

Mystic river

Five-star comfort isn't hard to come by in Africa, but the *Zambezi Queen* has taken the luxury experience on to the water. Eulogi Rheeder spent a few days on board and reveals how a city slicker lost her heart in the heart of Africa



It was bound to happen. On almost every trip I've taken 'something funny' has happened (although it's usually only funny in hindsight). On one trip to the Victoria Falls, my camera battery died within 20 minutes of my arrival and, having left the charger at home, I had to use my cellphone to take my holiday snaps (so much for being a seasoned traveller). Another time, I found myself on the Garden Route chopping up a (dead) whale and role-playing a beached dolphin - unreal, but true.

This trip turned out to be no exception. It started with Russel, the photographer travelling with me for this story, arriving at OR Tambo with his wife's passport instead of his own. Before I jetted off without him, he armed me with one of his non-user-friendly cameras and gave me a two-minute tutorial on how to take perfect pictures - I would have to be both writer and 'professional' photographer until he managed to join me. I boarded the plane to Livingstone, Zambia, thinking, 'Something else is bound to happen.'

AFRICAN TIME

The *Zambezi Queen* roves the Chobe waters between Namibia and Botswana and, while it took nearly nine hours to reach the boat (there are other, quicker ways to get there too - you can take a direct, two-hour flight from Jo'burg), the captivating journey there was well worth the time and effort. I had an eagle's view of Botswana's lush plains, Zimbabwe's stark lands and the thunderous Victoria Falls during the flight to Livingstone.

From there, I took a 90-minute drive to the Botswana border, where I hopped on to a ferry to make the two-minute journey across what looked like a small lagoon. It turned out to be the most exhilarating ferry ride ever: I was crossing the area of the Chobe River where four countries (Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana and Namibia) meet. Not that it was ever on my to-do list, but I'm pleased I can now claim that I once had one foot in Namibia, the other in Botswana, one hand in Zimbabwe and the other in Zambia - all at the same time.

Next I was driven 10 minutes to the town of Kasane, and from there I took another ferry ride through twists and

turns of reed and papyrus beds to the spot where we would embark. The black-blue river shimmered in the late afternoon light and the *Zambezi Queen* looked like a mirage drifting in the distance. I was in love, and I hadn't even reached the boat yet.

QUEEN OF THE RIVER

The *Zambezi Queen* is the brainchild of business partners Tony Stern and Brett and Jacqui Macdonald. Built 20 years ago, it was originally designed to take passengers on a seven-day cruise from Katima Mulilo down the Chobe River into the Zambezi River and back. But when it was discovered that the boat was too big to navigate the rivers, she was taken ashore where, for 15 years, she served as a hotel on the banks of the Zambezi.

Two years ago, Tony and Brett decided to resurrect the *Zambezi Queen* for her original purpose so they dismantled and rebuilt the boat. Today it has a completely new design, which takes into account sustainable and responsible tourism: instead of conventional propellers

SAFARI IN STYLE

Opposite The majestic *Zambezi Queen* sets sail; game-viewing from the deck of the riverboat is just one of the perks of the trip (insets).

Below Sun-deck lazing.





has a bigger sun deck with a splash pool. As the *Zambezi Queen* set sail after lunch each day, most guests flocked to the large deck, stretching out on chairs, splashing in the pool and sipping on mojitos. Pure bliss.

LET THE GAME BEGIN

Lazing aside, there was plenty to do and see. As a confirmed city girl, I'd choose exploring a new city over a game drive any day, but as soon as I arrived in Livingstone, something shifted: I found myself on an African high. Perhaps it was the humidity, but more likely

drive. The park sprawls across 11 000km² of verdant African bush and is home to the largest population of elephants in the world - before we'd reached the park, we were met by a herd playing in the streets. Once inside the park, we saw impalas, pukus (a type of antelope), buffaloes, vultures, bee-eaters, lions and even African wild dogs (apparently a very rare sighting). Later, during the *Zambezi Queen's* afternoon voyage, we witnessed giraffes loping in the far distance, elephants frolicking in the water, crocodiles baring their teeth and monkeys fooling around.

On day three I gave the game-viewing a skip and tried my hand at fishing. Not

thankful to be able to lose myself in the beauty of the surrounds without having to think about how to capture it. Later that evening we were taken to the Caprivi bank for a starlit boma meal. The area was decorated with hollowed mokoros (canoes), colourful pillows and sparkly fires. And the buffet of oxtail stew, kudu curry, *pap*, rice, steak and sausage, fused with traditional song and dance, was nothing short of an African feast.

After dinner we claimed our spots on the mats and pillows laid out for us and the lanterns were dimmed. I've done my fair share of stargazing but here, with three guides trained by renowned expert Garth Thompson and an impressive laser pointer, I discovered the planets, stars and galaxies I'd never before been able to locate. Tales of intrepid explorers were told to a background choir of bullfrogs and crickets. Heaven.

BON VOYAGE

As I packed my bags at the end of day four, I remembered my 'something's bound to happen' prediction. And I then evaluated my trip: I had been in four countries at once, finally figured out where Orion's Belt is, seen the most incredible game (I'd even found myself excited at seeing a dung beetle), gone fishing and stayed onboard the most luxurious of riverboats. What *had* happened was that this city slicker had lost her heart on a small stretch of African water, and couldn't wait to return to lose it all over again. ■

it was the glorious location. The area where the *Zambezi Queen* meanders on the Chobe River (between Botswana's Chobe National Park and Namibia's Caprivi Strip) boasts one of the densest populations of wildlife on the continent.

