

RECALL OF THE WILD

Gorongosa National Park has been variously beloved of A-listers and decimated by Civil War. But now peace has been restored – again – this beguiling biodiversity hotspot is resurging once more

WORDS SUE WATT

Rising up
An inselberg bursts
out of Gorongosa's
midlands forest



From the roadside, Mount Gorongosa looked daunting. Dark, foreboding clouds kissed its sacred summit, the highest peak among a bumpy ridge of distant

mountains swathed in largely unexplored rainforest. “Quite appropriately, its name means ‘mountain of danger,’” Vasco Galante said, with a wry smile. “Strange to think you were sleeping up there five years ago...”

In 2010, I’d come to Gorongosa National Park in central Mozambique to witness the early stages of one of Africa’s most remarkable wildlife restoration projects. Once one of the continent’s most vibrant and popular safari destinations, attracting Hollywood A-listers such as Joan Crawford and John Wayne, the park had been ravaged by a pernicious civil war. Fortunately, American philanthropist Greg Carr made it his mission to save the park, and an inspirational conservation success story ensued. As wildlife returned, so too did visitors: Gorongosa looked to be emerging from the ashes of its past.

But a reawakening of political tensions two years ago threatened to damage the park’s new lease of life. Gorongosa was again embroiled in a violent insurgency: the ‘dangers’ to which Vasco, Gorongosa’s director of communications, alluded were armed rebels from Mozambique’s opposition party Renamo, still camped on the mountain, some 100km away from the national park.

In 2014 the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office advised against travelling to the region. Visitors stopped coming. Thankfully, however, the insurgency was short-lived. Stability returned in time for peaceful elections in October 2014, and in March 2015 the FCO lifted its advisory. I jumped at the chance to see for myself how the park had survived its recent trials and tribulations.

“You could actually climb the mountain again now,” Vasco explained as we looked across to its brooding silhouette in the distance. “We’d just have to ask permission from the rebels. They’re not a danger to tourists. They’re fine if they know we’re going. It’s the locals they’re suspicious of, not us.”

Wildlife on the front line

Standing on the floodplains at sunset, with a cool beer helping to alleviate the

heat, the romance of Gorongosa beguiled me once again. As the sky turned violet and orange, a solitary waterbuck sipped from the water’s edge, his reflection calm and still in the glass-like river. An elephant trumpeted far away in the dusky darkness – perhaps the dinner-plate sized footprints in the mud beneath our feet were his. The air was heavy, earthy, full of anticipation and tension; predators and prey were waiting for the night to draw in and hunting to begin.

When I’d first come here, something about Gorongosa, something in the soul of the place, had touched me deeply and had drawn me back. Like reuniting with a first love, I felt mixed emotions on returning: excitement at seeing the park and its people again; concern that the recent insurgency might have caused further hurt and anguish; a lurking fear that things might not be quite as special a second time around – that it might somehow have changed.

I shouldn’t have doubted Gorongosa’s spirit and resilience – it’s lived through far worse than the recent disturbances. Following Mozambique’s independence from Portugal in 1975, neighbouring

Previous spread: Peter Haden/Red Bull Content Agency; Will Whitford



Building up strength
Elephants graze in Gorongosa – numbers have been raised by drafting in eles from Kruger NP; (left) taking view from summit of Mount Gorongosa

◀ Rhodesia and South Africa backed Renamo rebel soldiers to bring down Frelimo, the new Communist-supported government. Mired in Cold War hostilities, the bitter civil war lasted 16 years, leaving a million people dead and millions more displaced. A strategic base for Renamo troops, Gorongosa witnessed violent battles, aerial bombings, kidnappings and murder.

The park’s wildlife had been decimated too. Elephants were slaughtered for ivory to fund weapons while around 95% of its large animals, including zebra,

buffalo, wildebeest and antelope, were killed for food. By the end of the conflict, Gorongosa was virtually wiped out, a ghostly, empty shell. If it hadn’t been for Carr’s involvement, the park might have stayed that way. But in a multi-million dollar commitment, he set up the Gorongosa Restoration Project, working with the Mozambican government to manage and revive the park over 20 years.

