

Zimbabwe - despite its current political and economic tensions - still offers superb wildlife experiences in some of the finest reserves of Africa, from the water wilderness of Matusadona and Mana Pools to Hwange and the remote splendour of Gona-Re-Zhou. The crowning glory of Zimbabwe's natural beauty is the mighty Victoria Falls.

GONA-RE-ZHOU NATIONAL PARK

This is a scenic region of baobab trees, scrub lands and golden sandstone cliffs. In the Shona language, Gona-re-zhou means “place of elephants”. At dawn and dusk the rocks are bathed in coloured light and the baobabs are silhouetted into eerie shapes. The baobab is also known as the 'upside-down' tree, as it seems to have its head in the sand and its roots in the air. Legend goes that this is the price the baobab paid for offending the gods.

Gona-re-zhou borders Mozambique's wildlife reserves and South Africa's Kruger National Park and in a ground breaking trans-frontier agreement, implemented in 2002, the fences have come down between all the reserves allowing animals to move freely between the three countries.

ANIMALS AND BIRDS

Elephants here are shyer than anywhere else in the country and need to be treated with caution. The Save, Runde and Mwenezi Rivers meander through the hot, semi-arid lowveld and supports rare suni and nyala antelope and striped king cheetah. Bird life is rampant especially during the wet season when thousands of migrating birds arrive for a feeding frenzy.

SEASONS

The park is usually only open during the dry season from 1st May to 31st October.

Dry Season: The cool dry season is from the end of April to August. This six month period of almost completely dry, sunny weather gives average temperatures in the mid 70's°F to the low 80's°F (23-28°C). By late June the leaves begin to fall from the trees and the tall grasses have been trampled by game, making it prime game-viewing time. The hot dry spell is from September to early November and game viewing is at its peak especially in the cool of early morning and early evening. Midday temperatures are a sizzling 90°F+ (34°C+), but humidity is low.

Rainy Season: From November to March it rains about one out of every five days. The sun emerges after every thunderstorm and humidity and heat are high. The greenery is lush and wild flowers emerge in profusion. Thousands of migratory birds arrive to take advantage of the abundant food supply, and nature puts on her fullest displays. Temperatures rise to and exceed 104°F (40°C).

GONA-RE-ZHOU SPECIALITIES

- Unique transfrontier park
- Huge elephants

- Exceptional scenery

FACTS

The park covers 1950 miles²) (5,053 km²) and was created in 1967.

Take advice from your tour operator as to the suitability of a visit.

This is a malarial area.

HWANGE NATIONAL PARK

These sub-tropical thorn and sand flats on the edge of the Kalahari Desert were once home to the nomadic San (Bushmen) who lived off the land and feasted on great herds of migrating game. Now Hwange National Park is the largest game reserve in Zimbabwe, noted for its massive population of elephants.

It is a place of great contrasts between wet and dry season, with the extremes reminding you of the life-giving properties of water. During the desperately dry months the park can appear very inhospitable to such a large number of animals. The salt-pans are crusted and cracked, the acacia scrub is wilting and the grassy plains are yellow and crunchy. However the animals survive on limited vegetation and the help of man-made waterholes that sustain them until the rains bring forth new growth.

ANIMALS AND BIRDS

Hwange has Africa's Big Five and plenty of them! There are thousands of elephants and buffalo. Lions are commonly seen, but the elusive leopard and rhino are always a bonus to see. This park has such variety that one hundred different species have been recorded.

Dry season game-viewing is assisted by the shallow pans threaded throughout the park. The natural salt-licks provide elephants with favourite mud holes for wallowing and sixty man-made waterholes give much needed water during the hot parched winter months when everything else dries up. Several waterholes have raised wooden hides in which you can spend many hours observing animals and the interactions between them.

400 species of birds are found here making it a bird watchers paradise, particularly in the wet season. The largest is the ground dwelling Kori Bustard who will only take to the air if absolutely necessary. Abundant food marks the start of the mating season and crowned cranes prance in a comical dance and red bishops sport their startling scarlet breeding plumage. There are plenty more with long wispy tails, iridescent colours and loud squawking calls.

