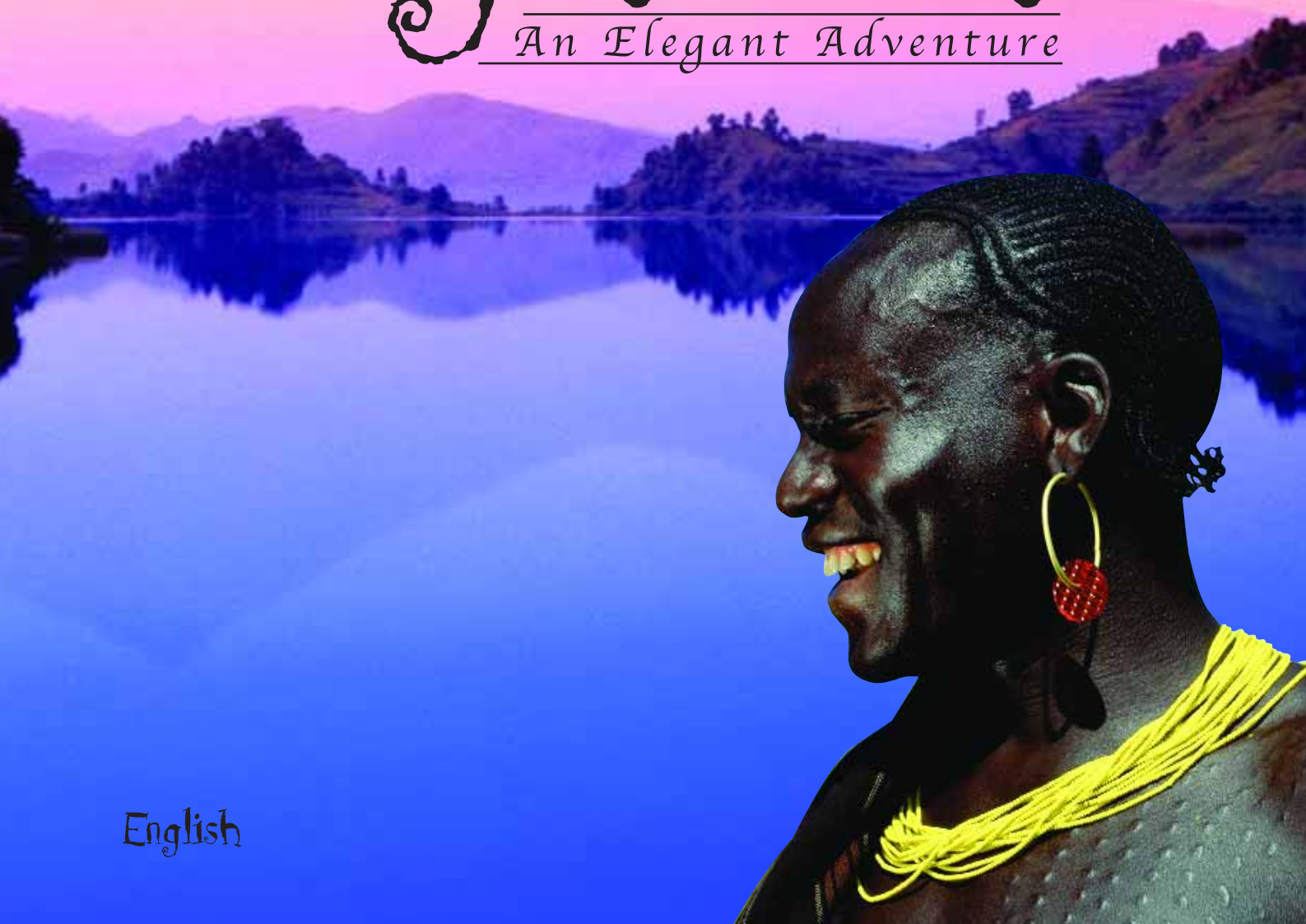




Uganda

An Elegant Adventure



English

Uganda

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From the moment you land at Entebbe's modern and efficient international airport, with its breathtaking equatorial location on the forested shore of island-strewn Lake Victoria, it is clear that Uganda is no ordinary safari destination.

Dominated by an expansive golf course leading down to the lakeshore, and a century-old botanical garden alive with the chatter of acrobatic monkeys and colourful tropical birds, Entebbe itself is the least obviously urban of all comparably sized African towns. Then, just 40km distant, sprawled across seven hills, there is the capital Kampala. The bright modern feel of this bustling, cosmopolitan city reflects the ongoing economic growth and political stability that has characterised Uganda since 1986, and is complemented by the sloping spaciousness and runaway greenery of its garden setting.

