

Historic flying-boat stop inspired by "flight of angels"

The view from Victoria Falls is so impressive that 68 years ago British Airways' forerunner, BOAC, added a stop to its UK/Johannesburg service, just so its customers could see it. It launched the new service on 4 May 1948, using Solent flying boats. These departed Southampton and - via five stops, including the one at the Falls - landed on the Vaal Dam four-and-a-half days later.



BOAC Short Solent S45 G-AHIN Southampton

It wasn't the quickest way to travel between Johannesburg and the UK - a Skymaster could do the trip in about 30 hours - but the BOAC planners hoped that a scenic night stop at the Falls would convince leisure travellers that the extra time the flying boats needed to cover the 5,600 nautical miles was worth it.

The Vaal Dam was chosen as a flying-boat station because, according to a BOAC newsletter from the time: "With a useable area of approximately 90 square miles, and alighting areas varying from 11,000 to 20,000 feet in length, Vaaldam (sic) now makes an ideal flying-boat station. It is almost unheard of for flying conditions to be suspended owing to severe weather."

Another attraction of the Dam was that BOAC didn't have to start from scratch. Training facilities which flying boat crews had used during the war, when 'C'- class flying boats operated the 'Horseshoe' route from Durban, could be upgraded and enlarged.

The flight

After taking off from the Vaal Dam the Solents flew to Victoria Falls, landing on the Zambezi. Station engineer, S. Kempson, describes what it was like seeing one of the flying boats coming in to land: "It circled Victoria Falls at 14.08 hours and in a few moments was orbiting the alighting area, four-and-a-half miles above the cataracts. Approaching from low above Kandahar Island, the aircraft lost height with superb grace, and scudding swiftly across the waters of the Zambesi, completed a perfect touch-down. She taxied easily towards the mooring-buoy, and tied up in seconds."

The next day – there was no night flying - the aircraft took off for the onward flight to the UK via Port Bell on Lake Victoria, Khartoum, Alexandria and Augusta.

The weekly service is commemorated on a mural at the Victoria Falls Hotel, where the 34 passengers overnighted; a stop which was affectionately nicknamed the Jungle Junction, a name given to the hotel's buffet restaurant in 1996.

Originally BOAC hoped to grow the flying boat service to three a week, but rapid improvements in post-war aircraft design meant that pressurised Hermes aircraft replaced the Solents. The Hermes could do the London/Johannesburg journey in a day-and-a-half. The last BOAC flying boat service to Johannesburg ended in November 1950.

Today

Today British Airways operates its most modern aircraft on the route. The A380 can accommodate 469 customers in four cabins; First, Club World, World Traveller Plus and World Traveller. It does the journey from OR Tambo to Terminal 5 in 11 hours. Its franchise partner, British Airways operated by Comair offers daily flights to Victoria Falls from Johannesburg.

In 1948 a return ticket on the flying boat service cost £300, 12s about £10,695 or R224,595 in today's money. This week British Airways' is offering a special, with World Traveller return tickets from Johannesburg to London starting from R10,540. The equivalent Club World (business class) fare is R45,42. The special is available for booking until 9 May for travel until 8 December in Club World. Dates for travel in World Traveller are 3 May to 21 June and 12 September to 8 December.

Although the scenic stopover at the Victoria Falls wasn't enough to save the flying-boat service, as faster, more efficient aircraft were introduced on the route, there's still plenty of demand for the 'flight of angels', with various charter companies offering flights over the Falls. Contrary to what visitors may think, the term wasn't coined tourism brochure copywriters, but David Livingstone, the first European explorer to see the Falls. He wrote in his chronicles: "It had never before been seen by European eyes, but scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight."

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