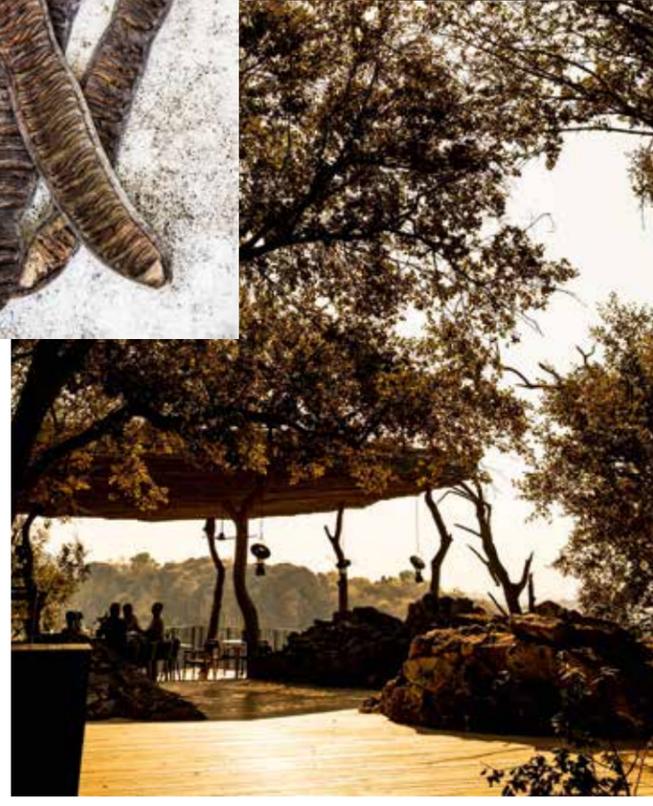


Clockwise from this picture:
wildebeest at Malilangwe
Wildlife Reserve; guest
signatures etched in glass at
La Rochelle, Penhalonga;
coffee break at Singita
Pamushana; lion; Sapi
Explorers Camp on the
Zambezi River; seeds from
the garden at La Rochelle.
Opposite, Singita
Pamushana interior



FACE FORWARD

ZIMBABWE IS NATURE IN THE RAW, A PLACE WHERE BIG-GAME SPOTTERS GET UP CLOSE TO SOME OF THE MOST ENDANGERED SPECIES IN AFRICA. PETER BROWNE RETURNS TO HIS HOMELAND FOR A SLOW SAFARI ALONG ITS BACKROADS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CROOKES & JACKSON

From left: dining terrace, white rhino, and Shangaan-inspired tiled shower, all at Singita Pamushana



WE CLIMBED SLOWLY through the forest on a steep path cut through dense ferns, wild figs and dragon trees. Ahead of us, tiny blue duiker antelope crashed through the undergrowth; up in the canopy, weaver birds announced our arrival with shrill cries and Samango monkeys followed our progress with curious, darting eyes.

At the summit, we emerged into a garden planted with white rhododendrons and blue hydrangeas. Beyond it, partially obscured by ebony trees, stood a castle. Climbing its square turret, we paused to drink in the views: the banana plantations of Burma Valley; the imposing edifice of Chinyakwaremba ('the hill of tired legs' in the local Shona language), where ancestral spirits are worshipped; and the Bvumba Mountains, forming Zimbabwe's border with Mozambique. My mother used to say that you could smell the sea from here. You can't, of course – the Mozambique coast is a good four-hour drive away. But even now, some 40 years later, I inhale deeply and imagine the salty tang of the Indian Ocean ebbing towards me.

I have returned many times in the 30 years since leaving my homeland, but this trip felt different. I had arrived almost one year after Robert Mugabe had been toppled from power (and, it turned out, one year before his death, at the age of 95, in a Singapore hospital). The initial euphoria following the coup had dissipated into disappointment and the battered economy was proving stubbornly difficult to revive. And yet – I had sensed optimism for a post-Mugabe era from afar, and it was time to see it for myself.

