

Gonarezhou

the light at the end of the tunnel

After spending a week in Zimbabwe's Gonarezhou National Park, **VILLIERS STEYN** and **TABBY MITTINS** believe there's more than enough reason to brave the Beitbridge border post.

PHOTOGRAPHS: BY VILLIERS STEYN

"The power is off."
"Again?"
It's midday. The heat and the million other people in the un-air-conditioned buildings of the Beitbridge border post have turned the air into thick, sweet treacle. I know the man behind the once-again-useless computer isn't to blame for their power cuts or the oppressive heat. The heaving crowds make it nearly impossible to maintain your place in the line, and the haphazard system barely manages to process the crowds. Border crossings always require a lot of time and patience.

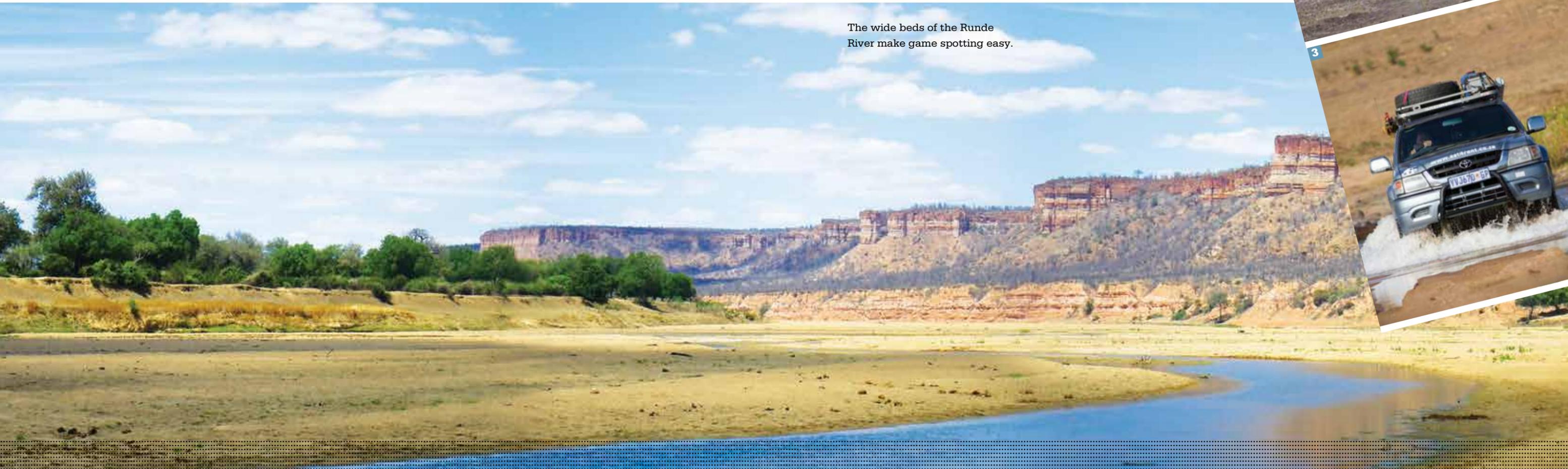
Once again I ask myself, why are we here? The answer floats out of the reddening mists of my exhaustion: Gonarezhou National Park. It had better be worth it.

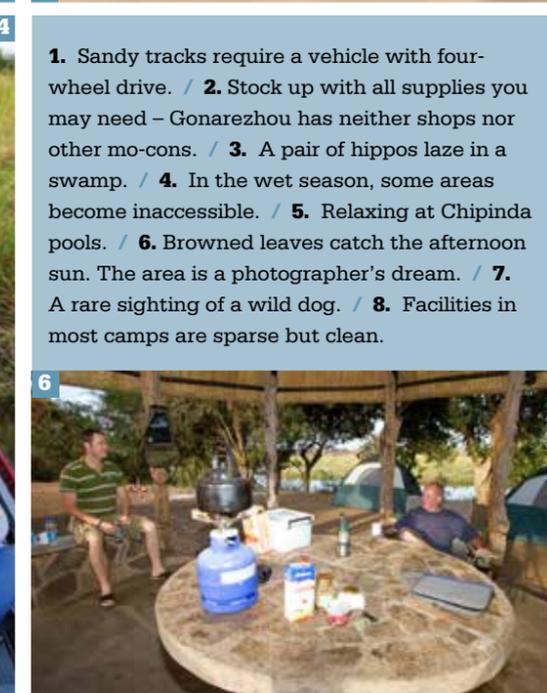
CHILLING AT CHIPINDA POOLS

It's a wonderful feeling getting into the bush, especially a reserve you've never explored before. After two days on the road and a nightmarish border crossing we can't help but have high hopes for Gonarezhou. Of course, only the week ahead will tell whether it's been worth the effort, but with rumbling elephants grazing along the opposite bank and green

1. Home for a week. / **2.** Elephants are among the star attractions at Gonarezhou. / **3.** Time your journey to avoid too much of the wet season.

