

Return of the traveller

SUE WATT
RETURNS TO
ZIMBABWE
TO FIND THE
COUNTRY
OPENING UP TO
TOURISM AND
CHANNELLING
EFFORTS
INTO WILDLIFE
CONSERVATION.

Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe

WHEN I FIRST SAW VICTORIA FALLS, IT WAS AT ITS MOST MAJESTIC, every roaring inch living up to its local name Mosi ao Tunya, 'the smoke that thunders'. Walking through rainbows in that infamous spray, I laughed like a child as my huge, allegedly waterproof, poncho proved useless. I was drenched to the bone.

But despite my feelings of exhilaration, I felt desperately sad too. This was May 2004 and the people of Victoria Falls, the town on the Zimbabwean side of the iconic world heritage site, were stuck in a spiral of economic ruin and despair, victims of President Robert Mugabe's brutal politics. Most visitors stayed away: hotels were deserted, shops bare, and the touts desperate and intimidating. A heavy cloud of hopelessness hung over everything.

But in October 2011, at the end of a trip to neighbouring Zambia, I returned to a very different Victoria Falls. While the Zambezi was calm, resting before the rains, across the border Zimbabwe was buzzing with a new vibrancy and warmth, a new self-belief. Gone was the gloomy air of despondency: hotels were packed with visitors, shops full of colourful crafts and carvings, and touts had virtually disappeared. Three relaxing days spent on walks, sunset cruises and helicopter rides over the falls convinced me that it was time to return to Zimbabwe.

Fast forward six months and I'm in Mana Pools National Park, standing on the banks of the Zambezi, this time in Zimbabwe. The whole place looks green and lush, sated by the rains and the swollen river. Mana means 'four' in the Shona language: the four pools, which give the park its name, draw in wildlife in droves during the dry season. Green Pool looks almost neon green, reflecting the reeds and lilac-blossomed water hyacinths around its shore, while the waters of the aptly-named 6km Long Pool are churned muddy brown by the wallowing hippos and elephants.

I'm staying at the luxury Kanga Camp, hidden away deep in the park's lush greenery. Overlooking Kanga Pan, a lily-strewn waterhole that in

< the drier months attracts a wealth of wildlife, it is achingly beautiful here. Even after the rains, when most animals stay well-hidden, I watch an elephant lumbering across the pan, herons stand deadly still on one leg, as monkeys swing from the branches like dare-devil acrobats.

My tent is charming, with a sumptuous double bed, leather chairs and a roll-top bath on a private terrace overlooking the pan. Alternatively, guests can stay on the riverbank in Kanga's new Zambezi Lifestyle Camp, while true romantics can sleep under the stars on raised wooden decks, with just a mosquito net between you and the glittering African sky.

You can't help but feel an intimate connection with the bush here. Unlike most African national parks, Mana Pools allows visitors the freedom to walk around the park even without an armed ranger, although they can be hired from the main gate. Canoeing is possible too, but I choose an afternoon stroll along the sandy Chivava riverbed to watch vivid purple-crested turaco flirting above, dwarf mongooses playing hide-and-seek on termite mounds and impala skipping off into the bush. Enjoying sundowners as dusk falls, my guide suddenly whispers: "Shh, I can hear an elephant's ear flapping." Sure enough, two minutes later, an old bull emerges out of the woods and saunters past.

In Hwange National Park, in the west of the country, such encounters are far from uncommon, with 20-30,000 elephants migrating between here and Botswana. I see playful calves frolicking in waterholes, wise old matriarchs leading breeding herds along the plains, and bulls, often solitary, searching for mates. At sunset, we all gather at the pan for an evening drink: the elephants even slurp water from the swimming pool at the wonderful Somalisa Camp, while I relax on sun-loungers and watch all with contented astonishment.

