

# WALKING WITH GIANTS



After decades of instability, Zimbabwe is reinventing itself as one of Africa's safari gems – we rediscover a wilderness where there are 200 times more elephants than visitors...

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS MARK EVELEIGH

Just a few metres away, hunkered down in the dust, was a herd of snorting African buffalo. There was nothing but a thin veil of spiky acacia between us and a group of half-tonne bulls that served as the herd's rearguard. I was aware that there was only one high-calibre rifle in the immediate vicinity and I was doing my very best to position myself in between the man holding it and the potentially belligerent creatures.

There's something about the sheer, wild immensity of Hwange National Park that makes you feel very small indeed. Nowhere on the planet can you immerse yourself in such an impressive concentration of large animals; the biodiversity of Zimbabwe's biggest park (covering an area about twice the size of Devon county) is surpassed in Africa only by the Serengeti and Kruger. But whereas the crowded Tanzanian and South African giants each attract close to 2 million visitors a year, Hwange sees fewer than 40,000. With the long-awaited end of former president Robert Mugabe's dictatorship, visitors are slowly starting to return to Hwange; for the moment, though, it still offers that rare chance to experience an African wilderness where elephants outnumber foreign visitors by almost 200 to one.

## 'In Hwange National Park, elephants outnumber foreign visitors by almost 200 to one'

Ever since I had entered Hwange, after a three-hour road-trip from Victoria Falls, we'd been surrounded by elephants. At this moment, however, my focus was on the shadowy forms of the buffalo that were staring in our direction and sniffing noisily at the air. Zimbabwe is famous for producing the best guides in the safari industry and I was grateful that mine, Ty Hurst, had vast experience of bush-walking.

"We'll be fine if we keep downwind of them," he whispered over his shoulder. "But the wind's swirling a bit."

And if they did catch our scent? Hurst read the question in my eyes before I had a chance to voice it and replied with a phrase that I'd heard a thousand times over the years in Zimbabwe: "We'd just have to make a plan," he shrugged.

### Noisy neighbours

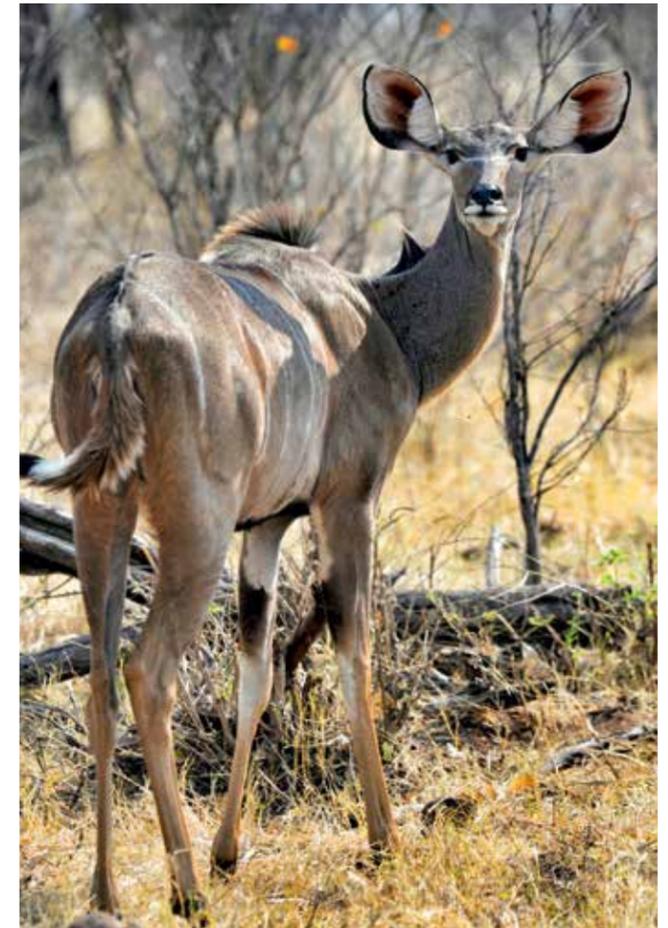
Ty Hurst is head guide at Nehimba Lodge, near the centre of Hwange and bordering a zone known as the Southern Wilderness Area. Since the lodge is in a private concession, the usual

strict rules of a safari in a national park are waived, so Hurst and his fellow guides are able to lead guests on adrenalin-charged walking safaris through a region that is known for its great populations of buffalo, lions, leopards, wild dogs and, of course, elephants.

