

THE PLACE TO BE OR NOT TO BE

Taking the edge off

That well-known SA philosopher, Van der Merwe, once observed: "Sometimes I sits and thinks and sometimes I just sits." Ryan's Corollary to Van der Merwe's Observation is: "Sometimes I sits and thinks while sipping an ice-cold beer."

GORGES LODGE

Where: Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe
Mood: Lazing on a sunny afternoon

Whichever of the three philosophies appeals to you, I have found the perfect place to sit — the bar at Gorges Lodge on the lip of the Zambezi River Gorge, a few kilometres downstream of Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe.

The platform around the bar extends over the edge, giving you a superb view of the rapids pounding away some 200 m below — not for nothing is the lodge's motto "living on the edge".

I have been visiting the Victoria Falls since the mid 1960s and over 50 years have seen big changes in tourist flow and the range of activities available to visitors.

The destination has seen almost as many booms and busts as the gold market and right now Victoria Falls seems to be recovering again, judging by my packed flights. When I last visited two years ago the planes were half-empty.

There used to be three main things to do: looking at the Falls; game viewing; and the traditional evening "booze cruise"

— now known as the "champagne cruise".

All are still available but there are now plenty of additional activities on offer, such as: white-water rafting, kayaking and boogie board surfing (below the

Falls); canoeing (above the Falls); elephant-back safaris; horse-back safaris; bungee jumping off the Victoria Falls bridge and the zip wire (a high-speed foofie slide) across the gorge near the bridge.

All these activities can be done using Gorges Lodge as a base — it's situated about 20 km from Victoria Falls town — and they will even organise a day excursion into neighbouring Botswana's Chobe region for you as well.

Why? That's the question that niggled at me while I sat admiring the view of the Zambezi River from the bar deck at Gorges while sipping that ice-cold beer I was telling you about earlier.

Who needs to go anywhere? The view is incredible, the weather is superb and

the silence is magnificent. There's also plenty going on. You just need to be patient and keep your eyes open. The resident pair of black eagles soar past a few times a day when they are not dog-fighting with the resident peregrine falcons or augur buzzards.

Then there are the white-water rafters and kayakers, who provide a distraction on their way past in the river far below.

This is known as "chilling out" — an activity I thoroughly recommend — but one which it seems many cannot do even when on holiday. I cannot remember when I last slept so soundly, with the constant rushing sound of the river in the background.

Two points to keep in mind if you do decide to visit. Do not go in October. That's "suicide month" in Zimbabwe, with maximum temperatures hitting 45°C

Black eagle Resident pair



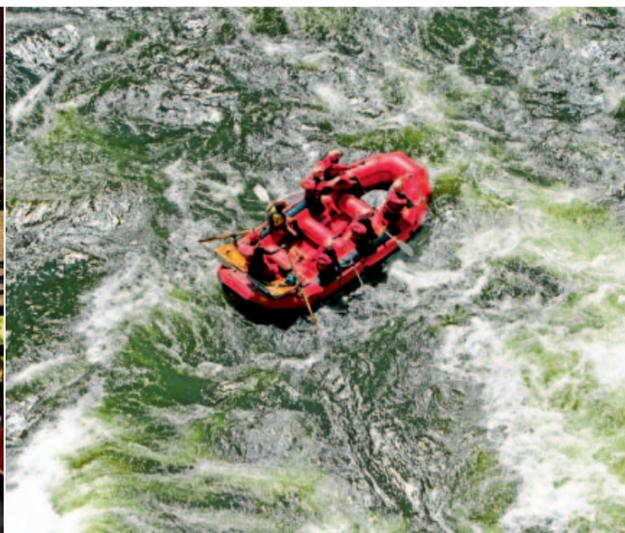
for extended periods along the Zambezi.

Also: there are a number of websites offering access to Gorges Lodge. The one run by the owners is www.imvelosafarilodges.com.

Brendan Ryan



The view Choose peace on the deck or action below



BOOK OF THE WEEK

Irrational rationale

Frank Chikane is an admirable man.

