

Kayaking into the gorge, with the promise of rough water ahead.

PHOTO: STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

# INTO THE ABYSS

THRILLS AND SPILLS IN AFRICA'S ADVENTURE SPORTS CAPITAL, WITH STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

“I am prepared to go anywhere,” David Livingstone once claimed, “provided it be forward”. But the first European to lay eyes on Victoria Falls may not have been thinking of doing it upside-down, underwater or dangling from 50 metres of elastic. A century and a half later, the town that bears Livingstone’s name offers high jinks to visitors that would surely have the great explorer turning in his grave.



BUNDU ADVENTURES

“This makes it incredibly safe to raft and river board, provided you use the appropriate equipment and heed the advice of your experienced river guides.”

As my board slid down the glassy face of the aptly named ‘Muncher’ towards a tsunami of white water, I had a split second to reflect that this seemed slightly suicidal. The next few seconds seemed like minutes as the rapid tossed me under one wave and over the next before, eventually, spitting me out the back. Spluttering for breath, and silently thanking my ‘overworked and underpaid’ guardian angels for getting me through, I swam over to a beaming Choongo for some wild high fives. I was pumped and I wanted more.

**CLIFF-HANGER (abseiling and rap jumping)**

Abseiling might not sound like the most terrifying activity available, but it did mark the start of a very tough Wednesday that saw me throwing myself off a ridiculously large number of cliffs and bridges. Abseiling instructor Dominique Namubwalu suggested I try rap jumping to liven things up. “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, I think. Easy then.

**DOWN TO THE WIRE (high wire/flying fox/zip line)**

“Dive off the cliff with your arms out and soar like an eagle across the gorge,” commanded my instructor, Fred Kawana. The so-called ‘flying fox’ requires you to attach your waist harness to a cable that is suspended above a gorge. You then sprint for ten metres before launching yourself over the edge, thus creating the momentum that propels you across the abyss.

I couldn’t help but notice, as I sprinted towards the edge, that I looked nothing like an eagle. And diving off the precipice, my harness straining alarmingly against my weight, I didn’t feel like one either. But I relaxed once I realised my harness would hold me up, and fear turned to exhilaration as I zipped across the canyon.

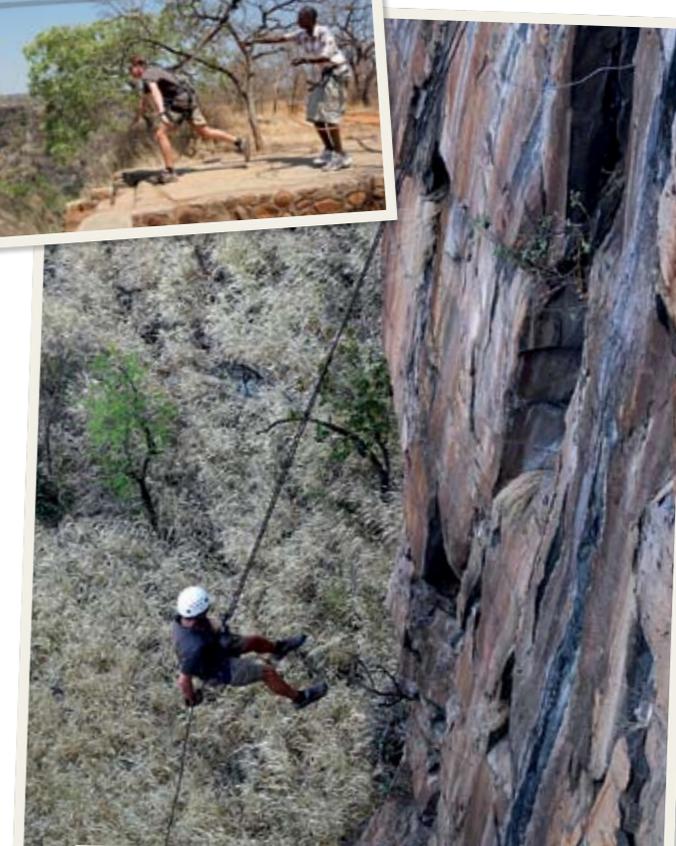
**SWING LOW (gorge swinging)**

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

It was a simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying experience. Abseil Zambia’s general manager, Kulu, convinced me to go again, but this time backwards “to experience the difference”. By the end of the morning I was completely drained and my nerves shattered. Not even the impeccable safety record of no accidents in over 100,000 jumps could entice me to a third swing. >>



