

By Kerina Roe (Aug'2022)

Getting There

I took an Ethiopian Air flight non-stop from Chicago. We were in the air for 13 hours, and the flight was about ½ full, so it was a very pleasant flight. On the other hand, the return on Ethiopian air was on a full flight.

While the Ugandan, Rwandan, and Burundi people were all very kind and welcoming, they tend to have a very laid-back nature and live in the moment. I learned not to expect everything to happen at the American pace and patience was required to better enjoy these countries. The Ugandans were friendly, and we would often be greeted with a smile and sometimes a wave. The people of Burundi seemed to be a bit more reserved, but possibly because they were more focused on their tasks at hand than the Americans that were completely enamored by them. The people of Rwanda were the friendliest, always waving and smiling as we drove by. At times, I felt as if we were the main attraction in a parade and the only thing that would have made it more exciting and realistic was if I had bags of candy to hand out to the children.



Out of the three countries, Rwanda had the best infrastructure and a government that placed great care and pride in their country, while the Ugandans and Burundians seemed to lack infrastructure and struggled more. The Chinese are building paved roads throughout Uganda, not because they care about the communities, but more so they can get from point A to point B easier. The one good thing they are good at is creating badly needed jobs. In addition, the Chinese and French have been given authorization by the Ugandan government to drill oil, particularly in Murchison National Park. There are also plans to install a pipeline from Murchison through Tanzania to the Indian Ocean set to be completed by 2025. However, the expectation isn't to distribute or give back to the wildlife conservation or communities that so desperately need better living conditions. Instead, it is likely to go directly into the pockets of those running the country. This is why conservation and tourism is important to both the communities and wildlife now more than ever.

Another thing we observed was how difficult life was for the people who continue to live primitively. They sowed and plowed the fields with hand tools. Rarely did we see anyone using cattle, other livestock, or machinery to plow the fields. Everyone had a job to do, from a very young age, children are tasked with getting water from the wells to the elders who were



tasked with caring for the young children. Most homes had no running water or indoor plumbing, and many lived in mud huts topped with grass roofs. Due to fire hazards in the drier regions, some had more modern metal roofs that would turn the homes into a literal oven. Seeing these living conditions reminded me once again how easy we have it as Americans and how grateful I am to have opportunities and privileges that many people in the world lack.

Lodges

The lodges were delightful, and each came with their own unique charm – deluxe rustic safari style in beautiful settings. Most contributed to the local community and wildlife conservation. Because most relied on solar energy, lighting and electricity weren't as strong as what we are accustomed to, so I highly recommend bringing head lamps. The lodges had hot water, but depending on the location, sometimes it would only last for 10 minutes or so. Most of the lodges only had Wi-Fi connection in the dining halls and even then, it was never reliable. We could get away with the basics such as checking email or sending a WhatsApp message back home to check-in, but rarely could we upload photos or download any documents. Maybe it was the universes way of telling us to get off our electronics and savor the moment and beautiful surroundings.



Uganda

August 13 - Arrive Entebbe

Arrival at Entebbe Airport was fairly quick, and it was easy passing through customs and immigration and collecting my bags. It appeared that we were the only flight arriving at that time, so the lines weren't too long. I was met by our fabulous second guide, Eriab, since our main guide, Paul, was finalizing some of the logistics of the tour. Eriab has a very lovely and had a laid-back personality and was very easy going. Paul, who also runs the local company in Uganda and handles local trip logistics, while very pleasant, knowledgeable, and easy going, is more focused.

The Papyrus Guesthouse was only about a fifteen-minute drive from the airport, hidden away in a beautiful, lush garden in a residential area of the city. There were several sections of the Papyrus – the old section, which was more basic, but clean and comfortable. The new section where we stayed, was in a modern apartment style structure and included modern amenities while maintaining its traditional Ugandan decor. Meals were good, but it is wise to order breakfast the night before and allow at least an hour for serving and dining. Before leaving for our activities, we placed our dinner order with a specific time to have it ready.

