

# UP IN THE AIR

An epic journey across Africa's diverse landscapes will leave you on a high, writes **Ginny Cumming**

**I**'m standing at the edge of the Batoka Gorge in Zimbabwe, just down from the famous Victoria Falls Bridge. On the other side of the gorge lies Zambia. Below – a terrifying 120 metres below – the Zambezi River rages. Strapped in to a harness, I'm about to leap off the cliff and free fall for the first 75 metres, before swinging out over a river teeming with crocs. Palms are sweaty, knees weak, arms are heavy...

I've been wanting to do the gorge swing ever since I saw it in the very first episode of *The Amazing Race* back in 2001. Right now, however, all I want to do is walk back to the nearby Lookout Café – also perched on the edge of the gorge – to have a drink and enjoy what is probably the best view in Victoria Falls. But there's no way I can miss the chance to tick a 16-year-old goal off my bucket list – or deal with the ribbing if I chicken out. And so I jump...

The gorge swing (a few seconds of sheer terror, followed by an epic swing that's so safe even grandparents and kids are allowed to do it) turns out to be just one of many unforgettable moments experienced from on high during a recent trip to Africa. Yet another was a helicopter ride over the nearby Victoria Falls: it's the best way to fully comprehend the lay of the land – a huge river flowing calmly through wide plains before crashing into a massive chasm and carving its way through dramatic, zigzagging gorges beyond. From a chopper the view is spectacular. Down at ground level it's pretty good, too. A path winds around the edge of the Falls, one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World, letting you witness its extraordinary size and power up close. When the river's in full flood it's twice the height and one-and-a-half times the width of Niagara Falls, with around *500 million cubic metres* of water thundering over the edge *every minute*. The resulting huge clouds of spray can be seen

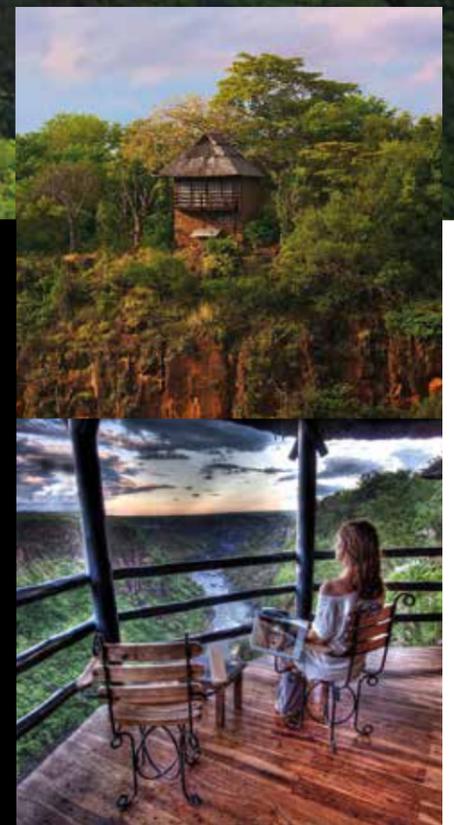
from miles away and inspired the traditional name, *Mosi-oa-Tunya*, aka 'The smoke that thunders'. It's also the smoke that drenches: be prepared to get soaked.

After thoroughly drying off we head for a well-earned drink in Stanley's Bar at the legendary Victoria Falls Hotel. It sits in the heart of the town (also called Victoria Falls) and is a local icon – built by the British in 1904, a gin and tonic here is akin to sipping a Singapore Sling at Raffles. Then it's a 30-minute drive to our much smaller, more secluded home for the night. There are just five luxury tents at Little Gorges, all sitting on wooden decks right on the edge of the gorge. The view here is just as grand as at the gorge swing, but the feeling it inspires is one of utter tranquillity rather than mounting fear. Tents give way to thatched-roof stone chalets at the main Gorges resort, just a short walk away, and it's here we head for a posh, candlelit *braai* (African barbecue) at a long communal table under the stars.