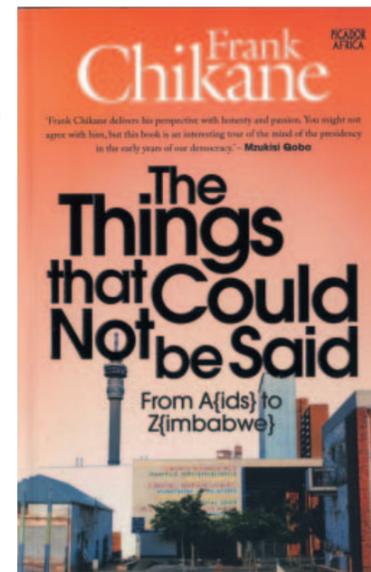
His working life as a pastor, academic, activist and civil servant has been devoted to uplifting the poor and the oppressed. Having narrowly escaped death from poisoning by agents of the apartheid government, he has sublimated feelings of hatred and revenge and publicly forgiven his enemies, most notably SAP general Johan van der Merwe and former police minister, Adriaan Vlok.

Furthermore, as he relates in this, his second book of reflections on his time in the office of the presidency, he never wished to become a public servant but agreed to assist presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki only because he was "a disciplined cadre of the movement".

Mbeki's former director-general begins and ends this book with a warning that the regulations protecting classified or confidential information prevent him from being entirely frank (no pun intended). Nonetheless, as one of the privileged few who "had seen it all", he is able to shed further light on the many deeply contentious issues — among them Aids, Zimbabwe, the RDP/Gear policy, Pikoli/Selebi, the Arms Deal, and endemic corruption — that continue to dismay and divide the nation.

The author admits to being closely attuned to the world-view that prevailed throughout Mbeki's, if not Mandela's, administration. Mbeki's default position, it appears, was that any proposals — good or bad — emanating from the West, the IMF, the World Bank, the pharmaceutical industry or other big busi-

nesses, were inherently suspect. "His focus was on defending the dignity of the African people (including people from developing countries) and their right to self-determination. What was critical to him was the right to think and think independently, notwithstanding the views and perspectives of the powerful and privileged. For him Europe and the US



THE THINGS THAT COULD NOT BE SAID - FROM A(IDS) TO Z(IMBABWE)

By Frank Chikane
353 pages
Picador Africa
R220

were not going to continue dictating as to what should happen in the world."

Understand this and the rationale behind the Mbeki government's deeply controversial policies on Zimbabwe and HIV/Aids become plain. Whether or not the Zimbabwean people might want to be rid of Mugabe after decades of dictatorial rule, if the West urged regime-change, SA would do its utmost to prevent it. If Big Pharma (an unlovely bunch, admittedly) produced a

drug that had not met the most exacting health standards but might save countless lives, the West must be up to no good in promoting it. Without explicitly saying so, the author implies that, on Aids, Mbeki had strayed into territory well beyond his competence. It took strenuous effort by Chikane and others before the president reluctantly agreed to put some distance between his own views and official government policy.

Similar impulses were at work on the Zimbabwean issue, where "the power relations between Africa and the rest of the world, especially those countries on the African continent, had to change to give Africans the sovereign right to determine their own destinies". No mention is made, however, of the Zimbabweans'

sovereign decision, in 2005 and 2008, to oust Robert Mugabe. "Regime-change" (or majority rule) was what the West wanted; therefore, because it did not fall within Mbeki's "particular approach to conflict resolution" in Africa, it had to be resisted.

In fairness, it should be said that George W Bush's duplicitous performance over weapons of mass destruction in Iraq — and the selective use of the International Criminal Court — must have stoked Mbeki's anti-Western prejudices.

The author adds an interesting perspective to Mbeki's role in the Selebi/Pikoli imbroglio. Vusi Pikoli was suspended because the president was shocked not only by an impending plea bargain that would let several gangsters off the hook in exchange for Jackie Selebi's prosecution, but also by the imminent threat of an armed stand-off between the Scorpions and the SA Police Service's crime intelligence unit. Mbeki wanted time, Chikane explains, to stabilise relations within the police before allowing the prosecution to proceed.

Corruption was an issue that worried the author throughout his years in government. Early on, he wrote letters to Mandela and Mbeki warning that a range of "counter-revolutionary" forces from agents of the old apartheid system, Western intelligence agencies, crime syndicates and vested business interests were undermining the ANC from without and within. Yet it was all to little avail. "The struggle for power for its own sake," he writes now, "has become a life-or-death issue as it means if you are not in power you cannot enrich yourself or ensure that you never go to jail." Powerful words — especially given from whence they come.

Chikane's book is well worth reading as much for its insider perspectives as for its illustration of the huge gulf in perceptions that persist among well-intentioned South Africans who wish this country to succeed. For the anti-colonialist, anti-Western mindset with which the author and his generation grew up still seems located — for perhaps understandable reasons — in the previous century. Since 1994 the world has moved on, politically and economically. Held back by suspicion and perpetually looking over its shoulder, SA lags behind.

Richard Steyn