

## Mana Pools – Kariba – Matusadona NP

Some of us were disappointed because we didn't see lions in Mana Pools. Although our sighting of a pack of wild dogs in Gonarezhou is twentyfold rarer, in the collective mind this doesn't count, since lions represent THE ultimate safari experience. What is the first thing we are asked when returning home? Did you see lions? Many articles on the web praise Mana Pools above all other parks in Zimbabwe and those raised expectations. Perhaps one of the reasons why Mana Pools NP and Hwange NP are more known than other parks might be that these parks allow private enterprises within their boundaries, luxury camps and safari companies operating from within, whereas Gonarezhou, doesn't. This surely has a direct influence on the amount of publicity out there.

So, we left Nyamepi and within an hour we were at Nykasikana gate and another 40min later at Chimutsi gate where we deposited cans and bottles at the refuse collection point. From here it was a breeze up the brand new 3-lane tar road to the turn-off to **Kariba**. A narrow oldish but still good tar road with very few bad sections descends the escarpment in serpentines and sharp bends. On this road we saw the most damaged trucks. Surprises around the bend come unannounced, like when suddenly faced with a broken-down truck and its load spilled out.



Exactly **3h30m** after departure from Nyamepi we arrived at the Total Station in Kariba. We drove to the small viewpoint for a glimpse of the dam wall. Here a handful of locals sell souvenirs and are thankful for every item one purchases from them. We found a limited choice of fresh products at the TM Market (PnP) and gave USD cash to a person looking semi-official wearing a vest who had used an Eco cash card to settle the bill for us in bond dollars. It is important to agree on the exchange rate beforehand. Check current rates on [www.zimrates.com](http://www.zimrates.com). We arrived mid-afternoon at **Warthogs Safari Camp** where some of us made the bar their home till dinner time.



The double/triple ensuite tents were USD60-90 classic/deluxe. Each tent has its own mini donkey for hot water on demand. There are 220V outlets in the tents. Beds were comfortable but not all had sufficient blankets. The camp is located on the outskirts and off the powerline road in a wildlife corridor with mopane trees and a good distance away from the lake. Game including elephant roam freely. It is strictly forbidden to keep food in the tents, and one is advised not to leave valuables in them. I was unable to find the camping proper. A vehicle with a RTT stood a bit awkwardly between the tents, if this is how they accommodate campers, then I cannot recommend camping here. The safari tents however are nice and good value, but they stand a bit close one another. Farthest from the bar and next to the vegetation are 'Zebra' and 'Ellie'. Breakfast lunch snacks and dinner are available at the bar from an independently operated kitchen run by a group of ladies who prepare and serve the meals. All their food was good, pizzas, curry, fish, chips, and the hot breakfast. The bar at Warthogs is

a lively watering hole also for the Kariba crowd. For hot days there is a small plunge pool in the garden.

There was an incident in the middle of the night when someone came into camp on foot and cut open the canvas around the pad-locked zipper of the tent where the boys were sleeping. Luckily the night guard was awake and noticed the thief just in time to prevent him from stealing shoes and phones (both very sought-after items we were told). The thug ran off into the dark without accomplishing his crime but also without being apprehended. The boys handled the situation without waking us adults up. In the morning we were able to thank and reward the night watchmen personally.



For our journey to **Matusadona NP** we booked the small **Mhofu ferry** via WA +263 778 733 784 with Sonya McMaster for a charter departing from Chawara, a small harbour mainly used by fishermen. It's only a few minutes' drive from Warthogs or Lomagundi camps down the powerline road. We were greeted by smiling ferry owner Dave McMaster on his motorcycle and escorted to where three sailors awaited their cargo and passengers. The cost of the charter was USD500 for the entire ferry. It can take up to four vehicles of the size of Land Cruisers or two with trailers. The trip to Changa usually takes about three hours. Everybody enjoyed it. Such a soothing experience after a lot of driving.



We disembarked on **Fothergill Island** which shortened the trip by half an hour. From the island we were able to drive to mainland thanks to low water level in the lake. We saw zebra hippo and elephant on the vast grassy plains along the stunningly beautiful shoreline and the famous dead trees in the background. Next time we will allow for a couple of days in this part of the park as well, with hopefully more camping facilities available in the future near the eastern side of the park where wildlife seems more abundant than in the west. There are more "wilderness camp sites" in the planning. We navigated towards **Tashinga** meandering close to shore for as long as we could before taking the upgraded track connecting Tashinga and Changa. This took us all in all about 3h30m including a lunch stop.