The next morning, looking out across the spectacular Dibu Dibu River to Zambia, we're served possibly the best scrambled eggs in the history of breakfast before departing on the hour-long journey (which doubles as a game-spotting drive) to Zambezi Sands River Camp. This riverside patch of paradise is located miles from anywhere, inside Zambezi National Park. A raised timber walkway connects the main lodge with eight luxury bedouin tents 'pitched' along the banks of the Zambezi. Just to be clear: apart from the fact that they're made of canvas, they resemble a normal tent in the way that Central Park resembles my garden. That is, not at all. They're enormous, luxurious and decked out with every mod-con you could hope for (except for electricity from about 11pm when the generator switches off – after that, it's torches till dawn). Each tent has its own deck and private splash pool right at the edge of the river, which is swollen and flowing fast after a particularly wet green season. But it doesn't stop hippos from wallowing in the shallows just outside our room every morning, their honks creating a uniquely African alarm clock. Which is just what we →

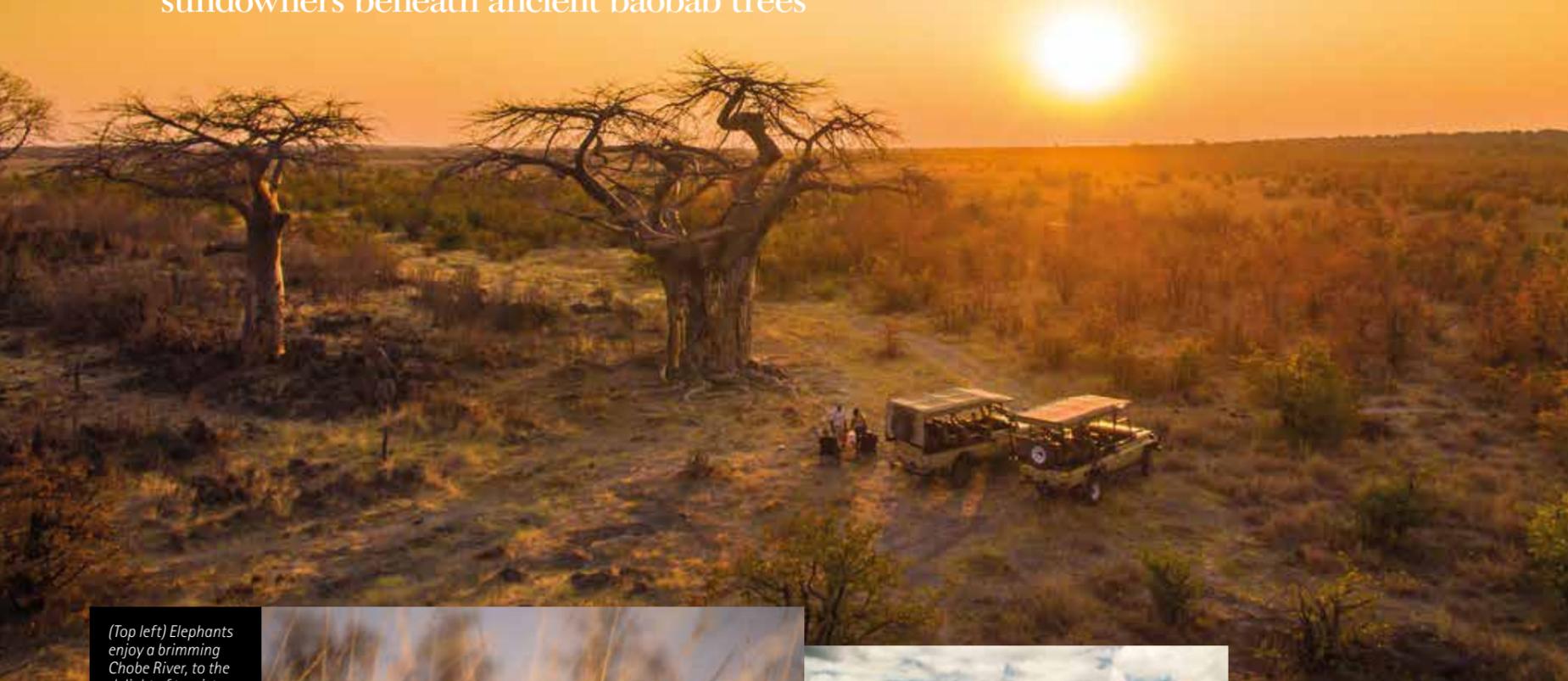


This page: (Above) Victoria Falls is best viewed from the air to appreciate its dramatic scale. (Right) The chalets at Gorges Resort teeter on the edge of the mighty Zambezi, offering incredible views of the river from their private balconies. (Left) Zambezi Sands' so-called tents are more like luxe cabins complete with a splash pool and sun loungers. Opposite page: If you dare strap in, the exhilarating gorge swing at Victoria Falls will fling you over the gushing, crocodile-laden river below





“A late afternoon game drive ends with sundowners beneath ancient baobab trees”