August 14 - Kampala City Tour

Because it was a Sunday, it only took us about an hour and 15 minutes to reach the bustling capital city of Kampala. Had it been a weekday, it would have taken us closer to two hours. Many people were enjoying the day off and spending time with their families shopping, dining, and relaxing. We visited the former King's (Kabaka's) Palace and although we didn't go inside, we



walked around the grounds while the guide provided us some background of the kings. Nearby was the Idi Amin torture chamber, originally built to store weapons and ammunition in 1971, but later converted into a torture chamber for anyone who disagreed with Idi Amin's policies. It was an eerie tunnel with a sad backstory, and it was easy to imagine the horrors that took place there. We stopped for a delicious lunch at the fantastic Café Javas. In a country where time seemingly stands still, this restaurant was fast, efficient, and satisfying. From here, we made our way to the Uganda Museum, the oldest in the country, which provided a great overview of Uganda's cultural heritage and history. Behind the museum were examples of traditional homes from across Uganda where we learned about the indigenous ways of the people.

August 15 - Drive to Murchison Falls National Park via Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary

The drive to Murchison Falls was long, about seven hours total, but along well paved roads. Along the way, we stopped at the privately owned Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary to see the endangered Southern White Rhinos. Due to human conflict and poaching, rhinos in Uganda have unfortunately died out. In 2005, six rhinos were reintroduced to this sanctuary, the only place in Uganda where rhinos can be seen in their natural habitat. Today, there are now 33 rhinos occupying the park, which we easily navigated on foot. As we observed these magnificent creatures from a distance, they seemed content and relaxed allowing us to feel



confident enough to know they were no dangerous threat. There were other animals in the park, such as monkeys, antelopes, and birds, but we hardly noticed as we set our sights on the rhinos. We had a simple lunch at the only restaurant in the park then continued the drive to Murchison and checked in to the delightful Kabalega Wilderness Lodge offering spectacular views over Lake Albert. We enjoyed dinner in the open dining hall reveling in the fresh air and pleasant lake breeze. The cabins were designed using local materials and all have a beautiful balcony on which to enjoy views of the Nile River or other natural settings.

August 16 - Murchison Falls National Park

Today was an amazing day starting with a wildlife safari in the northern section of the park. We saw warthogs, Uganda kobs, antelopes, Cape Buffalos, and Rothschild's giraffes, the most endangered giraffe in Africa. What sets this giraffe apart from the others is its dark patches and taller stature. On a boat ride along the Victoria Nile, we saw hippos, crocodiles, and waterfowl. Along the banks of the river we also spotted elephants and baboons. Despite a heavy downpour on our boat ride, which almost caused us to turn back and give up on seeing the falls, we persevered and were rewarded with spectacular views of the falls. We returned to our lodge and changed out of our wet clothes, then headed to the dining hall for an amazing sunset view over the Nile. After dinner, the lodge staff built a fabulous bonfire where we were treated with a welcoming musical and dance performance by locals from the nearby community, putting us all in a festive mood.



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August 17 - Drive to Kibale National Park

Today was another long drive, but again, on well paved road through the Albertine Great Rift Valley. We were rewarded with fantastic scenery through primitive villages and farms with a great overview of how

the people live. We were fascinated by how they could balance baskets, water, and other items on their heads while carrying hoes and other farming tools over their shoulders. Many of the women would also be carrying their children tied to their backs in a kanga. Kibale Forest National Park is primarily made of moist evergreen forest, the perfect environment for chimpanzee and other primates. The Chimpanzee Forest Guesthouse blew us away by the amazing views of green lush hills, blue lakes, and manicured gardens. The cabins were charming and fit in well with the environment.

August 18 - Chimpanzee Tracking and Drive to Queen Elizabeth N.P.

