

Why you should visit ZIMBABWE now

Our publisher, **Craig Rix**, urges readers to visit his homeland sooner rather than later, to capture the atmosphere and help boost the country's development

High spirits. Traversing the new SkyWalk, comprising two walkways suspended over Mutarazi Falls in the Eastern Highlands. Alongside is the SkyLine, a 400m-long, 500m-high zipline, possibly the most picturesque in the world

CHRISTOPHER CRAIG / FAR AND WIDE ZIMBABWE

Sitting in a cold Oxfordshire office, it was thrilling to watch the scenes from Harare and Bulawayo as the recent 'transition' of power in Zimbabwe unfolded. It was a deeply emotional time; Zimbabwe is where my soul and roots lie. Above all, I was struck by a feeling that, for the first time in so long, we were witnessing Zimbabweans expressing themselves freely, with abandon and sincerity. The open-armed embrace across cultural, racial and religious divides gave testimony to the reality that Zimbabweans are good people, honourable, dignified, respectful and very welcoming. There is a reason why visitors consistently talk about the friendliness and warmth of her people. It was wonderful to see this released so freely for the world to see.

I sincerely hope that travellers will now embrace Zimbabwe with enthusiasm. We started *Travel Africa* 20 years ago, in part, because on our international travels we had been surprised to hear a perception of Zimbabwe that didn't reflect the nation we knew. Yet over the years it was clear that many people were hesitant to visit because of their concerns about the political environment.

The journey to a reliable democracy in Zimbabwe can now begin, and a spirit of optimism and hope that has lain within her people has been released. In itself, that is good reason to get on a plane as soon as you can: to capture the mood of excitement and show your support as they try to sustain momentum moving forward.

One of the great social benefits of tourism is the exchange of ideas, the conversation that happens when people from different societies meet. This exposure is particularly important right now to Zimbabweans and the freedom of expression they seek, and it will help visitors to better understand the local environment.

More importantly, tourism is a cheap creator of employment; and perhaps the one thing Zimbabweans want more than anything is a job. On average, every employed Zimbabwean currently supports between 7 to 11 other family members, taking into account the extended family culture. Companies who have reduced staffing levels in recent years will swiftly take on new people as more guests arrive.

But that is only the beginning of the story. As the economy crumbled, most operators became deeply embedded in development projects and conservation programmes. Tourism is now funding education and healthcare in rural areas, and by recognising the value of tourism, villagers

are invested in the protection of wildlife and the environment. It is truly remarkable to think that your visit to a small lodge will have such a dramatic, and immediate, impact on whole communities.

And the great thing is, Zimbabwe is ready. Of course, it is well known that the country has a wonderful range of attractions for such a (relatively) compact country, most of which are highlighted on pages 104-105. Each is serviced by accommodation options for all budgets, and Zimbabwe's respected guide-training programme continues to ensure that safaris are safe and stimulating.

Despite the economic challenges, the infrastructure is remarkably well maintained — it is in better nick than most countries in Africa. It is a very easy country to drive around, especially now that the numerous roadblocks that have been in place in recent years have all but disappeared. This opens up the Eastern Highlands, Great Zimbabwe, Lake Kariba and Matobo Hills. One can comfortably drive from one destination to another in just two-to-four hours on good quality roads.

Since the new Victoria Falls International Airport was opened a year ago, more than 127,000 additional aircraft seats have been added on the route to Victoria Falls, which sits at the fulcrum of a most extraordinary wildlife region. More long-haul carriers are expected to launch services in this year. Internal transport is already boosted by, among others, the recent launch of flights servicing Gonarezhou in the south, and the revival of the 22-hour ferry service across Lake Kariba, an old favourite for self-drive visitors. One of the first deals announced by the new government was a plan to expand the airport at Harare.

There's been a surprising amount of investment in recent years. Not only have many lodges and camps been refurbished in anticipation of a surge in tourism, but new shopping malls, bars and restaurants have emerged. When I was in Harare last March, I was struck by how busy restaurants were every day mid-week. There is a buoyant middle-class, who have somehow found a way to endure and who will be central to the ongoing transition and emerging economy.

