

# The mighty Zambezi

The Zambezi is Africa's fourth largest waterway after the rivers Nile, Niger and Congo, and although it traverses six countries on its 2700-km journey from Central Africa to the Indian Ocean, the lion's share of this wonderfully wild river lies within Zambia. A Zambian river safari with boats, canoes, inflatable rafts and even a microlight helps one experience the Zambezi in all its guises.

Text **Stephen Cunliffe**



The Zambezi is the stuff of myth and legend, but the enigmatic river had a lifelong allure for one man in particular—Dr David Livingstone, the foremost African explorer of his generation. Livingstone enjoyed near-mythic status as a missionary, adventurer, anti-slavery crusader and philanthropist. And, ultimately, it was by travelling along the Zambezi that he completed one of the greatest expeditionary feats of the nineteenth century, becoming the first European to cross the African continent. A hundred and fifty years later, whether you're an avid safari connoisseur, waterfall and wilderness enthusiast or adventure sports junkie, the timeless Zambezi continues to seduce and thrill tourists of every age and persuasion.



Stephen Cumliffe

▲ Above: The Upper Zambezi floodplain comprises colourful, braided river channels and wide sandbanks. Previous page: The Upper Zambezi is characterised by lushly vegetated islands and small patches of subsistence agriculture along the river's banks.

### TRUE WILDERNESS ON THE UPPER ZAMBEZI

Beginning its journey as an innocuous little spring in north-west Zambia, the headwaters of the Zambezi bubble up as a feeble trickle between the roots of a fallen tree. It is an inauspicious beginning for Southern Africa's foremost river system. After a 235-km dog-leg into Angola, the now-swollen torrent re-enters Zambia at the Cholwezi rapids flowing due south before swinging east on its quest for Mozambique and the Indian Ocean.

Subsistence farmers and fishermen of the proud Lozi nation sparsely populate

the Upper Zambezi and although wildlife is thin on the ground, the river flows clean and strong. It is here, in the Western Province of Zambia and the heart of Barotseland, that the annual Kuomboka ceremony takes place. While this is undoubtedly the Zambezi's foremost cultural event, its remote location precludes all but the most determined tourists from witnessing the impressive traditional ritual. The Silozi word *Kuomboka* literally means 'to get out of the water' and when the Upper Zambezi seasonally inundates the low-lying plains, the king—or Litunga as he's locally known—relocates from his

dry-season compound at Lealui in the Barotse Floodplain to the high-ground palace at Limulunga. Amidst much pomp and ceremony, the local people gather in their thousands to observe the passage of Nalikwanda—the king's black-and-white striped wooden barge—which carries not only the Litunga but also a life-size replica of an enormous ear-flapping elephant!

Exiting the wide Barotse Floodplain, the Zambezi curls east, cutting through increasingly rocky terrain until its tranquil passage is interrupted by the horseshoe-shaped Ngonye Falls. This little-known cascade, also called Sioma Falls, lays claim to the title of 'second largest waterfall on the Zambezi'. Although historically neglected and largely undeveloped, the philanthropic Peace Park Foundation has been instrumental in getting the falls declared Zambia's newest national park. The subsequent reintroduction of wildlife, development of a visitor's centre and construction of basic tourist facilities has turned the gloriously wild Ngonye Falls into an attractive proposition for adventurous travellers.

Terrifyingly named rapids—Stairway to Heaven, Devil's Toilet Bowl, Overland Truck Eater and Oblivion—give an inkling of the epic river action that lies in wait for water-sport aficionados who brave the white-water mayhem.



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▲ Clockwise from above: A raft of lazy hippos relax on one of the Zambezi's many shallow sandbanks; The wild section of the Zambezi inside the Batoka Gorge offers the greatest one-day white-water rafting trip in the world; To truly appreciate the majesty and power of the Victoria Falls, take a paddle in the Boiling Pot directly below the thundering waterfall.

The Zambezi mellows again below the falls and it is on this tranquil stretch of water—shortly before the river demarcates the international boundary between Zambia and Namibia—that intrepid travellers will find the best tourist offerings on the Upper Zambezi. The secluded Mutemwa Lodge offers some of the best accommodation in the region; a serene spot to put your feet up and relax in the company of abundant bird life and honking hippos.

