

Walking in the wild

Rose Gamble relays her experience of walking in the remote Gonarezhou National Park, one of southern Africa's great untrammelled reserves



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JIM EGDWIN

It was our first dusk. We'd parked by an enormous baobab tree, decanted G&Ts into glasses and walked 200m through the dimming bush. Somewhere in the shadow of the reddening cliffs, a lonely jackal called. We headed towards the empty riverbed, intent on watching the sun set from its gentle, sandy depths.

As we left the last of the trees, a huge bull elephant lumbered up the bank, only metres away. For a moment, as time stood still, I noticed nothing but its sheer size, silhouetted against the orange sky. "Move behind," whispered our guide, Scott Slatter, calmly. And together we reversed, as quietly as we could, back among the trees. Then he said, "Follow me." And so I did, adrenaline unfurling its fiery fingers in my stomach. I felt tiny, fragile and, with a G&T in one hand, faintly ridiculous. We walked diagonally, slipping silently through the trees, until we stopped and crouched low in the shadow of a tangled acacia. With merely a tilt of its massive head in our direction, the giant beast continued, apparently unperturbed, on its path through the bush. Its hefty tusks gleamed purple in the gathering gloom.

Gonarezhou National Park, situated in a remote corner of the Masvingo Province in south-eastern Zimbabwe, derives its name from the pachyderms that populate it: 'Gonarezhou' means 'place of the elephants' in the Shona language. With elephant numbers dwindling across Africa, the park is remarkable in having an estimated 11,120 spread over its 5035sq km. Equally remarkable is that it has survived almost 60 years of neglect and abuse.

Situated adjacent to the Mozambican border, Gonarezhou has twice been caught up in the crossfire. The effects of the Rhodesian Bush War, or Zimbabwe War of Liberation, were felt in the park as early as the 1960s. After the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) by Ian Smith's Rhodesian Front government in 1965, a desperate and destructive search for oil – which had been heavily sanctioned by the British government – within the park ensued. Later, as civil war broke out, the park became an unwitting battleground, as guerrillas from Smith's Rhodesian Army and Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) fought each other deep in the bush. Smith's Selous Scouts mined an 8km strip along the border as a deterrent to ZANLA troops. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least 15 elephants per week were detonating bombs as they followed their traditional routes across the man-made boundary.

Gonarezhou's troubles did not stop following independence in the 1980s; instead, it became swept up in the Mozambican Civil War, which started in 1977. Therefore, the park was deemed dangerous to visitors and closed, and poaching became rampant as both guerrillas and dishonest rangers trapped, ate and sold meat. It finally reopened in 1994 and is now – somewhat ironically – wonderfully quiet, wild, rugged and, at times, harsh. As we drive the two hours from the park entrance to the banks of the Runde River, where we will be staying, I take in its natural beauty – there are no rolling plains or swaying grass, but I am struck by the miles of untouched emptiness.

The park is characterised by a broad, sandy riverbed, which slowly uncurls through its centre, and a 30km stretch of dusky-red sandstone, known as the Chilolo Cliffs, which rise 170m

from the river's south bank. Our mobile camp, Gonarezhou Bush Camp, sits on the bank of the empty riverbed directly opposite the rockface, which glows russet-orange as the sun drops in the evening and striped rose-pink as it rises. It sleeps a maximum of 10 in canvas dome tents, which house twin or double beds, a table and an LED lamp. At the front of each one is a tiny verandah with two chairs and a washbasin. A few metres behind my abode was a bucket shower and a short-drop loo. Washing here is, incidentally, incredibly fun: there's nothing quite like returning from your walk on the wild side, shrouded in dust, to bathe beneath the stars under hot, smoke-scented water. We eat our meals, except breakfast, in the 'mess tent', which is just a dining table and chairs under an awning. Before supper, we stroll down a sandy, candlelit path to the riverbed and sit by the fire, wrapped in inky darkness and starlight.

