

Giancarlo Velmarch

Travel and wildlife photographer

January - April 2022

Expedition to the Pearl of Africa

From a photographer solo traveler

Traveling to Africa is every nature enthusiasts dream, but for a young wildlife photographer it was a goal to achieve. For months I did my research, Africa is a big continent with hundreds of spectacular destinations, where to go was my first challenge. When we think of Africa our minds go directly to South Africa, Kenya and Tanzania but I knew there had to be something else, somewhere where wildlife is still pristine and untouched, where a traveler can go and really discover and live unique experiences viewed only by few. That is when I discovered Uganda, the untouched and unique pearl of Africa.

My journey starts in San Diego, California where my thirty four hour multi connection flight into Entebbe, Uganda started. Being my first time crossing the Atlantic and traveling by myself there was a mixture between enthusiasm and nervousness, even though I knew everything was going to be fine I had a long journey in front of me.

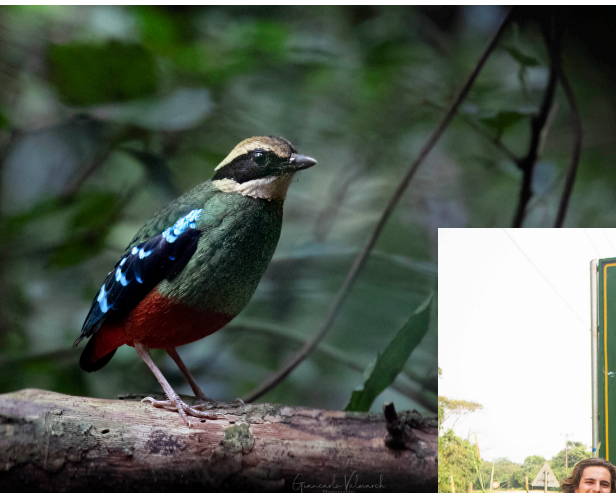
Once I landed in Entebbe I could feel all of these mixed feelings starting to kick in. I took a deep breath and started walking to the gate, as soon as I walked out of the airport I sensed there was something different in the air, this was my first glances of the ancient continent.

This adventure won't be the usual African safaris, I had a route idea in mind that I was going to venture as soon as I arrive to Kampala. On the 28th day of January 2022 my expedition started, my first destination was Kibale National Park. To get there my plan was taking a bus, it was strange for everyone seeing a muzungu (how Ugandans call white tourists) taking public transport but for me it was not big deal, the bus stopped in Fort Portal another "big city" but at least I was closer to my destination I just had to take a taxi to Kibale. Taxis in Uganda are quite interesting, they stop as many times as they need and give ride to as many people as they can. In my case I had my bag pack on my legs, my tripod in between them and in addition the car had enough seats for 5 people, at some point we where 9 and I have no clue of how there where 6 guys in the back seats.



Me in the Ugandan taxi with 3 people in front and 6 on the back seats

In Bigodi the small town right outside Kibale I met the local guides and the local people of the town making good relationships and even friends along the way. Kibale is known as the capital of primates of the world and with good reason, you can find up to thirteen species of primates in this small area in addition to that there are over 350 species of birds. One in particular seen almost only in Kibale the Green Breasted Pitta (*Pitta reichenowi*). In addition I had the community experiences of the hand made coffee from the town and the banana brewing with which they make some beverages like banana wine and gin



Green breasted Pitta



The Bigodi birders group outside Kibale



When anyone thinks of Africa, what comes to mind? Lions, Elephants, Hippos? Well here in The Pearl of Africa there is one place that would answer all those questions, Queen Elizabeth national park. This was my next destination, from Bigodi I needed to go back to Fort Portal and from there take a Matatu (A Ugandan taxi van) to take me all the way to the African savanna in QENP. As a young naturalist I always dreamed about watching elephants in the wild African savanna and on my first day in QENP that dream came true.



