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## **ZIMBABWE:**

Beyond the Headlines  
The Smoke That Thunders  
Elephant Moments  
At the Water Hole

## **BEYOND THE HEADLINES**

by Brian Hesse

(From *The Just Now News*, the Cowabunga newsletter, First Edition, 2003)

There's no denying it: Zimbabwe's politics have been a mess in recent years. But, in a twisted way, this has enhanced the safari experience. Few realize that most of Zimbabwe's parks and preserves are far removed from the farms and urban areas at the heart of the recent turmoil. As a result, Cowabunga groups in recent years have had entire parks all to themselves. The wildlife in these areas carry on as they always have, protected still, and blissfully oblivious of world events. It makes for wonderful wildlife encounters.

Perhaps more so than in any other country in Africa, Zimbabwe offers opportunities for combining a wide variety of activities during one safari: treks and walks at a pace set by the individual, game-drives during the day *and* at night in open vehicles with no sides and no top, canoeing and/or boating on the Zambezi, whitewater rafting below Victoria Falls, even horseback *or* elephantback riding in animal country. Our camps are isolated and small, sometimes capable of accommodating no more than eight people; frequently elephant, cape buffalo, and other animals pass directly through them. For these reasons and others, this is why Cowabunga's founder, Gary Clarke, wishes to have part of his ashes spread here on his last safari, and why, out of all the places he could have proposed, this is where Cowabunga Safari Leader Brian Hesse asked his wife to marry him (she said yes).

Before you write-off Zimbabwe, we challenge you to look beyond the headlines.



Safaris since 1974.

## THE SMOKE THAT THUNDERS

by Gary K. Clarke

(From *The Just Now News*, the Cowabunga newsletter)

Legend says that once the mist and spray of Africa's Victoria Falls washes over you and cleanses your spirit, you are changed forever. I believe that.

Long before being known to the "outside world", Victoria Falls was held in trust by the indigenous peoples of the area. It was revered as "the smoke that thunders", with the local name of Mosi-oa-tunya. The constant level of sound from the falling water actually resembles thunder from a distance. From nearby though, the sound is a continuous roar.

The force and volume of the water creates an unceasing spray above the Falls. In turn, this spray drops back onto the adjacent area resulting in a lush "rain forest" surrounding the visitors' footpath opposite the Falls. Oftentimes the mist ascends toward the heavens to such a height that it can be seen from more than 20 miles away — and it *does* look like smoke.

At dawn, when the rising sun colors the "smoke" a vivid orange, you'd swear there was a bush fire in the rain forest.

The sheer magnitude of this natural wonder in central Africa is almost beyond comprehension. It is not the highest waterfall in the world (that would be Angel Falls in southeastern Venezuela). Nor is it divided, as is Iguazu Falls between Brazil and Argentina, which consists of some 275 separate waterfalls or cataracts. But Victoria Falls is undeniably the most dramatic, and unsurpassed in splendor and power.

As opposed to Niagra Falls, which can be viewed from the side at the top or by boat from the river below, Victoria Falls comes at you straight on.

As the Zambezi River courses between the towns of Livingstone, Zambia and Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, it spreads out to a mile in width, swirling past dozens of islands and creating a multitude of rapids, eddies and whirlpools. The River drops abruptly into a chasm over 300 feet deep. This narrow gorge (??feet) has an opposing wall at the same height as the river level, with a visitors' footpath along the edge. From the path you can stand at the edge of the gorge with the entire mighty Zambezi River raging directly towards you before its wall of water falls literally at your feet, drenching you with its force, as well as its mist.

Viewing Victoria Falls is an experience you'll never forget, and the 12<sup>th</sup> — or 25<sup>th</sup> — times are just as moving as the first.

Even as *you* are standing there, hearing the roar with your ears, feeling the cool spray on your skin, and seeing -- with your own eyes -- the largest curtain of falling water in the world, well . . . still you can't believe it.

