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# BEAUTY AND TRUTH

*The majestic landscape and spectacular wildlife draw countless visitors to both Zimbabwe and Botswana, but there is more to consider when heading out on safari*

BY JAMIE MACCOLL



Within hours of arriving in Zimbabwe, there were already tears. Fortunately, these were not the result of jetlag-induced exhaustion (the one-hour time difference is one of the bonuses of travelling from the UK to this part of the world), but instead tears of joy, as my girlfriend finally fulfilled her wish of seeing elephants in the wild, albeit from a distance, as we sipped gin and tonics on the viewing deck of our hotel. As I sidled quietly away, hoping that the other guests wouldn't realise that I was accompanying the weeping woman, I realised this was going to be a very special trip.

I did not know quite what to expect from Zimbabwe, having spent the flight out reading Peter Godwin's *The Fear* (a compelling account of the injustices committed by the Mugabe regime), working myself into a state of anxiety and questioning the morality of visiting such a beleaguered country for pleasure. Quite aside from those issues, just weeks before our arrival the death of Cecil the Lion at the hands of a now infamous American dentist had raised the question of whether tourism in this part of the world caused more harm to wildlife than good.

Even so, a 48-hour stay in Victoria Falls didn't allow much time to dwell on these dilemmas. Our hotel, the

Victoria Falls Safari Club, was luxurious without being stuffy – there was always someone on hand to offer a drink, a smile, or advice about how to deal with an errant baboon. We also ventured out for zip-lining over the Zambezi gorge (not for the faint-hearted); a river cruise courtesy of *The Zambezi Explorer*, whose barman John told me: 'I can't guarantee you'll see game but I can guarantee you a cold beer' (fortunately we got both); and, of course, the falls themselves. Known in the local language as Mosi-oa-Tunya – 'the smoke that thunders' – the world's largest stretch of falling water is an extraordinarily awe-inspiring sight and sound. Our expert guide Lameck has been leading tourists here for decades, but says that the falls – one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World – still amaze him every day.

We left Zimbabwe feeling unexpectedly exhilarated; though the three-hour drive to our next destination in Botswana, passing the new Chinese-built international terminal at Victoria Falls Airport, gave me time to reflect on the questions of ethicality. In short, I concluded it must come down to a personal decision. A tourist boycott of Zimbabwe probably won't bring down the Mugabe government, but it will hurt areas like Victoria Falls that rely so much on tourism; and it is also clear from talking to local people that this industry is the key ingredient in the fight against poaching.

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## TRAVEL

The history of Botswana could not be more different from Zimbabwe's. One of Africa's most stable democracies, it has used the vast wealth generated by diamond-mining to transform itself into a middle-income country. It is also home to some of Africa's finest wilderness and, crucially for tourism, it has a government that is fiercely anti-poaching. If Zimbabwe, externally at least, seems to radiate chaos, then Botswana transmits calm.

Ngoma Safari Lodge, situated in the vast Chobe National Park, might well be the finest safari lodge in Africa. Its eight private suites are wonderfully lavish, but the most spectacular feature is their floor-to-ceiling windows offering a widescreen view of the herds of wildlife that flock to the Chobe River, all of them visible from the comfort of a king-size bed. Judy, Ngoma's delightful manager, described it as 'your television' (if only my television at home was like this).

The lodge itself is so magnificent that it is tempting to simply loll in the private plunge pool while admiring the scenery. Beware: you may wake one morning, as our neighbours did, to find your pool drained by a family of thirsty elephants.