African Savanna Elephant



Me inside the Matatu

QENP is the largest national park in Uganda with a mayor biodiversity. QENP occupies an estimated 1,978 square kilometers and it is home to 95 species of mammals and over 650 bird species. The park is famous for its tree-climbing lions seen nowhere else in the world.

I stayed in a small town right in the middle of the park called Katunguru, where I had the opportunity to talk with the locals, eat in local restaurants and even play soccer with some of the kids of the village. It was strange for everyone seeing a muzungu interacting with people of the community and I loved it.

It was a unique opportunity possible just because I was solo traveling open to any type of new experiences and staying in places where not many tourists know about.



The elephants all across the continent are evolving with a very this interesting adaptation of being born and living tusksless to eradicate the poaching of their own specie for the ivory. This recent adaptation is something scientists have started to see only for the past 70 years, a very recent proof of evolution happening in front of our eyes.

One of my main goals in Africa was watching and photographing the tuskless elephants, ever since I knew about these recent adaptation it filled my mind with questions, questions no one can answer yet because there is little to no research about this changes and new behaviors in our beloved African symbol.



Mother tuskless elephant raising her young without her important pair of tools

At my next destination there is one of the most popular experiences to be done in the whole world, this activity is such of a one of its kind hundreds of people come all over the world every year just for this... yes, I am talking about Gorilla tracking. But first I need to get to Bwindi Impenetrable forest, I have heard it is a though road and a tricky one if taking public transport.

My first challenge was taking a Ugandan taxi from Katunguru to a town 4 hours away called Kihihi. My second challenge was taking a Bora bora (small motorcycle who works as a taxi transporting people) from Kihihi all the way up to Buhoma, the entrance to Bwindi impenetrable forest with was an hour bora bora drive. My only thoughts where how am I going to do that with my two big back packs and my tripod.

It worked just fine, it was an interesting journey but I got safely to Buhoma.



My time living in Buhoma was full of new cultural, natural and community experiences. In my time there I met some of the bird and community guides in the areas meeting so many people that I now can call fiends. There is so much in Biwindi that most of the tourist don't know about. Like the community walk and cultural performances an amazing walk visiting a typical homestead, a visit to the local school, the traditional healer and a banana beer brewery organized by the local community. Also for me one of the most interesting and unique tours in the pearl of Africa is the Batwa cultural experience visiting the community of the tribe that not so long ago lived inside the park hunting and surviving in the wilderness of Bwindi.



My visit to a school that with a group of people we donated sports uniforms to the kids.