By the time of my first visit, Gorongosa seemed to be just on the cusp of a potentially wonderful transformation

as the wildlife, albeit shy and skittish, was slowly returning.

Beauty unchanged

Today, that transformation is in full, unbridled flow. Extensive anti-poaching measures, improved security, replanting the precious rainforest and animal reintroductions have helped reinvigorate the reserve. On our game drives, the wildlife was relaxed. We saw hundreds, possibly thousands, of waterbuck, but rarely saw the characteristic white rings on their backsides; rather than running away, they

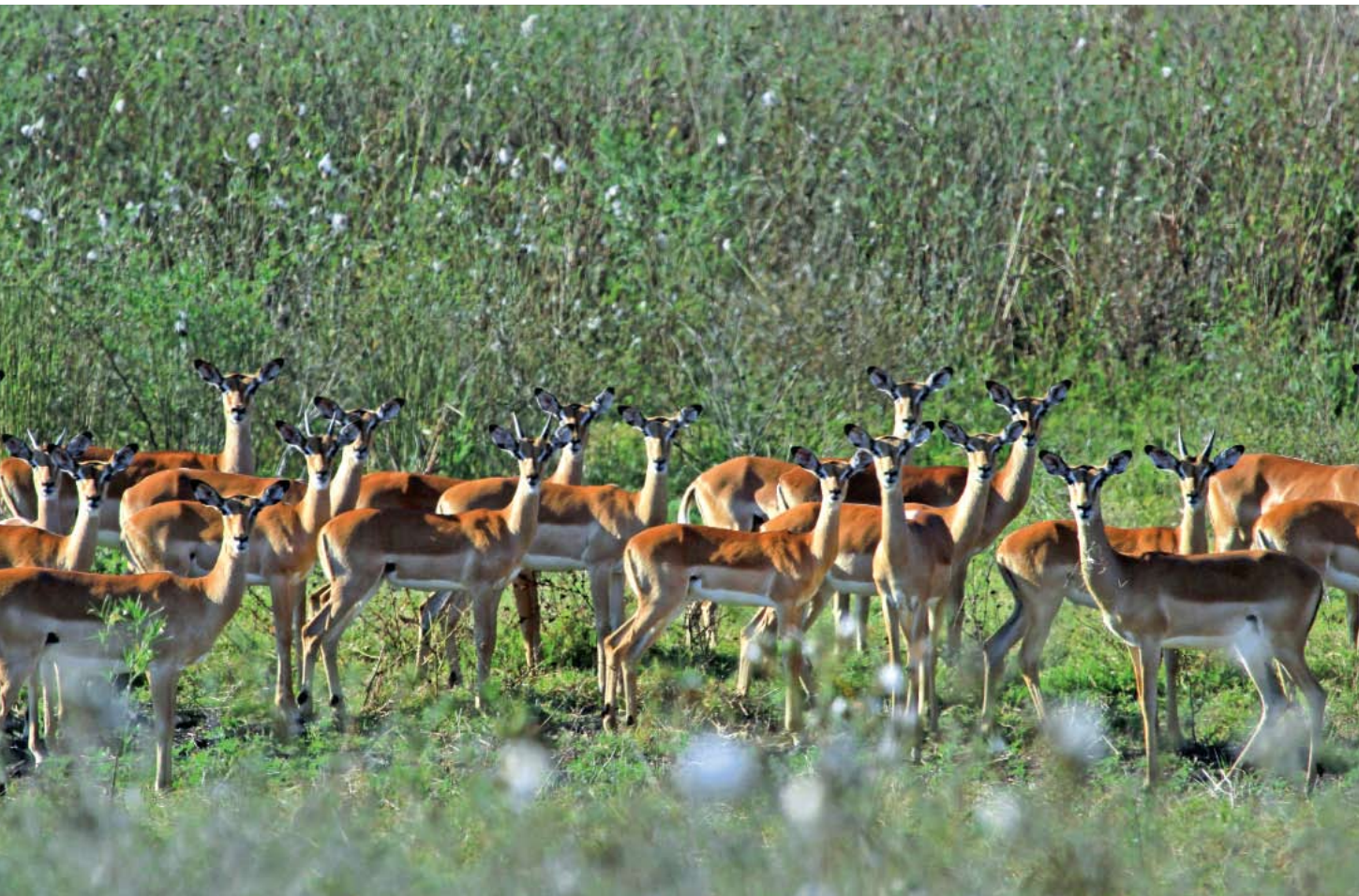
mostly stood serenely watching us watching them. Astonishingly, considering its past, there are now more waterbuck here than in any other protected area in Africa. There were impala in huge herds prancing around happily, jumping high over logs or rocks or nothing at all, as if they had springs on their feet. And tiny, Bambi-like oribi, always in pairs, darted in front of our Land Cruiser like they were playing a game of chicken.