Hwange challenges the popular misconception that there's no wildlife left in Zimbabwe. Under dramatic stormy skies at Ngweshla, I see zebras, wildebeest, impala, giraffes, jackals and hippos roam the beautiful open plain dotted with acacia trees. And at Kennedy Vlei, five lions wait for prey

from their vantage point on top of a mound, each identifiable by their individual whisker-patterns. Local conservationists here have asked that visitors help them in their research, by sending in head-and-shoulder snaps of these majestic cats to support their own data. Increasingly vulnerable, Africa's lions are disappearing rapidly as a result of trophy hunting and human-wildlife conflict; Zimbabwe's national parks desperately need the income generated from tourism and gate fees to prevent them resorting to the alternative funding provided by the hunters.

But conservation will only be successful if communities benefit too. Again, tourism plays a crucial part and African Bush Camps, which owns Somalisa and Kanga Camps, has its own charity, The African Bush Camps Foundation. A percentage of guests' fees go directly towards education and micro-finance projects in Dete, a village near Hwange where people live in mud houses without electricity or running water. To African Bush Camps' owners, Zimbabwean Beks Ndlovu and his wife Sophia, the charity is a pivotal part of their vision: "The foundation and travel business allows us to pursue that passion," Beks explains.

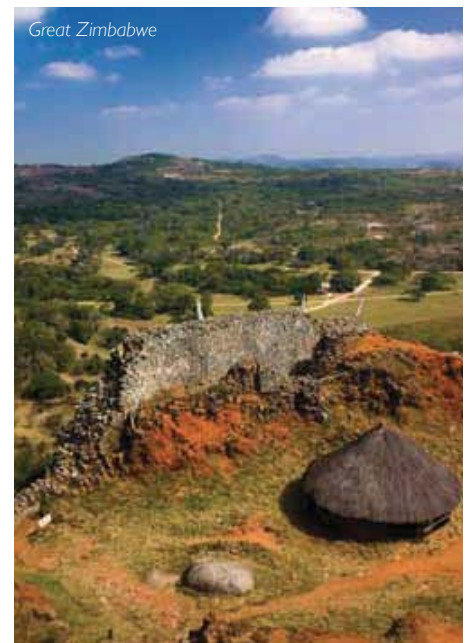
Sophia and I visit a chicken farm, an organic vegetable garden, a project making chic jewellery from recycled paper and a sewing group: all run by women with a palpable sense of pride in their work. Teachers and children of two basic primary schools also benefit from the foundation: its support has raised educational standards to the point where two pupils are now going to secondary school for the first time. But what touches me most is the rich warmth and welcome we receive from everyone we meet, people who have little else to give, and their gratitude for simply visiting their country.

Some will say Mugabe is reason enough not to visit Zimbabwe, but others will appreciate the huge and much-needed benefits tourism brings to both conservation and communities like Dete. I'm glad I came back and once again feel sad to leave: because Zimbabwe's new optimism makes me want to stay. ●

THE WHOLE PLACE LOOKS GREEN AND LUSH, SATIATED BY THE RAINS AND THE SWOLLEN RIVER.



Lioness and cubs, Hwange National Park



Great Zimbabwe

< ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW: ZIMBABWE

by Cox & Kings Africa expert – Louise Stanion

THE BACKGROUND

LOCATION Zimbabwe is a landlocked country located in southern Africa. It is bordered by South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Namibia and Mozambique.

LANGUAGES Zimbabwe has three official languages: English, Shona and Ndebele.

POPULATION 12.5 million.

TIME ZONE GMT +2 hours.

CURRENCY South African rand (ZAR / R) or US dollar (USD / \$). £1 = R13.08 or \$1.55.

VISAS Visas are required for entry. Ideally obtain prior to departure.

POTTED HISTORY In the 1880s, the British arrived into the area with the British South Africa Company. The name Southern Rhodesia was adopted in honour of Cecil Rhodes and in 1923 it became a self-governing British colony. Independence was granted to Zimbabwe in 1980 and Mugabe's government changed the capital's name from Salisbury to Harare. In 2009 a unity government was formed, with two parties sharing power. Although progress may be slow, Zimbabwe has turned a corner.

