

Ecotourists find wildlife aplenty in Uganda

By Kari J. Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

KASESE, Uganda — A warthog grazed on the thick grass outside my front door and by my back door stood a waterbuck. Both wild animals were harmless from a distance, I was told. Yet guests at this safari lodge in Queen Elizabeth National Park were warned not to wander off on their own. I discovered why when I was jolted awake by lions' roars rumbling across the savannah.

We had a chance to see several of the beasts the next day. A mile or so from Mweya Safari Lodge, we found six big cats lazing beside the dusty road with sprawling Lake Edward emerging out of the morning haze. And we hadn't even gone on safari yet.

Queen Elizabeth National Park, one of six established in Uganda since 1986, is home to not only lions, warthogs, and waterbuck, but also buffalo, elephants,

baboons, and 612 bird species. The park sprawls across 764 square miles in southwestern Uganda, with dense rain forests to the south and the snow-capped Rwenzori Mountains to the north.

Bisected by the equator, the park's topography is marked by lush savannah plains, nearly a dozen crater lakes, and a gorge that has one of the country's only habituated chimpanzee groups. The park also lies along an important migration route between Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania. For safari-goers, Uganda's national parks, sanctuaries, and reserves offer a chance to see the "big five" — rhinos, lions, leopards, elephants, and buffalo — without the crowds found in neighboring Kenya and Tanzania.

"The focus here is ecotourism and that's what people appreciate," said Tony Ofungi of the Uganda Tourist Board. "We don't have the planetloads of tourists and minibuses surrounding the animals in the parks."

The country does have plenty of wildlife. Much of it was decimated during Idi Amin's eight-year dictatorship and after his ouster in 1979, when animals were poached for food and black market trade. The Uganda Wildlife Authority and local nonprofit groups have spent the past two decades working to boost the number of animals, and reintroduce species that had disappeared.

Poachers wiped out the rhinos by the mid 1980s, yet in the past three years, Rhino Fund Uganda, a nonprofit governmental organization, has reintroduced six white rhinos.

I spent nearly two weeks in Uganda exploring several top wildlife parks and reserves. Navigating the country by car takes time, patience, and quick reflexes. Spotted goats and kobs, an African



PHOTOS BY KARI J. BODNARCHUK/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

At Queen Elizabeth National Park in southwestern Uganda, lions are a bigger attraction than the humble flock of cormorants surrounding a saddle-billed stork along the Kazinga Channel.

antelope, scurry across the streets. People push bikes down the roads, stacked high with bamboo, bundles of plantains or, in one case, a twin bed. And cars tend to fly down the middle of the streets. Many roads are paved while others are blanketed in a fine sand or have potholes or corrugated surfaces that make for slow going. Hiring a driver, as I did, is worth the minimal fee (\$10 to \$20 a day in addition to the car rental).

On our six-hour drive from Kampala, the capital, to Queen Elizabeth, we passed a monument marking the equator, zebras grazing on national parkland, and fruit stacked up like rock cairns at roadside stands. As we drove, the land became drier, flatter, and more open, and soon we were surrounded by yellow grasslands with fig trees dotting the landscape. We stopped to watch a group of olive baboons walking alongside the dirt road and to listen to the grasslands crackle like carbonation in the stiff breeze.

In the park, visitors can go canoeing on crater lakes, visit a bat cave in Maramagambo Forest, get up for a sunrise game drive, or hike and explore Kyambura Gorge. But the highlight is a cruise on the Kazinga Channel, a waterway where thousands of birds and other creatures live or migrate.

The wildlife authority runs two double-decker launches that are the only commercial boats operating on the channel. We spent an hour motoring upstream, passing elephants seeking shelter under trees, crocodiles sunning themselves on logs, and hippos submerged up to their eyeballs. Thousands of birds clustered along the banks and swooped overhead: black ibis, yellow-billed storks, egrets, pink-backed pelicans, goliath herons, marabou storks, African jacanas, and hammerkops with their hammer-shaped heads.

