



Africa Update
06.06.07

Hi All,

As we enter the month of June, I realize that we have already hit the middle of 2007. Time is flying in Africa too! Still in South Africa, I am waiting to hear back about my application for a new visa for Zambia. In the meantime, the pace for me is fairly relaxed.

In my last update, I wrote about the two Zambian women's conferences and the opening of the children's home in Zimbabwe. In this update, I'll bring you up to speed with some of the touristy things the Australian team did whilst in Zimbabwe.

After going to the children's village, we flew down to Victoria Falls. We had already been told to expect the spectacular. Because of heavier than normal rainfalls, the volume of water spilling over the falls was the most seen since 1956. Some of us hired plastic jackets to stay dry and I armed myself with a plastic bag to protect the camera. Just as well because I became soaked in a very short period of time whilst my camera survived by being shoved into the bag when the spray hit and removed quickly as the spray subsided to steal shots of this magnificent natural wonder of the world.



As you can see (or not see) from the photo below, the view of the falls from many of the viewing lookouts was greatly hindered by the ascending spray. It was still thoroughly awesome to see though.



Victoria Falls – spray included!

Having seen the falls twice before in the dryer September/October months, this was quite a different experience. On my previous visits I was able to clearly see all aspects of the falls and venture right up to the edge to peer down at the gorge below where the Zambezi River continues after its massive downwards plunge. Without those two visits, this visit may have felt a bit limiting or even disappointing. It was far too slippery and dangerous this time to venture close enough to look straight down and taking photos was risky with all the spray.

What was much clearer to understand this time was why The Falls had been called “The Smoke that Thunders” by explorer David Livingstone back in 1855. Even whilst approaching Victoria Falls by air from Bulawayo, we were able to see the spray rising up from the earth’s surface where the falls were situated. I also

remember seeing what looked like smoke in The Falls direction earlier this year when I first entered into Zambia from Botswana.

On day two of our Victoria Falls stay, we were up and ready by 7.30 am to begin a day trip to Chobe Game Park in Botswana. I was quite excited to be finally going to this famous park known particularly for its 45,000 elephant population. Being with a professional safari company, we crossed the Zimbabwe/Botswana border effortlessly. In fact going with the safari company made the whole day very enjoyable and relaxing because we were spared from the usual bureaucratic hiccups and holdups that often plague organisational arrangements in Africa. Across the Botswana border we were deposited into the hands of our Botswana driver/guide for the morning open vehicle game drive. After a short distance, we found ourselves entering the park.

Our driver/guide immediately headed towards Chobe River which is the continuation of the Zambezi River as it crosses the border into Botswana. Immediately, we began to see wildlife at close range - impalas, kudus, puku and other antelopes. We had stopped to enjoy the moment when the antelopes suddenly stiffened and one after another, they began to flee. I was thinking that maybe we had startled them but apparently not, the guide was on the lookout for something else. He began to steer the car in the opposite direction to where some of the antelopes were still lingering and as we came over a small rise, we were greeted by the amazing sight a young leopard. He had sauntered onto the open bank of the river and stood quietly and calmly, assessing the situation. He seemed quite unphased by our presence and looked like he was contemplating what to do next. Our driver gently nudged the vehicle closer and we halted to observe him, me taking numerous photographs.



Something's up! - Two startled puku antelopes

The leopard must have determined that we were fairly harmless because he proceeded to pass in front of us heading towards a nearby tree. On arrival, he quickly scrambled up and was soon draped across a suitable branch surveying the surrounding landscape. As he settled into a comfortable position, I continued madly to snap shots of this beautiful creature. Our spotted friend looked like he might be getting ready for a nap and there are only so many photos that you can take of a leopard lying still in a tree. It was time to move on and pursue other game.



The leopard- contemplating what to do next

We continued our safari around the park enjoying the other game species that had positioned themselves at close range to the access roads. My camera continued to snap wildly as we saw various types of antelope, birdlife, warthogs, crocs, a water monitor, baboons, giraffes, and finally the elephants.