The road network inside the park is being upgraded with heavy machinery we saw at the large and busy workshop at headquarters. **African Parks** 20-year management plan started only in 2019 and

already now, Covid-19 set-backs included the changes in infrastructure are enormous. Anti-poaching measures, reintroduction of animals and community-based partnerships and education are paramount to restore Matusadona back to its former splendour. We paid our fees for conservation USD25 pp, camping USD10 pp, tent rental USD30 per tent, and vehicle fees USD2. Here we met Tourism Manager Chris Chiparushe who had made this booking possible after many e-mails and initial difficulties to get us into a sort of self-catering accommodation, new and constantly changing. Contact: [chrispenc@africanparks.org](mailto:chrispenc@africanparks.org)



At the campsite we found the perfect setting for our family with four safari tents a central caged kitchen and a braai. Each tent had comfortable beds with duvets and crisp linen. They also provided towels. Electricity is solar with 220 V outlets available in the kitchen. Tented guests make use of the same two ablution blocks with permanent hot water and very clean toilets as all other campers. Tracey Pelham from AP management told me that in the near future each tent will get its own ablution and a small self-catering kitchen as part of their plans to increase tourism infrastructure.



**Tashinga campsite** occupies an entire small peninsula from where one can witness sunrise, sunset, moonrise all from the same spot with a 270° view. The atmosphere is very relaxed with seven or so camp sites spread out and each has at least one or two trees for shade and a concrete braai. The S/C safari tents are clustered on the western side. Houseboats are frequently seen on the lake.



We had one cheeky elephant in camp. African Parks has clearly identified him and will or has already warned him with chilli filled ping-pong ball shots to prevent him from getting naughtier than he already is. Up at the workshop they can't park vehicles under the largest Ana tree anymore because he stands on hoods to reach the branches. That morning he took a special interest in one vehicle at the campsite after picking up a scent from a bag tied on its roof rack. Trying to untie the bag with his crafty trunk he damaged the side awning structure and fabric whilst getting more impatient. We watched and took photos aside the owners of the vehicle standing next to the protective walls of the ablutions. The bull

circled their vehicle and tried again and again to get that bag down until we realized that he had to be chased away before more damage was to be lamented and did so with our vehicle.



Quite a moment there. But not enough. Later in the afternoon he came back for “his bag” but was surprised to find the vehicle had left. Instead, he turned towards a tree and almost did the “Boswell thing” to get to the upper branches.

Some of us went on a **sundowner boat cruise** with ranger Mickey and came back thrilled after witnessing a glorious sunset over Bumi Hills with bathing elephants and drinking buffalo. One night was especially busy in camp with a coughing leopard and the unusual visit of eight lions at the campsite, according to the person who was able to see them thru the tent gauze it was one adult male and juveniles/females. The Pelhams were very surprised to hear about the lions walking thru camp, so unusual it seemed to them.



Everyone would have loved to stay longer at Tashinga and in Matusadona in general, but we had to continue our journey. Forget, Chris’ assistant came to bid us farewell. She and all other staff who looked after us and the premises were terrific and full of praise for the work AP is doing in the park. Forget is from the first village just outside the park and has worked in Matusadona for the past 14 years. She is a descendent of the 50.000+ displaced Tonga people due to the construction of the dam and the flooding of the Lower Zambezi Valley in the 1950s. Her enthusiasm for the new Matusadona is contagious and it is wonderful to see how people respond to a well-managed project. I can only agree with her and am still metabolizing the effect this special place had on me.



## Matusadona – Maabwe Bay

We left mentally prepared for a very long day in the car for the trip from Tashinga to Maabwe Bay Camp. Distance is 270km and we accomplished it in **9 hours** without difficulties but also no real stops, just coffee in and coffee out.

(notes from my diary: 0830 dep Tashinga, 1100 Vulanchulia Field Station, 1200 Jct Karoi Bing Road, 1250 Bumi Hill Jct, 1330 Sengwa River, 1500 Chizarira Jct, 1550 Binga Jct, 1720 Maabwe gate).

First, we drove for about three and a half hours on the once dreadful 4x4 track out of the park and up the escarpment, but it is no longer that difficult. There are still rocky sections and a few sandy parts, but it is very doable, just very slow. African Parks invested a lot in repairing washes and did a lot of grading after the last heavy rains. Some sections are thru mopane forest with Tsetse flies sticking to the windows.



