

From the Sublime to the Ridiculous

KAYAKING IN ZAMBIA

The question was how could I sneak some paddling time into our family holiday? This was likely to be a bit more difficult now that our two children have flown the nest (or more accurately, paddled to new horizons), so how was I going to persuade my non-paddling husband that it would still be good to combine the two? Then I came across a two week Zambian adventure holiday, which included two days canoeing on the Lower Zambezi. Although Ian does not like getting cold and wet he is up for a bit of adventure, so the idea of getting close to wildlife was enough to convince him. I also needed to get in some canoeing hours towards my BCU 3 star and thought this would be more fun than the Thames.

A Wild Welcome

On arrival at Lusaka airport we were met by our tour guide Mark (who turned out to also be a kayaker), 4 other people on the tour and Joseph our driver of the overland truck which was to carry our gear, tents, cooking stuff etc. We headed straight for our first campsite on the banks of the Lower Zambezi River. On arrival we could hear the very distinctive calling of hippos which could be seen just a couple of hundred meters away in the middle of the river. After some dinner as it got dark we heard some splashing noises and went to investigate, only to find a group of five elephants swimming from Zimbabwe across the river to get to the banana plantation next to our campsite for a bite of supper! We watched them come right up to the shore and then we had to quickly retreat out of their way, as we could not see them in the dark and they were so silent on land. Later whilst in the comfort of our tents we could also hear lions calling on the far bank. Getting close to wildlife was going to be easier than we thought!

Exploring the Lower Zambezi

The next morning we met up with our canoe guide TK with whom we would be paddling the 50km Chirundu section of the river over 2 days. TK assured us that no one had yet capsized or been attacked by

hippos during his 11 years of guiding down the river. However, we did need to be very wary of the hippos and were to stay together, keep to the route he was taking (as he knew where they were likely to be) and not to put our hands in the water because of the crocodiles! The river was wide and had a reasonable flow so it did not take long for everyone to get the hang of paddling – this is when Ian delights in not being the least experienced paddler for a change.

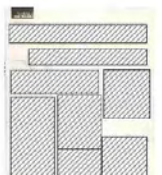
It was nice easy paddling with Ian up front in charge of the camera and me steering from the stern. Because we were on the river we could get very close up to the wildlife, which was absolutely amazing. There were loads of hippo pods of between 12-30 animals, which we found every 1-2 kilometres, usually on sandbanks. The trick was to make sure you were not between a hippo and deep water, and to give them plenty of room. Hippos are very graceful animals in the water and may have a mainly vegetarian diet but they do kill more people in Africa than any other animal- you get to appreciate just how big they are when you are paddling past them. However, the African elephants were even bigger, but were for the most part not disturbed by us paddling up to them taking photos. We also saw a vast range of other wildlife including: crocodiles, water buffalo,

numerous different antelope, monkeys, baboons and birds such as bee-eaters, kingfishers, fish eagles and storks.

The canoes were well suited for this pace of travelling with plenty of room for all the kit and you are not too close together, so can paddle without hitting each other (we have found this can be a problem in tandem sea kayaks when Mr and Mrs do not paddle at the same rate). We managed to find a small shallow sandy lagoon mid morning with no hippos where we could have a swim and cool down, and at midday we stopped on the opposite bank for lunch and a snooze in Zimbabwe. Later as the sun started to set we made camp on an island in the middle of the river on a sandy beach (no grass, as that is what hippos come ashore to eat) and had a very tasty beef stew with butternut squash and rice plus a few beers. We slept soundly in the knowledge that lions do not generally swim, so their roars were not at all worrying?

Essential Canoe Skills

The next morning we had an early start as all was calm and still and we had a lovely paddle before



stopping to cook breakfast back on the Zambia riverbank. I sat watching a Pied kingfisher hovering then diving to catch its breakfast of fish whilst yet another pod of hippos was grunting away merrily in the background. The real stars of this trip had to be the elephants. On the first day we had sneaked up into the long grass to get close to these enormous beasts and today we were treated to the sight of them splashing and swimming in the river. Again we managed to get up quite close to them, but one large mother took offence to us getting too close to her family and started to charge towards us. This is when I got to put my newly found canoe skills into practice, my reverse J stroke (which I had learnt only a couple of weeks earlier) was certainly put to use! However, as I was frantically paddling away our river guide TK stood up in the back of his canoe, held up his hand and shouted 'stop' at the elephant which had her ears out, trunk raised, was bellowing, and charging towards us - then he also made a hasty retreat!

