

golden ticket

Each time you revisit an old haunt, it is interesting to note how it has changed. And when the gap is fifty years, it is all the more pronounced.

WORDS AND PICTURES BY CRAIG S HARRISON

The massive silverback Malaya stoops over a rivulet in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, much of his weight supported by a brawny right arm. He repeatedly plunges his left hand into the clear brook, bringing the back of his hand to his lips so he can slurp some water into his mouth. This is extraordinary. Food such as bamboo shoots provides most of the moisture these animals need. The eminent biologist George Schaller studied them for 20 months and never saw a gorilla drink.

The 28-year-old patriarch of the Makara troop, which includes four moms and four youngsters, is magnificent. I am much too close, but our guides counselled standing our ground if one approaches. I watch, just downstream, and record the moment with my Nikon.

In December 1971, I had climbed Mount Visoke in Rwanda searching for gorillas. While I found spoor — nests and dung — I failed to see or even hear any apes. Hiking the trail into Volcanoes National Park, I had encountered the soon-to-be-famous researcher Dian Fossey, who opposed gorilla tourism and essentially ordered me off “her” mountain. I had a permit from the park authorities and ignored her.

My second gorilla experience, in January 2022, was hours long and almost exceeded my septuagenarian capabilities. Seeing gorillas was the apex of my return journey to Uganda after a lapse of half a century, and I was accompanied by my wife Marina and friends Vince and Lise Ciolino.

On my first visit I had explored most of Uganda’s national parks, entering Uganda without a valid visa soon after Idi Amin’s coup, but fortunately God protects the young and simpletons. Uganda was part of my year-long African adventure that I recounted in my book *Dreams of*

a Vanishing Africa: A 1970s Transcontinental Trek.

At that time, handheld gizmos that could instantaneously communicate across the globe were science fiction. Digital cameras and Vibration Reduction telephoto lenses would not be invented for decades. I travelled on a shoestring, lived out of a backpack, journeyed in decrepit vehicles and often slept in dodgy locations. By so doing, I experienced intimately the fabric of African societies.

This time, our group enjoyed our creature comforts. We stayed in upscale lodgings and celebrated gin o’clock for sundowners with Uganda Waragi and tonic. Though we had suitable transportation, our Landcruiser’s rear axle got mired in mud, and a week later a wheel flew off on a particularly potholed road. A pontoon on our launch on the Albert Nile leaked so badly that the crew distributed life preservers. Uganda remains unpredictable.

In 1971 guides were uncommon and unaffordable for me. Now they were instrumental in locating predators, endangered shoebills in a papyrus swamp, and in identifying elusive birds. Without trackers in Bwindi and

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Kibale parks, or the Uganda Wildlife Authority taking decades to habituate troops of apes to human presence, we would never have experienced the exhilaration of spending time with gorillas or chimpanzees.

CHANGES

Since 1971 Uganda’s population has quadrupled and now exceeds 45 million. Kampala’s daytime population is 2.5 million, over half of which commutes from its suburbs. The surging populace seems hazardous to its wildlife and to the quality of human life.

Yet the country’s ambiance remains mostly unchanged after half a century. Our Landcruiser rattled over corrugated murrum tracks in northern Uganda between Kidepo Valley and Murchison Falls parks. Crimson ribbons of road still meander through verdant subsistence banana farms. We passed settlements of round daub-and-wattle *manyattas*. Rural schools now seem more common, even ubiquitous. Many board students, and advertise on →

Opposite: Top row In 1971 the author drove around Uganda in a rickety Renault, camping where possible (here in Kampala); Craig S Harrison (right) and Merle Gering at the equator, Albert National Park, in 1971. **Middle row** A rare sighting of a gorilla scooping water to drink, in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest last year; At the equator in 2021, the author (far right) with his wife Marina with friends Vince and Lise Ciolino. **Bottom row** Market stalls are a familiar sight as you drive round rural Uganda; *Boda boda* motorcycles, used widely across the country for transporting people or an assorted range of commodities



roadside billboards. Throngs of uniformed youngsters smiled and waved as we passed. Ugandans are welcoming, a common feature of rural Africa that remains unchanged.

In the west and south, traditional thatch and grass huts are being replaced with red-brick homes roofed with tile. Clay bricks are fabricated locally in small wood-fired kilns that are common sights along the roadsides. Many of the main roads are now well paved, although bone-jarring speed bumps appear inexplicably. Our driver usually powered over them. Concrete stores now pockmark the countryside.

The fascinating kaleidoscope of roadside life is little changed: vibrant vegetable and fruit stands; goats and sheep grazing on short tethers; burlap sacks of charcoal for sale; locals clad in gaudy cotton *kangas*; drying laundry draped on the ground. Motorbikes, colloquially called *boda boda*, are new to me. Typically overloaded, they transport multiple passengers, enormous hands of bananas, furniture, scores of pineapples, and even livestock.

Population growth may account for poor air quality almost everywhere — an unwelcome change. The skies were opaque during our two-hour Cessna flight from Kampala to Kidepo Valley National Park, and in urban areas the effluvia of smouldering garbage befouled the air. Farmers burning stubble before the rains arrive contributes to particulate pollution, as does charcoal making and cooking with wood fuel.

WILDLIFE RECOVERY

When I enjoyed Uganda's national parks in 1971, they were considered to be the jewels of East Africa. I camped and drove an antiquated Renault to see vast herds of elephants, Uganda kob and handsome Rothschild's giraffes in Queen Elizabeth and Murchison Falls parks.