SEASONS

Dry Season: July to September is hot during the day but can drop to below freezing on particularly cold winter nights. During these dry months the animals are concentrated around the man-made waterholes, without which they would die.

Rainy Season: Big fluffy clouds release the summer rains and the vegetation bursts

into life. The area has a relatively low average rainfall of between 22½-25½ inches (570-650 mm) per annum. Temperatures can reach over 100°F (38°C), while on average they range from 65-83°F (18-28°C). Birdlife is most spectacular at this time.

HWANGE SPECIALITIES

- Thousands of elephants
- Over 100 different types of animals and 400 species of birds
- Strategically placed viewing hides

FACTS

The park covers an area of 5,656miles² (14,651km²) with an average altitude 3,300 ft (1,000m) above sea level.

It is situated on the main Bulawayo to Victoria Falls road in the northwest corner of Zimbabwe and borders Botswana.

Hwange has 300miles (480km) of roads, many of which are all weather but some get boggy during the rainy season and are closed. There is no off-road or night driving in the National Park.

This is a malarial area.

KARIBA AND MATUSADONA NATIONAL PARK

Lake Kariba is like an inland sea in a landlocked country. It was created by damming the mighty Zambezi and the new eco-system provides life in many forms and gives villagers and their livestock constant access to water.

Stunning sunsets are a distinctive feature of Kariba, as are the bleached skeletal trunks and bare branches of dead trees that were drowned in the dam all those years ago. They make excellent perches for fish eagles, cormorants and other water birds.

Matusadona National Park lies along the southern shores of Lake Kariba and is bounded in the west by the Umi River and in the east by the dramatic Sanyati Gorge. It's a superb game viewing park with the opportunity to take game drives, walking safaris, boat and canoe excursions, making it an excellent all-round safari location.

ANIMALS AND BIRDS

Lake Kariba is teeming with crocodiles and you can see them sunbathing at intervals of 00 meters or so along the shore. There are so many crocs that the National Parks Board allow crocodile farms to collect eggs every October, as long as they return 2% of hatchlings back to the lake. This is probably more than would naturally survive in the wild. Swimming is not advised except in a swimming cage on the back of some of the larger houseboats.

Matusadona National Park is the finest safari location along the lake with the best of Lake Kariba's water wildlife coupled with great inland wildlife viewing. Game viewing by boat near the shore is a wonderful experience and you will see large herds of elephant, buffalo and plenty of hippos and waterbuck. Further into the park roan and sable antelope, kudu, impala, lions and black rhino are often seen, but leopards

are elusive. Walking safaris are very rewarding and fishing for tiger and bream is excellent.

SEASONS

Dry Season: it is dry from June to October and animals come to the lake to drink and graze along the banks. As the rain clouds build, October's heat is oppressive and temperatures exceed 86°F (30°C). The dry season is the best time to visit.

Rainy Season: it rains intermittently from early November to the end of April and animals have no need to stay so close to the lake. The rainy season summer months are very hot and humid.

KARIBA & MATUSADONA SPECIALITIES

- Massive Nile crocodiles
- Swimming elephants
- Lakeshore lodges, houseboats and floating chalets
- Spectacular watery sunsets
- Masses of hippos
- Dead trees like sculptures

FACTS

Matusadona National Park is 543²miles (1,407km²).

Lake Kariba is 175 miles long (280km) and up to 20 miles wide (32km).

There is an overnight ferry from one end of Lake Kariba to the other, which takes 22 hours.

Operation Noah saved over 5,000 animals of 35 different species from drowning when Lake Kariba was formed and deposited many of them in what is now Matusadona National Park.

This is a malarial area.

MANA POOLS NATIONAL PARK

There is no greater thrill to be had on a Zimbabwe safari, than in Mana Pools National Park - the wild child of the Zambezi River! This portion of the Zambezi Valley is a true wilderness area with one of the highest dry-season concentrations of animals in Zimbabwe.

Canoeing along the Zambezi is a specialty of the area and is a real ride on the wild side. The river can turn from flat and calm to angry and choppy with a headwind into which you have to steer your small fibre glass canoe. This is more than enough to contend with but when a grumpy territorial male hippo decides you are too close and makes a mock charge which produces something akin to a tidal wave, you really have something to talk about when you get home.