Gorongosa’s beauty hadn’t changed though. Fever-tree forests were as spectacular as ever with their dusty bark changing chameleon-like throughout ▶

‘Astonishingly, considering its past, there are now more waterbuck in Gorongosa than in any other protected area in Africa. Rather than run away, they mostly stood serenely watching us, watching them’



Red reflections
A waterbuck heads for a watering hole at sunset ▶



‘At the blessing ceremony at mud-and-thatch Canda village, we gave the chief five litres of red wine, a bottle of gin and two packs of fags in return for his ancestors keeping us from harm’

◀ the day from neon yellow to dusky green to gold with the altering light. Next to them, or sometimes interspersed, lay exotic palm forests, their trees like huge umbrellas with fronds rattling in the wind. Then there were the vast tracts of savannah with tall, golden grasses, and the verdant floodplains of Lake Urema lying in the shadows of Mount Gorongosa and fed by its fragile rainforests.

For a moment, I was tempted to retrace my muddy steps to the mountain’s summit as memories of my past hike flooded back. I remembered the blessing ceremony we’d undergone beforehand at the mud-and-thatch village of Canda – we gave the chief five litres of red wine, a bottle of gin, two packs of cigarettes and a lighter in return for his ancestors keeping us from harm. And I remembered the pretty mountain villages, the soundtrack of monkeys and birdsong, the muddy paths, the humid rainforest, the

night camped under a full moon near the summit, the morning scramble up, the views – seemingly endless – from the top.

Much of Gorongosa’s vastness, spanning 4,067 sq km along the southern limits of Africa’s Great Rift Valley, remains unexplored. Today, scientists and researchers are regular visitors, seeking to demystify the hidden creatures and corners of gorges, caves, waterfalls and rainforest. Feeding vital rivers and lakes, the rainforests are the lifeblood of Gorongosa National Park. But local people, living in poverty, have been cutting down trees for firewood and practising slash-and-burn farming on its slopes. On our hike, we’d passed huge patches of withered maize, banana plants and beans lying tangled and abandoned where there should have been luscious green forest.

Fortunately for the forests, in the years between my visits, the upper slopes of the

mountain have now been encompassed within the national park. Millions of trees have since been replanted, providing much-needed employment, and the Gorongosa Restoration Project is teaching farmers to grow crops more sustainably. One win-win project is the new wild coffee plantation – indigenous trees have to be planted alongside each coffee bush to provide shade and the coffee bushes themselves provide income. “The coffee plantation is an island of hope in a sea of deforestation,” Fraser Gear, the park’s Activities Manager told me.

Cat comeback?