One senses there is an excitement in the air, an optimism that needs and deserves to be sustained. Your visit, sooner rather than later, will certainly help. And, importantly, you will have a glorious time. When you do go, give Zimbabwe my love.





Beks Ndlovu, African Bush Camps

PERSPECTIVES



Ours has been a journey of dark shadows turning into sorrows, hunger and shattered hope. A once-great nation brought low, a mighty people reduced to poverty in a rich country. But recent events have hinted at a new dawn, and I have never felt so excited and energised. Witnessing Zimbabweans re-introduce themselves to the world through one voice, regardless of colour, race or creed, made me realise that we are the most peace-loving people under the sun.

"Despite its political challenges, Zimbabwe remains a welcoming, safe destination. This is very evident here in Bulawayo, 'the City of Kings', where visitors will receive a royal welcome.

"Revenue from tourism contributes to funding conservation initiatives, many of which boost development and education. In areas like Matobo, tourism is necessary to help protect our rhinos and the wider environment.

"Tourism is constantly evolving, and demands by travellers force service providers to constantly improve their skill set. Some tour operators give scholarships, while others have built schools. Your visit will make an immediate difference."



EVANS MABIZA, ROWALLAN PARK, CHILDREN & NATURE CONSERVATION TRUST

So how do Zimbabweans feel about the changes in their country, and why do they feel it is important you make a trip there top of your agenda this year? We asked a selection of people associated with tourism for their opinion.



"Zimbabwe has long been the safari darling of the tourism world, but the perceived political and economic crisis over the last decade or so kept people away. Now that there has been a change, people will be excited and start returning. The way in which the transition happened — how peaceful it was — is some of the best PR any country could wish for. It demonstrated the beautiful nature and resilience of our people.

"I believe that tourists should visit Zimbabwe now, before the floodgates open. Be the pioneers of rediscovery! Zimbabweans are eager to share their passion and knowledge, and our prices are very competitive compared to many other countries. I believe that Zimbabwe offers one of the wildest, most remote, and truly authentic safari experiences. But it is far more multi-dimensional than just a standard safari offering.

"Because the operators that have hung in here over the last 15 years have demonstrated an acute dedication to conservation, guests can clearly see how tourism paves the way for wildlife conservation to be a conduit for prosperity and development in local communities. This serves to affirm our shared humanity, challenge perceptions and enrich curious, energetic safari travellers who are open to discovery."



BEKS NDOLOVU, GUIDE AND CEO OF AFRICAN BUSH CAMPS

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Evans Mabiza



Ross Kennedy

▲ **“The new political dispensation is showing a clear ‘open arms welcome’ policy to the world, and we are working closely with the appropriate ministries to enhance the ease of doing business with Tourism Zimbabwe”**

▼ **“Tourism creates jobs for the locals, development in the area and improves the lifestyles of the local community”**

“Tourism provides employment to most of the people of Zimbabwe. It is the main industry in the resort town of Victoria Falls. It creates jobs for the locals, development in the area and improves the lifestyles of the local community. Without tourist arrivals, there would be no activity here. Tourists should visit Zimbabwe because it has a vast number of attractions, diversity in culture, abundance of wildlife and people are very hospitable.”

LISTER NYATHI HOSTS MEALS FOR TOURISTS IN HER HOME IN THE CHINOTIMBA HIGH-DENSITY SUBURB OF VICTORIA FALLS. THE TOURS, ARRANGED BY WILD HORIZONS, PROVIDE A CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND VALUABLE INCOME FOR LOCAL PROVIDERS.



“Zimbabwe was, is and shall be once more, a jewel in African tourism! With the Victoria Falls at its hub, four other World Heritage Sites and a diversity of destinations, experiences and accommodation across a spectacular landscape, we have so much to offer.

“Why visit Zimbabwe in 2018? Zimbabwe is a proven, high-quality destination. Over the last three years there has been significant investment in tourism, most notably the opening of the new Victoria Falls International Airport, which helped generate a 25 per cent increase in international arrivals in 2017, attracting new long-haul carriers. More are expected to start direct flights this year. There’s been a knock-on effect, with improved internal travel options, and the private sector is investing in hotels, lodges and restaurants. New shopping malls have been built, attracting international brands, and there’s renewed creativity in the arts. With this energy and ambition comes a natural lifting of standards and service delivery.

