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# Victoria Falls, Africa: the smoke that thunders

As wonders of the world go, the Victoria Falls are astonishingly uncrowded, says Sandra McGregor.



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 4 Comments

'It's like standing on the edge of heaven, isn't it?' says the smiling gift-shop cashier as she rings up my purchases. "I've been working at the falls for nearly four years and every day it amazes me."

Still drunk on the experience of standing just inches away from one of Mother Nature's most sublime displays, I can only nod and look forlornly at the postcards I know offer but a shadow of the spectacle I've just witnessed. I shake my still-damp hair – it's impossible to stay dry here – over the postcards in the hope that the water marks may offer the cards' recipients some echo of the world's mightiest falls.

Located along the border of [Zambia](#) and Zimbabwe, at one mile wide and 360ft tall, Victoria Falls – or Mosi-oa-Tunya, the "Smoke that Thunders", as it's known locally – is one of the most enthralling sites on a continent boasting an abundance of heart-stopping highlights.

Arriving at the [Zimbabwe](#) side of the falls, I'm surprised to find the landmark's unremarkable, easy-to-miss entrance leads to an equally unassuming ticket booth, beyond which no vendors, slick signage or overcrowded viewing platforms await. Rather, visitors are greeted with a forest so verdant the only hint of what the trees hide is a continual light showering of mist and the muffled rumbles of what sounds like an



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As the mist teases the imagination, you follow a meandering pathway flanked by trees only to arrive at a fork in the road where one must rely on chance or, if lucky, the advice of a visitor returning from a viewing, on where to turn next. But not to worry: all roads lead to the falls and soon I'm standing on a precipice overlooking one of the world's most notable wonders.

Almost as astonishing as the view is the dearth of visitors. There are no crowds (or guard rails, for that matter – only branches and bushes act as barriers between viewers and the edge of the falls) and so there is no need to jockey for position. On Zimbabwe's side of the falls, you're as likely to run into foraging warthogs or cheeky vervet monkeys as you are into other visitors.

The lack of visitors is hardly surprising; although Zimbabwe offers the best views of the falls, its troubled history means that its neighbour, Zambia, receives the most visitors. Travellers from nearby countries such as South Africa are finally beginning to return, but visitors from beyond the continent are relatively few.

Although the town of Victoria Falls and the surrounding region are among the most stable and safe in the country, of a busload of 60 passengers arriving at the Zimbabwean border, I was the only one who raised my hand when the driver asked if any non-Africans were aboard. (Of course, my unique, if lonely, status as an international visitor came in handy at immigration where I was the first and last person in line at the "non-African passport" window.)

Despite not being completely surprised by my singular status, I was unprepared for how much this little corner of Zimbabwe would impress.

The truth is that aside from the falls, I was not expecting much from this overlooked country. But Africa has a talent for subverting expectations.

On the bus ride to my hotel, I see wild elephants calmly grazing along the roadside, reckless warthogs weaving between cars and baboons solemnly grooming one another, heedless of traffic. Garrulous vendors holding aloft copper bracelets and wooden carvings run alongside our bus, expertly dodging the smiling, waving children who demand of us equally joyous greetings in response to their top-of-the-lung hellos.

I finally arrive at The Stanley and Livingstone, a boutique hotel situated in the 6,000-acre Victoria Falls Private Game Reserve, to discover that my plans for a nap must be postponed thanks to the appearance of a herd of more than 50 buffalo lounging by a waterhole just feet from the hotel grounds.

Little do I realise that this is just the beginning: over the course of my stay, zebras, warthogs, springboks, kudu and eland make frequent visits to the waterhole. It's a site that rivals even the most prolific safari



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offering, and better still, all animal appearances can be easily viewed in the comfort of one's pyjamas.

A homage to David Livingstone (the first European explorer to "discover" the falls in 1855) and fellow explorer Henry Stanley, the hotel seeks to capture the elegance and charm of the Victorian period. In fact, with its antique décor, solicitous service and lush gardens, the hotel captures that erstwhile era so authentically, that one of the few (and welcome) concessions to modernity is the air-conditioning.

The next morning, a group of us decide to visit the nearby town of Victoria Falls. First stop is the market district famed for its affordable and authentic handicrafts.

Stalls are lined with beaded jewellery, wooden carvings and leather goods, and the enthusiastic vendors show off their handiwork with an energy that seems to have as much to do with pride as it does with earning a profit.

The most coveted buy here is the exquisitely handcrafted Shona stone sculpture (often made from soapstone, granite or limestone). It is internationally renowned as one of the country's most prized (and expensive) exports, and visitors line up for the chance to meet an artist and get a work of art for a fraction of what it would cost outside Zimbabwe.

The next day we head to the Victoria Falls Private Game Reserve for an elephant safari. Atop our tusked transportation (all of whom are rehabilitated rescues), we are each paired with elephant handlers. The patient pachyderms manage to move as quietly as cats through the reserve and thanks to their stealth and the unique vantage point, I spy kudu, impala, buffalo and a pair of rare wild dogs.

When our ride ends we are invited to hand-feed the elephants. The trunk tickles my palm and I realise I'll probably never again be so close to these giants. Inked copies of our elephant's footprints are for sale and I buy one, even as I know that, like my postcards of Victoria Falls, I will only come away with pale copies of some of nature's greatest originals.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

The falls are not the world's highest, but have the largest area of falling water – 360ft high by 5,604ft wide.

