

river. crossings

David Livingstone had a tough time exploring the Zambezi River; in fact, his journey ended with his death. For modern travellers, though, a visit to this moody waterway that forms the border between Zimbabwe and Zambia is far less treacherous. Today, the transport is reliable, the accommodation is comfortable and the food is really good. However, the region is still one of the wildest in Africa, as journalist **Melissa Siebert** discovered. ▶

TEXT BY MELISSA SIEBERT



I am prepared to go anywhere, provided it be forward...'. These are the words uttered by the famous explorer David Livingstone to his bearers as they struggled through the marshes of the Lower Zambezi in the early 1860s, an expedition that was thwarted by rapids, sandbars, sickness and death. On a recent journey to that same river, the continent's fourth longest, we went forward, backward and sideways as we investigated one of the wildest landscapes left in southern Africa, a waterway still infused with the spirits of river gods.

Rivers are mythic in Africa; for centuries they have captivated explorers from various empires. They have been the lifelines of the local people, yielding fish and providing water for washing, drinking, irrigation and hydroelectric power. They have served as transport lanes bringing in the word of God and carrying out thousands of victims to be sold into slavery. And they conceal a host of ancient gods to be propitiated. The Zambezi is no exception. It too has many stories to tell. Most people first see the river at its middle, at the legendary Victoria Falls, the spectacular world wonder that the locals call Mosi-oa-Tunya, 'the smoke that thunders'. Visitors walking along the Zambian or Zimbabwean banks may well reflect on the comment made by Livingstone when he first saw, and named, the falls in 1855: 'Scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight.'



BAINES' RIVER CAMP

On this particular river safari, our first indelible impression of the Zambezi was experienced at Baines' River Camp on the Zambian side of the river, across from Zimbabwe's Mana Pools National Park. Situated roughly 1 700 kilometres downstream from the river's source in north-western Zambia, 600 kilometres from the falls and just under 1 000 kilometres from where the waters spill into the Indian Ocean in Mozambique, it was a good place to start.

We'd arrived hot and dusty, seven of us in two small planes from Lusaka, after a 40-minute flight over the

Zambezi River Valley, skimming across the tops of gentle green hills until the river appeared beneath us like a silvery python. A short drive along the edge of the Lower Zambezi National Park, through a forest of mopane, rain, ebony and leadwood trees and heady wild jasmine bushes, brought us to the camp. Baines' River Camp is an elegant, colonial-style compound under the tamarind and jackalberry trees, with the most spectacular frontage imaginable.

A few paces through the airy reception area, across the wide veranda, is the river, promising adventure in either direction. It was late morning and the water was slate-blue, flat and flowing lazily. On the far golden bank a pod of hippos snoozed en masse, a trio of elephants stood and samangos swung from the trees overhead. Our immediate impulse was to get out on the river – and so we did.

'I'm taking you to wallow, not swim,' said the irrepressible field guide and general manager Scott Brown from the helm of our five-metre outboard motorboat, heading for some sandbars downstream. 'We also play touch rugby out there.'

'God's Highway', delivering the '3 Cs' – Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation – to the African interior was how Livingstone with his missionary zeal saw the Zambezi. We approached it with less intensity, but it

was not without respect and a twinge of fear that we stepped into the cool, shallow eddies, looking out for hippos and crocs. We wallowed, with a few shrieks, and quickly clambered back into the boat.

It's hard to take it all in: the river flows around you, through you, and on that particular stretch at least, calms you down, anaesthetising you with its smooth six-kilometre-per-hour flow, the reflections of sunlight on water and the surrounding silence.

Brown whisked us off to another sandbar for sun-downers. There, the camp's staff waited, manning a long table draped in a crisp white cloth and laden with a full bar; we soon discovered a Krone Borealis Brut 2007 chilling in a silver cooler.

