



READ BETWEEN THE LINES

ZIMBABWE IS AFRICA'S ORIGINAL SAFARI HEAVYWEIGHT
AND NOW IT'S THROWN ITSELF BACK IN THE RING.
PETER BROWNE LEFT HIS HOMETLAND FOR GOOD JUST
BEFORE IT SLID INTO TOTAL MELTDOWN. HERE HE REPORTS
FOR THE FIRST TIME ON ITS FEISTY RETURN TO FORM

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID CROOKES



BRADFIELD'S HORNBILL is a wily character. Short of leg, stout of chest, with mournful yellow eyes and an oversized red beak, he struts about the place, pecking at the ground for grubs and seeds to feed his expectant mate.

When ready to lay her eggs, the female will shed all her feathers to line the nest, then seal herself away behind a wall made of mud and her own droppings until the chicks are ready to fly.

'That's real trust,' says Lewis Mangaba, my safari guide at Linkwasha Camp in Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park. 'There must be a very strong connection between them for her to wait, naked, for 52 days, unable to feed or fend for herself.'

Zimbabwe has a reputation for producing the top safari guides in Africa and Mangaba is one of them. We first met two years ago in Tanzania's Ruaha National Park, so I was surprised to see him waiting for me at the airstrip in Hwange. 'Welcome home Peter,' he said, shaking my hand vigorously. 'It's wonderful to see you again.'

I was born in The Lady Chancellor Maternity Hospital in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia. Before I left my homeland

for good, it would change its name three times. Under the white-minority rule of Ian Douglas Smith it was defiantly, illegally Rhodesia; under the short-lived puppet government of Bishop Abel Muzorewa it became, somewhat half-heartedly, Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. It finally emerged as the independent state of Zimbabwe in 1980, two decades after most other countries on the continent.

I have lived here through all its guises. At school I wrote Cambridge exams and was called to assembly by bagpipes; I did national service in the Rhodesian army in what turned out to be the last year of a long and ugly guerilla war. Far too many friends were blown up by landmines; one died playing Russian roulette in the bar of the Monomotapa Hotel in Salisbury. By the late 1970s, violence had become the Rhodesian way. Everyone packed a firearm; if you had to leave town, it was under military escort.

When the war ended and Mugabe came to power in 1980, a cavalcade of newcomers arrived, this time armed with World Bank and NGO money to help rebuild the country. It was a time of hope, when sun-blushed Scandinavians and trust-fund Americans



danced in beer gardens with dreadlocked poets to the beat of the Bhundu Boys, Oliver Mtukudzi and Thomas Mapfumo.

For 20 years after independence things stayed mostly stable thanks to foreign aid, buoyant tobacco sales and a successful safari industry. In those days, I went home for Christmas every year. I saw in the millennium with old university friends in a stone cottage way up in the drizzly mists of the Eastern Highlands, where there are tea plantations and lakes stocked with fat trout and mountain views that draw whistles. As midnight approached, we all lay outside and counted falling stars. Back in England there would be fireworks and revelry, but I knew where I would rather be.

All that changed a few months later when Mugabe, incensed with white farmers for backing a new opposition party, MDC, took their land swiftly and brutally, without compassion or compensation. I watched from London as the land invasions escalated and insanity set in. In just a few years hyperinflation had reached 80 billion per cent and thousands of refugees and economic migrants had fled abroad, or bled into neighbouring countries.

LEWIS MANGABA REMAINED optimistic. 'Things will get better,' he told me from his base in East Africa, 'and then it will be time to go home.' For Mangaba and others, that time is now. Mugabe may still be in power and the country bankrupt, but since the American dollar was adopted as Zimbabwe's official currency, there has been a small but noticeable improvement. Where supermarket shelves were once empty, they are now well stocked with (admittedly expensive) imported goods; where banks were once shuttered, there is cash in some ATM machines. On the surface, at least, there is a veneer of normality.

Of course what is not being said, at least not in public, is that Mugabe is 92 and very soon will die. Then things will have to change, one way or another. To prepare for that moment, there's been a shift from safari operators boycotting the country towards supporting its return onto the Southern African circuit where it once played a starring role.