Most of the time it is peaceful and scenically beautiful with distant purple hills of the Zambian escarpment on one side and wooded slopes leading to the interior of the

national park on the southern banks. Along the river's edge are wide green flood plains tramped by elephants and buffalo who take little notice as you drift silently by on your two-man canoe.

At the public entrance to this park you are strictly warned that it is offence to take citrus fruits in with you. Elephants have a craving for oranges and will trample your tent or upturn your car just to get to them!

ANIMALS, BIRDS AND FISH

The Zambezi is a life force supporting great numbers of pink-eared hippos and huge crocodiles that resemble floating logs. Many people come here to fish for fighting tiger fish, large perch, delicious bream and slippery catfish.

The succulent flood plains are sometimes over a mile wide and are constantly grazed by elephants, buffaloes and waterbuck. Many other animals are to be found along this river valley and predators such as lions, leopards, wild dog, hyena and jackal have a good supply of food.

Bird life is wonderful with inquisitive yellow-billed kites swooping down to have a look at you and other raptors and vultures circling high in the thermals. Carmine bee-eaters flit about in a purple blur as they emerge from the sandbank pitted with their nesting holes.

SEASONS

Dry Season: June to October - large numbers of animals come to the river to drink and graze along the lush banks during these months. The increasing build up to rain in October creates considerable heat with temperatures over 86°F (30°C).

Rainy Season: it rains intermittently from early November to the end of April and most animals move away from the river towards the escarpment. It is hot and humid with temperatures around 82°F (28°C). Most roads within the park are closed during this period but charter flights operate to two airstrips in the park.

MANA POOLS SPECIALITIES

- Canoeing on the Zambezi
- Walking safaris
- Hippos and crocs
- Canoeing past grazing elephants and buffalo
- Remote luxury lodges
- True wilderness experience

FACTS

The park is 845miles² (2,190km²), on the southern side of the Zambezi River downstream from Lake Kariba.

The Zambezi River forms the border between Zimbabwe and Zambia.

Canoe safaris can last from 3 to 9 days with an option from budget to luxury with basic camping and cooking around a campfire, to top class tents with cots and mattress, cook and camp staff.

This is a malarial area.

MATOBO HILLS

The extraordinary Matobo hills are full of hidden caves, sacred places and Bushman paintings. Archaeological digs have found artefacts over 35,000 years old. Today the hills are the spiritual home of the Matabele people and a visit to a local village will bring you up to date with present day tribal culture in this area.

The massive rock formations of Matobo are awesome in their grandeur and create a unique atmosphere. Giant lichen-streaked boulders have weathered in place to create tremendous sculptures, which balance precariously in defiance of gravity.

ANIMALS AND BIRDS

Matobo is the domain of the impressive Black Eagle and is their chosen breeding ground. These powerful birds have no trouble targeting their main diet of rock hyrax (rather like a very large guinea pig but genetically closely related to the elephant)! These comical little creatures scuttle around the rocks in large numbers and there are plenty of small buck including rock-hopping klipspringers.

This is perfect leopard country and although many live here, they are seldom seen. You should however, be able to see giraffe, zebra, jackal, and perhaps caracal, porcupine, civet and genet. Ancient rock paintings showed that rhino used to live in this area, so the Whovi rhino sanctuary, adjacent to the park, reintroduced them and both black and white rhino are doing very well.

Birds to watch out for are a whole host of eagles, hawks, falcons and other raptors, plus colourful purple-crested louries who prefer the cover of dense foliage.

SEASONS

Dry Season: The cool dry season is from the end of April to August and the hot dry spell is from September to early November when temperatures get to 90°F (34°C), but humidity is low.

Rainy Season: From November to March thunderstorms unleash their might every few days but the sun re-emerges and humidity is high.

MATOBO SPECIALITIES

- Precariously balanced boulders and stunning scenery
- Cecil Rhodes' grave
- Black and white rhino
- Eagles
- Special accommodation

FACTS

The park covers 164²miles (424km²)

The region boasts over 300 rock paintings, many of which can be hiked to.

