

QUEEN ELIZABETH NATIONAL PARK, UGANDA

A hippopotamus nonchalantly ambled across the path as we approached our camp site high on a narrow peninsular formed by Lake Edward on one side and the Kazinga channel on the other. We had arrived at Queen Elizabeth National Park in Uganda and were already experiencing at first hand its magnificent setting and panoramas.

We left Joshua our cook to set up camp amongst the numerous grazing warthogs and strutting Marabou storks while we drove back a kilometre or so to the well established Mweya Lodge for refreshments. It was May and we almost had the place to ourselves except for the large house staff.

Sitting out on the lodge's terrace we humbly faced the distant rising slopes of the legendary Mountains of the Moon vanishing into the hanging clouds. To the south-west and climbing from the shores of Lake Edward were the Mitumba mountains of Zaire. Henry Morton Stanley had been so inspired by the Mountains of the Moon (Ruwenzori Mountains) that he wrote of them as being...*'in one of the darkest corners of the earth shrouded by perpetual mist, brooding under the eternal storm clouds, surrounded by darkness and mystery, the melting snow of whose tops has been for some fifty centuries most vital to the peoples of Egypt.'*

As we sat, numerous small and colourful birds flitted about us teasing the cameras into action. A green agama lizard was spotted in the creeper above us whilst someone had picked up an exquisite chameleon lizard - regarded by many tribes as a heavenly messenger sent to spy on humans and report their activities to the gods. We handled it with great care and kindness.

A metre long monitor lizard quickly crossed the lawn in front of us to disappear into the security of a hedge. He then reappeared only to show his head and tantalize the impatient camera holders. The grunts of hippopotamuses and the bellow of a lone buffalo bull, carried across the waters of the Kazinga channel below us.

It was a happening place.

Queen Elizabeth National Park was named after Queen Elizabeth II who opened it in 1954 and covers an area of 2,500 sq. km. The park includes the eastern portion of Lake Edward and the western portion of Lake George which are joined by the 34 km long Kazinga channel. Its remarkable range of ecosystems include deciduous tropical high forest, undulating grasslands, acacia savannahs, swamps and mosaic grasslands.

The once great herds of elephant, buffalo, kob, waterbuck, hippo and topi were almost wiped out in the late seventies by the retreating troops of Amin and Okello, and the Tanzanian army which occupied the country after Amin's overthrow. Surprisingly, in a comparatively short time much of the game has come back and certainly we were to see large numbers of ungulates, elephant and hippos. With the growing number of grass-eaters in the park, predators are increasing and it is becoming quite common to see lion and the occasional sighting of the aristocrat of them all, the leopard.

In the pleasant warmth of late afternoon we set off on a cruise of the Kazinga channel in a flat bottom steel-hulled launch. The now familiar and plaintive cry of the fish eagle greeted us as it soared majestically overhead to scan its watery domain - Lord of the African sky.

The old African boatman crossed the nine hundred yards of water to the other side of the channel, travelling upstream towards Lake Edward within yards of the bank. We were soon viewing countless numbers of hippos as they lay in the water, their gigantic hulks sensitive to the damaging effects of heat and sunlight. At nightfall these mistakenly lumbering creatures, with their false amorous expressions, will leave the water to travel some distance inland to graze the sweet grasses of the plains or wreak havoc upon a village cultivation.

Wallowing here and there along the shallow edges in social harmony with the hippos, were old buffalo bulls, their tattered ears and scarred hides the marks of age and experience of a life span almost over. Once the grasses dry off and lose nutrition, these feeble old bulls

with their sullen faces and unpredictable nature, will become easy prey for passing lions.

We continued on, marvelling at the great variety of water birds along the channel's edge - kingfishers, hamerkop, plover, yellow-billed storks, commorants, white and pink-backed pelicans, great white egrets, goliath and grey herons. A pair of fish eagles watched us intently from the bank and then with powerful wing beat, launched themselves inland to rise effortlessly in the warm air currents above the cliffs beside the channel. Further on were gentle grass slopes where native fishermen were folding or mending nets, watched by a jury of marabou storks. In the water close by were the exposed humps and bumps of partly submerged hippopotamuses, their intimate presence a constant threat to the river people.

The trip lasted two hours and we returned as the shadows began to lengthen and fish eagles cried out to each other high above the water.

That night we slumbered peacefully beneath our canvasses until the early hours of the morning when the lions started up, their roaring continuing at intervals through to dawn.

The next morning we left camp at first light to trek the Chamburu Gorge to observe chimpanzees in their unique forest environment but that is another story.

That afternoon with storm clouds menacing the south-east horizon we set off on a game drive to the beautiful craters region of the park where about one hundred elephants had been sighted yesterday. The trail took us through lush undulating grassland where prolific herds of Ugandan kob, Defassa waterbuck and buffalo grazed, making little impression on the vast sea of plenty. As we climbed up into the stony basalt country we passed and looked down into a number of extinct volcanic craters, some four or five kilometres across, all containing shallow water ringed by dense woodland. With the water reflecting the blue sky and crater walls on its mirror like surface, the photogaphy was absolutely superb.

Further on we found an even larger crater with a grass bottom. Sitting on its rim we gazed with a birds eye view of this sunken amphitheatre, enthralled at natures wondrous diversity. There a hundred yards below us was a herd of about forty elephants foraging in a long stragglng line amongst the acacia woodland on the crater floor. We sat and watched the families of bulls, cows and juveniles as they fed towards us in slow motion with a swaying, lumbering gait.

Unfortunately our keen attention was suddenly distracted by the rumble of distant thunder. Behind us and sweeping across the vast wide plain of Africa's rift valley was drenching rain. It hung like a huge curtain beneath the dark and billowing culmulus cloud of the approaching thunderstorm, blotting out the landscape enveloped in its veil of life giving moisture. It was a magical sight but we knew there was no time to linger as the dirt tracks would become treacherous when wet.

The rain soon engulfed us. We skidded sideways on a slope as a rear wheel caught in a deep rut and it was necessary for all of us to get out and push the Range Rover back on course. On the rise just above us, two massive buffalo bulls, noses held high, appeared to be pondering resentfully our encroachment of their domain. As we got under way again three bedraggled mongooses scurried across the road to disappear into the safety and dryness of their ant bed home.

Before reaching our camp site the weather began clearing and showing up on the southern horizon, about one hundred and eighty kilometres away, were the pale blue triangular shapes of the Virunga volcanoes - home of the gorillas in the mist.

It was a beautiful sight and brought back the captivating memories of the precious moments we shared with the mountain gorillas only a few days ago.

We ended the day relaxing on the terrace of Mweya Lodge watching the sun setting behind the western rift escarpment of the Mitumba Mountains. The rippled waters of Lake Edward and the soft floating clouds above, picked up the striking colours of the sun's dying rays then reflected them back in ever changing tones in what seemed to be a private display of natures boundless beauty for the captivated audience on the terrace. In front of us to the north the cloud was lifting and exposing the elusive snow-capped peaks of the Mountains of the Moon.

At this instant, one could not wish to be anywhere else in the world. We toasted the Almighty.