

TRAVEL TRILOGY

INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS ARE FLOCKING TO SOUTHERN AFRICA'S MOST POPULAR TRAVEL CIRCUIT — FROM THE CAPE TO THE KRUGER AND THE ZAMBEZI RIVER

TEXT DAVID ALLARDICE

Kingston
Treehouse, Lion
Sands, Sabi
Sand Game
Reserve



WE WERE GLIDING SLOWLY THROUGH A TRANQUIL, mesmerising wilderness, lulled by the reflection of a winter watercolour blue sky above and a deep blue below. Winter on the Zambezi River is predictably pristine: perfectly stable 28-degree blue-sky days. It is impossible not to dream.

From our canoe everything was magnified. The banks of the river were speckled with crocodiles, playing sentry in the midday sun. I surveyed the surface for the telltale bulging eyes and anticipated the surfacing snort of a hippo.

Then came a tug, which became a pull, picking up speed, a perceptible change in pace, in sound, and we were sucked into one of the feeder channels joining the root of the mighty silver serpent. Paddles up we gained speed and rode through rapids where the Tonga fishermen had deftly laid their handwoven traps, supervised by cormorants and darters.

After the Nile, Niger and Congo rivers, the Zambezi is Africa's fourth largest river, and is arguably one of the world's most majestic and enchanting rivers. Its birthplace, a diminutive font in the Mwinilunga area of northwestern Zambia, belies its true nature, as it flows serpentine over the Victoria Falls and its four gorges, into and out of the man-made Lake Kariba and Cahora Bassa, 2 700km into the Indian Ocean on the Mozambique coast. The river basin also incorporates several of Africa's finest national parks and safari areas and its magnificent delta has, for centuries, been a focal point in the history and culture of the region.

We were at Royal Chundu's Island Lodge, the first and only Relais & Châteaux property in Zambia and the Victoria Falls area. It is situated on the broad, verdant banks of the

Upper Zambezi, 30km above the falls on the private Katambura island in a serene side channel of the river. It comprises four luxurious suites with expansive viewing decks, outdoor baths and the plush colonial comforts of a bygone era.

The secluded setting is at the convergence of the Zimbabwean and Zambian borders, between Chobe National Park and Victoria Falls, two spectacular landmarks easily accessible from the lodge on a day tour. The lodge is a short drive from Livingstone, yet hidden from civilisation and the trappings of the modern world. Set on a 15km stretch of private waterway, protected by two sets of rapids, the only boats you will see belong to the lodge or local fishermen.

I'd been hearing the word from hospitality insiders: Zambia was the continent's unsung safari destination, and its best value. The country's comprehensive offering, from the upper reaches of the Zambezi to the river's flood plains, is described by foreign journalists as "Safari 2.0 — a next-level destination for experienced Africa hands who've grown jaded on other, more developed, luxurious places". The game viewing is reliably excellent, the quality of local guides superb, and the parks offer a diversity of experiences: canoeing, fishing, boating, night drives and walking safaris.

It's also an excellent choice for first-timers as the steady stream of foreigners, both small groups and independent travellers, shows. Royal Chundu shows 2011 to 2012 year-on-year sales increases of nearly 160% and 2012 to 2013 sales increases of just under 20% year to date. "That and a yield increase in the past year of 126% per person per night

without any increase in our rates, just a change in the traveller demographic being more guests on fully inclusive international rate rather than the discounted Southern African Development Community full board rate," says lodge owner and MD Tina Aponte.

Sales like this are extraordinary, and are due to a number of factors. Aside from the increasingly popular bucket list experience of the Zambezi River and Victoria Falls, Aponte explains it as "the result of increased ease, commercially accessible airline routings between the pivotal Southern African destinations. Primarily, SA Airlink's routing between Cape Town and Livingstone (four times per week), South African Airways (SAA) and British Airways' daily routing between Johannesburg and Livingstone".

