PARK AT A GLANCE

The 1,145 km² Mount Elgon National Park protects the higher slopes of the 4,321m Mount Elgon, an extinct volcano on the Uganda-Kenya border. Mount Elgon is one of East Africa’s oldest physical features, first erupting around 20 million years ago. The trek to the summit passes through the distinctive altitudinal vegetation zones restricted to Eastern Africa’s highest mountains.

Mount Elgon’s cool slopes with its distinctive, waterfall-streaked cliffs are an ideal retreat, especially during the long drive through dusty Karamoja to/from Kidepo Valley National Park.

The 1,145 km² Mount Elgon National Park is located on the 4,321m-high Mount Elgon in eastern Uganda. The border with Kenya bisects the mountain and national parks in both countries protect the flora and fauna on the higher contours. This trans-boundary conservation area has been declared a UNESCO Man & Biosphere Reserve.

A massive, extinct volcano, 80km in diameter, Mount Elgon once stood far higher than Kilimanjaro’s current 5,900m. Its height was reduced when an unusually violent eruption emptied the volcano’s magma reservoir and the cone, no longer supported by underlying molten rock, collapsed.

Mount Elgon still rises 3000m above the hot dusty plains of Karamoja to provide a cool respite for humans and a refuge for flora and fauna. The protected forest also represents an essential regional water catchment. Tourist activities on the mountain cater for various levels of ambition. Visitors can make extended hikes, requiring a minimum of 3 days, to the summits, take day/half day walks through forest on the lower edge of the park, or simply relax in resorts overlooking delightful waterfalls just outside the park at Sipi.

WILDLIFE

Large mammals, including elephant and buffalo, live in the forests of Mount Elgon but are rarely seen. Mount Elgon National Park is home to over 300 species of birds, including the African gooshawk, Chubb’s cisticola, white-chinned prinia, African blue flycatcher and the endangered lammergeyer.

THE LOCAL PEOPLE

Mt. Elgon is home to two tribes, the Bagisu and the Sabiny. The Bagisu, who live on the southern and western slopes of Mount Elgon are known for their colourful, biannual Imbalu ceremony in which boys are initiated into manhood through circumcision. The Bagisu, also known as the Bamasaba, consider Mount Elgon to be the embodiment of their founding father Masaba and refer to the mountain by this name.

ACCESS

Roads

Mount Elgon National Park lies above Mubale town, 235km east of Kampala. The route beyond Mubale is surfaced as far as Kapchorwa town on the northwest flank of the mountain. Dirt roads lead off this road to the various trailheads.

Mount Elgon can be climbed all year round though the dry seasons between June–August and December–March are most enjoyable.

ACCOMMODATION

UWA provides budget accommodation facilities at the Forest Exploration Centre at Kapkwai. Comfortable budget and mid range resorts are found at Sipi town, 15km from Kapkwai while Mubale town offers a wide choice of hotels.

ACTIVITIES AND ATTRACTIONS

KAPKWAI FOREST EXPLORATION CENTRE

The UWA-run Forest Exploration Centre (FEC) lies on the park edge, 13km beyond Sipi. It doubles as an education centre for local schools and researchers as well as a trailhead for the Sipi route to the peaks (see below).

FOREST WALKS

Routes over varying length explore the forest around the FEC passing caves, waterfalls and viewpoints and providing the opportunity to observe birds and primates.

Mount Elgon National Park

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MOUNTAIN CLIMBING
A number of routes ascend to the 4321m Wagagai peak, the summit of Mount Elgon.
The Sasa Trail ascends from the small town of Bududiri (1250m a.s.l.) in the Sironko Valley. The shortest and most direct option, it is possible to reach the summit and descend to Bududiri in 5 or (more comfortably) 4 days. It does however involve a stiff altitudinal gain of 1650m, including an ascent of the Mudangi Cliffs, on Day One. The Sipi Trail involves a longer but gentler ascent, starting 800 higher than Bududiri at the FEC (2050m). Other options are the Piswa and Suam routes on the northern side of the mountain and a proposed new route at Bushiyi. Jackson’s Pool and Jackson’s Peak
Jackson’s Pool stands at 4,050 m beside the Sasa Trail in the shadow of the 4,165 m high Jackson’s peak, a free-standing volcanic plug rising above moorland on the western flank of the mountain.

THE PEAKS AND THE CALDERA
Mount Elgon’s highest peaks are formed by high points around a jagged rim that forms the circumference of a giant caldera which, at 8km across, is one of the world’s largest. The tallest peak is Wagagai (4,521m) followed by Sudek (4,503 m), Koitobos (4,222 m) and Mubiyi (4,210 m).

Vegetation
A highlight of any ascent of Mount Elgon is the traverse through the distinctive vegetation zones peculiar to East Africa’s highest mountains. The lowest of these zones, between the park boundary and the 2500m contour is covered with dense montane forest and regenerating forests, draped with with lianas, epiphytes and lichens. This gives way to the bamboo forest (2,500–3,000m) followed by groves of giant heather (3000–3500m). Above 3500m, the mountainside opens into moorland dotted with outlandish forms of giant lobelias and groundsels. 

NKOKENJERU RIDGE AND WANALE CLIFFS
As the map shows, a narrow corridor of parkland extends 25km west from the Mount Elgon massif towards Mbale town. This follows the Nkokenjeru Ridge, a 25 km-long tongue of lava that burst out of the side of the volcano after the cone had collapsed to block the main vent. A trail within this section of the park visits the Khaukha Cave. The ridge ends at the lofty Wanale Cliffs (outside the park) which tower 700m above Mbale. A road winding upwards from the town through a gap in the cliffs leads to some stunning viewpoints and sites with paragliding potential.

OUTSIDE THE PARK

SIPI FALLS
The 7km section of the Sipi Valley immediately outside the national park is impossibly scenic as the river plunges over three sets of basalt cliffs during its descent to the plains beneath. These have given rise to a cluster of tourist lodges and a variety of activities.

MOUNTAIN BIKING
The Sipi area has much to offer mountain bikers, ranging from casual exploration of the many lovely trails in the vicinity, to the challenging Elgon Enduro hosted by Sipi River Lodge.

ROCK CLIMBING
Many of the basaltic cliffs around Sipi have been bolted and can safely be climbed. Contact Sipi River Lodge or the Mountain Club of Uganda for details.

FLY FISHING
Fly fishing for rainbow trout is possible on the Sipi River between the park boundary and the highest of the three waterfalls at Sipi. Again, contact Sipi River Lodge for details.

COFFEE TOUR
Uganda’s finest coffee is produced from Arabica beans grown on Mount Elgon. Take a guided tour of a coffee garden at Sipi to see how the beans are grown and ground.

Other regional attractions include Pian Upe Wildlife Reserve and Nyero Rock paintings near Kumi.

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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