

LAKE KARIBA AND MATUSADONA NATIONAL PARK

In the late 1950s, construction of the Kariba Dam created one of the world's greatest man-made lakes: Lake Kariba. Hydro-electric power was the driving goal, and the dam's output remains very important to Zambia and Zimbabwe. However, the price for this apparent progress was very high: nearly 60,000 people were moved and about 5,500km² of the middle Zambezi Valley was flooded with water.

On the lake's southern shore, Matusadona National Park was created to protect the game that had concentrated there. The park is bisected from southwest to northeast by the steep Zambezi Escarpment; the larger, southern side of the park lies on the rugged plateau, about 600m above the northern section, which stands at the foot of the escarpment.

Matusadona's lower northern section is the attraction for most visitors. Here, close to the lakeshore, you'll find a scattering of small islands, once the tops of rugged hills, and many iconic forests of drowned, skeletal trees. As with most ecosystems which have been so disturbed by man, this one took years to settle down – and it wasn't until the 1970s that torpedo grass spread across the floodplains beside the shore. The resulting nutritious meadows swiftly attracted increasing numbers of buffalo, which spend much of their time in the late dry season by the shoreline.

Matusadona National Park still has large herds of buffalo, usually attended by good numbers of lion. Leopard and spotted hyena are the park's other major predators. It's the last stronghold on the lake for black rhino, too, although the rugged land behind the shore means that tracking them on foot is physically very demanding.

The more common antelope found here are impala, zebra, kudu, waterbuck, bushbuck, grysbok and klipspringer. Elephants are seen everywhere, often paddling between the islands, and hippos and crocodiles are very common.



A confident crocodile, unperturbed by our boat

Around this shoreline there used to be many lodges, one or two of them even floated offshore. Now the area is quieter, with just a couple of active lodges. Rhino and Musango are both small, owner-run operations offering great game experiences; Bumi Hills is very different, but works well as a more luxurious stop which offers both relaxation and more gentle game options.



The bare trunks of drowned forests feature in most views of Lake Kariba's shoreline

RHINO SAFARI CAMP

Rhino Safari Camp stands on Rhino Island, within Matusadona National Park. In fact this is an island only when water levels are high; when they are low, it is connected to the mainland.

The camp has seven, simple, spacious A-frame chalets, each set back from the shoreline on stilts. Roll-down reed blinds shade each chalet's open sides, whilst mosquito nets and twin beds stand under the thatched roof. Slightly lower than the bedroom, the open-air en-suite bathroom has a flush toilet and a hot shower.

A raised lounge and dining room is the focal point for the camp, and at night this is lit very atmospherically by candles and lanterns. (There's a system of solar electricity for charging camera batteries.)

Rhino Camp is perhaps the best base for drives, walks and boating trips (birdwatching and fishing) around the park – with first-rate professional guides. Despite parts of the camp being in need of an upgrade, the gentle hosting and gracious hospitality of its owner, Jenny Nobes, coupled with her obvious love for the area, make this classic safari camp well worth visiting.

MUSANGO SAFARI CAMP

On an island just outside the national park, **Musango Safari Camp** is another small, well-established, owner-run safari camp. Its eight tented chalets each use a traditional tent as a bedroom and a stone structure as a bathroom (including a flush toilet and hot shower), all under a high, A-frame thatched roof. Each is set in dense vegetation facing the sunrise across the lake. Paths through the thick bush lead to a two-storey thatched main area overlooking the lake – with a dining room, an upstairs viewing platform and a convivial fire outside.

Steve Edwards, a former head warden of Matusadona National Park, set up Musango in 1990. Steve is an old-school Zimbabwean safari guide of note, and an active figure in local conservation circles, with an encyclopaedic knowledge that goes beyond the wildlife to the local landscapes, history, ornithology and palaeontology. Steve's expert guiding – from birds to large mammals – is a big draw for visitors.

Activities from Musango include walking safaris and game drives, both inside and outside the national park, as well as boat cruises, canoeing (two- and three-seater



Canadian canoes), visits to a dinosaur fossil bed and even yacht excursions for 2012. Fishing trips are possible, and in the past a world-record tigerfish was caught nearby. There's also the option of a visit to a local fishing village, which we felt was handled very well and sensitively.

BUMI HILLS SAFARI LODGE

Situated on a hill beside the lake, **Bumi Hills Safari Lodge** has views south to the Zambezi Escarpment and north over the vast expanse of Lake Kariba. For many years it was part of a top hotel group; now it is privately owned. As optimism returned to the country in 2009, its 20 luxurious rooms were completely refurbished.

Each of Bumi's rooms has a tiled en-suite bathroom, a fan, air conditioning, a minibar, a safe, a tea/coffee station and a veranda. The ten 'premium' rooms are much larger than the others and each has a spectacular lake outlook.

The central areas at Bumi Hills are large, very comfortable and set around an open

courtyard and its inviting swimming pool. In the guest lounge are substantial sofas in neutral tones, plus a fireplace for the cooler months, and a small library. There's a terrace bar, TV room and a restaurant with indoor and outdoor tables – the latter with a lovely view over the lake. Wi-Fi access is available, although the connection is often imperfect. You'll also find a small spa with a steam room, Jacuzzi and massage area.

Land activities from Bumi – game drives and walks – focus on its own private game area, which extends below and around the lodge. This includes a long stretch of lakeshore, but is outside Matusadona National Park itself. Water activities on the lake are also available, including game-viewing and birdwatching trips by boat. Fishing, cultural tours to local fishing villages and even a tour of a nearby crocodile farm complete the options.

Bumi Hills has an amazing location and still feels more like a smart hotel than a bushcamp – yet there's enough to do that a few nights of relative luxury here won't feel out of place in most safari itineraries.



Saddle-billed stork fishing