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SPECIAL REVIEW

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Forest Creek Resort
Doubles Capacity

Forest Creek Resort

bets on six factors as it increases its investments in Vumba

by **BERNARD CHIKETO**
IN A REGION where tourism has long been constrained by too few beds, Forest Creek Resort has quietly doubled capacity.

The Vumba property, already operating ten rooms, has added ten more.

It is a strategic wager that the mist, forests and waterfalls of Zimbabwe's Eastern Highlands can become sustained foreign-exchange earnings. Forest Creek's promotional treatise, *Why Visit Vumba & Mutare: Six Compelling Reasons*, reads like an investment thesis wrapped in cloud-forest language. What emerges is a portrait of a region that is Zimbabwe's best-kept secret—and perhaps its most undercapitalised asset.



The First Reason: A Climate Apart

The Vumba Mountains, known in Shona as Bvumba, take their name from mist.

Wake in these highlands and the mountains are swathed in soft grey cloud.

By mid-morning it usually burns off, revealing a range straddling the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border, ten kilometres southeast of Mutare.

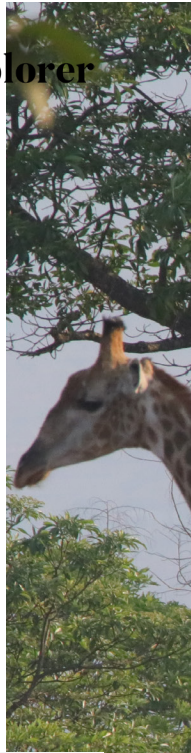
Castle Beacon, at 1,911 metres, is the highest point. Lower slopes form a mist belt kept moist by fog from the Mozambique Channel. Vumba receives 1,500 to 2,000 millimetres of rain annually—among Zimbabwe's highest.

Temperatures rarely exceed 25°C, even in summer.

This is not the dry, dusty Zimbabwe of popular imagination. It is green, lush and perpetually damp: “a highland world apart.” For hoteliers, the climate is double-edged.

It invites long walks and deep breaths, but demands robust drainage and tolerance for mildew.

Forest Creek Resort appears to have made peace with both.



The Second Reason: Forests Older Than Nations

Drive thirty kilometres south-east of Mutare and you enter a prehistoric world. Vumba Botanical Garden and Bunga Forest Botanical Reserve protect some of Zimbabwe's last Afromontane forest.

Ancient trees exceed thirty metres. Cape chestnut, red mahogany and white stinkwood dominate the canopy; tree ferns tower up to eight metres, giving valleys a Jurassic atmosphere.

Bunga Forest, the largest patch, is a mist forest along a mountain ridge.

Its deep red latosols weathered over millennia from rocks of the Mozambique Belt, more than 500 million years old.

"You're walking through deep time," Forest Creek observes. The forest supports blue duiker, samango monkeys and the dwarf chameleon *Rhampholeon marshalli*, found nowhere else on Earth.

The botanical garden was established in 1917 on Manchester Farm by retired miner Edgar Evans. Frederick John Taylor, a former Mutare mayor, took over in 1923.

The public began visiting in 1940; it became a national park in 1958.

Today exotic azaleas and hydrangeas thrive alongside indigenous forest—a ready-made amenity for paying guests.





Nyachowa Falls



Marindi Falls



Chinamata Falls

The Third Reason: Waterfalls as Economic Infrastructure

THE Eastern Highlands have Zimbabwe's greatest concentration of waterfalls.

Vumba alone has several. Nyachowa Falls, twelve kilometres from Mutare and three from Forest Creek Lodge, is Manicaland's third largest. A 600-metre walk passes striking rock formations before crashing water announces arrival.

The falls plunge into a natural pool surrounded by waterberry, albizia and strangler fig. Birdlife is abundant. Marindi Falls, about twenty kilometres from Mutare along Burma Valley Road, offers a double sheet of falling water and a rainbow in the spray.

A guide escorts visitors the final 200 metres.

Excelsior Falls, twenty-one kilometres from Mutare's central business district, offers solitude; Chinamata Falls, thirty kilometres away, is another hidden gem.

The geology beneath—granite, basalt, schist, limestone and shale—has been carved by water over millennia.

Each waterfall tells a story of erosion, persistence and the power of water through ancient rock.

For tourism operators, each also tells a story of revenue: entry fees, guide fees, picnic-site rentals and souvenir stands.



