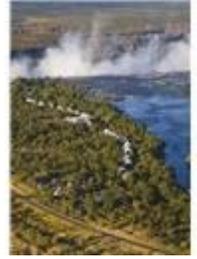
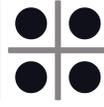


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Here the Zambezi moves slowly up until the moment its waters crash into the ravine below.

.the river. wild

If a luxuriously relaxing setting, scenic safaris, an armful of adrenalin rushes and fantastic service sound like your kind of holiday, Zambia's Vic Falls is the ultimate destination.

BY SAMEENA AMIEN

as *the plane starts its descent towards Livingstone's Harry Mwanga Nkumbula International Airport, I wonder where the city buildings are. All I can see from my window seat is red earth, and national roads that seem to go on endlessly before meeting little clusters of houses that make up the border towns in the vast, sparsely populated country that is Zambia. From my side of the aisle there is no sign of the mighty Zambezi either. The fourth longest river in Africa has its source in a tiny spring in northern Zambia, then meanders down, gathering strength until it reaches Livingstone, where it sends its waters cascading into the Zambezi gorge in the 1708m-wide curtain of water (the largest in the*

world) that is the Victoria Falls, or Mosi-oa-Tunya, 'the smoke that thunders'.

As we file out of the plane, reeking of insect repellent to ward off flies and malaria-carrying

mosquitoes (highly unnecessary in the daytime, btw), the air feels palpably still. Thankfully, the weather is mild, probably 27°C at most, as it is early September. The ground crew is manually unpacking our bags from the plane onto a kind of pickup truck. I feel as if I've tumbled back two centuries, a feeling that is reinforced as we sweep through the ornate gates to the Royal Livingstone Hotel by Anantara.

Falling in love



This pic: The Royal Livingstone is situated in the Mosi-Oa-Tunya National Park, and zebra, giraffes and monkeys roam the grounds.

OPPOSITE

Top left: Dinner on the Royal Livingstone Express offers dramatic sunsets and fine dining with the thundering Vic Falls as soundtrack.

Top right: Hippos cooling down in the river. **Bottom:** The island on which we had our impromptu picnic.

DAY 1 Warm welcome

The shuttle stops at the entrance to the Livingstone, a horizontal portico flanked by colonial columns – and I am given the rousing traditional Zambian welcome all guests are treated to on arrival. I'm always a bit awkward in these situations, but the singers' enthusiasm is infectious, and soon the grin that's millimetres away from a grimace turns into a real smile. Great as they are, though, I cannot take my eyes off the view through the entrance: framed by the columns, it takes you through the reception area across rolling

lawns, with the wide expanse of slow-moving blue river beyond! I can't wait to check in so I can go down to the deck and drink it all in. Before that can happen, though, I'm served a refreshing hibiscus iced tea while enjoying a hand massage in the formal lounge, with a piano tinkling in the bar area. Everything about this place feels luxe and unhurried...

My room is pure elegance, with a balcony and a view of the river through the monkey trees (more on that later). On my bed, there's a welcome note and a selection of bespoke chocolates. Before indulging in those, I elect to have lunch at Kubu, one of the restaurant decks on the riverbank.

Out of the bush emerges a herd of zebra, casually crossing over in single file. They look like little toy horses.

Sipping my ice-cold virgin mojito under the shade of the huge acacia, with the Falls 'smouldering' away in the distance, I notice movement on the opposite bank. It's a young male elephant casually stripping the branches off a young acacia and having a leisurely chomp. The combination of the stillness of the surrounds, the intense heat, the river gliding silently by – swirling around a sandbank here, rippling there – and the contentment with



which he was enjoying his solitary lunch in full view feels like such an enormous privilege that I just sit there, reduced to tears. I linger over my roasted shrimp with a red curry, lime and coconut milk sauce, unwilling to lose the moment.

Zebra crossing

The Royal Livingstone is situated in the Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park, so it's not uncommon to find a herd of zebra wandering across the lawns, stopping occasionally to pose for a pic (or so it seems!) before moving on. A family of six giraffes graze near the gates, and while it all seems benign, you are warned to keep a safe distance and reminded that these are wild animals. The safari shuttle approaches the gate and suddenly brakes, and out of the bush emerges a herd of zebra, casually crossing over in single file. They look like little toy horses.