All too soon we reached our get out. I could have quite happily spent a few more days paddling on this fantastic river with its abundant wildlife. Whilst the boats were being loaded ready to shuttle back to the campsite, we relaxed in a swimming pool which overlooked the spot where the elephants were pulling down trees just next to our get out. Apparently they pull the branches off the trees before eating the leaves so that the tree does not have time to synthesise bitter tannins in response to the damage.

Temptation Below the Fall

The rest of our holiday included such highlights as tracking wild rhinos on foot, a night drive in the Kafue national park in an open topped 4x4 with lionesses all around and only ten feet away from a male lion crunching on the bones of the antelope he was eating (that was scary). Then discovering leopard footprints in the camp when we get up. And of course there was Victoria Falls with a free day for optional activities....

My boat of choice is usually somewhat smaller than an open canoe, and there is an interesting gorge to paddle just below the Victoria Falls. I will be honest and say that I had originally not considered the possibility of kayaking the Zambezi Gorge as I had only just had a shoulder operation when we booked the holiday, but as September approached and my confidence in my fitness improved, I did begin to think that I would probably only get the one chance to give it a go.

We arrived at Victoria Falls late in the afternoon with just enough time for a good look around before the sun went down. There was certainly plenty of

water, and we could see the rapid under the bungee jumping bridge, it looked like a nice wave train, but we were a long way up... Later that evening we went to the booking office in the campsite in order for everyone to book the activities they wanted for the next day. I was all sorted having booked in advance but Ian surprised me by booking on a kayaking trip (under his own free will) on the Upper Zambezi as well as a microlight flight over Victoria Falls.

Into the Gorge

The next morning the guys from kayak the Zambezi. com arrived at the campsite to pick me up and I was introduced to Tristan who was to be my guide for the day (who was the same age as my son). After sorting the equipment we climbed down to the bottom of the gorge to get on where the rafts were also getting sorted for their trip. We were to go on ahead so that we were clear of most of them. I then got into the boat that I had never paddled before and looked at the first rapid, No.1: Against the Wall. There was only one way to find out if me and the boat were as one, and that was to ferry glide across the wave train to avoid the cushion wave against the wall. With some apprehension I gritted my teeth and went for it knowing that I was being watched by all the rafters who were preparing for their trips!

Luckily the boat felt fine and all was well, so after tightening up the back strap a bit more, off we went down the rapid No. 2 'The Bridge' which was under the bridge that the bungee jumpers launch themselves off (too scary for me!). I had seen these two rapids the previous day whilst walking around the falls and they were fun, just larger than I was used to. Tristan was great at explaining in a few words the line down each rapid and I followed him knowing he was there to fish me out if required. The first real taste of what the Zambezi had to offer was rapid No.4 'Morning Glory'! I came through it thinking 'Oh my God what have I let myself into' and glad that there was time to get my breath back between rapids!

As we approached No. 5 'Stairway to Heaven,' Tristan asked me if I wanted to get out and have a look as this was 'a big one' and there was the option to portage. I had seen some youtube footage of this rapid and knew that it was a big, steep wave, but it was the one wave I really wanted to paddle. So after some instruction on which way to paddle, I followed him over a very ominous horizon line. Wow, a beautiful clean, steep, green tongue gave a fantastic ride down into a crashing, boiling, seething, chaotic mass of white waves and holes. I was flipped over and rolled up, I felt like a very small leaf in a storm, the only clue I had of where I was in three dimensions was if I could breathe air or not.

Eventually I managed to spot down river and paddled as hard as I could in the right direction to come out at the bottom of the rapid. Still at one with my boat - all those years of chucking myself into Hurley Weir had paid off! I was grinning from ear to ear, and my heart was pounding. This had to be the best ride ever.

