



Uganda | On a road trip along the upper reaches of the Nile, *Isabella Tree* and her family take in history, nature – and some serious rafting

Our open-air bathtub on an island in the White Nile has a grandstand view. I have the binoculars on the bath-rack next to the soap. In a dead tree above the rapids, my gaze meets the scrutiny of African fish eagles. A platoon of red-tailed monkeys with white whiskers swings through the trees above my head – our first glimpse of the primates for which Uganda is famous. There would be birdsong, and the crashing of fallen fruit, but the thunder of water drowns them out. You have to shout to be heard.

We are staying at Wildwaters Lodge, near the town of Jinja, and are here for a watery baptism to our family road trip around Uganda, a landlocked east African country that is, astonishingly, 25 per cent water by area. For much of our 1,600-mile odyssey in an eight-seater Toyota Land Cruiser, we'll be tracking the upper reaches of the Nile. So, naturally, we started with a pilgrimage to its "source", Ripon Falls, where Lake Victoria feeds the start of the river. Except the site, named after the president of the Royal Geographical Society by the Victorian explorer John Speke, was subsumed into Lake Victoria after a dam was built just downstream in 1954.

To capture the frisson of history, motorised canoes take tourists to a rocky outcrop in eddies emanating from the ghost of Ripon Falls. Jostling on the tiny wooden jetty, our 23-year-old daughter Nancy and her cousin Ari



finally made it to selfie position beneath a sign proclaiming the "Source of the Nile", the longest river in the world. No matter that this spot remains contentious, or that Speke himself died, or possibly killed himself, before his discovery was acknowledged; it felt momentous, this salute to Nilotic adventure – our starting post. "Never fear," Roberto flashes a winning smile. "We don't leave you in the water, and say, 'See you in Cairo.'" The safety briefing by our dreadlocked Ugandan raft guide the following day leaves Ari and Lia, our son Ned's 21-year-old girlfriend, who have never been white-water rafting, ashen-faced. "If you have a big brain and a big head, choose a big helmet. If you have a big brain and small head, chose a small helmet. But if you choose the wrong helmet, you have no brain at all."

Five miles north of Jinja, Bujagali is east Africa's adventure tourism capital and one of the world's top white-water rafting sites. From here the Nile flows 4,250 miles through 11 African countries north to the Mediterranean Sea. This is the river in teenage mode – impetuous, bottled up, prone to violent mood swings. Most of the rapids, with names such as Novocaine and Condolences, are rated five – the highest permitted for paying punters. The sign for Adrift, Bujagali's longest-serving rafting company, does not inspire confidence: a hazard-yellow triangle with a stick man being flung out of an inflatable. But the safety kayakers shadowing our progress, and Roberto himself, on the other hand, do. "If you're in trouble in the water," he says, "look for your nearest hero."

There is time, just, to take in the flash of pied kingfishers, branches pendent with vervet monkeys and weaverbird nests and the wake of African otters before the first rapid looms. "Forward paddle! Right side paddle! Backward paddle! GET DOWN!" As our bows meet the roiling waves we duck into the bottom of the raft, bracing ourselves for the rocks. It's only when we reach flat calm again, like a bundle of soaking clothes through a spin cycle, that we notice Roberto isn't with us. Moments later, he bobs up beside us and sheepishly hauls himself back into the inflatable. Even heroes, it seems, can lose their grip.

Improbable though it seems, in our life-vests and factor-50, we're in the slipstream of tribal tradition. For centuries, local leaders bounced down these rapids on a flimsy barkcloth to prove that Bugali, the spirit of the upper Nile, had possessed them – successful chiefs becoming known as Bujagalis. It's tempting to think a little of the Nile's spirit is entering us, too, as we leap over

the side for a cooling dip in a mercurial lull between Bad Place and Hypoxia.

The last uncontested Bujagali died in the 1970s without nominating an heir, though villagers believe the spirit entered a man who crossed the rapids while evading military arrest under Idi Amin. It's the first mention of Uganda's dictator from 1971 to 1979, the mythomaniac responsible for killing about 300,000 Ugandans and destabilising the country for decades – a trauma from which it is now, astonishingly, bouncing back. Michael Ohguchi, our guide and driver, a mountainous man in safari khaki, recalls the days when villagers would bolt for cover at the sight of a military hat or boots.

There's no sense, now, of those dark days. Today Uganda is one of the safest, stablest nations in Africa. We strike out on our mighty expedition on a day of rest, with processions sashaying to church in their Sunday best and young men washing their motorbikes ("boda-bodas") in the rivers. Our route covers a triangulation of the headline sights of Uganda – from Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary up to Mur-



chison Falls National Park; turning south to Semliki Wildlife Reserve, Queen Elizabeth National Park and Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, and finally east to lovely Mihingo Lodge in Lake Mburo National Park, and back to Entebbe.

Life gravitates roadside, spinning us a flash-by kaleidoscope of entertainment – quirky trade stores ("Darling Hair Additions", "Cleanliness Next to Godliness Drycleaners"); endearing primary schools ("Happitots") and paint shops ("Colour Your World"); the self-deprecating ("Plan B Guesthouse") and the bewildering ("This Land is Not For Sale" – plus telephone number); the unambiguous (solar power – "Chase the Darkness Away", "Talk & Work" mobile phones) and the euphemistic ("Organic Chemicals Ltd").

