

Journey to Uganda

Not your usual first tour

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.

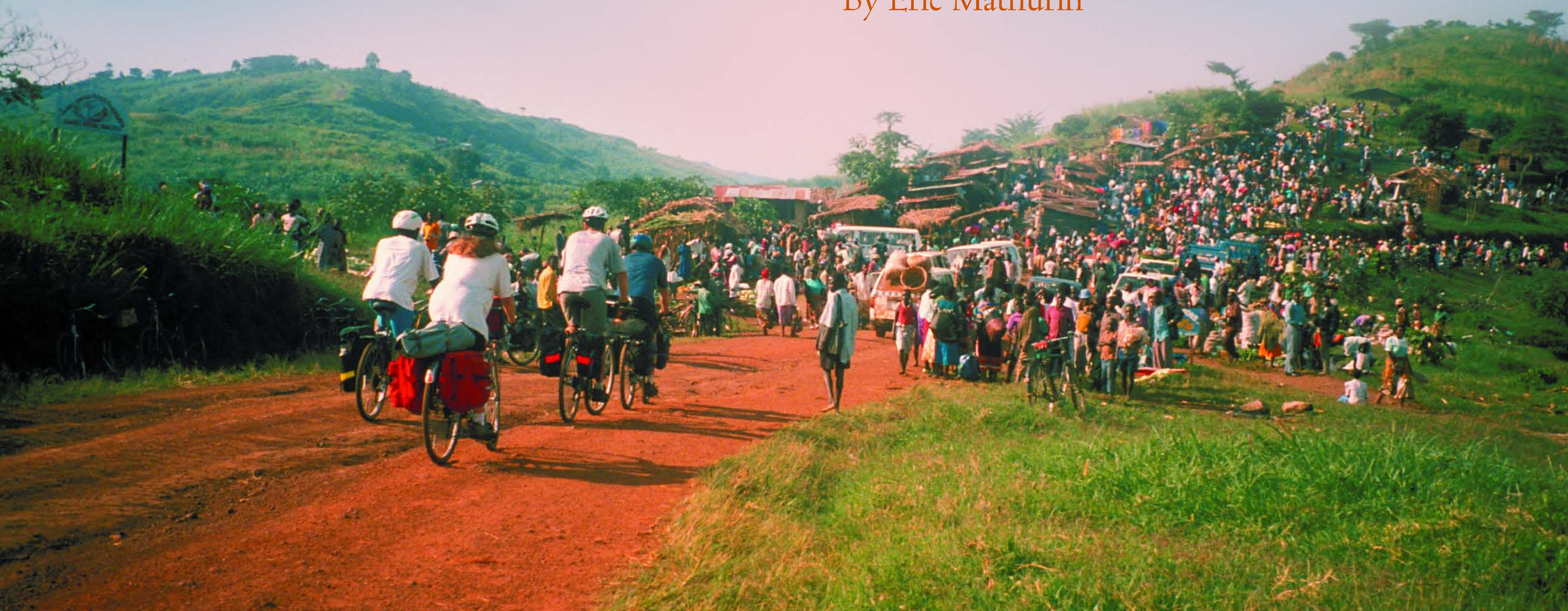
Uganda, home to more than 22 million people, sits upon the northern waters of Lake Victoria, Africa’s largest lake. While neighbouring Tanzania and Kenya draw in far more tourists per year, Uganda has earned a reputation of having the most friendly, open people in East Africa. Even so, my motive for 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

By Eric Mathurin



that would complete our adventurous group of six.

At the hotel we leaned our loaded bikes up against a tree and greeted the other two, stretched out on patio chairs and sipping sodas. I met Doug, a photographer from Montana who had been on several other tours with David, and Maxine, an outgoing geologist from Seattle. At 23 years old I was the youngest of the five of us and also the only Canuck among the group of well-travelled Yankees. I was pleased to learn that Nathan, a bicycle racer and David's Ugandan assistant, who we'd meet later, was my own age.

We spent the first two days of our visit getting acquainted with life in the city of Kampala, Uganda's modern, bustling capital. I was quick to learn that David's comments on the nature of Ugandan drivers applied here and it was with sheer bravado that I wove my bike through the relentless, aggressive traffic.