Mangaba has come home to be head guide at Linkwasha Camp, the smartest new lodge to open in Zimbabwe in decades. As a



A water pan in Hwange National Park. Previous pages, bull elephant in Gonarezhou, south-east Zimbabwe

A photograph of a bedroom featuring a four-poster bed with a white canopy. The bed is dressed in white linens and has two floral patterned pillows. The room has patterned wallpaper and bedside lamps. A zebra-print chair is visible in the foreground.

WE USED TO DRIVE TO THE NATIONAL PARK IN
A BEACH BUGGY WITH A CANOE STRAPPED
TO THE ROOF AND CAMP IN BASIC SITES. NOW
THERE ARE MUCH SMARTER PLACES TO STAY

statement of confidence in Zimbabwe's near-future, it positively vibrates with optimism. Owned and operated by Johannesburg-based Wilderness Safaris, it sits on a private concession in the southern reaches of Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe's biggest game reserve, with deep Kalahari sands and wide-open plains peppered with gigantic termite mounds, like thousands of miniature volcanic plugs.

There are no rivers in these parts, but a network of pans – filled from subterranean waterholes powered by rickety diesel engines ('the heartbeat of Hwange,' says Lewis) – attracts masses of wildlife. In winter, big herds of elephant and buffalo gather; there are elegant antelope, including glossy sable, and plenty of lions (handsome, black-maned Cecil was the most famous, and his gene pool is evident everywhere).

On safari on my first day, Mangaba and the camp's brilliant learner guide Bulisani Mathe (Buli) showered me with bush know-how and folklore on a walk

across the Ngamo Plains. They recounted how wild basil is used to treat sore throats and as a mosquito repellent, but also as perfume by the women of the village; how, if a helmetshrike songbird should cross your path on the way home, that night you will eat meat; how termites harvest grass for their fungal gardens, and how termite-mound soil makes the best bricks for houses. As the sun reached its zenith, we traced a trail of vertebrae bones to the skull of a young zebra which, said Buli, judging by the size of the puncture holes, had been taken by a leopard.

But nothing could compare to the sight later that day of a sexually aroused bull elephant scratching his belly with his penis. Male elephants only start breeding at the age of 30 (for females it's as young as eight) and bulls in musk for the first time are crazy on hormones, unpredictable and single-minded in their quest to mate with as many females as possible. We watched as two youngsters pretended to feed while they waited for an older bull to move away from a female in estrogen, before chasing after her. For some time we could hear her alarm calls carry across the savannah as she tried to shake off her inexperienced suitors.

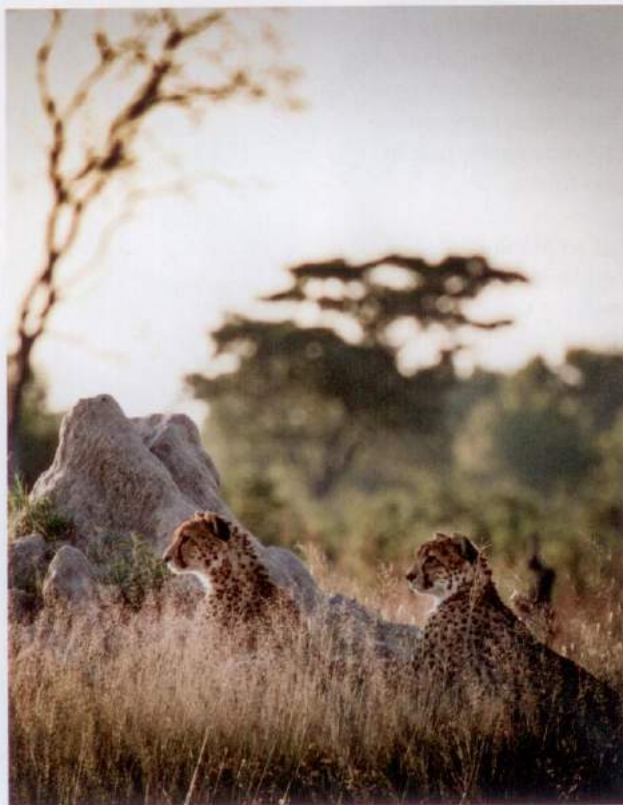
I FIRST SAW THE VICTORIA FALLS 35 years ago when my army squadron was based here, and I have been back many times since. But it's impossible to replicate the initial impact that sight commands: a curtain of water (500 million litres per minute in full flow) nearly two kilometres wide, crashing down over 100 metres to the rocks below. The sound reverberates through your body; the spray lashes your face. Slippery, winding paths skirt the roaring cataracts and cauldrons along the narrow gorge through a dense, dripping forest filled with orchids and lilies and

