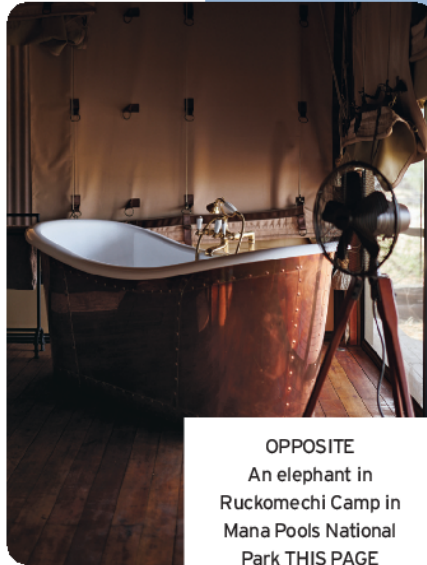


ANIMAL MAGIC

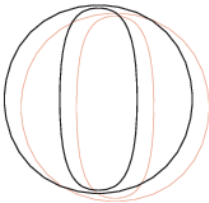
ONCE A STAR OF SAFARI, ZIMBABWE SPENT A DECADE OUT IN THE COLD, BUT IS RISING AGAIN. *LYDIA BELL* DISCOVERS ASTONISHING GAME, LAVISH LODGES AND ENCHANTING LANDSCAPES AND PEOPLE



“ This is a land ruled by ELEPHANTS,
the last on earth. They are everywhere,
FLAPPING THEIR EARS and
TRUMPETING indignantly ”



OPPOSITE
An elephant in Ruckomechi Camp in Mana Pools National Park **THIS PAGE**
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
LEFT Morning tea in Hwange National Park. **Bathtime** at Somalisa Camp. **A lion** in the pride left behind by their patriarch, Cecil. **Wilderness Safaris' Linkwasha camp** in Hwange National Park

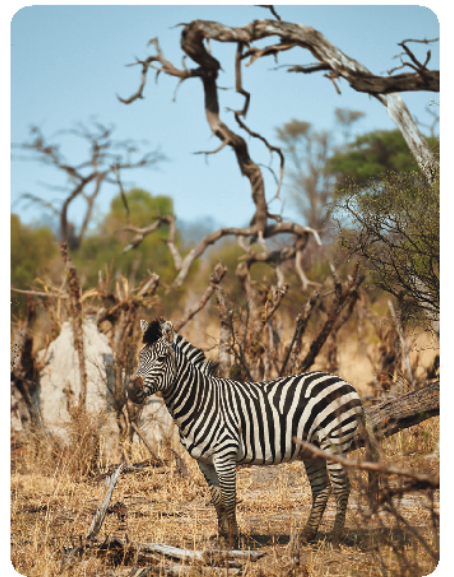


One morning, a pride of lions walks into our camp. I hear them roar at dawn. By breakfast, they are stalking a zebra near the camp waterhole. While drinking coffee, I watch them go in for the kill. They fluff it, and the zebra scampers off

over the prow of the hill unscathed, but the lions stay a while, drinking and play fighting till the apricot wash of dawn deepens into a golden morning light. Then they, too, disappear over the horizon. Known as the 'White Man's Grave' at the turn of the century because of its blazing heat and ferocious beasts, Hwange National Park - 14,700-square-kilometres of teak woodlands, Mopani forests and lion-coloured plains in western Zimbabwe - is home to about 450 of these magnificent creatures. With no rivers, it is the boreholes that arrived from 1930 that draw game. They total 56, although that number is on the rise. Zimbabwe's largest park, Hwange is an extension of the sands of the Kalahari, and as dry as a bone, especially now in October at the end of the dry season. From the window of our dinky Cessna 206, I could see nothing but a carpet of raggedy, elephant-obliterated trees. Until the rains arrive, hungry elephants, which feed on 200-300 kilograms of food daily, are chiselling bark off trees and turning up the earth for roots.

