

TRAVEL

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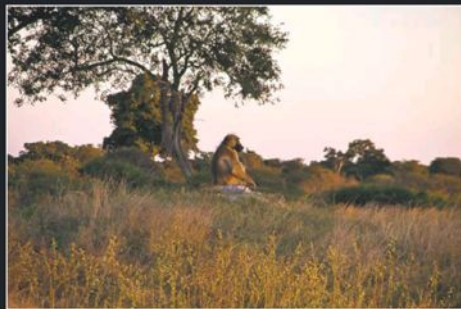
Back on safari

By Mark Sizsons

MALILANGWE WILDLIFE RESERVE, Zimbabwe — "Where else can you have a UNESCO World Heritage Site virtually to yourself?" asks my Zimbabwean guide, Mr. Lovemore.

The man has a point. On this misty morning, I'm one of only a handful of visitors exploring the exquisitely constructed stone ruins of Great Zimbabwe, legendary capital of the Queen of Sheba, and one of the most extraordinary man-made complexes ever built in Africa.

"We only get about 150 visitors a month here," says Lovemore as he leads me around the remains of the once-imperial capital of the Kingdom of Zimbabwe, from which the modern nation takes its name. Occupied between 1100 to 1450 AD, this incredible artistic achievement has captured the imaginations of African and European travellers since the Middle Ages, when the whole kingdom was mysteriously abandoned.



A baboon contemplates the sunrise in Hwange National Park, a haven for wildlife and home to vast herds of elephant, buffalo, zebra and giraffe, as well as the highly endangered wild dog.

"Please ask your friends to visit my beautiful country," Lovemore urges as we navigate the thick granite block walls of the Great Enclosure — the largest single ancient structure south of the Sahara. "Things are changing here," he adds.

One of Africa's most geographically beautiful but beleaguered countries, Zimbabwe has fantastic scenery spread across incredibly diverse

terrain, legendary game parks and breathtaking natural wonders like Victoria Falls. Now, after over a decade of near-total isolation due to devastating domestic political economic crisis and foreign sanctions, this former "pearl of Africa" appears to be getting back on the tourism map.

For adventurous travellers, Southern Africa's former breadbasket-

turned-basket case offers an exciting window of opportunity — to be among the first visitors in a generation to experience the kind of Africa that hasn't existed since Hemingway's day, minus the elephant guns. And at substantially less cost than comparable safaris in neighbouring countries like Zambia and Botswana.

"Zimbabwe is a really exciting place to visit now, especially for the first-time traveller to Africa. Perceptions of my country are beginning to change and we've witnessed enormous progress in the past two years," says archeologist, safari guide and native Zimbabwean Paul Hubbard over dinner the next evening at Camp Amalinda, a private safari lodge 45 kilometres from Zimbabwe's sleepy second city of Bulawayo.

"Tourists have always been safe in Zimbabwe because they're usually far removed from any potential flashpoints and dangerous areas," Hubbard adds, referring to the political turmoil that has wracked the country for well over a decade.

Continued
Please see **ZIMBABWE D4**

Zimbabwe welcomes new generation of adventurous travellers



MARK HODGSON / PHOTOGRAPH BY

The exquisitely constructed stone ruins of Great Zimbabwe, legendary capital of the Great Zimbabwe Empire, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, only receive about 150 visitors a month.

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Only since 2009, with the U.S. dollarization and a fragile power-sharing arrangement with the beleaguered opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change, have most Zimbabweans begun to see a glimmer of hope.

"Sure, you are putting money in Mugabe's pocket, but only in the form of visa fees and two per cent tourism levy that goes to the government," says Stead. "But Zimbabwe is not all about Robert Mugabe. There is so much more here. By avoiding our country, you are actually hurting us more," she adds.

Stead also points out that the more people who visit Zimbabwe's legendary parks like Hwange and Mana Pools (another UNESCO World Heritage Site), the more funding those parks will have for desperately needed infrastructure improvements like pump-outter holes for animals.

Tourist dollars also help pay and feed underfunded anti-poaching units that are fighting a David and Goliath battle against rampant poaching. Their continued presence is vital to the survival of endangered species.

During a recent stop traversing Zimbabwe — from remote Manobo and Gonarezhou National Parks in the southeast and massive Hwange, the rival of any game park on the continent, to one of the seven wonders of the natural world, Victoria Falls — I heard much the same argument from other locals. By visiting Zimbabwe, they said, you're not supporting the regime so much as the people who must live under it. Most of the money you spend is going directly into supporting local businesses and local people. Whereas if nobody comes, ordinary Zimbabweans risk losing what they have bravely fought so hard to sustain.

