

Go Africa

Wild at heart

From tracking down leopards in a game reserve to stomach-churning gorge swings by Victoria Falls, **Laurence Mackin** has the time of his life on a three-country safari through southern Africa

A MONKEY has stolen my shoes. They are good shoes, and have been halfway around the world and back again. In the past 10 days alone they've pushed off a dive into a 110m-high gorge that hummed to the tune of the Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, found grip on a boat while playful elephants spat water at each other in Botswana, and had their soles made salty by the red dirt of the bush in South Africa's Timbavati reserve. That was when we stopped to sip drinks after an evening searching by off-road jeep for a majestic leopard, which we found in the crook of a tree, tail flicking in the wind, lips parted in languorous yawns, sabre-like teeth licked clean.

This is 10 days and three countries with very different approaches to the wildlife experience, a grand tour through different habitats, attitudes and ecologies – perhaps the safari of a lifetime. Just remember to bring the right shoes.

This itinerary began in the opulent streets of Sandton, a Johannesburg suburb of business, shopping centres and splashes of wealth hatched in by walls, wire and warning signs.

The next morning it's off to Timbavati. At the heart of this 10,000-hectare reserve, which shares an unfenced border with Kruger National Park, is Umlani Bushcamp. It describes itself as rustic but is as luxurious as you have any right to expect. Electricity is limited, but water is piping hot in its comfortably chic thatch-roofed rondavals.

Its bar overlooks a watering hole where, in the course of three days, buffalo set up camp and wallow in the mud while zebras flit about in the grassy shade. Giraffes bend their mineshaft-length necks to drink, flicking their heads up before ramping blood pressure causes them to expire.

In the mornings and evenings, open-top safari trucks head into the wilderness. Impala roam in thick packs, and we give an obstinacy of buffalo a wide berth; a lone male, or dagga boy – from the Afrikaans word for mud – will not hesitate to charge a truck for the sheer sport of spending some ill-tempered energy. (A wide berth is perhaps slimmer in this part of the world: we come within metres.)

Giraffes are more reticent towards the vehicles; lions, once found, are studiously indifferent. They appear to have only two settings: explosive, violent intensity and a laziness that borders on torpor. Two brothers barely raise a whisker when we crawl within metres of their sunning spot. One rises on his haunches and strolls around the truck before flopping down in a cooler patch of dust. It's tough being the kings of the jungle; their majesties need a lot of rest. The lattices of scars on their tawny snouts show that ruling is not all sleeping in the sun.

The leopard is a more furtive cat, but we clock four in three days. After a hunt through the bush and some

Go there



Air France (airfrance.ie) flies to Johannesburg from Dublin via Paris. KLM (klm.ie) flies via Amsterdam. British Airways (ba.com) flies from Dublin, Cork, Shannon and Belfast via London Heathrow.

frenetic bursts of radio chatter we find a placid treebound leopard. A distant thrumming has set her tail twitching, and she ignores the whirr and click of our cameras; this jungle celebrity is indifferent to her fans. After she has graced us with enough of her presence, there's a yawn, a stretch and a swift descent, followed by a slow stalk into thicker undergrowth, away from the tourist paparazzi.

Each night ends with sundowner drinks, terrific colours fading to black in the enormous sky before an enormous moon rises at astonishing speed. Gin and tonics are irresistible – there is a little colonial in all of us.

One of the best lookout points in this private reserve is a tree house overlooking a watering hole in the thick of the brush. Crocodiles and hippos barely tolerate each other in the waters, where other game come down to drink. In the dead of night one couple have their sleep disturbed by the roar of lions, in time to see a moonlit elephant saunter underneath their post.

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From here it's back to Johannesburg for a flight to Zimbabwe, and Victoria Falls Airport. This is a dramatic contrast to South Africa. Despite having one of the natural wonders of the world, Victoria Falls is underdeveloped, making for a thrilling ramshackle tourist experience.

