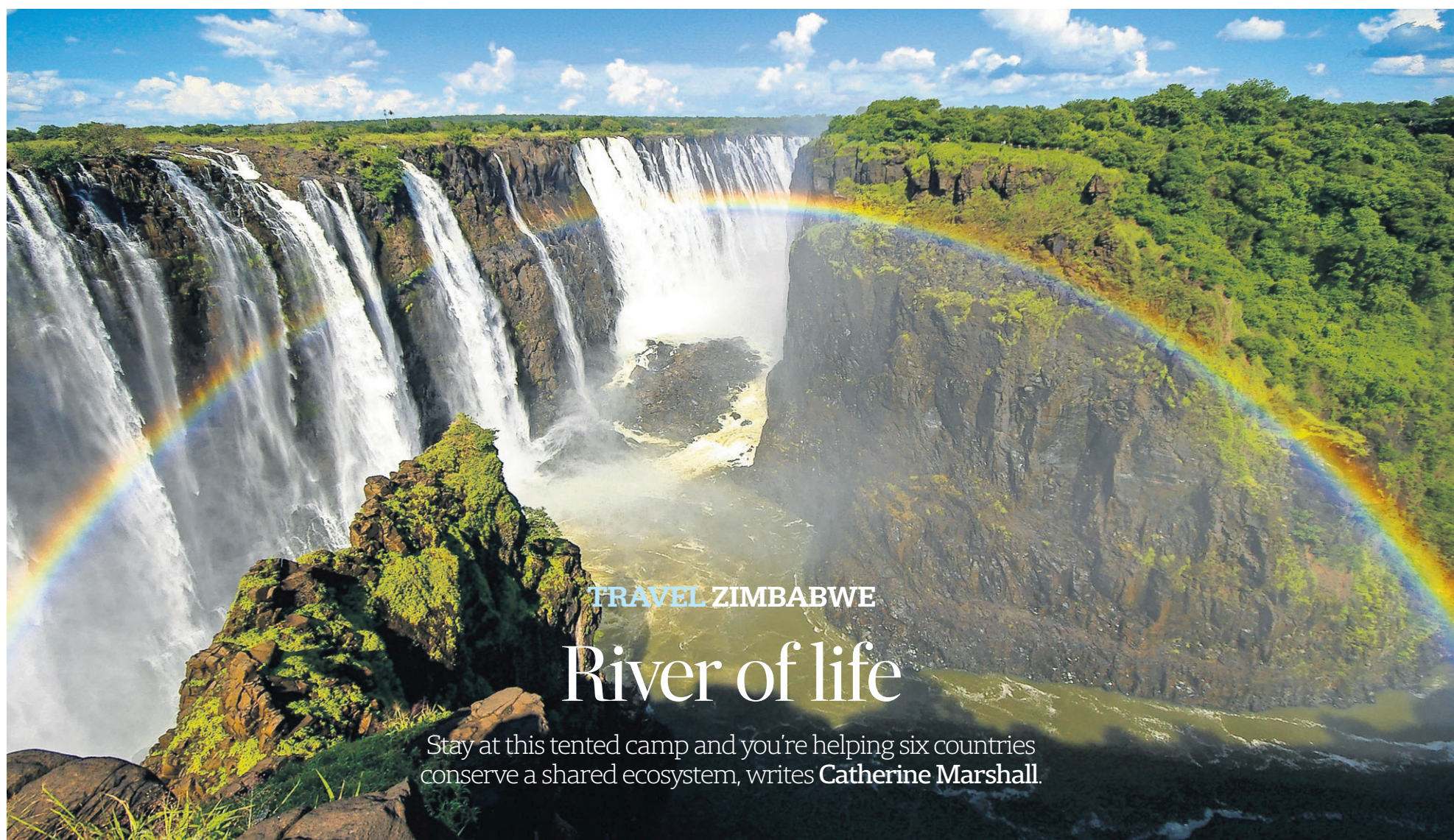




TRAVEL ZIMBABWE

River of life

Stay at this tented camp and you're helping six countries conserve a shared ecosystem, writes **Catherine Marshall**.

The road to heaven is a river. It arises in the sticky black swamps of far northern Zambia, turns west towards Angola, swerves back into the country of its birth, snakes along Namibia's Caprivi Strip and gathers speed as it loops towards its most famous port of call, the World Heritage-listed Victoria Falls (Mosi-oa-Tunya – "the smoke that thunders").

Here, 1000 kilometres from its source, the Zambezi River expands into the world's largest sheet of falling water, billowing over a lengthy basalt wall and smashing into Batoka Gorge far below. It churns apoplectically before continuing its journey along the Zimbabwe-Zambia border, coursing through Mozambique, seeping into the delta and expiring, replete, into the Indian Ocean.

It's an exhausting, magnanimous, transnational journey. Along its 2693km path, Africa's fourth-longest river has for eons quenched biodiverse floodplains, harboured wildlife, satiated the crops and communities gathered along its course. Today, it also balloons into man-made lakes and generates electricity.

