

All aboard the African Queen



Full steam ahead in eastern Uganda for an ageing star of the silver screen

MARK STRATTON

KATHARINE Hepburn isn't at the helm and Bogie isn't kicking the boiler, but the pugnacious African Queen is once again ploughing the Nile.

The century-old firebox is fed with wood to generate a sufficient head of steam, the flywheel twirls into life, the pistons pogo, the steam-whistle peeps and the engine groans into life. It sounds like a pair of wellies in a washing machine. This is its first pleasure cruise since being pressed back into service by a New Zealander, Cam McLeay, from its moorings at Wildwaters Lodge in eastern Uganda.

The film of *The African Queen*, directed by John Huston and released in 1951, is cemented in cinematic history. Based on CS Forester's 1934 novel, it was set during World War I in German-occupied East Africa. Humphrey Bogart won an Oscar for his portrayal of the gin-soaked, ambition-free steamboat captain Charlie Allnut, who takes on board prudish missionary Rosie Sayer (Hepburn).

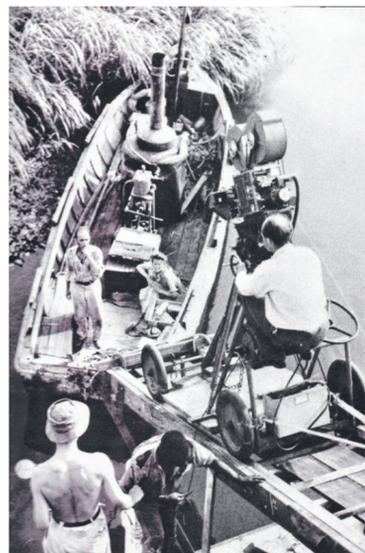
Allnut wants to see out the war in an alcoholic haze but Sayer has other ideas. In a pique of patriotic zeal she badgers the reluctant Allnut to take the African Queen down the previously unnavigable Ulanga River to destroy a German lake cruiser. Steadily, Allnut falls for his "crazy psalm-singing skinny old maid" and an unlikely romance blossoms on an epic voyage amid fierce white-water, German bullets and malarial swamps.

Forester was quixotic with his novel's locations. Ulanga is a Tanzanian river but doesn't flow into Lake Tanganyika, where imperial Germany held naval sway. Equally, the filming locations were geographically discordant. Scenes were shot in London's defunct Isleworth Studios, the Belgian Congo and Uganda. In this last location, Nile scenery was filmed at Murchison Falls National Park, where McLeay's version of the African Queen boat was unearthed in 1984.

I say "version" because of uncertainty about how many African Queens were used during filming. The original boat, the Livingstone, was built in 1912 in England. This 30ft steamboat operated in the Belgian Congo and was rented by Huston's crew for the movie, where it appears in scenes filmed around the Congo. It was sold to an American buyer in 1968 and now takes pleasure cruises out of Key Largo, Florida.

Its current owner insists none other than his African Queen and scaled-down models were used during filming. McLeay, however, is equally adamant his African Queen was specially constructed for the Ugandan film scenes. An explorer who has traversed the Nile's length by boat, McLeay founded whitewater rafting company Adrift and in 2010 opened Wildwaters Lodge. He wanted an old riverboat for his lodge.

"When I first heard a Kenyan guy, Yank Evans, was selling the African Queen, I thought, You're joking ...



Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn in *The African Queen*, top, and the boat during filming in Uganda's Murchison Falls National Park, left and below; right, clockwise from main picture, the refurbished African Queen on the Nile, its steam pressure gauge, and Wildwaters Lodge



MARK STRATTON

Humphrey's boat?" McLeay explains. "I phoned Yank and he told me he'd discovered it when building a road around Murchison Falls in the 1980s. His local workers insisted to a man it was the African Queen.

"Yank uncovered its steel carcass rusted below the waterline, with a mock boiler and toppled flue."

The fake boiler and flue are significant clues. In the movie the boat (or boats) used were diesel-driven but were mocked up to resemble a steam-powered vessel.

"Yank rebuilt its hull and his friend in England sourced a century-old steam engine [made in Blackburn], which he freighted to Uganda," continues McLeay. "By the 1990s it was running again but now truly steam-powered. When I bought it three years back, it'd succumbed to rust again. We've spent a few years overhauling it."

He rejects the idea of the Florida African Queen as

the only full-sized one in existence. "I strongly advocate we have one [that was] built for the Nile filming. To transfer the African Queen used in scenes in the Congo back to Uganda for further filming would've taken months back in 1951 [and] the cast were only in Africa for three months. There are images in Hepburn's book *The Making of the African Queen* that show a full-sized version on the Ugandan Nile, and ours is near-identical to the Florida boat."

