

IT'S OH SO QUIET,
IT'S OH SO STILL
AND SO PEACEFUL
UNTIL...

Livingstone is Zambia's Vic Falls playground. It offers as many adrenaline-fuelled activities as its Zimbabwean arch competitor, but it has its own character – and soundtrack. By JANINE STEPHEN



Photography: Lesanne Dunlop



THE SOUND OF A LAWN MOWER IN FLIGHT

“When I’d flown 25,000 passengers over the Victoria Falls, one at a time, I applied for the Guinness Book of Records (GBOR),” says microlight pilot Heiko Held. “By now, I’ve flown more than 28,000 trips with a 100 per cent safety record. The GBOR hasn’t been able to award a record, as it has to prove no one else has done more. But I’ve flown more than 8,200 hours over the Falls. So I’ve seen a few rainbows...”

We’d just swooped over the tumbling Zambezi and zigzagging Batoka Gorge as the sun rose, bathing the scene in rainbows. Lala palms waved, spray billowed from the lip of the chasm and elephants were scattered like raisins on Long Island. On a microlight, there’s nothing between you and the elements – which means pilots sometimes fly through the spray, the Angel’s Kiss.

Heiko, born in 1970s Berlin, had always felt “there must be a place where freedom and life can be experienced in its fullness”. Thirty-five African countries later, he settled in Livingstone (his son first flew in a microlight at three). Heiko has microlighted to the source of the Zambezi and to Windhoek, Namibia. “Life is never about our circumstances, but always about our perspective. Changing



perspective can change a whole life. Flying is beautiful: you lift yourself up – effortlessly – into a new perspective. All your troubles and cares are gone. I’ve flown people from all over the world; some can’t even greet you in English. But over the Falls we end up laughing together. I get people who sing to me: *Amazing Grace*. Some burst into tears when they see the full flow for the first time. It’s a oneness. After good rains, in March and April, I can fly in a certain way so that you see the rainbow as a full circle, a halo. In the middle is a little reflection of the microlight, and we can fly into that picture – like into a mirror of your own beauty.”

Heiko’s soundtrack: Laughter when Zambians get together and joke for hours. Fish eagles. And hippos: “My wife says I make the best hippo sounds – it’s a bit like laughter too.”

Microlighting over the Falls is only offered from Zambia. Batoka Sky; +260 213 323 589; livingstonesadventure.com

THE SQUEAK OF SHOES ON A GLOSSY FLOOR

“It’s a taboo for a man or woman to eat a banana in the presence of their in-laws,” an Agnes Buya Yombwe artwork states. In May, the Livingstone artist’s show on traditional strictures (and a need for new taboos, such as “do not litter”) hung in Zambia’s National Art Gallery. The building, a variation of a white cube, appears beamed down from space – it’s set in the dust on a plot surrounded by mopane woodland (a tree just outside the door had been pruned by elephants overnight). The gallery, opened in 2014, has already grown in ambit, progressing from generalised group shows of local art to targeted solos (Anawana Haloba, the Zambian conceptual artist currently based in Norway, was soon to exhibit) and curated, themed exhibitions. ☺

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FLY BOY

The Livingstone National Art Gallery (top) and microlight pilot Heiko Held, who has spent thousands of hours over the Falls





Right now, the man keeping open the doors of the brave new institution is Chansa Chishimba, an artist and retired art teacher who was trained in Lusaka and Sweden. He's seen younger artists begin to take on global themes such as transgenderism, tackle taboos and interpret existence. Behind his desk is one of his own pieces, a whirl of subtle colours and, unmistakably, a dozen or so humans flying on a rhinoceros horn. It references "the local Zambian science of moving from one place to another using traditional medicine", says Chansa.

AT WORK

Women supported by the Thorntree River Lodge community project (left); Maunga blacksmith Kuyaba Mulonda (below)

"It was the subject of much discussion in Zambia after a man said he was ready to demonstrate how to do this, but a government official said if he did, he would be locked up. It was not allowed... From childhood, I've heard that people can move from place to place like this. And I thought that if developed, this science, well, think of the benefits; it would bring the costs of flying down, [reduce] air crashes, even climate change. I'm craving the experience. Imagine the art that could be made."

