

TRIP REPORT = SOUTH AFRICA TO UGANDA DECEMBER 2007

In the beginning

The idea of travelling to Uganda had been in the back of my mind for several years. I had been reading and researching the country for some time.

Uganda held four particular attractions to both Mariane and I: The mountain gorillas, the tree climbing lions of Ishasha, the Shoe-bill Stork and the Nile.

The whole scheme fitted in with a long held desire to travel to and explore East Africa. The obvious difficulty being time combined with the fact that Uganda is hidden behind Lake Victoria, which makes it difficult to combine with the typical Tanzanian and Kenyan itinerary.

Fortuitously a good friend got transferred to work in Kampala for four years and the idea began to gain the shimmering of reality...

We began to draft a wish list.

From this the itinerary was slowly born. For me an itinerary is a tool to ensure that nothing important gets left out.

Due to time constraints we decided to make Uganda the destination and to get there and back in the shortest possible time.

Then came the route planning. It all too soon became clear that the area north of Lusaka was a virtual dead spot as far as ready information was concerned. I spent hours pouring over the Garmin and paper maps, surfing the web for information.

Uganda Wildlife made it clear that we had to make a reservation for a very specific date if we wanted to do gorilla trekking. Now, this is a sore point. I hate making bookings for a holiday, tying myself to deadlines. I live and work according to diaries, schedules and what have you, I certainly do not want to have my holidays scheduled in the same way... But, as they say I the classics, beggars can't be choosers. So the reservations were made.

As it turned out the only available dates suited us perfectly and the bookings were confirmed.

The trip now became reality and it was all too soon time to have the Landy serviced and checked for the trip. I decided to fit a new set of tyres and opted for BF Goodrich AT. I also wanted to replace both the main and auxiliary batteries. The existing batteries were both 5 years old and I did not want the hassle of battery problems during the trip. I was unable to source a 105 Ah Delco battery and replaced only the main battery. Fortunately the auxiliary held up and did not fail me at all.

The tyres I selected turned out to be the biggest disappointment of the trip. The only positive thing I can say about them is that they are much less noisy on tar than the MT-type tyres they replaced.

The new tyres tend to 'tram-line' and aqua plane, even on fairly small water puddles. Something I never experienced before.

We purchased visa for Tanzania and Uganda in Pretoria. The cost of the visas is R300 per person per country. I was impressed by the technically advanced visum supplied by Tanzania. It even has the holder's photo printed on it.

The trip

We left Johannesburg on the 13th, although only at 17:30. I had no definite destination in mind and after a pleasant drive found a place to sleep at 21:00.

Day 1

We were at Groblersbrug at 08:00 on Friday the 14th.



Early morning Waterberg

We were the only customers and the proceedings went silky smooth at both ends of the border. The customs list I prepared, containing a cryptic description of the contents of the car was of great help. I listed things very generically. I listed items as 'camping equipment', '3x cameras and associated equipment', etc. The only detail supplied was the vehicle engine and chassis numbers. This saved me from completing those frustrating border forms.

I have never been to Selebi Pikwe before and at the spur of the moment decided to drive to Francistown via Silebe Pikwe. Here I filled the fuel tank for the first time since leaving Johannesburg.

I initially planned to spend the night at Nata Lodge. We reached Nata early afternoon and decided to press on to Kasane, aiming for Torre Lodge.

The road between Nata and Kasane is badly potholed in places. Strange as it may sound, it actually breaks the boredom of the drive, forcing one to be alert and attentive. I am always surprised to the pace of development at Nata. Not long ago it seemingly consisted of nothing more than a fuel station.

The area was nice and green, the proof of the good rains evident in the plenty large pools of water alongside the road. We saw quite a few elephants.

We reached the Engen at Kazungula where I wanted to re-fuel at 17:30. The staff was having a huge argument as one of them apparently allowed a customer to leave without paying for his fuel purchase. They were trying to sort out which of them will be making up the cash shortfall...

