



ON SAFARI IN UGANDA WITH A GPS AND A MISSION



It was a safari to Uganda with a mission – to find out how six White rhinos translocated from Solio Game Reserve in Kenya had settled into their new homes and to visit areas where rhinos might be re-introduced in the future.

We left the Laikipia area of Kenya parched and bare, suffering the ravages of a severe drought. Travelling via Kisumu we crossed the border in our hired Range Rover at Busia. Thank goodness for the agent/tout who attached himself to us and showed us through the minefield of getting us and the vehicle into Uganda. Without previous experience, there really

Top: Murchison Falls in Uganda

Picture by: Felix Patton

was no way you would know which office to go to next or which form to fill in. After only an hour and a half we were on our way to Entebbe on surprisingly good tarmac roads. First we had to negotiate Kampala. If you think your traffic and drivers are difficult, Kampala and Ugandan drivers are hell! With not a road sign to be seen and no road user rules to follow, we were saved by having our own, pre-programmed GPS to guide us through the melee.

Eventually we arrived at our first port of call, the Uganda Wildlife Education Centre, UWEC, formerly Entebbe Zoo. Next morning we met Alex Doma, the

keeper who has had charge of two Solio-born rhinos since 2001. They were clearly enjoying their peaceful existence and elephant grass food supplement. UWEC is home to a host of other species, including chimpanzees and lions, with a view to educating visitors on the importance of wildlife conservation in Uganda. Here we were able to see the famous and rare Shoebill Stork.

Heading west, our next stop was at the 370 km² Lake Mburo National Park which was accessed from the main Kampala to Mbarara road through Nshara Ranch. The ranch and park area had been designated suitable for



re-introducing Black rhinos and judging from the copious healthy acacia trees it certainly would be. Having spurned the offer of a ranger guide (we did not really have room in the vehicle and there was an extra charge) we set off on the lakeside drive which turned out to be a drive through the woodland abutting the lake with nothing to see. The rest of the visit was just as unimpressive, perhaps because the rains came to spoil the day, making bird watching and game viewing largely impossible. The Park is the only one in Uganda to contain impala and the only one in the rift region to host Burchell's zebra and eland. On another day game viewing might have had more to offer.

From Lake Mburo it was some 250 km to Ishasha at the southern end of the extensive 1978 km² Queen Elizabeth National Park (QENP). The roads were good - as we found throughout our safari in Uganda. Potholes on the tarmac road had been filled and murrum roads were flat and well made. The remote southern sector of QENP is renowned for tree-climbing lions although the Information Officer had little information to give us about where to go and what to see! To be able to say we had driven right across Uganda - from the Kenya border to the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) - we took the short tracks to the two disused campsites on the River Ishasha and could see across the few metres to the DRC on the other bank. Did the hippos in the river belong to Uganda or to the DRC?

There were two tracks to drive round - the northern and the southern circuits. We tried the south track. It was poorly marked and on the afternoon drive we never succeeded in getting right round having to retrace our steps when we seemed to be going around in circles. However we did see a nice herd of elephants coming back from a drink at the river, walking through the long green grass stopping only to browse on the trees. We decided to try the south track again the next morning as this was where Victor, the most informative night-watchman ranger, had told us it was best to see lions. This time we tried going round in the opposite direction. It was not long before the track we were on disappeared completely and we had to turn back

yet again. We did, however, manage to find our way round the other way. Despite looking in hundreds and hundreds of trees there were no lions sighted but the unspoilt wilderness, herds upon herds of Ugandan kob moving around the lush green grass and occasional groups of elephants was worth the visit.

From the southern sector we drove 80 km on an excellent murrum road to the Kazinga Channel, a 40 km stretch of water that connects Lake George to Lake Edward, to catch the 3pm cruise between Mweya jetty and the Channel's entrance into Lake Edward. Not to be missed is this gentle, two-hour excursion among hippos and crocodiles with a knowledgeable Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) ranger eagerly pointing out the myriad bird species.

Next morning our early game drive was in the plains north of the Kazinga Channel towards Kasenyi which are claimed in the UWA QENP brochure to be the prime viewing area. Not in mid-September they weren't, with only a few waterbuck to be found. We take the 27 km Crater Drive to explore the Katwe Explosion Craters, a cluster of extinct volcanoes. A challenging steep, rocky road in some places but the views were magnificent.

From Mweya in the north west of QENP to Paraa in Murchison



Right: **Baby Obama in Ziwa Sanctuary**

Picture by: **Rhino Fund Uganda**

Falls National Park, our next destination, was a drive of 500 km and one of the worst roads in Uganda. We decided to stop at Bigodi Wetlands Sanctuary near Kibale National Park, renowned for its chimpanzees. At this point we must come clean, we are not primate fanatics and, while most safaris to Uganda currently include visits to gorilla and chimp sanctuaries, ours did not. So we drove past the chimp gate straight to the wetland site. Here we were treated to a

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walk around the edge of a wetland forest. With three out of four in our party being bird enthusiasts and a knowledgeable guide, birds were the focus and the normal two-hour trek was extended at no extra cost to four hours. The non-bird enthusiast was happy to see some gray-cheeked Mangabey, Red Colobus and Red-tailed monkeys.

