



RISING RISING THUNDER

New leadership, an upbeat outlook, and wildlife that's virtually untouched after years of seclusion have **Zimbabwe** ready to reclaim its mantle as one of Africa's most promising destinations. Go now to beat the rush.

BY AARON GULLEY PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEN JUDGE

Victoria Falls at high water, with the Zimbabwean viewpoints in the foreground.

ON A WINTER'S DAWN

On the Zambezi River, steam rises like gauzy apparitions as the night's cold air seeps onto the water. Squadrons of Egyptian geese skim across the surface, and hippos wheeze throaty grunts from the papyrus along the banks. I'm taking it all in from the deck of a Treehouse Suite on Kandahar Island, seven miles upriver from Victoria Falls, the first stop on an eight-day safari through Zimbabwe. This chilly water world, with temperatures hanging at 35 degrees that first morning, isn't what most people imagine when they think of an African safari. Then again, thanks to the country's ruinous politics, it's been years since many travelers, concerned over safety and the idea that their money might be funding an autocratic regime, have thought of Zimbabwe as a destination at all.

The country's obscurity isn't for lack of potential: Zimbabwe has 11 national parks, and though wildlife counts declined in the mid-2000s as economic woes increased, game numbers have risen steadily since. Hwange National Park, the country's largest game preserve, has healthy populations of wildlife, including the "big five." Elephants have thrived so successfully here that Zimbabwe is now home to nearly

20 percent of the animals remaining on the continent. The country's smaller parks are profuse with other species, including a few with stable reserves of endangered rhinos and cheetahs. Crowning it all is Victoria Falls, one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World.

With a lineup like this, Zimbabwe should be a tourism powerhouse, but its history has been more crushing than the thunder of the Zambezi over the falls. Considered one of the shining lights of Africa at its independence in 1980, the country had much of its potential stolen by corrupt leaders, first and foremost Robert Mugabe. Having bankrupted his nation, "Uncle Bob" or "Mr. Robert," as citizens know him, was finally ousted last November after 37 years following a series of widespread protests and a bloodless military coup. The interim president has declared the country "open for business," and, for the first time in decades, there's a feeling that the southern African nation could finally seize its promise.

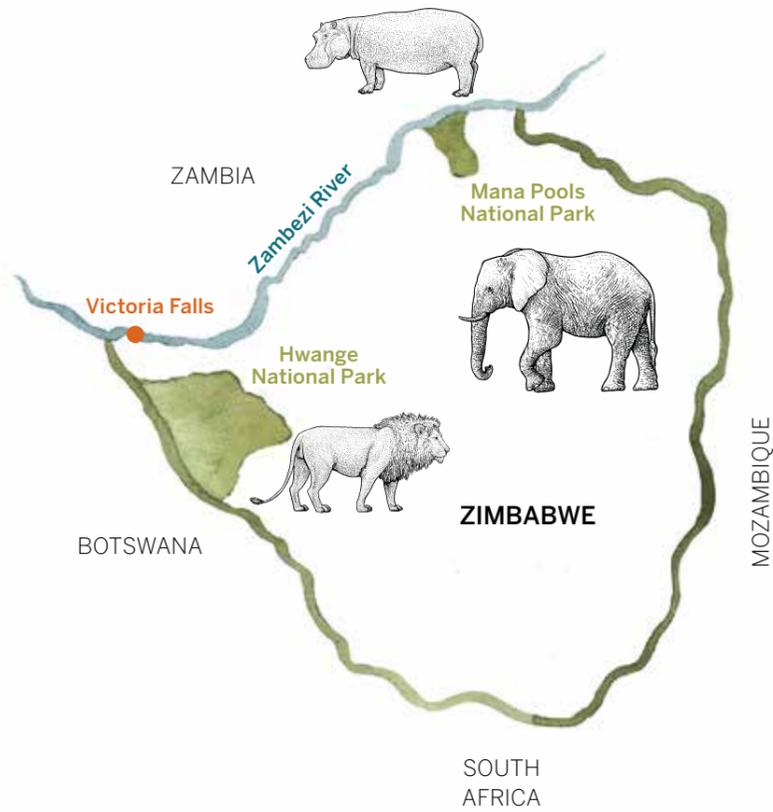
"In the post-Mugabe era, Zimbabwe has become more desirable," says Sherwin Banda, president of African Travel Inc., which led our safari and operates others like it throughout Africa's top destinations. With almost two decades of experience in hospitality service on the continent, Banda, who hails from Cape Town, says his company expects a surge of interest in Zimbabwe as its politics reshuffle. Because of its complicated history, the country is more untouched by tourism than the rest of the safari world. "It's a place where you can experience Africa at its rawest and truest," Banda says.

