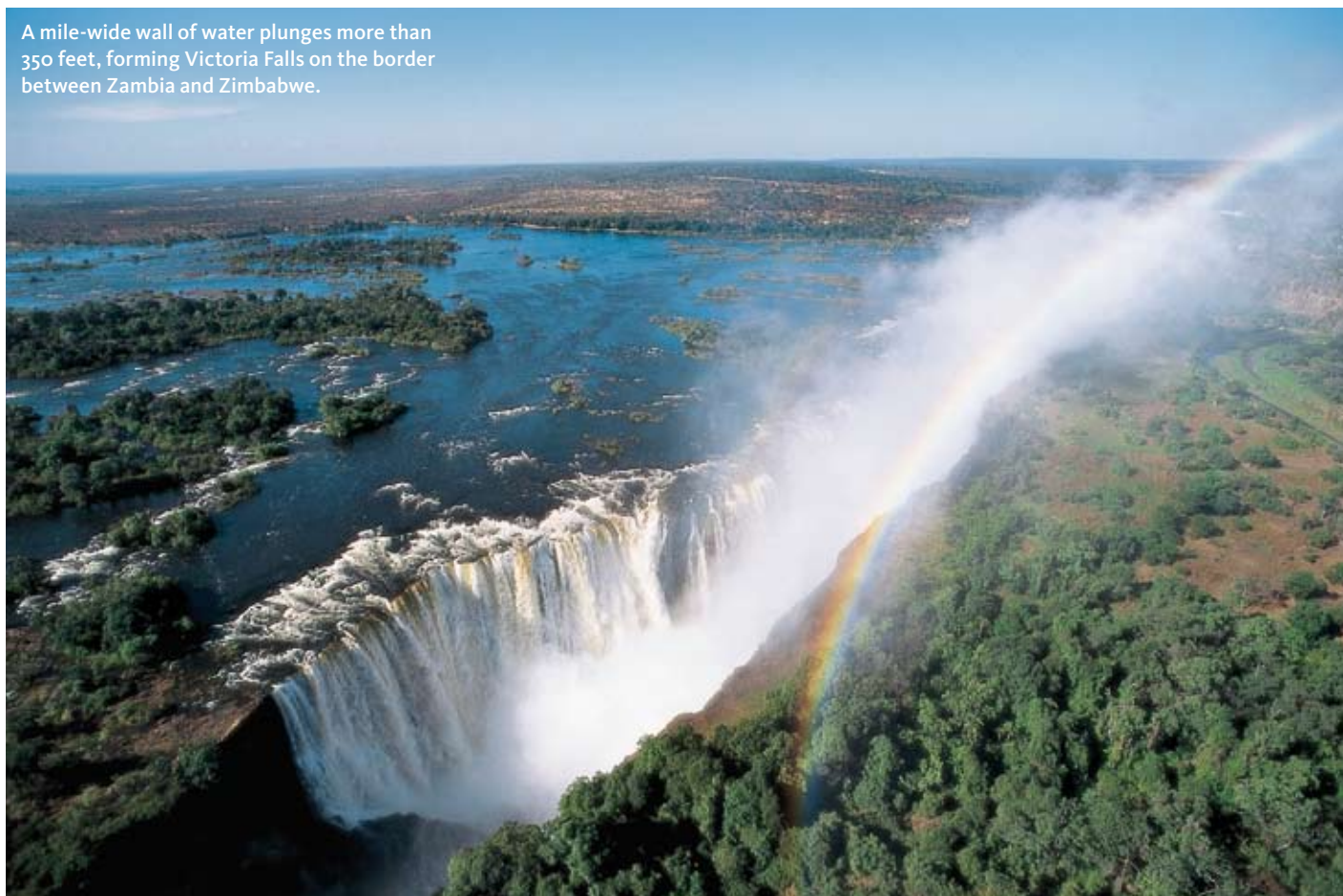


A mile-wide wall of water plunges more than 350 feet, forming Victoria Falls on the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe.



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African Adventure

Enjoying Zambia's natural treasures

By Rob Dunton

The paw print is the size of my outstretched hand and is pressed into the tire tracks from our safari drive last night. It is August, the middle of the dry season, when animals convene at the few remaining water sources and wildlife viewing begins in earnest. We are on foot in the cool of early morning within South Luangwa National Park in the Republic of Zambia. I catch the fragrance of dry grass, mixed with hints of

tamarind, wild mint and basil. The snorts of distant hippos ride the air. We wander through open plains, tall grass and dense hardwood forests, along trails of dirt, sand and dry, cracked mud in the hopes of spotting an elephant or giraffe.

