

Travel

Wonders of the pearl

Dubbed "the Pearl of Africa" by Sir Winston Churchill, Uganda's one of the continent's most charming and diverse countries. Although small in size, it has dazzling attractions to tempt the adventurous visitor. **Stephen Cunliffe** shares his pick of the country's top tourist drawcards



relaxation, the full-service lodge offers energetic travellers a choice between scenic birding walks, chartered fishing trips in search of the legendary Nile perch and the quintessential African sundowner cruise.

By contrast, nearby Ngamba Island is the stomping ground for primates of a different persuasion. Enthralling nature walks through the lush forest of the 40ha sanctuary allow visitors to closely observe chimps that have been rescued from the illegal wildlife trade and released back into their natural habitat. Half-day, full-day and overnight visits are available, giving guests the opportunity to connect with a 50-strong family of sociable primates that are our closest living relatives.

FIND OUT MORE...

Ngamba Sanctuary:

www.ngambaisland.com

Pineapple Bay Resort:

www.wildplacesafrica.com

LAKE VICTORIA AND THE SSESE ISLANDS

Flying into Entebbe International Airport (see 24 Hours in Entebbe), you'll find yourself deposited on the shore of Lake Victoria, the world's second-largest lake. This gigantic inland sea, with a string of 84 idyllic tropical islands, is the ideal place to begin or end any Ugandan safari. With tranquil beaches abutting dense rainforest and surrounded by sparkling, azure waters, the stress-free Sese Islands are a heavenly place where Bulago Island and the Ngamba Chimpanzee Sanctuary are the prime places to visit.

Pineapple Bay Resort on Bulago Island is only a short speedboat ride from the mainland, yet it feels as if it's a million miles away from the hustle and bustle of Entebbe and Kampala. Although primarily a white-sand beach paradise synonymous with

RAFTING THE SOURCE OF THE NILE

Below the Bujagali Falls in Jinja, the wild White Nile offers world-class white-water rafting. The most popular raft trip is a sensational six-hour descent through monster class-five rapids with frightening names like Jaws, Silverback and Rib Cage. The 31km maelstrom is undoubtedly one of the top white-water experiences on the planet, so take a deep breath and get ready for a swim!

If rafting whets your appetite for adventure, then you might be tempted to sign up for Adrift's panacea for thrill-seekers: a

pulse-racing combo of bungee-jumping, jet-boating and river-surfing.

FIND OUT MORE...

Adrift Adventure Company:

www.adrift.ug

Nile River Explorers:

www.raftafrica.com

Wildwaters Lodge:

www.wild-uganda.com

MAGNIFICENT MURCHISON

Further downstream, as the Nile thunders through one of the Pearl's most scenically spectacular national parks, the mighty river funnels through a narrow rock cleft barely 6m wide and plunges over the precipice to become the magnificent Murchison Falls.

Even more rewarding than the mesmerising view from the lip of the tumultuous cascade, the 17km launch trip from Paraa to the base of the falls is the ultimate must-do activity. Ubiquitous hippos and crocodiles share the river bank with thirsty herds of waterbuck, kob, elephant and buffalo, as well as a rich variety of birdlife, including the rare shoebill and iconic African fish eagle.

Wildlife-rich Murchison is Uganda's largest national park and offers a diverse range of safari activities so, when you tire of waterfall-watching, choose between action-packed game drives, escorted nature



THE RAINFOREST TREK TO FIND GORILLAS CAN BE A TOUGH, MUDDY, UPHILL SLOG, BUT THE REWARDS ARE SWEET: SITTING AMONG THESE ENORMOUS PRIMATES THAT SHARE 98% OF OUR DNA.

walks and chimp treks in neighbouring Budongo Forest.

Murchison also boasts a good range of accommodation options. From long-standing Paraa and the secluded Nile Safari Lodge to budget-friendly Red Chilli Hideaway, there's something for everyone. Luxurious Baker's Lodge is scheduled to open later this year.

FIND OUT MORE...

