SOUTHERN COMFORT

The introduction by Ethiopian Airlines of flights into Bulawayo has opened up southern Zimbabwe to visitors and created a convenient route linking the stunning Matobo Hills with Victoria Falls. To see what's now easily available, we sent **Jo Austin** to explore.

The welcome was heartfelt. It seemed that every man, drum, bicycle and classic car had come to Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo International Airport to celebrate Ethiopian Airlines' inaugural flight into Bulawayo. It is hoped this new route (the airline already flies to Harare and Victoria Falls) will create fresh opportunities for tourism in southern Zimbabwe in the wake of the pandemic and years of economic turmoil. I was eager to see what was in store.

BULAWAYO — 'THE CITY OF KINGS'

Leading my friend and I on a walking tour of the city centre, our hugely knowledgeable guide, Paul Hubbard, didn't waste a second telling us enthusiastically why Bulawayo deserves to be visited.

The former capital of the Ndebele State and royal seat of King Lobengula in the 1870s, Bulawayo grew to become the country's industrial hub. With Harare now the seat of government and finance, Bulawayo is positioning itself as a heritage city. Boasting jacaranda-lined streets (created wide enough to turn a wagon and span of ten oxen), elegant suburbs, historic buildings and diverse architecture, the city holds an alluring sense of originality.

"Bulawayo is the historic and artistic heart of Zimbabwe," Paul explained. "There are more authors, artists, poets and performers living here than anywhere else in Zimbabwe. Both Kipling and Stanley (of Livingstone fame) were great admirers."

The city is home to the country's first airport (a former RAF training base during WWII), its first stock exchange, its oldest library, the first basilica in southern Africa, its first bird sanctuary and even its oldest golf course, dating back to 1895. It is the headquarters of the country's rail network and the impressive Natural History Museum of Zimbabwe.

Trains first arrived here in 1897 to help create the country's commercial and industrial hub, but today they mainly carry cargo, with very few passenger services. Visitors should not miss the fascinating Railway Museum, which houses a unique exhibition detailing the history of southern Africa's railway system and a collection of steam and diesel locomotives, including the private carriage of Cecil John Rhodes.

We delved into a lively market offering fruit and vegetables (much imported from South Africa and Zambia). A touch of nostalgia hung over a butcher's shop, 'Heads and Hooves', a reminder this is an important cattle-rearing region. A friendly passerby asked me: "How is London Bridge?" and appeared happy to learn it is now in Arizona. It seems anything goes in Bulawayo.

We ended our tour eating scones in the leather-seated comfort of The Bulawayo Club, and it was clear that the city has moved a long way from its Ndebele name, 'Place of suffering'. This is a place of real opportunity.

My guide the following day, Norman Bourne of Black Rhino Safaris, agreed: "While international visitors simply evaporated during the pandemic, local tourism took off and has been great for the economy".

He's now hoping overseas visitors will return, drawn by attractions such as Khami Ruins, an often-overlooked UNESCO World Heritage Site he took us to, just 22 kilometres outside the city. The second largest stone-built complex in Zimbabwe, remnants of a civilisation that arose after the collapse of Great Zimbabwe (near Masvingo), the ruins reveal an intricate maze of carefully preserved dry-stone platforms, walls and passageways spread over several acres.

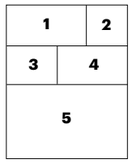
Another surprising gem – only a short distance from our exceedingly comfortable, spotless and welcoming accommodation, Traveller's Guest House, in the city's suburbs – was the Hillside Dams Conservancy, a recreational nature sanctuary that has been lovingly revived by the community, with an outstanding aloe garden, prolific birdlife and two dams, which were once a principal water source for the town. It's further evidence that Bulawayans care for their city.

TRAVELLER'S GUEST LODGE

YAGIL HENKIN / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ARTUSH / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

CHRISTOPHER SCOTT / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



1: Khami Ruins, the second-largest stone-built complex in Zimbabwe; remnants of a civilisation which arose after the collapse of Great Zimbabwe
2: Traveller's Guest Lodge in the suburbs of Bulawayo
3: The Railway Museum offers a fascinating insight to the country's history; a must-see for all
4: The Bulawayo Art Gallery and studios are one of many colonial-style buildings that speak to the city's history
4: Bulawayo was laid out in a grid pattern, with streets wide enough to turn a wagon and span of oxen

THE MATOBO HILLS

The energy of Matobo Hills National Park can be felt the minute you first spy its majestic granite rock formations.

