

MORE TO EXPLORE



Glowing: Gonarezhou's famous Chilojo Cliffs. Most international visitors stay at Chilo Gorge lodge, just outside the park

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GONAREZHOU NATIONAL PARK, ZIMBABWE

Caught in the crossfire of both Zimbabwe's and Mozambique's civil wars, Gonarezhou suffered decades of unchecked poaching. In 2007, authorities invited Frankfurt Zoological Society to help restore the park and in 2017 the Gonarezhou Conservation Trust was formed, to manage it for 20 years, working closely with local Shangaan communities. In 2019, I experienced a park still raw and unfettered, with big skies, winding rivers and sandstone cliffs glowing gold as the sun set. It's now flourishing, with black and white rhino reintroductions completing the 'Big Five' coterie, while predators and prey abound. Gonarezhou means 'The place of elephants', and the park is now home to some 11,500 jumbos.

STAY Community campsites and rustic reed-and-mud manangas; Gonarezhou Bush Camps with private guiding; Chilo Gorge lodge borders the park's northern border.



3 **GORONGOSA NATIONAL PARK, MOZAMBIQUE**

The safari darling of 1960s Hollywood A-listers, Gorongosa became the epicentre of Mozambique's bitter civil war, and by the mid-1990s it had lost 90 per cent of its wildlife. Yet, US philanthropist Greg Carr saw potential for recovery, realising the habitat was still intact, and established the Gorongosa Restoration Project in 2004. Over the

years I've visited, I've watched this captivating park flourish. Now home to over 102,000 large mammals, it has been called "the most diverse park in the world," with 200 new species discovered. **STAY** Villas and camping at Montebelo Lodge; an exclusive-use Expedition Camp; the seasonal Chicari Camp and flagship Muzimu Lodge.

4 **LIUWA PLAIN NATIONAL PARK, ZAMBIA**

Liuwa Plain is mesmerizing, its expansive golden savannahs dotted with vivid blue pools, carpets of flowers and an occasional palm tree piercing the horizon. It became a royal hunting ground in the 19th century with the Lozi community as its custodians: some 12,000 people still live here, coexisting with wildlife. Liuwa's demise started in the 1970s with neighbouring Angola's civil war bringing poaching, human wildlife conflict and illegal trophy hunting. In 2003, African Parks, the Zambian government and the Barotse Royal Establishment formed a partnership to protect the park, which has recently been renewed. A celebrated lioness called Lady — Liuwa's sole surviving lion for nine years — first drew me to the park in 2016. She died the following year, but not before bonding with translocated lions: around 20 now roam these vast plains. Today, the park hosts Africa's second biggest migration of wildebeest, while buffalo, eland, hartebeest, cheetah and wild dogs have all been reintroduced. **STAY** Ker & Downey Zambia's King Lewanika Lodge, or African Parks' mid-range Liuwa Camp and community campsites.



MARCUS WESTBERG / AFRICAN PARKS

5 **ODZALA-KOKOUA NATIONAL PARK, REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO**

I first visited Odzala-Kokoua's fairytale rainforest in 2013, shortly after it had opened up to offer tracking of Western Lowland gorillas. Three years prior, African Parks had taken on co-management of the park and the only premium lodges in the area had just been launched (now run by Kamba Africa). One of Africa's oldest parks, wildlife populations had plummeted from the late 1990s, due to the Congo Civil War, poor management, poaching and periodic outbreaks of Ebola. Today, it hosts some 20,000 gorillas, along with forest elephants, forest buffalo, bongo and sitatunga antelopes, several monkey species and over 440 species of birds. Nearby Lossi Gorilla Sanctuary also came under African Parks' umbrella in 2020, new camps have opened up, and Ngaga Research Camp (supported by The Sabina Plattner African Charities) is one of the most important gorilla research centres on the continent.

STAY Kamba Africa's Ngago, Lango and Mboko lodges for a touch of luxury, or African Parks' mid-range Camp Imbalanga.



ANDREW MACDONALD / AFRICAN PARKS

SUCCESS STORIES

Over the last few decades there has been an extraordinary effort to revive struggling national parks across the continent, giving impetus to conservation and economic development while enabling travellers to access once again some of Africa's greatest wild spaces. Much of this work is being done in inhospitable areas to secure important landscapes for the future. And some has transformed more accessible parks into thriving destinations. Here, Sue Watt selects just five for you to add to your bucket list.



AFRICAN MONARCH LODGES

2 **BWABWATA NATIONAL PARK, NAMIBIA**

Lying between the Okavango and Kwando rivers in the heart of Namibia's Zambezi region, it is no surprise Bwabwata is lush and luxuriant. In 2002, I discovered it was out-of-bounds unless travelling in pre-arranged convoys through the then Caprivi Strip. Deemed unsafe from the fallout of Angola's civil war, wildlife had been poached out too. Ten years later, I saw a park in resurgence, helped by the

German Government and now by the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area. On boat trips along lily-strewn channels, we saw fabulous birdlife, elephants, myriad antelopes, buffalos and predators — the same fauna as in neighbouring Botswana's Chobe National Park, but with far fewer tourists. **STAY** Nambwa and Kazile Island lodges, or self-drivers can stay at Nambwa campsite.