



TRAVEL JOURNAL

# Getting muddy in Uganda

After 16 months on the road between France and South Africa, the intrepid Gurneys spend a month in beguiling Uganda.

**BY PATRICK, MARIE & CALLUM GURNEY**

Uganda is big enough to get lost in, yet small enough to get around. It offers a variety of habitats: mountains, lakes, waterfalls, wetlands and savannah. We spent a month getting to know this surprising country.

We collected our son Callum (18) from the airport in Kigali, Rwanda, and drove north to Uganda. The tiny Cyanika border post was really efficient despite the mandatory Ebola checks: Your body temperature is measured, and you have to wash your hands and disinfect your shoes.

Soon we were in Uganda and heading to our first destination: Mgahinga Gorilla National Park.



MGAHINGA GORILLA NATIONAL PARK

## Primates and fungi

Mgahinga Gorilla National Park is part of a transfrontier park with neighbouring conservation areas in Rwanda and the DRC. Unlike the more famous Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, which has 12 habituated groups of mountain gorillas, there is only one group at Mgahinga that tourists can visit. We chose Mgahinga for two reasons: The trekking is easier due to flatter, more open terrain, and there are fewer tourists.

The road to Mgahinga was rather pitted with holes, making it a longer drive than anticipated. After three hours (covering 100 km) we finally arrived at park HQ and set up camp. No camping for Callum – we got him a room.

The following day at 7.30 am, we were briefed and set off in a group of six tourists, with an entourage of guides and trackers nearly double that number.

After about half an hour of walking, we found the habituated group of 10 gorillas and we sat with them for just over an hour while they foraged, groomed and played. They were much bigger than I had expected – the head honcho silverback had an enormous, one-metre shoulder width! With bodies of pure muscle, they don't really know their own strength. Callum, being a big lad, easily withstood a playful bump by a male gorilla, but a much lighter woman in our group was flung to the ground when bumped into. The male responsible was called Mafia, and our guide told us that during the habituation period (which took three years – during this time only the guides visit the gorillas) he tossed guides all over the place.

The other star of the show was a Jackson's three-horned chameleon – it truly looks like a miniature dinosaur! We snapped a few photos and headed back to camp for lunch.

After the terrible road coming into Uganda, I quickly checked the roof-rack brackets – one had broken on the roads in Tanzania. To my horror, I saw that three brackets had failed with only one good bracket left! How the roof rack had stayed on was anyone's guess.

I took a motorbike taxi into the nearest town, 12 km away, and found a bush mechanic – or a "fundu" as any trade specialist is called here – who managed to fabricate four brackets out of old angle iron. Back at camp, we fitted the brackets and they've since lasted some 2 500 km on awful roads.

We drove from Mgahinga to Bwindi, passing through mountain villages and tea plantations, on an endlessly winding dirt road. It was only 50 km but took almost three hours.

**Bwindi Impenetrable Forest...** The name says it all! One of Africa's more ancient habitats is home to the largest population (about 400) of the world's mountain gorillas. There are also 350 bird species, 11 other primate species, elusive forest elephants, golden cats, wild hogs...

However, Callum was especially interested in the smaller things like insects, fungi and plant life. The guides were speechless – their training had never focused on these "less important" elements, and they weren't equipped to answer most of our questions. They were just as amazed as we were by everything we decided to look at.

We went on two nature walks (US\$70/R1 025 per person) in Bwindi. We stayed just outside the Rushaga Gate in the south, at Ichumbi Gorilla Lodge. The lodge was a welcome luxury after camping, but it wasn't cheap.

While we were there, we learnt about the plight of the Batwa people – a small, slender people who hunted and gathered in the forest. In the 1990s, the Ugandan government evicted all the Batwa from declared reserves. Today, only a few Batwa still live in Ugandan forests, and most live on the periphery of their ancestral lands. Uganda recognises the Batwa's plight and pays certain proceeds from park entrance fees towards Batwa-related projects, but they have found it difficult to integrate in Uganda's larger community and now deal with depression, alcohol abuse, even the danger of tribal extinction.

