



Elephants often stroll through the grounds of the Mfuwe Lodge

ISTOCK

guide, Charles. He has a noticeable Irish blas to his accent, having been educated by Christian Brother Missionaries from Ireland. The late Brother O'Reilly inspired him to obtain a guide's diploma.

A statue surrounded by lush rainforest leading down to the many viewing points is that of Dr David Livingstone leaning on a walking stick, holding his Bible. In 1855, the Scottish missionary and explorer was the first white man to set eyes upon what he famously described as "scenes so lovely [they] must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight".

The Falls now appear in all their glory, plummeting down over a vertical drop framed by a perfect rainbow arising from spray and mist. Two other early-morning visitors approach. We smile wordlessly, sharing our mutual joy and wonder.

The 'soaking wet situation' is imminent. Crossing the narrow and slippery Knife Edge Bridge, I am blinded by spray, soaked to the skin off the cascades and almost lifted off my feet by the force of numerous bathroom showers and power hoses.

The true scale of Victoria Falls is fully appreciated from the air, enticing many to opt for an expensive bird's-eye view from a small plane, microlight or helicopter.

The short but thrilling 15-minute helicopter ride (\$195) with Batoka Sky (livingstonesadventure.com) took us soaring and dipping over the Falls and main Gorge, offering fantastic views of Zimbabwe's national park and the 1903 bridge designed by Cecil Rhodes, who died before it was finished. During our flight, the English-born pilot Kevin points out a tiny island on the brink of the Falls where Dr Livingstone once crept for the ultimate stomach-churning view.

From Livingstone, Zambia's most popular tourist centre, further exploration of the upper Zambezi beckons. Giving a dodgy-looking hotel a miss, we head out of town, passing exhausted-looking women loading heavy sacks of sweet potatoes onto a ramshackle truck bound for a market across the border in Botswana, 60 kilometres away.

A sign for the 'Snake Man' – a local witchdoctor who reputedly cures every ailment from reptile bites to impotence – is followed by discreet boards advertising various riverside lodges. The approach via a long, rutted red earth track belies the riverside paradise ahead.

The long-established Waterberry Lodge, where I pass the rest of the day and night, is a charming collection of authentically designed thatched bungalows catering for the visitor's every whim, set in tropical gardens hosting abundant birdlife.

A tasty chicken pie worthy of Delia Smith is served for lunch, and manager Michael Voack urges me to take their magical sunrise boat trip (such activities are part of the \$435 daily rate pp full board including drinks, laundry and airport pick up). A visit to nearby Kazungula village of mud huts, playing children and

foraging pigs is a must. It has no running water or electricity, but villagers are proud of their lovely pre-school Tukongote, built by Waterberry and supported by guest donations.

I am the only taker for boatman Webster's sunrise cruise after a 5.15am wake-up call. But it's well worth the early start. Surrounded by the dawn chorus, colonies of egrets and ibis leave their nightly roost forming white clouds above us, a majestic fish eagle flies past, and the kingfishers patrol the river bank.

A full hot breakfast of bacon eggs, tomatoes and mushrooms – to my astonishment – emerges from the picnic basket while we glide along, the Zambezi's ripples reflecting shafts of early morning sunshine. "Listen to our typically African sounds, the cooing of the doves and clicking of the crickets," says Weby, "and the soundtrack here of those loudly snorting hippos."

Neighbouring Tongabezi, Livingstone's top river lodge address renowned for comfort and cuisine, is the next port of call. My palatial bungalow's sumptuous interior with its private swimming pool is a design magazine's perfect photoshoot fodder. The activities – apart from serious chilling out – include dangling your rod in the river hoping for a tiger fish, canoe adventures and river cruises.

A party of Americans on our sunset cruise are jumping up and down with excitement, almost tipping the small boat over as a hippo opens its cavernous mouth to show off tombstone teeth just metres away. One of them asks our skipper to take us on to the Zimbabwe sand bank for close-ups of bathing elephants and cavorting baboons. Captain Felix shakes his head sadly: "Sorry, foreign territory . . . maybe someday we are allowed."

Billed as "the real Africa" of dramatic landscapes, ancient rock formations, cultural diversity and wilderness, Zambia is huge and sparsely populated. After a look around its capital, Lusaka – bustling and forever building new shopping centres – my journey takes off properly in South Luangwa National Park, a one-hour flight from Lusaka.

Its gateway Mfuwe lodge is world famous for an extraordinary event: the procession of wild elephants who climb its stairs, stroll past the reception desk and through its dining area every year. Mfuwe's general manager Ian Salisbury tells me: "They come for the ripened fruit that's irresistible to the elephants from our 100-year-old wild mango tree; they arrive without fail and their manners are impeccable, not even a broken glass or trampled chair left in their wake." Mfuwe Lodge's guests don't always look for wildlife, as it often comes to them.

