



**Y**ou don't mess with Nyaminyami, the river god of the mighty Zambezi. Half serpent, half fish, when something upsets him, he'll stop at nothing – not even death – to vent his anger: locals believe he killed over eighty people in one day seeking to protect his valley. And now I'm here, I can understand why.

It was my first morning in Kariba, and just after dawn I sat in stunned silence as the waters around my houseboat turned blood red. It wasn't from the wrath of the river god, though – it was the reflections of the most spectacular sunrise I've seen.

Truth be told, in fifteen years of travelling to Zimbabwe, Kariba had never really been on my radar. I knew of it but not really that much about it. I'd even flown over its vast sparkling waters. But with so much competition from big hitters like Hwange, Mana Pools and Victoria Falls, Kariba had remained resolutely in the shadows. Until, that is, I was asked to cover a story for *The Times*: a new cruise was starting up – would I be interested in going?

I'm not a fan of cruises, but this was a small houseboat for just four

days so, never one to miss a chance of heading back to Zim, I packed my bags and binos... and fell in love.

It was a 90-minute flight in a tiny Cessna from Vic Falls to Kariba town. We flew through double rainbows right over the 128km-long lake with islands sprinkled around its zig-zag shoreline. Our boat, the African Dream, was a new venture for the respected Croisi Europe riverboat company and Flame of Africa, its local partner. Its eight cabins had soothing hues of creams and greys that didn't distract from the mesmerising lake views through the floor-to-ceiling windows. With a bar, dining on the deck and a small plunge pool, it had everything you could imagine needing for a cruise that would take us around the lake's eastern basin.

Lake Kariba was only created in the late 1950s, when the Zambezi was dammed in the name of progress and hydroelectricity. This is why Nyaminyami got so mad.

A benevolent and much revered spirit, he'd been trying to protect the 57,000 Batonga – his people – who were forced to leave their homeland when the dam was built. To add insult to injury, according

to local legend, his wife had been trapped on the other side of the concrete wall. In fury, he lashed out, evoking unprecedented floods and storms, wrecking the dam walls and killing construction workers.

Life on the lake is much calmer now.

Indeed, it was almost eerily calm. On the tender boat we drifted over to Gache Gache Bay, where the tops of long-submerged leadwood trees still rise above the water, their bone-white branches like long arms grasping at the air. It's hauntingly beautiful but it's not an aquatic ghost-land: there's plenty of life here.

We bobbed on the water with bloats of hippos visible in all directions. On the lakeshore, there were antelopes aplenty, mostly impala and waterbuck grazing quietly while shifty crocs lay deadly still, their mouths wide open. Birdlife here is particularly appealing and Africa's familiar soundtrack played in the background: the cooing of doves, the chirruping of golden weavers, the haunting cry of the African fish eagle and the sweet call of a shrike, a long lonely whistle reaching out for a mate. When another replied, their duet was a perfect harmony.

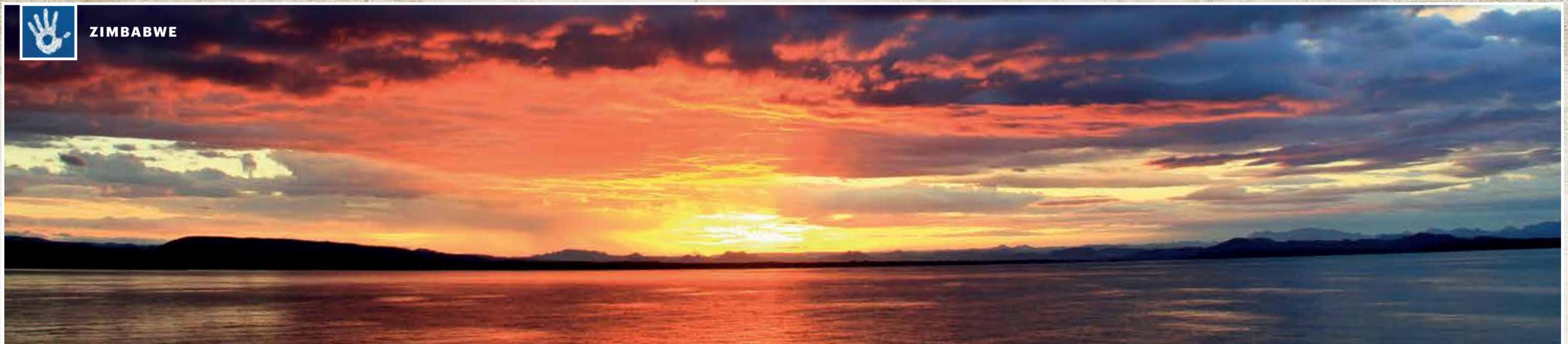
We cruised to the steep, emerald-green Sanyati Gorge, apparently →

# In reflective mood

It seems unbelievable that Lake Kariba has remained under the tourist radar for so long; perhaps dominated by other better-known attractions that make up Zimbabwe's embarrassment of riches. But, easily reached from Victoria Falls, Kariba offers a safari experience unlike any in Africa and makes a contrasting complement to conventional wildlife destinations like Mana Pools or Hwange. Here's why.