To help understand the magnificence of Victoria Falls, try the following. Take a one gallon container (such as a plastic milk jug) filled with water, and pour that water into another container. Watch it carefully as it ebbs and flows. Note the splash and sparkle. Listen to the noise it makes. Observe the fluidity and independent droplets of this life giving substance.

So, you've just seen a one gallon waterfall. Now think of one hundred gallons (100

plastic gallon jugs stacked against a wall). Now visualize a thousand gallons of water. Now a million. A *million* gallons of water.

This next is a quantum leap. But stick with me.

Now go from a million gallons to a hundred and forty million gallons. Yes. One-hundred-and-forty-million-gallons-of-water! That's how much water pours over Victoria Falls at high season . . . not in a year, not in a month, not in a week, not in a day, not in an hour . . . but every minute! One-hundred-and-forty-million-gallons-of-water e-v-e-r-y m-I-n-u-t-e. THAT IS VICTORIA FALLS. 140,000,000 gallons

The famed medical missionary and explorer Dr. David Livingstone did more than any other man, before or since, to map the interior of Africa. In his travels he traced the length of the Zambezi, from source to mouth. Much of his exploration, particularly along the middle Zambezi, was in the company of Sekeluti, Chief of the Makololo.

Both the chief and the missionary had often heard of Mosi-oa-tunya, but neither had seen it. On 17 November 1855 they paddled in light canoes toward the Great Falls, seeing the mist and hearing the roar. Approaching at a speed which made even Livingstone feel "a little tremor", they disembarked on an island at the lip of the Falls. Carefully making his way to the edge, Dr. Livingstone's first view of the Falls was from his hands and knees. He was overwhelmed at the majesty — "the most wonderful sight I had witnessed in Africa".

He named the Falls after his Queen — Victoria, 'the only English name I have affixed to any part of the country'. As this was long before human capability of flight, Livingstone was extremely perceptive when he wrote "scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight". (Today one can take the "Flight of the Angels" over Victoria Falls in a light aircraft, helicopter or micro-light).

On 5 November 1998 I had the privilege of reenacting Dr. Livingstone's first view of the Falls. It was easy to imagine myself in his place. Being out on the Zambezi River just above the Falls in a boat is scary, even with an outboard motor. Water is rushing and swirling all around as we navigate between jagged rocks and huge deadfalls. I kept thinking about all the stories of animals being swept over the edge — even hippos and crocodiles! The boat seemed rather feeble. As we drifted toward Livingstone Island with the motor cut I, too, felt "a little tremor"! What a relief to set foot on solid land, even if it was in the middle of the rushing Zambezi.

As I walked through the hot dense vegetation of the island I sensed Livingstone's awe, as well as the fact that little had changed in the past 143 years. Stepping out in the sunlight onto the exposed basalt I found the footing treacherous, and nearly fell several times. I walk with a bit of difficulty anyway, and my sense of balance is not good. Yes, I did ask myself "Why am I doing this?" But I was nearing the edge and felt compelled to experience this most significant moment in the history of African exploration.

Despite the rough and sharp-edged rocks, I crawled to the precipice on my hands and knees and peered down to the bottom of the gorge. Even at great heights I normally do not experience vertigo, but the sight of the waters beside me hurling deep into the narrow fissure with a deafening roar made my head spin. I thought, "If I slip off the edge, I'm dead".

So much water — such force, such power, such beauty! The leaping clouds of spray,

the iridescent rainbows, the condensing vapor over the lush vegetation. Now I knew how Livingstone must have felt, a feeling so different than that felt when seeing the Falls from the usual vantage point. The first time I saw Victoria Falls was from across the gorge on the Zimbabwe side. That view will always be special in my memories of Africa. But to experience the "first view" as did Livingstone . . . AHHH. . that truly served to refuel my passion for the spirit of Mosi-ao-tunya.



