

A hymn to Zim

Look beyond Zimbabwe's political strife and you'll find a sumptuous feast for the senses gracefully provided by its residents - human and animal alike, writes **Jillian Bolger**

The snares are simple things. Crudely fashioned rings of wire, hidden in the bush, they are designed to kill. Many maim rather than kill, leaving animals injured or, worse, limping off into the wilds, the metal snare forever knotted around their body. The majority of snares measure about half a metre in diameter but the Scorpions, an auxiliary Anti-Poaching Unit, regularly find larger traps several metres wide, designed to entrap unsuspecting elephants and giraffes. Ivory isn't the only prize in Hwange National Park **►►**

Ruckomechi camp in Mana Pools National Park, Zimbabwe



Camping at Ruckomechi: a communal experience



An aerial view of the safari park



Watching elephants during a walking safari



Lionesses at a watering hole



Better luck next time a lion turns its back on its prey



Viewed from the air, Zimbabwe is exhilarating to behold



A parachute pan treehouse in Ruckomechi



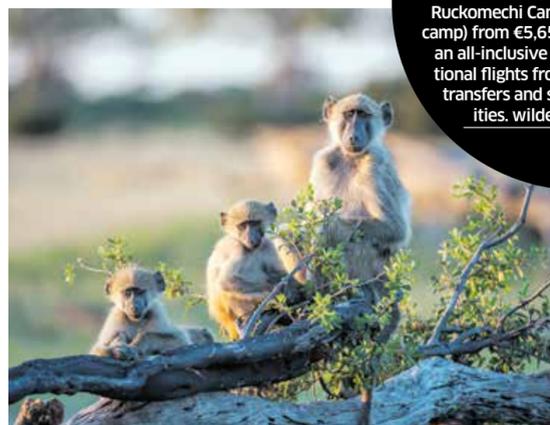
Relax by a pool with a sumptuous view of the local landscape

GETTING THERE
 Mahlatini Luxury Travel, Ireland's Africa specialist (01-9061883; Mahlatini.com) offers a six-night luxury holiday at Wilderness Safaris Linkwasha Camp and Ruckomechi Camp (three nights at each camp) from €5,650 per person sharing on an all-inclusive basis. Includes international flights from Dublin, light aircraft transfers and scheduled safari activities. wilderness-safaris.com

however, bush meat, in many ways, is more valuable, as subsistence poaching became a way of survival under Mugabe's regime.

Wilderness Safaris have taken me to meet the Scorpions Anti-Poaching Unit, whose base is close to Linkwasha Camp, where I'm staying in Northwest Zimbabwe. Part-funded by this luxury African travel specialist, which has environmental conservation at its heart, it's revealing to meet the patrol leader and his eight-man team. Uniformed, and professionally trained by a security expert, the unit was established in 2011 to help protect no less than 56,000 hectares of south-eastern Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe's largest national park. Working in partnership with the Parks and Wildlife Management Authority, they patrol on foot with park rangers removing snares and arresting poachers.

The facts are heartening. Subsistence poaching seems to be declining. Each year the unit finds fewer snares. Between 2011 and 2017 they removed 2,500



Above and below: monkeys and leopards at the Hwange National Park



wire snares; today only 20 are found per month. All large species in the Hwange area have increased in population size, including rare antelope and predators such as lions. Most importantly, the communities surrounding the park now embrace the role of sustainable ecotourism in enhancing their livelihoods.

It's easy to forget Zimbabwe's tumultuous past – and indeed its tumultuous present – as a safari guest on a luxury trip, sundowner in hand, but a behind-the-scenes experience like this helps shine a light on the importance of overseas visitors.

Decades of political violence, governmental mismanagement, social upheaval and economic ruin saw tourist numbers dwindle and poverty rise. What have never changed, though, are the incredible scenery, the Zimbabwean people's love of their country and their intense pride in their culture.

Out in the bush, there's a lyrical quality to everything. From the guides' names, Blessing, Clever, Lovemore, to Shona, the melodic language they speak. From the fauna that trips off the tongue like a poem – vetiver, acacia, mopane, baobab – to the evocative place names including Croc Pools, Parachute Pan, Ngamo Plains, and tuneful bird song accompanied by a four-legged brass section of yelps, growls and grunts.

