

# Escape into the wild

Wild campsites have the ability to make you feel a million miles away from the tedium of your daily routine, but they're not for the faint-hearted. Often they're at the end of treacherous roads with few facilities, and when the fire dies down there's no stopping visitors of the four-legged kind from slinking in to investigate.

Satisfy your wild side at these 10 campsites. By Villiers Steyn.

## Lesholoago Pan

Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, Botswana  
GPS: S24.94049°, E22.03115°

Mabuasehube is a little block on the eastern tip of Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park and consists of a series of pans, along the edge of which most of the game-viewing in this region takes place. Each pan is surrounded by a number of unfenced campsites. Currently water is being pumped for animals at only two pans, Mpayathutlwa and Lesholoago.

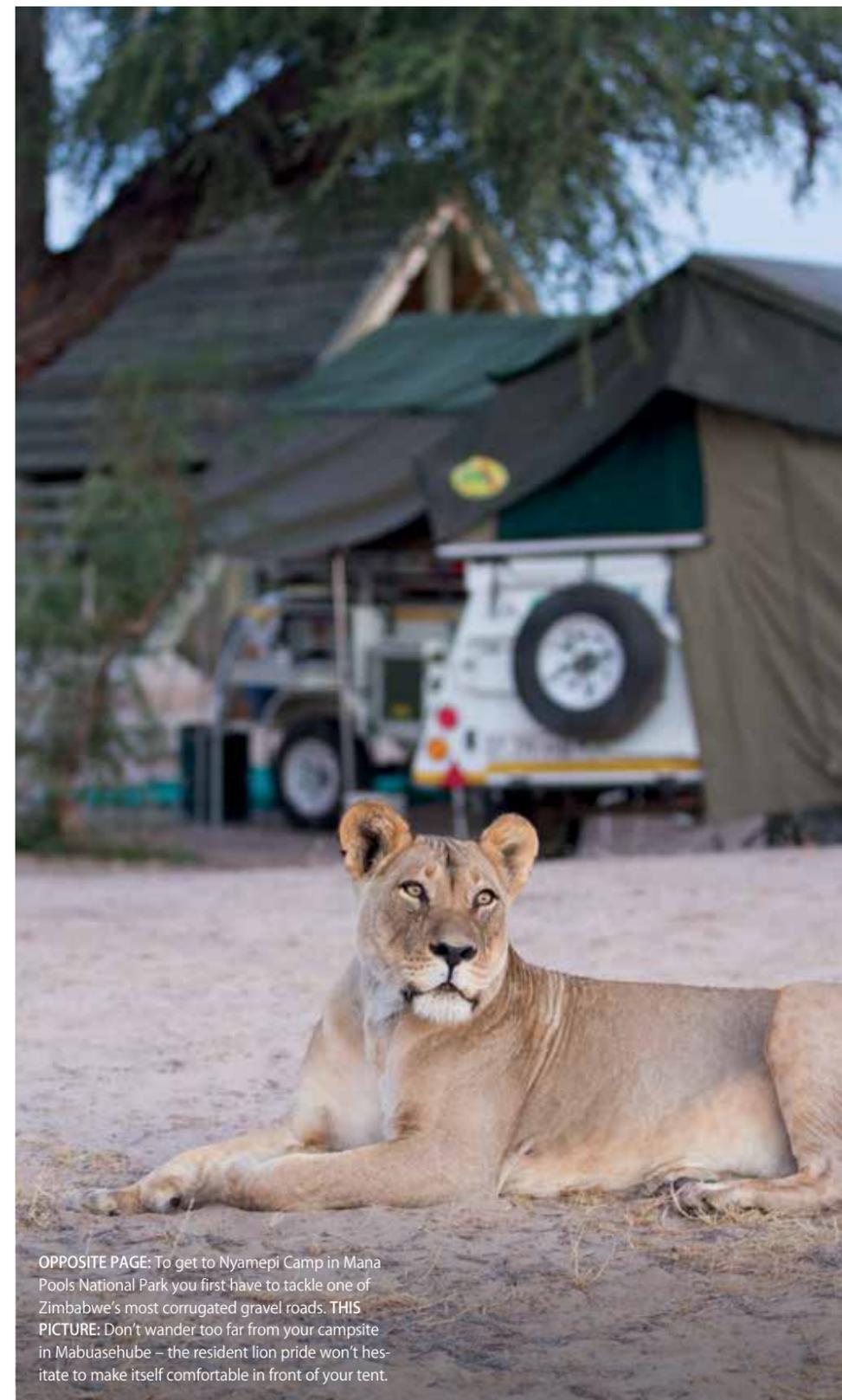
There are two campsites at Lesholoago, on opposite sides of the pan. No. 2 is most popular, because it's located just a few hundred metres from a waterhole, which attracts large numbers of game throughout the day. It also has a working tap in the campsite itself; as a result you'll have to put up with other visitors stopping by to fill up with water.

