



A tall tale *of* adventure

A mother and her teenage daughter
find that Uganda is the trip of a lifetime

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

On an ordinary day, if you want to see a wildcat, just wake my 13-year-old daughter, Jane, at 5 a.m. But this was no ordinary day — she was out of bed and through the mosquito netting by 5:01. We were going on a game drive at Murchison Falls National Park, a 1,500-square-mile preserve overlooking the Nile in Northern Uganda. If we were lucky, we would see wildcats for real.

We met our driver, Sowedi, for coffee in the lobby of Paraa Safari Lodge, a beautiful, casual hotel right in the park. It was still pitch dark as we drove into the savanna, but immediately our headlights revealed a figure waiting for us like the maitre d' at the door of a restaurant.

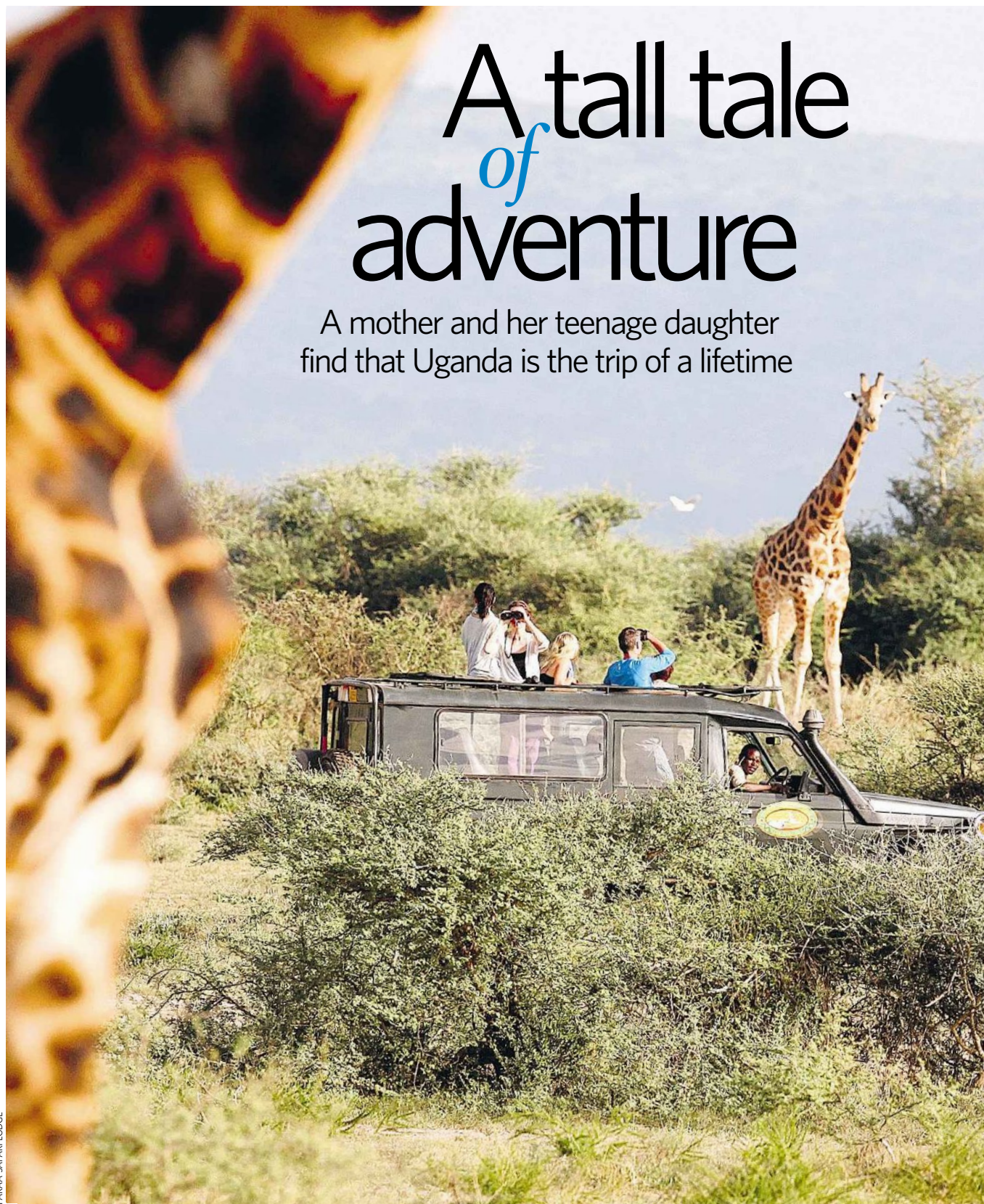
His spots and eyes ablaze in the light, the leopard did not streak away, as they usually do. Instead, he sized us up for a long moment, turned, and led us into the park.

