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 Bugungu Wildlife Reserves 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 northern section of the park contains savanna and forest. The southern is dominated by bush and forest. 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.

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.

WHEN TO VISIT

Accessible by road and air, Murchison Falls is renowned for its spectacular scenery and rich wildlife. 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.

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December-February and June-September dry seasons. This iconic rarity is best sighted in the delta during the wet season. These are rich in waterbirds, most notably the shoebill.

Nile Delta boat cruises are run by UWA and private operators. Boats also run downriver from Paraa to explore the Delta boat cruises. Excursions are 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).

Visitors should be sure to visit the Top of the Falls viewpoint to see how, 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).

Boat cruises also run from Paraa to explore the Nile 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 if 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 birthing 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.

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.