

GOLFPUNK
ON TOUR
**Leopard
Rock**

How do you preserve a world-class golf course in the middle of a country that's hit rock bottom? Golf Punk travelled to Leopard Rock in Zimbabwe to find out...

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It's night-time, and I'm leaning out of my turret's window. Outside, there's barely a cricket stirring under a blanket of stars. The Southern Cross is looking down on this silent place, where only now and then does a night bird dare to rupture the chilly calm. I take a deep, deep breath. Not just because the crisp air's inviting me to drink in a lungful, but because it's refreshing to hear yourself breathe. Right now there is only peace.

And yet, I'm in Zimbabwe.

Cocooned in a chateau-style hotel dating back to the 1940s and once a favoured haunt of a young Queen Elizabeth, the news headlines about this country seems like pure fiction right now. Bloodshed, dodgy elections, land invasions and social unrest have been

synonymous with Zimbabwe for years now – never more so than in the past year. This is a land supposedly without the rule of law, governed by a mad, dribbling old buffoon and lacking any functioning economy or infrastructure. All those things are certainly true to some degree. But right here, right now, I can't sense a trace of pain. I'm feeling nothing but the sheer greatness of the Vumba bushveld and giant sky, which has intoxicated visitors to these parts for decades.

That's an illusion, of course. Zimbabwe has got real issues, and plenty of them. We're over three hours away from Robert Gabriel Mugabe's HQ in Harare, and just a stone's throw from Mozambique's western border. A half-hour drive outside the eastern hub of Mutare, we're on the edge of the

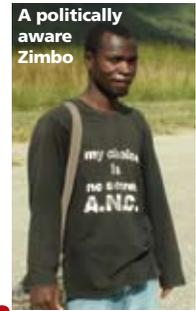
action, as it were. Even so, this nation's troubles have still touched this remote place in a hundred ways. But people are surviving out here. And so is an 18-hole championship golf course, complete with its stately hotel – turrets and all.

This is a bizarre trip. Leopard Rock, keen to let the world know it's still there to be enjoyed, has invited three or four journalists up to show us what it's like. And we have the entire three-storey place to ourselves. For three days I feel as if I've gone back to 1950s Rhodesia and I'm in some Agatha Christie novel. I'm half-expecting someone to get bumped off after dinner, Ten Little Indians-style.

All in the mind, of course. It's just the black-and-white photographs lining the corridors, the roaring log fires and the rustic furnishings that make me uneasy. That and the oddness of being



The golden evenings are the best time of day at Leopard Rock



**A politically aware
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The crowds (reluctantly) part for our landing at Mutare



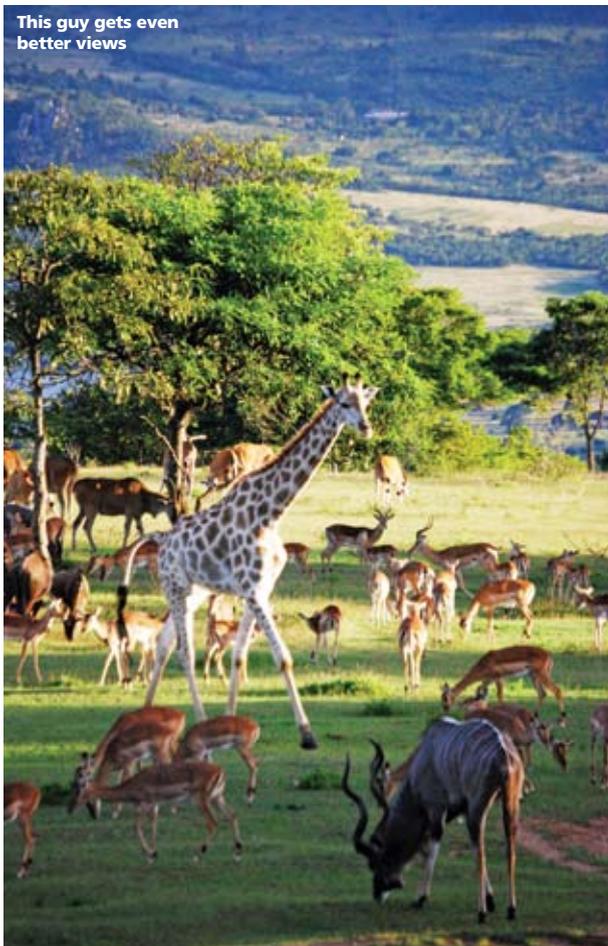
Our self-appointed welcome committee



The 18th fairway to the right, the 9th to the left



Life and business go on in Mutare



This guy gets even better views

outnumbered 10 to one by the staff. Waiters, barmen and chambermaids are hiding around every corner, just waiting for the customers to return. And return they surely must, because this place deserves to be visited. Leopard Rock is that special.

