



Seen from Gonarezhou's iconic Chilojo Cliffs, the winding Runde River and the pools it forms are the lifeblood of the region in the dry season (May to October).¹

GLORIOUS GONAREZHOU

ZIMBABWE'S BEST-KEPT PARK

MENTION WILDERNESS DESTINATIONS AND MABUASEHUBE, SAVUTI AND MANA POOLS SPRING TO MIND, BUT THERE'S ONE THAT TRUMPS THEM ALL. WORDS BY TABBY MITTINS. PHOTOGRAPHY BY VILLIERS STEYN.

After three-and-a-half hours of standing in seething immigration queues, shifting and shuffling in every direction but forward, you may be tempted to quit. Don't. Just empty your head and concentrate on the promise of Gonarezhou; the perfect antidote to insidious fixers and Beitbridge border officials' intimidation tactics. The crossing is enough of a shark-infested ocean to protect a perfect paradise from hordes of regular holidaymakers, but even with this in mind, we were feeling pretty

grim by the time the sharks had stamped our passports.

Then like a soothing balm on our scalded nerves, the whistling trill of green pigeons and the booming laughter of hippos welcomed us to Chipinda Pools for our first night in Gonarezhou National Park.

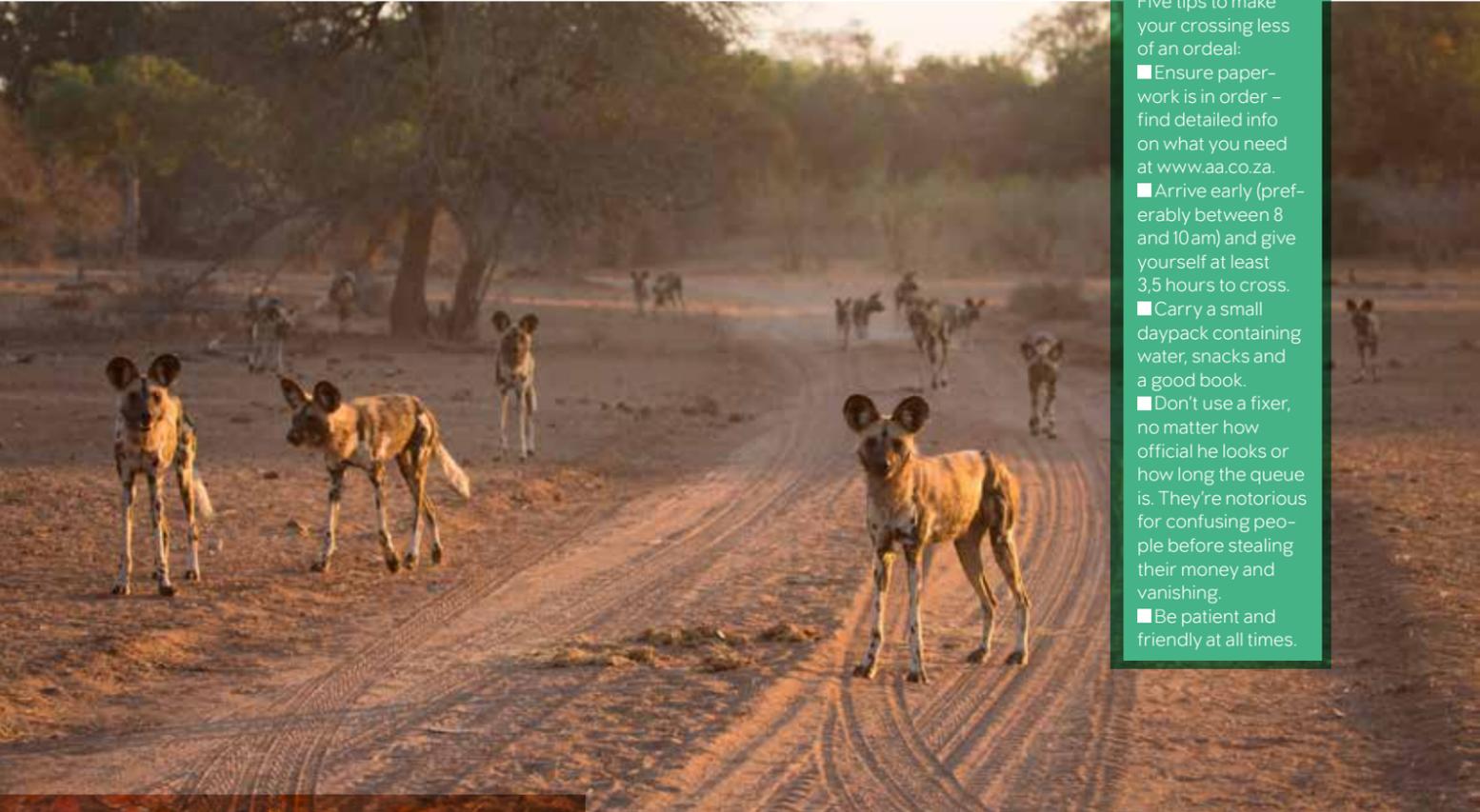
The park in Zimbabwe's south-east and on the Mozambican border has had its share of tribulations. Established in 1975, it was closed during the Rhodesian and Mozambican civil wars, until eventually re-opening in 1994 – just in time to feel the pressure of the drop in tourism caused by Zimbabwe's political turmoil. Even the formation of the Greater Limpopo Trans-frontier Park (GLTF) in 2002 – which now links Gonarezhou's robust landscapes to Kruger

