



Go to Gorongosa

Experience a rebirth

Venturing into forgotten lands is an adventure itself. **Sue Watt** returns to this war-scarred, beautiful corner of Mozambique and falls under its spell once again

A land before time:
Lake Urema in the centre
of Gorongosa National Park

PHOTOGRAPH BY PIOTR NASKRECKI

In time, Mozambique could be the bright star of Africa. Gorongosa is already a star. It's a magnificent and truly wild destination and a superb place for a dash of adventure

"I'm a big believer in the spirituality of nature," American philanthropist Greg Carr confided to me when we met at Gorongosa National Park, a place that is his passion. "I mean when the deepest part of you connects to a love of nature and the great outdoors."

It's impossible not to feel that connection in Gorongosa. I first fell under the spell of this remote wilderness five years ago. The vast floodplains of Lake Urema mesmerised me, as did the famed fever tree forests glowing gold at sunset and the Murombodzi waterfall tumbling dramatically down the slopes of Mount Gorongosa. The canopy of lush rainforest giving way to a canopy of stars entranced me as we camped overnight beneath the summit – a true, wild adventure. Few people have witnessed this beauty in recent years and ever since my first visit I'd been yearning to return. But my dreams had been thwarted by turmoil and conflict in this forgotten region.

Gorongosa's rollercoaster history had captivated me, too. Spanning 4067 square kilometres of central Mozambique this was Africa's most popular reserve in the 1960s. Glamorous guests included Gregory Peck and John Wayne enjoying safaris from the sophisticated Chitengo Camp. But the park's good times were shattered when it became a stronghold for Rhodesian-backed rebel force RENAMO, fighting against the new FRELIMO government following independence in 1975. The park became the unwitting epicentre of Mozambique's devastating civil war, which lasted sixteen years, during which time a million people died and millions more were displaced.

The war and subsequent uncontrolled hunting and poaching took a relentless toll on Gorongosa. Famed for its 6000 elephants, 14,000 buffalo and more than 500 lions, by 1994 around 90 per cent of its large animals had been poached for ivory and food. Ten years later, Carr flew over the park for the first time and saw a verdant habitat devoid of wildlife. In 2008 the Gorongosa Restoration Project (GRP) was born, with a multimillion US dollar commitment from the Carr Foundation and a twenty-year management contract with the Mozambican government to revive the park and benefit surrounding communities. Inspired by its story of redemption, my first visit in 2010 saw Gorongosa well on its way to recovery. Wildlife was returning, albeit tentatively, and communities were enjoying new schools, health clinics and employment. In 2011 eminent biologist Edward Osborne Wilson declared it to be "ecologically, the most diverse park in the world", prompting a profusion of scientific research.

But two years ago RENAMO's armed forces returned to the mountain following political tensions around Mozambique's upcoming elections. Gorongosa was again caught in a violent crossfire. Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) advised against travelling, tourists stayed away and its future seemed fragile. Thankfully, peace resumed before the October 2014 elections, which FRELIMO won. In March 2015 the FCO

lifted their advice against travelling to the region, paving the way for my return. Chitengo, now the only lodge in this vast park, and now run by Portuguese company Girassol, has been stylishly renovated. In the gardens, a wall riddled with bullets, the scars of war, has been preserved. But nearby the new bar was buzzing with local tourists and researchers; today this is a happy place. "It's incredible the love Mozambicans have for Gorongosa. There's so much history and romance here," Mike Marchington, GRP's Operations Director explained. "It was very quiet with the instability [in 2014]. Confidence is returning now and so are visitors." While locals and expats may now be returning, it's still off the radar for most international tourists. Yet there's plenty to satisfy more adventurous souls.

Gorongosa's wildlife has grown in confidence, too. No longer scared, antelopes were easily spotted on our game drives, including rare nyala and sable, kudu, bushbuck, reedbuck and tiny, prancing oribi. Huge herds of silhouetted impala looked like they'd been edged in gold as the sun went down and waterbuck were prolific. But fellow humans were few and far between – this isn't a place of 4WD convoys or crowds of tourists. It's still raw and unspoilt, and we had it all to ourselves. Gorongosa is all about positivity and passion, qualities that are exemplified in its scientists. Their studies encompass creatures great and small, from elephants to ants. "There's so much cool science here," Paola Bouley, Gorongosa's Lion Project Director, said. Today some 70,000 herbivores roam the plains. Elephant populations are increasing, numbering around 500. We saw several lone bulls and small breeding herds with young calves, boding well for the future. "There were around 100 elephants here last night, and we saw seven lions from the Sungu pride," a fellow guest told me on a sunset exploration of the floodplains. Aside from game drives, new activities include fly camping, canoeing and birding trips to Murombodzi waterfall in search of the rare green-headed oriole, one of nearly 400 bird species in the park. The lion population has been slow to recover, despite the ample prey. "They're ready to make a comeback," Paola explained. "Their only source of mortality is the snare. I love the scope of my project – it's long-term, focusing on restoration, not reintroduction. That's unusual in Africa."