Ecologically, Uganda is where the East African savannah meets the West African jungle. Where else but in this impossibly lush country can one observe lions prowling the open plains in the morning and track chimpanzees through the rainforest undergrowth the same afternoon, then the next day navigate tropical channels teeming with hippo and crocs before setting off into the misty mountains to stare deep into the eyes of a mountain gorilla? Certainly, Uganda is the only safari destination whose range of forest primates is as impressive as its selection of plains antelope. And this verdant biodiversity is further attested to by Uganda's status as by far the smallest of the four African countries whose bird checklist tops the 1,000 mark!

Yet there is more to the country than wildlife – far more! There is the mighty Nile, punctuated by the spectacular Murchison Falls, and the setting for some of the world's most thrilling commercial white-water rafting. There are the snow-capped peaks of the Rwenzori, which provide a tantalising challenge to dedicated mountaineers, as well as the Virunga Volcanoes and Mount Elgon, both of which offer highly rewarding hiking opportunities through scintillating highland scenery. More sedately, the myriad islands of Lake Victoria and Bunyonyi are idyllic venues, as are the myriad forest-fringed crater lakes that stud the rift valley floor and escarpment around Fort Portal. Whether you're a first time safari-goer or a seasoned African traveller, Uganda – with its unique blend of savannah and forest creatures, its rare wealth of montane and lake habitats – is simply dazzling.

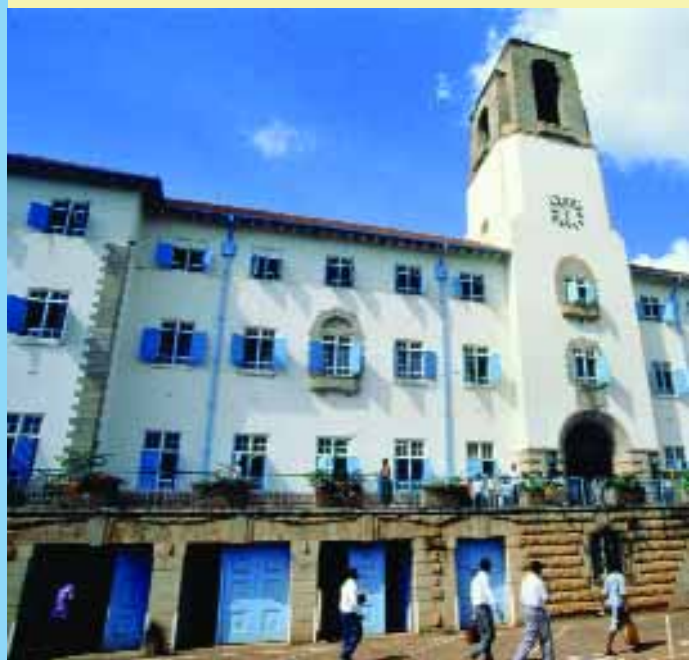


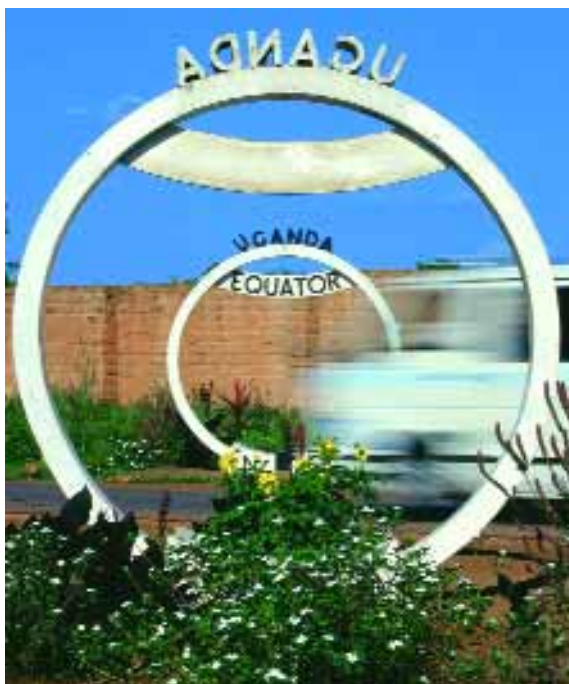


Africa's Friendliest Country

Uganda's reputation as 'Africa's Friendliest Country' stems partly from the tradition of hospitality common to its culturally diverse populace, and partly from the remarkably low level of crime and hassle directed at tourists.