Paraa Safari Lodge:

www.paraalodge.com

Nile Safari Lodge: www.geolodges.com

Red Chilli Hideaway:

www.redchillihideaway.com

Baker's Lodge:

www.ugandaexclusivecamps.com

MOUNTAINS OF THE MOON

Uganda has two magical mountain ranges on which trekking enthusiasts can work up a sweat. Straddling the border with Kenya, scenic Mount Elgon is the less demanding of the two, while the six massifs of the 120km Rwenzori mountain chain form a Unesco World Heritage Site offering some of the best trekking in all of Africa.

Although forest elephants occur on the lower mountain slopes, the Rwenzori range is better known for its endemic birdlife, majestic alpine scenery and bizarre vegetation. Rich

and unusual flora include giant varieties of lobelia and groundsel, not to mention a gigantic, moss-covered heather that can reach 6m in height.

A week-long hiking circuit, making use of rustic overnight huts, showcases the best of the Rwenzoris. The muddy trail initially cuts through verdant rainforest, alive with the chatter of monkeys and birds, before entering a zone of tall bamboo and finally

emerging onto the snow-fringed alpine meadows above. Bathed in swirling mist and presided over by a trio of menacing peaks, it's an otherworldly landscape that could easily have been hijacked from a sci-fi movie set.

Climbing to an elevation of 5109m at the summit of snow-capped Margarita Peak, the legendary Mountains of the Moon are the domain of the serious hiker with a trek that's among the most challenging and rewarding on the continent.

FIND OUT MORE...

Adrift Adventure Company:

www.adrift.ug

Equator Snow Lodge:

www.geolodges.com

QUEEN ELIZABETH NATIONAL PARK

Queen Elizabeth National Park lies sandwiched between the brooding presence of the Rwenzoris and

the watery expanse of Lake Edward. With habitats ranging from dense rainforest to open savannah and peppered with countless crater lakes, the reserve boasts one of the highest biodiversity ratings in the world. With 606 bird species and a staggering 97 mammal species (including elephant, buffalo, lion and leopard), this is Uganda's flagship national park.

Mweya Safari Lodge, located on a raised peninsula in the heart of the park, enjoys a marvellous waterfront setting overlooking the Kazinga Channel. With its abundance of game and outstanding birding, a boat trip along the Kazinga channel isn't to be missed.

In the south of the park, the remote Ishasha Sector is famed for its tree-climbing lions. The comfortable, tented accommodation of Ishasha Wilderness Camp is ideally placed to enable travellers to search for these arboreal felines, which can often be found draped over the branches of shady fig trees along the main road.

Built on the edge of a large crater lake, Jacana Safari Lodge is a luxury treehouse camp situated in a tranquil region of the park: the ideal place to kick back and drink in the beauty of nature. Nearby Kyambura Gorge harbours habituated chimps, so when you feel the need to stretch your legs, you know where to go.

FIND OUT MORE...

Mweya Safari Lodge:

