

Africa

A floating safari with an African Queen

Swap the jeep for a river boat and cruise among the crocs and hippos, says
Kathleen Wyatt

Under smoky skies, I stood on the deck of a boat that was turning in a slow circle. We were on shallow water in a tranquil part of the Chobe River, with Namibia on one side and Botswana on the other. There were no other boats around and though a hungry collection of crocodiles and hippos filled the water, everything was still. After a long journey of delayed flights, missing Jeeps and detours, I had finally found the *Queen*.

And what a demure creature she was, considering her fast-living past. She had been a floating casino, then a rusting heap on the river bank for decades, until she was rescued by her current owners and gutted to make a luxury vessel with 14 cabins and a top deck that is a bar and dining area. Now the three-storey *Zambezi Queen* plies a 14-mile (22km) stretch of the Chobe River, and offers one of the best balconies you could want for a safari. After all, why sit on the edge when you can be in the middle of the water with a 360-degree view?

Brett McDonald and his partners took the fallen *Queen* and made her great again by giving her a resplendent setting.

The vessel offers an entirely different perspective on wildlife, for here the animals come to you. The water calls loudly in Africa and every beast must drink at some point. My comfortable room was at water level, but every floor is open and I could have spent the day watching the elephants, the wildebeest, the lions — but I'll stop the list before I channel my inner safari bore (beware, we all have one). It may have got a little hot at night-time, but wak-

ing up with the river at your feet is quite a way to see Africa.

The absence of other boats is no accident. "I will unashamedly say that I bought up all the land around here to stop others using it," McDonald said, as he talked proudly of the need to preserve the land and animals. The boat is jet-propelled, uses solar energy, has filtered river water in its top-deck pool and cuts its generators from 10pm to 6am — not only is it good for the planet, but that silence is good for the soul.

With the *Queen* as a base, you can head off on smaller boats to find the places where the baboons hide and the elephants swim, go fishing or get closer to the lions on a Jeep excursion in Chobe National Park.

In my remaining four nights, I left the *Queen* and followed the water from Namibia to Botswana, across the Okavango Delta and into Zambia — for this was a safari trip ruled by the rivers. Xaranna Camp sits on an island in the seasonal part of the Okavango Delta, where the river comes and goes according to the rains and leaves behind a series of channels, groves and islets rich in nature. Here, wildlife can creep up on you at any moment and even the most obsessive safari nut might miss a couple of high-speed hyenas.

The sophisticated "safari tents", which were are like small, canvas houses, are open on all sides, save for a wire mesh. I did not have the safety of the boat here — and nature was in charge. It's too embarrassing to mention that I asked them to remove the spiders in my room or that I tried to avoid their unofficial pet "snakey", but I loved the bush baby (a nocturnal primate) that briefly appeared inside my room and

the elephant and calf who had mud baths by the veranda. The beasts I saw in our treks bewitched me, as did the trip by mokoro, traditional dug-out canoes, where we drank under an Amarula tree and were punted back as the sun set.

The thundering Zambezi was quite a contrast. It pulses through everything — and by the time I'd flown over it to Livingstone, eaten by it and sailed on it, I was mesmerised and could feel its pull, even when staying at Tongabezi Lodge, which is 30 minutes away from Victoria Falls.

The lodge was set up in 1990 by Ben Parker and Will Ruck-Keene and is devoted to responsible tourism — it minimises water use, offers a mouthwatering menu with food grown in its own garden and has set up a local school with the money it makes from tourism.

The "cottages" range from open-sided ones with thatched roofs on Sindabezi Island, to "houses" with an open front and the more insulated ones with a window on the river. Mine was open on one side. It was a wrench for a door-locking Londoner, but how liberating it proved to be. The mosquito net was the only thing protecting me, but instead of spending the night fixated on snakes, spiders and crocodiles, I soon fell asleep. I woke up unscathed in a blue dawn, with the Zambezi awaiting me.



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Cox & Kings (020-7873 5000, coxandkings.co.uk) offers a tailor-made trip of two nights at Tongabezi Lodge, three on the *Zambezi Queen* and three at Xaranna Camp from £4,545pp. Includes flights, full board and excursions.



The *Zambezi Queen*, formerly a casino and then left to rust, has 14 cabins, a top-deck bar, dining area and a pool