But this amiable quality extends beyond the easygoing people. Uganda's eco-friendliness is attested to by the creation of six new national parks under the present administration, as well as a recent mushrooming of community-based eco-tourism projects at the grassroots level, while the mood of social enlightenment is characterised by the progressive and much lauded policies towards curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS and promoting women's rights. The climate, too, is highly agreeable, reflecting the combination of an equatorial location and medium to high altitudes, while amenities such as hotels and game lodges now rank with the very best Africa has to offer.





Getting Around

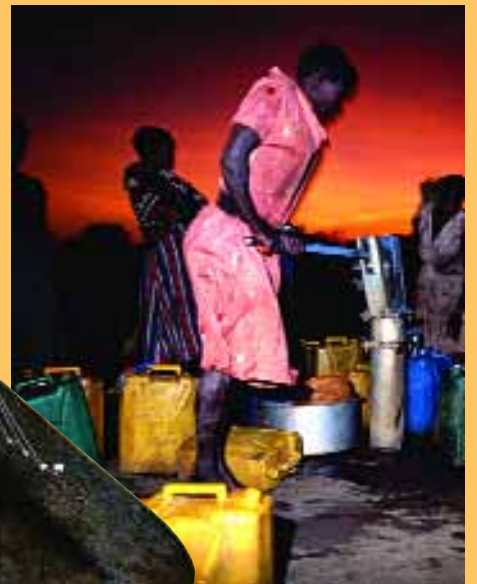
Consistently ranked among Africa's fastest growing economies since President Museveni came to power in 1986, Uganda has simultaneously experienced a steady expansion of road, communications and other vital infrastructures, and a corresponding increase in international tourist arrivals and upmarket facilities.

Entebbe's modern international airport, set on the Lake Victoria shore 40 kilometres from Kampala, is serviced by several prominent international airlines, ensuring easy access from the USA, Europe and elsewhere in Africa. Charter flights can be arranged between domestic tourist attractions.

Kampala is a modern capital serviced by an excellent selection of international hotels, including a high-rise Sheraton right in the city centre, as well as bustling malls stuffed with banks, shops, restaurants, internet cafés and cinemas. Reputable safari operators and car rental firms based in Kampala and Entebbe offer a wealth of local experience and specialist know-how to international visitors. And whether you travel by coach or rental vehicle, or join an organised safari, surfaced roads link the capital to other large towns such as Jinja, Mbale, Kabale, Kasese and Fort Portal, from where well-maintained dirt roads lead to the game reserves and national parks.

Outside of the capital, most national parks and other tourist hubs are serviced by at least one upmarket lodge, ensuring that the adventurous spirit inherent to African travel is complemented by the full range of creature comforts: stylish en-suite accommodation, fine cuisine, a range of chilled drinks and friendly service. For business travellers, internet facilities are available in most large towns, while an extensive cellular telephone network makes it possible to stay in touch with home in even the most remote of locations.







People & Culture

Situated at the geographical heart of the African continent, Uganda has long been a cultural melting pot, as evidenced by the existence of 30-plus different indigenous languages belonging to five distinct linguistic groups, and an equally diverse cultural mosaic of music, art and handicrafts.

The country's most ancient inhabitants, confined to the hilly southwest, are the Batwa and Bambutu Pygmies, relics of the hunter-gatherer cultures that once occupied much of East Africa to leave behind a rich legacy of rock paintings, such as at the Nyero Rock Shelter near Kumi.

At the cultural core of modern-day Uganda lie the Bantu-speaking kingdoms of Buganda, Bunyoro, Ankole and Toro, whose traditional monarchs – reinstated in the 1990s after having been abolished by President Milton Obote in 1967 – still serve as important cultural figureheads. According to oral tradition, these centuries-old kingdoms are offshoots of the mediaeval kingdoms of Batembuzi and Bachwezi, which lay in the vicinity of present-day Mubende and Ntusi, where archaeological evidence suggests that a strongly centralised polity had emerged by the 11th century. Three former kings of Buganda are buried in an impressive traditional thatched building at the Kasubi Tombs in Kampala.

Elsewhere, Uganda's cultural diversity is boosted in the northeast by the presence of the Karimojong, traditional pastoralists whose lifestyle and culture is reminiscent of the renowned Maasai, and in the northwest by a patchwork of agricultural peoples whose Nilotic languages and cultures are rooted in what is now Sudan. The Rwenzori foothills are home to the hardy Bakonjo, whose hunting shrines are dedicated to a one-legged, one-armed, one-eyed pipe-smoking spirit known as Kalisa, while the Bagisu of the Mount Elgon region are known for their colourful Imbalu ceremony, an individual initiation to manhood that peaks in activity in and around August of every even numbered year.





