



FROM ZIMBABWE, WITH LOVE

When Matthew Parris revisited the Africa of his youth he learnt more about the land, its people and its astonishing creatures than he ever had as a boy



look at her. She looks at me. I raise my head, she raises hers. I hold her gaze. Not so much a flapping as the slightest tremor ripples her door-sized grey ears. Her weak little eyes engage mine. Dare I take that shortcut across her path? 'Dare he?' she's thinking. Between us, something clicks: a shared challenge. Let's take this to the brink.

I edge forward. She lunges towards me, tusks gleaming in the African sun. I retreat. I trip. She stops. She's won, knows it and turns aside as I scamper back to my tented palace, heart thumping.

I spot her next morning, supple trunk reaching through a window towards the muesli on the breakfast bar. She catches my eye. 'You again? You – the one who backs off?' Elephants don't forget. Amy comes to the rescue and shoos non-human interlopers away as a disappointed monkey scowls from a convenient branch. Amy's colleague Nono fetches me a coffee. Shall I take it outside by the fire, with a view out over the mile-wide Zambezi river where crocs sunbathe and hippos belch and grunt? Or linger by the outdoor grill where another member of staff is preparing exquisite omelettes to order?

This is a wonderful lodge, in a wonderful national park, in a wonderful country. Why don't we know more about Africa's classiest, safest, friendliest destination? It's time we Brits reclaimed Zimbabwean tourism from the discerning French and the newly invading American rich. It's time we came back to this country we helped shape: the best-educated, kindest, most English-speaking country in Africa; a place where a glass of sherry greets you after an afternoon game-walk; where you can sink into a big, cast-iron bath made in England 50 years ago; and where the barman answers your request for a whisky and soda not with an uncomprehending stare, but a polite 'Famous Grouse or J&B?'

But I digress. She was back, my elephantine nemesis – or so I thought, as I sat alone in the library tent that night, consulting bird books about the sensational carmine bee-eaters I'd been watching from our canoe on the Zambezi. From the raised wooden boardwalks meant for guests, not elephants, I'd heard the familiar warning creak (often followed by a splintering sound), and turned sharply round, pulse racing.

'Hi, Matthew!' It was an exceptionally large American lady.

I was born in Africa and brought up in Zimbabwe – Rhodesia as it then was – and only came to Britain for university at 19. For 44 years I never returned. From what I'd read in the British press, I'd supposed the place would be in ruins.

And it's true there have been problems, and the politics have been ghastly. But Zimbabwe and its people are so much more than their politics. Chaos threatened but never won. This brave, big-hearted country fought back. The economy has stabilised. The infrastructure – roads, railways, water, electricity, schools, courts, hospitals – is all still there and working: just a bit shabby in places. Crime is low, the streets are safe. There is vigorous debate, and newspapers unafraid to lampoon politicians.

There has always been a tension below the surface in South Africa. There has always been a gentleness about Zimbabwe.

Half a century ago I knew the country as home, not a tourist destination. I was seven before we visited Victoria Falls, one of the world's great sights on our own doorstep, but Dad preferred the seaside. This time we flew straight to Victoria Falls, BA all the way, after an easy overnight flight to Jo'burg.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT, WARNING: ELEPHANTS CROSSING, VICTORIA FALLS. SUNSET, HWANGE NATIONAL PARK. A GIRAFFE JOINS THE HERD AT A WATERING HOLE AT LITTLE MAKALOLO CAMP. AT THE MANA POOLS AIRSTRIP, MATTHEW ABOVE THE ZAMBEZI GORGE, VICTORIA FALLS

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, AN ELEPHANT EXAMINING THE BAR AT RUCKOMECHI CAMP. ANOTHER BECOMES LUNCH FOR A LION. AFTERNOON TEA IN THE BUSH. MATTHEW TAKES POST-FLIGHT REFRESHMENT ON THE AIRSTRIP AT RUCKOMECHI. MATTHEW AND HIS PARTNER JULIAN CANOEING ON THE ZAMBEZI RIVER. A HIPPO IN MANA POOLS NATIONAL PARK. ABOVE, GUIDE NYENGE



CHAOS THREATENED BUT NEVER WON. THIS BRAVE COUNTRY FOUGHT BACK



There's only an hour's time difference, and after a grey London dusk it seemed strange that for the next we watched a crimson African sun all but plummet from the sky. 'It flies up at dawn,' said Peter Allison, who helped show me something of Wilderness Safaris' super-professional camps in Zimbabwe. 'Like toast from a pop-up toaster.'

