

Brace yourself for Rapid 4, also known as Morning Glory, one of the Zambezi's famous rapids that thrills and terrorises in equal measure.

AWAY GLORIOUS RIPIDS DROPS

WHY IT'S WORTH THE TRIP

- The Batoka Gorge rapids are some of the world's best for white-water rafting, and if the proposed dam is built, most of this stretch of wild river will be flooded. While the dam is still at the scoping stage, there's an air of inevitability about its construction, so if you want to experience the thrill of the Zambezi then go soon.
- The towns of Victoria Falls and Livingstone – from where you'll start your adventure – are near several of Africa's finest parks, including Chobe and Hwange.

Time is running out to raft one of Africa's most thrilling rapids. Scott Ramsay takes one last wild ride

For what seems like an eternity, I'm suspended upside down in mid-air, above a rapid known as Morning

Glory on the Zambezi River. With seeming disdain, this maelstrom of surging water in the Batoka Gorge has tossed our 16-foot inflatable raft, together with eight grown men aboard, into the pale blue skies of Zimbabwe.

On the International Scale of River Difficulty from 1 to 6, a Grade 1 rapid is the easiest to raft: 'Few obstructions, all obvious and easily missed with little training.' A Grade 5 rapid comes standard with this warning: 'Extremely long, obstructed, or very violent. Drops may contain large, unavoidable waves and holes.'

Morning Glory (Rapid 4) is a Grade 5 – and don't we know it. The raft flips like a pancake tossed in a frying pan, front over end, and all eight of us, including our river guide, are thrown out.

I fall backwards into the rapid. Immediately I'm ripped under the surface. I don't know which way is up or down. It doesn't matter, because no matter how hard I try to move, I'm crushed by water as heavy as molten lead. My body is wrenched, twisted and stretched. My life jacket – clearly critical to my safety – seems to have no obvious influence on my buoyancy. All I can see is a maelstrom of blinding white bubbles. But it's the noise that scares me most. The booming sounds of liquid hitting rock reverberate through my skeleton, shaking my bones.

As if playing with a human yo-yo, the river flings me up into the air, then pulls me underwater. I gasp for air but water floods my throat. I start choking and try to stay calm. Then, bored with the games, the Zambezi spits me out perfunctorily



into calmer water and I float downstream. I cough and splutter and draw deep breaths of sweet air.

Half terrorised, half ecstatic, the first thing I see is the pale blue sky of Zimbabwe, and I whisper a few prayers. The next thing I see is our river guide. Tatani Shoko has reboarded our raft and is pulling us out of the water, one by one, half-drowned rats clinging to our ship.

'It's good to be alive,' he chuckles. 'Don't worry, I've been doing this for 12 years and I've never lost anyone.'

I wonder whether Tatani is either mad or well connected with the Big Guy upstairs. Surely you'd have to be one or the other to do this almost every day for 12 years? During the rafting tourism season when water levels are low enough, usually from August to December, local river guides navigate these rapids – and their own mortality – every single morning.