I learned from a fellow customer that the border only closed at 18:00. I immediately decided to try my luck and promptly left for the border, only a few kilometres from there and left the quarrelling attendants without refuelling.

Our luck held out and managed to complete all formalities in time for the last ferry of the day at 18:00.

After clearing the tedious affairs on the Zambian side, we left for Livingston. We arrived at Maramba at 19:30 where we had a well deserved ice cold beer and a lovely meal in the restaurant.

Day 2

I was unable to purchase Zambian currency at the border the previous evening and none of the fuel stations were prepared to accept either dollars or credit cards. I was forced to wait for the banks to open.

Whilst waiting, we were approached by two street vendors. The exchange rate they offered, whilst not exactly bank rates, was quite decent and I decided to exchange \$200. Immediately after the transaction was done, they asked me if I rather could give them two \$50 notes as they wanted to share the money between them. They returned one of the \$100 notes I initially handed to them. I immediately noticed that this 'note' was a fake. The story became quite comical. When I informed them that the 'note' was a fake, this was strongly disputed. When I offered to accept the other \$100 note I handed them and replace that with two \$50 notes they refused, insisting that I should accept the proffered note.

The matter was only resolved when I insisted on calling the police to arrest them for trying to defraud me.

After this rather exciting start to the day, I refuelled and left Livingston, direction Lusaka.

At Lusaka I exchanged money at the Manda Hill shopping centre where the bureau de change is open, even on a Saturday afternoon.

After refuelling, we left Lusaka, direction Kabwe. We arrived in Kabwe, the Zambian Bible City at 16:00 and decided to call it a day. We spent the night at the Broken Hill Lodge.

Day 3

We left at 05:00 after a hearty English breakfast unexpectedly prepared by the very friendly staff at the Broken Hill Lodge.

At Kapri Mposhi I refuelled. From here on it is God's country. The excellent tarred road leads through exceedingly beautiful, undeveloped and sparsely populated areas.

It is a long drive to the Tanzania border at Tunduma, by far the most chaotic border post I have ever seen. It looks like one has just missed the end to parking competition for blind people. Trucks were parked everywhere, with more trying to drive in several different directions.



Tunduma

The entrance to the Zambian side is also the exit from the Tanzanian side, with only enough room for one vehicle to pass through at a time, but with three vehicles managing this feat simultaneously...

We were swamped by the usual horde of 'agents'. I needed to exchange money to obtain Tanzanian Shillings. I decided on a guy named MP.

MP turned out to be a great ally. He swiftly dispatched with the hordes of 'agents' offering their services and suggested that Marianne remains in the car, moving through the chaos to the Tanzanian side whilst I process all the formalities.

I finally managed to clear through at 18:00.

The Carnet de Passages I purchased beforehand from the AA in South Africa proved to be the best thing since sliced bread. It made procedures at the customs counter a mere breeze. It also served as the gate pass at the border posts. The moment the guards noticed that orange cover there was no problem at all.



En route to Mbeya

We pushed on from Mbeya where we arrived only after 20:00. It was a fascinating sight. For kilometres on end the road was lined with shops and teeming with people, all out and about to enjoy the coolness of the evening.

We needed a place to spend the night. We selected the Green Inn from the list provided by the GPS. A most unfortunate choice it turned out to be. I wanted to camp but the ablutions were filthy and Marianne opted for a room with en suite facilities. Fortunately the beer was cold. After the long day and the chaos at the border, the beer tasted like nectar.

Day 4

We departed in the direction of Iringa.

Tanzania is a beautiful country and the scenery outstanding.

At Iringa we decided to drive to Dodoma via Morogoro. A 500 km detour but much faster than the 350 km but 9 hour drive between Iringa and Dodoma on a very bad and virtually non-existent road.

The scenery is beautiful and one travels through the Mikumi National Park which is the northern most part of the famous Selous Game Reserve.

We decided to spend the night in Morogoro at the Hilux Hotel which has beautifully clean and air conditioned rooms. Morogoro is in a beautiful setting reminiscent of the Western Cape mountains. It is also a very hot place, less than 500 m above sea level.