“These prints are from a large female

lion,” says our guide Peter Pendecke Milanzi, who interprets them as ably as a city dweller might read a stop sign. He points out that one of the lion's prints is on top of a hippo's track and that hippos usually come to the river at dawn, which, he says, means that the lion probably

passed by in the last hour or two.

South Luangwa National Park was established in 1972 and has 3,494 square miles of protected land. The wide Luangwa River is the lifeblood of this valley; it's a tributary of the Zambezi, and one of the country's largest rivers. The sheer abundance of animals around the river and its oxbow lagoons is exceptional. Among the wildlife we may see are baboons, hippos, zebras, crocodiles and any of more than 400 bird species. Leopard sightings are also among the most frequent in southern Africa.

For safety reasons, the five members of our group stay close together and walk single file. Leading our band is an armed scout, followed by our guide, Peter. I am behind Scott Vickery, a passionate photographer and lifelong friend. He has joined me on this trip, which includes a 10-day private safari arranged by Mountain Travel Sobek, followed by a four-day rafting adventure down the Zambezi River with U.K.-based Water By Nature. At the back is our watchful porter, who also totes snacks and beverages for the group.

Today Scott and I are the only guests (the maximum number for walking safaris is 8). Our remote bush camps offer intimate, high-quality accommodations with the casual elegance of a world-class mountain lodge. Each day follows a rhythmic pattern established half a century ago when walking safaris were pioneered in the Luangwa Valley: up at dawn to catch the sunrise, then a warm breakfast, followed by a two- to three-hour walking safari in the cool of the morning. Return to camp for lunch and a two- to three-hour siesta, then tea, a game drive, and a sundowner, which is the British tradition of a drink at sundown, followed by night viewing from a vehicle with a spotlight. We return each evening to a camp lit with kerosene lanterns and a sumptuous dinner beneath the stars.

We follow the lion's tracks until we lose

them in chest-deep grass, comforted that our armed scout leads the way. Once back in the open, we come upon the weathered skull of a giraffe and scattered vertebrae that Peter estimates were left two years ago. We cross a former watering hole, with animal prints cast in the hardened

clay, and spot a herd of foraging elephants in a clump of trees nearby. They stop and raise their trunks to catch our scent, as they wave their enormous ears. We watch from a distance to avoid a charge, then head toward a stately sausage tree with 10-pound fruit dangling from its branches like giant salamis in a butcher shop. On the ground lie fallen crimson blossoms.

"Impalas love the nectar of these flowers. Leopards will wait silently in the branches of a sausage tree waiting for unsuspecting impalas to arrive," explains Peter, who has already checked for the big cats. "And when they do: room service."

Peter stops frequently to educate us about animal tracks, termite mounds, plants, bones and scat. Every animal leaves

its signature—which locals, guides and other animals read as second nature. As we near the meandering Luangwa River, the baritone chortle of a herd of hippos grows louder. From the riverbank, we look down upon more than 20 of them huddled in a group, submerged except for their nostrils, eyes, ears and spines.

Along the shoreline we



Elephants are often viewed in South Luangwa National Park.

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spot several crocodiles, each more than 6 feet long, camouflaged along the banks. We keep our distance from them while the porter unpacks ice-cold drinks and snacks. When the rains return from November through April, most of this area will be 2 to 6 feet underwater, most of the roads and camps will be gone, and the animals will disperse into the dense brush.

When we return to Chindeni Camp, the second of three bush camps we enjoy during our stay, the staff provides iced towels to cool our brows and wipe the dust from

WHEN YOU GO

There are international flights from London to the capital of Lusaka, and through Johannesburg to Livingstone, gateway to Victoria Falls. The national language of the Republic of Zambia is English, though 72 languages are spoken in the country (Bemba and Nyanja are the most common). We strongly recommend hiring reputable outfitters when organizing trips that interface with wild animals or Class V rapids.

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our faces. We walk to our tent, which is on the edge of a broad lagoon and is beautifully appointed with mahogany armoires, chairs, a desk and a sofa.

After refreshing showers, we enjoy lunch with Peter and camp manager Ed Boord. We learn about the six chiefdoms in the valley, village life and the annual flooding of the area. As we talk, troops of baboons converge along the water's edge to eat and drink among the grazing impalas, bushbucks and kudu. Farther out, zebras and elephants roam. There isn't another camp or vehicle in sight.

