

The sights and sounds of the African bush in Zimbabwe & Botswana rekindled fond memories for FAIRLADY staffer Caryn McCarthy.

A RIVER RUNS through it



THE ZAMBEZI QUEEN FLOATS ON THE CHOBE RIVER BETWEEN NAMIBIA AND BOTSWANA.



RIGHT: PANORAMIC VIEWS FROM THE BED IN MY GORGEOUS ROOM, ON THE ZAMBEZI QUEEN. THIS PIC: IMPALA GRAZE, EARS TWITCHING, IN THE SETTING SUN AT THE STANLEY AND LIVINGSTONE PRIVATE GAME RESERVE.



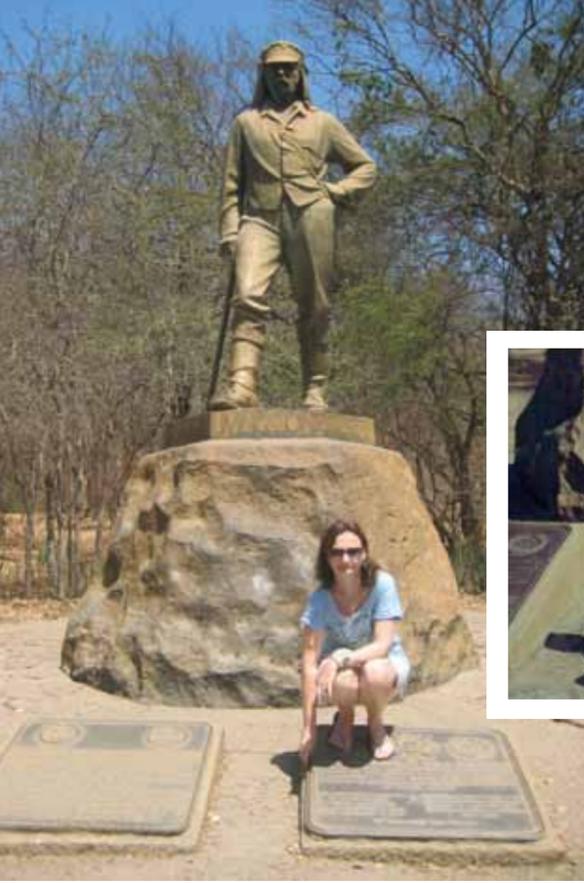
I was born in Zimbabwe, and my family immigrated to South Africa when I was 15. My childhood was an extremely happy one, so the day we took off from Harare Airport in 1982, leaving family, the ashes of my father, and my dog – with memories of long, hot, happy days – was difficult for me.

You can imagine my delight when FAIRLADY was offered a trip to Botswana and Zimbabwe and I was given the opportunity to revisit my homeland, with its heat, birdsong, bush sounds, smells and afternoon thunderstorms. I knew this journey would ignite my soul, that the sights and sounds would reach back into my memory banks, bringing the wonderful experiences I had left behind to the fore, and I hoped I'd be able to reconnect with my ancestry.

The big day dawns: I pack my bags, kiss my children goodbye and board the plane in Cape Town at six in the morning. Our connecting flight from Joburg to Botswana's Kasane Airport is a quick one-and-a-half hours. As we descend,



RIGHT: MY PASSPORT WITH ALL THE STAMPS FROM THE VARIOUS BORDER POSTS. BE WARNED, THERE ARE A LOT OF THEM. THIS PIC: SUNRISE FROM MY PRIVATE DECK ON THE BOAT.



BELOW: THIS PIC OF ME AT 4 WAS TAKEN BY MY FATHER. LEFT: ME AT THE SAME SPOT, 42 YEARS LATER. RIGHT: MY SKETCH OF TRAVELMATE LERATO AT THE POOL. I LOVED HER BLUE SUNGLASSES...



Travel tips

MUST PACK Sunscreen

Lots of it. I highly recommend Piz Buin In Sun Ultra Light Sun Spray SPF30. It smells gorgeous and works like a bomb. On my face, I used Eucerin Sun Creme SPF 50+ and, between the two, I did not burn once (I have a very fair skin).

Malaria tablets, and mosquito repellents

I strongly advise taking the more expensive anti-malarial tablets, Malanol, as they appear to have no side effects. In the evenings the mosquitoes are out in full force, so pack light trousers and a long-sleeved shirt to cover up as much as possible. I used Peaceful Sleep or Tabard Stick on my feet and hands.

Sarong

I swear by these. In summer, I practically live in them. They dry easily and I would have burnt terribly without one, especially at the Falls.

