

THE AKAGERA EXPEDITION



GEORGE BAGUMA



“

Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all.”

Helen Keller

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INTRODUCTION

CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORY

Founded in 1934, Akagera was much bigger than it is today. Over the years, population growth and the arrival of returning refugees led to land utilization challenges. Poaching and other illegal activities became rampant. Eventually, the park lost a big chunk of land and a significant percentage of its flora and fauna.

The last couple of decades have seen successful efforts to turn the situation around. When the government joined forces with partners and members of the surrounding communities, the ensuing ecological and economic revival was nothing short of spectacular.

Under the management of African Parks, the Big Five status has been restored. Numbers across the board are rebounding. An aerial survey conducted in 2021 recorded almost 12,000 animals, a significant increase from 2010 when the park's wildlife population had plummeted to less than 5,000. The best is yet to come.

This booklet highlights my safari experiences in Rwanda's only Savannah national park. By sharing my Akagera memories, I am encouraging you to create yours.



EN ROUTE

COFFEE BREAK AT URUGO ROADSIDE CAFÉ



Located in Kayonza District, along the main Kigali - Rusumo highway, Urugo Roadside Café attracts travelers in need of coffee and quick bites. The café is also popular with Akagera-bound tourists, myself included. It is at this joint where my coffee break took place, en route to Rwinkwavu.

After grabbing some coffee, I bought my favorite vanilla yogurt produced by women from the local community. Their gifted hands are also responsible for the creation of a wide range of handicrafts displayed in the gift shops set up on both sides of the café.

The coffee shop and the craft market are outlets of the Urugo Women's Opportunity Center (WOC). The state-of-the-art center was designed by a woman, built by women, for the benefit of women. The facility encompasses a restaurant, eco-lodge, meeting room and workshops. Tourists can also book cultural experiences offered by the center.

A stopover at the Urugo WOC, while visiting the Eastern Province of Rwanda, is highly recommended. The empowerment of women benefits every one. When enabled, women are capable of improving the welfare of not only their families, but also their communities.

IN TRANSIT

ONE NIGHT AT AKAGERA TRANSIT LODGE

I traveled to the Eastern Province one day before visiting the national park. This itinerary enabled me to enter the protected area at six a.m. without having to drive all the way from Kigali in the wee hours of the morning. It is important to have a good night's sleep before an adventure-filled day.

Speaking of a good night's sleep, I spent a night at Akagera Transit Lodge. The state-of-the-art lodging facility is located a stone's throw away from the park's southern gate. The property encompasses a restaurant, coffee shop and gardens.

Other lodges found in the area are Rutete Eco Lodge and Akagera Rhino Lodge. Despite their luxurious standards, the environmentally friendly lodges cost much less in comparison to similar establishments found in the park. However, the wildlife habitat offers affordable camping options and ultimate wilderness experiences.



HOT AIR BALLOON

PROBABLY THE MOST THRILLING ACTIVITY IN THE PARK



We entered the park through Kiyonza Gate. Then we branched off and spun along Kayitaba Road. Shortly thereafter, we took another turn and proceeded to our take-off spot, off Gasumbashyamba Road. There is a network of roads in the park, bearing distinct names. In addition, deviations and milestones are clearly marked.

Upon arrival, we grabbed some coffee and watched the Royal Balloon Rwanda crew inflating the balloons. The inflating exercise is quite intriguing. This was an opportunity to learn something about the science behind the first manned flying mechanism in history.

Flying in a gondola is one of the most thrilling things I have ever done. Also known as a wicker basket, the weaved carrier is partitioned to create a tiny cockpit. As small as it is, the cockpit has enough space for the pilot and liquid propane cylinders

As we ascended higher and higher, we waved at the passengers of the second balloon. They waved back, beaming with excitement.

While airborne, I marveled at the sprawling Savannah and saw wild animals roaming around. The ground crew was driving towards the direction of the balloons. When this was happening, drivers of safari cars slowed down to allow their passengers to capture the aerial show we were staging.

Our flights were followed by a champagne-toasting landing ceremony, in accordance with a long-standing ballooning tradition. Finally, we had breakfast in the bush. This treat was an icing on the cake.

GAME DRIVE

ULTIMATE SAFARI EXPERIENCE



After my unforgettable hot air balloon experience, I went to the park's reception to gather all the information I needed. While at the reception, I studied the map and fine-tuned details of my game drive.

It is advisable to buy a map prior to embarking on an unguided tour. However, my stingy self took a photo of the map hanging on the wall instead of buying one. The photograph of the map gave me clear directions. Getting lost in the bush wasn't a concern whatsoever.

