



Victoria Falls

Hwange National Park

Lake Kariba



# Africa's BEST-KEPT SECRET

TUPPY ROBERTSON goes on an eye-opening safari around Zimbabwe

**A** rainbow arcs over Victoria Falls from the Zimbabwe side from 3pm everyday if the sun is shining. 'Smoke', or rather, spray — billows up from the gorge 108 metres below as the Zambezi River cascades over the 1.7 kilometre-wide lip, forming the largest curtain of falling water in the world.

Both Zambia and Zimbabwe have a stake in one of the seven natural wonders of the world, but it is only from the Zimbabwean side that you get a full-frontal, spectacular view of the main falls made famous by explorer Dr David Livingstone. Upon seeing them for the first time, the good doctor said, "scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight".

Zimbabwe's chequered history has not been very good for tourism, but recently the trickle of visitors that continued to visit despite the country's shortcomings has started to develop into a stream, strengthened by the expectation of stability following the formation of a unity government last year.

The scenic paths leading tourists to good viewpoints of the famous falls remain as they were in the 1970s — no kiosks selling tacky souvenirs like in other parts of the world.

Tourism providers are still here, welcoming visitors with open arms and wide smiles. Victoria Falls Hotel remains the grand old lady when it comes to providing a glimpse of the country's colonial history, with its recently refurbished rooms and lounges oozing the luxury and elegance of a by-gone era. Summing up the hotel is an entry in the visitors' book, which reads "I visited here 40 years ago. Whilst I have aged, the Victoria Falls Hotel has simply matured".

On the other hand, the Victoria Falls Safari Lodge, with its waterhole in front, gives guests a continued feeling of being on safari. Especially so at lunchtime, for at 1pm everyday, vultures, marabou storks and other birds of prey drop by for a bite to eat, given to them by the hotel staff. It's a frenetic sight of feathers, swirling dust, meaty bones and hungry birds. Africa is ingrained in this lodge's veins — featuring tiered wooden stairways, drums and baskets on the walls and rooms in thatched chalets.

Old Ursula Camp is the newest luxury accommo-

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modation in the area — it opened in May this year in the Victoria Falls Private Game Reserve as a self-catering option. Ideal for a maximum of 10 guests, the camp overlooks the reserve which houses the 'Big Five' safari animals, including five black rhinos, a view shared by the sophisticated and classically colonial Stanley and Livingstone Hotel nearby. Both are owned by Rani Resorts of Saudi Arabian origins.

The latter hotel is built in harmony with its surroundings. Victoriana is everywhere — from the elephant tusks hanging on a wall, to the faded 1877 newspaper clipping featuring Henry Morton Stanley, journalist and explorer of Africa, who is best remembered for his casual greeting to a man he had spent months searching for: "Dr Livingstone, I presume?" The busts of both explorers are perched on pedestals in the lounge.

Two hours drive from Victoria Falls is Hwange National Park — Zimbabwe's largest game reserve spanning 14,651sq km. Parts of it are teeming with wildlife according to Chris Worden, professional guide and a director of UK-based tour operators The Zambezi Safari and Travel Company, "I've never seen so much game anywhere in my life."

Just a short hop on a charter flight away from

Hwange is a safari camp offering rustic luxury on an island in Lake Kariba.

Surrounded by bushes, animals and water, Musango Safari Camp, built by owner Steve Edwards in 1990, is a must for all bona fide Africa lovers seeking top game viewing experiences by boat, vehicle or on foot.

Nothing can beat the sunsets at Lake Kariba, which is man-made and was almost 82 per cent full in August, the same month the refurbished Bumi Hills Safari Lodge opened to include a spa, infinity pool, 20 rooms and a state-of-the-art conference room. Managed by Africa Alvida Tourism (AAT), the lodge will soon be linked to Victoria Falls and Hwange via a daily air service. "This circuit was an absolute winner in the 80s and 90s, so it will be again," says Ross Kennedy, CEO of the AAT. By December this year, the Kariba ferry service between Kariba town and Mlibizi on the western end of the lake should operate a weekly service again after a few years absence. Further afield in the southeastern corner of the country, is another hidden gem aimed at the high-end luxury traveller.

Accessible best by light aircraft to Buffalo Range near Chiredzi, Pamushana is simply magnificent. Perched on a *koppie* (small rocky hill) the lodge has six spacious suites and one villa, with views of the lake down below, to die for. All feature a double-sided fireplace, private lounge, an en-suite bathroom and two showers — one outside on the suite's own game viewing deck complete with an animal-spotting telescope and a private infinity pool.

So, is Zimbabwe safe? Is Africa safe? The only sure way to know is to find out for yourself. It will take some time before the country's infrastructure is up to handling large numbers of visitors, but it has the potential to be great again. For the people who work in the hospitality industry here, the sooner this happens the better.

But, their guests might just want to keep the status quo for now, and keep Africa's secret to themselves a little longer.

