

# Understand East Africa

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Fifty years after the countries of region gained independence, many challenges remain, but there are bright spots, too.

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From humankind's earliest days, through migrations, colonialism and independence, East Africa's history reflects many influences.

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# East Africa Today

All East African countries have been independent for over 50 years. In what state do we find them? A collection of stable countries that offers hope to the rest of the continent? Or a region perpetually on the brink of crisis? Which state will triumph remains the region's burning question. Beyond that, the spectre of terrorism remains in Kenya, Uganda and Burundi due to their involvement in an African Union force trying to bring peace to Somalia.

## Best on Film

**Out of Africa** (1985) Caused a generation to dream of East Africa.

**People of the Forest – The Chimps of Gombe** (1988) Documentary following a chimpanzee family.

**Echo of the Elephants** (1993) Elephants of Amboseli National Park.

**Hotel Rwanda** (2004) and **Shooting Dogs in Rwanda** (2005) Two powerful stories from the Rwandan genocide.

**Last King of Scotland** (2006) Uganda under Idi Amin.

**The Great Rift** (2010) BBC natural history documentary about the Rift Valley.

## Best in Print

**Out of Africa** (Karen Blixen; Isak Dinesen, pseud; 1937) The definitive account of colonial Kenya.

**The Tree Where Man Was Born** (Peter Matthiessen; 1972) Lyrical account of East Africa's people, wildlife and landscapes.

**We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families** (Philip Gourevitch; 1998) Searing study of Rwanda's 1994 genocide.

**No Man's Land** (George Monbiot; 1994) The modern struggle of the region's nomadic tribes.

**Petals of Blood** (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o; 1977) Perhaps East Africa's finest novel.

## Ethnic & Political Tensions

If there's one thing that could darken East Africa's future, it's ethnic tension and the role it plays in politics. In so many parts of East Africa – Tanzania is a notable exception – the first question on locals' minds upon meeting a fellow countryman or countrywoman is this: from which tribe do you come? The question lay at the heart of what happened in Burundi in 1993, in Rwanda in 1994 and in Kenya in 2007.

For all the progress since Kenya erupted into violence after the 2007 elections – in this regard, the 2010 constitution was a huge step forward – the politics of ethnicity and its inextricable link to political patronage continue to hold the country back. In Burundi and Rwanda, ethnic identity remains the great subtext to everything that happens in both countries. Even in Uganda, a sense of grievance simmers below the surface. Perhaps everyone should take a leaf out of Tanzania's playbook – despite having more than 120 tribal groups, ethnic conflict is extremely rare. Indeed, that most identify themselves as Tanzanian first and only later by their ethnic group is one of the region's most enduring nation-building success stories.

## Environmental Struggles

East Africa stands on the frontline of some of the most urgent environmental issues of our time – deforestation, land degradation and threats to endangered species are three serious issues among many. At one level, Kenya's private and community sectors are leading the way in finding solutions. Building on the country's impressive public portfolio of national parks and other protected areas while at the same time recognising their limitations, private and community landowners are building revolutionary partnerships between wildlife conservation, community development and