

SUNLIGHT CATCHES THE
CASCADING PILLARS OF THE
ZAMBEZI RIVER AS THEY POUR
OVER VICTORIA FALLS

GREAT THUNDERING SMOKE

Climbing into a microlight then onto a river boat
to experience Victoria Falls and the Zambezi,
CHARUKESI RAMADURAI basks in the full glory of
Mother Nature during her Zambian sojourn

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES; CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

VICTORIA FALLS IS determined to live up to its local name of Mosi-oa-Tunya — the smoke that thunders. Indeed, the spray from the falls is so dense that it seems to cast a cloak over the entire landscape in front of me. As I walk towards the first viewpoint, I feel raindrops falling on my face. I look up at the sunny skies and frown.

My guide Sim laughs at my perplexed face and points to the Zambezi river in the distance plummeting into an invisible gorge way down below, throwing up a ferocious spray. By the time we walk to the other viewing platforms closer to the falls, this gentle mist turns into a forceful shower. I am drenched to my skin, the yellow plastic poncho hired from a local vendor flapping ineffectively.

Right on the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe in southern Africa, Victoria Falls is the stuff of superlatives — Unesco World Heritage Site. One of the seven Natural Wonders of the World. Twice the size of Niagara Falls — but nothing has

THE PATH TO KNIFE-EDGE BRIDGE: OPPOSITE PAGE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): A CRUISE ON ZAMBEZI RIVER YIELDS STUNNING LANDSCAPES AND ANIMAL SIGHTINGS; WET BUT HAPPY LOCALS AT VICTORIA FALLS; MOSI-OA-TUNYA NATIONAL PARK IS ONE OF THE FEW PLACES WHERE THE WHITE RHINO HAS BEEN RESCUED FROM POACHING

prepared me for the actual sight. Of course, given that it extends for over 1.7 km, it is possible to only catch a small slice of it from any point. But even the merest peek is enough to inspire awe, especially the straight stretch visible from the theatrically named "Danger Point."

As I cross the Knife-edge Bridge — a footbridge connecting two separate parts of the gorge — I can barely see ahead because of the mist. Stepping gingerly onto the slippery path, I see a young boy in front of me slip and fall. And just as I reach out to help him up, his friends start laughing. Soon, every one in this group of pre-teen boys has started skating and sliding, competing to see who falls hardest.

Far in the distance, I could see the abandoned Victoria Falls Railway Bridge, which marks a boundary of sorts between the two countries. This ambitious project was commissioned by British politician Cecil Rhodes with the idea of connecting Cape Town to Cairo. It never took off, and the steel-arched bridge is now used mainly as a bungee jumping spot by adrenalin junkies who fearlessly dive straight into the Zambezi.

Finally, when it is time to head back to my hotel — the plush Avani Victoria Falls Resort just a couple of minutes' walk away — the smoke and the sound seem to follow me. It is only with great reluctance that I walk towards the main gate, turning back every few feet for that last glimpse of the Vic.

But it is only later in the evening, flying in a microlight aircraft several hundred feet above the ground — in fact, right above the roar of the falls — I get a sudden flash of insight into Scottish missionary David



Livingstone's reaction to this awesome spectacle. The first European to see the falls in 1855, he is believed to have exclaimed that these "scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight."

I feel like a bit of an angel myself, tightly belted next to Pascal, my pilot from Zimbabwe, who swings the tiny aircraft with practised nonchalance. He keeps up a steady chatter, pointing out the sights, partly to assuage my nervousness and partly to play tourist guide. I am terrified for the first few minutes of this joy ride on a two-seater plane that looks more like a tuk-tuk taken to the skies, especially as I find out that there is no handrail to hold on to. But Pascal orders me to just sit back and relax. "You'll forget everything else in a minute," he says in the manner of someone who has been there, done this several times.

Soon after take-off, we fly straight towards what seems like a thick cloud of mist (that Pascal says can be seen from over 30 miles away). "Mosi-oa-Tunya", I repeat to myself silently, marvelling at how the ancient tribes had coined the perfect description. Just as I am trying to control that churn of fear deep in my stomach, a rainbow appears in the horizon, gleaming cheerily through the haze enveloping the falls. And I truly forget everything else in that moment.

Pascal flies over the Zimbabwe border briefly to offer a glimpse of the falls from the "other side" before we spot the Zambezi river beneath us. The source of this thundering force of nature, the Zambezi looks deceptively serene from up in the air. He completes a couple of loops to show off his impressive flying skills — and to be fair, to also