As noon approaches each day, the Chobe elephants invariably wander down in herds to the river to cool off. In keeping with this, our first close encounter with the elephants occurred just before noon as we were driving along the scrub near the river. This small herd seemed to be leaving the river and passed us close by. As they were proceeding, one young bull elephant suddenly decided to stop. Before we knew it, he was thundering down towards our vehicle trying to intimidate us with his trumpeting threats, raised trunk and flaring ears. Since I had previously read that about 95% of elephant charges are bluffs, I wasn't that concerned and continued taking photographs. He stopped just short of our

vehicle to shake his head aggressively at us. I wasn't sure what the others were thinking but our driver made no attempt to back away so he must have known that this elephant was just sparring. After a couple of these mock charges, this young bull turned and hi-tailed it after the rest of the herd, probably to catch up with his mother again.

Knowing that elephant herds would now be gathering at a particular open section of the river bank, our guide moved us on towards this site. We pulled up and watched quietly as different herds of elephant came to drink and bathe in the river. Soon we had elephants on all sides of us. For some reason, one of the mothers unexpectedly turned towards us and sounded a warning. She must have decided that we were a possible threat to her young calf. In response to this, other large female elephants immediately gathered and formed a protective barrier between us and the calves, swaying to and fro in an intimidating manner.



The charging Bull elephant!



Strolling towards the river

This time, our guide recognised that this was not a bluff. Immediately, the engine fired up and without delay we quickly backed away to a safer distance. Never mess with an angry elephant mother!

Having squeezed these exciting, if not hair-raising, highlights out of the morning game drive, we were then treated to a delightful buffet lunch at a 4 star hotel. Following this, we were off to be indulged in an afternoon river cruise. If the game drive vista wasn't enough, we were now seeing water buffalo, hippos, more crocs, more elephants, a variety of water birds and even a puff adder. As the day coursed to its end, we were more than satisfied with our visit to the park and returned safely to our Victoria Falls accommodation in time for tea and our own Chobe slide/video show. Quite a day!

During our two day stay at Victoria Falls, the township appeared relatively safer than what I remembered it to be from my previous visit in 2002. At that time there were more local Zimbabweans hassling people on the streets desperately trying to get the tourist dollars and sometimes mugging people. It was very sobering though to think that many of the peddlers that used to be on the city streets have since been forcefully resettled by the Zimbabwean government in more rural areas where they have little means of earning any income and some of them have or are now starving. Such is the way of the Zimbabwean government in presenting a tidy Zimbabwe to the outside world. The message being put forward is: "It's safe to visit Zimbabwe and we want you to come". In reality, the Zimbabwean dollar has become worthless and the government is desperately trying to get foreign currency into the country.

As foreigners, the prices of Zimbabwean goods and services were very reasonable for us as we exchanged our United States dollars for Zimbabwean dollars. With each US dollar converting to 24,000 Zimbabwean dollars, buying fuel at Zim \$24,000 a litre was the same as paying US \$1 a litre. But inflation has now blown majorly out of control in Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwean people are

suffering greatly. Local salaries have not risen at the same rate as inflation and many people are struggling to afford basic foodstuffs. Much of the local industry has collapsed due to political and economic mismanagement and unemployment is rife. In Zimbabwe, a loaf of bread now costs thousands of Zimbabwe dollars.

Back in South Africa I have been able to read a good book which tracks the life of a white Rhodesian boy growing up in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). It covers the period from white rule under Ian Smith through to independence when President Robert Mugabe came to power. The book, called "Mukiwa", is well written by Peter Godwin and is an entertaining and informative read if you can get your hands on it.

South Africa is not without its troubles either. Crime and poverty abound. Even as I take a regular walk down by a nearby river, there are usually people sleeping on the ground in the warmth of the winter sun. Clothing washed in the river is often hanging out to dry. Judging by the remains of small fires on the ground, I can only guess that these people might be spending some of the very cold evenings sitting around small fires to keep warm. Life is very different to our western existence for the average African man and woman.

Anyway, that's it from me for now.
Hopefully I'll be writing again soon to say I have a work permit for Zambia.
Until then, stay well,

Mike