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Meeting planner's African trek was a little *too* adventurous

Getting washed overboard from a capsized boat and floating in a life vest for three hours in crocodile-infested waters definitely were *not* part of Alton Hagen's plan for an African adventure vacation.

Hagen, the dean of Kansas City's professional meeting planner industry, and six others survived intact a few weeks ago when their routine excursion from the Ugandan shores of Lake Victoria turned to harrowing fear.

When I first heard of Hagen's frightful experience from his sister, I Googled up Lake Victoria to learn more. Adding "crocodile" to the query unearthed a 2005 story in the *London Telegraph* that reported the capture that year of "Osama, the terror of Lake Victoria."

Reputedly "the world's most prolific man-eater," the reptilian beast at the time of his involuntary retirement had been credited with 83 human kills.

Gulp. Not a good neighborhood to take a swim.

"I'm glad I didn't know *that* at the time," Hagen — safely back in Kansas City — said in an interview last week.

Hagen's solo vacation to Africa was built around adventure — including a trek to see the great apes of the Congo and climbing 19,341-foot high Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. That six-day climb came after the boat swamping in Lake Victoria. Hagen said he had to do the first two days of the climb in tennis shoes while his hiking boots dried out.

"The view from the peak was incredible," Hagen said, but he has no photos of that memorable moment. His camera, a Christmas gift from co-workers, was at the bottom of Lake Victoria, along with his binoculars, glasses, cash and everything else in his backpack.

The boat ride was to have been a 45-minute trip to an island chimpanzee preserve.

The vessel "was like an old ski boat," said Hagen, and the weather that day had turned sour. "A big wave came in the back and killed the engine. I started bailing, but 30 seconds later another big wave hit us and we capsized.

"Fortunately we had our life jackets on," he said.

Hagen said the crew of three and all four passengers splashed into Africa's largest lake about a mile from their island destination at around 10:30 a.m. Feb. 5.

"Thankfully, after the first hour the waves settled down some," he said.

Around 1:30 p.m. Hagen said, they were spotted by a passing cargo boat and rescued.

While Hagen knew nothing of Osama's terrible tenure, he said he certainly was aware that Lake Victoria's waters harbored crocodiles.

At one point some of Hagen's fellow swampees suggested swimming as a group toward the island. But Hagen, drawing on a hunch that crocs tend to hang out — and feed — in shallow waters, said he quickly dissuaded them of that notion.

"Not a good idea," he argued.

While they never saw a croc, "that was more adventure than I needed," Hagen said. "I think that may have been my last mountain to climb."

A 30-year travel industry veteran and general manager of **Agenda: Kansas City**, Hagen recently became the metro area's first destination management certified professional and one of 200 meeting planners nationwide who have achieved that status in their industry.

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