

The heart of the matter

This is the story of a country, Zimbabwe, emerging from the trauma of war. It is also a memoir of an English family who loved and lived here. Author *Bella Pollen* takes her daughter on a journey of discovery to unearth their African roots

I'm standing 200 yards from one of the natural wonders of the world. But a cold rain is coming down on Victoria Falls and tourists in bad shorts are unraveling origami packs of waterproofs, avoiding eye contact with a loose-limbed band of men hawking 100 billion dollar bank notes – a sad souvenir of this country's troubled history.

This is not how I imagined my first glimpse of Zimbabwe – the country where my grandmother settled, the country where my mother was born. Every time I've pictured myself here, it is standing on the veranda of their whitewashed farmhouse near Bulawayo, looking down on to the untamed African veld, a land of mimosa, flat-topped trees and glorious isolation.

As children we reveled in my mother's bush stories; she loved Africa and I'd give anything to have seen it through her eyes, but Zimbabwe today is very different to its imperial predecessor, Rhodesia. Besides, I'm here on a mother-daughter trip of a different kind – one with my 16 year old, Mabel – she of the swishy pony tail and kohled Eskimo eyes. Mabel is no slouch at foreign travel, and in-between elephant rides and GCSE revision, she has little time for maudlin regrets and nostalgic reminiscences. This is 2014, she announces, and it's not enough to stand in awe of the Falls, we must bridge walk, bungee jump or cable slide across it and thus I soon find myself peering over a 500ft drop with a wire attached to my back. Below, the great Zambezi turns lazily through the gorge. "Jump", a young African instructs, "piece of cake". Here's the thing though, I do not like heights – but I guess every generation must find its own spirit of adventure. To return to my grandmother's Africa is going to require a leap of something, if not imagination, and so jump I do.

Small, courageous and tough, everyone called her "little brown mummy". The daughter of an Earl, my grandmother was born and raised in the Edwardian splendor of Longford Castle. At 19 she married a Coldstream guardsman and after the First World War, sailed to Africa to start a new life. Starting out with

virtually nothing, they lived first in a tent, then a mud hut, before finally building a three-roomed farmhouse from bricks my grandfather made and burned in a kiln. M'Coben, they called it – place of ghosts.

"Hey, just maybe your grandparents knew my grandparents," says our driver. We're en route to Hwange National Park, 150 miles south of the Falls. It turns out that the driver has a parallel, if inverted, history to mine. His grandfather and father worked on a white farm outside Bulawayo, whose owner left them the land when he died. "Back then it was easy to get a job. Easy to leave, too. White farmers would re-employ a good man

in a minute. Life was better, the economy was strong." Then came the '70s; a tribal war, followed by independence, the Gukuruhundi atrocities and Mugabe's land grabs. "No one benefited except the government." He gives a sad whistle. "White, Shona, Ndebele, everyone suffers the same under Mugabe."

When my mother returned to Zimbabwe in 1989, she couldn't face going back to the farm. With its neighbors either murdered or thrown off their land, M'Coben, place of ghosts, had lived up to its name. An estimated two million farm workers and their dependents were driven from their homes. I think it broke a piece of my mother's heart and she has not returned since.

Hwange is the Jurassic Park of Zimbabwe, or so claims Mike our guide, as Mabel and I reach the reserve, transfer into his jeep and trundle off. A few miles of nothing, then suddenly a massive bull elephant lumbers silently out of the teak forest and raises his trunk in salute. And this is only the beginning. If we were underdressed for chilly Victoria Falls, we're spectacularly ill-equipped for safari – no hats, camera or binoculars – not that we need them to see the black clouds gathering overhead. Within minutes the sky splits. Mike tosses us ponchos but they're little use against the power shower of an African storm. Water floods the jeep, our luggage is soaked, Davison's camp is two hours away.