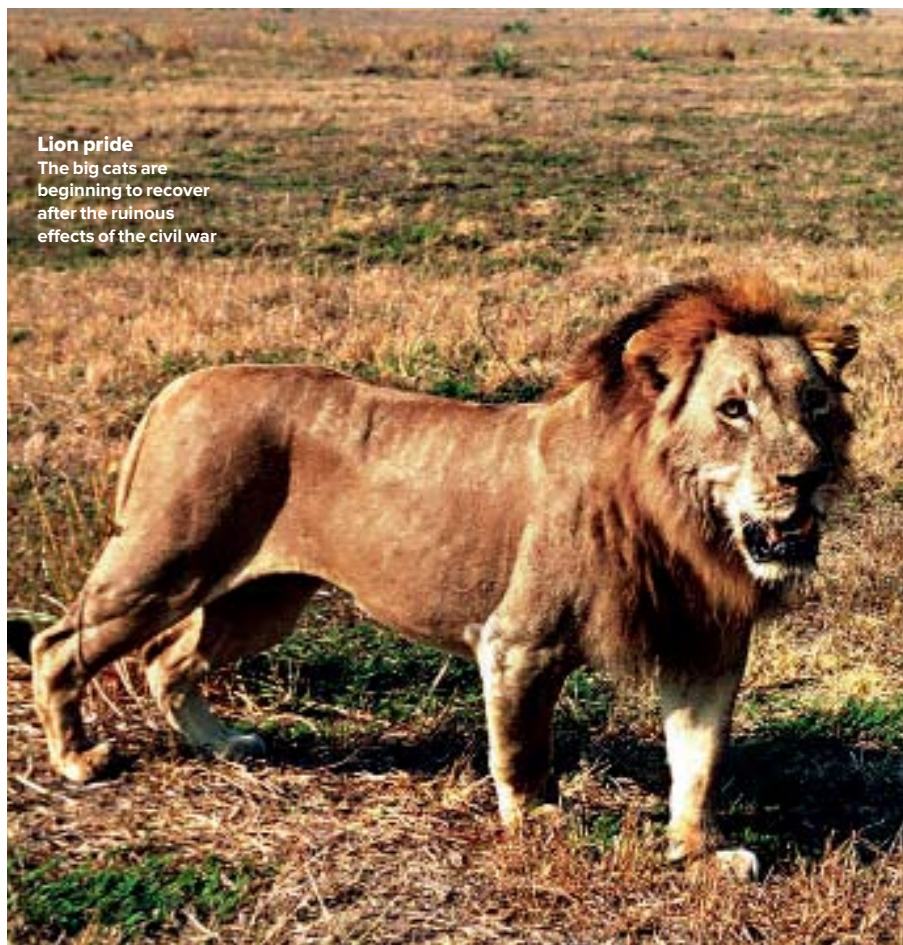
In its 1960s heyday, Gorongosa was the place for sophisticated safari-goers. Their days were spent watching thousands of roaming buffalos, elephants and wildebeest or spotting the park’s lions – numbering around 500 – stalking across the teeming ▶

Previous spread: Will Willmott/This spread: Alamy, Getty



Coming up
(clockwise from this)
A hippopotamus gives a lazy yawn; Vinho is one of the many local villages benefiting from Gorongosa’s rehabilitation; startled impalas scan for danger





Lion pride
The big cats are beginning to recover after the ruinous effects of the civil war

◀ savannah. Walking on the Msicadzi Plains, we stopped at the Lion House, a concrete shell of a disused restaurant, famous in the past for the big cats that would climb its spiral staircase to sit on the roof watching the grazing game. We waited quietly, anxious to catch a glimpse of a lion lying on high, choosing his dinner from the gamut of antelopes all grazing peacefully on the plains. The silence was broken by a flock of white-faced ducks flying past in relay and whistling as they went. A young bateleur eagle soared overhead but all else was still and perfectly calm – far too calm for there to be lions in our midst.

Indeed, lions aren't so visible today. After their food supply was decimated during the war, their numbers dwindled and have yet to recover. "We've documented 68 lions so far," Paola Bouley, Director of the Gorongosa Lion Project, told me. "We've learned a lot in the past three years – what they're eating, their prey population and their pride structure. Their main threat is snares laid by poachers. The positive thing is that we can do something about that."