Zimbabwe has just had economic sanctions against it renewed, overseen by a unity government one half of which is a byword for human-rights abuses, but the streets are quiet and free of hassle. At 10pm, on my way to a bar beneath a swathe of bright stars, I ask the gate man if it's safe to walk. “Oh, yes, but best get a taxi home. It's dangerous later on, because of the animals.”

Prices are in dollars, rand, euro or whatever hard currency you're having yourself – and are surprisingly high: the country abandoned the sinking Zimbabwean dollar almost a year ago. Knots of teenagers sell sets of the currency to tourists – \$5 nets 80 billion Zimbabwean dollars. I buy some and feel like a worthless central bank.

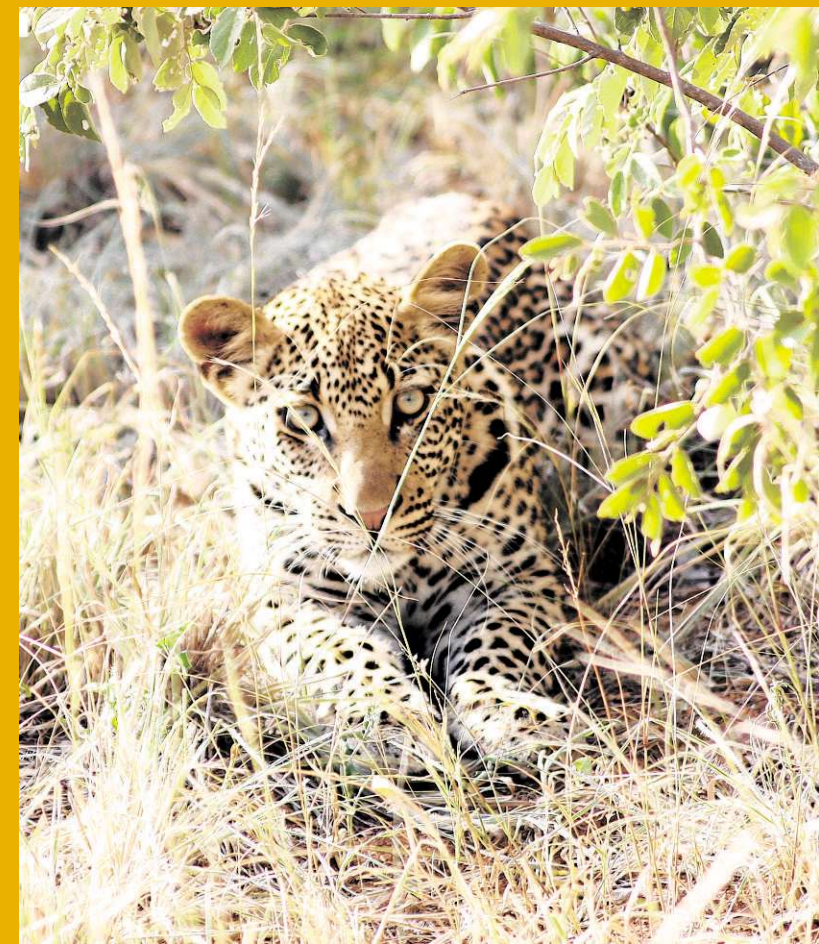
Perhaps the constant low roar of the falls has driven these people slightly mad, because an adventurous spirit suffuses the area. Alongside lion walks with rehabilitated cubs, and helicopter and microlight rides above the falls, is the prospect of bungee jumps, gorge swings and zip wires above 110m gouges the Zambezi river has carved from the landscape.

An adrenalin day begins with a flying fox run, strapped into a harness and running vertically off a platform to rattle across the gorge on fixed wires. Then it's on to the zip wire and a 400m run along cables that hits speeds, reportedly, of 100km/h.

These, though, are mere entrees to the blood-red meat of the gorge swing, a 70m free fall from a wooden platform before the cable swings out into the heart of the gorge and over the Zambezi river in a terrifying arc. “The record is 11, so you only have to do 12,” say the delightfully pushy crew working the rig.

