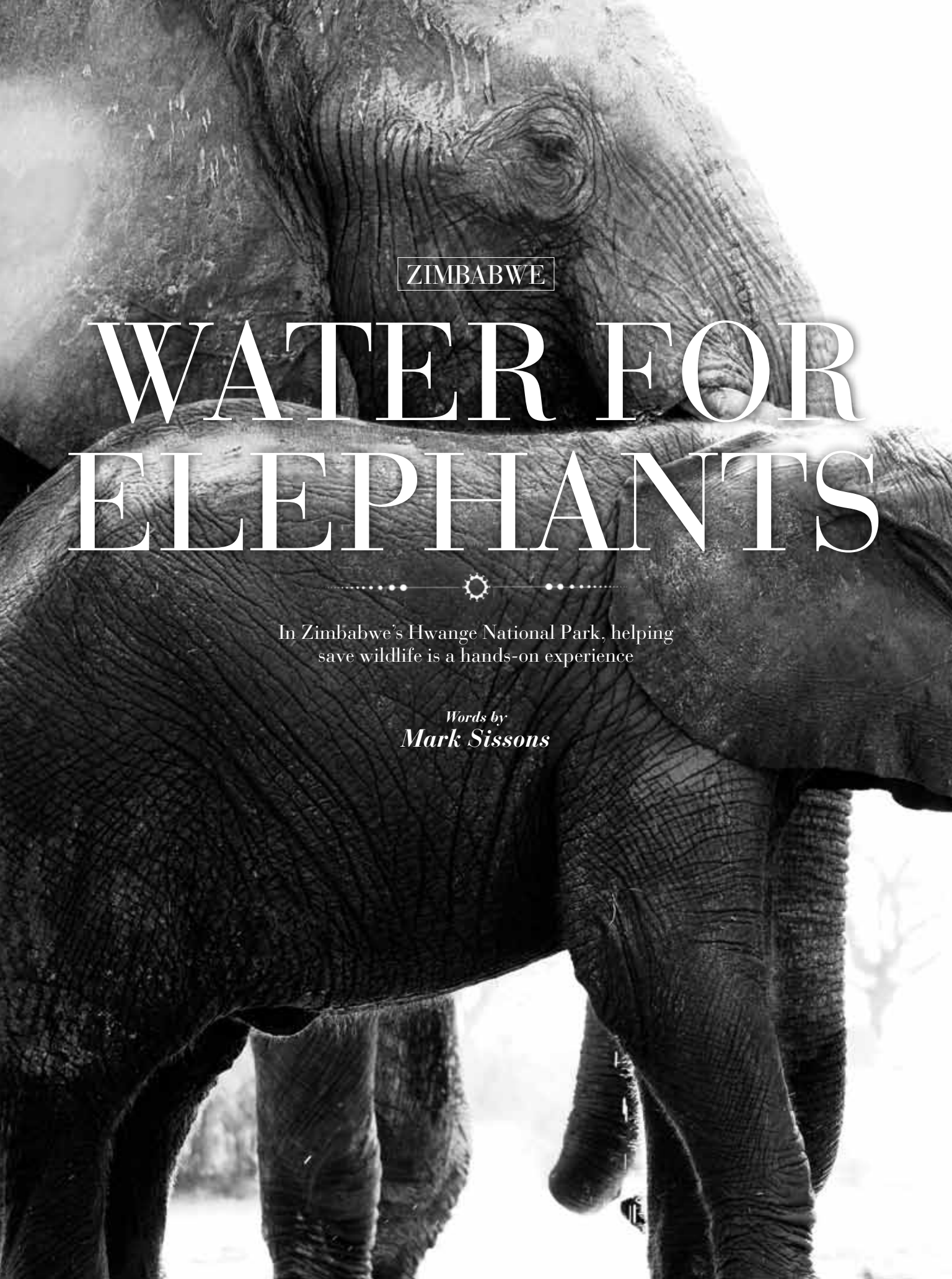


ZIMBABWE

WATER FOR ELEPHANTS

In Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park, helping save wildlife is a hands-on experience

Words by
Mark Sissons

Hwange's nearly 50,000 elephants depend on water pumped by diesel engines during the drought-ridden dry season.

Mark Sissons

"Jostling for space to drink, testosterone-driven young males swing their tusks at mothers and calves."

Mark Sissons

travel with purpose

Elephants and other wildlife flock to the waterhole at Imvelo's Nehimba Lodge during Hwange's dry season.