The wide beds of the Runde River make game spotting easy.





pigeons trilling in the sycamore fig trees above us, we set up camp beside the Runde River and feel instantly at home.

Chipinda Pools, with its nine campsites and four permanent safari tents comfortably spaced along the river, is no bustling Kruger. Though it's one of the better-equipped camps in the reserve, the facilities are minimal, with limited hot water and only solar lighting in the tents.

It's clear to see, however, that a huge amount of effort has gone into maintaining what's here, and the result is a camp that is wonderfully rustic without bordering on derelict.

A DARK PAST

Relaxing beneath our thatch gazebo at sunset, listening to the laughter of hippos across the water, the tensions of Beitbridge, and in fact all of the outside world, begin to fade.

We had the impression that this Zimbabwean park at the back end

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ABOVE: The Hilux is dwarfed by a giant baobab, the signature tree of the eastern parts of Zimbabwe.

of beyond was old, neglected and only for the more adventurous visitor, but it soon became clear that we only scored one out of three in our assumptions. Its few basic and unfenced campsites and almost non-existent tourist facilities (don't expect shops, restaurants or swimming pools) mean that only bold and well-equipped wilderness lovers can stay comfortably for any length of time, but old and neglected it most certainly isn't.

Established in 1975, Gonarezhou is a relatively young reserve, especially when you consider it was closed for much of the Mozambican civil war (1977 to 1992) and, despite the low visitor numbers, it's surprisingly well maintained. Driving from Chipinda Pools to Lisoda and then to Hlaro,

1. Sandy tracks require a vehicle with four-wheel drive. / 2. Stock up with all supplies you may need – Gonarezhou has neither shops nor other mo-cons. / 3. A pair of hippos laze in a swamp. / 4. In the wet season, some areas become inaccessible. / 5. Relaxing at Chipinda pools. / 6. Browned leaves catch the afternoon sun. The area is a photographer's dream. / 7. A rare sighting of a wild dog. / 8. Facilities in most camps are sparse but clean.



TOP: Most campsites have basic amenities. This is Hlaro.

ABOVE: Gazing across the Runde River from Mabalauta. our remote and private wilderness camps for the next two nights, we sail along well-attended roads, bringing out the shovel only once, in the deep sand of a dry riverbed crossing.

Brand-new signs point us to the lofty heights of the park's iconic Chilojo Cliffs, from where we watch a herd of buffalo make

its way through the broken mopanes and giant baobabs along the Runde River below as a Verreaux's eagle glares up at us on his way past. Further into the park, we find fewer signs to lead the way, but our GPS (loaded with Tracks4Africa) knows the roads, and before long we find ourselves

beside the spectacular Machaniwa and Tembwahata wetland pans, where scores of birds and animals congregate in the dry season.

Gonarezhou sustains 400 bird species, huge herds of general game, and rare species such as bush pig and sable antelope. However, since Zimbabwe hasn't been all that attractive for tourists in recent years, and with so little infrastructure within the reserve to begin with, the game are still unaccustomed to people and vehicles. But even as they bound away we can't help but marvel at their diversity and their sheer number.

Gonarezhou's elephants seem to bear the mental scars of the civil war: a lone bull may go about his usual business as you drive past, but the breeding herds are mostly wary and it's disturbing to imagine what terrors some of these giants remember from their years of slaughter not three decades ago.

WALLED BY WILD DOGS

The drive down south to our last camp, Mabalauta, takes us through the remote, mopane-dominated central region of the reserve, a section most visitors avoid by driving around the outside, but we enjoy a challenge and want to see all the changes in topography and vegetation the park has to offer. There's very little action away from the rivers in the northern and southern reaches of the reserve and these roads are seldom used, even by the park's management. More than once we find ourselves backtracking in search of the correct two-track, or removing whole mopane trees (probably pushed over by elephants) from the road.

After four days of wilderness camping, arriving at Mabalauta is like finding an oasis in the desert. The camp offices are surrounded by well-tended gardens and there's hot water as well as lights and flush toilets in decent communal ablution blocks.

Mabalauta isn't as pretty as the north and doesn't have the same vast network of roads, but the deep and limpid pools up and down the Mwenezi River, home to hippos, crocodiles and frolicking rare Cape clawless otters, make the drive south worthwhile.

At dusk on our last night in the park, as a bonus for our troubles, one of the carefully monitored wild dog packs makes an appearance. We spend at least an hour with them as they yip and play and investigate our Hilux before hurrying off to hunt.

Gonarezhou is remote and remarkably wild, but a lot of care goes into what's there. Running the gauntlet of Beitbridge to reach it is no small undertaking, but we'd do it a hundred times over to get another taste of the park.

