

Travel



Road Trip:
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ZIMBABWE



Pearl of Africa regains luster

Tourists slowly venture back to once-premier safari destination

Photos by Mark Sissons / Special to The Chronicle

By Mark Sissons

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

One of the most extraordinary man-made complexes ever built in Africa was made for a woman, although on this misty morning, the kingdom pretty much belongs to me.

"Where else can you have a UNESCO World Heritage Site virtually to yourself?" asks my guide, Mr. Lovemore.

The man has a point. 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.

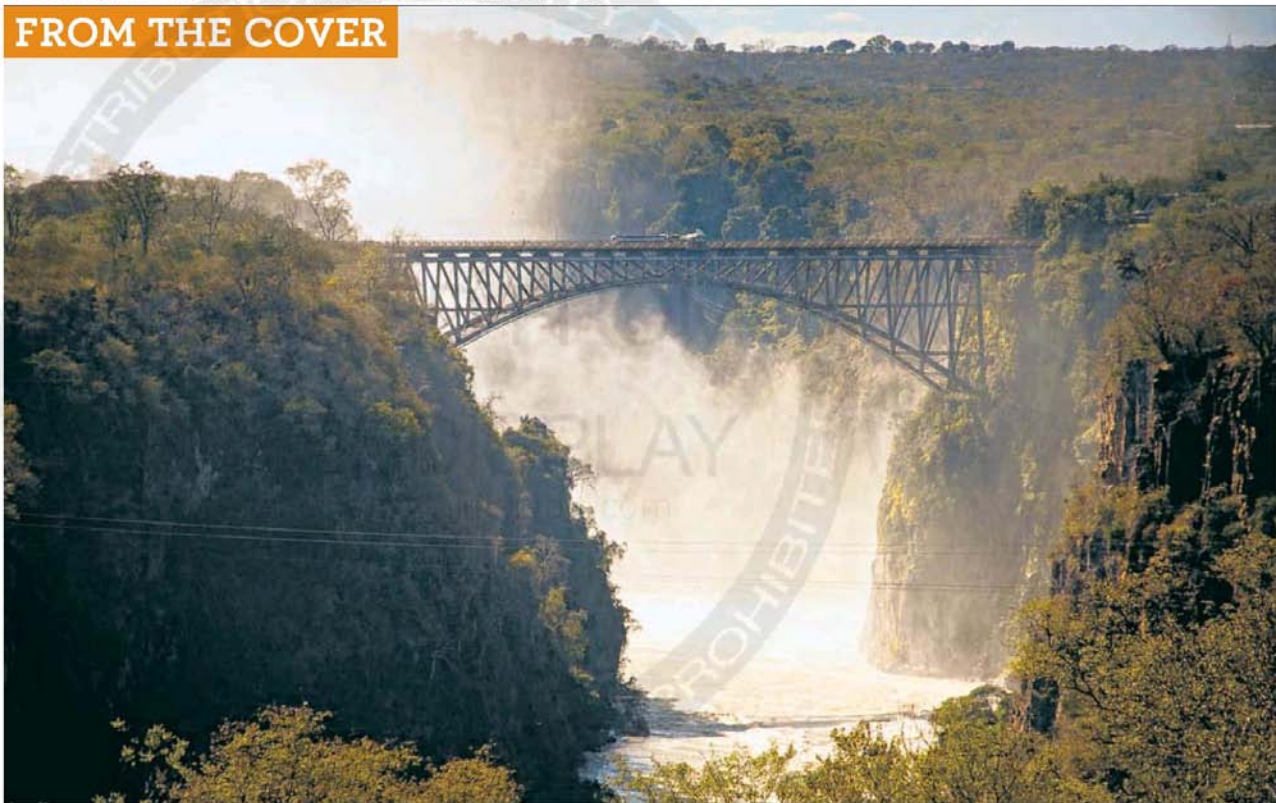
"We only get about 150 visitors a month here," says Lovemore as he leads me around the remains of the once imperial capital of the Kingdom of Zimbabwe, from which the modern nation takes its name. Occupied between 1100 to 1450, this incredible artistic achievement has captured the imaginations of African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

Zimbabwe continues on C4



Top: A safari lodge at Camp Amalinda. **Above:** Hwange National Park elephants benefit from tourist dollars that help fund antipoaching units.

FROM THE COVER



Photos by Mark Sissons / Special to The Chronicle

The brainchild of Cecil Rhodes, this 650-foot-long iron bridge was built in 1905 to connect Zimbabwe and Zambia near Victoria Falls.

Pearl of Africa back on tourists' map

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"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."

One of Africa's most geographically blessed but politically beleaguered countries, Zimbabwe has fantastic scenery spread across incredibly diverse terrain, legendary game parks and breathtaking natural wonders like the world's largest waterfall, Victoria Falls — the "Smoke That Thunders".

Now, after more than a decade of near total isolation due to devastating domestic political and economic crises, and foreign sanctions, the former "pearl of Africa" appears to be gradually getting back on the tourism map.

For adventurous travelers, this means Southern Africa's former breadbasket turned basket case now offers a potentially 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 for substantially less than neighboring safari destinations like Zambia and Botswana.

At Camp Amalinda, a private safari lodge 28 miles from Zimbabwe's sleepy second city of Bulawayo, Paul Hubbard, archaeologist, safari guide and native Zimbabwean, says tourists have always been safe in Zimbabwe because they are usually far removed from any potential flash points and dangerous areas associated with the political turmoil, he said.

"Perceptions of my country are beginning to change, and we've witnessed enormous progress in the past two years," said Hubbard.