What a start. After that roaring mile-long curtain of falling water that is the Vic Falls – and here's a wonder of the world that does not disappoint – we were overlooking a little lake at the (tip-top) Victoria Falls Safari

Lodge, awaiting a feast of ostrich, kudu steak, Zambezi bream and Windhoek beer, and enjoying a time-honoured African ritual.

Animals troop in from the bush at sundown and line the waterhole to watch all kinds of humans drinking G&Ts on a veranda. 'Amazing,' I could all but hear a warthog grunt, 'every day they all come at the same time! How do they know? Goodness, there's a rare couple of dun-coloured Englishmen next to those loud-livered Italians. Sshh! They're very shy.'

There was no time to visit my favourite bar in Africa – at the Gorges Lodge, 20 minutes below the falls and perched 650 feet above the Zambezi boiling in its canyon – for we were off before sunrise in Wilderness's 12-seater Cessna, following the great river east. From 1,000 feet we watched elephants trooping out into Lake Kariba and peered down at the bush, dry and brown before the rains, marking the logic of the game tracks: those ribbons on a map of mammalian intelligence, the geometry of the animal brain.

We were to visit the first of just two of the four camps Wilderness operates in Zimbabwe: Ruckomechi, on the banks of the Zambezi in the Mana Pools National Park. After that, we'd fly to Little Makalolo in the Belgium-sized Hwange National Park.

Bumping down on a dirt airstrip, we picked our way past the elephant dung to a welcome of a hot wind and cold African cider (the new craze across the continent) from one of those ice boxes on little trestle tables with tablecloths that seemed to magic themselves out of Land Rovers wherever we went. And off we bounced to Ruckomechi: a 22-guest camp where lumbered my African lady elephant and elephantine American lady.

'Don't worry,' said Elizabeth, Ruckomechi's deeply impressive manager (she'd told me that 'the job selects you'). 'They're completely relaxed but totally wild.' ▷



PHOTOGRAPHS: JULIAN GLOVER; DAVID FETTES; BETTY, GUIDO COZZI; CORNERS, CORBIS



◁ I don't know if she meant the elephant or the American, but really she could have been describing our whole adventure. Completely relaxed but totally wild. Completely informal but totally polished. Completely do-as-you-please but totally under control. All under canvas – but what canvas.

There's no space here to diarise the two camps where we stayed. In free association, the impressions tumble:

Dawn and the first flare of sun on the horizon: you know when you twiddle the dimmer switch clockwise? You can actually *see* the light swell.

Advice from Tendai Mdluli, a senior Wilderness manager: 'Don't hurry – there's no rush in Africa: remember that in Africa, food moves.'

Evening meals at Ruckomechi, then that whisky and soda round the fire while hippos wallowed; the hot bath outdoors under the stars; nights under canvas in our huge tent-houses and awaking to hear a distant lion roar; sleeping on a tree platform, frogs chorusing 'Bamboo! Bamboo!' My first leopard, in the headlights.

Watching elephants swimming the Zambezi, trunks up like snorkels, the babies' like mini-snorkels; sitting quietly in a hide at Little Makalolo right by the waterhole as about 200 – yes, 200 – elephants came down to drink in groups, wave after wave in a silent, slow lumber. We were almost under their legs as an enormous bull elephant emptied into his mouth the gurgling contents of his enormous trunk, sucked up from the pool. 'He's about 60,' whispered Tendai.

I was 15 when I last visited Hwange. Since then it has tactfully re-rendered its original name, which was Wankie when we took that happy journey, my mother struggling to get the Humber Super Snipe's steering-column shift into reverse while an elephant lunged, ears flapping.