My encounter with a baby mountain gorilla

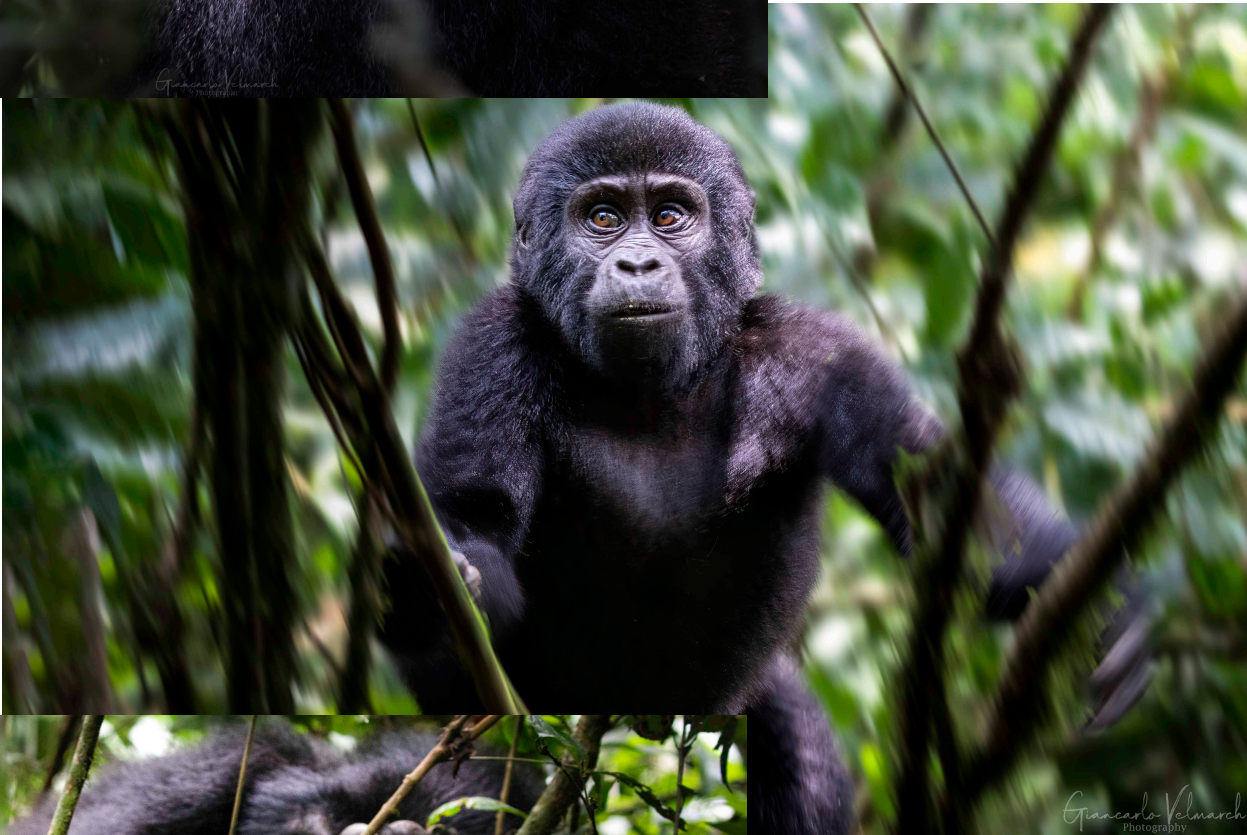
On the 23rd of February 2022 I accomplished a dream that I had since I was a young nature lover. This was the day I went Gorilla tracking, but I realized the tracking experience is not just being surrounded by 8 of these magnificent creatures. But all the process from going in the pick-up truck with the rangers, to following the trackers that are on the look out for your specific gorilla group to hiking for a couple hours thru (as the name says) an impenetrable forest. It is just an unforgettable experience watching the silverback protecting its family and the baby gorillas playing around just as us humans will do. It is just magical to be around this specie so strong yet so fragile.



Giancarlo Velmarchi
Photography

Baby Mountain gorillas playing and enjoying the time while their parents were sleeping and resting.