(Top left) Elephants enjoy a brimming Chobe River, to the delight of tourists. (Top right) Ghoha Hills Savuti Lodge is primed to capture those glorious African sunrises. (Above) Drinks beneath the baobab trees is the perfect way to wind up a safari adventure in the Ghoha Hills. (Far right) Savute's tiny 'international airport'. (Right) Locking eyes with a zebra in the wild is a 'pinch-me' moment



need as there's much to do, including a bush breakfast, kayaking, a sunset Champagne cruise on a small (but well-stocked) boat and dinner under the stars. Late-night drinks around a fire pit lead to incredible stories from our host, Butch. The scope and variety of the philanthropic work carried out at Zambezi Sands is fascinating and humbling, and we leave this special place – reluctantly – with epic tales ringing in our ears and a vow to return one day.

Driving from Victoria Falls for an hour or so, we pass the only place on earth where four countries meet at one point: Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia and Botswana, the next stop on our three-country African adventure. Our home here is the charming Chobe Bakwena Lodge. It's located in the little town of Kasane, the jumping-off point for Chobe National Park. The park is huge, but we're concentrating on the Chobe Riverfront region, famous for its, um, river, and the incredible wildlife that converges here (along with plenty of tourists), especially during dry months. We've arrived at the end of an exceptionally wet season, when food and water are plentiful and the river is just one of many watering options, but even so we still spot hundreds of elephants and cape buffalo, along with giraffes, impalas, warthogs, baboons, lions and even a leopard. Plus, during an afternoon cruise on the Chobe River, numerous crashes of hippos (a pile-up?) and enough birds to satisfy the most ardent twitcher.

