

## MANA POOLS SEPTEMBER 2008

This was the holiday that almost never was....

Firstly, on the day before we were due to leave, the Land Rover was involved in an accident which required some minor emergency repairs. This delayed the start of the trip with a day and a half. Secondly, upon arrival at the border post, I realised that I made that most elemental of blunders. I left the passports at home. Fortunately, it was soon resolved through the help of friendly colleagues who brought the passports to me.

### DAY ONE

After a late start due to sorting out some of the accident repairs, we spent the night at Bushmen Safaris close to the Groblersbrug border post. A nice campsite with good ablution facilities. Although set next to the main road there was not much traffic to disturb the peace. We were attended to by the very friendly camp attendant, Bree who had a minor medical incident when he sprayed himself with the security pepper spray he mistook for insect repellent.

### DAY TWO

We spent the night at the Marang Hotel in Francistown which was, as always, very pleasant. At the campsite, we met some guys from Bulawayo on a shopping trip to Francistown to buy stock for their shops. After enquiring about the security and fuel situations in Zimbabwe, we decided to alter the route we planned to use via Zambia to Chirundu.

Instead, we entered Zimbabwe at the Plumtree border post and travelled via Bulawayo to Chinhoyi. We spent the night at the Town Inn on the outskirts of Gweru, a very expensive lodge. Here we paid through our necks to camp and to use a bathroom in one of the chalets. The food at dinner (also expensive at US\$20 per head) was also terrible. The T-bone I had that night ranks as the toughest I ever had...

### DAY THREE

We continued our travel towards Marongora where the regional Parks Head Office is situated and where one needs to report first before entering the National Park. Note that this office closes at 15:00.

I remain convinced that one of the main contributing factors towards Zimbabwe's financial woes is the fact that they probably spend almost their entire budget on paper and carbon paper as there is always a sheaf of forms to complete in either duplicate or even triplicate.

Approximately five kilometres from Marongora and after having descended the Zimbabwe escarpment into the Zambezi valley, one reaches the turnoff to Mana Pools National Park.

One has to travel approximately seventy kilometres on a very bad road before reaching the Park Offices. I have travelled many bad roads before, but this one ranks as one of the worst corrugated roads I have travelled. It is badly corrugated with not a few potholes thrown into the mix to make for a dental filling rattling experience. I soon found that the best speed is either dead slow or somewhere between 60 to 70 km/h.

On this road one passes through two control gates where more registers are to be completed.

Upon arrival at the Park Office we were treated very friendly. It is clear that the Zim authorities realise that tourism is a very important source of foreign currency that should be treated accordingly.

When we made the reservations at the Head Office in Harare, we requested to be allocated a camp on the river bank and were allotted site 17. This turned out to be a really good site right on the river bank with lots of very good and much needed shade and ample level space for camping.

The ablutions were adequate with hot water always available. Cleanliness is not an obvious priority but was soon rectified through the judicious donation of some maize meal and cooking oil.

#### DAYS 4 TO 11

These days were spent in Mana Pools National Park. Mana covers a small geographical area and there are not many roads on which to do game drives. The result is one of the most relaxing holidays one can imagine.

Mana is one of only a few parks where one can freely walk where one pleases. This can be very exciting as Mana is most definitely Big Five terrain...

We often drove out to a water hole where we had breakfast or lunch. Sitting outside next to a water hole and seeing the animals come for their morning or afternoon drinks is a very special experience. Another very special experience and a first for me was to follow a pack of wild dogs on foot. Unfortunately we lost sight of them when they started chasing after some impala.

One should always remember that walking amongst wild animals is a dangerous activity and this is reinforced by the fact that several tourists are injured by wild animals each season. Only two weeks prior a South African woman was severely injured after being gored by an elephant.

Another attraction of Mana is the fishing in the Zambezi and Mana rivers. Tiger and bream is the most common. Many hours were spent this way. Remember to carry a rod on game drives as well. There are a number of picnic spots next to the river where one can always try one's luck. Just be very careful. The Zambezi is known for its croc population! There is also no shortage of hippos.

