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THE VICTORIA FALLS HOTEL: SEE THE FALLS, STAY AT THE HOTEL

By Anne Z. Cooke, Tribune Media Services,
[World's Fare](#)

VICTORIA FALL, Zimbabwe -- It doesn't take much to provoke a debate about the Victoria Falls Hotel, legendary queen of the Zambezi River and the pride of the former British Empire. Travelers with a soul and a sense of history glow with delight. A newer generation of travelers, the same people who demand armchairs made yesterday and 800-thread-count linens, aren't so sure.

The merits, in fact, of a stay at this historic watering hole, built in 1917 on the Zimbabwe side of Victoria Falls, have become an increasingly lively topic of conversation among guests at safari lodges in northern Botswana. Since the Falls are one of the world's great natural wonders, designing a safari itinerary that includes a visit to this awesome spectacle only makes sense.

Now you have to ask yourself: Are you ready to relive the days of Empire? And do you mind spending money in Zimbabwe, knowing that a portion will help prop up strongman Robert Mugabe and Africa's most repressive dictatorship? After all, there are several slick new hotels on the Zambian side of the Falls. But know this: During the months before rains from the highlands rush downstream to swell the Zambezi River, usually August through January, views of the Falls are poor from the Zambian side.

During the 20th century's early decades, when Zimbabwe was a colony named Rhodesia, the Vic Falls Hotel -- as it's known -- was in its heyday. Here at the spot where four countries now meet (Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana and Namibia), people of taste and influence made a beeline for the hotel, booking a room for the duration, for a week, two weeks, and in some cases, for months.

From prime ministers and princesses to explorers and Hollywood arm candy, all brushed elbows in the shade of the hotel's neo-classic columns, sipped gin-and-tonics on the veranda and regrouped for afternoon tea served by white-gloved waiters. Then -- as they do today -- troops of baboons chased each other over broad lawns beneath spreading shade trees and mongoose colonies prowled the grass sniffing for tidbits. In the distance, billowing clouds rose over the trees as the Zambezi River roared over the rim and down into the narrow gorge.

During the good times, successive owners enlarged and updated the Vic Falls Hotel, often to please contemporary tastes. Two so-called "hammerhead" wings and a new second floor above the lounges added rooms. An inner, landscaped courtyard expanded the gardens.

Eventually, in 1996, a long overdue renovation dug into the

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infrastructure, from water pipes, heating systems and air conditioning to wiring, smoke detectors and ceiling sprinklers. A new wing raised the room and suites count to 161, the Bulawayo Lounge and Reading Room was added and the swimming pool and Jungle Junction restaurant moved to the far side of the lawns.

Guided by the original plans and photos taken during the Edwardian era, the remodel took the decor back to the early 1900s, redecorating both public lounges and all guest rooms. But that was 11 years -- and a lifetime -- ago.

Today, with Zimbabwe's economy in ruins, inflation runs at 8000 percent annually. The Zimbabwean dollar is worthless. The official exchange rate is set at 30,000 "Zim" dollars to one American dollar, but the real, open market rate is actually 300,000 to \$1. There's nothing to buy, including clothes and groceries. If Victoria Falls weren't an hour's drive from the Botswana border, where stores are stocked, and if some people weren't crossing the border regularly and bringing back supplies, people would starve.

The regime's secret police thugs don't target tourists (it's safe to visit), but last year's repressive atmosphere discouraged tourism, starving the hotel and its employees of revenue. Tourism is now recovering and the hotel is busy again, offering all the old ambiance and spot-on service. But the oldest guest rooms have faded curtains and worn carpets. For better conditions, ask for a room in the New Wing.

Are you staying at the Vic Falls Hotel?" our friends asked. We said "yes." That's because some of the dollars (and especially tips) we spent at the hotel (and for an entrance visa: \$30 per American visitor) throw a lifeline to employees and their families.

Stay at the Vic Falls Hotel and bask in its ambiance. But don't add your tip to the restaurant or room bill; hand American dollars to the waiters and maids who serve you. Just as important, bring a duffel bag stuffed with tennis shoes and T-shirts and trade them for souvenirs at the craft market. Or give them away. Your presence and kindness gives hope that times will change.

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty explore the world from Venice, Calif. They can be reached at TravelsWithAnne@cs.com.

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