

South Africa Airlines' flight from Washington to Johannesburg is one

of the longest a traveler can take—it's 18 hours plus a fuel stop in Senegal. Worlds away, Africa is a continent more diverse in culture, language and geography than I can fathom, and last spring, my father and I set off on a trip to explore the southern region of the fabled land.

NATURAL WONDERS

After a pit stop in Johannesburg, including an overnight at the Grace Hotel, Dad and I gathered ourselves and joined our tour group for a brief flight to Livingstone, Zambia, a town near Victoria Falls.

Southern Africa
mesmerizes with
a land always ready
for its close-up.

BY LAINEY
R. SEYLER

The *Other* *Side* of the

WORLD



Residents joke that the highest point in this part of Africa is a termite mound. But it's here the Zambezi River, seemingly impossibly, plummets more than 350 feet from a plateau into a gorge. The visitor's only sign from a distance that he or she is approaching this natural wonder is the spray, which rises more than 1,300 feet above the falls. By some considerations, Victoria Falls is the largest in the world, passing some 2 million cubic feet of water per minute over its edge by the end of the rainy season.

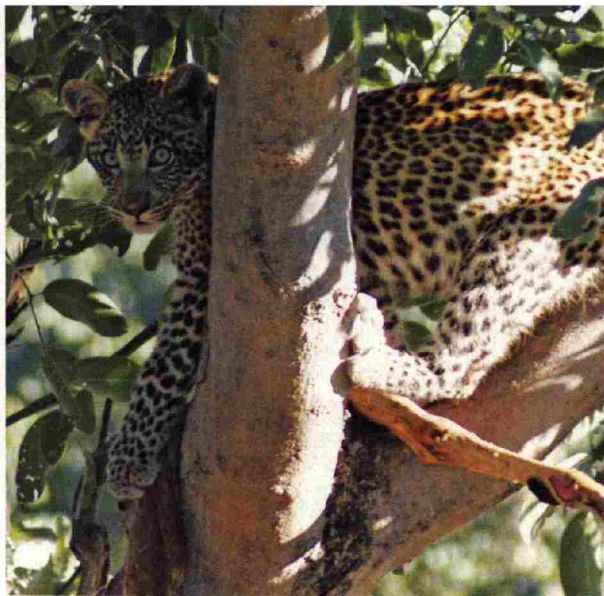
A tour of the Zambia side of the falls affords close contact with the river before it takes the plunge. Outfitted with rain ponchos, our group hiked on a paved trail to a point directly across from the falls. After this year's monumental spring rains, we could barely see the cliff through the mist of spray. We made the trek without slipping but laughing and completely soaked—even with the ponchos.

Later that day, we caught a twilight boat cruise on the Zambezi, during which we spotted vervet monkeys on the Zimbabwe side of the river, a few errant hippos, and the lively and colorful white-fronted bee-eater—a bird common enough in Zambia, but one I never grew tired of seeing.

SAFARI TIME

The following day, we passed into Botswana for the wildlife-centered portion of the trip. Botswana, South Africa and Zambia have enjoyed a prosperous decade, achieved by luring tourists to wilderness areas protected from poachers and industrial development. Botswana's government has also worked to limit the number of tourists who enter its national parks in order to promote the territory's conservation and encourage a calmer atmosphere for the animals.

Up before sunrise each morning, our group of six was in a Land Rover after breakfast, cameras and binoculars in hand. Our guide for the trip was Botswana native Francis Kudumo, who seemed to know everything about the flora and fauna of the region. Deer-like impalas crossed our path at practically every turn, and Kudumo always had something new to tell us about their coloring, horns, group dynamics or mating habits. And he knew this information for every animal we saw.



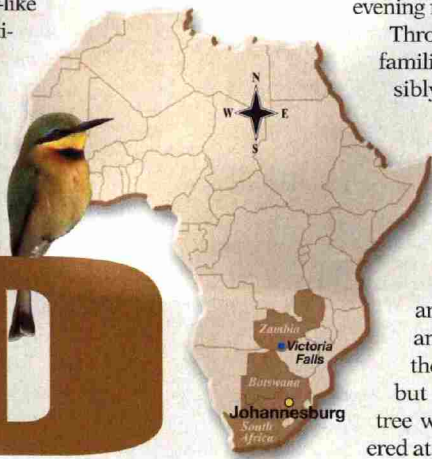
An ethereal mist envelops the bridge (left) that led the author and her father (inset) to what many consider the largest waterfall on the planet—Zambia's Victoria Falls—while an evening excursion in Botswana paid off with a wildlife encounter—a leopard consuming its prey (above).

Observing the animals was like solving a mystery of nature revealed bit by bit. Stumbling upon a herd of elephants foraging the Linyanti River, we saw how the adults shielded the youngsters from us. Kudumo told of the pachyderm's memory for every trail it travels. I was in complete awe of the symbiotic balance of nature playing out before me.

Our morning drives took us countless miles on dusty roads. We stopped mid-morning for a coffee break, then returned to camp for lunch and a siesta in the heat of the day. Following afternoon tea, we were out again for an evening ride.

Throughout, we spotted exotic raptors with prey, families of warhogs and mongooses, and impossibly colorful birds such as the lilac-breasted roller and the saddle-billed stork. We were even fortunate enough to spot a few larger predators. One night under a full moon, we happened upon a pack of wild dogs whose kill had just been stolen by a group of hyenas.

Another night, we received word of a leopard sighting. Kudumo shifted into third gear and sped to the spot. It took a while to find the cat, which had temporarily fled the scene, but patience paid off when it returned to the tree where its impala was hidden. Hyenas gathered at the base of the tree, ready to catch any stray



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morsels. We observed and snapped photos in stunned silence from the safety of the vehicle.

■ *Lainey R. Seyler*

ON THE DELTA *is assistant editor*

The third camp *of Home & Away.*

we visited was in the middle of **Botswana's** Okavango Delta. Okavango is the largest inland river delta in the world. Instead of emptying into the ocean or a lake, the Okavango River trickles through the Kalahari Desert until it evaporates.

We stayed at a camp located on an island. Traditionally, Batswana maneuver the river in canoe-like boats called *mokoros*, propelling themselves with a long pole. Hired "polers" ferried us to our campsite and on quiet early morning and evening tours.

We spent hours drifting from island to island through the delta's reeds, careful not to squish the spiders and tiny frogs that wandered into the *mokoros*. And when hiking, we were more cautious of elephants and Cape buffalo without the protection of a vehicle.

We stopped to sip wine at dusk each evening. Even on the other side of the world, the sun still sets in the west, presenting a new display for those who take time to watch it.

H&A

PLANNING YOUR TRIP

For information on Zambia and Botswana, visit www.zambiatourism.com and www.botswanatourism.us. Wilderness Safaris, which partners with Travel Beyond to handle its bookings, operates more than 60 lodges throughout southern Africa. To plan your Wilderness Safaris journey, contact Travel Beyond at (800) 823-6063 or craigb@travelbeyond.com. To receive the best value, provide your AAA member number and the contact details for your AAA Travel consultant when making an inquiry; Travel Beyond will partner with your consultant to plan your journey.

To read Seyler's Web Bonus about Wilderness Safaris' extensive conservation efforts and to see more of her images, log on to www.HomeAndAwayMagazine.com.