



HIGH EXPECTATIONS: Nick flies over the Falls in a microlight. Top right, an open-front chalet on Sindabezi Island



Soaring above the mighty precipice

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

Unesco World Heritage site is a constantly evolving spectacle. Livingstone named the falls after Queen Victoria but tribes already knew them as Mosi-oa-Tunya, "The Smoke That Thunders", which is a far more fitting name.

Victoria Falls is Africa's adrenaline playground. Rafting trips on the whitewater sections of the Zambezi are legendary as is bungee jumping from the 365ft-high Victoria Falls Bridge, a no-man's land between the two countries. The best views though are from above, ideally in an open-air microlight aircraft or, as my friend Amy unhelpfully described it as I was being strapped in, a "hang glider with a hairdryer attached".

The microlight accelerated down the unpaved runway at the Batoka Sky base just minutes from the falls and suddenly the treetops fell away. Wind whipped around me but the flight was smooth and invigorating. We soared towards the falls where the water fell like ribbons of ivory silk. In the distance, the Zambezi vanished into the emerald horizon.

Zambia is renowned for its 19 national parks and the plains below us were teeming with life. Pilot Pascal pointed out a herd of elephants and hippos wallowing in the mud. A lone giraffe grazed on the upper branches of an acacia tree.

Back on terra firma we strolled across the Victoria Falls Bridge, where a string of nervous bungee jumpers awaited their turn and crossed the border into the Zimbabwean town of Victoria Falls. The immigration officer issued our visas enthusiastically and welcomed us into his country.

A day trip into Zimbabwe is not only easily done but also offers an intriguing glimpse into this warm yet struggling nation. We were greeted by hawkers selling

everything from carved handicrafts to 10billion Zimbabwean dollar banknotes, which were going for as little as US\$1 each. The offer soon escalated to five defunct banknotes for the price of one.

"So, how much would a loaf of bread have cost?" I inquired. "About Z\$20trillion," the vendor replied nonchalantly.

We stopped to take in the panoramic views of the waterfalls from a different perspective and roamed the town's quiet, tree-lined streets, spotting the Big Tree, a baobab with a 66ft circumference. The British colonial-style Victoria Falls Hotel is another local institution having welcomed guests since 1904. Its elegant terrace, which overlooks the bridge, is still considered the best spot in town for afternoon tea.

LIKE MOST travellers we based ourselves in Zambia, staying on the private and eco-friendly island of Sindabezi. An exclusive retreat with only five open-fronted chalets, Sindabezi is a tranquil escape with a sophisticated following: Prince Harry and girlfriend Chelsy Davy are rumoured to have stayed here.

Each thatched chalet is hidden among dense trees, offering complete privacy and unobstructed views of the Upper Zambezi that can even be savoured from the outdoor bath.

After a day's high-octane activities, guests can opt to dine at the resort's intimate restaurant. We preferred dinner under the stars on the sandy bank outside our chalet. It is still possible to get to know your neighbours, however, with a nightclub on the loungers beside the roaring campfire, lit every night at the heart of the island. We found it was also a great place to view wildlife. Besides Horace, the resident hippo, other animals including baboons and elephants, can be seen just across the river in Zimbabwe.

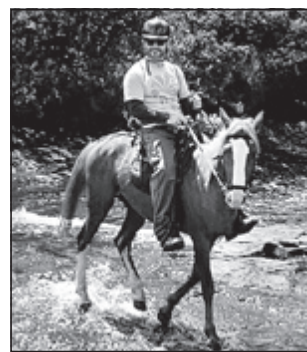
Later we ventured into Livingstone, just 10 miles away. Home to around 100,000 people, life in this compact city moves at a fast pace. Crossing the main drag, Mosi-oa-Tunya Road, took several attempts as cars careered towards me. The locals were unfazed as they rushed past to the markets and post office. Taking pride of place in the heart of the city is the Capitol Theatre. Built in 1931, this worn but charming colonial building was reopened as a cinema last year.

Nearby is the Livingstone Museum, which houses a fascinating exhibit on Zambia's tribal history and a collection of Livingstone's belongings. The vibrant Maramba Market is also not to be missed. Livingstonians flock here to pick up fresh produce and browse the latest rolls of bright fabrics on offer.

Before leaving we couldn't resist one final farewell to the Falls with a stroll through the Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park. The park, Zambia's smallest, offers little in the way of trekking and wildlife but its well-maintained trails through dense tropical flora reveal several fantastic viewpoints.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky but the spray came down like a tropical storm. Carrying umbrellas was a futile exercise and we soon embraced the refreshing shower. Wherever you are in this part of the world, you can't fail to be touched by Victoria Falls.

Lesotho is blessed with astonishing natural beauty and some of Africa's friendliest people, as DUNCAN CRAIG discovers during a stay in a luxurious mountain retreat



OUT OF WATER: Duncan lets Lion take the reins

● GETTING THERE: Audley Travel (01993 838 500/www.audleytravel.com) offers six nights in Lesotho and the Drakensberg from £1,590pp (two sharing). Price includes three nights, full board, at Maliba Mountain Lodge with pony trek and village tour, and return flights from Heathrow to Durban. Europcar (0870 607 5000/www.europcar.co.uk) offers car hire from £18 per day. Lesotho tourism: www.lesotho.gov.ls South African Tourism: 0870 155 0044/www.southafrica.net

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The kingdom in the sky

IDON'T recall Clint Eastwood giggling uncontrollably whenever his horse broke into a gallop. So it was a touch disappointing to find myself behaving like an overexcited schoolgirl on my debut ride.

