

MANA POOLS NATIONAL PARK

Leaving Lake Kariba, the Zambezi River continues through the huge rift in the Earth's crust, widening and slowing down as it meanders through the Lower Zambezi Valley. It is flanked by Zambia's Lower Zambezi National Park (see pages 122-123) on its north bank, and Zimbabwe's Mana Pools National Park to the south. The valley's scenery is stunning, with the languid Zambezi River stretched across the horizon, reflecting the islands and sandbanks against a backdrop of the distant escarpment.

Over millennia, the wide, slow Zambezi River has continuously carved new channels through the mineral-rich volcanic soils, just as it abandoned old courses. The most recent of these form long, curving pools, whilst older ones have long dried up, leaving grassy 'vleis' in their place. Both are lined by tall, broad-leaved trees like mahoganies and ebonies – and surrounded by woodlands of huge old acacias. It's very beautiful.

Mana Pools National Park was designated in 1963. Almost uniquely, the park's authorities have always encouraged walking, which has

habituated animals to people on foot. Thus, many of the game species are relatively relaxed when encountered on foot. Set this scene within tall woodlands with sparse undergrowth to understand why Mana Pools is one of Africa's best parks for walking safaris. In 1984 it became a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

From its soil to its game densities, Mana is naturally rich. However, rich 'black-cotton' soil has a drawback: it is impassable when wet. Thus, during the rainy season (Dec–Mar), access is difficult and all the lodges

close. Then, when water is everywhere, the game spreads out – up to, and into, the southern escarpment. Later in the dry season, the rains end and the scattering of temporary pools dries out. Then the animals concentrate near to drinking water, around the pools and river. Herds of elephant and buffalo frequent this area – and groups are commonly seen swimming across the river to browse on lush green islands.

Kudu, waterbuck, zebra, bushbuck, impala and many other antelope are common in Mana. Eland do particularly well, as do the predators. The environment is perfect for leopard, which make great use of the trees; lion and spotted hyena are very common, and mana is a real stronghold for wild dog, which are often seen. Meanwhile, the rich vegetation helps Mana to maintain a great diversity of birdlife.

RUCKOMECHI CAMP

The seasonal Ruckomechi River marks the western boundary of Mana Pools National Park. For several decades, **Ruckomechi Camp** has stood at its confluence with the Zambezi. A few years ago the camp was rebuilt 2km upstream with ten lovely tented chalets, all widely spaced along the river. Each has canvas walls, a high canvas ceiling, great views over the river and French doors which open onto a private, shaded, wooden veranda.

Each bedroom has very comfortable double or twin beds, a useful writing table, a leather chair, and good places for bags and hanging clothes. A screen of river pebbles divides this from an open-plan bathroom, which has showers inside and out, and a copper washbasin in the shape of a dug-out canoe. (The camp's honeymoon suites also have outside baths.)

Ruckomechi has an airy and open dining room, a bar/lounge area, a small library, a small infinity pool and a small circular seating area that juts into the river like a tiny pier. Water activities include boat trips and catch-and-release fishing trips (bring your own kit!), as well as short 3–4-hour canoeing trips in Canadian-style canoes.

On dry land, 4WD game drives and walking safaris are led by qualified walking guides. Both usually remain within the camp's private concession – a lovely area that is half in the national park, and half outside it. To explore further east into the national park, ask us to book a private vehicle.



VUNDU CAMP

Beside the Zambezi, **Vundu Camp** stands in deep shade. Eight canvas chalets are hidden in the vegetation, each with shade-mesh windows and thatched roofs. The beds are swathed in mosquito nets, whilst wicker chairs and a table form a small 'lounger' area. The open-air en-suite bathroom is large, with a flushing toilet, a hot shower and locally crafted washbasins. Vundu's raised lounge/dining area/bar area is large, open and very relaxed. Like the tents, it's comfortable but fairly simple.

Vundu is owned by Nick and Desiree Murray who are both 'Zim-Pro' guides. Nick has a degree in zoology and wildlife management and 20 years of guiding experience. Desiree was the first woman to be awarded Zimbabwe's prestigious 'Best Guide of the Year' award – and even guided the travel editor of The Times when we sent her to Mana Pools in the late 1990s!