Morogoro

Day 5

After breakfast, we left Morogoro, direction Dodoma on excellent tar. It was fantastic to see the Masai cattle herders along the road. Another day of beautiful scenery. This area has plenty interesting balancing rocks.

On this section we also reached the lowest point of our trip – only 423 m above sea level.

Dodoma is the capital city of Tanzania. It turned out to be a most unattractive and uninspiring place. I refuelled and departed in the direction of Nzega.

The road started out as excellent tar but after about an hour the tar stopped. The next section of about 150 km is still under construction and consists of a very badly potholed track. There are many heavy vehicles on this road. Some are making their way to Mwanza and others to Rwanda or Burundi. The trucks generally tend to drive at about 20 km/h with the smaller traffic weaving and bobbing around them at speeds ranging from 20 to 40 km/h and the occasional sprint up to about 60. These sprints always ended in hard braking to avoid the ever present huge pothole.



We did not make it to Nzega that night. We bush camped on a track leading to a missionary school. My last thought before falling asleep was an apology to the Landy for subjecting it to the type of punishment it had to endure for the last 5 hours or so.

Day 6

We started at the crack of dawn. Turned out we were only 30 kilometres from where the tarred road started again. This section of the road is newly built and in excellent condition. I realised that heaven is ...a good tarred road.

I refuelled at Nzega and for safety's sake again at Kahama.

The section of road from Kahama is noticeably older than the previous section of road and is beginning to show signs of wear. There are some potholes on this road.

This section is interesting to drive. Rice is the most popular produce with rice paddies lining the road for long sections on both sides. I almost expected an Asian to appear at any moment.

At Lusahunga we were faced with a choice. To either carry with the tarred road for another 100 km before turning north towards the Uganda border or to turn immediately in the direction of the border via Biharamulo. The road leading towards Biharamulo looked particularly bad.

I enquired from a minibus taxi driver which is the best route. He indicated the road via Biharamulo and off we went. The 60 km section to Biharamulo is bad and took almost 2 hours. Just outside Biharamulo the road leads through the Burigi Game Reserve. I did not see any animals.



Burigi Game Reserve

From outside the game reserve the road deteriorated even more as this section of the road is also under construction and the 'detour' is in a very bad condition. Luckily the road is completed from about 70 km before Bukoba. We reached Bukoba at about 19:30 and stayed in a hotel. We planned to camp but the hotel was closer and thus the choice was not difficult. At the Hotel we had excellent Tilapia, the fish of choice from Lake Victoria.

Day 7

Bukoba is 100 km from the Uganda border and we left in time to be at the border when it reopens at 08:00.

Approximately 30 kilometres before the border lies the little village of Kyaka, entirely insignificant but for the fact that it lies on the banks of the Kagera River which has its source somewhere in Rwanda and is presently considered to be the true source of the Nile.



Kagera River

We arrived at Mutukula, the border town, at 08:00 and the formalities on the Tanzania side was dispatched within a few minutes. The visums in our passports received particular attention. It was the first time that the officials have seen the new format visa.

