

Where there's smoke ...

Enjoy extravagance and one of the most famous views in Africa



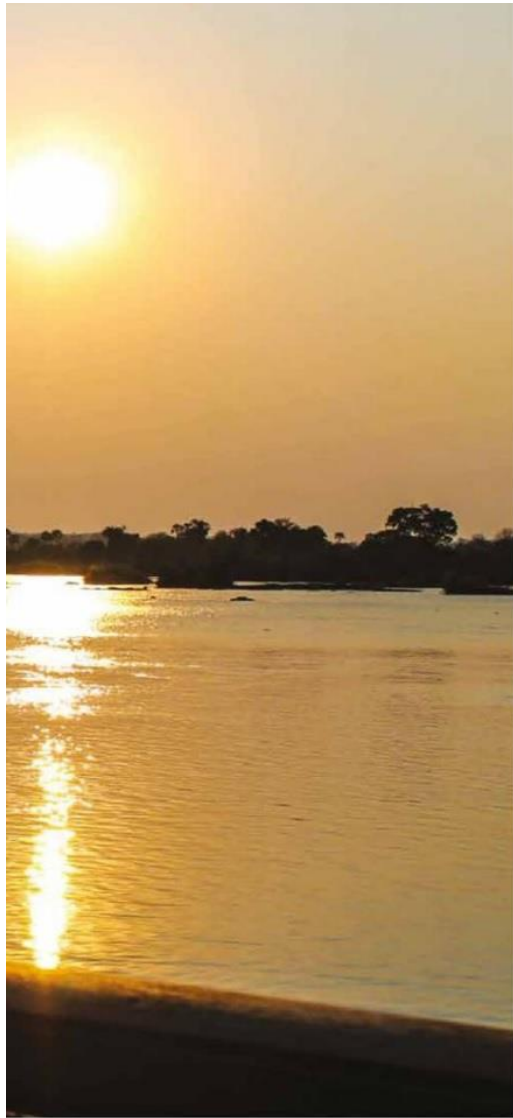
One of southern Africa's most enduring clichés sees well-meaning marketing types constantly going on about “the smoke that thunders” – the English translation of *Mosi-oa-Tunya*, the Kololo name for Victoria Falls. It's one of those facts that adds local colour for visitors, but which, after being mentioned in every pamphlet and guided tour introduction, quickly loses its effect.

For more information or to book a stay at the Royal Livingstone Hotel by Anantara, go to royal-livingstone.anantara.com

That is, until you find yourself on the sun deck at the Royal Livingstone by Anantara, right on the water in sight of the famous rising spray from the falls, hippos occasionally snorting in the channel in front of you and a kingfisher working on his dinner off to one side. Then you begin to understand what all the palaver is about – a cocktail on that deck is a bucket list event.

The hotel, just outside the town with which it shares a name, is a very different proposition from the many safari options that tourists passing through Livingstone and Victoria Falls on the Zimbabwe side of the border might be on their way to or from. It's unashamedly big, grand and regal and is a winner from the first moment thanks to its location on the wide, scenic part of the river just before the chasm, encircled by emerald-green lawns and flooded with commanding air-conditioning that blows away the heat and humidity that bounces off the bank along the river.

There are macro (the enormous lounge area with its wood-lined bar) and micro (the fresh roses in the room on arrival) touches that convince of the pampering power of the hotel. Being able to watch a



zebra cropping the grass around your room's patio has a similar effect – an antidote to exhaustion.

Access to adventure

Getting out of your room is also good, though. The aforementioned lawns hug the edge of the Zambezi, and if you trundle along with the river on your right, you'll merge into the adjoining property, Avani Victoria Falls (owned by the same group) and from there – show the security guard your room key so he knows you're not a drifter – you emerge right at the entrance to the Zambian side of the Victoria Falls.

That side room key gets you a free pass to the trails around the falls, around the highlands next to the cliffs or down the steep steps that descend to the Boiling Pot, where the flow of the river hits its first rapid, joined by a



side stream the stairs and bridges you've just clambered down and over have criss-crossed.

That walk down is enjoyable and beautiful, lined with huge trees, glowering cliffs, verdant layers of ferns and, if you're lucky, the occasional shy (but huge) monitor lizard who's leading the way for a few seconds, terrifying the hikers coming the other way. At the end of the walk is a sign bearing the legend 'Danger Zone' – if you can avoid humming the Kenny Loggins tune, you're a stronger person than me – and on the day I visited, a nun was improbably standing next to it, having her picture taken by the security guard stationed there to ensure less demure visitors don't do anything remarkably stupid.

The view of the Victoria Falls Bridge, reportedly built where it is because Cecil John Rhodes wanted travellers on his unrealised Cape to Cairo railway to be cooled by the spray from the falls as they looked down on the river from their carriages, is spectacular, and you can watch an American backpacker grow in size slightly as they bungee down towards you and then shrink as the elastic whips them away again.

Getting back to the top of the gorge requires an effort not to be underestimated if you're doing so in summer heat. It's steep and it's hot and there's no shame in taking a rest stop (or seven or eight) as apparently unaffected schoolkids skip past you while your muscles and lungs shriek and twitch.

The pool back at the hotel is a healing balm after such endeavours, with the only gnats in the ointment provided by the helicopters and microlights that constantly carry thrill-seekers over the area. Boats are not as much of a problem this close to the falls. Higher up the river, rush hour (sunset cruises) can get a touch congested, but in front of the Royal Livingstone, only visitors setting out for the Devil's Pool – the somehow-you-don't-die indent on the lip of the cliff alongside the sheet of water leaping

The luxurious rooms are set out along zebra-cropped lawns

How to get there



Airlink connects Cape Town with Victoria Falls. Go to page 91 for flight schedules
www.flyairlink.com



Take a walk from the hotel to see the famous Victoria Falls Bridge

over the edge where swimmers take peerless selfies – create bow-waves to lap on the shore.

Eat, drink and chill out

In keeping with the glossier sheen – relative to tented safari camps and whatever else is available in the region – of the hotel, there’s a dress code for dinner at the The Royal Livingstone Dining Room. It’s not much (long pants and closed shoes), but it creates a particular vibe, as does the saxophonist out on the verandah where the good seats – read: in view and/or hearing of the Zambezi – are.

The menu is limited, but features a number of locally influenced dishes. That might lead to some confusion, easily remedied by a discussion with a waiter, but as it

happens, it’s not the Zambian specialties that stymie a nearby diner who, clearly trying to impress his svelte girlfriend, enquires of a passing professional: “Your fillet – what cut is that?”

If the main restaurant is not what you’re in the mood for, there are plenty of options – the bar, the decks (one is hosting a big party) or a ridiculously romantic table set up under a chandelier in a small grove in the middle of the lawn.

If you’ve come to Zambia to visit its national parks or are en route to a similar destination in Zimbabwe or Botswana, this location is an excellent option to either acclimatise on arrival or relax before returning or moving on to another leg of your journey (Livingstone’s Harry Mwanga Nkumbula Airport is a short transfer away).

Text and photograph | **Bruce Dennill**

