

Taking a gander at Uganda

■ By David Dowling – Editor

FOR those of us old enough to remember, talk of Uganda naturally recalls the dictator Idi Amin and the dramatic and successful hostage rescue by Israeli forces at Entebbe airport, near the capital of Kampala in 1976. For those of a less mature vintage, Uganda is the one of the homes of the mountain gorillas of East Africa.

Winston Churchill called Uganda the Pearl of Africa – and it's not hard to see why. It covers the Great Rift Valley of Africa and takes in the shores of Lake Victoria and a wonderful mix of mountains, forests, savannah and some great farming areas. The scenery is amazing and while it is tropical (right on the equator) most of the country has an elevation of over 1000 metres which keeps temperatures down.

Having heard some interesting stories about the farming in Uganda, I decided to take a quick look, before a scheduled farm study tour to southern Africa in July. And quick it was – covering most of the western half of the country in a week, driving all the way with my great guide Martin and Robert, one of the

passengers on the study tour who had heard about the Uganda “scouting trip” and asked to come along.

Entebbe airport is right on the shores of Lake Victoria and has a wonderful approach over the lake, and while the terminal itself is a disappointment, it is currently undergoing major renovation, funded by Chinese money – as is just about every activity in the country at the moment. They have moved the terminal since the Israelis stormed it in 1976, but only a kilometre or so and you can still visit the old terminal with bullet marks intact.

Entebbe is a delightful town with plenty of nice houses with some decent small hotels and B&Bs. There are botanical gardens, wildlife reserves and Ramsar wetlands. Many of the nation's politicians and public servants make Entebbe their home rather than the nearby capital of Kampala and, not surprisingly, the road into Kampala is a very good one. Mind you, this was the only good road to be found in the country – some days we would drive all day only to find that we had only covered 250 km. Not that we were complaining – the scenery is fantastic and there is something to see at every turn. And the people are so friendly that you get a sore arm from waving back to them, especially the children.

From Entebbe we took the long drive to the Murchison Falls National Park, through some traditional farming and cattle areas, including herds of the famous Ankole or King's Cattle with their majestic and dangerous looking horns.

Murchison Falls are not high but immensely powerful as the Victoria or White Nile River narrows down through an eight metre gorge. Downstream, a ferry, soon to be replaced by a bridge, takes vehicles to the northern shores of the Nile, firstly to a National Park with an incredible population of animals. The hills are alive with grazing herds of antelope of all descriptions, elephants, buffalo, giraffes and the rest of the African gang, including the big cats. Further north the country flattens out into some very good broadacre farming areas which will be one of the targets of a proposed tour in 2020 – but more of that later.



Getting up close and personal with one of the magnificent mountain gorillas.



The famous Ankole or King's Cattle with their photographic herdsmen.

We heard that there were also some wonderful creatures in and on the Nile River before it flows into Lake Albert – apart from the multitudes of hippos and crocs. The information proved to be correct with a sighting of the rare and slightly ridiculous Shoebill water bird and the capture (and release) of a 78kg Nile Perch – like a barramundi on steroids.

From Murchison, we followed the Rift Valley over roads, or rather roadworks, that left a lot to be desired. It seems that every road in the country is under construction with Chinese finance, equipment and supervisors. The Chinese are either doing it from the goodness of their hearts or it could relate to the largely untapped resources of oil, copper and cobalt in the country. The roads will be good when and if they are finished, but the price may have to be paid for a while to come.

To cut a long story, and drive, short, this was amazing country with crops of sorghum (the staple food), maize, cotton, bananas, tea and coffee plantations. We stayed in a guesthouse perched on a hill overlooking a blindingly beautiful crater lake, with beautiful black and white colobus monkeys playing in the trees. The guesthouse was on a farm originally owned by the present proprietor's grandfather before they were kicked off during the Idi Amin era. Luckily, the family held the original deeds which were honoured many years later and the family returned.

Further south, we searched unsuccessfully for the famous tree climbing lions of Queen Elizabeth National Park. These lions have adapted to the long grass areas by resting on the branches of the sycamore fig trees as they search for potential prey and escape the heat of the day.

Further south still, we travelled through mixtures of jungle and farming villages to the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, home of the mountain gorillas of Uganda. They also occur in neighbouring Rwanda and Democratic Republic of Congo. Two hours of hard



One of the monsters from the Nile River.

slog up a jungle covered mountain produced an amazing hour or so in close proximity to a group of gorillas – an unforgettable experience.

This scouting trip was part of the planning for an East Africa farm study tour by Greenmount Travel in 2020. Apart from Uganda, the tour will go to Kenya and Tanzania for a wonderful three weeks looking at the farms and other attractions of the region. Numbers will be strictly limited, so keep an eye on the website www.greenmounttravel.com.au when more details become available in coming months.



Cotton crop in western Uganda.