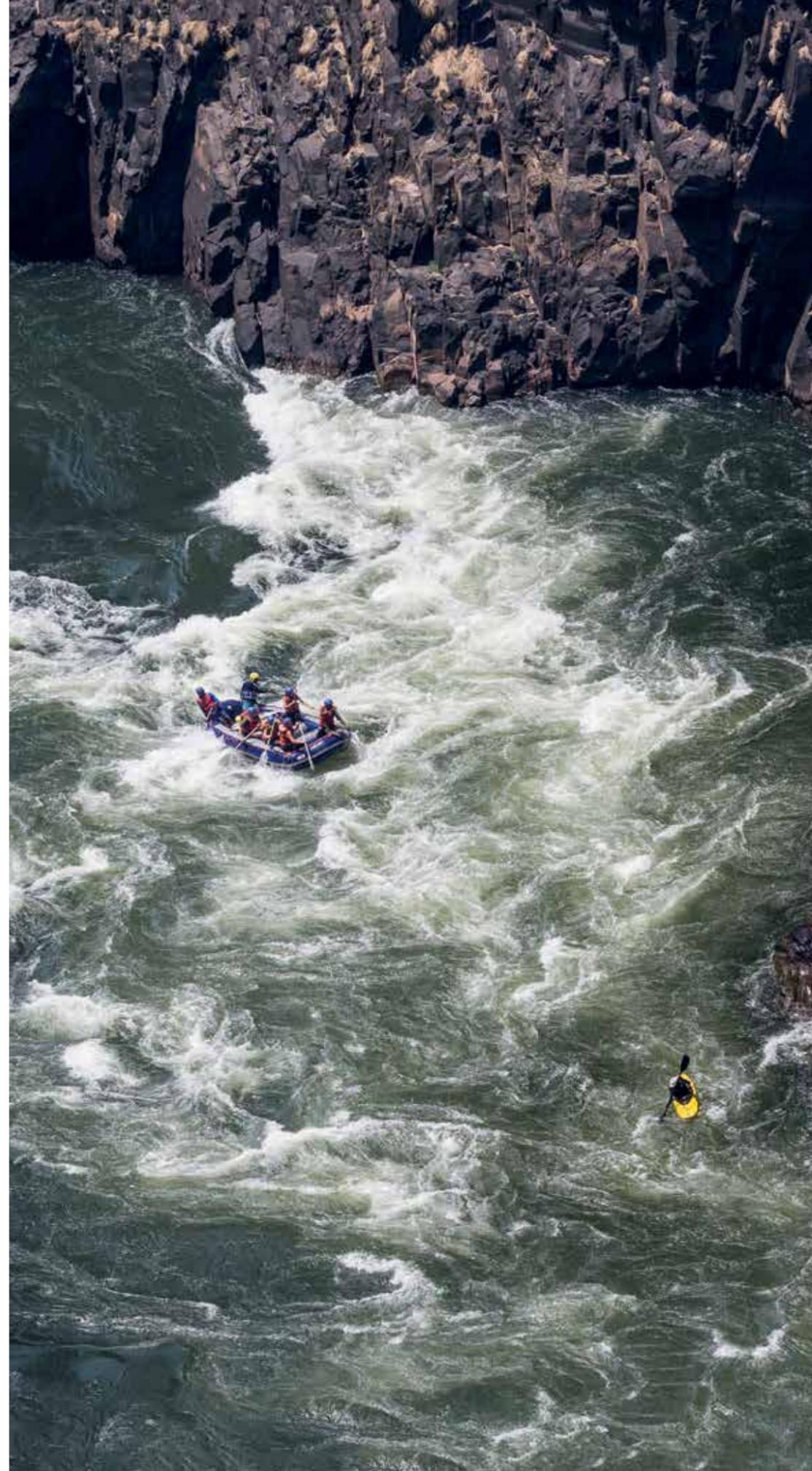
But there's no time to think, because no sooner are we all back on the raft, than the next rapid approaches. And its name does nothing to calm my nerves.

'This one's known as Stairway to Heaven [Rapid 5],' a grinning Tatani shouts to us above the cacophony of the approaching raft-eater. 'It's another Grade 5, so hold on tight and see you on the other side!'

THE RAPIDS

The Zambezi is the fourth largest river in Africa. It starts in Zambia and passes through Angola, before flowing across the vast plateau of central Southern Africa on the northern border of Zimbabwe.

Above Victoria Falls, the river is broad and steady and nice enough, with houseboats serving snacks and sundowners, and hippos and elephants trundling along the shorelines. Then, as >