The lodge building overlooks a waterhole that attracts so much wildlife that you can often see as much from your own veranda as you can from a safari vehicle. There was also an enticing-looking swimming pool, built for the use of human visitors – at least that was the plan. ►



Zimbabwe's riches (clockwise from this) Wildebeest gather at The Hide waterhole; kudu; Tyron Hurst, head guide at Nehimba Lodge; zebra



◀ “The elephants enjoy the cool, clean water from the tiled pool,” said Hurst, a smile breaking out, “so every night they drink it dry.”

Water is a constant preoccupation for pretty much every living creature in this arid part of Africa – essentially an extension of the mighty Kalahari Desert. Lodge guests may be delighted to sip their gin and tonics while, just a few feet away, six-tonne pachyderms muscle in on the pool. But, for the park’s wildlife, natural supplies of water are scarce and it is only through man-made sources – in the form of scores of boreholes rather than swimming pools – that they survive.

It wasn’t always the case, though. When Hwange (then known as Wankie) was first established as a game reserve in 1929, Nehimba Seeps was the only permanent water source in the entire region.

“Nehimba means ‘place of digging,’” Hurst explained as he eased his Land Cruiser past the cracked earth of the pans that afternoon. Sure enough, as we came over the ridge, a huge bull elephant was kneeling on the baked earth, snorkelling water up from a deep trough it had

excavated with its powerful feet and tusks. Behind him, on the edge of a thinning forest, we saw the bulky forms of countless others, breaking branches and battering trunks to get at the succulent mopane leaves.

When the first pump-driven boreholes were created here, there were just 1,000 elephants in the park; now some 46,000 dominate Hwange’s forests and savannah. The battle the park faces today is to balance the needs of the animals they push out with the depletion of different kinds vegetation and the destruction that so many elephants bring.

In the ransacked bush, we watched as kudu, roan, sable and other browsing antelope plucked the greenery from branches the elephants had brought down. Occasionally the young bulls would wave broken branches at us in juvenile temper tantrums or try a mock charge. When Hurst cut the engine near a shrinking waterhole, we could hear the rumbling of a dozen huge specimens slaking their huge thirsts.

In the background, giraffe, zebra and wildebeest waited nervously at the tree-line for their overbearing neighbours to move away. But

further across the savannah a matriarch was already leading her herd towards the waterhole. Amid the tangle of trunks and shuffling legs, a couple of calves could be seen, their legs going double-time to keep up.

“There’s a trick to estimating elephant numbers,” our guide quipped with a smile. “Just count the legs and divide by four.” I knew he was joking but a glance across the great plain, speckled with black dots, told me that there were at least 150. While their numbers have become a problem for some residents of the park, the lions have their own solution and have come to see elephants as a part of their diet.

“The local pride that hunts around Nehimba Seep have become real experts in elephant psychology,” Hurst explained. “They will usually make a dummy attack on the youngest baby in the herd. When the elephants – loving parents that they are – rush to protect the baby, the lions change tack and quickly bring down one of the adolescents.”

We weren’t disappointed to move on from Nehimba before we saw that. Besides, I was still to visit the park’s Somalisa Camp, on the edge

of a great chain of pans that are famous as the hunting grounds of some of Africa’s biggest lion prides. That was all to come.

### Changing of the guard

This was my fifth trip to Zimbabwe, and every time I’d arrived in the country with very different feelings. But my first visit, rattling over the border from Mozambique in the back of a lorry, was an unadulterated case of love at first sight. The rolling hills, studded with rock *koppies* (small hills), seemed to epitomise everything that I’d read about Africa.

Back then, at the start of the millennium, the country was already slipping from its pedestal as the ‘bread basket of Southern Africa’, yet every US dollar I changed still bought me eight Zimbabwean dollars. Less than a decade later, the same transaction would make me a local trillionaire (15 times over) as things fell apart. Now, with Robert Mugabe very effectively removed from power by the military – in the coup that wasn’t a coup – there is great hope for the future again. ▶



**Muddy waters**  
Elephants at one of the controversial boreholes that are often credited with helping turn Hwange NP into a success; (left) giraffe



