

TRAVEL



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Edited by JANE MEMMLER

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Zimbabwe's wild ways

LISA GRAINGER has the wildlife all to herself on a unique African safari



NAME OF THE GAME: Spotting wildebeest and zebra at close quarters in Gonarezhou National Park, top; an elephant takes an energetic dip in the river, and a pride of lions chill out in the shade



THERE aren't many places left in this crowded world that can still be called wilderness but I was recently in one of them, among just 10 people in the Gonarezhou National Park in Zimbabwe.

It was as raw as any stretch of Tanzania's Serengeti and as teeming with elephants as Botswana's Okavango Delta, yet there was virtually no one else there.

I had travelled to the southern African country to stay in the recently refurbished Chilo Gorge Lodge and meet its owner, Clive Stockil, one of Africa's most celebrated conservationists. The 63-year-old Zimbabwean is well known for co-founding the Campfire organisation that helps local communities benefit from wildlife and last year he became even better known when Prince William presented him with a Lifetime Achievement Award for Conservation at the inaugural Tusk Conservation Awards Ceremony in London.

Sitting with Stockil beside a campfire on the wide sandy bed of the Save River, over which his Chilo Gorge Lodge looks, I see a crocodile on a sandbank and, in the distance, the sound of a trumpeting elephant reverberates in the evening air.

"This place must be the closest thing to the Garden of Eden," Stockil says, before pointing out a bright blue malachite kingfisher diving for its dinner.

"I've been coming here since I was about three and have never seen anything else like it. It is crossed by three big rivers, so the diversity of wildlife is extraordinary. It has

waterfalls, sand forests, about 450 species of birds and, on the plateau, magnificent pools around which elephants gather. It really is heaven on earth."

Exploring the area over three days with Stockil and his knowledgeable Shangaan guide, Thomas Mutombeni, I can see what he means. Gonarezhou means "Place of many elephants" in the local Shona language, and here it's impossible to go on a game drive without seeing them.

The last game count estimated there were more than 10,000 – which is why, Stockil

explains, "we have so many South Africans now coming here to see them".

Although Zimbabwe's troubles are not yet over, tourists are slowly returning. Last year room occupancy in Victoria Falls hotels ran at an average of 77 per cent, and in Hwange National Park there were seven private safari camps open for business.

Since Stockil renovated Chilo Gorge Lodge in 2012, he's seen visitor numbers grow tenfold. "I think people are at last realising that Africa's wildlife belongs to us all," he says. "And unless we all protect it, and put money into the local communities, it will vanish for ever."

Stockil's relationship with nearby residents is essential to the success of the project, he says, which is why all of the 33 staff are local, why 10 per cent of profits are shared with them, and why he encourages guests to visit their village with its clinic, school and traditional Shangaan homes.

Over three days at Chilo, my parents and I spent most of our time with guide Thomas. In the morning, we walked with him past enormous thousand-year-old trees, soaring red cliffs and thundering waterfalls.

At lunchtime, we sat beside luxuriant green lawns flanking the pool, spotting birds from our loungers – squawking ducks, white egrets, jewel-coloured bee-eaters and soaring snake eagles.

In the afternoon we set off in open-sided safari vehicles to explore Gonarezhou National Park where we walked round a 3,000-year-old baobab tree, gazed at big herds of zebra,

LIFETIME'S WORK:
Lodge owner Clive Stockil receives his conservation award from Prince William



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CHILO LODGE

Watch elephants, hippos and crocodiles cooling off in the waters of the Save River from the viewing deck of Chilo Lodge.

Set amid well tended gardens high on the river bank, there are 10 en suite rooms located in thatched lodges.

Decked out with natural materials, the rooms have animal skins on the wood floors and throws on the netted beds.

There's also a pool, library, dining room and a light and airy lounge with a stone fireplace, African artefacts, dark wood furniture and leather sofas.



WATERING HOLE: Chilo Lodge's pool, above, and expert guide Thomas Mutombeni, left

IN THE BAG: On safari**For her...**

Denim shirt, £32, Topshop (0345 121 4519/topshop.com)

Patterned shorts, 27.99, Mango (08450 822 448/mango.com)

Green jacket, £24.99, H&M (0344 736 9000/hm.co.uk)



Zebra print sandals, £52, Solillas (solillas.com)

For him...

Brown leather satchel, £137, The Original Satchel Store (originalsatchelstore.co.uk)

Shorts, £25, River Island (0844 576 6444/riverisland.com)



Sunglasses, £143, Ray Ban at Sunglass Hut (0844 264 0860)



Nike trainers, £64.99, Office (08450 580 777/office.co.uk)

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wildebeest and buffalo and later heard hyenas howling in the moonlight. This year, Stockil hopes the park will complete its Big Five with a family of rhino he has successfully bred near his home in the nearby Save Valley Conservancy, something the Duke of Cambridge was particularly interested in.

"I was very impressed by what he knew," Stockil said over a glass of wine by the camp fire. "He is extremely passionate about wildlife - I'm sure he would be here in a second if protocol allowed it. "It doesn't now - but President Mugabe won't be around for ever. And I think people realise that unless they start to support the wildlife here it will be gone, that the best thing they can do to support conservation is to come and stay."

Before tourists start to pour into the country again, I relished being almost alone in Zimbabwe's beautiful bush, laughing with its good-natured people, walking with its passionate guides and seeing the country slowly get back on its feet.

Prince William might never have visited here, but he clearly has advisers who understand the peril of its wildlife and the need for its conservationists to be recognized. When he does get here, there can be no doubt that he can only fall in love with it.

● GETTING THERE

The Ultimate Travel Company (020 3051 8098/theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk) offers three nights at Chilo Gorge and three nights at Chilo Adventure Camp in Gonarezhou National Park from £2,750pp (two sharing), full board. Price includes return Heathrow to Harare flights with Kenya Airways and private transfers. Business Premier World return fares from £2,385.

