

ADVENTURE TOURISM

UGANDA

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DEAR READER,

I wish to take this opportunity to welcome you to Uganda, the Pearl of Africa. Uganda is the highlight reel of all that is rare, precious and beautiful in Africa. Uganda is a host to over 54% of the world's remaining population of endangered mountain gorillas; among the best to offer this unique and exciting tracking experience. The country does not only host gorillas but also home to 11% of the world's recorded bird species making it a true birder's paradise. Flora and Fauna International (FFI) reports Uganda among the top 10 countries in the world with the highest biodiversity. It is also a very diverse, welcoming country with an extremely rich culture, amazing landscapes with a serene true African wilderness. With a large variety of landscapes and cultures, Uganda is among Africa's premier adventure destinations that offer an unforgettable, once in a lifetime experience!

As a result of these amazing attributes, in January 2023, CNN listed Uganda among its top travel destinations to travel to in 2023. The country is ranked as an excellent destination for adventure with an abundance of opportunities for trekking, hiking, mountaineering, running, cycling and canoeing among many things.

I can testify on the active and adventure travel experience in Uganda. I have had the thrilling experience of abseiling on Sipi Falls in Eastern Uganda. I climbed

Margherita Peak, in the Rwenzori Mountains, "The Mountains of the Moon" in Western Uganda. At an altitude of 5,109 meters above sea level, it is a world of fantasy. Getting there was tough, obviously, but worth the effort. It was an epic experience that I will remember forever.

Adventure tourism is among the most sustainable forms of tourism and can easily be combined with safari tourism. Attracting adventure tourists benefits the country as it provides business opportunities for the host communities, small companies as well as employment for many Ugandans.

This magazine is developed by lovers of adventure. It features adventures from all over Uganda. It covers both high-adrenaline as well as more relaxed activities. I believe reading these articles is already an adventure in itself. This magazine is full of hidden gems, all to be found in the Pearl of Africa. Uganda is not a destination but a journey for travelers. You are invited to come and explore it!

Lilly Ajarova

Chief Executive Officer
Uganda Tourism Board

Adventure Tourism Uganda is a consortium of companies that collectively aims to develop the adventure tourism sector in Uganda. It is supported by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency.

As a leading sustainable tour operator in Uganda, **Matoke Tours** offers bespoke full-service travel experiences, which reflect their care and respect for the destination and its people. **Red Dirt Uganda** is the #1 cycling tour operator in Uganda and Rwanda, showing adventure-lovers the red trails of Africa on our surprising and culture immersing trips. **Home of Friends Guesthouse** in Kapchorwa is a comfortable base to explore the green and unspoiled beauty of Mount Elgon. Sustainable tourism is key for **Kara-Tunga Arts & Tours**, as it offers authentic culture and untamed adventure tours in Northeastern Uganda. **Bergwandelen.com** organizes small scale hiking and mountaineering trips in various countries. **UG-Motobike** offers the most adventurous motorcycle trips in Uganda. **EyeOpenerWorks** is a creative international agency that supports organizations to create social and sustainable impact.

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EXPLORE
UGANDA
 THE PEARL OF AFRICA



Netherlands Enterprise Agency

Uganda is famous for its mountain gorillas, as it has more than half of the world's population of them. Being close to those creatures is an absolutely stunning sight, but Uganda has so many more adventures to offer. We asked a number of Ugandan adventure fanatics what it is that makes their country such a great destination and where adventure tourists should go. Throughout the magazine you will find answers from the experts:

- Adrine Nankunda is among Uganda's leading female tour guides.
- Kisambira 'Sunny' Hassan has a shop in outdoor gear and clothing, called Sunny Outdoors.
- Paul Olweny, cyclist in the Tour of Karamoja in 2022





THE HIDDEN TRAILS AND WATERWAYS OF MABAMBA

A bikerrafting adventure across the
wetlands of Mabamba Bay





Written by Jan Bakker
Photography by Lawrence Musoke
Cover photo by Jan Bakker

It's busy in the small port of Nakiwogo. The ferry is about to leave and people are rushing to get on board. I manage to find myself a small landing for my packraft, away from the curious crowds. The water looks foul, with a green slushy film floating on the surface. I push my raft into Lake Victoria to start my 50km journey across Mabamba Bay.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, people have been searching for ways to escape the crowds of the city – and not just in Europe or the USA. Outdoor sports like mountain biking and running have been booming worldwide ever since. For Ugandan cities like Kampala and Entebbe it is no different, and both cities are blessed with an incredible outdoor playground on their doorsteps, just a short boat ride away.

Boat landing sites give me a great sense of adventure. They breathe possibility. You paddle for a couple of kilometres and you're away from everything. You literally leave noise and air pollution behind, perhaps still looming over the city in the distance. Landing sites enable you to plan routes that would otherwise be impassable, creating lines on the map that wouldn't exist without them. Throw yourself a packraft and mountain bike in the mix and you've got yourself a proper adventure.





The first port of call is Lulongo, a small landing site that's primarily used by fishermen. It's tucked away in a small bay, only 3km from Entebbe as the crow flies, but it's a world away from buzzing *boda bodas* (motorcycle taxis), shopping malls and tarmac roads. Arriving anywhere in rural Uganda as a *mzungu* (foreigner) usually attracts quite a bit of attention, but doing so in a bright yellow packraft with a bike strapped on top of it raises people's interest to a whole new level. In all fairness, it might also attract quite a few onlookers as well in, say, Burton upon Stather. This is my very first time bikerafting. As with many of my adventures, I just go out and do it and figure it out along the way. In the words of Pippi





Longstocking, "I have never tried that before, so I think I should definitely be able to do that." I pack up the raft, strap it on my handle bar and start the second stage of my journey. It's easy cruising on the innumerable small community trails that connect quaint villages and farmland. With a sense of direction, you can avoid riding on main dirt roads and stick to beautiful single tracks that wind their way through the fertile fields of Central Uganda.

Today's goal is a lush hill called Nkima. This spectacular spot looks out over the vast swamp of Mabamba Bay and Lake Victoria. Nature reserves in Uganda come in different shapes and sizes. There's the explicit beauty of places like the Virunga volcanoes in the south of the country and the endless savannah of Murchison Falls National Park in the north. In some places, you need to get closer and immerse yourself into that environment to really appreciate its natural splendour. The wetlands in Uganda are one of those places, and the great thing is, you don't have to travel far to get there.

After a delicious lunch at the Nkima Forest Lodge, which is perched on top of the hill amidst a dense old-growth forest, I head down with just my raft to search for one of the most elusive birds in East Africa, the shoe-billed stork. It's the strangest prehistoric looking bird, more

suited for a Jurassic Park setting than the modern world. They are a difficult creature to find, but if you do find them, they usually stay put, feeling unthreatened by humans.

The Mabamba wetland is a vast papyrus swamp with a labyrinth of narrow waterways. It is designated as a Ramsar site to protect this vulnerable habitat for waterbirds, mammals and aquatic life. I glide through one of the channels where the shoebill is often seen. It's silent and I realise how understated this place is. The only thing I hear is my paddle stroke and some of the swamp's residents like the African jacana and Goliath heron. After pushing my boat forward with my arms through a particularly narrow channel, I'm up close with a shoebill. It looks me straight in the eyes, undeterred. If this water safari was on land, I guess I could say I ticked off one of the "Big Five".

The next morning, I am keen to leave before sunrise to beat the mid-day heat, as this expedition is right on the equator. I set up my raft

**"IT'S THE STRANGEST PREHISTORIC
LOOKING BIRD, MORE SUITED FOR
A JURASSIC PARK SETTING THAN
THE MODERN WORLD."**



with a crowd onlooking, as usual. I hear them chatting and pointing with slight worry on their faces. Immediately I think there might be something I don't know, but should know. Crocodiles? Hippos? When I ask one of the men what the discussion is about, he laughs at my worries saying, "They think your boat will not make it to the other side. The reeds and papyrus will pierce through it." They probably think this raft is an ordinary dinghy that springs a leak at the first brush with vegetation. I ensure them I should be fine, and besides that...I can swim!

Without any troubles I make it to the other side, Busi Island. This is an isolated spot, not connected to the mainland and almost traffic-free. I peek at the map and see an interesting track skimming the northern part of the island. It's a true cyclist's paradise with a maze of small tracks and trails. Tourists don't take this track, so wherever I go I'm chased by excited kids trying to outrun me. Via a broad ridge that forms the backbone of the island, I navigate to the channel that connects with the mainland.

Looking back on this adventure, this is the Africa I'm looking for – the skinny red dirt trails, lush vegetation and sleepy villages with thatched rooftops which are away from tourist hot spots with their oversized Toyota Land Cruisers and swanky lodges.

DISCOVERING THE ROOTS OF UGANDA'S RUNNING CHAMPIONS

Written by Daan Oxener
Photography by Juma Chebet



Uganda has delivered some very successful running athletes in the past decade, including those who win world titles and Olympic golden medals. Where are these athletes from? And how are they so strong? These are some of the questions on our minds as we are about to traverse the remote northern foothills of Mount Elgon in the Kween District.