WRITTEN BY **SUE WATT**

**View finder:** Perched on top of the escarpment, Bumi Hills Safari Lodge overlooks the floodplains and Starvation Island, where wildlife stranded when the lake's waters rose still survive



SUE WATT

**We watched in awe, cold G&T in hand, as a massive bull elephant shuffled silently on the shoreline just a few metres from our boat as an extraordinary sunset of golden rays spanned Kariba's vast skies**

one of the best places for catching tiger fish in the lake. I don't know (nor care) much about fishing, but we passed boats moored up in coves and inlets, casting a line in the most beautiful of settings.

Most holidaymakers in houseboats or fishing boats were locals. Zimbabweans wax lyrical about this place. Even my Pilates teacher in London, originally from Bulawayo, went misty-eyed when I told her why I'd be missing some classes. Her uncle had a houseboat on Kariba, she'd told me, which became their childhood holiday home full of happy memories.

But relatively few international travellers come here, presumably because it isn't easy to get to – driving is a challenge with poor roads; 4x4s are essential. And flying in can be costly. Perhaps they believe, as I initially did, there are better places to go. They don't know what they're missing.

Kariba's sunsets are as spectacular as her sunrises. One afternoon, we moored at Palm Bay, ready to settle with a sundowner. But someone had spotted something on Spurwing Island and the crew

launched the tenders instead. Just in time, we watched in awe, cold G&T in hand, as a massive bull elephant shuffled silently on the shoreline just a few metres from our boat as an extraordinary sunset of golden rays spanned Kariba's vast skies.

Next day, we headed for dry land on a more traditional game drive around Matusadona National Park, skirting the lake's southern shore. This is Big Five country, although the rhinos are tricky to find at the best of times. In April, just after the rains, the rest of the popular clique that draw people to Africa – elephant, buffalo, lion and leopard – also played hard-to-get. For the best chances of seeing them, come a couple of months later when the grasses and water have receded, although our guide Cliffy Mandu had recently seen nine lions. "We have two prides here, around 40 lions," he told me. "And four big males. Between them, they killed 18 baby elephants last year. They even kill crocs."

Sadly, the lions evaded us. But driving along a terracotta-hued track through mopane woodland, we came across a bush roadblock in the form of two elephants and a curious youngster, its trunk impersonating

a periscope. We sat in silence, perfectly still, as they sauntered nonchalantly past. More elephants played in the lake, splashing each other like children. And in the shadows of the Zambezi escarpment we saw plenty of impalas, buffalos, hippos, crocs and zebras.

The completion of the dam almost decimated the wildlife in this stretch of the Zambezi Valley, and were it not for the courage and commitment of the then Senior Ranger Rupert Fothergill, there would likely be little here today. As the waters rose, animals had been left to survive on ever-decreasing land surfaces as higher hilltops rapidly morphed into islands. In a spectacular rescue mission called Operation Noah, he and his team saved some 6000 animals, taking five years to move elephants, rhinos, antelopes, buffalos, lions, leopards and more to safety in Matusadona as the water level got higher. A hero of conservation, Fothergill's pioneering techniques in animal relocations are still used today and one of Kariba's islands has been named after him in his honour.

Just west of Matusadona lies the private reserve of Bumi Hills and

the lodge of the same name, where we spent a couple of nights. Part of African Bush Camps' portfolio, it sits on a hilltop overlooking Kariba, with expansive views of the lake and the elephants who like clockwork come to swim in the afternoon heat.

An early morning walk yielded yet another fabulous lakeside sunrise. The colours of the water, punctuated by the naked trunks of dead trees, change from burning gold and red to pink and mauve and baby blue.

And at sunset, we joined Captain Eddie for a spooky sundowner boat trip. The winds had brought dust in from Namibia and in a hazy canvas of blue devoid of birdsong, it was impossible to tell where the lake ended and the sky began.

Through the haze, Eddie pointed out the ominously named Starvation Island. Some 180 waterbuck and 300 impala live here but it's a tough life. After the rains, as the water level rises, the island shrinks and it's too sandy to provide food for them all. "It's survival of the fittest on Starvation Island," our captain explained. →



**Nature's barcode:** Guests are taken on a guided walk on the floodplain below Bumi Hills. When Kariba's waters rose, they engulfed forests. The submerged trees give Kariba a photogenic charm

AFRICAN BUSH CAMPS



## ZIMBABWE



ALEXANDRE SATTLER

**Dreamboat:** Sleeping just 16 passengers, but with plenty of space and amenities, the African Dream powers across a bay to seek a mooring

What surprised me was the number of elephants, and particularly babies, in Bumi Hills. They have a strange tinge, taking on the tones of the terracotta-coloured soil. With the blue lake, green grasses and red elephants, everything looked vibrant. But with little policing on the lake, these elephants are vulnerable.

