



Akagera National Park isn't nearly as popular as other African reserves such as the Masai Mara and Serengeti, but that doesn't mean it has nothing to offer. In fact, it is a very special place. Stephen Cunliffe explores this Rwandan wildlife paradise

Text and photography: Stephen Cunliffe

Caption



AKAGERA NATIONAL PARK

Rwanda's Ngorogoro Crater

As we trundled along the two-track path in second gear, our Land Cruiser carved a route through a sea of animals. The herds split ahead of our approaching vehicle, opening up a narrow corridor through the game-rich Kilala Plains. I couldn't help but think of Moses parting the Red Sea. It was a bizarre but very apt analogy as we found ourselves slap-bang in the middle of the proverbial "land of plenty". The wildlife concentrations defied belief. To witness animals gathered in their

thousands was a rare and totally unexpected privilege that had all of us in awe of the scenes unfolding around us.

Amazingly, we weren't in the Masai Mara or Serengeti, watching the annual wildebeest migration. We were, in fact, in the most unlikely of places: Akagera National Park. This relatively unknown gem in the north-eastern part of Rwanda can best be described as the country's very own Ngorogoro Crater.

Our Akagera adventure had begun three days earlier when we entered the park through the southern gate at Kiyonza. As we explored the southern region of Rwanda's only protected savannah ecosystem, we saw quite a bit of wildlife. However, it was the incredible diversity of attractive landscapes that really impressed us. The acacia woodlands and rolling grassy hills of the west gave way to a labyrinth of lakes and papyrus-dominated swamps

along the Akagera River in the east. I soon discovered that this watery terrain, which covers a third of the park's surface, constitutes the only protected wetland system in central-east Africa.

Proclaimed in 1934, Akagera is Rwanda's oldest national park. And unlike many protected areas in the region, it is dominated by grassy savannahs and broken woodland. While the open grasslands are a last refuge for buffalo, impala and defassa waterbuck, large populations of hippo and elusive sitatunga thrive in the well-watered eastern areas of the reserve.

Until recently the park was Rwanda's only Big Five reserve, but heavy poaching and relentless persecution by cattle herders have almost certainly eradicated the rare black rhino and driven the last lions across the border into Uganda and Tanzania.

However, the 111 000ha park remains a birdwatcher's paradise. It has a staggering 525 species, including the iconic shoebill and endemic papyrus gonolek, recorded within the varied habitats of this small, diverse sanctuary.

Akagera used to be three times its current size. In the aftermath of the horrific 1994 genocide, tens of thousands of refugees streamed back into Rwanda, bringing large numbers of cattle with them. The government had to find a place to accommodate all these people and a decision was taken to de-proclaim two-thirds of the park. Huge tracts of prime wildlife habitat were lost to cattle but, thankfully, the most attractive areas were spared and remain within the redefined Akagera National Park.

Of course, the wild animals were blissfully unaware that their home ranges had been re-assigned to people and cattle. Conflict was inevitable.irate villagers poisoned carcasses, with devastating effect on predator populations. Cattle regularly entered the park to graze and drink, further heightening the hostilities. Inevitably, it was the wildlife that lost the battle, and Akagera's future appeared increasingly bleak before the arrival of the African Parks Network (APN) in December 2009. After negotiating a public/private partnership with the Rwanda Development Board (RDB), APN took on full responsibility for the long-term management and rehabilitation of the park.

I tracked down Bryan Havemann, the recently appointed APN park manager for Akagera, and asked him how he felt about the government's decision to sacrifice so much of the park. "The original Akagera was a beautiful self-contained park, but much of the lush central valley was lost, so the smaller park cannot support the same wildlife

populations. However, it is a waste of time to reminisce about what has been lost. What we have to do now is knuckle down and work with what's left, because the Akagera that remains still has incredible potential. It's an absolute jewel, and we have the opportunity to turn this place into something special."

With generous financial contributions from the Walton Family Foundation and the RDB, plans are afoot to fence the western boundary of the park, which should significantly reduce the tension between humans and wildlife in the region.

Funds have been allocated for translocations to help rehabilitate the park. Black rhino and lions are viewed as key species and major tourist drawcards. They have therefore been given priority for reintroduction as soon as the new fence has been erected. Many of the existing antelope populations will also be augmented.

