

THE ELEPHANT EXPRESS AND BEYOND

HEADING INTO ZIMBABWE'S
LARGEST NATIONAL PARK ON
A SINGLE-CARRIAGE TRAIN,
SUE WATT DISCOVERS JUST
HOW MUCH HWANGE HAS TO
OFFER - FROM SUPERLATIVE
WILDLIFE ENCOUNTERS TO
REWARDING COMMUNITY
EXPERIENCES.

PREVIOUS PAGE:
African leopard in
Hwange National Park.

THIS PAGE:
Plains zebra in the long
grass of Hwange
National Park.

I am celebrating my long-awaited return to Zimbabwe with a cold Zambezi beer, the perfect antidote to the afternoon heat, when my train comes to a juddering halt. There's a zebra crossing ahead – not a pedestrian walkway but a real zebra, the size of a stocky pony, galloping over the railway line.

Another zebra follows, and another, closely tailed by a tiny foal with a Mohican-style mane, dashing to join their herd on the plains of Hwange National Park. Their stallion is the last to cross, kicking up the dust and making an ugly honking bark, his alarm call, which completely belies the beauty of these elegant equines and warns his hareem they are in danger.

We scan the scene for a furtive predator, perhaps a cheetah fancying the foal for supper, but see nothing, and eventually continue our journey. A dazzle of frightened zebras fleeing for their lives certainly beats the tedious British excuses for train disruptions – the wrong kind of snow or leaves on the line – but it's nothing unusual on this stretch of colonialist Cecil Rhodes' overly ambitious and thus unfinished Cape to Cairo Railway. Built in the early 1900s, it marks the northern borders of Zimbabwe's largest national park.

I'm travelling on the Elephant Express, a bespoke single-carriage train adapted for

wildlife viewing by local operator Imvelo Safaris. Named with a nod to Hwange's huge population of 50,000 elephants, it's a unique way to start a safari, departing from Dete, a small railway town two hours' drive from Victoria Falls, to reach Imvelo's lodges near Ngamo, just outside the park.

'It's great fun spending two or three hours riding our railcar across Hwange – we can stop whenever we want to watch the wildlife,' Mark Butcher, Imvelo's MD, says over the clattering noise of the diesel engine. Known as Butch, this former ranger now in his 60s has a flair for creating out-of-the-ordinary safari experiences. 'It's 50 miles to Ngamo and the line is straight with excellent visibility – you can see the train from miles away.'

The railcar's exterior is painted a shiny racing green and, in true safari style, is all open sided, ideal for spotting wild animals en route. Curled trunks of ornamental pewter elephants act as brackets for handrails inside the carriage, which seats 22 passengers around polished teak tables.

On one side of the line lies Hwange's 5,863 square miles of unfenced wilderness, with teak woodlands, mopane forests and palm-dotted plains. On the other lies private woodland, farms and conservancies; wildlife roams across the border at will.

The train rocks rhythmically as we roll along the tracks, spotting wildebeest dotted around the plains like freckles and impala all bunched together for safety in case predators emerge. A vervet monkey scurries down a termite mound flashing his pink backside and blue testicles, and grumpy buffalos caked in mud glare at us when we stop to take photos.



CECIL'S LEGACY

We stop again an hour into our journey, when Butch points out a small tree on farmland bearing a simple wooden sign with the words *CECIL'S TREE* carved into it. 'This is where hunters hung meat to lure the lion out of the park,' he says.

Much loved by safari guides and their clients, Cecil was charismatic, calm and easy to photograph. In 2015, the collared lion was cruelly killed at the crossbow-holding hands of a trophy hunter dentist from Minnesota, leaving his seven cubs fatherless and at risk of being killed themselves by other male lions.

Popular in his lifetime, Cecil became almost immortalised in death, touching a raw global nerve as an unprecedented media outcry thrust the vulnerability of Africa's lions into the world spotlight. Over 200,000 lions once prowled across the continent; today, only around 20,000 survive. Human encroachment, loss of habitat and prey, trophy hunting, poaching and human-wildlife conflict have all contributed to their demise.

Full of raw power and a swaggering arrogance, lions have always captivated me: Cecil was no exception. My partner Will and I saw him on our first trip to Hwange in 2012. I can still picture him, all golden-grey muscle and voluminous black mane, ambling nonchalantly through flank-high grasses towards Ngweshla Pan, looking like he owned those golden plains.

In 2016, we came to find his cubs and report on their survival a year after their famous father's death. The three lionesses of Cecil's pride had miraculously kept their cubs



OPPOSITE PAGE:
A plaque marks the tree that was used by hunters to lure Cecil out of the park.

