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From Poverty To CEO: Ugandan Founder Of 'Great Lakes Safaris' Looks Back On 20 Years Of Success



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Travel

Chasing the dream: I write about travel and the world around me

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Today, on 23 April 2021, **Great Lakes Safaris** – one of the most successful safari tour operators in Uganda – marks its 20th anniversary. Ugandan founder and CEO, **Amos Wekesa**, has much to celebrate as he looks back on the past 20 years. Here, exclusively for Forbes, I talk to him about his remarkable rise to success from humble beginnings and how his latest launch – **Great Lakes Safaris Foundation (GLSF)** – has an authentic 'give-back' philosophy. This new venture will be committed to sustainable development by creating opportunities to support rural communities located in vulnerable wildlife areas of Uganda.





Amos Wekesa taken in the Budongo Forest, Uganda. (CREDIT: SARAH MARSHALL)

You've come a long way from growing up in a small village on the border of Uganda and Kenya in the 1970s. Was being CEO of your own company always the dream?

Achieving what I have was so far from my reality when I was growing up. We had very real and daily challenges of finding where the next meal was coming from and jostling to survive. So, I never imagined that I could achieve even 10% of what I have. I failed in school and only started my A-Levels at the age of 23. I never thought I would be anything. I just wanted to find a way to survive.

When I got my second job in an office, I would watch and learn from others, and only then did I have an aspiration that maybe I could match what they were doing. Even in my early days as a tour guide, I did not have this dream. People kept telling me you are so good at what you do. After a while, I started to believe them!

Out of necessity, due to the political situation in Uganda, your family made a living as smugglers, what are your main recollections of this time?

I was born in 1973, a difficult time in Uganda under the rule of Idi Amin. There was nothing across the country, not even any bread. We lived in a small village called Lwakhakha, on the eastern border of Uganda and Kenya. My parents would smuggle basic food items, like tea and sugar, across the border. There was always a chance they would get arrested by the Kenyan army. They had their goods confiscated many times, so naturally it would be easier for us kids to smuggle, as there was less chance of being caught.

I remember we had to cross a river, which was so cold, and it would regularly flood. I was nearly taken by the river so many times. I was scared for my younger sisters – that they would be washed away.

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The little food we had was shared across the family. Apart from the chicken. Only the adults would eat the chicken and, us kids we would wake up early the next morning to search for the left-over bones and strip them of any remaining meat. To this day, I still do the same. My family laugh at me when I eat chicken – there is no waste!



Amos (on the right), starting out as a guide with his first Land Cruiser vehicle, in 2003. (CREDIT: AMOS WEKESA)

You were chosen by the Salvation Army to be taken away to be educated. But it must have been so difficult to leave home at the age of 10. How did you manage?

I had no choice in the matter! I would get the beating of my life by my mother if I did not go. She showed us tough love. But she knew it was the only opportunity for me to go to school and build a better life. I had never even worn shoes or been in a car before. When I arrived at the children's

home in Tororo, I was shown my dormitory and I sat on my bed looking around. One boy came into the room and touched the wall and light appeared. At the age of 10, I had never seen light before. This was a whole new world to understand. It was a tough environment, but I was used to surviving.



Uganda is home to spectacular scenery such as Murchison Falls. (CREDIT: GLS)

Looking back now, what would you tell your 10-year-old self?

I would tell myself to always have hope. I had to endure suffering as a child and that is not right. My experiences have given me the chance to be able to love my kids and be there for them. Hope and faith have carried me on my journey. If I would have told myself I would be the CEO of my own company, and live a comfortable life, I would have not believed it.

From your first job as ‘sweeper’ to now as CEO, what personal qualities have helped you on the road to success?

I have learned many lessons over the years. But I’ve found that there are a few constant things that apply, no matter where I was in my journey.

The first is to make the most of every opportunity. I may have been taken away from my family at a tender age, but what I gained, I could never have created on my own. I may not have been the best student, but I would grasp every opportunity to work hard and find a path for myself to achieve my goals.

Secondly, honesty is ALWAYS the best policy. My second job was as an office messenger for Nile Safaris. I was in charge of taking money and paperwork to guides out in the field. My boss said to me that I was the longest-ever serving employee in this job. Not only did I walk fast, but I was trusted with money. I told him that I had a big dream, so I was not going to steal small money.

