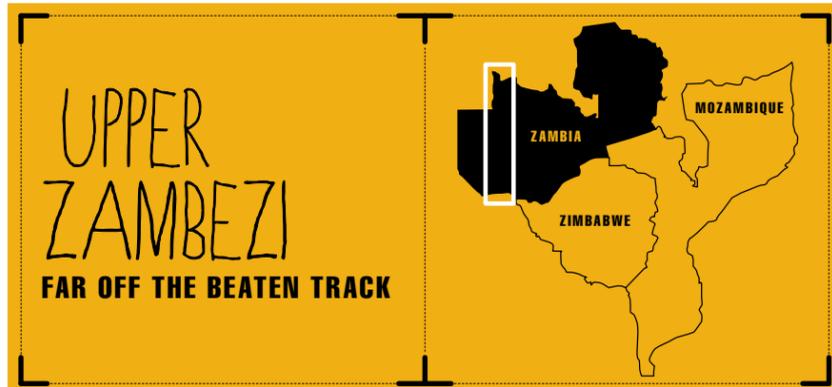


PICTURE YOURSELF IN A BOAT ON A RIVER

**THE MIGHTY ZAMBEZI, OR 'GREAT RIVER'
IN TONGA, HAS MANY PERSONALITIES.
STEPHEN CUNLIFFE CHARTS ITS COURSE,
FROM START TO FINISH**

Africa's fourth largest waterway after the Nile, Niger and Congo traverses six countries on its 2,700 kilometre journey from Central Africa to the Indian Ocean, but the lion's share of this wild and wonderful river lies within Zambia. The Zambezi is the stuff of legend, and the enigmatic waters held a lifelong allure for one man in particular: it was by following the Zambezi that Dr David Livingstone completed one of the greatest expeditionary feats of the 19th century, becoming the first European to cross the African continent. Some 150 years later, this timeless river continues to seduce and thrill visitors of every persuasion.





TRAVEL PLANNER

WHERE TO STAY?

➔ Mutemwa Lodge, a 2.5-hour road transfer from Livingstone, is the premier accommodation choice in the region, with six luxury en-suite tents (from R2,100 ppp). Champagne breakfasts on the beach, fishing, boat cruises, bird walks and more. mutemwa.co.za

➔ Nearby, more rustic and self-catering Kabula Tiger Lodge offers thatched chalets on stilts (from R595 twin chalet a night) and camping, plus boat rental and activities. kabalulodge.com

BEST TIME FOR THE KUOMBOKA CEREMONY?

March or April (depending on floodwater timing).

BEST TIME FOR TIGER FISHING?

September to April.

BEST TIME FOR BIRD WATCHING?

The wet months of November to April (also good for appreciating waterfalls).

MORE INFO

peaceparks.co.za
sisheke.com



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE

In search of the fabled tiger fish at sunset; the royal barges in the Kuomboka ceremony, *Nalikwanda* and *Nalwange*, are supported by a flotilla of boats during their journey; being selected as a poler on one of the barges is a great honour

PREVIOUS SPREAD

There's no better way to soak in the serene beauty of the Upper Zambezi than from a canoe at sunrise

THYS VAN DER MERWE/VID AFRIKA PHOTOGRAPHY; STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



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eginning its journey as an innocuous little spring in the Mwinilunga district of north-west Zambia, the Zambezi bubbles up as a feeble trickle between the roots of a fallen tree – an inauspicious beginning for southern

Africa's foremost river system. After a 230km dogleg into Angola, the now-swollen torrent re-enters western Zambia at the Cholwezi rapids, flowing due south before swinging east on its quest for the sea.

Subsistence farmers and fishermen of the Lozi tribe sparsely populate the Upper Zambezi. Although wildlife is thin on the ground, the river flows clean and strong. It is here, in the heart of Barotseland, that the annual Kuomboka ceremony takes place. A Silozi word, *kuomboka* means 'to get out of the water'. When the Upper Zambezi seasonally inundates the low-lying plains, the king relocates from his dry season compound at Lealui on the Barotse flood plain to the high-ground palace at Limulunga.

The ceremony starts with the beating of the royal *maoma* drums. When the Lozi people hear the rhythmic pounding, they gather in their thousands along the riverbank to observe the passage of *Nalikwanda*, the king's black-and-white-striped barge. The massive wooden vessel carries a replica of an enormous ear-flapping elephant, while a smoking fire signals that the king is alive and well. For his wife there is a second barge, *Nalwange*, adorned with a huge wing-beating egret. Accompanied by an entourage of boats, it's a breathtaking spectacle, but the ceremony's remote location precludes all but the most determined travellers from witnessing it.

Exiting the wide, sandy Barotse flood plain, the Zambezi then curls east, cutting through rocky terrain until its tranquil passage is interrupted by the horseshoe-shaped Ngonye Falls. This little-known cascade, also called the Sioma Falls, eclipses Chavuma Falls on the Angolan border to claim the tag of second largest waterfall on the Zambezi. The Peace Park Foundation has been instrumental in getting the falls declared Zambia's newest national park (tying with Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park for the title of Zambia's tiniest reserve). Game has been reintroduced and basic tourist facilities built, making Ngonye Falls well worth a visit.

