Memoirs of Uganda

Jen and I are overwhelmed with joy and excitement as I eagerly attempt to explain and depict our amazing journey of Uganda, Africa that we were so fortunate to experience. I typically leave these types of holiday explanations to Jen, but this particular adventure connected with me more than most and I can only hope to capture a glimpse of the beauty and culture that Brian and his friends showed us along the way. You might say we fell in love with Uganda and as my intentions are to document our reflections and emotions of the trip with it fresh in our minds; we hope that a few others may appreciate our experience and perhaps we may inspire others to visit this beautiful country and its people.

Jen and I arrived in Uganda with very open minds and the excitement of both meeting up with Pete and meeting Brian. Jen instantly recognized Brian as he walked up to greet us and could not believe his resemblance to her dad (Doug) and grandpa Lyle. Brian introduced us to his good friend and travel guide Emmanuel (Emma) or whom we would come to know as, "The Bushman". It was an early Thursday morning and Brian began the trip by taking us for coffee and breakfast at a small hotel on Lake Victoria on route to his home in Kampala. We were immediately breath taken by the beauty of Uganda and little did we know this would be only the beginning of some of the most incredible beauty we have ever experienced in all of our travels.

Sitting at breakfast with Brian and the Bushman we began to learn about both Brian and the Bushman’s ample journey experiences throughout Eastern Africa. They are both so full of knowledge and take great pride in the sharing of their stories and passion for Africa. After getting briefly acquainted over breakfast we headed off to the Buziga Hotel where we were greateed with open arms by Uncle Pete-ropolis. Buziga
is a great hotel with an amazing view of Lake Victoria, a great little gym and sweet little Banda’s for our sleeping quarters. We quickly settled in and later got to visit Brian's private villa. His full time guard named Sesenga greeted us with a welcoming smile and Brian gave us the tour of his compound and home. He has great piece of property to call home, surrounded by passion fruit trees and grassy, green garden space. His home is quaint and modestly decorated with many sculptures, instruments and pictures from his years of travel. His garage is my personal favourite, as Brian is an avid collector of vintage style motorcycles and a beautiful Yamaha V-Max that he rebuilt and is probably one-of-a kind in Uganda.

That night we were fortunate enough to watch one of Brian's humanitarian documentaries (what he does for a living) and listen to him play the blues on his standard upright piano. Pete, Brian, Jen and I appeared to have an instant connection and yearning for life and travel. As we sat on the small cement wall leading down Brian’s driveway discussing our experiences and getting acquainted we could see two tiny feet under his solid grey gate and two bright and curious white eyes glaring at us from the distance. I finally got up to inquire and was astonished as a cute petite Ugandan girl that lives next door, took my hand and followed me back to the driveway where we were talking. This was one of the first of many wonderful encounters we would have with the children and people of Uganda. With their immaculate smiles and welcoming words, we quickly learned that the people of Uganda were some of the friendliest we had met. Most have next to no money and live in homes that we as westerners would consider shacks, but yet appear to have a passion for life and pride for their country that is inspiring. We would soon learn along the way that this passion is infectious and I believe we really learned a lot about what is most important in life as we headed deeper into the heart of Uganda.

After having a great lunch and drink at two of Brian’s favourite local hangouts the following day, (very cool to really get amongst it, "local style") we finalized our itinerary with the Bushman and got an early nights rest to prepare for a long twelve hour journey to the Bwindi Impenetrable Rain Forest. We were greeted by The Bushman in his safari explorer van, or as he referred to as the “flying saucer” and settled in for the long ride ahead (none of us, well maybe Brian, really knew how long it would be...those endless African roads, as Brian put it). The Bushman is an extraordinary character and I swear between his laid back demeanour and hilarious quirky personality, this guy could actually be the star of a Nat-Geo adventure show. We basically knew right from the get-go that between Brian and The Bushman, we were going to be in very good hands. Brian had unfortunately lost his voice at this point, due to a nasty flu, so The Bushman took advantage and his remarkable knowledge of Uganda began to pour from his mouth and heart. I’m not exaggerating when I say that this guy knew something about everything.
Including wild life, vegetation, numerous tribal traditions, birds and even natural bush doctor remedies. He also wowed us with his driving skills, as he navigated us through numerous construction sites and overwhelming back-road terrain for hours. It was all worth it as we stopped the flying saucer to take pictures of zebras, elephants, enormous storks, water bucks, baboons and impalas just to name a few. The country side as we approached Bwindi was full of lush, rolling green hills, beautiful terrace crops of plantains, sweet potatoes, tea, coffee and deep rainforest. As we approached the final hours of our long journey, night began to fall and somehow The Bushman navigated his van over the most intense rocky terrain that we have ever experienced. It was not pleasant for about two straight hours, to say the least. Finally, we arrived at our mountain side lodge in the blackness of night and after a quick bite to eat of the local cuisine we went to bed with the daunting anticipation of our trek into the mysterious mountains where we would soon meet the, “gorillas of the mist.”

