

# Wildest dreams

Ben Lerwill heads to Uganda to explore the country's wild side

**A** dozen hippos are wallowing in the Kazinga Channel, creating a muddy jumble of bulbous snouts, hefty rumps and little pink ears. They make a sight that would normally be all-absorbing – but I can't keep my eyes on them.

Just beyond the hippos are five elaborately horned buffalos, a warthog family scuttling along the foreshore and a baleful-looking crocodile lurking in the shallows. There's a sea eagle in the tree above its head and a

herd of elephants making steady progress along the shoreline; it's hard to know where to look.

Uganda's Queen Elizabeth National Park goes big on wildlife. Just as remarkable as the range of animals, however, is the space to appreciate them. Other than the boat I'm on, there's no one else around. It's the same the following morning, when an early-morning game drive results in a thrilling private encounter with a leopard, its jaws clamped around the body of a baby antelope,

its most-recent kill. There's not another jeep to be seen for miles.

## ▶ PEARL OF AFRICA

It's not as though I'm the only visitor in the country, far from it. This landlocked East African nation might not be the first safari destination to leap to mind, but its reputation is well established. Queen Elizabeth is one of 10 national parks in the country – there are also a further 18 protected areas and wildlife reserves – and all of them offer

something different in terms of their wildlife and natural beauty. Winston Churchill famously described Uganda as 'The Pearl of Africa', and he wasn't known for using empty words.

The country is roughly the same size as the UK, and packs in plenty. The vast Lake Victoria forms much of its southern boundary, while elsewhere there are dramatic mountains, open plains and the frothing headwaters of the Nile. It shares borders with Kenya, Tanzania, [→](#)





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## AFRICA UGANDA DESTINATIONS



LEFT:  
Kazinga  
Channel

RIGHT:  
Gorilla in  
Bwindi

BELOW:  
Lake  
Victoria



→ Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan, but retains a colourful identity that is very much its own. The dark days of brutal ruler Idi Amin have long passed, and visitors can expect a destination accustomed to tourism.

There are no direct flights from the UK, but access via other hubs is straightforward. The main international airport in Entebbe is an 80-minute drive from Nairobi. And as of 2016, it's been possible for travellers to arrange the necessary entry visas online at [visas.immigration.go.ug](http://visas.immigration.go.ug). They are compulsory, and cost \$50. As with many African destinations, yellow fever certificates are required and malaria tablets are recommended.

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Tourists receive a very warm welcome and often a rapturous one where children are concerned

Culturally it's a country of different ethnic groups, with English widely understood. Tourists generally receive a very warm welcome and often a rapturous one where children are concerned. Christianity dominates in terms of religion, and while the food isn't especially exciting – if there's a national ingredient, it's

the omnipresent plantain – the meals served in hotels and other tourist spots are usually very tasty.

### ▶ GORILLA TRACKING

For many, if not most, visitors, there's one overriding reason to visit Uganda. The mountain gorillas that inhabit Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in the southwest of the country very much hog the limelight – and it's easy to understand why.

There are just over 1,000 mountain gorillas left in the wild according to the latest census, a small increase on previous estimates, and about half of them live in Uganda. Joining a gorilla-tracking hike is a pricey proposition. The permit alone costs \$600, even with the

number of extra permits released this year, granting clients an hour with gorillas in a maximum group size of eight. It can also involve a serious amount of steep rainforest hiking, but it's an extraordinary experience.

It's worth bearing in mind that across the border in Rwanda, the cost of a gorilla-tracking permit was hiked up to \$1,500 last year in a bid to attract high-end visitors, so Uganda offers good value in comparison. And, unlike Rwanda, Uganda also offers the chance to join a gorilla habituation experience – also priced at \$1,500. This gives clients a much longer day with wild gorillas that are in the process of growing accustomed to human visitors. →



PICTURES: UGANDA TOURISM BOARD/KAMILI



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➔ There are four main gorilla-tracking trailheads on the outskirts of the park: Buhoma, which is the longest established and most popular (although the gorilla experiences it offers are ostensibly no different from elsewhere), Nkuringo, Ruhija and Rushaga. They're all located significant distances away from each other, and each of the four gives access to the territories of specific gorilla groups. Tourists booking independently sometimes make the mistake of staying in one trailhead but inadvertently booking a tracking experience from another, so this is something to double-check.

The forest itself is beautiful – shaggy, huge and primordial, with a sea of green hills – and there's plenty to warrant staying around for a few days. I was based around Nkuringo, and enjoyed a series of other walks, both inside the jungle and through the often spectacularly located villages of the wider community. The area is an excellent birding destination too, as well as being home to wildlife such as chameleons and monkeys.

## ▶ PARK LIFE

After Bwindi, tourist attention generally falls on Queen Elizabeth National Park, which is known for its tree-climbing lions among other wildlife, and Kibale National Park, which is famed for its chimps. Chimp-tracking permits are \$150 for a standard trek and \$200 for a habituation experience. And seeing chimpanzees up close – charging up



PICTURES: SHUTTERSTOCK; JAVIER GONZALEZ MANZO



**See chimps up close – charging up trunks, scampering through the bush and hooting from the treetops**

trunks, scampering through the bush, hooting from the treetops – can be no less thrilling than witnessing their larger Bwindi counterparts.

Bwindi, Queen Elizabeth and Kibale all sit in the southwest of the country, making a combined trip eminently manageable. Bear in mind, however, that even distances that look short

on the map can be extremely time-consuming, due to the poor condition of some of the roads. But it's a well-travelled region, and experienced local destination management companies such as Great Lakes Safaris ([greatlakessafaris.com](http://greatlakessafaris.com)) help UK operators to tailor itineraries that are workable, sorting out everything from airport pick-ups to accommodation and park fees.

Close to Kibale, the Rwenzori Mountains National Park draws adventurous types with its snow-capped peaks – the highest of them reaching well over 5,000 metres – while further north, Murchison Falls National Park also attracts a lot of attention, largely thanks to its Nile gorge and thunderous whitewater falls.

The sprawling capital city, Kampala, doesn't figure on too many visitors' lists, chiefly because international flights arrive into quieter Entebbe, 25 miles away.

## ▶ WHERE TO STAY

Accommodation options range from full-on luxury to basic guesthouses, with new openings still commonplace. Properties on touring itineraries are often of a high standard, with plenty of character. A new option worth knowing about is Elephant Plains, a luxury lodge in Queen Elizabeth National Park, which opened this year.

All told, Churchill's 'Pearl of Africa' is a destination with huge potential, plenty of cultural interest and a genuinely world-class wildlife offering. **TW**



**Explore** has an 11-day Gorilla & Chimp Safari group trip, including time in Bwindi National Park, Kibale National Park and Queen Elizabeth National Park, from £3,865 per person (excluding flights). [explore.co.uk](http://explore.co.uk)

**Distinctive Africa** has a 13-night Distinctive Uganda tour, taking in all the key wildlife highlights as well as time in Murchison Falls National Park and hot-air ballooning over Queen Elizabeth National Park, from £6,895 per person including accommodation, most meals, activities and flights from Heathrow to Entebbe. [distinctiveafrica.co.uk](http://distinctiveafrica.co.uk)



**ABOVE:** Great Lakes

**LEFT:** Chimps