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Are These Luxury Lodges Uganda's Best-Kept Secret?

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Apoka Safari Lodge in
Uganda

Photo: Alamy

Uganda is revered for its gorilla-filled jungles, awe-inspiring Nile waterfalls, and untamed, un-touristy safaris through the savannah. But just recently, Americans have woken up to this dreamy destination: The number of annual U.S. visitors grew by 31 percent from 2010 to 2014, according to data from the Uganda Tourism Board. And when I visited in February, the general manager at Apoka Safari Lodge confirmed that the majority of their guests today are from the U.S. (Thank the strong U.S. dollar and a stateside demand for

uncrowded, off-the-beaten-path experiences.)

This is great news for the friendly, landlocked country, where newly constructed, breathtaking lodges have cropped up in many of its 10 national parks (all with amenities you might not expect from their remote locations: Hot showers, flush toilets, and delicious restaurants come standard). From deluxe “glamping” tents just steps from the Nile to private lodges tucked into a tangle of rainforest, here are seven of the best accommodations in the Pearl of Africa.



Mahogany Springs Safari Lodge

Photo: Courtesy of Mahogany Springs Safari Lodge

Mahogany Springs Safari Lodge

Tucked into the Virunga Volcanoes mountain range, this property comprises sun-splashed cottages and a sweeping main lodge overlooking the Munyanga River and the lush Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. Unwind next to the fireplace or on the wraparound terrace after a day of gorilla tracking; Bwindi is one of a small handful of places in the world where humans can come within feet of mountain gorillas, who eat, play, and nap without giving their visitors a second thought.



Apoka Safari Lodge

Photo: Courtesy of Apoka Safari Lodge

Apoka Safari Lodge

Kidepo Valley National Park inhabits Uganda's northernmost tip, a short distance from South Sudan and Kenya. This is the safari vacation you've always pictured: a dry, fawn-colored landscape dotted with Tim Burton–esque acacia shrubs and fat Kigelia trees, and the roar of lions rolling in from distant hills. Apoka Safari Lodge is a shocking oasis of luxury in the middle of the rugged savannah; there's a stunning open-air main lodge, a curated handicraft shop, and even a luxe swimming pool, not to mention 10 handsome cottages with private terraces and outdoor stone baths. Come for the remoteness; on three half-day game drives, my group encountered elephants, zebras, giraffes, lions—and zero other jeeps.



Kyambura Gorge Lodge

Photo: Courtesy of Kyambura Gorge Lodge

Kyambura Gorge Lodge

This eight-cottage lodge, housed in a converted coffee processing plant, has sweeping views of both the thickly wooded Kyambura Gorge and the wonderfully biodiverse Queen Elizabeth National Park. The 764-square-mile park is home to almost 100 mammal species and more than 600 species of birds, thanks to its varied habitat, from papyrus swamps to crater lakes to open, rolling savannah. Kyambura Gorge is contemporary and luxe, built from locally sourced, environmentally friendly materials fitted and made by local craftsmen. Plus, it's an ideal home base for birding, tracking chimpanzees, and viewing lions, leopards, elephants, and more, as well as visiting the Rwenzori Sculpture Foundry & Gallery, a foundry and sculpture gallery featuring the work of European and Ugandan artists (Damien Hirst helped fund its construction by donating a work).



Baker's Lodge

Photo: Courtesy of Baker's Lodge

Baker's Lodge

On the grounds of this Nile-front resort, a little sign posted next to a suspended rattan seat bears a warning: “Beware of crocodiles.” The reptiles, along with hippopotami, buffalo, baboons, monitor lizards, and a menagerie of other creatures, are wont to wander along the river, past this property’s plain air lodge, eight thatched “safari suites,” and little crops of outdoor seating. With Baker’s as a home base, go on a water safari past herds of elephants, hippos, and more crocs than you’d like, and stop at Murchison Falls National Park’s eponymous waterfall for a hike to the top: At the top, the Nile, miles wide at other points, squeezes over a gorge just 23 feet across.



Ishasha Wilderness Camp

Photo: Courtesy of Ishasha Wilderness Camp

Ishasha Wilderness Camp

Queen Elizabeth National Park isn't just a birdwatcher's paradise; the Ishasha Sector is also home to one of just two known populations of tree-climbing lions. (Yes, the pride literally can be found relaxing among the knobby branches of fig trees.) Ishasha Wilderness Camp, a constellation of 10 luxury canvas tents perched next to the Ntungwe River, is the only camp situated inside the park, for easy access to safari drives and sundowners overlooking the pristine African bush. The property also arranges sunrise hot-air balloon rides, where the sight of predators on the prowl rewards those willing to wake up before dawn.



Crater Safari Lodge

Photo: Courtesy of Crater Safari Lodge

Crater Safari Lodge

Kibale National Park in southern Uganda protects a swath of lush, misty tropical rainforest. A few minutes' drive from its border is Crater Safari Lodge, a nine-cottage property on the banks of Nyinabulitwa Crater Lake. There's a mobile spa facility and individually designed furniture, and each room has its own spectacular view of the pristine lake.



Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge

Photo: Courtesy of Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge

Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge

One of the best-known (and most-awarded) lodges in the country is Clouds, a pioneering eco hotel at the foot of Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. The lodge consists of a chalet-like main lodge and seven guesthouses, built from local volcanic stone and outfitted with handwoven rugs and works from the country's most renowned artists. At almost 7,000 feet above sea level, Clouds is Uganda's highest inn—and it's not unusual for visitors to see the Virunga volcanoes glowing amber against the darkened sky.