

ESCAPE TO KAMPALA

By Anya Braimer Jones



Kampala, Uganda. I am sitting in Sparkles Salon, in the Game Mall, sixty minutes into what I'm told will be a marathon four-hour hair-braiding session. Not your usual tourist activity, perhaps. But this isn't an obvious tourist city. In fact, most visitors give Kampala a miss and rush instead to see the gorillas and big four (for five, the rhino, you need to go to the zoo). But Kampala should be a compulsory stop, a must-see for anyone who likes food, art and African life. About which, more later.

But back to my hair. God only knows how, but I've managed to persuade my dear companion kindly to sit with me in the salon whilst two women attempt – with finger-work faster than a cheetah on the run – to turn me into more 'gap year Afrikaaan' than my usual English white gal look. And whilst they've said it'll take four hours, this is Africa – where time keeping is as flexible as a baked plantain – so it will likely be closer to six or seven. (Our African guide teaches us that the only way to get anything done fast is to say, "I'm on the way to the airport." But it's not worth trying that for my tresses. They might plait me to the chair).



Let's wind back. We arrive in Kampala after a tough and gruelling week of trekking in beautiful Mount Elgon (a little-visited extinct volcano in the East with tropical rainforests and a Jurassic Park-style caldera), doing wild camping (think water only from the stream and light just from the stars) and living like cavewomen. So when we arrive in Kampala and more specifically at the Sheraton.....oh boy, am I excited!

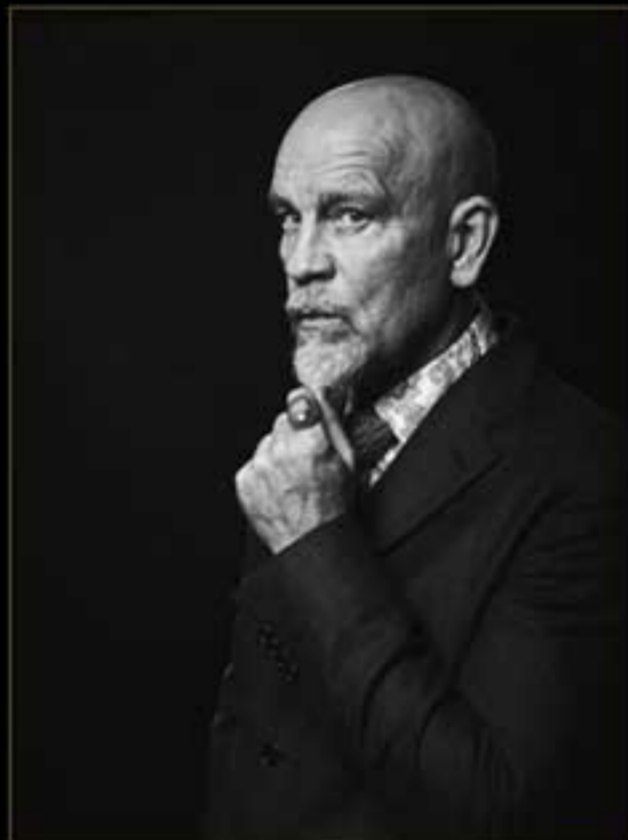
This five-star hotel – built in the '60s and towering at 14 storeys – boasts an ice-cream parlour in the lobby, strong WiFi throughout the hotel, a 24-hour fitness suite and a pool big enough to drown a whale. Or a whole school of them or whatever the collective noun is for a bunch of whales. In our room, a complimentary basket of fruit awaits us – miniature bananas, mangos and T-tomato fruit (like sweet 'n' sour tomatoes). Plus two generous servings of chocolate cake – the like of which we cavewomen haven't seen for 120 hours and seven minutes.

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Best of all...there's a bath, shower and mirrors. Plus enough toiletries to open an outpost of Space NK. I never thought – in my 22 years on Earth thus far – that I would consider a bath, shower and seven different toiletries to be the ne plus ultra of luxury. Frankly, the whole shebang would earn the 'luxury' tag for any well seasoned, smart living traveller – not just cave women.

After our past five days of living 'Bear Grylls' style, the finer things of life offered by this hotel come as a particularly welcome surprise. I'm delighted by everything from their vast menu of room service options (and portions to feed a small army of whales) to their complimentary shoe-shining service (that returns my Timberland hiking boots clean enough to take back to the shop for a credit note) and oh, let me mention again the generous array of toiletries. You see, they offer more toiletries than I've ever seen in a five star hotel.