We departed the lodge early this morning for our Chimpanzee Trekking expedition. This was a fairly easy trek on level terrain, and we were able to spot the chimps after only about 30 minutes of trekking. In addition, we saw black and white colobus, and red-tailed monkeys. There are some 120 habituated chimps in the park, and we were able to watch them play and carry on for an hour, but from a safe distance so as not to risk passing on any illnesses to them since they are prone to human diseases. We returned to the lodge to freshen up and have lunch. Though we had an easy day of trekking, this may vary depending on the location of the chimps (from 30 minutes to a few hours). Most often, they are sighted within an hour.



After lunch, we headed out on a two and a half hour or so drive to Queen Elizabeth National Park, which is connected by road from Kibale. The scenery took us through lush rolling hills of tea and banana plantations and traditional villages full of smiling children waving at us. We arrived at our amazing lodge, which overlooked Lake George. This was glamping at its best! The permanent tents were situated on raised wooden floors and were made from local materials built by artisans from the local communities. This was the perfect place to appreciate the spectacular sunset views across the park and Rwenzori Mountains. Some of the group members just sat back, enjoying the peaceful surroundings with a good book, while others headed out for a late afternoon safari in hopes of spotting elephants and lions and perhaps a glimpse of the elusive leopard.

August 19 - Queen Elizabeth National Park to Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park

Today's we set out for a game drive to spot elephants, baboons, lions, warthogs, waterbucks, and Uganda kobs. We were even able to spot a leopard in a tree from a distance! In addition, there was a variety of colorful birds fluttering about.

The drive to Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park was long, about five or six hours over bumpy dirt roads. First, we traveled to the Southern region of Queen Elizabeth National Park over more bumpy dirt road to the Ishasha section known for its tree-climbing lions. Despite roaming the plains for hours, the lions decided they just didn't want to be seen; but you might be luckier, so we finally gave up and continued to Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park. The drive took us from the plains to the forests, past swamps and lakes, tea and banana plantations to the mountain jungles, then back to the plains.



By the time we checked in to our lovely eco lodge, situated alongside a steep hill overlooking a stunning green valley, we were a bit worn out and tad sore from the day's "African massage." Unfortunately, there are few options for getting to Bwindi, but we had plenty of stops along the way and a lovely picnic lunch consisting of sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs, bananas, and cakes prepared by the lodge.

August 20 - Gorilla Trekking at Bwindi National Park

After an early breakfast, we set out to the park headquarters where we met our tracking crew of guides, security, trackers, porters, etc. But first, we were entertained by a song and dance from the local community. This seemed to be a ritual wishing us the best of luck on our gorilla encounter. We had the option of hiring our own personal porter and all of us took advantage of this option. At \$15 for the hire plus tip, it was well worth the assistance. It had rained hard the night before, so the terrain was wet and slippery. Our porters were there to pick us up if we slipped and to offer a hand over downed trees. For those who feel they cannot do the hike, you can hire a "helicopter," a group of four men that carry you in a lounge basket or sedan chair supported on metal poles. In all, there are eight men that rotate in shifts. The cost is anywhere from \$300 to \$500 plus tips, but we saw the work was extremely difficult for the crew. The price was rewarding for the guests as they were able to focus on the scenery instead of looking down to watch their every step. The trackers spotted a family of gorillas supposedly only 30 minutes hike away, but



apparently, they decided to move, so we ended up on a long chase to get to them. The trek was hard and took us along slippery and steep hillsides, thorny bushes, and down rocky embankments. But all the thoughts of giving up and turning back was immediately forgotten as we were rewarded with the gorillas emerging from the brush. We were able to get within six feet of the gorilla family, including the second in command male and the rest female. The silverback must have been watching our every move from a distance, because he was nowhere to be seen. The gorillas seemed very comfortable around us and went about their business as if we were an extension of the family. After our hour was up, we reluctantly headed back to base camp. But first, the spotters cut down a clearing for us to stop and enjoy our picnic lunch as we excitedly talked about our close encounters with the gorillas like children at an amusement park. Our packed lunch consisted of sandwiches, bananas, apples, cakes, and juice. It was much more than we could manage, so most of us shared with our crew, who were eager to accept our offerings and happily devoured every last bit of it. They all shared everything equally, then showed us their gratitude with beaming smiles and multiple thumbs up. The trek back to the base was shorter, closer to two hours, but straight up the mountain. We were stunned by the way the carriers managed those helicopters up the hillside while we stopped to catch our breath every 20 feet or so. We celebrated our success back at the base where we were awarded certificates documenting our accomplishment. At dinner back at the lodge, we were giddy and high from the day's events, and for most of us, a good night's sleep was not going to be a problem.