Despite the clarity of the said photograph, a guide would have been more useful. Hiring one is highly recommended. There are things an image of a piece of paper can't explain. Guides will be at your disposal, for a reasonable fee, whenever you show up.

As part of my final preparations, I located viewpoints, picnic sites and campsites. Although camping wasn't part of the itinerary, I relied on these facilities for bathroom breaks. I also had lunch at Mihindi Campsite & Café.

Furthermore, I skimmed through the park's etiquette and made sure I understood its code of conduct. Then I pinpointed the locations of different lakes, marshlands, peninsulas and plains. On top of that, I estimated distances between milestones and figured out how to pace myself along the way.

EPIC ADVENTURE

SOUTHERN ENTRANCE TO NORTHERN EXIT



Apart from a variety of bird species, primates and antelopes, I didn't see much in the southern part. If you spin around the southern flank of the park and exit through Kiyonza Gate, you will probably be disappointed. I found a lot of animals on the northern side of the park. The second half of this memorable game drive was slower because I spent a lot of time gazing at animals of all shapes and sizes.

Herds of giraffes, zebras, elephants and buffaloes were all over the place. From time to time, I had to stop and wait for animals to cross the road. Watching a group of giraffes strolling elegantly, right in front of my bumper, was the highlight of the game drive.

LAKE IHEMA

EXPLORING THE BIGGEST LAKE IN THE PARK



Boat rides in a crocodile-infested Lake Ihema are both thrilling and nerve-racking. Before we get to the boating part, let's revisit the past and put history into perspective. While camping at Ihema View Campsite, I was informed by my host that Lake Ihema derived its name from a tent. This campsite is set up on Nyagakonji Hill, overlooking the lake.

In 1876, Henry Stanley reportedly pitched his tent on the shore of Lake Ihema. His tent became a monumental landmark along the shoreline. Eventually, the lake was named Ihema, a Kinyarwanda word that means tent. This was Stanley's second expedition in Africa. He was on a mission to map out major East and Central African water bodies in a bid to trace the source of the Nile.

Boating around Lake Ihema enables tourists to see both aquatic and land animals while enjoying the thrill of sailing. In addition, this activity offers an opportunity to take a closer look at Nyirabiyoro Island, named after an 18th Century fortune-teller.

Legend has it that Nyirabiyoro ended up on the island, in the 1740s, after being banished by King Kigeli III Ndabarasa. His dismissal was a result of an unpleasant prophecy.

LAKE SHAKANI

WHEN HIPPOS STOLE THE SHOW



This deviation wasn't part of the script. I ended up at Shakani Campsite because I needed to use the bathroom. Emptying my bladder in the bush would be risking being eaten by a lion. After the bathroom break, I spent some time gazing at a score of hippopotamuses.

Hippopotamus (singular) is a Latin word derived from two Greek nouns -- *hippo* and *potamos* -- which can be translated as horse and river respectively. Combined, the two words mean river horse.

Hippos are native to sub-Saharan Africa. They have barrel-shaped torsos, wide mouths and large canine tusks. Despite their stocky shapes and short legs, they are capable of running at a speed of up to 30 km/h. The semiaquatic mammals are vegetarians. However, they can attack human beings when felt threatened.

Through the powerful lenses of my binoculars, I observed a group of grunting hippos keenly. Watching them lifting their 1500-kg bodies before falling back onto the surface of the lake, and disappearing underneath it, was captivating.

As this was going on, one of them emerged with its mouth wide open. Next to the mouth-opening monster, another hippo seemed to be asleep. It's unbelievable how these creatures take naps while floating.

LAKE MIHINDI

LUNCH BREAK AT MIHINDI CAMPSITE & CAFÉ

Apart from Mihindi, there are three other campsites namely Muyumbu, Shakani and Mutumba. High-end accommodation services are offered by Ruzizi Tented Lodge, Magashi Camp, Karengu Bush Camp and Mantis Akagera Game Lodge.

Mihindi Campsite & Café is set up on the shore of Lake Mihindi. For the record, there are ten lakes within the boundaries of the protected area.

Before I entered the park, I packed sandwiches and refreshments from Akagera Transit Lodge. There is another coffee shop at the park's headquarters, about three kilometers from the entrance. For lunch, I would recommend Mihindi Campsite & Café. However, it is advisable to have snacks and refreshments in your vehicle throughout the ride.

While munching my sandwiches, I marvelled at the lake and listened to my favorite songs. I am talking about the soothing melodies produced by those birds I always write about. It is at this point when I added camping at Mihindi to my bucket list.

