

## Kisangani Ruins



While stuck in Kisangani last July, I was struck by the beauty of the many crumbling colonial-style houses and buildings.

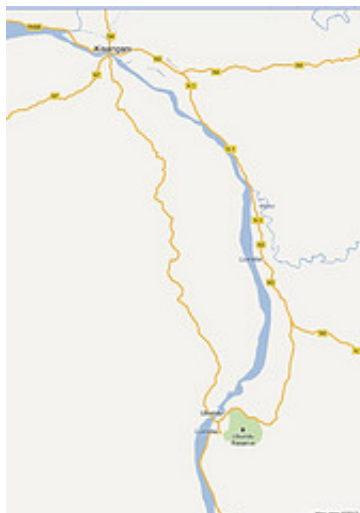
Thus, I thought I'd capture some of that beauty before it falls into oblivion. The rise and fall of Kisangani is well described by V.S. Naipaul in his novel *A Bend in the River*. (please see the quotations at the end of this piece)

In short, the city is located at a key point along the Congo River. Boats heading up river from Kinshasa (or Leopoldville as it was called from colonial times until the 1960's), can only go as far as Kisangani.

That is because there is a series of rapids that finishes there, but starts several hundred kilometers upriver.

Thus, there's a section of the Congo River that is not navigable, so the Belgians built a railway from Kisangani to the next point up river where it is once again navigable. Like Kisangani, the railway south to Ubundu has fallen into disrepair. There is a road between the two towns, but what was once an abundant flow of goods up and down the Congo River has been reduced to a trickle.

Ironically, the Congo River flows as strongly as ever.



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This is a photo of the Congo River and Ubundu (somewhat hazy on the other side of the river) and the start of the series of rapids that makes the Congo River unnavigable starting there until Kisangani. To be clear, the Congo River is flowing from left to right in this photo.



Even the great paddle wheelers that used to make the trek between Leopoldville and Kisangani have changed to become meager and beat up wood boats.



Here are a few of the old and once impressive metal steamers sitting on the side of the Congo River.

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The once great town of Kisangani is slowly making its way back, but probably not in time for it to have the resources to resurrect its wonderful buildings.



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V. S. Naipaul: *A Bend in the River*

"I knew other things about the forest kingdom, though. I knew that the slave people were in revolt and were being butchered back into submission. But Africa was big. The bush muffled the sound of murder, and the muddy rivers and lakes washed the blood away."

"Sun and rain and bush had made the site look old, like the site of a dead civilization. The ruins, spreading over so many acres, seemed to speak of a final catastrophe, but the civilization wasn't dead. It was the civilization I existed in and in fact was still working towards. And that could make for an odd feeling: to be among the ruins was to have your time-sense unsettled. You felt like a ghost, not from the past, but from the future. You felt that your life and ambition had already been lived out for you and you were looking at the relics of that life. You were in a place where the future had come and gone."

"Recent events had shown our helplessness. There was a kind of peace now, but we all--Africans, Greeks and other Europeans--remained prey, to be stalked in different ways. Some men were to be feared, and stalked cautiously; it was necessary to be servile with some; others were to be approached the way I was approached. It was in the history of the land, here men had always been prey. You don't just stride towards your prey. You set a trap for him. It fails ten times, but it is always the same trap you set."

"Who wanted philosophy or faith for the good times? We could all cope with the good times. It was for the bad that we had to be equipped. And the Africans had called up this war; they would suffer dreadfully, more than anybody else; but they could cope. Even the ruggedest of them had their villages and tribes, things that were absolutely theirs. They could run away again to their secret worlds and become lost on those worlds, as they had done before. And even if terrible things happened to them they would do with the comfort of knowing that their ancestors were gazing down approvingly at them."

"That place had been captured by the rebels and pillaged. The main building was basic and very ordinary...The walls still stood...but all the fittings had been destroyed. The rage of the rebels was like a rage against metal, machinery, wires, everything that was not of the forest and Africa."

"The growth of the population could be gauged by the growth of the rubbish heaps in the cities. They didn't burn their rubbish in oil drums, as we did; they just threw it out on the broken streets--that stinky, stinky African rubbish. Those mounds of rubbish, though constantly fattened by rain, grew month by month into increasingly solid little hills, and the hills literally became as high as the box-like concrete houses of the cities."

"The red dirt roads of our town, neglected for years, had quickly become congested with the new traffic we had, and these [phases of taxis by traffic police] were in a curious kind of slow motion, with the vehicles of hunters and hunted pitching up and down the congestions like launches in a heavy sea."

"They didn't see, these young [p]olice, that there was anything to build in their country. As far as they were concerned, it was all there already. They had only to take. They believed that, by being what they were, they had earned the right to take; and the higher the officer, the greater the crookedness--if that word had any meaning."

"But I hadn't understood to what extent our civilization had also been our prison. I hadn't understood either to what extent we had been made by the place where we had grown up, made by Africa and the simple life of the coast, and how incapable we had become of understanding the outside world. We have no means of understanding a fraction of the thought and science and philosophy and law that have gone to make that outside world. We simply accept it. We have grown up jaying tribute to it, and that is all that most of us can do. We feel of the great world that it is simply there, something for the lucky ones among us to explore, and then only at the edges. It never occurs to us that we might make some contribution to it ourselves. And that is why we miss everything."

"It had begun as a squabble with some pavement sleepers who had tarred off a stretch of pavement in a semi-permanent way with concrete blocks isolated from a building site. And it could easily have ended as a shouting match, no more. But the officer had slumped and fallen. By that fall, that momentary appearance of helplessness, he had invited the first blow with one of the concrete blocks; and the sight of blood then had encouraged a sudden, frenzied act of murder by dozens of small hands."

"...the violence, which at first seemed directed against the authorities alone, became more general. African stalls and shops in the outer areas were attacked and looted. People began to be killed in horrible ways, by rioters and police and shanty-town criminals...I once again had to think of myself as exposed, with nothing to hold on to. I took this fear with me into the familiar streets, this feeling that I was now physically vulnerable. The streets had always been dangerous. But not for me. As an outsider I had so far been allowed to be separate from the violence I observed."

"The strain was great. It corrupts everything, and for the first time I considered the idea of flight... And, forgetting goals, I kept on, living my life... In this way fear, the feeling that everything could at any moment go, became background, a condition of life, something you had to accept. And I was made almost calm by something a German from the capital, a man in his late thirties, said to me at the Haberic Club one afternoon."

He said, "In a situation like this you can't spend all your time being frightened. Something may happen, but you must make yourself think of it as a bad road accident. Something outside your control, that can happen anywhere."