
Zimbabwe: Secret Zimbabwe

10 Great Natural Attractions off the Usual Tourist Track

Want to go on holiday somewhere quiet, away from the well-trodden tourist traps, but which still offers a great African experience? In every African country you will find several such places, allowing you to spend your entire holiday in one country, but with a variety of scenery and activities. Zimbabwe is most widely identified with Victoria Falls, but Lake Kariba and Hwange, Matusadona, Mana Pools and Matobo Hills National Parks are also on many visitors' itineraries. We decided to ignore all these places - and a few other better-known attractions - to see what else the country has to offer. Here are ten ideas for off-the-beaten-track places to visit on your next holiday to Zimbabwe. Some are day-trips from a major town; others are more remote.

1. Save Conservancy

The Save and Chiredzi River conservation areas comprise 340,000ha of lowveld scrubland adjoining the Gonarezhou National Park in southeastern Zimbabwe. The conservancy was formed in the early 1990s, when 23 cattle ranches were merged and restocked with wildlife. It is now part of the largest game area in the world. This includes Gonarezhou, Kruger Park in South Africa and the Banhine and Zinave National Parks in Mozambique.

The Save Conservancy is rich in wildlife. It carries a very wide range of antelope, many different predators and a variety of bushveld birds. However the reserve is best known for its projects in elephant translocation, black rhino breeding and the preservation of wild dogs and other predators. A stringent wildlife management policy is maintained and the conservancy works to enhance the standard of living of neighbouring communities.

There are three upmarket lodges in the conservancy: Makwekwete, in the Chiredzi river area; the Turgwe River Lodge on Humani ranch in the Save sector; and Senuko Safari Lodge, run by renowned conservationist Clive Stockil. All three are set amidst granite kopjes in classic lowveld scenery - baobab-dotted savannah grasslands, mopane woodlands and ilala palm scrub.

2. Nyazengu Nature Reserve

This unique, privately-owned nature reserve of some 1200ha, in the middle of Nyanga National Park, is a walker's paradise. There are stunning views. To the west you look over the Honde valley far into Mozambique. The southern and eastern aspects encompass panoramic vistas of the Matenderere and Pungwe river valleys, while the craggy face of Mount Nyangani, the highest point in Zimbabwe, dominates the north. In the south the property drops down into the Byazengu river gorge, only 1400ft above sea level. Two-thirds of the property is open rolling grassland, cut by crystal clear streams, with numerous cascades, waterfalls and pools for swimming. The remainder is covered with natural montane rainforest.

The forests and grasslands nurture all four species of tree fern, as well as a multitude of smaller ferns, orchids, moss, bracken, wild flowers and heather. About 12km of walking trails meander through this unspoiled environment, giving easy access to the most interesting points of the property. The property is unfenced and completely surrounded by the National Park. Thus it is possible to access otherwise inaccessible areas that are remote and these can be enjoyed in complete solitude, even on public holidays.

Game is not abundant, but a variety of antelope graze the grasslands and caracal, serval and baboon can be spotted. Leopard are resident but seldom seen. Birdlife includes rarities such as Lanner and Peregrine falcons, Black eagle, Flufftail, Blue mantled flycatcher, Blue swallow, Livingstone's lourie, Rameron pigeon and the Cinnamon dove. From October through to May fly-fishing is available in the miles of wild streams. The rainbow trout are not large but are plentiful and great eating fresh out of the river. Salmon trout can be bought smoked or fresh from the trout hatchery. There are two fully-equipped self-catering serviced cottages and two campsites are available.

3. Kazuma Pan

This little known unfenced, 30,300ha reserve lies northwest of Hwange National Park on the Botswana border. It's not easy to get to, requires 4WD to negotiate the deep sand and only has basic camping facilities. However it's very remote and is an unusual enclave of vast tracts of treeless savannah grassland surrounded by dense teak forests and mopane woodlands. During the rains these are well watered by streams and rock pools.

The heart of the park is a large seasonally-flooded pan, typical of those in the Kalahari sands of Botswana. This depression is home to Zimbabwe's only gemsbok and oribi, as well as such rare antelope species as roan, tsessebe and eland. Wild dog may be seen, cheetah occur in relatively good numbers, lion are fairly common and buffalo and elephant inhabit the pan area. About the only animals not found here are hippo and black rhino.