Next morning we set off early for the roughest part of the journey. The road between Fort Portal and Hoima was murrum mixed with red soil which had cut up badly in the wet. It was also very hilly. There was only one way to travel – slow and bumpy but nevertheless passable. There is an alternative route to Murchison Falls but it goes via Kampala which is a huge detour and only for the faint hearted. We could have made Murchison in one day but it was Saturday and there was bound to be English football on the TV. So we stopped part way at a camping ground in time to watch Manchester United beat Manchester City 4-3.

The next day we arrived at

Top: Elephant in Queen Elizabeth Park Uganda

Right: Buffalos and egrets at Buligi, Murchison Falls National Park

Facing page: One of Uganda's Ankole cattle

Pictures by: Felix Patton



Murchison Falls National Park in time for the 2pm launch trip down the Victoria Nile to the Falls. The three-hour trip was excellent value. Hippos and crocodiles near to and on the river banks, many bird species and the gentle chugging of the boat in the warm sunshine until we reached the bottom of the Falls and marvelled at the cascade crashing 40 metres down the rocks. Even better was next evening's view from the top of the Falls.

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wilderness sandwiched between the Victoria and Albert Niles. To get there from south of the Victoria Nile requires a ferry crossing which, while only a few minutes in duration, can only accommodate eight

vehicles at a time. The ferry goes back and forth until the last vehicle has been delivered. The game drive from Paraa passing Delta Point takes between three and four hours with the Buligi, Albert and Queens circular tracks clearly marked. We were advised to leave out the Victoria track as the long grass made game viewing nearly impossible. We were not to be disappointed. The vast swath of savannah grassland was the habitat for herds of buffalo, hartebeest and kob. We also saw Rothschilds giraffe, elephants and two female lions as well as many different birds.



If you want to see large numbers of wildlife you are advised not to come to Uganda. But it is equally as enthralling to seek out those animals that have survived mass slaughter during the regime of Idi Amin and are now prospering, although under constant threat from poaching. You can easily imagine how the wonderfully green Uganda grasslands were once the home of thousands of animals.

We were nearing the end of our safari but had saved, for us,

the best until last. Some 110 kms from Murchison Falls on the road back to Kampala is Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary where the visitor can see the only wild rhinos in Uganda. Of the six adults, four were introduced from Solio Game Reserve in Kenya. Despite having moved from short grass open plains to long grass woodland, the rhinos had settled well and were in great condition. Taleo, the dominant male, had become a father in June 2009 to a calf whose mother came from the

USA. The new male was duly called Obama. (See adjoining article)

And so with the safari coming to its close it was back through Kampala and a border crossing into Kenya this time at Malaba but once again only with the help of a self-appointed agent/tout. The Ksh1000 (about

US\$13) 'fee' was money well spent on both occasions.

A wildlife safari in Uganda is a must for the seasoned traveller. The roads we encountered were generally good and at worst adequate. The Ugandan people we met were helpful and welcoming - apart from the road users, especially the taxi drivers! The animals made up in quality what they lacked in quantity and the habitats were stunning. But don't go without a programmed GPS unless you enjoy getting hopelessly lost and, as a self-drive visitor, don't expect too much information, maps or signage in national parks and certainly don't expect hot water at most UWA camp sites. And you can add in the gorillas and chimpanzees! ●



Felix Patton, a rhino ecologist assisting with rhino monitoring at Solio Game Reserve, Kenya and his techno-savvy partner, Petra Campbell, spent two weeks on a self-planned, self-drive safari in a hired Range Rover with roof tent and camping equipment.

CAMPSITES, LOCATIONS AND COMMENTS

UWEC, Entebbe – perhaps better to use their accommodation as camping is on a steep slope, hot showers were cold

Masaka Tourist Cottage and Camp, Masaka – nice small site, cold shower

Mburo Park Lakeside Camping, LMNP – large open UWA site by lake, facilities poor

Ishasha Camping, QENP – UWA site with no water in shower but nice to hear hippos grazing by vehicle during the night

Simba Safari Camp, Kasenyi/Equator – newly opened in 2008 but campsite not ready, lots of vehicle noise from main road but excellent facilities with hot water

CVK, Kibale – does not look much but great location by the lake, friendly staff and hot water

Eco Garden Lodge, Hoima – large clean site with camping between bandas and allowed to use banda facilities with hot water

Red Chilli Rest Camp, MFNP – camping between bandas, very busy site (as near the ferry terminal) with nice facilities

Top of Falls Campsite, MFNP – a UWA campsite within the sound of the Falls, simple and clean and set up for using your own solar shower

Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary, Nakasongola – fenced field, good clean facilities with hot water

Red Chilli Hideaway, Kampala – 5km east of the city, popular with overlanders, good facilities with hot showers