That night, we explore by Land Rover with a bright spotlight for the reflective eyes of the nocturnal world. Herds of impalas and puku are easy to spot. Elephants and hippos forage in the brush or cross the road in front of us. Then Peter points out a lone pair of eyes circling a tree.

"A hyena," declares Peter. "A good sign that a carcass—and possibly a leopard—are in the tree." We inch closer, and the lone hyena eyes us sheepishly and then moves to the fringes. We spot a tail dangling from a low branch, and as we move closer, our spotlight illuminates a reclining leopard, then another, feeding on the carcass of an impala in the branches. In the shadows, we see another leopard farther up in the tree, then a fourth, the mother of the pride. We shut off our engine and watch for an hour as the leopards feast, nap and yawn, unfazed by our presence.

We return to camp for another handcrafted feast. Nightly variations have included a selection of salads, succulent pork fillets, tilapia, chicken or the local staple *nshima*, a porridge made from corn meal with side dishes of meat, vegetables, beans or fish. After dinner, we retire to our lantern-lit tent and recharge for another day.

After 10 stirring days of studying lions, leopards, elephants, giraffes and dozens of other species in the bush, we depart

Luangwa for our multiday rafting adventure on the Zambezi River. Where Zambia and Zimbabwe meet, the entire volume of the Zambezi drops over a mile-wide ledge creating Victoria Falls, twice the height of Niagara Falls and a natural scenic wonder. The water flows from this enormous hole through a 360-foot slot, then turns, forming a churning pool called Boiling Pot—where our rafting trip begins.

Our lead guide is Bob Vranich, a strapping Canadian with a ready grin. Scott and I join 14 other rafters and kayakers who hail from the U.K., France and New Zealand. As Water By Nature's team preps our two rafts on the river's edge, we watch downriver as bungee jumpers soar from Victoria Falls Bridge.

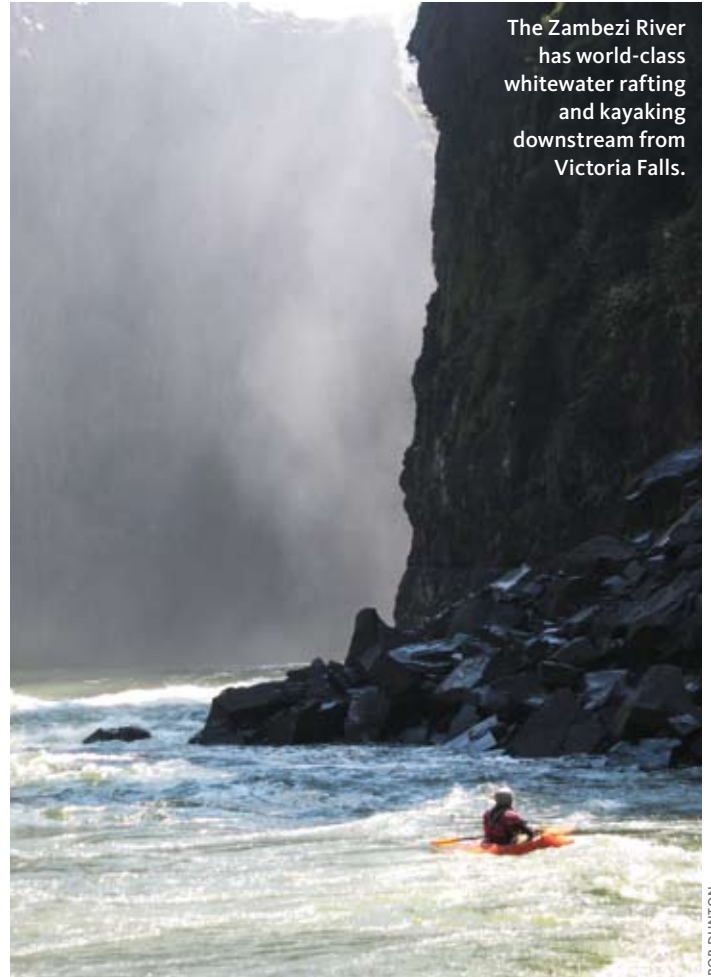
The kayakers and video team enter first and run the Class IV/V triple-humped rapid named Against the Wall with apparent ease. The first raft goes next, pushing upstream through an eddy, then turning into the turbulent wave train. The torrent grabs the group as they paddle intensely to clear the rapids, but the last wave engulfs one side of the raft and flips the boat.

