



travel | leisure | lifestyle
VICTORIA FALLS

Rise and Falls

The Victoria Falls and the surrounding area allow for an exploration of both the wilderness and history

Helicopters are whirring high overhead. The main thoroughfare is jammed with trucks queuing to transport cargo across the iconic bridge that connects Zimbabwe to Zambia. It's hot. A long line of informal tourist stalls are open for business, with vendors offering local souvenirs and dozens of blue raincoats to pedestrians strolling past.

*For more information,
go to greatplainsconservation.com,
bushtracksafrica.com,
mjair.zw and
victoriafallshotel.com.*

We watch two juvenile baboons as they bound playfully along the canopy of one of the trucks, racing across the length of the vehicle before jumping down onto the pavement. On the other side of the road, an adult warthog saunters along, nibbling on a patch of green grass. It is a parallel world. This is the gateway to the Victoria Falls and, standing in the hub of activity, it seems almost impossible to think that this was considered the impenetrable heart of the African interior less than two centuries ago.

Cecil John Rhodes's vision for a railway system linking the Cape to Cairo instigated the conception of Victoria Falls' – the town's – infrastructure and commercial tourism success. The Victoria Falls Hotel, established in 1904 to offer temporary lodgings to railway staff and construction workers assembling the Victoria Falls Bridge, soon opened as a hotel to visitors to the waterfall. To this day, the hotel, with its epic views, continues to operate as one of Zimbabwe's most prominent tourism institutions.



There is plenty to do in town, and more than one or two ways of doing it. The variety of tours and adventures cater to a diverse range of interests and budgets, and range from high-octane adrenaline sports to leisurely boat cruises.

An experience banked

We arrived a few days earlier, following a wonderful four-night train journey from Pretoria on board the magnificent Rovos Rail, with safari stops en route in the

Motopos and Hwange National Parks. Disembarking the train on a red carpet rolled out from the station platform at the Victoria Falls Hotel just after 10am on a Sunday morning, we transferred to a six-seater speedboat that powered us upstream on the Zambezi River to the small, idyllic tented boutique safari retreat Mpala Jena.

Instead of a red carpet, we found ourselves stepping off the boat onto a tropical white sandy beach before being escorted into a gorgeous camp, consisting of a four freestanding pavilions on wooden platforms with

***Victoria Falls Hotel
is an unmistakable
landmark.***



**Watch others
 bungee jump while
 enjoying a G&T.**

French doors and shutters to allow for a cool river breeze to gently alleviate some of the mugginess during the hottest hours of the day. Mpala Jena sleeps just 10 guests in five luxuriously appointed suites under flowing canvas that has been erected in the dappled shade of the Zambezi National Park's indigenous jackalberry and sausage trees. There are no other nearby lodges or camps, ensuring that guests enjoy exquisite privacy and optimal tranquillity. With the Victoria Falls buzz some 16km away downstream, the only sounds comprise snorting hippos, trumpeting elephants and an orchestra of crickets and cicadas. Being situated in a private concession on the bank of the Zambezi River, the lodge offers guests the choice of morning and evening game drives or sunrise and sunset river cruises.

operated by Mjair. Taking off from the helipad is a fantastic experience. The panoramic views over the Zambezi valley, the national park, the Batoka Gorge and the rising spray of the falls are breath-taking and offer sensational aerial opportunities for photos and videos. It is also extraordinary to observe the proximity and remoteness of the small town within its vast bushveld environment. The helicopter pilots perform a figure of eight over the waterfall, affording passengers optimal views from all sides, before flying over a stretch of the Zambezi River in anticipation of the descent back to land.

The following night, our last, is spent at the Victoria Falls Hotel. We savour the luxury of afternoon tea at Stanley's Terrace before meeting a representative of Bushtracks, a specialised destination management company with which we have booked a photographic sundowner cruise on the Zambezi River. A short drive takes us to a jetty, where a boat with six swivel chairs is kitted out with mounted cameras fitted with long telephoto lenses. As the vessel gently courses downstream to within approximately 800m of the falls, the professional photographer guide offers suggestions on how to take the best shots of the abundant birdlife, as well as hippos and crocodiles. With sundowner drinks and snacks served throughout the tour, it is the perfect ending.



How to get there

*Airlink connects
 Victoria Falls with
 Cape Town and
 Johannesburg. Go
 to page 67 for
 flight schedules.*

[www.flyairlink.com/
 flightschedule](http://www.flyairlink.com/flightschedule)



View from above

No visit to the area would be complete without a visit to Mosi-oa-Tunya – the Tsonga name for the Victoria Falls themselves. World famous for their plume of spray that can be seen from more than 30km away, the falls constitute the globe's greatest sheet of falling water. The mist of humidity and spray's precipitation supports an ecosystem of tropical rainforest in the midst of the generally dry Kalahari ecosystem, rendering it one of seven natural wonders of the world. To gain different perspectives, we drive to the Zimbabwe-Botswana road, a short distance from the hub of town, for a 20-minute helicopter flip

Text | **Fransje Van Riel** Photography | **Shutterstock**