I prefer to camp at Lesholoago No. 1. It's a bit more isolated, but still only five minutes' drive from the waterhole. Each campsite has a wooden A-frame that provides welcome shade during the heat of the day (and sometimes serves as a jungle gym for rambunctious lion cubs) and a neat long-drop toilet and shower cubicle where you can hang your own bucket shower. The resident lion pride makes a habit of keeping Lesholoago's campers awake, so look twice before answering nature's call at night – the king of the Kalahari might just be waiting in the doorway of your tent.

**DO THIS:** Park next to the pan's waterhole early in the morning and late in the afternoon and watch as brown hyenas, bateleurs and other creatures come down to drink.

**COST AND CONTACT:** Entrance costs from R23 a person and R5 a vehicle a day. Camping is from R34 a person a night. Tel +267-318-0774, email [dwnp@gov.bw](mailto:dwnp@gov.bw).

**TIP** If you want to avoid the occasional interruption of other visitors looking for water, book site No. 1. The water from No. 2's tap is undrinkable, but ideal for showering and washing dishes. >



OPPOSITE PAGE: To get to Nyamepi Camp in Mana Pools National Park you first have to tackle one of Zimbabwe's most corrugated gravel roads. THIS PICTURE: Don't wander too far from your campsite in Mabuasehube – the resident lion pride won't hesitate to make itself comfortable in front of your tent.

### Mahurushele No. 3

Khutse Game Reserve, Botswana  
**GPS: S23.28445°, E24.38987°**

Of Khutse's five camping areas (each with three to 10 private stands), Mahurushele No. 3 is the most comfortable and secluded. It has a neat and clean long-drop toilet, bucket shower and braai area, as well as a huge camelthorn tree under which to pitch your tent.

It's impossible not to keep an extra close eye on the golden Kalahari grasses that line the campsite, especially if you hear lions roaring close by during the night (three roads lead in different directions from Mahurushele No. 3, so you have a good chance of picking up the pride on an early-morning game drive if you know where they were calling from). Quiet and very isolated, it's quintessential Kalahari camping – the kind of place where you can switch off easily.

**DO THIS:** Drive down to Molose Waterhole, about 24 kilometres southwest of Mahurushele Pan, to spot the local lion pride that comes down to drink fairly frequently, especially early in the morning and late in the afternoon.

**COST AND CONTACT:** Entrance from R139 a person and R58 a vehicle a day (pay to Botswana Parks before arrival, tel +267-318-0774, email [dwnp@gov.bw](mailto:dwnp@gov.bw)). Camping costs from R194 a person a night (max. eight). Book through Bigfoot Tours, tel +267-395-3360 or +267-391-0927, email [reservations@bigfoottours.co.bw](mailto:reservations@bigfoottours.co.bw), [www.bigfoottours.co.bw](http://www.bigfoottours.co.bw).

**TIP** Take along an ultraviolet black light to search for scorpions at night. They're common in the campsite, especially after rain.