Older reports warned about the **Karoi - Binga gravel road**. While it is still corrugated in various degrees, it is generally a wide road thru forests and occasional views of the Chizarira mountains. Overall, the road was in better condition than expected but less scenic than often described. Perhaps in the other direction it is different. Due to the corrugation it's either drive fast 80km/h+ which we didn't or slow 40km/h or less which we chose to do, and therefore it took us 3h30m from the Matusadona NP Jct to the Chizarira NP junction. Then from there another 45min to the Binga junction where one reaches tar. We were impressed by the number of villages and their schools we saw and by the size of the school buildings and their excellent condition. No wonder that literacy rate is above 90%. We learned later that schools are built in part with funds and labour from parents and villagers. So, if there is any kind of anger or dispute regarding education, they will not damage infrastructure. We passed only two trucks that day, one loaded to the brim with people. Just before Manjolo village we took the turnoff towards Sebungwe and Maabwe Bay (no signage). The landscape begins to change with more open views and many baobabs.



Along this very scenic good gravel road we started to pass some beautiful indigenous villages with elevated round huts so typical in Tonga culture. The last 8km to **Maabwe Bay** are slow going over a sand ridge with some rocky sections. We announced our arrival at the electrified gate and help came to open it. At camp **Margot and Richard Donaldson** were expecting us warmly and had prepared three very well-equipped chalets for our family, all with fully equipped kitchens, bedrooms each with a private bathroom and air conditioning. Our chalet had even a little plunge pool.



Cost for accommodation was USD30 pppn, dinner USD10pp. Chalets are spread out on the little hill overlooking the private bay. On these premises are also a few of the “developed” campsites. The “wilder” campsites are a couple of km away behind the hill in a different bay from where also the fishing activities start. We enjoyed our prebooked dinner of bream and a teaser of the amazing, sweet water crayfish and shared stories and chatted with our attentive hosts. It would have been great to have an additional day for bream or tiger fishing with Richard. Contact: [margotld@icloud.com](mailto:margotld@icloud.com) WA +263 776 977 446 Margot and Richard Donaldson are consummate hosts, I highly recommend this place, both for camping and self-catering chalets. It's well worth to plan for more than just an overnight stop if you like to travel the back country roads and get to see how locals live and finish a dusty journey near water in a laid-back atmosphere with high standard creature comforts.



### Maabwe Bay – Hwange NP

For this leg of the trip, we backtracked the 8km over the Sandridge and then took a different gravel road to reach the main road towards Hwange in under an hour. The surface of that road was a seamless patchwork of repaired potholes in all shades of grey and was not too bad to drive on. Around Harare and other larger cities, we had seen men filling the holes with earth with shovels asking motorists for a small contribution, on this day the road maintenance team was a group of children on school holidays and their fierce little dog. Cautious driving for unexpected events is necessary at all times along this road





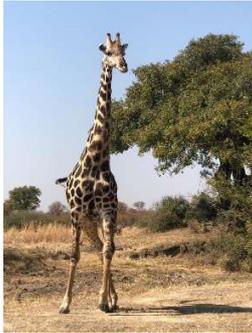
The scenery was very attractive, mopane forests gave way to different kinds of scrub and trees including larger leafy trees as we slowly climbed from 500m to over 1000m into the hills and villages got sparser. We encountered virtually no traffic at all on this route. In retrospective the entire Karoi-Binga-Hwange Road was the most beautiful drive we did in Zimbabwe, when speaking of land outside national parks.



Shortly after Gwai River bridge we were waved thru at the police check point once more. We never had to produce paperwork at any of the roadblocks. We reached **Crossroads** in **2h30m** from Maabwe. Crossroads is just what its name suggests, an intersection with a petrol station and a few basic shops including a local butchery for the very brave a bar and a general dealer with a bit of everything including very basic pantry food and farm supplies. We found all we needed: bottled water, sliced bread, eggs and chips at the shops and bought a few bananas from the ladies outside. Prior to deciding whether to enter Hwange NP at Sinamatella or Main Camp Margot had phoned the Total filling station (+263 717 158 785) for us to check diesel availability. The drive from Crossroads via **Deka** to **Hwange Main Camp** took us one hour.



Zimparks reception office was busy, with several buses and safari vehicles parked outside. Registering and paying outstanding conservation fees of USD20pppn and vehicles USD10 consumed an hour. International visitors only profit from discounted entry fees when accommodated in Zimpark Lodges in Hwange (10USD instead of 20) but not when accommodated in other lodges at concessions. We entered the park proper thru the boom gate next to the freshly painted chalets without visiting main camp any further. Camp layout is generous and equally flat on this sandy expanse. It is very different from Sinamatella which is perched on a rocky plateau and enjoys fabulous views far into the plains below. Just after the boom gate and driving along the fence we saw a few chalets boasting a recent facelift.



We immediately spotted game, mainly giraffes and zebras. The landscape changed and opened the view onto plains and pans covered with long yellow grass. We had our lunch stop after 11km, and after half an hour on the bad road on **Nyamandhlovu** platform where a few crocs sunbathed below us and zebras drank.