The world's leading authority on elephants, Joyce Pool, is also here. "Gorongosa's elephants have had a gruesome history," she explained. "These circumstances place a distinctive stamp on the behaviour, traditions and culture of an elephant population." Her work involves habituating matriarchs who remember those traumas, and understanding their intricate communications when they react with aggression.

In this largely unexplored and unknown land, many smaller species have been discovered that are totally new to science. "We recently discovered a new gecko!" Carr exclaimed. "We've found many new invertebrates, but a new vertebrate is extremely exciting. We may not know half of what's here..." A broad

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estimate is that 35,000-75,000 species may exist in Gorongosa. Marc Stalmans, Scientific Services Director, talked of the GRP's ambition to create a total inventory using the state-of-the-art Edward O Wilson Biodiversity Laboratory, which opened last year near Chitengo. New lecture halls, laboratories, a veterinary clinic and palaeontology centre are planned. "Our vision is for this field station to be the best in the world," he declared.

Crucially, locals are playing a pivotal role. Schoolchildren have enthusiastically embraced 'BioBlitzes', in which they seek to find and identify as many different insects as possible. Young people, particularly women, are employed as researchers, funded by universities. And since the introduction in September of WildCam Gorongosa, an interactive online global citizen science project involving fifty-two cameras in the park, anyone in the world can partake in Gorongosa's cool science.

Almost 400 locals are employed here, many of them women. We returned to Vinho village, crossing the Pungwe River in swirls of morning mist. Neat rows of vegetables grew in allotments, a concept new to these farmers who are learning about crop rotation from GRP. Maize is still grown, too, unfortunately attracting elephants. "Elephants come here every night at this time of year. When the maize stops, they stop. But they come again when the mangoes start," our guide Mutino said, explaining that GRP-funded scouts help protect crops from marauding pachyderms. GRP also funded new housing for medical staff of a local clinic. "People are far healthier now," Mutino said. "Before, they would go for traditional medicine. Now they come to the clinic."

"Half of our project is with communities, involving agriculture, healthcare and education," Carr explained. "It's essential that any national park has an active programme with communities. I don't mean lip service, I mean real projects." Some 200,000 people live in the buffer zone and GRP is planning similar initiatives and another headquarters near the park's northern border. Other plans include new lodges, and discussions are underway to extend GRP's management contract for 25 years, proving its overwhelming success.

Carr has huge faith in the country and its people. "In time, Mozambique could be the bright star of Africa," he said. Gorongosa is already a star. It's featured in two films, *Africa's Eden* and *War Elephants*, David Attenborough's BBC series *Africa* and a new PBS/National Geographic documentary, *Africa's Wild Kingdom Reborn*, which premiered in October.

Despite recent challenges, Gorongosa is a magnificent and truly wild destination, and a superb place for a dash of adventure. On our last evening by the floodplains, we watched the sun go down as the moon came up, deep orange and purple skies on one side and an egg yolk-yellow moon, full and fat, on the other. In the serene, dusky light, we could just make out the burly shadows of six elephants ambling silently to the river. Gorongosa had captivated me once again...

SAFARI PLANNER

■ **Getting there** Sue Watt travelled as a guest of Cedarberg Travel, which offers tailor-made trips to Gorongosa National Park. Kenya Airways flies to Maputo via Nairobi and South African Airways flies to Maputo and Beira (the nearest international airport to Gorongosa) via Johannesburg. LAM Mozambique Airlines flies from Maputo to Beira.

■ **Where to stay** In Maputo Serena Polana Hotel and Southern Sun Hotel are good choices. At Gorongosa check in to Chitengo Girassol, currently the only lodge in the park, where accommodation ranges from luxury villas to thatch bungalows, and facilities include a restaurant and bar, two pools and a play area. New lodges are planned in the near future. Sixty kilometres outside the park, near the town of Vila Gorongosa, a new budget hotel called Kapulana has opened. It has friendly staff and beautiful views of the Gogogo mountain range and Mount Gorongosa.

■ **When to visit** Gorongosa National Park closes from December to March. May and June are humid and warm, and October and November are hot and showery, so the best time to visit is in the dry season from July to September.

■ **Things to do** Activities include game drives, visits to Vinho village, fly camping, canoeing and guided birding walks.

■ **Read more** *A Window on Eternity: A Biologist's Walk through Gorongosa National Park* by Edward O. Wilson; *The Bradt Guide to Mozambique* (6th Edition) by Philip Briggs

ADVENTURES IN GORONGOSA

Following his documentary *Wild Mozambique*, cinematographer Bob Poole tells **Rose Gamble** what makes this park so special

"Gorongosa used to be a famous national park, teeming with wildebeest, elephant and lion. But after years of civil war it was done – left for dead. And yet, since conservation efforts began, the wildlife has rebounded in an amazing way. Today it is a thriving, unspoilt place to go if you're looking for an adventure. I grew up on this continent and I've watched it change over my lifetime. A lot of wild Africa is disappearing. But Gorongosa really is a wilderness. The elephants don't just ignore you when you drive past. Here you rely on your bush skills; this is a place for real enthusiasts who know Africa well."



BOB POOLE

To read the rest of Rose's interview with Bob Poole, visit travelframag.com