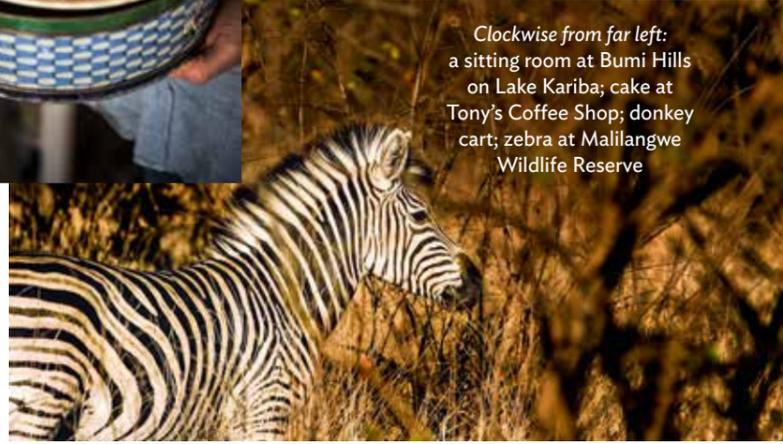
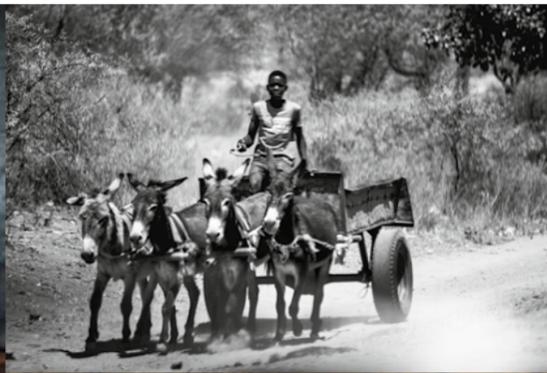
This time, though, I wasn't flying to visit the hotspots of Victoria Falls and Hwange National Park; they could wait. My route would take roads less travelled, to the Eastern Highlands and the Southern Lowveld; to the deserted ruins of an ancient city and the granite mountains of Matobo, the southern shores of Lake Kariba and the great Zambezi Valley. This would be a safari in the old-fashioned sense of the word – a journey of discovery.

I have travelled the road from the capital, Harare, to Mutare in the Eastern Highlands all my life. As children we'd take turns sleeping in the back of my dad's DKW station wagon, swapping over at Mutare as we headed into Mozambique on our way to the sea. Much later, I would hitchhike along it to walk in the whispering pine forests of Nyanga National Park or climb the Bvumba Mountains.

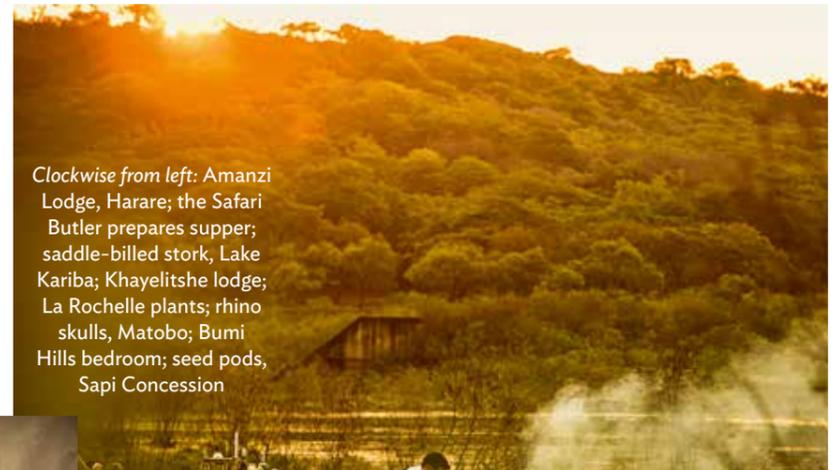
Now I was back with my own driver and guide, Dean Dewdney, a former professional rugby player who's known as The Safari Butler. Dean is in his element on the open road, stopping to cook under an acacia tree while serving drinks from the back of his Land Cruiser. There is an old saying in Zimbabwe that 'if there is a problem, we make a plan', and Dean always has plans.