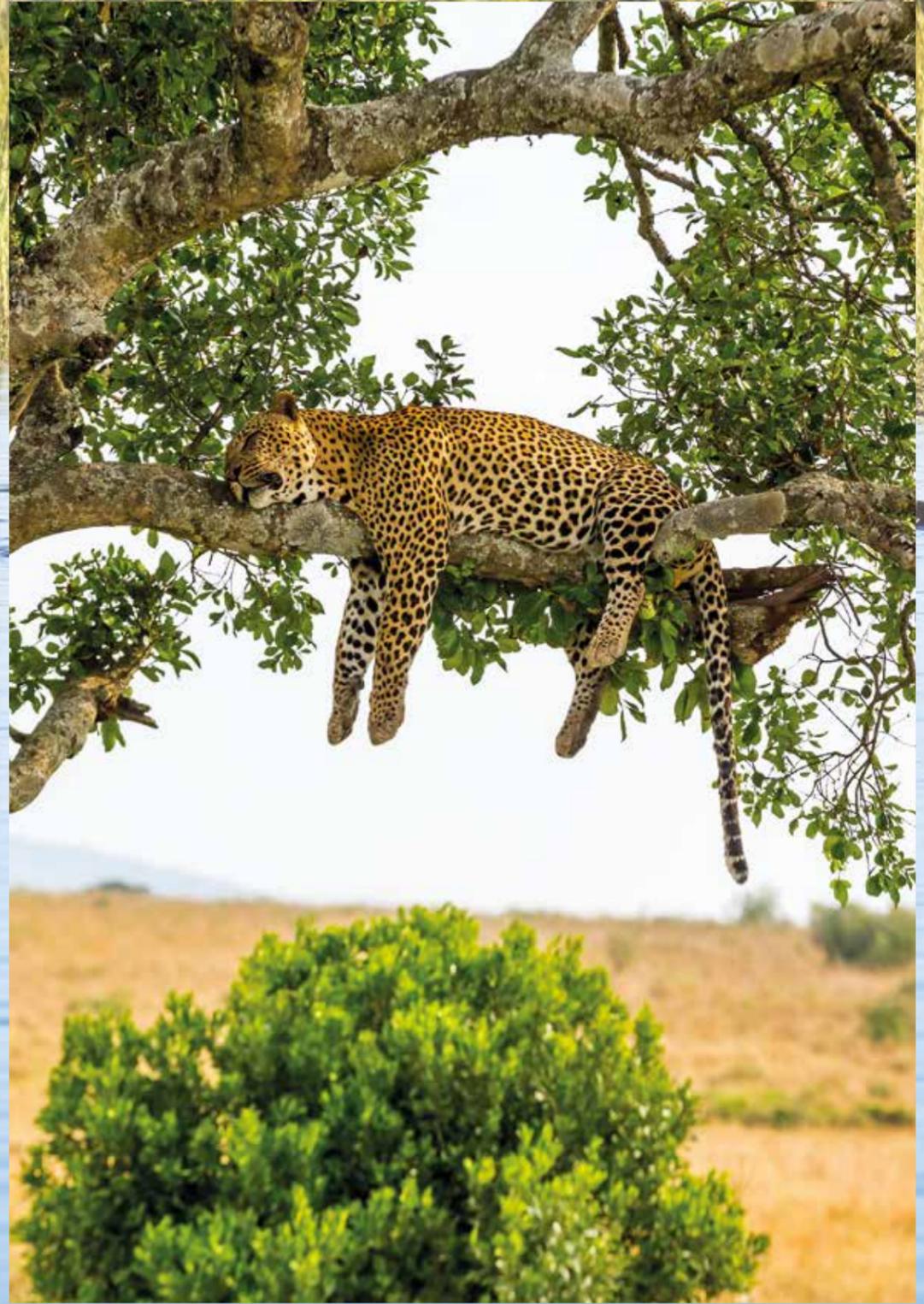
After exploring the riverfront we fly to the interior of the unfathomably large Chobe National Park, boarding a tiny plane to take us to an area known as the Savute. For a good hour we watch as the landscape changes from towns, woodlands, floodplains and winding river to flat bushland that stretches as far as the eye can see. It's unchanging and gives new meaning to the term 'splendid isolation' – we feel like we're the only people in the whole of Africa.