Half a day's drive north of here, and just 20 miles from the Congo border, lies Semliki Valley Wildlife Reserve. In 1913, it became Uganda's first protected area, and the Semliki Safari Lodge serves as one of its main guardians today. The lodge has a special concession giving it sole development rights within the reserve, and allowing its staff and visitors unequivocal access to the land for safaris and wildlife viewing. In exchange, Mark Vibbert, 37, who runs the lodge with his wife, Kristen, 36, and the guides he has trained regularly monitor the wildlife and help the UWA protect the area from poachers.

"In 1995, when the lodge came into the reserve, the number of kob were at an all-time low of 650 at most, probably less," said Vibbert. "Now, we believe there are

If you go . . .

Getting there
British Airways flies from Boston to Entebbe International Airport, with one stop in London. By car from Entebbe, it's one hour to Kampala and another six hours to Queen Elizabeth National Park. Semliki Valley Wildlife Reserve is about eight hours by car from Kampala or a 45-minute chartered flight from Kampala Aeroclub in Kajjansi (flyuganda.com).

What to do
Queen Elizabeth National Park
Kasese District
uwa.or.ug/queen.html
\$10/\$20, \$15/\$35, and \$25/\$50 for one, two, or three nights; plus \$30-\$40 per vehicle for entire stay.
Semliki Valley Wildlife Reserve
Western Rift Valley
Entrance fee: children/adults, \$5/\$20, \$10/\$25, or \$15/\$30 for one, two, or three nights, plus \$30-\$40 per vehicle for entire stay.
Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary
Nakitoma, Nakasongola District
011-256-77-271-3410
rhinofund.org
Located 105 miles northwest of



Kampala, the sanctuary has six white rhinos and offers basic accommodations.

Where to stay
Mweya Safari Lodge
Queen Elizabeth National Park
011-256-483-44266
mweyalodge.com
Upscale with views of Kazinga Channel and Lake Edward. Includes breakfast and optional buffet dinner. \$138-\$840.
Semliki Safari Lodge
Semliki Valley Wildlife Reserve
011-256-77-707007
safariuganda.com/semliki_safari_lodge.htm
The only accommodation option in the reserve. Open year-round. \$370-\$640 per night, includes meals, drinks, and game drives.

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between 8,000 and 10,000."

At 210 square miles the reserve is not big, but it is home to all of the big game animals except rhinos, and it gets few visitors.

The lodge has eight canvas tents, each with a thatched roof, Persian rug, desk, boudoir, and attached bathroom that's built in a log cabin style. Its breezy lounge has Congo masks and carvings, comfortable chairs, and a window seat with plenty of cushions. Guests eat at family-style tables and cool off in an outdoor pool that overlooks the Rwenzori and the Blue Mountains of the Congo.

Guides run chimpanzee treks, walking safaris, and game drives around the reserve by day, at sunset, and after dark. They also lead bird-watching trips to neighboring Semliki National Park and offer boat trips on Lake Albert, just 17 miles away, which is home to the rare, endangered shoebill.

After dinner, we all climbed into an open-sided Land Rover for a night safari, cutting through tall grass that reached four feet high in spots. We kept our eyes peeled for anything big, like lions, leopards, buffalo, elephants, wild pigs, or kobs. All we spotted, however, were several pennant-winged nightjars, with their 18-inch feath-

ers, and about a dozen wattled lapwings that like to nest on the lodge's "airstrip," nothing more than a mowed patch of land.

The next afternoon, however, we spotted three colobus monkeys, several olive baboons, and at least a dozen kobs. Banded mongoose darted across our path as we drove out to a clearing near a seasonal gully where palm trees grow. We stopped, waited, and watched.

The whirr of cicadas amplified as the sun sank and bats started swooping overhead. A black-and-white nightjar passed by, fluttering like a butterfly.

Soon we heard a rustling in the bush. A kob heading for water, we wondered? Or perhaps monkeys in the palms? Yona Katembo, one of the guides, walked down through the bush to investigate. Then suddenly it came into view: an enormous buffalo with long horns coming straight toward Katembo. We quickly called to him and he made a dash for where we stood by the Land Rover. Startled by the ruckus, the buffalo took off.

The thrilling encounter drove home the point that in the wild, it's best not to wander.

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