

**GETTING THERE**

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Falling for adventure

Victoria Falls is a world-renowned wonder, but also a warm-hearted Zimbabwean town full of surprises.

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You can see the cloud of spray from Victoria Falls before you've even landed at the airport named after this global landmark in Zimbabwe's Matabeleland North province. Every second, up to 700 000 cubic metres of water from the Zambezi River plunges into the Batoka Gorge in a breathtaking cascade also known as Mosi Oa Tunya (the smoke that thunders), the Lozi name for Victoria Falls. Locals have revered it since pre-colonial times, and it is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site shared by Zimbabwe and Zambia.

The warm-hearted Zimbabwean town that's grown adjacent to Victoria Falls and shares its name is a southern African adventure capital and haven for nature. A short flight from global

capitals like Johannesburg, Victoria Falls lies within the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA), the five-country mega park formed to protect biodiversity while supporting people living in the landscape. Forged across borders, KAZA's five member countries – Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe – have committed to collectively manage a conservation landscape larger than Germany that provides continuous habitat for lions, wild dogs, and the planet's largest connected population of elephants, enabling them to move across borders and between protected areas. It's common to see elephants swimming across the Zambezi from Zimbabwe into Zambia on a sunset boat cruise above the Falls.

At the heart of KAZA, the town of Victoria Falls is a test case for the vision that conservation and tourism can be the economic driver of a region and that people and nature can thrive together. Surrounded by unfenced, protected and game management areas, the town's most beloved residents are nature guides, artists, adrenaline-seekers, conservationists, hospitality entrepreneurs, troupes of baboons and the occasional elephant that wanders down the main street.

The area around the Falls is dry, and people and wildlife depend on the river to sustain life. Its most famous feature, the 1 708-metre-wide falls, is where it all comes together – people, wildlife, countries – and there are many ways to experience this phenomenon. The simplest is to visit Victoria Falls

National Park, follow the pathways forged along its width, and linger at iconic viewpoints. During high water from December through June, you'll be showered with mist and rainbows as the light weaves in and out of the spray.

The gorge below the Falls is the starting point for some of the world's most spectacular white-water rafting (safpar.com). Some river guides raft with guests daily and then shoot the notorious Rapid 9 (a grade-six rapid, so not commercially done), or other grade-five rapids on their off days for fun. The white-water rafting season is typically closed (water-levels dependent) from February or March until May or June. Still, other adventure activities are year-round, such as scenic microlight and helicopter flights. There are also gorge swings and ziplines, or you can bungee jump off the railway bridge spanning the gorge connecting Zimbabwe and Zambia.

"They must be bloody mad," I thought as another person took flight, their bungee cord catching the light. Shearwater's Big Air Combo lets you try all three activities (bungee, swing and slide) at a discounted price (shearwatervictoriafalls.com). The Wild Horizons Canopy Tour gives you aerial views of the Zambezi rapids, the bridge, and the Falls' spray – all as you soar above and between the trees in the Batoka Gorge (wildhorizons.co.za).

You can also tour the bridge itself. The impressive feat of engineering is a crucial part of Victoria Falls' story. It's where arch-colonialist Cecil John Rhodes chose to site a vital link in the railway line he planned to connect Cape to Cairo, precisely so that the spray from the Falls would wet the windows of the steam trains that would use the route. Zimbabwe and Zambia gained independence from British rule in 1964 and 1980, respectively. Whatever role it played in the nefarious colonial



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imagination, today, the bridge is used by tourists, travellers and truck drivers crossing between the two countries.

You can still book a steam train experience with Bushtracks from either side of the border, where you are treated to bubbles at sunset on the bridge (bushtracksafrica.com). When the driver sounds the locomotive's whistle, it feels like heading into another era. The Bamba Tram is another excellent option for families that departs from Three Monkeys' Restaurant in Victoria Falls town at set times (3monkeyszw.com). The tram meanders through a section of the Zambezi National Park, where you can see wild animals, such as elephants, buffalo, or warthogs before crossing the landmark feature of the Victoria Falls Bridge. The Three Monkeys' bar is inside an old train carriage, and you can watch the freight and vintage steam trains pass by literally metres away. Then, there are other classic Victoria Falls experiences, like silver service high tea at the town's grande dame, The Victoria Falls Hotel built in 1904 (victoriafallshotel.co). There are also various options for languid sunset cruises on the placid waters above the Falls, where you can watch pied kingfishers dive for dinner, listen to fish eagles call, and sip cold gin and tonics.

Great Plains Mpala Jena

(greatplainsconservation.com) is one of several luxury camps upstream from the Falls in the Zambezi National Park, like Victoria Falls River Lodge (victoriafallsriverlodge.com), with some secluded treehouse suites on the private Kandahar Island or Chundu Island – another river gem. You can take a self or guided drive into the park, but staying in it elevates the experience to another level. These water-side lodges can also play an important conservation role. Mpala Jena, for example, works with national parks to plough money and resources into the Zambezi National Park, fix roads, organise anti-snare patrols, and clear the river of illegal nets. Head Guide, Blessed Mpofo, says, "I love this park because this is where I learnt to be a guide 25 years ago, on the canoes." During the Covid-19 pandemic, Blessed organised a volunteer group of guides to patrol the park to keep poaching incidents down, using his own vehicle and fuel – a sometimes scarce and expensive commodity in Zimbabwe. "Being out here feels like heaven, you know?" And it is like heaven: dinner on the river's sandy shores under a full moon, with a soundtrack of fluting frogs, the distant thrum of roaring lions, and the smell of dinner cooking on an open fire.

Back in town, there are many fantastic accommodation options, from

the opulent Palm River Hotel with an upstairs art gallery to the family and budget-friendly PheZulu Guest Lodge, Safari Suites, or more adult-oriented Shongwe Oasis. In town, you might meet people like novelist Violette Kee-Tui, who also runs The Orange Elephant gift shop, or musician Tinashe "Nash" Maoneni, the lead singer, founder and songwriter of the Victoria Falls band called Flying Bantu. There's live music every weekend at Victoria Falls Brewery with locally brewed beers, one of which is named after the band. Another inspiring local is photographer Tami Walker and her gallery (tamiwalkerphotography.com) is a must see. "This is an eclectic little town. The combination of river, wildlife and international visitors keeps me busy and entertained," says Tami. She spends her time chasing lightning storms and rainbows, river watching, and bush adventuring, capturing it all with her camera.

And a trip to Vic Falls isn't complete without a visit to The Boma, where the singing, dancing, drumming and food are always amazing. There is also a newly opened show at the Ndlovu Theatre. Simunye is apparently a performance that can rival anything you'd see in London's West End. And don't forget a few cocktails at the Lookout Café, overlooking the gorge.

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The essentials

CROSSING THE BORDER

"When visiting Victoria Falls, give yourself more time than you think you need," says Kim Barnett from regional destination marketing company Africa's Eden (africaseden.travel), who has seen cross-border travel between Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe get more accessible, with fewer visa requirements and red tape. This means border-hopping to experience Livingstone Island, where you can swim above the Falls in the low water season (only accessible from the Zambian side), is feasible for a day visit or as part of a longer stay in Zambia. You can also visit the renowned Chobe National Park in Botswana for a day or as part of a multi-day itinerary.

INSIDER TIPS

- Bring a raincoat and something to keep your camera dry when there is spray from the falls.
- Victoria Falls is a malaria area, so consult your doctor before travelling.
- Buy a bottle of Victoria Falls Gin as a souvenir.