PLACE OF THE

The trusty Toyota Hilux makes short work on fording the Runde River at Chamuluvati crossing.
Chilojo, Chipinda, Chinguli, Chitove, Chamuluvati, Chamachinzu... the alliterative place names of Zimbabwe's Gonarezhou National Park roll off the tongue, dripping with the promise of exotic 4x4 adventure. Gonarezhou – meaning 'the place of elephants' – is just that: an untamed 4941km² wilderness that is home to an estimated 11 000 cantankerous pachyderms. Having last explored the elephant-festooned Gonarezhou 19 years before, Stephen Cunliffe considered it high time that he took his old friend Duncan Gutsche and a trusty Toyota Hilux back to rediscover the magic of this oft-overlooked Zimbabwean wilderness.
The lion roars grew steadily louder, echoing off the unseen Chilojo Cliffs. With no moon or stars visible above, the darkness beyond our campfire was absolute. Both Duncan and I pulled our chairs a little closer to the dancing flames, blaming an imaginary chill in the night air rather than the guttural grunts bouncing back off the rock face across the river. Taking a deep swig of Zambezi lager, I fumbled for the powerful torch next to my chair. The hairs on the back of my neck bristled and my heart thumped a little louder as the king of the beasts continued to proclaim his territory loudly.

This was the raw and resurgent Gonarezhou at its very best. I could tell my travel companion felt the same way when, feigning indifference, he casually observed, “Well, it sounds like he’s getting a little closer… So, how far away do you reckon that guy is, anyway?”

Our exploration of the gloriously wild Gonarezhou had begun five days earlier, when we’d exited the rain-soaked Kruger Park at Pafuri, and taken a short detour through Mozambique before entering Zimbabwe: a welcome alternative to tackling Beitbridge! Leaving the paved roads at the South African border, we’d entered a maze of sandy tracks that soon converged on the south bank of the languid Limpopo. It was September, so fording the river involved little more than a short splash for our Hilux. Having negotiated the river, we’d traced the Zimbabwean border northeast, with nothing more than a flock of crested guinea fowl and a rundown police checkpoint for company.

Wearing flip-flops, fatigues and a torn T-shirt, an ‘officer’ exited the bullet-riddled old police outpost to remove the flimsy wire strung across the road. Utterly absorbed in his cell phone, he’d waved us on without even looking up from it. We’d driven on, thankful to have negotiated a notorious Mozambican police check with such ease. Two
hours after crossing the Limpopo, we’d already arrived at Chicualacuala, filled out departure forms, and made our way over to the Zimbabwe side of the border at Sango.

The border formalities at Sango had been painfully slow. The buckled wheels of Zimbabwean officialdom turned at glacial speed. A junior government employee was dispatched in search of diesel for an ancient generator, as immigration and customs officials sought to get their computers whirring back to life. We’d been the first tourists to pass through Sango in 48 hours; and I couldn’t help feeling that we might still be there when the next group arrived in a couple of days’ time! Eventually, we had all the necessary documentation and receipts, and – after patiently submitting to a further 20 minutes of petty police harassment (see Zimbabwe Shakedown sidebar) – we’d finally left the border, entering directly into southern Gonarezhou.

Having negotiated four border posts in one long bureaucratic morning, I found myself daring to hope that rumours of a soon-to-be-established seasonal Limpopo border crossing might, in fact be true. The proposed second border crossing between South Africa and Zimbabwe would be a tourist facility, providing South African overlanders with direct 4x4 access into Zimbabwe during the dry winter months.

After all, it’s been 13 long years since 9 December 2002, when the Zimbabwean, South African and Mozambican heads of state signed a treaty establishing the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park. At the core of the agreement was an audacious Peace-Parks-inspired plan to re-establish a 60km wide ‘conservation corridor’ following old migration routes that would enable wildlife once again to roam unhindered between the three countries’ protected areas.

For Gonarezhou, the envisaged corridor would not only provide elephants with more secure access to the Limpopo River, but would also link Gonarezhou to the Kruger and Limpopo national parks down south. While an undeniably exciting concept on paper,

It is sad to say, but, in the last decade, Zimbabwe’s police state has grown dramatically while simultaneously degenerating into a largely ineffective force concerned primarily with manning the ubiquitous police checkpoints that plague every road journey in Zim. Police checks are a dime a dozen, but those on the main A4 trade route between South Africa’s Beitbridge and Harare tend to be the most nefarious.

