

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 easy, 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

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 Zarafa 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

15 MINUTES

AARON KOHN and JONATHAN LIEBMANN

TEXT TARYN LAMBERTI PHOTOGRAPHY GARETH JACOBS



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very great city or part of a city has a museum," says Jonathan Liebmann, the property developer behind the exciting urban renewal project Maboneng, south east of central Johannesburg.

Once a run down industrial area to which no young hipster ever gave a second thought, today Maboneng is a worthwhile and enticing attraction in the City of Gold. Liebmann's latest addition to the area is a museum space called Museum of African Design (MOAD). MOAD will host four quarterly exhibitions a year says museum director Aaron Kohn, with 20% of the content from SA and 80% from the rest of the continent.

The first one, held at the end of this month, will be by Southern Guild, a group of SA's top crafters and designers including furniture maker Gregor Jenkin and Kwa-Zulu Natal ceramicists Ardmore.

Maboneng, which means "place of light" in Sotho, is a small neighbourhood of apartments, shops and restaurants and hosts the popular Market on Main, open every Sunday.

So far, the developers have bought up 35 buildings, seven of which have already been developed into retail and residential areas. Five are in various stages of development and eight new renovations will begin next year.

"Maboneng has exceeded our expectations," says Liebmann. "We came up with the idea of making a museum about two years ago to add another layer to the development and to make it an even bigger attraction."

MOAD will be housed in a 2 600m² building that was used as a manufacturing facility for mining parts in the 1930s and in more recent years as a panel beating firm. The shell of the building will be kept in its rough finish, "raw and industrial", in keeping with the style of other spaces in Maboneng. Still in its construction phase, there will be four different levels which will host separate exhibitions and events. There will be a cocktail bar, restaurant and swimming pool for outdoor functions and two retail shops within the space. In a further effort to attract Joburg residents, family days, regular concerts and various classes will be held at the museum. It will also stay open late on Thursday nights. "We are playing with the idea of what it means to be a museum. It's never going to be the Tate Modern. It's not a new build. It's a thing we found and turned into a gem," Liebmann says.

Museum of African Design, 281 Commissioner Street, Johannesburg, 084 951 2060, www.moadjhb.com

Dokter and Misses, Kassaena Server, slate

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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-hobenort.com

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

GETTING THERE

British Airways www.britishairways.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