TRAVEL ADVICE

When the Runde River is in flood during the wet season (November to April), many of the exclusive campsites along its banks become inaccessible. It's therefore best to visit the park between May and October. There are two ways to travel from South Africa to Gonarezhou. You can either brave the chaos of Beitbridge, or take the longer, more relaxing detour through Mozambique via Pafuri and the Sango border posts.

Bear in mind that the second option is usually possible only during the dry season, when the Limpopo River is not in flood. If you do decide to cross at Beitbridge, remember (a) to make sure all your paperwork is in order, (b) to be patient and give yourself at least three to four hours to cross (c) to take with drinks and snacks, and (d) never use an "assistant", no matter how big a hurry you're in. The majority of the park's roads can be driven with a high clearance 4x2, but a 4x4 is necessary for the sandy Runde river crossings in the northern section.

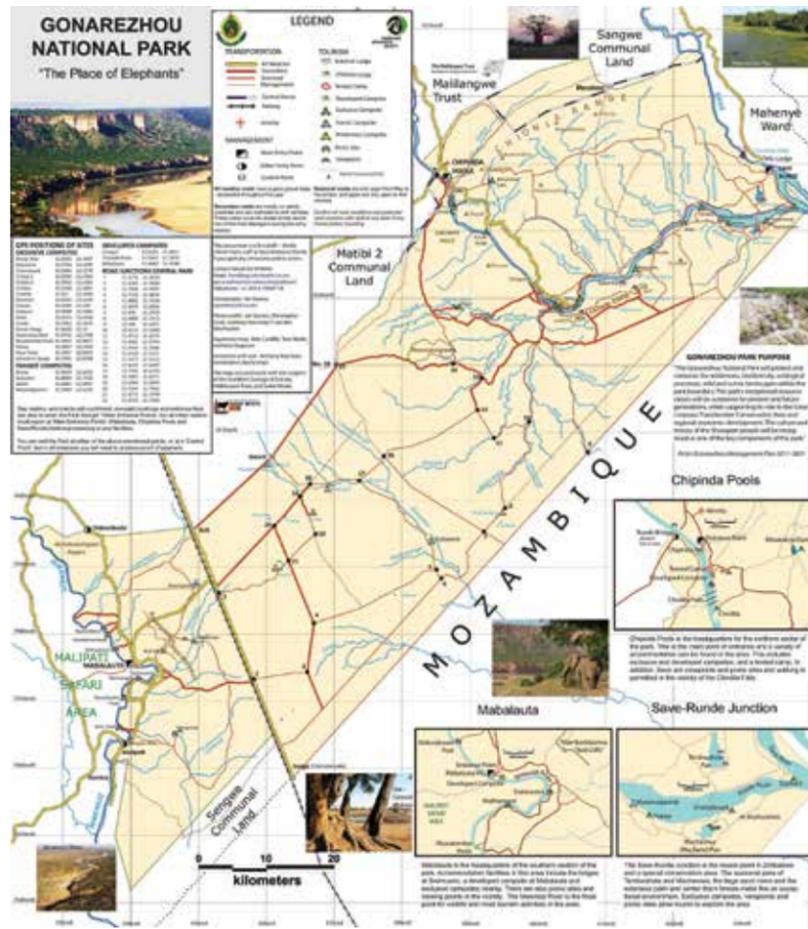
There are no filling stations in the park, so fuel up along the way as you approach the park or carry additional fuel with you.

The cost: you'll need US dollars to pay the park entrance fees upon arrival. It is \$4 per person per day and \$15 per vehicle, valid for five days (for SADC members, so these prices apply if you carry a South African passport).

There is firewood for sale at Chipinda Pools and Mabalauta. It costs about \$5 per barrow-load, which can easily last two nights.

- 1. Thatched gazebos at Chipinda Pools. /
- 2. Basic chalets at Swimuwini Lodge near Mabalauta. /
- 3. No driving after dark – plan accordingly to reach your destination before sunset.





► WHERE TO STAY

Gonarezhou is ideal if you like roughing it in the middle of the wilderness.

There are a number of exclusive campsites scattered throughout the park. Our favourites are: Hlaro, on the banks of the Runde River, with a remarkable view of the Chilojo Cliffs; and Chamuluvati, near the Save-Runde confluence in a rich game-viewing area. You'll find nothing but a long-drop and a firpit.

Bear in mind that these camps are not always accessible in the wet season.

If you prefer proper ablution facilities and don't mind sharing with other campers, pitch your tent at Chipinda Pools in the north (ask for stand no. 7 or 9) or Mabalauta in the south (ask for stand no. 3).

Self-catering options include safari tents at Chipinda Pools, basic thatch chalets at Swimuwini Lodge near Mabalauta, and more luxurious units just outside the park at Chilo Gorge Safari Lodge, which offers full board. For bookings at Chilo Gorge, visit www.chilogorge.com. For all other bookings, visit www.zimparks.org or email bookings@zimparks.co.zw. **Z**

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