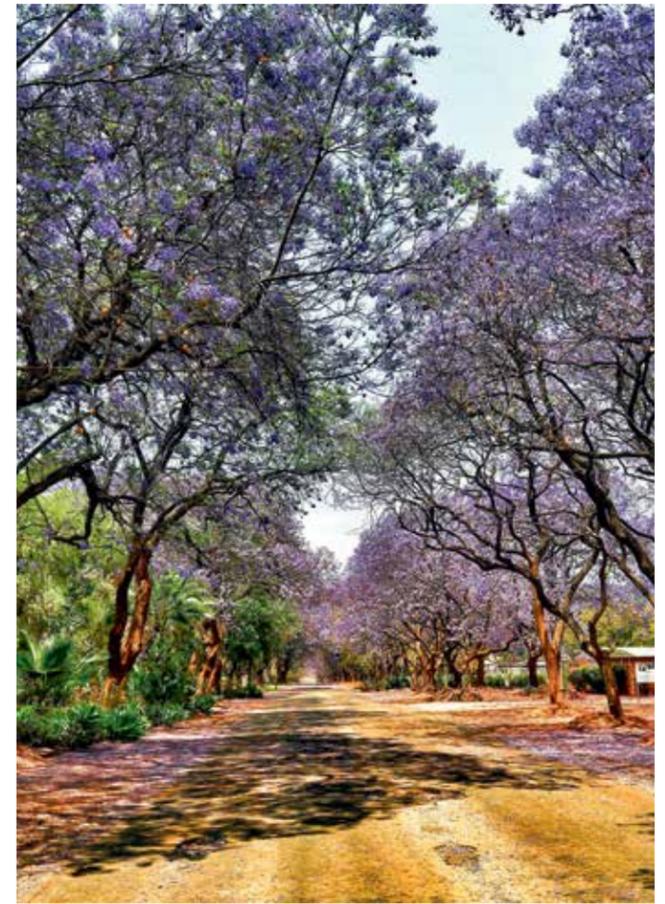
◀ I recalled the words of a long-suffering Bulawayo conservationist I'd met when things were at their worst: "You only realise just how rich this country is," she'd said, "when you see how much has been ripped out of it, for so long... and there's still so much left!"

From the Mana Pools in the north – one of the most concentrated wildlife habitats on the continent – to the Great Zimbabwe Ruins further south, the largest medieval stone city in sub-Saharan Africa, there is certainly plenty to see. Yet, for scenery, you can't beat the west.

Before visiting Hwange, I picked up a hire-car in Bulawayo and drove out of a city that seemed almost sedated by the hazy bloom of jacarandas that arched over the avenues. Western Zimbabwe has traditionally been the homelands of the Matabele people and was, until recently, a magnet for much of Mugabe's hatred and violence. Only now are visitors returning to rediscover one of the most beautiful parts of Africa, rising from the tinkle of the Limpopo River at the South African border to the crescendo of Victoria Falls at its northern tip.

Within an hour's drive I was among the rock domes of Matobo National Park. The Matabele call this area 'Bald Heads' – after its smooth boulder-topped koppies – but the ardent imperialist Cecil John Rhodes thought of it as 'World's View' and loved it so much that he chose to be buried here. I explored its landscape for a few days, and the play of the light on its rock was so hypnotic that I woke before dawn every morning to watch the sun work its way down the valley. Tiny rock hyrax (closest relative to the elephant) and nimble-footed klipspringer antelopes joined me to enjoy their own moment of sun-worship.

Together with a guide, we worked hard tracking Matobo's prolific leopards but wildlife is notoriously hard to spot in this area. Easing the car through the bush with my camera balanced optimistically in my lap, there were moments of excitement when we stopped to photograph the offspring of a zebra that had crossed with a donkey ('Debra the zonkey', I named her). Then, late one afternoon, I was rewarded for ▶



**Kings & queens**  
*(clockwise from this)*  
 The gravestone of Cecil Rhodes in spectacular Matobo NP; lionesses prowl; jacarandas shed over the path



**The new king**

Taking over the pride that once belonged to the famous Cecil, Bhubesi's name means 'big male lion' in Xhosa



◀ my patience. I skidded to a halt as a white rhino crashed out of a thicket and rumbled into the bush with her baby dashing ahead.

**Pride before a fall**

Matobo might be the best place on the continent to experience the serenity of the African wilderness, but Hwange is still the setting for the most dramatic wildlife encounters.

I'd been drawn here not only by its elephant herds but its great predators.

True to form, the park's elusive painted dogs evaded us for a solid week of tracking. Then, one night, a pack of ten instigated a nocturnal squabble with a small herd of elephants, right in front of our tent at The Hide camp. The area's big cats, however, weren't anywhere near as shy: we had four good leopard sightings and, in the course of a single game drive one morning, we saw half a dozen hyena and no less than 22 lions.

