SUNDAY TIMES DIGITAL
The world's loneliest baboon — watch our report on Robinson, who's stranded on an island in the Zambezi
thesundaytimes.co.uk/travel

Chris Haslam, David Fetters, Wolfgang Kaehler, Thomas Retterath/Getty

Back to Zimbabwe for Africa's greatest safari

It's been shunned by tourists for the past 15 years: now the time has come for Zim to reclaim its crown as the continent's most exciting destination, says **Chris Haslam**

It's sunset in the bush, and time for the safari afterparty. The setting — acacia, water hole, G&T — is perfect, but as Venus lights up, a herd of 30 elephants gatecrashes the party, shuffling in with rumbling bellies and dust-streaked tusks.

Then, out of the gathering gloom, another herd, then another, until we're surrounded by so many elephants, it's impossible to count them. The calves approach the vehicle, trunks raised in mild curiosity. Their mothers crowd the water hole, gulping their sundowners like Geordie lasses at a free bar. This event would be a YouTube sensation if it happened anywhere else, but here, in a country we've shunned for the past 15 years, it happens every day. This is Zimbabwe — for my money, the best safari destination in Africa.

The land grabs, spiralling inflation, rigged elections and brutal repression wrought by Robert Mugabe's Zanu-PF plunged Zimbabwe into destitution and despair. As sanctions gnawed and debts rose, tourism collapsed. The best guides left the country, poaching was rife and dozens of lodges went bust. But that's all in the past.

Life is still tough, wages are still low and injustice is frequent, but in Zimbabwe's tourism hub, Victoria Falls, the supermarkets are fully stocked and optimism is rising like the steam over the falls.

"Yes, the country is almost bankrupt, and yes, you still have to be careful about who's listening, but the bad years have definitely gone," says Happiness, a woodcarver at Victoria Falls. He refers to Mugabe by his Shona clan name, Gushungo, meaning "crocodile". "The crocodile's teeth are getting weak. Soon he will have to let Zimbabwe go."

On the deck of the sunset bar at the Victoria Falls Safari Lodge, one of the finest hotel bars in Africa, Ross Kennedy, CEO of the Harare-based Africa Albida Tourism, seems as optimistic as Happiness. "There's an overwhelming feeling that we've left the bad times behind, and a real sense of excitement for the future," he says. "Companies can get finance again, and hotels are spending millions upgrading facilities."

Some say we should stay away until Bob has gone, so we can show solidarity with the Zimbabwean people. The Zimbabwean people argue that tourism boycotts destroy livelihoods, not regimes. But you're not going there to make a political statement. You're going because this is the most exciting emerging destination in Africa, and here are just three reasons why.

First, the country's guides are the best in the world. The training process is the longest, toughest and most exhaustive in the business — it takes a minimum of four years to become a professional.

Second, you get a lot for your money. Top-end camps start at £270 a night in high season, compared with £320 a night in South Africa's Greater Kruger, £430 in Zambia and £480 in Botswana.

Third, the wildlife is astonishing. I started at Little Makalolo Camp, in Hwange National Park, 5,700 square miles of semi-arid savannah at the eastern edge of the Kalahari. It has the highest diversity of mammals on Earth, with 108 species, and it's so bereft of tourists that you can drive all day without seeing another vehicle. The same can't be said for elephants. They steam like great, grey battle fleets from salt lick to thicket to water hole, bullying the buffalo and intimidating the impala, and their numbers are staggering.

Trunk and disorderly Elephants, above, can be especially stroppy around water holes, while hippos, left, are surprisingly adept at camouflage. Right, the star deck overlooking the Zambezi at Rukomechi Camp

Nobody can say for sure how many are here — some estimates go as high as 120,000 — but on a single day in 2013, the NGO Wildlife Environment Zimbabwe counted 20,373 at the water holes alone, and these pools are the clue. Government funding to maintain Hwange's boreholes has dried up. No water means no wildlife, so companies such as Wilderness Safaris, which operate in the narrow northern tourist zone, keep local pans topped up. With a constant supply of water, herds that should be travelling hundreds of miles in search of something to drink stay put. The result: wall-to-wall elephants, a unique sight in Africa, where 100,000 of the animals have been killed by poachers in the past three years. And while other nations fret about strategies to deal with this largely Chinese-funded scourge, there are signs that Zimbabwe has adopted a more direct approach.

In Victoria Falls, I went into the bush with the local Anti-Poaching Unit (vfapu.com). Its work, funded wholly by private contributions, mainly involves looking for snares set by bushmeat gangs, but every now and then they spot armed ivory poachers. "We fetch the police, then we follow the gang through the bush," says the patrol leader, who, for reasons that will become clear, preferred not to be named. "When they stop to rest, the police snipers pinpoint the gunmen and shoot them in the head. No warnings, just thwack..." He mimes a bullet's impact on a human skull. "Poachers are learning that if they come to shoot our elephants, they will be killed."

If this is what's happening, it's brutally effective. Elephant poaching in both the Victoria Falls National Park and Hwange has plummeted, says the unit's chief, Charles Brightman. Now, however, the poachers are turning to more subtle methods. Last year, more than 100 of Hwange's elephants were killed after drinking from water holes contaminated with cyanide. Last month, four elephants died in the same way in the Zambezi National Park.