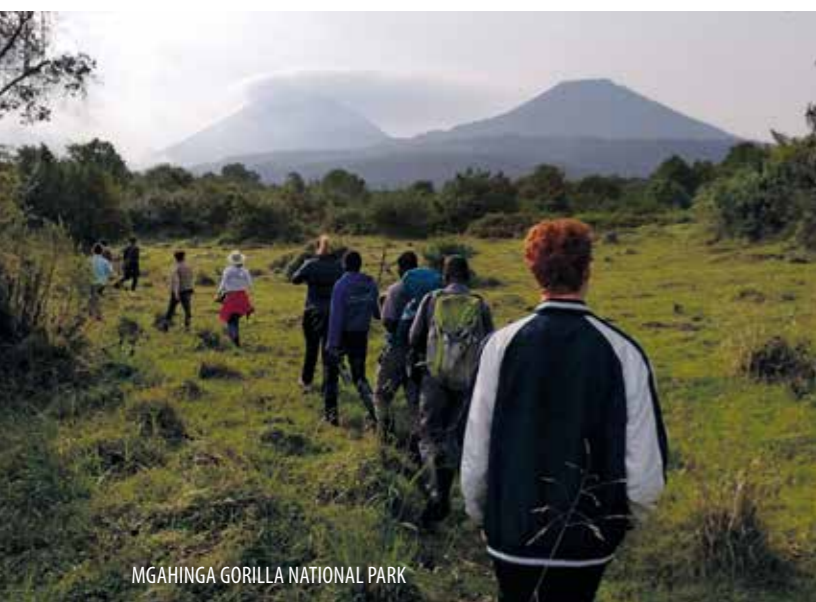
After our visit to Bwindi, we quickly returned to Kigali in Rwanda because Callum had to fly back to the UK where he attends Bristol University. With our son safely on his flight, we turned around and headed back into Uganda – or so we thought...



PATRICK FIXES THE ROOF-RACK BRACKETS



MOUNTAIN GORILLAS, MGAHINGA



MGAHINGA GORILLA NATIONAL PARK



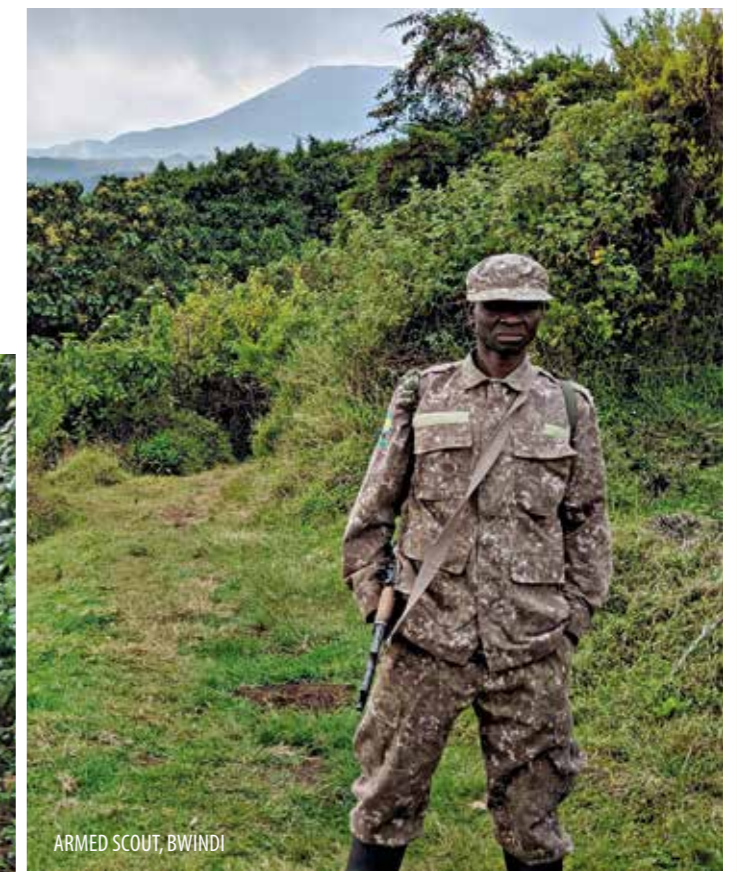
JACKSON'S THREE-HORNED CHAMELEON, MGAHINGA



PATRICK HELPS CALLUM GET A CLOSE-UP PHOTO, BWINDI



BWINDI IMPENETRABLE NATIONAL PARK



ARMED SCOUT, BWINDI



FUNGI, BWINDI



FUNGI, BWINDI



KIBALE NATIONAL PARK

## Rain, or chimp pee?

We drove 230 km (four hours) and passed through Queen Elizabeth National Park. We attempted to find a wild campsite inside the park, but this was aborted due to the sticky black soil. We got horribly stuck, but luckily some people were around to help push and pull. Getting stuck was going to become a regular theme in Uganda.

We camped just outside the park and travelled 100 km north the following morning, to Kibale National Park. Our plan was to spend a few nights at a half-built community camp – we were happy to be their first clients. We had booked a night walk, but the rain was too heavy.

