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Visiting Zambia

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Introduction

Nestled in the heart of Southern Africa, Zambia is a landlocked nation celebrated for its stunning natural landscapes, incredible wildlife diversity, and a rich mosaic of cultures. It's a destination that powerfully draws adventurers, nature enthusiasts, and those seeking authentic cultural immersion. Zambia's most iconic feature is arguably the majestic Victoria Falls, known locally as Mosi-oa-Tunya ("The Smoke that Thunders"), one of the world's largest and most breathtaking waterfalls, straddling the border with Zimbabwe. Beyond this natural wonder, Zambia unfolds into vast, wild expanses, encompassing some of Africa's premier national parks that offer truly exceptional safari experiences.

Home to over 70 distinct ethnic groups, Zambia boasts a vibrant cultural heritage, underpinned by a national identity of unity ("One Zambia, One Nation") and renowned for the warm, welcoming nature of its people. This guide aims to provide essential information for travelers planning an unforgettable journey to this gem of Southern Africa. From the bustling streets of Lusaka, the nation's capital, to the tranquil village paths, every corner of Zambia promises an enriching adventure.

Visiting Zambia is not just about witnessing its breathtaking landscapes but also experiencing the symphony of its natural world. Safaris across its numerous national parks, like South Luangwa, are portals into witnessing some of the continent's most marvelous wildlife in its natural habitat. Whether it's the dawn chorus of birds or the thrill of spotting a lion's pride, the whispers of the wild are Zambia's undying allure.

No journey to Zambia is complete without delving into the cultural tapestries woven by its people. The nation prides itself on its deep-seated traditions, dances, and local cuisines that offer visitors not just a taste, but an entire experience. Festivals across the country brim with colorful displays of cultural pride, reflecting the nation's diverse ethnic identities and harmonizing them into shared national celebrations.

Traveling through Zambia also provides opportunities to engage with the country's efforts in wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism. These are arenas where Zambia not only strives but also leads, positioning itself as a guardian of some of Africa's most treasured natural reserves, reflecting modern tourism sensibilities that embrace sustainability and community empowerment.

In essence, this book serves to equip prospective tourists with the knowledge needed to enjoy and respect Zambia's natural and cultural offerings. Whether it's navigating entry requirements, understanding local customs, or planning an itinerary through Zambia's stunning landscapes, this guide is your companion to discovering the beauty

of "The Real Africa".

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CHAPTER ONE: Getting There

Zambia's position, tucked away in the southern central part of Africa without a coastline, might seem remote on a map, but reaching this remarkable country is more straightforward than you might imagine. As a major hub for safari adventures, particularly centred around the iconic Victoria Falls and its world-class national parks, Zambia is well-connected, especially by air. However, for the more intrepid traveller or those exploring the wider region, overland routes offer a different kind of introductory experience to the continent. Understanding your options for arrival is the first practical step in planning your Zambian journey, setting the stage for the adventures that lie ahead. Whether you envision a seamless flight directly to the threshold of the wilderness or a more gradual immersion via neighbouring countries, getting to Zambia is an achievable prelude to exploring its vast landscapes.

By far the most common and convenient method for international visitors to reach Zambia is by air. The country boasts three main international airports, each serving a distinct region and purpose. The primary gateway is Kenneth Kaunda International Airport (LUN) in the capital city, Lusaka. Located approximately 22 kilometres northeast of the city centre, LUN handles the bulk of international flights and acts as the main nerve centre for domestic air travel within Zambia. It's named after Zambia's first president, a figure synonymous with the nation's history. The journey from the airport to the city centre typically takes around 30 to 45 minutes, though Lusaka's notorious traffic, especially during peak hours, can significantly extend this, so it's wise to factor in potential delays when planning onward connections or meetings.

A host of major international airlines connect Zambia to the rest of the world via Lusaka. Carriers like Emirates (via Dubai), Qatar Airways (via Doha), Ethiopian Airlines (via Addis Ababa), Kenya Airways (via Nairobi), and South African Airways (via Johannesburg) offer regular services, linking Zambia to hubs across Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and North America with typically one stop. Regional airlines also play a crucial role, providing connections to neighbouring countries. Upon arrival at LUN, travellers will find the standard facilities expected of a capital city airport, including currency exchange bureaus (offering Zambian Kwacha), ATMs, various mobile network kiosks for purchasing local SIM cards (a highly recommended early task for easy communication), car rental desks representing international and local firms, and taxi services. Lounges are available for eligible passengers, offering a space to relax before or after flights.

