

Following in Sir Samuel Baker's footsteps

Cover story

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WRITTEN BY SAMSON BARANGA

0 COMMENTS



“The fall of water was snow-white, which had a superb effect as it contrasted with the dark cliffs that walled the river, while the graceful palms of the tropics and wild plantains perfected the beauty of the view.

This was the greatest waterfall of the Nile, and, in honour of the distinguished president of the Royal Geographical Society, I named it the Murchison Falls, as the most important object throughout the entire course of the river.”

That's an excerpt taken out of Sir Samuel Baker's gripping account of his explorations, written nearly 150 years ago. Reading the text is 73-year-old David Baker, Sir Samuel Baker's great-great grandson.

David, with his daughter Melanie Baker, are retracing the footsteps of Sir Samuel, accompanying modern-day explorer and anthropologist Julian Monroe Fischer who is trekking across the continent, following the routes of the Victorian age explorers of which Sir Samuel Baker is part.

Fischer's Great African Expedition is following the explorers' routes, reading through their letters, diaries and books that they wrote. The aim is to make comparisons between the tribes of that time and how those tribes are today.

After settling in at Paraa Safari lodge, David and the team visited the Bunyoro towns of Hoima and Masindi, where they met the Omukama of Bunyoro, Solomon Gafabusa Iguru, at his palace in Hoima town.



The swimming pool at Murchison

They then set off to see Lake Albert whose original name was Mwitanzige. They stood at the exact spot where Sir Samuel Baker stood 150 years ago. The spot has been baptized Baker's View.

The team then proceeded to Sir Samuel Baker Secondary School in Gulu, built in memory of the great explorer, years after he had left Uganda.

David was clad in the school's T-shirt when we met him at Paraa Safari lodge. They also came face to face with Sir Samuel's legacy and his fight against slave trade at Fort Patiko.

When we set off on a boat cruise to the bottom of Murchison falls, you could see David was having the time of his life.

On the cruise, we saw the sandbank covered with crocodiles lying parallel to each other like trunks of trees prepared for shipment, plus schools of hippopotamus as described by his grandfather 150 years ago.

The wow feeling he experienced when the falls suddenly burst into view was contagious, especially to us who were beholding the spectacular scene for the first time.

New tourists site

The Great African Expedition led by Fischer unearthed another site referred to as Baker's View. Located in Kabwoya Wildlife Reserve, this is the spot where Baker stood when he first set his eyes on Lake Albert.

This is another addition to the historical sites like Fort Patiko, Kasubi Tombs, Nyero Rock Paintings in Kumi and Namungongo Martyr's Shrine, among others.



The African Queen ferry on River Nile

David's visit to the Murchison Falls national park will further draw attention to the historical significance of the national park, whose revenue increased from about Shs 4bn in 2010/2011 to Shs 6.8bn in 2011/2012 according to statistics from Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA). "We need to harness our history to support our growing tourism sector," said UWA's Executive Director, Dr Andrew Seguya. There are plans to partner with the Royal Geographical Society and others to draw attention to all areas that have been covered by the Great African Expedition.

Who was Sir Samuel Baker?

He was born on June 8, 1821 in London. In March 1861 he set off for exploration in central Africa. He became the first explorer to see Lake Albert and was knighted in 1866, the year after he returned to England.

Other than his exploration works, Baker is remembered for fighting slavery alongside his wife Florence, whom he had rescued from a slave merchant in Bulgaria.

Thirty kilometres north of Gulu town on Ocecu hill, is Fort Patiko as a reminder for generations to come of his anti-slavery work in the area.

This is where the slaves and ivory collected from all over East Africa were kept and sometimes sold by the Arab slave traders.

baranga@observer.ug