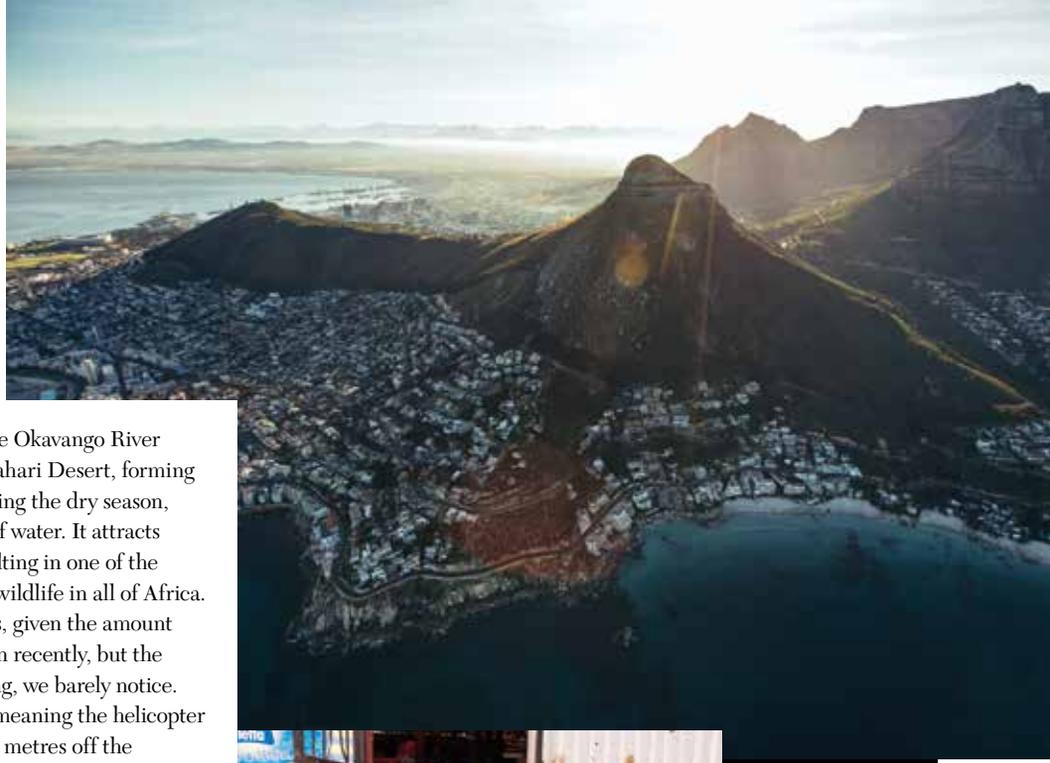
An hour-long drive from the 'Savute International Airport' (in reality a tiny airstrip)

allows us to explore this intriguing landscape at ground level. We spot numerous animals – but not a single human – before arriving at Ghoha Hills, the only elevated land for about a million miles. At the very top (yes, we're up high again), sitting on the eastern side of the hills in prime position for the sunrise, is the eco-friendly Ghoha Hills Savuti Lodge. Arriving just in time for afternoon tea we head straight to the main area, which boasts 180-degree views across the vast Ghoha plains. Checking in to our luxury tented rooms a little later, we quickly discover the views from here are just as breathtaking, either from our private viewing deck or the romantic, mosquito-netted bed – just roll up the canvas for an instant window.

A late-afternoon game drive ends with sundowners beneath ancient, massive baobab trees and then it's back to the resort for dinner served under a million twinkling lights. There's nowhere better to stargaze than in the middle of the African bush, where there's no other light to detract from their glow, but Ghoha Hills has a powerful telescope so we also stare in wonder at Jupiter and its four moons. Even better is the accompanying soundtrack – the haunting sound of hyenas and lions fighting over a kill somewhere nearby. We hope to spot some of these predators on a full-day game drive the next day, but it's not to be. Not that it matters, there's so much else to take in as we explore the Savute marshes. We haven't gone more than 20 minutes before we have an up-close encounter with a jackal, and from then on it's an embarrassment of riches: kudu, elephant, giraffe, buffalo, roan antelope, impala (the 'McDonald's of Africa' – they're everywhere, and they even have the golden arches on their backsides), vultures, ostriches, countless other birds, and even an industrious dung beetle. It's a magnificent day out and confirms to me that my happy place in Africa is out in the bush, surrounded by wild animals in the middle of nowhere.