Thirdly, dream big and work hard. My third job as a tour guide was when I discovered my gift. I was earning a US\$1 a day, working long exhausting hours and sleeping only two-three hours a night. All the time, I had my dream in sight. People rush to earn good money, but first you should learn a skill. I learnt on the job and managed to save up \$200, and then I started Great Lakes Safaris.

Lastly, keep the faith. Throughout all my life I have been a Christian. I have tasted poverty and I knew I never wanted to go back. I now use my voice to promote tourism and help pave the way for other Ugandans to believe in themselves, and their country too.

In 2001, you formed Great Lakes Safaris. How did you overcome the early difficulties?

As I said, I started Great Lakes Safaris with just \$200, working out of my briefcase for the first nine months. I eventually got an office, under a staircase in a shopping mall! At the time, I was still living in a slum, but my dream came first.

Tour-guiding taught me how to build relationships and to appreciate the value of networks and meeting people. Many of the opportunities that have come my way are through meetings with people who believed in me. I have been built by people.

The year after I opened, business stalled, with no single tourist coming in for three months. I even contemplated closing the company. But earlier that year, I had been guiding some American tourists and, unbeknown to me, one of them was an editor at *The Washington Times*. He went on to write an article about his trip to a beautiful country bypassed by tourists. This was a pivotal point for my success and Great Lakes Safaris quickly grew after the article came out.



View from the Elephant Plains Lodge in Queen Elizabeth National Park. (CREDIT: GLS)

In 2006, you get permission to build your first lodge – as the first Ugandan to do so. What did that feel like?

I was the first Ugandan to be granted permission to build a lodge inside a national park and, at the time, this felt like a huge victory. Previously only white foreigners had built lodges in parks in Uganda, so I knew I may face a few challenges. Initially, I struggled to get support in getting started. I was written off by other lodge owners, tour operators and stakeholders in the tourism industry. But this only made me want it more. I had started Great Lakes Safaris without anyone's help and support, so I was determined to do this, too. If people say I can't do something, then this becomes my biggest motivator.

Slowly, people started to see that I was serious, and their support eventually came. This was a great feeling. I wanted Ugandans to see that this has nothing to do with colour – it is about striving for your goals and overcoming bias in the industry. I hope I have shown that Ugandans can do this and that I have left a path for others to follow.



Primate Lodge in the Kibale National Park, Uganda. (CREDIT: PETERHOGEL.COM)

Now, you have operations throughout Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya and Tanzania. You have four lodges in Uganda, and 180 employees. What sets your company apart from others?

We are unique in that we are 100% Ugandan. In Africa, that is a rarity. Because of this, we are able to offer a truly traditional African safari experience across east Africa. Our authenticity is the luxury. We can provide luxurious lodges, but our focus is on the experience.

What is your favourite ‘secret spot’ in Uganda?

Murchison Falls is my absolute favourite park in Uganda, and the Falls themselves are breathtaking. This is the point where the Nile bursts through a gorge of just 7m wide and cascades 100m to the river below. It is one of the most powerful waterfalls in the world.



Tracking chimpanzees is one of the experiences you can have with Amos. (CREDIT: GLS)

What is your favourite animal to see and where can visitors see them?

I love the chimpanzee. We share over 98% of our DNA with these intelligent creatures, but they are six times stronger than us. They display amazing compassion and empathy towards each other. Chimpanzees split into groups to feed, so they don't compete with each other for food, like other animals. They also use tools to help them get food. I prefer them to the famous gorillas, that many people come to Uganda to see. Gorillas are lazy giants, but chimpanzees are strong and agile, and they communicate using many different calls and facial expressions. I could (and often do) watch them all day.

You can see chimpanzees in several places across Uganda, but my favourite place to see them is in **Budongo Forest**. It is a lesser-visited forest, and the chimpanzees here seem to spend a lot of time on the forest floor. We offer a chimpanzee habituation experience, which allows visitors to spend the whole day watching them, moving from nest to nest with the troop, and observing them playing, hunting, and communicating with each other.





Tree-climbing lion in Queen Elizabeth National Park. (CREDIT: GLS)

You still work as a tour guide – what do you love about it?

