



# I am Uganda ...

BY JERRY BIRD



I am Uganda, a land that's painted in 1,001 shades of green; a friendly land whose balmy temperatures are matched only by the warmth and hospitality of its people. While I straddle the equator, thanks to an average altitude of 4,000 ft. above sea level, instead of blistering days and hot steamy nights, you'll enjoy an amazingly mild and pleasant climate all year round. I am one of only three countries in the world that is located on the equator and has a high altitude. One can enjoy my endless activities without wearing a jacket or sweater, even in the mid December.

## Lake Victoria and the Nile

My borders are shared with Sudan on the north, Congo on the west, Tanzania and Rwanda on the south and Kenya on the east. To the south is Lake Victoria, world's second largest fresh water lake. It's waters teem with fish; its shoreline and islands are a paradise of wildlife, with an abundance of boating, water sports and cruise possibilities. This immense waterway is the major source of the Nile, world's longest river. From Uganda, the Nile flows north via Sudan and Egypt to the Mediterranean Sea.

## Historical Roots

My history as a tourism destination goes back over a century, being one of the first popular destinations on the African continent. Speaking of my diverse people and varied cultures, who else could have performed such a miracle in the past decade. Through their faith, dedication and perseverance, I have become an example of progress, and a showcase for all of

Africa. What do today's visitors' have to say about me? According to Muguette Goufrani, of Vancouver, who made a return visit after several decades, "So many highlights marked our month long stay in Uganda, one hardly knows where to begin. The Kampala portion had its own high spots, such as our flight by army helicopter to President Museveni's ranch followed by dinner at the State House. During the flight, the decisions was made to stage future ATA events in Uganda, including an International Congress. Fortunately, our Executive Director Mira Berman was on board to confirm the decision. Some say that President Museveni knows every one of his several hundred Ankole long-horned cattle by name. I wouldn't doubt it for a minute.

## ATA Uganda Chapter Born

At the Skol 10th Anniversary gala, we shared a table with the newly formed ATA Uganda Chapter and met many of the country's active and growing travel-tourism fraternity. The event was held in a huge tent on the lush grounds of the

Nile Hotel, now known as the Serena Kampala. This quality hotel and conference center was headquarters for the ATA 8th Cultural and Ecotourism Symposium, one of the most rewarding events hosted by ATA in recent years. Host Country Day included a visit to Jinja, the falls, forest and source of the Nile.

## Getting to Uganda

Many friends asked about the long haul from Western Canada's Pacific shores? Our flight via American Airlines and SN Brussels Airlines says a lot for their new alliance, which allows access to the heart of Africa from over 30 U.S. locations alone. We boarded at Vancouver International Airport (YVR) on Canada's Pacific Coast and had one of the most perfect, seamless trips ever, even though we touched down in Dallas and Chicago en route to Brussels. U.S. customs was cleared in Vancouver, and our luggage was checked through all the way to Entebbe, a further convenience, especially when we were carrying a precious supply of Africa Travel magazines just off the press." *Continued on page 14.*

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**ON SAFARI WITH A SMILE**

## Good Vibrations in Uganda

By David Cogswell

I knew almost nothing about Uganda before I attended the ATA's Cultural and Ecotourism Symposium in October 2004. In a short time I was to fall in love with it. For me the experience of Uganda is joined with the experience of the symposium, with the glowing energy of the hope and purpose shared by its participants. That was how I experienced Uganda.

**Coming Down to Earth:** We arrived at the Entebbe airport at night and were met at the airport by ATA's Uganda Chapter President Susan Muhwezi, and a group of about the friendliest people I could remember ever meeting. For an American, there is something about the encounter with Africa that cannot be fully communicated unless both sides of the conversation share that experience. The ATA is made up of people who do share that experience, and who also share the belief that the world would be a better place if more people traveled to Africa. I share that conviction. The whole thing is embodied in that first mind-altering encounter with the African culture, and the African land. It was not my first encounter with sub-Saharan Africa, but it was the first of its kind for me. I had been on Safari in Kenya, and it was magnificent. But I had had an unquenched thirst for coming in from the bush and the tourist lodges to meet and mingle with the people in the cities and villages of modern Africa. This trip there was no safari; it was not a tourist trip. On paper it was a business trip, but really it was a people trip.

