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# Wild horizons

STEPHEN CUNIFFE

Jonathan Wright left a life in Canada to return to Uganda, the place of his childhood. With him, he brought ambitious goals to rejuvenate some of the nation's remote national parks. To see how he's making out, Jack Barker ventured into the wilds of Semliki and Kidepo.

Kidepo's kopjes – unforgettable horizontal aberrations

It was a chance meeting with President Museveni that brought Ugandan-born Jonathan Wright, then running an eco-lodge in Newfoundland, Canada, back to the country where he was raised. The Ugandan leader was touring the world in search of investors and trying to tempt back Asians expelled by Idi Amin. When Jonathan asked if he'd be welcomed back to the country he'd left at 14 he was told yes. "I'd always felt homesick for Uganda and when I got there it just seemed right. The smells, the sights all felt totally familiar to me 20 years on... You don't forget where you grew up."

In the mid '90s there wasn't much interest in investing in lodges in Uganda's National Parks. Idi Amin's turbulent regime and the brutal repressions of Obote's second term in power had given the country a worldwide reputation as an African basket case, politics at their most savage and confusing. Uganda's wildlife, once prolific enough to attract Churchill and Robert Mitchum, was decimated. The years of conflict saw government soldiers and rebel militias treat the country's natural heritage as little more than a well-stocked larder. At local markets AK47s were on sale for US\$20 – the same price as a goat – and anything large enough to eat was killed. Although the situation stabilised under Museveni, attempts to build a safari circuit suffered repeated setbacks: Rwandan rebels attacked Bwindi and shot eight tourists and two rangers, militia from the Congo ran amok in the west, a whitewater rafting operator was shot in

Murchison and the Lord's Resistance Army continued a mystifying but savage campaign in the northwest.

Jonathan's decision to form The Uganda Safari Company to take on Semliki National Park was, therefore, a brave one. At 550 square kilometres it isn't the biggest of Africa's national parks, but it is unquestionably one of the most ecologically valuable: It runs along the Semliki River and ranges across the easterly extent of the huge Ituri forest that spreads across the Democratic Republic of Congo to the open savannahs of the Albertine Rift, itself an important part of the Great Rift Valley.

At the time it was in poor shape. There were just 40 buffalo left, and the Ugandan kob, despite being the national animal, had been reduced to a mere 90 individuals. "We've improved those numbers since. In 2007, we counted more than a 1000 buffalo and 8000 kob. Semliki's biodiversity is as good as ever, with more than 500 bird species – 600 if you include those living in the Ituri forest to the west – and good populations of primates and other animals." And he's right. As we drove through great herds of Uganda kob, I often heard leopard and lion. The sightings tend to be unexpected and diverse: ten kusimanse mongooses rushing towards me, flowing on either side through the undergrowth and flashing up a borassus palm with red-flashing tails; pennant-tailed nightjars fluttering away from the headlights of the Land Rover; and countless bright butterfly species drinking moisture from my sleeve. Semliki is also

one of the best places in Uganda to see chimpanzees. Here, they're slightly less habituated than in Kibale, as it is researchers, rather than tourists, who visit daily. Clambering along the rickety bridges that were built by naturalists, the one thing you can be sure of is the knowledge that you're the only Westerner in the forest. The morning I went looking for chimps was cold and wet, meaning they stayed in their treetop beds. I later heard that Kibale's chimps, faced with the same weather that day, behaved similarly. And I, unlike the Kibale trackers, came across a 3m-long python that blocked my path. Birdwatchers also flock to the area, as shoebill storks reside at Lake Albert, just outside the park's northern boundary. I managed to come upon three (shoebills, not tourists), and got much pleasure from the furious debate between my boatman and guide over the exact identification of a distant duck.

It's Semliki's exclusivity that is its main draw. While other African parks are cake-sliced up by rival concessions, Jonathan Wright's is the only lodge in Semliki. It's a soaring thatch creation that matches any in East Africa, and it's expertly run and hosted. You'll have the place completely to yourself.

Any tourist development in Uganda inevitably comes up against the country's dependence on mountain gorillas. As only a few dedicated birders visit without the chance to meet the primates, the 6000 annual gorilla-tracking permits almost set the maximum number of Uganda's yearly visitors. Considering these tourists will then scatter thinly over the country's parks and reserves, Jonathan Wright's next move was even braver. He bid for and won the concession to build the only lodge in Kidepo National Park, which sits in Uganda's far northwest on the border with Sudan.

In all the guidebooks, Kidepo seems to be squeezed onto the very back pages, its entry changing little over updates and revisions. Covering 1400 square kilometres, it's the national park that most have heard of but few have visited. By road it's 12 rather unsafe hours through Karamojong cattle-rustling country from Kampala and the British government is amongst those who recommend travelling only by air. Landing at Kidepo's dirt strip, I looked around in surprise. I'd expected a desert but found a 5ft-deep field of green waving in a blustering rainstorm.

