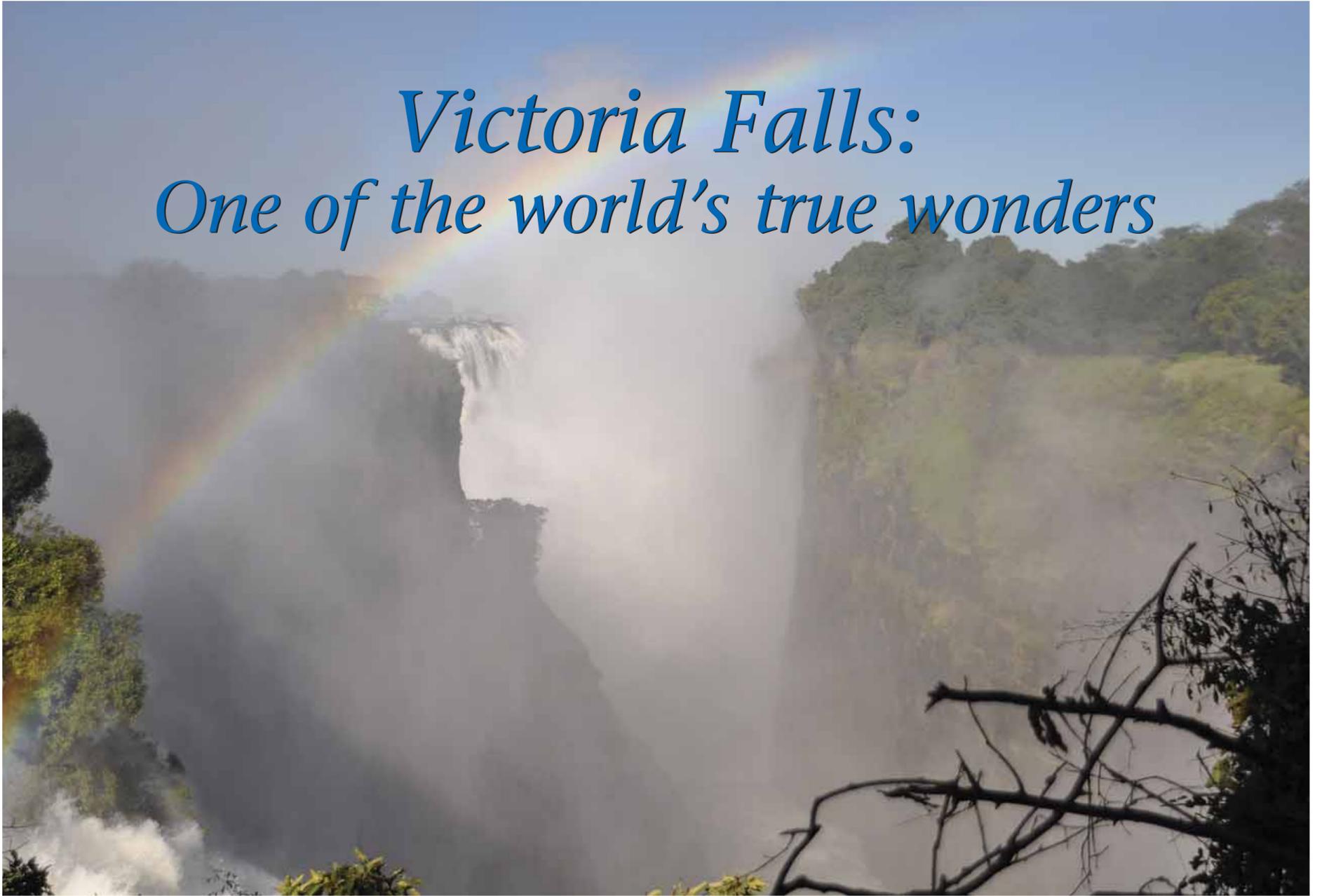




Victoria Falls: One of the world's true wonders



THUNDERING SMOKE: (Top) A view of the Victoria Falls; (above) the Zambezi River and (left) the Victoria Falls Hotel. (Irving Spitz)

• By IRVING SPITZ

VICTORIA FALLS – The Scottish explorer, David Livingstone, is believed to have been the first white man to view this magnificent curtain of falling water and he named it in honor of Queen Victoria, the British monarch reigning at the time.

The falls are formed as the Zambezi River plummets in a vertical drop into a chasm carved by its waters in the basalt plateau.

