

Southern Africa = Adventure

by Cheryl Robertson



Every time I visit southern Africa something totally unexpected happens. Two years ago I found myself in the Zimbabwean bush counting the breaths coming out of the trunk of a prostrate bull elephant, out-for-the-count on the ground as wildlife vets fixed a satellite tracking collar onto his neck.

Following that incident was a speed boat dash from Musango Safari Camp where we were staying across Lake Kariba to relieve baby elephant that was being choked to death by a wire snare. The same vets had to dart first the mother and then the baby to remove the poacher's trap.

The opportunity to take part in all of this came about simply because two vets from a non-profit wildlife trust shared our light aircraft to the Bumi airstrip, so they welcomed us to tag along. All in a days work to them, but to a visitor, something so special. Zimbabwe is like that. Flexibility, spontaneity and can-do attitudes are visitor musts.

Nowhere is there currently more adrenaline pumping than at Victoria Falls, one of the most spectacular natural wonders of the world. The Zambezi River, dividing Zimbabwe and Zambia, flows over a 1,700m wide lip creating the world's largest sheet of falling water. The site of the falls has been refreshingly unexploited by commercialism, let's hope it stays that way.

Both countries offer similar activities in and around the famous falls, and share some too, such as shooting rapids on the roaring Zambezi River and bungee jumping down 128m off the Victoria Falls Bridge. It was here that news about a young Australian's bungee jump became plastered all over the internet as she plunged head-first into the river after the rope tied around her feet snapped. (The woman survived with cuts and a broken collar bone.)



The company, which introduced and has operated this activity for 17 years without a single incident, has since reviewed every part of their operation, tested everything and replaced all bungee cords and has established more checks and procedures than ever before. The incident was one among about 150,000 jumps taken since the sport came to this region.

It is therefore as safe as a bungee can be, and to reinforce this, the Zambian Minister of Tourism, Given Lubinda (50), leapt off the bridge later in January, to restore visitor faith in the bungee experience here.

A Zimbabwean marketing executive put it into perspective saying: "...this is the first ever incident one must remember that people do these types of activities BECAUSE of the element of danger!"

But if bungee jumping doesn't float your boat, wild water rafting might. From just beyond the base of the Victoria Falls large rubber rafts take off and it's the bumpiest, scariest, wildest, most exciting stretch of turbulent surf I've ever been in, and idiotically fallen into. Taking holiday snaps while on a bucking bronco is not a bright idea.

Like a washing machine, the thrashing, bubbling water does eventually spit you out onto a calmer shore. The word "terrifying" doesn't really cover all those feelings of anticipation, hope, desperation, fear, exhilaration, excitement and sheer amazing fun.



"Get complacent and she rises up and slaps you in the face," my highly trained, well disciplined oarsman sighed about his lifeblood, the Zambezi River. "She's simply unpredictable."

Shane White of Wild Horizons tour operators says: "The best time of the year for adrenaline junkies to visit here would be from October through to end of November. River levels permitting, this is normally when the Zambezi is at its lowest and offers one of the best one-day white-water rafting trips in the world."

In fact, anytime between July and mid-February is exciting for rafting, for the Zambezi is at low level. Watch out for the short closed season around April/May, depending on the extent of the rainfall. The rafting here has been classified by the British Canoe Union "extremely difficult, long and violent rapids, steep gradients, big drops and pressure areas", according to tour operators the Zambezi Safari and Travel Company.

Equally successful at raising pulse rates are high wire activities including the Flying Fox - you take a running jump over the Zambezi gorge and soar horizontally over it; and the Zip Line and Gorge Swing. I spotted this on website: "If anyone is feeling worried about the strength of the cables over the high wire then read here. The cables supporting the products at the High Wire are rated to hold a weight of 22,700kg each. That is the weight of five bull elephants (4,000kg each)...." Noted.

Less exhausting but still keeping you on your toes is an elephant-back safari or a walk with lions. Personally, being a native Zimbabwean I feel peculiarly vulnerable when on the back of an African elephant and walking side by side with something that would prefer to eat me for dinner, but it's a popular activity with tourists.

Canoe safaris above the falls on the upper Zambezi River produce a different kind of fear. "What about the hippos and crocodiles?" I asked my guide querulously. Well of course they are in the water, that's where they live, but he said nothing. He watched the water though, all the time. Respect animal's territory, stay out of their pathway and they will do the same to you, seems to be a good motto.