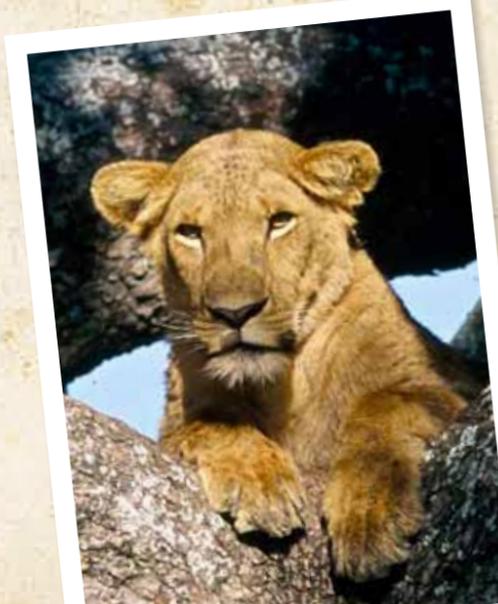
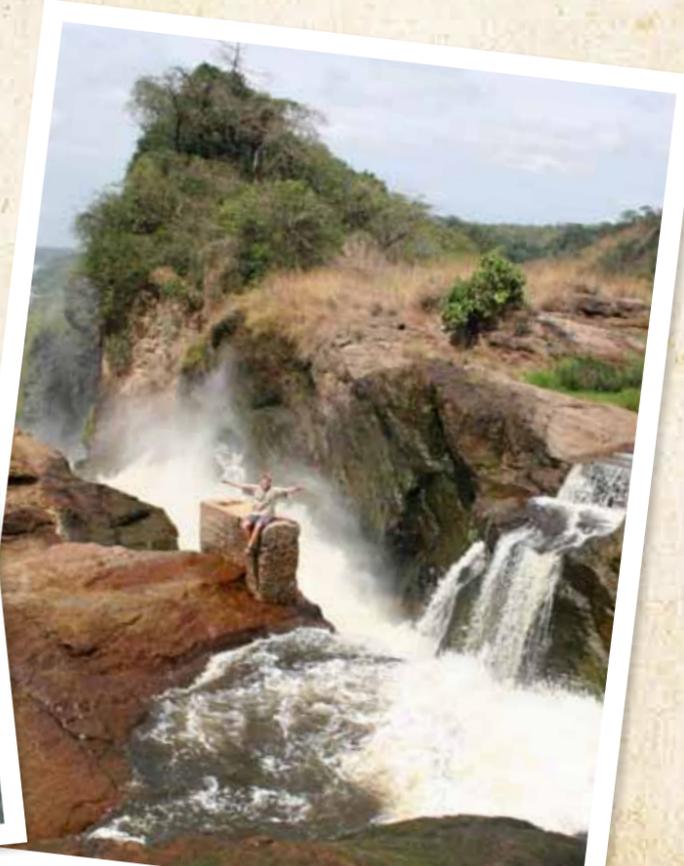
www.mweyalodge.com

Ishasha Wilderness Camp:

www.ugandaexclusivecamps.com

Jacana Safari Lodge:

www.geolodges.com



PRIMATE-TREKKING IN THE WEST

The verdant rainforests of south-west Uganda are once again luring intrepid visitors with the promise of unforgettable primate encounters. While habituated troops of chimpanzees can be found in Murchison, Queen Elizabeth and Semliki, the best place to see these fascinating animals in the wild is at Kibale National Park, where an exceptionally high density of chimps and a highly successful habituation programme continues to produce reliable and close-up sightings.

But chimps aren't the only primates on display in Uganda's forests and few would argue with the main attraction: an opportunity to spend time with a family of critically endangered mountain gorillas.

Two Ugandan parks – Bwindi and Mgahinga – harbour habituated gorilla groups and offer the privileged visitor a chance to spend an hour in the company of these gentle giants. The rainforest trek to find them can be a tough, muddy, uphill slog, but the rewards are sweet: a rare opportunity to sit in the presence of these enormous primates that share 98% of our DNA. The gorillas interact and feed, oblivious to human intrusion, and an hour whizzes by all too quickly in their company.

Be prepared to part with some hard-earned cash, however, as permits cost a hefty US\$600, but it's a life-changing experience that's worth every cent.

FIND OUT MORE...

