

«SIGHTS THAT WILL BLOW YOU AWAY AT MURCHISON FALLS»



1. Elephants graze on the wind-torn grass



2. Lying off a carcass in the park

IN 1952, THE PARK SERVES AS THE CLEAR BLUE WATERS FROM LAKE VICTORIA TRAVELLING 4,000KM AND EGYPT TO THE



3



ADVENTURE: The team takes a cruise on the Nile

EXPLORING MURCHISON

By Stephen Ssenkaaba

The sun is beginning to retire, affording us an eleventh-hour glimpse of its glorious golden rays on the glistening and glassy waters of the White Nile. It is a cold Wednesday evening, about 5:30pm, when we arrive at the green and earthy ferry-crossing point on the southern side of Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda's one of Africa's top national parks. Gazetted in 1952, the park serves as a pathway for the clear blue waters of River Nile from Lake Victoria to Lake Albert, travelling 4,000km through Sudan and Egypt to the Mediterranean Sea. It also is the second most visited park and home to about 1,600 elephants. It is here that British explorer Sir Samuel Baker passed on his search for the source of River Nile. Baker also named the raging water falls here after Sir Roderick Murchison, the then president of the Royal Geographic Society. More than 184 years since Baker's historic adventure, we are here — many of us for the first time — to explore, maybe even "discover" the length and breadth of our own country.

HAPPINESS You can tell the excitement, not just from the curious murmurs of fellow tourists and their frantic efforts to get the best photo angle for the

breathtaking scenery, but also from the fact that we are in the company of the most unlikely of visitors: religious leaders.

What are religious leaders going to do in a national park? Preach? I initially wondered when I learnt that we would travel with priests, preachers, pastors and sheikhs. But John Ssempebwa, the Uganda Tourism Board (UTB) deputy chief executive officer, cleared the air in good time, explaining that church leaders were visiting as "ambassadors" — important partners in promoting domestic tourism to Ugandans.

They are here to see, and then preach about the beauty of Uganda. To do that well, however, they would have to first personally witness this country's sprawling splendor. They would then preach from personal experience. This trip organised by UTB in conjunction with the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCUG) was a launch pad to several domestic tourism promotion initiatives by both bodies.

So here we are with Pastor Daniel Matte, head of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, Sheikh Muhammad Ali Waiswa of the Islamic faith, Bishop Joshua Lwere, the overseer of the National Alliance of Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches of Uganda, the Rev. Can. Michael Mukhwana, the provost of All Saints Cathedral, Kampala, Bishop Herbert Buyondo from the Born-again faith and Rev Fr. Emmanuel Ssekya from the Orthodox Church — on what turns out to be a revealing exploration of the park and the falls. All

NUMBERS

1,600 The park, the second most visited in Uganda, is home to about 1,600 elephants.

1,000 About 1,000 hippos live here.



The religious leaders pose for a group photo at the Murchison Falls National Park

FALLS PARK WITH THE PREACHERS

preachers appear too formally dressed for an adventurous outing: Sheikh Ali Waiswa, in a flowing dark grey Islamic tunic and black canvas shoes and the rest in jackets and formal leather shoes. A strong air of formality hangs over the tourism ministry corridors where tourism minister Prof. Ephraim Kamuntu flags off the team. However, all start to loosen up as we arrive in the park following a nearly three-hour drive from Kampala before getting on a 10-minute cruise on the ferry to the northern part of the park.

The air gets chilly as the ferry comes to a grounding halt on the other side of the river, but it is still bright enough to savour the natural wonders that lurk on the friendly blue waters of the Nile: from the gentle strides of the green shrubby mangrove across the water to

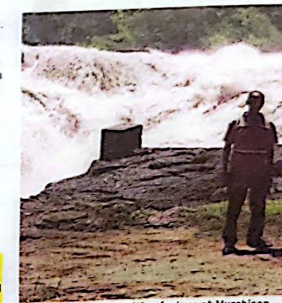
2 FACTS ABOUT MURCHISON FALLS NATIONAL PARK

Despite enormous challenges, the park remains home to 451 bird species and 76 different animal species.

The national park receives more foreign visitors than local ones.

the friendly smiley warthogs and baboons. We ride through an extensive green park to Pakuba Safari lodge, a cozy hideout nestled deep inside the sprawling park. In a ride that lasted close to an hour, through the narrow dirt paths, we witness several animals strewn across the green expanse of the park. Brown antelopes with their quick steps, bulging herds of buffalo that seemed to stop to curiously stare at our convoy and the spotty giraffes gracefully craning their necks in watchful gazes. It is never a lonely moment into the dark knights as our convoy quietly roars through the paths to the sweet sounds of rickets and the distant howls of various wild animals.

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An exciting feature at Murchison

An exhilarating blend

GOD, NATURE, TOURISM

Bishop Lwere leads an interesting discussion on the relevance of Holy Scriptures to tourism, particularly pointing out that nature is a gift from God that should be embraced, harnessed but not worshipped "because God gave man dominion over nature." Lwere says there is a lot that Uganda has to offer in the abundant flora and fauna that has yet to be explored by Ugandans. He promises that through IRCUG, religious leaders will lobby policy makers to support tourism more and use their platform and influence to encourage their congregations to visit and appreciate Uganda.

An afternoon game ride leads us into the clear blue waters of the Nile on a serene cruise to Murchison Falls. Amid the calming breeze, we get to see more interesting creatures: elephants, hippos, birds, crocodiles and the captivating brown and crunchy rocks. We also get to hear some tantalising facts from Uganda Wildlife Authority's senior ranger Taban Bruhan. He intimates that Murchison Falls has lost nearly 13,000 elephants to poaching over the last 58 years. And that out of the over 5,000 hippos that lived here some years ago, only about 1,000 still exist. That despite enormous challenges, the park remains home to 451 bird species and 76 different animal species. That the national park receives more foreign visitors than local ones; that Amin unsuccessfully tried to change the name of Murchison Falls to Kabalega Falls. It is night when we retire back to Pakuba. We start the following day on a game drive, and eventually trace our way to the top of the falls. From a cold, vantage point we marvel as the rafting waters rage down the deep dark rocks forming a graceful rainbow pattern. It is Friday. And the sun is up. Time to go home. We and the preachers are all converted. Uganda is gold.

WIN!

A Father's Day

Extreme Adventure

at Busiika

Do you have an interesting fathering story or tribute to your father?

Share your story and picture with us on Sunday@newvision.co.ug or www.facebook.com/the.sundayvision by 10.00am on Tuesday June 12