STEPHEN CUNLIFE



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**SPRAY IT AGAIN (whitewater rafting)**

“We need to pass right of the indicator rock before making a hard left turn,” says our guide, Clement ‘Potato’ Chisangwa of Bundu Adventures. “A large diagonal wave lies in wait and we need speed to break through.” His next words sound even more daunting: “We’ll drop into a gigantic hole called ‘The Crease’,” he continues, “but at all costs we want to avoid being pushed into ‘Temple of Doom’ on the far left.” This doesn’t sound good. “If we still haven’t flipped by then,” he adds, “we’ll run ‘Land of the Giants’, where you can expect huge waves from every direction.” So far so terrifying.

This team talk was aimed at galvanising our motley crew of wannabe rafting enthusiasts into action as we approached the Zambezi’s longest and most technically challenging stretch of grade five white water. Rapid Seven, known as

Gulliver’s Travels, is renowned for flipping rafts and giving rafters a long swim – with serious ‘downtime’. Everything went just as Potato had instructed ... until The Crease. The seething mass of white water effortlessly flipped our 16-foot raft and plunged our team into the river. And we flipped again in the notorious Star Trek rapid, where Potato’s prediction – a 3% chance of getting through unscathed – proved accurate.

OK, so this might sound like a somewhat alarming way to spend a Monday, but it was one of the most exhilarating and entertaining days imaginable.

**SURF’S UP (river boarding)**

Tuesday dawned as hot as ever and I headed happily back to the mighty Zambezi. This time I traded the ten-man raft for a pair of fins and a one-man body board. Safar riverboarding guide David Choongo was charged with leading me safely through the rapids. With nine years of guiding experience and a love of big-wave surfing, he was the perfect escort for a rookie.

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 walls of water. They’re enormous!

River boarding essentially involves trying to make the correct approach into a rapid, then taking a deep breath and hanging on for dear life. Contrary to what many people think, however, it is actually a very safe undertaking. “The Zambezi is classified as a high-volume pool-drop river with few exposed rocks,” explains Safar’s head river guide, Andrew ‘Sven’ Bolton.

Above: Whitewater rafters can expect spills as well as thrills.

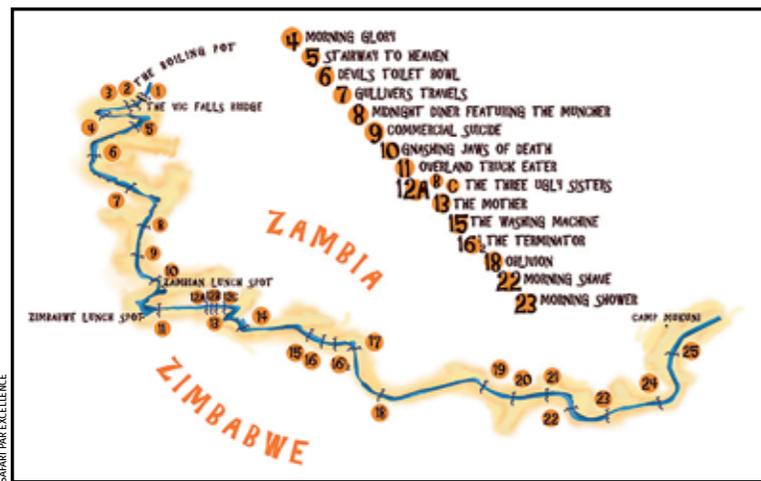
Opposite from top: Preparing to launch into space on the flying fox.