National Park and Mozambique's Limpopo, Banhine and Zinave national parks – hasn't had a marked effect on visitor numbers. For officials, these are uncomfortably low – for adventurous travellers like us they were just about perfect.

This doesn't mean the facilities are decrepit; rather the opposite. The campsites are practically designed and wonderfully situated on the banks of the Runde River. And as we watched a herd of elephant on the opposite bank, we couldn't help but wonder why similar camps in Hwange and Mana Pools, both of which we'd recently visited, aren't as well kept.

DRENCHED IN DIVERSITY
A freshly graded gravel road led us to Hlaro, our second

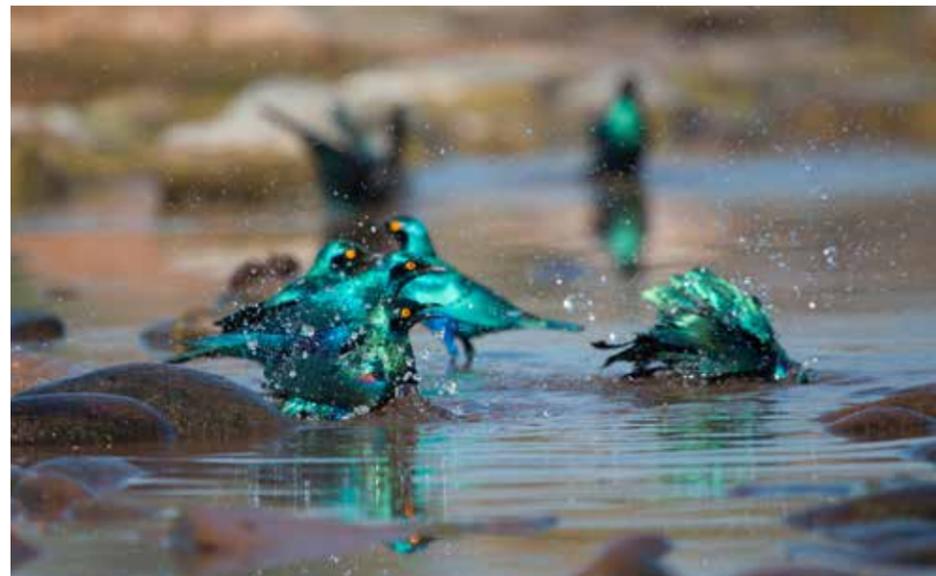
We knew thee rich Okavango Delta-like pockets of life in the park's north would be hard to beat