The total width of the Victoria Falls is more than one and a half kilometers and the height is over 100 meters. It is twice as high and almost twice as wide as North America's Niagara Falls. It is no surprise that Victoria Falls makes the list of one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World.

To witness the sight of millions of gallons

of turbulent water cascading over a sheer precipice into a narrow gorge is an unforgettable experience. Between February and May, when the falls are at their most spectacular, more than 500,000 cubic meters of water a minute flow over the edge.

The spray from the falls typically rises to a height of over 400 meters and sometimes even twice as high, and is visible from up to 50 km. away. For this reason, the local inhabitants refer to the falls as "Mosi-oa-Tunya," or "the smoke that thunders."

During the day, at a close vantage point, the spray creates a brilliant rainbow effect. At sunrise when viewed from a small distance away, the spray produces dazzling color effects. During the flood season it is impossible to see the foot of the falls and most of its face. At this time, the walks along the cliff opposite it are in a constant

shower and shrouded in mist.

The Zambezi River forms the boundary between Zimbabwe in the south and Zambia in the north. The falls can be seen from both countries, but it is generally acknowledged that the view is more impressive from the Zimbabwean side. A trip down the river reveals abundant wild life including hippos and crocodiles.

European settlement of the Victoria Falls area started around 1900. The driving force was Cecil John Rhodes. Born in England in 1853, he migrated to southern Africa at an early age. He became a diamond prospector, formed the De Beers Mining Company and ultimately became prime minister of the Cape Colony.

His dream was a railway extending through the African continent from the Cape to Cairo. The railway eventually reached the Zambezi River in 1904. Rhodes planned the bridge across the river and insisted it be built where the spray from the falls would fall on passing trains. The bridge was constructed in England and the different parts were sent by ship and rail and erected piecemeal from both sides of the river. Today this bridge still carries traffic across the river and is a site for bungee jumping into the narrow gorge.

The legendary and gracious colonial-style Victoria Falls Hotel is situated in a unique setting overlooking the Victoria Falls. From the immaculate and lush tropical gardens, and terraces of the hotel, there is a sweeping vista of the bridge and the spray from the falls.

Construction began in 1904 and it was

originally envisioned as a temporary wooden structure with a corrugated iron roof to house workers building the bridge. With the increase in tourists, it was decided to erect a permanent building. Today, the hotel retains its gracious old world charm and ambience.

This is evident in all public areas, including lounges, bars, dining room and library. All furnishings are in harmony of the time of the original building. The different sections of the hotel are connected by wide corridors with lofty ceilings.

Each corridor houses a unique photographic collection displaying the illustrious history of the hotel and documenting the famous personages who stayed there. One of the great highlights was the visit of the British royal family in 1947.

From the gardens of the hotel, a short walk takes you to the falls. Because of the wildlife, visitors are accompanied by a ranger. On the way back, I was accosted by three elephants. I whipped out my camera and started to photograph. A bellow and stamping of feet from one of these pachyderms sent me sprinting away with great alacrity.

The name Zimbabwe is derived from the local language and means "great houses of stone."

This stone type of building was characteristic of an independent African state which reached its zenith between the 13th and 14th centuries. Originally this country was part of the British Empire and was known as Southern Rhodesia (in honor of Cecil Rhodes). It became a self-governing British colony in

1923 and achieved independence after a long war and much bloodshed in 1980. Since independence it has been governed by Robert Mugabe.

Tragically for the inhabitants, there is gross corruption, economic mismanagement and human rights abuse. Despite having large mineral reserves including diamonds and platinum, Zimbabwe has one of the lowest life expectancy rates and highest rates of inflation in the world. Up till recently, banknotes of up to \$100 trillion were in circulation. In view of this, the recently elected prime minister, Morgan Tsvangirai, has allowed transactions to be conducted with US dollars or South African rand.

The visitor is thus faced with a surreal situation. Inside the confines of the Victoria Falls Hotel, there is opulence and wealth, outside abject poverty. The few shops have empty shelves and lack all but minimum basic provisions. The unfortunate locals beg for toiletries from the bathrooms of the hotel, any old used clothing, indeed anything. Despite their miserable situation, the people are friendly, peaceful and appear resigned to their dismal fate. The sad look on their faces still haunts me today.

The writer, emeritus professor of medicine, is an avid traveler and photographer. He frequently writes, reviews and lectures on medical topics, music, art, history and travel. Additional pictures from this as well as other trips can be seen on www.pbase.com/irvspitz