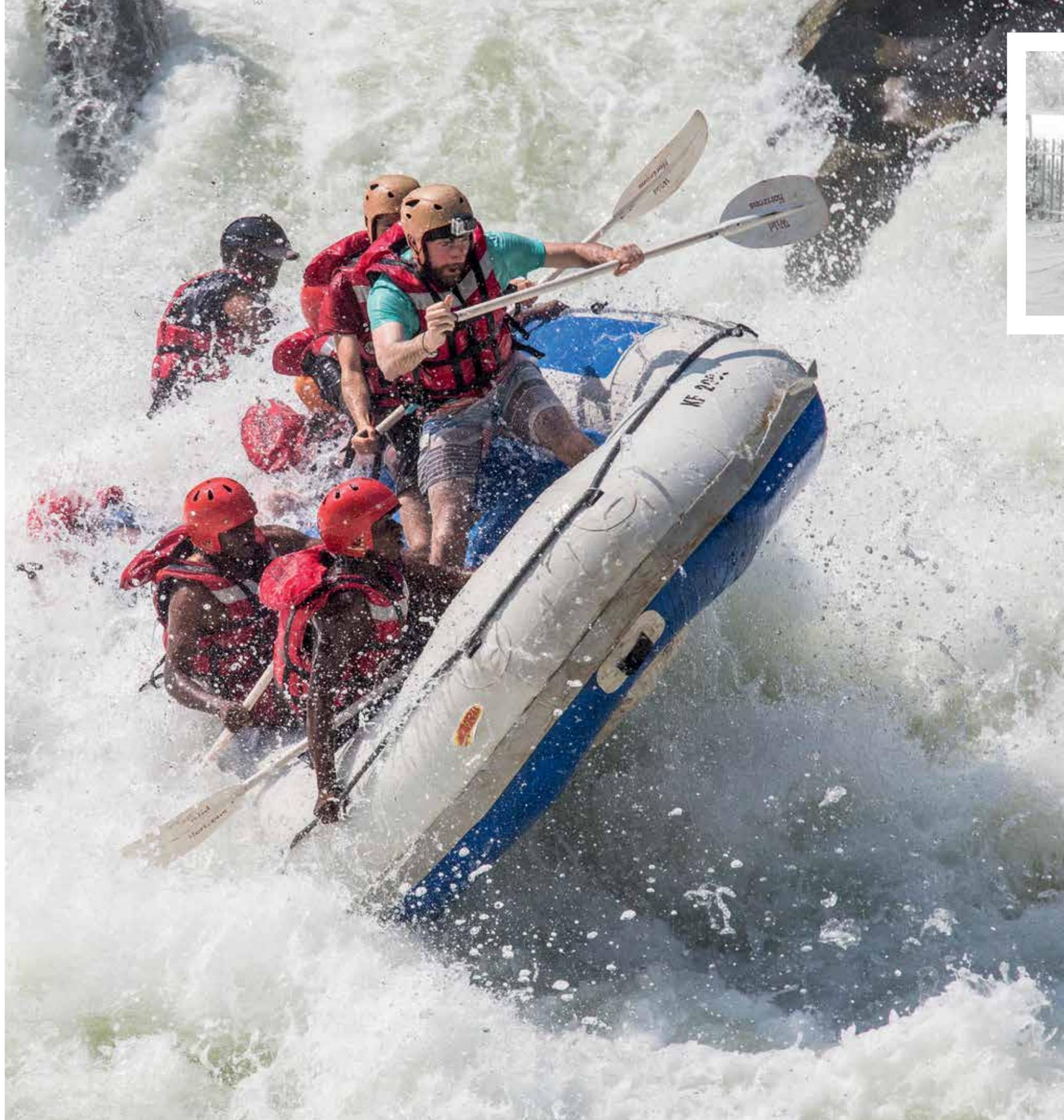


'ALL I CAN SEE IS A MAELSTROM OF BLINDING WHITE BUBBLES. BUT IT'S THE NOISE THAT SCARES ME MOST'

THIS PAGE Big rock, lots of water and a few humans on a tiny raft. It's humbling to be at the mercy of the Zambezi River as it powers its way through a fault line in the 180 million-year-old basalt rock. **OPPOSITE** An angel's view of Victoria Falls and the Batoka Gorge, looking west towards the town of Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe.

'IF EVER THERE WAS AN EXAMPLE OF GRAVITY, THIS IS IT: AN AVERAGE OF 3000 TONS OF WATER FALLING EVERY SECOND'

THIS PAGE The Zambezi has its way with a few terrorised humans on Rapid 5, known as Stairway to Heaven. **OPPOSITE** The building of the dam means the rafting industry would all but disappear and more than 100 river guides – including (back row, from left) Gideon Dube, Captain Frank, Kazibert Muposwi, Mfundisi Nowake and (front row, from left) Fani Shoko, Nkulumo Ndlovu and Tatani Shoko – may lose their livelihoods.



if bored with all the pleasantries, the geological gods start getting mischievous. After flowing for hundreds of kilometres without much interruption, the river encounters a two-kilometre-long crack in the basalt geology. The mighty Zambezi can only go one way. If ever there was an example of gravity, this is it: an average of 3 000 tons of water falling every second into a 100-metre-high gorge below.

