



UNCOVERING EDEN

UGANDA'S OPPRESSIVE PAST – AT THE HANDS OF IDI AMIN, MILTON OBOTE, THE LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY – HAS BEEN CONSIDERED TO HISTORY, AND ENLIGHTENED TRAVELLERS ARE FLOODING BACK TO A WELCOMING COUNTRY THAT SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL DUBBED 'THE PEARL OF AFRICA'. **STEPHAN CUNLIFFE** RECALLS THE TIME HE SPENT LIVING IN THE REMOTE NORTHEAST

World-renowned primate safaris in the verdant rainforests of southwest Uganda are once again luring visitors with the promise of unforgettable encounters with mountain gorillas and chimpanzees. Yet, Uganda's greatest attraction remains hidden in a far-flung corner of the country, undiscovered by all but the most adventurous.

There is no doubt that Kidepo Valley National Park in Karamoja, a district in northeastern Uganda, has a rough bunch of neighbours – Kenya's Turkana region to the east, South Sudan to the north – but with the demise of the LRA and the disarmament of the local Karamajong 'warriors', the park is slowly clawing its way back onto the East African safari circuit as it opens up to travellers looking for an Africa that is untamed and undiscovered.

In the 18 months my wife and I called Kidepo home, we enjoyed phenomenal wildlife encounters in what was effectively our own private national park. Bull-Bull, a rambunctious old elephant, was a regular visitor to the camp waterhole. After slaking his thirst, he would invariably turn his attention to the lodge's vegetable garden, causing consternation among the gardeners as they endeavoured to keep the wily behemoth at bay and thwart his voracious appetite.

I vividly remember a night when we were woken by the blood-curdling howls of the local hyena clan as they tormented a lioness with two sub-adult cubs. The lions had killed a waterbuck right outside our house and the hyenas were hell-bent on stealing their feast. We jumped out of bed and watched the raucous fight through the window. After the hyenas eventually triumphed, we retreated to bed and the lions soon followed suit, opting to spend the night on our veranda. One cub even chose to curl up and sleep on the doormat. The following morning we found ourselves under house arrest as the tawny cats, seemingly in no hurry to move off, dozed fitfully just outside the door.

Cheetah – an incredibly rare species in Uganda – would often use the lodge firebreaks to run down their quarry. Watching one of these sleek cats tear past the chalets at lightning speed as it closed in on an anxious oribi or distressed duiker was a sight to behold. The wildlife viewing we enjoyed from our house and around the safari lodge was on par with the best I've experienced anywhere in Africa. Best of all, we never shared our sensational sightings with more than a handful of privileged guests.

Kidepo Valley National Park is a pristine landscape of undulating grasslands enclosed by tall, jagged mountains. The savanna terrain is strongly reminiscent of Kenya's Masai Mara: a place of wide vistas and abundant life. However, in stark contrast to the mass tourism of the Mara, Uganda's most secluded national park is a rare slice of truly wild Africa – a genuine Eden.

The 1 442km² park comprises the rugged, arid Kidepo and more well-watered Narus river systems. Both rivers flow roughly north before converging in the Sudan and, ultimately, draining into the Nile. Officially classified as semi-desert, the park has experienced above-average rainfall for the past decade, producing lush savannas sprinkled with borassus palms, sausage trees and rocky koppies. To the west, the grasslands give way to the Napore-Nyagia hills and, in the east,

