



To Uganda With Love

WRITER MARION WINIK AND DAUGHTER JANE HAVE A WILD AND WONDERFUL HOLIDAY WITH FRIENDS IN AFRICA.

I have a motto that gets me through life, a simple one. An impulse since childhood, it became a slogan in 1982, thanks to Nancy Reagan.

Should I take this job? Try this dish/drink/drug? Go on this date? More recently—should I spend Christmas break in Uganda?

That question arose when my friends Steve Bolton, a medical researcher, and Jim

Magruder, a novelist and playwright, issued an invitation to their circle in Baltimore to visit during their year abroad.

Just say yes.

DAY ONE

My 13-year-old daughter, Jane, and I head down to Dulles on Christmas afternoon. A full 24 hours later, we walk out of the Entebbe airport into the hugs of our friends.

Jim and Steve are renting a marble palace in a small gated compound on a hill overlooking the city. (Security is high here, with locked gates, metal detectors and checkpoints everywhere.) Jane approvingly takes in the paving-stone drive, red-tile roof and colorful landscaping. She confesses she'd imagined we'd be staying in a mud hut, eating rice on the floor.

Since it is Saturday, the ladies who cook and clean are off, but our room is lovely and there's quiche and gazpacho for dinner. Having cooked for muzungus (white people) all her life, Jeninah is a disciple of "The Moosewood Cookbook" and Mark Bittman.

DAYS TWO AND THREE

Kampala has a small but vibrant expat community, including the filmmaker Mira Nair, and a palette of colorful restaurants to go with it. Today we maneuver over dirt roads to meet a Canadian schoolteacher and her daughter for lunch at an open-air restaurant called Buzz. It has mats and cushions on the floor, a menu with Indian and Mexican dishes and soccer on the TV. The adults while away the afternoon with double-size local beers called Nile Specials.

The next evening we go with the next-door neighbors, Susan and Fred, for poolside machomo at the Silver Springs Hotel—barbecued goat, pork and chicken served with a mild salsa called kochumbari.

A Seattle entrepreneur who came in June 2012 to adopt a baby, Susan has quite a story. Her son, Emi, is now 2½ and due to bureaucratic complications, they are still trying to get home. In the meantime, she's met and married Ocom Freddie Kad, a local gardener 17 years her junior, and they have opened a gym in the village down the hill.

Fred fills us in on some vocabulary: A muganda (a native) in Uganda can be a Buganda (the largest of 52 tribes) and speak Luganda. Jim adds that the state of Israel was almost established here, which would make it Jewganda.

DAY FOUR

On the way to the Paraa Safari Lodge at Murchison Falls, we stop at a preserve that houses the last 13 rhinos in Uganda. Each is guarded around the clock by two rangers to protect them from poachers. We trek in to find a very pregnant mama lunching on grass with two of her children.

From there, it's a hot, bumpy three hours to our lodge overlooking the Nile. (After all those theme-park impostors—the actual Nile!) We spend the remainder of the day recovering poolside, learning an invidious domino game called Mexican Train.

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GO. STAY. PLAY.

Paraa Safari Lodge
Double room with full board for two, \$300 per night.
www.paraalodge.com

Premier Safari
Multiple safari packages including Paraa and other national parks.
www.premiersafaris.com

Ziwa Rhino and Wildlife Ranch
\$35 per person for a guided visit.
www.ziwarhino.com

Airlines that fly to Uganda include KLM and British Airways; we took Ethiopian Airlines.

We made our in-country arrangements through Ugandan travel agent Mohit Advani. Current pricing and sample itineraries at www.global-interlink.org.



The pool at the Paraa Safari Lodge overlooks the Nile River. The author and her daughter at the entrance to Murchison Falls National Park. African retail outfits and restaurants tend to have optimistic names.

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DAY FIVE

We rise before dawn, drive into the savannah, and immediately come upon a leopard. Jim and Steve gasp—leopards are the hardest to spot of all. Even more unusual, instead of running off, he gives us a long look, turns, and leads us into the park.

Our luck holds—in the next few hours we fill out our “Big Five”—leopard, lion, elephant, rhino and Cape buffalo. We see monkeys and baboons, giraffes, jackals, hyenas, and herds of bucks, hartebeests and oribi.

“Pumbaa!” I cry when a warthog appears—but am silenced when the queen herself, a mother lion with a yearling and three cubs, steps out of the brush.

DAY SIX

New Year’s Eve begins with a ten-mile float up the Nile. There are sleeping hippos, sunbathing crocs and brilliant birds everywhere. When we sight the blast and mist of Murchison Falls ahead, a guide named Saviour meets us at water’s edge to hike to the top.

That evening, Jane and I dress to the teeth and meet the boys for a party at the pool. But by 10 the dance troupe wraps up the floor show and we are back in the room, playing dominoes. By 11, Jim and Steve poop out altogether.

Jane and I go down anyway and meet some girls who insist the party is about to start. Soon after, a DJ appears, the staff pours outside, giant sparklers are distributed and right at midnight balloons shower down from the roof! Ugandan fireworks.

DAYS SEVEN AND EIGHT

Back in Kampala, Susan takes Jane and me for mani-pedis at the luxurious Hotel Serena. We get there by boda boda—a motorbike taxi that zips around the traffic. Jane, seated between the driver and me, is elated.

The afternoon presents a different experience of Kampala retail—we walk down the hill to Susan and Fred’s gym, Gorilla Fitness, passing the shanties that house the Blessed Restaurant, Fast Moving Consumer Products Inc. and Nice Plastics.

Back home, Jeninah is killing a rooster on the back porch for our dinner. It will be

served with various starches, greens and lavender ground-nut sauce.

DAY NINE

We take bodas to visit Steve at work at MU-JHU, Makerere University and Johns Hopkins’ center for studying and helping people with AIDS. They offer treatment and support to hundreds of mothers and babies with HIV—surely part of the reason Uganda is ahead of other African countries in this area.

Afterward, lunch at an artsy cafe called The Crocodile, rushing inside when a sudden downpour hits the terrace. I am sad that the Wi-Fi isn’t working.

TIA, says Jim.

TIA means This Is Africa, an expression used, usually by muzungus, when things take too long, are difficult and illogical, involve dissimulation, bribes and insider knowledge.

True, this is Africa. But on the other hand—this is Africa! Awash in light and color, filled with kind people with remarkable optimism, elaborate superstitions and excellent posture.

Yes.