Elephant numbers are also relatively small, down from 2,000 in Gorongosa's golden days to some 500 today. We saw lone bulls mooching quietly around

waterholes, some having been translocated from South Africa's Kruger National Park. But the small breeding herd we came across wasn't so calm. We stopped still, hoping the noise of the Land Cruiser wouldn't alarm the matriarch. But we were upwind and she could sense our smell. Nervous and tense, she raised her trunk like a periscope, sniffing the air for tell-tale signs, then shuffled agitatedly, flapping her ears, ushering her brood, including three young calves, away.

Famed for long memories, many of the elephants that survived the war are still wary of humans, traumatised by the death and devastation they saw; they sometimes react aggressively to vehicles. Hence Joyce Pool, a renowned authority on elephant behaviour and often referred to as an 'elephant whisperer,' is leading a remarkable healing process here. She spends hours at a time with the elephants learning to understand their communications and slowly habituating them to vehicles and humans as they gradually get used to her presence.

Romance and resilience

Gorongosa isn't just about big beasts: its little creatures matter too. In 2011, the eminent biologist EO Wilson declared

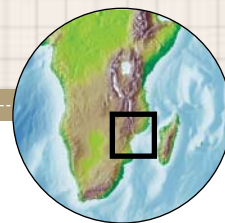
Gorongosa as "ecologically the most diverse park in the world", and the new high-tech EO Wilson Biodiversity Laboratory, built in his honour, opened within the park in 2014. The place is buzzing with scientific research, on everything from ants to plants, and many new species previously unknown to science are being discovered. The scientists' excitement is palpable: their work has far-reaching consequences. "A lesson from Gorongosa is that African ecosystems are resilient – they can rebound," Joyce Pool told me. "We must find ways to repeat this experiment over and over to repair the damage we've done across the continent, across the planet."

To succeed, conservation efforts need local communities onside and the Gorongosa Restoration Project is as much about helping the 250,000 people living around the park as it is about rehabilitating wildlife. On our last day, we walked to Vinho village near the park's southern border, crossing the Pungwe River in a small aluminium boat as locals were making their morning commute to work. Among houses built of mud and sticks, we saw the smart new school, health clinic and allotments with neat rows of vegetables. But what struck me most was the people, warm and friendly, all saying hello and pleased to see tourists returning.

"Some 97% of our staff, nearly 400 people, are locals, and many are women. Half of our entire project involves communities," Carr explained over a beer in the lively restaurant at Girassol, the only lodge in the park. "We're not just ticking boxes. We teach better farming techniques, build schools and clinics, train health workers and send mobile health clinics to remote villages. We're employing men and women in science research and sending them to university – that's very empowering."

Now accessible again after the recent insurgency, villages to the north of the park will soon benefit from similar projects, along with a new regional headquarters. Future plans include new lodges and hotels, more animal relocations and a state-of-the-art research complex. Planned new activities include kayaking, fly-camping, birding walks to Murombodzi waterfall and to that mystical summit of Mount Gorongosa. Clearly, Gorongosa's story is far from over.

It's a story of passion and pride, of romance and resilience. Slowly but surely, Gorongosa is being nurtured back to glorious life. "This place is special," Carr told me as I left. "We're all so grateful to be here. None of us plan to leave." I didn't want to leave either. Once again, Gorongosa had etched its spirit on my soul. **W**



Mozambique Footnotes

VITAL STATISTICS

Population: 25.3 million
Language: Portuguese; indigenous languages include Makhuwa, Tsonga and Sena
Time: GMT+2
International dialling code: +258
Visas: UK nationals require a visa. Apply at the Mozambique High Commission in London (020 7383 3800, mozambiquehighcommission.org.uk). A single-entry visa costs £40.
Money: Metical (MZN), around MZN64 to the UK£. ATMs available in most towns. South African rand (ZAR) and US dollars are useful currencies.

When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

■ **Dry season:** rain eases from April. May-June is hot, cooling July-August when temperatures average 26°C. Good for game viewing as water becomes scarcer. Showers from late September reinvigorate the park.

■ **Rainy season:** November is hot and humid, with short rains; temperature average 32°C. Gorongosa is closed mid-December to mid-April.