Back on the game-rich Kilala Plains, it seemed absurd to even suggest that there could be a shortage of animals within Akagera.

Kilala, with its abundance of food and water, is a veritable oasis for the park's wildlife. The wide, grassy plain and large, shallow wetland in the north are encircled by low hills. This distinctive topography, combined with massive concentrations of game, give the place an uncanny resemblance to the Ngorogoro Crater in northern Tanzania. But in sharp contrast to Ngorogoro, there were virtually no tourists on the plain.

The ubiquitous topi and bohor reedbuck mingled with big herds of buffalo, eland and zebra. Giraffes journeyed across the plain for a drink of water. On the far side of the plain, an old elephant bull munched his way through an endless supply of reeds. Warthogs wallowed in the muddy shallows and an assortment of cranes, herons and storks fished along the water's edge.

This was off-the-beaten-track Africa at its best and our guide, Niyibizi Filmin, eloquently articulated what we were feeling when he whispered: "On the Kilala Plains you just don't know which way to turn. There is just so much going on."

As the last rays of late-afternoon sunshine faded, we tore ourselves away from the mesmerising scenes and headed for our campsite atop Mutumba Mountain. The wildlife thinned out after we left Kilala, but it was by no means scarce. At the end of a long and fruitful day, the cherry on the cake was an encounter with a herd of stately roan antelope crossing the road. We watched as they made their way up the hillside and eventually faded from view.

Skittish oribi and territorial topi bulls took flight from the grumbling of our vehicle's engine. The vehicle rattled and bounced over the loose stones as it climbed the deeply rutted

track towards our mountaintop camping spot.

Located high on a grassy ridge, the campsite at Mutumba boasts spectacular views over distant Lake Mihindi. The altitude also ensured that our camp was pleasantly free of the bloodthirsty tsetse flies that lurked in the woodlands below.

As we drove into camp, a family of zebra and a group of old dugga boys loitered nearby. We reached into the cooler box and whipped out a couple of cold beers to celebrate our super-successful game drive. From a respectful distance, the animals kept a wary eye on our strange antics. But as we cracked the first cans and toasted "another tough day in Africa", I swear I saw the old bulls nod their heads in agreement.



Caption





TRAVEL PLANNER

GETTING THERE: Akagera remains accessible throughout the year. From Kigali, a two-hour journey along a good paved road brings you to the town of Kayonza. At the T-junction, head south to Kabarondo and follow a well-maintained dirt road for 30km before arriving at the southern gate for Akagera Game Lodge and the park headquarters at Kiyonza. Alternatively, head north to Gabiro and enter through Nyungwe Gate for access to the wildlife-rich Kilala Plains in the north of the park.

For prospective visitors put off by the long drive from South Africa to Rwanda, a painless alternative is to fly to Kigali and hire a vehicle in the capital.

WHERE TO STAY: The Akagera Game Lodge, perched on a ridge overlooking Lake Ihema in the south of the park, is currently the only non-camping option. The lodge complex consists of 58 en-suite rooms, two executive rooms and eight cottages. It has a swimming pool, tennis courts, bar and large restaurant.

Akagera offers self-sufficient visitors the choice between three rustic campsites at Mutumba, Shakani and Kiyonza. Firewood, a shelter and long-drop toilets are provided, but no water is available at the sites. Plans are underway to upgrade the camping facilities during 2011. While a park-assigned guide is not mandatory for camping, their local knowledge can be invaluable when exploring the park, as the roads are rough and the signage is poor.

PARK FEES: Fees are currently under revision, but at the moment foreigners pay \$30 (R217) for one night or \$70 (R507) for three nights inside the park.

FUEL AND SUPPLIES: The nearest fuel is available in Kabarondo, 30km from the park headquarters. Water is available at Kiyonza headquarters, but should be treated before drinking.

Visitors can eat and drink at the Akagera Game Lodge even if they are not staying there. A small market offering basic goods is located in Nyahora, on the park boundary. A larger market can also be found in Kabarondo. However, overlanders are strongly advised to stock up on fuel and provisions before leaving Kigali.

ACTIVITIES: Game drives, night drives, boat cruises, fishing, birding safaris and rustic camping are all on offer.

CONTACT: www.akageralodge.co.rw; www.african-parks.org; www.rwandatourism.com 🌐

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