Abseiling down the gorge.

A good scream sends these gorge swingers on their way.

Two’s company when it comes to boogie boarding.

Each of the Zambezi’s rapids has acquired its own nickname among whitewater rafters.



SABRI PRAKREKLENCE



## HUMAN YOYO (bungee jumping)

By Wednesday afternoon I was fresh out of adrenalin after a very long morning of throwing myself off cliffs. Yet, somehow, 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 100% petrified as I stood on the edge of the bridge, gazing over the yawning chasm of the Zambezi and listening to the countdown: "Five, four, three, two, one..." I was gone even before the final cry of "bungee!" One more second's delay and my fear would have frozen me to that bridge permanently.

The Vic Falls bungee has been operating commercially from the Zambian side for 14 years, during which time over 800,000 (in?)sane tourists have thrown themselves off a perfectly good bridge. Why? Jump-master Mulemi Mwandu puts it down to brainwashing. "Bungee jumping cleans the mind," he explains. "Everyday stresses vanish, and you feel like a newborn baby after you have been winched back up onto the bridge and realise that you have survived."

## PADDLE POWER (kayaking)

As an inexperienced kayaker, I definitely felt unable to tackle the Zambezi alone and live to tell the tale. Luckily I had Trevor Sheehan from Zambezi.com 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 of breath," he advised, as we headed into our first major rapid, "pull your skirt and abandon ship." We survived 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 of kayaking on the Zambezi involves plenty of water up the nose, a fair

amount of time upside-down and some good swimming practice, but it is also tremendous fun and I loved every minute of it.

## WHERE EAGLES DARE (microlighting)

The sun had just broken the horizon on a partly cloudy Friday morning as we taxied across the apron. I clipped on my earphones, Bernie gunned the engine and we rumbled down the dirt airstrip. The two-seater microlight was airborne within seconds and we began to circle like a hungry vulture looking for a thermal: we needed to gain altitude to meet the 4000-foot flight deck for microlights 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 about such a privileged spectacle.

After your eagle's eye view of the falls you have a choice of flying along the Zambezi gorges or taking a low-level flight over Mosi-Oa-Tunya National Park in search of wildlife. Either option reminds you of the riches that the area has to offer. ✨

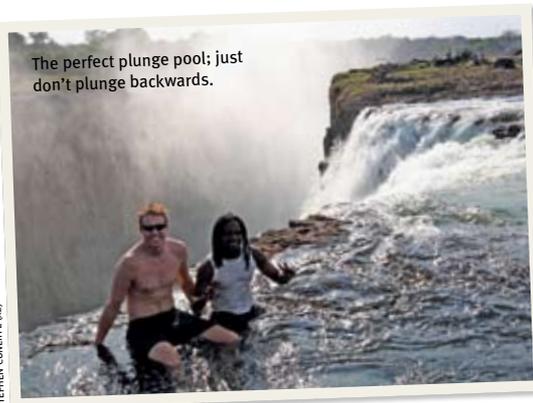
**One more second's delay and my fear would have frozen me to that bridge permanently.**

*Above left:* Bungee jumping doesn't come more spectacular than from the Victoria Falls bridge.

*Above right:* Kayakers can expect to put their eskimo rolling skills to good use.

*Below:* The best seat in the house comes on a microlight.





The perfect plunge pool; just don't plunge backwards.

## POSTSCRIPT

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 dose of unadulterated fear thrown in for good measure. My personal favourite was the full-day riverboarding-plus-rafting combo. But visitors in a hurry, and with no budgetary constraints, can take this a level higher: Safpar's marketing manager Sarah Mackenzie has a recommendation for the thrill-seeker's ultimate day out. "Start off with the full day combo of rafting and river boarding," she advises, "followed by a jet boat ride around Rapid 25, then a helicopter flight back up the seven gorges to Livingstone town."

