

Kidepo Valley in Uganda is one of Africa's least explored national parks. Its remote location and the years of political conflict suffered by a country now at peace, combined to preserve a wilderness to which outsiders have rarely ventured

SPLENDID ISOLATION

WORDS BY GARY ALMOND
IMAGES BY STEWART GAME

A view over a guest room and a National Park road from the 'watch tower' at Apoka, where a lookout monitors the wild animals in order to ensure visitors can move around safely

The horizon swelled with dark muscle and grey horn as the biggest herd of buffalo in Africa flowed in and out of the dry river valley. The sheer numbers were awe-inspiring, the dark backs in the long savannah grass resembling spilled oil on a yellow sea, ever spreading and expanding across the far distance. Tiny birds dipped on and off the buffalos' hulking backs.

Our guide Patrick estimated there were nearly 2,000 animals in the herd, out of a total of over 10,000 to be found in the entire park. The scene in front of me was taking place in one of Africa's most untouched wilderness areas, in a national park that has been cut off from mainstream tourism by geography and circumstance. The isolation only adds to the impact of one of the most exhilarating safari experiences in the world. Located in the north-eastern corner of Uganda, on the borders of South Sudan and Kenya, Kidepo Valley National Park was for many years rendered inaccessible by the vast, arid plains to the south, mountain ranges to east and west, and South Sudan to the north. Civil war, local tribal conflict and a series of Ugandan dictatorships also deterred visitors.

Nowadays, with improved infrastructure and a lasting peace in the region, this secluded natural gem is opening up to intrepid wildlife travellers, who are discovering an abundance of animals with the most minimal of human presence.

THE VALLEY IS AN OASIS in the mainly arid Karamoja region of Uganda. Perennial running water in the Narus River combines with the seasonal flow of the Kidepo River to create an unusual combination of ecosystems that provide a home to over 80 species of mammal and 460 recorded bird species.

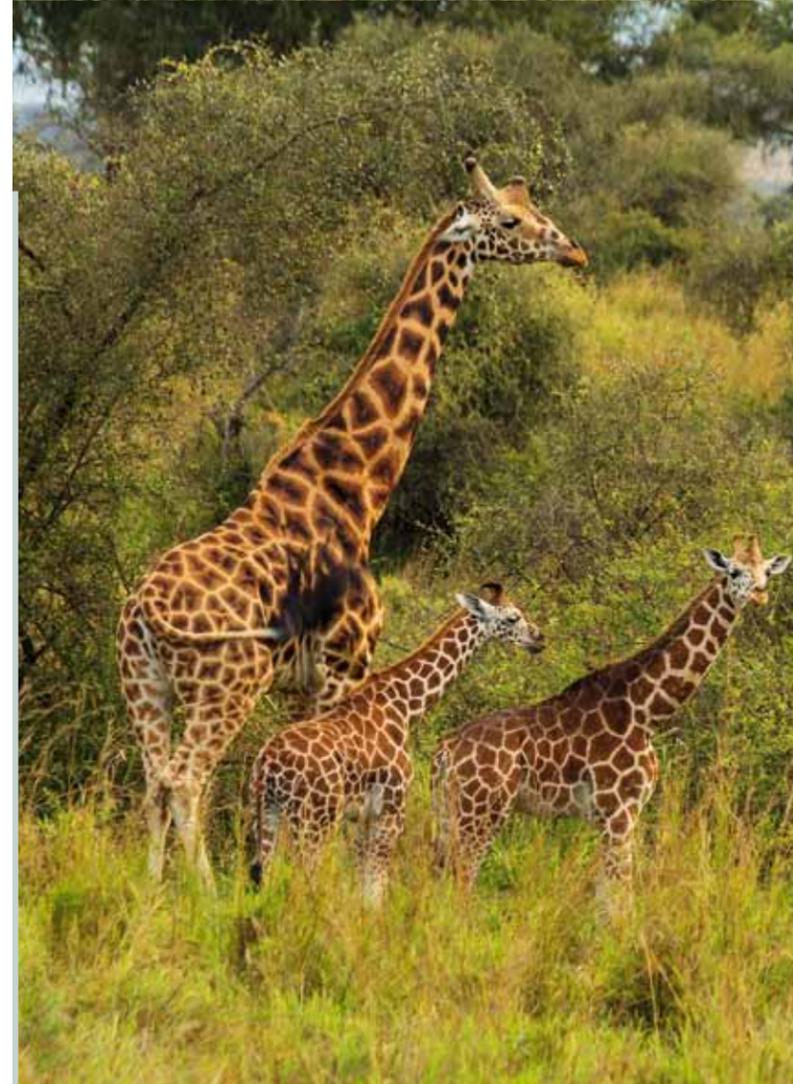
I travelled by car from Kampala, breaking the journey with a night in Kitgum, the last major town on the route and 134km southwest of the park. To access the valley we first had to traverse the Napore Mountains, where battered, fissured roads wind their way through scenery of prehistoric proportions. Once over the mountains we entered the panoramic valley and were faced with a swathe of savannah, with a backdrop of the Morungole Mountains to the east.