Binoculars

The bird life is prolific and I wish I'd packed a pair of binocs, especially on the Chobe River. A pocket-sized bird book (or an app on your phone) is also a good idea.



THE MAGNIFICENT VICTORIA FALLS

rhythm. A group of Mexican women, all in their 70s and, we later discover, all widows, is just ahead of us. Foundation running, lipstick disappearing into the cracks of their mouths,

they heckle with officials over a lost bag. Fortunately, all our baggage is accounted for, and we leave the squabbling behind.

The first leg of our trip is on the Chobe River, aboard the *Zambezi Queen* – a three-tiered houseboat, luxurious and slick. She is moored on the Namibian side of the river, and a small boat takes us across from the Botswana bank. Luggage loaded and passports stamped, we set off, the breeze a welcome relief as the temperature hits the high 30s.

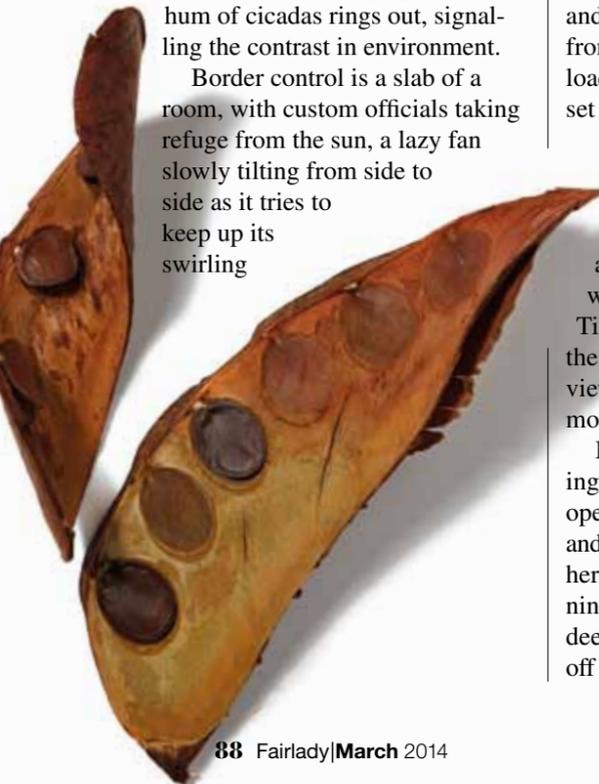
The Queen is beautiful, and to spend time on a vessel anchored in a river surrounded by wildlife is a glorious experience. Time stands still, and you rock with the gentle flow of the river, your view constantly changing as she moves with the currents.

Early in the morning the following day, and the boat is still asleep. I open the doors to my private balcony and sit down and listen. I do this often here – just listen. The bush is beginning to wake. Fish eagles cry, and the deep, guttural grunts of hippos echo off the banks. The river is a millpond,