It's a vast area of green rolling hills and fertile fields. Along the journey, we are greeted with warm smiles from the local Mosopisiek tribe. Unlike the western side of the mountain, this region is truly off the beaten track. Only a handful of adventurous tourists visit Kween each year. Multiple World and Olympic champion, Joshua Cheptegei, sees us off as we embark on our running adventure saying, "Life is full of ups and downs for runners like me and life in the Mosopisiek landscape." These words will



OUR FIVE HEADED TEAM

1) Dan Kiplangat: Mosopisiek expert and guide

2) David Cherop: Seasoned marathon runner, coach and brother of Olympic Champion Stephen Kiprotich. David has Mosopisiek roots and lived the first five years of his life in the forest "as one with the wild animals"

3) Levand Chemonges: Emerging running talent, adventurer and curious about his roots

4) Daan Oxener: Writer and manager of Home of Friends Guesthouse

5) Juma Chebet: Elgon guide and photographer



echo throughout our journey to the cradle of the Ugandan running scene.

share the same ancestral history as the Mosopisiek tribe.

Background of the Mosopisiek

The Mosopisiek is a minority tribe of roughly 15,000 people. Although the names Benet and Ndorobos are used as well for this tribe, Mosopisiek is the original name. Up to 1993, the tribe lived in the high-altitude forest in what is now Mount Elgon National Park. That year they were displaced from their forest settlements and forced to live outside the national park boundaries. Ever since they have been seeking political and cultural recognition. In the town of Kapchorwa, where all the Ugandan long-distance running champions like Cheptegei, Kiplimo and Kiprotich live and train, it is believed that the champions

Secret number 1: The food

On the first day of our journey, we meet several elders (senior and well-respected members of a tribe) who unveil one of the main ingredients behind the region's running success: the food. The Elgon Forest provides mushrooms and several types of spinach, all rich in fibre and minerals. Milk is drunk unpasteurised, directly from the cow. According to the elders, this contributes to higher immunity and body strength. We notice a sense of reverence when they speak about life in the forest. The words "heaven " and "paradise " are mentioned more than once.



Favourite vegetables and plants

A clear favourite among the various types of spinach is *sseewyondet*, or stinging nettle. It's a spiky type of spinach that's boiled to a mushy substance. The Mosopisiek believe that eating *sseewyondet* contributes to a longer life. The leaves of the Matooke banana and beans are also an integral part of the diet, as they are rich in protein. Forest bamboo (*Arundinaria alpina*) is used as an energy and immunity booster. Elders claim that many plants in the forest are medicinal. Some help fight pneumonia, a common health problem in this cold region that's well over 2000 metres above sea level.

Secret number 2: Hunting!

The elders we meet along the way all agree: if Uganda wants to produce more running champions, they should grant the Mosopisiek access to Elgon Forest and let them live and train in the traditional way. Besides the forest plant-based diet, this means hunting. Many stories go around of heroic men who chase cattle thieves, covering extreme distances to get their stolen cattle back, even as far as Kenya. This, in combination with the hilly and rugged landscape, explains a lot about Mosopisiek running abilities!

Secret number 3: Kapchela Hill

The striking green Kapchela Hill is situated close to the edge of Mountain Elgon National Park at an altitude of 2600 metres. Here we find coach Martin and his group of young talents. Martin tells us he has used this hill as a prime training ground for more than 10 years. The pupils run up and down the 217-metre elevation hill to build muscle and stamina. One of the younger athletes tells us with an air of nonchalance that it's completely normal to run up and down for a full hour. It's almost unimaginable when you see how steep this slope is. Rumour has it that Joshua Cheptegei still trains on this hill before an important race...

Four dominant clans

The higher you get on the slopes of Mount Elgon, the denser the concentration of strong runners. Our guide, Dan, has done his own research on why this is the case. According to Dan, the best runners in Uganda are related to only four of the 37 clans from the Mosopisiek tribe: Kapyomet, Kapkweyey, Kaprui and Kapkwosum. Athlete Peruth Chemutai is a granddaughter of the Kapkweyey clan. Cheptegei is blessed with the genes of no less than three of these clans. They have a strong representation on the highest slopes of this ancient volcano. Although locally not as often mentioned as the reason behind their success, the adaptation to high altitude and higher red blood cell count seems like a plausible explanation for the exceptional achievements of Elgon's running athletes.



Nature and lifestyle

The land of the Mosopisiek is abundant in greenery and extremely fertile soil, especially in the wet season. It is literally the land of milk and honey with thundering waterfalls and endless views across the savannah plains of Karamoja. Life in this part of the world is simple and pure. The landscape is dotted with small mudbrick houses, scattered cattle grazing across the fields and neat compounds with colourful flowers and plants. On our route we pass Mount Elgon's biggest known cave, Mukuuso, and the impressive Mengia Waterfall, which plunges almost a hundred metres from the escarpment. The trails are generally smooth and easy, with only a few rocky sections, making it a true playground for trail runners, mountain bikers and trekkers.

A special meeting with Cheptegei's grandfather and grandmother


On the second day of our journey, in the late afternoon at 2700 metres above sea level, we meet the grandparents of Cheptegei. The reception is cheerful in the soft light of the setting sun. The elderly pair is proud and happy. They are not only proud of Joshua, but of all their (grand) children. It becomes clear how closely linked the family ties are between the running champions. Cheptegei and Kiplimo share the same great-grandfather. Levand is flooded with questions by grandpa Cheptegei about his ancestors and the Cheptegei family. Grandma Cheptegei brings out a dark honey-based drink that is also thought to be a medicine against pneumonia.

The central theme remains – life in the forest and on the high-altitude moors of Mount Elgon is a place where many Mosopisiek long to be, runner or not.



**Sipi Falls, edge of Mount
Elgon National Park**

DANIELE COLLETTA PHOTOGRAPHY
MILANO, ITALY @URIZEN_PH



JAN BAKKER PHOTOGRAPHY

Murchison Falls, Northwest Uganda

"The River Nile, the world's largest river, flows through Murchison Falls National Park, after starting its journey from Lake Victoria in Jinja, often called East Africa's adventure capital. This is an ideal location for white water rafting, bungee jumping and kayaking. Go white water rafting on the world's most exciting grade five rapids in the morning, and go bungee jumping in the evening!"

- Adrine Nankunda



A LIVING HISTORY: BUGANDA KINGDOM'S KASUBI TOMBS

Written by Anne Kirya for Matoke Tours

Additional reporting by Anna Grodzki

Illustrations by Kalwany Joseph



Unique cultural experiences are rare, but highly sought after by adventure travellers. Few destinations worldwide offer a better setting to immerse yourself in local culture than Uganda. With over 45 different tribes and several active traditional kingdoms, the country presents a rich cultural diversity and variety in languages and dialects, food, dressing, customs and beliefs.

One such authentic experience is a visit to one of the most important cultural sites in Uganda, the Tombs of Buganda Kings at Kasubi, located in the capital city, Kampala.

Buganda, the largest kingdom in Uganda, has a reigning Kabaka (king) and its own political structures. For instance, each Kabaka has a Katikiro, a prime minister, who amongst other things oversees the Ganda parliament, the Lukiiko. The Baganda, as the people of this tribe are called, are divided into 56 clans. Each clan is represented by a totem, an animal or plant of spiritual significance to the clan. The totem animal or plant is to be protected by all clan members and it is strictly forbidden to harm, hunt or eat your clan's assigned totem.

Kasubi Tombs is a UNESCO world heritage site, recognised for its exceptional representation of African culture and its "intangible values of beliefs, spirituality, continuity and identity of the Baganda people". The Tombs are not only a burial ground for kings, but remain to this day an active site where cultural rituals are performed and "where communication links with the spiritual world are maintained".

David Nkalubo, our guide on our visit, is the heir to his father, who was heir to his own father, who was the Katikiro for Kabaka Muteesa II, who reigned from 1939-1969. It is important to remember that a lot of roles in Buganda are hereditary. Nkalubo grew up in Kasubi and has been trained from an early age about the seen and unseen customs and the history of Buganda. He too is addressed with the title of Katikiro.

Outside

At first sight, the Kasubi Tombs look like a structure encased in reeds. There are a number of houses, some grass-thatched and others roofed with iron sheets. At their centre sits one large dome-shaped hut. That's it. But pay close attention, open your mind and you will see that at this historical burial ground (and once the palace of Muteesa I), a lot more lies beyond what the eyes can see. You may even feel it. Here, our world intermingles with another where ancient kings exist, can be accessed and can communicate. Before you get to the inner sanctum, however, there is an education to be had.

Enter

There are a number of gates and entrances at the Kasubi Tombs. Some admit you into the outer courtyards, two into the middle one, and each has a designation. For instance, the reigning Kabaka always uses the middle gate. The one I would keep an eye on if I were you, though, is Kiryango kibi, which quite literally means, "the bad entrance". The king will only use this gate once he crosses over into the other plane.



