

The Smoke That THUNDERS -: An Experience

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Africa , the land of origin of life, human species , has been a mystery . Beats of African drums and Kenyan safari have been great attractions. Films like African Safari, Born Free , Serengeti Shall not die, have been thrilling to view. Nature has showered abundant beauty on Africa and chiselled like African people.

During 2012 , I got a dream opportunity to visit Zambia, the copper capital of the world. Zambia is known as the land of the legendary African walking safari, Victoria Falls, the wild Zambezi River, abundant wildlife, and raw wilderness. Typically Zambia is a land locked country and almost everything gets imported.

After an early morning flight from Mumbai , I landed in Zambia via Addis Ababa, Ethiopian capital. While flying had the dream view of the great mountain range of Kilimanjaro. Totally white with snow and sunshine. The famous story “ The Snows of Kilimanjaro” of Ernest Hemingway was lingering in mind.

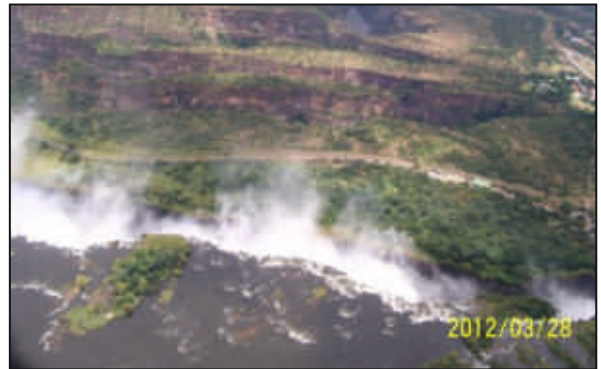
The road from Lusaka airport to city is excellent, and had trees on both sides. Never felt we were in Africa. Well maintained gardens, modern buildings and richness were visible. However Lusaka is different from interior Zambia.

After finishing the assignment in Lusaka , capital of Zambia , everybody advised , a visit to Victoria falls. One of the world's greatest waterfalls between Zambia and Zimbabwe border at Livingston. Incidentally Lusaka is a very clean city , full of energy, cheer and busy. But after evening it's advisable not to walk on the road alone or without the company of a local person.

I had 2 days free after fulfilling the assignment and every local person advised to visit Livingstone and Victoria falls. From my early days , I was reading about Victoria falls but had never dreamt, I will be able to visit.



Victoria Falls is the largest singular waterfall in the world spanning a width of 1.7km, a height of 108 m, (more than 300 ft) , and an average flow of 1 million litres of water per second! Just imagine the volume and noise. It's no wonder this waterfall is considered one of the seven natural wonders of



the world and is a UNESCO World Heritage site. David Livingstone, the Scottish missionary and explorer, is believed to have been the first European to view Victoria Falls on 16 November 1855, from what is now known as Livingstone Island, one of two land masses in the middle of the river Zambezi . Livingstone named his discovery in honour of Queen Victoria, but the indigenous name, “Mosi-oa-Tunya “ is now the official title of the fall.

Lusaka to Livingstone town is about 4 hour's journey . As one approaches the town , an hour (about 50 Km from town) before , a great cloud rose above in the blue clear sky. Immediately the compelling sound of wind like thunder followed . I was thinking , the heavy rains of Africa is going to spoil my visit and was cursing my fate. There would no second opportunity to visit Zambia again , and a dream to view Victoria Falls will be short lived. As evening was closing into night , wonderful evening setting Sun colours appeared on the horizon and the sound turned into thunder and clouds turned into a smoky shower look alike. Then the driver told , we are approaching Victoria Falls and what we are listening is sound of the waterfall and the cloudy smoke are droplet showers arising in the sky are from the Victoria falls back lash . An unbelievable colourful smoky view , thundering sound of “The smoke that Thunders” .

I just blabbered, Oh My God , “Mosi-oa-Tunya”.

