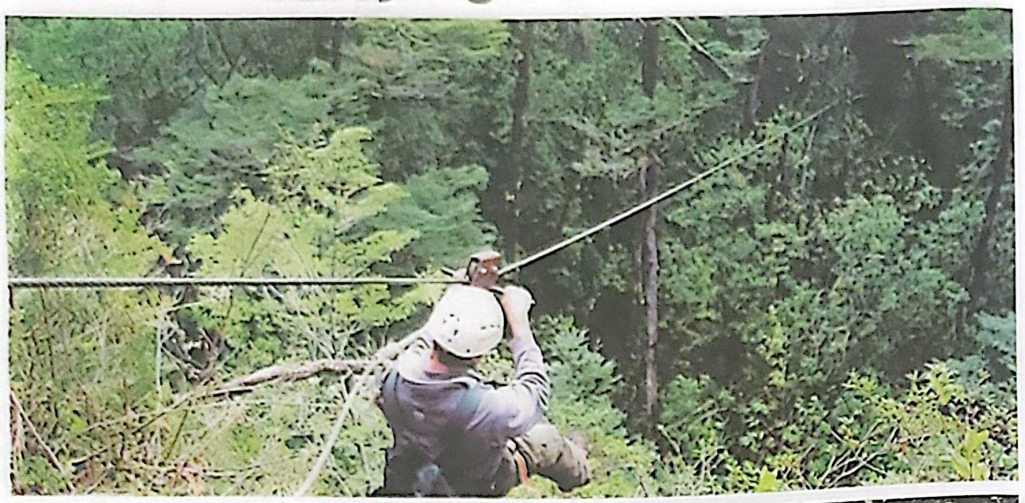
Mabira: Urban jungle with a variety of natural attractions



A tourist slides down a zip line in Mabira Forest. The zip lines are operated by a local community initiative. NET PHOTO

TOURISM ZONE. With its rich biodiversity, ease of access from two major urban centres and a host of tourism activities on offer, Mabira forest holds great tourism potential.

BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA
editorial@ug.nationmedia.com

A greedy and thieving monkey grabs two yellow bananas from a vendor, runs across the road and in the cover of paper mulberry trees, swallows them whole. The owner, a female vendor from Najjembe market curses and blames the beast for the afternoon losses.

About 7km North West, from the greedy monkey, zip lining visitors look at the forest canopy below them in awe as a mini battle between rock and water rages at Griffin Falls below them.

At night, high up in the tall trees, a tree hyrax in search of a mate cries loud as if it is being strangled. Its night cries pierce through the 300sq km, Mabira Forest.

Unique position

Mabira Forest is Uganda's only urban jungle. The forest is located between two major urban centres, on the main Kampala-Jinja highway about 54 km, an hour's drive from Kampala and 20 km from Jinja.

The forest is home to 312 tree and 218 butterfly species. Some of the tropical tree species reach up to 60 feet in height. Some have protruding buttressed roots along with an abundance of lianas and vines. Some are estimated to be 80 to 100 years old.

Forest tourism activities

The forest centre is on the edge of Najjembe Trading Centre, whose roadside market is famous for roast chicken and *gonja* (plantain). It is at Najjembe that the National Forestry Authority (NFA) runs an Eco Tourism Centre with accommodation facilities in form of bandas.

NFA maintains 10 extensive trail networks for both guided and unguided walks and biking allowing visitors easy access to undisturbed primary and secondary forest.

The Picnic Trail leads self-guided visitors into the forest meandering through regenerating forest along the valley of one of Mabira's many forest streams while the 3km Grassland Trail is good for bird watchers.

There is the Radio Hill Trial network for a more 'jungle like' experience and has views over the forest canopy. A number of trail circuits link to Radio Hill where a steep climb is rewarded by a panoramic view north over the forest reserve. Other remarkable trails include the Market Loop trail linking two impressive fig trees and is a common area for both Black and Grey-cheeked and Red-tailed monkeys.

The River Mabugwe Loops trail leads through intact rainforest along the path of the River Mabugwe which is one of the permanent rivers in Mabira Forest.

Other trails are the Gangu Ridge Trail which is the longest and leads into shaded thick forest far away from the highway. Given that Mabira has variety of butterflies, a trail called Butterfly was also created and is characterised by many flowering plants such as *Lantana Camara*, whose pink and yellow flowers attract clouds of butterflies.