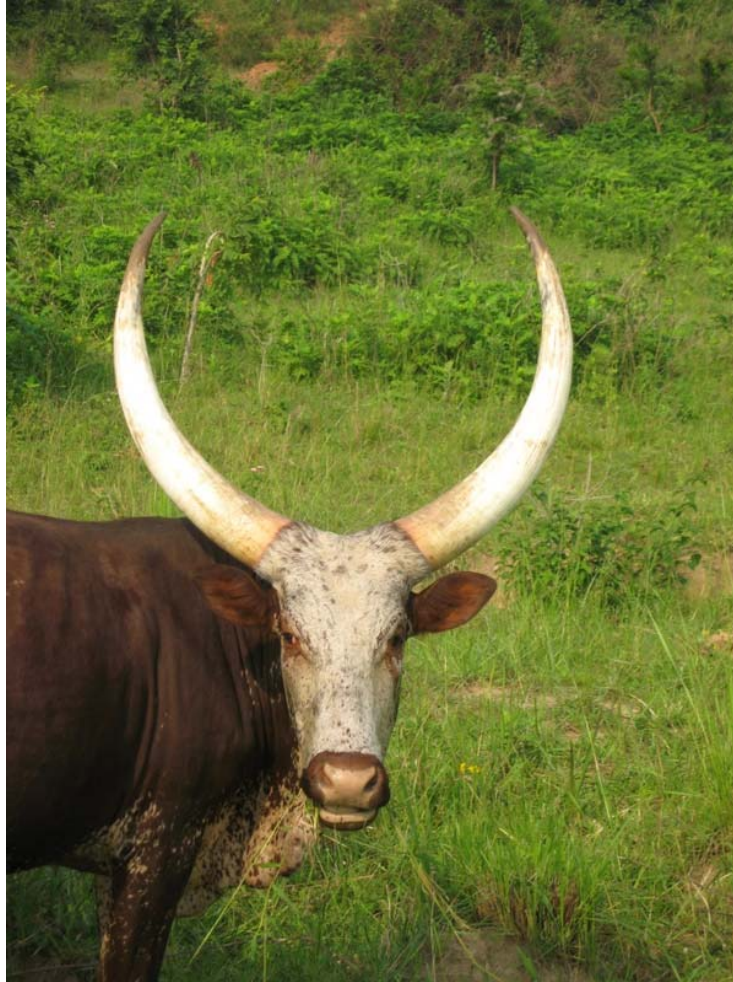
We walked to the Uganda side where the usual array of payments had to be made.

Uganda has a well organised system. Instead of making the required payments to the customs officials, they issue one with a voucher. One then is required to go to the local Stanbic Bank branch which is conveniently located on the ground floor of the customs building and deposit the money into the Uganda Government's bank account. The Bank issues a receipt and this receipt together with the Carnet serve as the gate pass. I also utilised the opportunity to obtain Uganda Shillings from the bank to the great dismay of an informal currency trader who was hoping that I would rather purchase Shillings from him.

The customs official responsible for completing the Carnet was an hour late for work Due to this it took us 2 hours to complete all the border formalities.

Finally we were in Uganda and on our way to Lake Mburo where our friends were already camped out for 2 days. I took a short cut to avoid Masaka and saved 70 km in the process.

We were soon met with the sight of Ancoke Cattle, famous for their almost ridiculously huge horns and favoured by the local cattle farmers.