### **The Land and the People**

As much as I hold the great wildlife of Africa in reverence, for me the greatest attraction of Africa is the people. Of course there is no real separation of the two. The fact that the people of Africa have learned to live in harmony with their extraordinary wildlife is at the core of what makes them such superb people. Such is the power of the land that within moments of encountering Africa, you are at home, and practically forget what life was like before you got there. Scientists say that all human life has its root in Africa. "To me it feels like there is a deep genetic memory that resonates when you fall under the spell of the land."



*ATA visits Museveni ranch: From left, Kelley McTavish-Mugar, Vice President ATA Uganda Chapter; Mira Berman, ATA Executive Director; President Museveni; Muguette Goufrani and Jerry Bird, Africa Travel Magazine. Ankole cattle in background.*

**Musical Magnetism:** The affinity between Africa and America has always been powerful. Growing up in America I experienced a great deal of African culture through the medium of the American cultural melting pot. I have long shared Bohemian composer Antonin Dvorak's opinion that the African component of America's music is the most vital part of it. So as an American interested in music, it is impossible not to feel a connection with Africa, even without ever going there. To hear African music at its source is a priceless experience. It was a great pleasure to be able to walk into a restaurant and hear an ensemble playing traditional indigenous music, a complex polyrhythmical cacophony, with both looseness and precision, everything going every which way at the same time and all perfectly in synch and in tune.

**Home Away From Home:** We took a half-hour trip from the airport by van to the Nile Hotel in Kampala. After many hours in transit it was a night for sleep. The next morning I woke up and looked out off my balcony to get my first look at the land in the daylight. God, what a Garden of Eden it was! The earth was deep red with a rich growth of plants, towering trees of many varieties, many colors and shapes of flowers, rich green grasses and vegetation. The air was thick with the smell of life. One of my first pleasant surprises was maribu storks that I could see in the

treetops out my window. I had never heard of them, but in Kampala they are a second population that shares the city with the human population. These birds are magnificent -- with huge wings that pump the air audibly as they fly overhead. They pose proudly atop the highest perches in the city, trees, high streetlamps, steeples and tall buildings. They are everywhere, living in marvelous symbiosis with people, as they clean up the garbage in the town -- and eat it.

If you see one on the ground taking inventory of a garbage receptacle you'll see that they are as big as small humans. In the morning a great many of them perched in the trees out my window and they woke up in the morning the same time as me, and preened their feathers, then slowly unfolded and stretched their wings and prepared for their first morning flight.

(Continued on next page.)



Above photo: Susan Muhwezi, Special Assistant to President Musevanie's AGOA office in Kampala, first President of Africa Travel Association's Uganda Chapter, of which the country's First Lady is patron. *For membership in any ATA chapter or to launch a chapter in your area, e-mail [africatavelasso@aol.com](mailto:africatavelasso@aol.com)*

**Touring Kampala:** After getting registered for the conference, the ATA group was treated to a tour of Uganda's capital city by Kelley MacTavish-Mungar the operator of Pearl of Africa Tours. Kelley is a former Texan who went to Uganda originally as a dentist with her dentist father, and then became a tour operator. Now she is married to a Ugandan and raising Ugandan children. She was a great guide for a group of Americans because as an American herself she knew just the kinds of things we would want to learn about. Before we began our tour, she began her narrative by sharing a few insights into the people of Uganda. "Ugandans are quiet," she said. "They may seem a little reserved, it's not because they don't like you, but during the war, if you attracted too much attention you may get shot. So they're a little reserved, but if you talk to them they will really shine."