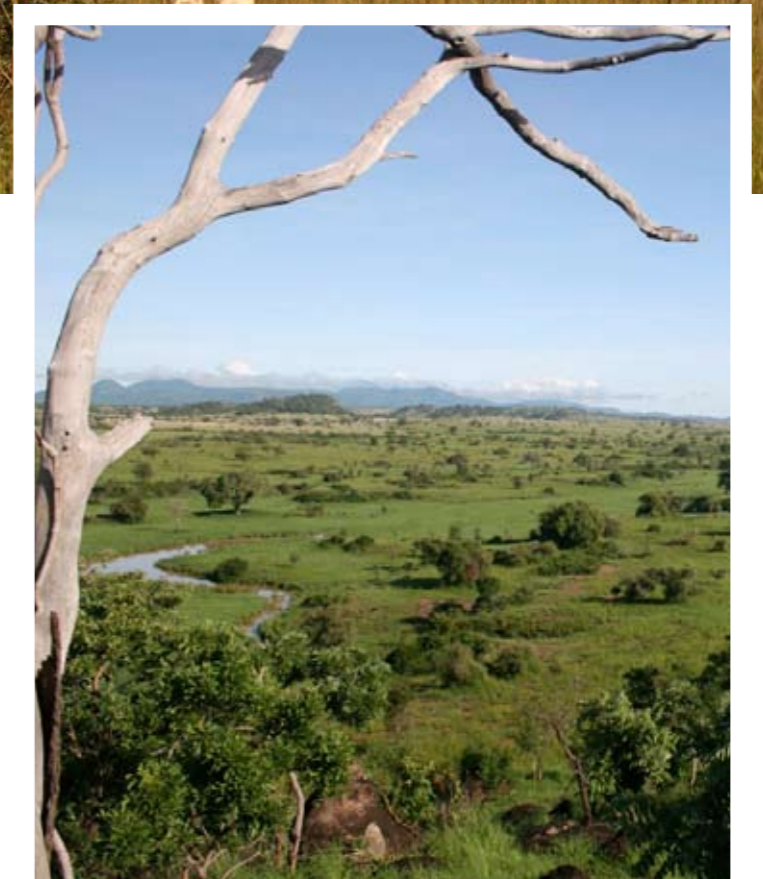
the two valleys are separated by the Lokayot-Natira hills. As a result, the altitude within the park varies considerably, from 914 metres on the floor of the Narus Valley to 2 750 metres at the peak of Mount Morungole.

This mountain provides a mouth-watering prospect for culturally minded visitors and enthusiastic hikers alike, with a rare opportunity to embark on an overnight adventure to visit the Ik – a marginalised hill tribe inhabiting the upper reaches of the mountains on the park's southern boundary. The Ik survive on subsistence agriculture and are largely unaffected by developments in the 21st century. With little understanding of what money is, they get the few necessities they require, and cannot grow themselves, by bartering with the Karamajong settlements at the foot of the mountain. A trek to visit the Ik is a journey back to ancient times, and visitors are few and far between.

Residing in small cluster villages surrounded by an outer wall of tightly interwoven branches, gaining access necessitated getting down on all fours and crawling through tiny openings in the barricades. Upon entering the hamlets, the colour of our skin provoked hysterical screaming from young children, who hadn't ever seen white people before. Scolded by the adults and reassured by the older children, curiosity soon took over and we became the centre of attention. ▶



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Etiquette demanded that we seek out and pay our respects to the village headman. In return for our gifts of a goat and bag of salt, we were invited to camp the night next to the village and share in their feast of roasted goat and *posho* (a maize porridge). This wasn't all we shared – village life doesn't afford much privacy and when nature called, one could be sure that a small army of inquisitive children would tag along to witness the deed.

The following morning, two young men were assigned to guide us on our quest to reach the summit of Mount Morungole. The mountain top is regarded as a spiritual place and our guides were terrified at the thought of entering the domain of the gods.

'When was the mountain last climbed?' The headman pondered my question for some time. He seemed to remember an Italian hiker who had visited about 15 years earlier.

As the sun reached its zenith, we scrambled up the final rock-strewn slopes and found ourselves at the highest point. Surrounded by spectacular wraparound views, we felt as if we were standing on top of the world. To the north were the Lotukei Mountains (where the helicopter in which Sudanese vice-president John Garang was flying crashed in 2005); to the east lay the town of Lokichokio in Kenya, and all the wilderness that is Kidepo stretched out below us.