What Royal Chundu and many other upmarket lodges, hotels and operators are experiencing is a surge in interest in the Southern African "trilogy", namely the Cape Town, Kruger National Park and Zambezi River/Victoria Falls circuit. Foreign guests, particularly Americans, Europeans and increasingly South Americans are driving demand and arrive in SA to undertake this particular journey.

Last year SA welcomed approximately 9.2-million tourists, with international tourist arrivals growth at 10.2%. This was against an average global industry growth of 4%. Minister of Tourism Marthinus van Schalkwyk, on opening the Travel Indaba in Durban earlier this year, said: "We are growing into a most sought-after tourist destination, with a vast array of unique experiences on offer. This year, we also start to take stock of 20 years of freedom and democracy, and

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20 years of tourism in our country. Tourism is a vital contributor to economic growth, catapulting SA from a pariah prior to 1994, to one of the fastest-growing and most desired leisure holiday destinations in the world today. In 1993, the country received just over 3.4-million international arrivals. In 2012, we witnessed over 13-million international arrivals, of which some 9-million were international tourists visiting our shores.

"Our brand message on channels such as National Geographic and CNN International enabled us to reach over 1-billion consumers last year. This complemented our online partnerships with the likes of Expedia, Facebook, TripAdvisor and WAYN.com. Last year, we also generated over R4.6bn in editorial coverage for our destination through our global and in-country media relations work."

David Ryan, CEO and founder of Rhino Africa, the top inbound online travel agency, confirms the trilogy circuit is in high demand, saying "70% of what we do is Cape Town, Kruger and Vic Falls with the UK clients mostly sticking to this route. The Americans often add on Botswana and some of the more intrepid Europeans such as the Germans and Dutch like to self drive, either up the Garden Route or up to Namibia from Cape Town."

Ryan adds that the French, Italian and Portuguese travellers like to add some "beach to their bush" and often include the Indian Ocean islands such as Mozambique's Bazaruto and Quirimbas archipelagos or Mauritius and the Seychelles. "We are seeing a surge in families and especially so with the South American market, such as Peruvians and Brazilians," he says.

"There's not a nation or traveller in the world who doesn't aspire to go on safari," says Ryan. "This is proper bucket list stuff; a true adventure and experience". The iconic experience of these three destinations dictate the demand and have created a route that is driving increasing numbers of travellers to SA as the point of arrival and departure. This



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increased tourist traffic has a knock-on effect on the properties in those destinations whose offerings have improved while yield and lead times have increased from three to six weeks to three to four months.

One of the best examples of packaging the trilogy is Relais & Châteaux's Ultimate Africa offering. It plays directly into this trend and encompasses the diverse beauty of both southern and eastern Africa, from beach to jungle, savannah and mountain — and at all Relais & Châteaux properties including The Cellars-Hohenort in Cape Town, Londolozi, neighbouring the Kruger National Park, Royal Chundu on the Zambezi and with options to extend further into Botswana at Zарапа Camp and Chyulu Hills in Kenya. SA Airlink and Kenyan Airways, linking Cape Town, Kruger, Livingstone, Kasane (Botswana) and Nairobi (Kenya), make this collection possible.

The adventure begins at The Cellars-Hohenort in the historic Constantia Valley on the verdant slopes of Table Mountain. Part of The Collection by the inimitable Liz McGrath. The exquisitely landscaped property hosts three award-winning restaurants, its jewel The Greenhouse, all overseen by Relais & Châteaux Grand Chef Peter Templehoff.

Tony Romer-Lee, CEO of The Collection, confirms an increase of more than 20% on last year's numbers, saying The Marine in Hermanus and Cellars-Hohenort are driving this growth, together with the favourable exchange rate and increased spend in the group's restaurants. "We've also seen more families with an average stay of three days and earlier bookings from some regulars over peak periods."

The Relais & Châteaux model works well as it provides guests with the ability to build their own itineraries and experience their dream journey with personal interaction and attentiveness, while the individual character of each property ensures distinctiveness and eclecticism.