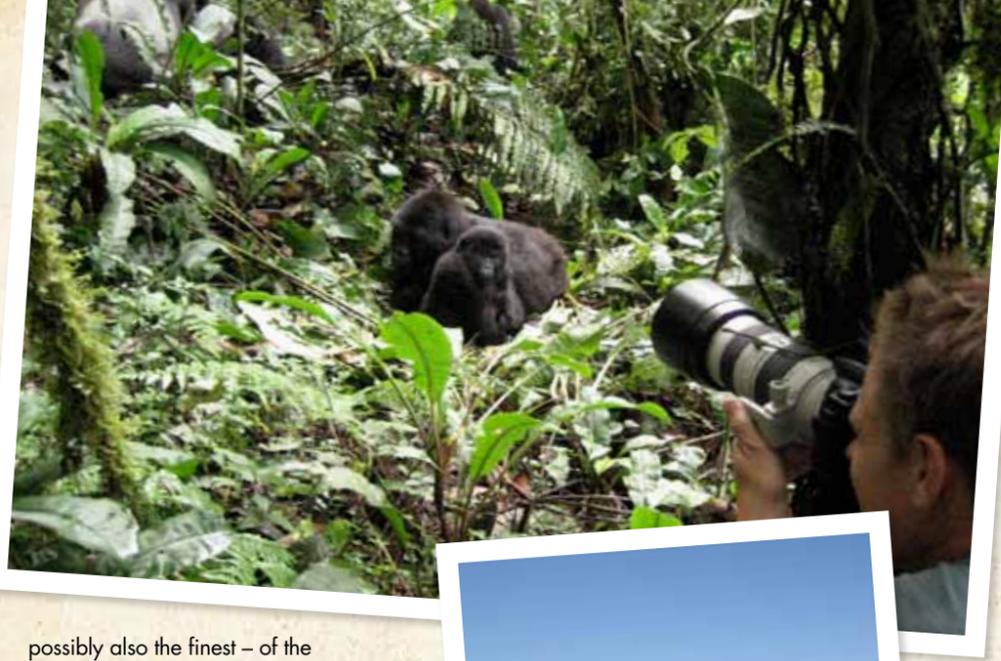
Ndali Lodge: www.ndalilodge.com

Clouds Gorilla Lodge:

www.wildplacesafrica.com

KIDEPO VALLEY NATIONAL PARK

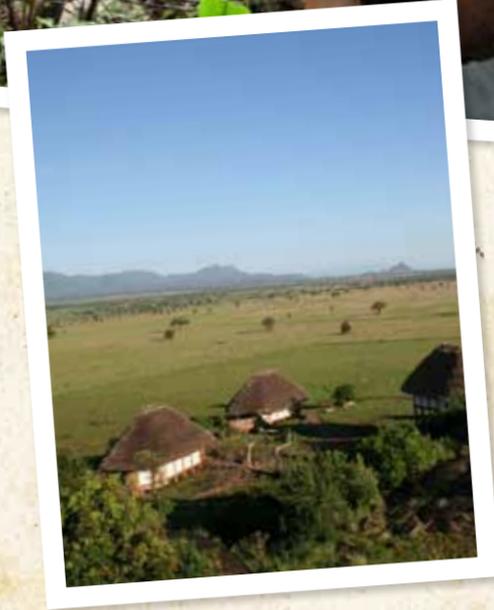
Tucked away in a far-flung corner of Uganda, Kidepo's certainly the wildest – but



possibly also the finest – of the Pearl's seven wonders. Undiscovered by all but the most courageous safari-goers, it's one of East Africa's most scenically spectacular and least crowded wilderness areas.

The park protects a pristine, Mara-like savannah landscape encircled by tall, jagged mountains. Its expansive, grassy plains are generously peppered with rocky koppies frequented by lions, while cheetah stalk past browsing giraffe and zebras grazing in the grasslands below. During the dry season, buffalo herds numbering in the thousands and elephants in their hundreds congregate along the perennial Narus watercourse.

The best place to stay inside the park is friendly Apoka Safari Lodge, where poolside loungers provide ringside seats overlooking an action-packed waterhole in the Narus Valley. For the ultra-adventurous visitor, an overnight hike up Mount Morungole on the park's southern boundary will take you to the fascinating hilltop villages of the Ik: a forgotten people whose culture time passed by.



This is wildest Uganda, where visitors remain few and far between: the domain of the genuinely adventurous traveller.

FIND OUT MORE...

Apoka Safari Lodge:

www.wildplacesafrica.com

Nga Moru Wilderness Camp:

www.ngamoru.com

24 HOURS IN ENTEBBE

WHERE TO STAY

The five-star **Imperial Resort Beach Hotel** is set on an 11 ha estate alongside Lake Victoria. Next to the botanical gardens and overlooking the lake, the **Imperial Botanical Beach Hotel** is another decent, large option: www.imperialhotels.co.ug

WHAT TO DO

Laid out alongside Lake Victoria way back in 1898, the expansive **Entebbe Botanical Gardens** are a nice place for a picnic or a walk away from the noise of town. The recently expanded

Uganda Wildlife Education Centre

is home to rare wildlife rescued from poachers and traffickers. Relaxing **boat cruises** and exciting **fishing excursions** to hook a giant Nile perch can be arranged through Wild Frontiers: www.wildfrontiers.co.ug

