



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Lions at Victoria Falls; a new family suite at Vic Falls Safari Lodge, an Africa Albida property; sunrise at Turgwe Camp in the Humani Reserve; elephants drinking at waterhole

When someone says 'Africa', what leaps to mind? It might be a vast, arid plain dotted with game and swirling with dust clouds; or a chaotic, gritty city full of wide smiles, exotic fruits

and rickety taxis belting black smoke; maybe even a huge, inky sky, wrapping around the earth's surface so that you can almost see the curve of the horizon?

My picture of Africa is a silent, secluded pan in the middle of a private reserve in the southeast Lowveld of Zimbabwe, the epicentre of the Savé conservancy.

It starts as a snapshot, a sudden flutter of brilliant white feathers draws the eye to a cluster of bizarre, beaky birds – straight out of a Dr Seuss book – as they pick along the waterline, fishing. Then in the canopy of towering hardwoods, or the thick forest of vibrant fever trees across the water, shadowy elephants slip, spilling a cacophony of baboons into the clearing. A small herd of buffalos dip their heads in unison to drink at the water's edge.

At first you hear silence but, as you tune your eyes to minuscule movements in the foliage, a flick of grass, the glint of an eye, and your ears to distant calls or dancing leaves in a light breeze, you quickly realise that an orchestra of sound is playing out, on mute, and you are in the royal box.

Humani reserve is as remote and isolated a stretch of land as you can hope to find in this world. Forget organised safaris with rows of branded Landrovers taking a manicured path through managed 'bush'. This is among the last bastions of true wilderness.

As AA Gill said, 'You either get the point of Africa or you don't. What draws me back year after year is that it's like seeing the world with the lid off.' And nowhere



has the lid lifted quite so unceremoniously as Zimbabwe.

The topic has the same effect at a dinner party as arriving arm in arm with Nigel Farage. It's deeply polemic. Not because of the country's infamous leader – opinions on the 'beloved' don't vary much – because of the western instinct to fix and save. 'What a shame such a beautiful place is going to the dogs,' they cry, topping up their Bordeaux. 'Oh! But remember how it once was,' they wail, waving a map of the highlands.

And, of course, Zimbabwe's decline has been catastrophic. But perhaps the topic gains more heat in my kitchen than most, because my husband is Rhodesian, as are his parents – who still live in Harare. If weren't for them, I would be staying at the much-lauded and highly luxurious Singita Pamushana lodge, by far the most distinguished property in the south of Zimbabwe. It does bells-and-whistles safari in a setting of virgin bush, which, for first-time safaris or honeymooners, is hard to beat. Yet

Humani is my mother-in-law's heartland, and while I have done plenty of safaris and loved every moment, I wanted to immerse my English children in real Africa, and not a version of it that my in-laws will dismiss as 'fine, if you're a tourist'.

And so we unfold origami legs after a six-hour drive from Harare and arrive at Turgwe camp deep in Humani. It might as well be the end of the earth. From the open fronted thatch cottage, elevated high above the Turgwe river, as far as the eye can see, the riverbed and banks are teeming with birds and animals. So much so, that anything less 'ace' than a lion loses value to the kids after a few hours. The guidebook I have bought them has so many ticks that it's not even possible to read the text anymore. The place has game, but there is nothing fancy, or even luxurious, about Turgwe.

Privately owned for the past two generations, it is a critical tracking point for migration of black rhino and elephant. But for all its value in the ecological jigsaw puzzle, the threat of having the land 'redistributed' under the reform act still hangs over the heads of the family who live and work here, so the safari wagon is on its last legs and if you want valet parking, air conditioning or a crisp turndown service, you'll need to go elsewhere. Which leaves the river, the heavenly people and the great game to real wilderness hunters who are willing to schlep this far to track black rhinos, observe truly wild lions or simply braai in blissful solitude.

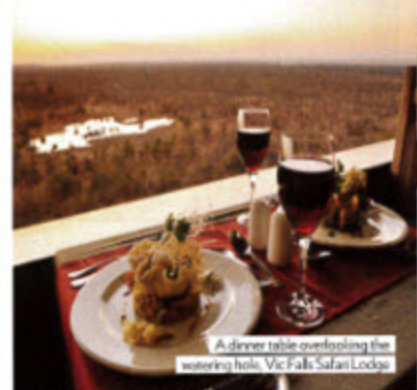
At the other end of the scale, and the country, is Vic Falls Safari Lodge. The flagship property in by far the most illustrious area of Zimbabwe (the only town that has seen a lick of paint in the past few years), the lodge is slick and stylish by any standards, and offers exemplary service and excellent facilities for families. In the lickety-split new three-bed family lodge, yours is a gargantuan villa, which backs onto open bush, with a wide terrace where you can sip your morning coffee, fiddle with your zoom lens and giggle at the baboons as they skirt the thatch, hurling the kids' flip-flops onto the roof. It's a perfect base for young families to dip a toe into safari at the nearby Stanley Livingstone private game reserve where (dehorned) white rhino abound. The evening we arrive, we take a night drive. The three generations of our family are wrapped in cosy windproof blankets and take turns to scan the bush with a spotlight. We stay out until the darkness has become dense, and finally the appearance of a bull



The mighty Zambezi launching itself over Victoria Falls on the border of Zambia



Lyn's husband and children watching game over the Turgwe river at Humani in the Savé conservancy



A dinner table overlooking the waterhole, Vic Falls Safari Lodge



Lyn's son building a camp fire at the park, Humani

elephant is both alarming and mystical.

It's up near the falls that you need to get stuck into the adventure. Book a dawn ride on horseback through the Zambezi national park (If you see a lion, don't react, keep your guide between you and the animal, and listen to his instructions.) Take a seriously swish 'booze cruise' on the Zambezi Explorer at sundown. Take a helicopter trip over the mighty Zambezi. And of course, see the Falls. Yes it's commercial, yes, you've seen postcards, watched *Planet Earth* and can rattle off facts about the volume of water. But you can't explain the sound of it hurling itself into the gorge. Not even when you have stood in a stupor for an hour, transfixed, your toes tingling at the very possibility of shuffling closer to the edge.

At the end of the day, tired little heads rest on the back of chairs in the open restaurant watching a slow parade of beasts visiting the waterhole way beneath the deck. And grown-ups sip wine and recount the day's events, turning shared experiences into family lore, before tripping home and into a deep sleep, while the soul birds catalogue the snapshots of our Africa.

Africa Travel offers a four-night stay in a two-bedroom Safari Suite at the Africa Albida Victoria Falls Safari Lodge from £1,975 per adult and £1,795 per child under 12 years, to include British Airways flights, transfers, breakfasts, and a private guided tour of the Falls (020 7843 3580; africatravel.co.uk.) For Humani reserve, bookings@humanizim.com



A suite at Africa Albida Safari Lodge