

WATER FOR ELEPHANTS

ON A SAFARI THAT HELPS SAVE
LIVES IN ONE OF AFRICA'S MOST
ICONIC GAME RESERVES.



Dozens of thirsty elephants congregate beneath the sprawling Acacia tree on the edge of a shallow, muddy, natural waterhole called a 'pan.' Jostling for space, testosterone-driven young males aggressively swing their tusks at one another while floppy-eared babies hide beneath their mothers' sturdy legs. Then a majestic old matriarch arrives, and the herd respectfully parts to let her drink. It's a classic African safari tableau.

But something is incongruent in this scene – the thump, thump of a diesel engine. Running day and night, it pumps enough underground water to keep the pan filled and these elephants alive through the harsh dry season in Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park. Half the size of Belgium, the country's largest park of Zambezi teak and miombo forests, false mopane woodlands, grassy savannas and deep Kalahari sands.

And elephants. Approaching 50,000 at last count, Hwange's is one of the largest intact herds remaining in Africa, where escalated poaching is driving Africa's signature animal ever-closer to extinction.

"I've seen people watch all of these elephants standing around drinking and think it's wonderful. What they don't understand is that these animals are at the absolute end of their tethers," says Mark Butcher, a former park ranger turned safari operator, as more parched pachyderms arrive.

Without the life-sustaining water pumped by safari operators like Mark's company, Imvelo Safari Lodges, tens of thousands of Hwange's elephants, along with lions, buffalo, leopards, cheetahs, rare African painted wild dogs, and hundreds of other species, would perish before the rains returned. Gradually, with the support of generous donors, Imvelo is replacing its diesel pumps with more environmentally friendly solar hybrid systems.

Providing critical water supply for Hwange's wildlife is just part of how Imvelo is helping to protect and preserve Zimbabwe's oldest national park. "We recognize that the fate of both people and wildlife are inextricably linked," Mark says as we explore a remote, seldom-visited sector of the park called Jozibanini—a truly wild landscape of drifting dunes and dense bush he calls 'the forgotten quarter'.

Here, as in much of traditional Africa, ongoing human-wildlife conflicts still plague communities, often leading to subsistence poaching. To combat this, Imvelo has to date, poured over US\$ 1.5 million into ensuring that local people benefit directly from safari tourism, despite the dangers wrought by crop-eating elephants and livestock-raiding lions. "It's about the concept of wildlife being more valuable alive than dead in the long run," Mark explains.

Johnson Ncube agrees. Hereditary leader of Ngamo, a village neighbouring Imvelo's flagship Camelthorn



NEHIMBA LODGE



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Lodge, he says that local people have stopped poaching because they know that whatever good is happening here is because of these animals. "We need wildlife, otherwise, no tourists will visit our country," he explains one morning as we sit drinking tea in his extended family's compound.

I'm in Ngamo 'visiting the neighbours' as Mark puts it, an option available to Imvelo's guests that lets them see firsthand how safari tourism can help support local communities on the front lines of African wildlife conservation. Safari Tourism's contributions include digging village wells, delivering vital medical and dental care and building primary schools, among many other philanthropic initiatives.

That afternoon I board the Elephant Express, a private rail car Imvelo operates on the colonial era track



linking the park's mountainous northern sector with the flat, arid plains. It connects with the new Stimela Star, Zimbabwe's only private overnight sleeper train operating from Victoria Falls to Hwange. We roll past herds of kudu, buffalo and wildebeest, stopping every few kilometres to let elephants and giraffes cross the tracks, I marvel at how tourism here can help save lives.

Upon reaching Imvelo's Nehimba Lodge, a cluster of thatched chalets overlooking a popular waterhole in the game-rich northern part of the park, I'm rewarded with an unforgettable sight. Just a few metres from where Mark and I dine on the lodge's terrace, scores of elephants gather, their long trunks extended like vacuum hoses, draining the swimming pool dry. Hundreds more will arrive overnight.

Like us, these 'ellies' have come to drink, relax, and socialize at the end of another day in one of Africa's greatest parks. As we raise our glasses to toast them, one gentle giant stops slurping and splashing in the cool, fresh water to stare in our direction. Ears flapping, she sniffs the air, then raises her trunk in our direction, as if in greeting. If only we could all communicate, what tales of the African wild she could share.

Learn how you can support Imvelo's innovative solar hybrid water for wildlife programs, at: waterforhwange.org.

GETTING THERE

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.

WHEN TO GO

Wildlife viewing is best between May and November, when Hwange's animals congregate around the park's many waterholes.

WHERE TO STAY

Imvelo Safari Lodges operate several luxury lodges and an adventure camp in Hwange, as well as two more accommodations close to nearby Victoria Falls. / imvelosafarilodges.com

RECOMMENDED OUTFITTER

Vancouver-based Heritage Safari Company can arrange complete Zimbabwe itineraries, including Hwange safaris and visits to nearby Victoria Falls. / heritagesafaris.com