

David Livingstone is widely regarded as one of the greatest adventurers, so it is rather fitting that a century and a half after his Africa expedition, the town that proudly bears his name offers adventurous visitors a smorgasbord of adrenalin-pumping pursuits. Extreme sports enthusiast Stephen Cunliffe recently spent a few days exploring the area's wild side

Text and Photography: Stephen Cunliffe

ADVENTURE JUNKIE VISITS LIVINGSTONE

Adrenalin overload

The Zambezi River below Victoria Falls offers perhaps the best one-day rafting trip in the world. Classified as a high-volume, pool-drop river and boasting some of the most exciting and challenging rapids to be rafted anywhere, it's a sure-fire recipe for an energetic day of epic river action that will be etched in your memory.

"We need to pass right of the indicator rock before making a tight left turn," said our guide, Clement 'Potato' Chisangwa of Bundu Adventures. "A large diagonal wave will be lying in wait for us and we need speed to break through."

His next words sounded even more daunting: "We'll drop into a gigantic hole called The Crease, but at all costs we must avoid being pushed into The Temple of Doom on the far left."

A couple of our crew members turned pale at these words. "And if we still haven't flipped by then," Potato added, "we'll run through Land of the Giants, where you can expect enormous waves to crash over the raft from every direction."

This terrifying team talk was intended to force our motley crew of wannabe rafting enthusiasts into action as we drifted towards the Zambezi's longest and most technically challenging stretch of massive white-water.

Rapid Seven, known as Gulliver's Travels, is renowned for capsizing boats and often giving rafters a long swim. With a hint of relish, Potato concluded, "When we flip, take a deep breath just in case Nyaminyami (a Zambezi River God) decides to give you some serious downtime."

Everything went according to plan ... until

The Crease, that is. The powerful whirlpool latched onto our boat and tossed it around a while before discharging us straight into the infamous Temple of Doom. We thumped into a seething mass of angry white-water that effortlessly flipped our 16-foot raft, plunging everyone into the raging river for a frightening swim through Land of the Giants.

Later we flipped again in the notorious Star Trek rapid, where Potato's pessimistic prediction – a 3% chance of getting through unscathed – proved prophetic.

Now this might sound like a somewhat alarming way to spend a Monday, but it was one of the most exhilarating and entertaining days imaginable. And it proved to be an appropriate start to my week of adventure in the Livingstone area.

Surf's up!

Tuesday dawned with all the hallmarks of another scorcher and I happily headed back to the mighty Zambezi. This time, however, I traded the ten-man raft for a pair of fins and a one-man body board. Safpar riverboard guide David Choongo was charged with leading me safely through the white-water labyrinth. With ten years of river guiding experience and a love of big-wave surfing, he was the ideal escort for a rookie like me.

If you think that grade five rapids look big from a raft, just try lying down on a boogie board and staring up at those gargantuan walls of furiously frothing water. They're enormous from that vantage point!

The Zambezi is to riverboarding what Hawaii is to surfing. Riverboarding is an aquatic adventure sport like no other and certainly not for the faint-hearted. Participants lie

prone on high-flotation boards with fins on their feet for steering and propulsion. Aside from tackling wild white-water, boarders can eddy out at "play spots" along the way to surf waves, ride whirlies and "squirt" (best described as flying underwater). I braced myself for a truly electrifying ride.

Essentially, riverboarding involves lining up the correct approach into a rapid, then sucking in a deep breath and hanging on to your little board for dear life. Contrary to what many people think, however, it is in fact a surprisingly safe undertaking.

"The Zambezi is a large-volume river with virtually no exposed rocks," explained Safpar's head river guide Andrew Bolton. "This makes it safe for rafting and riverboarding, provided you use the appropriate safety equipment and heed the advice of your experienced river guides."

As my board slid down the watery tongue of the aptly named Muncher towards a tsunami-sized wall of furious white-water, I had a split second to reflect that this seemed a slightly suicidal approach to river running. The next few seconds felt like minutes as the grade five rapid tossed me under one wave and over the next before, eventually, spitting me out the back.

