



Rwenzori Mountains, seen from Queen Elizabeth National Park. The mountains form the border with Congo. It is amazing to be looking across the savannah and see these mountains rising up out of the plains. It's a true gift to be able to spend this time in a country with such a varied landscape.

Hi All,

Wow – have we really been here for over two months already? We hope this finds you all in good health and that you are all ready for the holiday festivities (whatever holidays you choose to celebrate). It is a little hard to remember sometimes that Christmas is coming when you are not deluged with caroles and decorations everywhere you go starting the day after Halloween. There are a couple of stores here that cater to foreigners that are already playing Christmas music, but it is WAY more low-key here than in the States. Quite a relief, actually, although Devin, being a holiday freak, might not get her fill this year.

Although we haven't seen many reindeer lately, we have seen LOTS of other animals. We spent an amazing four days over Thanksgiving weekend on safari in Queen Elizabeth National Park. We've been itching to get out to the game parks, and we were finally able to make it work with both of our schedules.

Mark spent Wednesday shopping for food and getting the camping gear ready while Devin worked (Mark's pretty happy with that arrangement!). We got out of Kampala by 6:30 a.m. Thursday morning to miss the traffic, known as "the Jam", and had a very easy seven-hour drive there on very good roads (not something you really get to say too often in Uganda, as we learned on our way back home). We got to the park mid-afternoon, just in time to do one short game drive before setting up camp. Warthogs in abundance, as well as hippos, waterbucks and nice big leopard tracks (unfortunately not, at that moment, attached to a leopard).

We went to the park office to get a campsite, and were told “yes, you’ll definitely hear lions all night and there will be hippos walking through camp, so you might want to put your tent right next to your vehicle.” This being our first African camping experience, we both decided right then that we would NOT be getting out of the tent to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

The place we camped had a beautiful view over the Kazingha Channel, which connects Lakes George and Albert:



Of course, it was Thanksgiving, so we had to celebrate. Cocktails, anyone? We cooked our feast on the roof, but I swear it was because of the view, not because we were afraid of the animals!

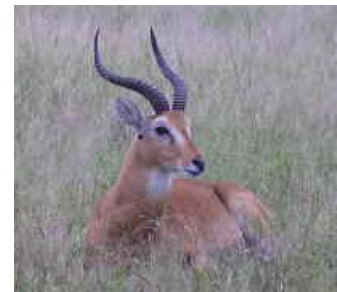


The next morning was another early one. We picked up our guide at 6:30 a.m. to go out for a game drive. Animals are pretty smart – they sleep through the heat of the day, so early and late are your best bets to see wildlife. There are parks that offer night-drives, which must be amazing, since that’s when most of the “action” happens. Most of the parks here in Uganda

only allow driving between 6:30 am and 7:00 pm in order to have as little impact as possible on the activities of the wildlife.

On our way out to the main Uganda Kob grazing grounds, we saw elephants, waterbuck, warthogs (always warthogs), at least one spotted hyena, and cape buffalo (*one of the most feared animals in Africa, along with the hippo – bet you thought the lion would rank, eh?*). It is pretty mindblowing thinking that all of that was “on the way to” the game drive, and that this is after the numbers of animals here were reduced by 75 – 80% during the 70’s and 80’s when Idi Amin and Milton Obote were busy trying to destroy this country. In the 1960’s, Queen Elizabeth was considered to be one of the best game parks in Africa, and people would come from Kenya and Tanzania (the homes of the Serengeti and Maasai Mara) to see the wildlife in Uganda. It must have been breathtaking (*well, actually, it’s breathtaking now, so I don’t know what it must have been like then*). On the bright side, though, if you want a safari experience where you don’t feel like you are in a traffic jam, Uganda is the place to go! We felt like it was really crowded this day because we saw three other vehicles while we were on our four-hour game drive.

There were hundreds of kob waiting for us on their grazing grounds. Kobs are beautiful, graceful antelopes that often congregate in herds of over 1,500. They have an interesting territorial arrangement where dominant males will have territories that they defend in good grazing areas, but then when the herd moves to a water hole, temporary mating “arenas” are set up where fifty or sixty males might gather to compete for mating rights. It’s bit like men leaving their homes to go to a sports bar. All this time, of course, we were looking for lions and leopards just like everyone else. Even though all animals are equally cool, Mark’s never seen a lion in the wild and Devin hasn’t seen one since she was in Kenya years ago, so we’re suckers for the whole carnivore mystique. Our guide took us to all of this favorite “cat-sighting” spots, with no luck. We finally saw one male and one female lion at quite a distance lounging next to a crater lake. Exciting, but we all wished we could have had a closer look.



do quite often.

