

# Gonarezhou Wild enough for you?

**Magnificent Nature.** Two elephant bulls amble up to slake their thirst at the Runde River right below the impressive Chilojo Cliffs.



**Top camp.** If you're looking for the best stand in all of Zimbabwe, number 9 at Chipinda Pools is the answer. It has two braais and you can't see your neighbours.

For a decade, **Villiers Steyn** and his family went on holiday in Zim annually. For another decade, political unrest kept them away before he and his dad, **Francois**, broke the drought. They had always wanted to visit Gonarezhou, and now it's their new favourite.

**E**very bush holiday has a good story. If I were to tell people about this trip, I'd probably tell of the time I curled up in a bundle on the Hilux's roof rack, or when we had to scoop up a hundred litres of water with a coffee flask.

After a week in the Gonarezhou National Park in the southeastern corner of Zimbabwe, my father, Francois, and I returned with much more than a bunch of good stories. We also returned with new friends, new hope for humankind and more hope than before for Zimbabwe.

**Day 1**  
**Bite the bullet at Beit Bridge**

I have a queasy feeling in my stomach. It's been there since I decided to visit Gonarezhou two months ago. It's not

the road blocks or a possible fuel shortage that stress me out. Nor the fact that the park is isolated or that I'm unsure of the roads. No. It's Beit Bridge. If only the border crossing was as easy as the booking. It took Zim Parks only six hours to confirm my booking.

Few things are worse than the Beit Bridge crossing. We pass 15 trucks and stop opposite the South African customs building. After completing a customs form we receive at the counter, we join the emigration queue. It winds its way in eight different directions, around trees and buildings into a brown tent that looks like a barrack.

Dad dubs it "the rinkhals", and luckily this snake is moving, albeit slowly.

Ever so often one of Beit Bridge's fixers helps a group of visitors to jump the

queue. It requires great willpower not to make a scene.

Before long our passports are stamped and we cross the Limpopo. On the Zimbabwean side things go like greased lightning. It takes two hours to get through Beit Bridge, but clearing the Zimbabwean side barely took half an hour.

"So it wasn't that bad," Dad says, surprised.

"Yup, and apparently today is a busy day," I concur.

Before long we settle into a room at the Lion & Elephant Motel on the banks of the Bubi River.

**Day 2**  
**10 out of 10 for Chipinda Pools**

We take the tar road via Rutenga and Triangle to get to Chipinda Pools, the

northern headquarters of Gonarezhou. A neatly dressed woman in uniform and army boots greets us at reception.

According to the camp register, only 14 people are sleeping in the park a quarter of the size of the Kruger National Park tonight. This will be an adventure.

We pitch our tent a few kilos further on the banks of the Runde River. The camp caretaker, Ginford Mutambandiro, is 22 years old and a perfectionist, judging by how he's swept our stand. After telling us of a few lionesses he encountered on stand #2 two weeks ago, he brings us the first of two wheelbarrows of wood.

We spend the afternoon staking out Bengi Weir. In winter, countless elephants apparently come and drink here, but all we see now is a burnt-down roof at a lookout point and a family of banded mongoose living under the collapsed longdrop. We drive back along the bumpy road between Bengi and Chipinda and light a fire.

After devouring the delicious sosaties we brought all the way from Pretoria, my dad and I thoroughly inspect our camp stand, #9. Could it be that after almost 30 years' camping we've finally encountered a 10-out-of-10 camp stand?

"Let's start with the basics," I start off the judging. "It gets full marks on account of being completely level, shaded and having a great view. There's plenty of space and you can't see your neighbours. It has a tap and a bin, and two braais – one elevated and one on the ground."

From the edge of the campsite we see elephant bulls grazing on a bank of the Runde River. You can sit back and watch hippos, Egyptian geese and fish eagles too.

"And the bathroom isn't too near or too far. And did you see they have hot water?" my dad adds. "And I was most impressed by the lapa. You can see it was designed by a camper." The thatched lapa has a big stone table in the middle and comfortable cement seats. A hippo grunts nearby, and we also hear spotted hyenas.