Researching another story, we spent some time with the Bumi Hills Anti-Poaching Unit, visiting one of their observation posts high up in the hills, and saw how, with technology, specialised training, commitment and courage, they're devoted to protecting this place. "As long as the elephants are still here, I'll still be here," one of the young men told me. "I have two children and I'm doing this for them. There's plenty of years in me yet."

Kariba may not have the ubiquitous wildlife of other places in Zimbabwe like Hwange and Mana Pools. It may not have the wild, bone-drenching force of Vic Falls. But it does have a magical charm and personality all of its own, and people who are passionate about its wildlife. Plus, I've yet to see a sunrise anywhere that can compare to Kariba's.

**Sue Watt** flew to Zimbabwe on Ethiopian Airlines, and her itinerary was organised by Expert Africa.

## SAFARI PLANNER



### WHERE TO STAY:

There are two distinct accommodation options at Kariba: water-based houseboats or land-based lodges. My suggestion is to experience both if possible.

For houseboats, think cruises; small self-contained, fully-catered floating hotels or lodges, the likes of which you don't find anywhere else in Africa. (See pages 92-93 to learn more). I stayed on CroisiEurope's African Dream as part of a set departure that also visits Chobe (Botswana) and the Caprivi Strip (Namibia).

Other operators include Zambezi Cruise & Safaris, with a range of vessels. Boats are usually launched from Kariba, Binga or Milibisi, and most moor overnight in the vicinity of Matusadona National Park.

There are a handful of lodges on the islands and lake shore. I stayed at Bumi Hills Safari Lodge, which is the only accommodation in this private reserve, near Matusadona National Park.

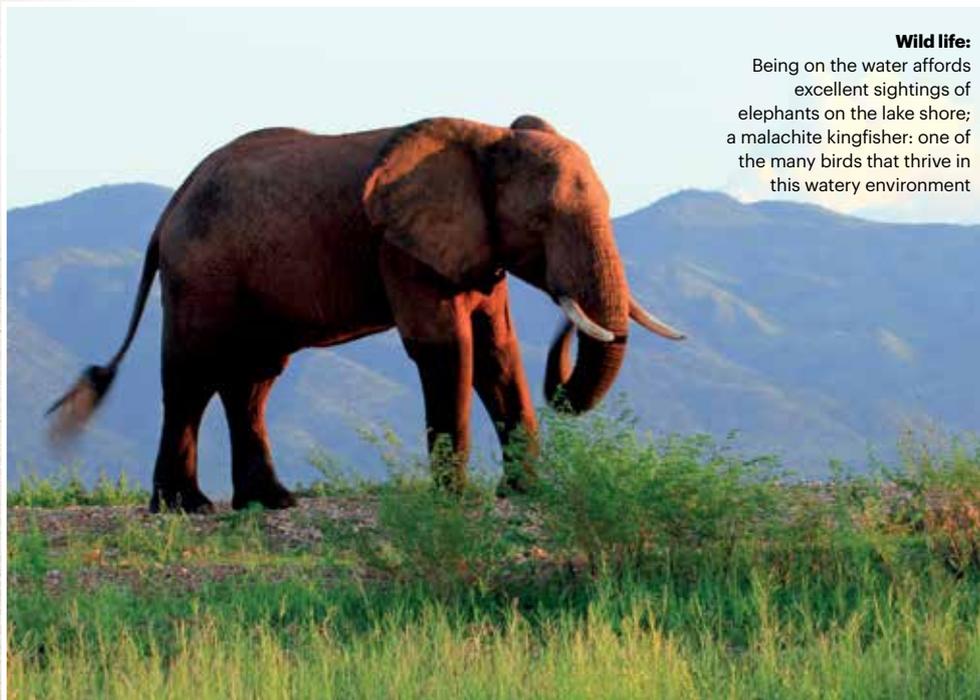
### HOW LONG TO STAY FOR:

To get the most out of the experience, and to allow yourself time to submit to the calm of the lake, I think three nights on a houseboat is the minimum, unless you're avid about fishing. Of course, if you want to just chill and melt into lakeside life, it would be easy to stay longer. In lodges too, I'd suggest two or three nights, or less if you're combining it with a boating holiday.

### ITINERARY PLANNING:

I absolutely love being close to rivers and the Zambezi has to be one of the world's best. My perfect Zimbabwe itinerary would be to start with a safari at Mana Pools (perhaps fly-camping on the banks of the Zambezi), then fly to Kariba or Bumi Hills for some time on the lake, ending at the Victoria Falls for a helicopter ride and walk through the spray.

Compiled by Sue Watt



WILL WHITFORD

### Wild life:

Being on the water affords excellent sightings of elephants on the lake shore; a malachite kingfisher: one of the many birds that thrive in this watery environment



SUE WATT