vines. There are still no safety railings along the way. Indeed, nothing seems to have changed much since 1904, when the Victoria Falls Hotel opened to billet grandees arriving on Cecil Rhodes' new railway line from Cape Town on its way to Cairo.

Victoria Falls airport is in the process of being upgraded with a \$150 million loan from China, allowing direct international flights to land for the first time. On paper, it has the potential to double the number of visitors to this tiny town; maybe even turn it into a commercial hub serving neighbouring Namibia, Botswana and Zambia. Certainly, its development has spawned a number of improvements and restaurant and hotel openings. The Victoria Falls Safari Lodge, built 20 years ago on a ridge overlooking a waterhole in the Zambezi National Park and still one of the best hotels around, has launched a more intimate Club with butler service, and also smart new apartments. The hotel's co-founder, Ross Kennedy, one of the Victoria Falls' most

ardent and vocal supporters, has even started work on an \$18 million family-friendly theme park.

But for me the only place to stay has always been the Victoria Falls Hotel. My grandmother and parents drank tea on the lawn here and I have stuck with it loyally through lean times when the food was gruesome and the staff uniforms frayed. For one unfortunate period it was painted a peculiar shade of pink that brought to mind a myopic old girl sporting too much rouge. Now there's crocodile Caesar salad on the lunch menu at Stanley's Terrace, from where you can watch the spray from the falls rise into the sky like Prince of Wales plumes, and silver service in the formal dining room where a pianist plays show tunes. As Holly Golightly said of another classy institution, 'the quietness and the proud look of it; nothing very bad could happen to you there'.



FROM THE FALLS, the Zambezi River continues its journey west towards the Indian Ocean until it fans out to form a vast inland sea, created by the construction of the Kariba Dam wall, officially opened by the Queen Mother in 1960. My father kept a little boat on Lake Kariba for 20 years or more. In those days, if we wanted to swim, dad would simply putter out into the middle of the lake, far from the reach of crocodiles, and we'd all dive in. In more recent years I've seen six- or eight-foot scaly-back monsters trailing houseboats a very long way from shore, snapping at scraps of food tipped overboard.

This time around, I hitched a ride to Lake Kariba on a Wilderness Air Cessna on its way from Hwange to Mana Pools National Park. Although there is no better way to spend a Kariba day than fishing on its surface, the only way to get a handle on its magnitude is to see it from the air: the hazy blue horizon; the deep incision of Sinyati Gorge; the red-sand shoreline; the

Above, cheetah brothers at Hwange National Park behind a termite mound used as a lookout. Opposite, a suite in the Victoria Falls Hotel

rocky islands circled by crocs and, swooping down on the final approach to the landing strip on Fothergill Island, fish eagles scouring its shallows and elephants on its emerald banks.

There are far fewer boats on the lake than I remember, and quite a few hotels have closed or are faded imprints of what they once were. And yet, perhaps riding the wave of positivity emanating from Hwange and Victoria Falls, two local-families recently joined forces to build Changa Safari Camp, a fantastic little lodge on the edge of the Matusadona National Park and just the sort of low-key, secluded hideaway Kariba deserves, with its private marina and pristine boats, big tented rooms with polished concrete floors, outdoor showers and wooden decks overlooking the lake.