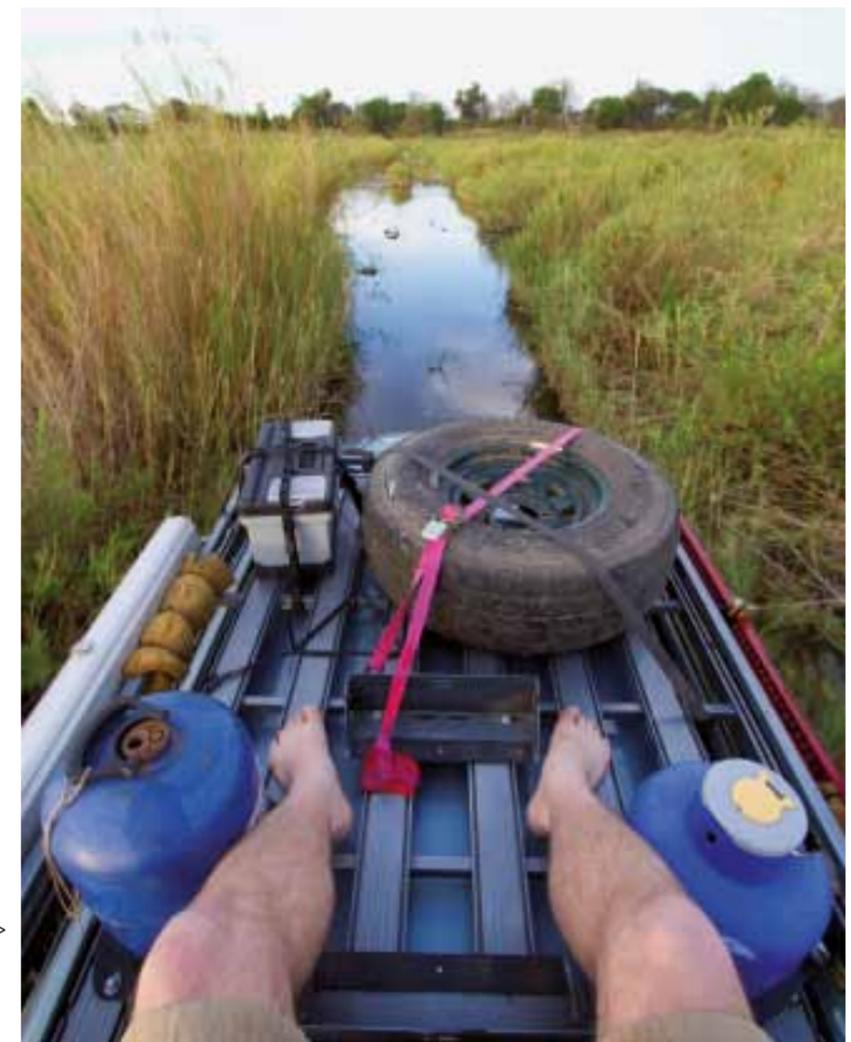
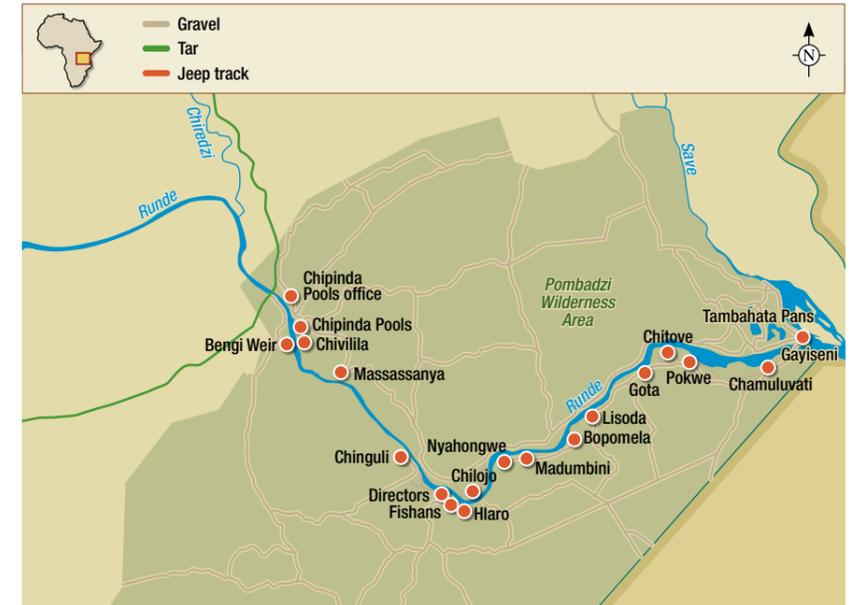
"And we have a camp caretaker! Stand #9 definitely deserves a 10!" I conclude.