VICTORIA FALLS

With little awareness of what lies ahead, the steadily flowing Zambezi River casually approaches Victoria Falls, and then topples out of control over a sheer 330-foot (100 metre) drop. This mile-wide (1,609 metre) curtain of water really is as spectacular as its reputation and can be viewed from various angles at numerous viewpoints. It is the widest curtain of falling water in the world, and during the warm wet months of February to April, it cascades at over thirty times its dry season flow. The resulting spray can be seen from 20 miles (32kms) away and explains the local African name for the falls - Mosi-oa-Tunya 'Smoke that Thunders'

The best view of the falls is from the air and the so called 'Flight of Angels', was born out of Livingston's November 1855 diary entry when seeing the falls he stated, "Scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in flight." It was Cecil Rhodes and his dream of a railway from Cape to Cairo, that brought settlers and tourists to the area in 1905, and the original Victoria Falls Hotel was built soon thereafter. Around the falls is 9 miles² (23 km²) of riverine jungle with ferns, figs, ilala palms, vines, mahogany trees and patches of rain-forest, providing a tranquil setting from which to view the five cascades. Antelopes can be seen in these areas and troops of nonchalant baboons patrol the walkways. Airborne droplets of fine mist creates an almost a constant rainbow, which can even be seen by the light of the moon.

The Victoria Falls are shared by both Zambia and Zimbabwe and is territorially divided by Cecil Rhodes' famous bridge - which he never lived to see. As well as a spectacular view down into the gorge, this bridge has more recently become famous for its adrenaline-pumping bungee jump with a fall of 364 feet (111 meters)! The other most popular adventure pursuit here is white-water rafting on the Zambezi.

ZAMBEZI NATIONAL PARK

5½ miles (9 km) from the falls is the Zambezi National Park. It stretches along the Zambezi for 25 miles (40 km) and boasts several safari lodges. The lodges are set along the riverbanks amongst Ilala palms giving leisurely views of the gently flowing river. Sundowner cruises paddle these deceptively calm waters above the falls.

ANIMALS AND BIRDS AND FISH

The park contains some big game such as elephants, buffalo, lions, giraffe and antelopes like kudu and waterbuck, along with plenty of hippos and crocs. Riverine bird life is plentiful with egrets, herons, cormorants, fish eagles and kingfishers. The Zambezi is renowned for its tigerfish, tilapia and giant vundu (catfish) over 6 ft long (2 meters).

SEASONS

Dry Season: May to October is usually dry and September and October allows better photo opportunities at Victoria Falls as there is much less spray, but the torrent is slightly less impressive. The dry season is also better for viewing game in the Zambezi National Park.

Rainy Season: It usually rains anywhere from November through to April, creating a hot and humid climate. The falls are at their wettest and most spectacular by the end of this summer rainy season.

VICTORIA FALLS & ZAMBEZI NATIONAL PARK SPECIALITIES

- Victoria Falls - one of the greatest natural wonders in the world
- Mighty Zambezi - white-water rafting, sundowner cruising, fishing, bird watching and game viewing
- Victoria Falls Bridge bungee jump
- Flight of the Angels

FACTS

Victoria Falls is one of the natural wonders of the world and a World Heritage site.

The Zambezi or “great river” is named in the language of the Batonka tribe.

The Zambezi is 1,687 miles long (2,700 km) and is Africa’s fourth largest river.

It originates in central Africa and ends in Mozambique at the Indian Ocean. To the Mozambicans it is known as the “river of great floods.”

Cameras and clothes tend to get wet when visiting Victoria Falls, but waterproof capes and umbrellas are available for hire.

There is plenty of accommodation in this area ranging from elementary fishing camps to rustic or exclusive safari lodges and five-star hotels.

This is a malarial area.

CHIZARIRA NATIONAL PARK

This park is considered to be Zimbabwe's most scenic national park, but the only way to see it is on foot with a guide. Chizarira is actually three parks: the Zambezi

Escarpment - an area of deep green river gorges, The Uplands - an upland plateau which is prime wildlife country, and The Busi Valley - an area of wild and remote

beauty along the wildlife rich banks of the Busi River. It is best explored on a walking safari. This is a malarial area.