I was staying at Apoka Safari Lodge, which was built in 2007 in the centre of the park around a large granite koppie that was once a traditional celebration point for hunters and tribes people. I was woken in the mornings by warthogs scratching at the veranda of my comfortable room and walked to breakfast through scattered groups of waterbuck.

Tourists to Uganda usually head southwest towards the gorillas of the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest and the game in Queen Elizabeth National Park. Or they head northwest to Murchison Falls, in large part due to the convenience of these journeys from Kampala. However, once you reach Kidepo the extra effort immediately becomes worthwhile and the rewards obvious.

I asked the man operating the gate to the park how many tourists he had let through that day. "You are the first," he said, needlessly checking his clipboard.

That afternoon, as we made our first game drive, we encountered 17 giraffe, ➤



Clockwise from top: a vast herd of buffalo; one of the orphaned lions; writer Gary Almond meeting some of the local tribe, the Karamojong, who offer visitors hospitality and an introduction to their village life; a group of Rothschild giraffes, one of the most endangered of giraffe species

THE KARAMAJONG

Historically troubled villagers around the National Park are now keen to welcome visitors

Traditionally nomadic people, the communities around Kidepo Valley have settled into land on the borders of the park, farming maize and sorghum, and keeping small numbers of livestock.

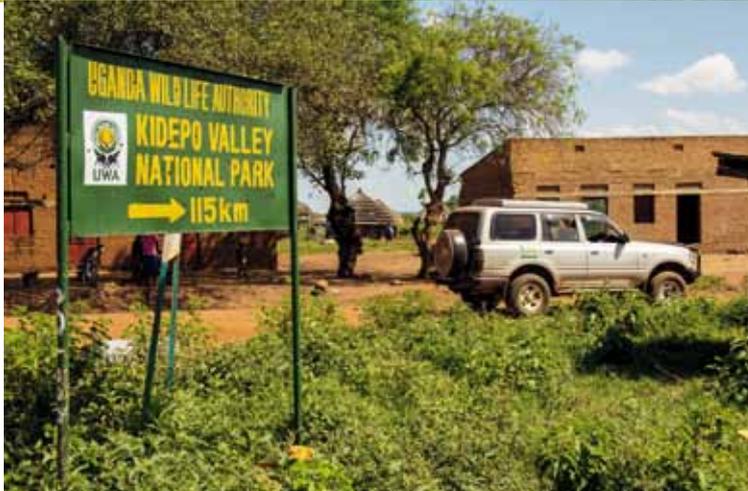
For decades there was a sustained conflict between neighbouring tribes and the people and wildlife in Kidepo. Heavily armed raiders attacked villages to steal cattle, and also poached in the park. The last white rhino in Kidepo was shot in 1983, and by 1990 the Rothschild's giraffes had been virtually wiped out.