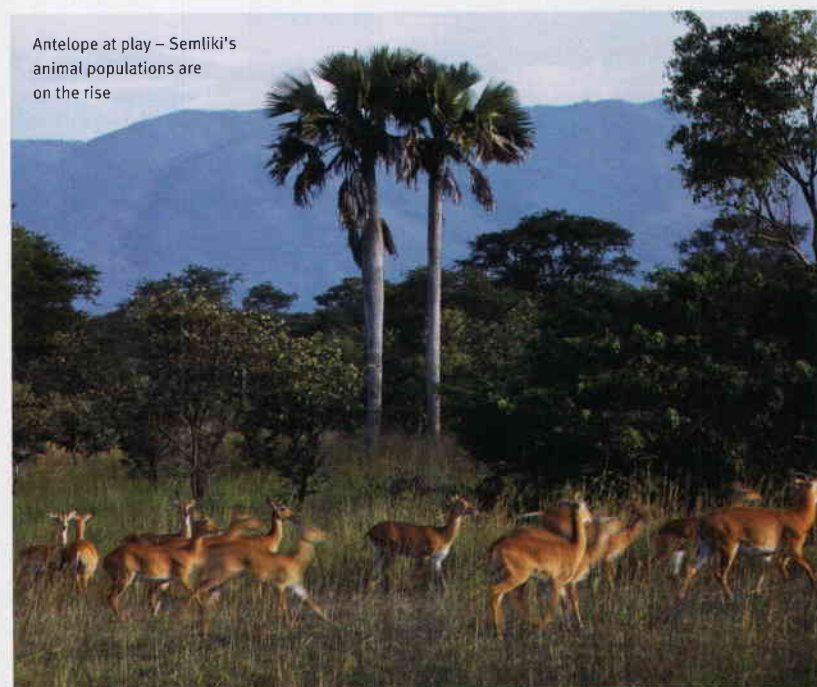
Various people have tried to run a lodge in Kidepo. Idi Amin actually built a huge property that was being furnished at the time he was overthrown. These days it's ruined; only the views remain. When Jonathan Wright took out the concession in 2005, his only option was to build and, once again, he did it in style. Set up on a kopje, Apoka Lodge's main structure possesses towering thatch rafters, overstuffed sofas and furnishing of polished Elgon teak. It even drops down to a swimming pool built over natural rock. The ten guest rooms are constructed of wood, stone and canvas, and are surrounded by an area of cut grasses that attract zebra, jackal and Jackson's hartebeest.

Kidepo has suffered from poaching in the past. Although the northern region, around the Kidepo River, was hunted out by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), we still came across elephant. The group of five tuskers, all with hollowed temples indicating an age of 40 or more, were remarkably calm considering the hunters they must have escaped over the years. >>



Where could the chimpanzees be?  
Venturing into Semliki's forests

Clambering along the rickety bridges that were built by naturalists, the only thing secure in your situation is the knowledge that you're the only Westerner in the forest



Antelope at play – Semliki's  
animal populations are  
on the rise



## Plan your trip

### Getting there

**Kenya Airways** ([www.kenya-airways.com](http://www.kenya-airways.com)) have daily flights to Entebbe via Nairobi.

### UK operators

Jack Barker travelled with **Journeys by Design** ([www.journeysbydesign.co.uk](http://www.journeysbydesign.co.uk)), a bespoke tour organiser. Tailormade tours also can be arranged by **Rainbow Tours** ([www.rainbowtours.co.uk](http://www.rainbowtours.co.uk)), **Safari Consultants** ([www.safari-consultants.co.uk](http://www.safari-consultants.co.uk)) and **World Odyssey** ([www.world-odyssey.com](http://www.world-odyssey.com)).

