

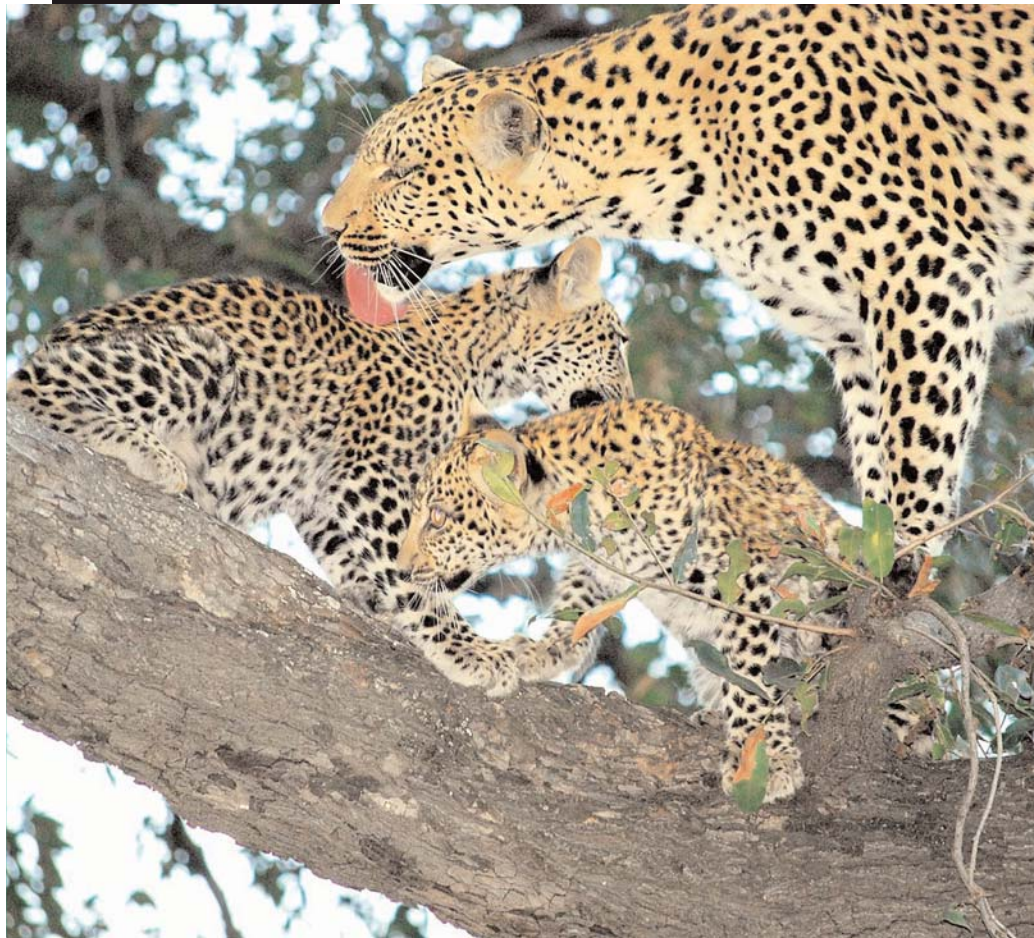
ADVENTURE

LAND'S END

CURIOSITY OVERCOMES TERROR
IN AFRICA'S ADVENTURE CAPITAL,
ZAMBIA, SAYS **YVETTE CARDOZO**
ON RETURNING FROM HER
AUDACIOUS ESCAPE



The spectacular roar of the Victoria Falls, located on the Zambezi River. It is among the most amazing natural wonders of the world.



One of the most elusive species of the Big Cats, the leopard makes for a loving parent, perched on a tree with cubs

Oddly, the high point of my trip to Zambia wasn't watching nearly extinct white rhinos from 30 paces or seeing so many hippos in a river that I lost count, or walking next to zebras or the National Geographic moment when a leopard in a tree ate a freshly caught impala. Not even the private island or the surprise bubble bath with a river view.

It was dancing half the night with local folk in a village after helping them gather firewood and then sleeping in their huts. Zambia is where you go in Africa for a more intimate experience; after you've done the wildebeest migration with 30 other safari cars on the Masai Mara.

My group of friends wondered initially about splitting the trip between a game park and Victoria Falls but in the end, it was a perfect combination. First, you watch game, which means getting up before dawn and going out again at dusk, sometimes not finishing dinner till quite late. It can be exhausting. Then you go to Livingstone (a 'stone' like the rock). Here, you make your own schedule, sleeping, partying late or tasting the array of wild adventures. Two halves of a single coin.



A group of tourists get up close and personal with wild elephants (top); a pair of rhinos grazing in the bush

Any trip that starts with an elephant sauntering past the front door of your lodge promises to be good. And it was. "A couple of weeks ago, we had an elephant up on the deck drinking from the plunge pool," said one of the staff at Robin Pope Safaris' Luangwa Safari House. "He was very careful not to step on the cushions."