African Bush Camps' welcoming 12-tent Somalisa Camp has been rebuilt. It has all the hallmarks of a superior African safari lodge - large tents with handsome copper baths, inside and outside showers, crispy linens and built-in hatches for your morning tea. But it's the familial atmosphere and top-grade guides that are the selling point. My guide David is probably the best I've met in Africa, dropping in anecdotes from his childhood in the Zimbabwean bush. The watering hole is a marvellous place to observe the rituals of elephants bathing. First they drink, then they splash themselves with mud. As they leave, they dust their mud-wet bodies with sand, which acts as a sunscreen and insecticide. They queue up, displaying etiquette not dissimilar to that of humans on the London Underground. Each herd waits until the last has exited before tucking in; the incumbent herd exits hastily on





realising the patience of the herd yonder is wearing thin. This is a land ruled by elephants. They are everywhere, flapping their ears and trumpeting. Hwange is part of the last great elephant corridor in Southern Africa, which stretches from here into Botswana's Chobe National Park. At the front of the camp there is a small pool of fresh water, and facing it, a few loungers. If you sit quietly, elephants drop by to drink. Mothers direct babies' floppy trunks, or puddle water on the ground for them. They come so near that you can hear them breathe, the water rushing down their throats, and their ears flapping against thick skin. Knowing that more than 140,000 of Africa's savannah elephants were killed for ivory between 2007 and 2014, wiping out a third, it's humbling to see them so close.

That's without mentioning the lions. Of the pride of 11 we watch at the watering hole, four are lionesses, but seven are oversized cubs, 18 months old, learning to hunt. This is the pride left behind following the death of their patriarch, Cecil, who was shot by a dentist from Minnesota as a trophy last year. Cecil had wandered into a hunting concession north of here. His demise thrust the plight of Africa's lions into the limelight. Today, only about 25,000 lions survive of the 200,000 that once lived on the continent, because of trophy hunting, habitat encroachment and rampant poaching. Lions could be extinct in the wild by 2050, but Cecil's progeny are doing all right. They kill a buffalo on our second day. We watch them gnawing on the carcass while hyenas lurk. It's quite a sight, with their mouths stained vermillion, the stench of death filling our nostrils and the monotonal buzzing of flies ringing in our ears.

After a decade in the cold because of political volatility, Hwange - and Zimbabwe at large - is enjoying a resurgence. Operators who boycotted are returning. In Hwange, three camps opened in the past two years. As President Mugabe edges towards his 30th year in office with no successor anointed, Zimbabweans are beginning to focus on a future without him. Small positives have arrived since the dollarisation of the currency in 2011. Hyperinflation is over and you can now get money out of the bank, even if you have to queue for hours. There are provisions on the supermarket shelves, even if imported.

In the Eastern corner of Hwange, Wilderness Safaris has opened Linkwasha. Nine opulent en-suite grey and cream tents and multi-level decks, a pool and a winter lounge with library overlook the Makalolo Pan. The new camp opened in summer 2015. Manager Joe Hanly tells us that, 'Linkwasha and the other openings in Zimbabwe are about putting your money where your mouth is. They are fuelled by a belief that positive things are coming soon.' The Wilderness concession takes over a 500-square-kilometre area, and Linkwasha brings the total of their camps to four.

From Hwange, we fly north, touching down on to a rough slash of dirt at Mana Pools (which, the day we arrived, had to be cleared of hundreds of elephants). We stay at Wilderness Safaris' solar-powered Ruckomechi, 10 tents amid the broad canopied Ana trees on a riverbank where elephants wander. Ruckomechi has been completely rebuilt; its vast tents contemporary and stylish, with a riverside pool. A few kilometres to the east, Wilderness has just opened Little Ruckomechi, a higher-end sanctuary. A family could book out its four beautiful tents, creating a private domain here.



andBeyond closed a camp here in 2012, when the situation in Zimbabwe was desperate. Re-opening in summer 2016 with andBeyond Matetsi River Lodge, THEY ARE bigger and better than ever

This is a sumptuous river valley - with the Zambezi River as its northern border - of mature, profuse acacia, Zambezi figs, resembling giant broccoli, baobab, mahoganies and albidas, with their pods beloved of snacking elephants. Elephants wander around the camp rubbing up against the trunk of the tree outside my tent and hoovering up acacia pods under the deck that skirts it. Ruckomechi offers a roll call of animal magic to rival an Attenborough series. You sleep and wake to the sound of hippos bellowing, and you watch their eyes disappearing into the water on dawn and sunset boat trips. Many memories will always stay with me. Such as the family of elephants swimming across the Zambezi. One night before sunset, the horizon a misty blue wash over the Zambian Kayila Mountains, I watched lion cubs prowl after a hippo. He chased them off crossly. I saw wild dogs prowling across the plains, sniffing and pricking up enormous ears. At dawn on the Zambezi, I watched brilliant copper and green carmine bee-eaters dive in and out of the holes they had bored near the riverbank for nests. One evening, a gin and tonic in hand, a lioness reunited with her cubs in front of me as a herd of buffalo thundered back and forth, forming their phalanx of defence.

