



The story of Tongabezi

I came to Zambia in 1986 and started out selling microlight aeroplanes and doing flight instruction. It was the perfect excuse to fly around the country, but whilst great fun, it was not going to take me far long term. Will Ruck Keene and I had been introduced to each other by mutual friends in 1987, and we started hatching plans to run safaris in Zambia. I found the ideal location consisting of two adjacent properties with individual owners.

The first was owned by a Mrs De Necludoff and I entered negotiations with a view to Will and I developing it into a lodge. Long and protracted discussions over six months failed to reach an agreement in the end, as Mrs D kept changing her mind about the sale (this property later became the River Club). In 1988 we found the owner of the second site, a retired bank manager, who was living on a farm outside Lusaka. We went to see him with an offer and he promptly accepted. It then took 18 months for us to be granted title of the land due to an unofficial ruling in government that non Zambians could not buy land on any of Zambia's borders.

While waiting for the title transfer we started to clear the land, put up a fence and then proceeded to build five tented chalets and dig a swimming pool. Inspired by the local people and the Zambezi we named our project Tongabezi. Will had a very artistic streak and was the main designer. One of his pet hates was straight lines and square buildings, and to this day there are not too many of those around at Tongabezi...

The five chalets were completed in 1990, and we opened in June. The following year we decided to build a Honeymoon House, which was completed in 1991. The house proved so popular that we continued the trend and built the Tree House, Bird House and Dog House in the '90's. Zimbabwe was really booming and we could feed off this market from 1992 through to 1999. For most of this time we were the only lodge right on the Zambezi in either country giving us a very competitive edge. In 1992 we decided to build a bush camp on an island, and identified the island with the best aspect, overlooking the Victoria Falls National Park in Zimbabwe. We had a bit of an issue with the international border, but have letters from both the Zimbabwean and the Zambian Surveyor Generals confirming that Sindabezi Island (as we baptized it) is indeed a Zambian Island. Initially Sindabezi was very basic with sand floors in the rooms, but over the years we have gradually upgraded the rooms.

The next big step was gaining the lease for Livingstone Island in 1992. Initially we had a small tented camp on the island which we mainly used for accommodation at the end of a two night canoeing trip. On the last morning we would walk the guests off the island and across Victoria Falls. Over the years our operation changed and while we no longer offer accommodation on Livingstone Island it is still possible to visit the island and explore the top of Victoria Falls. When we first started lunches on the island in 1993, guests still walked onto and off the island with provisions carried in cool boxes. Today food and drinks are prepared in a small bush kitchen.



BEN AND VANESSA PARKER CUTTING THE 20TH YEAR CELEBRATION CAKE

During this time another individual who would prove pivotal to the success of Tongabezi arrived on the scene. Vanessa Saunders came out to Zambia to volunteer as a mathematics teacher. I convinced her to stay in the capacity of my wife and she convinced Will and I of the importance of running Tongabezi with the emphasis on promoting and training the local team.

On the 1st of May 1996 Vanessa opened the doors to a preschool for 15 children. Tujatane has since grown into a primary school with more than 160 children – thanks to hard work and funding from donors worldwide. It has made a huge difference to the community surrounding Tongabezi and it has fostered strong bonds between the operation and the people who work in and around it.

Will died in a tragic car accident in June 1997. He was very much pivotal to the style and success of Tongabezi, and the business took a big knock in his absence.

In recent years developments continue. The quality of the Tongabezi and Sindabezi product is constantly upgraded – rooms, public areas, gardens and our famous individualized service all benefit from extensive training in all departments. Our core emphasis going forward from 2008 has been to go as green as possible. We have succeeded in radically reducing our environmental footprint through advanced grey water recycling, organic garden produce and we are approaching 0% charcoal usage. Sindabezi Island was completely rebuilt in 2009. It is currently the most environmentally friendly island on the Zambezi River.

2010 has seen the addition of the Lookout – an entire structure dedicated to sitting back, marvelling at the natural beauty of Zambia, regaining perspective and encouraging creative thought. To cater for small groups or families travelling together we have built the Garden House with two full size en-suite bedrooms and private walled garden with a plunge pool and in 2013 the team completed the new Dog House; a double bedroom, luxury, riverfront house to comfortably accommodate families and groups travelling together.

Twenty years after we welcomed our first guests Tongabezi has become something of a benchmark in relaxation but we continue to look to the future and work hard to ensure 100% guest (and of course agent) satisfaction.

THIS BRIEF HISTORY BY BEN PARKER