Being a tour guide is a constant learning cycle. Every day there is something new to learn. We have been blessed with such a beautiful country in Uganda. I also love the fact that you get to know all different types of people. My ‘work’ means being a part of someone’s holiday memories, and that is special. Today I have friends all over the world.

You have inspired other Ugandans to start their own business in tourism, and work with the Ugandan government on boosting tourism. Is supporting the future of your country and fellow Ugandans important to you?

Uganda has been blessed with some of the world’s most beautiful flora and fauna. It is our responsibility as Ugandans to protect this for our future generations. I have seen the expression on tourists’ faces when they see our scenery and our wildlife, which many Ugandans take for granted. I want Ugandans to love their country; only then can we make others love it, too.

I believe that tourism creates the best opportunities for Ugandans. It has a fast trickledown effect, a higher return on investment and can quickly

contribute to the lives of thousands of people. It is easy for tourists to create an impact in a developing country like Uganda. One tourist alone can create six to seven jobs.



Going on safari in Uganda brings a wealth of wildlife experiences. (CREDIT: GLS)

How important is it for Ugandan companies, such as yours, to work to limit the detrimental effect on the country's natural riches?

Hugely important. I have dedicated half of my life to ensuring our wild places and wildlife are protected and preserved. Last month, I was awarded a sustainable eco-tourism award for my outstanding contribution to wildlife conservation in Uganda. This is not the reason I do what I do. But I was given a voice and, along with other private sector tourism stakeholders, we must push for tourism to be prioritised as a source of sustainable investment for the country, over bigger and potentially harmful economies.

In an interview with CNN, you said that, “a lot of people in Africa think that everything important is out of Africa” – is that

changing?

Yes, some young people are discovering they can exploit their own environment to grow. But many still think everything ‘foreign is better’. While we are certainly starting to see a shift in the narrative, there is still a long way to go.

A lot of this is down to our education system. We are not taught to understand our own country. In school, children still learn about British history and American geography, for instance, but they don’t learn about themselves and their country, or what it means to have the River Nile running through Uganda or what Lake Victoria brings to our country.



The new Foundation has been set up to support and empower rural Ugandans and the younger generation. (CREDIT: GLS)

For your 20-year anniversary, you have launched the Great Lakes Safaris Foundation – tell us about that.

The Great Lakes Safaris Foundation (GLSF) is set up to support and empower local communities living close to our lodges and wildlife areas. It will be funded by a bed night levy when staying in our lodges, and a community fee, which will be added to our safaris.

GLSF will partner with local communities to support programs focusing on education, conservation, and community empowerment. By directly linking with tourism, we will encourage communities to learn to positively value wildlife and nature as resources for improving their own wellbeing and to achieve long-term conservation.



Great Lakes Safaris' first lodge - Budongo Eco Lodge - is being renovated this year. (CREDIT: RESERVADOS TODOS LOS DERECHOS)

What next for you and Great Lakes Safaris?

We are currently looking at expanding our portfolio with a lodge in **Bwindi Forest**, close to the gorilla tracking experience, and a boutique hotel in **Entebbe**, close to the airport, so we can smoothly manage our clients across most tourist destinations in Uganda.

My first ever lodge – **Budongo Eco Lodge** – will be completely rebuilt, in line with our brand of luxury lodges, to mirror **Primate Lodge**, in Kibale Forest, and **Elephant Plains Lodge**, in Queen Elizabeth National Park. We are also looking in Tanzania at a lodge in the **Tarangire National Park**, which is in the very early stages but looking promising.

I am still active in tourism for Uganda, and I am the chairman for the Presidential Investors Round Table on tourism matters. We engage with government on road networks, education, training of Ugandans in hospitality, more favourable taxations, and we push for a healthy marketing budget for tourism. I also keep a close eye on the conservation of all areas of Uganda, and make my voice heard for the preservation of our natural heritage.

I am also prioritising working with the tourism board and our government to ensure the success of our national carrier Uganda Airlines and their launch of international routes, which include London, Dubai, Mumbai, and Guangzhou. I have spent the last 12 years of my life lobbying for a national carrier for Uganda, so I was delighted to get this off the ground in 2019.

A good British friend of mine said I am like a stick of rock – if you cut me in half you will see I am Ugandan through and through.

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Writing and discovering the world is second nature to me. I have been a journalist for over 20 years, based in London, UK. I started off as an editorial assistant on...