Before I resumed the game drive, I took a walk around the campsite and saw a low-lying electric fence installed along the shoreline. The tent protects campers from dangerous aquatic animals.



BIRDING PARADISE

AKAGERA IS HOME TO HUNDREDS OF BIRD SPECIES

Before I visited this national park, I envisioned a dry Savannah, devoid of water bodies. When I showed up for the first time, I was surprised to learn that the protected area encompasses ten lakes surrounded by extensive marshlands. Kagera River flows on the eastern edge of the park, forming the boundary line between Rwanda and Tanzania.

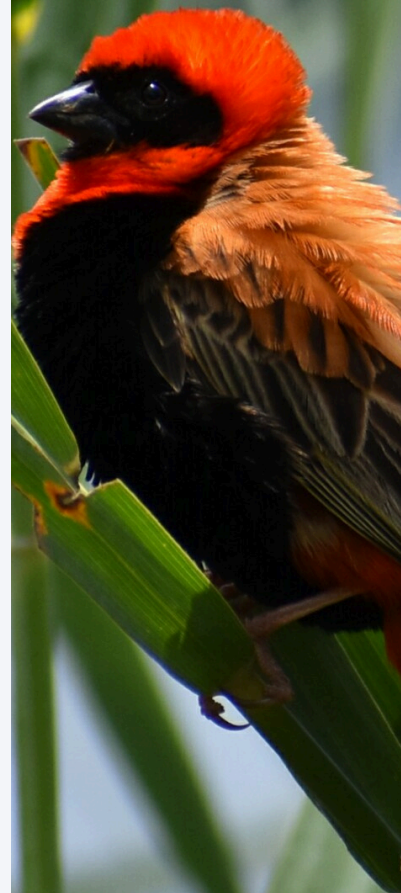
Akagera's wetland area is home to more than 400 species of birds. I could have done a whole booklet about birds without even scratching the surface.

Nature-based tourism enables me to understand wildlife better. Every nature getaway is a study tour. While visiting Akagera, I spent some time studying birds and trying to identify them through colors and sound.

As the name suggests, the red-winged francolin has red wings. The chest of a brown-chested lapwing is brown. The face of a red-faced barbet is I am sure you can easily complete that sentence. Yes, there are more distinctive features than the color alone. However, the pigmentation of body parts provides leads.

Furthermore, I try to put names to birds whenever I listen to the sounds they produce. The longer I listen to them, the more I notice differences in tones, patterns and pitches.

I mentioned earlier how the birds inhabiting the shore of Lake Mihindi entertained me during my memorable lunch break at Mihindi Campsite & Café. The soothing melodies of the yellow-fronted canary had a calming effect. Known for its silvery twitter, this talented singer is a true definition of a songbird.



WHERE ARE THE LIONS?

TRACKING THE KING OF THE JUNGLE

Lions were reintroduced to the Akagera National Park in 2015, about fifteen years after being wiped out of the Land of 1,000 Hills. Today, more than thirty lions call Akagera home. What are the odds of seeing one during a random game drive?

I was lucky to see other species of the big cats, barely a kilometer after entering the park. Then I covered a long distance before spotting anything else apart from primates, birds, antelopes, hippos and crocodiles.

The farther I drove, the more animals I encountered. Zebras, flaunting their beautiful black and white stripes, were all over the place. At some point, I had to stop because some baboons were conducting a meeting in the middle of the road. A couple of kilometers ahead, I stepped on the brake pedal again. This time, a handful of giraffes were crossing the road in a single file.

As I approached the exit, my hope of seeing the king of the jungle faded gradually. When I saw an experienced tour operator driving towards the opposite direction, I flagged him down and asked for tips. He advised me to try my luck at the relatively flatter Kilala Plains. After spinning around a herd of buffaloes at Kilala, I gave up and proceeded to Karengé Bush Camp for my last stop-over of the tour.

KARENGE BUSH CAMP

QUENCHING MY THIRST BEFORE EXITING THE PARK

Before heading to the exit, I took a detour to Karengé Bush Camp. Although non-residents do not have access to the camp, I was cleared.

I grabbed a drink and sat down at the fire place. From the hill, I used a pair of binoculars to look at the buffaloes I had seen earlier. After quenching my thirst, I strolled around and admired the deluxe campsite.

Pieces of stones are used to build pillars supporting wooden floors. This combination of stones and wood form the bases on which tents are erected. The said construction materials blend perfectly to reflect the environment nature enthusiasts yearn for.

Karengé Bush Camp can accommodate up to twelve people at a time. Each tent has an open toilet and an equally unenclosed solar-heated shower.



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