We received an odd non-solicited advice from a visitor on the platform, a guide with tourists from Victoria Falls who said we should not attempt the terrible road to Kapula Camp on the Shumba Road but rather backtrack to Main Camp, exit the park, take the tar, and re-enter at Sinamatella. I bit my lips. The bad corrugations got a bit better after Shumba. Along the way we stopped at all the pans with water and saw so many elephants buffalo and impala. It was most busy at Roan Pan. We reached **Kapula Camp** 2h30m after our lunch stop and were warmly greeted by William the attendant of **North Camp**. He looks back on 12 years looking after guests at Kapula self-catering camp. He cleans up the kitchen and does the dishes, prepares the fires for donkeys and starts the braai and makes up the rooms. Each of the independent North and South camps has 4 double tents and a central tented social area with an outdoor braai, a kitchen, dining area and living room on a wooden deck. **North Camp** can only be booked by one party at a time or on half camp basis of 2 tents. At South camp individual tents can be booked, and the rates a slightly lower. Cost for the entire north camp was USD740 per night and included use of the 5<sup>th</sup> room, the guide tent. The main area is laid out very generous with a good kitchen, a bar, dining area, and a large deck with comfortable chairs. Very tasteful and comfortable furnishing and well-chosen cooking and dining equipment. 2 large fridges and a big freezer to keep food and drinks.



Tents 1, 2 and the guide tent are located to the left of the social area and tents 3 and 4 to the right. People staying at tents 1 and 2 must drive to and from after dark since those tents are farthest away. All tents enjoy a view of Kapula vlei with its small waterhole and Ana trees. An electric fence limits the vlei with the camp area but to the back the camp is open and animals including elephants roam freely inside camp. Each tent has its own donkey for hot water for the indoor and outdoor showers. William announced that we would have hot water every second of our stay. The bathroom boast double sinks

and a separate flush toilet. Interior furniture is made of very beautiful dark wood and includes clothes rack, a large four postered bed with mosquito net, and a writing desk. The generous veranda with outdoor furniture opens to the vlei and invites to enjoy private time.



Kapula is located a 10-minute drive from Masuma Dam and an hour from Deteema Dam via a short cut. The Masuma Dam attendant and the caretakers at Kapula are in radio contact. One evening Adorable the super friendly attendant on duty at the dam radioed William about half an hour after sunset to inform him of the arrival of lions at the water. William did not pass the message on until the following day, knowingly that some of us might want to bend the rules a bit, as it is only a short drive. In fact, Masuma is so close that the hippos can be heard clearly at night.



### **Masuma Dam Hide**

has a very popular thatch roofed viewing platform and a well-maintained shady camp for more than one party at a time, flush toilet, hot shower, and braai stand. Adorable, short Adi was the attendant on duty. Mornings were quieter in terms of other visitors and with better light for photography. There are several large crocs and about a dozen resident hippos in the dam. Buffalo and elephants come in the hundreds to drink.



It is wonderful to just sit and watch and wait. There is always something going on. We feared for a baby hippo underestimating the intimidating effect its mother has on predators. Afternoons are also wonderful with dramatic sunsets and surreal scenery caused by the stirred-up dust. Camping here is most definitely a highlight of a Hwange visit.



**Deteema Hide** was also in tip top condition and with a new shower and solar panels for hot water. The toilet looked clean and had a fresh coat of paint. The road network around Deteema has been drastically reduced with the opening of Deteema Springs Camp by Machaba Safaris just opposite the dam at the old pic nic spot. Two of the roads circling the waterhole we wanted to take were closed off with no access signs. There are no trees for shade here.

#### **Hwange – Kasane via Victoria Falls**

We all left Hwange NP via Robins Camp and Matetsi Safari Area, but some of us had to leave a day earlier to make it on an outbound flight from Kasane the following morning. They left Kapula early and had time to include an afternoon visit to the thundering **Mosi-Oa-Tunya** after 10 years since they first visited the Victoria Falls and enjoyed a stroll along the footpaths to the different lookout points. For no frills and good value accommodation with convenient access on foot to visit the falls and with safe parking for the vehicle with all valuables inside **The Shearwater Explorers Village** met all the parameters and their food at the bar and restaurant was also good. It was only commented that sleeping in a kind of parking lot in one of the lined-up furnished dome tents was a very funny experience. But beds were comfortable and snoring neighbours absent.

