardworking staff complement to match, at its heart is an invitation to simply leave your shoes at the door and settle in as if staying at a private holiday home. Soft white sand beaches carry guests down to the water's edge and decor elements include natural wood, ilala palm motifs and artworks, and shades of blue and green, ranging from deep teal to sage, reflecting the surrounding landscape. Fun bar swings, hammocks, bean bags, pool loungers, and large couches you can sink into with a book or a pair of binoculars, invite relaxation at every turn.

'Arriving at this magical camp feels like coming home. As much as the relaxed atmosphere is so welcoming, I think for me it's the connection with our team that makes it so special. Most have been with us since the build and it feels like we have all grown and bonded together with Mpala Jena as our home. It has been incredible to see individual growth and confidence and I feel deeply proud of what the team have achieved in making Mpala Jena the gem it is,' shares Shannon Lang.

Like extended family, the Mpala Jena team and their home-away-from-home river lodge welcomes families, couples, and guests of all ages to its shores. And here, four days end up feeling like fourteen. ● [@mpalajena\\_zambezi.greatplainsconservation.com/safari/mpala-jena/](https://mpalajena_zambezi.greatplainsconservation.com/safari/mpala-jena/)

**Left** Architect Craig Hayman, of Hayman + Charlton Architects, worked to create a contemporary lodge that focuses on relaxation and a deep connection to location. Communal guest areas have thatched roofs with playful scalloped motifs and ridge lines shaped like crocodile skin, the result of the talented Zimbabwean thatchers, demonstrating their skill and flair. **Next spread** The design of Mpala Jena centers around the concept of barefoot luxury. The feel of the lodge is consciously low-key, and a deliberate step away from the traditional safari lodge. The lodge's dining room is filled with local artworks and objects.









**This spread and next spread** Each guest suite has a private living area and outdoor bath and shower that faces directly onto the river. The contented grunts and groans of hippos become the exquisite soundtrack to a stay at Mpala Jena.