The popular falls might seem an unlikely start to a safari, but once the first fiery-orange spears of daylight pierce the fog, river life surfaces. From the front deck of my Victoria Falls River Lodge suite, I can make out the zigzag of crocodile backs patrolling the shallows and hippo heads rising and falling from the water like slow-moving whack-a-moles. An elephant mother and her calf poke through the green understorey on the far shore for a drink. Downstream, a massive plume of spray from the falls rises into the

From left: Hippos on the Zambezi River, sunset near Victoria Falls, and safari guide Leo Mutsvangwa with kudu antlers in Hwange National Park.



LAY OF THE LAND



TIP

“Heading to Victoria Falls between March and August? Pack a raincoat and open-toed shoes that can get wet: The falls are at their peak, and the spray encompasses the walkways and all visitors. Since morning game drives can be cold, I always bring a balaclava and gloves to keep the chill at bay.”

— *Sylvia Berman, Virtuoso travel advisor, Hollywood, Florida*

Canoeing in Mana Pools National Park.



HIPPUS GRAZE BELOW THE MAIN DINING AREA,
AND, MORE THAN ONCE, ELEPHANTS WHISK PAST
OUR TENTS EN ROUTE TO THE RIVER.

(ICONS) PIMPAY/BETTY IMAGES



brightening blue sky like smoke from a wildfire. The only thing louder than the cacophony of birdsong is that falling water, a constant purr even at this distance. It sounds a little like the heart thrum of a country coming back to life.

IN 1855, WHEN SCOTTISH MISSIONARY DAVID LIVINGSTONE, ONE OF THE EARLY AFRICA EXPLORERS, first encountered Victoria Falls, he wrote, “No one can imagine the beauty of the view ... but scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight.” When I first saw the falls, at age 20, I probably said, “Whoa!”

I visited Zimbabwe in 1994 on a Christmas vacation from our home in Nigeria, where I was born and raised. Compared to West Africa, the country felt as orderly as England and as efficient as Switzerland. Roads were well paved (though everyone drove on the wrong side), stores were stocked, hotels gleamed, and everyone we met was well spoken. Mugabe was in power, but he’d yet to begin bleeding the country. And Zimbabwe, which sparkled compared to much of the Africa I’d seen, came to symbolize in my mind what the continent could be.

Victoria Falls, the first stop after the morning’s deck-front wildlife viewing, looks as if it hasn’t changed in the ensuing two decades. At 16 viewpoints on the walking path along its western rim, thick, woolly caper bushes have been cut away to reveal the wall of water. Its power is shocking, especially up close. The Zambezi is running at a ten-year high, which means 144 million gallons of water per minute make the 355-foot plunge past me, and a good portion of that erupts back into the sky as a clamorous spray, giving the falls its traditional name, Mosi-oa-Tunya, “the smoke that thunders.”

A Zimbabwean once told me that you haven’t really seen the falls if you wear a jacket or carry an umbrella, so at the closest viewing spots, I stand and soak in the experience – literally. It feels as if someone is hurling bucket upon bucket of water over me. If there’s a single reason for tourists to return to Zimbabwe, this is it: There’s wildlife all across Africa, but nowhere else also offers this kind of immersion.

From left: A Treehouse Suite at Victoria Falls River Lodge and a tall drink of Mana Pools water.

THEY LIKELY FED IN THE MORNING AND ARE NOW AS INDOLENT AS HOUSE CATS, LAZING ON THEIR BACKS AND YAWNING AT US WITH EYES SHUT.