#### **Hwange – Kasane via Pandamatenga**

We oldies left a day later from Kapula along the 8km shortcut to the junction with the main road to Robins Camp. From here 15km to Deteema in total one hour and from there to the Salt Pan its half an hour drive along mostly scorched land from previous fires. There was nice bird activity at the salty

waters though. **Big Tom's** tower viewpoint with pumped water and along the small Tom River offered no sightings noteworthy but a reminder of lesson No.1 to never ask occupants of a safari company game drive vehicle how their morning was. You will be guaranteed a punch in the stomach. A cheetah with cubs. Hard to digest, more so when you learn that you just drove past the area where they were seen.



The scenery between Big Tom's and Robins Camp became increasingly more verdant as we drove along the riverbed. Unfortunately, no photos. The track was a bit rutted in places and bore testimony of how unpassable or heavy muddy it must get here during and after the rainy season. Total distance from Kapula to **Robins Park Gate** was 67km and we needed 3h30m including the different stops. We left with want for more, it would have been great to have another couple of days at Robins Camp.

16km after the gate is the turnoff without any signage towards **Kazuma Pan NP** (another item on the bucket list) and **Pandamatenga border**. In fact, some of us couldn't grasp that this was a road towards an international border post. It is a very scenic drive which we greatly enjoyed to the extent to have a pic nic right on the road under a shady tree since anyway no traffic was to be expected. Daytime temperature was close to 34°C. We passed a few tiny streams and big was the surprise to see crocs in them.



Very little used Pandamatenga border post reopened on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, after more than two long years. We were the second vehicle and probably the last one to pass on that day. Operating hours are from 08.00-16.00. Officers on both sides were very professional and very friendly. Remembering the odyssey at Beitbridge one admires these fellows who must do all the different paperwork on complex computer systems between two or maximum three persons on each side. Foot and mouth disease preventive shoe dip and vaccination QR code scanning was done on Botswana side but no fees were collected opposed to what the young family experienced when entering Botswana at Kazungula. Total time for formalities including a friendly chat at both border posts was less than 40 minutes.

Right at the Botswana border gate begins the 105km tar road to Kasane. It is a good road with a few potholes only but a lot of trucks. In stark contrast to Zimbabwe's wild and natural scenery we passed seemingly endless expanding flat fields where potatoes and other crops are being cultivated with sophisticated artificial irrigation systems.

We reached **Kasane** right on time for a punctual hand-over of our rental vehicle at the parking lot of our centrally located accommodation **Chobe River Cottages** on President Ave where we had booked two of the self-catering Bungalows for USD160 each. They offer breakfast and meals too. Oratile at the reception is a charming knowledgeable and helpful lady who can arrange birding outings from the private mooring, guided Chobe NP daytrips, airport transfers, etc. The Spar is only a 2 minutes' walk a block away. CRC was the perfect place to end our journey and get ready for a long trip home.



### Vehicle Specs and Comments

We drove two Land Cruiser 79 rented from Bushlore. One was a model 2018 with 165.000km on the clock and the other one a 2022 model with barely 18.000km. The 2018 model was just over the 3-year age limit for rental as per Bushlore specs, but in good condition and had almost brand new Hankook Dynapro MT2 tyres. The fuel tank capacity of 130l was paramount since consumption was high. Average 6,59km/l or 15,17l/100km. Worst on sand or when driving at 120km on highways. We carried 2x20l jerry cans for reserve but didn't need them as fuel was available both at Chipinda Pools and Crossroads which were our two critical spots. The 96kW 6cyl 4.2l Diesel engine has very poor power. Climbing hills on tar even some trucks were faster. However, the offroad performance of the vehicle was very good and river crossings with these kinds of vehicles gave us peace of mind. Passengers on rear seat enjoyed the large windows but suffered from intense heat on the sunny side. Luckily, we brought car sunshades from home. It was tight for the three long boys and required a lot of goodwill and brotherly love and parental patience. The rear suspension of the 2018 model was a bit tired and the permanently low mounted trailer hitch banged too low for the rocky section mainly on the Pombadzi track and the road out of Matusadona. We did not investigate the electrical power supply problem on the 12-V fridge of the 2022 model any further once we were unable to solve it with a new battery which was reimbursed in full to us by Bushlore.

One-way rental was a good choice given the limited number of leave days from school and work. The R.6000 extra fee per vehicle was very much worth it to minimize transfer days. We handed over the vehicles in Kasane opposed to driving back to Johannesburg. We know from previous experiences that to do so in an enjoyable way one needs minimum three extra days. With the one-way rental we returned the vehicles at 5 pm, slept in beds and were able to fly out the next morning from Kasane via Johannesburg to South and North America the same night. It was an awesome trip. Zimbabwe will see us again!

