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Traveller

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THE JOURNEYS ISSUE

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SPECIAL ISSUE

TOURS DE FORCE

There are those routine, workaday journeys from A to B, and then there are the life-reaffirming journeys, where getting from A and B matters less than everything encountered in between. Welcome to this special issue showcasing not only the advantages of an organised tour, but also Traveller's inaugural Journeys Month. Over the next four weeks – and beginning with this magazine-style issue – our writers invite you on a series of memorable journeys from A for Australia to Z for Zimbabwe. Enjoy the rides.

Photos: iStock

SAFARI | ZIMBABWE

African ark

Once a threat to wildlife, the world's largest man-made lake is now an Eden, writes Catherine Marshall.

On the morning I'm due to take a boat across Lake Kariba, storm clouds ruff the horizon and wind whips the water into a meringue. We've scarcely cast off when skipper Eddie Penduka turns back.

"Too dangerous," he says.

A sigh escapes my lips; I feel like Jesus rebuking the storm on the Sea of Galilee. But as with that Biblical tale, a miracle ensues: sunlight pierces the brume, sinks in a pall of gold dust and subdues the waves. The storm clouds disintegrate and their tendrils waft off, tails between woolly legs. The lake becomes a sheet of rumpled silk, the sky a dome of blue.

This is the Kariba I'd seen yesterday, on the flight from Victoria Falls to Bumi Hills Safari Lodge at the start of my safari with The Classic Safari Company. Somewhere along the muscular flow of the Zambezi River, the lake had begun to swell, blue blood clotting a muddy artery.

When the river was dammed in the 1950s to facilitate a hydroelectric project, Kariba became, by volume, the world's largest man-made reservoir.

It expanded the fluid border between Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). The valley upstream from Kariba Dam wall was submerged and tens of thousands of Tonga people displaced.

"It was not an easy thing for those people to leave this place," says specialist guide Mike Padiwa. "They lost everything – economic, social, cultural. They left behind ancestral burial grounds."

Aquatic creatures spread out in their enlarged premises; I'd seen crocs sunbathing on the shoreline and hippos loafing in the shallows as the plane approached the airstrip behind the lodge, which is part of the African Bush Camps portfolio.

Starvation Island stretched beside me, a marooned hilltop that became a refuge for terrestrial wildlife as the tide rose.

In a six-year-long mercy mission dubbed Operation Noah, which concluded in 1964, Rhodesia's chief game ranger, Rupert Fothergill, rallied teams to help rescue more than 6000 creatures stranded here and on other islands: leopards, lions, buffaloes, rhinos, zebras and even snakes were relocated to the mainland. Some antelopes remain on Starvation Island, whose name denotes the meagre sustenance left behind for these castaways.

Still, the lake has its silver linings. Holidaymakers float about on houseboats; villagers take the ferry to do their shopping in the town of Kariba, avoiding the laborious road trip; fishing has become a primary

Clockwise from opposite page: a game drive spots elephants; Bumi Hills Safari Lodge overlooks Lake Kariba, Zimbabwe; a pair of waterbucks by the lake; view from the lodge's swimming pool; a luxury dining experience at the lodge.

industry. To preserve stock, fishers are forbidden from going out for seven days around the full moon. But the moon is waning, and they're getting ready to sail.

"You'll see tonight," says guide Rufaro Nebiri. "It will be like a floating town with all the lights."

The becalmed lake is empty when we cast off for the second time; even the crocs and hippos are concealed beneath the murky wavelets.

Penduka steers us into open water. From here, I'm better able to map the southern shoreline – the iridescent floodplains, the Matusadona Mountains girding the horizon like ramparts, the lodge windows winking from Bumi Hills' brow. We round a bluff, glide into an inlet and come ashore near the Ume River, the western boundary of Matusadona National Park.