Alas, my companion insists that it's time to explore the city. We're joined by Emma (a man; apparently it's short for Emmanuel), a guide. There's Kabaka's Palace with its chilling reminder of Idi Amin's reign of terror: this is where he built his underground torture and execution chambers. And yes, yes, of course there are churches, mosques, cathedrals, tombs and the likes which you can read about in any guidebook.

But we're cavewomen in search of retail therapy and hence lose ourselves shopping for African hand-printed fabrics; in craft markets — searching for wicker baskets, beaded walking sticks and cow horn cups — and wandering through endless lanes and alleyways: there's one for hardware, one for stationery, another for computers, one for fake designer trainers, you get the gist.



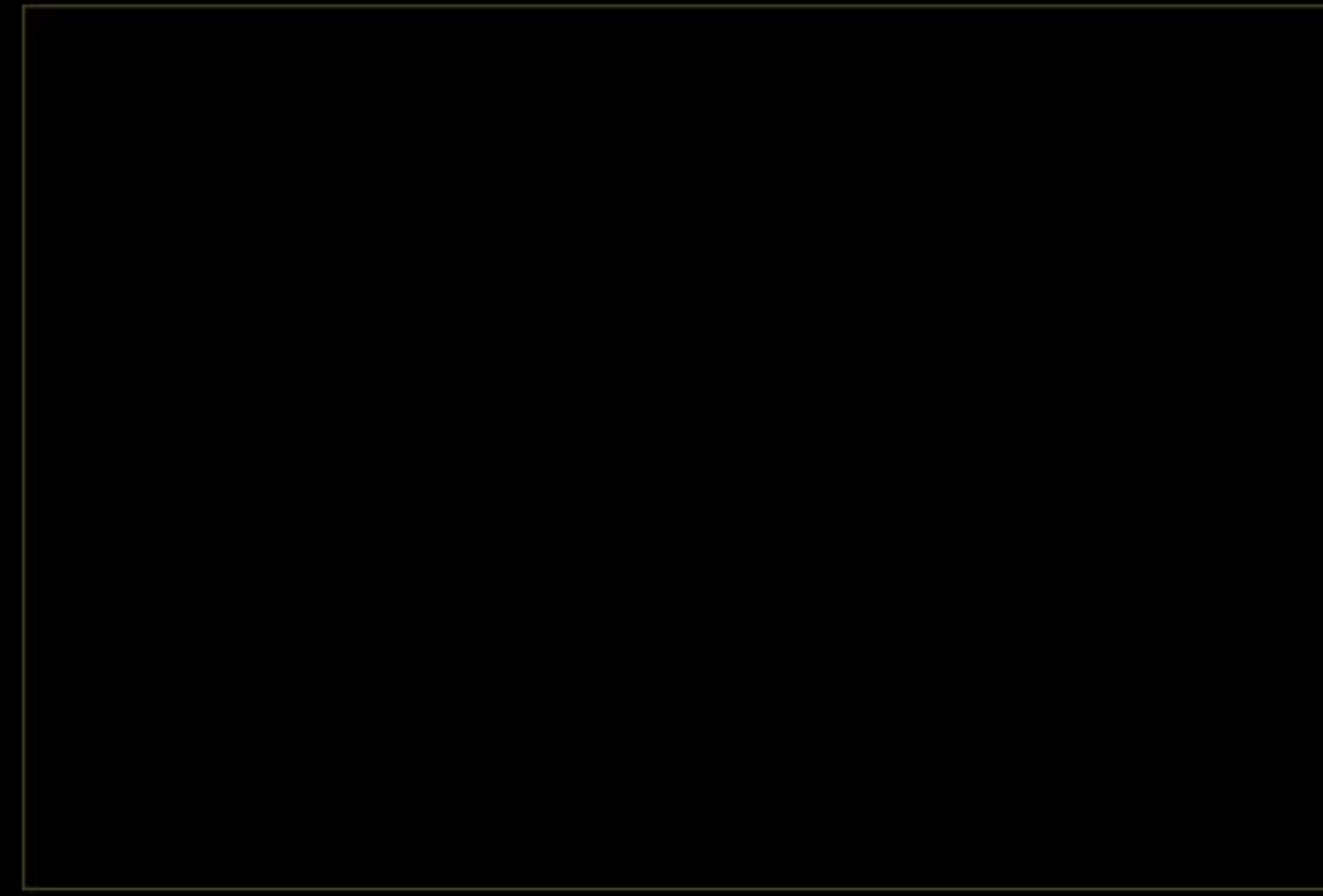
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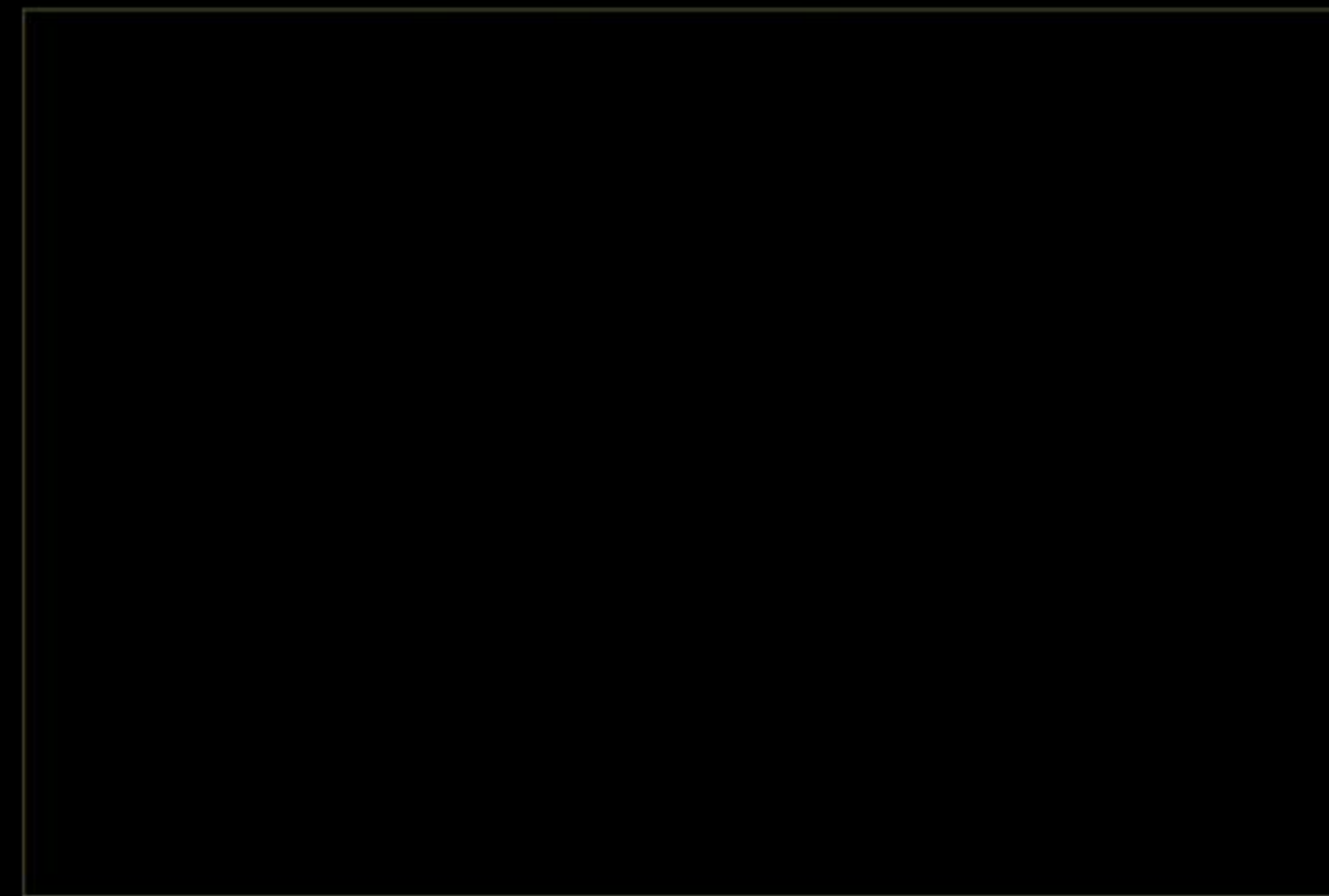
Everything here is chaotic and manic, but in an exciting way. Cross the road and you're risking your life between boda-boda motorcycle taxis and matatu taxi vans piled high with people. Emma takes us to The Old Taxi Park – the Victoria Coach Station of Kampala, but for taxi vans. Two thousand of them squeezed into less than ten acres and all plying for trade as 100 more arrive each hour. A woman – balancing a wicker basket of plantain on her head with her newborn snoozing in a kikoy sling on her back – rushes past us to sell the (delicious) green fruit to the vehicle that has just pulled up in front of us.