### Masuma Dam

Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe  
**GPS: S18.73057°, E26.28093°**

In the heart of Hwange National Park, Masuma is a picnic site by day and a very popular exclusive campsite by night. Complete with flush toilets and donkey boiler shower, the comfortable thatched hide overlooks a shallow dam and man-made trough, which attract large numbers of game between June and October when the surrounding mopane veld is a dusty wasteland. Sitting inside the hide, it feels as if you're in an arena, watching a late-afternoon procession of elephants come down to quench their thirst, often walking within touching distance of you, before they lull you to sleep at night with their deep rumbles.

**DO THIS:** Although there's a good network of roads around Masuma, you'll probably see more game by staying in the hide during the early morning and later afternoon. Remember to take comfortable camping chairs.

**COST AND CONTACT:** Entrance costs US\$15 a person and US\$15 a vehicle (valid for seven days). Camping is from US\$150 a site a night for six people and US\$25 an extra person a night (max. 12). Report to Sinamatella Camp before heading to Masuma Dam. Email [bookings@zimparcs.co.zw](mailto:bookings@zimparcs.co.zw), [www.zimparcs.org](http://www.zimparcs.org).

**TIP** To stay at Masuma during the busy dry season, you'll need to book a year in advance. For an extra-special experience, organise your trip over full moon, when you can see animals at night without a spotlight – with a good pair of binoculars it's almost like daylight game-viewing!



### Namuskluft

Rosh Pinah, Namibia  
**GPS: S27.86714°, E16.86666°**

Tucked away in a narrow valley and surrounded by mountains, you'll find this tidy little campsite. The four spacious stands, each with green grass and a shady tree, are maintained with the kind of personal touch you often see on the privately owned farms on Namibia's quiet back roads.

The attention to detail is obvious in well-designed, sheltered braai areas; immaculate communal ablutions (with flush toilets and hot showers) and the meticulously packed rocks that line the pathways and mark out the campsites. A generator provides power in the early mornings and evenings. It's the perfect little *kuier* camp, where groups of friends can enjoy one another's company around a roaring campfire.

**DO THIS:** Within walking distance of the campsite is a swimming pool surrounded by shade cloth-covered benches – the perfect place to spend hot summer's afternoons in southern Namibia, where temperatures often go above the 40° Celsius mark. A little further afield, look for quiver trees on the mountain slopes of |Ai-|Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park, about 13 kilometres away and just south of Rosh Pinah.

**COST AND CONTACT:** Camping costs R60 a person and R20 a vehicle a day. Tel +264-881-223-543, email [kluft@iway.na](mailto:kluft@iway.na).

**TIP** Keep your camera ready to catch the very relaxed *bokmakieries* (a type of bush-shrike) hopping around the campsite at dawn. >



## WILD CAMPING

### Ruaha Public Campsite

Ruaha National Park, Tanzania  
GPS: S7.67826°, E34.94073°

The public campsite at Ruaha National Park in central Tanzania is simply a small, open patch of earth on the banks of the scenic Great Ruaha River. It has a tiny ablation block with flush toilets and cold showers, but there's no fence or electricity and you'll have to share a single shady tree with the local wildlife. The first time I camped here, a lioness was sleeping under it upon our arrival. By nightfall that day, we'd seen 40 lions – and this was during a lush summer, which isn't as good for game-viewing as the dry winter months (June to October), when the riverbeds teem with animals. You can find a similar sense of isolation elsewhere, but what makes this campsite so special is the thrill of not just knowing the animals are around, but being able to see them on your doorstep.

**DO THIS:** Explore the Mwangusi River, north of the campsite. Roads on either side of its banks provide views over the riverbed, known as a favourite hangout of leopards.

**COST AND CONTACT:** Entrance is US\$30 a person and US\$40 a vehicle a day. Camping is from US\$30 a person a night. Report to Msembe Headquarters before pitching your tent. [www.tanzaniaparks.com/ruaha.html](http://www.tanzaniaparks.com/ruaha.html).