"It is time to be a part of the ground, to really be a part of it," says Padiwa, unsheathing his rifle in preparation for our bushwalk. "One of the golden rules is whatever we see out here, we should not be turned into an athlete. It's not an option. Otherwise, you leave the safety of your guard's protection."

Theoretically, there's plenty to send me scattering: leopard, lion, elephant, buffalo. Fothergill's mercy mission helped establish Matusadona, where much of the rescued wildlife was relocated.

The park suffered later, during the country's economic downturn, but a co-management agreement between African Parks and Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority has turned the tide. Tourism is growing, community welfare is strengthening and wildlife, abundant in this slip of land between the Kavango Zambezi and Lower Zambezi-Mana Pools transfrontier conservation areas, is safeguarded.

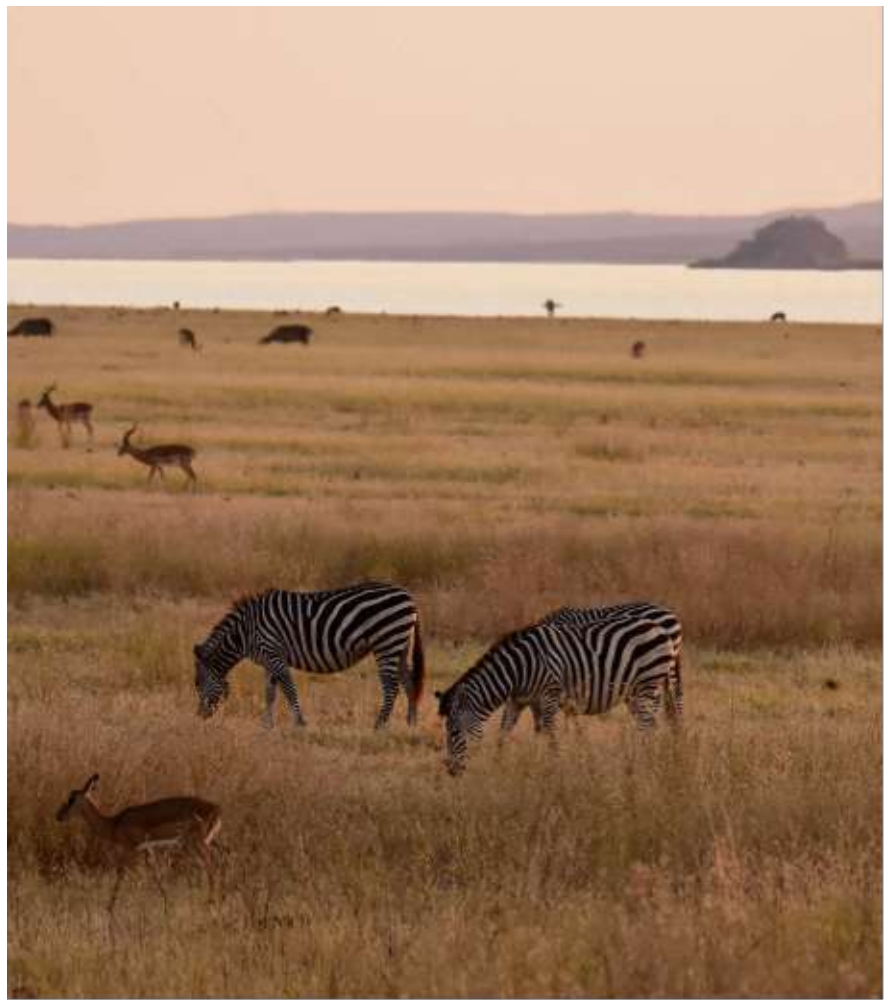
"We're actually quite a bottleneck on that [transfrontier] connectivity, which stretches all the way from Botswana in the west to Mozambique in the east," says park manager Michael Pelham. "We're incredibly lucky to have an organisation like African Parks that's committed to conservation and has the right approach to making a difference."