From Cape Town, SA Airlink flies directly to Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport, which is a two-hour ride into the Sabi Sand, a prolific and beautiful game reserve area which neighbours the Kruger National Park. Unsurprisingly

then, it is also the home to some of the most exclusive game lodges in the world. Singita, Londolozi and Lion Sands are three of the finest, and are a benchmark for the industry, commanding prices of around R15 000 per person per night during peak season. This end of the scale is for top-end discerning travellers, honeymoons and life events such as multi-generational family gatherings.

Another key driver is the favourable exchange rate for American, UK and European travellers, as South African companies charge in the weaker rand amount and not in US dollars as most other African countries do. This means better value for money and makes top end experiences more affordable to many travellers. Better value is beneficial for tourism, especially in recession recovery mode where, according to More Collection CEO Rob More, "they are spending about 20% more but all travellers remain more frugal than in previous years. It is a period of conservative and prudent spend, not 'show-off' spend."

home of the Varty family for 86 years and is founded on pioneering conservation and family values. A famous destination in its own right and a Relais & Châteaux property, Londolozi comprises five camps of different styles, design and décor all within the Sabie River concession.

Owner Shan Varty also confirms a marked increase in numbers: up by 30% in the year. She attributes it to the product offering, "a stand alone family-run unit with absolute attention to the guest experience allowing for tailor-made wildlife experiences".

Varty also agrees that the exchange rate "is helping, but at Londolozi guests are increasingly repeat or referred business, so price is less of an issue. What really matters is quality, but the weaker rand does help and we are seeing an extension in the average duration of stay from two to four or five nights."

Also sharing a family legacy and deep connection with the bush, the More Group is a collection of private hotels and lodges across Southern Africa, which opened its first lodge,

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Guests place a greater value on experience than they do luxury

Of course, everything is included in the per night price. Few hotels can match Singita's wine list, commanding vintages that not even the winemakers and wineries themselves still have. The décor, attention to detail and service is on another level, and with the best rangers and trackers guiding guests in an area teeming with big game, the expense is arguably worthwhile, especially if guests are pushed for time and are paying in dollars.

Repeat business forms a strong component of revenue with some guests returning annually for two weeks at a time, requesting their original ranger and tracker team in their own Land Rover.

Londolozi, from the Zulu word "to protect", has been the

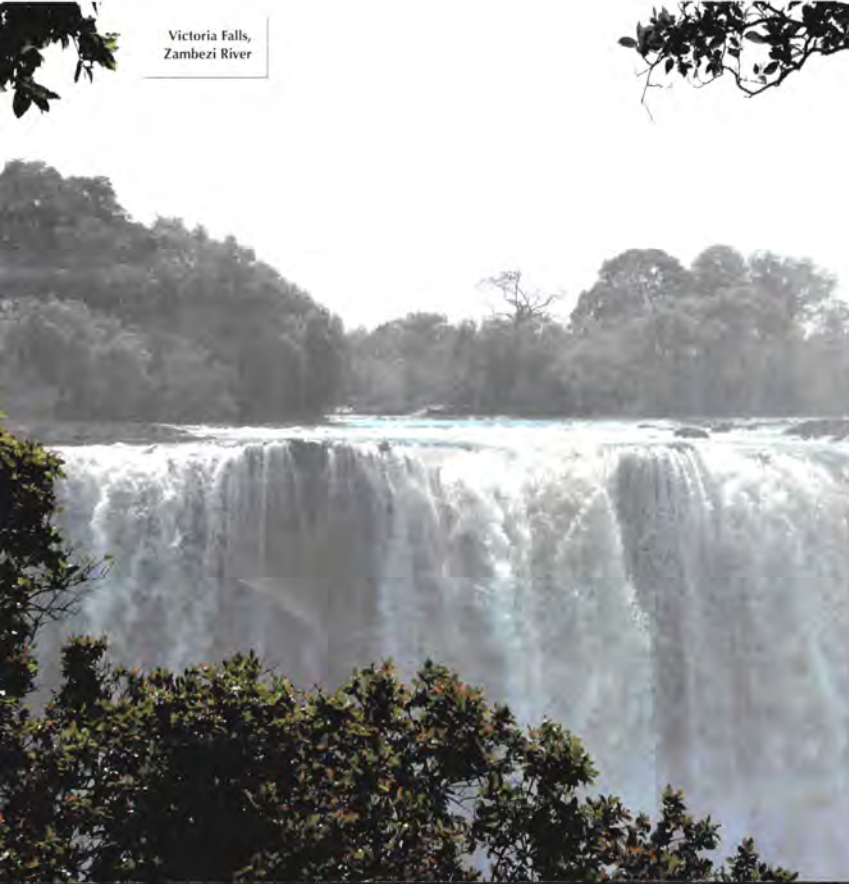
Lion Sands, on the banks of the Sabie River, in April 2001.