Non-stop Thrills

There was still plenty of action to come with No. 6 'Devil Toilet Bowl' which had some big, powerful, whirlpools and boils - I was getting used to going round and round when caught in one of the many whirlpools which appeared out of nowhere. No. 7 'Gullivers Travels' was approaching next and I knew this was the most technical rapid (excluding No. 9) and had not been sure before I got on the river whether I would paddle this rapid. I was pleased with how I was paddling and Tristan was happy for me to tackle it, so after going over the line a couple of times, off we went. I am only a wee lass and had to paddle very hard to make these lines, but just at the end of the rapid the edge of the hole caught my back end and had me over, but I was soon up again and out the bottom. Again I was over then moon at having been able to paddle such a great rapid. This was fun, but boy was it hard work!

The river does not give up and the following rapids were all amazing in their own way. We did portage No. 9 'Commercial Suicide' - as this was one you did not want to swim on, but it did provide a rare opportunity for a photo. I was far too busy paddling to get my camera out the rest of the time. By the time we paddled No. 14 the power of the water was starting to take its toll and after half a dozen attempts my roll failed me at the end of the rapid and I had my first OBE (out of boat experience). However, I had managed the biggest and best of the rapids in one piece, so I was not too disappointed.

A Great Finish

We found a spot for lunch a bit further down the river and enjoyed a burger and a drink in the hot sun. It was a rare opportunity to stop and look around at the stunning scenery in this deep gorge and remind yourself what an incredible place we were in. There were still more fantastic rapids, all with great names such as 'The Terminators' and 'Oblivion'. At one point we were on a great bouncy wave train when a hole opened up under Tristan, pulled down the back of his boat, sucked him under and then spat him out upside down. Whilst he pulled a few play moves I concentrated on staying upright. I had a couple more OBEs, but that was OK 'cos I came up smiling holding on to all of my gear - so Tristan was happy! I was

sorry to see the sandy beach at the end of rapid 25, but I was knackered by then. Although there were porters to carry the boats out at the end, there was still a good climb out of the gorge. However, Tristan managed to get me smuggled onto the cable car with the rafters and when I got to the top there was a very welcome beer waiting for me in the cool box.

Zambia really was a fantastic country to visit. The people were all very friendly and helpful, and the wildlife was brilliant. However, the highlight was definitely the Mighty Zambezi. So if you ever get the chance to canoe, paddle or raft this incredible river – go for it. 📷

INFO

The holiday to Zambia was booked with Exodus which included everything except the activities in Livingstone.

www.exodus.co.uk

You do need permits to paddle on the Zambezi. The canoeing was included in this Exodus trip, but can be booked separately with river horse safaris. www.riverhorsesafaris.com.

I booked equipment (everything except the nose clip, which came off anyway) and a guide in advance with Kayak the Zambezi.com and highly recommend them. They also offer various other kayaking activities including tandem kayaks and inflatables.

www.thezambezi.com.

Ian kayaked an inflatable on the upper Zambezi (and had to jump out on occasions to avoid the hippo) with Bundu adventures who also offer kayaking and rafting.

www.bunduadventures.com/



We want to hear about what you've been getting up to! Let us know via www.canoe kayak.co.uk, where you'll also find more great articles like this one.

