

ZIMBABWE'S LAND OF GIANTS

Zimbabwe's Matabeleland is once again gaining a reputation as one of the most spellbindingly beautiful regions on the African continent. Within a relatively short distance, you find Victoria Falls, the pretty city of Bulawayo, the natural sculptures and ancient rock-art of Matobo Zimbabwe, and the spellbinding immensity of Hwange National Park.

Words and pictures by Mark Eveleigh



There are few things that are more unpredictable than a 14-year-old in the throes of a really serious tantrum. It's even more intimidating when that fiery teenager stands two metres tall and outweighs you by a couple of tonnes.

I am sat nervously in an open Land Rover, trying to appear unfazed under a shower of splintering twigs as an adolescent elephant threatens to hit me over the head with a branch that is about as thick as my leg. As the frenzied teenager blurts out a last shrill trumpet-call and stomps off after the rest of the herd, I hear the quietly philosophical voice of my guide: "The cheekiest elephants are often just like people," he says thoughtfully. "The more noise they make, the more certain you can be that they're very unlikely to actually do anything."



Hwange is home to one of the largest elephant populations in Africa, with an estimated 44,000 pachyderms



Robert Chadyendia works at Somalisa Expeditions Camp and, like all the highly-trained guides in this part of Zimbabwe, he has developed attuned insight into pachyderm psychology. In Hwange National Park, the biggest protected area in Zimbabwe, you can enjoy the truly humbling experience of travelling through an area where elephants outnumber international tourists by around 200 to one.

On my first evening at Hwange, I'd sat in the main lodge at Nehimba Camp, silently nursing a gin-and-tonic while a blustering herd of elephants muscled in on the swimming pool like an oversized gang of local bullies taking over the bar.

"This pool was actually built for the use of human visitors," laughed Ty Hurst, Nehimba's head guide - as the pachyderms guzzled at the pool. "At least that was the plan. But the elephants enjoy the cool, clean water from the tiled pool even more than they do the pump-filled waterhole; every night they drink it dry."

Hwange's estimated 46,000 elephants (more than double Kenya's elephant population) could potentially drink the equivalent of three olympic-size swimming pools each day, yet this arid park is an extension of the almost waterless Kalahari Desert. Until permanent water was introduced via boreholes in 1928, Wankie (as it was known then) was just part of a great migration route, with vast elephant herds passing through to get to the great silver snake of the Zambezi.

While driving through the taunting mirages, swirling dust-devils and shrinking waterholes of Hwange, it can be hard to imagine that less than 100km from the park's northern boundary are the perpetually booming cascades of Victoria Falls. Known poetically to locals as Mosi-oa-Tunya ('the smoke that thunders'), the falls are one of the most dramatic wonders of our planet.

While the sleepy city of Harare is Zimbabwe's capital, there is little doubt that the booming tourist town of Victoria Falls (known as Africa's adrenalin sports capital) is the premier tourist attraction in a country that has more than its share of stunning locations.

Lake Kariba (created when a dam was built across the lower Zambezi in the 1960s) is a wonderfully relaxing water-based safari location. Further downriver, you find Mana Pools National Park, less than a sixth the size of gigantic Hwange yet world-famous as one of the best wildlife havens in Africa.

Along with its natural riches, Zimbabwe also boasts countless historical and artistic gems. Long before explorer David Livingstone first set eyes on the Zambezi, this was the centre of one of the continent's greatest empires and during the Middle Ages, the city that is now known only as Great Zimbabwe Ruins (the country's name



Above:
The magnificent Victoria Falls, known as Mosi-oa-Tunya ('the smoke that thunders')

Below:
British Imperialist Cecil J. Rhodes' grave in Matobo National Park

literally means 'Houses of Stone') was already about a quarter the size of London.

As I drove out of Bulawayo one morning in a rental car, Zimbabwe's second-biggest city seemed to doze under a blanket of mauve jacaranda blossoms. I made a short detour via Khami Ruins National Monument (also a UNESCO site, but less visited than Great Zimbabwe) but even this two-kilometre sprawl of 500-year-old stone bulwarks and palace walls is relatively a recent treasure in a region whose tangible history dates infinitely further back than this.

