

Falling for the falls

Famous for its thundering waters and high-adrenaline activities, Victoria Falls is now widening its appeal with new hotels, spas and attractions. **Nigel Tisdall** reports

The largest waterfall in the world certainly lives up to expectations. As I stand beside the Devil's Cataract, overwhelmed by the sight of triple rainbows and the ceaseless roar of water cascading into the chasm below, it is easy to appreciate why this World Heritage-listed wonder is a must-see on any southern Africa itinerary.

"Traditionally, Victoria Falls has always been the first or last stop on a tour," says Jamie Henson, a young Zimbabwean who recently opened a 19-room boutique hotel, Shongwe Oasis, in a leafy residential neighbourhood. "This means our guests arrive exhausted, either from a long overnight flight or after days of early starts and dusty, bumpy game drives."

To create a relaxing ambience, Henson has made his designer bolthole adult-only, invested in a \$5,000 coffee machine and added an intimate spa that offers treatments using baobab milk and African green clay. This step-up is typical of the upbeat mood in a close-knit town of 35,000

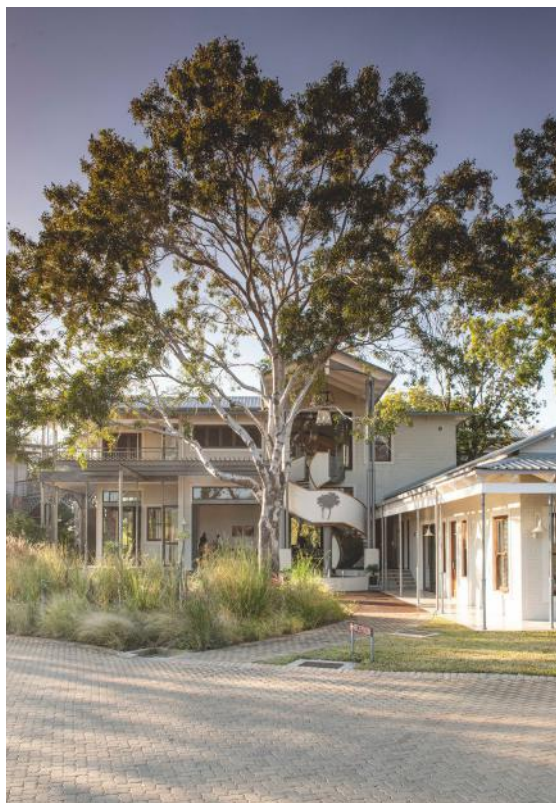
residents, keen to dispel the hackneyed view that Victoria Falls is only for backpackers queuing to make a full-screen bungee jump off the mighty 1905 railway bridge that straddles the Zimbabwe-Zambia border.

"Are the young getting soft?" wonders Mike Davis, the British chief executive of Shearwater Adventures, which has been organising tourist activities here since 1984. "In the 1990s we were doing 20 white-water rafting trips a day – now it's half that."

This year the company will open a 150-seat open-air theatre in the town centre, reflecting its transition to a more rounded leisure destination. Other initiatives appealing to families and older travellers include the vintage-look Bamba Tram that trundles across to Zambia, and the steam-pulled dinner train Bushtracks Express, which relaunched in June. E-bike rentals have also arrived, although it pays to remember Victoria Falls is surrounded by national parks and wild animals frequently come ➤

Victoria Falls

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Yury Birukov



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Palm River Hotel; Pioneers Victoria Falls; Victoria Falls Safari Lodge PICTURE: Elsa Young

into town. If your taxi driver arrives late and says, "Sorry, there was an elephant on the road," he isn't lying.

NEW OPENINGS

"My vision was to create an elegant camp in town," says Mati Nyazema, owner of the high-end, all-suite Mbano Manor Hotel, which became part of Accor's conservation-focused Mantis Collection in June. Set in a four-acre teak forest with a small pool, it's one of several impressive new or upgraded properties to emerge from the doldrums of Covid.

Of these, the standout newcomer is the five-star Palm River Hotel on the banks of the Zambezi. Here guests can take a dreamy sunset cruise aboard *Ra-Ikane*, a 40ft, vintage-style boat, then enjoy a riverside barbecue with hippos and elephants just yards away. Further plus points are a cut-above buffet breakfast, complimentary afternoon tea and an on-demand shuttle to and from town during the day.

Not to be outdone, the large and well-established Victoria Falls Safari Lodge, which has fabulous views over a waterhole, has been steadily refurbishing its rooms and added an excellent standalone spa last November. "Our guests asked for it," says general manager Anald Musonza, "and more of them now stay for three nights."

To escape the tour-group rush here, consider checking clients into the adjacent Victoria Falls Safari Club, which is more exclusive with a mere 20 rooms and perks galore.

For those who appreciate spacious gardens, new-build Pioneers Victoria Falls has a gracious feel with two pools and an airy terrace restaurant, while luxury lodge The Elephant Camp, 20 minutes out of town, has added highly romantic star beds to three of its tented suites.

LOCAL FLAVOUR

These days you're nothing if you don't have a locally made gin and craft beer. Victoria Falls now has both at the River Brewing Co, which

also has live music at the weekends. For a taste of Zimbabwean cuisine, seek out the colourfully decorated Dusty Road restaurant in the Chinotimba neighbourhood, where dishes include Zambezi bream and a hearty beef stew with a thick cornmeal porridge called *sazda*.

Find time too for a sundowner at the venerable Victoria Falls Hotel, with killer views of the railway bridge and clouds of spray rising from the falls. Even here there is evidence of the destination's revival, as rooms are steadily upgraded ahead of the grande dame's 120th anniversary next year. ➤

BOOK IT

Lusso Travel offers four nights at Victoria Falls Safari Club from £3,358 per person including BA flights via Johannesburg, transfers, park fees, breakfast and laundry. The holiday also includes a guided visit to the falls, helicopter flight, bike tour, *Ra-Ikane* river cruise and lunch at Dusty Road. lussotravel.com

3 PLACES TO STAY

The Palm River Hotel: This Queensland-style property has 73 river-facing rooms (including two that are wheelchair-accessible) set in three-storey blocks with a spa and fitness centre. Rooms from \$426, B&B, based on two sharing. palmriverhotel.com

Pioneers Victoria Falls: A four-star hotel with 50 rooms, plus a one-room spa and a restaurant serving ostrich and kudu. Rooms from \$250, B&B, based on two sharing. pioneersvicfalls.com

Mbano Manor Hotel Victoria Falls by Mantis: Surrounded by trees and birdlife, Mbano's 18 suites and one butler-service villa come with uniformed staff and an inviting sense of sanctuary. Rooms from \$415, B&B, based on two sharing. mantiscollection.com

NEED TO KNOW

- ✿ Fly overnight via Johannesburg (BA), Nairobi (Kenya Airways), Addis Ababa (Ethiopian Airways) or Frankfurt (Eurowings Discover).
- ✿ Visas (\$55) are available on arrival.
- ✿ High season is July to November when it is dry. The falls are most impressive in May/June; September to November is good for wildlife.
- ✿ Take US dollars. Credit cards may attract a surcharge.
- ✿ Malaria precautions are advised.
- ✿ Learn more: wearevictoriafalls.com