About those waiters. The last thing I expected to find in Zimbabwe were smiles. But the 150 salaried hotel staff, still smartly dressed and ready to work, are typical of this country's incredibly resilient people. Zimbabweans do not complain. Their tendency to "make a plan" to meet any kind of hardship and the fact that they're simply far too nice to stand up for themselves is probably Mugabe's biggest ally. But you can still sense a trace of melancholy behind the beaming smiles of the people working here, and it makes you want to scream.

On the subject of screaming, it isn't long before we head for the golf course. As charming and unique as the hotel is, the adjoining Peter Matkovich layout is the star attraction here. Having the entire 18 holes to ourselves is as surreal as taking the only table in the hotel restaurant. We play in a six-ball and it's the slowest rounds of our lives, but it doesn't matter. Only the impish samango monkeys in the bush had anything

fact, a sensational place to play golf. There aren't many courses where you can still feel good after shooting approximately 157, but this is one of them. With views like this, it's impossible to get too down about life. In the late afternoon, when the sun's rays turn the land gold, Leopard Rock is at its most magical. On tees such as the fourth, where you aim for a distant peak in Mozambique as you try (with no success at all, in my case) to hit the plunging fairway, it's easy to forget to tee off at all. Had there been a hammock in my golf bag, I might have strung it up right there and whiled the evening away without playing another shot. You might well do the same at the signature 14th, a par-three where you get to hit a wedge down the biggest drop I've ever seen in golf. It's spectacular stuff.

On the tee at 16, too, you simply feel lucky to be alive and living in Africa. To the right is Leopard Rock's own game reserve, where you can roam amongst impala, wildebeest, kudu, zebra and giraffe after your round. Ahead is a sweeping view of the valley, and what appears to be farmland – a rare thing in Zimbabwe. To the left is Chinyakweremba, the rock-like mountain that gave this place its name. Slicing it into the bushes on the right for the third time is

“We’ve had people paying for golf with petrol coupons and baked beans.” Leopard Rock pro Byran Rocher

to say about our intrusion, and their howls and croaks were gibberish in any case.

If only the simians could be trained to fetch golf balls. Golf Punk would have kept them busy. Over 45 holes of golf, I proceed to lose roughly that number of Callaways. If anything was going to break the will of the caddies, it was going to be looking for my errant tee shots rather the regime in Harare or the lack of regular bags to carry.

But despite my attempts to butcher it, I could bear this course no ill will. It is, in

painful, but the hurting doesn't last long.

But this is a tough course despite the jaw-dropping scenery. Blind tee shots abound, and there's little margin for error as the dense bush crowds the fairways. Both nines start with demanding holes, the par-five 10th being particularly monstrous and asking for three absolutely perfect shots. The par-three ninth is effectively an island green; Africa's answer to TPC Sawgrass and one of plenty of aquatic intrusions on the layout. The approach





Golf Punk takes the scenic route... as usual

to the 13th is devilishly narrow, with the trees crowding your view and a large ravine in front of the green. Matkovich, typically, offers some short par-fours... but they can and will bite. The seventh is a fine example – it's only 306 metres off the back, but finding your way around the tree guarding the fairway makes the tee shot one of the hardest on the course.

While the two golf tracks down in Mutare are now so overgrown that a local recently lost his ball in the fairway, Leopard Rock is in close to perfect condition. This is largely thanks to the current greenkeeper, known simply as 'Beefy'. He's a fine example of a resilient Zimbabwean: he's a local tobacco farmer by trade, but his land is under dispute. Not one to harp on about his problems, though, he instead takes great delight in telling stories of the fierce cyclone that hit the area a few years back. If you ever get to hear it, prepare for tales of collapsing barns and plenty of chainsaws – plus the golf group from Port Elizabeth that insisted on playing through the hurricane.

