

# Welcome to the lovably eccentric world of wilderness worshippers Chris and Charlotte



*Above: A stroll at dawn  
Page 27: Chris makes a point*

**O**ut in the wilds – and we do mean the wilds – of Kafue National Park, husband-and-wife team Charlotte and Chris McBride have defied all odds by running a camp they built from nothing, one that offers the lucky visitor a truly back-to-basics, although still very comfortable, experience.

Charlotte and Chris make a formidable and highly complementary team. There is a clear demarcation of roles, with Charlotte doing all the work while Chris – the self-styled “walker and talker” – does what he is best at in his role as one of the world’s leading experts on lions.

As a guide, Chris is something of an eccentric, especially in terms of his idiosyncratic bush attire, which makes no concession to the latest in chic d’Afrique.

On his head, placed at a slightly rakish angle, is the sort of hat that might be worn by a hard-bitten Australian sheep farmer. Below the distinctive headgear is an unkempt but luxuriant crop of sharply cut thick grey hair that would provoke envy from many men half his age, and this thatch is splendidly complemented by a beard of similar density and hue.

Around his neck is a tartan wool scarf of indeterminate clan (not McBride) tied loosely like a cravat beneath an open shirt undone to the fourth button.

Over this he wears an old and strangely incongruous tweed jacket that appears to be about two sizes too small, so that his arms extend further than would normally be the case



from such an item of apparel.

His neatly pressed but battered trousers have seen better days, too, and his soft boots have a scuffed quality that can only have come from long bush walks in the dry season.

To add to his unusual persona, Chris McBride has a habit of heading off into the bush in search of his beloved lions still clutching a mug of leaf tea (no tea bags here, then, not even in the depths of Kafue National Park). Once emptied, the mug is left dangling on the branch of a passing tree to be collected on his way back to camp.

## EFFORTLESS

By contrast, Charlotte McBride is the epitome of effortless efficiency – at least outwardly – as she takes in her stride the task of running a remote bush camp.

By now you are probably asking yourself how and why the McBrides came to the wilderness of Kafue National Park to build and run the eponymous camp.

It’s a long story, but the origins can be traced to the fact that a large rural property owned by the McBride family in Eastern Transvaal was sold by a trust after the death of Chris’s father in the mid 1980s. Under the terms of this sale, the McBrides had the right to stay on the land for a further 10 years.

When this period of grace ended, the McBrides were effectively homeless. The property had been in the family since 1948 and was home to lions, elephants and a host of other wildlife. “The place was in my blood,” said



*Left: A walk on the wild side  
Below: Make do and mend*

Chris. “We had owned the property since I was a child and the highlight of any year was a trip to this expanse of bush. My father was keen on lions and he walked after them and that’s where I got it from. I used to go to view lions with a Zulu tracker called Jack Mathebula.” It is worth noting that McBride is a fluent Zulu speaker and has his own Zulu name, Impangele

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Enhle Ekhala Egijima, while Charlotte grew up in the Zambian bush and has developed an uncanny rapport with everything in it.

He went on: “I was very sad about the sale, but Charlotte said let’s just find somewhere else. So we looked at one or two options in terms of a new place to live and we did consider the remote Niassa Reserve in northern Mozambique that was being revived after the civil war. But it was six days’ drive from Jo’burg and clearly difficult to reach and the nearest supply point was Pemba, itself a long way off.

“At that time I knew nothing about Kafue, but came here in 1998 to undertake some lion research work in conjunction with the Zambian Wildlife Authority.”

And, coincidence or not, since his arrival in Kafue there has been a remarkable turnaround in the concentrations of game within the Park.

Until the late 1990s, poaching on the east bank of the Kafue River had been a major problem. According to Chris, however, the Anti-poaching Incentive Programme funded by the World Bank and organised through the Norwegian Embassy in Lusaka has had a positive impact on the Park’s wildlife numbers.

When they first arrived in Kafue, the couple stayed in an old tent. “It was just so wild and this really appealed to us,” said Charlotte. “Across the river there are thousands of square kilometres of land with no roads, absolutely nothing, and that was the attraction and we realised that other people would love it, too.”

The McBrides’ backer, a prominent local businessman, not only applied for and secured the site – already part of ZAWA’s management plan for Kafue – but also agreed to fund the whole project. So Charlotte went to the Park with ZAWA officials and marked out the four-hectare plot.

**FEEL OF THE PLACE**

“Chris and I then came up here with four Zambians and put up a tent and we stayed here for a while without doing anything in particular and just got a feel of the place,” said Charlotte. “So, on and off, we spent three months here and hippos would walk past our tent and we would monitor where they went and slowly we got the feel of how we should live here. We knew where to place the hut for the dining area, for example, so as not to disturb a hippo path, and we did



Right: Charlotte and Chris: a formidable team  
Below: Big cat up close



not cut down a single tree in creating the camp. It took about six months to build the camp from local materials and all items are Zambian-made.”

**“We are still seeing new and exciting things virtually every day.”**

The camp opened in October 2002 and the McBrides welcomed their first guests. “These inaugural guests liked it so much they have come back every year since,” said a delighted Charlotte. “We emphasised walking safaris, as these are much more interesting, and we have a hippo pod directly in front of the camp.”

Hardly a day passes without leopard, lion and other creatures passing right

through the camp, which also has its own resident hippo, known affectionately as Simple Simon, a lone male who has been rejected from the pod.

In all there are seven comfortably furnished chalets – five large rooms and two small rooms, all en-suite – plus a thatched living and dining area. The Camp is open all year round unless the rains are particularly heavy, as in early 2007.

**BUSH CAMP**

In addition to the main McBrides’ Camp there is a makeshift bush camp 14 km downstream in still more remote area that can be reached either by boat or on foot.

The McBrides admit their Camp is not for first-time visitors to Africa. It’s

a place for the experienced and those who want to experience wilderness rather than just seeing the big five. In fact, McBrides has just been placed in 129th position in “Getaway’s 1001 Places to See Before you Die”, which says everything about the Camp’s unique set up.

Chris said: “It’s also important to understand the difference between Kafue National Park and low veld areas such as South Luangwa or the Lower Zambezi. The low veld has a high biomass but comparatively low diversity, whereas Miombo areas such as Kafue and Niassa are low biomass but high diversity – the opposite, generally speaking.” But he added: “You need to see both areas, as they are complementary. What’s more, there are almost no humans here. This is remote. For example, only once in six years have I seen someone else out walking.

Between them, Chris and Charlotte have at least 50 years’ experience of the bush and they continue to love their shared life in Kafue: “We are still seeing new and exciting things virtually every day.”

*Chris McBride has a Master’s degree in Wildlife Management from the University of California at Humboldt and has written three books about lions as well as a scientific paper. More recently he has appeared on Animal Planet in a highly respected film entitled ‘White Lions, King of Kings’ and he and Charlotte, together with a valued friend in the USA, have nearly completed a book about their experiences at McBrides’.*