Our third day in Uganda found us standing next to our bikes in the dirt streets of Fort Portal in Western Uganda. We had just disembarked the bus from Kampala where we had been scrunched inside, our panniers and helmets strewn throughout its length and our bikes lashed to the roof. I was glad to be off the crowded bus and eager for this portion of the trip: The real journey would begin here, bicycle touring through the Ruwenzoris — the legendary "mountains of the moon." We would encounter very little traffic for the rest of our trip — and even then with the drivers more intent on getting a good look at us than in reaching their destinations.

After stopping for a filling lunch of matoke (mashed plantain bananas) with peanut sauce we set off at a leisurely pace into the countryside toward the Nyankuku-Kichwamba orphanage, our accommodations for the night. As we rode, children and adults alike smiled at our approach, waving and calling out, "Hi, how are you?" I learned that while English is the country's official language, there are as many as 20 other languages spoken. David explained that English was chosen as a compromise — a language that everyone

could both love and hate.

As children ran alongside us and people hurried from their homes to see us pass, I realized that this was what David meant when he wrote that, travelling by bicycle, you travel at "people speed." The difference from bus to bicycle seat was astounding. From the confines of the bus we hurtled 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 ("Musugus!") on bikes particularly funny. Even the goats seemed to be amused by us.

The winding dirt road took us by spectacular views of the mountains in the distance — 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 there. He showed us around the orphanage, home to about 80 children. We soon discovered the orphanage to be a small community nestled in the lush mountains. Patrick showed us their schools, tilapia ponds, cattle and banana crops. I couldn't help but notice armed guards about and wondered if it was common practice. We returned from our tour to meet Morence Mpora, the quiet, humble man who had founded the community after years of working as a civil engineer in the city.

As we had fresh tea with Morence, he explained the presence of the armed guards. Seven months prior to our visit a group of unknown rebels had descended upon the community and killed some of the orphans. The other children had fled into the countryside, and it was only recently that most of the children had begun to return.

When asked about the rebels he told us in his soft-spoken voice, "I don't understand why people fight when they can be doing good."

Despite the horror of what had happened not too long ago, I couldn't help but feel safe and at peace. Afterward we were invited to bathe — they had hauled up and

heated some water for us, placed in a small bamboo stall. It was my first time bathing by bucket, and by the time my turn came around, darkness had fallen. I ended up using far more water than I should have as I stumbled around with my flashlight, trying to rinse my hair. Fortunately, before long, bathing with a cup, a bar of soap and a bucket of water would become second nature to me.

After having dinner with Morence, Patrick and a few others, we retreated to our guest houses for the evening — small, round cement buildings with 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 banana beer that someone had poured into her water bottle. It felt like my first sip burned all the hair out of my nose. There was, it turned out, a small miscommunication: it wasn't banana beer, but banana liquor. Christine's water bottle would carry a faint reminder of that night for the rest of the trip.

The next day we bade farewell to our hosts and travelled along winding, hilly dirt roads that ran alongside trees, bushes, and homes. While blasting down a section of road, manure splashed up into my face. Then I failed to accurately judge my distance from a deep puddle that doused my leg and pannier with red mud. I was filthy and growing tired, but having far too much fun to do anything but laugh at my misfortune.

Midway through the afternoon we stopped, hot, hungry and tired, at a small nature reserve for lunch. While we waited for the food we hiked down through the forest to the crater lake, the product of a small, long-dead volcano. I hesitated a moment, imagining what could lurk beneath the tropical waters before throwing myself in the lake. The water was deep, cold and invigorating and I swam around with the others, all fears forgotten, leaving my bike shorts and socks on in hopes of freshening them up.

After a much needed lunch of beans, matoke and tomato sauce we watched

Colobus monkeys with long, fluffy tails hopping around the branches in the surrounding forest. David had scouted a shortcut out of the reserve and so our departure found us pushing the bikes along a cliff edge through the brush. We coasted down a narrow, rutted trail, heaved our bikes over a mud-out, and then finally reached the main dirt road, which took us to Kibale National Park.