Barely a 40-minute drive from Bulawayo, Matopos (as it is known locally) is home to one of southern Africa's highest concentrations of rock art, dating back some 13,000 years. The park may lack big game, but it more than compensates with its dramatic scenery, plant and insect diversity, prolific birdlife (especially birds of prey, particularly the black eagle) and a healthy population of black and white rhino.

Amalinda Lodge is nestled discreetly amongst its granite surroundings, tucked away from the →

world and yet offering all the comforts of a five-star hotel, complete with a rock-hewn infinity pool. It's nine unique rooms seemingly melt into the boulders, so we were delighted when Angel ushered us to our luxurious 'cave', with its freestanding bath and huge beds.

Our arrival in late October coincided with what is traditionally the hottest and driest month of the year, but the rains had started early and already there were green shoots appearing and violent thunderstorms threatening.

Dining here is a communal event, and we were joined around a massive teak table by three Belgians, two Zimbabweans and a young South African family. We sat in the open-air bar and shared their travel tales and photos. I promised myself I'd buy a proper camera again.

Out in the bush, our guide, Howard, turned out to be an excellent birder. As we watched two fork-tailed drongos divebombing a black eagle, he told us he was one of seven siblings, and had received excellent schooling during the early years of Mugabe's presidency. He ended up mending fishing nets on Lake Kariba, where he first saw safari vehicles, and returned home determined to learn to drive, securing his job at Amalinda in 1996.

While the sighting of an elephant shrew and a rainbow lizard were highlights for me, Cecil John Rhodes' grave, entombed at the summit of a large *kopje* affording excellent views of the hills, still holds an intriguing fascination for all we spoke to. More intriguing were the incredible rock paintings that adorn so many hidden caves. Clearly visible and amazingly intact, they tell the tale of this mysterious, magical landscape.

A visit to Matobo Hills should be compulsory for anyone visiting Zimbabwe.

Amalinda Lodge is nestled discreetly amongst its granite surroundings, tucked away from the world and yet offering all the comforts of a five-star hotel, complete with a rock-hewn infinity pool

HWANGE NATIONAL PARK

On the drive to Hwange we passed rural communities cultivating cabbages, tomatoes and potatoes, women on the roadside selling bunches of carrots and baskets of monkey oranges (US$1 for seven), roaming cattle and a depressing amount of plastic bottles and general debris. I saw my first baobab tree.

We said farewell to Howard, and our new guide, James, took the dirt road towards Sable Valley, one of four Amalinda properties on the same concession bordering Hwange National Park. The concession, on land owned by the Forestry Commission, acts as a buffer zone between the park and communal areas, protecting the forests and the wildlife. There are no fences between the park and the concession, so animals move freely between them, with the result that game viewing here is just as good, if not better, than in the park itself.

Indeed, we were welcomed by the sight of a massive herd of elephants wandering to the waterhole in front of the lodge. We arrived too late to rush down to the hide for a closer look, but did watch one of the elephants stride boldly into camp, only to be chased off by James.

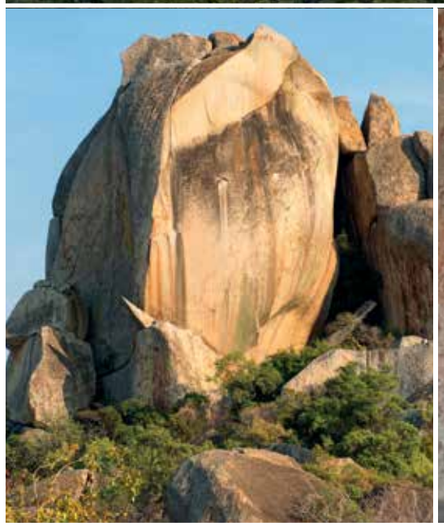
Sable Valley has had a chequered history. Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip stayed here when they visited the park in 1991, but in recent years it struggled with no revenue during the pandemic, and eventually the owners had to forego the property. Amalinda Safari Collection took it over in 2022 and have embarked on a refurbishment programme, which includes the construction of a hide and a treetop sleep-out platform for guests who enjoy sleeping under the stars.

