

# All work and all play

*Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe is the perfect place for both business and leisure travellers, writes Eugene Yiga*

**M**uch to the bemusement of nonchalant hippos and contemplating crocs, we're singing the national anthem and we're singing it loudly and off-key. We're probably not the first people to find ourselves so inspired by the mighty Zambezi River that our emotions find their expression in music flowing as freely as the water itself.

It's hard to believe that Zimbabwe's most spectacular natural wonder, Victoria Falls, is a mere 90-minute flight from the sprawl of Johannesburg. Our city-slicker problems – including a few suitcases getting plundered en route – feel far away as we sail along the Zambezi on a river

boat, taking advantage of the open bar by ordering endless gin and tonics. You know, to keep the mosquitoes away.

'The Zambezi is the fourth-longest river in Africa,' the boat's captain explains. 'Victoria Falls is part of what was called Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia, and Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, both named after [British imperialist] Cecil John Rhodes – the river forms the border.'

#### A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

That evening, we enjoy dinner at Elephant Hills Resort, one of five Zimbabwean properties recently acquired by South Africa's Legacy Hotels and Resorts. Overlooking an 18-hole Gary Player-designed golf course that's frequently visited by grazing wildlife, the restaurant is

the ideal place to enjoy drinks and a buffet.

The next morning's breakfast selection is even more impressive. While I'm happy to stick to my standard travel meal – an omelette 'with everything' – I'm surprised to see a large group of Chinese tourists enjoying white noodles and duck soup. It's the first time I've seen a hotel cater so precisely to the whims of a growing market.

'The buffet menu was redone in its entirety, and we have a new wine list based on the Da Vinci Hotel's selection in Johannesburg,' says Elephant Hills Resort GM Adrian Landry as he joins us for breakfast. 'We've found that not everyone who goes on holiday wants to eat new food. Some prefer to eat what they're used to at home, so we cater to them.'

During our tour of the property, Landry

explains that Elephant Hills Resort also has a dedicated in-house travel agency run by a Chinese local who can speak to guests in their language.

In addition to on-going preventative maintenance, he says, as we admire the resort's beautiful expanse, there are also plans to upgrade the hotel. It was originally opened in 1975, then destroyed in a fire caused by a heat-seeking missile during the Rhodesian Bush War two years later, and then rebuilt just over a decade after that.

'We've got a lot of work to do in terms of improving and renovating, but we're excited about it,' Landry says.

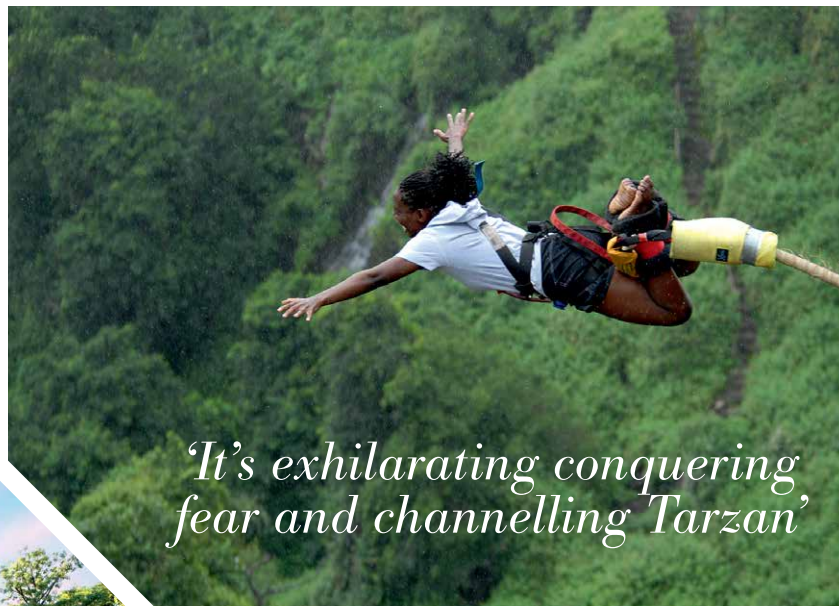
#### PLEASURABLE BUSINESS

Our next stop is The Kingdom Hotel, also a new member of Legacy Hotels and

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Victoria Falls at dusk, Zambia. **TOP:** Elephant Hills Resort, Zimbabwe. **LEFT:** A boat ride on the Zambezi River.

Resorts. Here guests are welcomed in an elaborate royal ceremony that mirrors those that take place in local tribes, and at dinner every night they're entertained by traditional dancers and singers. The hotel is built around a man-made water feature with a distinctive architectural design that's based on the Great Zimbabwe National Monument, the capital of the Queen of Sheba, according to legend. The hotel's guest relations manager Michelle Gapara walks us through the Great Enclosure, a cavernous casino area that was shut down because it proved unprofitable. 'Our focus is now on conferencing; we're going to convert the whole area into a 1200-seater facility with many breakaway rooms and a kitchen.'

Indeed, with Elephant Hills Resort also launching their own conference centre, Landry believes that these developments will be a 'game changer' for the country, which is already an ideal meeting point for the 15 states that form part of the Southern African Development Community.



*'It's exhilarating conquering fear and channelling Tarzan'*

**UP IN THE AIR**

The Kingdom Hotel is just a short walk from the Victoria Falls Rainforest where you can take a closer look at the awe-inspiring waterfall, which locals call *Mosi-oa-Tunya*, 'the smoke that thunders'. If you don't want to find yourself screaming like a child as you hover near its precipitous edge and get soaked by the inverted rain, Elephant Hills Resort offers scenic helicopter flights to keep you high and dry.

A helicopter ride is undeniably the best way to see what's considered the largest sheet of falling water in the world, even if it isn't the highest or the widest. And because our visit coincides with the annual rainy season – it runs from late November to early April, with the river's annual flood from February to May – we're completely bowled over by the water's immense sheet size and scope, with the iridescent spray rising up several hundred metres and visible from over 20km away.

Witnessing one of the seven natural wonders of the world from up in the air brings to mind what 19th-century explorer

David Livingstone said of the falls he named after the British queen: 'No one can imagine the beauty of the view from anything witnessed in England. It had never been seen before by European eyes; but scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight.'

**BRIDGING THE GAP**

Our next adventure is the impressive Victoria Falls Bridge, which was inspired by Cecil John Rhodes' unfulfilled Cape-to-Cairo railway ambitions. To learn about this towering feat of engineering, which was completed in 1905 after being constructed in England in only 14 months, we attend a fascinating historical presentation by a local actor playing the role of bridge designer George Andrew Hobson. Remaining in character, he then directs us as we're strapped into harnesses and walk for 200m under the main deck of 'his bridge'.

As we edge our way across clutching our cameras, we're oddly compelled to peer down at the gushing water 130m below,

even though doing so only makes us more afraid. But somehow this thrill fills us with the courage to attempt the Bridge Slide, a 300m zip line that simply requires us to keep our legs up and enjoy the smooth ride over the Batoka Gorge.

My fear returns afresh when I find myself preparing for the Bridge Swing, an 80m free fall! But there's no looking down into the abyss for me – we evolved our fear of heights because the first of humans to fall from high places didn't live to tell the tale.

Still, it's exhilarating conquering my innate biology and channelling Tarzan. It's so mindblowing, in fact, that I'm eager to go again. But this time it's a bungee jump into a ring of rainbows, with the expected whiplash as I dangle like a yo-yo and wait to be pulled up. I'm singing again, loud and off-key, but not in the least bothered about who might hear. It's the sound of success. **C**

**SAVE**

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