

Go Slow in Zimbabwe

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1 – 2** Outbound flights
-
- Day 3 – 8** Mana Pools – game drives, river cruises and specialist wildlife tracking for African Wild Dogs and 'standing Elephants'
-
- Day 9 – 10** Inbound flights
-

Tour extensions available

- Day 9+** See page 10 – please enquire
-

Departs

May

Focus

Mammals and Birds

Grading

A. Relaxed pace; some vehicle, some boat and some foot based

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ZWE02)

Highlights:

- Guided walking safaris in unfenced Mana Pools wilderness
- Specialist wildlife tracking for African Wild Dogs and 'standing Elephants' on foot
- Zambezi birding cruises for fishing eagles, skimmers and bee-eaters
- Comfortable lodge with excellent facilities
- Led by expert local guides and naturalists



From Top: Elephants, Saddle-billed Stork and Eland at Mana Pools



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Introduction

Zimbabwe is an often underappreciated country in Southern Africa, a land of wild rivers, ancient floodplains and vast, unfenced wilderness. Nowhere is this more evident than in Mana Pools, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where the Zambezi's seasonal floods sustain sweeping albedo forests, rich wildlife populations and one of Africa's most authentic walking-safari experiences. Yet, despite its reputation among seasoned safari-goers as a premier destination for on-foot exploration, Zimbabwe also lends itself perfectly to slower, more immersive travel, allowing visitors time to appreciate not only the remarkable wildlife but also the dramatic riverine landscapes and profound sense of untouched wilderness that make it so special.

This relaxed 'Go Slow' holiday is centred on a 7-night stay within Mana Pools National Park, one of Zimbabwe's flagship protected areas and home to the country's largest concentrations of Hippopotamus and Nile Crocodile, together with a thriving Elephant population estimated at well over 12,000 animals. Staying throughout at Mana Pools Safari Lodge, we will enjoy a carefully balanced programme of optional activities focused on some of Africa's most compelling wildlife experiences. Mana Pools is famed for permitting guided walks in genuinely wild, unfenced country, where relaxed and habituated game allows for extraordinarily close encounters with Elephant, Lion and African Wild Dog on foot, something rarely possible elsewhere on the continent.

Highlights include specialist tracking experiences for the endangered Wild Dogs, walks in search of the celebrated 'standing Elephants' of the winterthorn woodland, game drives along the floodplain and river channels, and river cruise birdwatching excursions on the Zambezi. The park's more than 380 recorded bird species will reward keen birdwatchers throughout. Equally important, there will be plenty of time to relax at camp, enjoy wildlife drifting past the water's edge, or simply soak up the atmosphere of the Zambezi Valley bush.

African Fish Eagle



NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Itinerary

Day 1 – 2

Fly Harare and onwards to Mana Pools

Today we depart London Gatwick on a direct overnight flight Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. From here, we take a private charter flight direct to Mana Pools, bypassing any need for an overnight in the city and transferring us straight into the heart of the Zambezi Valley, where we will be based for the next seven nights, exploring one of Africa's last great unfenced wilderness areas.

We will be staying at Mana Pools Safari Lodge, located on the banks of the Zambezi River. The camp's central areas, including the lounge, dining deck and viewing platforms, overlook the river and its surrounding floodplains, offering outstanding opportunities for wildlife-watching throughout the day. Whether enjoying breakfast, relaxing with a coffee or unwinding before dinner, there is always the possibility of Elephants, Hippos or other wildlife appearing just metres from the lodge. As befits a Naturetrek 'Go Slow' holiday, there is plenty of time to relax and enjoy the lodge itself between activities.

Accommodation is provided in spacious, en-suite rooms, each with comfortable furnishings and a private bathroom. Wi-Fi and mobile phone reception are available around the lodge for those wishing to remain connected, although many guests find it easy to slip into the slower rhythm of life along the Zambezi. For those who enjoy independent exploration, the immediate surroundings of the lodge and nearby river channels can be explored on foot with a guide, allowing guests to experience the reserve's birdlife, smaller wildlife and changing light at their own pace. The river itself is a constant source of interest. Regular visitors include Hippopotamus, Nile Crocodile and Elephant, whilst birdwatchers can enjoy a steady procession of herons, egrets, storks, kingfishers, raptors and riverine specialists. After dark, the sounds of the valley come alive with the calls of nightjars and other nocturnal species.



Mana Pools Safari Lodge Campfire

For those looking to get stuck straight into the wildlife, we can set out on our first sundowner game drive after arriving, giving us a first taste of this area.