Navigating the arrival process at Kenneth Kaunda International Airport is generally a manageable affair. Upon disembarking, you'll proceed to immigration control. Here, officials will check your passport and visa status. While Chapter Two delves into the

intricacies of visas, be prepared to present your documents and potentially answer questions about the purpose and duration of your stay. Having any required visa documentation, like an e-visa approval letter or details for visa-on-arrival payment (often preferred in US dollars), ready will expedite the process. Following immigration, you'll collect your luggage from the carousels and then proceed through customs. Zambia has standard customs regulations regarding the declaration of goods and allowances for items like alcohol and tobacco; random checks can occur. Remember to obtain an entry stamp in your passport – it's proof of legal entry.

For many visitors, Lusaka is merely the entry point before venturing onwards to Zambia's prime tourist destinations. LUN functions effectively as the central hub for Proflight Zambia, the country's primary domestic airline. From here, you can catch connecting flights to Livingstone (for Victoria Falls), Mfuwe (for South Luangwa National Park), Ndola (in the Copperbelt), Solwezi (also in the Copperbelt, primarily serving the mining industry), and various airstrips serving safari lodges in areas like the Lower Zambezi National Park. Booking these domestic flights well in advance, especially during peak safari season, is highly recommended as seats on the smaller aircraft fill up quickly. Be acutely aware of baggage restrictions on these domestic flights, which are often much stricter than international allowances, typically limiting passengers to around 15-20 kilograms in soft-sided bags only, due to the limited hold space on aircraft like Cessna Caravans or Jetstreams.

If your primary destination is the magnificent Victoria Falls, flying directly into Harry Mwanga Nkumbula International Airport (LVI) in Livingstone is often the most logical choice. Named after another significant political figure in Zambia's independence movement, LVI is geared almost entirely towards the tourism market centred around the Falls. Its location just a few kilometres from Livingstone town and a short drive from the Falls themselves makes it exceptionally convenient. Several airlines offer direct flights to Livingstone, most notably from Johannesburg (South Africa), which acts as a major regional hub, and Nairobi (Kenya). There are also reliable domestic connections from Lusaka operated by Proflight Zambia. Arriving here immediately immerses you in the relaxed, adventure-focused atmosphere of the region.

Compared to Lusaka's airport, Livingstone's is smaller and simpler to navigate, designed efficiently for tourist arrivals and departures. Facilities include currency exchange, ATMs, car hire desks, and representatives from numerous tour operators and accommodation providers, ready to assist with transfers and activity bookings. Taxis are readily available for the short ride into town or directly to hotels and lodges clustered near the Falls. A key advantage for travellers planning to visit both the Zambian and Zimbabwean sides of the Falls, or perhaps make a day trip to Botswana's Chobe National Park, is the availability of the KAZA UNIVISA upon arrival at LVI (as well as other specific ports of entry, detailed in Chapter Two). Getting this visa here, if eligible, can save considerable time and money compared to purchasing separate single-entry visas for each country.

The third international airport, Simon Mwansa Kapwepwe International Airport (NLA) in Ndola, primarily serves the Copperbelt Province, the industrial and mining heartland of Zambia. While strategically important for business travel, it sees significantly less tourist traffic compared to Lusaka and Livingstone. However, it does handle some regional flights, potentially offering an alternative entry point for travellers whose itineraries include exploring this part of Zambia or who find convenient flight connections, perhaps from hubs like Johannesburg or Addis Ababa. If Ndola is your entry point, be aware that onward travel to the main tourist circuits (Victoria Falls, South Luangwa, Lower Zambezi) will typically require a domestic flight (usually via Lusaka) or a substantial road journey. Facilities are adequate but generally less oriented towards tourism than LVI or even LUN.

When booking your flights to Zambia, considering the time of year and major airline routes is key. Flying during the peak safari season (roughly June to October) often means higher fares and reduced availability, so booking several months in advance is prudent. Comparing different airlines and connection hubs can sometimes yield significant savings or more convenient schedules. Common transit points like Dubai, Doha, Addis Ababa, Nairobi, and Johannesburg offer varying connection times and experiences. Pay close attention to baggage allowances for your entire journey, including any domestic legs within Zambia, ensuring your luggage meets the size and weight restrictions, especially the soft-bag requirement for many safari flights. Packing light and smart is always good advice for African travel.