LOUISE ROYALE

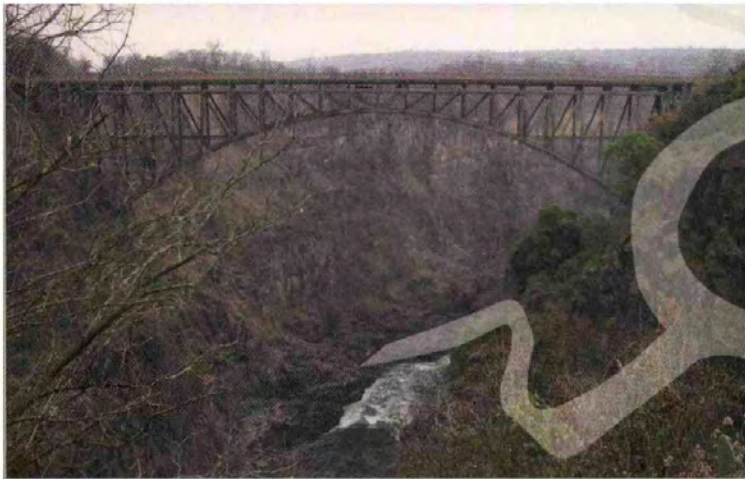
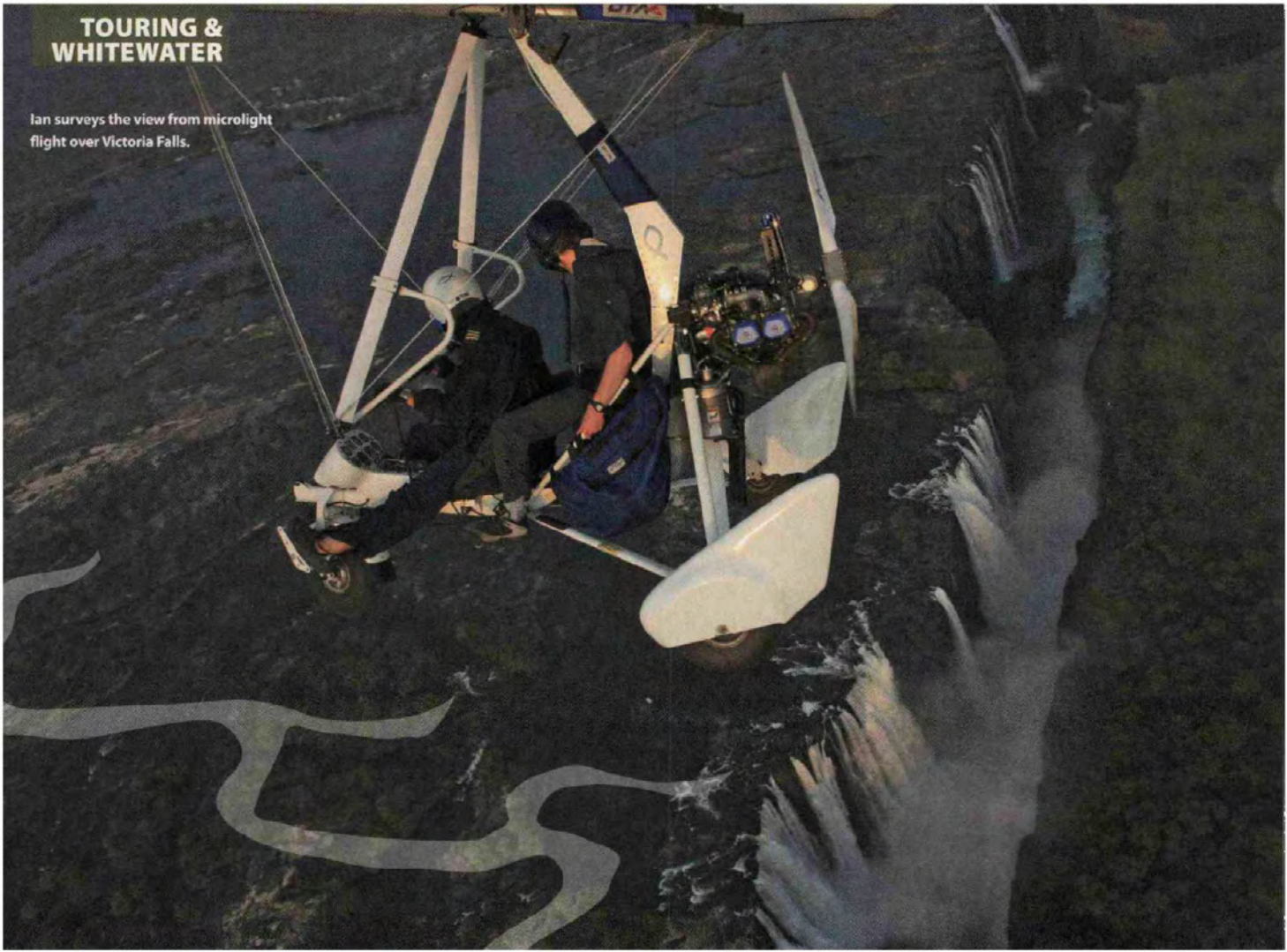
In her nigh on 30 years with Kingfisher Canoe Club, of which she is currently chair, Loise has raised her own two children into paddlers, aswell as inspiring and teaching countless others through coaching.