Sadly the days of visitors from South Africa or anywhere else have been gone for a couple of years now, as Zimbabwe reached an absolute low during the shambolic 2008 elections. The only visitors to Leopard Rock now are the few locals who still have the means – mostly weekenders from Harare. The hotel's downstairs casino also ensures a little passing traffic – though the somewhat rough diamond-trading crowd are only admitted if they promise to behave! But it's such a small trickle that it's hard to believe the place would still be going without the will of the Taberer Trust, which represents the children of tobacco baron and Leopard Rock founder Tony Taberer. Though the late Taberer was Zimbabwean, the South African connections

are strong: he was the man behind the Avontuur Wine Estate outside Cape Town, and his widow is now married to Jake White. The Taberers could have given up on Leopard Rock long ago, but their faith in the staff there has been repaid in kind.

"I often wonder how the heck we've managed to get this far," says the club pro Byran Rocher, who, like everyone else at Leopard Rock, is a jack of many more trades than his job description. "But never once did I think about us shutting down. We haven't had working phones for nine months and the nearest place to get a cell phone signal is nine kilometres away. So we've been running a four-star hotel entirely on email!

"When the Zim dollar's hyper-inflation was at its worst last year, there was a lot of bartering going on. I had people paying for golf bookings in baked beans, rice, petrol coupons... it was what we wanted because it was stable. I've had members help fix our vehicles and written off their subs in exchange. With the inflation there was no such thing as an account – we had to change our menu prices at least once a day – so it took a lot of trust and word of mouth.

"Things are better now that we're working in US currency, but we've still got plenty of issues – especially with power. Groups have been in for conferences and had no idea we've been down to the last litre of fuel in our power generator – they don't see me sprinting to town to get a drum of diesel and topping up just in time! I've taken a booking for 120 people knowing that there wasn't a single beer in the place, but we've made a plan. It's all about improvisation and taking it day by day, but somehow we get by.

"Every time the power goes off up here and it's a fault rather than scheduled

Leopard Rock pro Rocher shows how it's done



Tea on the terrace, anyone?



Empty reception awaits tourists...

Is it right to visit Zimbabwe?

Any trip across the Limpopo River comes with inevitable ethical question marks. Should we listen to those who say it's wrong to visit Zimbabwe because it gives financial and moral support to the regime there?

It's exactly the same argument that probably held back countless foreign tourists from visiting South Africa during Apartheid. And as long as you look at things from a purely philosophical point of view, then it's hard to find fault with it. And yet, did economic sanctions and tourist stay-aways really help bring down Apartheid? It's not a clear-cut answer, is it? Aside from easing your own conscience, then, what effect will staying away actually have?

Any cynic will rightly tell you that a ruler like Mugabe isn't going to lie awake at night worrying about tourists staying away. If he doesn't care about the opinions of his own people, he's hardly going to give a fig about what Europeans and Americans think. Particularly when you think of some of the rantings he's been known to send in the direction of the Northern Hemisphere.

Yes, if you go to Zimbabwe then some cash will be going to the government. But a great deal more will be going to the people like you and me – people who just want to make a living. From the caddies to the waiters to the flamboyant, goateed Tony and his decadent tea-and-cake chalet in the woods on the road to Leopard Rock, your dollars or rands are their means to surviving in spite of the regime's efforts to ruin their lives.

You could write a book on this subject, of course, but there's one last thing worth noting. In the last couple of months, there have been signs that the new coalition government is unexpectedly hanging together. The useless currency has been scrapped at last, making it feasible for people to go about their daily business with US or South African currency. Food is on the shelves once again, and petrol is available. There's even set to be an investigation into the farm invasions that have destroyed the country's agricultural sector.

A coalition regime is surely better than a one-man regime, and the general vibe I picked up was that the worst may be over as a result. Maybe it's time to lend some support?



The game must go on!

It's a sad truth that golf remains a rich man's game. And since there's always someone doing well for themselves, no matter how dire a country they live in, it shouldn't surprise people that golf is still very much alive in Zimbabwe.

It's true that many of the clubs around the country have virtually collapsed – particularly the rural courses that relied on farmers for much of their membership.

