

dive, cruise, explore, escape

CUTTING LOOSE



CROCODILE SMILE
Intrepid crocodile cage divers get close enough to count the teeth in the mouth of these intimidating reptiles

ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND

THERE'S FAR MORE TO THE FALLS THAN THUNDERING WATER. ADRENALINE JUNKIES CAN EYEBALL GIANT CROCS, LEAP HEAD-FIRST OFF A GORGE AND PADDLE THROUGH PODS OF HIPPOS

PHOTOGRAPHS AARON GEKOSKI

VICTORIA FALLS, referred to locally as Mosi-oa-Tunya, or the 'Smoke that Thunders', has long been one of Africa's most popular tourist attractions. It's a spectacle of unfathomable proportions: every second, 536 million cubic litres of water tumble into the Zambezi River below, making it the world's largest sheet of falling water. It would be easy to pick up a chair, sit back and simply soak up such a sight. And for an hour or two we did just that; we sighed a little, we 'ahhed' a lot. What must it have been like for explorer David Livingstone to stumble upon the Falls in 1855? Soon, however, it was time for us to move on to some high-octane activities. This region is about far more than just a giant waterfall. For a start, it's home to some of the most enjoyable, wild and downright terrifying adventure pursuits on Earth. We found ourselves with a mere seven days to sample seven of its best.

HIGH WIRE

As I reach the edge of the platform, set above a hairpin bend, I break rule number one and look down. I don't so much jump as crumble over it. Seventy metres of unassisted free-fall follow; my feet search for an imaginary floor. And then the cord tightens and the gorge cradles me in her giant arms. Gemma Catlin, ever the thrill-seeker, throws herself off backwards. She plunges, screaming, headfirst towards the river below. The Gorge Swing is not for the faint-hearted. Overlooking Zambezi's Batoka Gorge, aka The Big Eddy, the other Wild Horizons High Wire activities are a breeze by comparison. Gemma and I strap ourselves together on the zip line and race at 100km/h towards the rapids. Once our hearts' recover, we take a leisurely soar over to Zambia on the Flying Fox cable slide. En route, we even have a moment to take in the Batoka Gorge in all its glory.

Price R1 000 for all three; www.wildhorizons.co.za – *Aaron Gekoski*

WHITE-WATER RAFTING

After an exhilarating day of whizzing above the Zambezi, it's time to conquer her turbulent waters. Every year thousands of people visit this 21-rapid challenge, Africa's most popular rafting spot. Aaron and I stumble down the steep gorges' edge towards the river, ludicrously unprepared in our slops. After the 30-minute descent we haul ourselves aboard the raft, tighten our top-of-the-range lifejackets and secure our helmets. It's time to get wet. The next six hours hurtle by in a blur of instructions and frantic paddling. 'Hard left, hard left! Now get down!' bellows our river guide as we head straight for a level-four rapid. Moments later the mischievous river god Nyaminyami decides it's time for a swim. Flipping over is half the fun – and a great way to cool down before the steep hike back up the gorge.

Price R1 000, including lunch; www.wildhorizons.co.za – *Gemma Catlin*

CROC CAGE DIVING

As fanatical divers, we are always keen to experience new underwater adventures. And what could be more thrilling than coming nose-to-nose with a mighty Nile crocodile? An uncertain Gem and I edge into the cage. After a few checks to ensure the door's closed properly, we fix our masks and breathe slowly through the centrally fixed regulators. The enclosure stutters into the murky water below. Gem, despite my assurances, clings nervily to my arm. Once our eyes adjust to the

crocs' lair, we dangle shreds of raw flesh through the bars to lure them close. Within moments, we are just inches from the ancient reptiles. One clambers above our heads, while another looms towards the reassuringly thick window, pauses and sniffs at Gem – fast food? We emerge 25 minutes later, unscathed and sporting croc-sized grins.

