

MATOBO HILLS NATIONAL PARK

Just south of Bulawayo is the region's main attraction, Matobo Hills National Park. This is a relatively small national park, covering only about 425km², but its history, scenery, rich vegetation and game make it one of our favourites; it's a very underrated park.

The scenery of Matobo Hills is arresting. Huge piles of granite boulders litter the landscape; giant smooth whalebacks rise up from the plains; rocks balance on rocks at improbable angles. Perhaps this is why the area has attracted people for millennia. It boasts one of the highest concentrations of rock art in Africa, painted by San/Bushman people. Later these hills became sacred to the Ndebele people, and were subsequently chosen by Cecil Rhodes as his last resting place. More recently, they have attained the status of a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Around 20% of the west of the park, the Whovi Wilderness Area, is securely fenced off as an intensive protection area for rhino. This is actively patrolled by teams of game

scouts and provides a safe haven for a very high density of both black and white rhinos.

In the rest of the park, the more obvious game includes bushbuck, impala, zebra, kudu and giraffe, plus baboon and monkeys. Dassies, or rock rabbits, are very common, and provide food for the world's highest concentration of spectacular Verreaux (black) eagles – and a density of leopards which is also reputed to be very high. Klipspringers are in their element here, and the beautiful sable antelope are often seen, too. With fresh water, lush vegetation and a variety of different habitats the park is a great destination for birdwatchers.

Currently there are no lions, elephant or buffalo in the park.

There are two small camps here, both situated on private land within the hills, just outside the park. Although these are a little dated, they have started to upgrade – both to meet modern health and safety regulations, and to be more comfortable. Both organise activities with a guide which range from trips to historical sites in the national park, including Khoisan rock art, to game viewing, birdwatching and walking safaris. It's possible to track white rhino on foot with very good chances of finding them.



Tracking rhino in Whovi Wilderness Area

BIG CAVE

Located on a smooth granite whaleback, blending in amongst the boulders, **Big Cave Camp** is just a few kilometres from the park's boundary. It is family owned by Dave and Caron Waddy, with whom we've worked since well before Zimbabwe's recent troubles.

Big Cave Camp has seven thatched, A-frame cottages, each with its own en-suite bathroom and a private balcony, plus a honeymoon suite and a family room for couples with children. These are solidly built, and have good views from their small verandas.

The main area of Big Cave has a natural rock pool and a sundeck beside the rocks. There is also a lounge and bar area incorporating one of the many large boulders into its design, and a small library. After dinner, a campfire is often lit on the rocks.

AMALINDA

The more stylish of these two camps is **Amalinda**, with nine rooms nestled amongst the hills – including two recently refurbished suites. All are highly individual and scattered around a boulder-strewn hillside, with great efforts made in the design of most rooms to incorporate the granite boulders. Most have stone and polished-concrete floors and thatched roofs, and all are tastefully decorated with antiques and one-off pieces of furniture.

Paths to link the rooms wind through the hillside's boulders, joined by sections of wooden walkways and even the odd small bridge. These also lead to a shady lounge and dining room, a campfire between the boulders surrounded by comfy seats, and a cosy library. A separate tiny 'chess room' is particularly secluded.

In a more level area is a large swimming pool with comfortable loungers and a bar, as well as a very small 'spa' room – which offers massage treatments, manicures and pedicures. Notable among Amalinda's guides is an engaging archaeologist, Paul Hubbard, who brings the history of the hills alive.