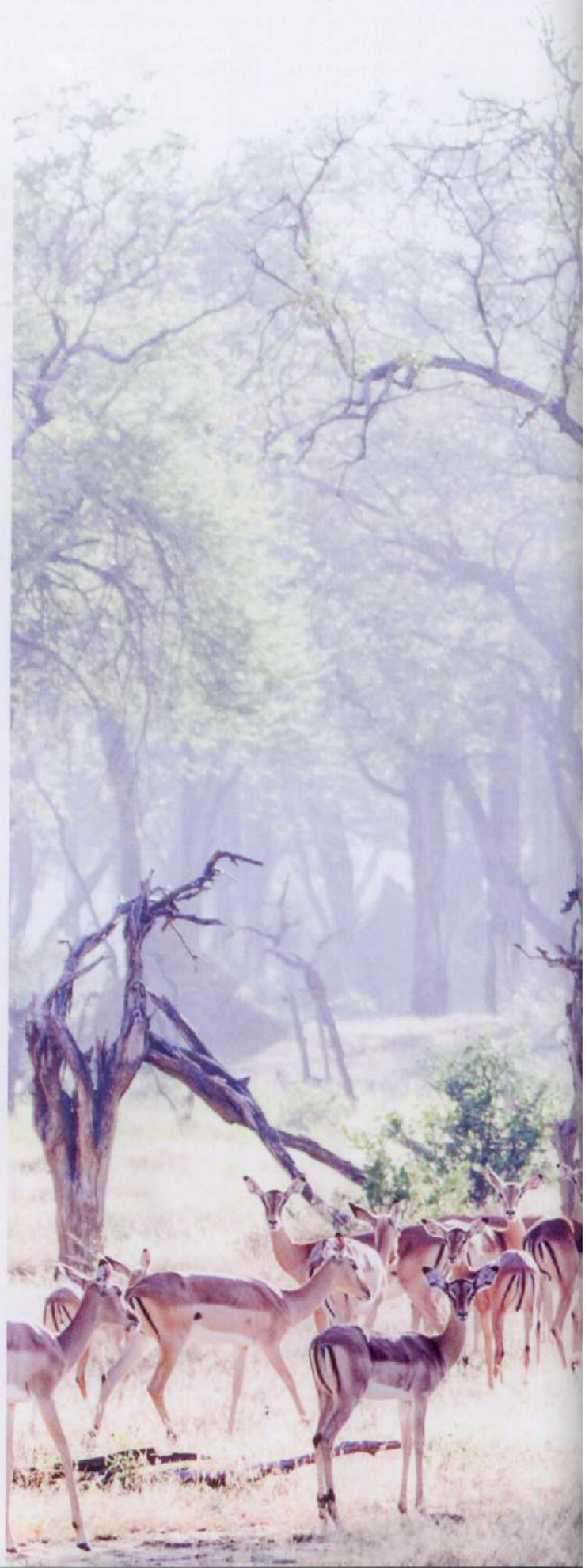
The game reserve itself takes its name from the Matuzviadonha mountains which form the backdrop to this startlingly beautiful and remote expanse of water, mopane woodland and open plains. It's where thousands of animals were released during Operation Noah, a six-year mission to rescue wildlife from the rising waters of Lake Kariba in the 1950s, and the game viewing is still superb, particularly from the water when the evening sky explodes in angry reds and oranges before bathing everything in a soft, Monet-lavender light and great white egrets nest in the black skeletons of drowned leadwood forests.

