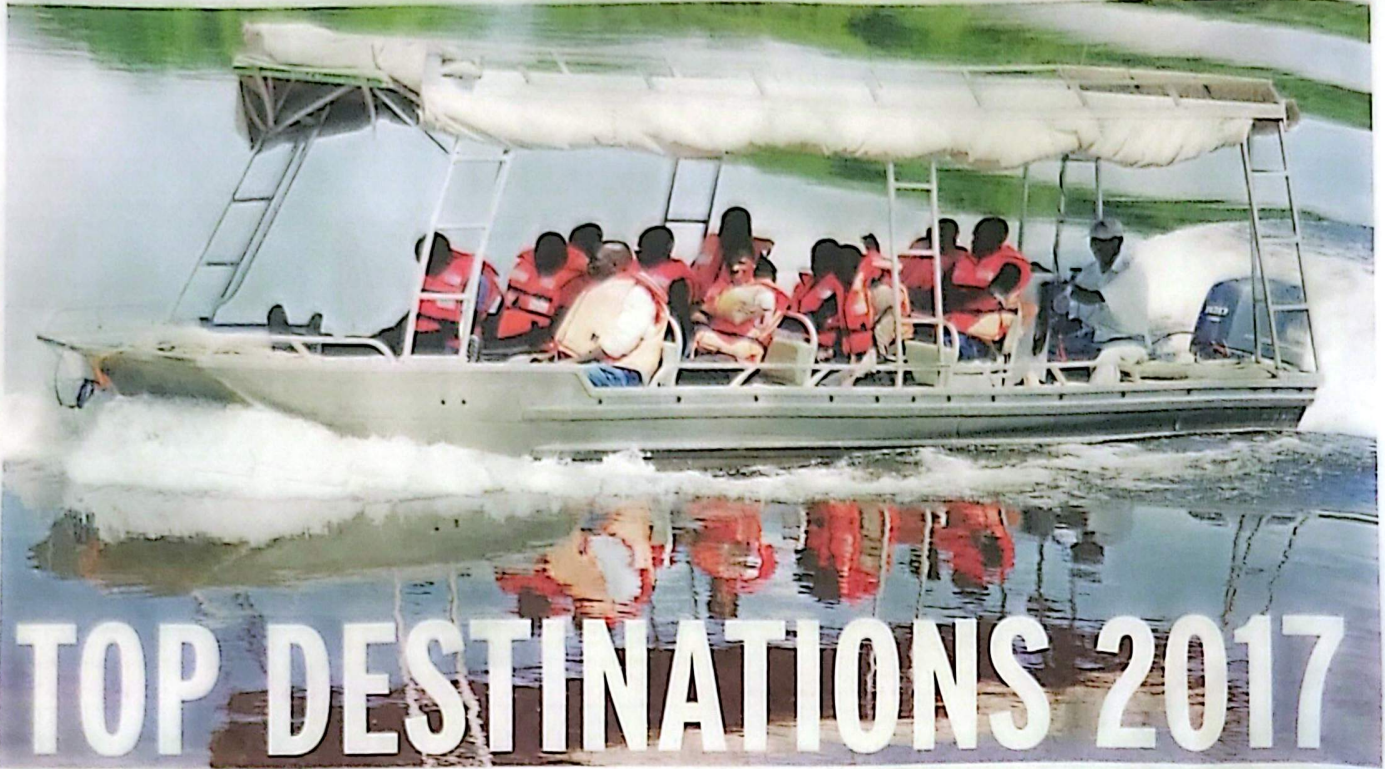


PEARL of AFRICA

SPECIAL TRAVEL SECTION



MURCHISON FALLS NATIONAL PARK



In the lead of preference comes Murchison Falls National Park, which had 70,000 visitors recorded by September 2017. The Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) director of tourism and business services, Stephen Masaba, reveals that nowhere else, the world over, can a tourist see a predator so easily.

While there, one cannot miss the hippos performing their sub-marine ballet while hiding away from the sun.