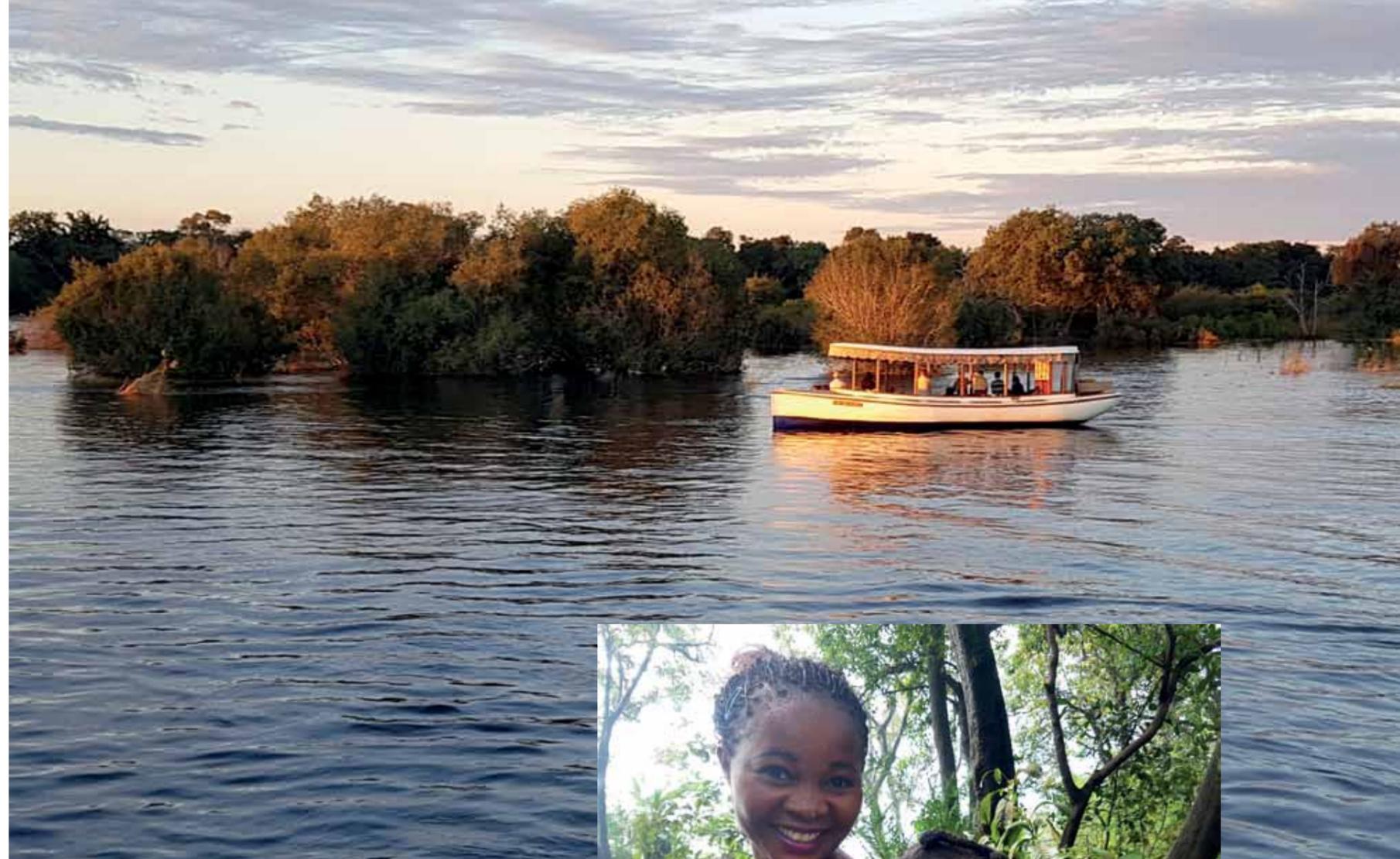
show off the magnificence of the Vic from various angles — before heading back to the base.

As we touch down after a full 15 minutes later of this fun, I realise that I am still holding my breath; it's a heady mix of the sight of multiple rainbows over the water and the feel of the cool breeze on my cheeks.

Feeling light in the head, I later step aboard the *African Queen* for a sunset cruise on the Zambezi. We glide languidly over the river that is calm at this point, the sheer drop of the falls just a few kilometres away. Dozens of colourful birds give us company for the next couple of hours, with the occasional hippo peeping out of the water to open its massive jaws for a formidable yawn. As we return to the dock, the sun sets slowly over the Zambezi, painting the African skies a bright palette of pinks and purples.

The next morning, it is an early start for a safari into the Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park in search of the rhino.

By the standards of other African forests like Kenya's Masai Mara and South Africa's Kruger, this one is tiny (surprisingly, its official borders encompass the Victoria Falls). But it is unspoilt territory, few tourists finding their way this far. We drive past usual suspects like zebras and



antelopes, with a few giraffes raising their heads from deep inside the bush upon hearing the sound of our jeep.

The highlight of this forest is the walking safari at the end of the drive. We get off and walk in single file behind the forest ranger to track the elusive white rhino. Thanks to the fierce protection against poaching by these dedicated rangers, the rhino population has been slowly but steadily growing in this region in the last few years.

The forest is utterly silent this early in the

day, only the dry grass under our feet crackling as we follow our guide, keeping our eyes peeled. But he knows exactly where the prize is, and at the end of a short hike, we come upon it — an adult rhino along with its baby. As we watch this pastoral family scene respectfully from a distance, I offer up silent thanks for the various forms of nature I got to see on this trip. ■