It was getting towards 10 am, so we had to get our guide back to the station. On the way back, we spent some time watching a multi-generational herd of elephants feeding until they crossed the road about 30 feet ahead of us and went off into the forest. There were around 20 of them, including one baby that our guide said was the youngest he’s ever seen. It is amazing how these giant creatures can just disappear when they move into the trees, without a sound and with almost no movement of the surrounding vegetation unless they are intentionally knocking over trees, which they

do quite often.

After dropping off our guide we knew it was too late to be a good time to see wildlife, so we decided to go for a scenic drive through the “crater lakes” area in the northern part of the park. We had heard that the road was sometimes questionable during the rainy season, so we asked about conditions at the gate. The guard basically said “well, you’re in a Land Rover...give it a try.” So we did, and we spent the next three hours on a very exciting drive through what felt like prehistoric wilderness. We didn’t see another human being the whole time we were out there, and given the condition of the road, we could see why. We had some baboons start barking at

us from a distance at one point when we stopped to enjoy the scenery and saw one family of elephants wallowing in a mud-hole, doing all the things they do on those National Geographic specials – throwing water over their backs with their trunks, rolling on their backs in the mud, etc. It was a fun show to watch.

The landscape was utterly amazing. It is an area of “explosion craters”, which seem to have been formed millions of years ago by a lot of volcanic activity right near the earth’s surface. They don’t have cones built up around the calderas, but the land undulates so much in this area that we were probably looking down about 1,000 feet into the crater in this picture.



After about three hours of wondering if we were going the right way (*it's not like there are any good maps of these tracks we were on*) we had a feeling that we should either be close to the main road, or that we really had no idea where we were. We started to descend, which seemed like a good sign, and could even see the main road in the valley below. Ahhh...saved. But wait, it can't be quite that easy. We came around a bend, and there was a huge acacia tree across the road, probably knocked over by an elephant. After a few moments of wondering if we were going to have to turn around and go the three hours back the way we came, we decided we'd just crash through the thickets next to the road and hope we could make it through. We did, and it turned out that we were only about 2 km from the main road.

That evening we decided we really wanted to see some lions at closer range, and the southern part of the park, Ishasha, is famous for its tree-climbing lions. We started asking around about the road down there, since the books all say it is questionable during the rainy season, but we were assured that it was in good condition. We have learned here that it is best to ask as many people as possible, and then take the answer you want to hear. We were given time estimates ranging from 1 to 7 hours for how long the 70km would take, so we accurately averaged it out to about 3 hours. It was actually a wonderful drive, through an incredible forest called Maramagambo. Now, I'm not quite sure that the word “pothole” really expresses what roads are like here. At one point a hippo crossed the road ahead of us and I'm pretty sure he had been wallowing in one of the potholes before we came along. However, this is actually a “good road,” since it is possible to get through.



We made it to Ishasha before noon, and were immediately glad we had come. It has an entirely different feel from the rest of the park, with long, flowing grasslands interspersed with acacia and fig woodlands, and mountains in the background. Not many people get to this part of the park since it is so difficult to get to, but those people are really missing out.

We set up our camp right on the edge of the Ishasha River, and could have thrown a rock into Congo. In this picture, the



grasses in the foreground are in our campsite in Uganda and the grass on the other side is in Congo. Fortunately, the hippo must have been Congolese, because we were not visited during the night even though we were serenaded by a number of hippos all night long. We also had a very fun visit by a troop of red-tailed monkeys. What a fun life they seem to have – they would jump out of one tree, grab onto a long branch from another tree and get flung up into the air by the rebound.

That afternoon, we were on a quest to find the tree-climbing lions. All of the guidebooks say to be sure to take a guide with you in this part of the park, because it is easy to get lost or stuck in the mud, since this area is much less developed and, again, we were there in the rainy season. As we're not smart enough to listen to simple advice, Devin came up with an ingenious alternative plan. There is one main track which offers the best lion-viewing opportunities. We decided we would wait where we could see the beginning of the track and when another group came through, we would follow them so we wouldn't get lost. Of course, we would follow at a discrete distance so that they wouldn't *really* know we were following them. Should be easy, since people tend to drive very slowly on safari to maximize their chances of spotting wildlife.