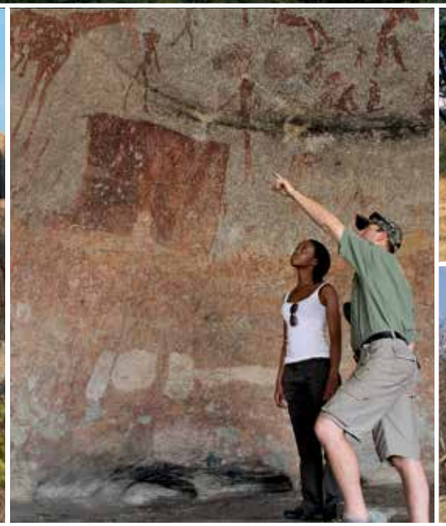
Stressing Amalinda's commitment to tourism here, CEO Sharon Stead told me: "This is the first step to securing an impressive wildlife corridor, central to the protection of this incredibly fragile ecosystem on the flanks of Hwange National Park. As one of the 'Big Five' destinations in Zimbabwe, our role is to encompass the ever-changing safari culture and adopt an holistic approach to wildlife management in this critical landscape".

A short drive away is Amalinda's Khulu Bush Camp. As camp manager Thabisa Ndlovu took us to our elevated tented accommodation, he told us how difficult life had been during the pandemic, with no international guests.

"We all agreed to work on half salaries and I am amazed how we pulled through," he explained, saying that he used that quiet time to attain a degree in Hospitality and Tourism Management through long distance learning.

A word of warning for guests who want to swim in the pool at Khulu: do so before 11am. After that, elephants regularly take it in turns to dip their trunks into the pool as if it is their own watering hole. To sit on the edge of the pool watching these magnificent animals in such close proximity is one of the most humbling wildlife experiences of my life. →





AMALINDA SAFARI COLLECTION (7)

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1: The tumbling hills and valleys of the Matobo Hills
2: There is art in nature everywhere you look in the Matobo Hills
3: One of the largest concentrations of rock art in the world are found here, dating back 13,000 years
4: The rooms at Amalinda Lodge are built in and around the rocks
5: The Matobo Hills are an excellent place to track white rhino on foot
6: Elephants visit the swimming pool at Khulu Bush Camp, Hwange NP
7: Khulu Bush Camp's Thabisa Ndlovu
8: The communal area at Sable Valley lodge in Hwange NP
Below: Amalinda Collection CEO Sharon Stead

In my head, I can still hear the cheerful whistle of the rufus-naped lark which inhabited almost every termite hill as we drove one morning to The Hide, on the south-eastern boundary of the park.

One of Hwange's most renowned lodges, the family-owned property is now in its thirtieth year. It retains many of its original features, including its iconic A-frame dining area, and a tiny museum. Artefacts and memorabilia add a sense of 'home in the bush', as do the selection of books and photos that kept me entertained one rainy afternoon.

All ten deluxe tents overlook a waterhole, while The Dove's Nest offers romantics the chance to immerse themselves in the bush for a night in their very own tree house. We met such a couple on their return to the main camp. They were taking a break from Mozambique, where they were working for a NGO clearing landmines.

Wildlife in this corner of Hwange is prolific and our dreams were quickly realised when we spotted seven magnificent sable antelopes on our first game drive.

Conservation and sustainability are major drivers at The Hide, with our bed-night levies donated directly to anti-poaching, elephant-collaring and community projects. Angus Preston, managing director and son of the founders, is a very active member of The Hide Community Trust and a trustee of Friends of Hwange, which works to protect and ensure the long-term sustainability of the park as well as empower the neighbouring rural community.

We were welcomed by the sight of a massive herd of elephants wandering to the waterhole in front of the lodge. We arrived too late to rush down to the hide for a closer look, but did watch one of the elephants stride boldly into camp

VICTORIA FALLS

After a three-hour drive from Hwange along a deeply pot-holed road (caused by the enormous trucks servicing Hwange Colliery), we were met at Victoria Falls town by huge billboards and busy souvenir shops which lined clean, wide streets.

The Victoria Falls (described as *mosi-oa-tunya*, 'the smoke that thunders') is the most spectacular of waterfalls and rightly deserves its listing as one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It never disappoints – at whatever time of year. Our arrival was at the end of a long dry spell and the waters were low, but the sight of the exposed dark, volcanic basalt walls that lie behind the falls was dramatic.

We were warmly welcomed by Lovemore Machipisa, owner of Africa Travel Tours. After two years of practically no tourism, when he had to reduce staff and sell two vehicles, he told me: "Today we have a very good problem: we are too busy!"

