

Uganda's hidden gems

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN ASSIIMWE

CEO OF THE UGANDA TOURISM BOARD



STEPHEN ASSIIMWE graduated in Political Science and Sociology at Makerere University. He has previously worked as a journalist and editor with the New Vision, Uganda's leading daily newspaper, for 10 years before pioneering the launch, as Managing director and Editor in Chief, of The East African Business Week which operates in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and Ethiopia.

The truth is that just about every part of Uganda is a gem, and all of them are packed into an area about the size of the United Kingdom. Uganda is a land of superlatives: it is home to the highest mountain range in Africa: the Mountains of the Moon. It is also the home of Africa's largest-lake, and the second largest in the world, and out of which flows the Nile, the world's longest river. It has the highest concentration of primates on the planet, among them the mountain gorilla. And with a population of just 37 million, it is also home to 56 different ethnic and tribal groups belonging to five main linguistic groups and more than 30 languages and dialects. In short, says Stephen Assiimwe, CEO of the Uganda Tourism Board, "Uganda offers the visitor the widest range of landscapes, cultures, and animal life of anywhere in Africa. Where else but in this uniquely lush destination can one observe lions prowling the open plains in the morning and track chimpanzees through the rainforest undergrowth the same afternoon, then the next day navigate tropical channels teeming with hippos and crocodiles before setting off into the misty mountains to visit the majestic mountain gorillas?"

Bordered by South Sudan to the north, Kenya to the east, the Democratic Republic of Congo to the

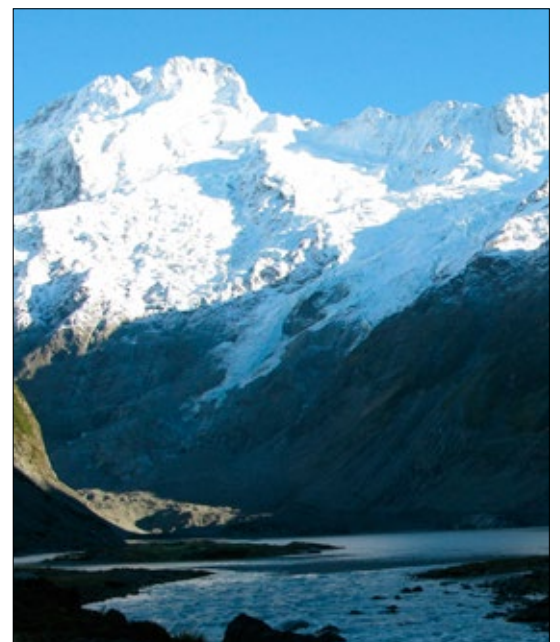
west, and Tanzania and Rwanda to the south, Uganda is where the East African savannah meets the West African jungle. Uganda is the only safari destination whose range of forest primates is as impressive as its selection of plain antelopes. Uganda is also blessed with a vast bird population of more than 1,000 species, around half of all in Africa, and more than 10 per cent of the world total, explains Mr Assiimwe.

He says that perhaps the simplest way to get an idea of what Uganda has to offer is to divide the country into four main areas.

Visitors to the heart of Uganda will find a range of cultural sites and destinations related to the Kingdom of Buganda, one of the oldest in the world, dating back more than 600 years. Kampala, the capital, is the arrival point for most visitors, and is worth spending a little time to discover. One of Africa's safest cities, Kampala is a compelling and confident place, a business and cultural center. Today's forward-looking capital is vastly different from the battered city to which it was reduced to in the 1980s following the overthrow of dictator Idi Amin. Modern buildings have sprung up all over the city, and old, dilapidated ones are slowly being renovated. But it's not only the buildings that are in better shape; there is a confidence about Kampala residents today that is infectious.



(L) Kampala, Uganda:
Baha'i Temple on
Kikaaya Hill.
(R) The Rwenzori
Mountain.



Just over 30 miles from Kampala is Lake Victoria, which in turn is home to thousands of islands, such as the 84-forested island of the Ssesse Group. "These offer a wonderful chance to relax and get away from it all: the temperature is ideal: after all, we are on the equator, but at 1,200 feet. Almost all of these islands are protected, and there is no traffic, or even cement buildings," says Mr Baguma.

Travelling eastwards brings the visitor to the source of the river Nile on the northern edge of Lake Victoria, where visitors can take a boat ride, or for the more adventurous try bungee jumping or white water rafting at Bujagali falls and Jinja. The eastern region also offers the opportunity to visit Tororo rocks, the Elgon Mountain, the Nyero rock paintings in the Kumi district, Mount Moroto,

The west of Uganda is characterised by golden grasslands, green tea plantations, hills with terraced gardens, thick tropical rainforests and the snow-peaked Rwenzori mountain range, home to the fabled Mountains of the Moon. There are several game parks, game reserves and forest reserves in this region, just two and half hours drive from Kampala. Heading down to the southwest, toward the border with Congo, is the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, one of seven protected areas that are home to mountain gorillas. If chimpanzees are your favorite close relative, then head due west of Kampala the Kibale National Park. There are stunning views and Pygmy villages in the Semuliki National Park and the zebra-filled savannah of Lake Mburu National Park.

The north provides yet another awe inspiring destination with ample opportunity to get to know more about some of Uganda's ethnic groups, as well as wildlife, again, in a stunning location. Most travellers heading into northern Uganda head for the Murchison Falls National Park to take a trip down the Victoria Nile in an open boat with only crocodiles and hippos for company. The falls themselves are spectacular; a torrent of water squeezing through a gorge less than 32 feet wide. The park is also home to many of Uganda's elephants, giraffes and a stunning array of birdlife. In the far northeastern corner of Uganda is the Kidepo Valley National Park.