My silver-screen homage had begun at Uganda's Entebbe airport. From here I travelled 145km east to Wildwaters Lodge on the White Nile, flowing north from Lake Victoria.

Beyond Kungulimira, some of the mightiest white-waters on earth thunder over Kalagala Falls and gush chaotically between rainforested midstream islands. Reaching Wildwaters Lodge means taking a dugout

across a tranquil corridor of water to the midstream Kalagala Island.

All-inclusive Wildwaters offers 10 high-end cottages linked by boardwalks to a river-facing restaurant and swimming pool.

My cottage exudes retro comfiness, characterised by plump floral-fabric armchairs, chaise longue and claw-foot bathtub on a riverside veranda for alfresco bathing. It overlooks a Grade 6 rapid (considered unraftable) called Hypoxia. The rapid's constant roar provides an ever-present gravelly tinnitus.

I'm introduced to McLeay's African Queen that afternoon. Wallowing in shallows off a slipway surrounded by water hyacinths, it's a narrow workhorse with a shallow draught, a white and bark-coloured steel hull trimmed by a wooden gunwale and a black boiler topped by a flue.

It is a bit of tinkering away from being readied to take visitors on two-hour cruises into calm water. I get to join a test run.

Completing final preparations is another Kiwi, engineer Gavin Fahey, who, like Bogart's Allnut, is appropriately unshaven and able to turn his hand to all things mechanical.

"The reason it's taken so long to get going is the old boiler. We've had to rebuild it and manufacture some parts ourselves. It never came with an instruction manual," shrugs Fahey. "We're trying to get as close to the original as possible. I've still got to assemble the awning Katharine Hepburn sat under and replace the mast that rotted through."

It is built for neither quick getaways nor solo operation. Fahey's co-engineer, a Ugandan called Bonny, busily feeds it firewood and tweaks hissing valves as we

wait 45 minutes for the boiler temperature to superheat steam to the 120psi pressure required before the flywheel will engage the gearbox. Then we're all aboard and it plods upstream at a few knots against the Nile current.

The plan was to test the boat in some mild white-water but after 30 minutes the water pump malfunctions. "We don't want to be aboard if the boiler dries out because she'll go pop," cautions Fahey.

Its steam is expelled mid-Nile, firebox doused, and we're ignominiously towed home.

While the boat heads back to the workshop, the next day I attempt one of Uganda's most popular activities: Nile whitewater rafting. Having experienced the African Queen's foibles, I soon realise that the movie scenes showing it careering down monstrously large rapids are laughable.

My first capsize of the day, tackling Grade 5 white-water by dinghy, guided by Tasmanian river guide Tom, is at a malicious rapid called Bubogo (meaning condolences). After barely keeping upright while plunging over a 4m waterfall known as Overtime, we're completely out of control within Bubogo's ferocious maelstrom.

We're flipped and I'm sucked underwater to rotate on fast spin before being rescued, gasping, by the safety kayakers.

The subsequent rapids — Vengeance, The Bad Place and Itanda (Graveyard) — scarcely rebuild my confidence. However, fear eventually transforms into adrenalin-fuelled fun as we ride river monsters to the point of hysterical amusement.

We're finally overturned by a rearing cobra of a wave at Kula Shaker rapid.

"I don't reckon your African Queen would survive this lot, mate, it'll fill up with water and sink after the first rapid," offers Tom.

A day later it's the commercial debut from Wildwaters Lodge of its African Queen. Fahey hopes he's solved the water-pump issue and I join the first paying customers, Alan and Cynthia from Launceston. We're soon sipping G&Ts.

As we make thumping progress upriver, Cynthia is offered control of the helm. She may well be the first woman to assume that responsibility since Hepburn. "I'm in disbelief," coos Cynthia. "I've never driven a boat before and now my first is the African Queen. I feel like Katharine, only without her jawline."

All is going well: second G&T in hands, canapes, visceral Nile scenery, Bonny bashing the flywheel. Then the water-pressure gauge slumps to nearly empty. Abandon trip.

Still, we've made 40 minutes this time and are able to whoosh back to Wildwaters on a fast current.

Beer in hand, Fahey smiles. "We're 75 per cent there," he says. "Well, maybe 65 per cent. But the old girl's worth the effort." I'm sure he means the steamboat and not Katharine Hepburn.

THE INDEPENDENT

Checklist

Wildwaters Lodge offers its guests a two-hour excursion on the African Queen for about \$95. Double rooms with all inclusions start at about \$745. More: wild-uganda.com.