I expect them to show some curiosity about us, but they seem supremely uninterested. There's a kind of majesty to animals in the wild: it's their domain, and they know it. On some level, so do we; it's evident in the very words we use to describe them: birds in the wild don't chatter and chirp like their gossipy city cousins – they call, and cry. And swoop, and soar. And, of course, you're much more likely to meet the

loners here: a single kingfisher, still as a statue, perched on the dry branch of a Waterberry or Mukute tree, and further on, an African fish eagle in a dead riverine tree, staring straight ahead. Pity we don't catch either of them making their catch. That's for another trip, fingers crossed. But there's nothing quite like seeing this parallel world steeped in its own daily struggles and totally impervious to us human visitors to instil an awe and wonder that not even David Attenborough's grave voiceover could.

Cruising

We settle into our seats in the canopied motorboat and our guide, Michael, offers drinks all round, informing us that in his experience, the more you drink, the more game you see. They probably kick off every cruise with that line, but it's delivered with charm and raises a laugh.

There are several tour boats, large and small, plying the Zambezi, but we're on this smaller one, says Michael, so we can get right up close to the wildlife. Sometimes the boats need to keep a safe distance as a herd of elephant migrates across the river, he says. It's a pity there's no such traffic jam today. Instead, as the pilot wedges the boat into a tiny crevice on the opposite bank, we catch

a male elephant in an epic David and Goliath battle with a hadeda. Poor birds – it seems they're universally regarded as pests. Michael points out a baby crocodile sunning itself on an exposed dead root. He (or she) is all of 25cm long. Mummy and daddy crocs usually watch over their young for about a year after they've hatched, so I scan the water excitedly (read: nervously), but there's no sign of the famous adult Nile crocodile. In 2018, a whitewater rafter lost her arm in a crocodile attack on the Zim side of the Falls, so I can't say I'm *too* disappointed.



Falling in love



Above: A bird's-eye view.
Left: The spa at the river's edge. In the Ukuchina massage, warm towels are used in kneading and compression movements to relieve muscle pain and tension.

The Zambezi is watering hole to a variety of animals, and if you're lucky enough to occupy a first floor room, at sunset you can see them come out to drink and play from your balcony – elephant, hippo, waterbuck, wildebeest, crocodile, and the 450 or so species of birds that call the area home. The region is a birdwatcher's paradise, and you could easily see about 50 different species a day. I'm convinced that when people talk glowingly about African sunsets, it's really the Zambezi sunset they're talking about: a deep amber corona melting across the horizon to a candy-pink marmalade sky.

Further upstream we come upon a bloat (an apt collective noun!) of hippos, all eyes, ears, nostrils and looong Shrek-face above the surface, with their huge, ungainly bodies underwater. They're watchful as we approach, and one by one submerge themselves with a soft plop. Hippos languish in the river for most of the day to stay cool. But when they feel threatened (or irritable) they just quietly sink down and pretend

they're not there, and can stay that way for up to four minutes. There's a lesson in that, I think.

The pilot moors the boat off a small island and we all jump off. In two ticks Michael sets up a scrumptious picnic of hot veggie samoosas, spicy chicken wings and steak kebabs; it's a great chance for the group to connect and break (delicious) bread.

DAY 2 Monkey tricks & Fall'ing in love

Early next morning, when I open the curtains, I see a troupe of about eight vervet monkeys edging ever closer to the hotel in full stealth mode, with some peeking out from behind tree trunks while others take the lead. They're hiding from the hotel security guard whose job it is to chase them away with a catapult!

I'm finally off to the Falls today, this time in a speedboat, with the wind whipping my hair and the cooling Zambezi spray on my face.

On Livingstone Island, we take a two-minute walk to the spot where David Livingstone first caught sight of the torrent. The Jurassic age cliff-face is deep-etched by the water erosion of millennia, and I feel dizzy just contemplating it.

Several brave souls tentatively make their way to Devil's Pool on the very edge of the Falls accompanied by their guide, and I feel a rush just watching them. The sight and sound of the great Zambezi thunderously tipping over the cliff into the roiling rainbowed gorge below makes my heart race. Their intrepid guide backflips into the Pool and we all catch our breath. A young American tells me later that she burst into tears at the mere thought of being washed over the cliff. So – not for the faint-hearted.

