

Place of miracles

Enjoy the ultimate African safari in Zimbabwe, a life-changing holiday where you will be pampered shamelessly, and leave feeling you have made the world a better place

Story **Christine Manfield**



Wenturing into the wilds of Zimbabwe in southern Africa, a country in a political wilderness, is not something most people would consider for an amazing, life-changing vacation. North of Kruger National Park and near the Mozambique border, lies one of Africa's best-kept secrets, Singita Pamushana Lodge in Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve in southeastern Zimbabwe. It remains virtually untouched by humankind, it is wild and untamed. We pinch ourselves to check we are really here. It is simply awesome, breathtaking in its beauty.

Nestling beneath trees and immense boulders, the lodge incorporates the natural environment and a forest-like, sensitive architecture of African design aesthetic that melds into the landscape and enhances views of the

pool, the lush gardens and the lake below. Pamushana Lodge comprises six luxury suites and one villa, each offering sharp attention to detail and private swimming pools with incredible views of the Malilangwe dam. The lodge is one of nine Singita game reserves, whose manifesto is to secure and preserve an increasing number of pristine locations in Africa, with a firm commitment to maintaining the sustainability of each property and continuing to build on the pillars of wildlife conservation, eco-friendly tourism and community support.

The balance of hospitality, conservation and community is what sets Singita apart; its vision is to share a unique part of the world in a manner that is highly respectful of its natural environment. Singita also believes in "fewer beds in larger areas", the idea being that a minimal number of guests has little impact on the land and its fauna and flora. A hugely successful venture, it also means our eco-tourism footprint is kept

to a minimum, while allowing up-close, intimate experiences for guests, with numerous opportunities for them to interact with their surroundings and learn more about the principles of conservation. Singita is dedicated to its local communities and assists in generating prosperity and social fulfilment, making a significant difference to the lives of many people surrounding its properties so their children and grandchildren can enjoy their rich and precious inheritance.

Over time, we have become safari junkies, totally addicted to the bush and its game, never tiring for a minute of the landscape and its hidden treasures. We feel like we have arrived in paradise. Our horizons are broadened, our knowledge is deepened and our souls become richer through this extraordinary experience. Fortune, our personal ranger and guide, shares his wealth of knowledge, humour and love of wildlife. We listen to endless stories and anecdotes as he drives us through the bush or takes us

out onto the lake by boat, where we are surrounded by hippopotamuses and crocodiles. One of our greatest moments comes soon after dawn one morning when Fortune gets word from a tracker that a pride of lions is 15km away. He says: "I have taken you on safari before but now I am taking you on Ferrari Safari" – and we speed along bush tracks at thrilling speed, hoping to get to the waterhole in time to see the lions. We do. Fortune parks the jeep on the opposite bank so we are just metres away from some 15 lions and several cubs, a majestic sight.

Moments like this will stay with us forever: watching cheetahs at play, watching a young leopard stalk its prey at sunset, staring at fearsome-looking rhinoceros with gigantic horns, watching as giraffes lope across the track in front of us, remaining dead calm and still as three enormous elephants wander dangerously close. We leave with zillions of photographs.

Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve consists of 52,600ha of

wilderness teeming with birds and wildlife, including rare and endangered species – such as the roan and sable antelope, and the largest concentration of black rhino in Africa. Famous for its cathedral mopane forests and majestic "upside-down" baobab trees, Malilangwe also has more than 100 rock sites that date back 2000 years. The reserve was bequeathed to the Malilangwe Trust and established as a not-for-profit organisation in 1994. The trust is highly acclaimed for its ecological research, breeding and protection of endangered species and models for sustainable community development and outreach projects. It also focuses on the education of local youth.

Malilangwe Trust is totally dependent for its survival, alongside the income generated from the hospitality offered by Pamushana Lodge, on financial contributions from a concerned, caring donor community. The conservation of wildlife and wild places calls for specialist knowledge, trained manpower and money, and for us to

all join together in ensuring its livelihood and longevity. By choosing to stay at Pamushana, we join the growing ranks of the responsible and socially aware traveller, contributing to the various conservation initiatives in place and supporting the resilience of its people. Pamushana (and all the Singita properties) is doing its bit to retrieve an abundance of unspoiled wilderness, something that has become rare, fragile and vulnerable in the 21st century.