**TIP** To keep marauding hyenas and curious lions out of your campsite, erect a makeshift alarm system on the perimeter. Fill empty cooldrink cans with pebbles and fasten to heavy-duty fishing line stretched between a series of storm pegs about 15 centimetres off the ground. It works like a bomb!



### Chipinda Pools

Gonarezhou National Park, Zimbabwe  
GPS: S21.28441°, E31.91429°

There may be no such thing as the perfect campsite, but stand No. 9 at Chipinda Pools in the northern sector of Gonarezhou is about as close as you can get. It not only has a spectacular view over the Runde River, but it's also located far from the other eight unfenced stands, making it very private. The stand is large, flat and predominantly in the shade, with two braai areas (one raised and one on the ground) and it's just a few steps away from one of three communal ablation blocks with hot water and flush toilets. But the best thing about it is the small thatched lapa with a table in the middle and comfortable cement seating. To top it all off, a friendly attendant comes to clean it every day.

**DO THIS:** Drive down to the base of the Chilojo Cliffs and watch elephant bulls quench their thirst in the riverbed. There's a picnic site here, so pack some sarmies.

**NEED TO KNOW:** Although you can reach Chipinda Pools throughout the year, the reserve's scenic central parts are often inaccessible during the rainy season (November to March).

**COST AND CONTACT:** Entrance is US\$4 a person a day and US\$15 a vehicle once off. Camping costs from US\$15 a person a night. Campsite No. 9 has the best location and view of the Runde River, but is relatively small. No. 7 is ideal for larger groups. Email [bookings@zimparcs.co.zw](mailto:bookings@zimparcs.co.zw) or [gonarezhoureservations@gmail.com](mailto:gonarezhoureservations@gmail.com)

**TIP** Drive slowly through the Runde River – if you hit the water too hard you may damage the radiator. I know this from first-hand experience.



### Kapishya Hot Springs

Northeastern Zambia  
GPS: S11.17137°, E31.60101°

Kapishya Hot Springs is a welcome oasis on the treacherous, pothole-covered Great North Road in northern Zambia. The retreat has a rustic campsite on the banks of the Manshya River, complete with flush toilets, donkey showers with hot water and braai facilities, but no power.

After a long day on the road, dip your feet in the main hot spring, which is about the size of a squash court – chances are you're not going to want to get out. In fact, you'll undoubtedly end up submerged in the crystal clear water, which stays at a constant 40° Celsius throughout the year, so be prepared to play hippo for a day or two longer than anticipated. The campsite is very basic, but comfortable thanks to a couple of thatched gazebos and cement braai spots. It's located in a riverine forest and thus very shady.