DOZENS OF ELEPHANTS gather at the waterhole beneath a sprawling Leadwood tree. Jostling for space to drink, testosterone-driven young males swing their tusks at mothers and calves. Matriarchs trumpet their arrival. A Dumbo-eared youngster curls his tiny trunk around his mother's spongy feet.

Many more elephants are on the way.

Before a dentist named Palmer killed a lion named Cecil, Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park was most famous for its enormous herds of elephants—herds that approached 50,000 at last count. Along with a supporting cast of fellow Big Five members, cheetahs, rare African painted wild dogs and over 400 species of birds, they inhabit Africa's tenth largest park, an exceptionally diverse landscape of teak and miombo forests, false mopane woodlands and vast grassy savannahs.

For tusker-lovers this enormous wildlife sanctuary half the size of Belgium is the place to be during the May to November dry season, when tens of thousands of elephants congregate around its waterholes. On a continent where many pachyderm populations are being decimated to feed buyers' lust for ivory, such a huge concentration of elephants in a single park appears initially encouraging.

But look closer at Hwange's waterholes and you'll see emaciated elephants with withered skin hanging off alarmingly thin torsos, their skulls sunken and shoulder blades protruding. A healthy elephant spends around 16 hours a day eating up to 600 pounds of leaves, grass and shrubs. Overgrazing has dangerously diminished that food supply here. During the dry season they also need to consume up to 50 gallons of water a day to remain hydrated. Hwange's elephants depend on water pumped by diesel engines manned 24 hours a day.

ELEPHANT MAN

Probably nobody knows Hwange and its elephants better than Mark Butcher, a native 'Zimbo' who worked with Zimbabwe's Forest Commission in the early '80s and spent decades as a game warden here before opening his own safari company, Imvelo Safari Lodges. In his khaki shorts and broad-brimmed safari hat and his Winchester Magnum 458 rifle slung over one shoulder, this weathered and wiry dynamo reminds me of one of Hemingway's *Snows of Kilimanjaro* characters. Except for his funky footwear… a pair of dusty old Converse sneakers.

Hwange is a ticking ecological ›

AT A GLANCE

On a continent where elephant populations are being decimated to feed buyers' lust for ivory, the huge concentration of elephants at Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park initially appears encouraging. But Africa's tenth largest park is a ticking ecological time bomb where the elephants depend on water that is pumped by diesel engines 24 hours a day.

Imvelo Safari Lodges

Diesel pumps manned by attendants keep the water flowing 24/7 during Hwange's harsh dry season.

Nehimba Lodge is nestled in a game-rich private concession in the northern part of Hwange National Park.

Mark Sissons, Imvelo Safari Lodges

time bomb, Mark explains, with far more elephants than it can sustain. Containing no major rivers or lakes and precious little natural ground water, especially during its harsh dry season, the proposed zone along Zimbabwe's western frontier with Botswana was a poor choice for a national park. But Ted Davidson, appointed Hwange's first warden in the 1920s, had an idea: why not drill boreholes and pump water for its waterholes during the dry season? The elephants and other wildlife would no longer need to migrate and the park would thrive year-round.

Davidson's solution temporarily solved Hwange's water problems and wildlife—especially elephants—flourished. But his best intentions eventually went awry and the park's elephant population soared, doubling in under a decade. Mass contraception was tried, but failed. Translocation was ruled out because of the massive logistics and expenditures required. Once considered a viable option, culling is not acceptable. And letting nature take its course by simply shutting off the water supply, as some experts have recommended, would lead to mass deaths.

"We created this water problem with the best of intentions and we've appointed ourselves to be the caretakers of these animals," says Mark. "Now we are morally obliged to sort it out. We can't just turn off the taps and walk away from it."

HWANGE'S HEARTBEAT

An Imvelo safari in Hwange National Park is more than just an opportunity to experience one of Africa's classic game reserves, rich in history and immensely endowed with wildlife. It's also a rewarding, hands-on opportunity to gain firsthand insight into Hwange's water supply situation and to help conserve and protect its elephants.

I call it *total ellie immersion*. Mark calls it 'the pump run'.

On a scorching September morning, I join Mark on a land cruiser journey through Hwange's rugged wilderness of Kalahari sandveld, mopane woodlands and acacia scrub. Our mission: to deliver diesel for the engines, oils and filters, plus payment of wages and rations for the pump attendants who man the network of waterholes Imvelo maintains throughout the park.

As we arrive at one waterhole, its diesel-powered 'heartbeat' chugging away in the distance, Mark points to the herd drinking and splashing in the cool, clean borehole water: "I've seen people watch all of these elephants standing around drinking and think it's wonderful," he says. "What they don't understand is that these animals are at the absolute end of their tethers."