We fly west, for now past the glory of Victoria Falls to another Zambezi-set gem with a rich story. The shiny new andBeyond Matetsi River Lodge has opened on a 50,000-hectare private wildlife concession with 17 kilometres of riverfront next to two hunting concessions, with the Zambezi National Park flanking the eastern border. This is the most ambitious of all 'our' lodges; a multi-million-pound refurbishment with two mirror-image camps of nine suites

ABOVE
A resting pride of lions in Mana Pools National Park.
OPPOSITE ALL PICTURES The bar at the newly opened andBeyond Matetsi River Lodge (left), which has a pool (top and bottom right) with views of the wildlife and surrounding landscape (centre right)



SAFARI ZIMBABWE

each that share a central spa, shop, alfresco treatment room, wine cellar and library. It is incredibly peaceful, and flawlessly run. The company andBeyond closed a camp here in 2012, when the situation in Zimbabwe was desperate, but re-opened in summer 2016 - now it is bigger and better than ever. Executive chef Nico Meyer has been shipped in from Singita South Africa and is whipping up a series of well-plated dishes. Then there is the standalone four-bedroom Matetsi River House, with dedicated guide, private vehicle, chef and butler, private pool and fire pit. But Matetsi is not about flash. It is, after all, a product of andBeyond, founded on the premise of making conservation pay. To make that happen, it has invested heavily in private anti-poaching units.

