

# ZIMBABWE IS STILL A WINNER

Despite Mugabe's grim regime, the country offers families an awe-inspiring adventure

By Lydia Gard

**M**Y HUSBAND David is Zimbabwean, so we visit his homeland often, even though the 'beloved' leader is no political pin-up.

Some people argue that a holiday here is tantamount to propping up Robert Mugabe's regime, but I just cannot agree. Zimbabweans rely on tourism and want to share their formidable country: from its rainforests and falls, to its open savannah and abundant game.

And what the country lacks in stability, it makes up for in charm, wilderness, adventure and, crucially, a dearth of other tourists. What's more, Zimbabwe comes with a little grit, some red sand in the back of your throat.

On this trip, David and I, our children, Oliver, six, and Rupert, three, and my parents-in-law meet at Victoria Falls.

We check into Victoria Falls Safari Lodge, the flagship property from Africa Albida. Our family lodge overlooks open bush where impala pick gingerly past the terrace, bush pigs dart between teak trees and baboons dangle from the thatch, dropping down to pinch our swimming costumes

before hanging them tantalisingly out of reach in the canopy.

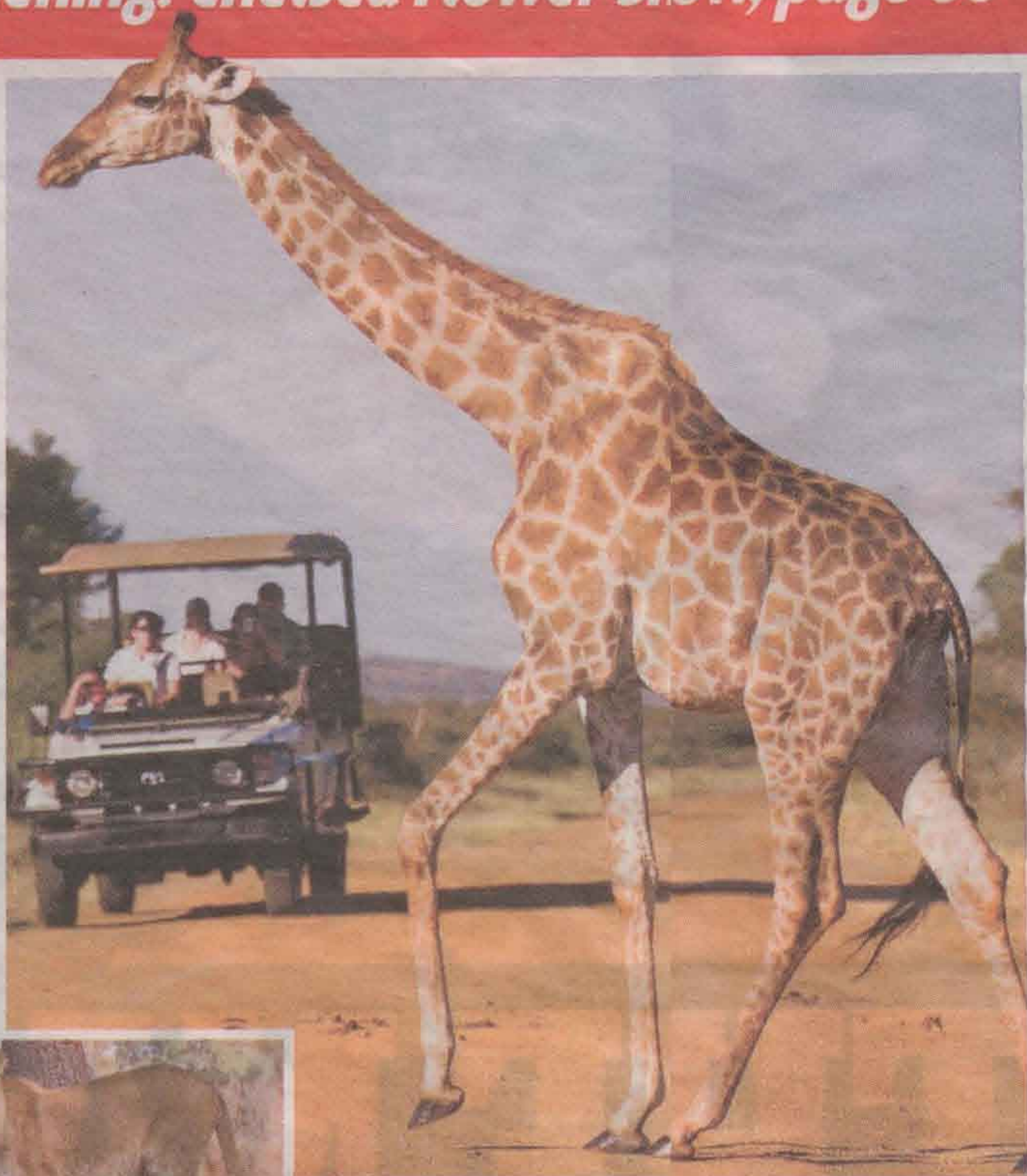
From the dining room we watch a slow parade of beasts visiting the waterhole. Our children try some traditional African dishes, including a Mopani worm. I cringe as I watch Oliver swallow the questionable 'delicacy' to impress an Amazulu drummer who has popped in to entertain us.

Here, you can dip a toe in adventure. I go for a dawn ride on horseback though the Zambezi national park; we take a nail-biting helicopter trip over the mighty Zambezi and we board a sunset cruise on the Zambezi

Explorer. Between the sushi, chilled chablis and the starched-white crew uniforms, it takes a herd of elephants on the riverbank to remind us where we are.

The highlight is a night drive at the nearby Stanley Livingstone private game reserve, where a family of (dehorned) white rhino spend an hour bumbling and bush-grazing around our car, before lumbering into the 6,000 acres of pristine bush and savannah.

The children track paw prints, poke at dung and have a staring contest with a chameleon while we sit on the Land Rover bonnet and sink a few beers. Then we



Making tracks: Lydia and family get close to a giraffe and lions

head south to Humani reserve on the Zambian border. It is an epic drive, but the boys have stopped asking to play on my phone and are instead quietly consulting their wildlife guides.

In fact, my phone has been dead for several days and none of us has noticed. Upon our arrival we are thrown straight into the back of a rickety old Jeep to track some cats that have been stalking through the camp.

It is dusk. Owner and conservationist Roger Whittall drives, turning from one track to another, stopping to crane for every sound, peering into shadows.

Here is a wilderness of towering hardwoods, dense mopani and fever tree forests, mapari plains and broken hill country. While the children are bending sapling branches into makeshift bows, he stops and holds up a hand.

On the sandy bank of the Turgwe river, a pride of lions is relaxing. They are so abundant,

so close, that the children are lulled into believing that this is what Africa is like all the time.

So bring your young and your not so young and offer them a taste of the real Africa. They might not find a kids' club, but they will learn to mimic a leopard call and be taught how to whistle a bow and arrow. The chances are that they will also fall in love with this enchanted, troubled and utterly captivating continent.

#### TRAVEL FACTS

AFRICA Travel (020 7843 3500, [africatravel.com](http://africatravel.com)) can arrange seven nights in Zimbabwe from £3,075 per person, including return flights, road transfers, three nights' B&B at Africa Albida Tourism's Victoria Falls Safari Suites, two nights all-inclusive at Wilderness Safaris' Davisons Camp in Hwange and two nights all-inclusive at Tom's Little Hide in Hwange.