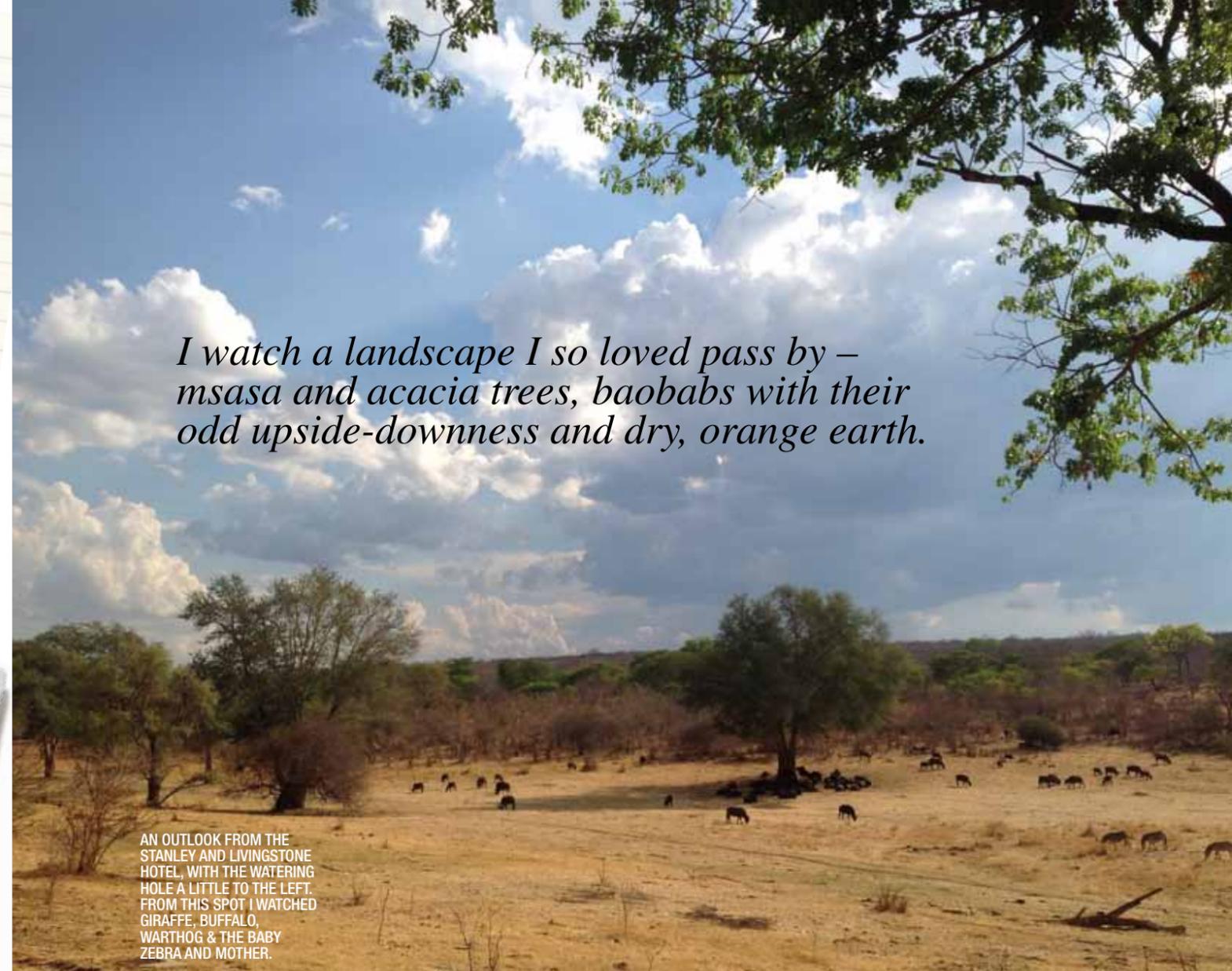
I look out over that dry landscape of bare trees and red earth, and realise how much I've missed those vast, open spaces.

We've left a very cold and windy Cape Town, and arrive to a dry heat that burns the insides of our nostrils. The air prickles and crackles, and the high-pitched hum of cicadas rings out, signalling the contrast in environment.

Border control is a slab of a room, with custom officials taking refuge from the sun, a lazy fan slowly tilting from side to side as it tries to keep up its swirling



I watch a landscape I so loved pass by – msasa and acacia trees, baobabs with their odd upside-downness and dry, orange earth.



AN OUTLOOK FROM THE STANLEY AND LIVINGSTONE HOTEL, WITH THE WATERING HOLE A LITTLE TO THE LEFT. FROM THIS SPOT I WATCHED GIRAFFE, BUFFALO, WARTHOG & THE BABY ZEBRA AND MOTHER.

broken now and again by the oily swirl of a fish breaking the surface. The annual rains begin at this time of year and, in the afternoon, great big black clouds roll in, thunder rumbles on the wind and, finally, long streaks of lightning carve up the sky. Our nights are peaceful; the wind drops and the setting sun casts an orange glow in the lounge on the top deck.

After two wonderful nights we leave the *Zambezi Queen* with new memories: a herd of elephants crossing the Chobe River, matriarchs on either end, young calves wedged between the adults, their tiny trunks raised to the sky. They slip beneath the water now and again, only to be hauled up by a mother close at hand. Recollections of four-metre

crocodiles sunning themselves on the river bank, butter-yellow mouths, edged with a row of razor teeth, wide open (they do this to cool down, we're told); hippos bobbing up from nowhere, little ears twitching, almost comically cute – until they open those wide jaws and yawn loudly.

At the Zimbabwe border control later that morning, we arrive to a tarmac sticky with heat and a long, snaking line of boiled tourists, all pink and shiny. The next part is key – how will I feel when my feet touch home soil again, my imprint clicking back into the DNA of Zimbabwe?

During the hour-long drive in the air-conditioned bus (it's 38 degrees outside) from Kasane to Victoria Falls, I watch a landscape I so loved

pass by: msasa and acacia trees, baobabs with their odd upside-downness, and dry, orange earth.