Sure enough, along came one other vehicle, and we quickly got into the truck and started to follow. Little did we know this would be the last time we would see our "leader" for the next three hours. After magically disappearing into thin air (*how else can you explain a 3,000 pound 4x4 becoming invisible on open savannah?*), the driver of that vehicle began to grow to mythical proportions in our minds. Our tracking abilities were tested to the limits, as we tried to pick out which way he had gone each time we came to a split in the road or when several tracks would fan out to find the best way through a marshy section. He led us through mud holes I never would have considered attempting on my own, and with each kilometer we felt ourselves more committed, since we were not at all sure we could make it back out the way we had come. Clearly we were following Crocodile Dundee, who had decided to leave the little island of Australia to explore some *real* wilderness. I could picture his sunburned, weathered face, wild hair and beard, animal pelt clothing...

We decided to just go for speed until we had caught up to our hero because, of course, if they spotted any lions they would stop for a while to look at them, right? Given that we started no more than a minute or two behind them, we had to be close. Right? Right? About an hour and a half later, we popped out onto what we decided was the main park road. We had never caught a glimpse of that other truck, and we had not seen a single lion even after all we had been through – Mark was shaking and drooling from the stress of trying to get through those mud holes without getting stuck, Devin was tired and hungry, and we were both very frustrated and feeling disappointed that we had come all the way down to Ishasha and we were going to have to go back to Kampala the next day without seeing any lions.

After taking all of these feelings out on each other, we decided we would just throw in the towel, tuck our tails, and go sit and watch the sunset until we had to be back in camp (the park requires that you be off the tracks by 7:30 pm, and it was about 6 at this point). We drove a little ways out a track that we had seen earlier in the day and found a spot to park where we could just sit and watch some kob feeding and try to forget about our failure. Moments later, we heard the sound of an engine coming up behind us. We looked at each other in disbelief and, sure enough, it was the same blue truck that we had been "following" for the last three hours. Although we were a little bitter about being abandoned by him, we were excited to finally see this off-road god.

We moved ourselves off to the side of the track to let him pass, and I can just imagine the look of surprise on our faces when we saw the freakin' Brady Bunch pull up next to us. There's Dad in the driver's seat, slightly balding, pocket-protector sticking out of his pinstriped short-sleeve-button-up shirt, Mom in the passenger seat, and four blond little kids piled into the back like they are on their way to Disneyland. We were stunned into silence, and it only got worse. They pointed over to the area where we had been "following" them, and they said "You should go over there – we drove through and saw NINE LIONS! And they were all tree-climbing lions!"

Unfortunately we didn't have a gun with us, so we just smiled, said "oh, that's great", decided not to mention that yes, indeed, we had also been over in that area and did NOT see nine lions, thank you very much for putting salt in our wounds, and watched them drive off. Not wanting to make the same mistake twice, we followed them *more closely* this time. We knew we had to turn around in the next fifteen minutes to make it back to camp on time, but we just had to take this one last chance, and we knew that "He-Dad" wouldn't let us down.

Not more than three minutes later, we saw them pulled over to the side of the track. Our hearts started racing, as we KNEW they must have stopped because of lions. We pulled out our binoculars, but then saw him waving us past. Apparently they were just stopping for a potty-break, and suddenly we found ourselves leaderless and saw our last chance to see the famous lions fading into the sunset.

Next thing we knew, though, there was a Uganda Wildlife Authority truck piled with Ugandan students coming our way with huge smiles on their faces. They stopped and told us that there were lions in trees "not far ahead." Even though we knew we should head back, we couldn't when we knew they were so close. So, off we went, hoping we'd be able to spot them in the fading light. We somehow managed to back-track the UWA truck's tracks right to the very tree where they had seen the lions and, lo and behold, there they were! Six of them, all females, stretched out on the huge limbs of an ancient fig tree. Literally in the last few possible moments of opportunity, these magnificent creatures let us see them.



We returned to camp happy and satisfied. Since you actually made it this far through this story, Devin demands that I reward you by not going in to detail about our trip home. Let me just say this – *Listen to the locals*. When everybody you talk to says "Go this way – it's longer, but it's faster," just listen to them. As we proved in Ishasha, we are unfortunately not that smart, so we found ourselves a short-cut. Another story for another time.

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