

Catch me if you can at Kyabobo

WHEN I checked my blood pressure during the last Easter, the nurse who had taken my readings looked me sharply in the eye and told me, "Do more exercises!"

I took her advice and selected one of the most difficult and, perhaps, the most interesting of all adventure exercises: a climb through the Breast Mountains to the Leboum Waterfalls.

If you have never heard of Breast Mountains or Leboum Waterfalls, it is not your fault. Both features are to be found in the Nkwanta District of the Volta Region, right on the border with Togo.

Breast Mountains and the wonderful Leboum waterfalls are within a high adventure protected area called the kyabobo National Park managed by the Wildlife Division of the Forestry Commission. A visit will remain one of your most unforgettable and physically challenging experiences in your life, whether you do keep fit or not.

When you get to Nkwanta, the capital of the district of the same name and you look up to the east towards Togo only a few score kilometers away, all you see are very smooth, lush forest and mist-covered mountains that leave you forever wondering how they might have been formed.

The earth is old, very old, and the mountains that form the **Kyabobo National Park** are also terribly old. The very high mountains are clothed in a thin bluish mist that makes you feel outside this world, and that also fills you with a mad urge to climb them to discover their hidden secrets.

The beauty of the mountains of kyabobo shrouded in mist has several times prompted both local and international tourists to insist that the kyabobo National Park should be called Misty Mountains National Park.

What strikes you most when you look at the mountains to the north east of Nkwanta are a pair of very tall hills in the distance that nobody needs to tell you why they are called the Breast Mountains. In the distance, they look exactly like the young breast of a woman lying flat on her back.

Within the **Kyabobo National Park** are very interesting features that leave you wondering about nature and people. The Shaire village on the park's fringe is a

most interesting community that tourists have been calling “The Hanging Village”.

Shaire is strung on a very, very steep hillside, so the houses are lines in rows on terraces. From the bottom of the village and looking up, the impression that is created is that at any moment the village might fall down upon you.

Another visual impression from the bottom is that the buildings were constructed one upon the other’s roof. My great wonderment was that neither people, especially the old and children or their livestock, ever lose their foothold and to crash below.

Kyabobo is full of birds, and butterflies, and a good deal of wildlife. I was indeed, amazed to find bird species like the great turaco (kokokyinka) and the casqued hornbill (onwam) in the park, but these are not the only residents of Kyabobo. The park also harbours elephant, aardvark, genet, civet and both the tree and giant pangolins.

Visitors may also see the hyrax, red river hog, wart hog and several types of monkeys. As for the butterflies, you will find yourself really awash in them especially in places where you have to follow river courses.

Kyabobo has a great drainage, with a lot of rivers and streams. I think I drank almost one gallon of this cold, refreshing water on the day that I challenged myself with a walk to the Leboum waterfall. I pride myself with being a specialist of some sort on waterfalls, but Leboum surprised me.

To get there, we were told we needed a two-hour walk, and about the same time to get back to the Leboum Ranger camp of the Wildlife Division. We indeed had to climb up and down three very high mountain ranges before getting there, in between which we walked level ground along or through river courses.

On such a trek, we discovered several places where the rivers and streams formed cool swimmable pools. Stated earlier that I had gone to kyabobo to exercise and challenge my muscles. But, to kill two birds with one stone, I had actually arranged for a week of training for our thirty Wildlife Division and community tour guides in the northern half of the Volta Region.

The programme was shared between me, one American Jim Bultman, and Theo van der Sluis of the SNV. I went with my one-third share of the “students”, aged between 27 and 52 years.

The Wildlife Division has responsible tour guides who take their work dead serious. Two days of the training had been devoted to the learning has been

devoted to the learning of the medicinal and other properties of trees and plants. For two days, therefore the chief herbalist of the area had come and lectured through an interpreter, and then taken us into the field to do the practical side of his teaching.

The closer you get to the Leboum waterfall, the higher the mountains become, and the last one was the mother of all. Its slope was so sharp that holes had been provided to give us and visitors to the place some relatively safe footholds. Yet, it was found wise to sometimes put your knees to the earth and grab a tree or twine to inch your way forward. Then a wise guy offered a good solution in such cases. Walking sticks for everybody.

A walking stick gives you a third leg, and putting your weight on it also helps to propel you forward. At the top of the Leboum Mountain, from where we could hear the familiar roaring of the waterfall, we discovered that the hundred remaining meters downhill to the fall was such a steep slope that in some places done was tempted to sit and slide, a very safe way to go down a dangerously steep slope.

By accident, somebody dislodged a fairly large stone and it rolled down crashing through trees and rocks with such violence that one of my students lost his nerve and decided not to go to the waterfall. He was sorry when we returned to find him very fast asleep in the resting camp where we left him.

The guides who decided to remain behind on the mountain peak was, however, right in his decision, because the real, real adventure is the last one hundred meters that goes through narrow rock clefts. Then we burst upon the Leboum waterfall.

The fall is very wide and very high, coming from the top of the mountain and sliding in a white living sheet on the rock face that looks like two very tall terraces one on top of the other. I immediately went into what I do wherever I find a waterfall.

Within two minutes, I had stripped and plastered myself to the rock on which the cold water was flowing, with my mouth and eyes open to catch tons of water. I have come to cultivate the belief that swimming under a waterfall or getting, beaten, by one is of the most invigorating leisure and health activities.

I wrote somewhere that waterfalls were used in ancient Rome and Greece to cure aristocrats who fell ill with madness and violence-generating stress. In such cases, the patient was taken into the forests and tethered to a tree near a waterfall

in such a way that he had no choice but to watch the water cascading down in the same old mesmerising way.

A most remarkable thing to wonder about in Kyabobo are the unbelievable rock forms. Besides the giant rock formations, there are places that the moss-covered rocks are piled up in such a way over wide expanses of mountainside that they appear to have been deliberately packed so perfectly.

A lot of tourists wonder if our prehistoric ancestors might not have been responsible for such perfect arrangements. But it is obviously impossible to ascribe these wonders to human being.

Then at another place on the Leboum walk, the rocks are also packed in a most intriguing way, but the real wonder is that the rocks have been sort of cut into perfect squares and rectangles, and piled on each other like a giant pack of cards.

Indeed, it is worth the while of everybody to visit the **Kyabobo National Park**. We need to free our minds sometimes so that we do not get stressed up. We need interesting physical exercises to keep our minds in healthy bodies, so what is better than a hard walk through mountain ranges to bath under a cool refreshing waterfall on our border with Togo?

In fact, on the Togolese side of the border is a much larger national park, and officials from both sides periodically meet in Ghana and Togo to compare notes and share strategies for conserving this wonderful ecological phenomenon and the wildlife it harbours.

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