The Stanley and Livingstone Hotel is a gorgeous thatched 'homestead', surrounded by thick shade, the only sound a gentle tick-tick-tick of sprinklers. It's in a private game reserve and each room, a large rondavel, has its own veranda overlooking a watering hole, where I spend many hours just sitting and watching.

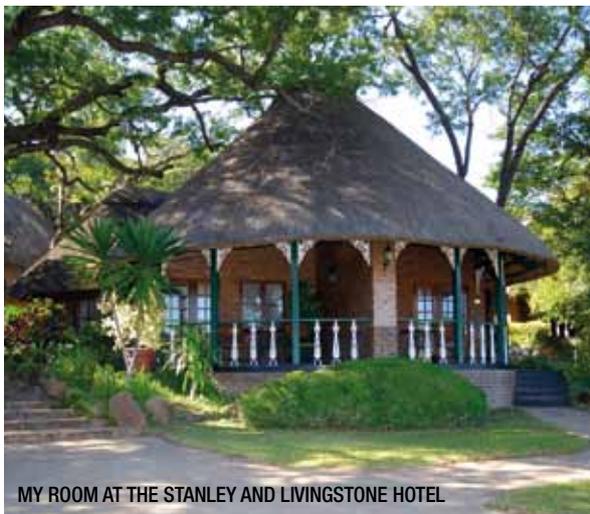
That evening, we go out on a game drive. Orpheus, our field ranger, is a wonderful man with a vast knowledge of the bush and a wicked sense of humour. The game is endless: buffalo, elephant, rhino, warthogs, kudu, waterbuck...



A STORM BLOWING IN AT STANLEY AND LIVINGSTONE PRIVATE GAME RESERVE.

We come across a newborn zebra and, for the next three days, I shoot out of bed every morning to make sure he has survived the night. Sure enough, there he is each day, close to his mother, not straying too far. Orpheus tells us that a baby zebra identifies its mother by her stripes, which are unique. It's remarkable to watch a tiny vulnerable, wobbly creature become a cheeky, confident teenager in a matter of days.

Our stay here is sheer magic, from the hours spent in my bathtub – a ball-and-claw beauty – to swimming in the rain, something I did as a child. I float in the pool, the sky thick and dark with thunderclouds, waiting for the first heavy drops of rain – so big, they really do ‘plop’. The weaver birds nearby are frantic; they sense the storm coming, and it's as if they're trying to get in the last nest-building opportunities before the rains come. Initially I'm unaware that Matthew, one of the waiters, is quietly sitting under an umbrella, making sure I don't stay in the water when the lightning eventually hits. When the thunderclaps are too close together, it's my warning sign to get out. Matthew and I sit under that



MY ROOM AT THE STANLEY AND LIVINGSTONE HOTEL

umbrella in the rain talking for hours about our childhoods, our upbringing, his family, wife and children, and where he wants to be one day. Zimbabweans have a positive spirit, a sense of ownership and pride in their beautiful country. He would not dream of living anywhere else. I envy him.

I've been lucky enough to travel to many spectacular places, but it always strikes me that no Parisian pavement café or busy London street comes close to the bush experience. Perhaps we feel we need to travel far to justify the money we spend on airfares. But what you bring back in your soul after sitting in a thunderstorm, watching an African sunset, and just listening and watching, cannot be surpassed.

Then again, I may be a little biased. After all, I had come home. ❖

Travel tips

MUST VISIT

Victoria Falls

This is one of the seven natural wonders of the world, powerful and magnificent, and something everyone should experience. Standing in the spray really does take your breath away. I didn't swim at Devil's Pool, a series of pools on the Zambian edge of the Falls that is popular with tourists – I was terrified at the idea. Google <http://bit.ly/1k0kdyF> to view a video. Frightening!

The markets at Vic Falls

Look out for the exquisite, cheap, locally printed fabrics. Don't be put off by their stiffness – after two or three washes, they soften. They're perfect for cushions or lampshades.

MUST TRY

Tanganda tea

If you're a tea lover like me, buy a couple of boxes to bring home. It's a strong brew of local tea that I think is world class.

Zambezi beer

A locally brewed beer, of which I drank a fair amount. It's reasonably priced, and delicious.

GOOD TO KNOW

Arrive early at border control on the Zimbabwean side as it tends to get a bit congested. Take a bottle of water. I didn't go anywhere without my sarong – it was a brilliant source of shade. The sun is a killer, especially at midday.

GETTING THERE

SA Airlink operates a short flight from Joburg to Kasane in Botswana daily.

More info and bookings:

mantiscollection.com
zambeziqueen.com
stanleyandlivingstone.com
flyairlink.com
britishairways.com

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