"Poaching in Zimbabwe is far from the epidemic levels seen in other countries, but it is a war," Brightman says. "And the government doesn't have the money to fight it. Without the money tourists bring in, the elephants would have no protection."

NEXT STOP is Mana Pools, probably the most beautiful national park anywhere in Africa. Overlooked by the Zambian Escarpment, and bordered by the fast-flowing waters of the Zambezi, this is the place you're thinking of when you close your eyes and imagine Africa. Ancient forests of baobab and mahogany, peppered with tamarind that sprouted from seeds dropped by Arab slave traders; lush grassland; the lakes after which the park was named; and that mesmerising river, which, as my guide, Kingsley Chinemushonga, wishes to make clear, is not the Zambezi.

Quite a buzz Above, the spectacularly plumed white-fronted bee-eater. Right, mating lions like to play rough

Mana Pools is the place you're thinking of when you close your eyes and imagine Africa

"There is no such river as the Zambezi," he says. "There is only the Mighty Zambezi."

Here, at the water's edge, lies Wilderness Safaris' Ruckomechi Camp: 10 luxury tents from where you can see all the way to Zambia, with game-viewing better than anywhere I've been in southern Africa. It's not just the sheer density of predator species — lions, leopards, cheetahs, wild dogs, hyenas and enormous crocodiles — or the kaleidoscopic bird life, from rare ground hornbills to purple-crested turacos, but its proximity to camp.

During one four-hour game drive, probing the forests of vetiveria — known as "adrenaline grass" because of what might be lurking within — we travel no more than 500yd from camp. Lurking within are three hungry lions, waiting for a herd of buffalo to wander into their cunning ambush, two guilty-looking jackals and a startled male leopard, which has clearly just stumbled on the lions — adrenaline grass is not just a human concept. Back at camp, I wait 20 minutes for a pair of elephants to clear off my lawn before I can enter my suite-like tent.

Kingsley, who combines Buddha-like calm and Google-like knowledge, wants to drive, walk and sit still for hours on end, waiting for the wildlife to come to us. And it does: a trio of lost lion cubs, eyes wide with anxiety; the muddiest baby elephant in Africa; a pack of wild dogs that trot past like a special-forces patrol.

But more than anything, Kingsley wants to get out onto that mighty river. Yes, there are 18ft crocs and, yes, the hippos might try to torpedo the canoe, but the overwhelming emotion on the water isn't fear. Instead, far from the news reports and the breathless blogging about Zimbabwe's continuing decline, the feeling is one of serene astonishment and immense privilege at observing nature's complex machinery in perfect working order. And the highlight of the entire trip turns out to be not Hwange's elephants, or the lions of Mana Pools, or even that startled leopard.

It's a 10ft cliff on the banks of the Mighty Zambezi. Dozens of cave-like holes are arranged in neat rows across its face. First one, then 10, then 100 white-fronted bee-eaters poke their scimitar beaks out of their holes, scoping the haze of insects over the river. And then, as one, they explode into the air like a firework, the setting sun fringing their emerald feathers with fire.

Half an hour later, as Kingsley pours the G&Ts, he points at an approaching herd. "The elephants are coming," he says. The gatecrashers are back.

While you're there, don't miss...

VICTORIA FALLS
They're not the highest in the world, nor the widest, but the Victoria Falls are without doubt the most spectacular, mainly because you can watch this channelled tsunami from the other side of the gorge at a range of less than 100yd. The experience is as terrifying as it is thrilling, and you'll get very, very wet. Tickets cost £18 (zimparks.org).

MATUSADONA NATIONAL PARK
On the southern shores of Lake Kariba lies Matusadona National Park, one of the best places in Africa to spot the critically endangered black rhino, thanks to the creation of the Black Rhino Intensive Protection Zone. Steve Edwards, a former warden at Matusadona, now runs the superb Musango Safari Camp, which has safari tents from £283 a night; book through expertafrica.com.

LAKE KARIBA
More than 140 miles long and up to 30 miles wide, this is the biggest man-made lake on Earth, created by the damming of the Zambezi in 1958. These days, it's where Zimbabwe comes to loaf — renting boats, fishing, watching wildlife along the shore and enjoying spectacular sunsets. Houseboats and cruisers start at £210 a night through houseboatsonkariba.com.

GREAT ZIMBABWE
The ruins of a huge medieval city and the stone palaces of Shona royalty can be found on a hilltop 200 miles east of Bulawayo. For years, colonisers and travellers tried to prove the intricate architecture was the work of Europeans. Ultimately, they were discredited, turning this extraordinary site into an icon of African nationalism.

THE BRIEF

Chris Haslam was a guest of Wilderness Safaris and Safari Consultants, which has a nine-day trip, with two nights at the Victoria Falls Safari Lodge (B&B), then two at Little Makalolo Camp, in Hwange, and three at Rukomechi Camp, in Mana Pools (both all-inclusive), from £4,450pp, including international and internal flights (01787 888590, safari-consultants.com). Itineraries swapping the Upper Zambezi for Mana Pools, with road transfers rather than internal flights, start at £2,895pp.

Or try Africa Travel, which has six nights, staying at the Victoria Falls Safari Lodge and the Hide, in Hwange, from £2,445pp, including international flights and road transfers (020 7843 3500, africatravel.co.uk).