On our way to the camping spot at Kibale, we got stuck again. It was 8 pm and we were not in the mood – we spent an uncomfortable night in the Hilux. There was a silver lining though: A forest elephant came to visit during the night.

Chimp tracking is big business in Uganda, especially in Kibale. It cost US\$150 per person (R2 200; this rate includes the park entrance fee). After we were briefed at the park office, the tourists were split into two groups of about seven each. We were put with the group of younger people, which meant we'd walk more quickly.

We all jumped into vehicles and headed into the forest to the start point of the hike. The chimps were on a rather brisk afternoon walk of their own and not interested in us. They moved really fast!

We had moments of silence watching their every move – I had a staring contest with the alpha male. More than once, the guide had to warn a client to get out of the way or be urinated on from up high in the canopy, where the chimps were looking for wild figs.

Having been forewarned about Kampala's traffic gridlock, we planned only a cameo appearance. We stayed at Red Chilli Hideaway, a backpacker lodge just outside the chaotic city centre. The lodge has a free city shuttle that we took twice for shopping and sightseeing. What a surprise! Kampala is a beautiful mess of street vendors and really well-appointed large shopping centres. Some of the coffee shops and restaurants rival those of Cape Town and Johannesburg in terms of offering, decor and service.

We shopped at Shoprite, had lunch at Meza, a local shawarma joint, then crossed the road to have coffee and dessert in the swanky Cafesserie. We also visited the National Museum. It was dusty and totally under-resourced, but we enjoyed an interesting black-and-white photographic exhibition about Idi Amin.

Getting out of Kampala again took us two hours – on a Sunday morning!



CHIMPANZEE, KIBALE NATIONAL PARK



RED-TAILED MONKEY (BELOW) AND A BABOON (RIGHT), KIBALE



## THE CUSTOMS FIASCO (A SHORT PLAY)

**SCENE 1:** Pouring with rain, Patrick and Marie arrive at the busy Rwandan Gatuna border post. There is one little building with an even smaller covered area where 30+ people are huddled to escape the downpour. It is almost impossible to stay dry.

**Rwandan Immigration Official (RIO):** You need to pay US\$30 per person to exit Rwanda.

**Marie:** What?

**RIO:** Your EAC visa has expired. When you drove from Kenya to Tanzania, you left the East African Community.

**Marie:** What?!

**RIO:** Your EAC visa was voided

when you entered Tanzania.

**Marie:** But the visa is valid for 90 days and includes Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya.

**RIO:** It is now voided, and you must pay again.

**SCENE 2:** Patrick stands back while Marie tackles the RIO with successive verbal body blows. The crowd gathers as the two heavyweights battle it out. During the final round, Patrick steps in – it's a tag-team effort. Both leave the ring battered and bruised.

The official was correct and we were wrong. We hadn't realised that our EAC visa only allows travel in

a specific direction. In other words, from Kenya, we should have gone to Uganda and then Rwanda – not into Tanzania, a non-EAC member state, like we'd done. We had voided our visa, but previous officials hadn't picked it up.

The arguing continued and eventually the Rwandan immigration official confiscated our passports. Frantic calls were made to both the South African and French embassies. The SA embassy told us to just pay and get out. I went back to pay, but now the officer refused. "You are in the country illegally," he said. "The passports will be sent to Kigali."

We dreaded the thought of doing the 150 km (5 – 10 hours) round trip to sort out the mess. The French embassy made a few calls and came back to us to say that the RIO was prepared to release the passports and allow us to pay the US\$30 (R440) per person charge. Relieved, we paid and got out as fast we could.

We still had to go through the Ugandan side of the border post, where we would potentially face the same issue, but thankfully the Ugandan officials let us in without a hitch.

After four hours of body blows in the rain, we were finally on our way!



CAMPING IN THE RAIN, KIBALE



CHIMP TRACKING, KIBALE



LOOKING FOR A SHOEBILL



SHOEBILL



A TOWER OF ROTHSCHILD'S GIRAFFES, MURCHISON FALLS NATIONAL PARK

### Shoebill, you say?

After a 170 km (four-hour) drive north from Kampala, we camped at Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary. The alarm went off at 6.30 am and we had just enough time for a quick coffee and a slice of toast before being allocated gumboots and a guide. No, we were not going to see rhinos, we were here for something even rarer: shoebills! This ancient-looking bird, with the weirdest bill, has a wingspan of more than two metres.

Our guide jumped into our Hilux and we drove a few kilometres into a marshy area. We were lucky – the guide told us they normally see one or two birds, but we had five different sightings.

