



ALAMY / ALAMY

# A RIVER SAFARI ON THE Zambezi Queen

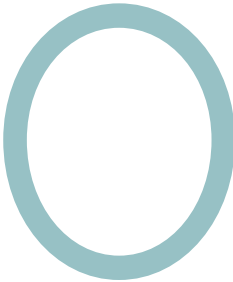
There's nothing quite like an elegant river safari on the Chobe River between Namibia and Botswana. Wake up to grunting hippos, and watch elephants at sunset while sipping champagne.

**JANICE AND GEORGE MUCALOV**





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OUR GUIDE, GILBERT, points to a jumble of large round boulders in the mud flats. “Hippos!” One boulder moves. We make out red-rimmed eyes and little piggy ears. Sure enough, it’s a hippo. It stands up, waddles sideways, and then plops down on top of other boulders, creating a grey ripple of hippo flesh. “You’ll see lots more in the afternoon when they wake up to feed,” says Gilbert cheerfully, as he turns the boat toward a herd of long-tusked elephants on the riverbank, using their trunks to splatter mud over their bodies.

We’re on a small aluminum boat, zipping along the Chobe River between Botswana and Namibia – ducking into reedy shallows to watch an eight-foot Nile crocodile sleep in the sun then leap into the river with a huge splash, spot Egyptian geese, black-and-white kingfishers, white egrets and yellow-billed storks preening and fluttering through mauve water lilies, and find hippos and elephants.

These enthralling sights are just part of the rich game viewing and bird watching experienced on a river safari aboard the *Zambezi Queen*. Launched in 2009, the elegant riverboat is owned by the Mantis Group, which manages a collection of five-star boutique hotels, eco-lodges and yachts around the world. Two- to four-night cruises are offered – a unique complement to an African safari itinerary. Instead of staying on land in a tent or lodge, you’re floating on the water, soaking up the life of the floodplain.

Resembling a houseboat, the *Zambezi Queen* has 14 spacious staterooms on the lower two of its three decks. Ten standard staterooms range from 215 sq. ft. to 235 sq. ft., while four master suites are a generous 300 sq. ft. They’re all lovely, with white walls decorated with sepia photographs of wild animals, gauzy curtains, small balconies and deliciously comfortable king-size beds with quality linens. Ensuite bathrooms have faux wood floors and glass showers.

The only thing missing is air-conditioning (being installed soon in all staterooms). Not that you need it in the cooler, dry season from May to September. Fans and aluminum shutters kept our stateroom comfortable. You just have to remember to close the sliding glass doors at night. If you don’t, and your lights are on, zillions of tiny bugs will fly in.

Getting to the *Zambezi Queen* is quite the adventure. We flew from Johannesburg, South Africa, to Livingstone, Zambia, where we were driven to the banks of the Zambezi River and ferried across to Kasane, Botswana. Staff took us in a small boat across the Chobe River to Namibia, where we trudged through desert sand to a simple border hut (entertaining – have you ever had to search for the immigration officer, only to find him sleeping under a tree?) After getting our passports stamped, we clambered back into the boat for a high-speed ride to the *Zambezi Queen*. Three new passport stamps in a day!

Onboard, smiling Namibian staff – mostly women, wearing bright orange turbans and long dresses – greeted us with African songs. We were then ushered upstairs to the top deck for a glass of champagne – and a spectacular view.

The entire top deck, consisting of the lounge, library and dining room, is one open room. As it’s completely open on three sides, you have unobstructed views of the African scenery. (At night, staff roll down see-through screens and turn the air-conditioning on.) Sipping our champagne, while reclining against zebra-striped cushions on a cream sofa, we watched an amazing tableau of perhaps 20 elephants munching away on a grassy river island. Occasionally, they’d splash each other with water. The setting sun cast a golden glow over the scene, a refreshing breeze kept us cool and the travel rigors of the day just melted away.

This page (clockwise from top): Hippos are just one of the many species of wildlife along the Chobe River. Smiling Namibian staff greeted us with African songs. Searching for wildlife from the top deck. Facing page: The elegant *Zambezi Queen*’s lounge and dining room (top) and comfortable spacious staterooms.





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We saw plenty more elephants on “water game drives” throughout our three-night cruise. These small boat excursions brought us even closer to the river-based wildlife. Crocs, comical-looking warthogs drinking from the river, mother and baby elephants, hippos galore (as promised by Gilbert) and an Audubon-worthy abundance of birds that would make serious birdwatchers swoon – we reveled in watching it all.

A half-day was also devoted to a game drive on land in Chobe National Park. The second biggest park in Botswana, Chobe has one of the largest populations of wildlife on the African continent.

Climbing into a six-person open Land Cruiser with a shade roof, we set off along red-sand tracks through the park. The dry ochre-colored savannah, pockmarked by enormous ‘upside-down’ baobab trees and thorny shrubs, was quite a contrast to the lush green scenery of the river. The animals were an even greater contrast. Gangly giraffes, their heads peering over acacia trees. Baby baboons, chasing each other and hitching rides astride their mothers. Graceful impala, bounding across the bushland. We kept an eye out for lions, but didn’t see any (they usually sleep during the day and hunt at night).

You also have the opportunity to visit the rural Namibian village from which the *Zambezi Queen* staff are hired. You learn how the local people live in clay huts and cook on open fires, and you can buy hand-beaded jewelry, wood carvings and other souvenirs.

With all the activities, the *Zambezi Queen* doesn’t do much actual cruising, mostly gliding along at a leisurely pace between two moorings 10 to 15 miles apart. Indeed, we wished our cruise had been longer, so we could have chilled out more on our lounge chairs or soaked in the outdoor hot tub on the upper back deck, watching the wilderness scenery slowly unfold.

We also still hanker for another slice of the heavenly lemon meringue pie served for dessert one day. Focusing on quality not copious quantities, the food onboard is delicious, with salads, quiches and fish for lunch and international specialties for dinner. The last night is a special buffet of typical African foods – like spicy lamb stew and creamed spinach in peanut sauce and oxtail. The staff members, dressed in grass skirts, coax all the guests to join them in traditional singing and dancing.

Still, for us, the river life stands out the most. We couldn’t get enough of the elephants on the riverbanks, the rainbow-colored birds strutting in the grasses and the hippos, waking us up with their ho-ho-ho grunting – only in Africa. ♦

**IF YOU GO:** Most guests cruise the *Zambezi Queen* as part of an African safari tour packaged by tour operators like AmaWaterways and Abercrombie & Kent. If traveling independently, transfers are included from Kasane, Botswana. All excursions and a premium selection of South African wines are included in the rates. Details can be found at [www.ZambeziQueen.com](http://www.ZambeziQueen.com).

Small boat excursions offer opportunities for closeup views of wildlife along the river.