Woven ceiling in Kasubi Tombs

To access the middle courtyard, you have to go through a hut called *Bujjabukula*. The entrance is low, compelling you to bow as you enter and in the process, offer your respect. When you get here, stop and look up to observe a spectacular piece of architecture – the incredible woven ceiling. The concentric circles flow into each other, seemingly with no beginning or end. The poles propping up the hut offer support that rivals concrete. Temperature control is inbuilt. Looking up, you have the feeling of being surrounded even if you might be alone.

At the centre of the ceiling are four black rings. These represent, starting from the inside: the king, his children, the clan leaders, and finally all Baganda people. The weaving expands into 56 rings, each representing a clan in Buganda.

Once you are done admiring the roof, observe the two doors adjacent to each other. These are manned by guards, Mulamba and Nsigo. Imagine our surprise when one of them, 96-year-old Nsigo, emerged. Although he is not always attired, he insists on receiving us in his livery, a mustard-yellow kanzu, adorned with ropes, cuffs and a whistle. You can imagine what these are for.

Kasubi is home to many people, everyone with a role. And while it is very clear who is in charge here, it is somewhat of a moving hierarchy. If this

happens then that...if the other happens then this. If Nsigo denies you entry, not even the king can reverse that decision. You will have to be content with having seen the beautiful entrance and be on your way.

Luckily, we found favour with the guard and were allowed to enter, but not yet into the inner courtyard. First, men who are “unclean “ must cleanse themselves in the hut to the left. In the past, these men could stay in this hut for up to nine days, sleeping on the ground and taking part in several other rituals before being allowed to go any further.

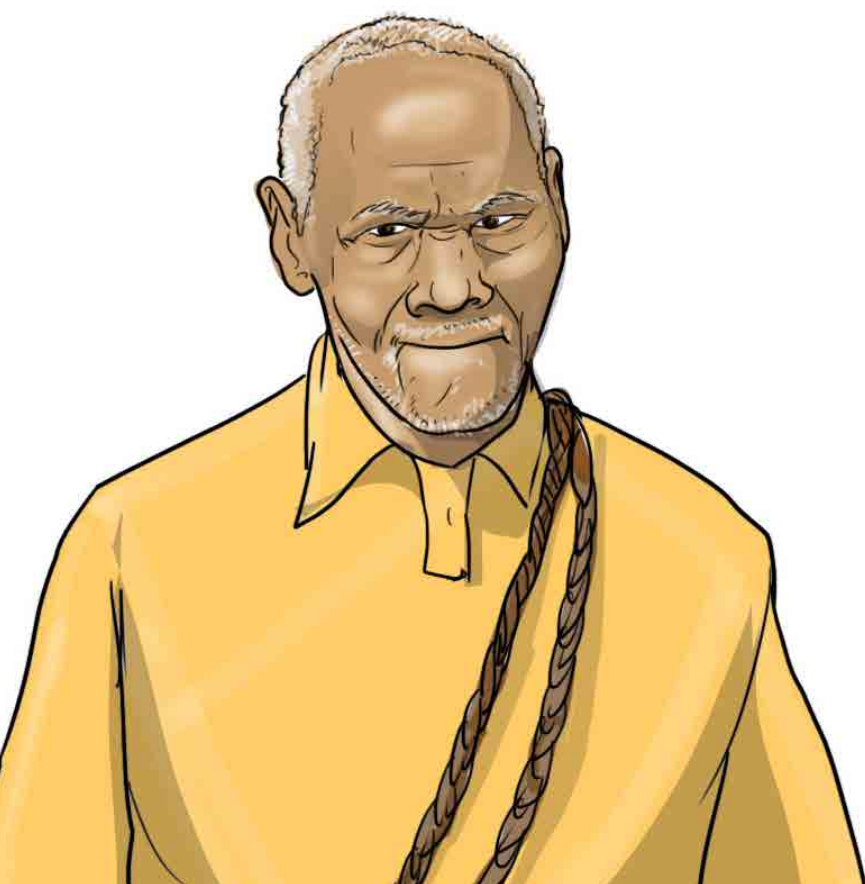
This perhaps is a foreshadowing of what awaits you on the inside. It is a domain of women. Buganda, particularly royal Buganda, held women in very high esteem. It was not unheard of for the king to charge his sister with ruling the kingdom in his absence.

Once you are admitted into the inner courtyard, you will have the chance to gaze fully upon the largest centre hut. This is where Kabakas Mwangi, Muteesa I, Daudi Chwa and Muteesa II lay. Kasubi is the only known tomb in the world with four kings. Atop the hut, men can be seen arranging thatch to complete reconstruction on the roof.

In 2010 the tombs were gutted by fire; a roaring flame that claimed invaluable pieces of history and left devastation behind. We couldn't access the interior of the tombs as reconstruction is still ongoing, 12 years later. Who holds the key to the completion of the restoration of this world heritage site seems to be a coin toss between UNESCO and Buganda.

This centre hut is bordered by several smaller huts where Kabaka Muteesa I's wives live. This position of wife is inherited, so some of the wives are descendants of their grandmothers. They play different roles and while they can have lives outside of the tombs, their primary duty is here. Each has been given land to cultivate. “The king provides,” Nkalubo says.

In one of the huts lives a woman, Kikome, who plays a critical role. During specific rituals, the king may hand the kingship to her for safekeeping. The kingship is a living entity, you see, one that is transferable. When this happens, this hut, as you can imagine, turns into the most guarded place in all of Buganda.



Guard Nsigo



Local Ugandan brew, available outside the tombs

Some of these women play another role. They are the voices of past kings. At certain times, they will be visited by the spirit of the king and convey his messages in his voice. The closest term, although not quite an accurate description, would be to say that they are the mediums of specific kings.

In another of the huts, lie the twins of the kings. In Buganda, every king is born with an ethereal twin. They talk to the king and may warn him in the face of impending danger, for instance. Through a series of rituals, these twins take on physical form and are placed in a hut. When the tombs burnt down, the twins of the kings remained inexplicably unscathed.

This isn't the only thing that can't be explained at Kasubi Tombs. Vitality seems to flow through the old here. Nsigo isn't the only sprightly individual in his age group. A third-generation wife of Muteesa 1, 100-year-old Kabajja, walks, talks and dances. Perhaps the fountain of youth exists close by.

If you are extremely fortunate, you may be allowed to go behind the tombs and see where some members of the royal family are buried. Was it just me, or was there a stirring in the ground when we made our way through? In addition to the burial grounds, you will see the gardens and where modernity starts to enter the kingdom – the first iron sheet roofed house ever built in Uganda.

This world and the other co-exist inside the tombs, but not far off there is a push and pull between past and present...in how things were done and how they are done. In some cases, legacy has won. In other cases, modernisation has taken the prize.

Back outside

Today, there is a tarmac road cutting through what used to be the palace and commerce is ongoing. At the side of the road, an older lady sells *mwenge muganda* (local alcoholic brew) in plastic bottles. She also sells *endeku* (gourds), in which the brew is traditionally drank, and a type of reed straw to complete the ensemble. *Mwenge muganda* starts out as *mubisi*, (banana juice) before *muwemba* (millet) ferments it into alcohol. It is sweet, but make no mistake, it is alcohol. When she hands me the bottle, it is with a black polythene bag to cover it. She jokes that she doesn't want people to wonder about this woman who has started to drink so early in the day (it is not yet noon).

Just outside of where the kings lay, is the resting place of Muteesa I's Katikiro. Here, I may enter but with no shoes on. Inside, the square room is divided by a sheet of bark cloth. This divide marks the difference between our world, and the other which is called Mukibila, the forest. The current *Katikiro* of the palace, Nkalubo tells us, is not allowed to go there. Forgive me for first thinking he was referring to a literal forest.

Closest to the road is a hut in which is buried a relation to one of the kings. When I light-heartedly ask Nkalubo if the "sleeping" royal doesn't complain about the noisy *boda bodas* (motor-cycle taxis) that zoom past all day, he responds

matter-of-factly, "He has complained to us many times. "

Nowhere more than in this gentleman is the dichotomy of past and present clearer. A trained engineer who has a day job, Nkalubo sees his most important duty to be this one – to his king and kingdom. This is a role he has inherited from his father (an 87-year-old who looks 50) who himself inherited it from his grandfather (the one in the forest). Next in line will be Nkalubo's son, who at 10 has already learned about the intricacies of this role.

In David Nkulabo I see hope. A possibility that tradition can walk in tandem with modernity. That the beautiful weaving and roofing skills can cross over to technical schools, and to the lecture halls of architecture department in Uganda and beyond. That we Ugandans do not have to abandon every single bit of the old in favour of the new. That, in fact, we have so much more to offer the world.

When asked how he balances his duty to the kingdom with his other work, Nkalubo says it is no problem, the king provides.



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MILANO, ITALY @URIZEN_PH

The Abyssinian roller, spotted in the Karamoja Region

“Uganda is also a great birding destination. Although our country is small, it has more species than the entire North American continent!”

- Adrine Nankunda

Cultural Diversity, Northeast Uganda

"Uganda has dozens of officially recognised tribes and nine indigenous minority groups - all in an area comparable to the UK in size. This makes Uganda among the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. Many Ugandans are proud of their traditions and are happy to tell you their stories or to introduce you to their unique styles of food, clothing, music and dance. I think Uganda is also among the friendliest countries in the world!"