It was the latter that caught the world's attention in 2015 when a lion was lured out of Hwange at a spot not far from The Hide, to be shot by American dentist Walter Palmer. Unfortunately for Palmer, that lion was Cecil, the undisputed superstar of Hwange – known for his spectacular size and obliging habit of posing for photographs. Even today, veterans of the park still enthuse about him.

"He really was exceptionally huge," Robert Chadyendia, one of the guides at my next stop, Somalisa Camp, whispered one morning. "When Cecil roared, you felt your vehicle shake from the tremors!"

Chadyendia had good reason to keep his voice down: we were sitting in an open Land Cruiser just a few metres from Bhubesi. The word means 'big male lion' in Zulu, and he certainly looked the part. He was draped across a sun-baked hummock on Ngweshla Pan and was hungry. Bhubesi took over the pride after Cecil was killed, and his battle-scarred nose gave him the air of an old warrior. But Chadyendia, who was there

when Cecil issued many of those badges of honour, maintains he was never a match for the ill-fated King of Hwange. Nor was the new lord of the savannah looking too happy this morning.

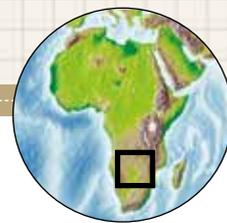
"He hasn't eaten for days but it serves him right," said Chadyendia. "Bhubesi is an old bully. The females do the hunting and then he steals their food. He's been roaring all night for his ladies; it's no wonder they don't answer."

We knew exactly where they were. Less than an hour ago, we'd turned

a corner to find ourselves in the middle of a dozen prowling lionesses. They passed so close to my seat in the Land Cruiser that I cursed my long lens. The click of my shutter drew their penetrating amber eyes towards mine and I felt the hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

Once again, it struck me that Hwange has a habit of making you feel very small. It's a healthy sensation – one we should all experience from time to time. The park is also arguably the best place on Earth to enjoy that sense of having a wilderness to yourself. As the country readjusts and visitors slowly return here, that may change. But secrets always escape in the end. You just have to cherish them while you can. **W**

## 'When Cecil the lion roared, you felt your vehicle shake from the tremors'



# Hwange NP, Zimbabwe Footnotes

## VITAL STATISTICS

**Capital:** Harare  
**Population:** 17 million  
**Languages:** English is widely spoken but Zimbabwe has 16 official languages; Shona and Ndebele are the most common  
**Time:** GMT+2  
**International dialling code:** +263  
**Visas:** Visas are issued on arrival for UK nationals. You should have a passport that is valid for at least six months and carry enough US dollars for the US\$65 (£46) single-entry tourist visa.  
**Money:** The Zimbabwean dollar was jettisoned in 2009 in favour of US dollars. Zimbabwe issues bond notes (equal to US\$1) but they're not legal tender outside the country. ATMs are unreliable, so travel with sufficient US dollars for your visit.

### When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

- Dry season** – the winter months are the best time to visit, as the wildlife will concentrate around waterholes, but evenings and early mornings can be chilly.
- Transition months** – expect fewer visitors and pleasant temperatures. November is also calving season.
- Wet season** – the hot summer (rainy) months are low season in Hwange NP. Many camps close and some roads are impassable, but there's great birding.

**Health & safety**  
 Malaria prophylaxis should be taken if travelling in the lowlands from Nov to Jun (and in the Zambezi valley year-round). Vaccines are recommended for hepatitis A, tetanus and typhoid. Violent crime is rare but avoid political meetings.

**Further reading & Information**  
**Zimbabwe** (Bradt Travel Guides, 2016)  
**zimbabwetourism.net** – the local Zimbabwean tourism authority  
**friendsofhwange.com** – conservation info  
**bhejanetrust.org** – local NGO

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## THE TRIP

Hwange National Park has a variety of accommodation to suit all budgets, with all-inclusive packages usually including game drives with Zimbabwean guides. The author travelled independently but stayed with the following:

**Nehimba Lodge** offers exclusive accommodation ([imvelosafarilodges.com](http://imvelosafarilodges.com)) from \$595 (£423) in one of nine thatched chalets positioned around a waterhole. Although game drives and night drives are included, you have a chance of seeing plenty of Hwange NP's wildlife from your veranda.

The beautifully designed **Somalisa Expeditions** ([africanbushcamps.com](http://africanbushcamps.com)) offers stylish tented accommodation under the shade of the acacias from \$420pppn (£300) and boasts fantastic guides.