In 2022, on the Albert Nile, pods of torpid hippos peered from the water's surface, wiggling their ears and blowing bubbles. Their boisterous snorting is the voice of Africa's rivers and lakes. Eighteen-foot-long Nile crocodiles lurked on the riverbanks with mouths agape, near flocks of African skimmers. Malachite kingfishers were legion.

In the 1970s Idi Amin ushered in an era of lawlessness, resulting in a gutting of Uganda's game-protection system. Soldiers and poachers slaughtered elephants and black rhinos. By the mid-1980s Uganda's elephant population had collapsed from 30,000 to under 2,000, black rhinos were rendered essentially extinct in the wild and plains antelope were decimated.

It must be said, the Uganda Wildlife Authority has done an outstanding job in restoring wildlife in Uganda's legacy

parks as well as establishing new ones. Besides controlling poaching so that animals can slowly reproduce to regain former levels, officials have translocated species that need additional help. Most have not attained the numbers of fifty years ago, but are moving toward full recovery. The situation is nowhere near as dire as Peter Beard's gloomy predictions in his 1965 book *End of the Game*.

Elephants have gradually increased to about 7,000, but are restricted to parks and some nearby patchy habitats. They lack functional migration corridors, so dispersal is restricted. Black rhinos remain virtually extinct in the wild, but may be reintroduced in Kidepo Valley National Park.

The park's Ishasha sector is magical, sporting some of the most fetching landscapes in Africa. Brian found tree-climbing lions, elephants chasing spotted hyenas, trees festooned with crowned cranes and a leopard asleep in an acacia

Most large animals inhabit only the national parks, where they are protected from interactions with the growing human population.

Our first destination this time was Kidepo Valley, a remote park in the far north that I had been eager to visit in 1971. (Then it was accessible only by 4WD vehicles on long stretches of barely passable road, and my Renault wasn't up to the task.) We flew from Kampala and stayed at Apoka Lodge, which is situated on a kopje overlooking the savannah. Hyenas yowled mournfully before dawn. Antelopes and warthogs sipped at the waterholes during the heat of the day.

Patrick, an affable Karamojong who grew up nearby, guided us. He has worked in the park for 20 years and helped reintroduce Rothschild's giraffes, which had been locally extirpated. Kidepo now has 13,000 Cape buffalo and we saw herds of a thousand or more. Patrick found us lions lounging under candelabra trees, and large numbers of elephant, zebra, giraffe and antelope. One evening he drove us to seek elusive pangolins, but an unseasonable downpour intervened.

There is talk that Kidepo may become a multinational park, joining with protected areas in South Sudan and northwestern Kenya to facilitate free movement of elephant, zebra, and antelope between them.

Our driver-guide for the rest of our safari was Brian Tuhaise, the general secretary of the Uganda Safari Guides Association and an ornithologist who seemed to be able to identify any bird.

Murchison Falls — where the Nile tumbles 400 feet through a 20-foot-wide gorge — is an iconic symbol of Uganda. From here, the river flows north 4,000 miles to Alexandria, Egypt, taking about three months. The boat trip on the Nile seemed little changed after a half century. The hippos remain abundant, although the crocodiles are not as enormous as the 70- to 80-year-old leviathans I remember. The herds of kob and waterbuck seem to have attained their former abundance, but elephants are less common. And there are some danger signs: we saw one elephant whose trunk was a foot shorter than normal because of a painful encounter with a poacher's snare; bulldozers are building a road through Murchison Falls National Park to service oil development.

Queen Elizabeth National Park's wildlife has changed little, albeit with fewer elephants and no truly long-tusked males. The park's Ishasha sector near Lake Edward is magical, sporting some of the most fetching landscapes in Africa. Brian found tree-climbing lions, elephants chasing spotted hyenas, trees festooned with crowned cranes (Uganda's national bird) and a leopard asleep in an acacia.

The Ishasha River forms the boundary with the Democratic Republic of Congo, near a border post where I entered Uganda from the Congo in 1971. Today the Uganda army has an encampment here, protecting against rebel incursions from a troubled Congo.

Fifty years ago, I never visited Kibale Forest or the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, which were not designated as parks until the 1990s. Trekking in Kibale to see chimpanzees and in Bwindi to see gorillas was reminiscent of my experience with the BaMbuti pygmies in Congo's Ituri Forest in 1971. Rainforests are silent, with somber floors strewn with vines, roots and rotting branches. Our guides swung pangas to hack away minor undergrowth. Without them we would become hopelessly lost for the foliage appeared trackless without landmarks.

In Kibale Forest we mingled with a troop of a dozen chimpanzees for several hours. Eventually the alpha male ambled down the trail where we stood, so close that he brushed against my trousers. To the amusement of Marina, Vince and Lise, he passed gas and pooped almost on my foot. I remained frozen until he sidled off. Our guide explained that he was taking my measure and responding to my challenge as a rival white-haired ape. It was gratifying on my return to Uganda to be considered an honorary silverback. 🐼

Craig S. Harrison lives in California and authored Dreams of a Vanishing Africa: A 1970s Transcontinental Trek.



Opposite: 1 A leopard lounging in a candelabra tree in Kidepo National Park. 2 The powerful Murchison Falls, where the Nile bursts through a 20-foot-wide gorge. 3 An elephant clears a hippo out of the shallows in Queen Elizabeth National Park. 4 A flock of African skimmers busy over the Albert Nile. 5 The top birding sighting in Uganda: a shoebill. 6 Setting off on a gorilla trek in Bwindi, and (7) finding chimpanzees in Kibale Forest