- Adrine Nankunda







ROADMASTERS: CYCLING 1580 KM ACROSS UGANDA ON A VILLAGE BICYCLE

Written by Alexander 'Lex' Bongers
Photography by Eric Mukalazi, Theo Vos
and Alexander Bongers

It started off as a joke. If we really wanted to promote cycling in Uganda and the *Uganda Cycling Trail* (recently launched by Red Dirt Uganda), why not use Uganda's most common, most accessible and cheapest bicycle? Why shouldn't we use a village bicycle, commonly referred to as a *Roadmaster*, or *manyi gakifuba*, to cycle from Kisoro in the most southwestern tip of Uganda to Kidepo Valley National Park in its most northeastern part? Was that even possible?

Nobody had ever done it, so even though we used the most local of bikes, it was hardly a common thing to do. Yes, it would be tough, but probably not impossible if my cycling buddy, Lawrence, and I agreed to just walk now and again, right? (Right???) If we could pull it off, it would be the greatest adventure of our lives. Enter the nerves...

Only a few alterations were made to the bicycles. They were made tubeless, to reduce the amount of punctures. We also replaced the saddle as well as the rack and a few other things to reduce the weight. We took a minimum amount of baggage with us. The manufacturer's sticker on the frame stating "extra heavy" made sure we were under no illusions – the bicycles would still be hard to handle.

Lawrence knows how to repair bicycles – I do not. Lawrence knows many local languages – I do not. Every day Lawrence wakes up in a good mood – I do not. I relied on Lawrence. He likes ad-



ventures – I do too, and that is how we clicked. And so our adventure began.

Extreme diversity

Uganda has a wide variety of landscapes: jungles, mountains, savannahs, lakes, cities, hills and even arid, desert-like landscapes (with camels!). The Uganda Cycling Trail passes through almost all of them. Starting near the borders of Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Rwanda, we would stay away from main roads as much as possible and would ride the most scenic trails all the way to the border with South Sudan and Kenya.

Uganda's incredible diversity of landscapes is only matched by its cultural diversity. On our journey we passed through at least 12 language areas. What we experienced throughout the country were the warm greetings from locals, their eagerness to grasp what we were doing and the surprise on their faces when we explained that we would cycle all the way to Kidepo on these simple bicycles.

Bicycles in the mist

After a long and wobbly drive, a night bus heading to Congo dropped us off in Kisoro. This town lies in the Kigezi region in the most southwestern tip of Uganda, close to DRC and Rwanda. Kigezi is sometimes called the

Switzerland of Africa because of its spectacular mountain scenery. It attracts a lot of tourists that want to see the rare mountain gorillas in the wild.

Kigezi is also known for two lakes that are arguably the most beautiful in the whole of Uganda: Lake Mutanda and Lake Bunyonyi. The silence, the mist, the Virunga mountains overlooking the lake and knowing that Congo is just around the corner – Lake Mutanda certainly provides the visitor a sense of mystique.

We took it easy on the day before we started, as the first day of cycling would be among the toughest. The 70-something kilometre route from Lake Mutanda to Lake Bunyonyi would consist of a range of steep mountains and sharp corners. As soon as we reached the slightest incline, we realised ours was going to be a long journey. We



“LAWRENCE WAS SHOWING THE LOCAL MECHANICS THAT, YES, THESE ARE THE VERY FIRST TUBELESS VILLAGE BICYCLES IN THE COUNTRY AND THAT, YES, IT REQUIRES A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT WAY OF FIXING A TIRE.”



got off the bikes and just walked...and walked... and walked. Why didn't we choose to use mountain bikes?! Reaching our destination after a full day of walking and a bit of cycling, we were more than happy. Only 1530km to go.

Whereas our first day was tough, days 2 and 3 were perfectly doable. The routes were gorgeous and the dirt roads led us through villages hardly visited by outsiders. Uganda is the most welcoming country I know. The bright smiles and warm greetings proved this daily. Day 4, however, proved challenging once more as we had to traverse the slope near Bugamba by foot. Our bicycles merely functioned as pack animals, carrying our little luggage. Navigating a long descent, my entire body was suffering; dust was in my eyes, the rocks were giving me the roughest African massage I've ever had and my hands pained from all the braking. Lawrence whizzed past me like a mad man. "That was fun!", he said, when we saw each other again on safer ground, "But halfway down, I realised my brakes were completely broken!"

Unexpected encounters

Lake Mburo National Park is one of Uganda's most charming national parks. It may lack big name species such as elephants or lions, but it has plenty of zebras, antelopes and giraffes. Cycling in Lake Mburo is a common activity, so Uganda Wildlife Authority rangers are more than happy to escort cyclists.

Just beyond the park we encountered our first mechanical issues, as Lawrence had a puncture and the sealant in his tube wasn't doing its job. So there we were, at the Total Petrol Station in Lyantonde. Lawrence was showing the local mechanics that, yes, these are the very first tubeless village bicycles in the country and that, yes, it requires a slightly different way of fixing a tire. It was getting late and we were tired, and Lawrence's bike was as stubborn as a donkey. But...it wasn't a problem! In fact, we were having fun. Lawrence and the mechanics did everything they could. In the meantime, I chatted to another customer about why Donny van de Beek wasn't playing well at Manchester United. This customer, like other people we met, was extremely kind. His car had been fixed hours before, but he spent another two hours in our company, just hanging around and being helpful wherever he could. Unlike me.

Matatus & Matatas

Our next few days took us to the tropical Ssese Islands on Lake Victoria, where it was quite sad to see that the jungle is being chopped down to plant palm oil plantations. On the boat to Entebbe, we crossed the equator and reached Uganda's vibrant capital city, Kampala. Kampala's daily "Great Migration" of people on their way to work was a joy to behold, but we realised once more that Uganda's top predator isn't a lion or leopard. The vicious and unruly *matatu* (minibus taxi) is the biggest danger to cyclists.

Our next notable destination was the River Nile in Jinja, sometimes called the adventure capital of East Africa. From here we cycled towards the Kenyan border. Being a typical crowded and dirty border town, Malaba is not an appealing town to many, but to me, Malaba feels like home. I lived here for six months back in 2014 and enjoyed each and every moment of my time there. I hadn't told any of my old friends about our intended visit, so they were surprised to see us.

"Lex?! Where did you get that bicycle? Did you ride it from Tororo?"

"Well, actually..." (The next moments were among the best of the trip, as I had been waiting for weeks to boast about our epic journey to my old friends).

Border reunions behind us, we moved north. The biggest challenges of the journey were ahead of

us. Day 15, the stretch from Mbale to Kapchorwa, was a case in point. From previous occasions, both of us knew that cycling up Mount Elgon on a mountain bike is a serious challenge. However, doing so on a village bicycle (remember the sticker on its frame that reads "extra heavy"?) proved impossible. The day started off with an easy 40km ride from Mbale to Muyembe. *Hakuna matata* ("no worries" in Swahili, a language often used near Kenya's border). The 20km climb to Sipi, however, did pose plenty of "*matata*". When we finally reached our end point in Kapchorwa, we certainly deserved our cold beers.

What goes up, must come down. Just beyond the mountain village of Kapchorwa was a little and dusty dirt road which descends to the plains that border Karamoja. All of a sudden, the landscape changed. Gone were the green colours. The sudden appearance of donkeys and cacti vividly highlighted the drier climate. We were almost entering the last part of our trip.

Crossing over to Kenya

In the imagination of many people in Uganda, Karamoja is a crossover between Timbuktu and the Wild West: it's far and it's dangerous. "We cannot wait for Karamoja to develop," is a popular saying in Uganda, expressed when something is taking too long. However, Karamoja is currently going through a phase of rapid change, and people in Moroto, the region's biggest town, believe that Karamoja can no longer wait for Uganda to develop. In addition, Karamoja is just a cycling





Photography by Theo Vos

distance away from Kampala, as Lawrence and I would say... Nevertheless, it is still by far Uganda's poorest region and climate change is hitting the region hard.

We timed our arrival in Moroto to join the Tour of Karamoja (ToK), an annual multi-day cycling event organised by Kara-Tunga Tours. It's safe to say we were the first competitors to ever do the ToK on a village bike! A group of seven of us cycled through arid, yet beautiful landscapes. The fact that Lawrence and I had already cycled for 18 days meant we were able to keep up with the rest of the group. From Moroto, our route took us east into Kenya's Pokot region to see Turkwel, a stunning man-made lake. On both sides of the border we saw many dromedary camels which reminded us how far we had travelled from the jungles of Western Uganda. If anyone believes Karamoja feels remote, please go to Lake Turkwel – it felt like we were in a different universe. It was on the shores of that very lake that we realised what a great adventure we were on. But the toughest part was still to come...

The Epic Finale

The 133 kilometres to Moroto on a dirt road full of thorns were more than hard and this stretch

proved to be the toughest of the journey so far. When we finally reached Moroto, I suggested just amputating my entire lower body as I didn't believe it to be worth saving anymore. But with a little help from my friends, and a little help from medical science, I was able to continue for the journey's finale.