Mutare was built in 1890 by British settlers drunk on the prospect of gold. Another wave of immigrants followed in the late 1940s, my parents among them, desperate to escape rations and start a bountiful new life bathed in sunshine. Considerably more well-to-do new arrivals were Sir Stephen and Lady Courtauld, who left Eltham Palace in London to retire near the gold mines of Penhalonga, north of Mutare. Here they adorned their modernist new home with a French-style château tower and christened the estate La Rochelle. When the couple died, the house and grounds passed to the National Trust of Rhodesia (and then Zimbabwe), and so it has remained. I had heard that the estate had new investors and we decided to check it out before pressing on.

Sir Stephen's botanical and woodland gardens, orchid glass-houses and arboretum of indigenous trees had always been remarkable if neglected; now the old place was looking sprightly again. I recall the food at La Rochelle as gruesome nursery fare, but that's all changed with Crispin Garapo, a talented local chef making the most of a huge field of organic herbs. Parts of the famous grounds have been redesigned, but the remains of Mah Jongg, the Courtaulds' pet ring-tailed lemur, still lie buried beneath a stone obelisk in the rose garden. Just beyond it stand the now-restored



Clockwise from far left: a sitting room at Bumi Hills on Lake Kariba; cake at Tony's Coffee Shop; donkey cart; zebra at Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve



Clockwise from left: Amanzi Lodge, Harare; the Safari Butler prepares supper; saddle-billed stork, Lake Kariba; Khayelitshe lodge; La Rochelle plants; rhino skulls, Matobo; Bumi Hills bedroom; seed pods, Sapi Concession



grand glasshouses, where 63-year-old Nicholas Kashiri has been tending the descendants of Sir Stephen's orchids for 47 years. That night I slept peacefully in a corner bedroom of the house, furnished with slightly wonky, period-appropriate antiques and pictures, and woke to the sweet, earthy smells of the Eastern Highlands. I have seldom felt happier, or more at home.

IT'S A SHORT DRIVE FROM PENHALONGA to Christmas Pass, the dramatic gateway to Mutare, from which the city can be seen slumbering in a valley at the foot of the Bvumba Mountains. In high summer the early mornings along these forested slopes are coated in mist and the woodlands drip with sweet, pure spring water. Wild orchids grow in profusion and flycatchers build their cupped nests on low-hanging branches. Villagers make quinine from the bark of

a fairy-tale castle for themselves above it on a granite outcropping, where they invited the Queen Mother to stay on her 1953 royal tour of southern Africa with Princess Margaret.

When the hotel was shuttered during the Bush War, and for a decade after, I used to stay in the Seymour-Smiths' castle, which in those days was run as a guesthouse by Vincent Toman and Alex Nunes, both fun and brilliant hosts. Six years ago, both Leopard Rock and the castle were bought by a Zimbabwean financier, and while the hotel has been much improved, the castle is now only used for special suppers or cocktails.

We walked up there, taking in the view of the Bvumba Mountains, guided by Benny Katsika, an ornithologist who knows everything about the traditional medicinal uses of the forest's roots and bark. Everyone will tell you that Zimbabwe has the best game

THE EARLY MORNINGS ALONG THESE FORESTED SLOPES ARE COATED IN MIST, THE WOODS DRIP WITH PURE SPRING WATER AND ORCHIDS GROW IN PROFUSION

the native knobwood trees, and gondolosi tubers are collected to sell as an aphrodisiac in the markets of Mutare.