THIS PAGE:
Cecil's pride resting.



THIS PAGE FROM THE TOP:
Elephants at a waterhole;
Mark Butcher (Butch), a
former ranger and now
MD of Imvelo in Hwange.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
The bespoke single-carriage
train known as the
"Elephant Express".

alive, hunting with frightening efficiency and constantly moving on to avoid encounters with males who might kill them. After a week exploring Hwange, we came to African Bush Camps' luxury Somalisa Camp near the Kennedy vlei (marshland), a favourite area of the pride. With expert guide Calvet Nkomo, we searched for our lions for three whole days to no avail. As we headed back to camp on our last drive, Calvet slammed so hard on the brakes I almost fell off my seat.

'Cecil's pride!' he whispered excitedly, pointing to an acacia beside the track. 'Look, they're there, under the tree!'

The hairs stood up on the back of my neck when we saw three mums and seven cubs the size of chunky Labradors doing what lions do best – lying perfectly

camouflaged in the shade and dozing peacefully.

Being midday, it was swelteringly hot and unlikely the pride would wake until late afternoon. So we waited with them for five blissful hours, silently watching the famous lions in our own little bubble in the wilderness. Sometimes they'd flinch or flick a tail to ward off pesky flies. Sometimes they'd yawn or stretch, rolling into each other in a mass of tawny fluff, or move to lie in shadier spots as the shadows moved with the sun.

Eventually the cubs stirred and began their leonine bonding, lovingly licking each other and rolling on their backs, paws in the air, with seemingly not a worry in the world. Then they crossed the road right in front of us, one by one, to go hunting. Cecil's pride had survived against the odds, a beautiful legacy of a now legendary lion.

LIVING NEXT DOOR TO HWANGE

Our next unscheduled stop on the Elephant Express isn't for wildlife, but for four boys walking home from school, waving enthusiastically to the train. Butch beckons them onboard and their excitement shines through their shyness as they watch wildebeest, warthogs and baboons whizzing past.



'There's this wonderful paradise inside the park,' Butch tells me, 'but outside, it's far from paradise. There are huge numbers of people, and when you have lions and thousands of elephants you have problems and human-wildlife conflict. Whole livelihoods can be wiped out overnight.'

Like many of Hwange's safari operators, including African Bush Camps and Wilderness, Imvelo is deeply committed to protecting wildlife and improving the lives of local people, helping to fill the huge void in resources created by Zimbabwe's grossly mismanaged regimes.

Over eight years, Imvelo, with donors and guests, have contributed US\$2.5 million to support schools, building classrooms and teachers' housing, paying teachers' incentives and scholarships, and taking children into the park, sometimes on the Elephant Express, to learn about conservation. They help fund health clinics, provide boreholes and wells,

“We waited with them for five blissful hours, silently watching the famous lions in our own little bubble in the wilderness.”

and facilitate annual 'Smile-and-See' safaris of international dentists and opticians: to date, they've treated 30,000 local patients. Imvelo's staff come from nearby villages and their Bomani and Camelthorn lodges lie on communal land in Ngamo, with lease fees paid directly to communities.

At Ngamo sidings, we leave our young passengers and the Elephant Express behind and head to Camelthorn, a 15-minute drive away. With just eight luxury villas shaded by acacias, Imvelo's flagship property is an elegant lodge with a homely feel, centred around an ancient camelthorn tree that dominates the garden and gives the place its name and character.

'Local people are our best bulwark against the onslaught of internationally funded elephant and rhino poaching,' Butch says passionately over dinner. 'Every cent we devolve from tourism to those villages strengthens that defence, whether through jobs, school feeding programmes or providing clean water – it improves the likelihood of poachers being reported and brought to book.'

This makes our visit to Ngamo village the next morning a genuine interaction rather than voyeuristic intrusion. Giggling children in maroon uniforms join us in our Land Rover on their way to school. They sing their little hearts out as we drive along. I walk the last mile, chatting to eleven-year-old Bright. 'We don't like lions,' he says. 'They kill our cattle. And elephants eat our corn.'

Running late, we race the final five minutes across the plain, until we see the



ABOVE:
Lunch time at Ngamo school.



RIGHT:
A local Ngamo woman making crafts.



“ *This makes our visit to Ngamo village the next morning a genuine interaction rather than voyeuristic intrusion.* ”

school sign with a picture of a rare African wild dog as its emblem, and single-storey classrooms with corrugated roofs. We watch the children dance frenetically to a lively drumbeat, as if they're jumping over snakes.