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## **ELEPHANT MOMENTS**

by Nancy Cherry

(From *The Just Now News*, the Cowabunga newsletter, First Edition, 2001)

Recently on Safari I had some of the most incredible elephant moments I've ever experienced.

Picture this: we're camped on the banks of the Zambezi River in Mana Pools National Park in Zimbabwe. We have seven tents all in a row facing the river, which has plenty of hippos and crocodiles, but is still a glorious water to canoe in.

One afternoon I elected to stay by myself in camp while others in the group either went canoeing, on a game drive or a bush walk. It was so lovely and peaceful, but not entirely quiet. There were always birds chirping, as well as the sounds of the camp staff - the ones who make the camp so delightful for the rest of us. They make our beds, clean our tents, wash and iron our clothes, prepare, cook, and serve our food, and bring us hot water for wash-ups in the morning and showers later in the day. I could just barely hear the murmur of their voices as they did their work and it was a delightful background sound as I was catching up in my Journal.

As I was sitting outside writing I 'felt' the presence of another being. When I turned around I saw an elephant ambling toward me, slowly sweeping the ground with his trunk and putting pods in his mouth. That's when I realized with dismay that my camera was in my tent which was only about 15 feet away. The elephant was about 50 feet so I worked up the courage to creep to the tent. Thank goodness there was film in the camera.

Each day we had seen a few elephants come into camp so I wasn't afraid. Because it is a popular campsite there are frequently humans. The elephants are by no means tame but they are used to the sounds of a camp, smell of diesel and campfires, the odor of humans and really don't bother anyone. They come in this time of year for one of their favorite foods - apple ring acacia pods. And if there are not enough on the ground they just shake the tree and the pods come tumbling down. These are mostly young bulls with pretty good sized tusks.

As the elephant walked down the row of tents towards me I was shooting photos like mad. I was standing outside my tent (I feel safer with something behind me) when he came so close that all I was getting through the lens was wrinkled grey skin which filling the frame - and I didn't have the telephoto on. I was standing by the tent flap when the elephant walked within three feet of me. I am only 5'3" tall, and he seemed like a moving Empire State Building! It was incredible. As he towered over me I had never felt so insignificant in my life. And just a little scared.

He passed the front of our tent and turned the corner. I went into the tent to look out the window. The elephant gently stepped over the guy ropes of the tent and continued to sweep the ground for pods while his tusk grazed the mesh window over my bed. I was actually afraid he would poke a hole in the mesh but he didn't.

Alone with an elephant on the banks of the Zambezi is very very special. And people wonder why I keep going back to Africa.



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## **AT THE WATER HOLE**

by Cowabunga Alumnus, Bwana Bob Burke

(From *The Just Now News*, the Cowabunga newsletter, Third Edition, 1999)

Out of the shadows they came — huge, lumbering but graceful giants with that distinctive swinging, rhythmic, ground-eating stride that, once seen, is never forgotten. Out of the bush they came, in what seemed to be endless columns of gray, almost ghost-like shapes — all sizes — all drawn as if by a magnet to that life-sustaining commodity — water. For it was July, the dry season in the Zimbabwe bush — rain had not fallen since January and there would be at least four months before the rains would fall again. The only water was at waterholes, scattered throughout Hwange National Park, and some of them were dry. All creatures, great and small, that inhabit that area of the African bush, were making their daily visit to the remaining open holes in search of that precious life-giving water.

There was order in the scene, as there is always order in nature. No one argues with an elephant, so the smaller creatures maintained a respectful distance, waiting their turns. Or, if the waterhole was not too crowded, a giraffe might drink a few feet away from an elephant. But the zebra, the waterbuck, the impala, the wildebeest, even the buffalo, and all the smaller creatures keep a wary eye out for their huge companions — and for the predators that lurk in the shadows waiting for their evening meal. Lion, leopard, hyena, wild dog, jackal — all come to the water, not only to drink but to eat!



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