National Parks & Safaris

Sprawling across both sides of the equator, a network of 10 national parks and several other protected areas offers wildlife enthusiasts a thrilling opportunity to experience Uganda's biodiversity: not only the mesmerising tracts of thorn-bush savannah teeming with antelope, buffalo and elephant one tends to associate with equatorial East Africa, but also lush expanses of tropical rainforest, shimmering lakes and rivers heaving with aquatic life, and the glacial peaks of Africa's tallest mountain range.

The country's largest protected area is **Murchison Falls National Park**, whose palm-studded grassland supports dense populations of lion, buffalo, elephant and Uganda kob, together with the localised Rothschild's giraffe and patas monkey. Immense concentrations of hippos and birds can be observed from morning and afternoon launch trips along the Nile below the spectacular waterfall for which the park is named.

Rwenzori Mountains National Park protects the eastern slopes and glacial peaks of the 120km-long Rwenzori Mountains or 'Mountains of the Moon', a world-class hiking and mountaineering destination whose significance as a source of the Nile was first alluded to by the geographer Ptolemy circa 150 AD. Rising from the Rift Valley floor to a wintry elevation of 5,109m, the Rwenzori supports large tracts of evergreen and bamboo forest, while the higher moorland zone is known for its other-worldly cover of giant heathers, lobelias and groundsels.

Set majestically in the shadow of the Rwenzori, flanking Lakes Edward and George, the lush savannah of **Queen Elizabeth National Park** offers prime grazing to buffalo, elephant and various antelope. A checklist of 600-plus bird species testifies to the extraordinary ecological diversity of this park. Mammalian specialities include the (elsewhere elusive) giant forest hog, and the legendary tree-climbing lions of the Ishasha Sector.

Of Uganda's forested reserves, **Bwindi Impenetrable National Park** is best known for its superb gorilla tracking, but it also provides refuge to elephant, chimpanzee, monkeys and various small antelope, as well as 23 bird species restricted to the Albertine Rift.

Mountain gorillas also form the main attraction at **Mgahinga National Park**, which protects the Ugandan portion of the





Virungas, an imposing string of nine freestanding extinct and active volcanoes that runs along the border with Rwanda and the Congo.

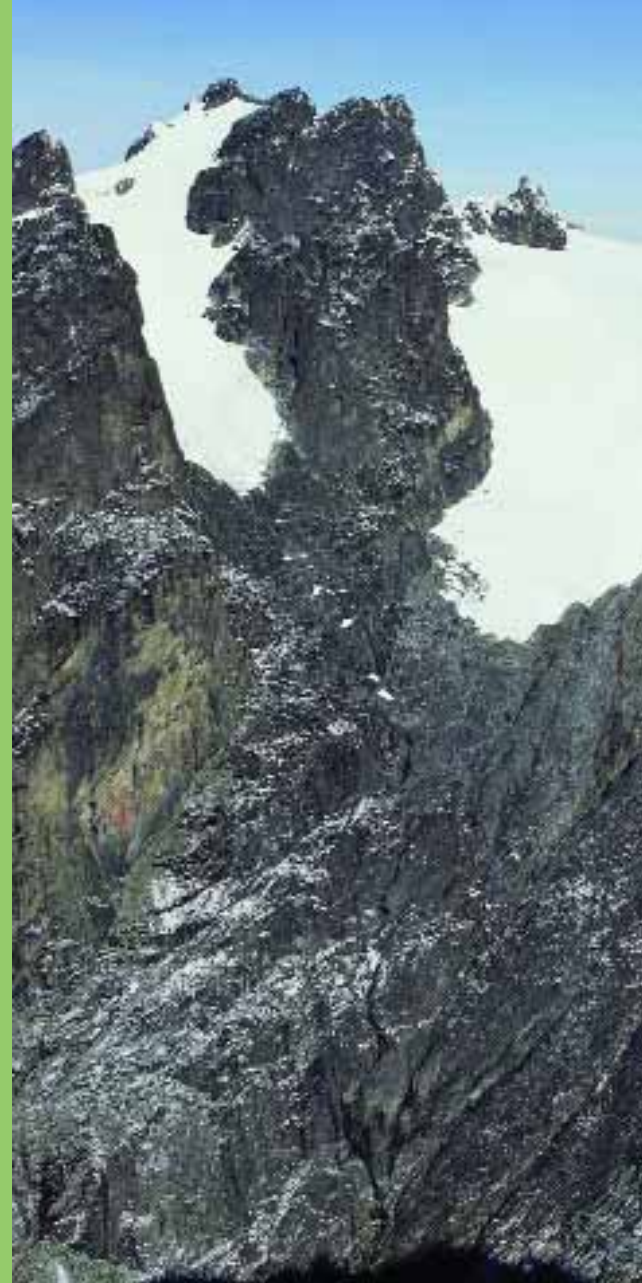
The lower-lying and more remote **Semliki National Park**, an Ugandan extension of the Congo's Ituri Rainforest set at the base of the northern Rwenzori, is of special interest to ornithologists for some 40 Congolese bird species recorded nowhere else in the country. Nearby, the spectacular **Semliki Wildlife Reserve**, which abuts Lake Albert, is one of the best localities for sightings of the enigmatic, swamp-dwelling shoebill.