TOP TIP If you'd like to donate items such as educational posters, pencils and pens to the local schools, please get in touch with Cox & Kings before you go, who will contact African Bush Camps (or whichever camp you are staying at) for advice on their specific needs.

BEFORE YOU TRAVEL

WHEN TO GO

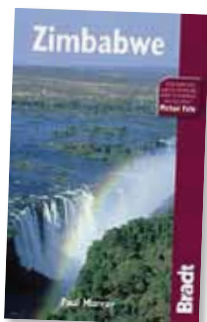
The winter months between April and October are best for safaris. Victoria Falls is at its most dramatic between March and May.

WHAT TO READ

Bradt Travel Guide to Zimbabwe (2010)

by Paul Murray

As political tension relaxes, wildlife enthusiasts and curious tourists are returning to Zimbabwe. Paul Murray has shown real dedication to the country and its people by carrying out such detailed research.



Catastrophe: What Went Wrong in Zimbabwe by Richard Bourne

A good summary of recent history that leaves few stones unturned, Bourne goes back before the days of Cecil Rhodes, through the colonial period, the declaration of independence and the rule of Mugabe. It is a compelling story and a sobering one.

THROUGH A WRITER'S EYES

Scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight.

David Livingstone on discovering Victoria Falls

WHAT TO WATCH

Mugabe and the White African

This intimate and moving feature-length documentary charts one family's extraordinary courage in the face of a relentless campaign of state-sanctioned terror.

A Game for Vultures

This 1979 British thriller stars Richard Harris, Joan Collins and Richard Roundtree. Based on a novel by Michael Hartmann, it is set during the Rhodesian bush war.

FIND OUT MORE

www.painteddog.org

This project has been working for 20 years to protect painted dogs, also known as African wild dogs, by re-educating children and adults about their significance. The visitors centre and trail system are well worth a visit.

BEING THERE

WHERE TO STAY

Somalisa Camp, Hwange National Park

Authentic classic tented camp reminiscent of a bygone era, with dark teak furniture, paraffin lamps and bucket showers.



SET YOUR COMPASS

Victoria Falls forms the largest falling sheet of water in the world and there are outstanding views from the Zimbabwean side, due to its network of rainforest trails.

Matobo Hills National Park includes 50,000 San rock paintings, the grave of Cecil John Rhodes, the highest concentration of leopards in Africa and a chance to track black and white rhinos on foot.

Great Zimbabwe is now a Unesco world heritage site. The ruins of Great Zimbabwe (meaning 'houses of stone') reflect the culture of the Shona people.

Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve is an 8,850-hectare private reserve that borders the Gonarezhou National Park, home to Singita Pamushana Lodge, a superb base for Big Five wildlife viewing and much more.

Eastern Highlands are home to spectacular gorges, waterfalls, dramatic valleys and Zimbabwe's highest peak. Activities in the area include hiking, camping and fishing.

The Victoria Falls Hotel

Popularly known as 'the grand old lady of the falls' this colonial style hotel is set in lush tropical gardens, home to ponds and croaking bullfrogs.

Kanga Camp, Mana Pools National Park

This high quality bush camp with six tents stands beside a large waterhole. Activities focus on walking, safari drives, canoeing, fishing and birdwatching trips.

WHAT TO EAT

Zimbabwe is a cosmopolitan society and enjoys local and international cuisine. A traditional dish is sadza (a stiff maize meal) eaten with meat and / or gravy and a relish.

TRAVEL WITH COX & KINGS

RECOMMENDED TOUR

Zimbabwe: Best of the West – 12 Days / 9 Nights Private Journey from £3,775 per person. Visit Bulawayo, Matobo Hills National Park, Hwange National Park and Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe's most iconic destinations.