When driving from Gonarezhou to the Botswana border, we encountered no fewer than 21 police roadblocks, with the worst checkpoint being on the arterial A4 between Ngundu and Masvingo. Our brand-new Hilux was pulled over and issued multiple US$20 spot fines for having “insufficient reflectors” even as a procession of ancient, smoke-belching local vehicles crawled through the roadblock unhindered. When I refused to pay the irrational and receipt-less spot fines being demanded, an hour of protracted negotiation ensued. In the end we parted with a bag of apples, some stale crackers and a tin of tuna to get our driver’s licences back and permission to proceed — with a final parting comment still ringing in our ears: “You guys are SO LUCKY that you got lenient cops like us!”
Duncan enjoying the elephantine view from Gota picnic site.
The Toyota Hilux 3.0-litre D-4D Legend 45 is – as the name suggests – a legendary vehicle. With its four-cylinder turbocharged diesel engine and potent low-range 4x4 capabilities, it kicks out sufficient power to overcome even the most stubborn road conditions, sweeping up long stretches of treacherous river sand without skipping a beat. The 2015 model we drove was an automatic, and although I prefer a manual gearbox, the automatic transmission did make for easy cruising on the longer road-trip days when we were driving to and from the national park. Decent fuel consumption, durability and extreme reliability complete an awesome package. Even the few small criticisms I might have had with earlier models – such as their “being a hard ride” and having less-than-comfortable back seats – have been addressed in the 2015 update, and even more so in the forthcoming generation. This is a vehicle that I would not only wholeheartedly recommend, but would also put at the top of my wish list for the next 4x4 that I will own.
Top Impala and kudu are two of the most plentiful antelope species. Above Any 4x4 with decent clearance should be more than capable of tackling the park’s roads and river crossings during the dry season. Below Dainty klipspringer and a family of Burchell’s zebra add to the herbivore diversity in Gonarezhou.
Gonarezhou’s elephants have had a rough time over the years. Rampant poaching and persecution combined with limited exposure to vehicles has resulted in a population of agitated and sometimes aggressive elephants. While the recent past (since FZS became involved) has seen the elephant situation improve dramatically, they still carry a lot of long-term baggage from the bad old days. Some are more relaxed than others, and our experience was that the bulls tended to be more laid-back than the highly-strung breeding herds. But the key to safely viewing these elephants is to exercise caution, always to treat them with respect, and not to try and approach them with your vehicle. In fact, during our visit, a Chilo Safari Lodge vehicle which had repeatedly approached a visibly agitated elephant was rammed. The enraged beast did some real damage with its tusks; but, despite the vehicle taking a real pounding, rather miraculously no-one was injured or killed. You can find a clip of the incident (taken by one of the tourists on the vehicle) on YouTube - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3V79KGkjOTw

section headquarters, and to focus rather on Muwatomba Pools and Rossi Pools. These two exclusive-use campsites overlook the Mwanezi River and are reputed to be among the park’s finest camping options. The river demarcates the park boundary, and is both scenic and a magnet for elephants during the dry season. It should be noted, however, that low numbers of visitors and the hunting across the river in the Malipati Safari Area make the wildlife – and especially the elephants – anything but relaxed in the southern region. (See Enraged Elephants sidebar.)

But, what the remote southern and central sections lack in terms of habituated wildlife, they more than make up for with an intoxicating, raw, wilderness vibe. It feels truly wild, and there are precious few vehicles to intrude upon your private nature experience. Irrespective of the low vehicle numbers, off-roading and bundu-bashing are not to be attempted, as the last of the Mozambican border minefields still await clearing in the southeast!

From Rossi pools, we snaked our way north through the heart of the national park. Despite having a number of perennial natural pans – including Gorwe, Lion and Malugwe – the central region is the least-explored section, and consequently the wildlife remains skittish. We saw herds of nervous impala and uneasy elephants, and we even startled a stretch of gangly giraffe, but none of these creatures hung around for long. A legacy of heavy poaching has exacerbated the situation, making animals understandably nervy.