For recharged visitors who tire of watching the mesmerising Zambezi, there's always the thrill of throwing a line and trying your hand at tiger fishing. But, be warned: 'tiger' is an apt name for the fearsome freshwater fighting fish with big teeth and a wild temperament!

### WET AND WILD AT THE VICTORIA FALLS

"I am prepared to go anywhere," Livingstone once claimed, "provided it be forward." But it's doubtful the first European to lay eyes on the Victoria Falls was thinking of doing it upside down, underwater or dangling from a 50m elastic band! A century and a half later, the town that proudly bears Livingstone's name has become synonymous with extreme sports, tempting its more adventurous visitors with a smorgasbord of adrenaline-pumping pursuits that would surely have the great explorer rolling in his grave.

*Mosi-oa-Tunya*—the smoke that thunders—more commonly known as Victoria Falls, marks the end of the Upper

Zambezi. At roughly 1.7 km wide and 108m high, the breathtaking falls are said to be the world's largest sheet of cascading water, creating arching rainbows and a swirling cloud of misty spray that can be seen from many miles away. But there is considerably more to the falls than its gobsmacking beauty.

From the Boiling Pot, a whirlpool immediately below the thunderous Victoria Falls, the Zambezi enters the zigzagging Batoka Gorge and embarks on a tumultuous white-water journey that is widely touted as the most exciting one-day rafting trip available on the planet. Its terrifyingly named rapids—Stairway to Heaven, Devil's Toilet Bowl, Overland Truck Eater and Oblivion—give an inkling of the epic river action that lies in wait for water-sport aficionados who brave the white-water mayhem. There's no better place from which to appreciate the enormity of the waterfall than bobbing below it in a tiny inflatable, and most 'survivors' agree that the experience of paddling into gargantuan walls of furiously frothing white-water will remain etched in their memories for eternity.

If rafting sounds like too energetic a proposition, then perhaps an exhilarating jetboat ride or swim in the Devil's Pool might be more to your liking? On the edge of the main falls, barely two metres from the cascading precipice, the Zambezi has scoured out a small natural rock pool, providing a handful of fearless souls with a rare opportunity to lounge in what is undoubtedly the world's most dramatically located plunge pool.



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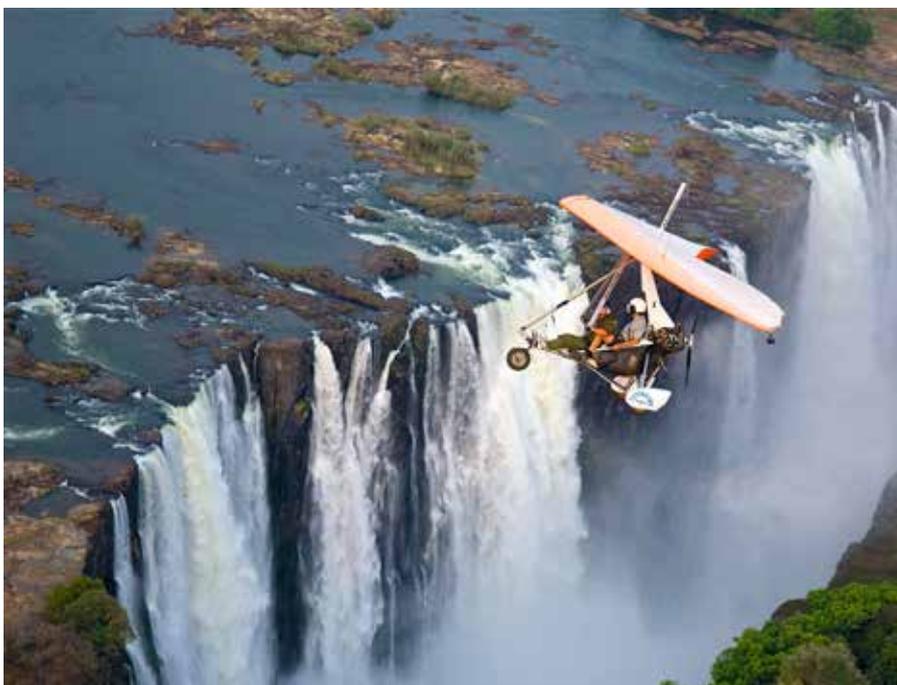
Bundu Adventures



▲ Above: The distinctive cry of the African Fish Eagle is synonymous with spending time on Southern Africa's foremost waterway. Below: With the wind blowing through your hair, there is no better way to view the spectacular Victoria Falls than from a two-seater microlight.