As the afternoon light softens over the floodplains, we'll track Elephants moving between river channels and scan for raptors silhouetted against the setting sun. With luck, we may encounter Lion, Leopard or Wild Dog on the open plains, while closer to the river, pods of Hippos and basking Crocodiles are commonplace. The drive will end at a scenic viewpoint for sundowners, allowing us to reflect on our first impressions of Mana Pools as the sky turns fiery orange and the valley settles into its nocturnal rhythm before we return to the lodge for dinner and a restful night's sleep.

Overnight: Mana Pools Safari Lodge

Day 3 Mana Pools – Morning Game Drive & Afternoon Bush Walk

Today we will spend our first full day focusing on two of Mana Pools' greatest strengths: game drives and walking safaris. In the early morning, we shall set out in an open safari vehicle to explore the floodplains, woodland and river channels, accompanied by knowledgeable local guides whose intimate understanding of the area helps bring the landscape and its wildlife vividly to life.

Morning is often the best time to spot predators such as Lions, Leopards and Hyenas, many of which may still be active after a night of hunting. Lion prides and their cubs frequently rest and warm themselves in the open woodland areas or bask in the early sun, while Elephants move purposefully towards the river to drink and feed. Plains game are often encountered in good numbers and may include Kudu, Impala, Eland, Waterbuck and Zebra, whilst Warthog, Baboon and Vervet Monkey are also regularly seen.



Birdlife can be equally rewarding. The acacia-dotted thornveld and riverine forest support a colourful variety of species, including hornbills, bee-eaters, rollers, kingfishers and a host of raptors. Raptors are often conspicuous, with possibilities including African Fish Eagle, Bateleur, Tawny Eagle, Martial Eagle, and Black-chested, Brown and Western-banded Snake-Eagles, whilst more open areas may produce Kori Bustard and Southern Ground Hornbill, along with other characteristic birds of the Zambezi Valley.

We will return to the lodge from some lunch before venturing out on foot for a sundowner bush walk. Mana Pools is famed for permitting guided walks in genuinely wild, unfenced country, and this excursion will demonstrate why. With no specific target species in mind, today's excursions offer an opportunity to enjoy the park as a whole, appreciating its diverse wildlife, beautiful landscapes and excellent birdlife while embracing the slower pace that characterises this holiday.

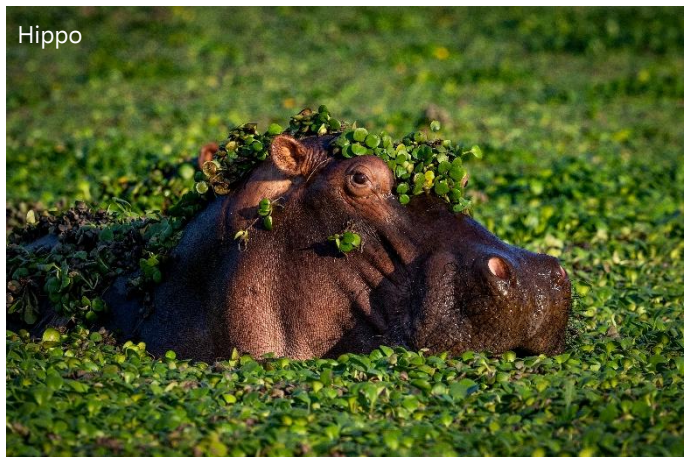
Overnight: Mana Pools Safari Lodge

Day 4

Mana Pools – Boat Cruise

Today we will take to the Zambezi by boat on a birdwatching cruise. Drifting quietly downstream as our expert guide navigates through the water channels, we gain a completely different perspective on the park's wildlife and habitats. With over 380 recorded bird species in Mana Pools, expect to encounter a wide array of waterbirds, raptors and riverine specialists. Among the most colourful are Carmine Bee-eaters and Lilac-breasted Rollers. Herons, egrets and storks will be ever-present wading in the shallows whilst African Skimmers cruise up and down the river, we may even catch a flash of ultramarine as a Woodland Kingfisher darts by.

As a bonus to the exceptional birding, the day provides front-row seats to Mana Pools' larger mammalian life, as it is common to spot pods of Hippopotamuses bobbing near the surface, Nile Crocodiles basking on the sun-drenched banks, and Elephants occasionally wading across the channels or feeding on nutrient-rich pods of the albida trees.



