

THUNDERING SMOKE

A magical long weekend safari taking in the sights and sounds of both Zimbabwe and Botswana is now within your grasp

Words MADELEINE HOWELL

They say an elephant never forgets. Likewise, the sight of the mighty Victoria Falls – known as mosi-oa-tunya, or ‘the smoke that thunders’, for the mists that gather around the rapids – is not an experience I’m ever likely to forget. Neither is the sight of dazzles of zebras, ranks of impalas and the rather aptly named ‘congresses’ of baboons that are so abundant in the wildlife-rich parks of Zimbabwe and Botswana. Nor is the moment I finally spotted a lion enjoying the shade of a baobab tree.

Happily, thanks to the new Victoria Falls International Airport, these bucket

list experiences are set to become more accessible to us Brits as we begin to take up a larger percentage of Zimbabwe’s tourism industry. Even for those with only a long weekend to spare, it’s doable. That said, it’s a long flight, and on arriving at the luxurious Victoria Falls Safari Club, I was grateful for the opportunity to relax on the game-viewing deck, and to fill up on ostrich carpaccio and warthog steak at the MaKuwa-Kuwa restaurant – all the while able to watch the animals gather (the lodge itself conveniently overlooks a busy watering hole).

If you can’t wait to get your first wildlife fix

up close, lodge guide Charles can take you down to the Sidule Hide, right next to the watering hole. Cunningly disguised as a termite’s nest, you can get close and personal while maintaining a safe distance from the dastardly crocodiles. At \$50 dollars for two or three hours, it’s the perfect arrival activity, or a final treat to squeeze into your itinerary before flying.

Next up on our list after a glorious sleep was a canopy tour with activity specialists Wild Horizons (enjoyable even if, like me, you are faint-hearted when it comes to heights and adrenalin-inducing activities) with stunning views of the Zambezi River, which straddles Zimbabwe and Botswana, followed by a leisurely guided tour of the mighty waterfalls themselves. It’s best to go early, we realised, before it gets too hot. The more adventurous can have a go at white water rafting and more hardcore high wires, such as the infamous Flying Fox.

After all of that excitement, we gratefully took the time to kick back, sip cocktails and relax with the Zambezi Explorer Cruise Company, spotting a few hippos along the way. With the sun setting, spirits high and appetites worked up again, it was soon time to don a traditional African sarong (a ‘chitenge’) and face paint to feast on smoked crocodile tail, kudu stew and buffalo



TRAVEL NOTES

The Long Weekend Safari package is priced from US\$1,620/GBP1,327 per person sharing, staying in a Victoria Falls Safari Lodge Standard Room (B&B) for one night, and for two on a fully inclusive basis at Ngoma Safari Lodge. Price includes a cruise on the Zambezi Explorer, dinner at The Boma, a guided tour of Victoria Falls and all road transfers.

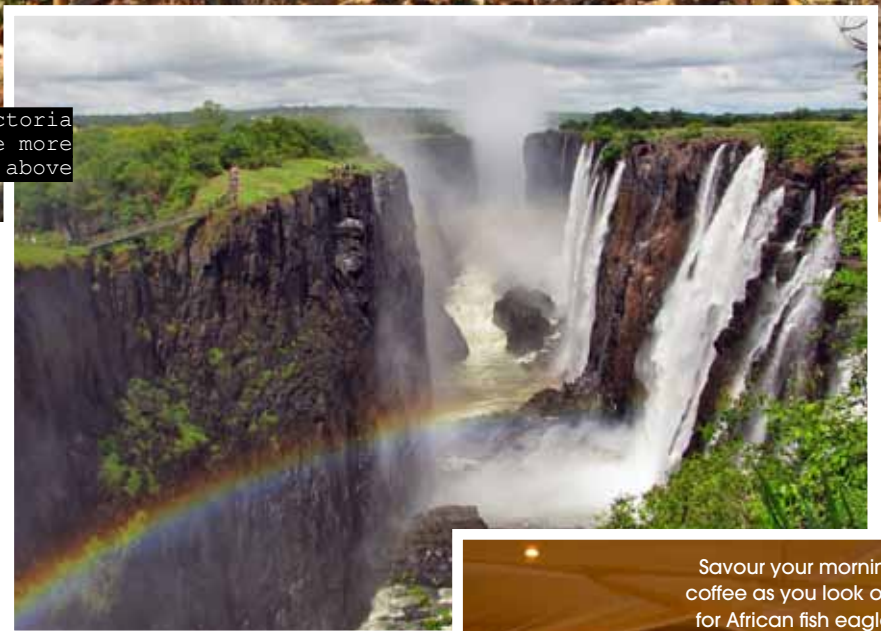
Botswana has the highest elephant population in Africa, with up to 50,000 in the Chobe river



Relax as you experience authentic luxury in the midst of panoramic views, and then set out on a night drive after dinner



The mighty Victoria Falls are all the more impressive from above



curry at La Boma – Dinner and Drum Show. Fêted as a must-do, drumming and dancing is compulsory, and there’s even a fortune teller. Don’t forget to try a Mopani worm – it tastes better than it sounds – and sample the traditional fermented beverage, made with local grain sorghum (regretfully not a beer that my own taste buds are developed for). Hangovers banished the next morning, it was time for another tour of the Falls – from above. A long, scenic helicopter flight with Bonisair was an idyllic finale to our stay in Victoria Falls before we headed across the border to Botswana.

The oasis of Ngoma Safari Lodge,

with its individual huts and private suites, was our abode for the next leg of the trip. The incredible location overlooking the Chobe floodplain gave us the chance to get down to some serious safari. They don’t call it the Land of Giants for nothing. We watched some of the largest herds of elephants on earth take a dip (later, they even sneaked up to drink from our private plunge pools), headed off on thrilling night drives, dined on the deck and woke to the African sunrise. What could be more magical – and unforgettable – than that?

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