

Gone drifting

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Hot spot: Lake Kariba

Tony Park takes a houseboat, a bunch of Aussies, a couple of crates of beer and a lonely catfish on a tour of Lake Kariba.

Messing about in boats: The luxury cruiser Return To Eden nudges up against the lakeshore during a stopover

Her name is Return to Eden. She has been booked by friends in Harare. When we arrive, the first thing that staggers us is her size.

"It's like a bloody battleship," says one of the Aussies, one of a potentially lethal mixed bag of Southern Africans and Australians who are aboard for a 40th-birthday gathering. Houseboats in Australia tend to be the size of a caravan — and about as luxurious.

“None of us fancy eating this monster so Claudius says he'll take it home”

We clamber up and down the stairs, exploring and staking out cabins, which are all far more luxurious than we have expected. Those who have experienced more rustic houseboats and Kariba's heat are pleasantly surprised to discover the cabins are air conditioned. There is a plunge pool — the biggest I've ever seen — which is not big enough for laps but it could probably take all 15 of us at once.

We've self-catered for the trip, though Return to Eden's owners can also arrange for all meals and drinks to be provided. It's a minor military operation loading enough food and beverages for 15 people for five days, and we're sweating, even with the help of the captain, chef and deck hand.

Some of the Zimbabweans on board are farmers, who have been kicked off their land once before and are waiting to see how long they'll still be allowed to work for a living. The tension is clear on the lined faces but, magically, a night on board Return to Eden is all it takes for worries to fade away. The farmers read and sleep; the Australians drink and sleep; and the younger bucks fish.

In the mornings and afternoons everyone boards the two tender boats — aluminium platforms on pontoons with an outboard out back — for a game "cruise". On the first day, the Aussies all snap pictures of each other fishing with elephants close in the background. By the second day they're so used to sightings of the giant beasts just a few metres away that it's hard to summon the energy to even draw a camera out of its pouch.

"Kariba-itis" spreads through the group like scurvy on a clipper and soon everyone is so relaxed that it's an effort to walk the five paces to the cold-box.

It's mid-year and the fish aren't exactly in a feeding frenzy, but that's of no concern to the Aussie amateur anglers. "I hope I don't get a bite. I don't reckon I've got the strength left to land anything," one says.

Of course, the boat's chef, Claudius, on a rare couple of hours off duty between meals, takes to one of the tender boats and returns to Eden with the mother-of-all vundus — a huge catfish.

None of us fancies eating this prehistoric monster and Claudius declares he will take it home to feed his family. This is day two, however, and the catfish is too big to fit in the gas deep freeze.

The crew seeks our approval to let the vundu live for a few more days. A passengers' meeting is called and the consensus is that while the days are sunny and warm, none of us has felt the need to use the swimming pool. The gargantuan fish takes up residence in the pool and he becomes a sort of slimy, ugly, whiskered mascot for the cruise.

The glittering waters, sunny days and cosily cool nights in the cabins act like an anaesthetic on the passengers. It's restful, but some action is needed and it comes on a fishing trip when the two tenders and a third speedboat are moored in an inlet.

On one boat, the Sydneysiders are drinking Zambezi and feeding fish. On the other tender the farmers' wives are watching a small herd of waterbuck grazing on partially submerged grass on the lake shore. The kids in the speedboat are honking back at the hippos.

It's a peaceful Kariba scene — that is until four lionesses break cover from the long golden grass further inland. There are screams from the kids; looks of open-mouthed stupor from the Aussies and dropped binoculars on the farmers' boat.

Before cameras can be turned on, the waterbuck are charging and swimming deeper into the water and the cats stop short in a series of splashes. They back away, shaking the droplets from their paws, like house cats after a failed attempt at catching the family goldfish.

As we cruise back to the houseboat, adrenalin slowly subsiding, we come across a bull elephant almost totally submerged. He puts his head under water to reach some grass still growing on the shelving floor of the lake. He lifts his trunk, splashing the last of the dirt from the roots, and pops the delicate delicacy into his smiling pink mouth.

That evening, as usual, Eden's captain beaches the nose of the boat on the shore. We're eating on dry land tonight.

The Aussies take charge of lighting the barbeque and despite their efforts, a fire is eventually raging. We cook chops and Zimbabwean fillet on the coals while making jokes about leopards and lions. There's plenty of laughter, and the occasional surreptitious glance over the shoulder into the inky bush beyond the glowing embers.

As well as exploring the shoreline there is also talk of a trip to Tashinga, Matusadona National Park's main camp. Tashinga is a key base for black rhino conservation. In particular, it's been home for a number of years to rhinos whose mothers were killed

by poachers. The operation has had some success, with animals being released as adults back into Matusadona, and Hwange National Park, near Victoria Falls.

We shuttle ourselves to Tashinga in two groups and arrive early in the morning to rendezvous with an armed scout at park headquarters.

Foreigners pay more than Zimbabweans, but at US10 a head those Aussies who have been to Africa before know this is still a bargain for a bush walk. There are no little rhinos in the boma when we arrive, but we walk for less than 20 minutes before coming across a mature female black rhino who seems smart enough not to stray too far into the bush from the nursery where she was raised.

She sees us and does nothing — except for straddling a fallen log in order to scratch her belly. Though she is unafraid of us — a side-effect of being raised by humans — the ranger with us keeps his rifle up high, across his chest. He walks us closer.

Not even the musical chimes of digital cameras being switched on phase her. I have never before, and probably never will again get as close to a black rhino in the wild as this. In two long paces I could've touched her. After the first salvo of photos we all stand there, in the sunlit clearing just drinking in the spectacle of this animal going about her daily business.

Back on the boat, we begin winding down. The farmers are thinking about their farms and the Aussie office workers start thinking more about the concrete jungle. When we come into range of the mobile phone tower atop Kariba's Camp Hill, the beep of incoming text messages begins an unwanted cure for Kariba-itis.

Unloading crates of empty bottles from the houseboat is not nearly as much fun as the first day. We promise that this won't be the last time.

- *Tony Park is a freelance writer and the author of three novels set in Southern Africa — Far Horizon, Zambezi and African Sky, all published by Macmillan.*

Getting there: Basics

Return to Eden sleeps 12 people in six double cabins. Each cabin is en-suite and is air conditioned. There is also space for eight people to sleep on the top deck. Cost per day is R5720 (self-catering). Fully inclusive rates are available on application. For bookings, call Kerry on (039) 695-2562 or 083 350-8666 or visit www.return-to-eden.com.