Two minutes on the water. Seven people in the drink. Welcome to the Zambezi.

The team of expert kayakers quickly collects the bobbing crew, and the raft is righted. Our group replicates the line of attack, and whether by luck, skill or tim-

ing, we make it through unscathed. A calm section follows each rapid, providing time to either regroup or celebrate. One after another, our group navigates the technical rapids, sometimes successfully, sometimes not: Morning Glory, Stairway to Heaven, Devil's Toilet Bowl, Midnight Diner—a mix of exhilarating and appropriately named Class III, IV and V rapids. (Class III rapids include numerous high waves and require some maneuvering; Class IVs are powerful, though predictable, and often require stopping to scout the best course; and Class Vs are long and frothy with large waves, a steep gradient and a complex course to safely navigate.)

We approach Gulliver's Travels, a 700-yard stretch of whitewater. Our partner raft goes first and runs it cleanly. Comforted by their success, we paddle confidently into the fray. Nyaminyami, the



The Zambezi River has world-class whitewater rafting and kayaking downstream from Victoria Falls.

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serpentine Zambezi River god, delivers a swift cure for such hubris. We've cleared the first boil and half the rapids when our raft is pulled back into a churning hole. Nyaminyami pulls our 18-foot raft down and spits us out to swim the final 300 yards. Properly humbled, we are collected and returned to our raft in short order.

With each tumultuous rapid and placid stretch in between, the Zambezi zigs and zags its way toward the Indian Ocean to the east. As the sheer cliffs soften into hillsides, forests of leadwood, mahogany and baobab fill the banks where baboon families roam the shore.

We negotiate our way through Overland Truck Eater, The Terminators I and II and Oblivion, and by midafternoon, arrive at Bobo Camp, just past Rapid 21. Because we are the first rafters of the season, ours will be the only footprints on the smooth sandy shore, which is crisscrossed by baboon, civet and genet tracks.

The sand squeaks beneath our feet with every step. The amusing sound is a result of the particular composition, size and shape of the individual grains of sand. Our group unloads a small mountain of gear: dry bags full of clean clothes, tents and sleeping bags, followed by coolers, stoves, propane tanks, tables and food. We set up camp between basalt cliffs and black lava stone on a broad beach formed by silt deposited just a few months before when the river was 20 feet higher.

Ice-cold beer, spirits and sodas are unpacked, and the bar is open. We scavenge for dead wood from the surrounding hillsides and build a campfire to keep cozy after the sun goes down. The guides prepare an aromatic curry dish, and shovel embers around a Dutch oven to brown Indian pappadams. Most of the guests grab tents and set up their homes for the night, while others choose to sleep by the fire under the profusion of stars. We share travel stories and life adventures late into the evening until sleep finally comes.

We rise with the sun and warm ourselves around a rekindled campfire with cups of tea, coffee and chocolate Milo. The river and valley are stunning in the morning glow. After a hearty breakfast (options

during the trip include scrambled eggs, sausage, potatoes, French toast, fruit, yogurt and cereal), we break camp, load the boats and paddle toward the next run of rapids. We clear the first three with ease, but at Open Season, a challenging Class IV/V with a small margin for error, our guides have us walk while they navigate the powerful run.

After running rapids by day, we spend two more serene nights alongside the river. We drink South African wine and local Mosi beer, and dig into hearty spaghetti Bolognese, Caesar salad and garlic bread, then baked apple crumble for dessert. On our last morning, we pack camp while a crew of local villagers hikes into the canyon to carry out our gear.

Faint at first, then swelling louder, comes the thwack of rotor blades from a helicopter approaching down the canyon. We climb aboard, put on protective earphones and take off up the river. As the copter climbs out of the canyon over the flat, dry grasslands, we see small, thatched villages dotting the landscape, connected by footpaths but no roads. The plume of Victoria Falls lies ahead. The broad river fans out as it approaches the edge of the gorge, then plunges down, creating a cloud of mist crowned by a rainbow.

I can see a collection of yellow rafts floating below the Victoria Falls Bridge. Through my telephoto lens I notice that two are upright and two have flipped. I send a silent message to the swimmers: Welcome to the Zambezi. For the rest: Nyaminyami awaits. ▲

Rob Dunton is a freelance travel writer and photographer living in Santa Barbara.

GETTING THERE



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