



Adventure. On Virgin Island, crocodiles live alongside birds and lizards. PHOTOS BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA

Virgin Island is a haven for birding enthusiasts

Island Paradise. Visitors to Virgin Island on the Ssesse archipelago will be amazed by the variety of wildlife on the island retreat. With its variety of bird species, it is a bird lover's dream.

BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA
editorial@ug.nationmedia.com

As the warmth of the sun conquers the morning chill, the creatures of Virgin Island shyly announce themselves from their dwellings.

Virgin Island, measuring only 30 acres in the middle of Lake Victoria, is Ssesse Island's miniature paradise. It is one of the best places in the

country to see crocodiles mixing with birds and monitor lizards basking in the sun.

Like in any community, Virgin Island also hosts some of nature's most ferocious predators – crocodiles, albeit calmed down and the fools – the Water thick-Knee.

According to the Executive Director UWA, Dr Andrew Seguya, there are other big animals in Ssesse such as hippos and sitatunga. "It opened our eyes to new places that have not been known. And Virgin Island is proof that we have a lot to offer."

The wildlife on Virgin island makes it Ssesse's top outdoor adventure destination. Ssesse Islands is an archipelago of 84 islands in the northwest of Lake Victoria in Uganda. About half of them are inhabited. The islands vary

in size from less than 10,000 square metres, to over 275 square kilometres in area for the largest island, Buggala. All of them are bundled into one district called Kalangala with its headquarters on Buggala Island which is also easily accessible by ferry from both Bukakata in Masaka and Nakiwogo in Entebbe.

The islands are a top tourist destination for both local and international tourists because of the white sand lined beaches and resorts. It is, therefore, not surprising

Eco-tourism. The food served on our expeditions is grown on the island. We do not cut trees to grow food. Our visitors get hands-on experience harvesting food and learning how to prepare meals."

that the national celebrations for International Tourism day 2017 (September 27) were held in Ssesse.

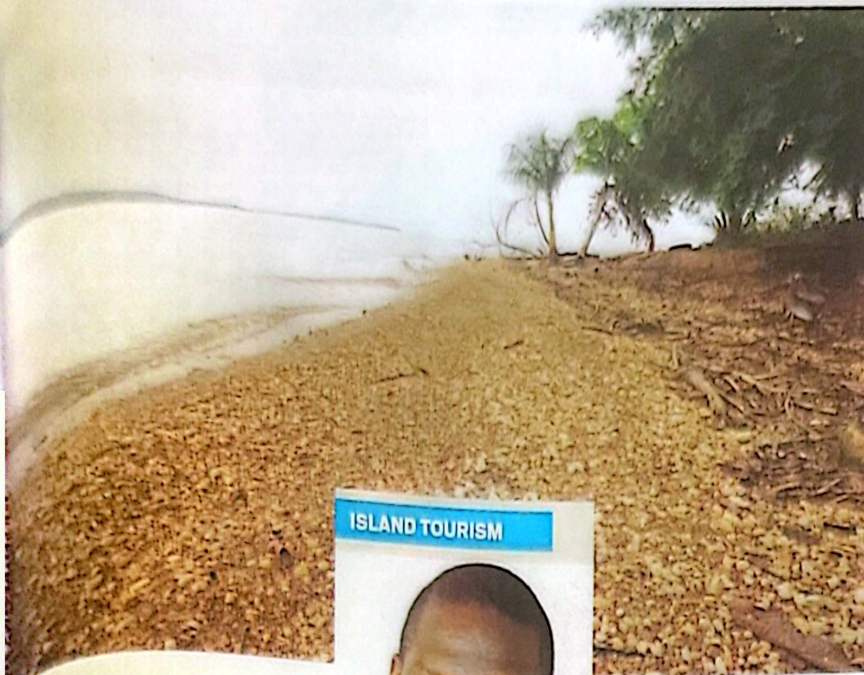
Haven of birding

While in Ssesse, an excursion to Virgin Island is worth the try. Small as it is, bird watchers to Virgin Island will not be disappointed as there are big numbers of water and forest birds. Some of the water and shore birds include the Sacred ibis, Long-tailed and Greater cormorants, African fish Eagle, Malachite Kingfisher, Sparrow-winged plover, African open-billed Stork, Sand Piper, Harmerkop, Black-winged stilt and the island's fool the Water thick-Knee.

Some of the birds that can be found deep in the island are; Tawny Eagle, African Paradise flycatcher, African Grey Parrots, Black kites, Black and Whites Casqued Hornbills and both laughing and Tambourine Doves.

The jokers of the birds are the resident Water thick-Knees. They have developed an unconvincing way of trying to disguise themselves by folding their knees and taking cover in the sand. Despite the play, they know not how to hide.