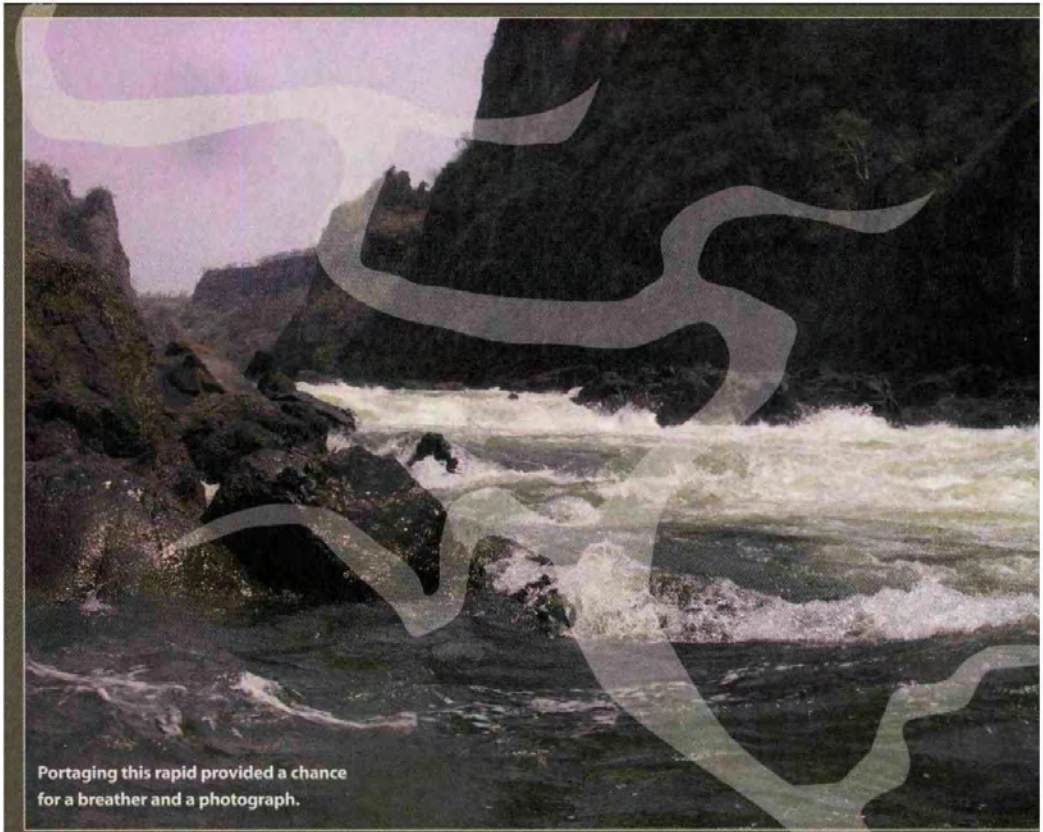
She enjoys mainly whitewater river and weir paddling, although she has occasionally been spotted in open canoes and sea kayaks in recent years.



TOURING & WHITewater

Ian surveys the view from microlight flight over Victoria Falls.





Portaging this rapid provided a chance for a breather and a photograph.