Lion Sands is family owned and managed by the fourth generation More Family. Their grandfather was one of the founding members of the Sabi Sand Wildtuin in 1948, instilling a long history of community and conservation.

Since then, under the vision and leadership of Rob, the group has acquired the taste, passion and expertise required to be a world-class hotel and lodge operator and has grown the business into four regions: Sabi Sand Game Reserve, the Kruger National Park, Madikwe Game Reserve and the Cape Town area, suitably allowing guests to pick and choose location, price points and experience.

Rob explains that this strategy is "approximately 70% of

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Victoria Falls,
Zambezi River



Ivory Lodge,
Lion Sands,
Sabi Sand
Game Reserve

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the US market and is intentional as circuits throughout Africa have proven to be very successful, especially within the safari industry as this is a way you can achieve feasible scale." What he means is that it is not possible to have a 50-roomed lodge but it is possible to have three lodges, with a combined total of 50 rooms, which to a large degree share in a number of marketing and sales overheads.

Rob also says his numbers are up on last year by anything from 15%-25%. "We have also seen an increase in rate which has been very important as the last three to four years have been tough on profitability. This always allows us to keep reinvesting back into the product to ensure we retain our standards."

Underlying this heritage and tradition is a strong drive to innovate. One manifestation of this is in the sought after Chalkley, Kingston and Tinyeleti Treehouses experience. "We have also invested in enhancing the experiential aspect of our properties with the leading example of this being the creation of our treehouse experiences. Guests place a greater value on experience than they do luxury," says Rob.

He sees confirmation of this approach from the market as about "10% of our guests are coming to stay at our lodges because of the treehouse".

This trilogy of Cape, Kruger and Zambezi is an iconic journey that has evolved out of demand and proactive product development. Its success, now commanding more than 70% of the US inbound market to Africa, has been borne out of good connections and flight access from British Airways, SAA and SA Airlink which will next year be flying directly to Skukuza inside the Kruger, a favourable exchange rate for foreigners, and the aggregation of quintessentially African experiences.

The sun was just starting to dip over the horizon and melt into one of those textbook bush sunsets. The first evening bat flurried past us, framing itself against the sinking orange lozenge. We were spending the night in the Kingston Treehouse, our own floating platform above the sounds, sights and smells of the bush, looking west towards the Sabie River and out over a chirping forest of acacia woodland. Spica and Saturn awakened and it was as if we were in a time-lapse sequence, a blanket of stars slowly enveloping us, some of them close enough to catch, others arcing across the inky canvas, burning into our memory.

STAY

Royal Chundu royalchundu.com

Lion Sands lionsands.com

Londolozi Game Reserve www.londolozi.com

Singita singita.com

The Cellars-Hohenort Hotel www.cellars-hohenort.com

The Marine Hotel www.marine-hermanus.co.za

GETTING THERE

British Airways www.britisbairways.com

SA Airlink www.flyairlink.com

South African Airways www.flysaa.com

David flew courtesy of SA Airlink from Cape Town to Johannesburg and then to Kasane. Return from Livingstone to KMLA and finally to Cape Town.



Cellars-Hohenort,
The Collection,
Relais & Châteaux,
Cape Town