ISLAND TOURISM



Vincent Mugaba. Ssesse has a lot of tourism potential that rhymed perfectly with the World Tourism Day theme, Discover. It opened our eyes to new places that have not been known. And Virgin Island is proof that we have a lot to offer.

Tourism Day theme, Discover. "It opened our eyes to new places that have not been known. And Virgin Island is proof that we have a lot to offer," Mugaba explains.

"We are happy that this island has wildlife. We can support local initiatives to sustain conservation by appealing to our conservation partners to offer support as long as the communities can benefit," says Simplicious Gessa, the PRO, Uganda Wildlife Authority.



(L-R). The long-tailed cormorant, Sacred Ibis and the African Open-billed Stork are some of the birds one can see on Virgin Island. PHOTOS BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA.



they can be seen in their camouflage a long distance away although their brown colour resembles sand. Thus the name fools.

A typical visit to the island begins by boat at an ungodly hour of 5.30am from Panorama Cottages in Lutoboka on Buggala Island. The time is important for witnessing a unique sunrise along the way.

According to the Arnold Asimwe, the Manager, Virgin Island's Panorama Cottages, the eco-Tourism project offers adventurers and nature lovers a chance to disconnect and be close to nature. "The food served on our expeditions is organically grown on the island. We do not cut trees to grow food. Our visitors get hands-on experience by harvesting the food and learning how to prepare meals," Asimwe says, adding that even the soap used for washing and bathing is extracted from the plants around. "We do not bring anything on the island from the modern world," he concludes. Some of the food crops like cassava, fruit trees and water melons can be seen scattered around the island.

At night, visitors are treated to the warmth of a campfire as they watch the stars. The other packages offered include sport fishing, bird watching and nature walks.

At Virgin Island, whose shores are uniquely decorated in fine round stones instead of sand, nature comes to life as soon as the rays of the sun start to warm the earth.

The waves whack the rocks splashing the sunbathing reptiles in the resulting waterfall - waves. The crocodiles, infamous for eating any creature that comes their way surprisingly seem to be friends with the resident birds led by the Sacred Ibis that pick food morsels round the water dwelling reptiles. It is at this island that crocodiles are more easily seen compared to other places in the country. Other aquatic creatures that can be seen sunbathing almost everywhere are the monitor lizards.

Vincent Mugaba, PRO, The Uganda Tourism Board (UTB), says Ssesse has a lot of tourism potential, that

IF I HAD TO BE SOMEWHERE IN UGANDA...

...It would definitely be...



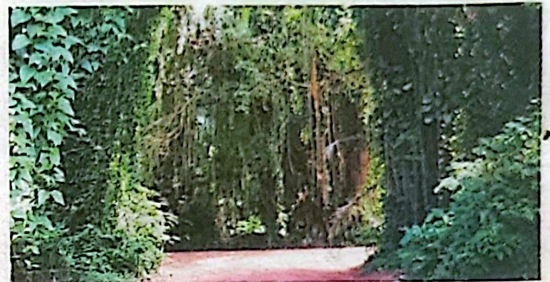
Migingo island

LAKE VICTORIA. The island is a beehive of activity as more than 100 boats bring in their fish catch every morning for weighing and sale. I would like to watch the fishing activity on the island. Although tiny in size, the island is home to nearly 150 people living in crammed huts made of corrugated sheets and wood. [Abasi Kimbowa, entrepreneur]



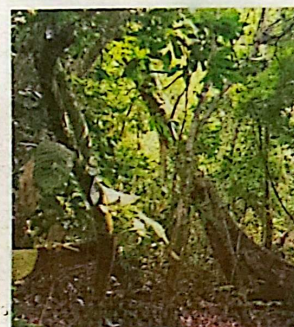
Kasenyi landing site

ENTEBBE. Kasenyi is considered the hub of silver fish in Uganda and I am a big fan of silver fish. While there, you will enjoy fresh water and cooling breeze off Lake Victoria. The landing site is also good for fieldwork trips and has friendly people who can take you through its history up to date, it is always a fun experience to be there. [Julia Nakate, trader]



Mpanga central forest reserve

MPIGI. Mpanga Central Forest Reserve is beautifully positioned in Mpigi Valley. The forest has been conserved since 1932 and has various attractions such as monkeys, owls, bird species and butterflies. The Forest is associated with the Ffumbe Clan. Ffumbe is a Luganda word for a Civet cat. During cultural festivities, clan members fetch water from the forest. The major attractions are the huge trees with knotted roots, monkeys, birds, and butterflies plus camping and picnic areas. [Chris Sseruyange, sportsman]



Zika forest

ENTEBBE. The forest is located on Entebbe Road, not far from the airport and thus easy to visit especially for foreigners. Zika forest is made up of swamps, forest type and grassland vegetation that extends to Lake Victoria. It has various types of plants and animals that make Zika Forest one of the attractions you should visit while touring Uganda. [Annet Acio, student]