We are astonished by the tidiness and quality of Chipinda Pools and by the warm welcome we received from personnel.

**Day 3**  
**On your marks, get set, explore!**

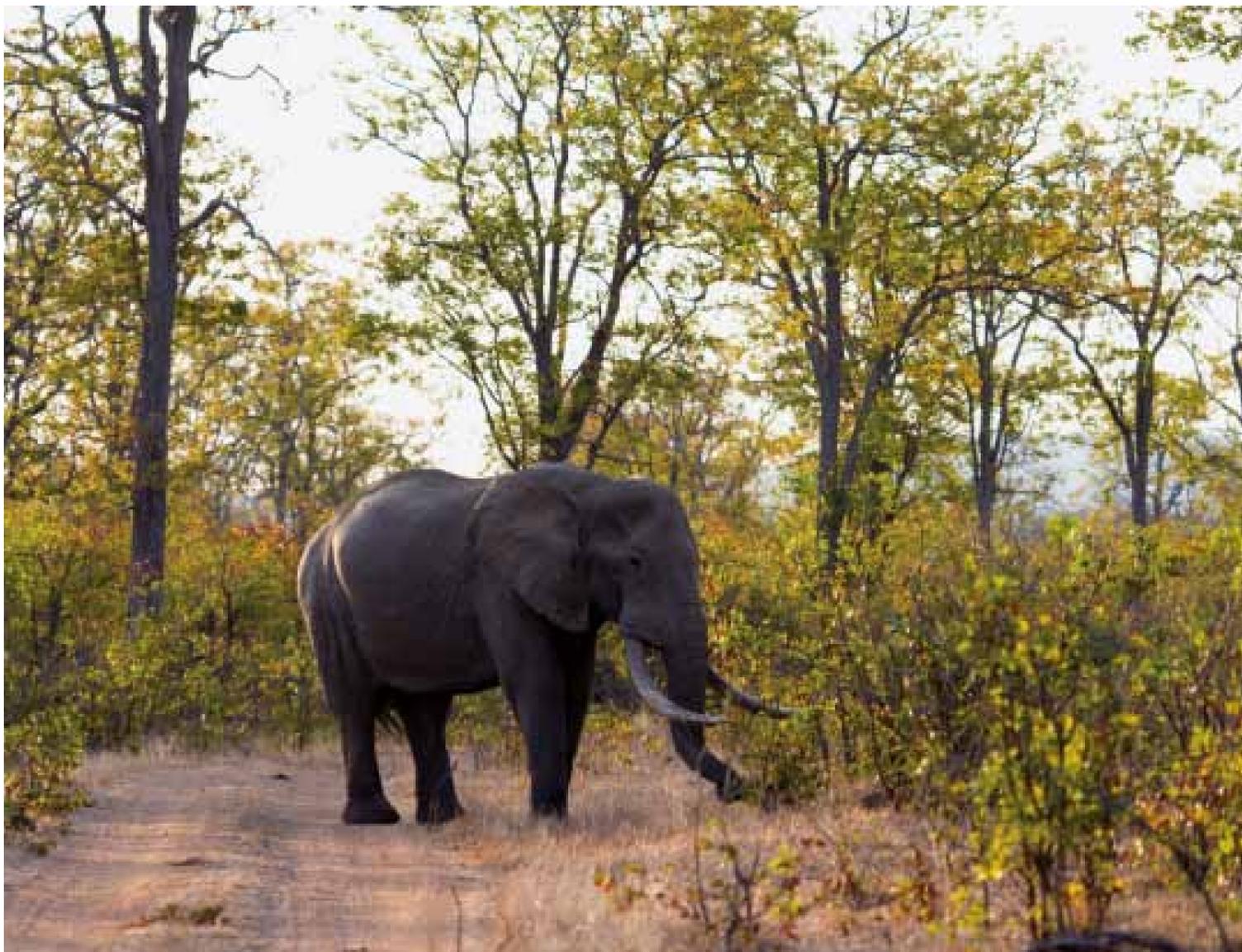
We want to explore the park thoroughly – first four days in the north and then two

