

## Charlotte Hawkins on safari in Zimbabwe

Television presenter Charlotte Hawkins is spoilt for choice with the wildlife on a safari for all ages in Zimbabwe



Victoria Falls Photo: Getty Images

By Charlotte Hawkins

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Ever since our first safari on honeymoon six years ago, my husband and I had been keen to return. Witnessing such majestic creatures close up in their natural habitat is mesmerising, so much so that we wanted to share it with other family members. My husband's parents had long dreamt of going, but at 67 and 74 years old felt a safari might be beyond them. Their main worry was that the holiday would be too fast-paced with little time to rest and recover.

Nor was that the only reservation. All of us were conscious of the political difficulties in Zimbabwe, its history of violence and continuing human rights issues. Together, these can put people off visiting and we had our doubts when the tour operator recommended it. What convinced us was the glowing testimony of people who knew Zimbabwe well, in particular their stories about how hard the safari companies worked to protect natural habitats and support local communities.

Once our minds were made up, we approached Africa Travel to make it all happen. It proposed a packed agenda that involved staying at four different camps, with seven flights as well as road and boat transfers. I could see my in-laws blanching at the thought of it. Every opportunity would be taken to be out in the African bush, we were told, with 5.30am pre-dawn starts and evening game drives ending with gin and tonics as the sun went down.

However, the safari planners did explain that none of this was compulsory. Guests have the choice of doing as much or as little as they want, but by now my in-laws had the bit between their teeth and were determined, as we were, to throw themselves into every experience.

Our first base was Little Makalolo Camp in the Hwange National Park, a reserve roughly the size of Wales. In safari terms, I wasn't sure whether this was big or small, or of just how many animals we were likely to see. Would it be like looking for a needle in a haystack?

I needn't have worried. The saying at Little Makalolo is "the more you eat the more you see". Over the next few days we gorged ourselves on sightings of lions, cheetahs, elephants, giraffes, buffaloes, hippos, zebras, impalas, ostriches, wild dogs, bat-eared foxes, jackals and more. Sadly, you are unlikely to see the Big Five now in Hwange, as rhino numbers are in such decline.

But the safari experience isn't just about ticking animals off a list, it is about all kinds of rare and special encounters. With two game drives a day at Little Makalolo, there is a strong probability you will see something new each time you go out. Just when you think you've had the ultimate experience, along comes another that is even more captivating. It could be a cheetah lazily sunbathing or a beetle struggling to bury its ball of dung by the roadside.

At Little Makalolo, we woke one morning to evidence of some surprise visitors to the camp overnight: the paw prints of a pride of lions were clearly visible. Later, from our room, we spotted the pride just across the waterhole less than a hundred yards away. A Jeep was hastily scrambled and we were taken for a closer look. To be among a pride of what turned out to be 17 lions, with two brothers clearly in charge and three week-old cubs scampering around, was special. We were so close that we felt we could reach out and touch them.

Not all our animal encounters were benign, however. Once we encountered a bull elephant in musth, and obviously in a very bad mood. He gave a mock charge that was intimidating enough, but as we moved away he charged for real. To be chased for 200 yards by a furious six-ton elephant was terrifying. I couldn't help thinking of a recent news story in which a tourist had been killed when an elephant overturned a Jeep. I sat immobile in the back of our vehicle and kept my fingers tightly crossed that we could outride the elephant, or that he would get bored and give up. He did eventually, but it was a hair-raising moment. At times like that you are thankful for the expertise of the guides. The safety of guests is their number one priority and, knowing the animals so well, they can anticipate how they are likely to react before it happens.

As well as being experts, the staff were incredibly friendly and made us feel part of the family. They always went the extra mile, and with special touches. One day we were heading back to camp for lunch when we turned a corner and spotted a table laid out with a chef standing by, right next to a waterhole complete with hippos. How lucky, I thought, whoever that is for; what a perfect spot.

It turned out to be for us, of course, and we found ourselves drinking Buck's fizz while watching the hippos. One evening, we also had the magical experience of dining under the stars with a candlelit bush dinner. With the reassurance of the guides, we soon forgot any concerns we had about animals looking for their own dinner.