Rwanda

August 21 - Drive across the Uganda border to Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda

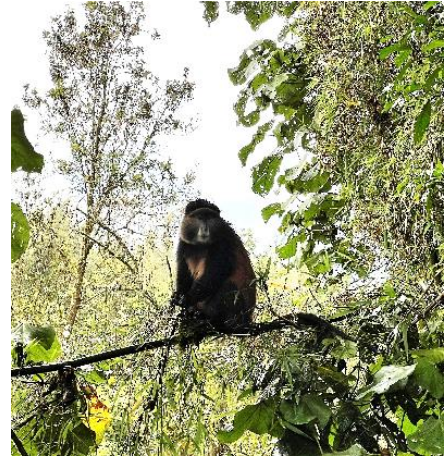
The border crossing today was uneventful. We entered one building to get our hands sanitized, then to another to fill out some paperwork then get our passport stamped. This took no more than 45 minutes. However,



seeing as it was a Sunday, any other day might take longer with more commercial vehicles on the road. The drive to Volcanoes National Park was only around three and a half hours. We stopped at a small local restaurant in the town of Kisoro where we had tasty French fries, rice, cooked vegetables, and for some, chicken, or fish. The food was good, service quick, and they even had a small display of arts and crafts we could buy. Before checking into our lodge, we stopped off at the medical center to get a Covid test, which is required for any primate trekking in Rwanda. The cost set us back \$50, a small price to pay to get close to the Golden Monkeys. On arrival at our lodge, Tiloreza Volcanoes Ecolodge (formerly 5 Volcanoes Boutique Hotel), we had some time to relax before dinner at this lovely hotel surrounded by lush vegetation and located on the edge of the park.

August 22 - Volcanoes National Park Golden Monkey Trek

The group was excited to head out on the trek and see the rare Golden Monkeys. It was a rainy and wet day, creating a slippery and muddy trail. The saving grace of this trail was it was levelled with no elevation changes. It only took us about 45 minutes to reach the monkeys. There must have been some 50 monkeys performing acrobatics in the trees as we watched in awe how quick and nimble these creatures were.



We returned to the lodge for lunch, then paid a short visit to the nearby Dian Fossey Museum, an attractive center featuring details of Dian's life and her contribution to saving the gorillas. It is an option that is well worth the \$20 donation. We also visited a crafts market where we bargained for some quality local handmade crafts.



In the late afternoon, we headed for the Iby'iwacu Village and was greeted by the "chief" who seemed to be yelling at us in his dialect, but in fact, this was a typical greeting of the Batwa. As he ushered us in, we were entertained by a group of drummers and dancers wearing bells on their ankles that filled our ears with a pleasant African melody. Some of the male dancers wore head pieces that looked like long blond wigs, but were actually made of grasses and performed their traditional "heroes" war dance for us. This was followed by a visit of the village to learn about how the locals went from poaching to conservationists. We also got a glimpse into their traditional ways of living. The highlight of the visit, in addition to the dance performance, was nominating a king and queen from our group who donned costumes and convinced us of their regal status. There was also a "wedding" performed by a couple in the group providing us with joyous entertainment.



Burundi

August 23 - Kigali and flight to Bujumbura, Burundi

Today we set out early to make the estimated three-hour drive to Kigali, where we visited the Genocide Museum, a well-planned museum documenting the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Though very emotional and thought provoking, the museum was a reminder of these atrocities that have impacted so many lives and continue to occur around the world today. On our way to the airport, we drove by the Hotel des Mille Collines, otherwise known as “Hotel Rwanda.” The hotel became famous after it provided refuge for over 1,200 people during the 1994 genocide.