We blasted down into the cool park forest, sometimes at breakneck speed, listening to the rocks caught by the tires go whirling loudly into the trees. We quickly arrived at Charles Lubega's tiny lodge just on the outskirts of the forest and sat down at his table. He came out with fresh slices of juicy pineapple and cold (how, I don't know) soft drinks — unexpected and quickly devoured treats. David explained that Charles was a gourmet chef who had retired to the country. We were soon to learn that it's possible 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 candle inside the empty soda bottle that lay on the floor next to my small bed. Though I was hundreds of miles from the nearest flush toilet, I felt like I was staying at luxury hotel. I eventually fell asleep to the sound of a mosquito buzzing ("Is it inside my net or outside?") and David, obviously 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 previous day passing warthogs, impalas and buffalo 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 hippopotamus right outside his door. He decided to hold it.) I cycled groggily down the dirt road that morning, pulling back my shirt to take a sniff, wondering if that awful

smell that seemed to permeate the air was me. Reasonably certain it wasn't, I asked David what it was.

"Elephant dung," he told me.

After finding a place nearby for the usual breakfast of omelettes, chai and mandazi (a kind of biscuit-bread) we turned for the main road.

As we made our way back, David, ahead of all of us, pointed to something in the bushes as he rode by. Doug, myself and then Christine passed, all of us stunned to see it was an elephant in the nearby trees. The four of us waited a short distance away. When Nathan passed he slowed down to look, then leapt off his bike and started running when the elephant, snuffling, took a couple of stomps toward him onto the dirt road. (The theory is that the elephant will be content to stomp on your bike instead of you.)

Laughing, David called out, "Now how are you going to get your bike?" Nathan did — carefully. We waited for Maxine to pass by, and when she did we all stopped, staring at where we had seen it. Then, suddenly, one by one, seven elephants came out — two adults and five younger ones — and lined up across the road. We all started snapping pictures.

My nerves were as taught as wires. I asked David, "How fast can they run?"

"Faster than you can ride," he answered.

The elephants stopped on the road and the big one in front turned our way and started to growl — a low, guttural bass that I could feel rumbling in my chest. After having successfully threatened us, they eventually walked away, leaving us there, our hearts racing.

The next night we dined on fabulous Nile Perch, but I would live to regret it. I went to bed feeling bloated and spent the next day exhaustedly following the group around. My stomach was gurgling and I was barely able to stand as we toured a tea plantation. When my tire went flat that afternoon I got off my bike in resignation. Before I could even start changing my tube, David came back and practically did all the work for me as every Ugandan within a two-mile

radius gathered around us to watch the tire-fixing process, clearly amused by it all. At the end of the day I was the first one to bed, a fever causing me to shiver under my sheets despite the warmth of the Ugandan night.

I felt much better the next day, and I was completely well again by the time we visited Kisiizi, a small piece of paradise centred on the village hospital. We spent the day touring the lush, colourfully 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 treated to a blinding displays of lightning and listened to the thunder roll in the distance and explode above us. We stood under cover, wind blowing, lightning strobing 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 my surroundings, but from the kindness of the people. I felt humbled by how such materially poor people, who had suffered so much, could be so welcoming and generous.

There are so many other vivid memories of Uganda — coming over a rise to see a crowd of stern-faced men holding spears; slashing through the rainforest, hoping to catch a glimpse of chimps in the trees; chatting with a friendly Ugandan on market day; watching the moon rise over the mountains, bats screeching overhead.

The sun was setting as we made our way back to our hotel in Entebbe on our last day, bathing the scenery in golden light. Sadly, I bid farewell to the others who would be moving on to tour Tanzania. After cleaning up, David rode with me through the rapidly darkening evening to the airport. As we shook hands inside the terminal I told him that this — my first bicycle tour — had been the best experience of my life.

Nuts & Bolts: Uganda

Tour Operator

Bicycle Africa runs yearly tours through Uganda, usually in late January and early August. Tours cost \$990 U.S. plus airfare and expenses. (Expenses are usually between \$50-100.) For more information, contact Bicycle Africa at: 4887 Columbia Drive South, Seattle WA, 98108-1919; Tel/Fax: 1-206-767-0848; website: www.ibike.org/bikeafrica/ and e-mail: ibike@ibike.org

Features

Small group exploration of western Uganda. Fascinating visits to traditional rural villages, social programs, development projects, schools, national parks, historic sites. Enjoy the wildlife, extraordinary beautiful scenery, delicious food and a lot of friendly people contact.

Description

Day 1-2: Entebbe and Kampala.



Uganda has earned a reputation for being friendly and open to tourists.

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 along the Rift Valley escarpment, including Queen Elizabeth National Park. Day 9-

12: 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.

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.

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. **AC**

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



Elephant crossing Up close and personal with Uganda's wildlife