“The new political dispensation is showing a clear ‘open arms welcome’ policy to the world, and we are working closely with the appropriate ministries to enhance the ease of doing business with Tourism Zimbabwe. We all recognise the two key upsides of tourism are the creation of employment and the generation of foreign currency earnings, both of which Zimbabwe needs in big measure!”



ROSS KENNEDY, CEO OF AFRICA ALBIDA TOURISM



Tendai Mdluli



“For quite a long time Zimbabwe was subjected to political unrest and virtual economic collapse, and the number of tourists declined. However, following the recent changes, the time to visit Zimbabwe is now.

“When it comes to tourism in Zimbabwe, the average person like myself gets to benefit the most. For example, I support at least 10 members of my extended family, and this is the trend with most of our employees. Wilderness Safaris employs more than 100 local community members in our camps, and on average each supports seven dependents, which shows how important tourism is to the local economy.

“Tourism also helps to support community programmes such as Children in the Wilderness, which runs educational Eco-Clubs, nutritional programmes for learners and school rehabilitation projects in the villages adjacent to Hwange National Park.

“In Hwange, we also support anti-poaching operations, and as a result all large mammal species in our areas have increased over the past 16 years, with fewer snares being removed each year. I am proud to say if you really want some quality time in the wilderness, Zimbabwe is your destination.”



TENDAI MDLULI, PROFESSIONAL GUIDE, WILDERNESS SAFARIS

▲ **“In Hwange we also support anti-poaching operations, and as a result all large mammal species in our areas have increased over the past 16 years”** →



Lister Nyathi



"Set up in 2006, the African Bush Camps Foundation is an example of how tourism

has an enduring impact on the wider community. It is wholly funded by a US\$10pppn contribution from the safari operations of African Bush Camps and donations from guests.

"An increase in tourists through the camps will result in additional funding for our programmes, which focus on education, conservation, community infrastructure and empowerment. The idea is that by linking these benefits to tourism, communities learn to positively value wildlife and nature as resources for improving their wellbeing. Currently, about 1400 people benefit from our projects directly, and about 3000 indirectly.

"It is important that tourists come to Zimbabwe to witness these achievements. Tourist revenues will be essential for the rebuilding of our economy."