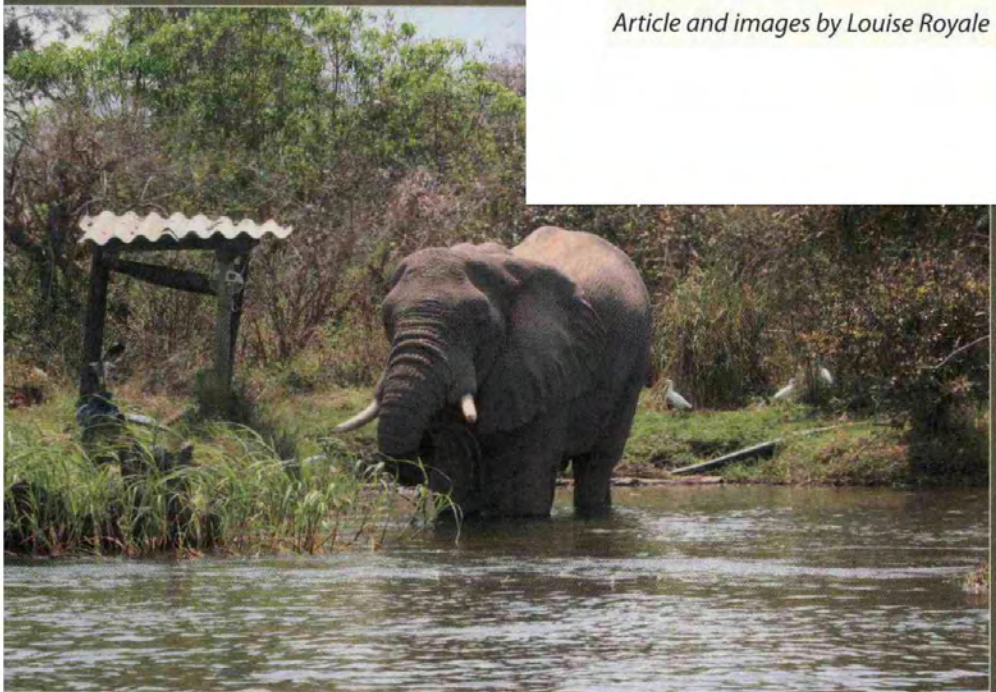


TOURING & WHITEWATER

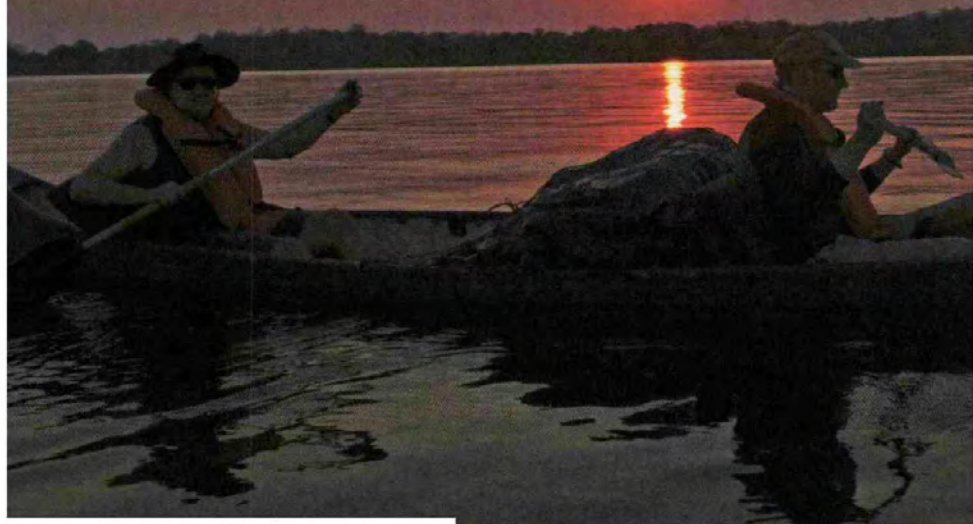


On a family adventure holiday to Zambia experienced kayaker Louise Royale enjoys the more relaxed side of paddling the Zambezi River and makes friends with some hippos, before giving into temptation and experiencing the not-so-relaxed side of the mighty river...

Article and images by Louise Royale



the canoes were well suited for the
gentle pace of travelling.



It's worth giving these
guys a wide berth!

