
INSPIRATION



Image Via: Alicia-Rae Light

A Sustainable Safari in Uganda's Most Remote Place

by Alicia-Rae Light / Jul 27, 2021

Kidepo Valley—bordering South Sudan and Kenya on Uganda’s northernmost tip—is Uganda’s most remote national park. Inside Is Apoka Safari Lodge—a unique sustainable, luxury safari lodge with unrivalled wildlife viewing experiences

“Quiet,” whispers our guide Patrick Okwelle as he swiftly hops up onto the driver-side door of our yellow, open-topped Landcruiser, scanning the vast savannah. He puts one hand on the windshield, the other on the steering wheel, and from this precarious position manages to reach his foot down

to the gas pedal and continue to drive. From up here, he says, there's an unobstructed view over Kidepo Valley National Park and he can spot just about any creature from afar, without touching his binoculars.



Patrick has worked in this park for over 20 years and has been employed by Apoka Safari Lodge for 15. He grew up in nearby mountain caves, so he knows a thing or two about the region and its wildlife. Even after a near-death experience with a cape buffalo—a story he recounts a few days later with gory, intimate detail—conservation is ingrained in his DNA, something reflected everywhere in this park. This region was once plagued with hunting, poaching, and conflict between neighbouring South Sudan and Kenya, and was finally designated as a national park in 1962.

It's 6:30 am and the sun—a blazing circle in a shade of pink that I've only ever seen here in Uganda—rises quickly, turning the entire sky into a dusty rose colour that fades into gold. Sands are blown here from the Serengeti, making it seem as though there's a fog that's settled in overnight—but it's hot and dry. Warthogs run with piglets trailing behind them, tails up in the air, zebra are aplenty. We spot a rare black-backed jackal and spotted hyena within the first hour of our morning game drive.

We quiet down, as per Patrick's request, and he stops the engine. We're looking for big cats this morning and he senses there's one nearby. A lioness is close, he says. He knows her call. She's searching for her partner, who's likely off mating with another lioness. We continue to drive, swiftly through the bush, Patrick still sitting atop the driver's side door, navigating expertly.

Suddenly, there she is. Staring intensely out across the grassy plains, her back is towards us, and her long tail is curled up in the air, moving slowly from side to side as she watches a small herd of Jackson Hartebeest—one of the 12 species of antelope found in the park—hop along not so far in the distance. We're prepped to watch her make a kill, but instead, she's set on finding her mate. She comes out of the grass and walks along the narrow dirt road in front of us, slowly and stealthily letting out a low, throaty roar with every step, desperate. Patrick shuts off the engine once again and we sit there in silence, listening.

Kidepo Valley has a steadily increasing population of lions, making it a critical wildlife habitat—around 132 roam its plains. While Uganda's Queen Elizabeth National Park has a primary focus on lion conservation and is said to be home to the only elusive tree-climbing lions—we spot one here.

As far as I can see, there are palm, acacia, and kigelia (aka sausage trees) filling the grassy plains, and the craggy Morungole mountain range towers in the distance. Those mountains are home to a very unique, small Indigenous tribe of 10,000 called the Ik people, who have lived here for hundreds of years.

They were displaced with the creation of the national park, and have strong roots in traditional African culture. You can make the strenuous four-hour, 2749-metre hike up the mountain to visit them from Apoka Safari Lodge.

In general, Uganda feels like the road less travelled, often overlooked as an exceptional safari destination. It's revered for its mountain-gorilla-filled forests and opportunities to track them, deep in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, as well as the unique biodiversity along the mesmerizing Nile River and towering Murchison Falls.

But Kidepo Valley—bordering South Sudan and Kenya on Uganda's northernmost tip—is the country's most remote national park, and until recently it's been tough to access. That's what makes it so spectacular. It's unlikely you'll see more than one other safari vehicle on your game drives. Previously, the journey to Kidepo would take three days by car, but with developments, it's now about an eight-hour drive from Kampala (520km)—4X4 required. Aerolink Uganda has a direct route from Entebbe, a one-hour flight on a small Cessna Caravan with a minimum of seven passengers (from \$690 per person).

Apoka Safari Lodge—an oasis in the arid, dry, savanna of 10 beautiful cottages—is one of three of the Wildplaces Africa lodges throughout Uganda—a land of stark contrasts. The owners, Pamela and Jonathan Wright, alongside their staff, are highly focused on being a part of the conservation solution in Uganda. Their approach to tourism goes hand in hand with preserving nature in Africa's wild places. At Apoka, they have a close relationship with the village of Lokorul on the outskirts of the valley—hiring almost exclusively from the village and offering professional training. Many resources are sourced from the local community, including fresh produce, firewood, and maintenance supplies. In the future, there are plans for Apoka to be a fully solar-powered lodge—something that was set to happen pre-pandemic, but COVID halted their plans. One of their other lodges, Semliki Safari Lodge in Semliki Wildlife Reserve, is already fully solar-powered.



Between game drives, I order lunch to my room and sit on my balcony—the perfect wildlife-viewing perch over the savanna, while one of the hotel staff draws me an outdoor bubble bath. I have an unobstructed view of zebra and antelope are grazing. Once I get in the bath, a resident warthog family gets as close as possible—so close I think they might hop in. They’re hoping to sneak a sip of water I presume but skittishly run away if I move an inch. A waterbuck stares me straight in the eye for the hour I’m relaxing in the tub—giving me no privacy, not that I want it here anyhow. On occasion, I’m told, lions make their way into the camp and can be seen from the cottages. This place is truly wild.

On our last evening in Kidepo, Patrick pours our drinks of choice——Uganda Wagari gin and tonics and Amarula on the rocks—at the most incredible spot in a part of the park that’s a designated wildlife reintroduction. It’s where they are planning to soon bring the first rhinos back into the Ugandan wild.

In his native Karamojong language—his ancestral indigenous tribe who also call the region home—he teaches us to cheers saying, “elakas, ejok-nooi,” which translates to happiness and goodness. He finally tells us the story of his altercation with the cape buffalo. He was attacked and left by his friend for dead with this thigh ripped open, but somehow managed to trick the buffalo into thinking he was dead and escaped. With a massive scar, and one testicle missing, he’s still here working in the park, raising his family to also appreciate the wonder of Kidepo’s wildlife—and to continue he legacy of working in conservation, creating a truly unrivalled safari experience for those looking to experience Uganda’s unique remote wilderness.