

## DESTINATION ♦ ZIMBABWE

# HIDE AND SEEK

Forget sitting in a jeep with a long lens.  
Get a real wildlife close-up

ELISSA DOHERTY

Observe giraffe, elephants and monkeys while hidden in comfort in Siduli Hide.

PICTURES: ALAMY, CHARLES BRIGHTMAN

## ESCAPE ROUTE

### VICTORIA FALLS

#### GETTING THERE

The new Victoria Falls International Airport means you can avoid Harare and fly straight to safari central with some airlines. It accommodates 1.7 million passengers a year, three times the old airport. Hwange National Park, the largest of Zimbabwe's 11 national parks at 14,650sq km, is about 200km south of Victoria Falls.

#### STAYING THERE

A night at Victoria Falls Safari Lodge starts at \$US197 (\$A267) a person sharing or single (includes breakfast). [africaalbidatourism.com](http://africaalbidatourism.com)

A deluxe tent at The Hide starts at \$US488 a person a night for singles, or \$390 sharing, not including transfers and park fees. [thehide.com](http://thehide.com)

For those on a budget, the Main Camp is an affordable alternative with facilities including self-catering lodges, bar and restaurant and more.

#### MORE

[zimparks.org](http://zimparks.org)

#### VICTORIA FALLS

Sitting inside an oversized fake termite mound, I'm being eyeballed by a 6000kg elephant. He's so close I can count his eyelashes.

The wrinkled pachyderm raises his trunk and my heart races. The wind has blown our scent across the watering hole and the bulky bull is assessing whether we pose a threat.

Our party of three stays deathly quiet, rooted to our seats inside the sturdy shelter as he peers through the viewing hole. Elephants have stuck their trunks through in the past. It wouldn't be hard to drag us out.

But we feel safe with our guide, conservationist Charles Brightman. He's the brain behind the Siduli Hide, one of the biggest drawcards of staying at Victoria Falls Safari Lodge in Zimbabwe.

The camouflaged bunker is set metres from the water's edge, offering a rare chance to spy on the animals on their level as they roll in from Zambezi National Park.

"People get very emotional seeing the animals so close," Brightman whispers after the elephant loses interest. "Some have even cried. They've told me it's like a spiritual experience."

He's right. Observing elephants is a spine-tingling delight as they drink, feed on the mineral salt-licks and interact with one another.

The hide is cool in the white-hot heat and we sit with ciders and beers for the ultimate in animal viewing.

Behind us, a curious warthog is checking us out through the slightly ajar door. In the water, a partially submerged crocodile eyes off a marabou stork.

It's an extraordinary experience just 4km from the centre of the tourist town and Victoria Falls.

Brightman, a passionate wildlife warrior, established the Victoria Falls Anti-Poaching Unit with the safari lodge in 1999 to fight disturbing levels of illegal poaching. In China, rhino horns can fetch \$US100,000 (\$A135,500) a kilogram on the black market, for use in traditional medicine. Local papers boast of the unit's

## SOME ENDURED AN ELEPHANT SNOT SHOWER AFTER ONE SNEEZED OUTSIDE THE SIDULI HIDE

success, including snaring three prominent ivory dealers last year and more than 300 poachers.

VFAPU knows it will never stop poachers but it is making inroads and, importantly, educating locals who can be complicit in the destruction of mammals for bush meat.

He changes gear and offers a fascinating commentary straight from a wildlife documentary.

From how elephants can communicate with each other up to 8km away to how the mothers discipline their young in a similar way to humans.

And the time some clients endured

an elephant snot shower after one sneezed outside the Siduli Hide.

As the sun begins to set, our stomachs rumble and it seems the elephants are hungry too, as they wander away.

#### HWANGE NATIONAL PARK

Reclining on a leather lounge at the bar as the sunset lights up the savanna, we watch a lonely giraffe stake its thirst at the watering hole.

Suddenly, a huge herd of elephants splinters the silence.

We race down the steps into the resort's bunker, called a "hide" in Africa, with our drinks, securing prime position for the night's show.

The elephants rumble in, mothers, sisters, bubs and brothers, jostling for position at the man-made dam. Newborns test out their trunks,

delightfully missing their mouths and squirting each other. They are oblivious to our presence as we sit in the dim light, peering through a peephole.

On the other side of the drink, a herd of buffalo arrive.

At The Hide, a luxury safari camp in the eastern corner of wildlife-rich

Hwange National Park, the animals come to you. The underground room is just a few steps from the bar, situated across from the watering hole at the end of a tunnel.

Comfortable bench seats allow you to settle in the cool with signs urging guests to be quiet (ignored by the American tourists next to us). A smaller hideaway for two people is even closer to the action, but requires a guide to escort you in and out.

The hides are among the most talked-about features of this luxury lodge of the same name, which has been voted Best Safari Camp.

"Tented", 16 times. Tent is, of course, an understatement. Canvas shells are housed beneath traditional thatched roofs that blend seamlessly into the African bush and boast surprisingly luxurious interiors.

Queen beds, carved wooden lamps, brightly woven Africa rugs, bathrooms and pamper packs await after a long day on safari, with private, fenced porches allowing game watching in comfort.

At dusk, the colourfully outfitted African chef beats the drums to alert guests that a buffet dinner awaits,

shared at a giant teak table. In the morning, tea, coffee and hot chocolate are brought to your bedside for a gentle wake-up call.

Jeep and walking safaris start early for some of the most spectacular wildlife sightings in Zimbabwe.

Sadly, one of the most photographed Hwange residents, Cecil the lion, was hunted and killed by an American dentist last year.

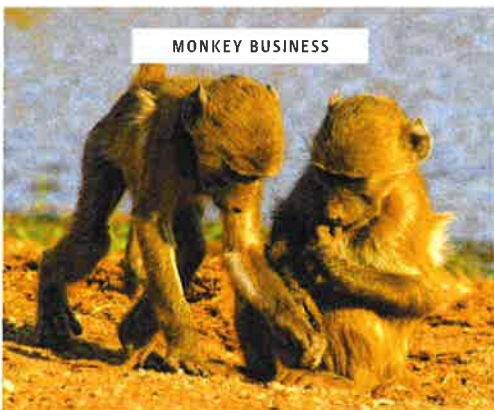
Our guide Nicholas says Cecil would walk up to their vehicles and rub along the side. "We knew when we were taking guests out that we would always see a lion," he says.

"Now, we have to look a lot harder." The sound of lions roaring through the night from the safety of our beds was the closest I thought I would get.

But on our final day, Nicholas's radio crackled with excitement. Three lions had killed a baby elephant, resulting in a stand-off with scores of elephants, who were flooding in from far and wide.

It was a BBC animal documentary brought to life.

THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF AFRICA ALBIDA TOURISM.



MONKEY BUSINESS



BABY ELEPHANT WALK