The remote north of Karamoja is home to the Ik, an ethnic-linguistic group whose language is unrelated to any major language and is spoken by just 10,000 people. Being an anthropologist, I had always wanted to visit the Ik community. Doing so was yet another highlight and it was incredible to see how responsible cultural tourism forms a means to preserve their cultural heritage and provide a source of income. However, reaching the Ik community proved to be the biggest challenge of our entire trip; whichever way you look at it, this day was truly epic.

Thunderstorms and pouring rain made it incredibly hard to cycle. Soaked to the skin, high in the cool mountains, we were shivering to the bone. These were the toughest conditions we had experienced. Just at the point where I thought I couldn't get any wetter or colder, Kara-Tunga's founder Theo and I fell in the water as we had underestimated the depth of what looked to be a puddle. This proved to be the end of my phone,

and the loss of much of our trip's photo material. The rain continued to fall. By the time we reached the Ik community, we had to seek shelter at the local school and put up our tents in a classroom.

The final day started off with more heavy rain. Thankfully, it suddenly cleared when we finally reached Kidepo Valley National Park. Located at the border of South Sudan and Kenya, this is my favourite park in the country. Imagine outstretched plains, spectacular mountain scenery and Africa's biggest herds of buffaloes. We couldn't help but feel as if we reached El Dorado, the Land of Eden, or something similarly iconic. We did it! We were probably the first people to ever cycle from Kisoro to Kidepo. We did so in 23 days of cycling on village bicycles, with five rest days in between, and a final bonus day in Kidepo Valley National Park. We had, as expected, experienced the greatest adventure of our lives.

A Cycling Paradise

One of the key things I noticed about myself while riding our bikes was how easy it was to build stamina. Every day we noticed our energy and muscle power increased. It was a steady transformation from Lex into Legs. The biggest challenge was enduring the saddle pain, not the fatigue. We also found that the bicycles can go fast if you keep the momentum going like a train. Yes, I'm now ready to accept any challenges for a village bicycle race on a bumpy dirt road (as long as it doesn't have a slope!)

Uganda is among one of Africa's safer countries to travel in and is pretty cheap, if you plan it well. This, in combination with its beauty and diversity, makes the country a fantastic destination for organised or independent cycling tours. Whereas most safari tourists visit the west of the country, cycling tourism has potential across Uganda. It's one of the most sustainable forms of tourism and can have economic benefits for the countless small communities you pass along the way.

For those who have never enjoyed Uganda on a bicycle – believe me, it's highly recommended. And in case you're wondering about importing your fancy 100-gear bike for the trip...no, you don't need a fancy bike, a village bicycle will do!

**“AND WE HAD, AS
EXPECTED, EXPERIENCED
THE GREATEST ADVENTURE
OF OUR LIVES.”**

DISCOVER KARAMOJA: UGANDA'S BEST KEPT SECRET



Written by Alexander 'Lex' Bongers
Photo by Eppo Karsijns





Photography by Marcus Westberg

The remote northeastern region of Uganda has long been associated with instability, poverty and conflict. However, responsible tourism helps to create economic opportunities in the region."

STUNNING LANDSCAPES



The region is now safe for anyone to visit . Whereas the region is still poor, it is now safe for anyone to visit. And there are plenty of reasons to do so, as Karamoja has a stunning landscape that is great for trekking, viewing abundant wildlife, and above all, its preserved cultural heritage has a sense of authenticity that is remarkably different from the rest of Uganda.



INHABITED BY VARIOUS ETHNIC GROUPS



Photography by Marcus Westberg

Karamoja is roughly the size of Belgium and is located in the extreme northeast of Uganda.

It is inhabited by various ethnic groups including the Karamojong, the Tepeth, the Ik and the Pokot. They speak a diverse range of languages, some of which, such as the Ik language, are not related to any language outside the region.



Photography by Jesse Griesse

RESPONSIBLE TOURISM



Photography by Marcus Westberg

Karamoja has a troubled past and it is still the poorest region of Uganda. It is also severely affected by climate change.

Responsible tourism is now embraced by several local communities as a source for income-generating activities and employment. In 2022, tourism stakeholders and local communities jointly came up with a Karamoja Travel Manifesto, in which they outline a strategy for developing responsible tourism in the region.



Photography by Marcus Westberg

PIAN UPE WILDLIFE RESERVE



Pian Upe is Uganda's second largest protected area and borders various mountain ranges and water bodies.

This makes it a birding hotspot and a home to endemic wildlife species like the Roan antelope. It is also an archeological site for rock paintings.



The mountains of Karamoja are an exciting alternative to the more strenuous climbs in East Africa.

It has many of the same attractions, but has a milder climate, lower elevation and it requires no special equipment or technical experience. Mountains such as Mt Moroto (3,083m), Mt Kad-am (3,063m), Mt Napak (2,538m) and Mt Morungole (2,749m) are perfect for multi-day hikes and are only visited by a handful of tourists.



Photography by Thomas White

THE MOUNTAINS OF KARAMOJA





WARRIOR

NOMAD TRAIL

Photography by Eppo Karsijns



Photography by Eric Mukalazi

The 550km Warrior Nomad Trail traverses Uganda's Karamoja and Kenya's West-Pokot and Turkana regions in seven unique stages.

It takes you from the southern grasslands of Karamoja, along the East African Rift, and into the award-winning Kidepo Valley National Park. The annual Tour of Karamoja is an annual mountainbike tour along this trail. Its profits are used to support various social initiatives, such as training young locals for a career in the tourism and hospitality industry.

"If you want to truly immerse yourself in the smells, sights and sounds of Africa, I recommend the Tour of Karamoja (ToK), an epic 6-day 550km cycling odyssey along the Warrior Nomad Trail through parts of Uganda and Kenya that very few tourists have ever had the privilege to experience, let alone on a bicycle.

Aside from the exhilaration, inspiration and growth I felt from overcoming the physical and emotional trials along the Warrior Nomad Trail; the amazing friendships and relationships I developed; and the breathtaking landscapes and scenery, the ToK is, in my honest opinion, the single most encompassing experience anyone who loves the outdoors, lives a healthy lifestyle, has a good level of fitness and a desire to challenge themselves to truly experience the peoples, cultures, landscapes and wildlife of Uganda from a totally unique perspective can have!"

- Paul Olweny, cyclist in the Tour of Karamoja in 2022

DANIELE COLLETTA PHOTOGRAPHY
MILANO, ITALY @URIZEN_PH





IN CONVERSATION WITH MOUNTAINEER TIM MACARTNEY-SNAPE

Tim Macartney-Snape is a legendary mountaineer from Australia. In addition to many first ascents, he was the first Australian, along with Greg Mortimer, to summit Mount Everest. He repeated the climb a few years later, this time from sea level; he was the first person in the world to do so. Tim is co-founder of the well-known outdoor brand Sea to Summit and is currently an in-demand keynote speaker and expedition leader for the company, World Expeditions. In 2019 he visited Uganda and climbed several peaks in the Rwenzori Mountains. In the summer of 2021, we spoke with Tim about his time in Uganda, the conservation of Uganda's natural treasures and the rise of adventure travel.



You were born in Tanganyika Territory (present day Tanzania) and grew up there for the first 11 years of your life. What draws you back to East Africa?

I've been very lucky growing up there. Especially in those times Africa was properly wild, with vast open spaces. The draw to Africa is something many people have in general. It's an instinctive attraction to the continent where we as a species originated from. I'd take every opportunity to go back to Africa.

You're most famous for your groundbreaking ascents of Mount Everest. In late 2019 you came to Uganda to climb a number of mountains in the Rwenzori Mountain Range. How do these mountains compare to the Himalayas?

I got sidetracked with mountaineering in the Himalayas, but I do believe that the ultimate adventure experience is to trek in the African bush. Most people come to Africa for its natural beauty, not so much for the cities, and the ultimate way to experience natural Africa is unmotorised. Seeing the natural splendour by bicycle, on foot or from a kayak gives the visitor a much deeper connection with the land. It's something that's food for the soul.

The Rwenzori Mountains are not really comparable with the Himalayas. As a child, I always wanted to go to the Mountains of the Moon (as the Rwenzori Mountains are sometimes referred to). I heard about them when I was in primary school in Arusha. These mountains are truly unique. They just suddenly rise from the Earth's crust and are covered in rainforest. The birdlife is absolutely amazing. It is obvious wildlife has been poached heavily over the past decades, so there's not much left, but it's still an incredible refuge for these animals, perhaps for future re-introduction.

What did you exactly do in the Rwenzoris and could you share your experience on the mountain?

I was leading a group for the Australian company, World Expeditions. It was an incredible

experience, with the high altitude and snow and ice right on the equator. I'm keen to go back and climb some more peaks and routes. One of the challenges is the weather. There's a lot of precipitation. Another challenge is the terrain; I was quite surprised about its ruggedness. It's difficult to move around and my compliments to John Hunwick (owner and founder of Rwenzori Trekking Services) for developing the infrastructure on the Kilembe Trail. Without these trails, boardwalks and huts, a trek here would be very slow going due to all the mud and bog.