When the pan is full, which happens periodically (as it is right now), an extraordinary variety of waterbirds can be seen. Montagu's harriers are frequent visitors and the rare wattled crane actually breeds in the area. One of the park's great curiosities is a small variety of fish - as yet unidentified - that hibernates during the dry years and comes alive when the

pans fill. Its ability to survive long periods of drought is one of nature's wonders.

Some tour operators may be prepared to mount two- to four-day trips to Kazuma from Victoria Falls. The upmarket Matetsi Game Reserve provides the nearest accommodation. Nsiza and Katsetsheti campsites in Kazuma must be pre-booked through the Department of National Parks. Kazuma Pan is only open between March and December.

4. Iwaba Wildlife Estate

Iwaba is a private wildlife estate situated in the Munyati Valley in the centre of Zimbabwe. It is one of a few places in Africa where both black and white rhino can be seen. The white rhino have been in the sanctuary for 27 years and the black rhino for 14 years. Both herds are breeding. Providing the necessary security for these endangered animals has required a non-stop personal commitment. The expenses of this self-sustaining wildlife enterprise are recovered from paying visitors.

The 100km² wilderness of heavily-wooded bushveld country, grassy valleys and granite outcrops is also home to elephant, leopard, cheetah, giraffe, zebra, sable, eland, kudu, wildebeest, klipspringer and crocodile. Over 300 bird species, from ostriches to tiny tits, inhabit the bush. Waterfowls and waders are attracted to the dams and rivers, where bream, barbel and bottlenose may be caught.

Day and night game drives in Land Rovers, bush walks with rangers and photography hides are offered. Single groups of between four and eight people are accommodated in en suite, twin-bedded, thatched rondavels or chalets. Meals are taken in a central dining area or round the campfire in the evenings. A tented bush camp and self-catering facilities are also offered.

The estate is a three- to four-hour drive from Harare, all but the last 40km of which are on good tarmac. The location is crossed by deep tracks cut by iron-rimmed wagon wheels travelling the old "Hunters Road" to Mashonaland. These ruts are still visible over a century later.

5. Chizarira National Park

Chizarira is one of the least known, most isolated, undeveloped and scenically spectacular National Parks anywhere. Its name is derived from the Batonka word Chijalila, meaning "closed off" or "barrier". This aptly describes the craggy-edged mountains that form the northwestern backbone of the park and guard the baobab-wooded Gwembe Valley.

Topographically there are three distinct areas: the Zambezi escarpment, the upland plateau and the Busi Valley. Near-sheer river gorges and elephant paths down to the lake cut the escarpment some 600m above the Zambezi Valley. South of here the plateau, dotted with msasa and mafuti (Prince of Wales) trees is prime wildlife country. The emerald-coloured pools of Chimbovo river gorge are an attractive feature. The Busi valley to the south is wild and remote, whilst the Busi River area is reminiscent of Mana Pools terrain.

The Park has a large, mobile elephant population, big herds of buffalo, and antelope ranging from the tiny grysbok up to eland. There are two exclusive lodges just outside the park and four basic Department of National Parks' bush camps within. This is THE park for walking safaris (see Ed. 2 p73).

6. Chimanimani National Park

Lying at the southern end of the Eastern Highlands, this range of sandstone ridges, with Mt Binga at 2440m the highest point, border Mozambique. The folded and faulted slivery schist and quartz peaks overlook rivers, tree-lined lakes and a profusion of waterfalls, including Bridal Veil (See Ed. 7 p12). Orchids and hibiscus grow on tangled slopes above lowland forests. Below are savannah plains carpeted with lobelia, heather, aloes and a variety of wild flowers. Chirundu forest, Africa's southernmost tropical rainforest, harbours strelizias, wild orchids, tree ferns, cycads and rare trees, most famous of which is the 1000-year-old, nearly 70m high and 16m around Big Tree - a red Mahogany (Khaya Nyasica).

The area is a hiker's paradise, with two- to four-hour walks and one- to five-day trails over the storm-lashed mountains being popular. These begin from Mutekeswane Base Camp, about 16km from Chimanimani village. Eland Reserve and the park are home to several species of retiring antelope (including the blue duiker), common but rarely observed leopard, baboon and the Samango monkey. Lion and buffalo visit occasionally and the unique and spectacular birdlife is captivating.

Chimanimani village is the service centre for the district. There is a tourist office, a bank, grocery and curio shops, the faded colonial Chimanimani Arms Hotel, two budget lodges and a camping/caravan site. The most popular budget accommodation is the quirky Heaven Lodge. Three self-catering establishments and the more upmarket Mawenje Mountain Lodge and Kaledo Lodge are near the National Park. Mahobahoba Tours run transfers to Mutekeswane Base Camp, where camping facilities are available.