Flames danced on a mountaintop across the river, possibly lit by poachers trying to flush out the animals, we were told. The staff regaled us with local stories: of Thomas Baines (the camp's namesake), the English artist, naturalist and explorer who joined Livingstone's Zambezi expedition in 1858, only to be

kicked off the next year for allegedly stealing sugar; of the writer Alexandra Fuller, whose parents own a fish farm nearby and whose real-life character 'K', the troubled soldier of Fuller's book *Scribbling the Cat*, lives in the vicinity; of all the crazies seeking highs ▶

a beautiful mermaid, the virgin spirit would enter and leave the river via the rock, and would capsize passers-by who didn't offer a prayer or a sacrifice

OPPOSITE Evenings at Baines' River Camp are spent around the flickering flames of a brazier.

LEFT Elephants emerge from a grove of winterthorn trees to drink.

BELOW The wild and legendary Victoria Falls.

PREVIOUS SPREAD The Zambezi Queen.



SARAH DUFF/GETAWAY



MELISSA SIEBERT



ZAMBEZI QUEEN

and adrenalin rushes at falls and at adjacent Livingstone, Zambia's former capital. 'We call it Livingstone,' quipped the logistics manager Kevin Macaulay, a fount of local and historical knowledge. 'A lot of weed is being smoked there...'

The next morning, while most people were just stirring, the head field guide Leonard Kalio, who grew up in a Gova village not far from camp, talked about the spirits that control the river.

'Every [local] community has its own river gods,' he said. 'Up at Kariba, the Tonga people worship a god called Nyaminyami. When the dam was being built, the Tonga believed that it separated Nyaminyami from his wife, and that he would get angry and break through the dam wall. Just before the dam was finished [in 1958], the wall broke and hundreds of people died. Those who remained offered sacrifices of cows, goats and chickens, all thrown into the river...'

'Downstream not far from here, the Gova people believe in the Rock of the Virgin.' A beautiful mermaid, the virgin spirit would enter and leave the river via the rock, and would capsize passersby who didn't offer a prayer or a sacrifice.

the main appeal was the other guests. All around us in the dappled light among the trees were elephants, their massive grey shapes shoving the trunks to loosen the bright orange fruit

Later, Kalio took us canoeing past the rock. Paddling madly, I forgot to pray. We covered 14 kilometres in three hours, gliding past pods of curious hippos popping up like gigantic, beady-eyed corks, twirling their tiny ears as if for take-off. Kalio, in the lead canoe, had warned us of these 'fat dogs', crocs that were nowhere in sight but definitely lived down below. 'Try to avoid dunking your limbs in the water,' he warned. We didn't capsize, though.

The canoe trip ended in a grove of towering winter-thorn trees, with a five-star picnic lunch comprising mainly fish and salads. But the main appeal was the other guests. All around us in the dappled light were elephants, their massive grey shapes shoving the trees to loosen the bright orange fruit. They seemed totally at ease with us; we were, in actuality, *their* guests.

The following day brought lots of moans about leaving, but all sorts of pleasures awaited. Although we still had many rivers to cross, or at least a couple of rivers to cross several times, our next destination was promising: the *Zambezi Queen*, a 45-metre luxury houseboat moored on the Chobe River, a tributary of the Zambezi.

One small plane, three vans and two powerboats later, we headed up the Chobe at sunset until, just off Namibia's Caprivi Strip, we sighted the *Queen*. The glamorous vessel, hosting no more than 30 visitors at a time, offers a one-to-one guest-staff ratio. It is elegant,

streamlined and eco-friendly, and it's hard to believe it was once a casino and backpackers' lodge in Kasane. We were welcomed aboard by chef Felix Ncube and a chorus of ululating women. On the top deck, skipper Charles Moody handed out champagne flutes and summed up the experience ahead: 'It's the ultimate unwind.'

