

**PIAS NEWSLETTER #5 - JUNE 22, 2004**  
**THE LION, THE DITCH AND THE WARDROBE**

“Let’s go back now and see if we can find the male,” said George, a veteran naturalist guide at Murchison Falls for the last thirty years. He had been in the park during Idi Amin’s time, when soldiers shot the lion, rhinoceros and elephant from helicopters for “fun”. He recalled his despair at trying to protect the animals during this time and of one dark night when “I heard soldiers laughing and shooting. I crept close and saw a soldier standing on top of an elephant. It was one of my friends, that elephant. I raised my rifle and shot that soldier, and ran away.”

This morning was the end of our visit to the park; the end of hours of fascination and wonder seeing the richness of Africa’s wildlife. Driving ourselves over 4WD roads and open savannah, we see animals around each bend in the road: The gentle kop nibbling breakfast at day break, the dark chocolate color giraffe, a lone elder, striding in front of the car, the crocodile snoozing with its mouth ajar cooling itself and showing off rows of wicked teeth. Only the elusive cats, the lions and leopards, had escaped our view.

So George shared our delight as we turned a corner to find a pride of five lions, females and yearlings, walking up the road. For an hour we watched them hunt and romp. Occasionally they would look our way but mostly they enjoyed each other’s company in a lazy playful way. Only as these beautiful creatures disappeared into the tall grasses did we realize our great luck in finding them on the open road, so easy to observe.

Now, two hours later, after seeing crested cranes, shoebills and amazing colored bee-eaters, George is suggesting we circle back to where we saw the lions. “There has to be a male nearby,” his years of experience tell him. He grows silent, intent; the quintessential African tracking wild animals. He closes his eyes listening, he sniffs the air, and he watches the hartebeest. “Watch where they are watching,” he advises, “Drive towards those bushes.”

We circle clumps of bushes. Nothing. “Listen!” Across the track three helmeted guinea hens are squawking. “What is upsetting them?” Hanging out of the window, searching, he advises ‘Circle that bush again’ pointing to a green clump 6 feet high and 10 feet in diameter. George abruptly pulls back from his perch on the window sill. “There is a giant male lion in that bush! Stop!”

We stop and stare from 8 feet away. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. There is a bush, nothing more. Staring, staring and then there is the vaguest of golden outlines in the center of green. How did he ever see that? Then with the binoculars, between the leaves, we are thrilled to see who is staring back.



We are 8 feet away from a 500 pound predator who would pounce and kill us in a flash. We would never have seen him if we were walking by. His hiding place obscures most of his body. We can just see enormous padded paws curled up under his chin, like a house cat, and one golden eye that watches us, unblinking. We think of all the times in the last few days we have jumped out of the car for a stretch or a better view. Now we understand why they say not to do that near the bush. A low deep guttural growl seems to make the windshield shake. "We are annoying him. Let's go." George knows and deeply respects who is king.

That afternoon, on our leisurely drive to our night's lodging we are pondering how danger is often not seen, but quite near. How chance encounters and preoccupation can be the difference between life and death. In Africa it is more obvious that one must pay attention, stay awake to stay alive. But we have not really learned the lesson.

It seems like a small adjustment to miss a giant hole in the road and drive on the shoulder. At a very slow speed we discover that "shoulder" on the side was a ditch disguised by tall greenery. Both left wheels are in the ditch not touching bottom, the car is high centered on the edge of the road and both right wheels are high in the air. Only the far side of the ditch keeps us from rolling over. Four-wheel drive doesn't help much when none of the four is touching the road. We are in the middle of nowhere. Remote enough that English is not spoken. And no AAA to call. Torkin climbs out the window as fast as she can landing with a plop in the red dust. No one to be seen in any direction.

Sometimes in Africa when you don't know what to do your only option is to wait. First a few young girls approach playing. Soon about ten children and teenagers are helping us try to push the car out of the ditch. Nope. Two young men appear out of the sugar cane fields carrying dangerous looking pangas. The unintelligible suggestions pour in, the chatter grows louder. Seems each person has a different idea on what to do.

Someone has gone on his bike for help. We smile at each other across the slanting hood of the car and let this moment take us. The sun beats down. Men show up competing for who is in charge. One is clearly drunk. Tree limbs are trimmed with machetes and slid under the back wheels as shovels fill the front of the ditch with dirt. Now two men are arguing, we think about whether forward or reverse is the way out.

And here we are, “muzungus” in tee shirts and shorts, fine outfits for a drive but inappropriate and never seen in village life. The young girls are giggling, pointing at Torkin’s pale legs sticking out of sherbet orange shorts, probably the most entertaining sight in a long time. Time to climb back in the tippy car and unpack the suitcase and put on a sarong...More laughter.

A moment ago the road had been deserted and now people are arriving from every direction. The word has gone out that two muzungus are in the ditch, maybe there are a few shillings to be made...certainly it will be more interesting than sitting under the village tree and watching the cassava grow.

With twenty smiling faces at the windows pushing from the ditch side to level us and many more straining from the front, with everyone chattering away, the tires spinning in reverse catch hold and, almost dreamlike, we are back on the road. From the terra firma of the road it is hard to understand how we could have driven into this ditch. . The villagers all knew it was there...but we could not see it ...or the lion either.

The rest of the trip our bodies keep experiencing the incredible power of the lion’s growl so close, and the sinking feeling of the car slipping into the ditch. Thinking how crucial it is to look beyond the surface we talk into the dark night about other aspects of Africa that remain unseen; how do Africans really feel about muzungus, the ramifications of sponsoring one particular child for school fees and not another, and how the bead business bringing money to the bead makers will affect the relationships between men and women in the Acholi Quarter.

Things are not always as they first appear. The longer we are in Africa the more we know less and less. Now after five months we are beginning to listen more and look “into the bushes” until we really see. The blinders of culture, the assumptions from the past, we are humbled as we gaze through these distortions. We do not yet know this land; we do not understand these looks, the meanings, or the ancestors. We are just privileged to move carefully and respectfully. We feel gratitude for our African friends who pick us up and put us back on the road when we get in harm’s way or stumble culturally through ignorance, exuberance, or impatience. We know there are more lions in the bush and ditches on the roadsides. From now on Torkin is traveling in sarongs, just in case....Mwaybale nyo

[Check out [www.charlesandtorkin.com](http://www.charlesandtorkin.com) for more photos...it’s under construction, so you won’t find much there yet, but it will continue to grow.]