That evening, we were supposed to celebrate the end of the day with drinks in a ritual known across Africa

as a sundowner. But the animals had other plans. "Um, you want to see a couple of leopards eating an impala in a tree?" asked our guide Jacob Shawa.

Okay, it's not exactly a Disney moment but it is life and death in the bush. And we were there, watching, as a female leopard gnawed on the deer-like impala while hyenas waited below. The next day, we went to the village of Kwaza. Robin Pope Safaris arranges stays, which run \$70 (₹ 3,169) a night and include lodging and food (www.robinpopesafaris.net). Our huts were small, with mud walls, pounded dirt floors, thatched roofs and comfy foam mattresses on cots. You can do a day or several and you can help villagers with the daily chores—carrying firewood, planting, cooking dinner. Or making moonshine, should you wish. The liquor is amazing—a handmade clay pot to make the steam, a cut-down bike tyre with a pipe to siphon off the condensing liquid and an old bottle to catch the final product. I've had moonshine that would peel paint off metal. This stuff

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WHEN TO GO

May through July is dry and cooler. August through November is dry and hot. December through April is wet. Game viewing is better in the late dry season since animals come to the limited number of water holes. But bird watching is better during the rainy season, plus the land turns green and beautiful. For Victoria Falls, go July through September. The rest of the year, it's either too dry or too wet.



smelled a bit grassy but was sweet and went down smooth.

Of course we bought a bottle for that night's celebration. The high point of our stay was tribal dances. But then the 'jazz band' showed up with homemade instruments that included a huge drum attached to an oversized finger board made out of a bicycle rim and bits of metal on strings.

Everybody got into the act, one little girl bouncing and vibrating so fast, we could hardly see her hips. Jumping, singing, drumming, bouncing, well into the night. This was village life for real. No kids with their hands out, no men pressuring you to buy carvings. Just local folk doing their daily thing.

Next, it was the walking safari. It's different when you are on foot. The animals let you get closer. We practically walked into a group of zebras. Elephants just went on drinking. Impalpas shone like gold against the shimmering sand of the dried up Luwi River. We were in the 3,500 square mile South Luangwa National Park in central Zambia. This

place is a garden of Eden—elephants, baboons, giraffes, birds of all kinds and in front of Norman Carr Safaris Kakuli Bush Camp, more rhinos than anywhere else in southern Africa (www.normancarrsafaris.com). I lost count at 100. The animals are more varied here, said our guide, Shaddy Nkhoma. In East Africa (think Kenya) it tends to be huge herds of one animal. (Norman Carr originally was an elephant control officer and learned to love the walks in the bush.) Before the 1950s, it was thought you had to be in a vehicle to be safe but Carr wanted to share the wonders of walking on the wild side and worked out how to do it safely. We went out with a guide to explain things and a scout who carried the gun.

We ate dinner on the river sand, visited villages and then we were off to Livingstone and Victoria Falls. Yes that Livingstone. Don't miss the museum in town and the room devoted to David Livingstone's expeditions, which were unbelievable slogs through the wilderness. "When I first came here the shops



Interiors of a cottage at the Tongabezi Lodge. The cottages are furnished using local materials; an outdoor bath glows in the twilight shade (above); tribals, sporting colourful beads, encourage tourists to join in the local dance



just had plastic plates, vaseline and peanut butter", said Ben Parker, owner of Tongabezi Lodge (www.tongabezi.com). Parker was among the first to build a lodge in the mid 1990s. Today there are 15 A-class lodges, though most were built only in the last decade.

Next, we moved towards Victoria Falls. The locals call it 'The' Victoria Falls. It is a mile wide and 360 feet high. But you don't really get a feel for this at the lip. It wasn't until I flew over it in a helicopter that I realised the falls, unlike Niagara, is a long, thin rip in the earth. And though the first thing you'd think of at a place with a gigantic waterfall is honeymoons, that's not the half of it. I thought Swakopmund in Namibia was Africa's adventure capital but Victoria Falls gives it a run for its money. Whitewater rafting, game viewing from canoes, walks with lions by your side, flights in microlights (think glider with a lawnmower engine), bungee jumping, some craziness that involves swinging on a cable like a pendulum over the falls.

And, of course, Devil's Pool. You take a boat to Livingstone Island, which

is where Livingstone first saw the falls on November 16, 1855 and named it after Queen Victoria. Devil's Pool was discovered by fishermen around 1970 but didn't become a tourist spot until the mid '90s. You hike a bit, swim through a shallow pond and scramble over some rocks. Then you jump into 30 feet across and 15 feet deep pool with a sturdy rock lip at the very edge of the waterfall. Our guide and his buddies scrambled over the rocks like they were crossing the street. We, meanwhile, let the current push us against the rocky rim where we clung, watching the rainbow sparkled water literally thunder from our shoulders to the chasm below. The guides stood on the lip where their ankles formed a sort of fence. It was tempting to grab a foot but, well, it's such bad form to knock your guide over the edge. So we just hung there and gawked.

We did a few more things in Livingstone including a rhino walk but after two weeks, Zambia was all done. I had as many photographs as memories. Along with the animals, it was the people who made this special. 🦋