You can also walk to the Falls – an easy eight-minute amble through bush and rainforest that's well worth the effort. But it's the dry season in Zambia, and the drought that's holding much of the continent in its grip is evident here. The Royal Livingstone

Falling in love

general manager, Laurie Burr, had told me that the lush lawns are an anomaly; the hotel pumps about 50 000 gallons of water from the river daily – an on-site purification plant provides ice and tap water that's safe for drinking and the rest of it goes to irrigate the grounds. Your daily bottled water comes in stylish glass bottles that may be redolent of a bygone era, but are also a sobering symptom of the environmental challenges the world is facing. At the Royal Livingstone, water and electricity usage are monitored daily, and all buggies within the grounds run on solar power.

Later, back at Kubu, I enjoy a sublime deep-fried battered calamari served with crispy chips and a chilli- and lime-laced mayo sauce, and the now-essential virgin mojito. To my right, sun-seeking hotel guests lounge by the swimming pool while the river slides quietly by.

Dinner is a dressy four-course affair on the Royal Livingstone Express steam train, which chugs along to the Victoria Falls Bridge, where you can enjoy your meal to the sound of the Falls crashing into the ravine. It feels like we're on the Orient Express, and I half expect to find Inspector Hercule Poirot's beady eye trained on us.

DAY 3 Taking flight

I'm taking a microlight flight over the Falls today, and am slightly apprehensive. After a divine breakfast of eggs Benedict with smoked salmon on the terrace of the hotel's Old Drift restaurant,

I hop into the shuttle. The friendly driver and I chat about his country, and the recent xenophobic attacks in ours. The Royal Livingstone staff deserves special mention; it's easy for someone like me, who's experienced apartheid, to be cynical about this perpetuation of the colonial idyll, but the staff here seem to own their jobs. They're super efficient and helpful, knowledgeable about the area, and warm and charming to boot. I watch the comings and goings of other guests and there are usually warm hugs all round, as guests

who have reached the end of their stay say their reluctant goodbyes.

It's a brilliant day, not yet hot but so still you can hear the grass 'singing'. The trip's been pre-arranged and the pilot, a Belgian named Heike, wheels out his vessel, which

I'm shocked to see is really two bucket seats held together by an engine of some sort, with hang-glider wings. What the hell have I got myself into?! To reassure me, Heike tells me he has been entered into the Guinness World Records for his record amount of flight hours. As we taxi down the gravel runway, pillion-style, he chats to me about religion, of all

things. He's a born-again Christian. Just before lift-off, with perfect timing, he says: 'God is Love, and you know that love conquers fear.' And up we go. The feeling of FREEDOM! The wind on your skin! The Zambezi below! Truly awe-inspiring. It's as if *you* are flying. I've honestly felt more fear sitting in a plane. I finally catch sight of an adult Nile crocodile on a sandbank, a herd of wildebeest and a hippo family underwater – from this height the water is crystal clear. Heike crosses into Zim airspace and I get to see the 'curtain'.

All too soon we're back on terra firma. It's a 15-minute flight and costs R2700, but I can't recommend it highly enough: I return to base on an all-time high. After lunch I walk down to the spa at the water's edge, where the lovely Ruth is waiting to give me their blissful signature Zambian massage.

Next morning, I sit on Kubu deck, committing the scene to memory. The wrought-iron chairs are cushionless, and a lone employee is clearing up for lunch. Without being asked, he quietly brings me the cushions and places them on my chair for me. This simple act of kindness, and my sadness at leaving this achingly beautiful place, has me fighting back the tears. I'll be back, God willing, Mighty Zambezi! ♣

The feeling of
FREEDOM!
The wind on
your skin!
The Zambezi
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It's as if *you*
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CHECKLIST

HOW TO GET THERE

Jozi to Livingstone: from R3439 (BA Com Air; SAA)

COSTS

The Royal Livingstone by Anantara: from R6873/room/night in a Deluxe Room, including breakfast. Their Heavenly Romance Special Offer (R9569/night) includes

3 nights or more plus breakfasts, one set menu at The Old Drift, return private water & land cruiser transfers, a romantic spa treatment, a 15-minute helicopter ride and a sunset cruise, *et al.* **PRECAUTION** Livingstone is a malaria area. I used Tabbard.

GOOD TO KNOW

The RL activity desk helps you tailor your itinerary to your taste: horseback adventures, sunset cruises and safaris, bungee-jumping, whitewater rafting, a dip in the Devil's Pool (offered only when water levels are low enough) etc.