

Correspondence from Africa

The Waterhole – “A Place of Solitude in a Sea of Discontent”

Sitting patiently beside a waterhole deep in African bushveld, our Zimbabwean sojourn came to a rewarding climax yesterday. Hundreds of elephants, a mere portion of the estimated 35,000 odd in Hwange National Park, intermittently came down to quench their thirst and to soak their ancient hides with relish in the clinging black soup. The Lister engine and pump, belching a haze of diesel fumes, struggled to maintain the supply.

Close by, two lionesses rested uncommitted in the heavy shade of a thorn acacia following a fruitless chase earlier on when a pair of nonchalant warthogs appeared and left, tails erect, in indignant haste.

Late in the afternoon when three painted hunting dogs trotted onto the scene it was though the stage had been set entirely for our benefit. Bedlam erupted when alarmed elephant cows with young calves challenged the dogs, charging them with squeals and trumpeting. The dogs were unconcerned at the elephants response and casually laid down just out of probing trunk reach as the second white rhino for the day sauntered down unmolested, adding his formidable grey presence to the wildlife menagerie.

As the sun began its final fiery descent towards the horizon, the lions woke from their repose. Throughout the day they had been taunted by a fearless sable, herds of kudus, giraffe and zebra that soon became aware of the predators presence and were brazen enough to indicate that they were not welcome at the waterhole.

The lions chose a lull between watering herds of elephants to approach the pan and on spying the dogs, much hated rivals and their superiors as hunters, gave chase. Happily the confrontation ended in a stalemate, all participants unscathed until another day. As twilight fell and the daytime performance came to a close the nocturnal players would continue this natural drama as has happened for aeons. We reluctantly returned to camp but happily burdened with much digital footage.

This was one of many fascinating and unrehearsed acts of nature that we were privileged to experience and enjoy in old Wankie during the week we were there.

Today we arrived at Bulawayo travelling the excellent bitumen road linking this major city with Victoria Falls, passing many rundown farms forcibly abandoned by whites and no longer contributing the once substantial wealth to the failing economy.

Like Victoria Falls the city is in poor repair and supermarkets display forlorn rows of empty shelves. Basic items are only obtainable by shopping around. A kilogram of fresh tomatoes was priced at Zim\$125,000; 1 x 410grm tin of tomato soup Zim\$127,015; 800grms frozen Hake fillets Z\$3,122,621.00!!! The current exchange rate for one US dollar is Z\$82,000. Some things are relatively inexpensive while other items are excessive. We bought diesel from friends for a reasonable US\$1 per litre. Fuel is presently unobtainable at service stations in Zimbabwe.

Regardless, life goes on with a resilient smile beneath the debilitating political farce of it all. The current standard of living is almost unbearable for everyone, both the black and few staunch whites who remain. The long suffering goes on in silence - it is unwise to say too much beyond a whisper.

Even with the loathed portrait of Comrade Robert Mugabe beaming down in hotel foyers and government premises in this traditional homeland province of the Matabele, there is still optimism.

It was here in the Midlands that Mugabe's dreaded North Korean trained 5th Brigade slaughtered in excess of 12,000 Matabele civilians who opposed his Marxist Zanu PF regime in 1983 while western nations conveniently turned a blind eye.

Only one police roadblock today but a "Good morning officer, Sir!" got us through without scrutiny. We never did get around to fitting those rear bumper reflectors as ordered!!

Tonight we had to time to look over some of Margie's photos to view her 'Walking with the Lions', her birthday treat. There is one particularly good snapshot of her holding an unrestricted lion by the tail as they both walked fearlessly through the African bushveld under strict supervision from trained handlers! The unexpected arrival of a small wild herd of Cape buffalo almost upset the apple cart!

Tomorrow we venture forth for the border post Bietbridge into South Africa and will enter the northernmost corner of Kruger to begin a 350 kilometre longitudinal descent to observe and photograph wildlife in the diverse ecosystems of this famous national park.

We leave this remarkable and beautiful land of Zimbabwe with sadness and much hope to close another tough day in Africa.

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