need to know

Africa Travel can arrange seven nights in Zimbabwe, including return flights to Victoria Falls with British Airways, road transfers, three nights B&B at Africa Albida Tourism's Victoria Falls Safari Suites, two nights at Wilderness Safaris' Davison's Camp and two nights at The Hide, both fully inclusive. From £3,075 per person, based on a family of four traveling. africatravel.com

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“Oh my Lord,” Mike sings. “Oh my Lord,” I shout. “Oh my Lord,” yells Mabel. Have I mentioned how much I love traveling with my daughter? Enthusiastic, unspoiled, independent, Mabel loves pressing her nose to the window of other’s lives and never runs short of unblinking curiosity.

Once at Davison’s we are duly wrung out, given hot water bottles and sent to our room. Of the half dozen or so camps spread out across Hwange, Davison’s is by far the most isolated. Seven tents stationed in front of a watering hole. Here you don’t wander anywhere without a guide and a rifle. Darkness falls. An animal screams. Even as Mabel and I push our beds together to hold hands, something large leans into the soft cotton of our walls as it passes.

It is not the colonial veneer of my grandmother’s Africa I find so compelling, but the primal survival of it, the stories of the epic discomfort of her daily existence. Before leaving Longford Castle, the only thing she’d ever cooked was fudge. In Africa, she had no electricity and a bucket for a toilet. At night, in her tent, the wind and dust were so bad that by morning she could write her name in her pillow. After a few months she hacked off all her hair. “It was the greatest convenience,” she wrote, with typical understatement. But short hair and divided skirts were surely a metaphor for the freedom Africa represented, in contrast to the constraints of the society she’d left behind.

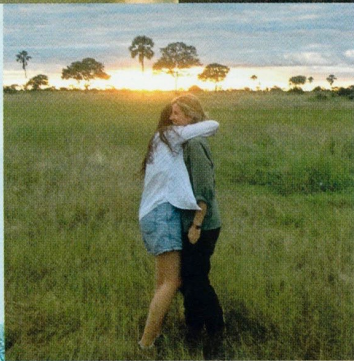
Davison’s camp is splendid. Hot showers, open fires, charm a’plenty. April is apparently the wrong season for animals, nevertheless, there are lots of them around. Towers of giraffe, mobs of mongoose, parades of emu. A cheetah yawns on a rock. We are shockingly close. Even without binoculars I can see his amber teeth, the spider on one paw.

Ultimately, safari-fun is down to the guide. Mike has a wife called Leave Me Alone and a laugh like Baron Samedi in *Live and Let Die*. He and Mabel bond over how many animals they catch consorting. “Oh, so that’s what they call it,” Mabel says archly, eying a male baboon humping an underage teen. By the time Mike delivers us to our next camp, The Hide, we are suffering separation anxiety. “Tell people to come,” Mike said, as he hugged us goodbye. “My country is beautiful.”

The Hide comprises beautifully designed thatched buildings and tents set in front of a panoramic landscape. Here I finally succumb to jeep fatigue, but who needs to chase after Africa when it comes so casually strolling by? Elephant, kudu, the bull’s-eye bottoms of the waterbuck. Baboons thunder through the long grass a few yards from my feet, displacing a family of warthogs. I shut my eyes to the buzz of insects and wake an hour later to the flutter of something inside my shirt. I touch a hand to my heart and a yellow butterfly zigzags out towards the buttery sun.

On our last night, we are dropped off at The Hide’s tree house, some miles from the camp. Up in the branches, we check the bed for creepy crawlies then huddle together. “The noise of an African night is miraculous,” my mother told me. “It’s the smell I miss, those incredible starry skies.”

“It is beautiful,” Mabel says, as we stare into the half-light, then she pulls her laptop from her bag and pings on the power. “But let’s watch *White House Down* anyway.”



Clockwise from left: Pollen with her daughter Mabel. The private hide at Davison’s camp. Pollen’s grandmother and her siblings at Longford Castle in 1903. Elephants at the water hide