For those with more time, a sense of adventure, or who are already travelling within Southern Africa, entering Zambia overland is a viable and often rewarding alternative to flying. Zambia shares borders with eight neighbours: the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Tanzania to the north, Malawi and Mozambique to the east, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Namibia to the south, and Angola to the west. This extensive network of land borders provides numerous entry possibilities, though some crossings are far more common and convenient for tourists than others. Overland travel allows for a more gradual acclimatisation and the chance to witness the changing landscapes and cultures as you traverse the region. However, it invariably takes longer, requires more planning regarding vehicle documentation or public transport logistics, and demands a greater degree of flexibility and patience.

One of the most popular overland crossings is between Zimbabwe and Zambia at Victoria Falls. The iconic Victoria Falls Bridge, spanning the gorge just below the Falls themselves, carries road and rail traffic, as well as pedestrians. You can literally walk from the town of Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe to the town of Livingstone in Zambia, passing through immigration and customs formalities at either end of the bridge. The view from the bridge, often with mist rising from the chasm below, is spectacular in itself. This crossing is well-trodden by tourists and generally straightforward, though queues can build up, especially during peak season. Taxis are available on both sides

to ferry travellers between the border posts and the respective town centres or accommodations. Ensure you have the correct visa documentation or can obtain the necessary visa (including the KAZA UNIVISA, if applicable) at the border post.

Another crossing point with Zimbabwe is at Kariba, where the massive Kariba Dam wall forms the border. This route is less frequented by mainstream tourists compared to Victoria Falls but is used by those travelling between Lusaka and Harare or exploring the Lake Kariba region. The road journey involves traversing the dam wall itself, which is an experience. Border formalities are handled on either side. Road conditions leading to and from Kariba on both the Zambian and Zimbabwean sides can be variable, so checking current conditions is advisable, particularly if driving your own vehicle.

The border with Botswana at Kazungula has seen significant change with the completion of the impressive Kazungula Bridge in 2021. This modern bridge replaced the old pontoon ferry system, drastically improving the flow of traffic and trade between the two countries, and indeed the wider region, as it sits near the confluence point where Zambia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Namibia almost meet. The crossing is relatively efficient and crucial for tourists combining trips between Botswana's Chobe National Park and Livingstone/Victoria Falls. The bridge facilitates road traffic and includes provisions for a future rail line. Border posts are located on either side, handling immigration and customs. This crossing is also a designated point for obtaining the KAZA UNIVISA.

Connecting Zambia with Namibia is the border post at Katima Mulilo (Namibia) / Sesheke (Zambia), linked by the Katima Mulilo Bridge (also known as Bridge 508) across the Zambezi River. This crossing provides access to Namibia's Caprivi Strip (now Zambezi Region), a unique panhandle rich in wildlife and waterways. It's a key route for overlanders travelling between Zambia, Namibia, and potentially Botswana via the Caprivi. Road connections on the Namibian side are generally good, while conditions on the Zambian side heading towards Livingstone or Lusaka can vary. Standard border procedures apply.

To the east, the main border crossing with Malawi is at Mchinji (Malawi) / Mwami (Zambia). This is a busy crossing, frequently used by overland travellers, buses, and commercial traffic moving between Lilongwe (Malawi's capital) and Lusaka or the South Luangwa National Park area (via Chipata). The road linking Chipata (the main Zambian town near the border) to Lusaka is generally paved and in reasonable condition, making this a relatively smooth overland route. As with most land borders, expect formalities and potentially some waiting time.

Further north lies the border with Tanzania at Tunduma (Tanzania) / Nakonde (Zambia). This is one of the busiest border crossings in the region, a major gateway for trade between East and Southern Africa, particularly for traffic using the port of Dar es

Salaam. It lies along the Great North Road and is also the terminus of the TAZARA railway line. For tourists, it can feel somewhat chaotic due to the high volume of trucks and traders. While essential for overland routes heading north towards Kenya or Uganda, it requires patience. Road conditions on the Great North Road within Zambia have improved over the years but can still be challenging in sections.

Zambia also shares long borders with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to the north and Angola to the west. Crossings like Kasumbalesa (near Chililabombwe, linking Zambia's Copperbelt with Lubumbashi in the DRC) are vital for commerce but are less commonly used by tourists due to potential complexities, security considerations, and often challenging road conditions beyond the border. Tourists considering these routes should seek up-to-date travel advisories and be well-prepared. Border crossings into Angola, such as near Chavuma or the Jimbe Bridge, are even more remote and primarily serve local populations and limited cross-border trade; they are generally not practical entry points for international tourists.