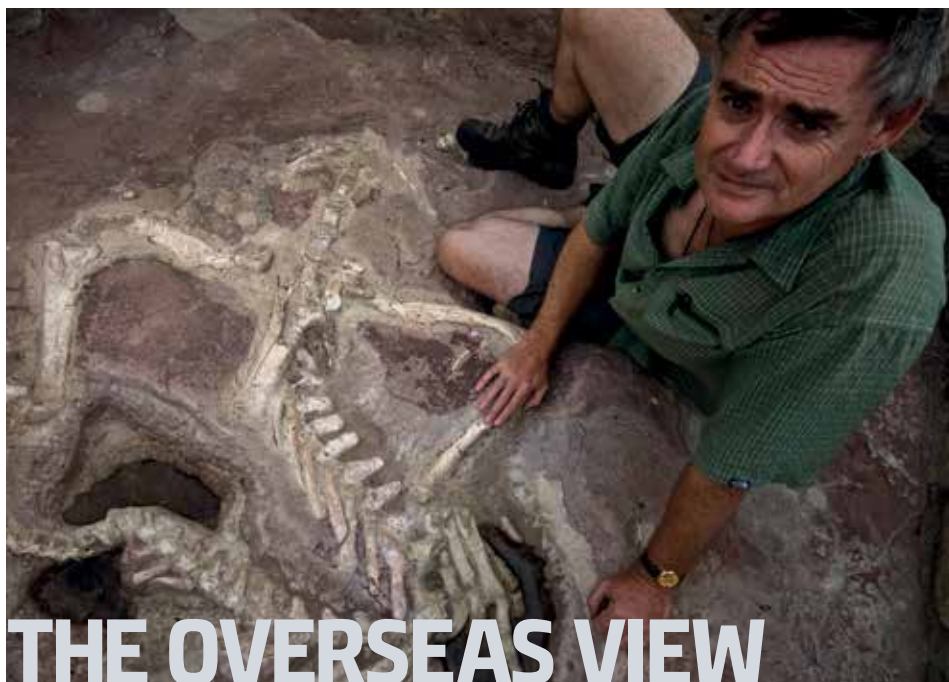


OBERT MANYEZA, TRUST MANAGER,
AFRICAN BUSH CAMPS FOUNDATION



Obert Manyeza

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THE OVERSEAS VIEW



"An anecdote I often share from my fifth visit to Zimbabwe, back in 2013, sums up the wide gap in perception that exists about a country that, even during the ravages of the past decades, always remained safe and welcoming to travellers. I'd been staying at the wonderful Victoria Falls Hotel when a duty manager at the time told me Robert Mugabe had visited a while back. As his entourage entered the lobby, the disgraced leader stopped to chat with a woman and compliment her baby. She told him she was a British holidaymaker and he allegedly replied that she was most welcome as the British were his special friends.

"I watched the fall of Mugabe recently with great satisfaction, although this was somewhat tempered by Mnangagwa's accession. Can a leopard really change its spots? We shall see. But what hasn't changed is Zimbabwe's preparedness to once again be the force it had become in African tourism by around 1990.

"I can tell you with certainty that Zimbabwe is a place to visit now because it has never really closed. National parks such as Mana Pools and Hwange remain wild and exciting; the lodges and hotels that support the livelihoods of so many beleaguered workers retain an undiminished style and service; and the Zimbabwean people extend a welcome that is as impressive for its warmth as it has been for their enduring stoicism. I will certainly be returning as soon as possible."



MARK STRATTON, TRAVEL WRITER



ZIMBABWE HIGHLIGHTS

Fans of Zimbabwe are quick to point out that the country packs a diverse range of attractions into a relatively small country (by African standards). Here's a selection of the more popular places worth including on an itinerary.



GONAREZHOU BUSHCAMPS

THIS PIC: RHINO SAFARI CAMP TOP: WILDERNESS SAFARIS

1 Lake Kariba
One of Africa's most underestimated attractions. When the Zambezi River was dammed to construct a hydro-electric power station, an immense inland sea was created, 270km in length. A remarkable and dramatic rescue ordeal (Operation Noah) was undertaken to save wildlife from the rising waters. Take a houseboat to explore the wildlife-laden shores or angle for bream or tigerfish. Petrified forests add mystery to some of the most intense sunsets you will see anywhere. Want a place to chill out? You can't go wrong with Kariba.

2 Matusadona National Park
An enchanting landscape of flat plains and rugged mountains, this national park sits on the southern shore of Lake Kariba. Wildlife populations remain strong; the park is popular for walking safaris. Used as a sanctuary for black rhino, a strong conservation effort persists.

3 Mana Pools National Park
A stunningly beautiful wilderness sitting between the Zambezi escarpment and the river, this UNESCO World Heritage Site is a favourite park for wildlife lovers, famous for both canoeing and walking safaris. Close-up encounters with its abundant wildlife are commonplace, and its forested floodplains, sandy riverbanks and the four main pools that give the park its name (*Mana* means 'four' in the Shona language) make this a particularly dramatic park.

4 Mavuradonha Wilderness Area
Mavuradonha — meaning 'Land of falling water' — forms the eastern part of the Zambezi escarpment in Zimbabwe, its steep mountainous landscape giving rise to numerous waterfalls and providing sanctuary to a healthy wildlife population, including elephant, various antelope, leopard and 290 species of bird. A hidden gem.

5 Chizarira National Park
About 50km inland from Lake Kariba, Chizarira is a remote land of sweetwater springs and seeps, hidden valleys and

pockets of lush vegetation. Very little tourism has reached here in recent years, but efforts are being made to reinstate an infrastructure. Hardy self-drive adventurers will be well rewarded.

6 Victoria Falls
One of the great natural attractions. Stretching over a width of 1700m and standing 108m tall, Victoria Falls is the world's largest waterfall, always impressive but utterly breathtaking at its ground-shaking fullest. The numerous exciting activities offered around the falls — from whitewater rafting to ziplining, bungee jumping and others — have made it Africa's adrenaline capital. Take time to linger in the rainforest. There are plenty of wildlife experiences nearby, including in the Zambezi National Park, just 5km upstream.

