

—
Bumi Hills Safari Lodge looks and feels a lot like a paradise island from its vantage point above Lake Kariba.

KARIBA

TELLS A MESMERISING TALE

IN MATUSADONA NATIONAL PARK, THE STORY GOES, IMPALA ARE CALLED 'MONEY BACKS' BECAUSE THEY ARE SO PROLIFIC. IF YOU DON'T SEE ONE, YOU GET YOUR MONEY BACK, WRITES **LORRAINE KEARNEY**



—
LEFT Sanyati Gorge cuts through the mountains on its way to Lake Kariba.

BELOW Mashonaland West from the air is lush and green after the rains.



—
LEFT In front of your deck at Fothergill Island is the lawn, kept trim by those sleek, crouching robo-mowers.

Below us, Mashonaland West was a patchwork of crop fields as far as the eye could see, and scatterings of bush were the seams knitting it all together. And everywhere was washed in glistening rivers and lakes, though some were that lurid turquoise of chemical pollution.

We were flying over this green and pleasant land on the way from Harare to Lake Kariba in a tiny four-seater plane. It was March, the rains had come in, and it was scorchio, the thermals bouncing us around jauntily.

The day before, I had sat with a pot of Tanganda tea, as one must in these parts, on the patio of York Lodge in Zimbabwe's capital, entranced by a circus of purple-crested turacos in the tree nearest me.

THE ISLAND THAT IS NOT AN ISLAND

Matusadona National Park is along the Zimbabwean shores of Kariba, the world's largest man-made lake by volume. To get there, we flew over Sanyati Gorge, with its cliffs, lush greenery, channels and pools. It's pretty, and pretty wild, mainly inhabited by buffaloes, birds and crocodiles.

There are also lions, leopards, elephants and antelopes. If you're the rough and ready sort for whom the rugged life is paradise, this is your place.



—
ABOVE Pink, pretty and poisonous: a Sabi star lily (*Adenium multiflorum*) on Fothergill Island.

I am not such a person. Instead, the pilot expertly landed the little plane on the bush runway. I was greeted with a refreshing towel and whisked away on a game drive to my lodgings at Fothergill Island, which was last an island in 2018 and is not expected to be one again as more water is being taken from the dam for hydroelectric power. And, of course, drought because climate change.

FAUNA AND FLORA

The comely Sabi star lilies (*Adenium multiflorum*) at the entrance to Fothergill waved us in. They're gorgeous but deadly, and their sap is used as a fish and arrow poison in Mozambique and South Africa.

Even so, they made a bright counterpoint to the landscape, which is all red soil and waving grass down to the lake on one side and up to the tree line on the other. It's known as jesse bush, but to get

technical, it's a mixed-species, layered dry forest with plenty of tree and shrub species. And it can become impenetrable.

Everywhere, the red soil is littered with quartz. And the land is littered with elephants and impala, the water with hippos and crocs.

AFRICAN PARKS BRINGS THE GOODS

In 2019, African Parks and Zimbabwe National Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (Zimparks) signed a 20-year management partnership agreement. It's one of 23 parks managed by African Parks in 13 countries. The model is the same: African Parks is responsible for the rehabilitation working with governments and local communities.

It's done a lot of good work. At Matusadona, the aim is to restore, develop and revitalise to become one of the leading elephant and rhino sanctuaries in Southern Africa. Thanks to this, fish stocks have revived. Indigenous bream and other slow-maturing species are returning in abundance.

This year, sable, eland and roan antelopes were translocated to Matusadona. Next year is the turn of about 30 black rhinos.

THE TWINKLING LIGHTS

Two things happened on my first night at Fothergill: the lights of the kapenta rigs strung across the dark water enchanted me, and a black robotic mower terrified me. You see, there are beautiful lawns around the tents. But beautiful lawns need to be maintained. Allow me to introduce you to the robot lawnmower. About knee-high and sleek, soundless and easily mistaken for a beastie in the dim moonlight. Funny but not.

But then it was morning and time for a bush walk. Zimbabwean guides are among the best, and Lloyd and Moses certainly know their stuff. And so we found ourselves crouched low on the ground, silently watching a lone young elephant bull happily shuffling around a waterhole. Til his mom raged out of the bushes like a Dahomey Amazon, intent, I swear, on stomping us.

When she was mere metres away, Moses and Lloyd uncurled like cats. Moses stood very tall, flailed his arms and roared. It worked. She stopped in her tracks, weighed up the situation and decided to back off. That got the heart pumping.



—
Lake Kariba is famed for its swimming elephants – they swim to cool down, for fun and to cross to richer grasslands.

If you're the **ROUGH AND READY** sort for whom the **RUGGED LIFE** is paradise, Sanyati Gorge is **YOUR PLACE**

Get Close to Nature
Matusadona National Park offers numerous campsite options scattered throughout pristine locations, providing pure bush experiences.
The main Tashinga Campsite, on a scenic peninsula, has views of Kariba's legendary sunrises and sunsets, as well as resident wildlife. Albida and Fig Tree sites offer private kitchens, ablutions and tented accommodation options.
The Tashinga Cottages offer elegant en-suite comfort, modern amenities, private verandas and flexible catering.
The all-inclusive, private Matusadona Bush Camps offer intimate, tented safari experiences, relocating between the Jenje-Biriwiri confluence and Shenga Bay's baobab groves (season-dependent), hosted by professional guides for unparalleled wilderness immersion.
African residents (excluding Zimbabwe): from \$15 pps pn (R265 wilderness camping) to \$290 pps pn (R5 142 Bush Camps all-inclusive) with park fees (\$20 ((R355)) pps pn for adults)
☎ **+263 78 677 4616**
@ **reservations.matusadona@africanparks.org**
🌐 **visitmatusadona.org**



What’s In A Name

Kariba Gorge:
the large, natural gorge through which flowed the Zambezi River.