When bumping along the Nyavasikana River track as we closed in on the Runde River in the north of the park, I sensed a change. The feeling of true remoteness began to dissipate somewhat, and the wildlife became steadily more prolific and self-assured. Our campsite for the next couple of nights was the picturesque Chamuluvati in the northeast, and although it is renowned for its high densities of elephant, the unseasonably cool and wet ‘ghuti’ weather was keeping temperatures low and elephant activity on the river to a minimum. In fact, it was a real compliment to Gonarezhou that, despite days of grey and drizzly weather, we were still having such a good time exploring the park.

Not far from our campsite was Machaniwa Pan, where despite the unseasonal rain, the water was rapidly receding. Storks, herons, warthogs, waterbuck, baboons and impala joined the feeding frenzy, while jackals called soulfully as they trotted around the fringes of the gigantic pan. It was a great place to stretch our legs and enjoy...
a picnic lunch before heading further east to check out the Save/Runde river confluence near an old abandoned tsetse-fly control post. It was in this northeastern region, especially up against the Save River boundary that we began to see the sobering signs of elephant poaching first-hand. Old skeletons with bleached bones and shattered skulls spoke of the scale of the slaughter during the previous elephant genocide, but there were also worrying signs of more recent poaching incidents: a fresh carcass right next to the road between the Save/Runde Gate and Gayiseni campsite hinted that all was not well in this wild paradise.

The following day, taking advantage of the cool conditions, we opted to drive through the mountainous north to Chipinda. Here, we caught up with the FZS project manager in an attempt to reach a better understanding of the current situation in Gonarezhou.

“That elephant carcass that you saw near Gayiseni yesterday was one shot by Mozambican poachers in February this year. With an estimated 11 000 elephants in the park (more than the entire population next door in Mozambique), a lot of poaching – especially of big tuskers – is being driven by the Mozambicans. To make matters worse, they’re not only using guns but also lacing marula fruits with Temik and then leaving the toxic fruits alongside major elephant trails,” Hugo explained.

The net result has been a steady rise in elephant mortalities, with 80 elephants lost to poaching this year alone. In order to address the poaching challenges and bolster law-enforcement efforts, FZS recently acquired two detection dogs to augment its growing anti-poaching scout force. Luckily, it’s not all doom and gloom for Gonarezhou’s beleaguered elephants. A number of very real challenges exist but, as Hugo explained, “Although we are devoting serious resources to tackling the scourge of poaching, the situation is perhaps not as dire as it first sounds when you consider that the elephant population has been increasing at an annual rate of 5.9% over the past five years.”

Other key wildlife species have fared even better. The lion population, down to a mere 20 felines when FZS arrived, has quadrupled under their nine-year watch; and friends of mine enjoyed three lion sightings during a week-long Gonarezhou visit in September. Wild dogs have also done exceptionally well, with over 200 dogs now recorded in eight to 10 packs scattered throughout the park. Herbivore populations have also rebounded strongly, and the outstanding diversity of game we saw during our visit was further evidence of this remarkable recovery.

It’s not just wildlife that’s doing well in Gonarezhou; tourism is also on the up, and the enactment of a comprehensive tourism strategy is urgently needed to safeguard the wilderness aspect that is unquestionably Gonarezhou’s greatest asset. The proposed management plan focuses on sustainable tourism development – which involves the restricting of permanent structures to the periphery of park, while allowing tented camps at designated concession sites within the park, and a handful of low-impact campsites in the wilderness areas.

With 6000-8000 visitors per year – and an emphasis on growing regional tourism – Gonarezhou is no longer the sleepy backwater of a decade ago: a strong rationale for both a tourism management plan and to visit the park sooner rather than later.
The main road from Chipinda Pools to the Chilojo Cliffs snake its way through scenic mountainous terrain.
SAFARI GEAR

4x4 MegaWorld supplied a comprehensive range of safari kit to make this trip possible. We made full use of six steel jerry cans, which ensured sufficient diesel for us to explore the entire park and not have to skimp on the game drives.

Heavy-duty 25-litre plastic water cans and food storage boxes allowed us to be totally self-sufficient.

Also in our kit bag was a T-Max air compressor, useful for re-inflating our tyres after a soft-sand river crossing as well as after fixing the inevitable puncture.

Just as a safeguard, we carried a hi-lift jack and full recovery gear, including shackles and a snatch strap — luckily these did not have to be deployed.

Last, but certainly not least, we also had use of an Engel 40-litre compressor fridge: a boon for keeping our healthy supply of braai meat frozen and we were even willing to sacrifice a few perishables to the icy cause of ensuring our beers were always well chilled!