At Ruckomechi Camp, in the Mana Pools National Park, the animals came to us rather than the other way around. Several times, the way back to our room was blocked by elephants that had made themselves at home and were wandering around the camp. It's important to remember that it is we who are in the animals' territory and need to adapt accordingly. Following advice, we avoided hanging out washing because the mischievous baboons would happily make off with any unattended items. Given the chance, they would merrily fling your underwear around the trees above the camp. After dinner, we were personally escorted back to our rooms and were not allowed outside after dark. The nocturnal rustling noises do take a bit of getting used to, so expect some sleepless nights to begin with.

But the animals are not the only stars of a trip to Zimbabwe: the scenery is spectacular. Glimpsed from the air, with a mist of spray rising from it, Victoria Falls is an incredible sight. You are taken back to the time when the British explorer David Livingstone first saw the falls in 1855 and wrote that "scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight". He named them in honour of Queen Victoria, but the indigenous name of the falls, Mosi-oa-Tunya, or "the smoke that thunders", gives a better idea of what to expect. On the ground, even the ponchos provided to stop you getting wet are no match for the damp mists swirling all around you.

To get a different perspective of the falls, we took a tour of the railway bridge that links Zambia to Zimbabwe. The Bridge Tour takes you on a walk along a narrow platform that goes right under the bridge, and you are told the incredible story of how it was built. While we wore harnesses clipped to a safety cable, the builders back in 1904 had no such luxury. You get to see an incredible feat of engineering close up, and those brave enough can get an even more exhilarating experience as they zip-wire, bungee-jump or rope-swing off the bridge. My mother-in-law (literally) jumped at the chance, and was thrilled to add zip-wiring across the Zambezi to her list of achievements.

Stay at nearby Victoria Falls Safari Club, owned and run by Africa Albida Tourism, and all this is on your doorstep, but there are plenty of wildlife experiences too. The staff feed the vultures at lunchtime, part of a conservation project aimed at protecting the endangered birds and showing visitors how important they are ecologically. The sight of swirling hordes of birds awaiting the arrival of kitchen scraps is spectacular.

We had some special visitors during dinner one night too, a family of elephants just below the deck where we were eating.

For those looking for more lively nightlife, the nearby Boma restaurant is a must. As soon as you arrive, you are presented with a brightly coloured shawl so you look the part as you join in with the music and dancing. There is a big barbecue with lots of local dishes, including a not-to-be-missed regional delicacy, the mopani worm. It's your very own bushtucker trial, and I'm pleased to say that I have the certificate to prove I did it.

At whatever age, a safari holiday to Zimbabwe is something special. Indeed, my parents-in-law now describe it as their holiday of a lifetime. They soon forgot their initial concerns about whether they would cope with the schedule, and were delighted to discover that in fact they were far from the oldest. At one camp we met a couple in their 80s who come back year after year. The youngest guests at our camp, aged 11 and 14, were equally transfixed by the wildlife.

To catch Zimbabwe as it is now – unspoilt, with all its rustic charms – you may need to act fast. Though there is no mass tourism as yet, next year will bring increased investment, a new international runway and airport planned for Victoria Falls, and a new luxury camp, Linkwasha, due to open in Hwange. It is a reassuring thought that the money all these tourists spend makes a difference, not just to the wildlife but also to local communities.

Many of the safari companies, such as Wilderness Safaris and Africa Albida Tourism, are dedicated to protecting the animals in the national parks. They invest in sink wells and pump water so the animals can survive; they make sure the camps are sustainable, with solar power for lighting and to heat water; they pay for anti-poaching programmes; and they open up their camps each year to local children to show them the importance of protecting the area's wildlife.

Zimbabwe's long-term future may be uncertain, but choosing it as a holiday destination ensures, for now, that the wildlife and landscape are preserved. Although there may still be poverty and instability in parts of the country, tourist areas have always been unaffected. The recognition of just how important tourism can be can only bring positive change to the rest of the country.



*Charlotte Hawkins travelled with Africa Travel (020 7843 3586; [africatransel.co.uk](http://africatransel.co.uk)), which arranges holidays to southern and east Africa. A one-week, five-star trip to Zimbabwe, staying for two nights at Little Makalolo, two nights at Ruckomechi Camp and two nights at the Victoria Falls Safari Club, costs from £3,875 per person. The price includes British Airways flights, transfers, all meals and activities on safari, and breakfast at Victoria Falls.*

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