Now that sounds like a day to remember. You up for it? ■

## SWIMMING WITH THE DEVIL (Devil's Pool)

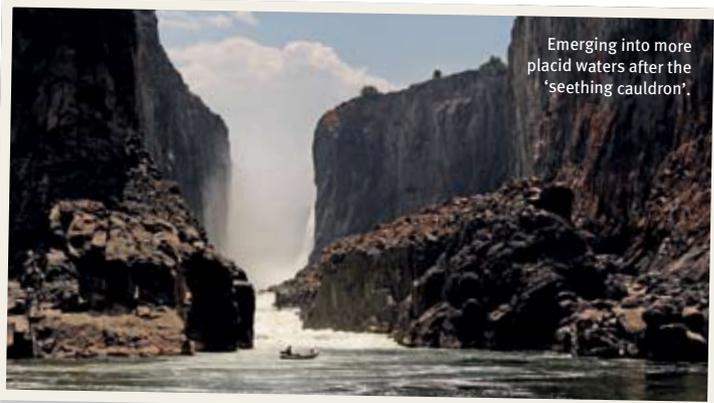
On the edge of the main falls, barely two metres from the cascading precipice, the Zambezi has scoured out a small natural rock pool. During the low-water months, this provides a handful of fearless souls with an opportunity to swim in what is surely the world's most dramatically located plunge pool. The views are unparalleled, though the most spectacular – straight over the drop – may be too much for some to stomach. Exuberant visitors can even enter with a jump, dive or back flip – just so long as they don't overshoot.

## ON THE BOIL (the Boiling Pot)

The Tonga people refer to the falls as Shongwe, which translates as 'seething cauldron'. Saturday saw me headed into the midst of this cauldron, also known as 'the Boiling Pot', in an inflatable two-man croc canoe. I was on the inaugural Spray View tour, on which participants can paddle around the Boiling Pot, then climb ashore and hike right to the base of the waterfall. This activity is the brainchild of Bundu Adventure's owner Nico Chassing, who envisages it as an affordable activity allowing people to experience the power of being surrounded by towering cliffs while facing a giant curtain of water. Sitting in our tiny raft surrounded by vertical cliffs and cascading water made me feel very insignificant. We shouted to be heard above the roar of the seething cauldron and, paddling against the powerful currents, I could sense the raw power of nature all around.

## JET SETTER (Jet boating)

Operating in the lower gorges of the Zambezi River, jet boating provides an exhilarating ride. For 30 minutes the custom-built boat uses 700 HP of raw power to buzz rocks, execute jet spins and crash through thundering rapids at death-defying speed. Less effort than the kayaking or rafting, perhaps, but a serious thrill for the passenger.



Emerging into more placid waters after the 'seething cauldron'.

## 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 excellent 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](http://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](http://www.livingstonesadventure.com)*
- **Bundu Adventures:** An owner-run company offering diverse activities, including rafting (with multi-day trips), river boarding, canoeing, kayaking, river surfing and spray view tours into the Boiling Pot. *Details at [www.bunduadventures.com](http://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](http://www.livingstonesadventure.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](http://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 river boarding and upper Zambezi canoe trips. *Details at [www.safpar.net](http://www.safpar.net)*
- **Water by Nature:** A UK-based operation specialising in the niche market of 5-Star multi-day expedition rafting trips. *Details at [www.waterbynature.com](http://www.waterbynature.com)*
- **ZambeziAdrenalin Company:** Bungee jumping, gorge swinging and cable sliding from the historic bridge linking Zambia to Zimbabwe. *Details at [www.safpar.com/bunjee\\_jumping.htm](http://www.safpar.com/bunjee_jumping.htm)*
- **Zambezi.com:** Specialist Zambezi kayaking operation that includes a kayak school, kayak guiding and multi-day kayak trips for experienced kayakers. *Details at [www.thezambezi.com](http://www.thezambezi.com)*

Stephen Cunliffe would like to extend special thanks to Sarah Mckenzie of Safpar and Nico Chassing of Bundu Adventures.