Chansa's soundtrack: "When sitting at the computer, I hear footsteps, but there's nobody. Perhaps it's the desire to see more and more people walking into the gallery."

+260 977 364 419; livingstoneartgallery.weebly.com. Agnes Buya Yombwe's work can be seen at WayiWayi Gallery; +260 965 559 101; facebook.com/wayiwayi

THE CLANG OF THE VILLAGE SCHOOL BELL

Tourism in Livingstone isn't all take, take, take. It seems as if every lodging and activity supports a project or 'Pack with a Purpose' initiative to supply, say, schools with notebooks. Many support local villages – and offer visits. Thorntree River Lodge's tour of Maunga is one humbling example. We got there on sandy tracks used more regularly by ox-carts – a drive that took in millet fields, fruiting trees, Meyer's parrots and the precious water pumps that allow people to survive this far from the Zambezi (15km or more). Guide Quintino Mbinji greeted a local midwife, always in need of gloves, and introduced me to a blacksmith. Kuyaba Mulonda popped a bit of metal into a ☺





tiny pile of coals, scooping them together with bare fingers, and I prepared for a long wait. But he operated a handmade ‘bellows’ fashioned from cloth- and plastic-covered fridge gas canisters, and within minutes the iron glowed red. His knives and axes are in sharp demand.

Twaambo Siyomunji, African Bush Camps Foundation’s Maunga Village project officer, walked me through a schoolyard where oblivious children played the ‘boardgame’ *nsolo* in the dust. Foundation conservation club members have written messages on the toilet walls: “Nature is a good friend if well conserved and a worst enemy if not taken care of.” Twaambo herself washed plates when she started at Thorntree, despite her developmental studies degree. Now she’s doing the work she’s always dreamt of doing. When the Foundation asked the community what they needed most, they asked for a half-built health centre to be completed, a project that had stalled for five years. The new building stood shining white in the sun. The first container of equipment had just arrived in Mozambique. The clinic will serve eight nearby villages and the community is deeply invested: we saw men offload from ox-carts sand for building toilets. One woman carried a tin of sand to add to the slow-growing pile. Every bit counts.

FLEET-FOOTED

The horses at Chundukwa River Lodge; the lodge is the base for the local polocrosse players

Twaambo’s soundtrack: The ringing of Maunga’s school bell – it is a length of salvaged railway track. african-bushcamps.com

A HORSESHOE NAIL BEING DRUMMED INTO A HOOF

Murray Evans holds the thoroughbred’s hoof in enormous arms. It takes mere moments to trim, then he’s whacking a shoe home. Murray is a fifth-generation Zambian, a master farrier, and he comes to the family’s Chundukwa River Lodge every five to six weeks to re-shoe the polocrosse and trail horses at this lovely riverside retreat. His father, Doug, was given his first horse, Copper, when he was about six – his grandfather would buy cattle from Botswana and herders on horseback would trek them to Zambia, swimming them across the river at Kazungula. The best horses on the journey obviously stood out, and Doug’s grandfather would buy them. Doug worked in Zimbabwe’s national parks for ten years before putting up four rustic chalets at Chundukwa in 1992 as a base for walking safaris (the current lodge is on a whole other comfort level).

Horses soon followed. “There were not a lot of horses in Zambia in those days,” says Doug. “I phoned the polo guys in Lusaka and asked them if they had any horses that ☺

OTHER LIVINGSTONE SOUNDS

A rafter’s scream: whitewater rafting on class four and five rapids. The annual Zambezi Whitewater Festival is two big days of timed and judged competitions, plus music. 24-27 October. safpar.com

The swish of bicycle tyres on sand: meander through neighbourhoods, villages and markets with the excellent Local Cowboy Cycle Tours. +260 977 747 837; cowboybicycle-tourslivingstone.com

Dinner plates clacking on a train: the restored Royal Livingstone Express steam train puffs to the Falls, then parks for a five-course dinner on a siding. +260 213 323 232; bushtracksafrica.com

The call of Schalow’s turaco: Savannah Southern Safaris offers birding, nature walks and cultural tours. Highly recommended. +260 213 327 282; savannah-southern-safaris.com

