

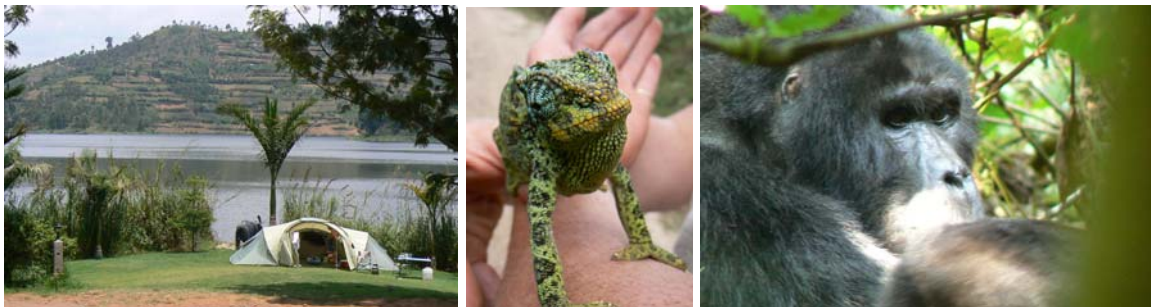


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## Vicky goes camping in Uganda

**Electric storms, vibrant markets, tree-climbing lions and copulating gorillas...Vicky sees it all in Africa's green and verdant heart**

I am sitting in my tent watching an amazing electric storm and listening to angry thunder rolling around the mountains of the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda - well I was last week, this week, sadly, I am back in the office. I returned to Uganda earlier this month having worked there 11 years ago helping to train the staff at Semliki Safari Lodge, and it was a well overdue visit to probably one of my favourite countries in Africa. The main areas to visit are on the west side of the country bordering Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo which are lush with banana and tea plantations, volcanoes, crater lakes and beautiful forests and gorges, and, of course a highlight are the mountain gorillas.



I decided for this trip to go back to my early travelling days, and we hired a Landrover and camping equipment and self-drove ourselves around some of the parks and beautiful areas Uganda has to offer. I love the freedom of driving and camping, shopping in the markets for dinner - the huge avocados and sweet tropical fruit - and just mixing with the local people. However, the usual issues of driving around any African country raised their crazy heads, with mad kamikaze bus drivers, pot-holed roads, lorries with bent axles looking like they are coming towards you sideways and the usual cows and goats on the roads. For those not used to it, I'd still recommend taking a driver and you can experience the freedom but with none of the anxiety.

Having picked up our gorilla permits, we set off from an unbelievably congested Kampala for a four-hour drive to Lake Mburo National Park, which is a natural stop-off-point either going to or back from the west of the country. It's a great little park with enough animals to whet the appetite for the coming weeks. It has a couple of mid-market camps and a lovely but simple campsite right beside the lake with plenty of grazing waterbuck and warthog who don't take heed of *muzungu* campers. I must admit though running the gauntlet by torch light from the tent to the bar on our first night in the bush, even for an old Africa hand, was slightly daunting, but fortunately we didn't

run into a hippo and the wee hogs didn't bother us or try to get into our tent which had been a slight concern.



We ventured on to Lake Bunyonyi (meaning 'lake of little birds') which is right in the south of the country, in an area called Little Switzerland. It's a truly beautiful lake, surrounded by terraced hills, and best seen from the top of the escarpment looking down on the masses of islands which dot the lake. On a clear day, you can also see the volcanoes of the Virunga Mountains on the horizon. Lake Bunyonyi is a bit of a holiday hangout for travellers and locals alike, with safe clean waters for swimming and canoeing in dugout canoes, and there are a couple of mid-range lodges on the islands for perfect peace and quiet, with only the birds for company.

We then headed north to the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest which conjures up thoughts of deepest darkest Africa and the thick forests and hilly terrain are certainly an excellent home for the endangered mountain gorillas. With only about 750 left, over half live in these forests. The rest are a bit further south in the Virunga Mountains which straddle Uganda, Rwanda and DRC. On the day of our Gorilla trekking, we were up early to eat a hearty breakfast preparing ourselves for an arduous day of hacking through the jungle in search of the gorillas. We arrived early at the ranger camp and after a safety talk set off in trepidation. After about 20 minutes of walking and hearty chat we were told to hush. The trackers had found the gorillas only a few hundred metres ahead. Some would say we were lucky to have found them so quickly but we felt slightly let down after our expectations of a strenuous trek! But it didn't dampen the thrill of seeing these beautiful, huge, hairy but delicate and very human-like creatures in the wild. We were watching a mother and juvenile and heard some loud grunting a bit further away, so all 10 of us crept(!) through the forest to come across two copulating gorillas. Feeling slightly like a voyeur as camera shutters snapped, at least I thought, we are seeing an intimate moment in the reproduction of this endangered species. Even the guide was taking photos on his mobile phone - but we soon found out why, when he turned round with a grin and in a whisper said gorillas are like humans, they have sex for fun and this is a silverback and a black back - both males! Ah well... Even though we were initially a little disappointed with our short walk, it was the most amazing experience and we were secretly quite glad when we met some Germans who had had a seven-hour trek to view their group.

Driving further north we headed for one of Uganda's bigger national parks, The Queen Elizabeth. Unlike most other countries in Africa, Uganda has kept the colonial names, with the Lakes Edward, George and Albert and Queen Elizabeth National Park. The

savannah of Ishasha, in the south of the park, is hot and dry and is famous for its tree climbing lions which we duly saw and a huge herd of elephant and buffalo. Further north in the park are crater lakes, gorges for chimp and primate viewing and boat trips on the Kizingo channel to see crocs, hippos and a plethora of birds.



With a tingling feeling of excitement we drove to the hilly town Fort Portal and onto the Semliki Game Reserve where I had worked 11 years previously. It's a beautiful drive down the escarpment into the Semliki Valley with the Rwenzori Mountains to one side and the Rift Valley escarpment on the other. The park, like many others, was ravaged in Idi Amin's time in the 1970s and the huge black-maned lions and tuskers which roamed the plains were wiped out. I was amazed how much the park had regenerated having previously only seen Uganda Kob (a type of antelope) there. We went on game drives and saw forest elephant, forest and cape buffalo, wart hogs, waterbuck and, of course, plenty of kob. Lions are being seen more regularly and the chimp project is still ongoing, unique in that the chimps are not only seen in the forest but also in the savannah. The lodge, which must be the best in Uganda, was looking fantastic and a welcome rest after our 10 days of camping, and I had many reminiscences of happy months working here.

Our Uganda adventure nearly at an end, we had our last night at the lovely colonial Ndali Lodge, set on the edge of a crater with beautiful views into the lake below and across to the Rwenzori Mountains. I was so happy to return to Uganda, so very different to its eastern neighbours of Kenya and Tanzania. Our outstanding memory is the diversity of the landscape: we saw something new every day, and the warmth and hospitality of the local people make it a very special country and well worth a visit.

**For information on holidays in Uganda, please contact Vicky on 0131 315 2464 or [vicky@farsideafrica.com](mailto:vicky@farsideafrica.com).**