As an expedition leader for World Expeditions, do you have any tips for local guides?

I was very impressed with the quality of the guiding. The guides are as good as anywhere...top class, they can match the best in the world. The only thing I would say that might need some improvement is the food. It could be a little better catered to foreign tourists. Another thing is that the trekking companies in the Rwenzoris should invest in a Portable Altitude Chamber. If people experience serious altitude problems, it's hard to evacuate them. Evacuation by helicopter is difficult because of the weather and lack of landing spots. On foot it would take too long to get them down. A Portable Altitude Chamber could save lives.

How important is it that a mountain range like Rwenzori Mountains National Park be protected?

Unfortunately, the African wilderness is eroding with rapid developments all over the continent. Conservation is key to keep the wild places wild.

I recognise that a tourism product such as the Kilembe Trail is a great boost for the local economy, bringing in lots of jobs. It's critical that the local communities have a stake in this form of tourism. Without it you run into all sorts of problems, notably poaching, logging and even security.

Kilimanjaro or Margherita Peak?

With respect for Kilimanjaro as a destination, I think Margherita Peak (Uganda's highest moun-

tain at 5109m) is far more interesting. Kilimanjaro is a little bit like the Everest of Africa. In a way it's kind of boring because it's so popular, especially the standard routes. The approach to Margherita Peak is much more interesting in terms of landscape and it's much harder because of the terrain. The Rwenzori routes are more diverse. And even though the Rwenzori Mountains don't have much wildlife, it's less than an hour driving to reach one of the best wildlife parks in Uganda, Queen Elizabeth National Park.

How could Uganda get out of the shadow of its more famous adventure tourism destinations, Kenya and Tanzania?

Marketing focused on adventure tourism is crucial to get it off the ground. Show what makes Uganda unique compared to the other countries, starting with places like the Rwenzoris.

What makes Uganda different compared to other destinations in Sub-Saharan Africa?

The people in Uganda are genuinely friendly and welcoming. It's really noticeable for an outsider when you travel around the country. It's an important part of the travel experience. It would be great to set up a network of homestays along the tourist trails. In my view this would be the ultimate way to experience the real Uganda.

Do you have any thoughts on how adventure tourism can recover from the COVID-19 pandemic?

Domestic and regional travel really presented itself as an opportunity worldwide and Uganda should tap into that. With the current situation, it's hard to predict when things will start to go back to normal again. That said, the foreign travellers are itching to go out and travel again. Europe is a great market to tap into as there is no real time difference and it's open for travel. And let's not forget about other African countries, especially for unique places like the Rwenzori Mountains. Adventure travel worldwide is definitely growing, you just need to make people aware of what's on offer. Again,

THERE IS NOT MUCH PRIMARY FOREST LEFT, SO THOSE WHO MAKE THE DECISIONS SHOULD ACT NOW.





the key is marketing to attract that audience.

Currently several Ugandan nature reserves are under threat of exploitation for oil and large-scale agriculture. What role could tourism play to avoid the disappearance of these nature reserves?

As in many other places where natural resources are exploited, the threats to these natural reserves are all money-driven. It's short-term and ego-centric thinking. The challenge is to convince decision makers that they should be proud of these natural assets and that they are worth more in the long run when you preserve them. We should convince them that Ugandan nature is part of the national identity. That legacy is something that will last longer as well, keeping industries out for short-term gain. For that to happen you need well-connected people with influence and that's a tricky one. There is not much primary forest left, so those who make the decisions should act now. It's a moral question, really. They need to ask themselves what makes Uganda unique. It's definitely not the number of sugar cane plantations or oil wells they have. Tourism can be the industry for economic prosperity for the long run, provided Uganda's natural assets are preserved.

Are there any other places in Uganda you would like to visit?

I'd love to visit the whole country! I've only visited the western part so far. Perhaps Karamoja for some rock climbing could be very interesting. I'm also curious to see the other national parks.

Any plans to come back?

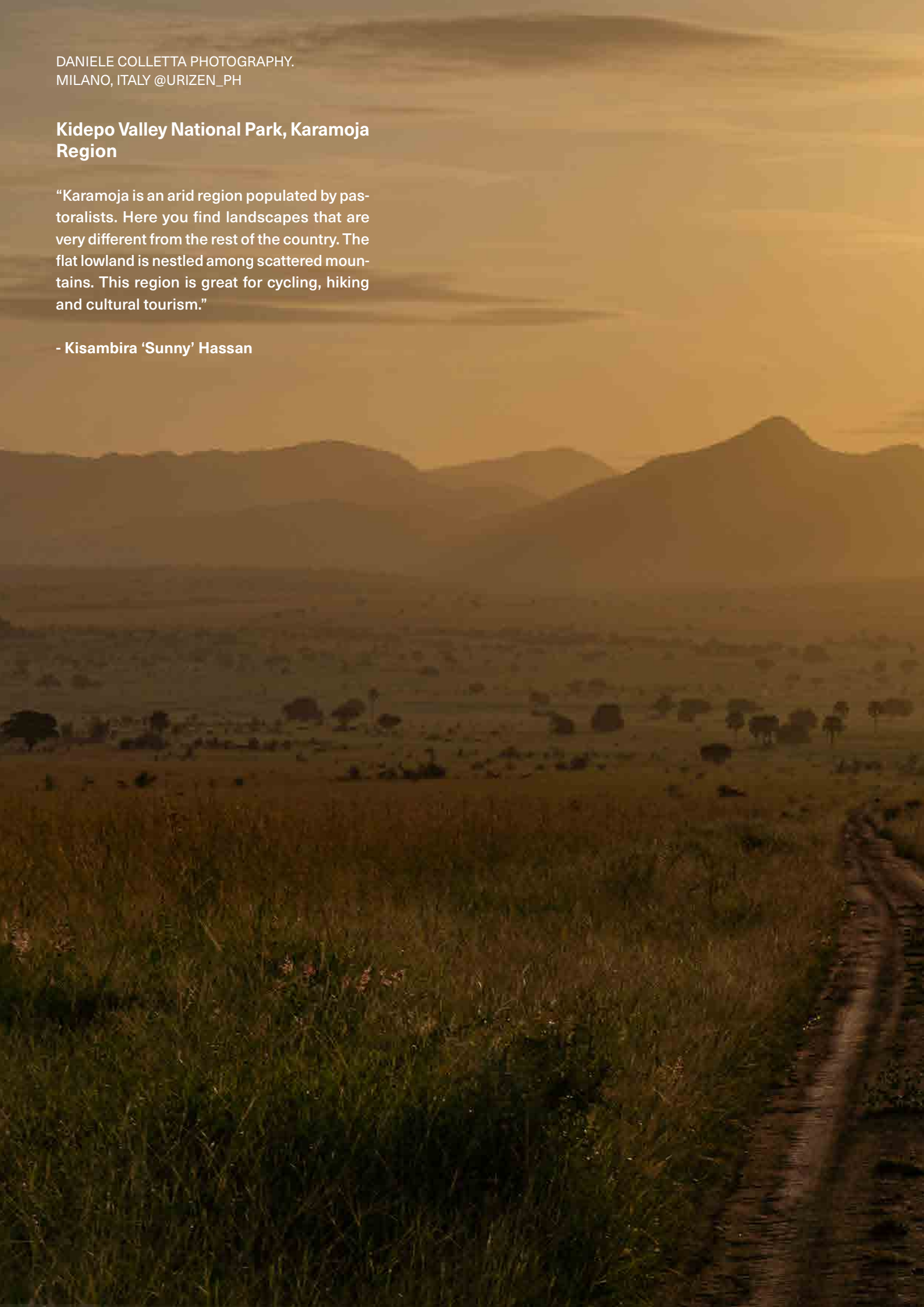
Definitely!

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Kidepo Valley National Park, Karamoja Region

"Karamoja is an arid region populated by pastoralists. Here you find landscapes that are very different from the rest of the country. The flat lowland is nestled among scattered mountains. This region is great for cycling, hiking and cultural tourism."

- Kisambira 'Sunny' Hassan







KINTU TRIAL: THE TOUGHEST RIDE ACROSS THE EQUATOR

Written by Thies Timmermans



Photography by Fatpigeon.cc

I'm standing in the middle of a tea plantation, just outside Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, somewhere in Western Uganda. I'm surrounded by rolling hills, all covered with tea plantations on one side and a thick impassable rainforest on the other side. You can still see a layer of mist hovering between the ancient trees inside the forest. The panoramic view is unearthly and simply breathtaking.

The beautiful shades of green contrast with the dusty, red dirt road where I parked my van just five minutes ago. It's warm and humid, but there is an occasional chilly breeze at this altitude of approximately 2000 metres. I have respect for the tea pickers who seem to move effortlessly on the steep hills, making smooth, swift movements, and picking the young tea leaves off the bushes. It's peaceful and soothing and the only thing I can hear is the wind blowing through the leaves of the bushes.

