

## **Sports Afield – By Craig Boddington**

### **Mozambique Buffalo**



**Mozambique is now one of the best countries in Africa for a buffalo hunt.**

*By Craig Boddington*

The sun was dropping fast when we walked up on my buffalo, and it would be long past dark by the time we got back to our spike camp at the edge of the big swamp. But this was the third buffalo we'd taken that day, all mature bulls—and as we brought in the Argos and did the necessary work, there were four other herds in sight, at all points of the compass.

We were in the Zambezi Delta of coastal Mozambique, right at the edge of the Marromeu Reserve. The specific hunting area we were in was Coutada 11, one of several big coutadas—hunting areas—that adjoin the reserve. A 2011 count funded by the World Wildlife Fund put the Marromeu herds at 13,500. It doesn't really matter if this is a precise number or not. Conducted by an organization that is, at best, neutral to hunting, it's approximate, and considers only the buffalo in and around the

floodplains, ignoring hundreds of buffalo found in the surrounding miombo forests. Any way you slice it, coastal Mozambique is one of the best places to hunt buffalo in modern Africa.

*Donna Boddington and outfitter Mark Haldane with a nice Zambezi Delta buffalo, taken in Coutada 11 in October 2011.*



Times change, and hunting areas change. In the 1960s, before my time, Mozambique was one of the most game-rich areas in Africa. Then came independence and the long civil war, and by the late 1980s very little wildlife remained.

In those days, Botswana was a fantastic destination for buffalo and plains game—and elephant hunting was closed. The buffalo are still there, likewise the plains game. But elephant hunting has been open since 1996, and the politics have changed. Botswana’s buffalo quota is tiny. Which means Botswana’s buffalo, though excellent, are extremely expensive.

Namibia and South Africa also have excellent genetics for producing big buffalo. But the safari industry is a supply-and-demand business. Few buffalo are available in either country, and not all are free range. If you’re in the fortunate position of not caring what things cost, then both countries have some good ones.

Farther north, both Zambia and Tanzania, depending on the area, can be exceptionally good for buffalo. Technically, Tanzania produces some of the continent’s best buffalo trophies—but not in all areas, and not at all times of the year. Zambia is also very good, again depending on area and timing. My own personal best buffalo came from Tanzania’s Masailand, a traditional place to look for a big buffalo—but my number two and number three trophies came from Zambia. The problem is that both countries have developed as “general bag” safari countries, stressing cats and the indigenous rarities rather than a shorter buffalo safari along with a limited selection of plains game. Again, if price is not an issue, or if you’re looking for buffalo as part of a larger safari rather than the primary goal, then Tanzania and Zambia are both excellent choices.

Which brings us to the two primary countries for a “buffalo safari” today: Mozambique and Zimbabwe. When I’m thinking of a “buffalo safari,” I’m thinking about buffalo as the primary quarry,

duration of the safari averaging ten days, and a modest selection of plains game also available. This is a very important niche in the safari market, and just a few years ago, Zimbabwe had it pretty much to herself. I've had a number of great buffalo hunts in both countries, and despite her severe political problems I have remained a champion of Zimbabwe. But in the last few seasons I have actually spent more time in Mozambique, especially the big coutadas around the Zambezi Delta.

Here I've actually been able to watch the numbers increase from maybe 7,000 a few years ago to nearly double that today. Advantages: There are few lions in the area, and the quotas are reasonable, allowing the herds to increase rapidly. One disadvantage: Poaching! In both Zimbabwe and Mozambique, the better outfitters have a pretty good handle on it, and run effective anti-poaching. But Africa is Africa. There will be "semi-official" poaching by local luminaries, there will be meat poaching, and, regrettably, there will be rogue outfitters. Coutada 10 in coastal Mozambique has recently changed hands, and one of the reasons, at least according to rumor, was gross overshooting of quota. Yet, in the wake of this, the game count continues to increase. In my experience this is a rarity in wild Africa, and is one of the reasons why I am increasingly supportive of Mozambique.



*Craig Boddington and Bill Jones with a very nice Mozambique buffalo from the floodplains of Coutada 11. Bill Jones used a scoped .404 Jeffery, probably a better choice on open floodplains than the open-sighted .500 Jeffery carried by the author.*

The big disadvantage to buffalo hunting in coastal Mozambique: In general it is non-traditional. Rather than tracking, as we all dream of doing, much of the hunting out in the open floodplains is done by glassing for the big herds—primarily looking for birds circling above the buffalo—and then stalking. The stalking, of course, is the same (except, in the swamp, consider bringing kneepads!), but the hunting is different. Even this is changing. As numbers increase—and poaching is more controlled—larger numbers of buffalo are moving into the forest. Mark Haldane's Zambeze Delta Safaris ([gamehunt@sai.co.za](mailto:gamehunt@sai.co.za)) controls the hunting in both Coutadas 11 and 12. Coutada 11 has access to the floodplains, but at over a million acres also has vast forest areas. Today they have buffalo in both, with an increasing number of their quota taken in the forest. Adjoining Coutada 12, even larger, has no frontage on the floodplain at all—but they have no problem taking a double-digit quota of buffalo in the forest, provided they concentrate late in the season, when the cover is down.

The last few years I've hunted in Coutadas 10, 11, 12, and 14, the primary Delta areas. All are good, all

are slightly different. All offer a significant mix of plains game along with buffalo—and at this writing, prices are as reasonable as it gets for buffalo hunting in our new millennium. The swamp hunting, either on foot or with Argos, is so different from Zimbabwe-style tracking that we've focused on that—but in seasons to come I'm sure I'll hunt Mozambique buffalo in the forest, where the buffalo are definitely increasing.



*The historic problem in the Zambezi Delta has been access, along with recovery of game. Swamp vehicles like the Canadian Argo have allowed much greater access than ever before.*