As I became acquainted with the people of Uganda, I remembered what Kelley said. At times I tried to fathom in my imagination what they must have experienced in those terrible years, those memories and scars that had become imprinted on the culture. It was a quality I thought I could feel in their presence, but could not name or pinpoint. What was not hidden was the great spiritual depth of the Ugandan people, the warmth, the generosity, the sensitivity. They were extremely kind to me, to other visitors and to each other. I was struck by how supportive they were to each other, as if they were all extended family.

For an American it was almost shocking. I found myself staring in wide-eyed wonder, trying to take it in and figure out what it was that the Ugandans had that we seem to have lost. They have a sense of immediacy, of being fully present in the moment that Americans seem to have left behind somewhere along the way, perhaps from being too comfortable, or watching too much TV.

"It was only 25 years ago, Uganda endured the devastating reign of Idi Amin, when thousands of people were killed merely as bystanders to a drive for power. In times of such overwhelming violence and death, I have heard, life takes on a luminescence, from the heightened awareness of the preciousness and fragility of life. In Uganda I felt that light shine on me for a while, and I was changed by it." And that brings us to President Museveni.

**A Hero for Our Time:** I'm not one to get carried away with the kinds of emotions political leaders are supposed to engender, but the experience of seeing President Yoweri Museveni speak at the opening lunch, and actually getting to shake his hand was a highlight of a week full of peak experiences. Museveni was the man who led an armed struggle from 1981 to 1986 that ultimately forced out the reigning military dictator Tito Okello, and subsequently transformed the beleaguered country into a thriving democratic republic. Ever since Uganda gained its independence from Britain in the early 1960s, it had been through one hell after another. Idi Amin, who had seized power in a 1969 coup, killed over 300,000 civilians just to maintain his iron grip. Amin had no clue how to govern a country, so while his soldiers massacred wildlife for meat or ivory and the economy collapsed into chaos, he launched a war of distraction against Tanzania. In retaliation, Tanzania unleashed its own wave of destruction on Uganda. The people, the wildlife and the landscape suffered each assault and the country lay in devastation.

After Museveni took over, Uganda reduced the poverty rate



*"Mountains of the Moon," an article on Hiking in the Rwenzori Mountains by Cam McLeay of Adrift Adventure Co., Kampala, Uganda. Featured in our Jubilee Yearbook in November.*

**I am Uganda** (continued from page 12)

We entered Lake Mburo National Park through the 'Nshara Gate' and arrived at Mantana tented camp, which was our destination for the first two days. Joining us for a candlelight dinner under the stars, were two pleasant couples; one from England, the other on leave from the French embassy in Kampala. This compatibility was a positive omen of things to come. A key part of the travel or safari experience in Africa is in the quality of people you meet at places such as Mantana Camp. Some become lifelong friendships. I often marvel at a certain bush camp's ability to serve gourmet meals in the wide open spaces, and Julius, head chef at Mantana Camp, was a standout. According to the tour itinerary, Lake Mburo and the five lakes, which together with surroundings wetlands, account for 20 percent of the park's surface. Herds of zebra, Cape buffalo, eland, oribi and topi are easily approached, and bird watchers will find more than 250 species here. *More on [www.africa-ata.org/ji\\_a\\_uganda/jt](http://www.africa-ata.org/ji_a_uganda/jt)*





## Adrift on the White Nile

by Cam McLeay

Downstream, the river raced swiftly out of sight, and another huge rapid thundered a warning to our vulnerable rafts. Wisps of spray sparkled with the colors of the rainbow, where the river disappeared, and a menacing crocodile charged our rafts from the far bank. Sanctuary was a small eddy on the south bank of the river, where hippos jumped on top of each other, wary of the strange intruders. I shivered at the idea of running a rapid we had never seen, nor didn't fancy the idea of facing a crocodile longer than our raft, and so opted to upset the hippos. A large bull rose out of the water, opened his huge mouth in warning, then crashed into the pool and disappeared. Seconds later, I pulled hard on the oars and spun the heavily laden raft into the eddy hoping he would not surface beneath me. We hit the bank, tied off the raft and watched the croc hold his ground behind a little rock island midstream. No-one had ever rafted these rapids before. More than four thousand miles in length, the mighty Nile is the longest river on earth. The great waterway has played a monumental role in history. It traverses an incredible variety of landscapes, a colorful medley of cultures and since the beginning of time has enthralled civilizations with its power and mystery. Ancient Egyptian kings sent armies in search of the source of the great river and explorers from Herodotus to Speke have sought to chart its course. Until very recently no one dared challenge the White Nile at its source - some of the most powerful and sustained rapids on earth. Adrift made an historic first descent of the Victoria Nile (the first section of the White

