



Buffaloes are most visible in this park given that it has a record for having the largest herd of up to 13,000 animals.

ONE WITH NATURE: Located in Kaabong District, Kidepo Valley National park opens one to an experience of wildlife in a very remote setting.

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His fame transcended the different villages. Far and wide, the name Ryonomoi echoed pride. Given this name after he killed an enemy who had a dark skin, there was no match for his hunting skills. This famous hunter stood tall among his peers, it is no wonder he was chosen to hold guard of the net trappings that fateful day at the foot of a Karamoja's vast Savannah.

When his peers drove the target, Jackson's Heartbeast towards the trap, Ryonomoi was trusted to spear this antelope like creature and bring success to the quest for daily bread. But as fate would have it, the whole herd went to the trap, catching Ryonomoi to death. Then, his peers mourned their great hero and buried him at the foot of the hill, then name it after him. Ranger guide Zachary Logeev amatelady tells the story of a man he barely knew, one he would not prove even if his life depended on it, of a time way past his.

View of the wild from above
Today, Ryonomoi hill stands tall, an imposing rock that opens one to the picturesque expanse of a section of Kidepo Valley National Park with the mountains as a backdrop. The park covers 1,442 square kilometres. The stop here was part of a game drive during a recent trip organised by Uganda Wild Life Authority (UWA) for some journalists. The trek up the hill



What makes Kidepo special is that the experience is about you and nature. The numbers you find are few, unlike other parks. You are just going to be you and nature.

DR ANDREW SEGUYA, UWA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

PHOTO: COURTESY UWA

Kidepo, a wilderness of tales

through grass and rocks is worth it as the cool breeze descends on your face and you admire the view, taking selfies. Many a tourist will be captivated, even thrilled by the adventure close to animals that a trip to Uganda's wildest national park brings. However, for the story teller in me, the tales that form a backbone to many of the features in the park blow me away. The blend of mysticism, science and norms of the society before the park was demarcated in 1958, sets Kidepo Valley National Park apart.

What is in a name

Its name, Kidepo, was derived from the fruit gathering characteristic of the native Karimojong, along the banks of the main river now called River Kidepo. A seasonal river, being the dry season, we had the privilege of standing right in the middle of the river bed. The high banks a mixture of clay, soil and sand form a valley. One's feet sink in the moist sandy bed as they walk around, a daunting experience when the clouds are threatening to let loose, as such rivers fill unceremoniously when it rains heavily in the mountains close by. Imagine you were caught in the action of water racing to fill the valley!

Tall coconut palm trees with orange sweet smelling fruit, conjure the image of an orchard carefully farmed, as they grow in rows on both sides of the river and pathways close by.

"Kidepo means 'to pick' in akarimojong. In the past, the natives used to come to this place to pick these fruits. When the

park was demarcated, it was seen as the perfect name for the park," says Logee. During the rainy season, the river is the lifeline of animals as the big and small come to drink and hunt.

Haven of wild life

While it was dry, enabling us to drive right through it, we managed to see some antelopes and a lioness in the area close by. Setting eyes on the lioness was exciting even if just the previous day, we had seen both a lion and lioness resting on a rock.

Logee humoured us with the fact that lions mate up to 50 times a day, so this couple was most probably taking a break from some action.

1,442

THE NUMBER OF SQUARE KILOMETRES THE PARK COVERS

Except for elephants that eluded us at the first attempt, I can crown that particular game drive on a Wednesday as the most successful I have had. We encountered a leopard who swiftly jumped off a tree, abandoning his feast high up. The cat lover in me was in heaven, despite that fact that Mr Leopard decided to play hide and seek in the tall grass. Thank God for the binoculars, though. The herds of buff-

aloes are most visible in this park given that it has record for having the largest herd of up to 13,000 animals. However, on the drive, you will find several scattered in the park, which is made up two valleys, Narus and Kidepo, which pride in hosting a wealth of wildlife.

Jackson's Heartbeasts, antelopes, Uganda kob, warthogs, giraffes, elephants, zebras, birds like ostrich, oribi stork, secretary bird among others are some animals we saw.

"What makes Kidepo special is that the experience is about you and nature. The numbers you find are few, unlike other parks. You are just going to be you and nature. You can park and watch a lion for up to two hours uninterrupted, but at the Masai Mara, there will be 100 land rovers and hundreds of camera's clicking," Dr Andrew Seguya, UWA executive director, says. Dr Seguya briefed the journalists at Apoka Lodge about UWA's plan to bring to the fore the park's great attributes.

Describing the park's uniqueness, he says: "When you come into Kidepo, you know you are leaving civilization and you have reached the wilderness. The way it is surrounded by mountains and its two valleys, gives you the impression that you are cut off from the normal world, that is what makes it special."