It was a restless sleep as thunder and lightning accompanied what sounded like apple size water droplets fell upon the tin roofs of our cabin rooms. We were all actually told to subside to our rooms early that night because some of the gorillas are known to wonder around the lodge and this led Pete and I to believe that the original rain drops on the roof were gorillas throwing rocks at the cabins...yeah we are pretty gullible! When we finally got our hiking gear on and opened the door in the morning we were overlooking the colourful mountains of the Bwindi rain forest. Pete, Jen and I tucked our track pants into our socks, had a short briefing by our guide and were shortly joined by park rangers (holding AK47's), a nice bloke from Scotland and Pete's personal porter Lawrence. With our walking sticks in hand, we took a short ride and began our trekking expedition to find the “gorillas of the mist”. They make it very clear at the start that you are not guaranteed to find the particular family of gorillas your group is looking for, but that the other park rangers are doing their best to radio our guide leader to explain where the gorilla’s tracks were spotted from the day before. To lay out the scene a little, our guide explained to us that each day a maximum of eight people may search for one of the three habituated gorilla families that reside in the mountains bordering Uganda, Rwanda, and the Congo. If we are to find where the gorillas are hanging out, we are to be very quiet, stay a minimum of seven meters away at all times, turn off our camera flash and can only stay in the resting place for a maximum of an hour. With this being said, it can also take up to eight hours to find the family and you may have to go deep into the jungle to find them...the guns are merely for our protection if one: a gorilla or other non-habituated forest animal attacks, or two: rebels from the Congo stir up some type of unusual commotion. Wow! Also, that they will never shoot a gorilla (unless they have killed 40 people!) and rather only shoot into the air to scare them off and finally to not stare into their eyes, touch them or run if they approach. And so it began...
Some of our crew - after hanging out with the gorillas.

She was not thrilled with his photo op.

We hiked up the mountain for what seemed like hours through damp and dense forest with the occasional break to take in the breathtaking views of the surrounding villages and countryside. After many annoying prompting questions, from myself in particular, "so...do you think were close... any word from the other rangers yet?" we were finally stopped and hushed on a very steep slope about twenty minutes from the “path”. We connected with a group of the trackers of which included; a researcher from a Ugandan college, and three more men with machetes and AK’s. We put down our bags and walking sticks and prepared cameras and ourselves for what we found to be one of the most surreal experiences imaginable. We approached the family in a clearing where the slope of the mountain began to fade and carefully surrounded; two mothers, the “one eye woman” female, two young males, three playful toddlers, two babies and of course...the silverback dominant male gorilla. We positioned ourselves about 4-7 meters from the family as another gorilla swung down from a tree and meandered just past us to join the group laying peacefully amongst the lush forest, eating lunch and relaxing. All three of us were pretty much speechless, but would frequently look at each other with big smiles on our faces. We didn't need words to describe the common flood of emotions that we embodied amongst these amazing creatures. They looked so peaceful and other than the playful children of the group, they just lay around eating leaves, grooming each other and were completely disinterested in us as we sat amongst them. I could not believe that they would allow us to get so close and move around them so freely.