"The park offers excellent wildlife viewing in the largest and oldest conservation area in the country," says UWA's Jossy Muhangi. "The River Nile bisects the park, passing through a seven-metre (23 ft) gorge, before tumbling in spectacular 45-metre (147 ft) waterfalls over the Albertine Rift Valley."

The menu of attractions there comprises elephants, lions, buffalos, giraffes, vultures and monkeys. Murchison falls also hosts the nation's largest population of crocodiles, stretching from the shores of Lake Albert. The park also supports many birds, including the rare shoe-billed stork.

Choosing lead attractions in Uganda was hard for the *Sunday Vision* team because the *Pearl of Africa* offers a variety of mind-blowing tours.

Titus Kakembo zeroed in on these

KIBALE FOREST



Monkey business in the primate city, which doubles as a tea country on the foot hills of Mount Rwenzori, has brought in many tourists. Kibale Forest is popular for having the highest diversity of primates in the East African region.

The forest received 12,000 visitors last year. During guided walks, visitors see

chimpanzees, red-tailed besides white and black colobus monkeys. As if that is not enough, there is an opportunity to spend a day with rangers habituating some primate families.

Being in an area that grows tea, there is plenty of photo opportunities in the beautiful green gardens.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Queen Elizabeth National Park is endowed with a variety of mammals, reptiles and birds, all seen during a boat ride on River Nile.

"By September this year, we had logged a sum of 63,000 visitors," says Stephen Masaba, the Uganda Wildlife Authority director of tourism and business services. "This is good because last year, the same destination attracted 90,000 visitors for the whole year."

"We have seen children from the US call the lions here big cats," reveals Masaba. "This is as the cats bask in the bush. The females do the hunting, while the males dine and protect their territory. Hyenas keep stalking them. If lucky, a guest hears the king of the jungle (lion) roar at night. That sound is unforgettable," he says.

Masaba says the survival rate of cubs is very low in the wild. Life is tough. "You can't be surprised if a hyena feasts on a wounded lion or a defenseless cub," he says. While there, one can also see lions climbing trees at Ishasha.

BWINDI IMPENETRABLE FOREST

Our tourism flagship, gorilla tracking in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest received 20,000 visitors by September.

Uganda Wildlife Authority says the majority of tourists destined there are interested in spending 60 minutes with the primates that are globally on the verge of extinction. Stephen Masaba, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) director of tourism and business services, says: "Lately, Uganda is the preferred destination, besides Rwanda and DR Congo where gorillas are also found."

"UWA is offering \$600 permits this season. We are victors when it comes to the price war as we charge \$600, while it is \$1,500 in Rwanda. Foreigners based here get a discount. And Ugandans pay a subsidized fee of sh250,000 only."

En route to see gorillas, a tourist is treated to a variety of other attractions, including forests, birds, mammals and reptiles. Upscale hotels are competing for clients with budget tourists. Consequently, the price per night ranges between \$10 (sh35,000) and \$1,000 (sh3.5m).



MGAHINGA PARK

Pygmies in MgaHINGA National Park, which sits high in the clouds at an altitude of between 2,227 metres and 4,127 metres, got 5,000 guests.

As its name suggests, it was created to protect the rare mountain gorillas that inhabit its dense forests. It is also an important habitat for the endangered golden monkey. It is a good example of how wildlife boosts cultural significance, in particular, for the Batwa pygmies.

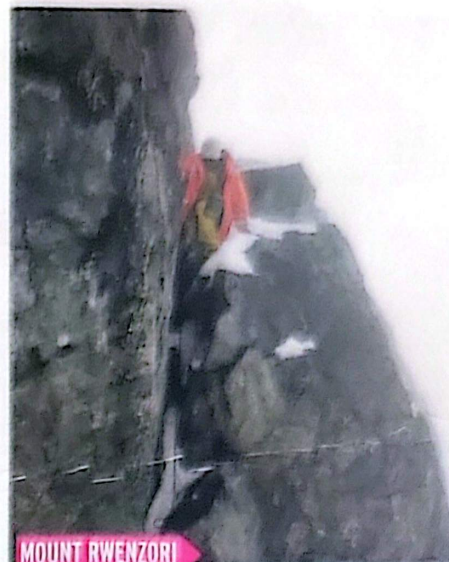
MgaHINGA's most striking features are its three conical, extinct volcanoes, part of the spectacular Virunga Range that lies along the border region of Uganda, Congo and Rwanda. MgaHINGA forms part of the much larger Virunga conservation area, which includes adjacent parks in these countries. The volcanoes' slopes contain various ecosystems, are biologically diverse and their peaks provide striking scenery.