Uganda's history is also rich with UNESCO world heritage sites including Nyero rock paintings, Kasubi tombs, and the newly discovered home of early man in Karamoja, in the northeast of the country.

"There are several ways to get around in Uganda, and the option you choose will depend upon your time constraints as well as your budget thereby, making travel around Uganda a truly elegant adventure. Travelling by road is the most accessible and probably the cheapest way to travel: public transport connects all major locations, and ventures far off the beaten

track. All major routes to the country have their spine in Kampala the capital city of Uganda," explains Mr Baguma.

Just eight hours away from most European capitals, Kampala is served by direct flights from London by British Airways. There are also direct flights from Doha by Qatar Airways and Dubai by Emirates Airlines, taking just two-and-half hours.

Uganda has been working on an ambitious tourism strategy in recent years, and has taken road shows to many of the world's major tourism events. Lonely Planet, the world's largest travel guidebook and digital media publisher, ranked the country as the world's most preferred tourism destination in 2012.

The world's media is beginning to take notice of Uganda: National Geographic puts it among the top 20 global tourism destinations, while CNN Travel listed the Kidepo Valley National Park number three out of its 10 Best African National Parks of 2013.

Last year saw the river Nile officially named one of the seven natural wonders of Africa, by the grassroots organization Seven Natural Wonders. The Bwindi Impenetrable National Park was voted Africa's number one birding site in 2012 by the African Bird club, while the The New York Times Travel section ranked Uganda among top 33 places in the world to visit in 2012. Uganda was also the third-best exhibitor at the ITB tourism event in Berlin in 2012.

"Some British people may know that Winston Churchill described Uganda as "the pearl of Africa" back at the beginning of the 20th century. One hundred years later, there are many other gems to be discovered here, rewarding the discerning visitor many times over," concludes Mr Baguma.

National Geographic puts Uganda among the top 20 global tourism destinations

Members of the Batwa Pigmy tribe



Photo: New Vision

Conservation Management

THE UGANDAN WILDLIFE AUTHORITY WORKS TO PROTECT THE COUNTRY'S NATIONAL HERITAGE

The UN Convention of Biological Diversity ranks Uganda as one of the top ten countries in the world for biodiversity

The UN Convention of Biological Diversity ranks Uganda as one of the top ten countries in the world for biodiversity, particularly for mammalian diversity.

The Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) is in charge of conserving the country's natural heritage, which includes animals, plants, natural features and ecosystems in general. It implements a range of strategies to conserve and sustainably manage wildlife. They include community participation in wildlife management; revenue sharing; collaborative management; problem animal management; wildlife use rights; and conservation education and awareness. UWA also addresses conservation challenges such as poaching, encroachment, and illegal grazing through strategies such as placing patrols in all protected areas and arresting people who invade park land.

The Authority has also worked with communities around protected areas to address other challenges between wildlife and humans around these areas such as problem animals and human-wildlife conflicts among others. Wildlife benefit sharing programs are intended to contribute towards achieving the government's aim of poverty eradication and improved community livelihoods.

UWA recognises the local community as a key stakeholder in ensuring the protection of wildlife both inside and outside Uganda's protected areas. Traditional conservation approaches largely excluded

the communities from protected area management. In contrast, community conservation, which has been employed since the 1990s, aims to harmonise the relationship between park managers and neighbouring communities, allowing these communities access to protected area resources. It also encourages dialogue and local community participation in planning for and management of these resources. Human encroachment on wildlife habitats is one of the biggest challenges to UWA and conservation in general. The main causes of this are changes in land use and the increasing search for farmland, leading to a decrease in the wildlife range.

UWA has a team of skilled staff to respond to reports about crop raiding and threats to livestock and to communities. These are dealt with using methods such as scare shooting to chase the problem animals back into the protected area; capturing and translocation; and sensitising the communities.

Among the international organisations working to help Uganda to protect its wildlife is Fauna & Flora International (FFI), the world's oldest conservation body. It has developed an innovative conservation initiative aimed at integrating cultural values into the management of national parks.

FFI is working to build local support for protected areas through innovative initiatives at the Lake Mburo and Rwenzori Mountains National Parks within the Albertine Rift. "We aim to show that integration of local cultural values into park management can improve relations between park staff and neighbouring communities, resulting in more effective conservation," says Dr Arthur Mugisha (Uganda representative of FFI and former Executive Director of the UWA). The results so far are positive – for instance, a cultural village has been constructed at Lake Mburo National Park to enable Bahima pastoralists to showcase their "beautiful cows" and to explain the cultural value of these animals to tourists and young Bahimas.

Fewer than 900 mountain gorillas struggle to survive in Central Africa's forests. The IGCP, a partnership between Fauna & Flora International, the World Wide Fund for Nature and the African Wildlife Foundation, supports transboundary protected area authorities in three countries to improve conservation of gorillas and their mountain forest habitat. The IGCP also improves local livelihoods; helping to mitigate threats to this critically endangered species.



Fewer than 900 mountain gorillas struggle to survive in Central Africa's forests



The Ugandan Wildlife Authority aims to harmonise the relationship between park managers and neighbouring communities

Clockwise from top: Crested crane, the symbol of Uganda; Rothschild Giraffes in Murchison Falls National Park; Rukungiri District, Queen Elizabeth II National Park, famous for its tree-climbing lions unique to this area; Elephants in Kidepo Valley National Park; African leopard; Murchison Falls National Park;