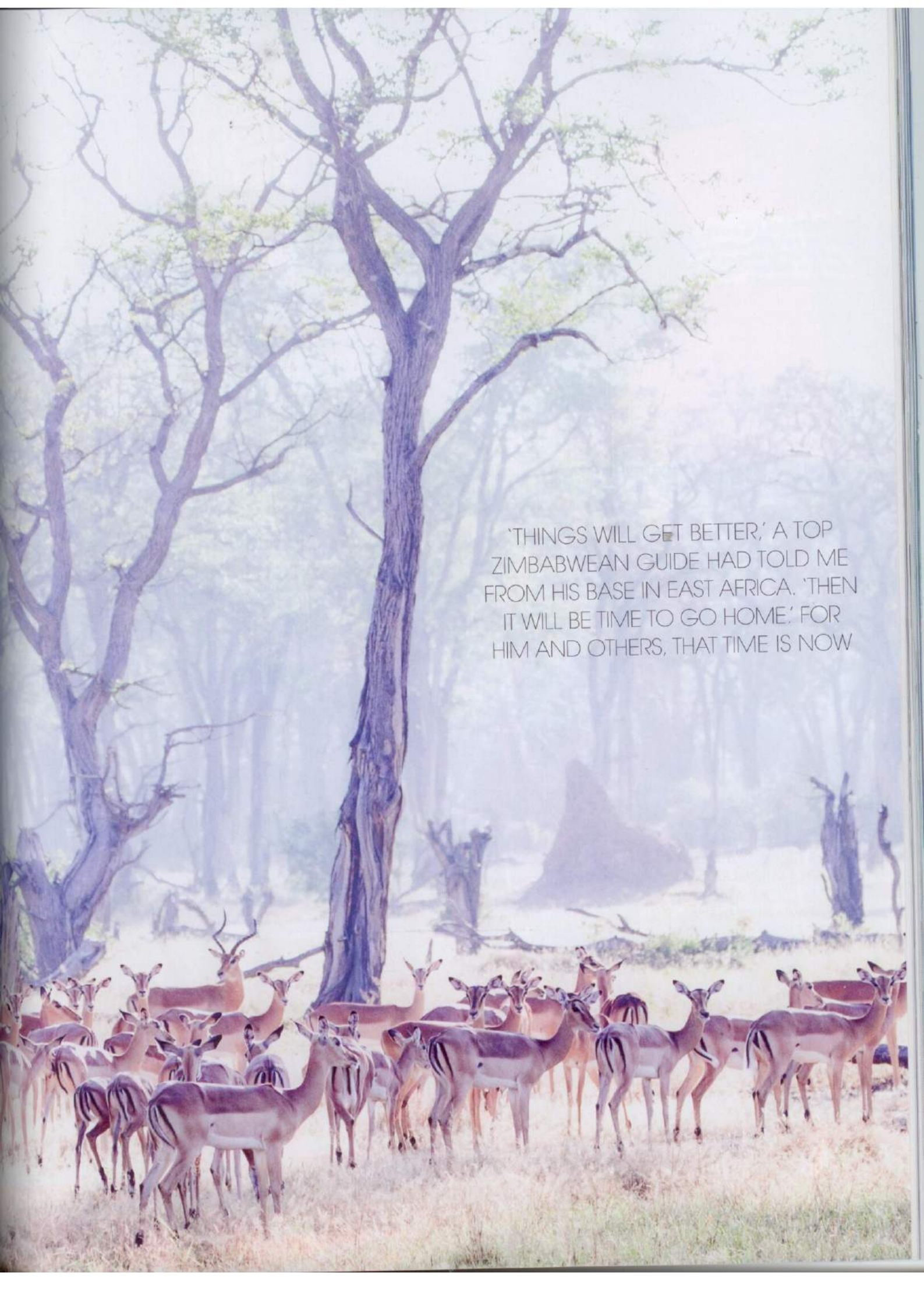
FROM KARIBA IT'S JUST A 20-MINUTE FLIGHT to Mana Pools National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site and a true Zambezi Valley classic, famous for its canoe trails and walking safaris. It is a wildly lovely place on a particularly wide stretch of the river, with four inland pools (*mana* in Shona) formed by the remnants of oxbow lakes. On autumn mornings, a smoky blue mist rises from the river and gently licks the surrounding forests. Crested guinea fowl call from the high buffalo grass and the baritone laughter of hippo echoes across the swift-flowing water.