BEAT THE BEITBRIDGE BLUES

Five tips to make your crossing less of an ordeal:

- Ensure paperwork is in order – find detailed info on what you need at www.aa.co.za.
- Arrive early (preferably between 8 and 10am) and give yourself at least 3,5 hours to cross.
- Carry a small daypack containing water, snacks and a good book.
- Don't use a fixer, no matter how official he looks or how long the queue is. They're notorious for confusing people before stealing their money and vanishing.
- Be patient and friendly at all times.



The Gonarezhou Predator Project, a joint initiative by the Frankfurt Zoological Society and Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority, monitors the movement and numbers of the park's larger predators, including African wild dog (top). This healthy pack of 18 was seen near Swimuwini in the south. The best time of year to visit the park is in the dry season from May to October, when birds and game congregate along rivers and the dusty orange and yellow hues of the broken mopane veld (above left) dominate. Shallow pools in the Runde riverbed are irresistible to local birdlife and visiting photographers. These remarkably relaxed greater blue-eared starlings (above right) are just one to tick off on the list of more 400 bird species, including Senegal lapwings, southern ground hornbills, and rare racket-tailed rollers.

campsite. We'd mentally prepared for an arduous morning of deflating tyres and digging sand from under the chassis (we'd heard the road can be tricky), but the spade stayed tucked away in the back and we arrived early to spend the rest of the day in our private patch of shade overlooking the Runde River, watching the wildlife and birdlife that throngs the surroundings.

Gonarezhou is home to an astonishing 400 bird species, only about a hundred less than Kruger, a park that's four times its size. On top of that, Gonarezhou is home to a long list of rare antelope, including roan, sable, Sharpe's grysbok and oribi. This impressive menagerie is thanks to the park's heterogeneous landscapes, which vary dramatically in underlying geology and altitude. They're incredible – from palm-studded alluvial plains a mere 100 metres above sea level in the north to sandveld woodlands more than 500 metres higher in the south. In all, the park contains 10 vegetation types and a little under a thousand plant species.

We visited in the dry season, when life in Gonarezhou revolves around its three perennial rivers – the Runde and Save rivers in the north and Mwenezi River in the south – and the pools and natural oases they leave behind in late winter (August to October). In the heat of the day, these pools are irresistible to animals and birds; upstream from our Hlaro we crept to within five metres of a flock of greater blue-eared starlings to photograph them bathing – they aren't rare, but there were hundreds of them and they were enjoying the pools so much they barely paid us any attention.

And there's more. Though Gonarezhou's diverse flora attracts a vast array of animals,

its breath-taking landscapes are enough of a reason to visit. Perhaps only Kudu Island in Botswana's Makgadikgadi Pans can rival the park's Chilojo Cliffs in grandeur and few visitors leave without a photo of the iconic caramel-vanilla-striped sandstone outcrops, that jut out from the earth like giant wafers. And from the top, the Runde River, its banks lush with vibrant yellow sjambok pods in bloom,

birds – including flocks of ever-vigilant white-faced whistling ducks – watched us from the water, and elephants, waterbuck and impala came and went, sometimes milling at the edge of the water. We were excited to be heading south to explore the other side of the park, but we knew those rich Okavango Delta-like pockets of life would be hard to beat.



The enormous baobab is one of few tree species that can dwarf an elephant, but they take thousands of years to do so. Gonarezhou's most impressive baobabs are found along the Save and Runde river valleys.

snakes between multi-hued greens of tamboti, ana, sausage and nyala trees. Towering over them all are colossal baobabs.