The most jaw-dropping activity I've ever witnessed has to be swimming in the flowing waters at the top of the Victoria Falls. Called the Victoria Falls Devil's Swimming Pool, this activity is only available on the Zambian side via Tongabezi Safari Lodge. At certain times of the year it's possible to swim in a pool on the very lip of the mighty falls. Insane.

For me, the best experience of all is to come face to face with wildlife in the raw. Just a bush or two separating us; and a mega experienced guide nearby. Now this is real, this is what Africa is all about and this is what gets all the juices flowing.

Some 28 years ago I went on a walking safari in Zambia's South Luangwa National Park around Chibembo Safari Lodge, and then it was un-trodden, pristine, unspoiled Africa. Thankfully, in this part of the world walking safaris are just as wild and earthy as they ever were.

In Zimbabwe, Steve Edwards from Musango Safari Camp offers humour-sprinkled and highly informative walking safaris. He's pretty much a legend here, his knowledge about the Matusadona National Park area is a huge advantage.

Anti-poaching activities are high on the Musango agenda, where he operates a team in conjunction with the Bumi Hills Anti-Poaching Unit and the National Parks & Wild Life Management Authority.

Leon Varley of Backpackers Africa operates backpacking safaris in Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park and the Chizarira National Park. The company provides all the gear, a tracker and a licenced guide, and clients carry their own packs, although a chef and other crew do the hard camping chores.

These backpacking safaris are all about respecting the environment and learning about what guests encounter, so lectures are given on animal behaviour and characteristics, bird life, plant ecology, geology and astronomy.

I do still like the approach of The Bushcamp Company's Mfuwe Lodge in Zambia's South Luangwa National Park, where guests simply have to walk to the reception to get a taste of wild real Africa.

Let's not beat about the bush, Zimbabwe is still in a state of confusion politically but despite all it is a safe destination of unspoilt, outstanding natural beauty. Zambia too has its own set of problems, but is equally magnificent from a nature point of view.

The two countries welcomed Emirates Airline's new service to Harare via Lusaka five times a week as from 2nd February 2012. From Lusaka, visitors can fly to Livingstone or hire a vehicle and drive to Victoria Falls, or from Harare there's the choice of a private air charter or vehicle hire or a luxury commercial bus. A few other airlines fly direct from Dubai to Johannesburg and from there are a number of connections to the falls.

Kenya Airways and Ethiopian Airways also fly from Dubai to both countries. I have been on all three airlines and all have their pros and cons...



Photo: Chris Worden (from the Zambezi Safari & Travel Company)



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Examples of costs:

Walking Safaris
Backpackers Africa = for a 5 day fully backed-up (i.e. with support vehicle, tracker, & cook) tented walking safari it is about US\$1150 per person fully inclusive; extras are park fees of US\$100 per person for five days. For a five day backpacking safari (carrying your own backpack, no vehicle) the cost is about \$950 per person. Price includes return road transfers from Victoria Falls and park fees. www.walkafrica.com

Mfuwe Lodge and The Bushcamp Company
For an 8-night Emerald (or Green) Season Luangwa Valley special safari of walking and game drives from three bush camps its costs around US\$3485 per person sharing, and US\$4050 single occupancy. Everything is included in the price as well as return scheduled charter flights between Mfuwe and Lusaka. www.bushcampcompany.com

One day white water rafting
low water around US\$130.00
high water around US\$120.00

High wire activities (with Wild Horizons)
from US\$38 to US\$126 - www.wildhorizons.co.zw

Flights
Dubai to Harare on Emirates costs anything from Dhs3,170 to Dhs 5,770 depending on time of year - the airline ups the price come the school holidays.
Dubai to Lusaka on Emirates costs from Dhs3,000 to Dhs 5,100
Kenya Airways and Ethiopian Airlines is about Dhs3,600

Useful Websites
The Zambezi Safari and Travel Company (ATOL protected tour operator - can put together a package for all of these below). www.zambezi.com
Musango Safari Camp
Wild Horizons
Shearwater River Rafting
The Zambezi Safari and Travel Company
Tongabezi Safari Lodge
Backpackers Africa
The Bushcamp Company
www.musangosafaricamp.com
www.wildhorizons.co.zw
www.shearwatervictoriafalls.com
www.zambezi.com
www.tongabezi.com
www.walkafrica.com
www.bushcampcompany.com

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