Kibale National Park is a primatologist's dream. It hosts a population of more than 1,000 chimpanzees, of which one 80-strong community has been habituated to tourist visits, as well as half-a-dozen readily observed monkey species, including the acrobatic red colobus and black-and-white colobus, and the handsome L'Hoest's monkey.

The closest savannah reserve to Kampala, **Lake Mburo National Park** is centred on a series of swamp-fringed lakes known for their rich birdlife, notably the secretive African finfoot. The green acacia woodland surrounding the lake harbours dense populations of zebra, warthog, buffalo, impala and various other grazers, including the last surviving Ugandan population of eland, the largest of African antelope.

Set on the Kenya border near Mbale, **Mount Elgon National Park** encompasses the 4,321 metre mountain for which it is named, which has the largest base of any extinct volcano in the world. A lush mosaic of Afro-montane forest, grassland and moorland habitats makes this park a highly rewarding destination for hikers and other natural history enthusiasts.

In the far northeast, the remote, wild and little-visited **Kidepo Valley National Park** provides refuge to a long list of dry-country species not found elsewhere in the country, including cheetah and greater kudu, while its perennial waters attract large numbers of elephant and thousand-strong buffalo herds, especially during the dry season.









Gorillas & Primates

Uganda's star attraction is the endangered mountain gorilla, the bulkiest of living primates, and among the most peaceable. Staring into the pensive brown eyes of these gentle giants, who share 95% of their genes with humans, is as humbling as it is thrilling; no less so when one realises that fewer than 700 individuals survive, divided between Bwindi National Park and the Virunga Mountains.

Within Uganda, five habituated gorilla troops – four in Bwindi and one in Mgahinga National Park – can be visited by a total of 30 tourists daily.

Uganda is also home to man's closest relative, the chimpanzee, a delightful ape whose evocative pant-hoot call is a definitive sound of the African rainforest. Chimpanzee communities have been habituated for tourism at Kibale Forest, Budongo Forest and Queen Elizabeth National Park's Kyambura Gorge. A community of orphaned chimps, most of which were confiscated from poachers, can be visited on Ngamba Island, which lies on Lake Victoria 45 minutes by motorboat from Entebbe.

Monkeys are exceptionally well represented in Uganda. Indeed, Kibale Forest boasts the greatest primate variety and density in East Africa, with five or six species likely to be observed over the course of one afternoon walk. Elsewhere, Mgahinga National Park hosts habituated troops of the rare golden monkey, while Murchison Falls is one of the few East African strongholds for the spindly, plains-dwelling patas monkey. The fossilised 20-million-year-old bones of Morotopithecus, the earliest-known ancestor of modern apes and humans, were unearthed in the 1960s near Moroto in Eastern Uganda, and are now housed in the National Museum in Kampala.





