

# Falling in Love The Victoria Falls Hotel

*A candyfloss-like cloud of spray rises from the distant gorge behind the bushveld. Distinctly visible from the comfort of our cushioned wicker chairs, we can clearly see the Victoria Falls Bridge spanning the cleft between Zimbabwe and Zambia. It's nothing short of an iconic view.*

On the table in front of us are two flutes of bubbly, a pretty pot of steaming Earl Grey and the imitable three-tiered tea server with traditional scones, clotted cream, jam, crustless sandwiches, and a colourful selection of macaroons, small cakes, and pastries. A family of warthogs, including four sub-adult piglets, are determinedly strolling across the width of the perfectly landscaped lawn with its scattering of commanding *Brachystegia speciformis* trees and traditional garden benches. The sound of various helicopters can be heard hovering overhead.

This is Afternoon Tea at the Victoria Fall Hotel. The mood at Stanley's Terrace is casually stylish with a hint of tradition. For us, newly arrived, it's bliss.

Affectionately dubbed The Grand Old Lady of the Falls, the Victoria Falls Hotel, nestled in the Victoria Falls National Park, a world heritage site, is not a mere historic landmark, but a paragon of the region's development as a modern-day tourism destination.

It all began with Cecil John Rhodes' dream of establishing a railway line from Cape Town to Cairo. Although this was never realised, the line had snaked up to the mighty Victoria Falls by May 1904, by when the construction of the bridge across the Zambezi River had begun.

*Simple to Stately*

Initially consisting of a simple wood and iron structure, the Victoria Falls Hotel originally served as temporary lodgings for railway staff and bridge construction workers but soon transformed into a grander venue with sixteen rooms, a

bar, a dining room, and offices. Modern amenities, such as electric lighting, fans, refrigerators and bathrooms with fixed baths that ran hot and cold water, had been installed. One of the early guests to stay at the hotel guests was Mrs Agnes Bruce, David Livingstone's daughter, the man who, some fifty years earlier, had been the first European to gaze his eyes upon the falls. Noteworthy also is that the Victoria Bridge was officially opened in 1905 by Charles Darwin's son, Sir George Darwin.

There have been numerous expansions and renovations, including a brand new refurbishment of the public areas and rooms today, 118 years later. This ensures that the Victoria Falls Hotel, a member of The Leading Hotels of the World, stands proudly recognised as one of Zimbabwe's oldest luxury hotels. It has welcomed royalty, celebrities, and visitors from all over the world, including the late Queen Elizabeth II, who, along with her parents, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth and sister Margaret, were guests at the hotel over the 1948 Easter weekend.

The rich tapestry of the hotel's history is evident everywhere; nostalgic sepia-coloured photographs and old posters adorn the halls, lobby, corridors, and public rooms, offering unique insights into the past. Another feature of the magnificent lobby is the beautiful curio shop, with its wide range of elegant memorabilia reflecting a bygone era and refined Zimbabwean artefacts.

The head porter, aptly named Stanley, has escorted us to our Signature room in the Stables Wing, which is the







semblance of old-world charm and luxury and overlooks the lush, expansive gardens. The interior, with its cream-coloured curtains, sofas and comfortable armchairs, blend surprisingly well with the antique-style other furnishings. The room furthermore facilitates every contemporary convenience, such as tea and coffee-making facilities, a bar fridge, a digital safety deposit box, air-conditioning cum heater unit, flat-screen television, and a direct-dial telephone. The ultra-spacious bathroom, with its stunning black and white tiles, offers a traditional slipper bath, shower, and stylish washbasins.

*Forgotten Grandeur*

We make our way along the low-lit corridors to the sophisticated Livingstone Room just before 8 pm, now changed into more formal evening attire. Although the restaurant's dress code has relaxed more recently, we feel like showing up for dinner in style and living up to the overall grandeur. There is a dance floor, and a pianist plays musical overtures on a Grand piano. Tables are candle-lit, set with damask, and crisp white napkins rolled up in rings and laid on side plates. There are white and red wine glasses and silver cutlery for the a la carte or table d'hôte



menus, presented in the most exquisite, lacquered wood casing. With servers dressed in black tie, this is luxury at its most opulent.

The following morning, we walk along the garden path to the Jungle Junction, one of the hotel's three restaurants. Tucked in an excellent spot of the gardens with incredible views over the falls, we pass the swimming pool and Stone Dynamics Gallery to find a buffet breakfast fit for a king. Taking its name after the landing spot on the Zambezi River where the BOAC's Solent flying boats used to land en route from Southampton to Johannesburg, the restaurant is also a popular venue for lunch and dinner.

With such a magnificent legacy, the Victoria Falls Hotel remains a stalwart of luxury and a unique holiday destination.

*Text: Fransje van Riel  
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