**It's still negotiable now ...** but the rising levels of the Runde River mean that the largest part of Gonarezhou is closed from November to March.





**The best view in Gonarezhou.** From the exclusive stand Hlaro you have an unparalleled view of the Chilojo Cliffs and the Runde River.



**All the time in the world.** Gonarezhou's elephant bulls are renowned for their gigantic teeth. This colossus near the Chilojo Cliffs was in no hurry to move out of the road.

more in the south around Mabalauta. Tonight we camp at Hlaro, an exclusive campsite below the iconic Chilojo Cliffs. If you've seen a picture of Gonarezhou, it was probably of these remarkable sandstone cliffs that tower about 170m above the Runde River.

According to our map, printed in 2000, there are 18 exclusive stands in the north of the park. It's difficult to get reliable information about the park, and we literally want to stop at every campsite and see if it still exists. Our explorations start at Chivilila and Massassanya near Chipinda Pools. Although both have a beautiful view of the river, the sun will burn you at Chivilila and you'll have to deflate your tyres to 1 bar to get through Massassanya's sandy campsite.

At 12:30 we cross the Runde riverbed for the first time. Since you can't cross the river during the rainy season, and many other parts turn into a mud bath, most of the park is usually closed from November to April. After lowering the Hilux's tyre pressure to 1.8 bar, we manage to pass through easily in 4-high, second gear.

We pass the exclusive camps Fishans and Directors, but we're glad that we're camping at Hlaro. Of the three stands in a row here, Hlaro is the most spacious and has the best view. A colossal nyala-berry tree ensures shade throughout the day.

After settling in at the camp, I walk down the riverbed to where a troop of baboons is chilling out. Lying flat on my stomach on the riverbed, waiting for the baboons to traipse through the water, I see white-fronted bee eaters and white-crowned lapwings noisily swooping by. But the primates are too clever for me and I only get one picture of a big guy splashing through the water.

We spend the rest of the afternoon exploring the area below the Chilojo Cliffs

and admiring the landscape. Here the trees are a lot bigger than in the rocky veld further away from the river. We drive along a twisty path to a picnic site right on the riverbank. From below, the cliffs look like an elephant's molars – weathered and full of ridges.

En route back a grumpy elephant bull with enormous tusks blocks our way for a while. "These old guys must have crossed paths with Renamo soldiers during the liberation war in Mozambique. It's probably best to give them their space," I say while we patiently wait for the bull to make way.

Around Hlaro we see heaps of impala, a herd of nyala and hundreds of baboons.

#### Day 4 Pass that spade, please

Today we want to explore the nine exclusive campsites between Chilojo and the



**Deflate.** You could cross the Runde River in a few places in winter, but prepare yourself for thick sand.

confluence of the Runde and Save rivers. First we drive to the top of the cliffs for an eagle's-eye view of the surrounding landscape.