The Kigali Airport was orderly and efficient. Unfortunately, we couldn't say the same for the airport in Bujumbura which was more chaotic. Our group chose to get a Visa on Arrival, but the lack of coordination and all the confusion at the window made us regret that decision. We jumped from window to window not understanding the method behind this madness. Anyone planning on visiting Burundi in the future should most definitely get one prior to arrival. After finally clearing immigration and got Covid tested were finally went on our way

Our hotel, located on the shores of Lake Tanganyika, was a beautiful resort hotel perfect for relaxing and enjoying the fresh breezes coming off the lake.

August 24 - Bujumbura & Drive to Gitega

The drive to Gitega we traveled over paved, but sometimes bumpy roads, stopping to visit a pygmy village located near Kibira National Park. We received a warm welcome from the entire community through a lively jamboree of clapping, whistle blowing, and singing. I bought a simple, but absolutely gorgeous handmade wooden bowl for about \$2.50! Had I had the space in my luggage, I would have bought them all!

A highlight of our visit in Gitega was a live performance by the famous Drummers of Gishora, a local community of drummers known as “Abatimbo.” This remarkable rhythmic drum and dance “ingoma” was founded by King Mwami Mwezi IV Gisabo Bikata-Bijoga in 1903 to celebrate his victory over Chief Ntibirangwa. The drums represented the power of the monarchy and would be beaten on special occasions such as king enthronements, sowing festivals, and funerals for kings and queens. This style of drumming is only performed by men and is taught from one generation to the next.

Before checking in to our hotel, we stopped for a quick visit to the Burundi Gitega National Museum, a small and seemingly neglected museum. However, it contained some interesting information about Burundi culture. As small as it is, it's the largest museum in Burundi, revealing the lack of funding in the country.

We stayed at the Helena Hotel, a vast contrast from the “glamorous” Club Du Lak Tanganyika, but the best in Gitega. The rooms were simple and a bit outdated, but fancy to the locals who conducted business here.



August 25 - Ruvubu National Park

After an early breakfast, we headed out on a two-hour drive to Ruvubu National Park, founded in 1980. It borders Tanzania and is said to have a variety of wildlife such as hippos, crocodiles, Cape buffalo, antelopes, monkeys, and baboons, as well as around 200 species of birds. However, after driving about an hour through the park over bumpy roads, we only saw a troop of baboons and waterfowls at the Nile. The scenery was beautiful, but it's obvious the park lacks the foreign visitors and funding that are received by the surrounding countries. But we could see the efforts being made towards conservation, which should be commended. On our return to Gitega, we did a driving tour of the city, driving past the immense religious complex and saw the stunning Christ the King Cathedral built in a unique triangular architectural style. There were also a few old buildings, but little else to see in the city.



August 26 - Drive to Bujumbura & depart for USA

We had a leisurely morning then made our way back to Bujumbura. The scenery along the way was fantastic. Despite the very poor conditions of Burundi, it is quite clean. Probably due in part that most of the locals grow and harvest their own crops and avoid packaged processed food which is a major contributor to litter. Watching the locals plowing the field, walking alongside the road balancing water and food items on their heads and children on their back while carrying hoes over their shoulders was remarkable. Life was primitive, but they didn't seem too bothered by it as they knew nothing else.

We had lunch at a restaurant offering delectable tapas, we headed for the airport in time to check in three hours before our flight. It was a good thing we did because the airport severely lacked any order or direction. In fact, there were no signs announcing which check-in counter was for RwandAir, Ethiopian Air, or any other airline, just a man scanning our passports and pointing to the line you should be in. But he didn't always direct you to the correct one, so some people stood in the wrong line. Then, this followed by immigration control which consisted of two booths – one for locals and one for foreigners – all cramped into a small room before we were finally able to make our way into the one terminal which acted as the one and only terminal for all flights departing Bujumbura. In all, it took us an hour and a half to get through security, check-in, and immigration. It just seemed to be the Burundi way, but there are no regrets.