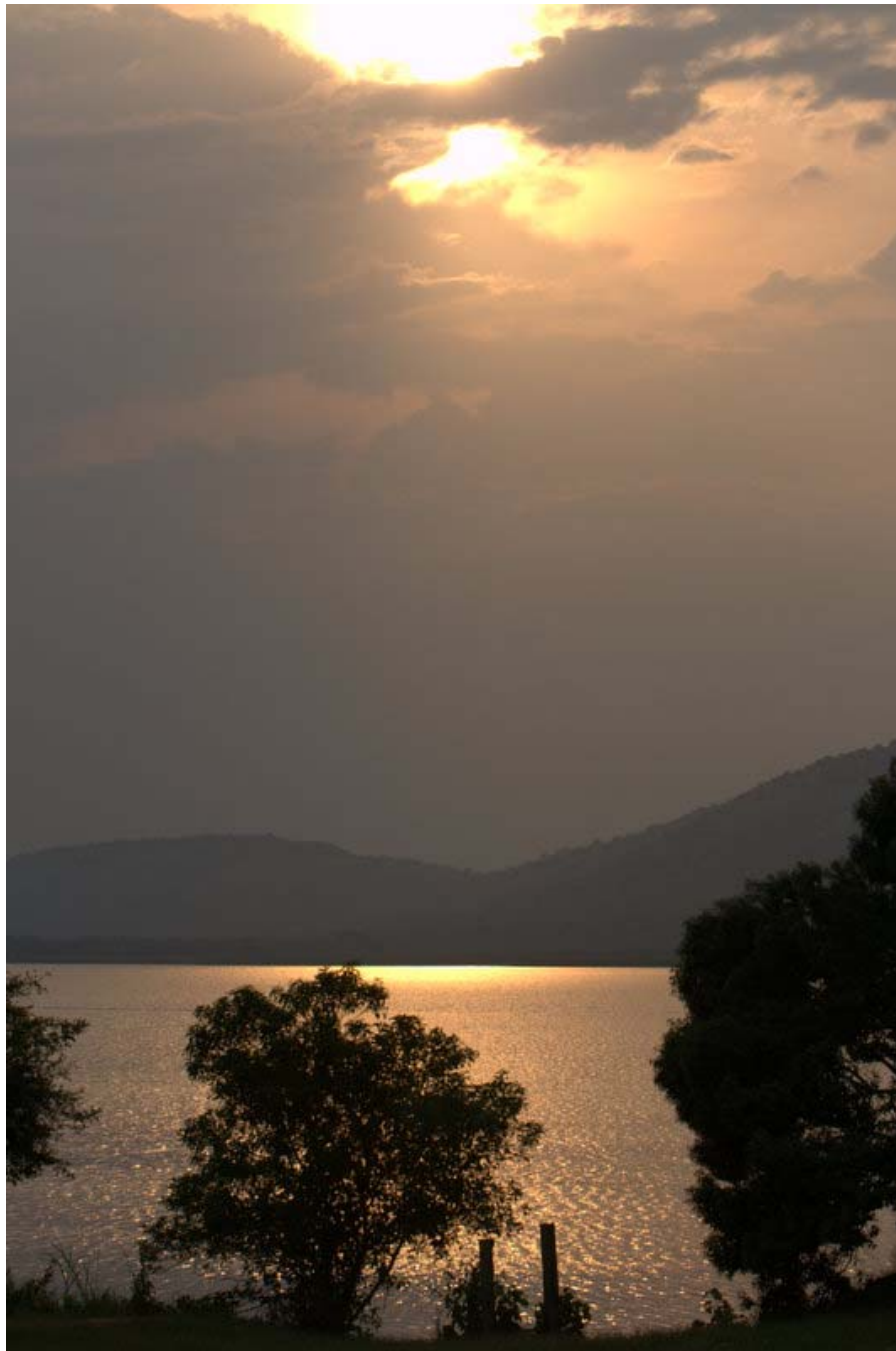
The entrance fees to Lake Mburo National Park were exorbitantly expensive. For two nights camping it cost \$130 for entrance to the park for the vehicle (\$35) and Marianne and me.

The Campsite at lake Mburo is situated on the lake side, offering beautiful views of the lake. The Restaurant also sells cold beer. The caretaker is pretty useless though. He failed to make fire to ensure that there is hot water for the showers. In fact, he failed to appear at all until we were almost ready to leave, but more about that later.

We spent the rest of the day chatting with our friends, simultaneously regaling them with the adventures of the trip so far and catching up on the latest news.

For dinner we had a braai. Our first of the trip and the chops, ribs and steaks were delicious. I opened an ice cold bottle of white wine. Thus ended another tough day in Africa.

Day 8



Lake Mbuoro

We awoke and lazed around the camp. After a week of hard driving, this was the first day that we did not have to drive.

We decided not to even go on a game drive!

We spent the day relaxing and catching up on lost sleep and conversation with the Schoemans.

We were paid a visit by an exquisite pair of Black Crowned Cranes.



On this evening we observed a Giant Forest Hog scrounging around the camp for almost an hour.

Day 9

We had an early breakfast and prepared to leave for the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park.

Whilst breaking camp, the caretaker made a guest appearance, hinting at receiving a tip. Maybe it was still the effects of all those hours spent behind the steering wheel or maybe it was the cold showers but I could not help but asking him what he thought entitled him to any token of gratitude from my side, especially since it is the first time in two days that he actually bothered to make an appearance and since I had to enjoy the invigorating pleasures of cold showers. It was then that he decided to curtail his chatter and abruptly left...