After about forty-five minutes of pictures and chill time, we were still unable to get a really clear shot of the silverbacks’ face. He was a beast of pure power, with layers of muscle and yet he lay in such peace and in complete control. This is when Jen and I decided to join our guide and a park ranger for a closer look and experienced a fright that we will never forget. We were about six meters from the family with the silverback smack dab in the middle, but there was a branch that was obstructing our view from getting that perfectly clear shot. So...the ranger decided it would be a good idea to cut the branch from its fairly thin trunk and pull it away. Not a good idea! It was at this moment that this enormous animal lunged from his backside resting position, let out a terrifying roar and came towards us. He apparently only took a few short steps before the ranger raised his machete and called his bluff, but it was enough to send Jen and I running with our heads down, quivering in our hiking boots. I had chills going up my entire body and Jen...well...of course broke into legitimate tears of fear and kept her distance for the reminder of the stay. It may have just been a warning, but we had gotten too close for comfort and it made us all realize the intensity of what it means to come in contact with a wild animal. After things settled, we were of course fine, and we carried on back to the lodge with an emotional experience that will not soon be forgotten. Lying amongst the gorillas was and will be forever a moment where we felt connected to something that is difficult to describe in words. Add it to the bucket list people, you will not regret it!
It took us about an hour to make it back down the mountain, where we passed by a quaint little church at the edge of the cliff side. Children of all ages quickly surround Jen and I and shouted, "muzungo" as they call the white people, with laughter and emotion. It was very evident that they had almost nothing material in life and very little hope for their futures, but they did not beg or shrug us off. They were led by a small boy and performed a song about how we made them happy to be visiting them in their village. It was amazing to see their joy and happiness and this was only the beginning of the connection we would continue to make with the children and amazingly welcoming people of Uganda. When we got back to the lodge, we spent many hours describing our day to Emma and Brian and tied one on that night at dinner as Brian told us numerous stories of his travels and documentary making in Uganda (thankfully his voice came back!). Out in the middle of the jungle we all really embraced each other that night and I am happy to say that it felt like we had known Brian for years. Brian and Emma are such genuine individuals and that night was a lot of fun.
Hanging out with the kids at the cliff side church. The boy in the white shirt led the group in song.

The next morning we headed for a crater lake (yes just like Westhawk!) and got to make a very important stop at the local school along the way. Jen and I had been inspired by some friends from Kuwait that took “Balls for Kids” and school supplies to schools in Rwanda earlier in the year and we wanted to put together a similar package for a school or two along the way as we traveled across Uganda. We filled an entire North Face duffle bag with soccer balls, Frisbees, volleyball, basketballs and a variety of school supplies like pencils, crayons, pens, paper, small white boards and magic markers, rulers and other everyday school supplies that we all sometimes probably take for granted. We had the opportunity to give away a few little things to individual children along the way, but we decided that this was going to be the “mother-load” school that we were really going to help.

We could barely fit the flying saucer through the makeshift gate as we passed by dozens of kids in their bare feet, carrying wood from the forest to cook their afternoon lunch with. When we pulled into the tiny school yard we were immediately the center of attention. Children peeked their heads curiously from the cement classrooms that surrounded the courtyard, as many as forty-five students per class. They were remarkably respectful as they did not rush the court, but rather watched in anticipation as we pulled out bags of balls and school supplies from the duffle bag in the back of the van. Brian and Jen were on top of the pictures and organizing of supplies, while The Bushman collected the head teacher for us, so Pete and I decided to get the kids excited by putting on an amateur presentation of how to play with the Frisbees and scoop toss. These were clearly unfamiliar sports to children of a school in the middle of nowhere, with no TV, internet or access to supplies outside of the village, so you can imagine that this set them off. They broke free from the restraints of their teachers and out poured hundreds of screaming and laughing children of all ages surrounding us and the van. It was very overwhelming and exciting to see the joy in their faces. They were all silent as Jen and I described some of the items we had brought for them and showed them some things like the white board that they had never seen before. It is another moment that I will never forget. We promised them all that if they went back to class that we would leave all of the supplies with the head master and that he would distribute them fairly and equally as he saw fit.

We were also invited to deliver some of the school supplies to the top class of the school as a reward to them for working so hard and it still brings tears to our eyes to be in their classroom. Four grey brick walls, a chalkboard and a few broken down wooden desks in a hot and musty room, are where these children learn, in overcrowded classrooms. We took a few minutes to introduce ourselves and show the boys and girls a few of the cooler items they would be receiving. They didn’t even know who the Barcelona football team was on the tiny white boards, but when we told them all that we had pencils, the group erupted. The simplest things that we take for granted in life brought them so much joy and made us all so happy to see. They once again returned our favour with a song and dance in the middle of the classroom. You have never seen such rhythm and pride in your life and Pete has the video to prove
it. It broke our hearts and at the same time, filled our hearts with emotion as children from other classes poked their heads in through the windows and clapped their hands. I know that we really didn't do that much and that there are millions of children in the world in similar circumstances, but I must say that it was one of the most rewarding things that we have ever done and made us appreciate on a whole other level, how lucky we all are to have been raised and educated in Canada. We waved our goodbyes and began our back road mountain expedition to the Crater Lake of Bunyonyi (lake of birds) only to be astonished by the beauty yet again.