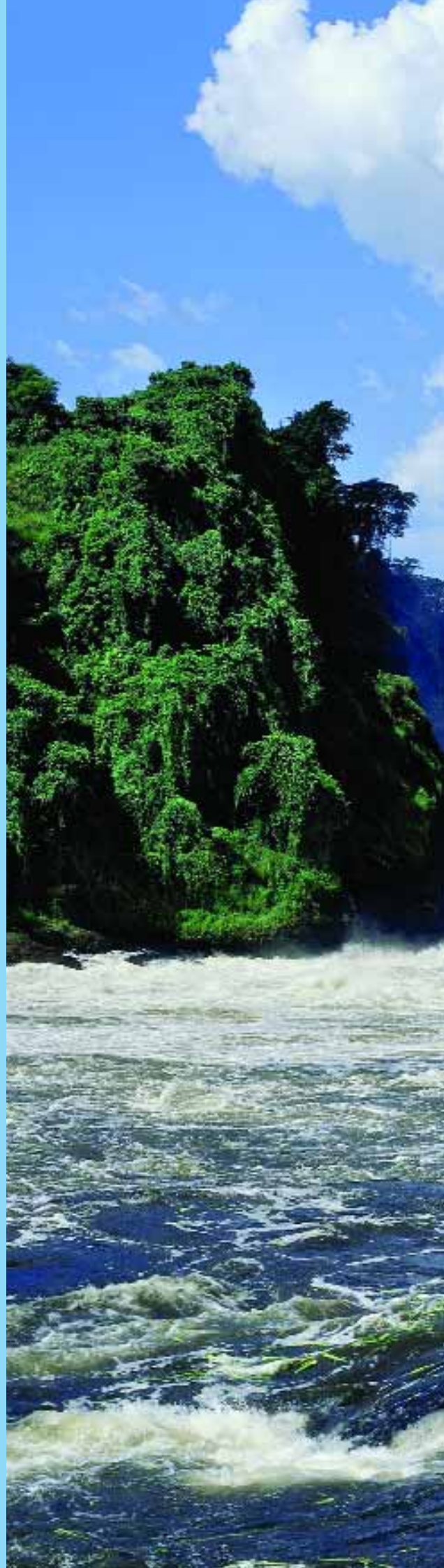
Source of the Mighty Nile

The source of the Nile, alluded to hazily in the ancient writings of Ptolemy, stood as one of the great geographical mysteries of the Victorian Age.

The desire to uncover this geographic Holy Grail inspired the epic journeys of exploration undertaken by Livingstone, Stanley, Burton and Speke. And it was the latter, John Hanning Speke, on a pioneering 1862-3 expedition around Lake Victoria, who first controversially suggested that a small waterfall flowing northward out of the lake might be the legendary spring - a theory whose accuracy was confirmed more than ten years later by Stanley.

Flanked today by the city of Jinja, the waterfall described by Speke now lies submerged beneath the Owen Falls Dam, Uganda's main source of hydro-electric power. Still, a visit to the source of the Nile remains a moving and wondrous experience, no less so to those who have seen the same river as it flows past the ancient Egyptian temples of Luxor some 6,000 km downstream.

Closer to home, the Nile downriver from Jinja offers some superb white water rafting and game fishing. Its crowning glory, however, is Murchison Falls, where the world's longest river funnels through a narrow fissure in the Rift Escarpment to erupt out of the other side in a crashing 43 metres plume of white water. The river below the falls is no less spectacular in its own way, with its profuse birdlife, thousands of hippos, and outsized, gape-mouthed crocodiles.









Lakes & Ssesse Islands

Roughly one-quarter of Uganda's surface area consists of wetlands, ranging from vast inland seas to the mysterious marshy expanse of Lake Kyoga, formed by the Nile as it drains into a shallow sump at the very centre of the country.

The northwestern third of Lake Victoria, the world's second-largest freshwater body, falls within Uganda's boundaries, while the impressively scenic Lakes Albert and Edward extend for 150km and 80km respectively along the Albertine Rift Valley floor bordering the Congo.

Renowned for its water birds and dense population of otters, mountain-ringed Lake Bunyonyi is one of Uganda's most rapidly developing wetland destinations, its steep-sided shores and small islands dotted with rustic hotels and campsites. Another rising attraction is the cluster of 200 crater lakes that extends northward from Queen Elizabeth National Park to Fort Portal, reaching its scenic peak in the vicinity of Kibale Forest, where several forest-fringed lakes have been developed as community-based ecotourism projects.

The jewel in Lake Victoria's crown is the Ssesse Archipelago, whose 84 islands - some large and dotted with local fishing villages, others small and uninhabited - are all well-watered and lushly forested. Mainlanders traditionally revere Ssesse as the Islands of the Gods, and one specific island called Bubembe is regarded to be home to Mukasa, the spirit presiding over Lake Victoria. The Ssesse Islands make for an ideal retreat after a long safari, and they also offer superb opportunities for birdwatching and for hooking heavyweight Nile Perch.