A devoted student of the Western, I was expecting to be something of a natural; cinematically saddle-hardened, if you will.

It started promisingly enough, me clip-clopping along the dusty track squinting heroically at the horizon. Then my guide Marti muttered something to his horse in Sesotho and it accelerated away. My untrusty steed followed suit and suddenly the Maloti Mountains rang with my alarmingly high-pitched screeches and the rhythmic thwack of posterior on rising saddle.

Thankfully there was no one around to witness the scene. That's the thing about Lesotho and particularly its awe-inspiring highland region: it's deserted. You can amble for days without seeing another person, let alone tourist.

Prince Harry's gap-year visit in 2004 boosted the mountainous kingdom's profile but most would still struggle to place it on a map (surrounded by the South African provinces of Free State, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape) or indeed pronounce it correctly ("Ler-suit-to").

In tourism terms the "Kingdom in the Sky" is very much in its infancy. I visited with my wife Eileen and mother-in-law Annette. Both are South African but neither had contemplated visiting before. Indeed, for the duration of our three-day stay we had the sneaking suspicion that we were the only tourists in the country.

We saw no one resembling an outsider during our passage through the endearingly chaotic border post at Caledonspoort, a four-hour drive from Johannesburg. Here we had our first encounter with the Basotho people, who are renowned for their friendliness and comprise 99 per cent of the country's population. Our passports were scrutinised, not with haughty suspicion but with amused fascination and we were waved on our way like departing friends.

Once beyond the bustling border town of Butha-Butha, signs of life thinned out dramatically; just the occasional cluster of circular huts alongside neatly farmed plots. Women hoeing the fields straightened to wave and herd boys dressed in their flamboyant Basotho rugs and white Wellingtons flashed us huge smiles. The only traffic we passed had hooves or was pulled by oxen. It was like stumbling across a medieval heritage park.

Our destination, Maliba Mountain Lodge, was not hard to find. It lies at the end of the road, in splendid isolation 6,660ft up, nearly twice the height of Snowdon. Manager Andrew Mostert led us to the decked terrace with the barely concealed glee of someone accustomed to revealing the astonishing.

A panorama of verdant, towering peaks awaited, their undulating emerald slopes nicked with flashes of silver as the sun



ROOM WITH A VIEW: Maliba Mountain Lodge sits 6,660ft up in wonderful isolation. Inset, schoolchildren provide a warm Basothan welcome

Pictures: DUNCAN CRAIG

caught distant streams and waterfalls. Wispy clouds floated overhead projecting a roving khaki on the untouched landscape.

Maliba is not the place to come if you crave distraction. The list of activities is pleasingly limited, cajoling you into a restorative indolence. Most guests do little more than sample the array of loungers on the terrace, which fans out from the steeply conical lodge with its open fireplaces and Asian-influenced furnishings.

Some don't even make it that far, preferring to rest up in their private chalets. There are six arranged in a tiered arc. As with the main lodge, they are hand-built in the style of an African "rondavel", with such luxurious touches as underfloor heating and queen-size four-poster beds.

LEAVING floraphile Annette to mosey around the lodge's botanical garden, Eileen and I set off into the Tselhanyane National Park, which surrounds the lodge.

Deforestation is rampant in Lesotho, a natural consequence of poverty and cold winters, but this mountainous, 5,600-hectare area is protected, enabling indigenous woodland species such as the squat, culturally revered che-che tree to flourish. So too some intriguing wildlife: African wild cat, black-backed jackal, clawless otter and the occasional leopard.

There are several walking routes mapped out by the lodge. We opted for the "waterfall trail". It sounded romantic. Arriving two hours later caked in sweat we felt anything but. However the exertion was quickly forgotten as we cooled off beneath the icy torrent, tasting the sweet, pure

water that serves much of South Africa.

A bit of intrigue never did an establishment any harm and we learned of Maliba's during dinner that night on the boma, a walkway-accessed octagonal platform that "floats" above the forest. With open fire crackling, we feasted on spicy tomato soup and wonderfully tender lamb shank slow-cooked in red wine.

Andrew joined us and told us of "the box", an unmarked, Portakabin-sized container that sits on the apex of a distant, inaccessible mountain. No tracks lead to or from it. The mystery seemed to grip Annette who spent time studying it through the deck's star-spotting telescope. An arms cache? Jetsam from the International Space Station? Bin Laden's hideaway? Andrew has pledged to hike up and find out.

Our stay passed in a flash. We took a guided tour of a nearby village, where we bought sweets for the children and were seen by a sangoma, a spiritual healer venerated among Basothans.

My pony trek was on the final day. I came to a tacit agreement with Lion, my surefooted if impetuous horse: if I responded quickly enough, I'd look as if I was calling the shots. Passively, I crossed streams and laid down virgin tracks as rock kestrels soared above.

That night we were treated to a performance of traditional songs and dancing from the staff at the lodge. Cast outnumbered audience by a factor of six as we sat and marvelled. We were encouraged to join in and to the amusement of the largely female performers I leapt at the chance to prove it wasn't just horse riding that I couldn't do. For the second time during our stay, the hills of Lesotho were alive with the sound of high-pitched giggling.

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