You can see all the action here is by the river. It's the only place with big trees and greenery, and it always has water. Through our binoculars we see vervet monkeys and impala in the riverine forest and a few elephant bulls in the riverbed. A herd of buffalo, easily 150 strong, comes and drinks by the Runde.

En route back to the riverbed we drive down a badly eroded jeep track to where it stops dead in a deep donga. Judging by the car tracks, everybody who drove here recently turned around, but we don't feel like driving all the way back. The only way out is to give the donga a facelift.

We take turns to lower the slopes of the donga's edge with a spade. Any moment now my dad will start singing his favourite song, "*As ons almal net wil saamwerk* (If only all of us would work together)", I think proudly. Indeed, thanks to teamwork, the Hilux is on the other side of the drift 45 minutes later.

"Let the explorations continue," my dad motions while wiping the dust and sweat from his brow.

#### Confluence? What confluence

Our next stop is Lisoda, an exclusive campsite near a steep slope. The veld is open and there's plenty of shade. We both like this camp.

Some distance downstream we see Gota. With not a tree in sight, it should be renamed Gota-have-a-gazebo.

We christen the next stand, Chitove, Gonarezhou's B&B – a camp for scaredy cats and bookworms. Here, unlike most other places, elephants can't surprise you from behind, because Chitove is protected >

## We stayed here

### Lion & Elephant Motel, Bubi River

**Where?** About 75 km north of Beit Bridge on the A4 Masvingo road.

**Cost?** R400 for a double room with its own bathroom. If you're on a strict budget, you could



also camp at R50 for two persons per night.

**Facilities:** A bar and restaurant with very reasonable prices (our pork chops and pap were good value at R70) as well as a pool. You can also buy meat.

**Bookings:** Call ☎ +44 127 3311608, send an email to ✉ lionandelephant@junglecomms.com or visit 🌐 www.lionandelephant.com

**Drive Out says:** If your journey starts in Gauteng, this is the ideal place to spend your first night on the road. From here it's a 3½ hour drive to Chipinda Pools.

### Chipinda Pools public campsite

**Where?** In the north of Gonarezhou National Park, about 60 km from Chiredzi

**Cost?** Accommodation: \$12 (R96) pppn camping; Wood: \$5 (R40) per bundle (a wheelbarrow full!); six people are allowed per campsite.

**Facilities:** Nine unfenced stands on the bank of the Runde River, each with a roof, braai and tap. There are three ablution blocks with flush toilets and hot water. Bring your own toilet paper.

**GPS:** S21.28400 E31.913722

**Bookings:** Usually Zim Parks' bookings are a nightmare, but we were lucky and booked within six hours. Send an email to: ✉ gonarez-houreservations@gmail.com, ✉ reservations@zimparcs.co.zw, or ✉ cmhuriro@zimparcs.co.zw

(Christina Mhuriro). You only have to pay upon arrival, in US dollar.

**Drive Out says:** Stand #7 and #9 are by far the nicest – #7 for a big group and #9 for a smaller group. No 8 is also nice.



### Hlaro exclusive campsite

**Where?** On the banks of the Runde River near the Chilojo Cliffs, Gonarezhou

**Cost?** \$25 (R200) pppn camping; 12 people are allowed per campsite.

**Facilities:** there is only a tree, long drop and braai, and of course a lovely view of the river. You have to be completely self-sufficient.

**GPS:** S21.445417 E 32.067222

**Drive Out says:** You can choose from stacks of exclusive campsites, but some are badly located and laid out. The best are Hlaro, Directors, Lisoda, Chilojo 1 and Chitove, in that order.



by a koppie. There also aren't many game paths, so it's the perfect place to kick back and read a book.

En route to the confluence of the Runde and Save rivers, we find fresh lion tracks. So there are predators out here. While spotted hyenas are seen fairly often in Gonarezhou, according to Dr Rosemary Groom of the African Wildlife Conservation Fund, lions and wild dogs are only occasionally spotted. Winter is the best time for spotting predators, as the veld isn't as lush and they're also much more active by day than in the hot summer months.