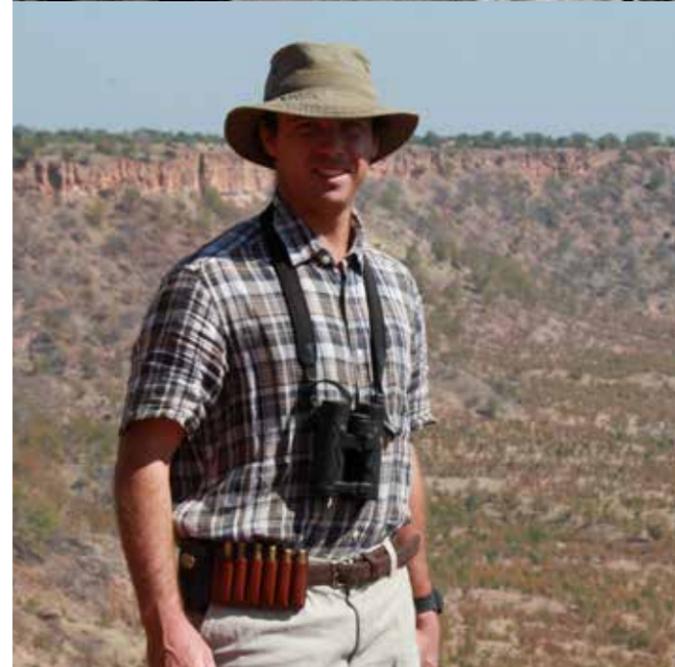
Gonarezhou Bush Camp is owned and run by Ant Kaschula and his wife Rawana. Their passion for the park is tangible. On our drive from Harare to the park, Ant told me how captivated he had been by the area's spectacular scenery and incredible wildlife when he first visited in 1993. He's returned repeatedly ever since – leading guests, walking, camping and throwing himself wholeheartedly into the park's conservation.

Since Ant's efforts to publicise Gonarezhou to the adventurous traveller have paid off, he employed Scott Slatter as a second guide. It was Scott who led us calmly through the lowveld each day. He was quiet and measured but gave off an air of confidence that comes from having spent much of his life in the bush. One evening, he told us at length about the process of gaining his Zimbabwe Professional Guide's Licence. The examinations here are some of the most rigorous, with an average pass rate of just 5 per cent. Scott spent six years working up to his. We immediately felt safer than before.

During our first night, we heard the low rumble of a lion on the far side of the river, so the following morning we set off in pursuit. The park's soft, sandy ground is ideal for learning about tracks, and almost immediately we spotted scribbles in the sand where a porcupine had passed. We saw the dinner-plate-sized prints of an elephant and could make out its toes. When we discovered the shapes of our lion's paws, they were so clear that we could see the gentle feathering of its fur encircling the deeper marks of its pads and claws. I stretched my fingers out above it, and it was bigger than my hand. We found the soft, barely formed jawbone of a long-dead baby elephant. Scott taught us to identify hippo dung. He showed us where elephant had stripped away the sweet-tasting bark of a baobab tree. We looked at a wild mango tree and studied its bitter fruits, shrivelled like miniature limes. Traversing a dry gully, we saw dwarf mongooses rushing to and fro and observed rock hyraxes scrambling deftly among a stony outcrop. I loved absorbing Scott's extensive knowledge of the trees, birdsong and animal tracks.

After an hour or so, he selected a shady leadwood tree and named it as our breakfast spot. On our approach, we flushed a graceful kudu out from a low-slung, thorny shrub nearby; it galloped away in a cloud of terracotta dust. Picnicking on *kikois* beneath the tree, we feasted on granola, yoghurt and coffee. →

CHILOLO LODGE SAFARI LODGE (Z) ANT KASCHULA (B)



PREVIOUS PAGES: Admiring the morning light on the Chilolo Cliffs. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Sunset over Chivilia Waterfalls; an elephant bull shows his annoyance at having been disturbed during his mid-morning mud bath; lightweight mosi-dome tents; a white-fronted bee-eater; Gonarezhou Bush Camps' guide Scott Slatter

