

MURCHISON FALLS NATIONAL PARK

PARK AT A GLANCE

The 3,840km² Murchison Falls National Park is one of Uganda's oldest protected areas. Originally gazetted as the Bunyoro and Gulu Wildlife Reserve in 1926, it was upgraded to form one of Uganda's first national parks in 1952.

The 5072km² expanse of Murchison Falls NP and the contiguous Karuma and Bugungu Wildlife Reserves are managed collectively as the Murchison Falls Conservation Area.

At Murchison Falls, the Nile explodes through an 6m wide gorge and plunges 45m into the 'Devil's Cauldron.'

The boat trip along the Nile to Murchison Falls is one of East Africa's top wildlife spectacles.



The northern section of the park contains savanna and borassus palms, acacia trees and riverine woodland. The south is dominated by bush and forest.

Murchison Falls National Park lies at the northern end of the Albertine Rift Valley where the sweeping Bunyoro escarpment merges into a vast, palm-dotted savannah. First gazetted as a game reserve in 1926 it is Uganda's

largest and oldest conservation area, hosting 76 species of mammals and over 451 birds. The park is bisected by the Victoria Nile which races west through the park for 80km, descending a series of rapids before exploding through a narrow (6m) gap in the remnant rift valley cliffs. This 45m plunge drains the last of the river's energy transforming the torrent into a broad, placid stream that flows quietly across the rift valley floor towards Lake Albert.

The river below the Falls provides one of Uganda's finest wildlife spectacles. Regular visitors to the riverbank include elephants, giraffes and buffaloes while hippos, Nile crocodiles and aquatic birds are permanent residents.

The 1951 film "The African Queen" starring Humphrey Bogart was filmed on Lake Albert and the Nile below Murchison Falls. Other notable visitors to the park include Winston Churchill, Theodore Roosevelt, Ernest Hemingway and several British royals.

ACCESS

ROADS

A number of routes can be used to reach the Nile at Paraa, the parks' main tourism hub. The river is crossed using a ferry that runs at intervals throughout the day.

Southern Entrance Gates

Two routes lead to Paraa lead from Masindi town, which is 305km from Kampala (a 4 hour drive). The most direct is the 86km approach which enters the park through Kichumbanyobo Gate, 16km from Masindi. Diversions along the way include the Kaniyo Pabidi section of Budongo Forest, the Heart of Murchison game viewing area and Murchison Falls. A longer but more scenic alternative route from Masindi runs to Paraa via Bulisa (136km). The route passes through Budongo Forest before a memorable descent of the rift valley escarpment with views across Lake Albert towards the Blue Mountains of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The park can be entered through Bugungu or Mubako gate. The latter is convenient for visitors staying in the cluster of lodges just outside the park's western boundary.



Northern Entrance Gates

Murchison Falls National Park can also be reached on the north side of the Nile via the Chobe, Wankwar and Tangi gates. These are all accessed from the Kampala-Pakwach road which crosses the Nile at Karuma Falls in the north-eastern corner of the park, 260kms from Kampala. These gates are convenient for visitors travelling to/from Gulu town and Kidepo Valley National Park.

AIR

Pakuba Airfield, 19km from North Paraa, can be reached using chartered aircraft from Entebbe International Airport or Kajjansi airfield near Kampala. Other airfields in the park include Chobe to the east and Bugungu to the south of Paraa.

CLIMATE

During the day, the temperature is around 25–32oC, making this one of the hottest regions in Uganda. Nights are cooler, dropping to around 18oC. Rainfall is low, though when it arrives it falls in torrential storms.

WHEN TO VISIT

The best time to visit is during the dry seasons from December to late February and from June to September when animals are concentrated around water points. The prime time for bird watching is January–March when tourist numbers are lowest.

ACCOMMODATION

A range of privately operated accommodation facilities in and around the park caters for up-market, medium range and budget visitors. UWA operates a campsite and a students' centre dormitory style with 60 beds at North Paraa. Camping is also possible at the Top of the Falls.

Other concessionaires include Chobe Safari Lodge, which is undoubtedly the gem in Uganda's crown of tourism destinations. Offers breathtaking panoramic views, coupled with the sounds of the River Nile's magnificent rapids, sets the scene for an adventure that will impress even the most discerning of visitors

Paraa Safari Lodge; Gives you the unforgettable experience and memories of Uganda's hospitality

Pakuba Safari Lodge; Strategically located along the River Nile offering breathtaking views and spectacular scenery that enhances an excellent wild experience

Red Chilli Rest Camp; Offers affordable accommodation in the heart of Murchison Falls National Park

Sambiya River lodge; Not just a place to sleep, but a great African wilderness experience.