The jeep track suddenly disappears like mist before the morning sun before we can reach the Machaniwa picnic site and Chamuluvati campsite. It clearly gets very wet and muddy here in the rainy season. We decide to turn around, cross the Runde River near Chitove and look in at the Tambahata pans.

We are amazed at what we see there. In the middle of an otherwise barren landscape is an enormous pan surrounded by warthogs, zebra, impala, three or four troops of baboons and more than a hundred elephants. This is one of the furthest points from Chipinda Pools, but definitely worth visiting.

Two more attempts at reaching the confluence of the two rivers, first on the bank of the Runde River and then on the western bank of the Save River, end in failure. The paths simply disappear the moment you get near the place where the rivers meet.

Here the vegetation is lush with enormous nyala berry, apple-leaf and leadwood trees, as well as the lala palms that dominate the riverine forest. We see a few buffalo bulls and a rare Sharpe's grysbok. We also encounter a herd of cattle grazing on the bank of the Save River. Since it's not completely fenced, you can see them all along the edge of the park.

### And then disaster strikes ...

At 3 pm, nine hours after our exploration started, we turn back to Hlaro. Less than an hour later, the Hilux's temperature gauge redlines. Without us hearing it, a rock has knocked a huge hole in the radiator.

Only teamwork will get us out of this fix, because in two hours it'll be dark and our vehicle knowledge varies from limited to basic. Since we don't have a socket set, we can't remove the radiator. The only way to plug the hole is to shove in steel putty from below. I try my best to plug the hole, but there isn't nearly enough room in the engine bay to do the job properly.

Half an hour later, when the quick-set putty has dried and the sun hits the horizon, we fill up the radiator. If it had leaked like the Victoria Falls before, it is now leaking like Augrabies – a little less, but still a lot.

Our attempt was pathetic, but we decide to push on to the Lisoda campsite, just so we don't have to sleep among the dense mopane trees. We cover about 400 m per litre of water, and we keep having to stop in time to fill up before the engine overheats.

Almost all our supplies – our tents too – are at Hlaro. Fortunately, I remember a tip I read in a magazine about lighting a fire with a bicycle tube. I happen to have a piece in my toolbox.

Under a full moon and by a giant fire we sit and talk about the day. We are in good spirits, despite our grease-covered bodies and broken vehicle. My dad opens a tin of bully beef and considers sleeping outside, but when a lion starts roaring downstream, we decide to rather sleep in the Hilux, even if it's uncomfortable. Fortunately we have enough drinking water and something warm to sleep under.

At 1 am my body can't handle it any more. I clamber up on top of the car, iPod and all, and curl up in a ball on the rear roof rack. Before falling asleep, I listen to the Heuwels Fantasies: "*Kom ons raak wilder as die wildtuin...* (Let's get wilder than the wilds") How appropriate.

### Day 5 One flask at a time

Today the plan is to get to Hlaro, where our tents are. Hopefully we'll encounter other visitors and they can give park management a message. At the rate our radiator is leaking, we can drive between 2 and 3 km before we have to fill up again with six litres of water. Thank goodness we have a 50-litre water tank and the road runs next to the Runde River.

En route to Hlaro we settle into a routine: fill up the radiator with a coffee flask, drive about 3 km, stop, fill a cool bag with water, scoop four coffee flasks full of water to fill up again, drive on... So it goes for four hours. We fill up the water tank at two river crossings and take the opportunity to take a well-earned bath in the shallow water. Not even the hungriest crocodile in Gonarezhou would have eaten such filthy bodies.

Near our camp we encounter a white Hilux – the first vehicle we've seen in four days. Alex and Graeme Bramley get out to say hello. One studies mechanical



**Mr Fixits.** Villiers and his dad were stranded near Lisoda. Francois is preparing a roll of putty after they found a hole in the Hilux's radiator. A day, and with the help of two students, later the problem was fixed.



**Wash & Go!** It may not look like it, but there are crocs in this river... Francois bathes in the river near Bopomela after he and Villiers worked on the vehicle and slept in the bush for a night.