Spluttering and gasping for breath, I was thrilled to discover I was still alive. After silently thanking my overworked and underpaid guardian angels for getting me through yet another gauntlet, I paddled over to a beaming Choongo and we threw some wild high-fives. I was "pumped", and I wanted more.

Cliff-hanger

Abseiling might not sound like the most terrifying activity, but it did mark the start of a very tough Wednesday that saw me throwing myself off a ridiculously large number of high cliffs and structurally sound bridges.

Abseiling instructor Dominique Namubwala suggested I try rap jumping to add a bit of spice to the activity. "You clip onto the rope, face forwards and sprint down the cliff," he clarified, in response to the puzzled look on my face. "Just like Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible."

Oh well, what the hell, I thought, I'll give it a try. After all, Tom Cruise's character made it look so easy in the movie. But when I took my first nervous strides over the edge and started running face-first down the vertical rock wall, I was forced to stifle screams of unadulterated terror as my pulse rate shot through the roof.

Flying the Fox

"Dive off the cliff with your arms out and soar like an eagle across the gorge," commanded my instructor, Fred Kawana. The Flying Fox, or high wire, requires you to attach yourself via a waist harness to a cable that is suspended above a deep gorge. You then sprint for ten metres before launching yourself over the edge, thus creating the momentum that propels you across the abyss.

As I galloped towards the cliff edge, I couldn't

help but notice that I looked and felt nothing like an eagle. When I dived off the precipice, my body harness immediately strained against my weight, reminding me that humans fly with about the same grace and efficiency as a lead zeppelin.

Although I held no naive notions regarding my ability to fly, as soon as I realised the harness would hold me up, I was able to relax and discover that, far from being scary, zipping over the gaping canyon was a fantastically invigorating experience.

Swinging low

"You will experience a 53-metre free fall lasting three seconds before the rope arrests your fall and swings you like a pendulum backwards and forwards across the gorge," explained my Abseil Zambia instructor, Peter Simasiku. "Feel free to scream," he added, with just a touch of sarcasm, as I prepared to take a giant stride off the cliff. "It comes with the package!"

It was a simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying experience. I felt sure once was enough. However, Peter had other ideas and cunningly convinced me to try it again... but this time backwards "to experience the difference", as he put it.

By the end of the morning I was completely drained and my nerves were shattered. Not even the fact that there had been no accidents in more than 100 000 jumps could entice me to swing a third time.

Taking the plunge

The Vic Falls bungee has been operating commercially from the Zambian side for 16 years, during which close to a million (insane) tourists have hurled themselves off this perfectly good bridge. Why? Jump-master Mulemi Mwandu put it down to a form of brainwashing. "Bungee jumping cleanses the mind," he said. "Everyday stresses vanish, and you feel like a newborn baby once you've been winched back up onto the bridge and realise you have survived."

After throwing myself off cliffs all morning, I was fresh out of adrenalin by Wednesday afternoon. Yet I desperately needed to summon up the courage to launch myself off one final bridge.

I won't lie and pretend that I take this sort of thing in my stride – I was absolutely petrified. Standing on the edge of that bridge, gazing over the yawning chasm of the Zambezi and preparing to impersonate a human yo-yo was one of the most horrifying moments of my life. I break out in a cold sweat just thinking about it.

As I listened to the countdown: "Five, four, three, two, one..." I was gone even before the final cry of "bungee!" One more second's hesitation and my fear would have frozen me to that bridge permanently.

Thankfully all went well. The experience was frightening but also immensely exhilarating. It certainly did cleanse my mind. And most importantly, it signalled the end of a scary, draining day!