To ease me gently into my African adventure, I was taken on a water-based sunset viewing trip on the first evening. What an introduction: the sky was a swirl of pinks, purples and oranges, and a flock of more than 50 billed storks danced across the colours; elephants waved hello with large, Dumbo ears and hippos broke the waters to greet us.

The next morning we went on shore to the Chobe National Park for a game

very glamorous, but with rod in hand and fish eagle cries in the background, I came to understand why some love angling so much: it was the most relaxing thing I'd done in a while. I didn't catch anything more than a few reeds but Jill, my fishing companion, managed to pull in a large catfish. I was envious, until I met it close up: smelly, slimy and ugly. I'll take reeds over catfish any day!

WRITTEN IN THE STARS

By late afternoon on day two, Russel, our photographer, had finally joined the trip. I happily surrendered the camera,

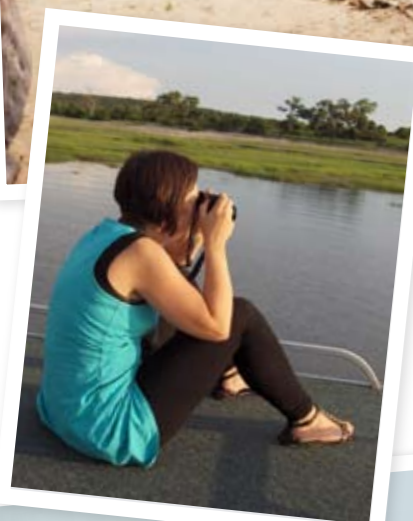
THINGS TO DO

■ **The Victoria Falls**, on both the Zimbabwe and Zambia sides, are 90 minutes from the *Zambezi Queen's* berth. Stay a night or two at one of the lodges in the area and go for high tea at the Victoria Falls Hotel on one side, or the Royal Livingstone on the other.

■ **Kasene** This Botswana town is a mere 10 minutes from the *Zambezi Queen's* docking point and is home to one of the

world's oldest and most fascinating baobab trees - in the early 20th century the hollowed-out tree trunk served as a prison. Make a stop at the Kasene Hot Spring.

■ **Kasenu** is located on the eastern part of the Caprivi Strip and is only a 10-minute drive from the boat's docking point. This traditional village is ideal for travellers hungry for even more sightseeing.



DOWN BY THE RIVER
From top The bedrooms aboard the *Zambezi Queen* are luxurious; the boma area on the Caprivi bank is ideal for after-lunch lazing and late-night stargazing; playing the part of professional photographer; a sunset boat safari is one of the highlights of the trip.



it uses a jet propulsion system that reduces damage to river beds; at night the boat switches to a low emission power system that saves energy; hot water comes from solar panels; and waste water is stored in holding tanks instead of being dumped into the river. Moreover, the *Zambezi Queen* also helps uplift the local community by employing staff from the impoverished surrounding areas. (I was astonished to learn that just eight weeks before the boat's launch, 90 per cent of the staff had no idea how to serve a table.) Although she has retained her original name, the boat's route doesn't include the Zambezi River any more as it's too shallow.

The boat has three levels. The first features a well-stocked library where, soon after boarding, I sprawled out on a comfy couch and brushed up on the fauna, flora and history of the area (in preparation for the game drives to follow). Fourteen suites take up the rest of the first level and the entire second level.

When I first heard I'd be staying on a riverboat, I imagined my 'suite' to be a compartment containing a bunk bed and simple ablution facilities. To my delight, the *Zambezi Queen* is like a five-star hotel - but with a better view. Renowned South African fashion designer Jenni Button is the talent behind the boat's décor - neutral in colour and contemporary cool in style with subtle African influences, from the paintings throughout the boat to the Nguni hide-patterned throw across my bed (on which I could have happily spent my entire holiday). My room was at the end of the boat and on a corner, which meant I had an almost panoramic outlook.

The best spot of all is on the boat's top level, where an opulent open-plan lounge, dining and bar area boasts an unobstructed 360-degree view of the Chobe River - with Botswana on one side and Namibia on the other. Both sides of the boat feature a deck: one is small and shaded for quiet lazing; the other

PHOTOGRAPHS: RUSSEL WASSERFALL, FRANK SMIT AND COURTESY OF THE ZAMBEZI QUEEN

GETTING THERE

Classic Escapes is a specialist travel company operated by Caroline Bayly, who has been involved in promoting luxury safari lodges, island hideaways, private villas and remote bush camps for over 12 years. With a wealth of knowledge and excellent relationships with key establishments in southern and east Africa, Classic Escapes offers tailor-made itineraries and personalized travel assistance, and is the easiest way to get to the *Zambezi Queen*.

All-inclusive packages (with return flights) from Jo'burg start at R8 800 per person sharing for two-night cruises, while three-night packages start at R11 800 per person sharing.*

For info and bookings contact Caroline on 011-234-9557 or 083-255-8227 or e-mail info@classic-escapes.co.za. * Fares are quoted on class type and are subject to availability; rates exclude airport taxes, visa fees, items of a personal nature and gratuities.