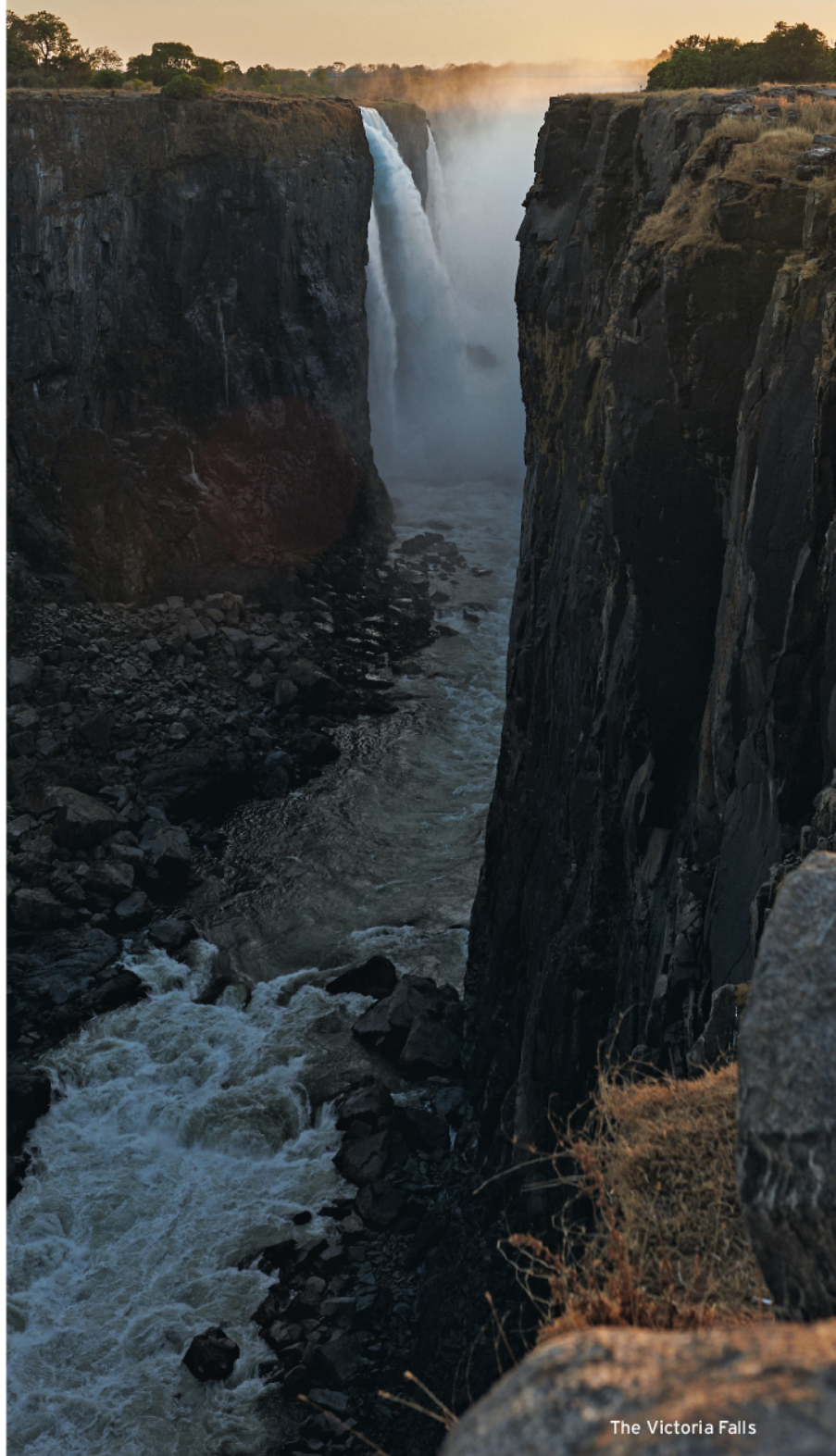
Matetsi tells a Zimbabwean story of resilience, loyalty and optimism. Many staff members worked here before; returnees include our amazing butler, Rashiwe. Manager Peter Dunning himself returned from managing a hotel in the Caribbean. 'When I heard about the lodge re-opening, I thought: "That's it. That's me coming home!"' The excellent guides have returned from other parts of the African continent, where Zimbabweans are high in demand for their education, crackling confidence and wit. My guide Fisher worked across southern and east Africa. Safari in Zimbabwe, he argues, 'harks back to the Seventies. It is authentic and wild. In South Africa the experience is more sanitised and the game more habituated.' Fisher brings us one of the trip's special moments - two fully maned male lions resting after a kill.

Finally it's back to the airstrip and our end point: the Victoria Falls River Lodge. Its smart tents opened in 2012 as a contemporary foil to the colonial nostalgia of the Victoria Falls Hotel half an hour away. In this river spot you can hear the lions roar. Elephants drink from your plunge pool, warthog graze on the lawn and hippos trot along the paths. It offers tranquil cruises past basking hippos and crocodiles but mainly it's a place from which to see the Falls. The lodge proves the new Chinese-built Victoria Falls airport is reconnecting Zimbabwe to the circuit. But most here, after the falls, will head on to Namibia, Botswana, or South Africa. The rest of Zimbabwe is not, currently, a feature on the mainstream safari map. Just before we leave, we finally get to Victoria Falls, formed 150 million years ago when molten lava surged from the earth's crust, then cooled to form crevices, which the flooding Zambezi River caused to recede, creating vast gorges. Standing on that precipice, drenched in spindrift and sunlight, double rainbows dancing overhead, is not a moment to forget. Finally, we reach Danger Point, at the end of the path, a perch to view the epic Eastern cataract. On the Zambian side, a group of gospel singers are praising God. As their mellow voices drift across to us, I find myself silently voicing my own prayer - that these heart-warming Zimbabweans create a better safari future for their country. In spite of everything, this place feels blessed. ①

› ESSENTIALS

HOW Cazenove+Lloyd (020-7384 2332; cazloyd.com) tailor-makes trips throughout Africa. A 12-night trip for two people, including three nights each at Linkwasha, Somalisa, Ruckomechi and Matetsi, on a full-board basis, costs from £10,350 per person, including all internal flights and transfers and international flights from London

“ Standing on that PRECIPICE, drenched in spindrift and sunlight, DOUBLE RAINBOWS dancing overhead, is not a moment to forget ”



The Victoria Falls