We decided to take an alternative to the recommended route over Kabale to Bwindi. This turned out to be a beautiful drive through exquisite Ugandan rural areas.

It soon became apparent why the words 'Uganda' and 'Banana' are often mentioned in the same sentence.



Matoke

Banana plants were everywhere. Several species of banana are grown, the most popular being Matoke. This is a green banana and is the staple food of millions of Ugandese. Matoke once cooked is very similar in appearance to cooked sweet potatoes and quite palatable with a nice sauce.



We arrived at Bwindi in the early afternoon and elected to set up camp at the Buhoma Community Camp.



This turned out to be a pleasant surprise. The ablutions were clean, the showers hot and the beer cold. The restaurant also served excellent meals at very good prices.

We were excited. Tomorrow is the day on which we hope to see the Mountain Gorillas.

Day 10

We met at the Park Office at 07:30 to receive a briefing on some Gorilla etiquette and the walk through the forest.

It transpired that three of the more than thirty family groups in Bwindi have been habituated to human presence. One is allocated a group when make the initial reservation and the name of the allocated group is written on the permit at the time of issue thereof. One has little choice in the matter. Not that it is of any significance as far as I could determine.

Groups are limited to eight tourists and four guides, two of whom are trackers. During the briefing it was explained that the group size was restricted to limit the potential exposure of the Gorillas to human disease to which they are allegedly very susceptible.

I could thus not help but to chuckle when immediately after the all-in-the-interest-of-the-gorillas speech, we were encouraged to each employ the services of a porter to “help the local community”. So much for the ‘group of eight’! This point was laboured to the extent that I was considering doing my civil duty. That was until the fee was mentioned: \$10. Suddenly my day pack did not feel heavy at all. This must have been a common feeling as nobody else employed a porter.

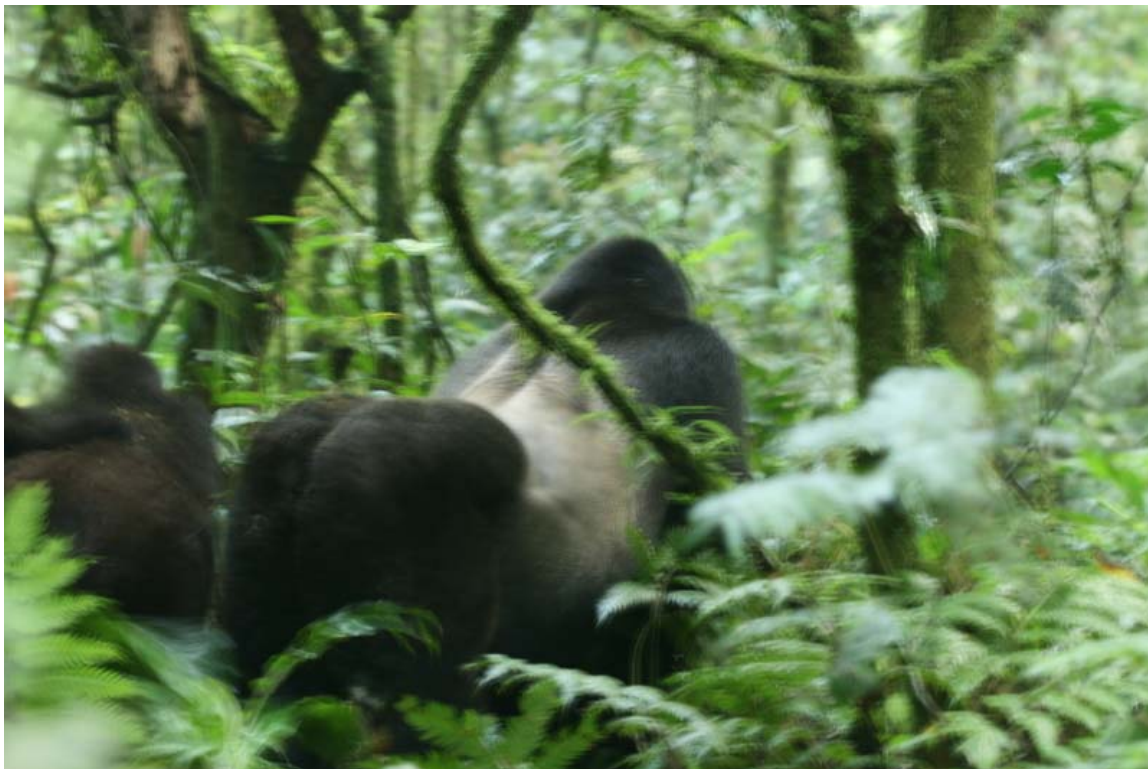
The trackers leave to locate the gorillas whilst the briefing is still in progress. They immediately head to the spot where the gorillas were last seen the previous day. From there, they physically track the gorillas to their new location and radio their position to the group leader.