**Life savers.** Alex and Graeme Bramley, brothers and students from Pretoria, ponder over the best technique to repair the Hilux radiator. This complicated process took five hours.

## Gonarezhou National Park

**Sound like a boffin:** At 5 000 km<sup>2</sup>, Gonarezhou is Zimbabwe's second-largest game park. The name is Shona for "place of elephants" and here you'll see plenty of them, especially in the late afternoon when the bulls come drinking in the Runde River.

**What are the roads like?** The road between Chipinda Pools and the Chilojo Cliffs is in a surprisingly good condition. You can see it's maintained. However, you need a 4x4 to cross the riverbeds and explore other parts of the park. During the rainy season (November to April) large parts are inaccessible.

**Look out:** Considering you are allowed to walk 500 m on either side of your stand, and swim in the river, you must always be on the lookout for elephants, hippos, crocodiles and other dangerous animals. Also beware the baboons in the camp – they'll steal any food that hasn't been stowed away.

**What does it cost?** Entry: \$12 (R96) pp and \$10 (R80) per vehicle. It's valid for a week. Fishing permits cost \$5 (R40) pppd.

**What can I experience?** Exceptional exclusivity in one of Southern Africa's most unspoiled and scenic parks.

**Is there fuel?** No. Fill up at Triangle ±30 km west of Chiredzi. We paid \$1.45 (R11.60) for unleaded fuel.

**Drive Out says:** Look out for the rare racket-tailed roller that can be seen here.

engineering and the other one industrial design, and coincidentally they live 3 km from us in Pretoria.

They offer to come and help us later that afternoon. We can't believe our luck.

### If you do it, do it properly

Just after 5 pm, the white Hilux stops in our camp. Alex and Graeme each have a toolbox in hand and even before we can pour drinks, the radiator is on a table. To determine the extent of the damage, they first have to remove the putty we put on it.

"This is my model maker's toolkit," Graeme says proudly while opening up his toolbox. "I designed it myself and inside are tools I've been using since I was a kid." Neatly stowed in foam recesses you'll find everything you'll need to assemble a spaceship. There are tools to make measurements and calculations, do sculpting and leatherwork – and hopefully also to repair a radiator. While I admire Graeme's toolbox, two elephant bulls watch us from the riverbed.

Like two surgeons the two start operating on the radiator. I've never seen such patience and concentration. With absolute precision, and beers at hand, they work. First the webbing is carefully removed and then the damaged pipes are cut shorter and folded over. Finally, putty made especially for radiators is placed around the bent pipes. But it's not just flattened between a thumb and forefinger. No, Graeme carefully adds it piece by piece, wets it with saliva, and then uses his sculptor's tools to seal it properly.

While we wait for the putty to dry, we eat braaivleis, roast potatoes and corn on the cob around the campfire. Two friends of Alex and Graeme have since joined us.

Before replacing the radiator, Warren, a mechanical engineer, insists that we do a pressure test. This is a good call, because they find three more holes to seal. The entire operation, from the removal to the refitting, takes five hours.

As the white Hilux's lights disappear in the dark, my dad says: "I can't believe what I just saw."

"There is indeed hope for mankind!" I add, equally astonished. "Such courtesy, passion and willingness to help a total stranger I haven't seen for ages."

### Day 6

#### The big test

It's 9 am and our camp at Hlaro has been broken up. It's time for the big test. How far will we get? Perhaps as far as Chiredzi north of the park where we'll have to pop into the scrapyard, or perhaps only as far as Chipinda Pools?

Our bad luck makes us decide not to explore the Mabalauta region in southern Gonarezhou this time round, but to rather leave it for another visit.

With the air-conditioner off and at a reasonable pace, we tackle the gravel road to Chipinda Pools... 2km, 3km, 4km pass and the temperature gauge hovers just below halfway, where it should be. About 30 km further we stop at Chipinda to stretch our legs. Once the vehicle has cooled down, my dad opens the bonnet while I take a peek at the bottom. He pours a full 75 ml of water into the radiator.

