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DOING THE ZAMBEZI

The gyrations of the native dancers would put a Moroccan belly dancer to shame. The beat goes on as we attended the African Tribal dance performance at the cultural village near the Victoria Falls Hotel, in Zimbabwe, in May last year. This seemed like a good place to shake the dust out of my safari suit, but I was not invited to participate. The mist and roar from Victoria Falls muffled the native drums but did not impede the shimmy of the dancers, or prevent one from shaking your booty to the rhythm of the tribal dancers. We were on safari with fourteen fellow travelers going into South Africa, having survived the longest commercial flight from New York to Capetown, with a stop over in Johannesburg.

Come along with me on a wild river adventure into Africa where elephants and lions and every other stalking beast roam free, and large predators rule the night. Many experts call the cape buffalo the most dangerous of Africa's "big five" - the others being the leopard, elephant, rhino, and the lion with their eyes shining at night like yellow saucers.

Flowing more than 1,600 miles from the Zambian Wetlands to the Indian Ocean, the Zambezi is Africa's fourth longest river, after the Nile, Congo, and Niger. Dr. David Livingstone envisioned it as a highway to central Africa, but the impossible Cohora Bosso Rapids in Mozambique dashed the dream.

Zimbabwe, formerly the British colony of Southern Rhodesia, achieved independence in 1980 and is bounded by South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, and Mozambique. Cecil Rhodes' British South African Company created a thriving

diamond mining industry and left a continuing legacy of Rhodes Scholars, including Darrell Banks and Raymond Burse from Hopkinsville.

Near nightfall, we took a boat safari on the middle Zambezi and in the extravagant African sunset the Zambezi River was deep red, reflecting the crimson sky and it shimmered across the black landscape of the flood plain. The Zambezi is teeming with life throughout its 1,600 mile length. "This magnificent stream," David Livingstone exclaimed when he first traveled the river in 1853. He called it "God's highway," an access route for the Christianity and Commerce Livingstone imagined the river would bring to the interior of Africa. We saw a place little changed since Livingstone's day - clusters of mud and fishermen in dugout canoes. What could have been boulders scattered all over the river were pods of hippos, waiting for nightfall, to go scrambling up the banks for grazing.

It was the old eternal Africa, the one Livingstone knew when he traveled hopefully, charting the river. His gifts were his linguistic skill and his ability to get on with Africans who, having seen so many instances of enslavement, were hostile toward outsiders. Livingstone charmed the African chiefs up and down the river, putting suspicions to rest. A ready smile is still a great asset on the Zambezi, though it has no effect on the hippos or crocodiles.

The banks of the river were green, and no matter how starved the rest of the land, the banks of the Zambezi are green from end to end. The sounds of the busy bird-life of the river - the kingfishers, the bee-eaters, the herons and fish eagles, blend with the occasional warning sound of hippos, which vibrated like a

tuba played underwater.

Fishing remains the main occupation for the men on the Zambezi with bottlenose bream, tiger fish, and catfish being the primary species. These are generally sun dried or smoked.

Natives plough the river in dugout canoes in search of the elusive tiger fish which grows to about 34 pounds. The riverside markets along the Zambezi bustle with swarms of people picking through baskets of dried fish and used clothing lying in enormous piles or draped on racks, underneath the palm and camel thorn trees.

The villagers appear content and healthy. The pace of life would seem very slow to Americans. The barefoot girls tend the children, goats and cows, raising the food - corn, millet, vegetables - and cooking it. The men fish and hunt and boil bark from water-berry trees to make a strain of white lightning.

"Angels in their flight" would have paused to marvel at Victoria Falls, wrote missionary and explorer David Livingstone, who in 1855 became ^{the} ~~to~~ first European to see the mile-wide cataract on the Zambezi. Today, helicopter and ultra lights provide heavenly views. Our South African Airways pilot gave us two birds-eye views as we approached Victoria Falls. A four-seater helicopter provided me with a dramatic aerial view and my Sony digital 8 mm provided me with the video footage you are viewing. A limited number of tapes are available in the lobby at intermission for a normal charge.

Back on the Zambezi, near a landing, a pinkish hippo with a cavernous

mouth and peg-like teeth and tiny ears, blew sour notes through its nostrils, looking goofy and loveable. But it could turn swift and deadly, a big bossy brute. "What do you do if a hippo comes after you?" Our guide replied, "Swim away from the canoe or boat, he said and explained that the hippo concentrates on the canoe rather than the people in it. The animal tips over the boat when its territory is threatened.

The hippos grab everyone's attention on our boat. They are bad tempered animals says the skipper of our craft. "This is close enough." "They are very dangerous. They can't swim, you know." I didn't know. They run on the bottom and they run very fast. This one has popped up for air but they can stay under water for quite a time and they like to tip over boats. We kept our distance. The crocodile would love the hippo to play bump the boat and force a turnover. Never go swimming or wading in the Zambezi because it has more crocodiles than any other place in the world.