As a young pump attendant in a tattered Zimbabwe national football team jersey named Oscar emerges from his tin shack to greet the boss, or *bwana*, Mark smiles. "These guys from the local villages; they're Hwange's true unsung heroes, " he says, explaining that they volunteer to live alone, totally isolated and far from their homes for months on end, while they maintain the pumps and watch for poachers. Sometimes they have to fend off hungry lions at night.

At the next waterhole we spot a long line of elephants slowly marching toward us across the savannah. But this pump is broken and no water will flow until it can be fixed in a day or two. When the elephants arrive to find the waterhole bone dry they fuss and trumpet. Then with ears flapping angrily some look straight at us as if to say: *'Hey, where the hell is the water today?'* Soon they give up in frustration and the whole parched procession starts out for the next waterhole several miles in the distance, undernourished calves struggling to keep up.

RECLAMATION PROJECT

There are still remote parts of Hwange that harken back to an earlier, more rugged era of safari travel—the days long before rose petal baths, complicated dietary restrictions and in-room WiFi. Situated in one of the park's most southern and untouched areas, Jozibanini Camp is one of them. This small cluster of spacious canvas tents on elevated teak platforms overlooks a seasonal waterhole. Surrounded by windblown fossil sand dunes and Zambezi teak forests where ancient elephant migration paths serve as roads and animals are still unaccustomed to seeing humans, Jozibanini is still untamed and until recently, unprotected.

"We wanted to re-establish a permanent presence in this neglected area after the 2013 Jozibanini poaching incident here," Mark explains as we sip whiskies around the fire pit at our last pump run stop of the day. "This is partly why we're down here now, to help prevent another mass slaughter."

He's referring to a series of cyanide poisonings by poachers that year that left around three hundred elephants and countless other wildlife dead—by some accounts the worst single massacre in southern Africa for 25 years. "Places like Jozibanini are

Mark Sissons

Nehimba Lodge is nestled in a game-rich private concession in the northern part of Hwange National Park.

on the frontline of the war against poaching," he adds emphatically, suggesting that tourists who venture out here can also play a role as eyes and ears against the enemy.

Park authorities have recently established a new ranger base near here and more eyes and ears on the ground (including mine) are making it harder for poachers to openly operate. Jozibanini's waterhole is flowing again thanks to a recently installed Imvelo pump, and the animals are starting to return, led by skittish herds of elephants that still prefer to drink by night, out of sight of these funny-smelling, two-legged newcomers. On a two-hour tour de bush mountain bike ride along elephant paths with Mark the next morning, I spot fresh lion, hyena and wild dog tracks. An encouraging sign in this freshly-reclaimed part of Hwange.

PACHYDERM POOL PARTY

As my weeklong Hwange Park adventure progresses, it isn't all about me going to the elephants—sometimes they come to me, like on my last night in the park at Nehimba Lodge, which is nestled in a 3,200-hectre game-rich private concession in the northern part of the park. Its seven spacious thatched chalets overlook a popular waterhole and a swimming pool frequented by large numbers of elephants and other game.

As we dine on Nehimba's deck, Mark and I discuss Hwange's prospects. "If we could find a few million dollars we could probably bring enough scientific minds together to come up with a solution to this problem," he says.

Whatever it is, we agree that it can't simply involve pumping more water for more elephants. But until then, the flow must go on. Behind us a dozen elephants silently congregate by the pool. Scores more of these ghostly goliaths will come to drink and bathe throughout the night—extras in a surreal widescreen movie about their own fate playing in the pale moonlight.