Many years ago, my uncle bought a sun-dappled plot of land here, where he thought he might retire. But by then – it was the 1970s and the Rhodesian Bush War had escalated – the Bvumba Mountains were under siege. When peace returned, the bullet-scarred barns and thatched cottages re-emerged as guesthouses and artisanal workshops. Tony's Coffee Shop was among the new arrivals and, 25 years later, owner Tony Robinson is still up there baking decadent cakes and chatting coquettishly to guests as he takes orders from his hand-written menus. We stopped there on our way to Leopard Rock hotel, a triple-turreted pink manor house embedded in a thick patch of jungle known as the Enchanted Forest, a fanciful anomaly built by Italian prisoners of war during World War II. In 1946 the owners, Leslie and Anne Seymour-Smith, built

rangers and guides in Africa, and it's true. But Benny was also generous, funny and kind, three attributes that are plentiful among the people of Zimbabwe, unlike electricity and fuel, which are often in short supply.

Leaving the cool of the mountains, we headed south, dropping into the hot Save River valley, where black-granite boulders are balanced like pyramids of giant billiard balls. We drove for hours beneath diaphanous blue skies, past isolated schools and mission stations, stopping to buy diesel from a butcher's shop in a tiny village (Zimbabwe was on the cusp of another fuel crisis and Dean had a sixth sense for sniffing out secret supplies). It was late afternoon when we turned off in the direction of Singita Pamushana, Zimbabwe's fanciest safari lodge.

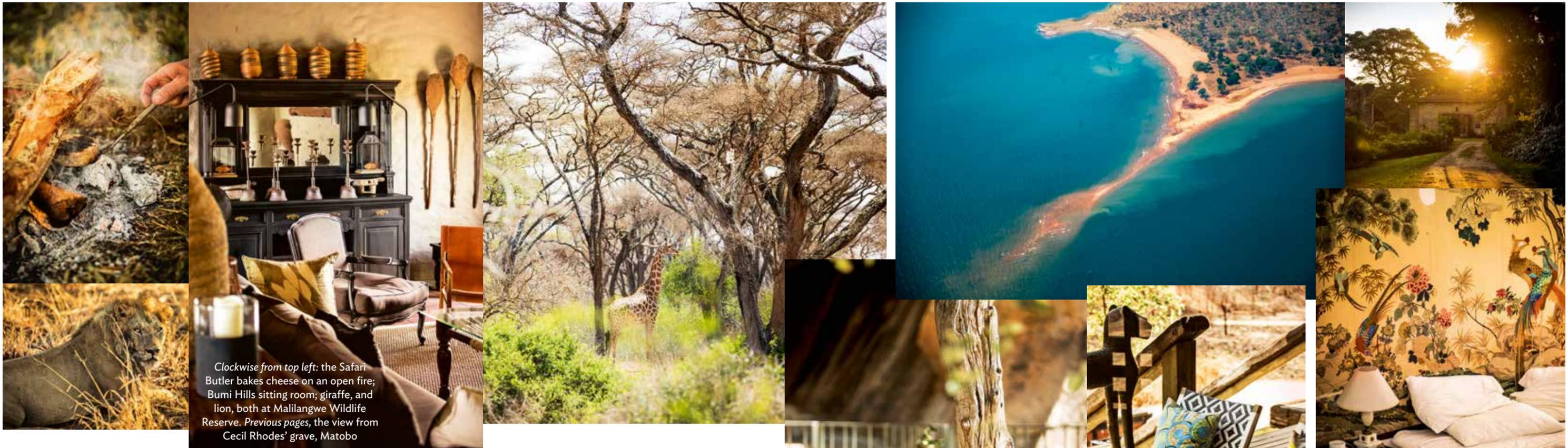
After World War II, huge tracts of the Lowveld were parcelled up as cattle farms. One of the most enterprising ranchers down here



AS TWILIGHT DESCENDED WE WERE JOINED BY WHITE RHINOS, THEN ANOTHER

AND ANOTHER, FOLLOWED BY BLACK RHINOS, PRIMORDIAL AND PERFECTLY AT PEACE





Clockwise from top left: the Safari Butler bakes cheese on an open fire; Bumi Hills sitting room; giraffe, and lion, both at Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve. Previous pages, the view from Cecil Rhodes' grave, Matobo