I was praying for good weather for next day. Got up early morning and took a taxi to “Victoria Falls”. Hardly 20 minutes from the lodge. There was little thunder sound as we neared. Not many tourists . Near the ticket window , quite a few curios shops and drum beaters . Bought a ticket and started journey to smoke that thunders. About half a KM from the entrance, water fall sound was distinctly heard. Like Niagara falls no stair cases to go down or under the fall or no view points . All is just natural and not commercial. I was going down the stony slippery steps , and suddenly showers were on my head. Just looked in front and could not believe. So much water jumping in front forward and sound was deafening . Just opposite , about 200-300 feet , a water mountain was visible. The water wall was falling down every second and creating fear in the mind. Not many tourists around, about 4 -5 of us were looking at the falling water wall. There was a small shed and a boy was

renting raincoats to go further. Wearing that raincoat was not a guarantee of keeping dry , but at least water canon will not hit . There is a walk way rope bridge of about 50 ft. to cross and the water flow bellow was horrifying. Crossing the bridge was a herculean and fearful exercise . Shaky, showery and cloudy .Rain shower drops were flying all around. Just crossed the small bridge and arrived at view point. This was awesome view. I was looking at water Himalaya, more than a kilometre width and 300 ft high . Water water everywhere. Compelling and deafening sound. Falling water, splashing water ,noisy water, brownish water , cloudy water. Call by any name , it was a water world. Horrifying. The feeling was awesome but had to leave with complete drenched.

Returned via the bridge and took a way down about 200 feet on slippery way , call them steps. And reached at the bottom land level. Looking up , it was just a thick water wall and the water flow from the base of water fall . As the water was taking turn into Zimbabwe, Zambezi was getting quitter and silent.

But at that corner whirlpools were every where. Local guide warned me, don't touch the water even with a finger, it is very hot, and one will be pulled by water fall and never return. Don't experiment.

Later I went to Zimbabwe side to have a view of the falls. The view from the bridge is a 360 degree lovely view. A memorable experience , tall , noisy, smoky waterfall on one side and on the other side, quiet Zambezi river in Zimbabwe.

In the evening had a speed boat ride , in Zambezi , and the colourful sky showed its natural wonderful colour play ,in setting sun. Hippos all around , watery smoke, greenery on the river bank , with elephants and Smokey African beer in hand. Only regret, I had no company. Early morning next , I planned a visit to nearby “Mosi-oa-Tunya” National Park.

Lions and Cheetah babies are brought here at very early age, looked after and after 3-4 years, they are again sent back to their Jungle homes. Just to avoid early death at baby age. They are free and one can touch them, walk with them and talk to them. I did all. Just with an ordinary stick, a soft and love touch, a bit soft talk and Cheetah started licking me. Never in life, I have been so close to wild animal, and not again. They are wild but respond to soft touch and do not normally harm. Their guard is around, but one can go so close, touch, feel and experience. Dare this and you will carry memory for ever.

I wanted to have a sky view of Victoria falls and helicopter ride is available at a very high cost. USD 234 / each. But it is worth taking the ride.



The view from above is breath-taking, super human and a huge perspective. I wondered at the nature's miracle and just folded hands to that mighty power. One more surprising information. In summer during September- October, the waterfall becomes dry and one can cross the waterfall from top by walk.

The only view remaining was from the top of the fall. I had to travel by a speed boat to Livingstone island. It was cloudy, bit rainy, but the attraction of reaching the top was in my mind. There was a small thatched shed and lunch was arranged. The island itself is small. And the guide took me to a corner and held my hand, asked me to look down and Oh My God, the water was jumping down with unbelievable speed. I was just about 7-8 feet from the water. A moment came when I felt, let me jump in the water and end myself and bow to the nature. Not even a second, one can survive. It was so slippery, but I never wanted to return from that point.

How nature creates such wonders? They are awesome, horrifying, humongous and hats off to those discoverers, who venture into unknown and opened the treasure for us.

Salam Livingstone and salam "Mosi-oa-Tunya". The smoke that thunders!