The river mellows again below the falls and it's on this tranquil stretch, shortly before the river demarcates the border between Zambia and Namibia's Caprivi Strip, that the best tourist offering on the Upper Zambezi is found: secluded Mutemwa Lodge. Penny and Gavin Johnson (of 1995 Rugby World Cup fame) own and manage this idyllic retreat right on the river, a serene spot to put up one's feet and relax in the company of abundant birdlife and honking hippos. For recharged guests who tire of watching the magical Zambezi, sundowner in hand, there's the thrill of trying out tiger fishing. Be warned: it's an apt name for a fearsome fighting fish with big teeth and a wild temperament. →



TRAVEL PLANNER

WHERE TO STAY?

☛ Stanley Safari Lodge, on a hill above the falls, has ten elegant teak and stone chalets, an infinity pool with views of the Zambezi valley and a raft of activities. From \$390 pps, all inclusive. robinpopesafaris.net
 ☛ On the river at Livingstone, Zambezi Waterfront is a laidback, lively spot with a restaurant and bar, daily sunset 'party boat' and a variety of accommodation (from budget tents to comfier chalets). From \$22-\$95 pps, thezambeziwaterfront.com
 * Also see *Top Places to Stay* (opposite page).

BEST WAY TO SWIM IN DEVIL'S POOL?

Only with a guide from Tongabezi Lodge, tongabezi.com

BEST TIME FOR WHITE-WATER RAFTING AND WATERSPORTS?

Late dry season (July to October), when the river is lowest. Try Bundu Adventures (bunduadventures.com), which also offers swimming under the falls; Safari Par Excellence for canoe trips on the Upper Zambezi above the falls and rafting and riverboarding in Batoka Gorge below the falls (safpar.com); Jet Extreme for jet-boat rides; and Batoka Sky for microlite or helicopter flips (livingstonesadventure.com).

BEST TIME FOR VICTORIA FALLS IN FULL FLOOD?

February to April, the late rainy season.

MORE INFO

zambiatourism.com



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A two-man inflatable paddler braves the Boiling Pot for an alternative view of the Victoria Falls; (left) a full-day raft trip, conquering the rapids of the Batoka Gorge, is widely regarded as the best white-water adventure on the planet

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 50-metre elastic band. The town that proudly bears Livingstone's name has become synonymous with extreme sports, tempting tourists with a variety of adrenaline-pumping pursuits that would surely have the great explorer turning 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 1.7km wide and 108 metres 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 miles around.

It's here where the Zambezi provides what is undoubtedly the world's most dramatically situated infinity pool. On the edge of the main falls, barely two metres from the cascading precipice, the river has carved out a small natural rock pool in which one can sit. The views from the Devil's Pool are exceptional, though the most spectacular – straight over the drop – may be too much for some to stomach. Those who possess nerves of steel and deep faith in their guide float to the edge and crawl out over the lip; while the guide hangs onto their ankles, they



ADDITIONAL TEXT: SONYA SCHOEMAN. PHOTOGRAPHS: BUNDU ADVENTURES

stick out over the abyss. Water thunders its way past and down, forming as it goes one of the seven natural wonders of the world.

Immediately below the falls is the Boiling Pot. From there, the Zambezi enters the zigzagging Batoka Gorge, ostensibly in a seething mood. This is epic white-water territory like nowhere else on earth. Even the names of its rapids inspire fear: Stairway to Heaven, Devil's Toilet Bowl, Overland Truck Eater, Oblivion... Surprisingly, however, watersports here are safe. 'The Zambezi is a high-volume, pool-drop river with almost no exposed rocks,' explains Safari Par Excellence's head river guide, Andrew Bolton. 'This makes it incredibly safe to raft, kayak or riverboard – provided you use the appropriate safety equipment and heed the advice of experienced river guides.' Those who have braved the experience (read: paddling into and over gargantuan walls of furiously frothing water) agree that it's unforgettable.

There's certainly no more dramatic place from which to truly appreciate the enormity and power of the falls than bobbing below them in a tiny inflatable.

To appreciate the scale of the falls, however, one needs to get high – in a helicopter or, better still, a two-seater microlite. Dubbed 'the 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 bird's-eye perspective.