Our navigation needs were taken care of by NavWorld, who supplied a Garmin Nuvi 2689LMT, which was loaded with the latest Tracks4Africa mapset — essential for ensuring we were on the right tracks when road signs weren’t up to scratch.
As we shook hands and climbed into our Hilux, Hugo left us with a parting thought: “Most of those tourists we just mentioned enter the park at Chipinda, visit the Chilojo Cliffs, check out the Save/Runde confluence and then head off to their next destination. My hope is that people will get over this Chilojo-Cliffs-and-confluence obsession. As you guys have seen, there is so much more to this park. In my opinion, the central section is a must-visit area for any 4x4 enthusiast who loves rougher roads and true wilderness.”

As we left the Chipinda park headquarters, the strange ‘ghuti’ weather that had dominated our six days in the park to date finally began to lift. Hugo had warned us that in previous years the thick, drizzly, grey mists had been known to persist for up to two weeks without respite! So, with the sun threatening to break through, we wasted no time in getting back to the Chilojo Cliffs. Excitement levels were high as we imagined the cliffs in all their sun-bathed glory.

Our first stop was Chamachinzu viewpoint atop the cliff’s eastern buttress. We sat in enraptured awe as the sky cleared and elephants emerged along the river far below. An hour later we finally tore ourselves away and drove across to the western vantage point. Now, at 4pm, soft rays streamed through the last fragments of cloud and bathed the cliffs in surreal shades of pink and Martian-orange. It was a spectacular scene, especially with the sky washed clean of smoke and dust. Sitting atop the Chilojo Cliffs with only baboons and baobabs for company, Duncan and I were in complete agreement: this was one seriously special place. Staring out over the resplendent Runde and its thirsty elephant herds, we quaffed the tastiest beers of our entire trip. As the sun sank lower, the cliffs turned from burnt orange to crimson and gold. The relentless rain of the preceding week ensured that the colours popped and the scene sprang vividly to life.

With the sun sinking low on the horizon, we could delay no longer: it was time to hit the road and race the sunset home. Two playful hyenas interrupted our journey with their antics, but we couldn’t spend long with the mischievous creatures as we needed to be back in camp before dark.

At the campsite, a relaxed elephant bull greeted our arrival; the old boy spent the entire night feeding noisily around camp. I found his branch-breaking and noisy chewing reassuring; it lulled me into a deep, dream-filled slumber.

I dreamt of the Gonarezhou: a wilderness rich in wildlife and largely devoid of visitors where (thanks to the commitment and dedication of Hugo, Elsabe and the entire FZS team) the park is rebounding and rediscovering its former glory. There is no disputing that Gonarezhou is one of southern Africa’s finest game reserves for nature-loving 4x4 aficionados, but herein lies the challenge: while the park’s steadily growing popularity will help finance the cost of safeguarding this wild Eden, it won’t remain off the radar for much longer.
WHERE TO STAY

Lodge accommodation is restricted to Chilo Gorge Safari Lodge (www.chilogorge.com), a new ZimParks-operated tented camp at Chipinda, and run-down park accommodation at Mabalauta. Developed multi-stand campgrounds can be found at Chipinda, Chinguli and Mabalauta, which have basic facilities such as running water, flush toilets, showers and thatched lapas. Although spotlessly clean when we visited, the facilities are crying out for refurbishment.

Most visitors concentrate on the prime northern campsites surrounding the renowned Chilojo Cliffs: Chilojo 1 and 2, Fishans, Directors and Hlaro. There are, however, some other stunning sites situated on the southern bank of the Runde further to the east, and Muwatomba and Rossi Pools are good options on the Mwenezi River in the south.

Campsite bookings are supposed to be made through the Zimbabwe National Parks Headquarters in Harare, www.zimparks.org, although this is invariably a frustrating experience unless you are fortunate enough to connect with the indefatigable Christina Muhiro. After countless phone calls and emails, I got the distinct feeling that she was the ONLY Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Reservation Agent who cared.

When the phones are working, you can reach her on +263 4 706 077/8, otherwise email her directly on: cmhurilo@zimparks.co.zw/or try gonarezhoureservations@gmail.com.

