

Africa's wildlife will come to you

Afloat where man and beast must stop offers a unique view

By Sandra MacGregor
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

ABOARD THE ZAMBEZI QUEEN — “Everyone who comes to Africa finds its heart somewhere. For some it's in the mountains, in the bush, or even in the baobabs,” says my waitress as she brings me a glass of wine and pauses on deck for a moment to look out over the water. “But for me it's the Chobe River — this is Africa's heart.”

It's not hard to understand why Chobe elicits such reverence. Dividing Botswana from Namibia, the wildlife-rich waterway borders Botswana's renowned Chobe National Park and is home to an astonishing density of both prey and predator, all bound by a primal dependence on the river for food and shelter. Chobe's fish-rich waters also provide sustenance to the nearby villages, and fishermen in handmade, dug-out canoes dot the waterway.

Here aboard the Zambezi Queen, a 14-suite luxury floating hotel that glides languidly along the remote river, all the passengers seem to be falling under Chobe's spell. Despite the beauty of the boat's interior and the delicious food laid out for lunch, we all remain at the railing, our gazes inexorably drawn outward by the ever-changing array of animals along the riverbank. “I can't close my eyes or I'll miss something,” says Jill from Denver. “I've been going on safaris for seven years now, and this is the most unique one I've ever experienced.”

After I ask Captain Wayne Badenhorst to identify what turns out to be my first-ever sighting of a red lechwe antelope, he says, with his arms open wide, “Zambezi Queen is about the circle of life. It's all right out in front of you.” Nodding to a herd of intermingling elephants and hippos, he adds, “There's no need to get into a safari vehicle. At a lodge you have to drive to get to the animals; here they come to you.”

Badenhorst is not exaggerating. Since this morning, from the boat's expansive upper deck we have spotted giraffes, zebras, dozens of elephants, and grazing along the shore, the largest pod of hippos any of us have ever seen out of water. As we watch the wildlife from the comfort of our loungers — getting up occasionally to take a dip in the plunge pool — excited birders run from bow to stern, with cameras at the ready and binoculars bouncing around their necks, yelling out, “African jacana here,” “I've got an open-billed stork,” “a couple of bee eaters this side.”

I will admit to originally being a



JONATHAN STRUG FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Passengers board the Zambezi Queen from a tender boat, returning to the 14-suite luxury vessel after a sunset cruise on the Chobe River, which here divides Botswana from Namibia in south central Africa.



JONATHAN STRUG FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

From the Zambezi Queen's top deck, passengers can see near and far — and enjoy feeling ignored by wildlife.

skeptic. Before boarding I was a safari purist, believing that game viewing must take place deep in the bush and not from a boat.

I could not have been more wrong. With the animals showing our boat no more interest than they would an overweight seabird, we are able to get within meters of herds of buffalo, impala, elephants, hippos, and sunbathing crocs. “The numbers are unreal,” says a traveler from South Africa. “At first I was excited about every single sighting, but now it's like, ‘Wake me up if you see an elephant, hippo, and croc all hanging out together.’”

Every inch of the Zambezi Queen is designed for unimpeded views. The massive upper deck patio flows into an airy dining area complete with wide windows and sliding doors. And all the suites have floor-to-ceiling windows that lead out to private balconies — the perfect place to greet the dawn. With none of the typical 5 a.m. wake-up calls of traditional safaris, I planned to catch up on shut-eye only to find that the stunning sunrise trumped sleeping in. Sitting on my balcony in my pajamas, I relax with a coffee as we float past buffalo, elephants, and a solitary fisherman cast-

ing his net in the river for that first catch of the day.

The Zambezi Queen's environmental ethos is in tune with its natural surroundings. So as not to cause damage to the riverbeds, jet propulsion is used instead of propellers, hot water is solar heated, the toiletries are biodegradable. Suites use fans and cooling river breezes rather than air-conditioners to cut the heat.

There is one concession to land lubbers — a guided visit to Botswana's Chobe National Park, famed for having one of the largest concentrations of elephants in the world. Though it feels

If you go . . .

Zambezi Queen
5 Victoria Road
Bakoven, Cape Town, 8005
South Africa
zambeziqueen.com
Two- or three-night cruises offering off-boat excursions. Two nights from \$1,175 per person, all-inclusive; three nights from \$1,755.

strange to be in a safari vehicle, relying on luck and speed for a good viewing, the park offers us some stellar sightings. We are lucky enough to spot the rare puku antelope, a group of sable, and some resplendent carmine bee eaters. We also see more elephants and buffalo but not nearly the numbers we saw from the deck.