MOUNT ELGON NATIONAL PARK

Mount Elgon, located in eastern Uganda, logged 4,000 visitors. Adventurous travellers find it an exciting alternative to the more strenuous climbs elsewhere throughout the year. It is still less congested, has many wild animals and a milder climate and lower elevation.

Climbing the peaks does not require special equipment or technical experience. The shortest Sasa trail, but toughest route to the peaks, traversing the community land, allows one to explore Bamasaba farming settlements and culture. It takes four days.

There are other ascending routes comprising Sipi, Piswa and Sasa. This allows a traverse of the caldera and a visit to the hot springs.



MOUNT RWENZORI

Mount Rwenzori attracted 3,000 scalars, although it hit the headlines as being part of the seven summit promotion of Mountain Climbing in Africa.

"Rwenzori has a character of its own; there are different climates, plants, horned chameleons, mammals and birds," the area manager, James Okware, says.

KIDEPO NATIONAL PARK

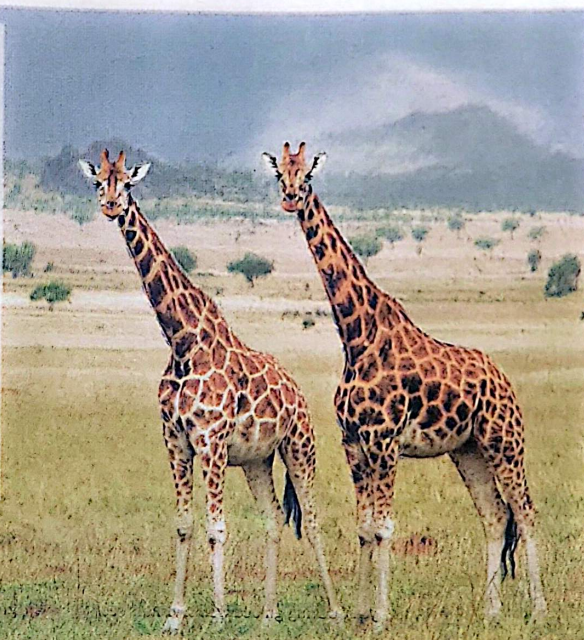
Kidepo Valley National Park received bookings of 8,000 visitors by September. The tourism manager, Steven Nyadru, says the park is visited by diplomats, journalists, school children and the corporates.

"The destination is known as the Jumbo jamboree, as the population of elephants has been swelling in the recent past. Our bull, who has a 'dual citizenship' in South Sudan, also returned after two years," Nyadru says. "We feared it could be a victim of illicit poaching activity."

Masaba attributes Kidepo's popularity to improved accessibility by road and air.

"Animals are fleeing war-torn neighbouring countries to seek refuge here," says Masaba.

"CNN declared the park to be the closest one to what Africa was 100 years ago. This is besides having the biggest herd of buffaloes in the world and migrant birds fleeing the harsh winter in Europe."



LAKE MBURO NATIONAL PARK

Lake Mburo National Park had seen 25,000 visitors by September this year.

"It is the only park in the world where animals and people live in harmony," says Stephen Masaba, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) director of tourism and business services. "During the game drive, zebras and antelopes are seen in human settlements grazing or gulping water. It is the nearest park to Kampala city, Mbarara and Masaka."

He says tourists visiting the park increased following the introduction of boats and a concerted Tulambule campaign.

The chief warden, Godfrey Matanda, says: "Here urban children learn how their ancestors grazed and milked cows, besides appreciating the biodiversity in place."

"There is a campaign going on to encourage communities in the neighborhood not to kill wild game, but conserve it. They earn 20% of the revenue from UWA gate collections to improve their livelihood."