That bottleneck runs thin today. Padding through a baobab thicket, Padiwa and Nebiri check the red earth for clues. There's no trace of the elephants they'd expected to find here. Also in hiding are critically endangered Temminck's ground pangolins, Southern Africa's only pangolin species. Pangolins recovered from traffickers and poachers are being released here in an initiative run by the Matusadona Pangolin Project and the Tikki Hywood Foundation.

"This is a good habitat for pangolins," says Admire Mrewa, a monitor with the project. "There are plenty of burrows and plenty of food."

The buffet is monopolised today by pint-sized creatures: termites stockpile food; banded dragonflies pursue insects; African monarch butterflies sip milkweed nectar and clap their ochre wings; a honeyguide bird whistles a post-prandial dirge in the apple-ring acacia tree.

Back at our mooring, a pod of truculent hippos appears in the channel, their complaints subsiding as we exit the inlet and fall into the lake's embrace.



Clockwise from far left: grazing zebras; Bumi Hills Safari Lodge has 10 luxury lake-view suites; the endangered African pangolin. Photo (pangolin): iStock

In the late afternoon, I watch African fish eagles surfing the thermals above my cantilevered private viewing deck at the lodge.

Their melancholy song follows me back inside my suite – one of 10, all overlooking the lake – and out to a communal infinity pool whose sill blurs with Kariba's boundless blue.

The raptors are still airborne as Nebiri steers the LandCruiser along the airstrip, now occupied by a herd of kudu, and turns towards the floodplain.

Noah's Ark seems to have spilled out from the woodlands: rutting impalas, carefree warthogs, patrician zebras, shifty marabou storks, their legs shellacked white with guano. They scatter when the elephants arrive, a herd of bossy mothers and timorous babies.

"There are ups and downs – elephants are smaller here, they like to overnight in the thickets, so they must climb," Nebiri says. "When it is very dry in August, September, October, you can see even 200 [elephants on the lakeshore], because the inland ponds are dry."

As they slurp from this great draught delivered by a feat of human engineering, we park at a distance and alight for our own sundowners: icy G&Ts.

The sky is a plate of burnished copper, the lake a pan of molten brass. Two men spearfish from a dugout, their bodies strokes of ink embossed upon the conflagration.

Darkness falls back at the lodge and as Nebiri promised, the lake becomes a floating town kindled by the fishing rigs' lights. In honour of that ephemeral settlement, I sup on pan-fried tilapia.

Our waiter Tabvuma Siamusune's hometown of Kariba glitters on the far shore. More than half of his colleagues come from Mola, a village south of here that benefits from the upsurge in tourism as well as the educational and human-wildlife coexistence programs implemented by Bumi Hills Safari Lodge.

Also reshaping lives is African Bush Camps Foundation's Women in Tourism program. Throughout the company's properties, women are being appointed as guides, hostesses, camp managers and chefs.

"I hope to acquire knowledge in all departments," says program participant Kuzivakwashe Nasho as she sells me handmade crafts in the gift shop after dinner.

The 21-year-old dreams of working in tourism after completing this final assignment in the nine-month program. "You can come to my graduation in Bulawayo next week!" she says.

Alas, I'll be gone by then. On my final day Nebiri takes me back out on the lake. The trunks of drowned trees stand along the shoreline, tombstones signposting a submerged cemetery. Only their reflections disturb Kariba's once-capricious surface.

So polished is this lake, so shatterproof, I might climb out of the skiff and walk across water until I reach the shore.

THE DETAILS

FLY
South African Airways flies from Sydney to Johannesburg, with Australian connections on codeshare partner Virgin Australia; Airlink flies from Johannesburg to Victoria Falls. See flysaa.com; flyairlink.com

STAY
The six-night Somalisa and Bumi Hills safari costs $4290 a person including transfers from Victoria Falls, meals, game drives and water-based activities. See classicsafaricompany.com.au

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The writer travelled as a guest of The Classic Safari Company and South African Airways.