A LION BROMANCE

This proved to be an omen — in the next two hours, we had the good fortune of seeing almost everything people hope to find on a game drive: a family of six elephants with brilliant white egrets perched on their backs; a herd of Cape buffalo; monkeys and baboons; elegant, goofy giraffes parading in evenly spaced formation; hundreds of beautiful deer-like creatures: kob, waterbuck and bushbuck, Jackson hartebeest and the littlest ones, adorable, wide-eyed oribi. We saw a hyena, a jackal, some whimsical, ungainly warthogs, and, if I didn't already feel like I was visiting "The Lion King" . . . a mother lion with a yearling and three cubs.

Our luck continued as

See **UGANDA** on C24



PARAA SAFARI LODGE

Giraffes take a safari to new heights in Murchison Falls National Park. ■ See more photos: newsday.com/travel



Adventure in Uganda

UGANDA from C23

we next spotted the inseparable male lions the rangers call Butchaman and Bernie and learned their story of bromance.

Three years ago, poachers sneaked in across the Nile River and set a trap that snared Butchaman, severing his hind left leg and causing him to be named after a popular Ugandan reggae musician with a similar disability. A vet flew in to save his life, and he was released back into the savanna, where he now limps around, his

brother Bernie never more than a few feet away, frequently coming over to give him an encouraging nuzzle.

"If I was home," whispered Jane in amazement, lowering her camera for a moment, "I'd just be getting to school."

NO CROWDS ON YOUR SAFARI

In the 1950s, Uganda was the most popular tourist destination on the African continent, but after decades of trouble and unrest, safari lovers moved on to Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania. Though the country has been safe for

tourists for almost 25 years, it gets a fraction of the traffic of the popular destinations. Since crowds are the last thing you want on a safari, this is nothing but good. Also, despite everything they have been through, the Ugandan people are known as the friendliest in Africa — not one person I made eye contact with — even security guards — failed to break into a sunny smile.

To get to Paraa, we traveled six hours from Uganda's capital, Kampala, where Jane and I were visiting our friends Jim Magruder and Steve Bolton, who helps run Johns

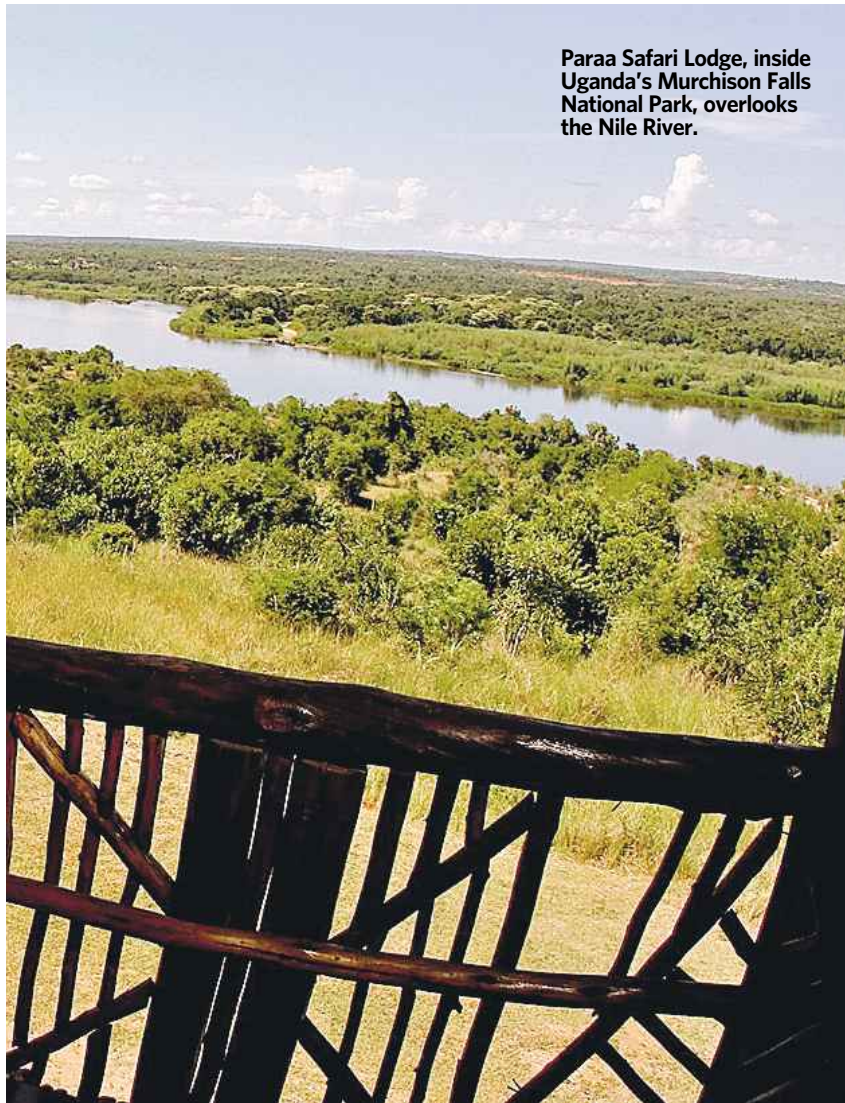
Hopkins' AIDS study and treatment center. We broke up the drive with a stop at the Ziwa Rhinoceros Sanctuary, which houses the last 13 white rhinos in Uganda. Though the rhinos already have been declared extinct, this place provides the chance for them to reproduce and ultimately reintroduce them at Murchison Falls and other preserves. Each rhino is guarded around the clock by two rangers to protect them from poachers, who come in by any means, including helicopter, to cut off their horns.