Unlike other holidays, where it takes a few days to get your bearings, safari delivers an immediate sense of place. Africa viewed from the air is exhilarating, and any nerves about flying in a light aircraft will be off-set by the sheer colour, scale and beauty that unfolds below you. Wilderness Safaris has its own airline, Wilderness Air, so your whole itinerary is connected up from international arrival to final departure. Four-wheel drives wait at remote airstrips to whisk you away to your camp, perhaps an eight-tent affair scattered around a dining area, bar and infinity pool in the middle of the wilds.

In Linkwasha, there's a sleek modernist aesthetic that might surprise the safari traditionalist. Tents are linked by a raised walkway, each with private decks, outdoor showers and large living areas. Created around a waterhole, there's a never-ending procession of wildlife traversing the savanna grassland, with a panoramic vista that stretches as far as the eye can see.

Game drives deliver an abundance of wildlife in thrilling locations. Sleepy lions, herds of elephant, Burchell's zebra, wild dogs, frisky baboons, jackals, impala and spotted hyena. It's not long before the animals take on humanlike characteristics before my eyes, like scripted characters on set. There's the secretary bird looking like a judge in flowing robes



A safari vehicle shadows a majestic elephant



Walking safaris are popular in Hwange National Park



A waterside camp under a leafy canopy

dashing to court; the wildebeest hanging about like aging rockers in biker's gear, the giraffes coquettish, like leggy super models, and mean-mouthed buffalo glaring at you as though you owe them money.

Even the most indifferent towards our feathered friends are guaranteed to return home fluent in bird trivia. From ostriches to spoonbills, vultures to hornbills, saddle-billed storks to the world's largest flying bird, the kori bustard, there are over 400 species in Hwange National Park and they make for a dazzling supporting cast. (Think you're hard to impress? Just wait until a lilac-breasted roller or ruby red carmine bee-eater swishes past in a kaleidoscopic blur.)

We learn how to identify different animal prints, tell fresh tracks from day-old ones and say thank-you in Shona. Twice daily, game drives are punctuated by down time at camp or snacking on the go, perhaps a surprise campfire breakfast on the plains, or molten wood-fired pizza whipped up at sunset from an oven built into the bush.

After the wide open plains of Hwange, a trip north to Mana Pools is an otherworldly experience. Here, Ruckomechi sits along the banks of the mighty Zambezi River, a lush waterside camp tucked beneath a leafy canopy with dazzling views of the jagged rift valley escarpment.

The differing terrain means different wildlife, with cavorting hippos especially entertaining neighbours. A prowling leopard on the hunt proves mesmeris-

ing as we track her along a dry river bed, the same place we found a well-fed lion snoozing earlier in the day. Herds of elephants, statuesque kudu and impala, fun warthogs and majestic waterbuck play hide-and-seek with us while a mischievous lioness comes into camp during dinner one night, causing a thrilling distraction from dessert.

Here, we tick off bucket list stuff by the load: canoeing down the Zambezi, taking a sunset cruise to hippo watch and enjoying mid-morning pancakes and coffee in the bush cooked up on a traditional four-legged grill over a mopane wood fire. Nights are spent around the fire pit, star gazing, chatting with guests and enjoying colourful Zimbabwean tales and history revealed by the guides.

On our last night at Mana Pools, we leave camp under dark and drive to Parachute Pan for a night in the tree house. An infra-red light reveals the shining eyes of creatures prowling along and slipping into the waterhole below. Dazzled by the soundtrack, we fall asleep beneath a blanket of stars to the snap of branches, the splash of feasting crocodiles and the shrieking of baboons.

Post-Mugabe Zimbabwe is, as of yet, an unwritten chapter, but a new day is dawning for this mesmerising country. ■

Jillian Bolger travelled as a guest of Wilderness Safaris and Mahlatini Luxury Travel



A dazzling sunset at Hwange National Park