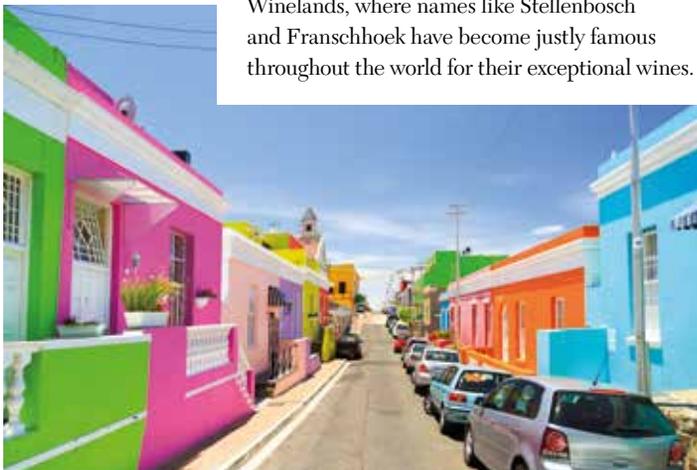
Farewelling the delightful team at Ghoha Hills, it's time to take to the skies in another light aircraft, this time stopping en route to pick up guests from other resorts and lodges, like a bush bus service. Landing at the airport in Maun, we decide to make the most of a few spare hours and continue on our quest to see Africa from above. This time, it's with a helicopter flight over the Okavango Delta – an extraordinary natural →





wonder that's created as the Okavango River flows into the parched Kalahari Desert, forming a unique wetland that, during the dry season, is one of the only sources of water. It attracts thousands of animals, resulting in one of the greatest concentrations of wildlife in all of Africa. Pickings are slimmer for us, given the amount of rain the country has seen recently, but the experience is so exhilarating, we barely notice. It's an open chopper ride, meaning the helicopter has no doors. As we fly just metres off the ground, swooping over myriad waterways that weave and snake their way across the Delta, it's like we're in *Apocalypse Now* (but with less heavy artillery and more giraffes). I almost expect 'Ride of the Valkyries' to start playing in our headsets, but instead our pilot informs us that he's setting down in the middle of the Delta, where he promptly cracks open a bottle of Champagne just for us.

After toasts and too many selfies we fly back to Maun, swap our helicopter for a plane and wing our way to Cape Town, South Africa's proudly multicultural 'Mother City'. The beauty of Cape Town cannot be overstated – it's surely one of the most spectacular cities in the world. Towering over it all is the magnificent Table Mountain, the flat-topped icon of the city. It provides us with yet another elevated experience, courtesy of a trip to the top via aerial cableway. Table Mountain is, deservedly, number one on most tourists' to-do lists; others include the brightly painted façades of the Bo-Kaap area, the gorgeous beaches (don't miss Camps Bay), the must-see Robben Island and a visit to a township, which is simultaneously sobering and uplifting. Beyond the city, in just a couple of hours you can be in the vine-sweet Winelands, where names like Stellenbosch and Franschhoek have become justly famous throughout the world for their exceptional wines.



(Above) The flat-topped Table Mountain watches over Cape Town. (Left) Kids smile for the cameras in a local township community – a sobering reminder of Cape Town's segregated past. (Below) The Bo-Kaap area is famous for its happy rainbow of neon houses, a legacy of its original Malay residents who painted their homes to celebrate the end of Ramadan

These fine drops are the perfect accompaniment for fine dining back in Cape Town. The city's reputation as a hotbed of gastronomy grows stronger every year and it's brimming with stylish bars and seriously good restaurants, in particular the Luke Dale Roberts-helmed Test Kitchen (but good luck getting a table!). Another gourmet experience synonymous with the city is high tea at the supremely elegant, five-star Belmond Mount Nelson Hotel, a pale pink confection of a building that's as sweet as the treats served within. Tiered cake-stands are filled with dainty sandwiches and baked delights, but it's the enormous, totally Instagrammable spread of perfectly crafted, sweet delicacies that will take your breath away (and your figure). The exchange rate makes it even more tempting for Aussies – expect to pay around A\$30 (compared with about A\$90 for high tea at The Ritz London).

After tea for two, our final up-in-the-air moment comes courtesy of our third helicopter ride in less than two weeks. Taking to the skies above Cape Town is definitely one of the best ways to view this stunning city, backed by the silent sentinel that is Table Mountain – it's a glorious sight and the perfect end to a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Africa. I can't wait to do it again. 📍

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