"If you ask me, we didn't fill it up completely this morning," I say, overjoyed. "Not a drop leaked out the bottom!"

Incidentally, this was the last water we poured into the radiator before it was replaced in Pretoria.

En route back home I think back on Gonarezhou. It's big, it's wild and it's close (at least for Gauteng's). The service was excellent and the roads good. We also saw plenty of game. What more do you want from a game park? Now people should just get over their Beit Bridge phobia. By the way – upon our return it takes us only 55 minutes to pass through it.

*Photos of the carnivores. If you encounter large predators in Gonarezhou, please take pictures and send them to Dr Rosemary Groom (rosemary@africanwildlifeconservation-fund.org). Enclose the date, location, herd size, age and sex of the carnivores, if possible.*



**Back to camp.** Visitors to Gonarezhou have to be back in the campsite at sunset. This photograph was taken just outside Hlaro.

## Banish the Beit Bridge blues

**South Africans' negative perception of Beit Bridge is probably the main reason why many people will never reach Zimbabwe's fantastic game parks. I passed through here ten years ago – and it was chaotic, with droves of pushy fixers. This time round I was pleasantly surprised. Here are a few tips to make your passage through Beit Bridge easier:**

### South African side

- Step 1:** Slowly drive past on the right of all stationary trucks in front of the border post.
- Step 2:** Park right outside the customs building and resist the temptation to hire a fixer to get you through faster.
- Step 3:** Fill in the DA331 Traveller Declaration form at customs. (We didn't declare anything.)
- Step 4:** Join the emigration queue and be patient. Bring a hat, sunblock, water and a book or magazine. We spent an hour in the queue, but time flies when you have good company.
- Step 5:** Cross the Limpopo.

### Zimbabwe side

- Step 1:** Follow the green route and park outside the immigration building.
- Step 2:** Let the group join the immigration queue with their passports while the driver pays a toll amount far right. He/she should also get the gate pass here and can then join the rest in the queue.
- Step 3:** Have passports and the gate pass stamped at immigration.
- Step 4:** Move on to customs and let someone else from your party stand in the queue again. The driver must then fill in the red-and-white TIP form (Temporary Import Permit) in duplicate.



When you get to the counter, you must hand in your vehicle's registration documents and the TIP for inspection. You also pay road tax, carbon tax and third-party insurance. You can pay this in rands. Make sure your gate pass is stamped.

- Step 5:** Fill in one of the blue customs forms (Form 47) before leaving. Remember to complete a list of your electrical appliances. We only wrote down a description, no values or serial numbers.
- Step 6:** Pop in at the police office across the road. Have your gate pass stamped again.
- Step 7:** Stop at the inspection area in the middle

of the road in front of the customs building and hand in your blue customs form. Once your vehicle has been searched, you get your final gate pass stamp. We weren't even searched.

### From Zim back to South Africa

The return was very quick and easy. Everything was clearly marked. The most important thing is to have your TIP at hand – you'll be asked for it a few times.

### What did it cost?

It cost us R520 going in (R80 toll fee, R80 road tax, R120 carbon tax and R240 third party). Coming back, we paid R72 for a gate pass.

### A few more tips:

- Always be friendly and patient.
- Keep your seatbelt on at all times when driving through the border post.
- Don't be shy to ask around where you should go next.
- Take a sheet of carbon paper to fill in the TIP in duplicate.
- Preferably get a police clearance certificate for your vehicle. If the vehicle or trailer is registered in someone else's name, remember to bring a letter of permission, preferably in the form of an affidavit.
- Stick two silver reflectors on your front bumper and two red reflectors on your rear bumper. The stickers are available at Safari Centre and the AA.
- Keep all border post documents, especially the TIP. You'll possibly be asked for it along the way, and definitely upon your return.
- Bring a few \$1 and \$5 notes along for toll fees and cool drinks.