I used to drive up here in my brother's beach buggy with a couple of friends hanging off the back and a battered canoe strapped to the roof. We'd spend days on the Zambezi fishing, reading, talking, drinking, and never thought of staying anywhere other than in basic government campsites. They are still open, and used by locals and South Africans on self-drive safaris (until recently it was even possible to walk in Mana Pools National Park without a guide), but of course there are much smarter places, of which Ruckomechi Camp, also in the Wilderness Safaris portfolio, is the most sophisticated, a real charmer set on a kilometre of river front, shaded by towering Natal mahogany trees trimmed into lollipop shape by grazing eland and kudu.

Mana Pools has produced some of Zimbabwe's finest guides, including veterans Andrew (Stretch) Ferreira, who runs a small tented camp on the river, and John Stevens, a former warden at Mana who now works privately. My guide at Ruckomechi Camp was Temba Ganje, another fellow Zimbabwean who has come home after stints in Tanzania, Uganda and Rwanda, and is equally at ease on land or water. Together we cruised the Zambezi, past hippos and pairs of fish eagles, lone crocodiles sunning themselves on the sand, and hundreds of tiny, bell-shaped nests of masked weavers dangling from overhanging branches. We watched carmine bee-eaters boring holes into the bank to build a safe house for their eggs, and found fresh leopard prints on a late afternoon walk.

About 15km from the Zambezi River, reached on shuddering, rudimentary roads, is Kanga Camp, a remote outpost owned by the hugely respected Beks Ndlovu, who was born in a rural Zimbabwean village and educated at Plumtree, a private



A photograph of a savanna landscape. In the foreground, a large herd of kudu antelope stands in a field of dry, yellowish grass. The antelope have reddish-brown bodies and long, spiraling horns. A large, mature acacia tree with a thick, textured trunk and sparse green leaves stands prominently in the middle ground. The background is a hazy, sunlit savanna with more trees and a clear sky. The overall tone is warm and naturalistic.

'THINGS WILL GET BETTER,' A TOP ZIMBABWEAN GUIDE HAD TOLD ME FROM HIS BASE IN EAST AFRICA. 'THEN IT WILL BE TIME TO GO HOME.' FOR HIM AND OTHERS, THAT TIME IS NOW



boarding school, before qualifying as a guide. His company, African Bush Camps, operates in Botswana and Zimbabwe. With just six tents on raised wooden decks arranged around a hidden water pan, Kanga appears from nowhere like a secret glade in a scene from *Fantasia*. Bush-whacked and laid-back rather than clockwork-smarty-pants, this feels like the Mana of old, somewhere to scale back expectations, switch off your internal engine and watch as creatures emerge from the vegetation and come down to drink.

THE LOWVELD OF ZIMBABWE is a hot, parched region in the south-east of the country, bordering South Africa and Mozambique and home to the Shangaan people. The ruined city of Great Zimbabwe, built in the 12th and 13th centuries by ancestors of the ruling Shona tribe, lies to the north and the great Limpopo River to the south. There isn't much in between. In colonial days, enormous tracts of this barren land were parcelled up as cattle ranches and used to lure white settlers, which is how my parents ended up in Southern Rhodesia on neighbouring farmsteads, until they eloped when nobody was looking.

The only other way to make a living down here was to find work on a sugarcane plantation – Triangle, which opened in the late 1930s, and Hippo Valley in the 1950s – beneficiaries of elaborate irrigation systems that suck up and store water from

THE CAMP APPEARS FROM NOWHERE. BUSH-WHACKED AND LAID-BACK, IT FEELS HOW THIS PLACE USED TO, SOMEWHERE TO SWITCH OFF YOUR ENGINE

the seasonal Runde and Save rivers. Even today the sugar estates remain incongruous expanses of bright green amid the inhospitable, red-earth scrubland.

Gonarezhou National Park is the Lowveld's secret weapon. Its name translates as 'place of the elephants' as back in the day of Great White Hunters, this far-flung expanse of untouched wilderness was known for throwing up a disproportionate number of big tuskers. It is a phenomenal park with brooding baobabs and a great phalanx of sandstone cliffs: grand, compellingly epic, and completely empty of people. It is also resolutely difficult to access and the infrastructure is primitive, although that is changing with the help of the Frankfurt Zoological Society. There are hopes that it will one day form part of an enormous Peace Park to straddle Zimbabwe and Mozambique and take in South Africa's Kruger National Park.