The park is characterised by a broad, sandy riverbed and a 30km stretch of dusky-red sandstone, known as the Chilojo Cliffs, which rise from the south bank. The rockface glows russet orange as the sun drops in the evening and striped rose-pink as it rises



GONAREZHOU BUSH CAMPS

OPPOSITE: Gonarezhou's magnificent Chilojo Cliffs tower 170m above the River Runde creating beautiful reflections on the water below.
ABOVE: Staying at Gonarezhou Bush Camp, on the empty riverbed, is a real adventure. It's a superb base from which to explore the wilderness on foot

We listened to the chatter of a colony of weavers and watched them dart in flashes of cheery yellow between the fronds of a palm tree. Despite Scott circling the area twice to assess the danger, it took another couple of mornings before I could relax during bush breakfast.

In the afternoon, as we followed the coiling dried riverbed, we turned a corner and came across three buffalo. We beat a hasty retreat and all was well, but I can still taste the sting of adrenaline in my throat. Just moments earlier, we had been looking at a putrid buffalo carcass, holding our breath against the stench of rotting flesh and commenting on its enormous size, with horns as thick as a human thigh. Walking in the wilderness, I realised, was a totally different safari experience. When you're in a car, you are invisible, encased in carbon-fibre walls. You're top of the food chain – a benign, rumbling beast that can outstrip anything. On foot, I felt horribly aware of my diminutive size, my human vulnerability, though there was something good about it. It was as if the natural order of things had been restored.

Every day, we returned from our baking-hot jaunts to cold showers and lunch. We would spend the afternoon siesta wrapped in damp *kikoi*s outside our tents, watching a herd of elephant digging for the water that flows beneath the riverbed. In the afternoons, we would drive until we saw something of interest. Then we would hop out and set off to look for nyala antelope, porcupines or elephant, ending most days sitting in the soft sand of the riverbed with ice-cold drinks. The sand turns to ochre as the sun tumbles into the tree line, the sky torn into tendrils of orange and pink.

During three days exploring a tiny section of this vast park, we saw only one other vehicle. Time blurred into a haze of soothing simplicity: the beauty of sunrises and sunsets; the lingering smell of the campfire; the rich aroma of strong coffee; the baked red earth in the blistering midday heat; telltale mounds of fresh elephant dung; and thick dust. As time went on, I adjusted to the taste of adrenaline – to the way it made my muscles tighten and ricocheted along my nerves. On the long journey homeward, I pondered how sensational Gonarezhou is: it truly is an untrammelled wilderness.

SAFARI PLANNER

■ **Getting there** Kenya Airways, Ethiopian Airlines, South African Airways and Emirates all fly to Harare. From there, it's a 448km drive to Gonarezhou National Park, which lies in the secluded south-east of the country. The roads are mostly tarmac until you get close to the park; once there, 4WD is required. Air Zimbabwe has scheduled domestic flights between Harare, Bulawayo and Victoria Falls, and you can also arrange chartered flights to one of the private airstrips at Chilo Gorge or the Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve.

■ **Where to stay** The writer was hosted by the tented Gonarezhou Bush Camp (doubles from US\$1300, all-inclusive); note, you must be a group of at least four adults staying for at least four nights. Chilo Gorge Safari Lodge (doubles from US\$1200, all-inclusive), located on the edge of the park, is a good alternative. There are also several designated camping areas for self-drivers.

■ **When to go** If game viewing is your main priority, the dry winter months (between April and October) may suit you best, as the grass is at its lowest and the foliage is sparse. During the wet summer months, from December to March, the scenery changes dramatically into a lush oasis; this is a brilliant time for birding, photography and spotting newborn animals.

■ **Health** Gonarezhou is a low-risk malaria zone between April and November but you should still visit your local travel clinic in advance of your trip to seek advice.

■ **Further reading** *Bradt Guide to Zimbabwe* (3rd edition) by Paul Murray; *African Laughter: Four Visits To Zimbabwe* by Doris Lessing.

