My African High

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And just like that, with one awe-inspiring and painful brush stroke, my view changed, never to be the same again.

I love animals, all animals. I could not get enough of nature shows like Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom when I was young. I dreamed of going to Africa to experience the animals up close and in their environments. I longed to live among them, study them, and help protect them from humanity. Things don't always turn out as planned.

2004, I organized my dream trip to Africa to celebrate my 40th birthday. My boyfriend and I researched Uganda, where the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest borders the Democratic Republic of Congo. The DRC historically has been volatile, and the threat of terrorism is high.

We weighed the risk and determined it was worth it. I have long held the outlook that if I died fulfilling a dream or doing something I loved, my soul would be content. Conversely, I joked that if I died in a car accident in the traffic-jammed, toxic exhaust on the Tobin Bridge heading into Boston for work, I would come back to haunt someone.

So off we went to Africa.

Our first stop was Kenya and the Maasai Mara National Reserve. We arrived at the first camp in the early afternoon, during the day's heat. I lay on my bed and closed my eyes. My mind was reeling—a bird unknown to me called repeatedly. The sound was enthralling. I desperately wanted to get out of the tent and find it, but my partner was already asleep. The minutes ticked by like hours.

Finally, the artificial blare of the alarm pierced the natural symphony. I was outside the tent in a nanosecond, scanning the landscape for the mystery serenader. I met the Cuckkoo, not the most

stunning bird, but it captured my heart with its alluring call. Like Africa itself, the Cuckkoo is not always as it seems. The trip was uncomfortable in many ways.

Africa is mind-blowing. It is a land of extremes with breathtaking beauty, vast expanses, and wildlife in unimaginable numbers. Yet, poverty and disease run rampant. As a middle-class person from a developed country, I struggled with the reality of African life. We did not fully contemplate the ramifications of being in this untamed place.

Maasi men escorted you to and from your tent. We blew a whistle if we needed someone to accompany us outside at non-scheduled times. When you were in your tent, you were trapped.

We ran into digestive issues with limited restroom options, which proved torturous. One I used resembled a port-o-potty but without the potty. Instead, there was a hole in the ground. Suffice it to say, the people before me didn't have good aim.

Meanwhile, the lodges go to extraordinary lengths to provide guests with amenities. Water was trucked in from tens of kilometers away in some cases. Then warmed over fires, and men carried five-gallon jugs to each room so our spoiled butts could luxuriate in a five-minute hot shower each day.

I reflected on my life that felt overindulgent and excessive. One of the astounding facts we learned before going was that the annual average income in Uganda was $250. I could not imagine what that looked like, but I quickly learned.

Next on our itinerary is Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda. If Kenya was uncomfortable, Uganda was borderline traumatizing. The drive from Entebbe International Airport to the gorilla camp in Bwindi was ten hours through endless impoverished villages.

We learned that children were assigned chores to help their families as soon as they could walk. Toddlers swept dirt away from the entry of their mud house. Slightly older kids carried water in

small buckets from roadside creeks, wearing tattered t-shirts sizes too large and often with bare feet.

Some villages anticipated our arrival. Children lined the street, called out loudly, and ran next to our vehicle, looking for handouts. The tour operator told us to bring gifts for them. Candy, sunglasses, pens, pencils, and crayons were highly desired. We tossed these things out the windows as we passed through.

The closer we got to the gorilla camp, the more desolate the land became. The villages were tiny, and the reaction from residents was one of surprise. The locals stared at us as we passed through with their eyes wide as saucers. I felt vulnerable. I was thankful for the steel of the vehicle's walls that protected me. At times, people converged around the truck and reached for the doors.

Despite the apparent poverty and hardships people faced, I marveled at the joy demonstrated by the children. We passed a group of kids playing soccer with a banana leaf ball. They ran to and fro, jostling for position, calling out to teammates, and laughing.