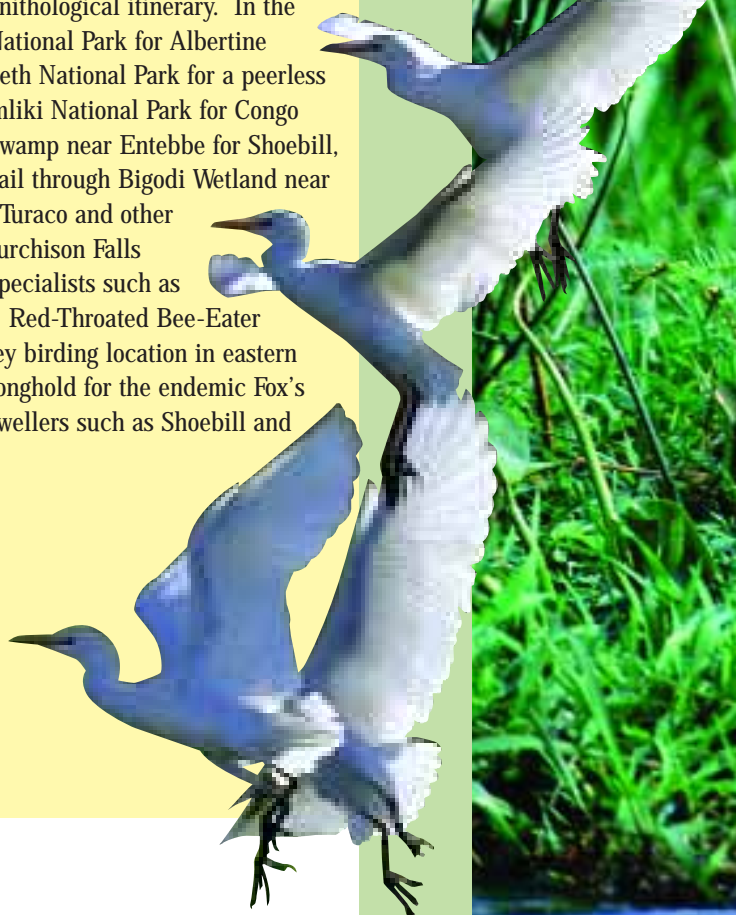
Birdwatching

Transitional to the East African savannah and the western rainforests, Uganda is Africa's most complete birdwatching destination, with more than 1,000 species recorded within an area comparable to that of Great Britain.

Specialist birding tours through Western Uganda routinely notch up an incredible tally of 400 species within two weeks, while enthusiastic amateurs might reasonably hope to aim for 300 species within the same time.

For dedicated ornithologists, Uganda's prime attraction is the presence of more than 100 West African forest species at the most easterly – and most accessible – extent of their range. This alluring list of forest specialists includes the psychedelic Great Blue Turaco and the raucous Black-and-White Casqued Hornbill, as well as the gem-like Green Broadbill and 23 other species endemic to the Albertine Rift. Uganda is the best place to see what many rate as the most sought after African bird: the Shoebill, a massive prehistoric-looking swamp-dweller notable for its heavy clog-shaped bill.

Birdlife is prolific throughout Uganda, but certain key sites should be included in any ornithological itinerary. In the west, these include Bwindi National Park for Albertine Rift endemics, Queen Elizabeth National Park for a peerless checklist of 600 species, Semliki National Park for Congo Basin endemics, Mabamba Swamp near Entebbe for Shoebill, the community-run guided trail through Bigodi Wetland near Kibale Forest for Great Blue Turaco and other colourful forest birds, and Murchison Falls National Park for savannah specialists such as Abyssinian Ground Hornbill, Red-Throated Bee-Eater and Denham's Bustard. A key birding location in eastern Uganda is Lake Bisina, a stronghold for the endemic Fox's Weaver as well as papyrus-dwellers such as Shoebill and Papyrus Gonolek.









Adventure

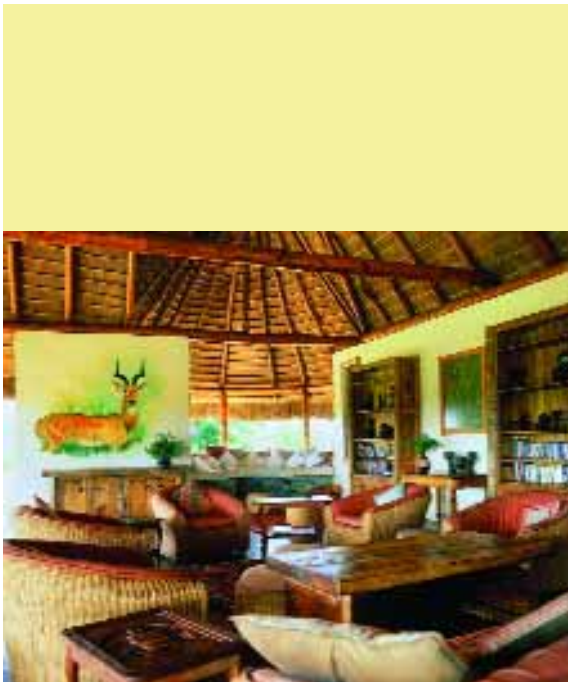
Uganda is a classic adventure tourism destination. Indeed, Bujagali Falls, which lies downstream of the Source of the Nile an hour's drive east of Kampala, is the East African counterpart to more southerly 'adrenaline capitals' such as Victoria Falls and Cape Town.