Clockwise from top left: Lake Kariba; forest castle behind Leopard Rock hotel; the Peacock Room, and library books, both La Rochelle; Rhodes burial site; hill path near Mutare; elephant; Singita Pamushana; veranda at Khayelitshe

was Ray Sparrow of Lone Star Ranch, on the border of Gonarezhou National Park. Sparrow eventually sold Lone Star to the American billionaire Paul Tudor Jones II in the 1990s, who went on to create the private Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve, now crowned by Singita Pamushana lodge, built from local stone with conical towers and impeccable, Shangaan tribal-inspired interiors. We arrived just as the sun was beginning to wane, the late-afternoon light bouncing off the deep-green lake far below the swimming-pool terrace. Tea and cakes were being served to guests dressed in immaculate pressed khaki before their afternoon game drive. Fortunately, Pamushana does not exist in a bubble of international prosperity. The Malilangwe Trust supports community projects – the rich, dark-blue honey at the lodge is produced by 20 families – and local schools. It is also at the forefront of wildlife conservation in Zimbabwe, particularly its rhinos.

That evening we photographed lions and elephants drinking at a waterhole as a murmuration of red-billed quelea flew past. As twilight descended we were joined by a pair of white rhinos, and then another and another, followed by two black rhinos, until we were surrounded by 13 specimens of one of the most endangered species in the world, primordial and perfectly at peace in this protected sanctuary of Zimbabwe's seldom-seen south.

WE LEFT THE SANCTITY OF MALILANGWE and headed north to Great Zimbabwe, the remains of an ancient city ruled by Shona royalty. The magnificent stone-walled ruins, scattered over 722 hectares, date from the 11th century, and their scale and grandeur are still remarkable – its three-foot-thick walls are constructed with enormous granite blocks to rival those of the great Egyptian pyramids.

We had Great Zimbabwe to ourselves that morning; the dimly lit little museum containing Chinese porcelain and Arab glassware excavated from the site was quiet. The main exhibit, the Zimbabwe Bird Sculptures, are thought to represent Shona ancestors. Some

say the soapstone effigies are hornbills or fish eagles, others that they represent human spirits. Myths and legends – including one that linked the city to the Queen of Sheba – still swirl around these walls, once the thriving capital of a kingdom rich in gold.

Our safari continued west to the Matobo National Park south of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city. Our home for the next couple of nights would be Khayelitshe, an eclectic four-bedroom house built by Beks Ndlovu, the Zimbabwean founder of African Bush Camps safaris, as a private retreat for himself and his young family. It's an exuberant amalgamation of weathered Indian doors, carved four-poster beds, bright West African fabrics and bronze carvings picked up on his travels, and you will not find its like anywhere else in the world, which goes for the surroundings, too.

The Matobo is an otherworldly landscape of bald granite hills, dense woodland and isolated inselbergs, with some 50,000 caves containing rock art dating back 13,000 years. King Mzilikazi Khumalo, the first Matabele monarch, was said to have been buried here sitting on a stone chair looking out over the land he had conquered. Cecil Rhodes, who claimed this land for Queen and country in 1895, was well aware of the significance of these hills when he chose it as his own burial site, creating a place of pilgrimage for decades to come. We spent an evening at his grave in the company of Ian Harmer, a fifth-generation Zimbabwean guide. Earlier in the day, he had taken us to see the rock paintings at Nswatugi Cave – a gigantic frieze of giraffes, elephants, kudu, zebras and hunters etched by ancestors of San bushmen. Now, with the sweep of the earth's curvature before us, I listened as Harmer helped put several centuries of cross-cultural Zimbabwean heritage – from the dispersal of the original San people by the Bantu to the arrival of the white settlers and the fight for independence – into perspective. Brightly coloured lizards scuttled on the still-warm rocks as the sun set, and for a moment the orchestra of Zimbabwe's once discordant ancestral spirits seemed to fall into an easy, amicable silence.

