

BOATS & TRAINS

There's nothing that recalls the Victorian era better than playing David Livingstone and riding the train that Cecil John Rhodes wanted to run. RICHARD HOLMES knows – he's done it.

"THE WATER IS TOO MUDDY," calls Vusa Sibanda from the back of the boat as I send cast after cast towards the banks of the Zambezi. Each time, my shiny lure comes back empty. It's my third visit to this iconic African river but I'm yet to hook its most famous resident, the hard-fighting tiger fish. With the muddy waters rushing headlong towards the Victoria Falls a short way downstream, my losing streak is in no danger of being broken.

Vusa grew up on the banks of the river and knows its waters well, so I take his advice and trade my rod for an ice-cold can of Zambezi lager. As the sun falls behind the indigenous forest lining the riverbank, a herd of shy kudu steps tentatively from the woodland. An African fish eagle completes the sunset cliché with its unmistakable

call. Yup, just another beautiful day in Africa.

Zimbabwe has had its share of misfortune over the past decade or two, but for tourists the tide is turning fast. With a new political dawn, 2018 looks to be the year visitors rediscover this ever-friendly corner of southern Africa. Airlines are pouring flights into the refurbished airport, hotels and lodges are being spruced up, and there's a sense of energy and optimism on the streets. Whether you're new to the country or you reckon a return visit is long overdue, there's no better place to start your discovery than at Victoria Falls.

When David Livingstone first stumbled on the Falls in 1855 they were, of course, long known to the local Tonga people, who called them Mosi-oa-Tunya, 'the smoke that thunders'. Not surprisingly,





A stylish revamp of Matetsi River Lodge has imbued each suite with a bright and modern safari aesthetic. Sweeping views of the Zambezi River come standard, balanced by plenty of welcome mod-cons. From the airport pick-up to the experienced rangers, service at Matetsi is always with a smile. Aside from game drives exploring the vast concession, life at Matetsi revolves around the mighty Zambezi River.



tourists flock here to marvel at the largest waterfall in Africa, as well as the Batoka Gorge carved out by the surging waters of the Zambezi. Although Cecil John Rhodes never did realise his dream of a railway from the Cape to Cairo, the bridge built to carry its trains still spans the gorge and offers fine views of the watery maelstrom below.

It's also with good reason that this corner of Zimbabwe is dubbed the 'adventure capital of Africa'. In and around Victoria Falls you could find yourself bungee jumping, microlighting, fishing, kayaking, interacting with elephants or discovering the fabled Big Five on a safari drive.

While the Falls are impressive, it's the prospect of a safari that has drawn me up north. Just a 30-minute drive from Victoria Falls we turn into &Beyond's Matetsi Private Game Reserve. Set on a 50 000ha private concession on the banks of the Zambezi, including 15km of exclusive river frontage, the lodge provides the ultimate blend of adventure and bushveld escapism.

Matetsi reopened in mid-2016 after a \$10-million renovation, although 'transformation' may be a more accurate description. Just months after welcoming its first guests, it made *Condé Nast Traveler's* 'Hot List' of the world's most sought-after hotels and lodges. And with good reason. The refurbishment injected a modern safari aesthetic into the lodge, deftly blending organic colours and textures with 21st century conveniences. Private plunge pools and designer

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decor come standard, as do the in-room iPads pre-loaded with useful wildlife guides.

Though there are 18 safari suites on offer, the property is divided into two 'camps', each with its own dining and communal areas, to ensure an intimate escape. Tapping into the trend of multi-generational travel, Matetsi also offers a deluxe sole-use villa: the four-bedroomed &Beyond Matetsi River House, which comes complete with a dedicated chef, butler and field guide.

The guides, like Vusa, are superb. Although we were tempted to luxuriate in the lodge all day, during our short stay Vusa enthralled us with opportunities for exploring. Morning excursions could see us canoeing on the Zambezi or casting a line for tigers, while twice-daily game drives traversed the length and breadth of the concession. And, despite years of poor land management, the reserve offered up superb game sightings: herds of sable and roan antelope, shy leopards, lazy lions and more. Birders will be particularly happy here as Vusa proved expert at pointing out everything from summer migrants to the area's numerous broad-winged predators.

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WHICH SIDE OF THE FALLS?

The Victoria Falls can be admired from both the Zambian and Zimbabwean banks of the Zambezi. When the river is in flood (January–April), the Zambian side is perhaps more impressive, with immense spray rising from the Eastern Cataract to fall in a downpour over the Knife-edge Bridge. In the dry season, though (August–December), the Zimbabwean side offers the best views, as the river continues to flow over Devil's Cataract and the Main Falls while the Zambian side remains largely dry.



