

Magazine

A Sudden Breach in Uganda

Lives

As told to KATYA CENGEL APRIL 15, 2016

A few years ago, when I was still relatively new to the tour-guide business, a company hired me to show an American photographer around Rwanda and Uganda. Six days in, we had toured a rain forest in the southwest of Rwanda, spent two days with the mountain gorillas and crossed over the Ugandan border. Now we were in the town of Kabale, in the hills of Southwestern Uganda. Everything was going well.

At dinner that night, the photographer and I discussed what we would do for the last three days of the trip. Then we agreed to meet at 8 the next morning. I was serving as tour guide and driver and staying at the same hotel he was, a nice but slightly out-of-date place with a huge grass garden.

A knock came at 5:30 the next morning. The hotel security guard, dressed in his dark blue uniform, was at my window.

“Your client is leaving,” he said.

“No, it can’t be my client, we aren’t leaving until 8,” I said. “It must be someone else’s client.”

But the security guard was sure it was my client. He recalled how we arrived late the night before. He described my client, a divorced American man in his 60s, outfitted in khaki shirt and pants, with lots of pockets. I opened my window. To my surprise, there in the compound was my client — with his luggage.

I asked the guard not to open the hotel's outer gate until I had a chance to talk to my client and figure out what was going on. I went into the compound and confronted the photographer. He told me he was going to continue the trip on his own.

"How come you didn't tell me about this?" I asked. "I am your guide, if you have a problem, I am the first person you should talk to."

"No, no," he said. "I am going."

He told me again that he was going to continue on his own, by bus. The thing was, he had paid for only part of his trip and still owed the tour company that hired me around \$1,000. I told him I would call the manager of the tour company and he could explain to the manager that he wanted to break his contract. Then I listened as he told the manager how good he had been to me. During the trip he sometimes offered to pay for my meals. But I always refused and paid for my own food. Now he said, "You know, I was so kind to Eric, I did this and that, and when we had dinner together I offered to pay for his meal."

I didn't understand what happened. Everything was fine until that morning. When you are just two people traveling for the whole day in one vehicle, having almost every meal together, you talk about so many things. I thought I knew him, but now he was like someone else.

Today I work with white people all the time, but back then I had little experience working with white people, or, as we say, *mzungus*. When I was a child, we were taught only good things about white people: *mzungus* are always on time, *mzungus* always treat people fairly, *mzungus* are to be trusted. It was the message I was given by my parents and teachers, the message that was reinforced at school, where I was taught by white priests, who were always kind and fair. Maybe it was left over from colonialism, but in Rwanda, the Germans, the Belgians, they were remembered as hard-working and serious.

This white man was not acting how white people were supposed to act. I asked the manager of the hotel not to let him go, because he was trying to break his contract and still owed money. The manager of the hotel called the police. The police called a local company to assess the situation and decide how much money

my client would need to pay to continue on his own. After much back and forth, he agreed to pay around \$400.

It was less than the \$1,000 he owed, but he also wasn't going to continue the last three days, which the original price included. My tour company told me to leave him and return home.

Before I left, the photographer came up to me and apologized. "Let me buy you a drink, and let's forget about everything," he said.

I asked him what had happened to him.

"I don't know," he said. "Don't ask me. Let's shake hands and forget about everything."

I had this image that all white people were perfect. This American photographer was my first proof otherwise. But in Rwanda, you learn to move on. So I shook his hand.

I ended up having lunch with him. He never told me why he changed his mind, but now I understand that people don't always act how you expect them to. After lunch I drove him to the bus stop — then continued toward home.

Eric Kayiranga, 44, works as a professional freelance tour guide. He spoke in English to **Katya Cengel**, who was a 2016 fellow with the International Women's Media Foundation's African Great Lakes Reporting Initiative.

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