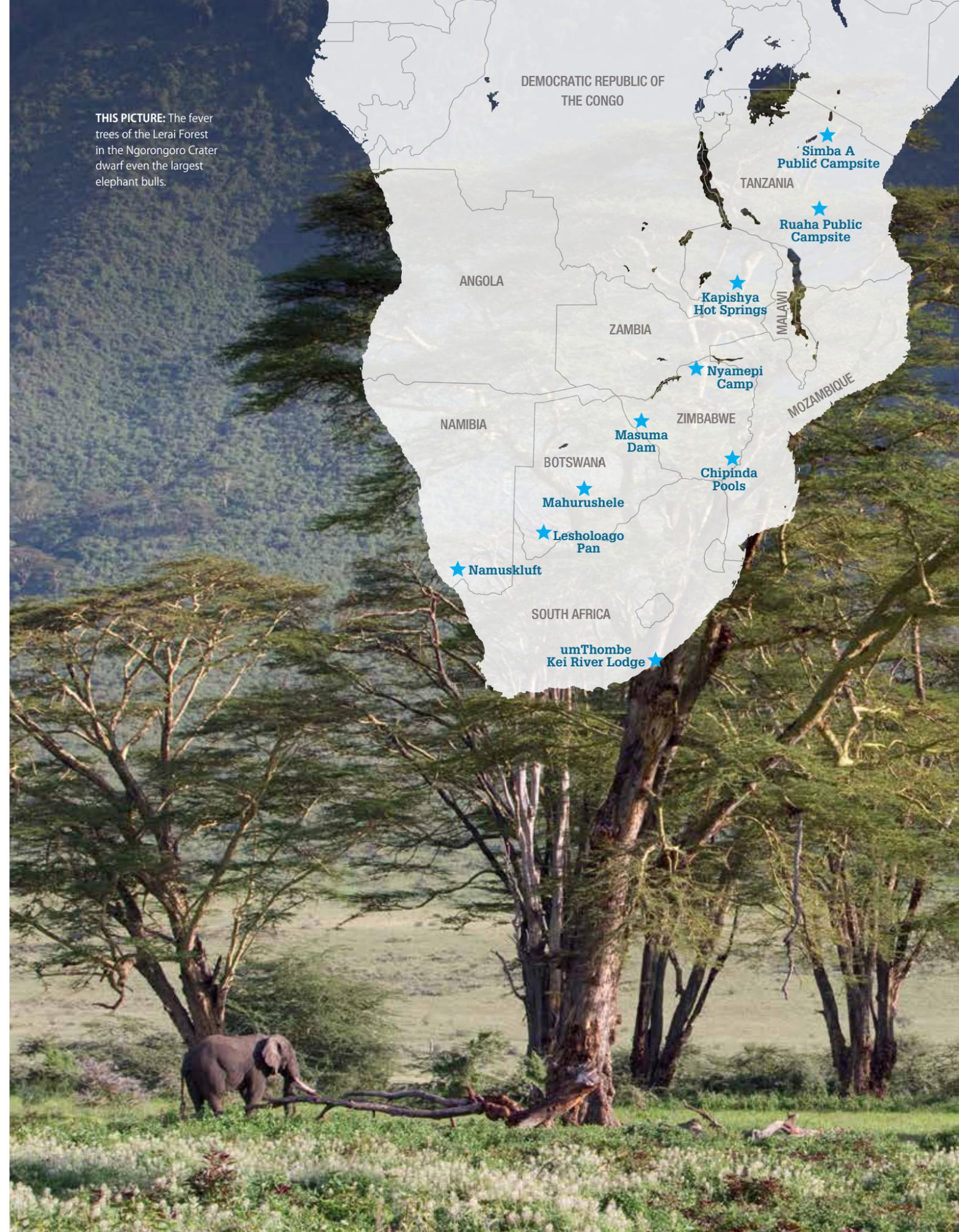
**DO THIS:** Visitors can pre-arrange a number of outdoor activities at Kapishya, including game drives, mountain biking, river rafting and birdwatching walks. Spot the rare Ross's turaco in the raffia palm forests surrounding the hot springs. Look out for the flash of its crimson wings and listen for loud, guttural cawing.

**COST AND CONTACT:** Camping is from US\$14 a person a night. Tel +260-97-697-0444 (Mark Harvey), email [kapishya@shiwafaris.com](mailto:kapishya@shiwafaris.com), [www.shiwafaris.com](http://www.shiwafaris.com).

**TIP** The gravel entrance road to Kapishya Hot Springs can become extremely muddy after rain; don't attempt to drive it without a 4x4 when it's wet. >



**THIS PICTURE:** The fever trees of the Leraï Forest in the Ngorongoro Crater dwarf even the largest elephant bulls.



## WILD CAMPING

### Simba A Public Campsite

Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Tanzania  
GPS: S3.22799°, E35.49027°

Simba A is a hub for overlanders visiting Tanzania's popular northern safari circuit and has two communal ablution blocks with flush toilets and warm water. There are no demarcated stands on the unfenced lawn and it's usually covered with row upon row of dome tents, making your chances of camping in private about as good as driving into the Ngorongoro Crater free of charge ... but that doesn't mean it isn't wild. During the day, relaxed elephant bulls pop in for a drink from the plastic reservoirs and wily yellow-billed kites steal snacks from your hands. At night, buffalo bulls and bush pigs mow the lawns, while you dream of the crater floor so clearly visible from the edge of the campsite.

