



JOINED AT THE HIPPO

Zora Avila embarks on a memorable safari through Zambia in southern Africa, her journey uniting wilderness and adventure.

Separated from the untamed waters of the lower Zambezi by a thin sheet of fibreglass, there is nothing between me and a dominant bull hippopotamus besides my canoe, my camera and about 30 metres of open river.

The canoe feels like it shrinks appreciably as soon as I push away from the riverbank, and with the first oar stroke by Nevers – my trusty safari guide seated behind me – the hippo raises its head a little further and decisively positions itself directly in our path.

“He can be a bit of a problem,” whispers Nevers as he manoeuvres our canoe, cautiously giving our increasingly belligerent friend a wide berth.

Nevers is right to be vigilant. Without warning, the enormous bull hippo launches at full charge toward us, mouth wide and baring huge incisors with unmistakable purpose.

Instantly, Nevers leans towards the hippo and, with the loudest yell, slaps the water with his oar, causing the hippo to pause momentarily and reassess. Thankfully, it’s all that’s needed to warn him from advancing further. And with a couple of powerful oar strokes, Nevers steers us away from danger.

We’re only five minutes into our 12.5-kilometre canoe expedition on the lower Zambezi – downstream of our remote yet sophisticated safari lodge, Sausage Tree Camp – and the adrenaline is already pumping.

The rest of our trip is no less enthralling. The river is peppered with

opportunities for experiences that cannot be replicated in motorised boats, such as close encounters with delicate Malachite kingfishers, glimpses of Nile crocodiles basking in the sun and various other African wildlife.

Our Zambian canoe journey certainly elicits an acute awareness of our natural surroundings, with the silence and proximity to the environment changing the essence of our wildlife interactions.

Our hippo encounter is just one of many memorable and impactful experiences on our 10-day itinerary with leading luxury tour operator Abercrombie & Kent, our journey a modified version of the group’s normally 12-day Southern Africa Safari Adventure. While the usual route crosses three countries (Zambia, South Africa and Botswana), we’ll be focusing on the former, taking in the lower and upper Zambezi and iconic Victoria Falls.

Ahead of the game

It’s late afternoon when we arrive in Lower Zambezi National Park, flying in from the Zambian capital Lusaka and then collected from the Jeki Airstrip by a 4WD safari vehicle for the first leg of our hour-long journey to the remote Sausage Tree Camp.

Our safari starts immediately, as our transfer coincides with optimal game-viewing time, in the rays of the setting sun. We spot waterbuck, warthog, zebra and more, before arriving at the Zambezi River, where we board a small, open runabout-style boat.

01 Hippos are a common sight throughout Zambia © Dan Avila
02 A tent with a view at Sausage Tree Camp



03 An elephant wading across the river 04 Victoria Falls' iconic rainbow 05 The main pool at Sausage Tree Camp 06 Zambia's birdlife is as spectacular as its big game 07 Catching a stare from a lioness 03, 04, 06, 07 © Dan Avila



A layer of dust hovers across the horizon as the sun drops, delivering spectacular gold, rose pink and purple hues reflected on the mirror-still surface of the river.

Our arrival at Sausage Tree Camp is just after sunset. The seven large, white Bedouin-style tents are spread out along the river's bank and sheltered by large mahogany trees, with the camp illuminated by candles. It is indulgent, private and beautiful.

After dark, all movement around the camp is with an escort, as elephant, hippo and other creatures frequently wander between the suites. But not only at night. Heading for a late breakfast during our stay, I open our door to be confronted by a large bull elephant enjoying a casual feed just metres away.

The camp's style is perfect for this setting, and while fully air-conditioned, each luxury tent has screens allowing the cool riverine breeze to deliver delightful sleeping conditions – if you can sleep through the sounds of grunting hippos.

Each morning, there's a buzz of anticipation as we set off in open safari vehicles for game drives, travelling through varied terrain, from dense forest to open savannah and marshland, and along the banks of the river.

The waters of the Lower Zambezi National Park are teeming with wildlife, making the river safari a wonderful afternoon alternative. The herds of hippo around the camp are astounding, and while they aggressively defend their territory, even the bulls acquiesce to groups of elephants bathing in the river.

It's home to the legendary Victoria Falls – or Mosi-oa-Tunya, 'The smoke that thunders', as it's known locally – which is a must-see on any visit to southern Africa.

Our late morning arrival coincides with optimal light for photography, with rays penetrating the waterfall's cavernous rift and soaring cliff face, illuminating its spray to create a beautiful rainbow.

We check in to Sanctuary Sussi & Chuma, the retreat's treehouse accommodation linked by suspended wooden walkways. The main lodge is at ground level and, as we find out while enjoying dinner outdoors one evening, in the middle of the path a local elephant herd likes to take.

Setting out on our game drive, we notice the herbivores are more relaxed with no predatory cats in their vicinity. Rather than move away from our 4WD vehicle, they purposefully meander toward us, surrounding our now stationary vehicle, inching ever closer.

"The baby is only two weeks old," our guide explains as the newborn approaches us. Its trunk bounces around without dexterity, randomly flopping against the side of our vehicle.

A curious juvenile bull notices our cameras, leaning in to inspect them, then raising his trunk carefully as if preparing for contact. He pauses for a moment at the sound of a camera shutter and rethinks his move, while the herd slowly disperses. We're left exhilarated at yet another extraordinary Zambian encounter. ♦

Falling for Zambia

On the outskirts of the Zambian city of Livingstone is Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park, a World Heritage site that is our next, and final, Zambian destination along the upper Zambezi.

Travel file

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