Donations help conserve this unique wildlife reserve and provide essential support to local communities, making the trust's activities economically viable and extending benefits beyond its boundaries. Our mere presence and contribution play one tiny part in enhancing the wellbeing of the area. Contributions are invested where requested, anything from food security to the school feeding program, local school support, AIDS education and management, sustainable agriculture, wildlife research and supporting the anti-poaching effort.



MARGIE HARRIS

Luxury in the wilds of Africa; Pamushana Lodge "offers an unparalleled travel experience that should be on every discerning traveller's radar".



“We have engaged in philanthropic practice and memorable adventures”

Going on holiday and making a difference never felt so good; to comprehend that so little can go so far.

The Pamushana staff are young, enthusiastic and sensitive to the value of biodiversity of the land over which the trust has stewardship and they actively participate in the educational drives within the reserve. Jason, the general manager, gives us the warm welcome of a life-long friend and is dedicated to enhancing our knowledge, so a few afternoon chats out on the pool deck between safaris with gin and tonic in hand don't go astray. He talks to me at length about the philanthropic philosophy and practice of the trust and its achievements. His love for the place is palpable and infectious.

We talk about food security and the feeding schemes where direct involvement within the local community takes the form of philanthropy. For example, 28,000 schoolchildren, based in schools in the vicinity of the trust land, are fed a balanced meal each school day. This project was introduced in response to a very real need, which saw the education of many children undermined by inadequate nutrition and daily hunger.

As a contrast, there's recognition that the sophisticated traveller has changed; they now want an acute sense of place and experience that leaves them feeling moved. Consequently, Pamushana menus feature locally grown,

carbon-neutral foods, not truffles that have been flown halfway across the world.

Jason has gathered a close-knit team of Zimbabwean staff, who share the spirit of the place and the land. They have the best names imaginable, apparently given them by their mothers depending on how their births went – Difference, Difficult, Innocent, Never and Fortune, to name a few. It provides us with some hysterical stories.

The chefs proudly show me around their kitchen one afternoon: the ingredients they source from local farms, the fish they have procured for our dinner that night, which they cook over hot coals out on the open-air dining deck. Throughout our stay, they produce a never-ending supply of edible treats – house-made jams and breads for breakfast, tempting cakes and cookies for afternoon tea, delicious snacks for each safari adventure, fresh and nourishing salads for lunch. There are decadent dinner feasts where we taste impala, kudu and springbok.

I experience a bush dinner around a campfire out in the wilds under the carpet of stars in the sky. A couple of the boys prove to be good baristas and make a decent espresso with local La Lucie beans so the bar becomes a popular meeting spot, especially pre-dawn as we gather for our sunrise safari. The lodge has a fabulous wine cellar with intriguing wines from Africa and around the world.

Sommelier Emily introduces us to various regional wines from South Africa at every dinner, more than happy to share her passion for the grape.

Being here is all about safari and we can't get enough. We head out twice a day – at sunrise and sunset for four hours at a time. No trips are the same. On safari, there is absolute silence, our eyes become attuned to the shapes of the bush, learning to distinguish the animals that roam within, perfectly camouflaged among the grasses and trees. In the middle of the day, we loll about in our infinity pool, gazing out over the bush, knowing it's alive with animals and birdlife. The afternoon safaris end with sundowners in some magical spot, the front of the jeep transformed into a makeshift bar.

There is one easy way to visit Zimbabwe without the monotony of intrusive bureaucracy, harrowing drives, lacklustre service or inadequate infrastructure. From Australia, fly direct to Johannesburg then choose between a twice-weekly Federal Air flight to nearby Buffalo Range airport (a 20-minute drive from the property) or charter a private plane for a 90-minute direct flight to Pamushana's private landing strip. Bypass the hassle – the sense of luxurious indulgence has begun.

A divine property like this does a whole lot more than give pampered guests the holiday of a lifetime. It gives jobs to locals, who used to have to leave home and family to find work further away (if there was any). We experience an extraordinary sense of tranquillity and peace during our stay and leave yearning for more, with a renewed faith in humanity and a vow to return soon. We have engaged in philanthropic practice and memorable adventures.

Pamushana offers an unparalleled travel experience that should be on every discerning traveller's radar. Singita lives up to its name as “a place of miracles” and, without doubt, provides the ultimate safari experience in Africa. Come to grips with its vibrant humanity, its colour and spirit. Embrace khaki and book now.

singita.com; malilangwe.org

