



Every Side of Albert

A recollection of Lake Albert, Over the Last 30 Years

by Keith McAllister



Jackson's Hartebeest

I can recollect seeing the Ugandan side of Lake Albert for the first time as it happened only a few years ago. We drove down the ridge in the back of a beat-up Land Rover slowly progressing towards the valley floor. The land opened up and the way became clearer and less leisurely as we started speeding towards the lodge. Turacos had submitted territory to the Weaver Birds as the land turned from forest to brush and then savannah. Ugandan Kob and Oiribi became common along the roadside as we headed west. In front of us the land would fall away to the shores of Lake Albert.

When I was a little boy I experienced the mirror image of the same scene. By this I mean that I grew up on the other side of the lake, and remember having to look to the east to see Lake Mobutu, as it was known then.

We would have left Bunia and travelled to Bogoro to picnic near the edge of the escarpment. Our family would be travelling in the sky blue Range Rover that my father had brought to Zaire (present day Democratic Republic of Congo). It was a perfect place to look out across the Simlik Valley towards Uganda on the other side.

Be it from the Ugandan or the Congolese side of the lake you still get the feeling of looking into the abyss and seeing one of Africa's great lakes lowering itself into a sun-baked depression a couple of hundred miles north of the equator. Like an old bull hippopotamus refusing to leave the last damp muck in a drying landscape, this lake sits in its own hollow and remains defiant against the heat. At its northern reaches the waters rumble at Murchison Falls but for the most part it sleeps, regardless of time, war or rebellion.

While I was at university I read about the United Nations involvement as this part of Congo in the weekly reports in the back-pages of the international news.

There were pictures of tanks bulldozing over the land full of my childhood memories and articles illustrated with images of bloodshed and despair. In some photographs I could recognise where the troops were in relation to favourite shops, the dusty market, a road to a friend's house, or what might be left of the expatriate hangouts.

In the old days there was the Greek Club, where we would sometimes take dinner as a family. Walking past old men playing backgammon on the porch we would filter through to the main room and await the set menu. It was a funny collection of foods to be honest. We would have Halloumi cheese (which I found, half-a-life later, was actually Cypriot and not Greek), Congolese grilled chicken and salad laced with a powerful vinaigrette. But as one of the few eating establishments in Bunia it was a pure delight and we relished every visit.

It was like living in an extract from a novel by V. S. Naipal. Traders of various nationalities and tribes or villages came to this place to live and work. Hawkers



Bird at Kabwoya



Uganda Kob

traded small packets of gum, plastic combs, peanuts, single cigarettes and anything else costing a handful of filthy notes. The market was full of groceries scattered across sack cloth along with pyramids of tomatoes and vegetables. Here and there wooden-box kiosks selling batteries and various packets and sachets would encase a shop owner, dealing through a wire mesh at the front with passersby. In the centre of the whole affair was a tin roofed brick building around which there was the stench of butchered meat and the buzz of constant flies. But it brought beef, goat and sun-dried fish to the surrounding communities.

In 2009 I went back to the land around Bunia and Bogoro and saw, to my horror, how this beautiful and pristine land of my childhood and been marauding rebel groups. Thousands of refugees huddled under the mango trees and chopped down the undergrowth for camp fires. Every garish colour of tarpaulin could be seen clashing with the lush green of the invaded forests. I took the photographs and documented the stories and interviews

I needed and flew back to Nairobi shortly afterwards, with any sense of nostalgia for 'Zaire' wholly dispelled.

Even now when I sit in the deckchairs of Lake Albert Safari Lodge, on the Uganda side, and sip at a cold beer or gin and tonic I cannot help but think of both sides of this great expanse of water and what history has encircled it. I cross one old hunting boot over the other and face the Blue Mountains across the water and on the fringes of Eastern Congo. I lay slouched down in the canvas chair until I am as close to being horizontal as I can get without falling off the seat altogether. And I think of that mighty lake and what it means.

My grandparents had to cross this lake in the early 1950s to get to the port of Kasenyi by paddle steamer, to land at the docks and step foot in the Belgium Congo. In 1964 my family was then rescued by Mike Hoare's Wild Geese farther to the east in Stanleyville (Kisangani) and since then for every happy occasion we have enjoyed in this beautiful country we have anticipated the extreme opposite. >



outdoor adventure



Uganda Kob on the top of a ridge

However, these days the land at Kabwoya is magical. It rolls in places and stretches out along the cliff top which is cut sharply by the lapping tide of the lake itself. Even to drive out from the lodge with nothing more in mind than sighting in a rifle you feel like you are in a little paradise far from every worry.