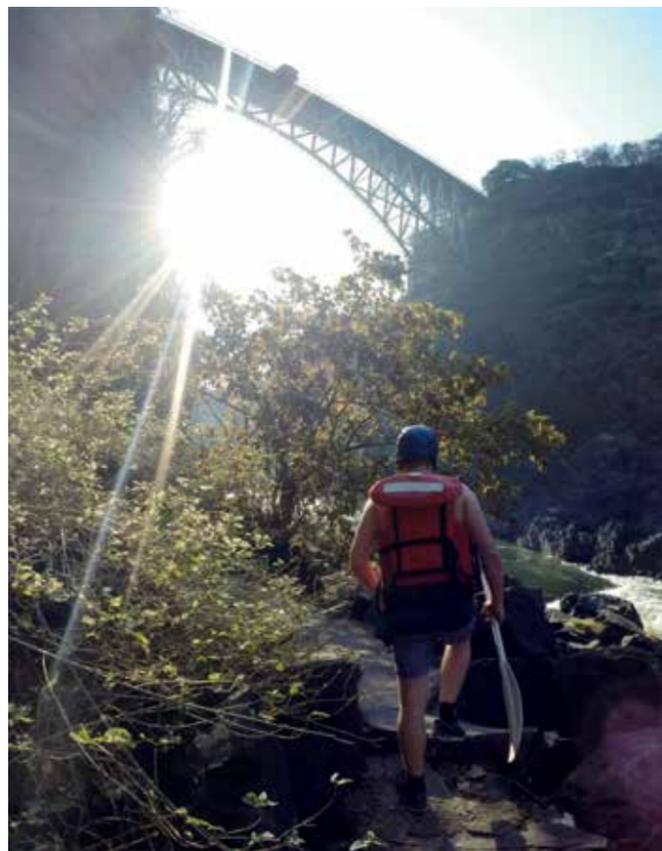
Call it whatever you want: Victoria Falls, Mosi-oa-Tunya, The Smoke That Thunders ... it is the largest sheet of falling water in the world, a World Heritage Site, a national park, and a truly wild place that must be seen to be believed. During low-water levels, water flow averages around 600 tons per second. During flooding, that figure can exceed 10 000 tons. That's 10 million kilograms of water every second. Every single drop of this water is forced into the Batoka, a chasm just 100 metres wide. Welcome to the finest white-water rafting on the planet.

The rapids in these narrow depths are the stuff of legend. David Livingstone may have been the first European to 'discover' the falls in 1855, but it took another 126 years for someone to pluck up the courage – or madness – to run the river below.

In 1981 a crazy American river guide from Colorado with the fabulous name of Richard Bangs pioneered the river. Since then hundreds of thousands of tourists have opted for the legendary one-day trip, guided by rivermen such as Tatani, a brave man who dices with death daily.

Starting just below Victoria Falls and ending about 24 kilometres downstream, the 25 rapids come quickly, one after the other, the densest concentration of white water in the world. The river drops 120 metres over this distance, and there are seven Grade 5 rapids, each one a tough taskmaster. Rapid number 9 is Grade 6 and unrunnable so rafters porter around it. Its name, Commercial Suicide, is apt.

'There is no other white-water rafting like it in the world,' explained Andrew Kellett, a professional kayaker who first rafted the rapids in 1994 and now mentors many of the current guides. 'It's simply unique and one of those things that every adventurer must do at least once in their lives.' >



TAMING THE WILD WATERS

But the time for adventure is running out. The wildest waters in Africa are in danger of being tamed. A new dam is planned for construction, about 50 kilometres downstream of Victoria Falls. The reason? Electricity is in short supply, and the hydroelectric power from the proposed 1600-megawatt Batoka Gorge Dam would feed into the Southern African Power Pool, a regional electricity network for Southern African Development Community countries.

It's not a new idea. Back in the 1970s, governments wanted to build a hydroelectric dam on the Zambezi at Mupata Gorge east of Mana Pools National Park, another World Heritage Site that consequently would have been flooded. Communities and conservationists campaigned successfully against that dam, citing the destruction of some of the most spectacular wildlife areas on the continent.