Whichever method one chooses to experience the Zambezi's heart-pounding incarnation around Victoria Falls, one can expect squeals of pleasure and shrieks of terror in equal measure. There's potentially bad news on the horizon, though: long-delayed plans for a third dam to be built across the river (in the Batoka Gorge) have been reignited. The clock is ticking for adventure sports aficionados to realise their Zambezi dreams. →

TOP PLACES TO STAY

THE RIVER CLUB, ZAMBIA

Set on a tall ridge overlooking the Zambezi, this is a fabulous and very British spot: an eco-luxury Edwardian-style lodge with a sense of home. The owner is Peter Jones, ex-British army, a consummate host and great storyteller. The communal heart is two long, high-ceilinged buildings separated by a manicured lawn that doubles as a croquet field. There's an infinity pool over the river, with loungers, a hammock and deck, and the guest chalets have a wonderful indoor-outdoor feel. From \$595 pps. wilderness-safaris.com

VICTORIA FALLS RIVER LODGE, ZIMBABWE

This is the new kid on the river bend, which stands out because it's different. Modern it might be, but this lodge is also very comfortable, and there's something wonderfully peaceful and magical about it. The location is prime, in the Zambezi National Park, set along the river among lovely old trees that provide shade. Guests stay in glamorous tents on raised platforms; the décor is in a beautiful palette of greens, whites and greys. From \$435 pps. zambezi crescent.com

VICTORIA FALLS HOTEL, ZIMBABWE

Built in 1904, this hotel has chemistry: it's a grand, old, elegant lady with a fabulous Art Deco pool and lovely views towards the gorge with the 'smoke' from the falls rising in the near distance. Warthogs run about on the lawns, the staff are well trained and the food is excellent. A certain grandness permeates everything in the hotel; some rooms are small but lovely examples of Art Deco simplicity, others are very grand and luxurious indeed. From \$302 per room B&B. africansunhotels.com



The massive 281km-long Kariba Dam engulfs the Zambezi as it exits the magnificent Batoka Gorge into the Gwembe Valley. Below the dam wall, the river 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.

While Peace Parks works towards establishing a formal Mana-Lower Zambezi transfrontier conservation area, on the ground it's the small non-governmental Conservation Lower Zambezi (CLZ) that actively assists the Zambia Wildlife Authority with managing its 4,092km² Lower Zambezi National Park, providing technical and logistical support to further the goals of environmental protection, education and local community upliftment. It's fair to say that the prolific herds of buffalo and elephant encountered along this stretch of river have endured, in no small part, thanks to the work of Ian Stevenson and his dedicated team at CLZ.

The flood plain, sandwiched between rugged 800-metre-high escarpments, makes the Lower Zambezi a picturesque and game-rich safari destination. The Zambian side has a relatively narrow flood plain, which concentrates the wildlife against a spectacular mountain backdrop before the valley walls close in and funnel the Zambezi through the steep Mapata Gorge to Cahora Bassa lake in Mozambique.

Tourism activities in the Lower Zambezi focus on this productive flood plain, taking place exclusively during dry season. 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 unique is that nowhere else on the continent can one experience the sheer diversity of game-viewing activities concentrated in one area.

At Sausage Tree Camp, for instance, guests are spoilt for choice. Guides conduct game drives, spotlight night drives, bush walks, catch-and-release tiger fishing excursions, canoe safaris and sunset boat cruises to view

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Elephants are prolific along the banks of the Lower Zambezi; (right) a lion braves a crocodile-infested channel in search of prey on one of the river's islands

elephants galumphing in the river, not to mention the seemingly endless procession of animals slaking their thirst at the banks. As a wildlife experience, it's unparalleled.

Safari connoisseurs agree that there is something strangely addictive about spending time on southern Africa's largest waterway. Perhaps it's the age-old ritual of the sundowner, inextricably linked with a Zambezi safari, that's at the root of this. When grunting hippos drown out a distant lion's roar, and the sinking sun transforms the golden sky blood red, there's no denying a gin and tonic ever tasted quite so good. ■

STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



TRAVEL PLANNER

WHERE TO STAY?

➔ The top luxury choice, Sausage Tree Camp, has eight white Bedouin-style tents with open-air bathrooms and *muchindas* (butlers) in a lovely setting. From \$575 pppn (after three nights, it's half that), including meals and activities. sausagetreecamp.com

➔ Chongwe River Camp has a variety of options, from standard safari tents and grander tented suites to a private thatched bush house. From \$550-\$1,100 pppn. It also offers a canoe safari with sleepovers in an exclusive camp on Tsika Island. chongwe-river.com

➔ For the Mana Pools National Park, Afrizim offers canoeing, walking and photographic safaris, plus seven camps to stay in. afrizim.com

DRY SEASON?

The dry season starts in May; July to October is when the river is lowest.

BEST TIME FOR WILDLIFE?

Sightings peak from August to October.

MORE INFO

conservationlowerzambezi.org



GET GOING
DESTINATION: ZAMBIA

The **Zambezi River Festival** on 28 October-2 November will include kayak races, a world record attempt, water rodeo and parties (thezambezi.com). October is also when the annual **river rafting regatta** takes place, at the old Zambezi Boat Club (the first regatta was held here in 1905). The **David Livingstone Bicentennial Canoe Safari**, from Mambova (85km upstream) to Livingstone Island, right on the edge of the Victoria Falls, takes place 14-16 November, and is the final event in a year of celebrations (livingstone2013.com).

British Airways flies to Livingstone, Zambia, and Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, from Johannesburg. Visit ba.com.