We were fortunate. The gorillas actually moved closer to the park offices. After a twenty minute walk we were literally surrounded by gorillas.



It is a truly awesome experience.

The sight of the silver back is amazing. It is a huge animal, with arms thicker than my legs and a head so large that it has to be seen to be believed.



It is a moving experience, listening to the sounds of the gorillas peacefully feeding and continuously communicating with each other against the backdrop of the music of the forest. I was particularly impressed by the intermitted chest beatings by the younger males.



All too soon our allotted hour was over and we had to make our way back.

Back at the camp we still had most of the day ahead of us. We decided to do some housekeeping. I cleaned the Landy on the inside whilst Marianne repacked and reorganised the contents of some of the boxes. The water at Buhoma is of excellent quality and I took the opportunity to refill the water tanks.

Day 11

After a hearty breakfast at the restaurant we left Bwindi for the Ishasha section of the Queen Elizabeth National Park.

The road to Ishasha is bad. Fortunately it is only about 70 kilometres.



The attraction of Ishasha is threefold: The bush camps on the Ishasha River, the famous tree climbing lions and the distinct possibility of seeing a shoebill stork at Lake Edward.



The Ishasha River forms the border between Uganda and the DRC.



At the park office we were informed that due to 'security reasons' the bush camps were closed. We were directed towards a particularly unattractive camping area virtually next to the staff accommodation. We refused to accept this state of affairs and after some persuasion, were given the mobile telephone number of the officer in charge of park security. After speaking to this officer on the telephone, we were granted permission to use the bush camps.

There are two bush camps and after driving to both, decided on Camp 2. It is clear that Camp 1 is used as a picnic spot by the guides of the private lodges.



Game is plentiful in Ishasha. We noticed large herds of Cape Buffalo, Defassa's Waterbuck and Lichtenstein's Hartebeest.



Large heard of Hartebeest

Christmas Eve was spent in the traditional manner. We had a good meal and exchanged presents. I opened a good bottle of well chilled Champagne.

Day 12

In the morning we drove towards the Edward Flats and Lake Edward, hoping especially to spot a Shoebill. It was still to early I the dry season. The area around Lake Edward was still waterlogged to a large degree. The cotton soil and generally clay soil makes driving a challenge. There is a limit to the desire to spot a shoebill...



Edward Flats

In the afternoon we drove the 'south circuit' hoping to spot the famous tree climbing lions. We were successful. It feels wrong to see a grown lion sleeping in a tree.



It was a hot and stuffy day. Back at the camp I decided to throw caution to the wind and dipped into the river. Seeing that I was really enjoying myself and that I was not attacked by a crocodile (there is none) or trampled by a hippo (there are many) I was soon joined the others. The swim was wonderful!

Christmas Eve was spent in the traditional manner. We had a good meal and exchanged presents. I opened a good bottle of well chilled Champagne. A perfect end to a perfect day.