**DO THIS:** Spend a day exploring the base of the world-renowned Ngorongoro Crater. Early mornings are the most productive for game-viewing along the crater floor, but late afternoons when the traffic subsides make for quieter and more pleasant drives.

**COST AND CONTACT:** Entrance costs US\$50 a person and US\$40 a vehicle a day, plus an additional US\$200 a vehicle to drive into the Ngorongoro Crater. Camping is from US\$30 a person a night (pay at the entrance gate to the Ngorongoro Conservation Area). Simba A is operated on a first come, first served basis, but rumour has it you'll never be shown away – they just squeeze you in. [www.ngorongorocrater.org](http://www.ngorongorocrater.org).

**TIP** Pack warm clothes for evenings. Since the rim of the crater is more than 2000 metres above sea level, it's always cold at Simba A.



### umThombe Kei River Lodge

Wild Coast, South Africa  
GPS: S32.63304°, E28.35115°

With its large lawns and plenty of shade, this jungle-like campsite on the banks of the Kei River has a Garden of Eden feel to it, making it easy for you to forget about tar roads and shopping malls. Since there are no demarcated stands, campers simply choose their favourite spot under a tree. The communal bathrooms have two flush toilets and hot showers (one of each for men and women) and the campsite has no power. umThombe is set in a lush valley only a ferry ride away from the southern tip of the Wild Coast, making it the perfect place from which to explore the rolling hills of one of South Africa's most under-developed stretches of coastline. A 4x4 is essential if you want to tackle the eight-kilometre dirt road to the lodge during the rainy season from September to March.

**DO THIS:** Row one of the camp's kayaks down the Kei River (free of charge) or tackle one of five hiking trails (500 metres to four kilometres) and search for rare birds such as Knysna woodpeckers and brown scrub-robins.

**COST AND CONTACT:** Camping rates are seasonal and start from R50 a person a night. Tel 082-570-6000, email [reservations@umthombekei.co.za](mailto:reservations@umthombekei.co.za), [www.umthombekei.co.za](http://www.umthombekei.co.za).

**TIP** If you plan to explore the Wild Coast's back roads, make sure you have Slingsby's Wild Coast map in the car (about R85 at Outdoor Warehouse). It's incredibly detailed and shows every little dirt track and back road, as well as filling stations, clinics, viewing points.



### Nyamepi Camp

Mana Pools National Park, Zimbabwe  
GPS: S15.71988°, E29.36666°

With poorly marked, overgrown stands and somewhat dilapidated communal ablutions, Nyamepi can hardly be called neat, but that's not why you come here. Indeed, you'll quickly forget the shoddy facilities as you watch hippos come into the campsite to graze. Senses are heightened and you're almost guaranteed to go home with stories of close encounters of the wild kind. The showers are hot, the toilets flush, and it's almost impossible not to camp in the shade since the campsite lies in the dense riparian vegetation of the Zambezi River. Nyamepi attracts plenty of game, especially in winter (May to October) when animals from far and wide descend on the Zambezi. Elephants, hippos, lions and even wild dogs amble through camp as if you're not even there. You're allowed to get out of your car anywhere in Mana Pools and may wander on foot wherever you like, without a guide. The freedom is phenomenal, but it's worth remembering your place in the food chain: respect the animals' space.

**DO THIS:** Buy a fishing permit at reception (US\$20 a day) and reel in a few tigers from the banks of the Zambezi River.

**COST AND CONTACT:** Entrance is from US\$15 a person and US\$15 a vehicle. Camping costs from US\$100 a stand. Email [bookings@zimparcs.co.zw](mailto:bookings@zimparcs.co.zw), [www.zimparcs.org](http://www.zimparcs.org).

**TIP** Don't wander around the campsite alone at night – people have been killed by wild animals here. Use a torch to scan the surroundings and get into your tent or car when any dangerous creatures come too close. ■



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