



Blowing the Blues with the Batwa Pygmies in Uganda

By Margie Goldsmith

”Wakoze Kuza,” says Batwa pygmy Chief “Steve” Varaheegwan, welcoming us to his tribal village in the Virunga Mountains of Uganda as Herbert, the vivacious Ugandan liaison, translates. The entire Batwa tribe of about 75 men, women and children stare and I try not to show my surprise at their relatively normal height. These people are certainly not the pygmies I imagined. Herbert later explains that they have intermarried with other tribes.

I’ve just huffed and puffed two hours up an unending hill at an altitude of 8,500 feet to meet this indigenous Ugandan tribe, a cultural visit which the safari lodge where I’m staying, Mt Gahinga Lodge offers to Muzungus (as we foreigners are called by the Ugandans).

The new Batwa cultural program was created by Volcanoes Safaris Partnership Trust to help the Batwa revive their traditions so their history and culture can be better understood by the local communities and by the younger Batwa generation.

The Trust has built a Batwa Heritage Site to show how the tribe used to live in the forest, they’ve constructed a cultural center where the Batwa women learn to sew and make straw baskets, and a cultural dance, singing and drumming performance which I am hoping to see shortly, with the other four Mt. Gahinga Lodge guests who’ve hiked up the mountain with me.

We are still catching our breath when the Chief explains that the tribe will perform the dance ceremony tomorrow for the entire community, on the lawn of Lodge. He offers us a tour of the round huts made from branches and twigs and with thatched roofs. Up until 1992, the Batwa lived in the forest and made their living hunting, foraging for vegetables, and harvesting honey; then the government evicted them and

turned their land into a national park.

image: http://www.gonomad.com/images/article-images/uganda-pygmyies/Batwa_Moms_Performing.jpg



Batwa moms performing. Now they live as squatters in these drafty huts with no water or electricity or any other necessities we're used to in the west. Inside, the sparse walls are blackened from cooking. There are no beds, no furniture, just a couple of burned pots and a sleeping space on the bare ground.

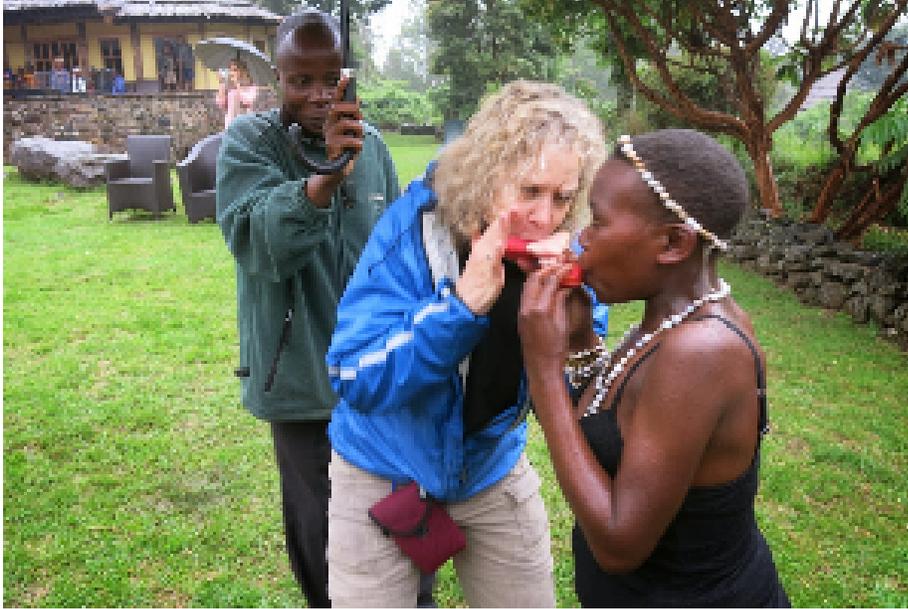
As we exit the cramped hut, some children crowd around us, including a little boy wearing a man's shirt that comes down to his ankles. A girl wearing a torn yellow dress touches my hand and giggles. Both males and females of all ages wear their hair cropped short, and the only way you can tell who's who is that the girls wear thread worn skirts.

They might be poor, but they look healthy and their smiles are real. Batwa children don't go to school but often help their parents who eke out a living working in the fields and performing cultural visits. Tomorrow's dance ceremony, for which they will receive a small sum, helps pay for salt, soap, sheep and goats.

While the dance ceremony helps keep their cultural traditions alive, they also abandoned some customs after leaving the forest, such as praying to their gods. They've been introduced to other religions and many, such as Chief Steve, have adopted Christian names. Herbert translates as one of the older men tells me, "Life in the forest was good. We never lacked for anything; we had food, we had

medicinal herbs and meat, we had clean water, but now have to buy our water.”

image: http://www.gonomad.com/images/article-images/uganda-pygmyies/Goldsmith_Teaches_Batwa_Woman_the_Harmoica.jpg



Goldsmith teaches Batwa woman her blues harmonica techniques. Life was not monetary in the forest, the older man says. “When we left the forest, our first challenge was land.” At first, other tribes received the Batwa because they provided cheap labor, but now it’s difficult for them because the population has increased and there are few jobs for them.