Photographs taken on my first expedition to Uganda February 2022



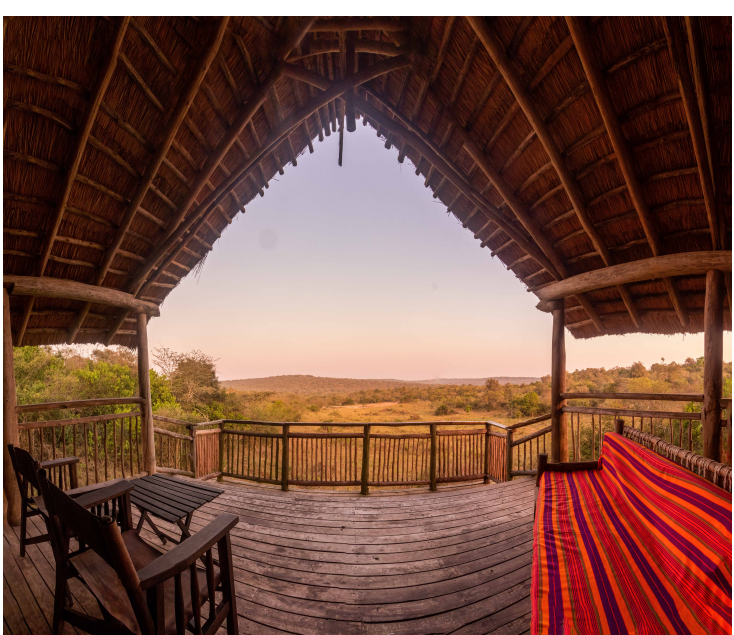
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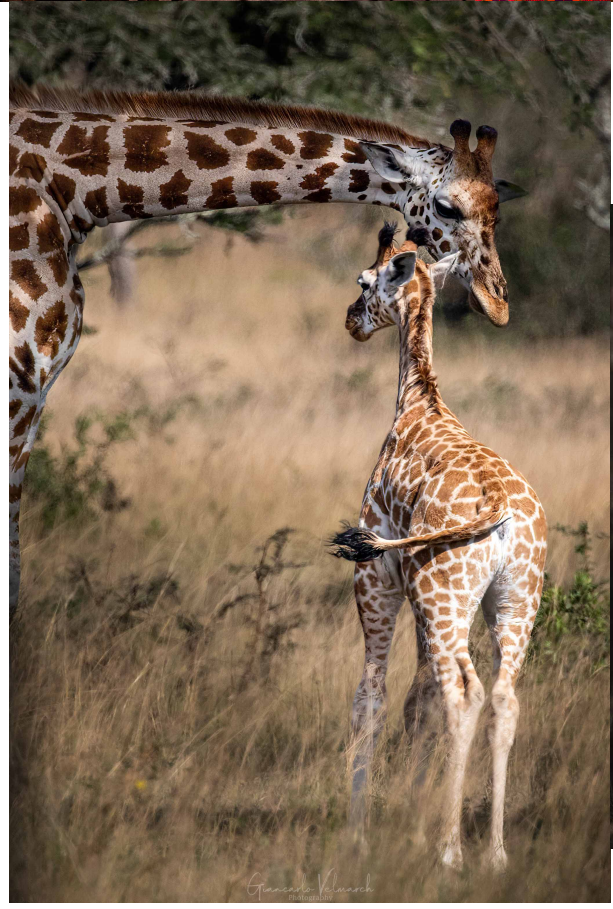
My next stop is Lake Mburo National Park, I had high hopes of this savanna national park for multiple reasons but mainly because I am so excited to see zebras and giraffes which is possible here in Lake Mburo. I am also excited because this is one of the only parks in all of Africa where you can actually walk within the park boundaries, it is possible to do a nature walk

with a ranger mainly because there is no elephants and only one lion which is rarely seen.

The view of my cabin at Mhingo Lodge



Leopard seen in Lake Mburo NP



Mother and baby giraffe

Heard of zebras analyzing the danger

It was for sure a unique experience going with a Bora bora inside the park looking for giraffes and bird species. I made friends with one of the rangers who was willing to drive me inside the park with his motorcycle. It was harder than I thought it was going to be but we managed to find the giraffes and walk along them for a couple hours. For sure something not possible to do in most of the parks on the continent.

