Journey to Uganda
Not your usual first tour

By Eric Mathurin

As I put my bike together I was startled by an explosive bang right behind me, like a gunshot. I remember thinking to myself, “I don’t want to know what that was.”

This was, after all, Uganda: a place best remembered by foreigners for the murderous dictators Idi Amin and Milton Obote, mass graves and hostage takings. The sound of laughter behind me, however, made me turn away from my task. David Mozer — our trip leader and founder of Bicycle Africa — was holding up a blown tire to the crowd of onlookers that had gathered to watch us assemble our bicycles in the dry heat outside of Entebbe’s airport.

Uganda, home to more than 22 million people, sits upon the northern waters of Lake Victoria, Africa’s largest lake. While neighbouring Tanzania and Kenya draw in far more tourists per year, Uganda has earned a reputation of having the most friendly, open people in East Africa. Even so, my motive for coming to Uganda was simple: If I was going to travel to an equatorial country, I wanted it to be during the dreaded Canadian winter. And according to the Bicycle Africa schedule, that meant Uganda.

As Christine (a bicycle mechanic from Portland), David and I prepared to meet the others at our nearby hotel, David warned us of the traffic we might encounter during the next 12 days. “Ugandans,” he told us, “are quiet, gentle people … but when they get behind the wheel of a car they check their brains at the door.”

With his words echoing in my ears I followed, both nervous and excited, toward our hotel, where we would meet the others.
compromise—a language that everyone approaches, waving and calling out, "Hi, how are you?" Why people fight when they can be doing something else, I wondered. One can be more at ease with his surroundings, less afraid, if he has spent his childhood in a small, confines of the bus we hurled past the scenery and people. Now, face-to-face, I felt buoyed by their enthusiasm and smiled and waved back as I responded to their inquiries with, "Fine! How are you?" I also couldn't help but notice as we passed that the locals seemed to find the sight of a bunch of white people ("Mausquets") on bikes particularly funny. Even the goats seemed to be amused by us.

The winding dirt road took us by spec- tacular views of the mountains in the dis- tance—magnificent vistas that would be with us for almost the entire trip. We cycled up a hill and into the orphanage where we met, Patrick, a 17-year-old orphan who had spent his last 10 years in the orphanage. He showed us around the orphanage, home to about 60 children. We soon discovered the orphanage to be a small community nested in the lush mountains. Patrick showed us their school—stuffed with two-dozen backpacks, milk, beans and rice. Our guest houses for the evening—small, thatched roofs and a single kerosene lantern, which David thoughtfully turned down for me so that I didn't burn down the village. Christine brought over a sample of the local banana liquor. (Christine's water bottle had a hole in it and quickly devoured treautes. David explained that Charles was a gourmet chef who had retired to the country. We were soon to learn that it's passable to cook up incredible meals using just a fire. That night I pretended I didn't see the lizards on the walls of our cement rooms. While I set up my mosquito net Charles came in to make sure I had a cane—braced bed that lay on the floor next to my small bed. Though I was hundreds of miles from the nearest toilet, felt I like I was staying at a lux- ury hotel. I eventually fell asleep to the sound of a snoring kid. ("Is it small or not?!") and David, obvious- ly more at ease with his surroundings, snoring loudly on the other bed.

The next few days brought us more exhilarating views and encounters, but it was early in the morning on our eighth day as we were leaving Queen Elizabeth National Park that we had an encounter of the large kind. We had spent the previ- ous day passing warthogs, impalas and buffalos on the road, and then drifting by hippos and countless birds on a river boat tour. (That night Doug had got up to go to the bathroom only to find a hippo right outside his door. He decided to hold it.) We cycled groggily down the dirt road that morning, pulling back my shirt and waving at us than in reaching their destinations. The sun was setting as we made our way back to our hotel in Entebbe on our last day, batting the scenery with golden light. Sadly, I bid farewell to the others who would be moving on to tour Tanzania. After cleaning up, David rode his bike for a final 15-mile ride to the disc centred on the village hospital. We spent the day touring the lush, colour-fully flowered village and the hospital, which admits over 30,000 people per year. Shortly before bed that night Christine, Nathan and I went outside our guest house and pressed ourselves against the wall, under the eaves, to watch the storm that was brewing. We were delighted to hear the thunder roll and listened to the thunder roll and the distance and explode above us. We stood under cover, wind blow- ing, lightning striking for a long time, soaking up the African thunderstorm.

That night—one of the last—was a magical moment in Africa, but the real magic of the trip came not just from the beauty of our surroundings, but also from the people. I felt humbled by how materially poor people, who had suffered so much, could be so welcoming and generous, and our many other vivid memories of Uganda—collected over a rise to see a crowd of stern-faced men holding spears, screaming with the rain, to catch a glimpse of chimps in the trees, chatting with a friendly Ugandan on market day, watching the moon rise over the moun- tains, bats screeching overhead. The sun was setting as we made our way back to our hotel in Entebbe on our last day, batting the scenery with golden light. Sadly, I bid farewell to the others who would be moving on to tour Tanzania. After cleaning up, David rode his bike for a final 15-mile ride to the disc centred on the village hospital. We spent the day touring the lush, colour-fully flowered village and the hospital, which admits over 30,000 people per year. Shortly before bed that night Christine, Nathan and I went outside our guest house and pressed ourselves against the wall, under the eaves, to watch the storm that was brewing. We were delighted to hear the thunder roll and listened to the thunder roll and the distance and explode above us. We stood under cover, wind blow- ing, lightning striking for a long time, soaking up the African thunderstorm.

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Elephant crossing Up close and personal with Uganda’s wildlife.

Gazing out the terminal window, watching the flames from burning crops lick in the darkness at the end of the runway, I knew I would forever be hooked on bicycle touring, and Africa.

Adventure Cycling member Eric Mathurin lives in Ottawa, Canada and recently completed his second bicycle tour — along Canada’s East Coast.

ALL SKILL LEVELS WITH MILEAGE AVERAGING 12-40 MILES PER DAY ON DIRT (60%) AND PAVED (40%) ROADS FOR A TOTAL OF 420 MILES. THERE IS NO TENT CAMPING, BUT PARTICIPANTS ARE ENCOURAGED TO BRING A MOSQUITO NET AND WATER PURIFIER.

**CLIMATE**

The bulk of the country enjoys the same tropical climate, with temperatures averaging 60 degrees at night. The hottest months are from December to February, when the daytime range is 80 to 85 degrees. The driest times to visit Uganda are January and February and June to September.

**MISCELLANEOUS**

Uganda has an area of 91,343 square miles. The official language is English, which most people can speak. The other major languages are Luganda and Swahili. The currency is the Ugandan shilling.

Visit historical and cultural sites and meet local officials.

**Day 3:** Travel to Fort Portal. Visit development projects, schools and farms. Day 4-5: Cycle to Kibale National Park; forest hike and observe a variety of primates. Day 6-8: Cycle through the extraordinarily scenic Buhoma-Kabale area — aptly called “the Switzerland of Uganda.” Visit villages, schools and a medical centre. **Day 13:** Return to Kampala and Entebbe.

**General Information**

A mountain bike is recommended. Tours are suitable for all skill levels with mileage averaging 12-40 miles per day on dirt (60%) and paved (40%) roads for a total of 420 miles. There is no tent camping, but participants are encouraged to bring a mosquito net and water purifier.

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