The Fourth Reason: Birds That Pay Dividends

The Vumba Highlands are an Important Bird Area. Some 242 species have been recorded—extraordinary for a relatively small area.

What makes Vumba special is its endemics. It is the type-locality for Roberts's warbler (*Oreophilais robertsi*), found nowhere else but the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

Bvumba is also type-locality for three endemic forest-bird subspecies: Orange ground-thrush, Barratt's warbler and Chirinda apalis.

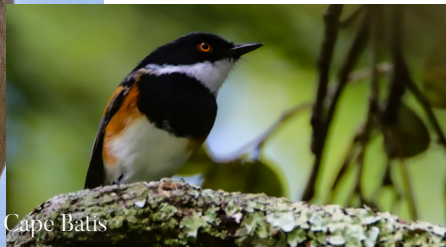
These are birds you will not see anywhere else on the planet. Swynnerton's robin, white-starred robin, red-capped robin-chat and silvery-cheeked hornbill are regular sightings. At least four pairs of globally threatened blue swallow use the grasslands.

Birdlife has been well studied for twenty years, and records are meticulously kept.

This is not guesswork; it is documented, verified and genuinely exceptional.

For the dedicated birder, Vumba offers a rare chance to see multiple endemic species in a single morning's walk.

For resort operators, this is a niche but high-yield market: international twitchers with binoculars and a willingness to pay for guides who know a Barratt's warbler from a Chirinda apalis.



Cape Batis



White-eared Barbet



Stripe-cheeked Greenbul



Juvenile Swynnerton's Robin



The Fifth Reason: History as Narrative



Mutare and Vumba's history is layered and deeply human. Before colonial occupation, the region fell under the Jindwi or Zimunya chiefdom, overlapping with the Manyika or Mutasa chiefdom.

Portuguese traders established feiras—trading posts—at Masekesa, Chipangura, Bvumba and Mutare to procure gold.

Modern Mutare, then Umtali, dates to 1890 as an outpost of the British South Africa Company, beginning as a fort and prospectors' camp.

Its name means “piece of metal,” referring to river gold. Because mountain terrain challenged engineers, the railway from Beira to Salisbury was rerouted.

To remain a transport hub, the town moved to its present site in 1896 and was inaugurated in 1897—still marked by an annual festival.

In Vumba, colonial settlers entered the wet, cool mountains in the early 20th century; Leopard Rock Hotel was called “the most beautiful place in Africa” by the Queen Mother in 1953.

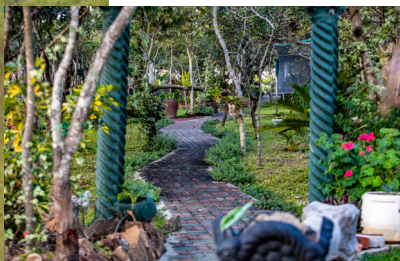
There is also sombre history: twelve people were killed at Elim Mission in 1978. In 1982 Umtali became Mutare.

For thoughtful travellers and hoteliers, this layered past is an asset.





Tony



The Sixth Reason: Hospitality as Competitive Advantage

For all its natural wonders, what makes Vumba and Mutare memorable is the welcome. The region has long attracted visitors escaping low-land heat, and its hospitality industry evolved accordingly.

This part of Zimbabwe, home to its best-known country hotels, has earned a decades-long reputation for the finest cuisine in the Eastern Highlands. As one visitor put it, “it’s the wonderful hospitality and warm welcome ... that makes visiting Vumba an unforgettable experience.” For deeper cultural connection, Forest Creek Lodge offers cultural tours to the nearby Chigodora and Gombakomba communities. The annual Vumba Fair at Tony’s Coffee Shop showcases the area’s creative and community spirit; Tony’s Coffee itself embodies Bvumba’s culinary heritage after more than three decades. Local establishments have put Manicaland on the national tourism map, and some Forest Creek staff bring that experience to its new product. Accommodation ranges from boutique hotels to back-packer lodges, but the common thread is genuine warmth that makes visitors feel less like customers and more like guests.

The Forest Creek Bet

Forest Creek Resort sits in the Vumba Mountains, fourteen kilometres from Vumba Botanical Gardens. With twenty rooms, a garden, restaurant and bar, it offers a tranquil base. Guest ratings exceed 9 out of 10.

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