So our 60-year-old friend was 10 when I was 15.

I wonder if we met. I wonder where his life has taken him, while mine took me through Cambridge, the FCO, Margaret Thatcher's office, Parliament, TV, journalism and radio. There will have been big events in his elephant life too. But as Wittgenstein didn't quite say, 'even if an elephant could speak, we wouldn't understand'.

And still that jumble of impressions... The very different Africa when you land at Little Makalolo, a 14-guest camp in the Hwange Park. The wide skies and flat horizons, the endless open parkland they call savannah.

The horror as a magnificent lion eyed a baby elephant's gnawed carcass and one remaining ear saved for pudding, panting and irritably flicking his tail – 'a voluptuary under the horrors of digestion' – while the vultures waited their turn

Lord, but nature's a nervy business; so much the antithesis of the Buddhist ideal, so very different from the peace, love and harmony with all living things that the green brigade try to believe. Greenpeace? There's no peace. In a week when we saw almost every famous African animal there is, plus some I'd never heard of, I observed only fear, greed, impatience, anger and lust. Waves of panic sweep hourly through those species with reason to be afraid. Among those with nothing to fear, fights are ceaseless as each covets the other's meal, or status, or shady patch, or cow. It makes investment banking seem positively zen.

I'll never forget the walks. Our guide Nyenge, standing by a 20-foot anthill and describing vividly the life of termites – things I never learnt when I lived here for 11 years, dammit. 'In our younger generation in Zimbabwe,' he said, 'people envy to be guides. Our country's exams are the most respected in Africa.' I was glad of that as we ducked into the long grass in a teak forest, downwind of a bull elephant. Ntando, another guide, knew the beast's eyesight was weak and supplemented by smell.

He explained the fear there can be in silence. When birds stop singing and the tropical boubou ceases his one-note creak of an iron gate – always the sound of Africa to me – it is because a predator is near.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, A BAOBAB TREE IN HWANGE NATIONAL PARK. SUNSET AT THE VICTORIA FALLS SAFARI LODGE. LITTLE MAKALOLO CAMP. THE TERRACE AT THE VIC FALLS LODGE



ELEPHANTS COME DOWN TO DRINK – A SILENT, SLOW LUMBER

And he showed us an elephant's footprint. 'She passed here, but not today,' said Ntando. How did he know? 'There is an ant-lion insect's track across the print,' he said, pointing. 'Ant lions only crawl at night.'

I was learning more about the landscape of my boyhood than I ever learned as a boy. What a one-sided view of Africa a white child got, living in the Highlands suburb: the Hampstead of Harare. Why, like the other whites, did I learn hardly a word of the country's African languages? Why did I never ask our servants about their villages, about life in the bush?

And which was the real Zimbabwe? For life in a luxury camp in an exclusive 'concession' in a national park, with more staff than guests, has unrealities of its own. I interviewed some of the staff, and put such questions to them. Should tourists even come here, I asked? Does visiting imply approval of a government?

No, said Elizabeth. 'Some of us built this camp. If nobody visits, our parks will close. We work so hard. We bring schoolchildren from across Zimbabwe to teach them to cherish their land and its wildlife. We are 23 staff, and building Linkwasha [a new camp, open next May] are 35 more workers from villages nearby. Zimbabwe needs us and we need you.' 'We have such good things to tell people,' said Nono, 'it's the people, not the government, who benefit if you come.'

So go. We British have a duty to Zimbabwe. We should reclaim something of this wonderful country, which still bears our imprint. But we should go this time not as occupiers, not as colonists. We should go as travellers – independent or on fantastic trips like mine – as customers, as guests, as visitors. And as friends. □

Book it Africa Travel (africatravel.com; 020 7843 3580) offers two nights, including breakfast, at Victoria Falls Safari Lodge; three nights, full board, at Ruckomechi Camp; and three nights, full board, at Little Makalolo Camp, from £4,175, including flights, transfers, park fees and activities.