

THE LOADING OF THE VICTORIA

Africa, that fascinating continent, who like a magnet draws the intrepid traveller purposefully on to explore the mysteries of her soul.

Already behind us, as my wife and daughter and self continued our journey westwards through East Africa, were the splendours of Ngorongoro Crater and the vast grasslands of the Serengeti and its teeming wildlife. We had witnessed the overwhelming spectacle of the wildebeest migration, an experience that will be etched on our memories forever.

In front of us now lay a huge inland sea, the object in yesteryear of so much speculation, which tonight we will cross by boat with our vehicle and trailer. We had arrived at the great inland port of Mwanza where in 1858 the famous explorer John Speke looked out across the endless expanse of water to make the bold and very controversial statement that the lake at his feet was the source of the Nile.

This was the mighty Lake Victoria - the second largest freshwater lake in the world.

As we relaxed on the patio of the Tilapia Hotel we experienced the marvellous view of the harbour, bathed in the late afternoon light. Dominating the hill on the shore opposite were the terraced ochre mud-brick dwellings of the local inhabitants, in stark contrast to some of the more modern buildings along the foreshore. In the distance, their white superstructures reflecting the rays of the sinking sun, were the docked freighters which ply the commercial sealanes of Lake Victoria, supplying goods and passage to the three nations who share the common water boundary of imaginary dotted lines on some nautical map.

The harsh mechanical sound of an outboard motor of a water taxi, rudely broke the evening stillness as it sped past us, slicing the smooth water's surface with its load of passengers. When it had past out of sight the sheltered harbour returned to peace and tranquility again. Only the gentle slap of the ebbing ripples of the boat's wake against the stone wall below us lingered on as a reminder of its passage.

At dusk we drove the short distance to the Port of Mwanza where we unloaded essential items from our trailer, including stretchers and sleeping bags, which will be needed on board for the overnight journey. The motor vessel *Victoria* was thirty-four years old, built by the British and assembled at Kisumu in Kenya. Its ironclad hull was capable of carrying two hundred tons of cargo and was well maintained.

As we went through the security gate, showing our passes and onto the wharf, the dockside was a hive of activity. The warm humid air carried the smells of toiling human beings mingled with interesting aromas of the cargo strewn along the dock and destined for distant ports of call. Sacks of all sorts of produce, food, timber, large balls of twine, mattresses, brown paper wrapped new Chinese bicycles, and cartons of Kangaroo brand matches were being laboriously manhandled on to pallets by the Tanzanian workers. The cargo was then picked up by the ship's crane and lowered into the hold where it was unloaded and re-stacked. Black people on their way to Bukoba and Ugandan ports drifted onto the boat throughout the evening - the women with an air of grace and dignity, spotlessly dressed in their kangas and some carrying their babies slung on their backs with perhaps a toddler at their side as well. These people were mainly confined to the second class forward section of the ship. The captain made a brief appearance, his rotund figure clothed immaculately in white and bearing the insignia of his important rank.

The only white person on board beside ourselves was an agricultural adviser, specializing in banana growing in Tanzania.

After boarding the *Victoria* and setting up our stretchers and sleeping bags on the covered first class deck, we sat down in the dining room to a choice of fish or curried chicken, served by a formally dressed waiter.

Later it was fascinating watching and filming the activity going on about the ship. Strong spotlights with their halos of insects, illuminated the busy scene.

In the shadows of the foreshore the townspeople took advantage of the faint visibility shed by the dock lights as they cast their lines for tilapia and Nile perch in the inky waters of the lake.

An hour before midnight, a square steel frame with a cable and wheel clamp hanging from each corner was lowered over the Range Rover waiting its turn on the wharf below the ship's crane and the clamps attached to each wheel. Our vehicle then the trailer rose high in the air, highlighted by the spotlights, momentarily hanging thirty feet above the dockside before being swung across and gently lowered and secured to the forward deck. There was a sigh of relief.

This was the finale - the loading was complete.

The dock labourers, stripped to the waist, stood idly by and aimlessly looked up to the boat or drifted away, their work finished. The sweating bodies of those who had been loading sacks of produce were covered from head to foot in spilt flour and appeared as ghostly apparitions as they rested in the shadows away from the glare of the lights. Friends and relations bid farewell to passengers. Suddenly the ship's siren shattered the dull hum of hundreds of human voices hanging in the still night air, indicating her readiness.

At midnight we were on our way, heading out into the vastness of Lake Victoria to be quickly swallowed up in the blackness of the night. Within minutes of our departure the lights on the wharf were turned off and the place deserted - as if nothing had happened.

Eight hours later we embarked at the other side of the lake at Kemono Bay in Tanzania after passing through a horrific storm in the small hours of the morning. Today we would resume our land journey with cook and guide through the lush countryside of Uganda. Later, we would pass close to the war torn borders of Rwanda and cross into Zaire to share an intimate moment with the awesome mountain gorillas on the fan slopes of Mount Sabinyo.

And so the crossing of Lake Victoria fulfilled part of a boyhood dream to someday tread the hallowed footsteps of such famous explorers as Burton, Speke and Stanley who penetrated the earth and waters of this fascinating, unknown and timeless land.