

# Safari sailings

A cruise across Lake Kariba shows this region of southern Africa in a new light, writes [Alex Spencer](#)

The unbroken cobalt blue of the African sky, fronted by a line of umbrella-like mopane trees, is suddenly interrupted by a shadowy movement and the Jeep driver, knowing the telltale signs, pulls over and switches off the engine.

We gasp collectively as a huge cow elephant emerges from the undergrowth, casts an oblivious eye around, and ambles purposefully past, followed by a small herd with some excitable babies among its number.

As we click away with cameras or gaze in awe, our guide explains that the matriarch – the oldest and largest female – is setting the day's agenda for a family group encompassing relatives including aunts, sisters and daughters.

We'd come hoping to see elephants but certainly didn't expect to see so many within minutes of arriving in Chobe National Park. In fact, as the

reserve has no fences, we'd even seen a couple grazing by the road on the way to the park, which is home to one of the world's largest elephant populations.

Ask most people what they might expect on a river cruise and they're more likely to say castles than crocodiles and historic buildings as opposed to hippos, but an African sailing is a world away – in every sense – from its European equivalents.

## BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Firstly, CroisiEurope's southern Africa safari itinerary is not all waterborne, offering the best of both worlds for maximising wildlife-spotting opportunities.

After a day and night in Johannesburg, including a tour of Nelson Mandela's township of Soweto and the Apartheid Museum, we flew to Botswana, followed by a short transfer across the Zambezi

River for three nights in the line's 16-guest Cascades Lodge, set on a private Namibian island.

Staff welcomed us with an exuberant song and dance followed by cocktails on the terrace before we settled into luxurious bungalows, all with plunge pools overlooking the river.

As I freshened up, I was lucky enough to spot one of the two hippos that regularly break away from the rest of the bloat – the wonderfully appropriate collective noun for these semi-aquatic mammals. In the ensuing days we see many, and they seem as transfixed by us as we are with them, turning their heads and swivelling their disproportionately small, round ears towards us as we pass. ➔

A hippo at Lake Kariba, Zimbabwe



Clockwise from top: river safari; elephant in Matusadona National Park; African Dream on the Zambezi River; birdlife in Chobe



## RIVER RIDES

Our days at the lodge are leisurely, with no huge rush to get up for early-morning game drives as on some safaris. In fact, with the density of animals you're always going to see something, and along with elephants, our trip to Chobe brought skittish impala, playful baboons, a pair of lions snoozing under a tree and all manner of birdlife including jewel-bright lilac-breasted rollers and marabou storks, to name just a few of the 400-plus birds that can be spotted in the park.

Each day we boarded the lodge's small safari craft to potter along the Chobe and Zambezi rivers to take photos of crocodiles basking stock-still on the banks, one-and-a-half-metre-tall goliath herons and, of course, more hippos.

One morning we went for a village walk on an adjoining island, discovering how locals weave intricate mats from reeds and recycled sacking and ending with another high-spirited dance display beneath a spreading banyan tree, with some members of the group joining in.



PICTURES: CROISIEUROPE; ALEXANDRE SATTLER; KEVIN HOGAN



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## EXTRAORDINARY SIGHTS

The second section of the itinerary, as captivating as the first, takes us to Lake Kariba in Zimbabwe to board *African Dream*, which sails this sector alongside sister ship *Zimbabwean Dream*. The world's largest artificial lake, over 140 miles long and up to 25 miles in width, was formed when a dam was built in the 1950s to supply hydro-electricity to Zimbabwe and neighbouring Zambia.

Kariba's most amazing feature is the petrified forest of drowned trees, their branches emerging from the lake and providing high roosts and nesting spots



## African Dream

Launched in 2018, the small but perfectly formed *African Dream* is a bright, modern vessel with eight outside-facing double cabins, two with small balconies. The decor features eye-catching local artworks, which many passengers ask about purchasing (alas, they're not for sale).

Meals are sociable affairs, often at a communal table depending on the number of passengers, and the open bar and free-flowing wine add to the cordial onboard vibe. The fare also includes an enforced 'digital detox' as the ship has no Wi-Fi or TVs and the phone signal is virtually non-existent.

Crew members are delightful, beating African drums to herald mealtime and singing and dancing on the last night.

**BOOK IT:** CroisiEurope offers a nine-day sailing on board *African Dream* from £5,007 departing March 30, 2022, or 13 days from £7,045 departing March 26, with additional days in Cape Town and the Cape of Good Hope. Both include meals, drinks, internal flights and transfers, a three-night lodge stay and three nights on Lake Kariba; international flights not included. [croisieurope.co.uk](http://croisieurope.co.uk)

for white-breasted cormorants and magnificent cream-and-brown African fish eagles, the national bird of Namibia, Zimbabwe and Zambia.

Again, days are interspersed with excursions on *African Dream's* safari boat to Matusadona National Park, where we are rewarded with the sight of giraffe and zebra, and sailings on the lake from *African Dream's* various mooring spots. Afternoons bring atmospheric sunset sailings on the small boat where our guide magically conjures up gin and tonics and snacks as the improbably bright ball of orange sun dips over the horizon.

Back on board we gather in the bar to raise another toast to a memorable day with the signature mosquito cocktail, a very drinkable, but deceptively potent, mix of white rum, lime, orange juice and soda.

## TRAVELLING THRILLS

On this trip the actual travelling adds to the sense of adventure. Passing between different countries involves border crossings, which can be time-

consuming and may involve additional red tape in light of varying pandemic travel restrictions, but with CroisiEurope filling out all the necessary paperwork in advance they remain relatively hassle-free.

Flights to and from *African Dream* are aboard baby propeller aircraft, with the chance to sit next to the pilot. But it's important to note you need to travel light and with soft bags – CroisiEurope provides detailed information. The alternative is to leave luggage behind at the lodge and pay for it to be delivered later.

That said, I was faced with a different kind of excess luggage issue when I chose to take an optional helicopter ride over Victoria Falls, where the itinerary ends.

All passengers are weighed individually before boarding and the digital read-out was more than I expected, testimony no doubt to the week's delicious meals and open bar. Still, it was worth it for a spectacular flight ending a memorable river cruise with a difference. ●