Falling asleep each night to the sounds of the Hippos making their ridiculous sounds and the whooping of hyena is wonderful.

The campsite at Mana is not fenced. One should always be extremely careful as elephant and buffalo are daily visitors to the camp. At night hyenas skulk around. We saw spotted genet and a badger in the camp at night. I was also often awakened by the roar of lion close to the camp.

#### DAYS 12 TO 13

We decided to return via Beit Bridge. We slept over at the Masvingo Municipal Campsite. The place was spotless, although there was no hot water due to a lack of electricity supply.

A pleasant surprise was to find the Beit Bridge border post rid of all the self-appointed helpers or 'gumagumas'.

## GENERAL

Bob Mugabe should be complimented in succeeding in converting one of the most successful commercial agricultural economies to a typical African rural subsistence farming society in only a few short years. It is heartbreaking to see how some of the most productive agricultural land in Southern Africa lies fallow. The less said about this, the better.

It also seemed as if the whole of Zimbabwe has been burned down. From where we entered Zimbabwe at Plumtree, the grass has been burned down and this was the position the whole way to Marongoro. A perpetual haze hid the sky. I was very concerned that Mana Pools itself would also be burned down but fortunately it was not. In the two weeks I spent in Zimbabwe, I did not once see a clear blue sky.

It is clear that the country is in a huge mess and that we shouldn't be surprised by the large number of Zimbabwean immigrants we have in South Africa.

A lesson I learnt is not to change money at a bureau de change. My friend and I each changed P50 at Plumtree. For this we received a combined total of Z\$640 at the official rate of exchange. In Bulawayo this amount was insufficient to purchase a single banana from street vendors! Payment for almost anything can be made in either US Dollar or South African Rand. You will seldom be offered change in the same currency. Carry small denomination notes to minimise potential losses.

We encountered no hassles whatsoever at any of the border posts or at any of the numerous police stops at virtually every town. We were treated with nothing but courteousness and friendliness. The only arrogance and slack service we experienced was at our own border posts. Three cheers to Home Affairs!

I should make special mention of the fuel situation in Zimbabwe. Not knowing where fuel will be available we started off by filling up wherever fuel was available. One of the peculiarities is that one is required to purchase fuel coupons available in 20 litre increments. These coupons are available at the very fuel station where one fills up. After having purchased the said coupon, one is then required to complete a register, stating the usual name, ID, address, etc. (Remember my point about the paper work?).

We also once bought 20 litres of fuel on the so called 'black market' at a rather hefty R350.00. Here no paper work was required.

We found a fuel station a few kilometres outside of Karoi where diesel was available and we filled up the tanks. On the return trip, I purchased 60 litres of diesel at this filling station which were sufficient to see me back to SA.

Judging from the large number of fuel trucks I noticed on the roads, it seems as if the fuel crises is already or at least will soon be history. The fuel crisis was caused by price control. The Zimbabwe government made a law which set the retail price of fuel at a much lower rate than the costs thereof to the wholesalers. One tends to think that it should not require a genius to predict the inevitable result... This law has since been revoked and fuel is available.

Diesel costs around US\$ 1.40 to \$ 1.60 a litre. Petrol seemed to be more available than diesel due to that fact that most vehicles are diesel driven. For those with petrol driven cars, I did not once see unleaded fuel. No petrol other than the unique Zim 'Blend' was available.

As far as camping is concerned, it seemed that many of the camping places identified on the Garmin maps (including Tracks4Africa) may no longer be in operation. Allow sufficient time to find a sleeping spot for the night.

All said and done, Mana Pools is a fantastic place which will see me again. Soon.

See my photos at: [http://www.flickr.com/photos/nico\\_roets/sets/72157607277465518/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/nico_roets/sets/72157607277465518/)

Nico Roets