The river elephants have been plundered for many years. Muslin traders were well established here by the end of the 15th century, trading cloth and other goods for ivory. One tusk produced three billiard balls, two tusks, a piano. "Every keyboard entailed one elephant killed and at least two slaves to carry the tusks," wrote Timothy Holmes in Journey to Livingstone.

Although poaching has diminished as a result of the international band on ivory since 1989, elephants still suffer from the irregular flow of the river here due to dams being build and vast areas no longer flood. There are virtually no rhinos

here. The world demand is great. The Chinese grind the horn and sell it as medicine for whatever ails you. It has been said that tourism discourages poaching because rhinos feel safer near the camp and lodges where poachers dare not go.

When the elephants came to a sandbar, they clambered out and crossed it. I counted forty-five. They were big and small, swimming from Zambia to Zimbabwe, enormous bulls up ahead and cows behind nudging the babies. The current was swift and the babies needed encouragement. The elephants were panting from their effort and the steep muddy banks posed a further obstacle, as the elephants struggled to get out of the water.

The Zambezi made the elephants blacker and the water streaming from their flanks made their hides shine. The procession of gleaming black hides and bone white ivory mixed with their heavy breathing, made them seem hardworking and vulnerable.

Our stay at Chobie Game Lodge produced no unusual event other than the warthogs which roamed freely on our front lawn overlooking the middle Zambezi. The management assured us that Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton spent their *second* honeymoon safely at the Chobie Game Lodge. My live-in of forty-four years was not overimpressed with the Elizabeth Taylor tale or the wild hogs roaming at will.

In Botswana the varied terrain - savannas, riverbanks, and forests - supports an unusually diverse mix of wildlife. We took the standard game drives in a 2 1/2

ton Mercedes Benz truck, elevated for viewing and protection with the best opportunity to see a variety of game early in the morning, after an overnight kill. Surprisingly, it was cold at 6:00 a.m. and we were wrapped in wool blankets when we commenced our game drives chasing zebras, lions, and giraffes, down dusty trails in the grasslands. Game was very plentiful in Chobie National Park with huge herds of elephants, roaming at will.

From the Victoria Falls Hotel, the mighty roar and odd grinding sound of collapsing water with a rainbow suspended above it, created an undescribable beauty. The sound of falling water was pierced briefly by the whistle of a the train on its way across the other end of the gorge. Covered with a yellow slicker, the next day we got near enough to feel the spray from Victoria Falls on our faces and views into the depths of the gorge.

The locals call it "the smoke that thunders." You see the smoke from a long way off, rising above the forest. Then you get close enough to hear the thunder - and you see that it's not smoke at all, but a great cloud of mist rolling upward and raining down again to drench you to the skin. Through the downpour you glimpse the white water of the mile wide Zambezi River just as it plunges into a gorge so steep and narrow that it is lost to view.

There on the edge stands the bronze figure of explorer David Livingstone, who renamed the cataract Victoria Falls to honor his queen. Nothing to honor Albert.

Down in the gorge, white water rafters decked out in spandex suits, listened

to the rafting guide shout safety instructions and wondering if they really wanted to do this. I opted out of this Class V adventure, considered to be the wildest one-day raft trip in the world. Daredevils who find its rapids too tame can bungee-jump off the railroad bridge. For maximum bragging rights, you can hire a raft to receive you below and take you directly from elastic cord to white water. But you don't go to Africa only to raft. Not when there is Africa to see.

Earlier, we had flown to Etosha National Park, Namibia. Mokuta Lodge was the center of operations for the game drives. It was hard to imagine how the German colonizers of Namibia coped with unlimited elbow room, vast deserts, and an annual quota of 300 days of sunshine. Even in the desert you'll find elephant, giraffe, zebra, and lions. Every watering hole had at least one lion perched nearby waiting, waiting for the other animals to take a life or death chance of escaping the lion from pouncing on them as they sought to quench their thirst with their last drink.

Our guide told us not to bother climbing a tree if an elephant charges you while out in the bush. Elephants can take down a tree with ease if they want to, and if you startle a lion, don't run. No cat can resist a moving object.

Along the Zambezi, lives follow the traditional pattern, the men fishing in the river to the cries of birds and the women and girls grinding corn. The thud of the pestle and mortar is like a heartbeat on the river, the same here as always.

Livingstone believed all the Zambezi was navigable. He was wrong. He would be surprised that no ships ply the river; he would be startled by the hydroelectric

dams, and by the towns on either side of the falls. But much of the river would be familiar, for so little has changed.

Apartheid ended with South Africa's first all-race elections that propelled African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela into the presidency in 1994, surviving prison on Robben Island outside Capetown. Things are moving slowly but there is hope.

On the Zambezi everything is measured differently. The going rate for a dugout canoe is two cows and distance is measured in foot hours. The separate notion of time and distance and its simplicity was strangely relaxing, modifying my sense of urgency. Here local expectations have not changed much since Livingstone's day. I began to shift gears, taking each day at a time, feeling lucky to be so near the life-giving river, and the reassurance of a return ticket on the trustworthy 747 from Johannesburg, that would get me out of Africa.