Kariba Dam:
the wall built in the gorge between Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Lake Kariba:
the reservoir that was formed when the dam was built.

Kariba:
the Zimbabwean town built for construction workers on the lake’s dam.

The Numbers

223 km – lake’s length
40 km – lake’s width at widest
5 580 km² – lake’s area
185 km³ – lake’s storage capacity
29 m – lake’s mean depth
97 m – lake’s maximum depth
128 m – dam’s height
579 m – dam’s length
13 m – dam’s width at crest
24 m – dam’s width at base



MORE ELEPHANTS

Elephants like water, Kariba’s elephants more than most. Puttering along on our crossing to Rhino Safari Camp on Rhino Island, we skirted two, setting out for a long swim to another island.

I thought of the intrepid elephants I had heard about the evening before: on 25 January 1982, two young bulls, about 18 years old, swam leisurely out on the lake, on a predetermined course, no land in sight. They piggybacked to help each other along – one swimming, the other resting on his back, regularly swapping places.

The duo eventually reached land and strolled off, paler and thinner, but unfazed. It was estimated they spent at least 27 hours in the water, swimming between 35 km and 40 km.

A LAPA AND A SOLIFUGE

You might know them as sun spiders or *baardskeerders*, even solifuges. I know them as fast-as-lightning-but-not-as-fast-as-Akani-Simbine hairy-scaries. Solifugae are an order of arachnida that are neither spiders nor scorpions, and they have intimidating jaws. They are not dangerous, they have no venom, and they are not chasing you. It’s just that they like to hang out in your shadow.

This is what I reminded myself as I gingerly backed away from one in the bathroom at Rhino Safari Camp. (Solifuges can reach up to 16 km/h; Simbine smashed 38.8 km/h in May.)

ABOVE A jaunt on the water is almost a safari law when you’re at Lake Kariba.

LEFT We saw dozens of elephants lumbering contentedly across Matusadona.



ABOVE Rhino Safari Camp is so much part of the bush that wildlife treats it as its own food garden and watering post.

Rhino Safari Camp is pared back. There are no tents. Your space is a thatched lapa on stilts (so as not to disturb the hippos’ night-time grazing), a mozzie net over the bed, a basic en suite, and a solar-powered inverter to run the fan. For all of this, though, I quite honestly had the best sleep in my living memory. Something to do with the darkness, the peacefulness, the water, the smell of the earth. Aswell, the guide, can spin a yarn or two. He spent years taking travellers on cross-continent explorations. He is unflappable, the kind of person you want on your side in a crisis. Together with the boat captain, Funnyboy, Aswell took us to secret places and hidden channels on the lake. The silence was profound, floating down a channel between steep red walls. It seemed unreal

– could this really be Kariba? A hippo guffawed nearby. Yes, indeed it was.

OF DEAD TREES AND GIN

Sunsets here are extraordinary. Gold then burnt orange, shimmering with purple and violet. They are frequently taken on a boat with gin and tonic. It’s a tradition one must keep. Max, our man mountain guide at Bumi Hills Safari Lodge, weaved through Kariba’s famous dead tree forest. Gaunt witnesses to the past, they have been here since the Zambezi flooded into the lake. They’re as hard as rock and will be standing long after we have gone, frozen by the minerals in the water. But here now, I raised a glass to the passing of time and drank in the wildness around me. **G**

PHOTOGRAPHY LORRAINE KEARNEY, KELLY LANDREY, COURTESY IMAGES
PRICES CORRECT AT TIME OF PRINT AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE



—
Sundowners are taken on a boat, accompanied by Kariba’s famous dead trees.



Trip Planner

The writer was hosted by **Africa’s Eden** (📍 [africaseden.travel](#)), an umbrella marketing body for tourism product owners in Botswana, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The initial return flights to Zambia were courtesy of **Proflight Zambia** (📍 [proflight-zambia.com](#)).

Stay Here

FOTHERGILL ISLAND
The tranquil space is surrounded by carefully kept lawns, bush and elephants; beyond them, the water. The tents are dreamy, and it’s your choice to close the sides or let the breeze flow through. There are seven Lake suites and three Island suites. It’s off-grid luxury, and is wheelchair accessible. And there is archery.

International from \$930 pp pn (R16 668); SADC from \$330 pp pn (R5914)
📍 [fothergill.travel](#)
📍 [fothergill_safari](#)

RHINO SAFARI CAMP
There are no fences between the camp and wildlife. Elephants come cruising through (in fact, the pool has been entirely appropriated by them), and hippos snuffle under your deck all night. It’s beautifully remote and rustic, and your bed is on a raised platform under a thatched lapa. There’s a mosquito net, but other than that, you’re completely open to the elements. And it was

hands down the best sleep I’ve had in years.
International from \$400 pps pn (R7 169); SADC from \$300 pps pn (R5 377)
📍 [rhinosafaricamp.com](#)
📍 [rhinosafaricamp](#)

BUMI HILLS SAFARI LODGE
You can be forgiven for thinking you’ve found yourself on a tropical island when you walk through the doors. The palm trees, the pool and the blue water beyond do not speak of safari. But from its vantage point, you can watch across the floodplains as animals saunter to the lake, see the lights of the kapenta rigs twinkle in the darkness and spend the night on the Lady Jaqueline. It’s an unexpected luxury retreat from the blazing bush of Matusadona National Park. And the pillow menu made me swoon.
From \$750 pps pn (R13 440)
📍 [africanbushcamps.com/experiences/bumi-hills-safari-lodge](#)
📍 [africanbushcamps](#)