7 Kazuma Pan National Park
Another secret gem with oodles of potential to develop. It is dominated by swaying savannah grass plains, encircled by more familiar mopane woodland. Seasonal flooding inundates the pans, which draws in thousands of migratory birds. Elephant, big cats and antelope are seen here.

8 Hwange National Park
Known for its thriving population of elephant, at 14,651sq km, Hwange is Zimbabwe's largest protected area and most-visited park, just two-to-three hours from Victoria Falls. With 108 species of mammal and over 400 species of bird recorded, Hwange actually has one of the highest animal diversities of any park on the planet. No wonder it has attracted researchers, which has ensured, among others, a healthy wild dog population. Several lodges and camps make all areas of the park visitable.

9 Matobo National Park
Many who explore Matobo talk of its almost spiritual ambience. It is unlike anywhere else in Africa. Its rambling landscape of whaleback *dwalas*, precariously balanced boulders and granite kopjes is

inspiring. The ancient San people believed the area to be sacred, and more than 3000 of their rock art sites are found here, earning it its UNESCO World Heritage status. The park has a high concentration of black eagles, leopard and ground hornbills, and also protects healthy populations of white and black rhino, which attract the tourism that helps further protect them.

10 Bulawayo
Zimbabwe's second city is certainly worth spending a few days in. It's charm lies in its colonial buildings, wide avenues, delightful museums (Natural History and railway), Hillside Dams and nearby World Heritage-listed Khami Ruins, which provide an intriguing look into the ancient Kingdom of Butua.

11 Naletale Ruins
The remains here are of a city dating back to the Rozwi Empire in the 17th century. The Rozwi defeated the Portuguese in 1693 when they tried to make inroads into the plateau that now forms much of modern-day Zimbabwe.

12 Harare
Despite a rapidly growing population and economic challenges, Harare is surprisingly well-maintained and is arguably one of Africa's most picturesque and organised capital cities. Its central business district bustles, the tree-lined suburbs are serviced with modern shopping centres and the restaurants and pubs are perpetually busy. It is home to the National Archives, National Gallery and National Botanic Gardens, and on its outskirts is Lake Chivero and Domboshawa, both popular weekend excursions.

13 Eastern Highlands
The northern ranges of Nyanga and Vumba are just three hours drive from Harare, and will transport you to Scotland-like highlands. Mountain roads wend their way through pine forests, hiding coffee shops, inns, tinkling streams and picturesque fishing lakes. Vestiges of Iron

Age settlements and other archaeological sites pepper the park, and there are numerous trails and plenty of birdlife. The famed botanic garden is well worth a visit. The latest attraction is the world's highest zipline and an accompanying walkway that traverse a 500m-high chasm enabling visitors to look at the Mutarazi Falls face on.

To the south, the Chimanimani National Park is a trekker's dream. Accessible only by foot, the park's bulbous mountain peaks, jagged pinnacles, waterfalls, crystal-clear river, savannah valleys, stone forests and numerous caves, provide a stunning destination for those looking to escape to nature.

14 Great Zimbabwe
The namesake of the nation, these ruins date from the 11th century, making them the oldest structures in southern Africa. Built entirely of stone, the city is believed to have once housed up to 25,000 people. Artefacts suggest the civilisation here was part of a trading network stretching as far as China. There are two clear focal points — the Acropolis (Hill Complex) and the Great Enclosure, some 500m away on the plain below. Both are equally dramatic, with their elegant curving walls, consuming nearly a million individually shaped pieces of stone. Its 15,000 tonnes of material make it the largest ancient structure in Africa south of the Sahara.

15 Gonarezhou National Park
In the far south-east corner, the 5000sq km Gonarezhou is the second biggest and most remote of Zimbabwe's parks, which is a shame because it is spectacular. A trip here will take you through a continuum of ever-changing ecosystems, ranging from floodplain thickets, sandveld forests and wetland. Three rivers form natural shelters for more than 400 species of bird and abundant wildlife, including the legendary tuskers that give the park its name (*gonarezhou* translates as 'the wilderness of elephants'). A new charter service will make it easier to visit, and visit you should.