We get back to our floating safari boat just in time for an afternoon cruise. With wine in hand to toast the sunset, we are taken out in tender boats to get even closer to the riverbank and see what the reeds and rushes are hiding. Our knowledgeable guide, Elvis, makes sure to keep a respectful distance from a mother hippo and her two babies (“If we get too close she may get angry,” he says, “and trust me, you don't want to see an angry hippo.”)

Sudden ripples in the water alert us to a croc that lumbers out of the river to sun himself on the bank while two curious kingfishers look on. A monitor lizard digs for stranded fish in the rocks nearby while an African fishing eagle in a nearby tree seems put out by our appearance and moves off with an haunting cry.

But come dusk it's the sunset that holds our attention. With wine glasses refilled, we settle in to watch the sky transform from blue to pink to purple until the river swallows up the sun and fishermen in handmade canoes pass us with a wave as they head for home.

Dinner tonight — our last night — is a land-based, traditional boma (an open-air barbecue around a bonfire). Now that night has fallen sounds replace sights; the unmistakable song of the nightjars is soon drowned out by the lovelorn call of frogs hunting for mates, and the cacophonous chirp of crickets. It's the perfect farewell orchestra. Under a star-stained sky, drunk on a heady mix of wine and great food, and filled with the collective wistfulness that inevitably marks the end of a communal adventure, many of us begin to dance around the bonfire and stamp our footprints in the banks of the river.

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Game to get off the boat? Excursions can be liberating

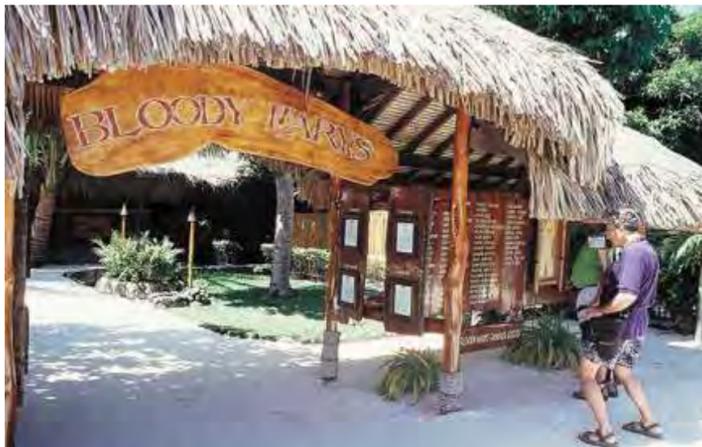
By Claudia R. Capos
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

We were sitting on the Tahitian Princess fantail, eating fresh pineapple and admiring Bora Bora's majestic Mount Otemanu, when a Detroit couple, Ray and Lois Tylenda, invited us to share a car rental and tour the island. Doug and I didn't know the Tylendas very well, but we had taken several Princess shore excursions during our Polynesian cruise and were ready for a change. We agreed to go.

An orange-and-white tender boat dropped the four of us ashore in Vaitape, a tropical settlement with metal-roof island houses and a lively covered market. At Fare-Pitt Rent-A-Car, we slapped \$100 on the counter and took the keys. With Ray behind the wheel, we headed off along the coastal ring road, figuring we could hardly get lost. We stopped at coral-sand beaches, climbed giant boulders, and browsed for black pearls in gift shops. We snapped pictures outside Bloody Mary's bar, a favorite watering hole for the rich and famous. It was a glorious adventure. We returned to Vaitape elated, and a bit smug, that we had seen and done things at our own pace — something not possible on a bus tour. And we had saved a wad of dough.

The question of whether to book a sightseeing excursion through the cruise line or to wing it alone onshore can leave some passengers in a quandary. There's no simple answer.

“I love going solo and walking around the ports, stopping in Internet cafes, and sampling street food,” said Anne Preston of Ann Arbor, Mich. “I might miss some big things on my own, but I get immersed in the local culture.” During her 12-day sailing from Buenos Aires to Rio de Janeiro aboard the Oceania last December, however, Preston booked an excursion to Sao Paulo. “We drove inland from the port for two hours to reach Sao Paulo, and I couldn't have done that



CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Doug Taylor takes video of a stop on a drive around Bora Bora, a jaunt provoked by a fellow cruise passenger's suggestion to rent a car.

myself,” she said. “Still, it's good to do a combination of both types of sightseeing.”