Price R420; www.predatordiving.com – *AG*

CANOEING

At last we are in for a calmer day: a relaxing paddle down a gentle stretch of the Zambezi with my loved one. A canoe built for two – what could be more romantic? We take a meandering game drive to the launch point, where we pause for coffee. Before the peaceful row to the Falls, we receive a crash course in steering and a list of potential dangers. I notice a croc surveying us from the bank. 'Forget crocs,' we're told. 'It's hippos you need to watch out for.' We hop into our lightweight boat, but it's not long before some passing birds divert Aaron's attention and we find ourselves first spinning in circles and later heading straight for a pod of angry hippos. We survive – just – and bicker our way downstream. Finally, distracted by the grazing giraffe, we make up and (in unison) cruise back to the Falls.

Price R600, including breakfast; www.wildhorizons.co.za – *GC*

ELEPHANT-BACK SAFARI

A leisurely meander on a pachyderm is a great way to see the valley of the Masuwe River and get close to the wildlife. Our obedient hosts even respond to 45 commands – in three languages. The elephants, all orphans, appear well treated and are rewarded for their efforts with food. As we stroll through the thick vegetation, our guides treat us to some well-rehearsed nelly facts. The aptly named Handsome tells us that they: often live to over 70 years of age; have about 100 000 muscles in their trunks; and can top the scales at over 6 000 kilograms. This may just be the most impressive way to explore the Zim bush.

Price R1 000; www.adventurezonevicfalls.com – *AG*

WALKING WITH LIONS

I am not looking forward to this activity one bit. Not only is our alarm again set for 5.30am, but I also anticipate a shameless lion breeder full of false claims. African lion populations have declined by an estimated 80 to 90% in the last 50 years. Sadly, a number of 'conservationists' are cashing in on their demise. I am expecting Lion Encounter to be one of them. Fortunately I am wrong. The programme supports ALERT's four-step breeding initiative that aims to reintroduce lions into the wild. Before the big cats welcome us, we learn about the current lion crisis: their loss of habitat, poaching threats and increasing conflicts with man. Guests beam during the rare opportunity to interact and walk with the playful cubs. The initiative appears to benefit lion conservation and at last a burgeoning problem is being addressed.

Price R1 000; www.adventurezonevicfalls.com – *GC*

HELICOPTER RIDE OVER THE FALLS (FLIGHT OF ANGELS)

When David Livingstone first documented the Falls, he remarked on 'a sight so wonderful that angels must have gazed down on it in flight'. If only the explorer could have witnessed the aerial views from our tiny chopper. A 13-minute helicopter ride is probably the most impressive way to view Mosi-oa-Tunya, as well as the easiest on the legs. I organise the trip as a surprise for Gem's birthday: it's almost too perfect. The Falls spraypaint a giant rainbow that frames the scene beneath us. Clusters of tourists morph into brightly coloured specks as we are treated to views far beyond the waterfall: past the Zambezi and deep into Zambia and Zimbabwe. We end our flight reflecting on Zimbabwe's troubled past and, with any luck, its bright future.

Let's hope people start returning to this magical country.

Price R1 000; www.shearwatervictoriafalls.com – *AG*

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

WHERE TO EAT AND STAY Gorges Lodge is incredibly special. Teetering 200 metres above the Zambezi River, this ecolodge ploughs resources into local communities. From R575; www.invelosafarilodges.com.

Even if you don't stay at the Victoria Falls Hotel, the colonial atmosphere and some of the region's best food make it an essential visit. From R1 040; www.africansunhotels.com.

Adventure Lodge is one of the best budget options in Vic Falls. The rooms are cosy, but the spacious communal area and tasty grub more than compensate. From R325; www.adventurezonevicfalls.com. **WHEN TO GO** Summer time (November to April) is the wet season, when temperatures are hot and the rainfall is heavy. May to August can be pretty chilly in the morning, but there are blue skies and warm afternoons. September to October is dry and swelteringly hot.

GETTING THERE Fly from Joburg to Victoria Falls with British Airways, from R4 432 return, or SAA, from R4 966 return. Via Livingstone Fly to nearby Livingstone, Zambia, with BA, from R3 166 return, or SAA, from R3 800 return; www.travelstart.co.za. The 20-minute road transfer to Vic Falls is about R200; www.victoriafalls-guide.net.

FREE AS A BIRD
THIS PAGE Soar over the Zambezi Gorge on the Flying Fox cable slide opposite Crocodile cage diving is an adrenaline rush second to none