The road itself is Jekyll and Hyde, careening between the future and the past. An ostentatious new highway red-

Clockwise from main: driving in Uganda; Isabella Tree with Ronald 'Rhino' Sempira, a guide at Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary; searching for white rhinos at the sanctuary; at the top of Murchison Falls; a chance sighting of a leopard at the Queen Elizabeth National Park

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olent of Chinese investment catapults you on to a dusty track, and 100 miles later you're thrown back on to new surfaces. Neither is a cushioning ride. On the tarmac, speed bumps rear up like macadamised waves, and the dirt tracks are ravaged by erosion. It's known as the Ugandan massage and it's not long before we realise that the short straw is over the rear wheels. The girls say the potholes are, quite literally, booby traps and you need a sports bra to sit here.

But the distractions more than compensate for the bounce, and we're already bonding with the road and our intrepid vehicle. We can pause in a patch of forest to watch colobus monkeys with streaming white capes and long white tails. Papyrus swamps produce sightings of malachite kingfishers, their minuscule bodies the weight of empty matchboxes. We can boil eggs in hot springs and eat our picnic on a kind person's lawn. Then there's the dazzling reward of Rolex. Not the Swiss luxury watch, but a pun on "roll-eggs" – a golden omelette sizzling on a street griddle, then wrapped in a soft chapatti and a page of The Daily Monitor. The ultimate takeaway breakfast.

Beneath the thunderous spray of Murchison Falls – our northernmost objective – we toast our river guide Stanley Kengeraho (of course) with Nile Specials from the cool box. With eyes like a bateleur eagle, he's found us black crakes and purple swamp hens, steered us through spluttering pods of hippos and punted us to within five feet of a basking crocodile longer than our aluminium skiff. And now, moored near the site where Hemingway crashed in a Cessna (more confirmation of the virtue of a road trip), we've crept to within four feet of a pair of rock pratincoles.

As we glide back downriver, a skein of sacred ibis arrow into the gathering sunset. The necks of giraffes are angled on the horizon like tower cranes. It's hard to imagine anywhere more abundantly peaceful but Stanley is troubled. The elephants here, still traumatised from ram-

pant poaching in the Amin era, now face subterranean threats. They are driven mad, he says, by the seismic vibrations of oil exploration. The Great Rift Valley along the western border of Uganda contains a billion barrels of crude and the race is on to extract them. There'll soon be a bridge over this stretch of river, an oil pipeline beneath it and dozens of drill sites in Murchison National Park itself. He's worried about the impact on rebounding wildlife and tourism.

Tourism now accounts for 7.3 per cent of GDP and rising, but a growing population and demands for natural resources are heaping pressure on national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. Streams of schoolchildren have cheered us every stretch of the way, jumping and waving as though our dusty Land Cruiser is continuously crossing a finish line. Half the country's population is under 16; six children are born to every woman. It's the product, in part, of an enduring cult of machismo, articulated ostentatiously



in the herds of Ankole cattle we encounter grazing in the national parks, their priapic horns up to eight feet long. Cattle and children maketh the man.

Sebo lies back, legs crossed, arms folded, like the venerable patron of a gentlemen's club. Just feet away from us on the ground, he seems entirely oblivious to our clicking cameras and excited whispers. Occasionally he opens his eyes, yawns, scratches his belly, then stretches back contentedly on his bed of leaves. We've seen seven species of primate on our road trip so far – from thuggish olive baboons (the "welcoming committee" at every national park) and forest-dwelling blue monkeys, with their puffed-out cheeks and princely diadems, to Uganda mangabey and red colobus. But nothing is as stirring as this wild encounter with our closest cousin, the chimpanzee.

Thirty-five years old – the park warden Memory tells us – Sebo isn't driven by ego like the younger, stick-throwing males, relegated to nests in the trees above us. He emanates composure and self-respect. Ever since Jane Goodall's observations in the 1960s, naturalists have come to accept that chimpanzees, like us, have personalities. But it's more than this that makes our crouched homage to this great ape so compulsive. His fingers and fingernails, the creases around his eyes, his ears, are ours. He has more in common with us than with any other primate. The reality of our shared DNA, double-helixing among the haunting calls of hornbills and emerald cuckoos in Kibale forest, is profoundly moving. This reunion is personal.

Ahead of us lie the delights of Semliki Lodge, with pennant-winged nightjars fluttering up from the track on evening safaris and, in the marshes, shoebills – a primeval-looking bird with a face like a clog and a penchant for lungfish. There'll be a brush with a leopard in Queen Elizabeth National Park and we'll even hike out to see a family of gorillas in the Impenetrable Forest of Bwindi – a calf-searing trek from the sublimity of Clouds Lodge, the crowning celebration for Ned's 21st birthday.

But this encounter with Sebo seems a pivotal moment. That stirring of human cognition. It feels as though we've driven through the red dust of dawns and dusks to the solar plexus of equatorial Africa, to the source of things, the bubbling up of its greatest river and now the fount of our own chromosomes – a close encounter with our own primogenial past.

Isabella Tree's latest book is *'Wilding'* (Picador)

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