For birding, the Buwoola Pond is basically a birding spot where the White Spotted Flufftail, Sooty Boubou, Shining Blue Kingfisher, and Jamesons Wattle Eye can be spotted.

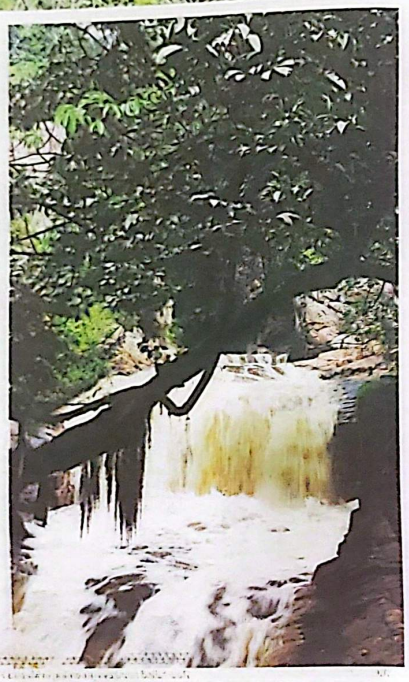
There are also cycling routes where visitors can explore the jungle on mountain bikes.

Eco tourism and community activity

Communities also benefit from the forest. An example is the Zip lining activities at Griffin Falls. Visitors are treated to a ride above the tree canopy. This activity is offered by MAFUKO, a community-based project under the Corroborative Forest Management. Under this initiative, communities living around forests

"Mabira is one of the most important birding areas in Uganda. To make the forest a popular tourist destination, we have gone into Grey-cheeked Mangabey habitation. They are endangered primates only found in Mabira and Kibale National Park. We are promoting community eco tourism activities such as zip lining at Griffin falls and increasing protection for this natural habitat. NFA has Eco Tourism management agreements with the Rain Forest Lodge and Wild Waters Lodge to add value to tourism packages. Mabira Forest offers Uganda a great opportunity for transformation as it is a great catchment area for international riverlines such as the Nile and Sezibwa."

LEO TWINOMUHANGI, NATIONAL FORESTRY AUTHORITY RANGE MANAGER, LAKE SHORES.



Griffin Falls on River Musamya is one of the forest attractions. PHOTO BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA

enter into an agreement with NFA to sustainably use the forest resources.

One prominent feature here are the Griffin Falls along River Musamya. Unfortunately, the river has been continuously polluted by sugar manufacturing activities and its water is brown and stinks.

On the high end, there is the eco-friendly and organically designed Rain Forest Lodge that completes nature's harmony for visitor's enjoyment.

Brought to life by organic designer Zahid Alam, the lodge structures complement the natural surroundings. "There is no winner or loser" Alam says.

The dining area is built of raw stones and is shaped like an egg while the front office is housed in a stone structure that resembles a medieval prison.

Accommodation is offered in form of high-end wooden cabins set on on pillars in the forest with en suite facilities that give the impression of sleeping in the naked forest. It is only when you reach out to touch the forest that you feel a barrier in form of a thin mesh.

The cabins are interconnected to the public area by meandering walkways sealed in stone. Each cottage has an individual forest viewing deck. The long distance between the cottages ensures peace and privacy.

At night, as sparks fly up from the camp fire into the air in a heart formation, couples start holding hands thinking of the comfort in the self-contained cottages. And as if watching from up in the dark canopy, the tree hyrax starts crying out for a mate.

Wildlife haven

The signature song at the Rain Forest Lodge is the crying tree hyrax- one of the 23 small mammals in the forest. There is also the rare Genet cat.

Genets are slender cat-like animals with spotted fur, a long body, a long-ringed tail and large ears. One was spotted at the Rain Forest Lodge at night trailing an edible rat. A flash from the camera sent both the hunter and hunted into disarray.

Although leopards are present in the forest, they are rarely seen, with Tree Hyrax, Grey Cheeked Mangabey, Red Tailed Monkey, Bush Babies and other mammal species being far more common.

There are several trails from the Lodge meandering deep into the forest that give visitors a glimpse into the dynamics of a rain forest that will impresss scientists, adventurers, birders, naturalists and witchdoctors.

Natural remedies and charms

It is not only animals and scientists that treasure the forest. Ugandan witchdoctors have struck gold from some of the trees such as the Love tree that is said to charm and melt even the coldest woman's heart.

