



Waiting for tourists

The Presidential elephants on Hwange Estate, Zimbabwe, enjoy nothing better than a sundowner with friends.

The sky is pale blue, drained by the heat of midday. A troop of chacma baboons is picking through elephant dung in search of seeds and insects. Warthogs are on their knees, feeding amongst elegant antelope. A family of elephants joins them, trunks raised momentarily like periscopes, sniffing air which is heavy with wild Africa: sunbaked earth, elephant dung and birdsong.

There's the pleasing sound of leather against leather as the elephants delight in one another's close company. There are slurps and rumbles, the swishing of tails, flapping of great grey ears and the echo of cool water being tossed down enormous throats.

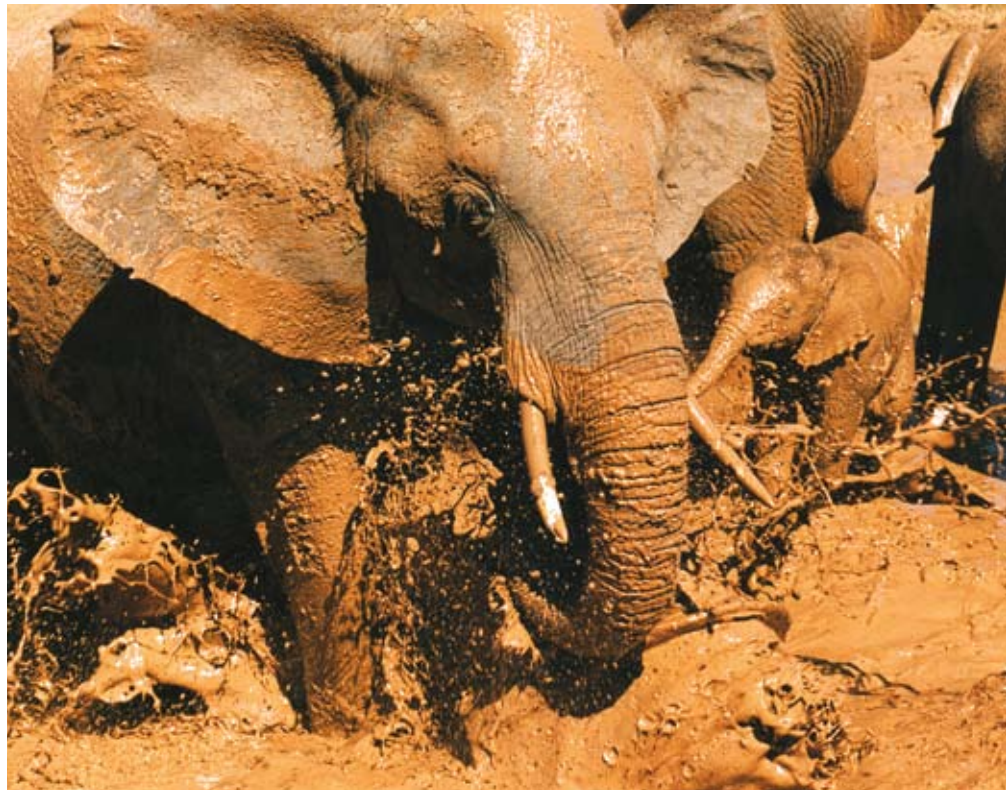
These grey giants happen to be part of the largest Presidential elephant family that roams this land – the 'A' family group – all of whom are known by names beginning with this letter.

It's late 2009 and I find myself still among the very habituated Presidential elephants of Zimbabwe. Somehow, I've not been able to leave the Hwange area. Wild Africa, it seems, not only worms its way into your blood, it lodges itself firmly in the very core of your heart. Zimbabwe, despite its troubles, continually tempts me to stay on.

The wildlife here on Hwange Estate has learned once more to relax. The elephants are friendly and welcoming. Favourites named Lady and Misty are just two of those who produced babies late last year. Lady gave birth to little Lantana, and Misty to Masakhe – which means, in the local Ndebele language, 'to rebuild that which has been broken' – a fitting name in these times. What a pleasure it is to have them just centimetres from my 4x4, sharing their lives.

The availability of dry season water on this stretch of land remains a cause for concern; key waterholes are yet to be resurrected. The

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- Hwange is in an area with no natural water supplies, so its animals, particularly the elephants, are reliant on man-
- made waterholes for their survival in the dry season.

snaring of wildlife continues to be a challenge too, although sightings of badly snared animals have thankfully reduced in recent times.

Despite the insufficient number of pumped pans, today I am fortunate. Eight more elephant families arrive in the open area of Kanondo in the mid-afternoon, mingling peacefully; greeting ceremonies piercing the silence. They linger for hours before heading off in the direction of the adjoining Hwange National Park.

More than 300 Presidential elephants recently appeared together like a mirage at the waterhole directly in front of the Hwange Safari Lodge. Over 100 buffaloes and two hungry lions joined them for what was a truly spectacular sundowner. Days

earlier, the nearby Ivory Lodge had hosted a similar gathering.

It's not possible to feel confined here. In the wide-open spaces of wild Africa, you learn to pay attention to all the wonders of life, large and small. And you can't help but be touched by it all.

As the sun sinks in the western sky, I am relaxed – and without any human company. As has often been the case over the past few years, not one other person witnessed the hours-long spectacle that I alone revelled in today.

Although there are still things to be righted, the Presidential elephants of Zimbabwe beckon the tourists of the world back to experience this unique region. The hundreds of great grey forms in the sunset are the true spirit of the African veld. ■