Perhaps the most unexpected and incredible habitats are the bustling Machaniwa and Tembawahata seasonal pans, well-hidden wetlands tucked between long stretches of autumn orange, dusty yellow and speckled green mopane thickets near the Save-Runde confluence in the north of the park.

On our last day in the north, we settled in for a picnic on the bonnet beside Machaniwa. Crocodiles, hippos and wetland

JACKPOT!

The seldom-used 100-kilometre route to Mabalauta through the centre of the park was quiet, as we'd expected. Though we'd encountered scores of nyala, kudu, warthog, waterbuck, hippo, buffalo, enormous herds of impala, and even sable, ground hornbill and bushpig in the north, they were all a little skittish around vehicles (they don't see many), and the many elephants we'd come across were nothing short of terrified. Many are survivors from the Mozambican civil war and still bear the mental scars of their horrific slaughter less than

two decades ago. Needless to say, we gave them plenty of space and respect.

Driving up and down the Mwenezi River in the south of the park, we dropped in on a number of camps and picnic spots, eventually stopping for coffee on a rocky ledge overlooking Muwatomba Pools one of the most picturesque spots along the river. The site is labelled on the park map as an exclusive campsite, but it's clearly become a little-used picnic site. As we busied ourselves with the coffee, a splash in the deep, limpid pool below caught our attention. And there, gazing up at us, our first-ever Cape clawless otter.

Many bush lovers spend a lifetime searching in vain for these elusive river dwellers and we had a bird's-eye view of a hungry adult rummaging in the shallows.

Our last full day in the park was no less extraordinary. Heading back to Mabalauta Campsite at the end of an afternoon spent tracking lions we'd heard the night before, we turned a corner into an 18-strong pack of wild dogs. They looked at us with unbribed curiosity before trotting along the road into the fading light for the night's hunt – a pack this big can

only mean good things for the survival of this critically endangered animal.

It's unlikely that 2014 will see the end of Zimbabwe's political hurly-burly, but while Gonarezhou National Park is holding its own, brave the border and experience its bounty for yourself. Nowhere else in Southern Africa will you find as good a combination of spectacular scenery, animal diversity, and game-viewing, not to mention camping exclusivity. So pack your passport, hook up the trailer and take your seat for one of the best shows around.



Many of Gonarezhou's elephants are survivors from the Mozambican civil war when they were slaughtered for their ivory. Years of safety in the park have rendered some of the larger bulls entirely relaxed, but the majority are still wary of people.

PLAN YOUR TRIP

GETTING THERE

The most direct route from South Africa is via Beitbridge Border Post (you could skip this crossing by detouring via Mozambique and the Pafuri and Sango border posts). There are park gates at Mabalauta in the south and Chipinda Pools in the north, both of which sell a comprehensive park map for \$5 (about R50). Roads are gravelled, well sign-posted and, for the most, in good condition. You'll need at least a high-range 4x4 to get across some of the sandy river crossings in the popular north. If you plan to drive through the remote centre of the park, it's worth having a GPS with Tracks4Africa installed.

WHEN TO GO

Gonarezhou is best during the dry season (May to October), since large, very scenic parts such as the Save-Runde confluence become inaccessible during the rainy season (November to April). Book specific campsites well in advance and avoid South African and Zimbabwean school holidays.