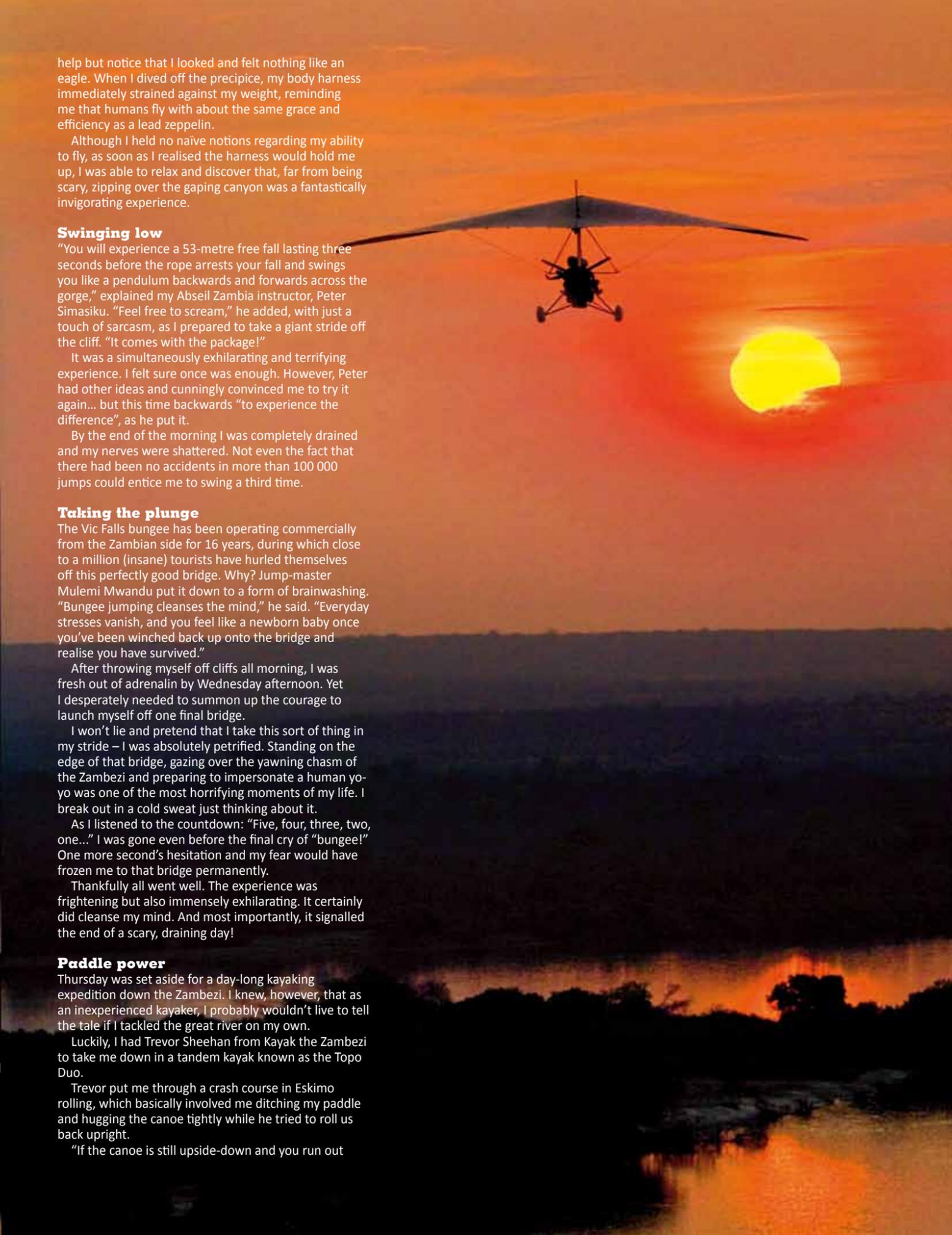
Paddle power

Thursday was set aside for a day-long kayaking expedition down the Zambezi. I knew, however, that as an inexperienced kayaker, I probably wouldn't live to tell the tale if I tackled the great river on my own.

Luckily, I had Trevor Sheehan from Kayak the Zambezi to take me down in a tandem kayak known as the Topo Duo.

Trevor put me through a crash course in Eskimo rolling, which basically involved me ditching my paddle and hugging the canoe tightly while he tried to roll us back upright.

"If the canoe is still upside-down and you run out





breath," he advised, as we headed into our first major rapid, "pull your skirt and abandon ship."

We aced Morning Glory and dominated Stairway to Heaven, but I followed his advice at The Devil's Toilet Bowl and pulled my splash cover in a desperate bid for air.

A full-day kayak trip on the Zambezi involves plenty of water up the nose, a fair amount of time spent upside-down and some solid swimming practice, but, all that said, it's tremendous fun and I loved every action-packed minute on the river.