Health & safety

Recommended immunisations include hepatitis A, tetanus, typhoid and diphtheria. Malaria is present throughout Mozambique; consult your doctor in good time before you go. It's also sensible to take out comprehensive travel insurance – see wanderlustinsurance.co.uk.

Further reading & information

Mozambique (Bradt, 2014)
A Window on Eternity (Simon & Schuster, 2014) by Edward O Wilson
visitmozambique.net
gorongosa.org
wildcamgorongosa.org



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- ◆ Rediscovering Mozambique – issue 98
- ◆ Mozambique: Northern exposure – issue 65

PLANNING GUIDES

- ◆ Mozambique travel guide

THE TRIP

The author travelled with **Cedarberg Africa** (020 8898 8533, cedarberg-travel.com) which offers an 11-night tailor-made Mozambique trip from £2,959pp, based on two sharing. This includes flights from London Heathrow, all transfers, three nights at Girassol Gorongosa, one night at Southern Sun Maputo (both B&B) and seven nights full-board at Machangulo Beach Lodge.

Getting there

There are no direct UK-Mozambique flights. Airlines flying from London to Maputo include **South African Airways** (flysaa.com) via Johannesburg and **Kenya Airways** (kenya-airways.com) via Nairobi. Flights cost from £750; journey time is from 14 hours.

Beira is the closest airport to Gorongosa. Indirect flights from London cost from £1,220 with South African Airlines.

Getting around

Mozambique Airlines (lam.co.mz) flies from Maputo to Beira from MZN4,700 (£70) one way. Car hire is expensive. Self-driving is currently not allowed in Gorongosa.

Coaches and *chapas* (minibuses) run from Beira to the EN1 turn-off to the park, 30km away. Girassol offers transfers from Beira or the EN1.

Cost of travel

Activities at Gorongosa are **reasonably priced**. Game drives cost MZN980 (£15), guided walks to Vinho village MZN400 (£6). Park fees cost US\$20pp a day (£13). If camping, note the **nearest shops are in Vila Gorongosa**, 90 minutes away. Main courses at the Chikalango Restaurant & Bar cost MZN350-750 (£5-11); 10% tips are the norm.

Accommodation

Gorongosa Chitengo Lodge (girassolhotels.co.mz) is currently the park's only option, with luxury villas, bungalows, camping and two pools. Garden rooms from MZN4,300 (£60), double occupancy; camping MZN350pp (£5).

Kapulana (Vila Gorongosa; amarildo@sapo.mz) is a new budget hotel. It offers transfers to and from Beira and Gorongosa National Park. Doubles US\$60-70 (£40-45).

Food & drink

Matapa (cassava leaves and peanuts) is a local speciality, often served with giant tiger prawns. With 2,500km of coastline, Mozambique's seafood is superb. Try it with *siri-siri* – spinach-like algae with cashew and coconut.

MOZAMBIQUE HIGHLIGHTS



1 Maputo

Mozambique's capital is chic Afro-Portuguese, with superb restaurants and bars. Take a walking tour with Jane Flood (facebook.com/Maputo.a.Pe), focusing on the city's architectural gems, and explore the Mafalala region, the birthplace of the liberation movement, with community tourism NGO Iverca (iverca.org).

2 Machangulo Bay

Discover spectacularly wild and empty beaches, superb snorkelling, diving, fishing and kayaking, and the village of Santa Maria with its small beach bars. Not far from Maputo, but a world away.

3 Ilha de Moçambique

The former capital of Portuguese East Africa for 400 years, this tiny island is how

Zanzibar might've been 40 years ago, full of slave-trade history, Arab-Swahili culture and faded grandeur. A magical place.

4 Bengueria Island, Bazaruto National Park

A perfect honeymoon location, with romantic lodges on the shore, horseriding on the beach, sundowner cruises and sunsets to swoon over. This marine reserve has pristine coral gardens and over 300 species of fish.

5 Ibo Island

One of the 32 islands making up the Quirimbas Archipelago, little-visited Ibo has a fascinating history as a slave port with a distinctive Mediterranean vibe. Perfect for hikes and cycles exploring the 'lost in time' town of the same name.