"All you need to do is to rub liquid squeezed from the tree into your hands and greet your target woman. She will come running after you," my guide commonly known as Mzee told me.

A historical perspective

Mabira was gazetted a forest reserve in 1932. Before then, there were communities living there whose land is now scattered enclaves in the forest that are usually mistaken to be encroachments

In 2007, the Sugar Corporation of Uganda Limited (SCOUL), jointly owned by the Government of Uganda and by the Mehta Group, announced plans to clear one-third of the Mabira Forest (around 70 sqkm), for sugarcane plantations and proposed to the government to de-gazette this land and transfer it to SCOUL. President Yoweri Museveni and his cabinet supported this plan but not the masses and activists.

While environmental activists feared the loss of hundreds of endangered species, increased erosion, the damage of livelihoods of local people and negative impacts on water balance and regional climate, supporters hoped for the creation of jobs.

A cabinet paper said the plan would generate 3,500 jobs and contribute Shs11.5billion to the treasury.

Riots in support of forest conservation ensued, marring the plans.

218

THE NUMBER OF BUTTERFLY SPECIES DOCUMENTED IN MABIRA FOREST



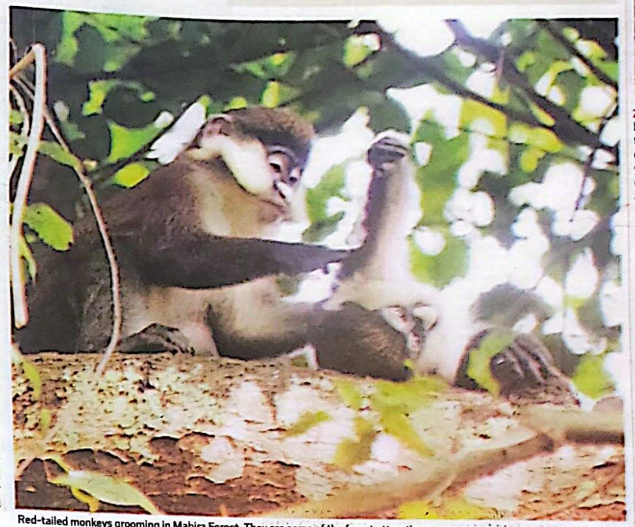
Natural attractions and rich biodiversity

The signature song at the Rain Forest Lodge is the crying tree hyrax- one of the 23 small mammals in the forest. The forest is home to 312 tree and 218 butterfly species. It has great tourism potential because of its rich biodiversity.

Since Mabira has variety of butterflies, a trail called Butterfly was also created and is characterised by many flowering plants such as *Lantana Camara*, whose pink and yellow flowers attract clouds of butterflies.



The Tree Hyrax is one of the 23 mammals found in Mabira Forest. Above, Mabira has a variety of butterflies. PHOTO BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA



Red-tailed monkeys grooming in Mabira Forest. They are some of the forest attractions. PHOTO BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA

If I had to be somewhere in Uganda right now, it would definitely be...



BIGODI WETLAND: It is a paradise for bird watchers. Skilled birders can spot up to 50 new species on the bird list. It is also good for spotting butterflies and primates, with eight different species, including grey-cheeked mangabey.
Other activities include village walks, basket-weaving demonstrations, dance and drama performances and fun meals
YUNUS SSEKITOLEKO, FARMER.



KYAMBURA GAME RESERVE: Located in the far eastern corner of Queen Elizabeth, it has a rich wildlife diversity that comprises of primates, wild animals as well as birds.
While there, you can do bird watching, chimpanzee tracking, guided nature walks, private and game viewing.
SEBASTIAN LULE, ENTREPRENEUR



ZIWA RHINO SANCTUARY: Located between Kampala and Masindi, Ziwa, is the rare opportunity in Africa to see rhinos on foot on a one of a kind trek. While there, you can do birding, nature walks among others. The sanctuary is also home to an assortment of rescued animals from a pair of colourful grey-crowned cranes to a tiny antelope.
SANDRA NANTEGE, ACCOUNTANT



GADDAFI NATIONAL MOSQUE: Situated on Old Kampala Hill, with a gorgeous view, the mosque is the most modern venerable monument of Islamic civilization in Uganda. Few people know that you can climb up to the minaret of this high mosque. In size, it is second to the King Hassan Mosque in Casablanca, Morocco.
HARRIET KISAMBU, NURSE
Compiled by Godfrey Lugaaju

CamScanner