From Khami, I made the 30-kilometre drive southwards to the rock koppies and caves of Matobo Hills, where I gazed upon Picasso-esque hunting scenes daubed by some long-forgotten artist who had stood on the same spot more than 10,000 years ago. According to UNESCO, archeological findings around this area constitute 'evidence that Matobo Hills have been occupied for at least 500,000 years'.

Driving through this breathtakingly beautiful area, with the afternoon sun throwing surreal shadows across what locals named the 'Bald Heads', it was easy to see why this landscape had captivated man's artistic yearnings almost since the beginning of time.

Zimbabwe has long been known as one of Africa's most beautiful countries, and after emerging from troubled times, the country is now reclaiming its rightful place as one of the continent's tourism highlights. For the moment, wilderness areas like Mana Pools, Gonarezhou and Hwange remain secrets that are known only to a few; places where you are still able to enjoy that rare feeling of being almost alone in the immensity of the African bush.

In Hwange, however, the feeling of solitude is frequently overwhelmed by the feeling that you are travelling through a land of giants. Hwange is the domain not only of vast

elephant herds but also of a very healthy population of big cats.

Early one morning, Robert Chadyendia eases the Land Rover into the pretty acacia forest at the back of Somalisa Camp, passing slowly through what appears to be a very nervous elephant herd.

"We particularly watch out for herds with babies and elephants without tusks," he explains quietly over his shoulder. "Decades of hunting took most of the big tuskers out of the gene pool and about ten percent of the elephants here are born tusk-less. But they're cheekier, as if to compensate. It's as if they hope that a simple bad attitude and lots of noise will compensate for the fact that they lack the big guns."

Perhaps these elephants had reason to be defensive. We had heard lions roaring early in the morning and Hwange's 'super-prides' (numbering more than 20 cats and even up to 33, each) are famous for hunting juvenile elephants. While this herd, with babies to care for, might have been very keen to avoid the local pride, Robert was doing his best to arrange a successful rendezvous for me with Hwange's super-predators.

We headed toward the rolling grassland of Ngweshla Pan - meaning

'place of the leopard'. We had seen two leopards in the teak forest near here in the last couple of days. Now only a pair of jackals and a lone hyena snickered at the fringe of the cracked pans and we watched unsuccessfully for any signs of nervousness among the massed herds of zebra, wildebeest, waterbuck, impala, giraffe and roan antelope.

We were driving across a scrubby hillside near Makalolo Pans when we came across a jittery herd of kudu on the edge of a mopane forest. And, just a couple of hundred metres down the dirt-track, we realised that their jitteriness was well-motivated. I sat as if frozen in the back of the Land Rover as the lions walked down the track directly towards us. I counted 12 lionesses and cringed behind my lens as the click of the Nikon's shutter drew their intense amber eyes into mine.

That night I lay in bed listening to the local pride roaring out on the plains. Somewhere behind my tent, another belligerent elephant bellowed, and suddenly it struck me as highly paradoxical that during a week in an area that receives very low visitor numbers, I seemed to have spent a lot of time feeling delightfully outnumbered. ☺



WHERE TO STAY IN HWANGE

Somalisa Expeditions (africanbushcamps.com) is one of Hwange's premier luxury camps and boasts some of the country's best guides and extremely stylish tented accommodation from USD420 per person per night.

The evocative Davison's Camp (wilderness-safaris.com) - near the spot where the park was founded in 1928 - offers an unforgettable slice of Hwange pioneering history from USD380 per person per night.

Nehimba Lodge (imvelosafarilodges.com) has nine spacious chalets arranged around a wildlife-packed waterhole from USD561pppn and Imvelo's new Stimela Star overnight sleeper service now runs between Victoria Falls and Hwange National Park, offering an irresistible touch of vintage luxury.

The Hide (thehide.com) might make you rethink the definition of 'tented accommodation' with its 10 immensely spacious canvas suites from USD362pppn. These rates all include meals, drinks, park fees and game-drives but for a budget, self-drive option, try Tuskers Camp Site (amalindacollection.com), which offers simple camping space and amenities from USD14pppn (plus USD18 park fees per day).