The evocative **Davidson's Camp** ([wilderness-safaris.com](http://wilderness-safaris.com)) offers African adventure under a canvas from \$385pppn (£274). Meanwhile, **The Hide** ([thehide.com](http://thehide.com)) takes 'glamping' to a new level with stays from \$390pppn (£277). Its ten immense tented suites also come complete with bathtubs overlooking the floodplains.

All prices include meals, drinks, park fees and game drives.

### Getting there

There are no direct flights from the UK to Harare. Most UK visitors arrive in Victoria Falls via Johannesburg with **British Airways** ([ba.com](http://ba.com)) or with **South African Airways** ([flysaa.com](http://flysaa.com)); flights from London Heathrow to Johannesburg take around 11 hours and cost from £643, with a 1.5-hour connection to Victoria Falls from £238. Other routes, such as with **Kenyan Airways** ([kenya-airways.com](http://kenya-airways.com)) via Nairobi (3 hrs from the Falls), are also available.

### Getting around

**Air Zimbabwe** ([airzimbabwe.aero](http://airzimbabwe.aero)) connects Harare, Bulawayo and Victoria Falls, while **Fastjet** ([fastjet.com](http://fastjet.com)) flies between Harare and Victoria Falls. Many choose to take an air charter from Victoria Falls (about one hour) into Hwange NP with **Wilderness Air** ([wilderness-air.com](http://wilderness-air.com)). A road transfer from the falls takes five hours, with local taxis both reliable and safe (figure on about US\$2/£1.50 per km).

### Accommodation

Budget accommodation is available in chalets at the national park's **Sinatatela Camp** ([zimparcs.org/parks](http://zimparcs.org/parks)) from \$40pppn (£28), or in tents at **Kapula Private Camp** ([kapulacamp.com](http://kapulacamp.com)) from \$44pppn (£31). **Tuskers Camp Site** ([amalindacollection.com](http://amalindacollection.com)) is located just outside (unfenced) Hwange National Park and has camping and amenities from \$15pppn (£11). In all these cases you will need your own vehicle and to cover your

own park fees (\$10/£7 if you're in accommodation; \$20/£14 for day visitors).

### Cost of travel

National park entry fees here are among the cheapest in the region, but unless you have your own vehicle, costs run upwards of about £120pp per day.

However, self-driving can be rather expensive and complex to arrange. Most visitors arriving in the park **tend to book all-inclusive trips that combine several camps and parks**. When booking multi-stop packages, [africanbushcamps.com](http://africanbushcamps.com) and [wilderness-safaris.com](http://wilderness-safaris.com) are both highly recommended.

## WEST ZIMBABWE HIGHLIGHTS

**1 Harare**  
 In 2011, Harare was dubbed by one leading analyst as 'the world's least liveable city'. Things have improved but the capital, with its population of 1.6 million, is still largely used by travellers as a handy hub for onward travel to Victoria Falls or one of the many parks.

**2 Victoria Falls**  
 Undeniably a highlight of many African trips, Mosi-oa-Tunya (The Smoke that Thunders; *pictured*) is different every time you visit. Light changes constantly through the day, so don't necessarily limit yourself to a once-in-a-lifetime viewing.

**3 Great Zimbabwe National Monument**  
 The ruins of Great Zimbabwe are the remnants of the greatest African civilisation of the Middle Ages. Zimbabwe means 'stone houses' in the Shona language and the biggest stone city in the sub-Saharan region once supported an estimated population of 20,000 people.

**4 Bulawayo**  
 A charming city of parks and colonial avenues lined with the cascading blooms of purple jacarandas, Bulawayo rewards those who take the time to visit. An ideal stop en-route from Hwange to Matobo NP.

**5 Matobo National Park**  
 A spellbindingly beautiful region of iconic, domed rock *koppies*, Matobo means 'bald heads' in the traditional



language, and while its wildlife can be elusive, it is irresistible for its sheer beauty and thousands of rock art sites dating back 13,000 years.

**6 Mana Pools National Park**  
 A UNESCO World Heritage site since 1984, Mana Pools is considered one of the world's great wildlife hotspots. Although only a seventh the size of Hwange, it is famous for its density and variety.

**7 Lake Kariba**  
 One of the world's largest man-made lakes, Kariba covers more than 5,000 sq km. In this land-locked country Kariba is what passes for the beach, and apart from great wildlife viewing (along with spectacular crocs), this is also a popular place to relax.