In the 1990s Zambia and Zimbabwe turned their eyes to the Batoka Gorge, but they couldn't agree on the terms. Then in 2012, the two governments signed a memorandum to go ahead. The environmental and social impact assessments are under way, and if all goes according to schedule, then the dam – at an estimated cost of between R86 and R172 billion – will be finished by 2025.

The proposed dam wall will be 181 metres high, and the dam will probably flood the gorge for 26 kilometres upstream along a contour line of 757 metres above sea level. This means that almost 19 of the 25 rapids would be flooded, back to rapid number 6, seriously crippling the white-water rafting industry.

'IF THE BATOKA GORGE DAM GOES AHEAD, IT WOULD SEVERELY HARM THE AREA'S RIVER-BASED TOURISM'

After an uproar from local tourism companies, a new contour level of 740 metres was suggested. Even then, all rapids from number 8 down would be flooded by the dam.

'If the Batoka Gorge Dam goes ahead,' explains Rudo Sanyanga, the Africa Program director for International Rivers, 'it would severely harm the area's river-based tourism, it would partly flood the Victoria Falls Unesco World Heritage Site and destroy crucial habitat for endangered bird species like the Taita falcon.'

Hydroelectric power in the region has come under scrutiny from climate experts, who say that rainfall in the catchment area could fall by between 25 and 40 per cent in the next few decades.

'This could seriously jeopardise the Batoka Gorge Dam's power output,' said Rudo, who has a PhD in

aquatic ecology. She also notes that it's unlikely the dam's construction will supply jobs to locals, as most employment will go to foreigners with niche skills. Whatever jobs are created for locals, opportunities will be limited once construction is finished.

Yet the white-water rafting industry as we know it will be gone forever. About 50 000 tourists come to Victoria Falls every year to raft the rapids, and the industry employs about 400 people in Zimbabwe and 300 in Zambia. The detrimental knock-on economic effect could extend to other businesses.

The day after my rafting trip with Tatani, I catch up with him in town and ask him what he thinks of the proposed dam. He looks at me, and his trademark smile turns into a frown.

'If I lose my job, what am I going to do? Tourism is everything here,' he tells me. 'There's no other work. And what about the river? It's a free river at the moment. And it supports me and my family. I don't want that to change.'

RAISE YOUR VOICE

To register as an interested stakeholder in the environmental and social impact assessment currently under way, and to contribute comments and objections to the proposed Batoka Gorge Dam, e-mail Environmental Resource Management on batokagorgehes@erm.com.



THIS PAGE The view of Victoria Falls and the Batoka Gorge from Devil's Cataract. **OPPOSITE** Walking down the gorge to start rafting.

PLAN YOUR TRIP

GETTING THERE

Air Zimbabwe, British Airways, South African Airways and FlyAfrica all fly to Vic Falls from Joburg. Tickets start from R2 500 return. airzimbabwe.aero, britishairways.com, flysaa.com, flyafrica.com.

Or take to the road and drive via Botswana. Avoid Beitbridge, the queues at the border post are horrendously long.

WHEN TO GO

Low-water season is between August and December. September and October is best. In dry years, the river can be rafted all year round.

DO THIS

The two recognised white-water rafting companies in Victoria Falls town are Wild Horizons and Shearwater. Both are respected for high-quality guides and stringent safety standards. It costs R2 210 pp for the one-day rafting trip that passes through 20 rapids, from 7am – 2pm. wildhorizons.co.za, shearwatervictoriafalls.com

NEED TO KNOW

You don't need previous rafting experience, but you do need to be a good swimmer. Life jackets and helmets are supplied. The sun is intense, so take sun cream for your face, neck, arms and legs. You undertake the rafting at your own risk.

STAY HERE

The new Bayete Guest Lodge is the best B&B in Victoria Falls. Central yet quiet and personalised, owners Mike and Alex Johnson have created a centre of hospitality excellence. From R1 150 pp sharing. bayeteguestlodge.com

**Prices and conversions correct at time of going to print*

Visit getaway.co.za for a full guide on where to stay and what to do and eat in Victoria Falls