The checkpoint where I'm standing was strategically chosen for its position right on the top of a hill, roughly halfway through the trial. The only other way to reach it is via an extremely steep, narrow and technical path. I can see the treacherous gravel, pointy rocks and a slippery, muddy

section from where I am standing. It's the route that they are taking, and it's my task to look out for them and check that all is well. I'm working for Red Dirt Uganda, a local cycling tour operator and the logistical partner of the toughest ride across the equator: The Kintu Trial.

Africa's latest cycling challenge

The "they" and "them" I am referring to are the participants who signed up for the The Kintu Trial, Africa's latest cycling challenge. It's a 5-day adventurous mountain bike event where participants ride a total of almost 500 kilometres, with an average of 1800 altimeters per day. The route is put together by local mountain bikers in the months prior to the event and gives a glimpse of the endless cycling potential in Uganda.

Riders start in Fort Portal and cycle 95% on off-road trails to Lake Mutanda, close to the Rwandan border. On their way, they will pass through two national parks (Queen Elizabeth National Park and Bwindi Impenetrable National Park), and cycle along the border of a third one (Rwenzori Mountains National Park). Riding this route is a privilege, as the Uganda Wildlife Authority,

who manages these conservation areas, doesn't grant access for cyclists to ride through these parks easily. Each day is different. The landscape varies from dry savannah plains to gentle green hills with beautiful crater lakes, and from misty tropical rainforests to a rocky mountainous environment. That, combined with the extraordinary and unique wildlife that Uganda is home to, makes this event something that is hard to beat.

Totally exhausting, but unforgettable

The Kintu Trial is a great example of the many cycling events that are popping up like mushrooms in East Africa. The marvellous Tour of Karamoja has been running for a number of years now in the Northeast of Uganda. In Rwanda, you can find the Rwanda Epic, Race Around Rwanda, and Gravel Gorilla. Kenya has its Migration Gravel Race and the long-existing 10to4 and the Rift Valley Odyssey. In Tanzania, the latest cycling event is the Evolution Gravel Race. The fact that all of these events sell out quickly shows that cycling adventures in East Africa are in high demand.

Seasoned cyclist, Tom Dumortier, who joined last year's edition of the Kintu Trial explained that, "It was brilliant, but bloody tough. You have to be physically very well prepared to do this. At one point I saw one of my friends collapse just when we reached a checkpoint. He was absolutely exhausted. That shows exactly how difficult this trial is and that you really have to train hard for it. Yes, it was a true challenge to ride a mountain bike in such a setting as Uganda, but the incredibly beautiful nature, a good bed and having fun with friends in the evening by the campfire makes up for a lot. This adventure was one to never forget."

Uganda is located on the equator and therefore it's often warm with a high humidity. Combine this with the different altitudes for five consecutive days and you've got yourself an epic ride. "Every day you find yourself in a totally new environment and you experience something new. One Sunday we heard people singing in the local church and just moments after we found a street party. Everything is possible in Uganda and that makes it fun", Dumortier adds.

"What I've learned is that the Kintu Trial isn't just a challenge. There's complete exhaustion, feeling down at times and taking risks. The great thing is that there is no age limit. It's all about

how you prepare yourself for it and how you deal with it, both physically and mentally," Dumortier explains.

Near divine creatures

Meanwhile, I'm still standing on the top of the hill. After 30 minutes, the first riders are coming in. They look fit and tell me that the ride is a bit more challenging than they had anticipated. They say it is beautiful, but demanding. I know that this is a huge understatement although these riders would never admit that. After a quick water refill and eating some energy bars, the group is back on the road. Just before they leave, they tell me that two Ugandan young guns are riding ahead of them. They are so fast, I just missed them. When I check my emergency GPS tracking system, I can confirm that they are moving at an incredible speed. No need to call in the rescue party.

That doesn't apply to the next cyclist who is coming in. He is covered in red dust. His cycling top contains some holes that are not supposed to be there. During a fast downhill section a couple of kilometres earlier, he had a nasty crash, leaving him with a bloody knee and elbow. He is still a bit shaken. "Shall I make some space in the vehicle so we can drive to the endpoint?", I ask him. He looks at me with a big smile, puts on some bandages from our first aid kit and jumps back in the saddle saying, "Why on Earth would I do that? I am just starting to have some fun!"

Background Story

According to local legends of the Buganda Tribe, Kintu was the very first man to walk the vast plains of Uganda. His humanity was tested by the God of the sky, Ggulu, for whom he had to undergo five consecutive trials. Each test was even more challenging and difficult than the last, just like each stage of the Kintu Trial. Ultimately, Kintu managed to accomplish every challenge with the help of an unknown, almost godly power. And that's exactly how I view all participants of the Kintu Trial: they must be near divine creatures if they manage to complete the toughest ride across the equator.





**“EVERY DAY YOU
FIND YOURSELF
IN A TOTALLY
NEW ENVIRON-
MENT AND YOU
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SOMETHING
NEW.”**



Rwenzori Mountains

"The Rwenzori Mountains are the only snow-capped mountains on the equator. Many mountaineers consider the scenery among the most beautiful they have ever seen. Next to the mountains are Queen Elizabeth National Park, which is Uganda's most famous safari park, and the crater lakes region, which is a region dotted with small volcanic lakes. This area is great for cycling and hiking. Nearby Kibale Forest is Uganda's biggest jungle and is especially famous for its variety in primates including chimpanzees."

- Kisambira 'Sunny' Hassan



MUD, SWEAT AND TEARS: TREKKING IN THE RWENZORI MOUNTAINS

Trekking in wellies? I had to chuckle a little when I was given kit advice for a trek in the Rwenzori Mountains, often referred to as the Mountains of the Moon. But then again, the Norwegians hike their boggy fells in rubber boots. And I learned that Rwenzori means “rain maker”, so I should probably take this advice seriously.

I have trekked on many different types of terrain and in many climates on this planet. This is my first time doing a high-altitude trekking expedition right on the equator. I'm in the lush mountain village of Kilembe in Western Uganda. It's pretty much the exact centre of the African continent and the main trailhead for the muddy jungle trails into Africa's tallest mountain range. The plan is to climb its highest point, Margherita Peak. This summit is part of the Mount Stanley massif, named after British ex-

plorer Henry Morton Stanley, who was the first non-African to confirm the existence of these snow-capped mountains in the heart of Africa. Margherita Peak measures 5109m above sea level, making it Africa's fourth highest peak.

The boundary of the Rwenzori Mountains, a UNESCO-listed national park, is shockingly clear. Agricultural land is abruptly replaced by dense primary forest. I enter an entirely different world where the sounds of cultivation – dogs barking, a chain saw, and people shouting commands – are exchanged for ambient jungle sounds – insects buzzing, birds singing, and monkeys grunting.

I'm trekking with my sister, Anita, who's an outdoor education teacher. Over the years, she has become one of my best adventure buddies. Normally, we adventure out independently, but in this case we are obliged to settle for a “package”.

Written by Jan Bakker
Photography by Jan Bakker



“BAD TRAIL SECTIONS ARE HAPHAZARDLY COVERED WITH BOARDS AND LARGE TREE BRANCHES. SLIPPING OR LOSING YOUR BALANCE HERE IS NOT AN OPTION.”

We are doing the Kilembe Trail, which is managed by Rwenzori Trekking Services, and access to this trail is only possible through them. They have blazed the trail through thick vegetation and established several shelters and simple huts in strategic locations. We're a bit embarrassed by the number of porters that accompany us on this expedition; I believe there are 10 of them all together. But it's good to remember that our trip provides them with a badly needed income. After a brief visit to the office of the Uganda Wildlife Authority, we set off on a well-worn path with nearly 4km of vertical gain ahead of us.

We quickly reach the Sine hut at an altitude of around 2600m. It's been easy cruising so far, but it looks like from here we are going to exchange our walking boots for the ridiculed wellies. The mud fest has started. Bernard, our local guide, explains that the rainy season has lasted longer than usual. Most of the trails have not dried or drained the excess rain water yet.

Bad trail sections are haphazardly covered with boards and large tree branches. Slipping or losing your balance here is not an option.

The path steepens and our final approach to the Kalalama Camp involves scrambling on tree roots to avoid sliding back down. Anita and I marvel at the immaculate Kalalama hut. It's neatly painted in bright yellow and lime and looks brand new. Our crew provides us with a brilliant, hearty meal and we hit the sack straight afterwards.

It's an early departure as we continue on the steep spur through the dense forest. This area on the mountain is the Heather Rapanea Zone. It's a mystical place. The valley is filled with lichen-covered Giant Heather looking like Gandalf in Lord of the Rings. Huge limestone cliffs on both sides disappear into the clouds. The path is not the kind where you can look around you and admire the surroundings while walking. Every step requires concentration; a misstep and you'll either be soaked or covered in mud. It's energy draining and possibly the most challenging trekking I've done in my life. We manage to stay dry and arrive at Mutinda Camp at an altitude of 3582m. Three different huts are connected with boardwalks as the camp is built on a pool of mud. Both Anita and I are avid campers, but we're glad this is a hut-to-hut trek. A thunderstorm rolls in and we tuck ourselves into our sleeping bags, listening to the roaring sound of the rain on the tin roof.