When we are satisfied, our guide will pull sail to shore after an amazing few hours on a quiet, shaded sandbank or secluded river island for a classic bush picnic lunch coupled with freshly prepared local delicacies, cold drinks, and warm bread while surrounded by the untamed sounds of the African bush.

Overnight: Mana Pools Safari Lodge

Day 5

Mana Pools – Wild Dog Tracking & Chitake Springs

Today we focus on one of Africa's most endangered and charismatic carnivores: the African Wild Dog. Starting at dawn when temperatures are cool and the packs are more active, we set out on a tracking safari alongside a visit to the remote and dramatic Chitake Springs.

The African Wild Dog are among the most endangered carnivores on the African continent due to historical pressures, habitat fragmentation, and human-wildlife conflict that has seen their numbers reduced to just over 7,000. The Lower Zambezi basin and Mana Pools National Park however serve as important habitats for these dynamic animals, popularly brought to global prominence through nature documentaries such as Sir David Attenborough's *Dynasties* series.

Wild Dog



We will learn how to track these special animals by looking for fresh spoor, listening intently for the high-pitched yips, squeaks, and greeting chatters unique to the Wild Dogs. Once spotted, we can disembark our vehicles and continue on foot allowing for a once in a lifetime experience to get up close and observe their social dynamics, adults regurgitating food to provision pups, hierarchical interactions, and playful sparring. Common sightings include pack hunting or resting under dense Ana trees or termite mounds.

We will finish the day with a visit to Chitake Springs, a striking natural feature set within the surrounding woodland. The springs provide an attractive focal point to finish our excursion and may offer further opportunities to observe birdlife, smaller mammals and other wildlife drawn to the water. As the day cools, we

can take time to appreciate the peaceful setting and the changing light across the landscape before returning to camp.

Overnight: Mana Pools Safari Lodge

Day 6

Mana Pools – ‘Standing Elephants’ Safari

Today we go in search of one of Mana Pools’ most famous behavioural spectacles, the ‘standing Elephants’. This is a phenomenon where bull Elephants stand on their hind legs to reach high-nutrient seed pods and canopy leaves in the floodplains. While Elephants are massive creatures weighing several tonnes, this unique, small group of dominant bull elephants in Mana Pools, in particular a now world famous large, tusked bull named Boswell, have adopted and mastered an astonishing physical feat.

When the lower foliage of the albida trees has been entirely stripped away, these specialised bulls over-stretch by rearing completely upright onto their hind legs, maintaining perfect balance to feed on high-hanging apple-ring acacia and albida pods. This unique survival adaptation represents a learned tradition with younger bull Elephants frequently shadow veterans like Boswell, observing the manoeuvre and adopting this physical feat to enhance their own chances of survival during the harsh dry season.



Accompanied by experienced guides, we will explore the winterthorn woodland and surrounding floodplains, using both game drives and short walks to search for these remarkable animals. Whether or not we witness the full standing behaviour, the time spent in their habitat provides a fascinating insight into Elephant ecology and the unique conditions that have shaped this behaviour.

Overnight: Mana Pools Safari Lodge

Day 7

Mana Pools – Game Drive & Afternoon Boat Cruise

Today we will rise early for another game drive across the floodplains with the aim of tracking and observing the park's prolific wildlife while the temperatures are still low. As we drive deep into the bushveld, our guide will interpret the surroundings by pointing out fresh animal tracks, distinguishing between various species of dung, and explaining seasonal migration patterns influenced by the Zambezi floodplains.

Common wildlife sightings include large herds of Buffalo, Eland, Kudu, Zebras and Impalas, alongside predators such as Lions, Leopards and Spotted Hyenas. The drive will last between three and four hours depending on sightings before returning to the lodge for a mid-morning brunch.



We will have plenty of time to relax during the quiet midday hours, unwinding in the shade of ancient trees overlooking the river, watching the wildlife wander directly through the lodge boundaries before heading out again in the afternoon for another river cruise, where we can once again scan the river channels, sandbanks and islands for waterbirds, raptors and mammals as the day cools off.

Overnight: Mana Pools Safari Lodge

Day 8

Mana Pools – Morning Walk & Sundowner Drive

This morning we will have a final opportunity to walk out into bush. The pace will be deliberately unhurried as the cool morning ground retains the crisp imprints of nocturnal activity which turns the open plains into an open-air ledger of the night's events. The open river terraces and minimal undergrowth mean we will have exceptional visibility across the floodplains, making every subtle shift in the environment visible and appreciated. We will keep our eyes peeled for Elephants, relaxed prides of Lions resting in the warming sun and different types of antelope.