When travelling overland, especially if driving your own vehicle or a rental, ensure you have all the necessary documentation. This typically includes vehicle registration papers, proof of ownership or rental agreement authorizing cross-border travel, a valid driver's license (an International Driving Permit is recommended alongside your national license), and appropriate vehicle insurance. The COMESA Yellow Card is a useful third-party insurance valid across many countries in Eastern and Southern Africa, including Zambia, and can often be purchased at the border or in advance. If bringing a vehicle registered outside the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), a Carnet de Passages en Douane might be required, acting as a passport for the vehicle to avoid paying import duties. Check specific requirements well in advance.

Border post operating hours vary. Major crossings like Victoria Falls, Kazungula, Chirundu (another Zimbabwe crossing, mainly commercial), and Nakonde typically operate 24 hours a day or have extended hours. Smaller, more remote crossings may only operate during daylight hours. It's always wise to verify current operating times before planning your arrival, especially if aiming for a late-day crossing. Expect queues, particularly at busier crossings or during peak periods. Officials process immigration (passport control, visas) and customs (vehicle and goods declarations). Currency exchange facilities are usually available at or near border posts, but rates may not be favourable, and unofficial money changers should be approached with caution. Having small denominations of US dollars can be useful for visa fees or initial expenses, but changing into Zambian Kwacha for use within the country is essential. Patience and politeness go a long way in navigating border formalities smoothly.

For budget travellers or those seeking a local travel experience, long-distance international bus services connect Lusaka with major cities in neighbouring countries, including Harare (Zimbabwe), Johannesburg (South Africa), Lilongwe (Malawi), and sometimes Dar es Salaam (Tanzania). Companies like Intercape, Shalom Bus Services,

and others operate these routes. Journeys are typically long, often overnight, with varying levels of comfort depending on the company and service class chosen ('mainliner' vs. 'sleepliner', for example). Buses make stops for rest breaks and border formalities, where all passengers disembark to be processed. Tickets can usually be booked in advance online or purchased at the respective bus terminals. While generally safe, be mindful of your belongings, especially during stops and at busy terminals. This mode of travel offers a glimpse into regional transit but requires considerable time and tolerance for potential delays.

A more niche and adventurous option for entering Zambia involves water travel, specifically on Lake Tanganyika in the far north. The venerable MV Liemba, a former German warship converted to a passenger and cargo ferry, plies the waters of the lake, connecting Mpulungu (Zambia's main port on the lake) with Kigoma (Tanzania) and several other smaller ports along the Tanzanian shore. This journey is legendary among intrepid travellers and offers stunning lake views and interaction with local communities who rely on the ferry. However, it's far from a conventional tourist transport option. Schedules are notoriously elastic and subject to change with little notice, the journey takes several days, and onboard conditions are basic, particularly in the lower classes. It's an experience for those prioritising adventure over efficiency or comfort. If considering this route, meticulous research into the current status, likely schedule, booking procedures (often done locally in Mpulungu or Kigoma), and necessary supplies is paramount.

Regardless of your chosen method of arrival - air, land, or the rare water route - you'll need to pass through Zambian immigration and customs. As detailed in Chapter Two, ensure your passport is valid for at least six months beyond your arrival date and has sufficient blank pages. Have your visa sorted (whether obtained in advance, eligible for arrival purchase, or exempt) and be prepared to show proof of onward travel or sufficient funds if requested. Health officials may also check for a valid Yellow Fever vaccination certificate, especially if you are arriving from or have transited through a country deemed high-risk for Yellow Fever transmission. It's crucial to check the latest Yellow Fever requirements pertaining to your travel history before your trip.

Once you've cleared the official entry procedures, the final step is arranging onward transport from your point of arrival. At the international airports (LUN and LVI), pre-booking an airport transfer through your hotel or a reputable tour operator is often the most hassle-free option, ensuring someone is waiting for you. Official airport taxis are also available; agree on the fare beforehand or ensure the meter is used (though fixed rates to common destinations are often applied). Car rental desks provide options for self-drive travellers, but be prepared for Zambian driving conditions if heading straight out onto the roads. At land borders, transport options might be more limited, typically consisting of local taxis or minibuses ('jitneys') waiting to ferry passengers to the nearest town. Negotiating fares is standard practice. If travelling onwards by long-distance bus, ensure you know how to get from the border post to the relevant bus

station.

Reaching Zambia marks the beginning of your exploration of this captivating country. Whether stepping off a plane into the warmth of Lusaka or Livingstone, crossing a bridge with the spray of Victoria Falls in the air, or navigating the organised chaos of a busy land border, your arrival is the threshold to experiencing "The Real Africa." The journey might involve meticulous planning or spontaneous adaptation, but the promise of wildlife encounters, stunning landscapes, and the renowned Zambian hospitality makes the effort of getting there entirely worthwhile.

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