By the time we reached the camp, I was emotionally weary. My boyfriend wanted to walk into the nearby village to check it out. The memory of the Maasi village fresh in my mind made me unwilling to participate. It did not take long before he excitedly busted into the tent, and words poured out of his mouth as he told me about his experience. He grabbed my hand and dragged me down the dirt road.

Most notable was that orphans ran many of the shops. A composed sixteen-year-old girl explained to us in perfect English that the town had over 250 orphans. They made handmade gifts for tourists to buy—the money they made purchased school supplies. The girl's grace, strength, and the responsibility she demonstrated to better her life were remarkable. Imagining her circumstances tugged on my heartstrings.

Before this trip, my view of humanity was harsh. There were many reasons to be angry with humans, especially when viewed from the perspective of the planet and the other living beings on it. I felt strongly about using my resources to help nature, not people. Here, I felt empathetic to the human plight for the first time.

We trekked to meet the mountain gorillas. At that time, there were less than 900 left in the wild. Two men with AK-47s accompanied us to search for the gorillas. The guides explained that they were sometimes elusive, but we found them in an hour. Their human-like faces, silky black hair, and the caring interaction between individuals were enthralling.

The Silverback was stunning. Individuals parted, making way for him as he strolled to the group's center and plopped down on his stomach, his weight borne by his massive arms tucked underneath him. Soon, the young gorillas played chase and dashed over his back to add to their fun. Occasionally, he rolled over, grappled one playfully, and then released them to their playful antics.

The trip was drawing to a close. All that was left was the 10-hour drive back to Entebbe. We decided to break the journey up with an overnight at a camp located on an island. Before the trip, this sounded like a unique experience and an excellent way to spend our last night in Africa. In hindsight, we wished we had driven straight to Entebbe.

By the time we climbed into the truck, we were travel weary. Neither of us had ever been homesick on our trips to foreign countries. But this trip was different. Between the lack of autonomy, ever-present danger, poverty, food, and digestive issues, I was ready to be home, free to come and go as I pleased, eating and drinking whatever struck my fancy without the worries that faced us in Africa.

The drive to the island camp was as impactful as the ride to the Bwindi. The countryside was hilly and terraced as far as the eye could see. Terracing land helps to reduce erosion and soil loss. The local people used every inch of land to farm and feed their families. The smell of smoke permeated the air.

We drove by vast tea plantations. When the workers saw our vehicle, they ducked into the tea plants and hid. The driver explained that they wanted to avoid having their picture taken and viewed by wealthy foreigners with critical eyes.

All the workers we saw on these plantations were women. Many of them had a baby strapped to their backs. They were barefoot, and the primary occupational hazard was snake bites. They worked from sunup to sundown for $1 a day. I had another thing to feel guilty about: my morning tea.

Later, we passed men sitting on the side of the road cracking rocks together to make gravel. They did this for 12 hours a day for paltry pay. It was not hard work—it was back-breaking, soul-sucking labor for barely enough income to survive.

When we arrived at the dock to board the boat, my perspective of what constituted good versus evil and fair versus unfair work and pay had made a seismic shift. I wish I could say that last night was as magical as those first hours in the tent in Amboseli National Park listening to the Cuckcoo, but it was not.

The experience created a tectonic shift in how I viewed humanity; the privilege of my life and work wholly reframed. I refer to this trip as “My African High.” It made me realize the incredible luck I had at being born to middle-class parents in the United States. The hardship I knew paled in comparison to what people endured in Uganda.

After returning, I wrote to my family about Africa’s impact on me. I proposed that we discontinue gift giving for adults and instead give to a mutually agreed upon charity. My Africa experience has acted as a grounding agent. It provided me with a new lens through which to compare my life with those of others.

Twenty years later, I have booked another trip to Africa. I am going to Botswana with my brother in May. We will experience Africa as middle-aged adults. I expect the unexpected and look forward to the gifts the trip will bestow on me, both easy and hard.

Of course, I am excited to see the black mane lions hunt in the water. But I am willing to bet that the prominent memory will not be the lions when the trip concludes.