GREAT CRUISE ESCAPES

Queen's birthday honours: Cunard's flagship Queen Mary 2 will celebrate a decade's service this year. Since its January 2004 launch, the majestic QM2 has completed 419 voyages carrying about 1.3 million passengers, crossed the Atlantic more than 200 times and visited 182 ports in 60 countries. As part of the celebrations, QM2 embarks on a second Royal Circumnavigation of Australia in February and March, and the anniversary year will also see the three Cunard Queens visit Australia together for the first time — QM2 arrives in Fremantle on February 12, Queen Elizabeth in Sydney on March 1 and Queen Victoria in Brisbane on March 3. More: 132441; cunard.com.

Continental drift: APT has released a range of offers for its 2015 continental river cruising program; for example, book an all-inclusive 15-day Magnificent Europe Royal Collection voyage from Amsterdam to Budapest by April 15, 2014 (March 1, April 5, October 1 and December 31, 2015 departures) and receive free return flights from Australia, including taxes. From \$6595 a person, twin-share, with "royal" extras such as a private tour of a German castle and exclusive concert by the Mozart Boys Choir at Vienna's City Palace. More: 1300 278 278; aptouring.com.au.

Spring into action: Majestic Line has 10 per cent off its northern spring small-ship cruises along the west coast of Scotland; there are three six-night itineraries available from April 5 and a new wildlife cruise, Around Mull: Wildlife Explorer, leaves Oban, about three hours by road from Glasgow, on April 19, with opportunities to spot otters, dolphins and porpoises; white-tailed and golden eagles; and those cartoon-like puffins nesting on remote islands. More: themajesticline.co.uk.

Way up north: Silversea has an 11-day round-trip voyage ex Vancouver on June 19 that takes in the best of Alaska's wildly beautiful scenery. Silver Shadow cruises the fjords of the Inside Passage and then heads along the coast to Ketchikan, Juneau, Skagway and Sitka before cruising Tracy Arm and Sawyer Glacier; from \$6350 a person twin-share, including butler service, meals and drinks, gratuities and myriad extras. More: 1300 306 872; silversea.com.

Hop aboard: Royal Caribbean is holding a Royal Class Earlybird Sale with savings of up to \$2100 a person across a range of 50 cruises for the late 2014 to early 2015 summer season. Sail from Sydney or Fremantle on Rhapsody of the Seas, Radiance of the Seas or Voyager of the Seas to local ports, New Zealand, and a variety of South Pacific islands — note that bookings must be made by February 28. More: 1800 754 500; royalcaribbean.com.au.

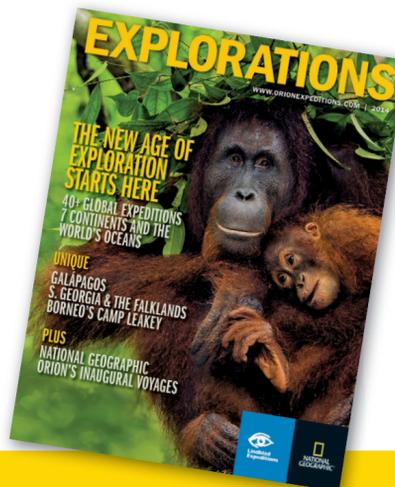
Get in quick: February 28 is also the booking deadline for Celebrity Cruises' Annual Sale, which offers savings of up to \$1500 a person next summer. The company will have two ships — Celebrity Century and Celebrity Solstice — based in Australian waters for an expanded series of 26 cruises from Sydney, Fremantle and Auckland later this year and early next year. A seven-night Tasmania sailing from Sydney on December 15, for example, now starts at \$899 a person for the lowest-category cabin. More: celebritycruises.com.au.

SUSAN KUROSAWA

THE MOST AUTHENTIC & ENGAGING TRAVEL EXPERIENCES ON EARTH

In 2004, Lindblad Expeditions and National Geographic joined forces to inspire the world through expedition travel. Now our fleet of 10 ships voyage to over 40 extraordinary destinations on 7 continents providing vivid, once-in-a-lifetime experiences. If you once promised yourself you'd embark on a great adventure, chances are 2014 is your year. Your expedition of a lifetime is here.

Inside our 2014 EXPLORATIONS brochure you will find stunning photos shot by National Geographic and our expedition photographers worldwide. Plus, you'll find complete itineraries for 40+ destinations, and learn more about the Lindblad Expeditions' heritage, our acclaimed staff, and the exclusive Lindblad Expeditions-National Geographic alliance. Embark with us in 2014!



BE INSPIRED— GET OUR 2014 BROCHURE

Call 1300 361 012, visit www.orionexpeditions.com or contact your travel agent



JOIN US TO EXPLORE THE PLANET'S MOST PRISTINE, WILD PLACES