Hundreds of children were amazed to see us, as we arrived at their school in Bwindi and dropped off supplies.

One of the greatest things about Uganda is its diverse landscapes and nature. Lake Bunyonyi is a perfect example of how you can go from the crowded, dusty city to the lush jungles and then relax on a serene freshwater lake surrounded by forest and hundreds of species of birds. At the crater lake we had some amazing avocado and crayfish meals, slept in Banda's overlooking the lake and got to go for a boat ride in a carved out canoe style boat. There are zero cabins on the lake, but rather an island with a school that many of the children are transported to and of course the governor had an amazing lodge on an island with his own private zebras and water bucks. We basically sat on the patio for the evening drinking Tusker Beer and Jack Daniels and had a well-deserved peaceful evening. In the morning we were back to Kampala for two more nights before we would have to return to Kuwaiti land.
In Kampala we returned to the same hotel and had an opportunity to meet some of Brian’s friends. We met the team that he works with on documentaries at a coffee shop and had a delicious Tilapia salad. We then went to meet two of Brian’s best friends, Hendrick and Susanne from Sweden at their restaurant called, “The Bay.” They were two of the friendliest and most welcoming people around and treated us to an amazing dinner and drinks at their very cool lake side restaurant. It had a great little spot for indoor and outdoor dining at large picnic tables and a long strip of grass leading down to the water with bonfires and benches for their customers to relax, late hours into the evening. Jenna was thrilled to play with their dogs Tusker and Bell (named after the local beers) and we had some really great conversations about Africa and shared many stories about traveling the world. It is so amazing to meet such down to earth people everywhere we go in the world and we were so thankful to them for having us all and being such gracious hosts.

Over the final two days we spent time hanging out with Brian and his girlfriend Liz and had a video night at Brian’s house, where we watched both Pete’s and Brian’s videos from over the years. I guess making movies is in the McDonald blood. Brian is a very talented documentary filmmaker and producer and has made many films that depict the lives of the African people and their unique and often desperate conditions. Liz is from Kampala, but between speaking to Liz, Brian and his friends, the three of us learned a lot about the history of Eastern Africa, its people and current conditions. It made us all really appreciate the luxuries of life that we have grown up with and taught me personally that I need to stop being such a westernized consumer. I feel that we all tend to get sucked into this world of constant consumption in North America and often tend to forget that there are so many children and people around the world that will never have, nor even care about these items that often begin to possess us. We can’t all move to Africa or Asia or South America and change the world over night, but someone once said that we must find our “middle ground.” We don’t need to give thousands of dollars or spend
hundreds of hours, but rather find a balance of “giving back” that we can live with. We should all learn more from each other and our experiences. I feel very lucky to have had this opportunity to spend this very short time in Africa.

Jen and I are very excited to finally return home to Winnipeg and reconnect with family and friends, but we have learned so much about the world and ourselves in our time abroad. If I could give any words of wisdom from my time overseas, it would simply be to go and see things for yourself. We can all talk and read about the negative and positive things that we had encountered in our travels, but all of these amazing and unique places are so accessible to us in today’s world and we should all take advantage of it. We have learned that it is important to plan trips to places that are out of our comfort zones and rewarding to find out ways of how you can spend a short portion of your holiday giving back to the community. In the past two years my personal favourites and eye opening trips have definitely been Nepal, Jordan and Uganda. It has been an amazing journey for both Jen and I and I hope you all enjoy the pictures and stories we have shared. We look forward to seeing everyone this summer and in particular, bringing our closest friends and family together for our wedding. See ya soon!

Heyyyyyaaaaaaaaaa!!!

Cheers,

Phil and Jen

“Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.” - Mark Twain
A few of the animals we saw along the way.