

PEARL of AFRICA

SPECIAL TRAVEL SECTION



Herd of buffaloes are a common sight on every boat cruise on the Kazinga Channel



MEMORABLE SIGHTS IN THE PARK

ELEPHANTS
Elephants and the goats from the local community interact. These goats are not wild, so they run home before it gets dark.



ANTELOPES
Other animals such as antelopes come down to the channel for water

BUFFALOES SURELY RULE KAZINGA

BY KALUNGI KABUYE

There were buffaloes, more buffaloes, and then even more buffaloes. There were buffaloes everywhere you looked; at the shores, in the water, and even where a brave woman was laying out her clothes to dry. I have never seen as many buffaloes as I did when we took a boat cruise on the Kazinga Channel, which connects Lake George to Lake Edward in the Queen Elizabeth National Park in western Uganda. It is said this piece of water has the largest collection of hippopotamuses in the world, so this is what I expected to see. I have seen more than my fair share of hippos, especially along the River Nile, and they always seemed like they would love to upend our boat if they got the chance (hippos kill more people in Africa every year than any other animal). At one time, that almost came to happen when an Israeli woman who wanted to be known as the 'hippo woman' took our small boat very close to a bull hippo, which let us have a great view of his extremely wide mouth. I still get shivers when I remember that incident.

«UP TO 60 DIFFERENT SPECIES OF BIRDS ARE MORE OR LESS GUARANTEED TO BE SPOTTED»



Kazinga Channel is also rich with different bird species

While there was a sizeable collection of hippos, there were hundreds more buffaloes. My closest encounter with a buffalo was in the Murchison Falls National Park, when an obviously bad-tempered lone male tried to charge at our vehicle (we were later told by a ranger that it had probably been driven from the herd, thus its bad temper and aggressiveness).

But these seemed docile enough, I am happy to report. An amazing thing about the Kazinga Channel is that it is only 40km long. But the boat ride usually takes almost two hours to get up and down that

stretch of water; 40km and two hours of the most amazing boat ride in the country.

HOW IT FORMED

The Kazinga Channel was formed at the same time as the formation of the western arm of the Great Rift Valley, and the volcanic activity that ensued formed the two lakes, which were at first just craters. But melting snow on top of Mount Rwenzori formed rivers, which poured into and formed Lake George (named after an English king by Henry Morton Stanley in 1889).

The overflow from Lake George, a pretty shallow lake because of boulders from the Rwenzori, formed the Kazinga Channel which pours into Lake Edward (also named by Stanley for the then English Prince of Wales). Water from Lake Edward flows to the River Semliki then into Lake Albert and thus

A close encounter with hippos is not for the faint-hearted

Location of Kazinga Channel



Kazinga Channel connects Lake George to Lake Edward in western Uganda

joins the River Nile that eventually pours into the Mediterranean Sea. This channel is among the most important features in Queen Elizabeth National Park (at 1,978sqkm, the second largest national park in Uganda, but the most visited one). The park is a pretty dry and hot area, lying at the bottom of the Rift Valley; and thousands of animals go to the channel to drink water.

The park hosts over 600 bird species (which is the second highest bird count in a national park in Africa and sixth highest in the world), and almost 100 species of mammals. On a good day you might see them coming down to the water for a drink.

There are thousands of the African (Cape) buffalo, and they seem to

It was surprising to see buffaloes walk past a woman who was laying her clothes to dry on the banks of the channel

CHANNEL

coexist peacefully with the local human population. It was amazing seeing these wild animals a few metres away from a woman laying out her washing to dry. Neither the woman nor the animals seemed perturbed by the presence of the other.

A SCENIC BOAT RIDE

The Kazinga Channel boat trip is very popular, and rightly so. Boats leave the landing stage below the Mwya Safari Lodge four times a day for the two hours trip along the edge of the 1km-wide channel. You can actually see both sides of the channel as you go along, first on the southern edge as you head towards Lake Albert, and on the northern edge on the return trip.

Seeing buffaloes, elephants, crocodiles, and monitor lizards is a virtual guarantee. You can see the giant Nile monitor lizard, the biggest lizard that can be found in Africa, along with a wealth of birdlife. You get to see fish eagles throwing their heads back and making the most extraordinary calls.

Up to 60 different species of birds are more or less guaranteed to be spotted, including the black bee eater, black-rumped butorquail, 11 different species of kingfisher, several falcons, African skimmer, the great white and pink-backed pelicans, African shoebill, yellow billed stork, great and long tailed cormorants, open-billed stork, saddle bill stork, clariers, black crane, Jacana and many more.

In the late afternoon you also get to see men from the fishing village of Kazinga on the opposite shore of the channel to Mwya, setting out in their boats for the night's fishing. They go out at night to avoid the hippos, which, of course, graze on land at night and spend the days in the water. It is also interesting to watch elephants and the goats interacting, not something you see in your average 'Western world' wildlife park. These goats are not wild, so they run home just before it gets dark.