Zambezi on the brain: swim directly under the Falls in low water. Activity only offered in Zambia. +260 213 324 406; bunduadventures.com



hadn’t quite made the grade. Very tongue-in-cheek, they said: ‘We’ve got some – if you can catch them.’ What had happened was some farmers had bought a load of horses unseen. When they arrived, they were Namibian wild

GRUB’S UP

The Elephant Café offers elephant interactions, but no riding (left); Adelina Banda, chef extraordinaire (right)

horses... [one of many stories about their origins is that they came from a ship that sank off the coast, swam ashore and toughened up]. Big joke. Of those 12 horses we managed to train ten. They were the most amazing horses, tough, hardy. I’ve still got some of the bloodline. That’s how we started Chundukwa Horse.”

Nowadays, Doug rehabilitates racehorses, offers overnight riding trails and started polo-crosse in Zambia, including coaching for the World Cup. Chundukwa is the base for local players.

The area is not quite as wild as it once was, but elephants still pass through occasionally. Doug looks for “brave” trail horses that can stand their ground. “It’s not about training horses to behave, it’s about selecting the right one. You can get on a horse and within 20 minutes you’ll know he won’t make the grade. It’s just a connection.”

Doug’s soundtrack: Trumpeter hornbills.

The Livingstone Polocrosse Tournament is in June/July. chundukwariverlodge.com

THE SIZZLE OF MONGONGO NUT OIL

Taking a speedboat to dinner works up an appetite. The Elephant Café is considered Livingstone’s best eatery, and the tented premises slide into view on the edge of the Zambezi. Here Adelina Banda conjures up ultra-fresh fare full of local ingredients: *muchingachinga* (red, sour fruit “called monkey fingers because they grow in a bunch”), *lusala* roots, baobab. It all began when she suggested that a small white bean called *mbwila* would make an excellent substitute for chickpeas in hummus. Her life changed completely.

Adelina left school in grade eight when she became pregnant. She’d been working as a housekeeper for Chris Aston and Annabel Hughes on their farm. Annabel, a trained chef, journalist and restaurant critic in Zimbabwe, was deeply interested in local foods and the concept of suffi-



British Airways flies to Livingstone from Johannesburg daily.



ciency. “She started asking me what kind of food we ate from the bush,” Adelina says. “She saw my interest and started teaching me to cook and how to incorporate [wild foods] in dishes.” Adelina had first-hand knowledge to share. “All children would go to the bush to look for ripe fruits to eat. My grandmother loved those fruits and she’d tell me about them. She’s the one who taught me to make mongongo nut oil.”

After a few years of experimentation, Annabel was approached to head up The Elephant Café. Mongongo nuts now replace pistachios in Flor-entines served with ice cream that have guests begging for seconds. “Wild fruit is healthy and beneficial and not only eaten by people who are poor,” says Adelina. A network of local women supplies the café with produce.

Adelina’s soundtrack: The crack of the notoriously hard mongongo nut (“You find a nice big stone, then a round one, and then ‘bah!’”); gospel music.

The Elephant Café offers elephant interactions (no riding). +260 213 320 606; safpar.com/the-elephant-cafe/ ■

WHERE TO STAY

Thorntree River Lodge: an African Bush Camps property with 12 top-notch, airy suites with Zambezi views and pools; excellent staff; and a floating deck for romantic dinners. africanbush-camps.com

Toka Leya: a lovely lodge a 30-minute drive from the Falls, in Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park; impeccable Wilderness Safaris service and riverside suites; a gym with a view. wilderness-safaris.com

Chundukwa River Lodge: individually built chalets on the Zambezi River on a property threaded with paths, secluded benches and natural style. chundukwa-riverlodge.com

Avani Victoria Falls: sleep with the hum of the Falls in your ears – guests have unlimited access to the World Wonder, a five-minute walk away; convivial 212-room hotel (four suites). avanihotels.com

The Waterfront: riverside chalets, adventure village rooms and camping; catering to a younger crowd; an activity centre signing up bungy jumpers and sunset cruisers. theexplorerclubafrica.com; safpar.com