

# My national park initiation was at Murchison Falls

DAVID LUMU

It is a widespread assumption in the West that Africans share streets with wildlife and we all have our very own lions and giraffes in the backyards. That could not be further from the truth.

I can claim to know all the top hangouts in Kampala, but had never stepped foot in any of the 10 national parks this gifted nation is blessed with.

So, nothing prepared me for what to expect on June 23 when I joined 30 other media personalities for a two-day trip to Murchison Falls national park.

The itinerary had everything one would wish of a safari; hiking, barbeque and of course a game drive.

I had lots of anticipation and even figured out how memorable the whole trip would be. However, I was already feeling out of place just three hours into the journey when the initial get-together banter dried up in the minibus and many around me engaged in a competitive snooze fest.

A check-in at Kabalega resort hotel in Kiryandongo district was the ideal tranquiliser. This place in the middle of nowhere is the perfect



A monkey in the park

stopover on the long Kampala-Karuma stretch and has everything one may need to refuel the body tank; right from accommodation, traditional dishes and the well-stocked bar.

Personally, I couldn't handle the heat and whereas everyone on the team settled for a soft drink, a cold Guinness did wonders for me in spite of raising a few eyebrows, most notably Stephen Asimwe's, the Uganda Tourism Board boss.

Two hours later, I was more than relieved to arrive at Murchison Falls national park at around sun-

set. However, we still had roughly another 30 minutes to drive to our destination, Chobe Safari lodge, located within the park.

All of a sudden, the minibus became hyperactive as our guide, Uganda Wildlife Authority's (UWA) Jossy Muhangi, took us through what to expect.

Temperatures were raised at the first sight of a warthog. A group of kobs raised more excitement, but when we approached a lone giraffe, it triggered some jostling for window positions.

Many pulled out their gadgets to photograph the tallest mammal. It was an exhibition of might; from high-end digital cameras and smartphones to the low-end unbranded phones common in downtown Kampala.

I did not bother pulling out mine, as did my neighbour Jimmy Adriko, the *New Vision* photo editor, whose Kabiriti did not even have a camera.

Our arrival at Chobe was grand, attracting the top management to share a moment with us. Chobe is quite a spectacle in and out.

On this cold night, a barbeque at a campfire was just what the doctor ordered. Only that some 'uninvited guests' were lurking metres away.

The nearby presence of hippos and, later, a buffalo unnerved first-timer me, as I imagined escape routes in case they charged at us. Luckily, wardens were around to watch the animals' movements.

## THE PARK EXPERIENCE

Muhangi had hyped the following morning as a life-changing experience and by 7am, the team was on a game drive to catch the wildlife at its most active.

Within minutes, kobs and antelopes could be seen freely wandering about. Deeper into the wild brought us closer to buffaloes, giraffes and elephants. Plenty of them.

I noted vast areas with little wildlife, something our ranger/guide, Amos Kakuru, blamed on the on-going oil projects in the park.

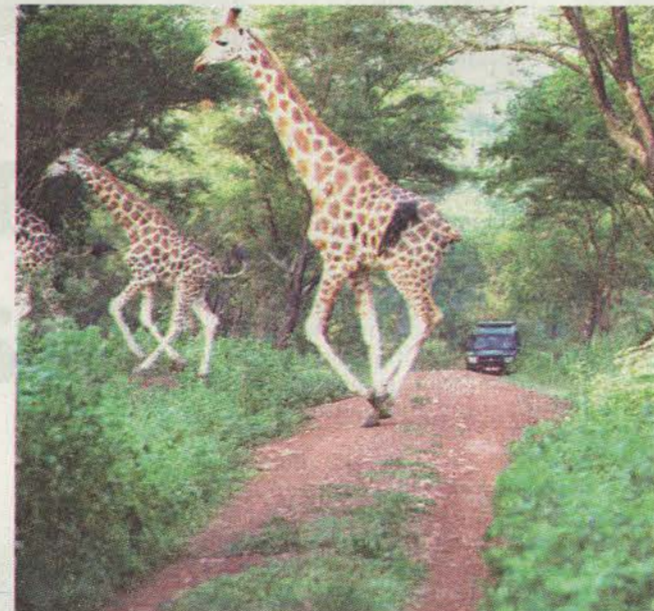
"Animals don't like the heavy machinery of drilling and they move away as far as possible," he noted.

We stumbled upon vultures digging their beaks into what seemed to be a buffalo carcass. It looked a bit fresh, prompting Kakuru, who was armed, to cite possible work of poachers.