Indeed it was. 'Pampered' doesn't begin to describe the treatment. Three to four days are spent being gently escorted from the cosmopolitan mother boat to smaller tender boats for cruises, tigerfishing or land-based game viewing in Chobe National Park, home to about 120 000 elephants. Ncube's expertly prepared meals included freshly caught bream in a light cream sauce; fluffy, crusty quiches; a lemon meringue pie that looked and tasted like it had floated down from heaven; and mountains of fresh fruit. We drank Pimm's in the plunge pool on the top deck, with a 360-degree view of Africa slipping past, very slowly. We saw elephants, more elephants, hippos, African fish-eagles, storks and other waterbirds, herds of antelopes, and even a rare puku. Occasionally, a dugout passed us, being poled downstream.

Was there a down side? Well, yes. The wind came up, and when it blows in excess of 18 knots (33 kilometres per hour), the *Zambezi Queen* can't sail; it will simply fall over. And when the vessel is not sailing, it's moored at one end, swinging back and forth languidly, vaguely reminiscent of a childhood swing. At some stage you may feel entirely disconnected from the rest of the world, except for that mooring, there in the middle of the river, in the middle of Africa.

Our last port of call, after negotiating a zigzag of border crossings through Namibia, Botswana and back to Zambia, took us 40 kilometres east to the Royal Chundu Lodge, also on the Zambezi. Lying 30 kilometres upstream of the falls, Chundu's name means 'meeting place of the chiefs', and we were all treated accordingly.

Along the lodge's 15-kilometre private stretch of river, we each claimed our own riverfront suite: a thatched cottage on stilts, nestled between the reeds and waterpear

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trees with tropical boubous singing and hippos grunting a wake-up call each morning. It would have been easy to lounge in the sublimely comfortable king-sized beds all day, watching the river slide by. But Chundu had other plans for us: river rafting, with the rapids luckily a far cry from 'The Terminator' below the falls; more tiger-fishing (I caught a tree stump); sunset cruises; a visit to a local village; and, a novelty, some scary Makishi dancers with blazing torches doing a circumcision dance in the boma.

'The backyard of David Livingstone' is how the Chundu brochures describe its environment. For sure, the explorer's presence is everywhere on this part of the river. There are statues of him at Livingstone Airport and at the falls; his biography is in every gift shop; the town's name itself commemorates him. I thought of him often, of his celebrated and ill-fated journeys, of his obsessions, of his ultimate demise from malaria and prolonged dysentery, and of his heart lying buried under an mvula tree in a Zambian chief's village. Livingstone's travails threw our Zambezi expedition into stark relief, making one thing absolutely clear. We didn't suffer.

Pack your bags

There are numerous places to stay along the Zambezi. Siebert's journey took in just three. The first, Baines' River Camp in the Lower Zambezi National Park, offers colonial-style accommodation and activities such as walking and water safaris, game drives, photographic workshops, fly-fishing clinics, elephant studies and birding weeks. Contact by telephoning +27 (0)33 342 7498/(0)82 806 4074; e-mail info@bainesrivercamp.com; reservations@bainesrivercamp.com; www.bainesrivercamp.com

Her second stopover was the *Zambezi Queen* on the Chobe River, the waterway that divides Namibia's Caprivi Strip from Botswana's Chobe National Park. From the decks, guests can sit back and view one of the densest populations of wildlife in Africa. Contact on tel. +27 (0)21 438 0032/(0)83 309 3874; e-mail info@zambeziqueen.com; www.zambeziqueen.com

Siebert's final stay was at the Royal Chundu Lodge (above), which comprises two luxury lodges upstream of the Victoria Falls in a peaceful bushland setting. To contact, tel. +27 (0)87 700 8310; e-mail reservations@royalchundu.com; www.royalchundu.com

ROYAL CHUNDU



ABOVE Royal Chundu Lodge.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE Lions are pretty much an everyday sighting on the Chobe River floodplain.

OPPOSITE, BELOW Canoe safaris allow one to gain a closer perspective on the animals.



SARAH DUFF GETAWAY