Several years ago reports of the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) came through on the news about the Ugandan side of the lake. And I would think about this big old lake, and felt strangely comforted by the knowledge that it was too formidable to be affected by the brutality. The old Kiboko (Swahili for hippo) would still be wallowing the years away.

Luckily it has indeed endured.

In 2012 I was at Lake Albert and I stood and watched the day come to a close, with the Blue Mountains hiding the orange glow of the setting sun. I was back and the lake was still there. This trip marked for me a turn of events. I was off to the lands at the northern stretch of the lake with my good friend, and fellow contributor to H&S, Cameron Hopkins. We were volunteering to try and make an impact on a Wildlife Reserve in East Madi, on behalf of Bruce Martin and the Uganda Wildlife Authority.

We stayed at the lodge for a few days in preparation for the long and arduous task ahead. Then we spent days fighting with poachers' snares, and building bridges and clearing roads to open up the areas of East Madi for game hunting. The poaching was just too prolific and a few months later the whole area was deemed unsafe and the operation got canned. It was a massive disappointment, to not only have wasted our time with the effort but to also be forced to leave the wildlife unguarded. It



B&W image of some Congolese refugee children

had the potential for being a great wildlife reserve and now I am sure it has been set back several years in our efforts to try and encourage the wildlife numbers to return.

Subsequently, whenever I am in Uganda I head straight for Kabwoya. These regular visits have helped rekindle good memories and offer the chance to appreciate the beauty and piece found so regularly in this little pocket of paradise.

Lake Albert Safari Lodge (at Kabwoya) takes bookings all year round for passing travellers and tourists, but you will not find a better place to hunt Uganda Kob anywhere else in the world. The record books do not lie and they will testify that a large percentage of the top Kob trophies taken over the past few years have come from this block. Additionally it offers Jackson's Hartebeest, Nile Bushbuck, Oribi, Nile Buffalo and few lesser trophies. Be warned, however, that when you take your trophies back home from the taxidermist a few months after your trip, it might just be the lake and countryside you want reminding of more. And that is why I find myself going back regularly.

I might grab a rifle and jump into the open-top Land Rover. Heading out to some secluded spot to just cut the engine where the land rolls gently on the escarpment. In the late afternoon the Kob idle across the plain feeding as they go and the birds sing in the bushes and trees.

Resting the rifle on my shoulders I walk out a little way from the vehicle and immediately feel so much at home.

It is stimulating to walk through the bush with a shouldered rifle, equipped with a good hunting knife and well-worn boots. For me none of it is necessary, as I could walk through this land un-armed and dressed in a tailored suit if I felt the urge. The only thing to worry about is Buffalo and running out of water, and both can be avoided with experience and a little bit of forward planning.

Sometimes I leave the rifle in the vehicle to venture out short distances without the burden. I used to arm myself to the teeth with spare ammunition, but over time I have just reached for the rifle and left three bullets parked in the magazine, with an empty barrel and chamber to



Fishing Village on the shores of Lake Albert



Oribi

face skyward. There is really no need for anything more than that. It is too light to stop a charging buffalo at any rate, and is, for me, just part of the romance of walking through the African bush.

When the land was first gazetted as a wildlife concession and Lake Albert Safari Lodge was first built, there were only a few hundred animals, of varying species, hidden in cracks in the landscape. Now, without the harassment from herds of cattle and poachers' snares, there are literally thousands of antelope and almost one hundred buffalo residing on the reserve. All paid for by hunting and tourism, proving that wildlife conservation still has its success stories.

The Bushbuck, which can be seen on the borderlines of clumps of trees and bushes, are stunningly beautiful, the Kob and Oribi litter the open grasslands, and the warthog and duiker fill the gaps in between. Jackson's hartebeest take to the higher ground near the escarpment and baboons patrol every mile they feel the need to. It is a safe haven for all of these animals and home to hundreds of species of birdlife. It is a little bit of Classic Uganda contained in a few hundred square miles.

At sundown I sit on the Land Rover or in a deck chair at the lodge to view the distant land where I grew up. I can see the land's relief from across the lake and imagine which peaks and troughs of the hillside might hide Bunia or Bagoro, or where the flat lake shore might support the old docks at Kasenyi.

At these times, my 'hunting' knife is unsheathed and used as nothing more than a bottle opener and I take a loving draw on a bottle of CLUB or NILE SPECIAL beer. The world spins unnoticed and the afternoon softens to amber. No worries are to be had here.

When I was a boy and not at boarding school at Rethy Academy I would have sat on a large boulder on the Congolese side of the lake and drank from a bottle of warm coke. Sometimes I imagine myself as a boy looking out across the lake, when I am looking now towards the Congo.

If someone had told me when I was a boy what that lake would mean to me as a man I do not think I would have been surprised - for I have always loved this lake. [h&s](#)

KMc.