However, to truly appreciate the scale and splendour of the falls, you need to hop aboard a helicopter or two-seater microlight for the flight of a lifetime. Dubbed 'flight of the angels'—after Livingstone's famous remark, "Scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight"—there is, indeed, something celestial about this unique bird's-eye perspective of the Victoria Falls that is usually the exclusive domain of soaring Fish Eagles.

But no matter which way you choose to experience the middle Zambezi, expect your squeals of pleasure to curdle with shrieks of terror—especially if you bravely choose to join




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other white-knuckled adrenaline junkies in tackling the heart-pounding river action head on.

### TAKING IT EASY ON THE LOWER ZAMBEZI

The gigantic 281-km long Kariba Dam engulfs the Zambezi as it exits the magnificent Batoka Gorge into the magnificent Gwembe Valley. Below the dam wall, the river—now known as the Lower Zambezi—curls its way past Chirundu and is soon flanked by the Lower Zambezi National Park on the Zambian side and world-renowned Mana Pools National Park on the Zimbabwean bank. Together, they form one of Africa's premier wilderness areas.

The Lower Zambezi is a picturesque and prolific safari destination with Zambian tourism activities focusing on the narrow, wildlife-rich floodplain that lies sandwiched between the towering escarpment and river. A strict management plan limits the number of safari operators within the park to just six exclusive lodges, but what makes the Lower Zambezi safari experience so unique is that nowhere else on the planet can you experience the same diversity of wildlife-tourism activities concentrated in one area.

At Sausage Tree Camp, for instance, knowledgeable nature guides conduct daily game drives, spotlit night drives in search of nocturnal creatures, informative bush walks with an armed escort, exciting catch-and-release tiger-fishing excursions, sunset boat cruises to view cavorting elephants and tranquil canoe safaris down the Zambezi's braided channels. The safari options are endless and guests are truly spoilt for choice.



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▲ Above: Guided canoe safaris offer incredible wildlife-viewing opportunities on the Zambezi provided your nerves can take paddling past all the hippos and crocodiles. Below: A yawning hippo completes the quintessential Zambezi sunset.

The Lower Zambezi boasts one of the greatest wildlife experiences on earth and safari connoisseurs agree that there is something very special about spending time on Southern Africa's premier waterway. Perhaps it is the age-old ritual of the sundowner, inextricably linked with every Zambezi safari, which is at the root of their addiction, but when grunting hippos drown out a distant lion's roar and the sinking sun turns the sky blood red, there's no denying a gin and tonic ever tasted quite so good.



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## Fact file

### Getting there

Jet Airways operates daily flights to Johannesburg from Mumbai using code-share partner South African Airways. From Johannesburg, you can catch a connecting flight to Lusaka or Livingstone in Zambia.

### Best season to visit

The dry season months of May to October are the most popular time to visit Zambia and explore the mighty Zambezi. Wildlife sightings and white-water rafting are at their best from August to October. November to April is a prime time for birders and waterfall watchers. The annual Kuomboka ceremony takes place during March or April.

### Accommodation

- Upper Zambezi: Mutemwa Lodge ([www.mutemwa.co.za](http://www.mutemwa.co.za))
- Livingstone Area (Victoria Falls): Stanley Safari Lodge ([www.robipopesafaris.net](http://www.robipopesafaris.net)) and The Zambezi Waterfront ([www.thezambeziwaterfront.com](http://www.thezambeziwaterfront.com))
- Lower Zambezi: Potato Bush Camp ([www.potatobushcamp.com](http://www.potatobushcamp.com)) and Sausage Tree Camp ([www.sausagetreecamp.com](http://www.sausagetreecamp.com))

### For more information

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