Life certainly appears calm at Camp Amalinda, tucked into an ancient San (Bushmen) shelter with spectacular views of the granite domes, gravity-defying giant boulders and citadel-like kopjes that dot the surrounding Matobo Hills National Park. Long the setting for ceremonies and rituals, this also



The stone ruins of Great Zimbabwe, linked by legends to the Queen of Sheba and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, only receive about 150 visitors a month.

seldom-visited UNESCO World Heritage Site is still regarded as sacred by the Shona and many other indigenous peoples of Southern Africa.

Famous for its San rock art and artifacts dating back thousands of years, Matobo is also the final resting place of Cecil Rhodes, the iconic Victorian era empire builder and eponymous founder of the former Rhodesia.

Early one morning, I hike up to Rhodes' grave site on a summit called World's View. Just a few miles drive from Camp Amalinda, it commands a panoramic view of Matobo's fractured, bronzed landscape. From this epic vantage point I try to imagine the surreal scene of this mining magnate and ruthless colonizer's burial here in 1902, attended by Ndebele chiefs who insisted that salutary rifles not be discharged lest Matobo's spirits be disturbed. More than a century later, this magical place still attracts some of Africa's most powerful men.

Camp Amalinda owner Sharon Stead, a third-generation Zimbabwean, like so many other whites saw her family farm unlawfully seized by President Robert Mugabe's notorious war vets. Stead and her husband have struggled to keep Camp Amalinda afloat through years of economic instability and political violence. But now she sees the tide beginning to turn.

"We're now considered the new kid on the safari block," Stead chuckles. "Travelers who remember Zimbabwe's golden era as a premier safari



Source: ESRI John Blanchard / The Chronicle

destination are beginning to flock back and see it again."

The ethical question arises, as it does in the case of other political pariahs such as Burma — should you go at all? Is visiting and spending your tourist dollars there simply helping to prolong the odious regime of Mugabe?

Glimmer of hope

Only since 2009 (the U.S. dollarization and a fragile power sharing arrangement) 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 2 percent tourism levy that goes to the government," says Stead. "By avoiding our country, you are actually hurting us more."

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, and also that tourist dollars help pay and feed the desper-

ately underfunded anti-poaching units. Their continued presence is absolutely vital to the survival of critically endangered species like the black rhino.

Zimbabwe's magnificent parks, once the envy of Africa, have certainly teetered on the brink of oblivion, mostly due to a huge increase in poaching in recent years. Driving through Hwange, which is roughly half the size of Belgium, I see little trace of its once extensive herds of elephants. Nor do they emerge that evening to congregate, as they once did, round the watering hole at Hide Camp, deep within the park, as I watch from the porch of my nearby chalet.

"By visiting Zimbabwe's parks you are effectively helping to protect the animals," says Jason Turner, manager at Singita Pamushana, a luxury safari lodge perched high over a dam deep within the Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve's majestic Baobab and Mopane forests.

Haven for species

This haven for rare

If you 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 game viewing, while the December to March summer offers birding.

GETTING THERE

South African Airways (www.flysaa.com) has daily nonstop flights to Johannesburg from the East Coast, with same-day connections to Harare and Bulawayo.

WHERE TO STAY

Camp Amalinda (www.campamalinda.com) is in the Matobo Hills, only 28 miles from Bulawayo. This exclusive safari lodge is tucked away in an ancient Bushman's shelter.

Singita Pamushana Lodge (www.singita.com) overlooks southeastern Zimbabwe's Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve and has six luxury suites and one villa.

Hide Safari Camp (www.thehide.com) in Hwange National Park offers accommodation in luxury tents overlooking a waterhole where animals congregate day and night.

The Victoria Falls Hotel (www.africansunhotels.com/victoriafallshotel), popularly known as the "grand old lady of the Falls," is located in the Victoria Falls National Park.

RECOMMENDED OUTFITTERS

Africa Adventure Consultants (www.adventuresinafrica.com, (866) 778-1089) offers customizable Zimbabwe safaris that include Victoria Falls, Great Zimbabwe, Hwange and Matobo Hills.

Global Sojourns (www.globalsojourns.com, (503) 622-9101) offers customizable Zimbabwe tours.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Zimbabwe Tourism Authority website (www.zimbatourism.net) provides information on the country and its local attractions, including an events calendar and directory.

and endangered species like the Roan and sable antelope and the black rhino borders Gonarezhou National Park in the far southeastern corner of the country, and contains more than 100 San rock art sites dating back more than 2,000 years.

Later, cruising on Pamushana's boat with Turner toward a herd of elephants that just emerged from the Malilangwe bush to drink at the edge of one of the few dams of this size set aside purely for private use, I find it hard to fathom why anyone would want to tamper with, let alone destroy, this relatively pristine forest.

In 2009, only about 2,000 local and international tourists visited Gonarezhou.

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

Mr. Lovemore would be happy to see a fraction of that number visit Great Zimbabwe. As the ethereal mist enveloping it the morning I visit

turns to gentle rain, he leads me to a 30-foot-high beehive-shaped conical tower within the Great Enclosure thought to have once been a royal residence.

Pointing to its mortarless walls, he explains that from the time Portuguese explorers first laid eyes on Great Zimbabwe until relatively recently, many outside of his country clung to the inherently racist belief that this monumental city of stone could not possibly have been constructed by black Africans.

"Whites did not build Great Zimbabwe. Blacks did," Lovemore assures me, eager to pre-empt any doubts about its origin, which still contains many other unsolved mysteries.

There is, however, little mystery about the hopes Lovemore and the others have for bringing more visitors to Zimbabwe. There is so much to share — but its future relies on sharing it.

Mark Sissons last wrote for *Travel on the Kalahari*. E-mail comments to travel@sfchronicle.com.