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A three-night stay was ideal for our short safari break but, in no rush to return, we decided to take the long way home, hopping aboard the weekly Rovos Rail service from Victoria Falls to Pretoria.

Since its first trains trundled along the tracks of the Lowveld in 1989, Rovos Rail has grown from the personal hobby of owner Rohan Vos – “I have the world’s best train set!” he’s been heard to exclaim – to one of the world’s most sought-after luxury adventures. Over the past 30 years it’s evolved to include dozens of immaculately restored carriages, each refurbished in the vintage-luxury style that has become the hallmark of this family-owned business.

There’s a gentle Edwardian feel throughout the train, from the smartly turned out cabin attendants to the waist-coated barmen who know how to keep the G&Ts flowing as we make tracks for the south. In terms of both velocity and hospitality, a journey on Rovos Rail is a journey back to a slower, more refined era of travel.

After welcome drinks at the stately Victoria Falls Hotel, we board

the train at the station platform just across the lawns. Attendants whisk away luggage and show us to our compartments, each decorated in wood, brass and charming chintz. Though cosy, the compartments are cleverly laid out with useful nooks and drawers to maximise the compact space. There are en-suite facilities and air-con, but – happily – no Wi-Fi. The emphasis is on admiring the scenery, chatting to fellow travellers and letting time slow down for a change. Updating your Instagram feed can wait.

We meet our first fellow guests at dinner, always a five-course formal affair paired with award-winning South African wines. Travellers are encouraged to dress for the occasion, so pack appropriately: a jacket and tie is a minimum for gentlemen, the pre-departure notes politely advise.

The second day dawns with a morning drive through Hwange National Park. It’s a treat for visitors fresh from the Falls but after our few days at Matetsi we’re happy to step aboard the train again. Later

BEYOND: ROVOS RAIL



With its wood-panelled carriages and old-school service ethic, a trip aboard Rovos Rail is a journey across Africa as well as back in time. Suites are superbly equipped with all the comforts you could possibly need for a few days on the rails. Whether you’re rumbling across the Karoo or heading south through Zimbabwe, gourmet meals are enjoyed in the elegant dining carriage.

TRAVEL ADVISORY

GETTING THERE: Kenya Airways offers three flights per week direct from Cape Town to Victoria Falls. Additional flights are available, via Johannesburg, on South African Airways and BA/Comair.

WHEN TO GO: The Falls are at their most impressive at the end of the summer rainy season (February–April), but are still impressive in early winter (June–July), when game viewing is better and the weather is mild.

VISAS: Tourists holding a South African passport receive a free entry permit on arrival into Zimbabwe. Most other nationalities can obtain a visa on arrival for US\$30.

CURRENCY: Since 2009, Zimbabwe has used the US dollar as its official currency. Bills in small denominations are best for souvenirs, gratuities and incidental purchases. Hotels and lodges accept major credit cards.

that morning we speed along an oddity of the Zimbabwean railways: at 114km, one of the longest stretches of straight railway track in the world.

Between leisurely brunches and high tea in the lounge cars, we spend the hours watching the scenery slide past the windows. It’s the end of the dry season and the parched lands cry out for rain, but Zimbabwe still unfurls itself beautifully as we barrel our way south. Come evening, the open-air observation deck becomes my favourite corner of the train, the place to swap travel tales with fellow passengers and toast the sunset with a G&T as the tracks slip away behind us.

Our three-night journey whips past in a blur of landscapes and luxury and before I know it we’re through the Beitbridge border post and into our last night on board. We spot baobabs in the sunset as we meander south through Limpopo, sipping a light Pinot Noir with our dinner of duck confit.

The next morning we’re greeted on the outskirts of Pretoria by the unmistakable sound of a steam engine, its sooty whistle piercing the Highveld morning. ‘King Zog’, built in 1954 by the North British Locomotive Company in Scotland, is one of a handful of vintage engines Rovos Rail keeps running out of its private Capital Park Station. While the lack of coal and water along the lines means these engines rarely venture far from their home base, it’s a fine way to begin and end a Rovos journey. With a hiss of steam – and no shortage of bemused bystanders – we roll along the last few kilometres of track.

It’s been the perfect break, blending outdoor adventure on the banks of the Zambezi with the chance to rest, recharge and indulge in a little locomotive luxury. I’m tempted to simply turn right around and do it all again, to catch the next train heading north. Besides, somewhere out there in the lazy waters of the Zambezi there’s still a tiger fish with my name on it.

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