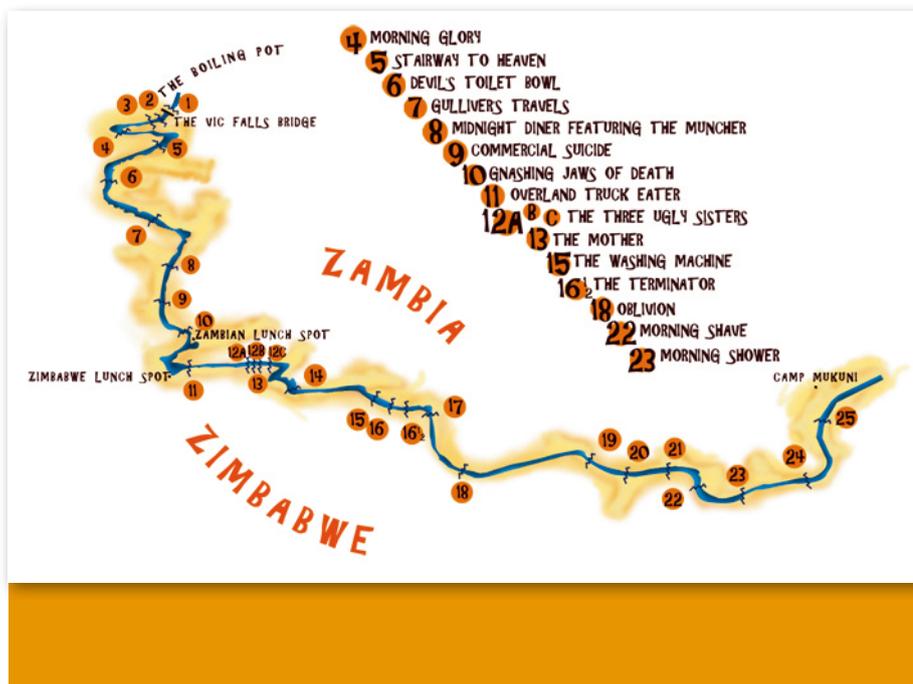
Flying high

The sun had just crested the horizon on a partly cloudy Friday morning as we taxied across the apron. I clipped on my earphones, Bernie, the pilot, gunned the engine and we rumbled down the dirt airstrip. The two-seater microlight was airborne within seconds and immediately began circling like a hungry vulture looking for a thermal: we needed to gain some altitude to meet the 4000-foot flight deck for microlight flights above Victoria Falls.

The flight is a revelation, offering a unique and breathtaking perspective of the river, the falls and the dramatic topography of this extraordinary region. Not surprisingly, it is dubbed The Flight of the Angels, after Livingstone's famous remark – and there is, indeed, something celestial in this privileged spectacle.

After enjoying a bird's eye view of the falls you have a choice of either flying along the zigzagging Zambezi gorges or taking a low-level flight over Mosi-Oa-Tunya National Park in search of wildlife. Either option will





expose you to the incredible geological beauty and natural heritage of the area.

A dip with the devil

On the edge of the main falls, barely two metres from the cascading precipice, the Zambezi has over time scoured out a small natural rock pool. During the low-water months, this unique swimming hole provides a handful of fearless souls with a rare opportunity to lounge in what is surely the world's most dramatically situated plunge pool. Exuberant visitors can even enter the Devil's Pool with a jump, dive or back flip – just so long as they don't overshoot.

The views from the pool are unparalleled, though the most spectacular – straight over the drop – may be too much for some to stomach. However, if you possess nerves of steel and a deep-seated faith in your guide, then float to the edge and crawl out over the lip. While the guide hangs onto your ankles for safety's sake, you'll find yourself sticking out over the abyss with water thundering over the falls all around you. It's an unforgettable experience and a great way to end a busy week of adventuring.

The activity I had lined up for the following day was more sedate – but only slightly so.

On the boil

The Tonga people refer to the falls as Shongwe, which translates as "seething cauldron". Saturday saw me headed into this cauldron, also known as the Boiling Pot, to experience the newest activity on offer at Vic Falls.