We lingered on the summit for as long as we dared: it was a special place with a panoramic vista to savour. But soon it was time to race the setting sun and make our way back down to the national park. As we retraced our steps through the Ik villages, our young guides walked tall – they had braved the place of their ancestors and survived.

After a couple of days roughing it with the hill tribes, the Apoka Safari Lodge is a welcome sight for weary adventurers returning from the mountain. The lodge is built around a rocky koppie with breathtaking views over the surrounding savanna, especially from the

camp's top attraction: a gigantic swimming pool carved out of an enormous granite boulder. Poolside loungers under shady umbrellas offer a ringside seat overlooking an action-packed waterhole frequented by an endless procession of Bohor reedbeek, Jackson's hartebeest, defassa waterbuck, bushbuck, plains zebra and warthogs.

Boasting some of the best walking terrain in all of Africa, a bushwalk through the expansive grassy plains and broken woodlands of Kidepo provides the perfect opportunity for twitchers to make a dent in an impressive checklist of 475 bird species. But most visitors want to view bigger beasts with sharper teeth, and Kidepo won't disappoint.

This is the only national park in Uganda where one can see cheetahs, and the open savanna strewn with termite mounds provides an ideal habitat for them to stalk their favoured oribi prey. There is also a healthy lion population, and these

cats can often be found lazing in shady sausage trees or regally reclining atop the ubiquitous koppies that litter the dramatic landscape. These raised vantage points provide ideal lookouts for the felines to detect prey, while simultaneously allowing them to take advantage of cooling breezes and escape the ticks and biting flies down below.

Sneaking up on a giraffe browsing a flat-top acacia might provide an opportunity to snap the quintessential East African safari picture, but Kidepo's ultimate sights are reserved for the dry season. From December through March, safari goers are treated to a magnificent wildlife spectacle as elephants congregate in their hundreds along the perennial Narus watercourse and buffalo herds swell into the thousands. Memorable sightings and thrilling encounters are never far away.

While it is truly magical to witness such impressive concentrations of wildlife in such breathtaking scenery, the real privilege is that there usually isn't another tourist for 500km. ●

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TRAVEL NOTES KIDEPO, UGANDA

✳ **BEST TIME TO GO** The park is open all year, but the long dry season (December to early March) is best.

VISAS South Africans require a visa (R500) to enter Uganda. 012-342-6031, uganda.org.za

CURRENCY Ugandan shilling. R1 = US\$ 340.

NEED TO KNOW Take precautions against malaria. A yellow fever vaccination is required.

The Far Horizons (thefarhorizons.com) is highly recommended as a ground handler for all Ugandan travel. For more information on Kidepo, visit the official website of the Uganda Tourism Board (visituganda.com).

SLEEP HERE The stunning Apoka Safari Lodge (wildplacesafrica.com/apoka-lodge or safariuganda.com/apoka_lodge.htm) offers luxury accommodation in 10 comfortable

thatch-and-canvas chalets with private verandas and outdoor bathtubs. It offers fully inclusive fly-in packages (from ??price??/about Rxxx per person per night). The Ugandan Wildlife Authority (ugandawildlife.org) has basic self-catering *bandas* (rondawels) and two rustic bush campsites in Kidepo. From price??/?/about Rxxx per person per night.

DO THIS Twice-daily wildlife-viewing activities led by knowledgeable guides centre on game drives in open-top safari vehicles and escorted morning bush walks. Specialist bird-watching safaris and overnight excursions to visit the Ik hill tribes are bonus attractions.

📍 **GO THERE** British Airways flies daily from London to Entebbe, Uganda. It is recommended that visitors fly into Kidepo Park

due to sporadic incidences of banditry along the road through Karamoja. Air charters can be booked through Eagle Air (flyeagleuganda.com) or KAFTC (flyuganda.com/charter.php). **ba.com**