Shoebills are shy. The first two attempts at getting closer were not successful. Without a 500 mm lens, we never stood a chance of getting that shot that most birders dream of. We reverted to binoculars to watch the enigmatic birds hunt for lungfish – and even baby crocs – in the early morning sun. At only US\$30 per person (R440) this was money well spent.

The next day, we followed a back road for 200 km to the southern tip of Murchison Falls National Park, which took us five hours. The day thereafter, we went to see the waterfall (US\$40 per person entry fee, plus US\$50 for the car; R1 900 total). The gorge violently pushes the water onwards and then bursts through a chasm – six metres wide – to form the raging Murchison Falls.

After soaking up the sights for two hours, we caught the ferry across the Victoria Nile River (the White Nile) and entered the national park. Our wild-camp spot (US\$50 per person; R730) on the edge of Lake Albert was amazing – we spent one night there. From our camp, we saw a huge group (80+) of Rothschild's giraffes, we had visiting elephants, and lions roared just outside our tent. It was incredible, and afterwards we were really sorry that we didn't stay in the park for longer.



MARIE ON THE LUGOGO SWAMP, WHERE THE SHOEBILLS ARE FOUND



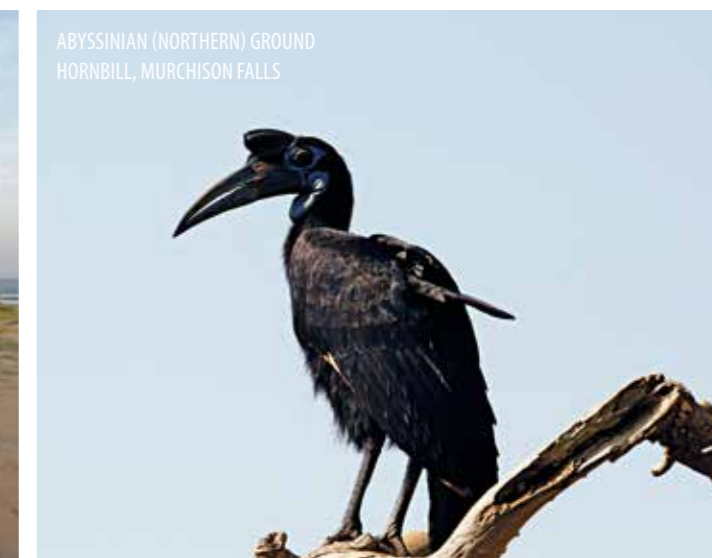
MARIE AT MURCHISON FALLS



LELWEL HARTEBEEST, MURCHISON FALLS



WILD CAMPING, MURCHISON FALLS



ABYSSINIAN (NORTHERN) GROUND HORNBILL, MURCHISON FALLS



LION, KIDEPO VALLEY NATIONAL PARK

## Kidepo to Kumi to Kenya

Kidepo Valley National Park constantly came up when we asked Ugandans what we should see in their country. They all mentioned its beauty and remote location – and that it's best avoided during the rainy season...

Kidepo is in the far north of the country, on the border with South Sudan. It took us 10 hours to drive only 390 km from Murchison Falls. The route included an overnight stop in the town of Kitgum.

Kidepo is totally wild, with only a basic road network and facilities. There are two campsites, and we made one of them our home for three nights (US\$40 per person entry, US\$50 for the car, US\$30 per person camping; R2 780 total for the two of us, per day).

It's special to be in nature – in a wilderness like this – when it rains, but driving on Kidepo's slippery roads made it even more exhilarating. We were 3 km out from the campsite, and this time we really got horribly stuck in thick clay. Out came the trusty panga, which we used to cut dead roadside branches to put under the wheels. Doing so, we managed to free the Hilux. The experience was enough to limit our game drives to two outings, but we still had one of our best lion sightings on the journey – not to mention a cute baby tortoise.

**We were now headed back** towards Kenya, passing through Uganda's nomadic warrior region called Karamoja. It was a scene straight out of Dr Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* since the local tribesmen all wear outlandish headgear.

Despite the comedic appearance of the residents, it's a dangerous area to pass through. People told us that you can exchange a cow for an AK-47! There have been several disarmament agreements since the mid-2000s and the situation is improving, but still, we never opted to wild camp and kept heading south along the Ngora Road, covering 340 km in eight hours.

Out of nowhere, at a village called Kumi, we saw a sign saying "Nyero Rock Painting Site". We were heading for the Kenya border, but we wouldn't make it there before dark, so we needed a place to sleep. We took the turn-off.