We wander on, squeezing between cars, vans, bikes, people, dogs and live chickens en route to market. Boys are hastening to school, whilst buttoning up their yellow shirts. A man shouts, "Mzungu" (a friendly word which translates as 'white person' in every East African language) and asks us if we would like a mani-pedi. At the side of the road, as it happens. Next to the beggars, stressed businessmen marching to their meetings and chaos that makes up this wonderful city. I think I will pass mate, but thanks for the offer.



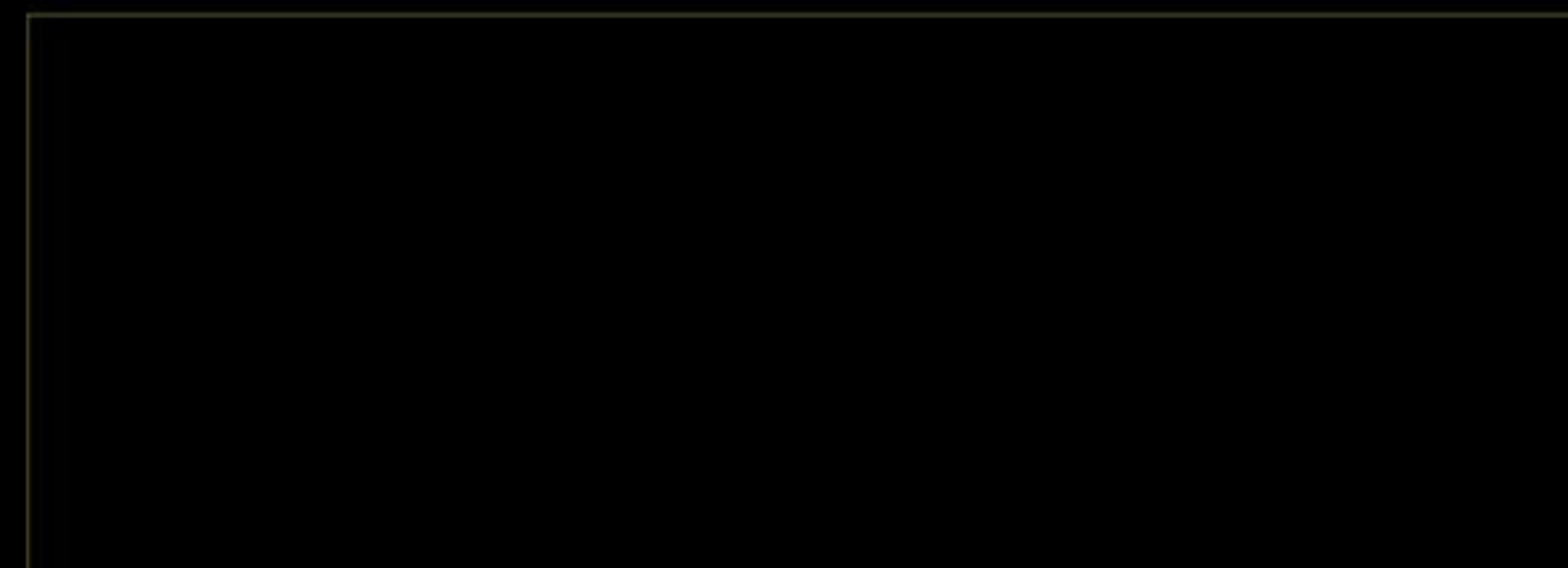
This brings me to my next point: the 'Mzungu' issue....if one more person shouts this at me, I am going to flip! Or fry my face to match my dark braids. My companion has taken it upon herself to answer back: "Eeeeh Mafrica" each time someone calls her 'white person.' Apparently, 'Mafrica' means "hey black person." Or so she thinks. This fills me with dread as I'm not sure whether her greeting will receive a smile, a laugh or perhaps result in a punch-up. Luckily, a huge grin is the regular response.