But in the two major cities, clubs like Royal Harare and Chapman are still alive and well. Not only do they have plenty of active members filling the fairways, but they're still hosting proper golf tournaments. The Zimbabwe Amateur went ahead as usual last month, with a host of South Africa's top players making the trip to Royal Harare. SA Amateur Stroke Play champ JG Claassen added to his title collection there before joining his team-mates for South Africa's usual Zone VI clean-up job at Chapman a week later.

And did you know that Zimbabwe has a small professional tour? The purses are unlikely to attract Tiger Woods (or even Zim's very own Open champion, Nick Price), but it's surviving. The top five at the end of the year still get Sunshine Tour cards, which keeps Zimbabwean pros moving through the ranks beyond their borders. And the legalization of foreign currency has now helped the tour get back on its feet after 2008, when the peak of hyper-inflation ensured the ZPGA Tour was the only circuit in the world where players were fighting it out for petrol vouchers rather than cash!

The 2nd fairway and green



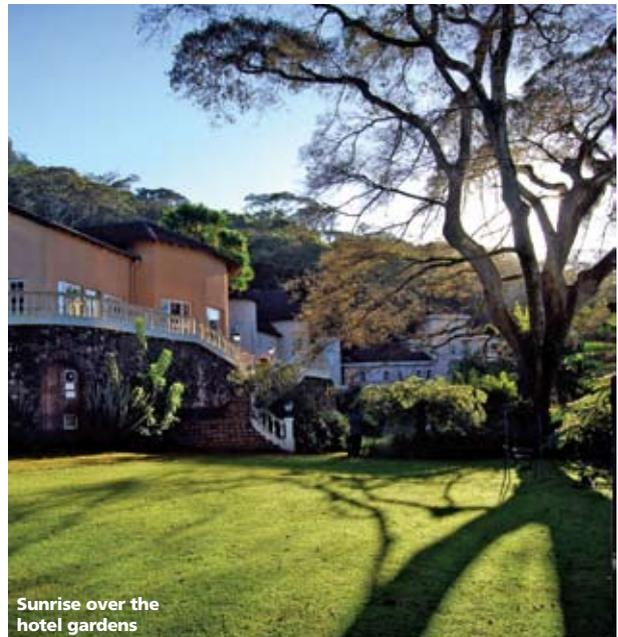
Uncle Bob keeps an eye on the lobby

load-shedding, we have to send a vehicle to Mutare, pick up the ZESA [Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority] guys and do a 250km round trip to locate the problem and sort it out. They haven't got transport, so if we didn't do that we'd have to run our generator 24/7, which is not viable at all.

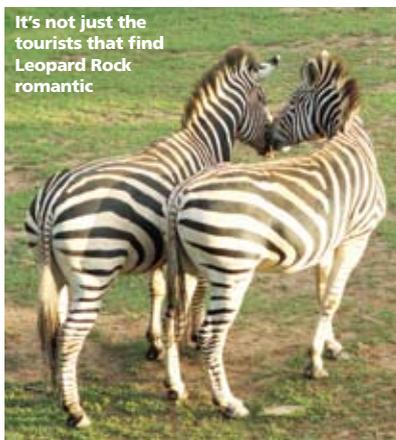
"We manage to get jobs done with no resources. I'm a golf pro but now I can do anything in this hotel. The most important thing of all is motivating the staff when they don't see guests for a long time. We're all multi-tasking – the caddie master is also the toilet cleaner and I've become the official driver! But I believe we've turned the corner now and we're heading in the right direction."

You don't need a great deal of imagination to work out the trials the skeleton greenkeeping staff of 11 (down from 38) have to endure to keep the course in such fine shape. Sometimes they've had to use green mowers for tee boxes, and tee box mowers for fairways – but it would be churlish to complain about minor imperfections here. It is, all things considered, still in fantastic condition and extremely good value at 15 US dollars for a round.

It's with some sadness that we end our golf-saturated stay and head for Mutare's little aerodrome to catch the charter flight down to Durban. Once again we have to chase away the good-natured locals, who are far too fearless for their own good and seem to enjoy using the runway as a walking track. If their spirit is anything to go by, Zimbabwe can undoubtedly prosper once again. Let's just hope it's allowed to do so. 🇿🇼



Sunrise over the hotel gardens



It's not just the tourists that find Leopard Rock romantic



The spectacular Burma Valley from the 17th green