Indeed, our drive for hours to see ostriches takes us through large expanse of semi-arid vegetation; it feels like we are traveling to eternity. The drive that goes up to one kilometer to the South Sudan border brings us in touch with yet another

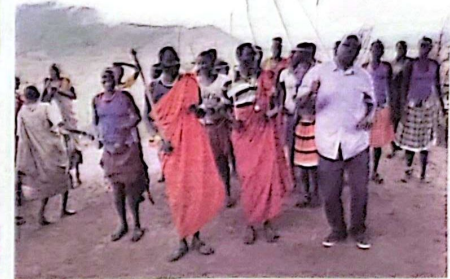


The writer gets a feel of the water in hot spring of Kanangorok. COURTESY PHOTOS

IF YOU VISIT

Access. One can either drive to Kaabong District on a 13-hour journey or fly from Kampala on arrangement by UWA or Apoka Lodge.

Accommodation. For accommodation, there are currently three options. High end Apoka Lodge, Savannah lodge (\$95 and \$143) and UWA's Apoka Rest Camp where bandas cost between Shs40,000 and Shs75,000.



JUMP TO THE SKIDS WITH THE NATIVES

You will not get to Nacyangun village until after two or three hours of a drive from Apoka UWA camp. The journey takes you from the tropical savannah like vegetation towards the cool temperate mountainous relief areas of Kaabong District. Anxious to interface with the Dodoth who are native to the place, the crew is captivated by the scenic surrounds, perfect spot for an award winning shot and well, a selfie. Young boys herd cattle and goats along the village paths and a dry river bed.

At the foot of the mountains, the village we visit is alive with natives dashing towards us and amused children chucking. A tour of the neat manyattas, leave one fascinated by the order, right from the way twigs and branches are weaved to form a fence to the setting. One thing that will leave you amused is the narrow low entrance to the courtyard. Daniel Akuro's homestead serves as our point of contact with the Karamojong way of life. Every piece of life is in its place, right from the huts of his three wives, to the kraal of his goats and the fireplace where men thump their chests with tales of conquest and prowess as they drink local brew.

far from the manyattas, the crowning moment of a visit to this community is the dance by the Kar-angle Dance Group. You definitely need to have many trips to the gym before you try to jump like the natives. Gladly, it's the experience that counts more than your abiliies to match their vitality as their heads seemingly reach for the clouds that you can see at a distance forming around the mountain. Community engagement is one of the activities that will leave tourists charmed by Kidepo.

foliore, this time at the hot spring of Kanangorok.

The warm waters of Kanangorok

"It was named after a young warrior called Ngorok and the community has a tale about its formation, despite the fact that there is a scientific explanation." Logee tells the team of excited journalists, some of whom are touching the water in the little pool, trying to ascertain how hot it is.

The small pool, part of which is under a rock, is surrounded by very green grass that although up to ten inches high, easily forms a soft carpet. Some colleagues seized the moment to 'chill' and take photographs on the grass.

Legend has it that in the past, areas that now form South Sudan were facing drought. The chief rainmaker dreamed that the key to ending it lay in water from the Morungole mountains that were far away, in the present Karamoja sub-region. A few strong young men were selected to fetch this water in special gourds and bring it back to the community.

"It is said they were given strict instructions to walk slowly on their way back and not to look back," narrates Logee.

As fate would have it, however, one of the boys, Ngorok looked back. That day as they were resting in that location, clouds formed and lightning struck him, breaking his gourd. The spillage of its contents are what is said to have formed the hot spring.

The self-burning hill of god

This area was in the past a centre of spiritualism as natives made sacrifices

there during drought, but today it is one of the must see places for tourists. Like most African societies before the advent of Christianity, Logee says, the community depended a lot on spiritualism. It, therefore, does not come as a shock when later, on the trip back to our lodging in the Apoka UWA camp, he points out a small green hill called Morauku or 'Hill of god', yet another interesting tale.

"The top part of that hill sets itself ablaze every so often. It simply lights up and we find the grass on just a portion on the top burnt," he says. As the four truck drivers further away from the thick of the wilderness, towards our camp, a grin of amusement fills my face as I ponder on the experience, wondering what few words would best describe the four days in Kidepo's wilderness.

Would I draw them from the exhaustion of the 13 hour drive to Kaabong District where the park lies? Perhaps from the tales of the forest rangers at the night campfires, amidst chuckles and sips for red wine, about their jobs that are characterized by risk and adventure. Will the fact that warthogs and zebras walk right in the middle of the camp during the day make a great Facebook posting? Or perhaps the dread that the white heep with shiny little eyes resting near a close banda in the coal dark night could not be the jackal, like it was the previous night, but a lioness looking for a comfortable spot?

The numerous seasonal rivers, warmth of the staff headed by chief warden Johnson Masereka, cheekiness of the media team or simply being far, far away from civilisation. I realised that just about everything and anything about Kidepo Valley National park will enchant one.