In a simple kitchen, mothers cook school meals, sweltering over steaming iron cauldrons on wood fires on the floor. Food at home is scarce in the dry season, and Imvelo's feeding programme encourages attendance and improves pupils' performance – after all, it's hard to concentrate on an empty tummy. At lunchtime, children queue patiently, tin plates in hand, for beans and *sadza* – the

thick, white maize-meal that is Zimbabwe's staple food.

Empowering women is another objective for local safari operators, who fund projects including jewellery making, chicken breeding and selling crafts. We wander around their mini-market near the school where women sell batiks, baskets and bangles shaded by trees.

The enigmatic village headman Johnson Ncube lives a short walk away in his pristine homestead made of termite-mound mud and thatch. It's elaborately decorated in traditional black, white and ochre 'paints' derived from charcoal, ash and soil. Murals of leopards and

giraffes adorn the walls.

'Personally, I love wildlife because it brings in the safari industry,' he tells me. 'Before, people felt all animals were bad, but we see the good in wildlife now. It brings tourists here and makes our schools what they are. Without wildlife, we wouldn't have what we have today. Whoever brings education, brings light into our life.'

Ncube worked with Imvelo from the start to develop lodges for the benefit of his people. 'It wasn't easy convincing our politicians,' he says, 'but today everyone is enjoying the rewards. Butch is a son of this area now.' Future plans include a wildlife sanctuary and a training college. 'Me and Mr Butch will make things happen,' he says. 'We'll make things better.'

HWANGE'S WILD WONDERS

Our days in Hwange are full of surprises. One morning, I find Chiz waiting for me. A gorgeous dapple-grey horse, he's placid yet responsive, perfect for riding in the bush should we meet wildlife behaving badly – thankfully, we don't. We trot along the plains, passing chubby warthogs and a kudu with spiralling horns, and splash through mirror-like pans strewn with waterlilies.

Our riding guides lead us to another crystal-clear pan where dining tables have been laid, complete with flowers, a delicious buffet and chilled wine. Some brave souls go swimming; I choose a soothing massage at the discreet pop-up spa nearby.

Later, safely ensconced in Imvelo's ingenious 'Look-up blind', a semi-submerged shipping container with windows, we watch herds of elephants up-close beside a waterhole. A bull comes sniffing nearby and I can see the wiry hairs on his trunk and scratches on his milky white tusks. I hear him slurping and dribbling as he drinks, then rumbling contentedly as he walks away sated.

One morning, we spot two rare crested cranes looking almost coiffured with perfect grey plumage and crowns like a fan of golden feathers. And we find Cindy, a super-mum cheetah, sitting on a mound while five frisky cubs play around her. Each day ends blissfully, sipping sundowner G&Ts as elephants come to drink at the waterholes and the skies turn red.

All too soon, we're back aboard our Elephant Express, reluctantly heading for home. I spot a lone lion in the distance, bringing back memories of Cecil. His legacy continues, with many of his descendants now roaming Hwange's plains, and I wonder if this might be one of them...



OPPOSITE PAGE:
Two cheetahs next to a waterhole in Hwange National Park.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP:
A crested crane in Hwange; A woman prepares lunch in Ngamo school.

NEXT PAGE:
An elephant with its trunk curled into its mouth.



NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

Victoria Falls is the nearest international airport for Hwange. From there, it's either an exciting one-hour bush flight in a small charter plane, a four-hour drive, or a two-hour drive to Dete, followed by the two- to three-hour Elephant Express transfer to Imvelo's lodges.

BEST TIME TO GO

For the best wildlife sightings, go in the dry season from July to October when the pans will be teeming with animals and grasses are low, offering great visibility. For birders, the wet season from November to April attracts migratory birds aplenty, but the weather – and roads – can be challenging, especially during January and February.

CURRENCY Zimbabwean dollar; tourists can use US dollars.

TIME ZONE GMT +2

FOOD

Sadza is Zimbabwe's maize-meal staple, often served with tasty stews of meat, veg or beans, or try fried mopane worms, a local protein-filled delicacy. Lodges serve a mix of international food, including braais with sizzling steaks and game meats.

WHERE TO STAY

Imvelo Safaris' Camelthorn lodge or Bomani Tented Camp; African Bush Camps' Somalisa.

HOW TO DO IT

Expert Africa and The Luxury Safari Company, both specialist Africa tour operators, can arrange trips to Hwange with Imvelo Safaris and African Bush Camps.

MUST-PACK OPTION

Binoculars, antimalarials and an open mind.

WHY GO

To see past the bad press this underrated destination often unjustifiably receives. Safaris here are exceptional, with prolific wildlife, world-class camps and lodges, excellent projects by committed conservationists, and some of the best guides in Africa (known as ZimPros, Zimbabwe Professional guides have the most intensive training on the continent).

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