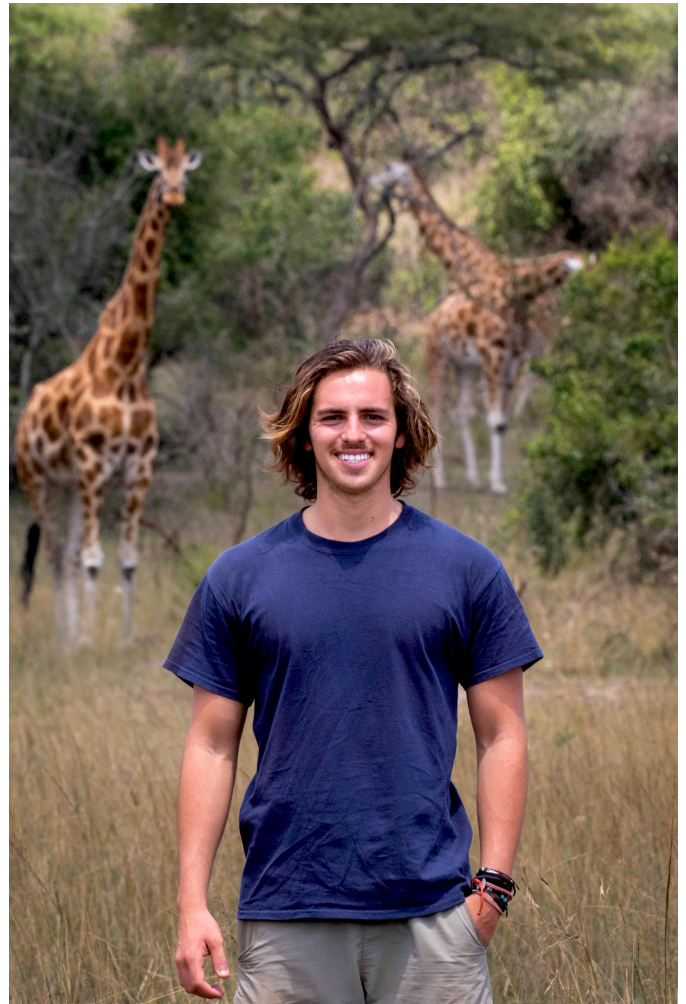


My friend Cylus the ranger and driver

The past days I had been working with another photographer, Alex Braczkowski setting up camera traps to identify and count the number of leopards in the park. I have done this work before in Mexico but

it was really interesting doing it again in Africa capturing not only leopards but also some big game that passed by. On my last night in Lake Imburo I was invited by Ralph Schenk, the owner of Mhingo Lodge to stay in exchange for photography content for its web page and social media.

An absolutely incredible experience staying at this magnificent place with Ralph and Alex.



Me on a unique experience walking among giants

As a solo traveler I've always seen the articles and information about the good stuff and the pretty stuff of the place or country I am traveling to so here I will write about some things I saw in my experience traveling on a budget around the Pearl of Africa.

I come from the tropical coast of Mexico where I am used to mosquitos almost everywhere but in Uganda in some parts it is a real problem, make sure you bring enough mosquito repellent with you.

If you are traveling with a tour operator you might not have this problem but you should know about it. This might be really helpful if you are traveling on a budget or for along period of time. In Uganda it is normal for us as tourists to get charged different prices than what a local person will have so when you are buying groceries at a local store or a bus ticket make sure you know the exact prices of things. Sometimes it happens you end up paying twice or even triple the price for a taxi ride or a meal. I really understand the local people raising the prices for the tourist, first of all they usually don't know and secondly most of the tourist coming to Africa might have enough money to pay extra which will probably make the day of the seller.

I did not have any issues with insecurity traveling around the country. I felt very safe even though I had all my camera equipment with me at all times, but still make sure you know where your personal items are located at all times. If you are a backpacker make sure when traveling by bus to have your bag pack with you at all times, sometimes you might have to buy an extra ticket for your bag (if it is too big) but it is worth it because sometimes bags get misplaced into other buses or bags fall of the buses so make sure it stays with you.

But most important of all make sure to live the local experience. Must tourist in Africa go to the touristic attractions and destinations missing out in some incredible and unique hidden gems by not letting their guide know they want to live the true African life by brewing your own banana gin in Bigodi or making your own hand made coffee in Bwindi.



Hand picked coffee experience in Buhoma

My journey was coming to an end when I was heading back to Kampala from Lake Mburo. This time my transportation was not going to be challenging because Alex offered me a ride back to the capital as he was driving over there that same morning. This was the end of my incredible expedition of about one month traveling around the Pearl of Africa. I know there is still too much to be discovered here in Uganda. Many more new adventures will take place in this unique country.

I am so grateful to have the opportunity of traveling around Uganda. One thing that I won't be able to forget was my misperception of the people before coming here. I thought it was going to be a challenge dealing with the locals but here in Uganda is different, everybody is so friendly and so willing to help anybody who needs help. It does not matter if you are a muzungu or a local. I will forever be impressed by the kindness of the people of this country.

Thank you Uganda