Led by a guide who commu-

nicated with the rhino bodyguards by radio, we trekked about a half-mile into the bush to find a stunningly pregnant mama rhino — rhinos gestate 16 months — lunching on grass with her two children. From a distance of about 30 feet, their gray hides looked surprisingly velvety.

SPOILED FOR GREAT ADVENTURE

Arriving at the lodge hot and dirty after the long trip, we were greeted with cool face towels and papaya juice, and spent the afternoon resting up from our wildlife adventures.



Paraa Safari Lodge, inside Uganda's Murchison Falls National Park, overlooks the Nile River.

PARAA SAFARI LODGE



SOWEDI KAYONGO

A cattle egret perches on an elephant's back.

IF YOU GO

Airlines that fly to Uganda include KLM and British Airways; we took Ethiopian Airlines. We made our arrangements through Ugandan travel agent Mohit Advani, mohit@global-interlink.org. Fares start at \$1,000; current pricing and sample itineraries at global-interlink.org

- Paraa Safari Lodge. Double room with full board for two, \$300 a night; paraalodge.com
- Locate safari packages, including Paraa, at premiersafaris.com
- Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary. \$35 a person for a guided visit; ziwarhino.com

OTHER UGANDAN SAFARI DESTINATIONS:

- Myewa Safari Lodge at Queen Elizabeth National Park — elephants galore
- Apoka Lodge at Kidepo National



Park — luxury in the wilderness
Bwindi Impenetrable Forest — gorilla tracking
Semliki National Park — for serious bird-watchers
 — MARION WINIK



SOWEDI KAYONGO



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PARAA SAFARI LODGE

Butchaman, left, lost his leg in a poacher's trap; a grey crowned crane, the national bird of Uganda; guests stop to take pictures during a water safari to Murchison Falls.

This involved a pool with a swim-up bar and a delicious buffet dinner, served outdoors. The sauteed Nile perch and vegetable salads I piled on my plate were fresh and organic (no pesticides here); though Ugandan cuisine is not spicy, a mint sauce and tiny chilies in

vinegar did the trick for me.

Just as the game drive spoiled me forever for Great Adventures, zoos and the like, our 10-mile float up the Nile put theme-park "Niles" in their place. Crocodiles lazed on the rocks; schools of hippos snoozed in the shallows,

having spent the night tromping up the steep banks to graze. Our guide gave us names for the dazzling menagerie of birds: grey-headed kingfisher, Goliath heron, spurwing plover, African fish eagle, red-throated bee-eater.

Once we'd gotten in sight of

Murchison Falls, we were dropped off at river's edge to meet a guide named Saviour, who led us on a 40-minute hike to the top of the falls, two separate downspouts crashing into a rocky abyss.

Why would you go to Uganda, people asked before I made

this journey, and I think Jane was a little dubious, too. Now we can tell you — because it is the adventure of a lifetime, with more beauty and fun than you can imagine. It is not close, and it is not cheap, and it is absolutely worth whatever it takes to get there.