Bujagali is the launching point for a commercial white-water rafting route that ranks as one of most thrilling but also one of the safest in the world, passing through three heart-stopping Grade Five rapids in one day. Other activities at Bujagali include kayaking, mountain biking, quad-biking and a new 44 metre-high bungee jump from a cliff above the Nile.

Boasting three separate montane destinations topping the 4,000 metre mark, all protected within national parks, Uganda offers some of Africa's top hiking and climbing possibilities. Serious mountaineers need look no further than the majestic Rwenzori, whose trio of craggy 5,000-plus metre glacial peaks offers a genuine challenge to experienced alpine climbers, while fit hikers will find the six-day loop trail through the Rwenzori's forest and moorland zones to be as rewarding as it is demanding.

Further east, Mount Elgon, Africa's eighth-highest mountain, offers an excellent and relatively undemanding introduction to Afro-montane climates and vegetation, culminating in the ascent of a 6km wide volcanic caldera studded with small waterfalls, caves and hot springs. Another estimable hiking destination is the Virunga Mountains, where mountain gorilla tracking can be supplemented by a tough day ascent to one of the three extinct volcanoes protected within Mgahinga National Park, the tallest of which is the 4,127-metre Muhabura.





Travel Tips

Getting There

Entebbe International Airport, which lies 40km from the capital Kampala, is serviced by a number of international airlines, including SN Brussels, British Airways, South African Airways, Kenya Airways, Air Tanzania, Rwandair Express, Egypt Air and Ethiopian Airlines. Uganda can also be reached overland from Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania.

On Arrival

Customs and immigration officials are polite and efficient, and a visa – for those who require one – can be purchased on the spot at Entebbe International Airport or at any overland border. Foreign exchange and ATM facilities are available at the airport, which is also serviced by several shops and restaurants. Most midrange to upmarket hotels in Kampala and Entebbe will arrange airport transfers by request, as will any tour operator based in or around the capital. Local time is GMT+ 3.

Health

A certificate of yellow fever vaccination is required. All visitors should take malaria prophylactic drugs. It is advisable to drink bottled rather than tap water.

Money

The unit of currency is the Uganda shilling. The US dollar is traditionally the hard currency of preference, but Euro and Pound Sterling are also widely accepted. Hard currency cash can be changed for local currency at banks and private bureaux de change in all large towns, but travellers' cheques are not widely accepted outside Kampala. Local currency can be drawn against Visa and other major credit cards at selected ATMs in Kampala, at Entebbe International Airport, and in a few other large towns.

Language

Educated Ugandans are generally fluent in English, which is the official language. Of 30-plus different indigenous languages, Luganda serves as something of a *lingua franca*.

When to Visit

Uganda can be visited at any time, though mountain hikes, gorilla tracking and other forest walks are more challenging during the rains, which generally peak over mid-September to November and March to May.



What to wear

Daytime temperatures are generally warm to hot, so bring lots of light clothing. Evenings are cooler, especially at high altitudes, so carry a couple of light sweaters too. Those who intend to hike on the mountains will be exposed to alpine temperatures and should pack accordingly. Solid walking shoes and sturdy clothing are ideal for forest walks. Don't forget to bring a hat, sunglasses and a waterproof jacket.

What to bring

A valid passport is mandatory, and visa requirements should be checked before you travel. To make the most of the game reserves and national parks, carry binoculars and field guides. Photographers will need a zoom lens for wildlife (70-300 or similar). Print film and developing is available in Kampala. Toiletries and other essentials can be bought in the cities.

Driving

Driving is on the left side. Visitors without experience of African roads are advised to organise a vehicle with a driver rather than self-drive.

Tipping

Tipping is not standard practice at local hotels and restaurants, but it will always be appreciated. It is normal to tip 5-10% at tourist-oriented restaurants. Guides and drivers should always be tipped.

Food & drink

Tourist-oriented hotels and restaurants serve good Western-style meals, while a wider range of cuisines being available in the capital and some larger towns. Local restaurants serve Ugandan dishes, typically ugali (a stiff maize porridge) or matoke (cooked banana) eaten with a stew.

What to buy

A wide selection of local handicrafts are available as souvenirs. These include musical instruments, such as the hide drums made in the vicinity of Mpigi, as well as excellent local basketwork, paintings, batiks and pottery.

Further information

Guidebooks from Bradt, Spectrum and Lonely Planet, and a wide range of other books about Uganda, can be bought at bookstores in Kampala. The Uganda Tourist Board website (www.visituganda.com) contains information about all tourist attractions and protected areas.



If you want to learn more about
National Parks and Protected Areas
in Uganda, Visit the web site of the
Uganda Wildlife Authority,
www.uwa.or.ug



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