SOUTHERN AFRICA

A 10km walk and $10 fine for asking directions

With its constant supply of fresh water in an otherwise barren land, the Okavango Delta is truly a wildlife lover's dream.

Victoria Falls, which locals call Mosi-oa-Tunya (the smoke that thunders). Left: An elephant on the road to Zimbabwe.

FROM PAGE 4

You know you're crossing into Zimbabwe when the border policeman asks for your carton of juice, then fines you $10 for asking for directions.

Like thunder before lightning, you hear the Victoria falls before you see them. You can almost feel the great movements of water in the ground beneath your feet before you see one of the great natural wonders of the world. Millions of litres of water thundering down a gorge, creating a rain-like mist all around. The sheer scale of the falls is awe-inspiring.

The falls are also a heaven for adrenalin junkies with a range of activities like bungee jumping from the bridge between Zimbabwe and Zambia. I don't know if it was the blood rushing to my head as I bungee-jumped or a suicidal inclination, but cool light-headedness overwhelmed any sense of fear as I leaped into space.

As you reach terminal velocity, the ground seems to approach faster. You open your mouth to scream and hear the cord snap as you bounce back up and really begin to enjoy the view of the falls while upside down.

From there, we drove to Bulawayo. It was dreary, like a big city with a small town mentality. Locals said infrastructure and maintenance were lacking because the president favoured his Shona tribe in Harare. They spoke wearily of no food on the shelves and inflation rates in 2008 that sound funny now. Street vendors even sell former trillion Zimbabwean dollar notes to tourists as souvenirs.

Within five hours we reached the capital, a bustling city sprinkled with lavish houses and expensive cars. Huge acacia trees drape over the main streets. You can even drive past President Robert Mugabe's army-guarded house. No stopping outside, though.

Our next stop was Beitbridge, the infamous border that links Zimbabwe and South Africa but barely 10km from home soil, the car came to a dead stop.

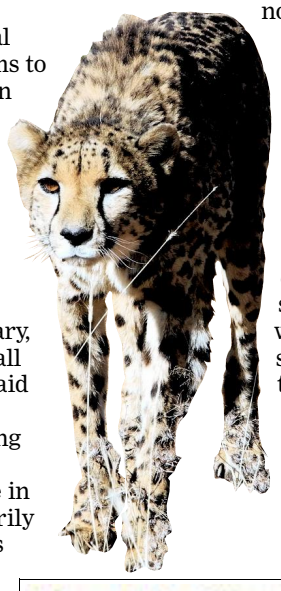
This time push-starting, oil or choking the engine didn't help. Smoke poured from the engine and it roared like a wounded Wildebeest until it was finally silent.

To add insult to injury, two men emerged from the bush beside the road. "Get out of the car," shouted one, brandishing an axe. The other pulled a dagger from his jeans.

They failed to steal our buggy, which still wouldn't start, then fled with $20, a sleeping bag and a cellphone. With adrenalin still racing throughout our veins and the thought of them returning, we pushed our car to the next town and over Beitbridge. I had never been so happy to be back on South African soil. But the old VW engine had seized – more than 1 000km from Durban, the car was going nowhere slowly.

It was bitter-sweet ending to a roller coaster of emotions.

Beitbridge was a gathering of car courier trucks carting vehicles from Durban to the Zimbabwean border and going back empty. A pack of cigarettes and R1 500 secured a one-way ticket with the car on a truck. A somewhat ignominious end to the journey.



We almost stepped on this cheetah hidden in the bushes when trekking through Okonjima.

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