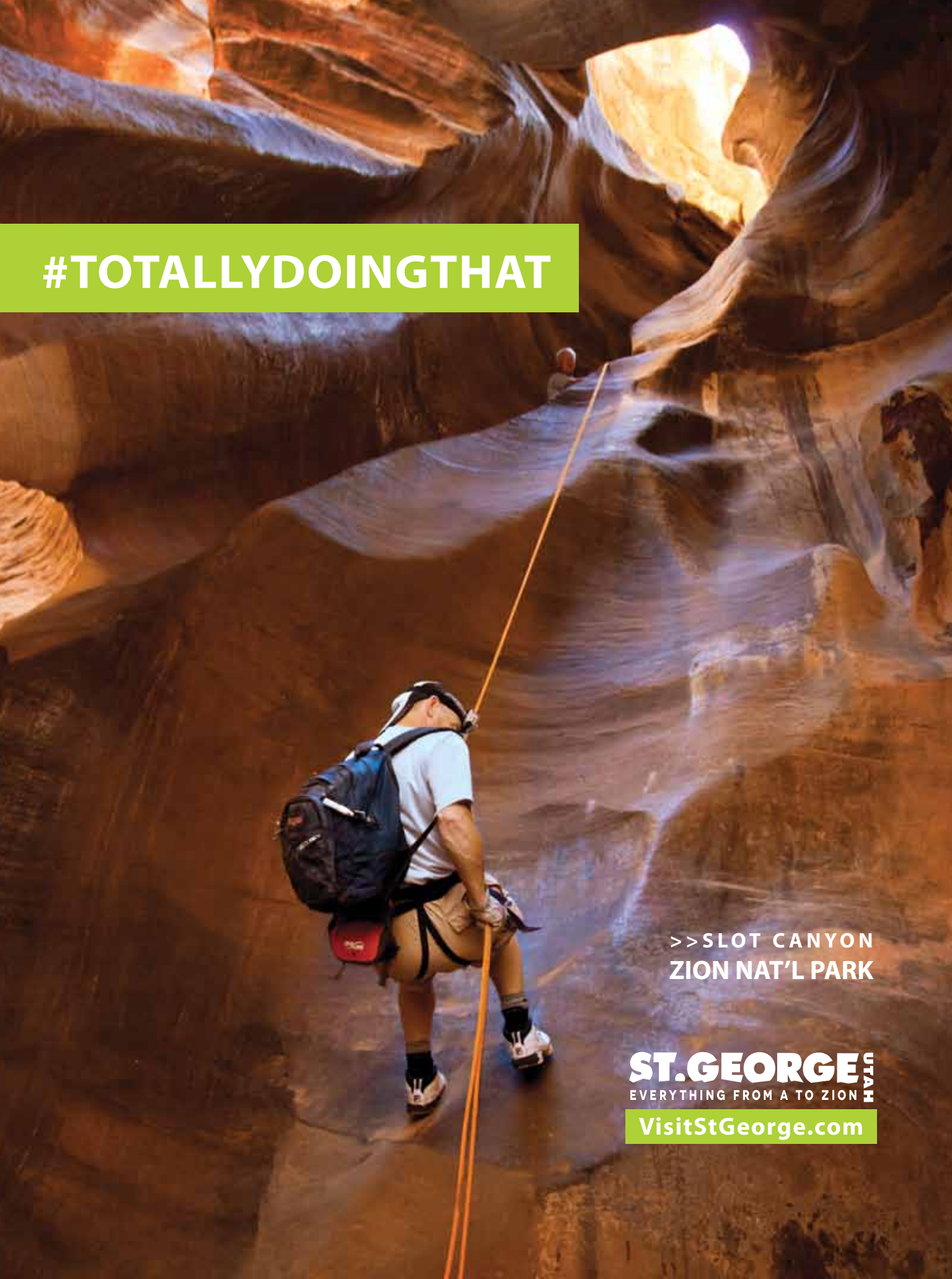
HOW YOU CAN HELP

- The Imvelo Elephant Trust actively works with local wildlife communities to find a long-term sustainable solution to the problems of elephant overpopulation in Hwange National Park. As well as managing and maintaining water pumps, drinking troughs and bathing pans to help protect thousands of animals against dehydration and death, it contributes to anti-poaching efforts and raises awareness about the elephants' plight within surrounding communities. You can learn more about Imvelo's conservation efforts at imveloelephanttrust.com.
- You can also help by donating to the D-3 Foundation, a private US-based registered charity that helps fund water for Hwange's wildlife, as well as drinking wells, primary education and medical care for nearby indigenous communities. Learn more at d3charity.org.

WHEN YOU GO

- Wildlife viewing is best between May and November when Hwange's animals congregate around the park's many waterholes.
- South African Airways and British Airways fly from Johannesburg to both Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe) and Livingstone (Zambia), while regional carrier Airlink flies direct to Livingstone and Bulawayo. Transfers to lodges can be arranged.
- Imvelo Safari Lodges has three well-appointed lodges and an adventure camp in Hwange, along with two lodges located close to nearby Victoria Falls.
- Imvelo guests ride on the Elephant Express that follows an old railway line bordering the park. Built from a bus chassis and two Toyota land cruiser engines, this 24-seat private carriage makes scenic transfers from a hub near Hwange Main Camp to Imvelo lodges in the southeast corner of the park.
- Imvelo guests can visit villages near their lodges in Hwange and Victoria Falls. Hosted by local guides, these opportunities to interact with local communities provide insights into rural Zimbabwean life and how these communities are learning to protect wildlife.

Imvelo Safari Lodges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