ACTIVITIES & ATTRACTIONS

PARAA

The park's tourism hub is located on the banks of the Nile at Paraa, which appropriately means 'home of the hippo' in the local Luo language. Paraa's significance derives largely from the vehicle ferry that shuttles between the Masindi road on the southern bank and the Pakwach road and the Buligi game tracks on the north. It is also the starting point for boat trips to the Falls and the delta. Consequently, most of the tourist accommodation serving MFNP is also located near Paraa, much of it on a stretch of riverbank outside the park, 5km to the west.

THE NILE & MURCHISON FALLS

Murchison Falls boat cruise

The launch voyage upriver from Paraa to see the Murchison Falls exploding through the cliffs at the head of Fajao Gorge is the park's oldest and most popular excursion. The 3 hour return trip passes a wealth of riverside wildlife on the way, including resident hippos and crocodiles and visiting elephants, buffalo, etc. Excursions are run by UWA and private operators.

Top of the Falls

Visitors should be sure to visit the Top of the Falls viewpoint to see hear, and feel the Nile thunder through a 6m-wide gorge. The site can be reached by vehicle but it is more rewarding to disembark from the launch to climb up to the Top of the Falls through Fajao Gorge (a ranger escort is required for this walk).

Delta boat cruises

Boats also run downriver from Paraa to explore the Nile Delta where a maze of channels threads between wetland islands that choke the river's exit into Lake Albert. These are rich in waterbirds, most notably the shoebill. This iconic rarity is best sighted in the delta during the December-February and June-September dry seasons.

Sport Fishing



The river below Murchison Falls provides an exciting challenge for anglers with the record for Nile perch landed with rod and line standing at a hefty 108kg.

GAME VIEWING

Buligi Peninsula

The park's prime game viewing area lies on the Buligi Peninsula, a triangle of grassland bounded by the Victoria Nile entering Lake Albert, and the Albert Nile flowing out of it. Expect to see elephant, buffalo, antelopes and giraffe and keep your fingers crossed for lion and leopard. The game track network converges at Delta Point where the Nile flows north out of Lake Albert; this is a convenient place to stop for refreshments and view waterbirds offshore and distant hippos.

Visitors can also take to the air to explore the plains north and west of Paraa in a hot air balloon. Contact the Jobihani Dream Balloons office at Paraa Safari Lodge

Heart of Murchison

While much of the southern part of MFNP is covered by bush and forest, a delightful tract of savanna rolls down to the river from the Rabongo road in the very centre of

the park. Vehicle tracks have recently been opened in this area, which thanks to substantial herds of Uganda kob, is becoming known as a prime location for lions. The 'Heart of Murchison' lies 20km east of the Masindi-Paraa road.

FOREST WALKS & CHIMPANZEE TRACKING

Kaniyo Pabidi Forest

This forest in the south of Murchison Falls Conservation Area is home to a habituated chimp group which can be tracked with experienced forest guides. Kaniyo Pabidi Forest is an essential birding site due to the presence of Albertine Rift endemics and other 'restricted range' species including the chocolate-backed kingfisher, white-thighed hornbill and Puvel's illadopsis. A comfortable lodge is found on site, while additional accommodation is available at Masindi town, 30km south.

BIRDING

Birding activities overlap with the wildlife viewing locations described above. Highlights include easy sightings of resident and waterbirds on the cruise to the Falls, thrilling shoebill sightings in the Nile delta and careful searches for rare and restricted range forest species in Kaniyo Pabidi Forest.



OUTSIDE THE PARK

Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary

The 70km² Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary is home to Uganda's only wild rhinos. Track them on foot and support this important step towards the eventual reintroduction of rhinos to protected areas. Ziwa lies close to the Kampala-Gulu road, 5km before the turning to Masindi. Visit www.rhinofund.org for more information.

TARIFFS & PAYMENT

For information on park entrance and activity fees, please refer to the UWA tariff sheet at www.ugandawildlife.org. Payments can be made using Uganda shillings, US dollars, British pounds, Euros and Visa. Twenty percent of all park fees are shared with communities in park boundary parishes to share the benefits of ecotourism and generate local support for conservation.

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