Gonarezhou was for decades in a no-go zone overrun with Mozambican troops, but since the end of the war it has found a voice in conservationist Clive Stockil, who was born in the Lowveld and is its greatest supporter. His pioneering Campfire scheme, which involves local communities in wildlife management, won him a Prince William Award for Conservation. In the 1990s he opened two safari camps on Shangaan land bordering Gonarezhou, with hundreds of villagers set to benefit. But as the Zimbabwe economy collapsed, so did the dream.

One of the camps, Chilo Gorge Safari Lodge, recently reopened after a shake-down and refit financed by fresh investors. From this necklace of smart stone-and-thatch cottages hugging a cliff above the Save River there are astonishing views across Gonarezhou as far as the eye can see.

I crossed the river by pontoon and traversed this majestic place with Lionel Muzengi, Chilo's sparky learner guide, and we


didn't see another vehicle the entire day. We picnicked alone at the base of the Chilojo cliffs, soaking up the silence while watching a family of elephants lumber past in the distance, followed by another sizeable herd, and yet another. We drove through forests of fat baobab trees thousands of years old and down to Machanu water pan, surrounded by lala palms and riverine woodland, where red-billed buffalo weavers build their show-off nests of many rooms.

Also adjoining Gonarezhou is Singita Pamushana Lodge, the most exclusive safari camp in Zimbabwe. The 130,000-acre former Lone Star Ranch was bought by the American billionaire Paul Tudor Jones almost 20 years ago from Ray Sparrow, a much-loved character who lived on the property until he died last year, age 92.

From this land, Tudor Jones created the Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve, which he restocked with animals from the finest gene pools and built Pamushana, now part of Luke Bailes' superb Singita safari stable, which includes Grumeti Reserve in Tanzania, another Tudor Jones venture. I had been hearing good things about Pamushana since the late 1990s; even then it seemed incredible that something so audaciously ambitious could exist in understated Zimbabwe, and that was before Singita took on the management and upped its game. Each of Singita Pamushana's six stone guest lodges (to call them rooms, or even suites, seems impertinent) is multi-layered with colourful mosaics, fabrics and

abstract murals inspired by Shangaan culture; they have private pools and open fires and bathtubs deep enough to swim in.

Sheltering endangered wildlife comes with a great deal of responsibility and the reserve is patrolled by 80 anti-poaching rangers, financed by the non-profit Malilangwe Trust. Buying and stocking this land was the easy part; hanging onto it through various land-ownership disputes must have involved diplomatic skills of balletic dexterity. The trust has been hugely influential in the Lowveld, feeding almost 20,000 children at school each day and subsidising building, irrigation and even solar-power projects in the area. Last year it donated five of the reserve's black rhino to the Zimbabwe government, allowing their translocation to Botswana to honour a political pledge made in 2011.

I didn't see any rhino on my evening game drive with the jovial and meticulously versed Japheth Mutinda, so had to make do with a gang of excitable elephant bulls playing in a mud bath, a herd of handsome kudu, a yellow-eyed martial eagle drowning its prey, an irritated white plover dive-bombing an open-billed stork, and two regal cheetahs hunting an unsuspecting impala until night fell and we sat silent in the moonlight, transfixed by their precision stalking and, finally, the thrash and thud of the kill. 

GETTING HERE

Africa Travel (+44 20 7843 3587; africatravel.co.uk) can arrange an eight-night trip to Zimbabwe, staying at the Victoria Falls Hotel, Linkwasha Camp, Changa Safari Camp and Ruckomechi, including international flights with South African Airways, internal flights and transfers, from £4,725 per person. Side trips to Gonarezhou to stay at Chilo Gorge Safari Lodge or Singita Pamushana Lodge can also be arranged on request, as can stays at the Victoria Falls Safari Club.