Darkness falls in an instant in Africa. Through the gloom, a wondrous sight suddenly appears: six lionesses, oblivious to being watched, are crossing the lawns in front of me in single file, off on their nightly hunt. A stirring image of a place that cannot fail to stir the senses. ■

FACTFILE



The Royal Livingstone Hotel near Victoria Falls

Isabel Conway was a guest of Zambia Tourism (zambiatourism.com; zambia.travel) and Ethiopian Airlines (ethiopianairlines.com), the latter of which has four flights weekly from Dublin to Addis Ababa and onwards to Lusaka, economy return from €724, business class (Isabel sampled feature comfortable flat beds) from €1,793 return. Ethiopian Airlines recently launched its new route from Dublin to Victoria Falls, with convenient transfer times via Addis Ababa from €657.63 return, and business class €2,311.63.

Why go now: described as "the real Africa", landlocked Zambia is endowed with stunning natural beauty and rated as one of Africa's safest, friendliest countries. For safari-goers, it is very unspoilt and uncrowded.

What to see: the legendary Victoria Falls is a must. Zambia boasts outstanding wildlife roaming over its 20 national parks. South Luangwa has seven different habitats sustaining an impressive diversity of animals including large numbers of elephants, giraffe, hippos, lions, leopards, many varieties of antelope and 400 recorded bird species.

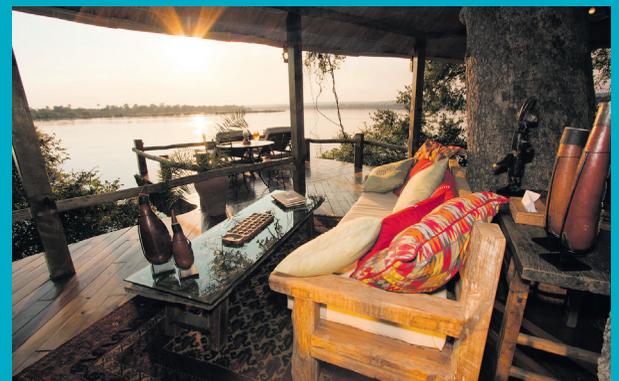
When to go: for wildlife viewing, June to October. The Emerald season (rains Dec-March) is when everything is lush and green and you can tick off an impressive tally of bird sightings.

Where to stay: the Lusaka Grand (bestwestern.com) offers authentic Zambian friendliness close to the "Cultural Village" market, where haggling for textiles and tribal carvings takes place. The Intercontinental (intercontinental.com) in the diplomatic district is very Raffles, replete with colonial architecture and manicured gardens.

In South Luangwa, the stylish Mfuwe Lodge (mfuwelodge.com) is on two lagoons filled with hippos and crocs. Owners the Bushcamp Company (bushcampcompany.com) take guests north to diverse wilderness bush camps.

At Victoria Falls, the Royal Livingstone Hotel (royallivingstone.anantara.com) is for lovers of luxury. On the Zambezi: Tongabezi Lodge (tongabezi.com) is a five-star experience overlooking the river. The lodge also has an island retreat named Sindabezi that's popular with honeymooners. Waterberry Lodge (waterberrylodge.com) is intimate, friendly and beautifully located.

Insider knowledge: while an African safari holiday never comes cheap (though Zambia represents better value than most of its neighbours), Zambian tourism has a good website for online research, and your IATA travel agent can provide specialist tour operators for packages. Irish citizens don't need visas for visiting Zambia. Discuss possible immunisation with your doctor, with safeguarding against malaria prophylaxis highly recommended.



Tongabezi, Livingstone's top river lodge



Picturesque, hospitable and exotic, the southern African country of Zambia has so much more going for it than just the stunning vista of Victoria Falls, writes **Isabel Conway**

‘It’s going to be a soaking wet situation. No handbags or rucksacks, no good shoes like the ones you’re wearing . . . and that camera doesn’t look waterproof.” I am hastily dispatched back to my room in the grounds of Zambia’s Five Star Royal Livingstone Hotel to take proper precautions before visiting one of the seven natural wonders of the world.

Above: the splendid vista of Victoria Falls; below: a herd of grazing zebra

A golf buggy then transports us past a pair of docile, grazing zebras and a “beware of crocodiles” sign close to the river bank. The night before, I was lulled to sleep by a faint rumble of thunder. Twilight photo opportunities on the hotel’s romantic terrace, overlooking the racing waters of the Zambezi, included the clouds of smoke-like spray rising mysteriously skywards in the distance.

Drawing ever closer to one of the most spectacular sights on earth, the anticipation is almost unbearable – visiting Zambia and not seeing Victoria Falls is unthinkable, like dropping in on Colorado and forgetting the Grand Canyon.

The rains were over, and the Falls were in their prime. A phenomenal ten million cubic litres every second was dropping to a depth of 103 metres along an almost two-kilometre expanse between Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Arrive during the dry season and you can take a dip in “the Devil’s toilet bowl” and go white water rafting in rapids with names like Terminator and Judgement Day. Bungee jumping and abseiling are among the year-round adrenalin-rush offerings.

The Victoria Falls visitor checklist reads: rain jacket, poncho, umbrella, plastic sandals, flip flops or old sports shoes, dry t-shirt, waterproof camera, catapult! Can we take pot shots at Mosi-oa-Tunya (“the smoke that thunders”), I ask? A deafening roar drowns me out. Vast columns of spray part to reveal a monstrous curtain of water falling with astonishing force.

“Hotels and lodges supply catapults to frighten off the monkeys if they’re pestering you,” explains our

Falling for Zambia