Except for my wife, photographer Jen Judge, and me and our guide, the path is virtually empty. Back at the hotel that night, I ask Peter Dunning, the Zimbabwean manager who has worked in the industry for more than 30 years, about the lack of visitors. He says that tourist numbers plummeted after 2008 over concerns about economics and security. “But this country has never been unsafe for tourists,” he says. “Never.” Dunning says he’s heartened that the new government is opening up and courting international investment. “You live in this part of the world,” he concludes, “you have to be optimistic.”

IN AFRICA, WHERE DISTANCES ARE GREAT AND TARMAC IS OFTEN POOR, BUSH PLANES ARE LIKE taxis. Zimbabwe’s main arteries are smooth enough for overland travel, but with a packed itinerary, we hop a Cessna 206 for the hour-and-a-half flight from the falls to Hwange National Park, a mostly dry savanna reserve about the size of Rhode Island and Connecticut combined.

Although Jen and I arrive in the late afternoon, and our driver, Leo Mutsvangwa, promises to take us to a scenic spot for sundowners, he first wants to check a side road where lions have been spotted in recent days. Within half an hour of landing, having passed roan antelope and kudu and Cape buffalo, we find the pride. Actually, we damn near drive over the animals, which are stretched out in the two-track like speed bumps. They likely fed in the morning and are now as indolent as house cats, lazing on their backs and yawning at us with eyes shut. Leo says that the two males are the grandsons of Cecil, a claim that’s later corroborated.

Cecil the Lion, many wildlife enthusiasts will recall, was the alpha male who, in 2015, was lured from

**From left: Zebras,
Linkwasha Camp's
airstrip, and lions of
lineage in Hwange
National Park.**





Hwange onto a private game reserve and trophy hunted by a Minnesota dentist. The incident became an international sensation and a flash point for conservationists, so sitting five feet from his offspring feels a little like hobnobbing with movie stars. In busier parks, half a dozen Land Rovers would roar up within minutes of us radioing in the find, yet we have the lions to ourselves for 30 minutes. Even Leo fumbles out his phone for some footage of the arm's-distance beasts. It's not until we leave the pride at dusk that I realize I never got that cocktail. Sundowners, I guess, are for drivers who strike out.

Our two days at Linkwasha Camp unfold in a flurry of similar close encounters – 500 Cape buffalo at the house watering hole at dawn; crossing tracks with rare brown hyenas, twice – but it's the guides who really impress. With a toothy grin and the charisma of Jim Carrey, Lovemore Nowakhe, who guides us for most of our stay at Hwange, knows more about his country than Google. No matter the question, Lovemore has an answer: a typical elephant tusk weighs 50 to 75 pounds; the gestation period for hippos is eight months; that soft trilling we hear, like a cassette tape on rewind, is the call of a pied kingfisher, not the giant variety.

It's seemingly harder to become a guide in Zimbabwe than a doctor or lawyer in many countries. The certification – the strictest on the continent – involves two years of coursework and a series of practical exams that can cost some \$10,000 and take five to ten years to complete. Any working guide is a veritable PhD in the bush. And it's not only credentials, but attitude. "I love my job," Lovemore, the last of 23 siblings, who got his name after his 80-year-old father cheated on his third wife to conceive him, says half a dozen times each day. Such knowledge and enthusiasm, which I witness in almost everyone I meet here, set Zimbabwe apart from some of my prior safari experiences. "The politics threatened even our jobs in the park," he tells me. "So every day working is another great day in Africa."

TWO BUMPY CESSNA HOPS CARRY US TO OUR FINAL DESTINATION, MANA POOLS, WHERE THE packed-dirt landing strip is as crenellated as elephant hide. Clinging to Zimbabwe's northernmost stretch of the Zambezi River, this national park, which is closed during the rainy season because of flooding and mud, is less than half the size of Hwange and has much smaller animal stocks. Yet the lush, green croton

Cape buffalo at Linkwasha's watering hole.



From left: Sundowners are a safari tradition in the field, Linkwasha's bar and lounge, and local beadwork at Little Ruckomechi Camp in Mana Pools.

trees along the riverbanks beckon the animals and make spotting game here almost more reliable than in Hwange. At Little Ruckomechi Camp, which opens onto the water, hippos graze below the main dining area, and, more than once, elephants whisk past our tents en route to the river.