In the next two days we aim to reach the first base camp for a climb up the 4843-metre-high Mount Baker. The landscape opens and we cross large sections of swamp with Giant Lobelia poking out. Bringing wellington boots is probably the best trekking advice I've ever had! And they are surprisingly comfortable. Not a single blister yet, despite the uneven terrain and long walking days. We spend a cold night at Bugata Camp, our first night above 4000m. The basic huts are perched on a windy ledge with potentially magnificent views, weather permitting. Unfortunately, we are not that lucky. The following day is a relatively short walk and via the 4450-metre-high Bamwanjara Pass, we roll into Hunwick's Camp. It's an alien, yet amazing, location with views of the spiky summits of Mount Stanley and Mount Baker.



MULTIPLE TIMES WE CROSS THE RIVER THAT IS GRADUALLY BECOMING A RAGING TORRENT THE FURTHER DOWN WE GO.

The day of the Mount Baker climb is a dreary one. The entire mountain is shrouded in clouds and we set out in a drizzle. From our camp a day earlier the ridgeline looked complex, like a dragon's spine.

At the bottom of the first scramble, we look up at the wet, smooth rock, covered in moss. On top of that we find out that the flanks of Mount Baker are a proper labyrinth of small gullies, cliffs and gnarled rock. There is no obvious route. Bernard brought a rope and we're happy to use it to get past some dicey sections. Closer to the summit, fixed (but pretty worn) ropes provide some protection. Four hours after leaving Hunwick's Camp, we reach the summit of this immense pile of rubble. Margherita Peak should be located straight across, but there is zero visibility. The descent is extremely challenging, both physically and mentally. I can't recall a climb where going down takes as much time as going up. This must be one of the toughest mountains I've done in my climbing career.

The next stop is Margherita Camp, a spectacular location in the shadow of the cathedral-like towers of Mount Stanley. This is the original camp from where the Duke of Abruzzi made the first ascent of the mountain. We intend to follow his footsteps to Margherita Peak, crossing two of



its glaciers and finishing off with a scramble to the top. An early start is necessary as the snow softens during the day and bad weather rolls in most afternoons. The alarm clock rudely wakes us up at 3am. After trying to fuel our bodies with some porridge, it's game on. Anita and I feel strong and our quick pace takes us to the first glacier where we strap on the crampons. It's an easy traverse and we move on to the main glacier. The snout is a steep climb on blue ice. I realise I should have sharpened the front points of my crampons as I struggle kicking them into the ice.

When we step on the top of the ice field we hear a dull *voomp* sound, as if the glacier has collapsed a few centimetres. It might not be far from the truth. The Margherita Glacier has lost most of its ice cover in the past five decades and it continues to recede, causing its instability. With squeezed buttocks we continue to ascend, while behind us the sun rises over the rainforest. It's a surreal thought to walk on a glacier at 0 degree latitude. The tower on our left is Alexandra Peak (5091m) and we traverse to the final scramble of its twin sister, Margherita Peak. It's still sunny, but from the Congolese side we see thick clouds creeping up the slopes. After taking the summit pictures, we move down rapidly. Our small rope party swiftly negotiates the rock and ice, back to

the safety of Margherita Camp and further down to the thicker air of Hunwick's Camp.

It's still a long way down back to Kilembe, although we don't backtrack our steps. From Hunwick's Camp, a heavily eroded trail zigzags up Oliver's Pass, a rather unwelcome 500m climb after summit day on Margherita Peak. Makeshift ladders allow us to overcome some vertical sections. From the pass, it's a slippery descent to Kiharo Camp following the Nyanwambo River. The muddy approach was technically challenging, but descending this type of terrain on wellies is simply extreme. Multiple times we cross the river that is gradually becoming a raging torrent the further down we go. The discomfort is worth it. The misty valley is hauntingly beautiful with low-level clouds whirling around the limestone pillars. We reach our camp back in the Heather Rapanea Zone and spend the rest of the afternoon at the roaring campfire with the unsung heroes of this trek, the porters.

The final stretch to Kilembe is a whopping 2000m drop in elevation. After an 8-hour, knee battering descent we walk into the village, in search of a fridge with well-deserved cold beers.



DANIELE COLLETTA PHOTOGRAPHY
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The Kigezi region, Southwest Uganda

"The Kigezi region in the mountainous southwest of the country hosts plenty of beautiful lakes, including Lake Bunyonyi, the world's fifth deepest lake, and Lake Mutanda. You will have beautiful views of the volcanoes nearby, called the Virungas. These are located at the border with Rwanda and DR Congo. Three of them can be climbed from the Ugandan side: Sabyinyo, Gahinga and Muhabura. They make up excellent day trips of varying degrees of difficulty."

- Kisambira 'Sunny' Hassan



1

TREKKING RWENZORI

The Rwenzori Mountains has two main trekking routes. The 5-day Kilembe Trail is operated by Rwenzori Trekking Services and the 6-day Central Circuit is operated by Rwenzori Mountaineering Services. Both routes offer d-tours to the many spectacular peaks including Uganda's highest mountain Margherita Peak (5109m). Shorter treks are possible as well.

<https://rwenzoritrekking.com/>

<https://www.rwenzorimountaineeringservices.com/>

2

KINTU TRIAL

The Kintu Trial is a 5-day stage race traversing the western edge of Uganda. It's a tough challenge, cycling 475km on unpaved roads and single-track trails with more than 9000 metres of vertical gain. The route crosses several national parks, each with their own unique landscape and wildlife. The race supports young, talented local riders, using this event as a test for their abilities.

www.kintutrial.com

3

MABAMBA BAY

The boat landing at Ziba is the jump off point for adventures in the wetlands. You can reach it by car from Kampala and Entebbe. Alternatively, you can take a boat from Entebbe (Nakiwogo) to the Ziba boat landing and bring your bike(s). From Ziba you can hop on a boat to Busi Island, Zinga Island and onwards to the mainland. The islands have a great network of small dirt roads and are almost traffic free.

<http://nkimaforestlodge.com/the-mabamba-wetlands>



UGANDA CYCLING TRAIL

The Uganda Cycling is a newly launched, open-source cycling route that crosses the entire country. The 1580km trail, developed by Red Dirt Uganda, starts in the southwest and crosses pristine forests, savannah plains and rural villages to end in Kidepo Valley National Park in the far north east. While 85% is unpaved, it's easy to find accommodation along the way. Do bring a decent set of tires and a good repair kit as cycling spares and tools are hard to find outside of the capital Kampala.

<https://www.ugandacyclingtrail.com/>

<https://reddirtuganda.com/>



TOUR OF KARAMOJA

The Tour of Karamoja is a bi-annual cycling event that cruises through the heart of the Karamoja region in Eastern Uganda. Kara-Tunga Arts and Tours are the organisers behind this unique event.

<https://www.kara-tunga.com/tour-of-karamoja/>

TREKKING ELGON

There are several routes that wind their way up this massive volcano including the 4321m high Wagagai summit. Here you'll peer into one of the biggest calderas in the world. Hikes through the fairytale landscapes of Elgon are organised by Elgon Trek. If a cultural experience is more your thing you can trek along the edges of the national park through the fields and villages of the rarely visited Kween District. Home of Friends can hook you up with a local guide.

<https://www.elgontrek.com/>

<https://www.homeoffriends.com/>

A FINAL THOUGHT

What footprint do you leave behind?

Uganda has many adventurous trails to follow, and no matter the number of steps we take, the only footprint we should leave behind is that of our bare feet or hiking boots. As you leave the comfort of your home to embark upon a foreign adventure, you will inevitably leave a mark on the places you explore and the people you meet. And if there's one type of travel that makes this mark a positive one, it's adventure tourism.

The first mark to be made is within culture. Adventure tourism is not about hopping between luxury safari lodges before returning home. While adventure travelling, you meet people all along the road, and when you foster an equal cultural exchange, you create an opportunity for both parties to learn from one another, colour each other's lives and widen horizons. Adventure tourism is all about sharing experiences and creating memories together.

The second is the impact of your spending. When travelling, where do you want your money to flow? If you choose to skip big, commercial lodges at tourist hotspots, and go off the beaten path instead, you will not only gain a more authentic experience, but you will also support micro-economies by spending

your travel budget in local shops and family-owned guesthouses.

The third is travelling ethically. We all know the West's history across the African continent and the privileges it brings white and Western travellers today. At the core of adventure tourism is a genuine curiosity and respect towards our hosts. When on the road, stay aware, and only do things you'd appreciate from travellers exploring your own home. Only take pictures of people, especially minors, when given permission. And make sure that whatever content you create shows the beauty and diversity of the country you're roaming, and defies harmful stereotypes rather than perpetuates them. And lastly, always be kind to nature. Adventure tourism is about immersing yourself in your surroundings. What better way to do that than travelling by bicycle, kayak, or by foot...when we are aware of every bump in the road, every tree that provides much-needed shade, and the orchestra of crickets at dusk and birds at dawn.




"Take only memories and leave only footprints", is what they say. What footprint do you leave behind on your adventure?

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