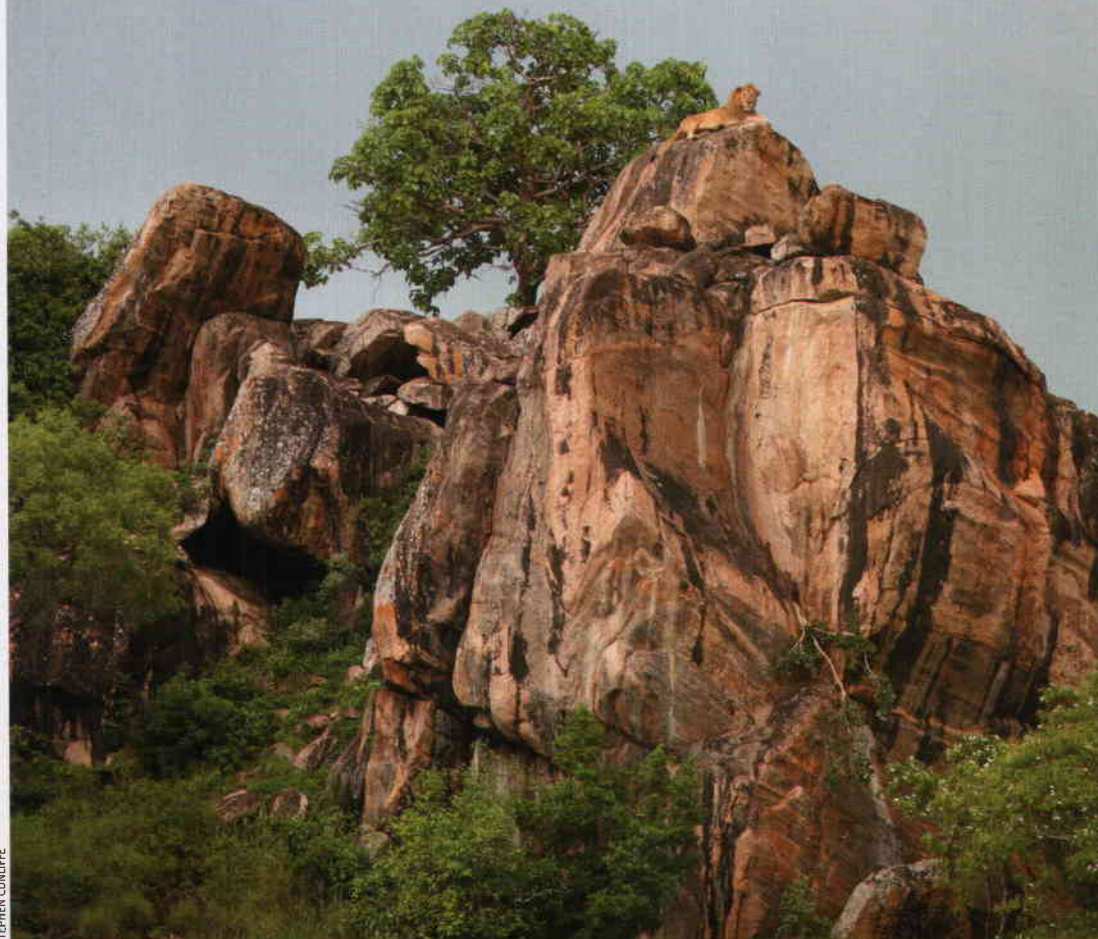
### Specialist operators

**The Uganda Safari Company** ([www.safariuganda.com](http://www.safariuganda.com))  
**Volcanoes Safaris** ([www.volcanoessafaris.com](http://www.volcanoessafaris.com))  
**Wild Frontiers** ([www.wildfrontiers.com](http://www.wildfrontiers.com))

### Climate

The best season to visit Kidepo and Semliki is from January to March. Semliki is also dry in August and September.

The lion king of Kidepo surveys his domain



STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

The lodge itself is in the broad valley of the Narus River, where the game is more varied. I saw a herd of more than 500 buffalo, most of the park's giraffe, and elephant with (very) young calves. I also got close to two prides of lion and heard leopard every night.

But Kidepo does have a problem and it's not clear what could, or should, be done about it. The climate is changing – and not to every animal's liking. Twenty years ago the park was semi-desert and then suffered from drought, but for the last ten years the wet seasons have been getting longer. Now they stretch unbroken through ten months of the year, and the grassland, too wet to burn off, grows tough and tall. The only animals who can cope with the conditions are buffalo and elephant; signature species such as the Bright's gazelle and oryx have long gone and even zebra are struggling, as the too-rich diet inflames their ankles, making them easy prey for the plentiful predators.

However, it's still a great place for the serious naturalist, as in this remote part of Africa there are plenty of discoveries to be made. After a few months in Kidepo, Apoka's resident guide, Joe Duplessis, still finds something new every day, whether unrecorded bird species or snakes that defy definition. "There's plenty up here that doesn't match the wildlife pictures," he told me after tentatively identifying a juvenile snake as a velvety-green night adder. "None of the professors who write the wildlife books have been up here."

Jonathan Wright's ambitions remain undimmed.

He has built the first boutique hotel in Kampala, Emin Pasha, and is bidding for concessions in Murchison National Park and – to add gorillas to his circuit – at Bwindi. Over the last ten years Uganda has become infinitely more settled: even the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, Joseph Kony, has been lured into talks. As The Uganda Safari Company's network of luxury lodges spreads across the country, it's to be hoped that the resulting tourist income will help to regenerate once-traumatised areas of the natural world, as well as push forward the nation's safari scene. 🌿

Taking a real walk on the wild side – Kidepo National Park



*Below right:*

You'll be swimming in style at Jonathan Wright's lodge in Semliki

Elephants – one of the few species liking Kidepo's changing climate



THE UGANDA SAFARI COMPANY (2)