But the regime's magnificent parks, once the envy of Africa, have teetered on the brink of oblivion, mostly due to an increase in poaching. Much of the mass murder is conducted with brutal force and precision by ex-military mercenaries who use automatic weapons and helicopters to hunt black rhinos and elephants for their horns and tusks, which are trafficked in the Arabian Peninsula and East Asia. China is by far the largest customer. Its millions of newly wealthy often flaunt their new-found economic status by purchasing intricate ivory carvings. Traditional Chinese medicine still promotes rhino horn as an aphrodisiac, despite irrefutable scientific evidence to the contrary. Now, because of China's massive trade with Africa, more than a million Chinese are working all over the continent, expanding ivory and rhino horn smuggling channels.



MARK HODGSON / PHOTOGRAPH BY

Rescued as a day-old kitten when locals near Bulawayo noticed his mother and siblings being eaten by a lion, Sylvester the Cheetah now resides at Elephant Camp Resort near Victoria Falls.

IF YOU GO

WHEN TO GO: Zimbabwe's generally high altitudes result in a moderate climate. The end of the cool, dry winter season, around August to October, is the best time for most overall game viewing, while the December to March summer offers superb birding opportunities.

GETTING THERE: South African Airways (www.saa.com) has daily non-stop flights to Johannesburg from New York and Washington, with same-day connections to Harare and Bulawayo. There is also a twice-weekly return flight direct from Johannesburg to Buffalo Range Airport near Singita Pamushana Lodge.

"By visiting Zimbabwe's parks you are effectively helping to protect the animals and provide livelihoods for people whose passion and life goals are to protect those animals from poachers," says Jason Turner, manager at Singita Pamushana Lodge. "Global Wonders in the conservation category at the 2011 World Travel & Tourism Summit held in Las Vegas, Pamushana is one of Africa's best-kept secrets."

As well as supporting community projects like a critical feeding scheme for some 22,000 preschool children living within the vicinity of the reserve, it also funds the preservation of Malilangwe's majestic Baobab trees and mopane forests, which are teeming with birds and wildlife, including rare and endangered species like the black rhino. Malilangwe also contains more than a hundred San rock art sites dating back more than 2,000 years.

As I sip a gin and tonic with Turner and watch

elephants emerge from the bush to drink at the edge of one of the few dams set aside purely for private use, it's hard to fathom anyone would want to tamper with, let alone destroy, this patch of Eden.

The Frankfurt Zoological Society recently pledged US\$10 million to Gonarezhou for the next 10 years to aid in park management and anti-poaching. Turner explains, "This is a huge step forward because without that money the park, as it stands, has extremely limited resources. In 2009, only about 2,000 local and international tourists visited."

"A park the size of Gonarezhou could easily cater to 750,000 visitors per year," Turner adds. "There are over 9,000 elephants here and it is absolutely wild."

So is the resident country that contains natural gems like Gonarezhou, Hwange and Mana Pools, world-renowned UNESCO sites, and if feedback from increasing numbers of travellers eager to experience Zimbabwe's tentative return to the world tourism stage is any indication.

So long as you're not a white farmer or a member of one of the opposition parties targeted by Mugabe's thugs, it's perfectly safe to visit, just bear and breed Zimbabweans like Hubbard, Steed, Turner and Lovemore. All remained during their homeland's darkest years, firmly believing the country they love will rise again soon to retake its rightful place as the pride of southern Africa's safari destinations.

— Postmedia News

WHERE TO STAY

■ Camp Amalinda (www.campamalinda.com) is situated in the World Heritage Site of Matobo Hills, only 45 kilometres from Bulawayo. The exclusive safari lodge is tucked away in an ancient bushman's shelter. Mammal and bird species are prolific and include the highest concentrations of leopard and black eagle in the world, as well as a healthy population of the endangered black and white rhino.

■ Singita Pamushana Lodge (www.singita.com) overlooks southeast Zimbabwe's Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve and has six luxury suites and one villa, each with a private plunge pool and panoramic views of the Malilangwe plain and sandstone hills. Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve is home to rare and endangered species such as the rhino, sable antelope, and the black rhino. Famous for its cathedral poplars forests and majestic baboons, Malilangwe also contains over 100 rock sites dating back more than 2,000 years.

■ The Hide Safari Camp (www.thehide.com) in Hwange National Park offers accommodation in luxury tents overlooking a water hole where animals congregate day and night. Zimbabwe's largest national park, Hwange is home to over 100 mammal and 400 bird species, including an estimated 20,000 elephants, as well as what is thought to be one of the largest populations of African wild dog left in the world.

■ The Victoria Falls Hotel (www.africansunhotels.com/victoriafalls), popularly known as "the grand old lady of the Falls," is located in the Victoria Falls National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Set in lush tropical gardens, this 104-year-old five-star landmark was recently redecorated and refurbished. Victoria Falls is just a 10-minute walk away using the hotel's private pathway.



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