In the past, whenever John and Jana Hanson set sail on vacation, they had one rule: no group tours. “We never liked shore excursions because we always ended up on a bus with 50 people,” said the Grand Rapids, Mich., couple. They had a change of heart, however, when they took a 12-day northern European voyage on Holland America's Eurodam in May. The ship's itinerary included St. Petersburg, Stockholm, Helsinki, Copenhagen, and other magnificent Baltic Sea cities steeped in history and culture. The Hansons signed up for a shore excursion at every port.

“Our excursions cost almost as much as the cruise, but we wouldn't have done it any other way,” John said. “It was fabulous touring these wonderful old cities and seeing their highlights. Knowledgeable guides gave us a real lesson in history.”

In Tallinn, Estonia — a European Capital of Culture for 2011 — the two retirees left their tour group early and

lingered a few hours longer in the Old Town. “We wandered around Viru Square, had lunch in a French-style cafe, and then walked one mile back to the ship,” John recounted. “We managed to get by, speaking limited English.” In St. Petersburg, however, the Hansons didn't stray far from their shipmates while visiting the Hermitage and Catherine Palace because the ship's blanket visa only covered organized tour groups.

Cruise lines are doing more these days to help passengers enrich their onshore experiences. “We are watching the trends, listening to our guests, and offering a wide variety of options to suit all tastes,” said Erik Elvejord, Holland America's director of public relations. Passengers can go sightseeing by bicycle, combine excursions with culinary lessons, and take behind-the-scenes tours of museums, led by multilingual guides. The line also will arrange private cars, vans, boats, and planes, with or without guides, to help guests customize their tours, according to Elvejord.

There are certainly advantages to

letting someone else do all the heavy lifting while you lean back and enjoy the sights. Tour groups often receive red-carpet treatment not accorded to lone travelers. In St. Petersburg, the final port on a weeklong river cruise from Moscow, Doug and I took a group tour to the splendid Peterhof Palace and gardens. To our surprise, our guide marched boldly past several hundred tourists waiting in line and led us to the palace entrance, where we were immediately admitted. While sailing the Yangtze River shortly before the dam was completed, our contingent from the MV Victoria were treated like visiting dignitaries and entertained by Chinese schoolchildren. On last year's Ocean Princess cruise through Southeast Asia, two passengers became separated from our tour group at the Grand Palace in Bangkok. A local guide returned to the palace grounds and searched until she found the strays.

Unexpected weather events and mechanical meltdowns can unravel onshore travel plans. An advantage of booking a shore excursion is that the ship will wait for guests to return to the vessel. That's not the case for passengers who arrange independent sightseeing jaunts with a private taxi or tour operator. We experienced this peace-of-mind perk in Puerto Madryn, Argentina, during a Cape Horn cruise aboard the Celebrity Infinity. Our tour bus was caught in a horrific dust storm while returning from the Punta Tombo Penguin Wildlife Reserve. To accommodate our delay, the ship remained in port well past its scheduled departure time.

Passenger safety is always a concern. “We know our operators are fully bonded and will show up,” said Elvejord. However, no cruise company can completely guarantee the safety of its tour groups. In February, 22 Carnival cruise passengers were robbed during a guided nature trail excursion in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Nevertheless,

individuals traveling alone still tend to be easier targets for criminals or rogue taxi drivers. It's all about safety in numbers.

Despite the pluses, cruise sightseeing tours can be overly regimented and pricey. Average costs range from \$40 to \$350 per person. Private car, motor-scooter, and bicycle rentals offer attractive, lower-cost alternatives to pre-arranged tours booked through the ship. Hiring a local taxi with an English-speaking driver who agrees to set a firm price, or chipping in with other passengers to pay for a privately run minivan tour are also options.

Paul and Evelyn Kaplan, a South African couple sailing on our Southeast Asia voyage, pushed the boundaries of self-styled touring during a stop on Thailand's Ko Samui island. They hired a motor scooter in Na Thon for 200 baht (\$7) and went around the island. “We stopped at convenience stores to fill up the gas tank with a Coke bottle of gasoline,” said Paul, who had never driven a scooter before.

Public transportation is often cheap and readily available at major ports. In Hamilton, Bermuda, we used the local ferry to cruise to outlying islands. In Hong Kong, we rumbled around the island atop the double-decker Big Bus and then zipped up to Kowloon's flower market on the ultramodern MRT subway.

Some of our most memorable travel expeditions have been on foot. After viewing the changing of the guard at Taiwan's Chiang Kai Shek Memorial Hall, we whiled away the evening in Keelung's Miaokou night market near the seaport terminal. The exotic sights, sounds, and smells emanating from stalls, where women stirred pots of pig's-blood soup, deep-fried strange insects, and sold octopus-on-a-skewer, remain as vivid today as they were then.

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