The first jump is a now-or-never moment, egged on by a heckling audience. The fall is hellish, jaw locked open by the G force at speeds of up to 180km/h for seconds that last for minutes, falling, falling, falling until the merciful, beautiful moment when the slack disappears and the harness gains an edge of tension to flick you over the hungry waters. They winch you in, look at you with big grins and tell you the good news: “Great! Only 10 more to go. The next one you're doing backwards.” I manage five more in nonsense positions, the worst a handstand start. After this the zip wire is child's play, and two abseils high on the gorge face are fun formalities.

Then there's the falls themselves. In this, the rainy season, Mosi-oa-Tunya – the Mist that Thunders – is in full 1.7km-wide flow, toppling over the 110m drop where it hits a huge submerged rock





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and sends a plume of water into the air that you can see as you fly into town.

Approaching the falls through a permanently green park, made rainforest by the tumbling mist, the noise moves from a gentle murmur to a low, stomach-churning roar. The first glimpse is of cliff faces of moving water, too huge to take in from any one spot. We descend to the Cataract viewpoint, climbing into the belly of the beast. The savagery of the falls knocks the air from the lungs, and you check the ground to make sure it's solid underfoot. From this point the falls begin above you on the opposite bank; the viewpoint is in a womb-like alcove of greenery, surrounded by the noise. We are the only people on the platform. It is an assault on the senses.

From Victoria Falls it's a 90-minute drive across the border to Botswana. The country has the same leisurely feel, but this is a much more developed tourist trail. At the immigration point a hand-painted poster extols the virtues of masturbation. "Do it yourself," it advises, as a man sits at home in front of a television, beer in one hand, other hand occupied. Hotel rooms put condoms, male and female, in drawers beside the ubiquitous Bible. This is part of a serious and creative approach to sexual health.

Chobe National Park sits next to the Okavango Delta. At its heart is Chobe Safari Lodge, an elegant, luxurious place to stay, with an enormous open restaurant area. Beautiful balconies give views of the Chobe river and park. Several stern signs warn you to keep the screen doors closed, or the monkeys will pay a visit. (I commit the schoolboy error of leaving my shoes out to dry.) Riverbank cruises and safa-

ri drives leave from the lodge. On the one hand, this is not a wilderness experience to the extent of, say, that offered by the Timbavati area, in South Africa. But, on the other hand, the area is teeming with animals.

From the comfortable viewpoint of a river cruise we watch crocodiles and hippos paddling in the shallows. Elephants bumble down to the water's edge to climb in and cool off from the day's heat. Their calves splash about, doing their best whale impressions, wrestling and pummeling each other with gutfuls of water. The sun slips down the line, the sky hums into an ochre pink and the ice cubes tinkle gently in the gin and tonic.

On safari drives, animals walk nonchalantly away from the jeeps, and a pair of lionesses and their burly cubs trot across a Tarmac road that cuts through the park. While the two mothers scout for food, the cubs launch surprise attacks on each other, and the eldest male chews on a reflective cat's eye to test its edibility.

Ten days, three countries and a torrent of thrilling experiences. This is a trip that can leave you exhausted, exhilarated, overloaded with experiences and glowing with glittering moments.

And shoeless.

■ Laurence Mackin was a guest of Imaginative Traveller. This Colours of Africa tour starts at €2,305 per person, including 10 nights' accommodation in hotels, a guest house, and lodges; an upgrade, where available, to a tree house in Timbavati; most meals; transport; game activities; most entrance fees; and the services of a tour leader and driver. Flights from €800. 00-44-1473-667337, imaginative-traveller.com



On safari, clockwise from left: a trio of rhinos; an elephant and her calf; a young female leopard in Timbavati game reserve; Victoria Falls; Laurence Mackin dives towards the Zambezi, and after a jump; a lion rests. Photographs: TUI, Laurence Mackin, Ian Murphy/Stone/Getty

Travel along the mighty Zambezi



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