Visitor numbers from the UK were diminished but Americans were increasing, and I noticed groups of Russians enjoying themselves at the legendary Boma Dinner and Drum Show run by Africa Albida Tourism (AAT).

The company's flagship property, Victoria Falls Safari Lodge, like so many others, survived Covid with a skeleton staff. But it has since launched a magnificent new Safari Spa and will embark on a massive refurbishment in 2023.

Celebrating only its first anniversary, the luxurious 72-room Palm River Hotel is idyllicly situated on the banks of the Zambezi, just 4km from the Falls. The understated elegance of the hotel and sense of calm created a perfect sanctuary away from the buzz of the Falls, and was the ideal place to end our time in Zimbabwe.

Immaculate staff could not do enough to make us feel welcome, even wandering around the grounds with us to identify the indigenous trees before leading us to the jetty for a memorable sunset cruise on the graceful Ra-Ikane (fashioned along the lines of David Livingstone's exploration boat and named after his guide).

Linking the hotel's reception area with one of its bedroom wings is a dramatic steel bridge designed to replicate the Victoria Falls Bridge, making a quirky addition to the Queenslander architecture. The spacious, fresh interiors boasted stunning artwork reflective of the area – I wished I could leave with a piece of art by Zimbabwean-born Nicole Sanderson to remind me of my stay.

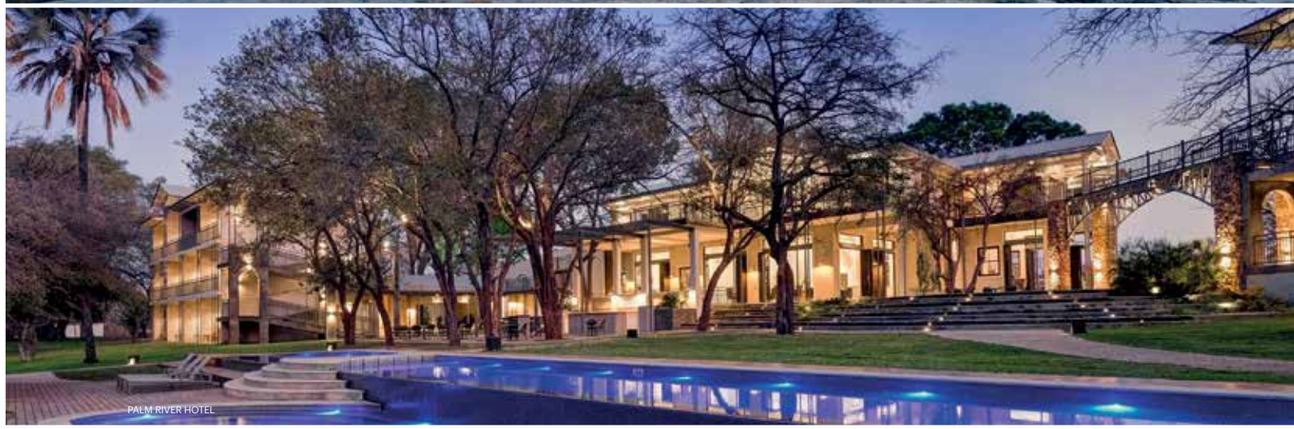
For too long visitors have flown in and out of Victoria Falls, seldom venturing further south than Hwange. With the convenience of Ethiopian Airlines' new route to Bulawayo, there is no sense in overlooking this alluring region. Linking Hwange and the Falls with Bulawayo offers a stimulating journey through three very different ecosystems, with diverse experiences and a fascinating historical insight.

Add to this the kindness and candour of the Zimbabweans, who make it their mission to make you feel welcome, and the adventure is complete.

"We will miss you!" said our driver, Jimmy. The farewell was heartfelt.


THE HIDE SAFARI CAMP


AMALINDA SAFARI COLLECTION


PALM RIVER HOTEL


AFRICA ALBIDA TOURISM


RA-IKANE / PALM RIVER HOTEL

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1: The Hide, renowned safari camp in Hwange, overlooking a popular waterhole
2: The new underground hide and platform deck at Sable Valley, Hwange
3: Palm River Hotel, in lush gardens on the banks of the Zambezi, Victoria Falls
4: The new Safari Spa at Victoria Falls Safari Lodge
5: The perfect end to a Zimbabwe tour: a cruise on the Ra-Ikane, taking in the sunset on the Zambezi