The site at Nyero dates from the Stone Age and is one of Uganda's oldest and most important rock art sites, first documented in 1913. We had found it purely by luck. We hired a guide who took us clambering up and around a large outcrop of granite inselbergs to explore the three main panels, depicting people, animals, canoes and rather strange circles.

As dusk descended, we took our gin and tonics up one of the larger inselbergs to witness a magnificent sunset.

From here, we were technically on our homeward route, which would see us blasting through Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe to get back in time for Christmas in South Africa.

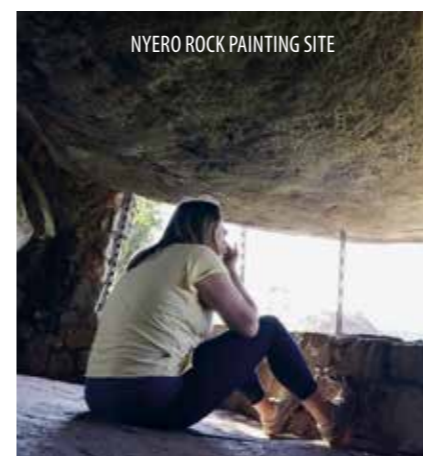
Sitting on that outcrop with our G&Ts, we could feel that the end was near, and that time was running out on our epic journey.



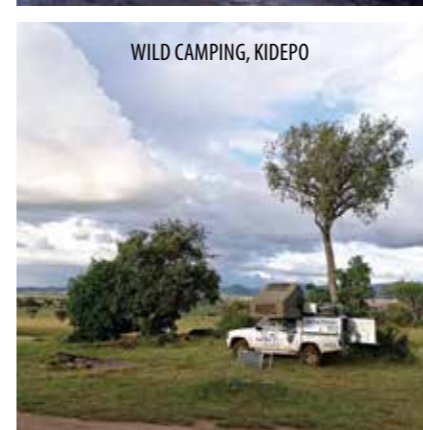
A KARAMOJA TRIBESMAN WITH CHARACTERISTIC QUIRKY HAT



KIDEPO VALLEY NATIONAL PARK



NYERO ROCK PAINTING SITE

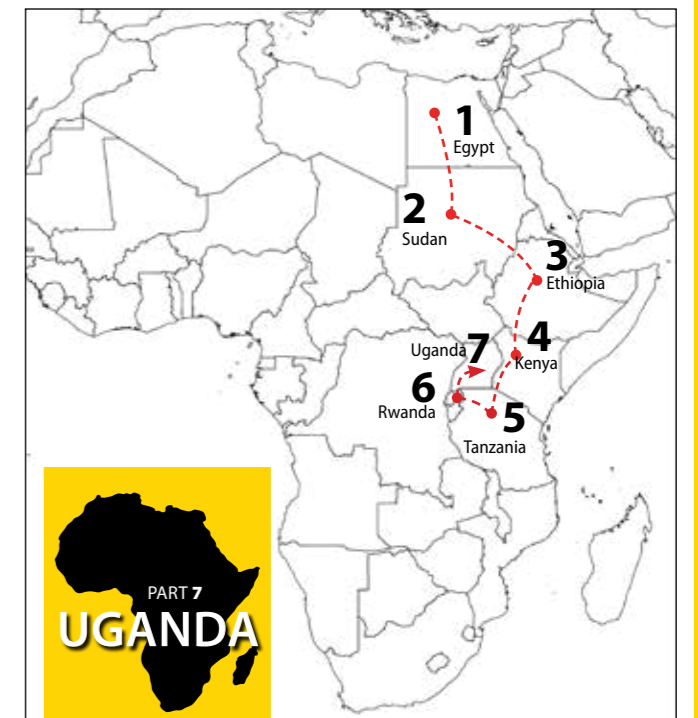


WILD CAMPING, KIDEPO

## THE GURNEYS' GREAT JOURNEY

Patrick and Marie set off from Valence in France (Marie's home town) on 3 June 2018 with the aim of driving all the way back to their home in Johannesburg in 18 months. By the time they reached Uganda, they had been on the road for 16 months, having driven through France, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Rwanda.

**MORE INFO:** Contact the Gurneys by e-mail [info@skultcha.com](mailto:info@skultcha.com), or visit [skultcha.com](http://skultcha.com). Find them on Facebook (search "skultcha") and on Instagram @skulcha.



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**NEXT MONTH:** *The final instalment!* For parts 1 – 6 of the Gurneys' Travel Journal, see issue #158 (Egypt), #159 (Sudan), #160 (Ethiopia), #161 (Kenya), #162 (Tanzania) and #163 (Rwanda).