Game meat is reportedly popular



Beautiful poolside at Chobe safari lodge



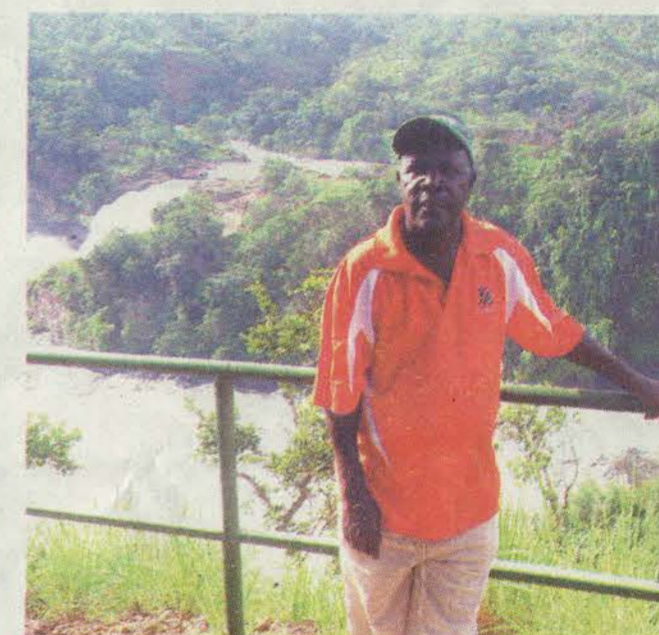
Giraffes in the park



Dinner time



Photo moment at one of the rocks along the Murchison falls



A relieved Ofwono Opondo after reaching the top of the hill overlooking Murchison falls



An elephant and its calf

fore reaching the top and then descending for a lifetime experience of the powerful force of nature.

The numerous cliffs along the route were perfect for adrenaline junkies such as Radio One's RS Elvis and Mike Segawa of watchdog.co.ug. But there was no room for error as any slip could be fatal.

With everyone through to the final destination, there was a humorous moment as the team worried about the whereabouts of *Daily Monitor* executive editor Charles Odoobo Bichachi, who seemed to struggle with the hike. He played it cool saying he simply delayed to enjoy the sight of birds.

Seeing the falls from top was the best moment of the tour and the journey back to Chobe left me satisfied.

Along the way, we stopped over at Pakwach for a little shopping just as the night set in. Many on the team were taken aback by the impressive crafts sold by the locals.

A stopover at Heritage safari lodge was another worthwhile stop for a first-time park visitor like me. Owned by William Lalobo, also the proprietor of Paragon hospital, Heritage's grass-thatched facility looked ideal for family holidays.

Back at Chobe, there was only one item left after dinner: winding up to recollect the events of the day.

Chobe is not a place for misers as a beer goes for Shs 7,000 while a shot costs Shs 15,000. Just as well, I imagine, as getting too drunk in a wildlife park must have disastrous endings...

## CHOBÉ AT A GLANCE

For all its elegance and class, Chobe is quite modest when it comes to costs.

James Rattos, the Chobe general manager, told me the place has special discounts for Ugandans especially on weekends, as a way of encouraging locals to visit the park.

Marasa Holdings, which owns both Chobe and Paraa in Murchison, and Mweya in Queen Elizabeth national park, charges Ugandans \$110 full board per night as a promotional price at their top lodges.

That cost is on the low end when one compares the amounts spent at less thrilling destinations.

Would I go back on my own? Absolutely; if only it were cheaper...

dlumu@observer.ug



The magnificent Murchison falls

“The nearby presence of hippos and, later, a buffalo unnerved first-timer me, as I imagined escape routes in case they charged at us. Luckily, wardens were around to watch the animals' movements.

in the communities surrounding the park. Kakuru said a kilogram of hippo or buffalo meat can go for around Shs 6,000. He admitted the existence of some tension between the park rangers and the community, exacerbated a few years ago with the killing of seven alleged poachers in the park. About three hours into the game drive, we had seen dozens of animal and bird species and found ourselves at Albert Nile along the Uganda-DR Congo border. However, the biggest anticipation

for everyone on board was seeing a lion or leopard. Sadly, they remained elusive and the closest sight of the predators was watching fleeing kobs and antelopes, possibly pursued by one of the big cat species. It was such a thrilling spectacle for me after years of seeing such footage on NatGeo Wild. THE CRUISE At 2pm, we were at Paraa Safari lodge for lunch. I was taken by surprise at the buzz in the place. But again, I observed that majority of tourists were foreigners and

the few blacks also seemed 'un-Ugandan.' I asked Asimwe about this and he admitted one of his biggest challenges is changing the mindset of Ugandans towards tourism. Anyway, that was the least of my worries as we geared up for the boat ride to the Murchison falls. The 90-minute cruise aboard the *Queen Of Africa* was quite enthralling, especially when we came into close contact with numerous hippo groups along the way. The sight of hippos mating caught the eye of many, weird as it looked, but more than anything,

the trip brought out the best of Uganda's beauty. THE FALLS We reached the bottom of Murchison falls around 4pm, much to the excitement of the team. However, to reach the top of the falls was a one-and-a-half kilometre hike that took me by surprise, given how energy-sapping it was. For a moment, I was worried about Ofwono Opondo, the government spokesperson, who struggled early on. The hike has several rings with breathtaking views of the falls be-