"Everything around here is influenced by the river," says Clever Moyo, resident guide at Great Plains Conservation's Mpala Jena camp in Zambezi National Park. "[Most] of the Zambezi River is being exploited."

The road to hell, therefore, is also a river. Around every bend, the Zambezi risks pollution, poaching and climate-induced change. "Human interference is the major cause of changes on the river and its course," Moyo says. "And remember, it now becomes a broader kind of thing to manage because these are different states."

On the Zimbabwean side of the falls lie the Victoria Falls and the Zambezi national parks; on the Zambian side, Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park. Both countries are members of the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA), along with Angola, Botswana and Namibia. The organisation aims to preserve the river's ecosystems, communities and cultural resources through responsible conservation and tourism.

"The relations with these countries when it comes to conservation, that's where we have one mind," Moyo says. "They work together as countries to try and curb [environmental degradation] and protect wildlife."

It's a tall order in a region vulnerable to poaching; while elephant are still plentiful, critically endangered black rhino – whose horns fetch high prices in East Asia – face extinction. Their location is closely guarded,



The smoke that thunders, main. Clockwise from top left: The swimming pool at Mpala Jena; a sprig of scarce jackalberries; Mpala Jena's guests stop for sundowners on a river bank; a wallowing hippo. PHOTOS: CATHERINE MARSHALL

and anti-poaching patrols monitor the river and neighbouring national parks. The only rhino I'll see here is the specimen carved from a malformed tree trunk as Moyo guides me along the falls' 1.7km breadth.

And though the river surges towards the abyss and drenches us to the quick, rainfall has dwindled recently. The dwaba tree, one of Moyo's favourites, has produced little fruit this year.

"The trees always provide food. But currently the berry is not available, it didn't produce too much fruit because we received less rains. If they were to be around, I'll be the last one to get a meal because the baboons would have got there first!" he says.

"Animals like baboons, they know where to get food at a certain time, and if it's not available their behaviour changes, there's more competition and less

reproduction. That's an effect [of climate change]: it changes the whole ecosystem."

While the climate crisis requires a global strategy, Moyo and fellow conservationists are determined to safeguard a region beloved of both their countrymen and of tourists – who are themselves essential cogs in the conservation wheel.

Tourism incentivises environmental preservation through employment and community projects run by organisations like Great Plains Foundation. And lodgings like Mpala Jena, about 20km upriver, model the most delicate of footprints with the use of solar energy, recycled construction materials and borehole water treated with reverse osmosis. Consequently, the river on which the camp sits appears to be in rude health.

"This channel is very deep, 50 metres," says guide Wellington Sakaila as we glide



upriver. "Some places are shallow – one metre. But here it is like a gorge."

With razor-sharp precision he steers the boat across the oncoming rapids, past pods of truculent hippos and islands frilled with swamp-grass. In the wet season these islets will be submerged; in the dry, elephants will wade across and feed on their tussocks.

The five-tent camp slouches on the water's edge, vaguely tropical with its white-sand frontage and thatch-and-driftwood vibe. My suite is more marquee than canopy, its outdoor bath obscured from the eyes of all passers-by bar the voyeuristic vervet monkeys. While they fight over the dwaba tree's slim pickings, I take high tea in the pavilion overlooking the breezy Zambezi.

Everything around here is influenced by the Zambezi River.

Clever Moyo, Mpala Jena

That mercurial waterway presents a miracle as we glide along it at dusk: a hippo and her newborn calf, still pink-flushed and wobbly. Mother and babe sink into the river until only the elder's downy ears and bulging eyes protrude. What a day to be born, I think, as dying sunlight floods the sky.

Sunrise is muted, a wash of pale gold backlighting a troop of baboons descending a jackalberry tree. They appear fit, despite the dearth of dwaba berries. Moyo eases the Landcruiser through Zambezi National Park, in which Mpala Jena sits. Lion tracks are embossed in black cotton soil; giraffe and zebra graze indifferently. We halt beside a weeping wattle tree.

"This is what we used when I was being introduced to manhood in my village," Moyo says. Possessed by spirits, his initiation leader had dipped a feathery leaf into a clay pot filled with water, brushed it onto trunks withered by drought, and talked softly to the rain-deprived trees.

"For me, it means ecology didn't start today," Moyo says. "It's about respecting life. Respecting trees."

Perhaps the road to heaven is really a path forged for eons by the people who have always lived here. On the day of his initiation, after the possessed man blessed the thirsty trees, rain fell over Moyo's home country. **L&L**

The writer was a guest of Bench Africa.



Need to know

Getting there | Qantas flies direct from Sydney and Melbourne to Johannesburg; Airlink flies from Jo'burg to the Victoria Falls.

Stay | Bench Africa's three-day Zambezi safari starts from \$3735, including two nights at Mpala Jena, all meals and drinks. For more, see benchafrika.com