#### GETTING THERE

British Airways (0844 493 0787; [britishairways.com](http://britishairways.com)) and South African Airways (0844 375 9680; [flysaa.com](http://flysaa.com)) fly from Heathrow to either Livingstone, Zambia, or Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, via Johannesburg from around £950 return. Hotels will arrange for transport from either airport or you can rent a car or take a taxi ([victoriafalls-guide.net/getting-around-victoria-falls.html](http://victoriafalls-guide.net/getting-around-victoria-falls.html) for information). A unique and scenic way to get to the falls is a two-night trip aboard Rovos Rail via Pretoria or Durban in South Africa ([rovos.com](http://rovos.com)).

#### PACKAGES

Audley Travel (01993 838500; [audleytravel.com](http://audleytravel.com)) offers a variety of packages to Victoria Falls, including a 12-day package that includes seven days on safari in Botswana from £4,300 per person, including return flight, transfers and full board.

#### GETTING AROUND

Most hotels and activity operators offer free transfers to Victoria Falls,



the town and the game reserve, so hiring a car, unless you plan to travel outside the area or into nearby Zambia, is probably unnecessary. But you can check [victoriafalls-guide.net/getting-around-victoria-falls.html](http://victoriafalls-guide.net/getting-around-victoria-falls.html) for information about car rentals.

## THE INSIDE TRACK

Bring a waterproof jacket with a hood to the falls; depending on how close you get, you can experience a light drizzle to a solid soaking.

A visa is necessary for British residents for both Zambia and Zimbabwe. You can get one ahead of time at the respective country's embassy or at either Livingstone or Victoria Falls airport, but beware: credit cards are not accepted – it's US dollars only. Also, rules regarding single and multiple-entry visas change often, as do costs, so be sure to confirm current visa requirements with a travel agent or the respective embassy.

Though most activities can be booked through your hotel, a good activity co-ordinator in the area is Shearwater Adventures (00263 13 44472; [shearwatervictoriafalls.com](http://shearwatervictoriafalls.com)). You can book safaris, elephant encounters, bungee jumping and village tours.

You really can't go wrong with any market purchases in Zimbabwe, but do not leave without at least one Shona sculpture. You won't get better deals elsewhere. Wooden carvings are also a good buy and copper jewellery is ubiquitous, well made and for sale at bargain prices.

## THE BEST LODGES

### The Stanley and Livingstone at Victoria Falls ££

One of the best hotels in the area, The Stanley and Livingstone offers a unique combination of luxury, proximity to the falls and immersion in the bush, with poolside wildlife sightings that almost compete with the falls for wow factor (0027 11 658 0633; [stanleyandlivingstone.com](http://stanleyandlivingstone.com); doubles from £178 per night, including breakfast; £220 per person for full board).



### Ilala Lodge £££

This charming lodge is a 10-minute walk from the falls – so close you can see the mist from your balcony. It has a good, full-service restaurant and friendly staff, with baboons, warthogs and the occasional elephant wandering through the grounds (0027 21 685 9809; [ilalalodge.com](http://ilalalodge.com); double b & b from £220).

### The Victoria Falls Hotel ££££

The beautiful, colonial-style Victoria Falls Hotel is more than 100 years old and is within walking distance of the falls. Known as the "Grand Old Lady of the Falls", the hotel also features a spa and an old-school high tea (00263 13 44751; [africansunhotels.com/victoriafallshotel](http://africansunhotels.com/victoriafallshotel); double b & b from £250).

## THE BEST RESTAURANTS

### Mama Africa Eating House £

On the main street; a quaint, bustling restaurant offering good, basic dishes that feature mainly beef, chicken and burgers, with some vegetarian dishes. Live African jazz band most evenings. Main courses around £6 each (00263 13 41725; [mamaafricaeatinghouse.com](http://mamaafricaeatinghouse.com)).

### The Boma: Place of Eating ££

One of the best places to experience traditional Zimbabwean foods such as warthog steak, smoked crocodile tail, impala knuckle terrine or even the local favourite: deep-fried kapenta and mopani worms (the restaurant also offers less “adventurous” choices). Meal times feature traditional storytellers, dancing and a drumming show. Around £25 for three courses. Open for dinner only. Reservations recommended (13 43201; [thebomarestaurant.com](http://thebomarestaurant.com)).

### The Victoria Falls Hotel £££

The finest five-star dining in the region. Several different restaurants, ranging from casual to high-end; menus offer European and African fusion selections. Stanley’s Terrace is your best bet for light meals and a famous afternoon high tea, plus lush gardens and fine views of the Victoria Falls bridge (13 44751; [africansunhotels.com](http://africansunhotels.com)).

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Sometimes, when I visit the British Museum, I wonder why I bother - I can never ever see and comprehend every single wonderful item that is on display. It's the same with all the wonders of the world, like the Victoria Falls or the Grand

Canyon - however many I visit, I won't even have begun the process. Year ago I decided the only thing any of us could meaningfully do was to seek serenity, internal peace and contentment, unaffected by time, condition or location.



stoffel45  
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I too love Romance - but in all my many years at Vic Falls I never heard a single person, African or white, refer to the Victoria Falls as "Mosi-oa-Tunya" - unless they were writing travel brochures or acting as guides for some larney bunch of gullibles.

If you asked any of the "locals" in Zambia or Zim what Mosi-oa-Tunya means or where it is - they wouldn't have a clue.



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Been there, seen it and got the tee shirt... AWESOME!!!!!!!!!!!!!!



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Good article, but I'm slightly offended by the headline 'Victoria Falls, Africa'. It's like saying 'Stonehenge, Europe'.

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