Nile) in July 1996. BBC news featured this incredible 10-day descent at prime time viewing. Both the Royal Geographic Society and the National Geographic Society have recognized this as one of the most challenging river descents ever. The 80 km section of river between Karuma Falls and Murchison Falls in the Murchison Falls National Park is the steepest section of the entire Nile and provided the biggest challenges. The Adrift team was charged eight times by large crocodiles, drifted through pools holding hundreds of hippos and were watched over on one portage by a pride of lions. In over 20 years of rafting worldwide, for the Adrift guides, this river is the ultimate challenge.

However, today Adrift have diversified into much 'softer' options to cater for the wide range of tourists the country now attracts. The company cater for rafters from ages 2-72 years and there is certainly no prerequisite regarding swimming. On average, several dozen non-swimmers raft the river every month and the wonderful thing about the Nile in Uganda is that it can meet the a variety of needs, desires and expectations. For those who want to challenge some of the biggest rapids on the planet then towering waves rise to meet the highest expectations. For 72-year old grandfathers who want to share the experience with their grandchildren then the Nile in Uganda offers a wonderful experience. There are no hippos and very few crocodiles in this section of river so swimming in the calm pools between the rapids is safe. Young children delight in leaping from the rafts to ride on safety kayaks who accompany every trip down the river, they marvel at the fish lying in the bottom of the dugout canoes the fishermen use and watch eagerly as troops of red-tailed monkeys fly through the trees alongside the river. For the older children, the surf waves at Nile Special and Malalu provide huge excitement. Using boogie boards and fins the expert guides from Adrift instruct the children in the use of the foam boards to ride the waves. Incredibly these boards race down the face of waves and give the ride a thrill that brings a smile

to both the kids and anyone who can see how much fun they are having. The waves behave much the same as an ocean wave and break every day of the year in much the same way. This is part of the reason the Nile is unique among rivers throughout the world. Lake Victoria and the dam at Owen Falls mean that the river level of the Nile remains relatively constant year-round so regardless of the time of the year, the Nile offers the ride of one's life.

Perhaps most importantly, the Adrift presence in Uganda has created employment in an area where there was relatively little before. Over forty families from villages in the area are supported directly from a wage from the company. The volume of tourist traffic in the area has grown substantially and looks set to expand with the attraction of Uganda as a tourist destination. The Adrift presence in the area is attracting other investors and the goal of the company now is to increase the visitor nights to the area or increase the amount of time visitors spend in Kayunga District. In no small part this is only possible with the support and cooperation of the local community. Adrift recognizes that the future of tourism in Uganda and in Kayunga in particular is dependent on the the continued partnership between the company and the communities with which it comes into contact.

Neither Adrift or Uganda as a whole have to market Uganda as probably the most exciting destination in Africa. Those who come here marvel at the friendliness of the people, the beaming smiles and the warmth of the reception. Despite the reputation of the country and the tyranny of the past, today a visitor can expect one of the warmest receptions they could find anywhere in the world. Couple this with a diverse range of exciting activities and a wonderful climate and you have a country that should be at the top of your 'to visit' list. Cam McLeay, Adrift Adventure Co., Kampala, Uganda Website: [www.surftthesource.com](http://www.surftthesource.com)

Photo of hiking in the Rwenzori Mountains, courtesy of Cam McLeay, Adrift Adventure Co, Kampala, Uganda. Read "Mountains of the Moon on the ATA Website - [www.africa-ata.org/ug\\_mountains.htm](http://www.africa-ata.org/ug_mountains.htm)

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