7. Kame Ruins

Kame was the capital of the Torwa State that emerged as a strong power in southwestern Zimbabwe after the decline of Great Zimbabwe in the 15th Century. In the late 17th Century the site was burned and levelled by the Rozwi. In the

1830s Ndebele raiders displaced them from Kame and many of the other sites they had established.

The Kame complex comprises circular, sometimes terraced, artificial platforms encased by dry stone walls. The beautifully decorated 6m-high by 68m-long retaining wall of the precipice platform bears a checkerboard design along its entire length. The platforms, rising 2-7m above the ground, carried dhaka (clay) huts and courtyards where those of status lived. The remnants of cattle kraals and huts for ordinary people can be seen below the Hill complex. Nearby is a Mujejeje (ringing stone) and tsoro game boards (see Ed. 4, p48) carved into flat-topped stones. A variety of artefacts discovered at Kame are to be seen in the museum on site or in Bulawayo 22km to the east.

Although only a 20-minute drive from Bulawayo, a good Kame experience can be achieved by staying at Khami Game Lodge, a new four-roomed safari lodge on a private ranch just 5km from Kame Ruins. Here they have recreated the royal residence of Kame's Mambo or Great Chieftain.

8. Chinhoyi Caves National Park

The rolling plains about one hour's drive northwest of Harare along the road to Kariba give no suggestion of the presence of this largely unexplored maze. Suddenly on approach from the car park entrance there is a 50m sheer drop to the seemingly bottomless Sleeping Pool.

Its vivid aquamarine contrasts starkly with the creamy ochres of the surrounding limestone and dolomite. A steep flight of steps takes you down to a viewing platform before the electrically-lit Dark Cave. From here there is a stunning view of Chirodziva - "the fallen pool", so named because victims of rampaging Nguni invaders were tossed into its waters. The startling view reveals an ever-changing mosaic of breathtaking reflections that dance on the surface below overhanging stalactites, whilst goldfish swirl below. Light penetrates deeply into the 91m crystal clear pool that is believed to be part of a larger body of water. An underwater passage leads from Bat Cave, a sub-chamber of Dark Cave, to another cavity known as Blind Cave.

Chinhoyi Caves, named after a local chief who used them as refuge from Ndebele raiders, are open from dawn to dusk. Above them is a pleasant recreational park with camping and picnicking facilities beneath msasa, mukwa and fig trees. There is a motel at the turn off and another hotel in Chinhoyi 8km away.

9. Mavuradona Wilderness Area

This wilderness area, lying north of Centenary on the Zambezi Escarpment, is relatively unknown. Characterised by rugged mountainous hills and miombo woodland, the wild landscape was a main theatre of conflict during the bush war. Declared a game reserve in 1988, its protected status has lured wildlife back. Antelope include sable, eland, kudu, waterbuck and impala. Elephant roam the area, baboon, warthog, zebra and leopard are common and lion are occasionally seen. The 290 species of birds include several types of eagles that inhabit the water-berry, mhobohobo, msasa and other brachystegia trees. The freedom to hike the park's designated 3-7km trails is a big drawcard. Carew Safaris run horseback trips through remote acacia-dotted valleys (see Ed. 11, p32). The CAMPFIRE project campsite is maintained by the local community. Lodges are under construction at the main camp and a weekend at Murota Village can be booked through the Zimbabwe Travel Bureau. In the adjacent Tingwa state land is a grove of Raffia palms. These plants have the longest leaves in the world and produce exquisite waxy amber cones.

10. Sentinel Reserve

The 32,000ha Sentinel Reserve lies west of Beitbridge, near the point where South Africa and Botswana meet with Zimbabwe. Once a cattle ranch, it is now divided between a 12,000ha "ecotourism" reserve that borders the Limpopo and a hunting area over the escarpment behind it. The area teems with wildlife - antelope and the carnivores which prey on them, zebra, warthog, ostrich, elephant and their tiny cousins the dassie or rock hyrax (see Ed. 2, p84). Fossil deposits are amongst the world's best. To date the remains of 28 dinosaurs, from huge vegetarians to comparatively smaller carnivores, have been unearthed, some completely intact. (see Ed. 2, pp76-78). The many bushman paintings include a unique bottlenose fish rendered in a green, copper-based dye. An inclusive adventure camp offers the opportunity to explore and experience this wild and remote lowveld park.

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