Spray View Tours is the brainchild of Bundu Adventure's owner, Nico Chassing, who envisaged it as an affordable activity that would allow people to experience the power and majesty of being surrounded by towering cliffs and thundering water.

"You have seen the amazing Victoria Falls from the top, but the most awesome perspective is from the bottom of the gorge," explained Nico. "The Boiling Pot surely must

rank as one of the most beautiful places on earth."

Inflatable rafts took us right to the base of the waterfall, allowing us to enjoy a unique perspective of the spectacle. We had to shout to be heard above the deafening roar emanating from within the boiling cauldron. Paddling against the powerful currents, I could sense nature's raw power all around us.

It made me feel very small and insignificant. Our skilled guides used the powerful currents to manoeuvre the inflatables into a position that enabled us to climb ashore and hike through a series of rock pools right to the base of the western cascade. Swimming below the falls, surrounded by towering black basalt cliffs and gigantic curtains of tumbling water, was one of the most breathtaking experiences of my life.

Spray View Tours might be the most recent addition to the Vic Falls' adventure sports repertoire, but it is destined to be a classic.

Jet setting, Zambezi style

I ended my visit to Livingstone with a final (large) dose of adrenalin. I rode shotgun in a jet boat.

Operating in the lower gorges of the Zambezi, jet boating offers guests an extremely exhilarating ride. For 30 minutes, a custom-built speedboat buzzes rocks, executes jet spins and crashes through thundering rapids at death-defying speeds.

Squeals of pleasure blend with shrieks of terror as white-knuckled speed freaks lap up the fast-paced river action. It requires less effort than kayaking or rafting, but offers a ton of thrills!

The Awesome Foursome

Livingstone's array of adventure sports thrilled and terrified me in every conceivable way during my action-packed week. There was plenty of fun and excitement, with regular shots of adrenalin and a healthy measure of unadulterated fear thrown in for good measure.

I have to say that my personal favourites were the rafting and riverboarding excursions. Of course, most travellers and overland travellers won't have a week to try out all activities, so I would suggest going for a full-day riverboarding-plus-rafting combo.

But if you really want to get your adrenalin pumping, and have a day to spare, there is an even better suggestion. Safpar's marketing manager Sarah Mackenzie suggests the following: "Start off with the full-day combo of rafting and riverboarding. Follow this up with a jet boat ride at Rapid 25, then climb into a helicopter and experience the thrilling flight back up the seven gorges to Livingstone before finishing off with a sunset bungee jump."

Now that sounds like a day to remember. The only question is: are you up for it?

The Operators

The following is by no means an exhaustive list of the many adventure sports operators in the Livingstone area. However, all those mentioned here have a good reputation and impeccable safety record, use top-quality equipment and offer top-notch customer service.

Abseil Zambia: A dedicated site 3km from Livingstone offers many activities for the adrenalin junkie, including abseiling, rap jumping, a gorge swing, the Flying Fox and a cable slide. Details at www.thezambeziwing.com

Batoka Sky: Specialises in microlight and helicopter flights over the Victoria Falls and Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park. Details at www.livingstonesadventure.com

Bundu Adventures: An owner-run company offering diverse activities, including rafting (with multi-day trips), riverboarding, canoeing, kayaking, surfing and spray view tours into the Boiling Pot. Details at www.bunduadventures.com

Jet Extreme: Easily accessed via a private cable car into the gorge, offering jet boat rides around Rapid 25. Details at www.livingstonesadventure.com

Kayak the Zambezi: A specialist Zambezi kayaking operation that includes a kayak school, kayak guiding and multi-day kayak trips for experienced kayakers. Details at www.thezambezi.com

Livingstone Island tours: Tongabezi has exclusive rights to Livingstone Island: they offer five daily tours, which include the option of swimming in Devil's Pool on the lip of the falls. Details at www.tongabezi.com/livingstone_island.php

Safari Par Excellence: Arguably Livingstone's most professional adventure sports operator. Activities focus on popular half- and full-day rafting trips, but also include riverboarding and upper Zambezi canoe trips. Details at www.safpar.net

Zambezi Adrenalin Company: Bungee jumping, gorge swinging and cable sliding from the historic bridge linking Zambia to Zimbabwe. Details at www.safpar.com/bunjee_jumping.htm