STAY HERE

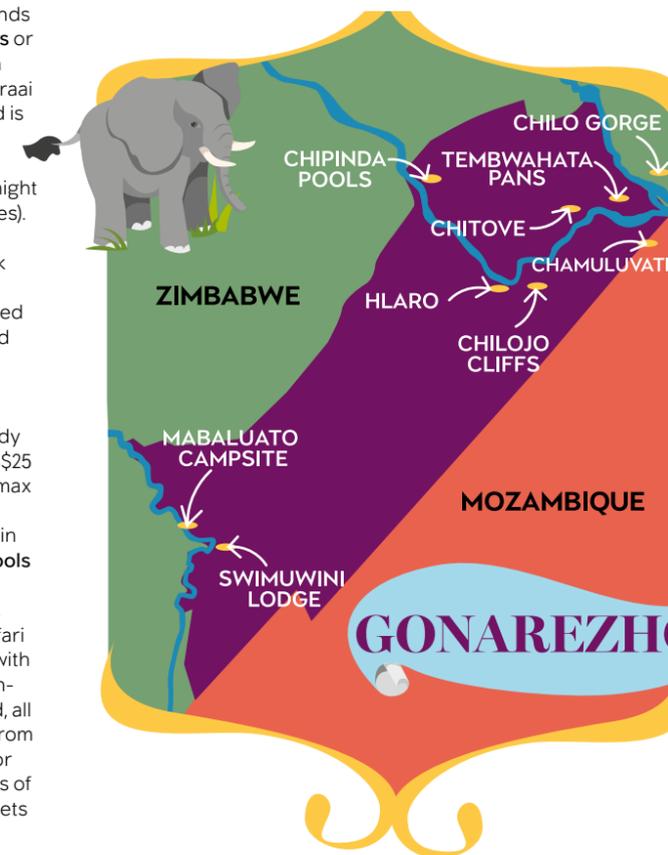
If you prefer to camp, book stands seven or nine at **Chipinda Pools** or stand three at **Mabalauta**. Each stand overlooks a river, has a braai area, tap and cement table, and is within walking distance of hot-water ablution facilities. From US\$15 (about R150) a person a night (max six people and two vehicles).

If you like to rough it and are completely self-sufficient, book one of the following exclusive campsites: **Hlaro** for unparalleled views over the Chilojo Cliffs and Runde riverbed, **Chitove** for tucked-away seclusion, and **Chamuluvati** for prime game-viewing. Stands have large shady trees and a long drop. From US\$25 (about R250) a person a night (max 12 people and three vehicles).

If you like your luxuries, stay in relative comfort at **Chipinda Pools Tented Camp** in the north or **Swimuwini Lodge** in the south. The former consists of four safari tents (up to four people each) with small kitchens, solar lighting, ensuite bathrooms, hot water and, all overlooking the Runde River. From US\$100 (about R1000) a night for two people. Swimuwini consists of nine fully equipped thatch chalets



Just nine private, unfenced campsites with thatched gazebos and views over Runde River, Chipinda Pools is ideal for those who prefer a wilderness experience to include flushing toilets and hot showers. Expect to share your campsite with the local wildlife – bushbuck, bushbabies, and the occasional elephant.



(one to three bedrooms) with electricity, but no hot water (communal ablution facilities provide that). From US\$75 (about R750) a night for two people.

For all the above, email bookings@zimparcs.co.zw or visit www.zimparcs.org for more information.

For even more luxury (we're talking four-poster beds, mini-bars and private balconies), head to the newly refurbished **Chilo Gorge Safari Lodge** just outside the park on the banks of the Save River. Self-catering from US\$200 (about R2000) and full-board from US\$700 (about R7000) a night for two people. www.chilogorge.com

NEED TO KNOW

Gonarezhou isn't the ideal family destination. It's much less developed than Kruger or Kgalagadi and has no swimming pools, shops, restaurants or information centres. All the camps are unfenced, making it dangerous for small children to play outside, especially after dark.

There are no petrol stations in the park. Fill up before you enter and take extra fuel for a long stay. The closest filling station to Chipinda Pools is in Chiredzi, about 60 km outside the park.

Buy wood at Chipinda Pools and Mabalauta offices for \$5 (about R50) a wheelbarrow-load, which should last at least two nights.

Pay entrance fees – \$4 (about R40) a person a day and \$15 (about R150) a vehicle for five days for SADC residents – in cash upon arrival.

The Lion and Elephant Motel, about 80 km north of Beitbridge, is an ideal overnight spot if you're driving to Chipinda Pools. Email lionandelephant@junglecomms.com to book. 📞