WHERE TO EAT

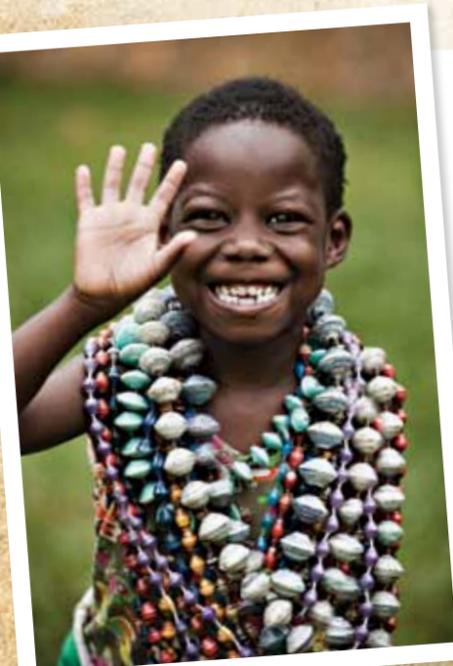
Many visitors stick to their hotel restaurants, but family-friendly **Nicky's Pizza Restaurant** is a good option, while the **China Garden Restaurant** offers a fair selection of tasty Eastern fare.

FINDING ENTERTAINMENT

The **Four Turkeys Pub** is a popular Entebbe watering hole that also serves tasty grub, while the **Club Knight Rider** disco is the place to dance the night away.

PLANNING A VISIT?

The **Far Horizons** is the Pearl's premier tour operator and comes highly recommended for all your Ugandan safari needs: www.thefarhorizons.com For further information, visit **Tourism Uganda:** www.visituganda.com



PHOTOGRAPHER: STEPHEN CUNLIFFE. GALLOIMAGES/GETTYIMAGES.COM



Clockwise, from left: The group. Amy on the back of a boda. Coming out of a mosque. A boda tour. Entrepreneurial boda driver Walter. A "jam", as the locals call them.



By Amy Fallon.
Photographer: Clare Wise de Wet

Uganda's fast rides

Bodabodas, Uganda's motorbike taxis, are arguably the fastest and cheapest mode of transport – and a great way to see the city

As I carefully negotiate the potholed road, a red helmet in one hand, a Bajaj Boxer BM 100 motorbike races toward me. Its driver – sporting a second-hand bomber leather jacket, corduroy trousers, trainers, crocheted hat and Ray-Ban sunnies – gives me a huge wave.

"Garden City. How much?" I enquire, trying to haggle the best price to one of Kampala's many shopping malls, after he pulls up.

"Seven thousand," he says in a deep voice.

"Six." I put one foot in front of another, beginning to walk away.

"Sit," he orders. So my day begins, the wind blowing through my hair and the, er, dirt blowing onto my face, as my cabbie snakes his way through gridlock the locals describe simply as a "jam". How could I ever go back to the London tube or Sydney buses after this?

You're very likely to see cows, TVs, mattresses – in fact, everything but the kitchen sink (actually, don't be surprised if you do see the kitchen

sink) – being carried on the back of these vehicles by the many thousands of Kampala's "smart" (read: stylish) riders.

They've been branded a "necessary evil" and "silent killers". But take *bodas* out of Uganda and not only would many people be stranded, but a lot of youth would also be jobless.

"I have many customers. This work helps me pay school fees and helps me with my family's other needs," says driver William Ntulume (33). This married father of four makes up to 50 000 Ugandan shillings (about R206) a day.

Walter Wandera (27) started riding a few years ago to put himself through computer school.

"Kampala wouldn't function without *bodas*: they're part of

our lifestyle. You don't need to plan ahead of time and they're fun – and affordable," he says.

The driver-turned-entrepreneur now runs *boda* tours of the Ugandan capital. "It's the best way to see Kampala because you smell the smells, see the sights and don't get stuck in traffic," says Wandera.

Highlights of the four-hour tour include the Parliament and palaces of Buganda, one of Uganda's royal kingdoms; Africa's only Baha'i temple; the city's best art galleries and craft markets, plus a local lunch at the 2k restaurant. Oh, and each passenger gets a helmet they must wear. 🇷🇺

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🌐 www.walterstours.com

Prices start at \$30 per person.