In the late afternoon, we round off our time in Mana Pools with a sundowner drive, revisiting some of the park's most scenic spots as the light softens and wildlife becomes active again.

Overnight: Mana Pools Safari Lodge

Day 9 – 10

Depart Zimbabwe, Arrive Home

This morning we will take a charter flight back to Harare, before boarding our return flight home.

Tour Grading

Grade A – Most tracking will be conducted from a safari vehicle or river boat, except for the designated foot-based activities. These excursions are paced slowly, often lasting between 30 minutes to an hour allowing for maximum enjoyment of our time in the field. For those wishing to explore further on foot, you may do so directly from the lodge, standard distances are between 1km to 5km in the flat river floodplains. One of the lodge vehicles can then collect you, avoiding the need to walk back again. Of course, all walking safari and activities are completely optional.

Focus

As a Naturetrek 'Go Slow' holiday, this tour has been designed to maximise enjoyment whilst minimising exertion. Most activities are undertaken at a relaxed pace from safari vehicles, allowing ample time to observe wildlife. The emphasis is on quality wildlife encounters rather than covering long distances or maintaining a demanding schedule. Our focus throughout will be on tracking and observing the remarkable wildlife of Mana Pools, and whilst there will be a few early starts and occasional evening activities, these are balanced by generous periods of free time at the lodge. Guests will have plenty of opportunity to relax and enjoy the lodge facilities between excursions.

Anyone with a reasonable level of mobility who is comfortable walking short distances on uneven ground should have no difficulty enjoying the holiday. The overall pace is intentionally relaxed, allowing participants to fully appreciate both the wildlife and the unique atmosphere of one of Zimbabwe's finest conservation areas.

Food & Accommodation Included in the Price

We will stay at the excellent Mana Pools Safari Lodge, where spacious, well-appointed rooms all have private en suite facilities and views across the surrounding flood plains. The lodge provides a comfortable and welcoming base for our stay, with superb wildlife-watching possible directly from its viewing platforms.



Mana Pools Safari Lodge

All meals are included in the cost of the holiday, from dinner on Day 2 through to breakfast on Day 9. Meals are taken at the lodge and are of a high standard, offering a variety of freshly prepared dishes in a relaxed and friendly setting. Items of a personal nature, together with snacks, soft drinks and alcoholic beverages, are not included in the tour price.

Weather

May marks the beginning of the dry season at Mana Pools, bringing clear skies, low humidity and generally settled conditions. Days are pleasantly warm, with temperatures often reaching around 28°C, while early mornings and evenings can be considerably cooler, sometimes falling to between 10 and 15°C. Rain is unlikely, although conditions can vary from year to year.

As the vegetation gradually begins to thin following the summer rains, visibility improves and wildlife can become easier to locate. Animals may increasingly gather around the remaining pools and along the Zambezi River, creating excellent opportunities for game viewing. The cooler temperatures are also well suited to walking safaris, while the clear light and open conditions can be particularly rewarding for photography.

Participants should be prepared for a range of temperatures. Lightweight, breathable clothing is ideal during the day, whilst a fleece, warm jacket and long trousers are recommended for early morning walks, boat trips and evening activities. Comfortable walking shoes, a sun hat, sunscreen and a refillable water bottle are also essential. With its warm days, cool mornings and increasingly concentrated wildlife, May is a particularly rewarding time to experience Mana Pools.

Transport

Please assist our tour leaders (and guides) in ensuring that there is a rotation of seats around the safari vehicle(s) to allow each tour member to enjoy approximately equal time in the front. In order to be fair to all participants, we regret that we are unable to guarantee a perpetual front seat to those who might suffer from motion sickness or other concerns.

Extending your holiday

Zimbabwe is an increasingly expanding part of our portfolio, and we would be delighted to help arrange an extension if you would like to spend more time exploring the country.

Among our favourite destinations are Victoria Falls, where the Zambezi plunges over a dramatic series of cataracts surrounded by lush rainforest sustained by the Falls' spray; Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe's largest national park, renowned for its excellent opportunities to see predators including Lion, Leopard, Cheetah and African Wild Dog; and the Eastern Highlands, a beautiful mountainous region of forests, montane grasslands and rolling scenery, with excellent birdwatching and numerous other species possible.

How to Book Your Place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests, at the time of booking.

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