It’s time for a photo opp, and the four of us take turns posing for photos with the tribe. Then Herbert announces we’re leaving. It’s not as though going back down will be a hardship --the scenery of gigantic extinct volcanoes in every direction is gorgeous, not to mention children waving as they herd goats, women carrying huge bundles of branches on their heads, and men digging in the fields with hoes – the images are priceless and so far removed from my city world. But I’m not ready to leave so soon.

Before the trip, I asked **Hohner** to make a donation of 30 pink plastic Hohner harmonicas, as I knew they’d be perfect gifts for the Batwa children. But as I do a quick count, I see there are at least 50 kids. How do I decide which ones should get a harmonica?

Hopefully, there will be another opportunity. But I suddenly have an id

image: http://www.gonomad.com/images/article-images/uganda-pygmyies/Entire_community_Watches_Dance_at_Mt._Gahinga_Lodge.jpg



The entire community watches the dance at Mt. Gahinga Lodge. I pull out my own harmonica from my pocket and hold it up. They look curiously, never having seen one, the usual reaction I get when I show people from foreign cultures my little pocket-sized ten-holed instrument.

I began to play harmonica a few years ago, primarily to communicate in tongues I didn't speak. Music is the universal language, a perfect icebreaker wherever I am. I clap my hands in a rhythm and pantomime that the Batwa should clap with me. Tentatively, they put their hands together.

I play a boogie-woogie and by the third bar, they're clapping loud, swaying, and tapping their feet on the ground. When I finish, they break out into huge smiles and applaud. I only wish I had enough pink harmonicas for everyone.

Sound of Pounding Drums

After lunch the next day, I'm in my room staring at the pouring rain outside. I assume the Batwa

image: http://www.gonomad.com/images/article-images/uganda-pygmys/Bawa_Baby.jpg



A Bawa Baby, all wrapped up on mama's back. performance has been cancelled, but suddenly I hear the sound of pounding drums, so I grab my jacket and backpack of harmonicas and run to the front lawn of the Lodge.

About 100 people from the local community plus the entire Batwa tribe have gathered to watch 16 Batwa performers, a few of whom I recognize from yesterday's visit, now dressed in identical bright saffron colored pareas, singing, dancing and playing drums. Two women have babies strapped to their backs and a third breast-feeds her infant strapped to her torso as she pounds out a rhythm on the drum.

Five Batwa dancers snake their way in front of the singers and move on the wet grass. Chief Steve, shell necklaces crisscrossed on his bare torso and a shell headband on his forehead, leads the troop. The beat is infectious, the singing intoxicating. I shoot photos, then I put my camera in my backpack and clap.

They play for a good half hour or more and when they finally stop, I pull one of the pink plastic harmonicas from my backpack. They begin to clap out a rhythm anticipating I will play, but I have something else in mind: I take the pink harmonicas from my backpack and hand them out one by one to the performers.

image: <http://www.gonomad.com/images/article-images/uganda-pygmys/highwayInUganda.jpg>



A highway in the jungles of Uganda.

I pantomime that they should bring the harmonica to their lips and blow. “Inhale, and then exhale,” I tell them. They don’t understand what I mean so Herbert, who is at my side shielding me with a giant umbrella, translates.

I breathe in, making the sound of a chord and breathe out, producing a second chord. The performers try it, and they immediately get it, creating a rhythm as powerful as the drums. We blow in and out together on the two chords, tapping our feet, the drums still pounding. I move from performer to performer, bringing my face close to theirs, improvising a melody line as they breathe in and out, creating the rhythm.

Herbert is still following me around with the giant umbrella and I feel ridiculous like some British royalty, so I hand him a pink harmonica and tell him to drop the umbrella and play. His eyes light up as he folds up the umbrella, joins the performers, and happily blows away. The entire community is clapping.

image: http://www.gonomad.com/images/article-images/uganda-pygmyies/Ugandan_Boy_In_Field.jpg



A Ugandan boy in a field.

The Elders Come Dancing

Two village elders come dancing up to us. Herbert stops playing long enough to tell me to give them each a harmonica. They, too, join us. One of them doesn't even use his hands, but blows in and out, the instrument firmly planted between his lips. When the crowd sees me giving out pink harmonicas, they race up and hold out their hands expectantly.

I pull the rest from my backpack but run out quickly, so I kneel down and play at eye level for the kids who didn't get one. And in the pouring rain in this remote Ugandan village beneath the volcanoes, we joyously send our music to the universe. We only stop when we are completely exhausted.

The next morning as I'm climbing into the Jeep to head for the airport, I hear the distant sound of a harmonica, the same riff I taught the Batwa yesterday. I follow the sound up a nearby trail where a barefoot eight-year-old boy is playing his pink plastic harmonica. He stops when he sees me, but I encourage him to keep going. He plays

and when he's finished, I applaud, then put my palms together and bow to him. He grins, holds up the harmonica and bows back.

Read more at <http://www.gonomad.com/travel-tools/airport-parking/17-cultures/5510-uganda-playing-music-with-pygmyes#hL0h0cSWVbeY50om.99>