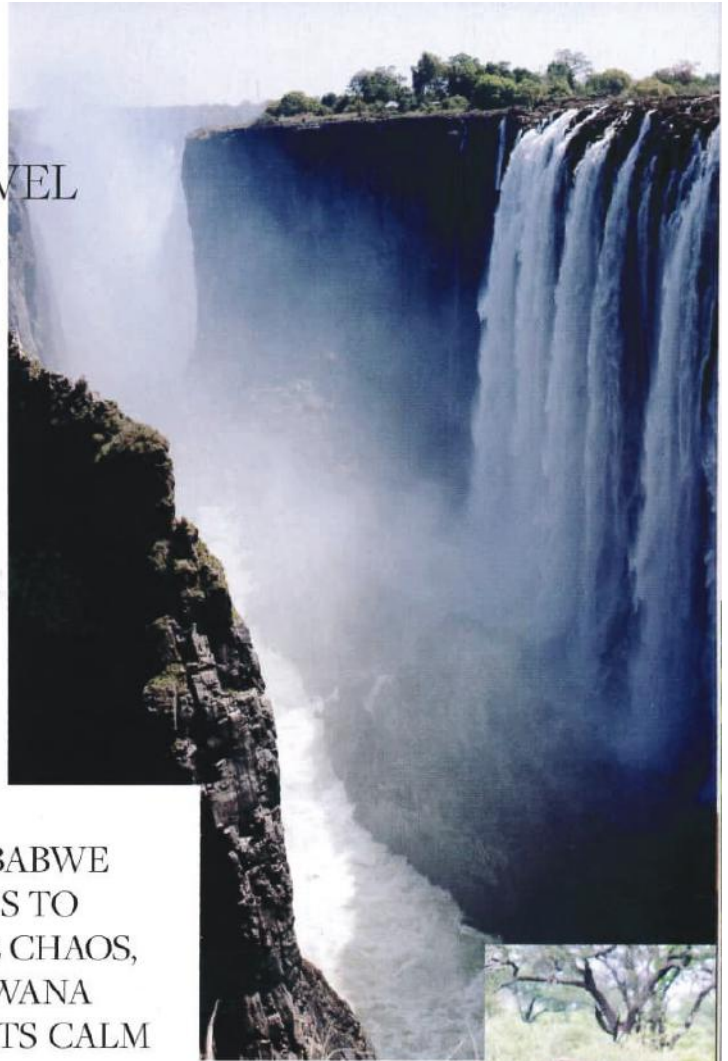
One of the many joys of Chobe is the opportunity to encounter elephants, as was apparent from our very first game drive. Estimates about their numbers vary but MK, our knowledgeable guide, thinks there may be as many as 100,000 in the park. The anti-poaching campaigns here have been so successful that some now question if there are almost too many elephants in Chobe. It is true that

### IF ZIMBABWE SEEMS TO RADIATE CHAOS, BOTSWANA TRANSMITS CALM

they can be destructive, both for local communities and indeed to the park itself, which is struggling to support such a large population. Yet MK is also keen to stress the role that elephants play in the renewal of the bush: although they eat a great deal, much of their food isn't digested properly and so their droppings contain seeds that subsequently germinate and create new flora. By the end we have a keen awareness of the symbiosis of nature in Chobe, where, as our guide says, every living thing plays a vital role.

During our stay, MK led us to elephants, giraffes, lions, zebras, buffaloes, hippos, crocodiles and wild dogs (his personal favourite – unlike most species, they look after their old). Yet the four days with him and the rest of the staff at Ngoma personify what is best about Botswana and what will take us back there – the genuine and heartfelt warmth of the people. □

*The Long Weekend Safari costs from about £1,122 a person, based on two sharing, staying in Victoria Falls Safari Lodge for one night B&B, and at Ngoma Safari Lodge for two nights full-board with activities, with Africa Albida Tourism (+263 13 432 1120; [www.africaalbidatourism.com](http://www.africaalbidatourism.com)). South African Airways flies from London Heathrow to Victoria Falls via Johannesburg (0844 375 9680; [www.flysaa.com](http://www.flysaa.com)), from £1,062 a person return.*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A BEDROOM IN NGOMA SAFARI LODGE. VICTORIA FALLS. AN ELEPHANT IN ZIMBABWE. ZEBRAS AT A WATERING HOLE. A BRIDGE OVER THE ZAMBEZI. OPPOSITE: GIRAFFES IN BOTSWANA