A controversial government policy of disarmament in the last 10 years, which saw the UPDF accused of heavy-handedness and brutality, was followed by a bigger effort to engage with the Karamajong and promote understanding of the benefits the park offers.

I spoke to the Council Chairman of the local community, who is responsible for representing the Karamajong to the local authorities and tourists. As I toured the village it was noticeable how engaged the community was in promoting the park and developing the area. Money from tourism has built new pit latrines, which has significantly cut the instances of cholera. A new medical centre is being built on the village edge.

Improved relationships have also benefited the wildlife. Giraffe numbers in the park have increased in the last 10 years from a precarious position to abundance, and there are now plans afoot to attempt to reintroduce white rhino from a sanctuary.

The lives of the Karamajong are intrinsically linked with wildlife. The settled communities at the base of the mountains bordering Kidepo demonstrate how conservation can be universally beneficial, and how promoting communal animal and human existence can enhance the lives of all involved.



four orphaned lions, 14 elephants, two ostriches, a 6ft long spitting cobra, numerous zebra, buffalo, warthogs, eland... and not one single other vehicle or human being. It was a surreal experience, one that was to be repeated over three days of game drives and activities. To be the only people enjoying such an abundance of wildlife in a stunning setting felt like a guilty pleasure.

There were only ever four guests staying at Apoka in my time there, the others flew into the airstrip 4km from the lodge. The lack of other claims on his time gave me plenty of opportunity to talk to the lodge manager George, and hear stories of lion and leopard sightings, of crocodiles and hippos in the Narus River, of changes he had seen in the park over the last six years, and the continued challenges the lodge faces in attracting visitors.

Kidepo was designated a national park in 1962, yet it has struggled in the 50 years since to establish itself as a tourist destination. Just 10 minutes' drive through the entrance gates you pass the shell of a vast hotel built into the mountainside, which commands a fantastic view over the savannah. Katurum Lodge acts as a metaphor for the entire park: construction was begun in the late 1960s but abandoned by its Indian financiers when the then President, Idi Amin, banished the Asian population from Uganda in 1972. Since then there has been numerous attempts to reignite the project but each have got bogged down in political, financial and circumstantial issues. Today, over 40 years since work was first

Top: a herd of Jackson's hartebeests keep a wary eye on the photographer.

Above: the end of the road; from here the route is a mud track.

Below right: villagers stage a welcome dance





Clockwise from top: a family of elephants benefitting from the protection of local tribespeople; a game drive free from crowds; rooms or bandas at Apoka Lodge, linked by stone pathways; the orphaned lions of Kidepo

halted, court battles are still ongoing to ascertain ownership. Beyond Kidepo, the region of Karamoja suffers from a reputation for lawlessness, with stories of vicious rivalries between nomadic, cattle-herding tribes affecting the general population and the wildlife in the area. However, whilst there is cattle raiding and conflict in the south of the region, the 1,500 Karamjong on the borders of the valley are settled and peaceful, and have developed working systems with the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) to ensure all parties benefit from tourism in the park.

IN 2012, AN AMERICAN ORGANISATION released an online video publicising the hunt for Joseph Kony. Kony is the notorious leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), that until 2006 fought a brutal campaign across northern Uganda in opposition to the government forces. The video became a viral sensation, with over 100 million views worldwide on YouTube, but it provides a glaring example of the type of misinformation that has kept Kidepo from the tourist mainstream, and has isolated the park within its own country. I asked many people during my trip about the influence of Kony in the region. There was an obvious frustration at the question and each showed bewilderment that it was being raised as a continuing or current issue. All stressed that the LRA had never been to Kidepo and that Kony has not operated in Uganda for eight years.

This is a frustrating situation for the locals, who are keen to

This secluded natural gem has an abundance of animals and the most minimal of human presence

promote the joys of the park and attract more visitors to enjoy the exceptional seclusion that can be found there.