I get called 'Mzungu' at least ten times in the market. Ah, the market. This is a two-acre open air area space dedicated to fresh foods – and open every day from 6am until 10pm. You can't get much fresher than a live chicken in a cage, throttled to order. Or the delicacy of just-caught grasshoppers ready to fry. There are also sacks filled to the brim with coriander, cumin seeds, star anise and cinnamon sticks the size of small oak trees. For any foodie, this is an unmissable experience.



From there, we go to another street that is solely for the tailors of the capital; a place where young girls sit with wrinkled men, all working away at their vintage Singer sewing machines. No factories with nasty man-made fabrics here. Just good, proper, old-school work, as my grandfather would say. In Kiyembe Lane in downtown Kampala, each little fabric store is bursting with materials piled floor to ceiling: splashes of colour, strong ethnic prints, waxed cotton and local handcrafted materials for sale by the yard (for a mere £2).

Next, we go to some of the art and artefact galleries. Kampala has a burgeoning contemporary African art scene. My favourite is the *Afriart Gallery*. It boasts a temporary exhibition of acrylics daubed on bark cloth. And my top choice for African crafts is Banana Boat (a real er, Mzungu haunt), where they sell hand-sewn and beaded dog collars, purposefully misshapen rustic brass hoop earrings, cow hide drums, paper bead jewellery made out of recycled cereal packets and magazines, and hand-blown coloured glass fashioned from old wine bottles.



After a full-on and chaotic day in the city, it's back to the Sheraton to have a Ugandan massage. Uganda isn't famous for its massages – it's not part of their culture. People don't ask, "Are you going to spa in Thailand or Uganda?", do they? But wow, wow, wow! I am impressed. My companion, a spa junkie and reviewer, is blown away too. My lovely massage therapist really knows what she's doing. First, she applies a body scrub of bananas, avocado, ground coffee beans and salt – most of the contents of the fridge, detractors might say – but to me, this is heaven. After leaving it to soak into the skin, I shower until I'm gleaming clean. Then she gives me a great massage kneading my tired muscles with lemongrass oil.

Afterwards, we love the meal at the Sheraton's Seven Seas restaurant, its (mostly) Italian eaterie. Don't get me wrong, I have thoroughly enjoyed the rice and beans we have had almost daily since arriving and trekking in Africa....but fresh fish and grilled vegetables send me to another planet. Their Serbian chef, Aleksander Pavlovic, cooks using mostly Ugandan ingredients (but also Italian and Serbian....we're talking truly international here) and serves dishes packed with flavour and colour, and presented prettily.

We have the creamiest avocado and tomato salad known to mankind: Ugandan avocados are, hands down, the best in the world; a sweet but tangy and crunchy mango and raw vegetable salad; flipping fresh Nile Perch baked in a banana leaf; and Talapia (a fish found in Ugandan lakes) with black bean sauce and gonja (another form of plantain). I opt for lots of plantain, of course, because after eating my weight in the stuff since arriving in Africa, no meal would be complete without it.

All too soon it is time to leave. Cue for tears of sadness. It's just ninety minutes by car from Kampala to Entebbe, then just over an hour's flight by Kenya Airways from Entebbe to Nairobi. In the latter, we're welcomed to the airline's Simba Lounge. It has a wide selection of international newspapers from Le Monde to the New York Times; a VIP room; Halal breakfast options (think sour brown porridge); the best macadamia nuts I have ever tried; and fluorescent fruit juice. Plus comfy chairs and deliciously fierce air-conditioning.



Once on board, I'm delighted to be welcomed with a wash bag that even today, even at over two decades of age, the highlight of my flights is seeing what's inside that bag. In this case, a cosy pair of yellow socks with paw prints for grip on the sole is the winner. The seats are comfortable too and adjust perfectly into flatbeds. Even the menu is impressive – at least for a flight – and the food is good. Think beetroot carpaccio and lamb biryani.

As we soar above the clouds, I think of the city we've left behind. I reckon it would be safe to say that Kampala is not for the faint hearted. It is crazy, yes, but it is also an authentic and life-enhancing experience – a welcome break from the sometimes hamster-wheel existence of London and other cities. Oh, and I forgot to say....my hair-braiding took six hours. That's Africa for you. But did I tell you how many toiletries they give you in the Sheraton?