THE VALLEY IS A BRITTLE, BONE-DRY OVEN, A TOUGH YET EXTRAORDINARY ENVIRONMENT. AND THROUGH IT ALL GLIDES THE LIFE-GIVING FORCE OF THE RIVER



Clockwise from far left: baskets at Bumi Hills; Springs Camp; breakfast at Pamushana; Great Zimbabwe ruins; Leopard Rock hotel; Pamushana pool. Opposite, fishing on Lake Kariba

MY ROAD TRIP CAME TO AN END at Bulawayo airport, where I caught a flight to Lake Kariba, a vast inland sea in the extreme north of the country. Most of the hotels here have been closed for a decade or more, but then a couple of years ago Ndlovu overhauled Bumi Hills Safari Lodge, the lake's oldest outpost.

My father kept a small boat on Kariba for many years, setting up camp on one of the lake's deserted islands after checking for crocodiles and elephants. Even when Bumi Hills opened in 1972, it was too smart for the likes of us, and the updated version, with its flawless contemporary African design, is far more beautiful and polished than it ever was. But the point of the place has always been the views of elephants on the red-sand beach below, wallowing in the shallows and swimming in family formations, the tips of their trunks breaking the surface like submarine periscopes.

I took an afternoon cruise, hugging the shoreline as three young bull elephants swam in the shallows. A lone kingfisher stood guard on the drowned branch of a petrified tree as a pair of fish eagles swooped to catch one of the lake's silvery Kapenta sardines. Crocodiles basked everywhere, absorbing the last heat of the day, while huge pods of hippos laughed in unison as we passed.

The next day I flew along the Zambezi River's majestic course to one of the wildest places I have ever been in Africa. The Zambezi Valley in October is a brittle, bone-dry oven, a tough yet extraordinary environment: regiments of baobabs stand at attention in the shimmering heat; piles of hyena faeces lie bone-white on black-basalt plains. And through it all glides the cool, life-giving force of the Zambezi.

The Sapi Concession is 120,000 hectares of raw, untrammelled Africa bordering Zimbabwe's Mana Pools National Park. There has been nothing here forever save for a couple of small fishing camps, the rest of it left to the mercy of poachers and trophy hunters. Then, three years ago, the concession was leased to Great Plains Conservation, the safari company set up by the wildlife filmmakers

Dereck and Beverly Joubert. All hunting ceased and two tiny seasonal camps opened for the exclusive use of small groups on photographic safaris: Sapi Explorers Camp, on the riverfront, and Sapi Springs Camp, built amid red mahogany trees.

Here I swam in the fast-flowing river and cruised up and down the invisible line that forms the boundary with Zambia. I watched carmine bee-eaters nest on the steep banks, their iridescent blue and orange plumage bright against the red earth, and huge herds of elephants splash through the rapids, crossing between nations. At night hyenas rampaged through the area while lions called. At Springs Camp, I woke at daybreak on an open-air platform high up in the trees, encased in a hazy gauze of mosquito netting, a baboon staring down at me, blinking. We drove to Mana Pools, where I saw a grey heron catch a ride on the back of a hippo. Back at the camp that night, we ate chicken roasted to perfection in a hole dug in the earth and covered in hot coals.

It may be that nothing lasts forever, but in Sapi I felt the call of eternity, and the pull of a simpler time and place. If I had set out to rediscover the essence of a country I have loved all my life, I left immensely relieved to find that its bruised heart still beats soundly. 📍

GETTING HERE

Although Zimbabwe is safe to visit, the country continues to experience severe economic difficulties, and it is essential to book with a specialist tour operator. On-the-ground experts Mavros Safaris offers a similar two-week trip from £11,722 per person, full board, including all flights and activities, private guiding by The Safari Butler by road through the Eastern Highlands, Lowveld and Matobo, air transfers to Lake Kariba and the Zambezi Valley, Amanzi Lodge in Harare and a tour of the studio of jewellery designer Patrick Mavros. +44 20 3824 6000; mavrossafaris.com