

FRESH WATER LAKE THAT'S A SEA - LAKE VICTORIA TRAVELS IN KENYA

Ms. Padmaja Parulkar-Kesnur

Introduction

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It began with the search for the "Source of Nile"—the holy grail of human exploration. After all, the Nile Basin in Africa has cradled civilisational secrets in its bosom for centuries. It was believed that whosoever controlled the source would rule this part of the world. The quest entailed explorers and missionaries from Europe who scoured the "Dark Continent" to finally reach the shores of a lake. Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that it was this hunt for "Lake Victoria", which is the source of Nile that cast the dye for the story of Africa to unravel and reach the rest of the world.

Last year, I travelled to Jinja in Uganda to explore the source. It was stupefying to note that the Nile spurts from an innocuous spring from whence the river continues its journey for 6000 kms before it drains into the Mediterranean. It was the British explorer John Speke who was credited with the discovery of the source of Nile, and who, presumptuously, named it Victoria after the Queen. Incidentally, a Kenyan friend – an



environmentalist and poetess scoffs at the audacity of the colonisers in usurping and claiming their lakes and history. And rightly so. For the local inhabitants, of course, the Nile existed forever, long before Speke. A century and a half later, I too stood dazed at the Speke Memorial Obelisk, the spot where Speke stood gazing, in awe at the narrow gulf that magically transformed into a river.

And yet, while the Speke Memorial was not out of place, what was indeed odd was the presence of a bronze bust of Mahatma Gandhi. It is said that the Mahatma's ashes were dispersed in the Nile, though why this should be done is a bit of a mystery. As I was watching this memorial and wondering about it, some young girls, local tourists, expressed their displeasure. One of them said within my earshot; "I don't like it, why should this be here; it is our country... of Blacks." The vestiges of Idi Amin's legacy still persist in some pockets of Uganda, it may seem.

The source having being 'discovered', the

Great Lake now seized the British imagination leading to the grand idea of a railway cutting across the hinterland connecting the lake to the East African coast. The reasons were strategic, the vision romantic and the implementation full of adventure and toil. The Uganda Railway did not reach the shores of the source (at least, in its first incarnation) as envisaged but ended on the eastern shores of the lake in present day Kisumu, in Kenya. The "Lunatic Line" as its detractors nicknamed it, actually presaged the birth of a nation - Kenya. As British Commissioner Charles Eliot remarked; "It is not uncommon for a country to create a railway, but this railway actually created a country".

This time round, I am visiting the Railway's lake terminus, Kisumu to see the Great Lake that the nation owes its existence to. Also, my son's French teacher, a Kenyan Indian from Kisumu, had ignited my interest when she said that you can't say you have been to Kenya if you haven't seen the sun set over Lake Victoria!





Kiboko, is Kishwahili for Hippopotamus. Our tented camp, Kiboko Bay, was bang on the lake shores and after sunset we could hear the grunting of the residents in the distance. From my earlier sojourn by Lake Naivasha, I was aware that the hippos would come out of the water at night to graze. But unlike at Naivasha, the owner did not deem it fit to warn his guests of the same. At night, as I was just drifting into a daze, I heard the inevitable ominous snort-grunt very close to me. From my tent window, in the dimly lit environs of the camp, I saw the dark outline that resembled a battle tank, no less! I could have touched the hulk if I wanted. Afraid of my own laborious breathing and wood-creaking movements I sat transfixed watching the kiboko's every move. One guest lumbering in late night was caught unawares and I could see him frantically calling out to the askari (sentry) who nonchalantly shoed the animals

away. The hippos scrambled to the lake's edge only to be back again, shortly. They had to feed themselves, you see; after all, it was their territory. The next day brought me closer to the world of the lakeside denizens, but that is another story for another day.

Lake Victoria is the second largest lake in the world, in terms of surface area. In that respect, this fresh water lake is more like a Sea due to its dimensions. It glues Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya together, in more ways than just geographically. Ships transporting cargo of soap, plastic and cooking oil ply from Kisumu to Mwanza in Tanzania and to Jinja in Uganda. The Mikingo Island in the lake is a bone of contention between Uganda and Kenya, and often hostilities arise over its occupation and ownership. But, for the local populace on its shores, the Lake spells livelihood and life, itself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ms. Padmaja Parulkar-Kesnur began her career as a journalist. However frequent movements pushed her into taking long sabbaticals in between work. After a decade of working as a full-time print journalist, she made a clear break from 9 – 5 to indulge in backburner hobbies of gardening, birdwatching and photography. Her naturalist instincts and camera capers coupled with creative writing found fruition in her blogs. She has been blogging for 3 years now. Her blogs are parked at <http://www.padmaja-earthletters.blogspot.in/>

SAVOURIES

- ★ A small boy swallowed some coins and was taken to a hospital. When his grandmother telephoned to ask how he was, a nurse said " No change yet".
- ★ Some people's noses and feet are built backwards: their feet smell and their noses run.
- ★ When William joined the Army he disliked the phrase " Fire at will".
- ★ There was once a cross-eyed teacher who couldn't control his pupils.
- ★ I wanted to lose weight so I went to the paint store. I heard I could get thinner there.





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