The long line of distractions and obstacles may have prevented the park from becoming one of Africa's most popular, yet they have also served to shelter its natural beauty and allow wildlife to thrive.

Kidepo is the only park in Uganda where giraffe and zebra can be found living side by side, and it is able to offer opportunities and activities that a more populated park would not, all in a more relaxed manner than elsewhere.

Walking safaris allow you to lower your viewpoint and stumble upon the most unusual of animal inhabitants. Led by Patrick, we encountered a leopard tortoise minding its own business, peered nervously down a warthog's lair, and strolled casually towards a herd of zebra.

At one point, as we reached the bottom of a shallow bowl of land, we heard a huge commotion over the ridge in front of us. "Baboons," said Patrick. "They must have spotted a leopard. Or a cheetah." Kidepo is the only park in Uganda where cheetahs can be found, yet sense prevailed and we



altered our course away from the baboons' noise and I avoided the embarrassment of having to ask to hold Patrick's hand.

A night safari revealed yet more wildlife for our eyes only: a greyish eagle owl perched in a tree; a crested porcupine scurrying through the scrub at the roadside; a family of serval cats looking after their young. My personal highlight of the nighttime explorations was coming across a pack of spotted hyenas just moments after they had enjoyed a feed. I had previously only caught fleeting glimpses of the animal, but this time the adult female stood tall and motionless, intimidating and ugly, and a mere metres away from the safari truck.



Top: tracking down a herd of zebra in Kidepo. Above: a spotted hyena caught in the light of a torch

IN ALL NATIONAL PARKS there is a balance to be found between 'commercialising' the wildlife and protecting it. What makes Kidepo so exceptional is how far, at present, the balance is swayed in favour of the animals. This is, of course, as much to do with circumstance and location than any human failing or missed opportunity, but it is exceptionally rare to find a situation where human tragedy and conflict has left relatively little lasting collateral damage to the wildlife or landscape.

Kidepo has had to endure more than its fair share of obstacles and challenges. But it has emerged from international and regional conflict in a position to offer the adventurous tourist the opportunity to see wildlife in the most unspoilt and rugged of settings, and to admire the nature of Africa as it was truly intended to be seen.

TRIP ADVISER

COST RATING ★★★★★☆

SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR

Visits to Kidepo are arranged on a custom basis. Speke Holidays Uganda organised the transport (excluding flights), park permits and safari activities for the writer, Gary Almond, while he sourced his own accommodation at Apoka Lodge. For a five day trip you should expect to pay US\$2,500 (around £1,500) per person.

GETTING THERE

There are regular flights to Entebbe Airport from London Heathrow with a number of airlines. Entebbe is an hour from the capital Kampala and Kidepo is a further 14-hour drive from there. The park can also be accessed by a chartered flight, which takes 2-3 hours from Entebbe and costs US\$690 (£410) per person (minimum four people).

VISA REQUIREMENTS

EU nationals require a visa for entry to Uganda. This costs US\$50 (£30) and is payable at the airport.

TIPS & WARNINGS

Kidepo is so remote it is essential that you take sun cream and insect repellent with you. The equatorial sun is extremely penetrating and tsetse flies can be encountered on the edges of the park. The temperature drops in the evening, especially during night safaris if the wind runs through the valley, so a warm jumper is recommended. For walking safaris, long trousers and socks are required and proper walking shoes are highly advisable.

WHEN TO GO

The rainy season tends to be from March to April and October to November, but this is changeable. The rains don't really impact the wildlife, only the roads into the region, which can become very rutted and difficult to navigate, so Apoka offers both low and high season pricing.

TOUR OPERATORS

SPEKE UGANDA HOLIDAYS

Tel: +256 312 294 531
www.spekeugandaholidays.com

APOKA SAFARI LODGE

Tel: +256 414 251 182
www.wildplacesafrica.com

JOURNEYS DISCOVERING AFRICA

Tel: +44 (0)208 144 4412
www.journeysdiscoveringafrica.com