

## Victoria Falls Once More

Two three-week school holidays broke up our three-term school year in Rhodesia, but most of all, we looked forward to the six-week Christmas school holiday. It fell in the middle of summer at the height of the rainy season, and I've loved summer rain ever since then. The Christmas school holiday at the end of Form Four was one of the most memorable for me.

I'd expected six weeks of hanging around town, playing my favourite LPs on my gramophone, and sleeping in on weekdays. Soon it would be Christmas, when I hoped to grow my record collection. But then, I got an unexpected invitation from my friend Peter to go with him on a pre-Christmas hitchhike to Durban. We returned to Bulawayo from that trip in time for the always enjoyable Christmas and New Year celebrations, which only culminated for me on my birthday in early January. It seemed like we buzzed from one fun thing to the next, and at this stage, we'd only completed half the long school holiday.

Like me, my cousin Jean had just written her Cambridge O-levels, and her father thought a well-deserved trip to Victoria Falls was in order. As fun as that sounded, Jean thought younger company would add to the enjoyment, so she invited me to go with them.

Just after my birthday, four days into the New Year, we jumped into my uncle's car and set off on the Victoria Falls Road. I'd always loved hitting the open road in Rhodesia, going to one of the many distant attractions. Unlike the Durban trip, I'd no need to hitch a lift, or wonder where I'd spend the night, so I settled back to enjoy the ride.

Soon after leaving the city, we passed grassland and wooded areas before reaching the mopane, teak, and mahogany forest around Lupane, about a hundred and seventy miles from Bulawayo. The drive to the Falls would normally be an easy four hours, though we took longer with a lunch stop at the old roadside country hotel near Wankie. Many holidaymakers visiting the Falls would remember the curried eggs and rice for which the hotel was renowned.

A roadside Mosi-oa-Tunya sign advised us that on certain days we'd be able to see the spray of the Falls thirty miles ahead. It primed us for our arrival. In the early afternoon, we drove into the bracing tropical heat of Victoria Falls, where the fresh Zambezi air always made me feel so alive.

We parked the car and checked into the famous old colonial-style Victoria Falls Hotel. A porter led us through historical corridors to our rooms on the ground floor at the northwest corner of the hotel. The bright, spacious rooms with their large windows overlooked the elegant gardens. After getting settled, we hopped into the car and drove to the Falls.

In those days, we could visit any of the Falls' attractions without charge or border restrictions between Southern and Northern Rhodesia. Our first goal was the Rainforest, with its vines and bromeliads, and multiple views of the thunderous cascade of water.

Following a quick inspection of the David Livingstone Statue and the Devil's Cataract, we wandered along the winding path to the other views of the Falls. The cooling spray carried on the wind provided relief from the intense tropical heat.

Up ahead, we could see several people in shiny plastic raincoats standing on the rocky outcrop known as Danger Point. As we approached that vantage point, a steady soaking spray enveloped us, reminding us of the urgings of the Africans hiring out raincoats at the entrance

to the Rainforest walk. We'd declined their concerned offers, and now we stood in a heavy tropical downpour, soaking us through and through.

Once we'd absorbed enough of the Rainforest's welcome, we retreated to the main path and walked on a short distance to a side-on view of the magnificent Victoria Falls Bridge. Although only a distance of about two hundred and eighty yards, in the tropical heat our clothes were almost dry.

After leaving the Rainforest, we walked onto the Victoria Falls Bridge. The breathtaking view along the enormous gorge, past the Knife Edge to the Falls, was humbling. On the Northern Rhodesian side, we descended the steps to the Boiling Pot at the foot of the Falls, its crushing power almost within touching distance.

Later, walking along the northern riverbank in the comfort of its shady trees, we passed the signs warning visitors that bathing was suicidal. They fuelled my imagination with pictures of crocodile attacks and people swept over the Falls.

At the hotel, the dining room proved to be a special treat. The waiters, all dressed in their smart uniforms, served us dishes selected from a menu designed to satisfy most palates. And yes, it listed vanilla ice cream among the desserts.

The next morning, after a generous English breakfast, we set about exploring. The car enabled us to visit areas along the river that I'd not before seen. A visit to Livingstone, with its small frontier town atmosphere, added to the sense of history.

At dinner that night, we planned our next day. We'd brought fishing rods, and my uncle suggested we should rise early and drive to the northern side and fish from the riverbank. Jean was not interested and decided that sleep was more important than catching fish. Based on the theory that fish bite best at sunrise, we arrived at our fishing spot in pitch darkness. Perhaps Jean's view that sleep was important had merit after all.

We knew crocodiles snatched their prey at the edge of rivers, but we'd not heard of anything like that happening at Victoria Falls, though I'm unsure how many people may have stood there before in total darkness at the water's edge.

As the light improved, something swam in small circles in front of us. Two parallel points, which may have been eyes, disturbed the surface. They were too wide for a frog and moved too fast for a crocodile. As dawn broke, the creature disappeared.

Soon, a tug on my line alerted me, and I began to reel it in. Whatever it was felt heavy. Might I have hooked a small crocodile or a large tigerfish? It fought me all the way until I landed it, a two and three-quarter pound bream. It remained the only fish we caught that morning, and the hotel kitchen cooked it for us for a delicious dinner that night.

At first, it disappointed me that the bream weighed less than three pounds. But then, I read in the Bulawayo Chronicle that the first prize for the heaviest bream in that weekend's Matopos fishing competition was only half the weight of mine.

The next morning, we tried again, and once more I was the lucky one with a single catch. In Rhodesia, the tigerfish was renowned as a game fish, known for its fighting qualities and having too many bones to eat. It proved much easier to land than the bream because it weighed less and sometimes swam towards me, not fighting the entire way to the riverbank.

The hotel kitchen cooked it that night. Jean and my uncle weren't interested in eating such a bony fish, but I was determined to try it. It took patience, but once I'd extracted all the bones, I found it to be most tasty.

One afternoon, we hired a small boat with a tiny outboard motor. Because of its cramped size, we shelved any idea of fishing from the boat, and its pedestrian pace amid the interesting Zambezi River scenery proved relaxing.

The stern edge of the boat, where I sat, was only about one foot above the water. We all looked towards the front in the direction we were heading. At one point, I looked back and saw two huge nostrils, within touching distance, disappearing under the water. I think the hippo was intending to surface but changed its mind when it noticed the boat. I was unaware how dangerous hippos were and how easily it could have overturned our boat. As they say, ignorance is bliss.

Next, it rained. In our open boat, we were all soaked, but the tropical heat made it refreshing, not deterring us from venturing further.

At our Christmas lunch a week or two earlier, we all got high-quality party hats, not the colourful cheap Christmas cracker paper ones cut to look like crowns. Mine was a black cowboy hat, which I thought suited me. I'd always liked cowboy films, and I couldn't have chosen better. The hat, made of compressed cardboard, moulded into shape and sprayed with imitation felt, was not designed for wet weather. By the end of the boat trip in the rain, my beautiful black cowboy hat looked more like the sun hats kindergarten kids wear at break time. Ah well!

Round about morning tea each day, an African band played xylophones to entertain the hotel guests, and one evening we watched colourful traditional African dancers performing in the garden.

Like all holidays, our brief trip passed in a flash, and it was time to return to Bulawayo. Without the holiday to look forward to, the journey home acquired an urgency missing from the outward journey. Jean experienced a queasiness, made worse by the undulations of the old Victoria Falls Road. She lay on the back seat of the car, complaining that her father didn't need to overtake every car he saw ahead of us.

And best of all, still two weeks of the school holidays remained.