

Uganda—The Pearl of Africa

by David Skillan

I've been considering returning to Uganda for some time. Yes, I've been there a number of times, and I think it should be on every Africa aficionado's short list of preferred destinations.

In the early 1970s, when I was based in East Africa on behalf of an international travel organization, many safaris included a few days in all three East Africa countries: Kenya, Tanzania (or, before it merged with the island of Zanzibar, Tanganyika), and Uganda. The beautiful, hilly, green country of Uganda has long been known as the Pearl of Africa. A good friend of mine who used to live there often claimed it was the prettiest and friendliest place in all of Africa.

Uganda is a landlocked country of 236,040 square kilometers, bordered by Kenya to the east, Sudan to the north, the Democratic Republic of Congo to the west, Rwanda to the southwest, and Tanzania to the south. It has several large lakes, including Lake Victoria, Kyoga, Lake Edward, and Lake Albert, sharing the last three with its neighbours. Victoria is the largest lake in Africa, and generally thought to be the source of the Nile, the longest river in the world.

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A former British colony that peacefully obtained its independence in 1962, Uganda has adopted English as the official language and retains Swahili as the lingua franca. The country has a population of some 31 million and substantial natural resources, including regular rainfall and sizable deposits of copper and cobalt, as well as largely untapped reserves of crude oil and natural gas.

Unfortunately, the nation underwent great upheaval during the 1970s, under Idi Amin's brutal, dictatorial rule. Although the Tanzanian army eventually overthrew his regime and he fled into exile in Saudi Arabia (where he died a few years ago), Uganda experienced nine horrific years that reduced it to a shadow of its former glory. Today, I'm happy to report that Uganda is again peaceful, stable, and prosperous. Many Asians who were unceremoniously evicted by Amin's ruthless

regime have returned to set up successful businesses, and Uganda again attracts visitors from all over the world, including increasing numbers of Canadians.

Less commercialized and less well known than neighbouring Kenya and Tanzania, Uganda is an outstanding destination for those who enjoy wildlife. It's renowned for its many different primates, including chimps, gorillas, baboons, and colobus, spot-nosed, and vervet monkeys. While the chimps are relatively easy to get close to, the gorillas are another story. Gorillas are shy and reclusive, tending to hide in thick underbrush. Their whereabouts determines whether you can reach them in a leisurely ten-minute walk or only after a strenuous two-hour mountain hike. However long it takes, everyone who sees them at close quarters agrees that it's the most unique and satisfying of experiences. It's well worth the time, effort, and expense required to see these creatures in their natural habitat.



My Uganda wildlife adventure, which departs in September, encompasses the major game reserves and an optional one-day excursion to see the endangered mountain gorillas. This one-of-a-kind, life-enriching tour includes Lake Victoria (largest lake in Africa), the Ruwenzoris (mountains of the moon) and the internationally acclaimed national parks of Murchison Falls, Queen Elizabeth, Kibale and Bwindi (the rainforests that are home to the mountain gorillas), and Ngamba Island (a sanctuary for chimpanzees).

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Uganda is well known for the African Big Five (elephant, lion, buffalo, leopard, and rhino), as well as zebra, giraffe, bushbuck, hartebeest, four species of jackal, Nile crocodile, hippo, bush pig, giant forest hog, and Uganda cob (the country's national symbol). It is also a bird-watcher's paradise, boasting the largest concentration of birds in Africa—more than one thousand species—including the secretary bird, ground hornbill, black-chested snake eagle, tawny eagle, marshal eagle, Goliath heron (the largest heron, shown below at left), shoebill stork, African goshawk, red-necked spurfowl, tropical boubou, red-wattled lapwing, white-throated bee-eater, southern red bishop, Denham's bustard, purple swamphen, papyrus gonolek, and Abyssinian ground-hornbill. No birds sing sweeter than those in Africa.

Tourist accommodations range from rest houses to fine hotels, game lodges, and tented camps. Some are a bit rustic, but always clean and comfortable, and invariably built into spectacular settings that make for an even more memorable and authentic African safari than you might expect. And the famous Kenya-based Serena hotel group has moved into Uganda in recent years, raising standards of accommodation to international levels.

From my perspective, as an old Africa hand who has lived, worked, and travelled over much of the so-called Dark Continent, Uganda is one of Africa's most exciting safari destinations. If you like Africa, as many people do, you owe it to yourself to visit this intriguing country. The sooner, the better.



*For details about David Skillan's wildlife tour to Uganda,
please visit www.skillansafaris.com/david-skillan-tours.html.*