The real attraction is this camp's top-quality guiding – from a small, hand-picked team including some top-flight freelance guides. Between them, they lead consistently excellent 4WD game drives, walking safaris and half- and full-day canoeing trips. If you want superb guiding and are happy to forgo some luxuries, then Vundu may suit you.

KANGA CAMP

We visited **Kanga Bush Camp** as it opened, in 2010. It's a sister camp of Linyanti Bush Camp and Khwai River Camp in Botswana (pages 104 & 89), and Somalisa Camp in Hwange (pages 152–153). Kanga stands beside a large lake-like waterhole known as Kanga Pan. Unusually for Mana Pools, this is about an hour's drive south of the river.

Kanga Camp has six welcoming Meru-style tents with large mesh windows. Inside are low-voltage lights and comfortable beds. A canvas divide separates the bedroom from the flush toilet and a zipped door leads to the open-air bathroom, where a walk-in shower and washbasin have a great view. (The honeymoon/family suite also has a large, free-standing bath.)

Beside the waterhole, a sculpted canvas roof links huge old jackalberry trees with its taut curves. Beneath it, on a raised wooden platform with open sides, are the camp's lounge and dining areas, a reading corner and a relaxed bar.

Thick vegetation around Kanga means that short drives aren't always productive. However, relaxing in camp and watching the waterhole is – with some excellent game coming down to drink. Equally, whole-day drives (including walking sorties), which go north to explore the floodplains and terraces of the park's riverfront, are exceedingly rewarding. Canoeing, fishing and birdwatching trips on the water are also possible. Kanga is a small, high-quality bushcamp with excellent standards. It makes a good destination in Mana – but also combines well with the camps on the riverfront if you'd like a longer stay in the park.

GOLIATH SAFARIS

Goliath Safaris have a seasonal tented camp beside the river, which has six well-maintained but fairly simple Meru-style tents, each with an en-suite toilet and shower. Although nameless (!), it is compact and secluded, and remains set up here for six months every year – so it's about as permanent as any 'seasonal camp' can be. Under a shady tree at the centre of camp you'll find an open-plan bar, a lounge area and a remarkably well-established dining room.

The big draw in this well-run camp is Stretch Ferreira, its charismatic host, owner and chief guide. Walking, canoeing and 4WD safaris feature, often combined together into a morning or afternoon. Stretch has been guiding in Mana for many years and leads many of the safaris himself. He knows some of the park's individual animals, and will often approach them exceedingly closely on foot. Come here for great guiding and intimate encounters with big game.

PRIVATE CAMPS AND CANOE TRAILS

In addition to Mana's fixed camps, we work with several smaller, seasonal tented camps. These vary considerably in size and comfort – but almost all are set up beside the Zambezi.

Often we'll arrange a small, private camp for just for a few nights, for one or two guests – typically using comfortable dome tents, bucket showers and a long-drop toilet. These are usually run by a couple of camp staff, in addition to your 'Zim-pro' guide. Such small 'fly-camps' are great for



walking trips, or for stopovers on a longer canoe safari, or perhaps for a few days' wild camping out at Chitake Springs.

On a more substantial basis, some camps are set up for a few weeks, or even months, and are used by different guests. One camp like this is **Zambezi Lifestyles**, run by the Kanga Camp team. It contains four fairly sizeable, Meru-style twin-bedded tents, each with en-suite bathroom facilities including a flush toilet and an outdoor bucket shower. This combines well with Kanga, and usually has a minimum stay of three nights. On a similar basis, **Little Vundu** is run by the Vundu team and has a permanent location; it's often used as a private camp by small groups or families.

Seasonal camps like this, large or small, give you access to a very wild experience, usually with a top professional guide and activities that often focus on walking and canoeing. The river here is spectacular, so trails by Canadian canoe, typically lasting two to four nights, are amazing experiences. Be aware though that the crocs are large and hippos numerous in Mana Pools' stretch of the Zambezi River. While we can have you guided by some of the best in the business, canoeing trips here are not for the faint-hearted and are not completely devoid of risk.

Crawling up for a closer look – don't try this without an expert guide!



Kudu are common throughout Zimbabwe