Over the course of our stay, we canoe down the Zambezi, slaloming between rafts of hippos in the water and scrums of elephants on land, and take a walking safari, where we get within 70 yards of two lions. We spot leopards and lions almost every time we go out. But my favorite activity is the night drives, when our guide, Engilbert Ndhlovu, flashes a red light into the black wilderness in search of eyes. It's flabbergasting how good he is at driving and spotting at once, and we see almost more wildlife after dark than in the daylight: catlike animals called genetids, with stunning spotted coats, and their larger counterparts, civets; fist-size primates with bat ears called bush babies; porcupines; more leopards; and even a pair of honey badgers. The breadth of wildlife and geography highlights Zimbabwe's diversity.

One night, as we're bouncing down a dark track, I ask Engilbert what he thinks of the current state of the country. Taciturn and intent on his work, he's reluctant to talk politics, but he allows this: "All that the people want is some basic industry coming back to the country. We need some jobs, and we need some money." I ask him if he thinks the new government will bring those changes. "It's difficult to know," he says. "But I hope so."

I hope so too. The country is still flush with potential, and somehow, miraculously, its past hasn't robbed it of hope. Livingstone famously said, "I am prepared to go anywhere, provided it be forward." If all goes well, Zimbabwe might finally be ready to follow suit.

Before I can press him further, Engilbert kills the engine, dangling his red light to the side as he strains to listen. Far off, the gruff paroxysms of barking baboons echo through the canopy. The animals only sound that alert when predators are near, Engilbert says. Maybe lions or a leopard. He fires the engine, and the truck clatters into the night, our light pulling the golden eyes of impalas and bushbuck from the slender black silhouettes of leadwood trees. Like the country's future, there's plenty out there looming. The question is what will materialize from the obscurity.

GO WILD

Hotels and safaris to discover the best of Zimbabwe.

STAY Originally consisting of 13 glamping-style tents with en suite bathrooms and waterfront decks on the Zimbabwe shore of the Zambezi, **Victoria Falls River Lodge** last year added five Treehouse Suites just upstream on Kandahar Island. With glass walls fronting the river, large bathrooms with soaking tubs, and decks as big as the rooms, the stilted units connect to the main lodge via elevated walkways that hippos and elephants freely wander beneath. *Doubles from \$595 (Treehouse Suites from \$880), including breakfast daily and a \$160 spa credit.*

Built in 1904 as accommodation for workers on the Cape-to-Cairo Railway, the palatial 161-room **Victoria Falls Hotel** overlooks the Second Gorge and the bridge connecting Zimbabwe to Zambia. Turn-of-the-century antiques fill the hotel, including four-poster beds and leather travel-trunk desks in the rooms, making it a place for history buffs and connoisseurs, but still sophisticated by today's standards. *Doubles from \$455, including breakfast daily and one-way airport transfers.*

The 173-room **Royal Livingstone Hotel** by Anantara brings colonial grandeur to the eastern, Zambian side of the falls. Rooms are decorated in Victorian style and open onto quiet verandas, where guests can watch zebras, warthogs, and

elephants occasionally wander past. *Doubles from \$755, including breakfast daily and water-taxi transfers from the airport.*

GO African Travel Inc.'s ten-day Zimbabwe safari takes in the country's trio of top destinations, with river cruising and hiking at Victoria Falls, profuse herds of elephants and Cape buffalo at Hwange National Park, and hippos and canoe trips on the Zambezi at Mana Pools National Park. *Departures: Any day through 2018; from \$8,995.*

Cox & Kings' 11-day adventure also visits Zimbabwe's big three spots and adds two nights at Matusadona National Park, home to water-adapted elephants that frequently swim and frolic on the banks of the Zambezi. *Departures: Any day through 2018; from \$8,725.*

The compact nine-day safari offered by **Kensington Tours** packs in Zimbabwe's waterfalls and wildlife, with less travel time. The journey starts at Victoria Falls, makes a quick hop to Hwange, and then beelines eastward to the less-visited Matobo National Park, where granite-domed hills hide both endangered black and white rhinos. Travelers can also opt to visit a Matebele village for insight into traditional life. *Departures: Any day through 2018; from \$5,382. VI.*



From left: The bridge connecting Zimbabwe and Zambia at Victoria Falls, a lilac-breasted roller in Hwange National Park, and the Victoria Falls Hotel.