

# Zambia: Its Culture, Wild Animals, and Victoria Falls

Peachin.com

Text and photographs by Yvette Cardozo

May, 2011, Vol. 15, No. 7



Oddly, the high point of my trip to Zambia wasn't watching nearly extinct white rhinos from thirty paces or seeing, more than I could count, hippos in a river, or walking among zebras in a "National Geographic" while a treed leopard ate a fresh caught impala. Not even the private island or the surprise bubble bath with a river view.

No, 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 the place to go in Africa for a more intimate view ... after you've done the wildebeest migration with thirty 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, viewing game, which means getting up before dawn then another game drive at dusk. Many times not finishing dinner till quite late can be exhausting. Then you go to Livingstone (that's "stone" like the rock, by the way). Here, you make your own schedule, sleeping in, partying late, and tasting the array of wild adventures. It's like two halves of a single coin.

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 continent 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.



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 a night and include lodging and food. 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 with the daily chores.... like carrying firewood, planting, cooking dinner.

Or even making moonshine, should you wish.

The liquor still is amazing ... a hand made clay pot to make the steam, a cut-down bike tire 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 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: first, tribal dances. But then the "jazz band" showed up with home made instruments that included a huge drum attached to an oversized finger board and this ... thing ... 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. It went on like this ... 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 off to 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. Impalas 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 really is a Garden of Eden ... elephants, baboons, giraffes, birds of all kinds and in front of Norman Carr Safaris Kakuli Bush Camp, more Hippos than anywhere else in southern Africa. I lost count at 100.

The animals are more varied here, said our guide, Shaddy. 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 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 wonder of walking and worked out how to do it safely. We went out with a guide to explain things and a scout who carried the gun. A very big gun with very, very big bullets.

And so, we ate dinner on the river sand, we visited villages and, especially, we visited schools where children learn under the most awful conditions. Imagine being five years old and walking four miles to school alone, having to wash your own clothes at school, getting your only decent meal of the day at school, writing lessons in the sand because you don't have paper and pencil.

A lot of the schools exist because of donations from visiting tourists. You can't help wanting to go home and organize a huge box of supplies (which are best coordinated through your safari lodge).



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. He died on the third of malaria and dysentery.

But that's not really what the area is known for these days.

"When I first came here," said Tongabezi owner Ben Parker, "the shops just had red plastic plates, blue plastic plates, Vaseline and peanut butter."



Parker was among the first to build a lodge in the mid 1990s. Today there are some fifteen "A class" lodges, though most were built only in the last decade.

Victoria Falls (locals call it "The" Victoria Falls) 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 realized 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 ultra lights (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 discovered the falls on Nov. 16, 1855 and named it after Queen Victoria.



Devil's Pool was discovered by fishermen around 1970 but didn't become a tourist thing until the mid '90s. You hike a bit, swim through a shallow pond and scramble over some rocks.

Then you jump into THE pool ... a large basin 30 feet across and 15 feet deep with a sturdy rock lip at the very edge of the waterfall.

Guide Felix 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.

Among other activities during the two weeks we experienced in Livingstone was a rhino walk. I had so many photographs ... 65 gigabytes worth ... and even more memories.

But in the end, along with the animals, it was the people who made this special. At the conclusion of our stay at the Normal Carr bush camp, the plastic strap on my watch split. I asked our guide, Aubrey, for some tape and he disappeared for an hour. When he returned, I realized he had sewn the plastic band with tiny surgical stitches.

There is no way I'm replacing the band. It will be my very constant, very sweet reminder of my trip to Zambia.

#### **WEIRD FACTS:**

\* One wonders about the folks who came up



with herd names for animals. According to “Beat about the Bush: Mammals” by Trevor Carnaby, it’s a “journey” of giraffes and a “dazzle” of zebras. But you also get a “mischief” (honest) of baboons, a “whoop” of gorillas, a “crush” of rhinos and, of course, a “leap” of leopards.

\* If you think lions are the most dangerous animals in Africa you’re wrong. It’s actually hippos that kill more people than any other mammal. They are grouchy, nearsighted and highly territorial.

\* On the matter of serious survival, if you are totally out of water and you need some REAL bad, you can squeeze the liquid out of fresh elephant dung, filter it through your T-shirt and drink up. Those who know say it tastes like muddy wheat grass juice. Yum.

\* Zambian farmers use impalas to forecast weather. If the impalas get pregnant and all goes well, the rains will come. In the 15 years that this has been studied, the Zambian meteorological department has been wrong twice and the impalas have been dead on every time.

### **GETTING THERE:**



South African Airways ([www.flysaa.com](http://www.flysaa.com)) flies from New York (JFK) and Washington (Dulles) to the gateway city of Johannesburg in South Africa before transferring to domestic flights to Zambia. SAA has an arrangement with Jet Blue ([www.jetblue.com](http://www.jetblue.com)) and United ([www.united.com](http://www.united.com)) to transfer bags, which works at least on the outbound leg.

Beware, though, the baggage allowance for domestic flights is lower than for international but the good news is the fee is minimal. We were about 10 pounds over and paid \$7. The limit for checked luggage in economy on South African Airways is two bags weighing 50 pounds each for international, but that drops to one 44 pound bag on domestic flights. Carry-on is limited to one bag and a briefcase and each can’t weigh more than 18 pounds.

### **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, you



want July through September. The rest of the year, it's either too dry or too wet.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

Visits to Devil's Pool are arranged through Tongabezi Lodge: [www.tongabezi.com](http://www.tongabezi.com)

**Lodges:**

[www.robinpopesafaris.net](http://www.robinpopesafaris.net)

[www.normancarrsafaris.com](http://www.normancarrsafaris.com)

[www.tongabezi.com](http://www.tongabezi.com)

[www.stanleysafaris.com](http://www.stanleysafaris.com)

**General Information:**

[www.zambiatourism.com](http://www.zambiatourism.com)

[www.zambiatourism.com/travel/nationalparks/sluangwa.htm](http://www.zambiatourism.com/travel/nationalparks/sluangwa.htm)