To those who love walking safaris as much as they love 4x4ing, Ant Kaschula is one of the most respected walking guides in Southern Africa. During the dry season, he runs Gonarezhou Bushcamps from a private operator’s site on the Runde River in the shadow of the mesmerising Chilojo Cliffs. Check out www.gonarezhou-bushcamps.com for more.

PARK RULES

The speed limit is 40km/h and no off-road driving is permitted. Stick to the designated tracks and drive only during daylight hours. Removal of any fauna or flora, as with firewood collection, is strictly prohibited. Provided that you obtain a permit, fishing is allowed.

DWNP PARK AND VEHICLE FEES

Rates are subject to change; but, as SADC residents, we were charged a camping fee of US$29 per person per night, a daily conservation fee of $6 per day, and a once-off vehicle entry fee of US$10.

FUEL

Fuel is not available anywhere inside the national park, and the nearest place to reliably obtain diesel and petrol is in Chiredzi. Although the introduction of the US dollar has gone a long way towards ensuring reliable fuel supplies throughout Zimbabwe, it would be prudent to carry extra fuel reserves and to fill up whenever possible.

BORDER CROSSINGS

Seasoned overlanders who loathe the delays and irritations of using Beitbridge should seriously consider exiting South Africa at Pafuri in northern Kruger (08:00-16:00) and travelling through Mozambique to Chicalacuala, where you enter directly into Gonarezhou at Sango border post (08:00-18:00). Another circuitous option is to travel via Botswana and the efficient Plumtree-Ramokwebane border post.

Remember that all foreign-registered vehicles entering Zimbabwe will be
charged third-party insurance (US$30) and carbon tax (US$15), payable in cash. Expect delays to get this paperwork processed, as an ancient smoke-belching generator (I guess that’s why we need to pay carbon tax!) has to be fuelled and coaxed into life to generate the necessary receipts.

**ROAD CONDITIONS AND RIVER CROSSINGS**

The road conditions inside the park vary from good to mildly challenging. When traversing the less-visited central section of the park, we found most of the tracks to be in reasonably good condition, although a couple of drainage lines and eroded patches required a little more concentration to negotiate. The roads through the mountainous north of the park meander through the Chionja Range and tend to be very rocky in places, with numerous drainage lines, but these are fairly straightforward to navigate outside of the rainy season. Five of the six river crossings on the Runde are sand-bottom crossings, but – provided the water levels have not swollen after heavy rains – any 4x4 should be able to cross relatively easily. The sixth crossing at Chipinda is a stone-packed causeway.

**CONVOY OR SOLO**

Convoy is the safer option, as other vehicles can be few and far between, especially away from the popular Chilojo Cliffs area. Experienced overlanders opting for a solo sojourn should have all the necessary emergency equipment and recovery gear, including a tyre-repair kit, an air compressor and pressure gauge, a spade, sand tracks, a hi-lift jack and extra fuel. A GPS and satellite phone could prove invaluable.

Also, carry plenty of drinking water and watch your fuel consumption carefully.

**FOOD AND PROVISIONS**

We opted to bring most of our food and provisions from South Africa, as there is almost nothing available when approaching Gonarezhou from the Mozambican side. Firewood can be purchased at the park’s main entry points.

**RISKS**

Gonarezhou is a malaria area, so take the necessary precautions; prophylactics are advised. Watch out for the potent sun in summer and keep well-hydrated at all times. The hot, wet summer months coincide with increased scorpion and snake activity, so wear shoes at night and remain vigilant.

**NAVIGATION**

Gonarezhou can be accessed via three main entrance points: Mabalauta in the south, or Chipinda Pools and Save/Runde in the north. Most visitors opt for the main Chipinda Pools access point in the northwest, although – when coming from South Africa – the adventurous route through Mozambique and the Chivacualacuca-Sango border post is an exciting alternative worth considering.

**GONAREZHOU PREDATOR PROJECT**

Since 2008, the African Wildlife Conservation Fund has been trying to establish the abundance, distribution and conservation status of the large carnivore species found in Gonarezhou. If you are fortunate enough to see wild dog, lion, cheetah, leopard or hyena during your visit, then please email the sighting details along with any photos to researcher Dr Rosemary Groom: **rosemary@ africanwildlifeconservationfund.org**

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

Check out [www.zimparks.org](http://www.zimparks.org) or get your hands on the latest version of a Lonely Planet or Bradt travel guide to Zimbabwe.