

UGANDA

unleashed

BY SUE WATT

Violence kept travellers away from Uganda for decades – but the pristine landscapes and abundant wildlife of this east African nation are once again in the spotlight, and conservationists hope this is enough to protect the country's scarce primate communities.

Bili knows exactly what she wants. She races towards me, grabs my breast pocket and shoves her hand inside. And as chimpanzees can be six times stronger than humans, there's little I can do to stop her. The peanuts in my pocket were intended to be handed out to all the chimps during my hour's integration with them – Bili takes the lot and they are gone in seconds.

The other six chimps surround my partner, Will. Baron, a 10-year-old, clutches Will's hand as he feeds him some nuts. A couple of smaller chimps wait quietly, knowing their place in the group hierarchy but Afrika, a cheeky three-year-old, doesn't yet know her status, and tugs impatiently at Will's overalls, only to be shoved aside as Bili turns her attention to the new supply of food.

She's the senior chimp in this particular group of seven who've been brought into the huge enclosure on Ngamba Island, a chimpanzee sanctuary on Uganda's Lake Victoria, for this morning's integration

hour. All 44 chimps on the island have been rescued, either because their parents have been killed in snares or traps, or they've been removed from circuses, laboratories or homes where they'd been kept as pets, usually in appalling conditions.

It takes a lot of time and effort to introduce new, highly territorial chimps into an existing chimp community, and this integration exercise is part of that carefully managed process.

Only three visitors a day are allowed to mix with the chimps in this way, and they have to comply with stringent medical requirements so as to protect the primates from human diseases.

Sharing more than 98 percent of our DNA but with no natural resistance to our infections, the entire group of chimps could be wiped out if they came into contact with something as innocuous as a common cold. At US\$400 (AU\$362), an hour with the chimps isn't cheap, but the





money helps fund the conservation work of the Chimpanzee Sanctuary & Wildlife Conservation Trust (CSWCT), the group that manages this otherwise unpopulated island.

And the hour itself is priceless: this direct contact with our closest cousins – often elusive in the wild – is a rare and special experience. Normally, the integration takes place during a morning walk with the new chimps into the island’s 40-hectare forest, helping them to gain familiarity with each other and with the environment in which the integrated chimps spend their days.

But the day of our visit, a particularly aggressive adult chimp has decided not to return to the sanctuary base overnight and has remained in the forest, making it unsafe for us to walk there.

Instead, our hour is spent in a vast enclosure for the rescued chimps that leads down to the shores of Lake Victoria.

After the peanuts run out, we amble through the enclosure, the chimps scurrying around us. The two regular caregivers,

Philip and Yusuf, know them all, by name and by nature – each has a distinct personality, they say, just like humans.

Bili is definitely in charge – she’s quite large and commanding, sitting beside us as we recline on the grass, still searching for peanuts. Ikuru, with her dark, shiny fur, seems quiet and passive. Yoyo is noisy and boisterous, playing with the younger chimps, while Nagoti, tall and greying, watches timidly.

But it is Afrika who takes centre stage. A toddler the size of an average two-year-old child, she’s always pushing the boundaries, just like her human equivalents. She climbs on us, grooming our hair, play-biting, somersaulting on our laps, captivating us with her antics. I tickle her tummy and the grin on her face is unforgettable. “That’s her laughing,” Philip explains as she makes a funny “ha ha” noise, like a human chuckle but deeper.

I fall instantly in love with her and, as we walk on, she holds both my hands and walks up my legs to be

carried. Baron stays constantly at Afrika’s side, watching over her; he’s probably in love with her, too. Not to be outdone, he takes Will’s hands, hoping to be carried as well – but as he weighs considerably more than Afrika, he has to settle for Will swinging him around instead.

You don’t have to take part in the integration exercise to enjoy the chimps. Since the island’s forest is too small to sustain the chimp population, the caregivers feed them four times a day to supplement their foraging diet, and day visitors are allowed to watch from a high wooden platform above the enclosure.

Like a playground full of hyperactive children, the chimps squeal and shriek and yelp with excitement, increasing their intensity until they reach a piercing crescendo that reverberates in our ears. But once they all have something to eat – avocado or banana or jackfruit, it’s as if someone has suddenly switched a volume control to mute: a blanket of silence descends.

At dusk, the chimps are encouraged to sleep in one of four huge interconnecting cages decked out with hammocks, ropes and tyres for them to swing on. Here, feeding time is just as manic. The chimps jump around, reaching through the bars for bowls of millet porridge and bananas. My attention is drawn to Tumbo, a huge ape with light-grey hair and a wise, caring face, sitting quietly in a hammock amid the madness. “He’s only 22,” Yusuf tells me. “He’s just gone grey prematurely.”

As the feeding nears its end, I catch sight of Philip stroking Afrika’s hand through the bars as she sips her porridge. Before the CSWCT rescued her, Afrika had been kept in a wooden box with no room to stretch and, fed only on popcorn and bananas, had been suffering from malnutrition. Philip cared for her for three months in quarantine, nurturing her back to health, until she was well enough to join the sanctuary. “You can’t help having favourites,” he tells me.

With the chimps settling down to sleep, another noise takes the place of their squeals: the sound of birdsong. Ngamba Island is home to more than 120 bird species,



ANIMAL INSTINCT

Clockwise from above: Beautiful Bili on Ngamba Island; a weaver nest on the same island; admiring Ngamba’s chimpanzees from a feeding platform.

Previous spread: In Queen Elizabeth National Park, the lions find respite from the heat up trees.

Next spread: The semi-open dining lodge at Ngamba Island Tented Camp.

including Egyptian geese, ducks, egrets and sacred ibises on the lake’s shore. Masked lapwings squawk if anyone walks close to their chicks nesting on the ground; pied kingfishers squeeze in and out of their nest-holes on the banks, feeding their young. We take in the scene from the deck of our huge accommodations at Ngamba Island Tented Camp. Gazing over the water, we see two chubby monitor lizards, each about a metre long, lolloping towards the bank. A heron and a hammerkop are stalking fish in the shallows and a pair of vivid yellow weavers is building an almost perfectly circular nest, suspended by a thread in a tree like a Christmas decoration.

After a delicious four-course meal in the dining lodge, we walk back to our tent – one of only four on the island – under a star-filled sky and a sliver of a moon. We fall asleep with the sound of the lake lapping gently onto the shore: the perfect lullaby.

You don’t have to stay on Ngamba overnight but somehow, you appreciate it more if you do – it’s a special island with very special residents.



Four more Ugandan wilderness experiences

QUEEN ELIZABETH NATIONAL PARK

Uganda’s flagship national park nestles in the shadows of the Rwenzori Mountains in the Albertine Rift Valley. Habituated chimps can be tracked in the 100-metre-deep Kyambura Gorge; more elusive wild chimps hide in the tropical Maramagambo Forest. QENP is also renowned for the tree-climbing lions that frequent its southern Ishasha Plains, not to mention 614 bird species. To see how locals live alongside Uganda’s wild animals, visit the village of Kazinga Bukorwe, where a community tourism project supports grassroots development.



BWINDI IMPENETRABLE NATIONAL PARK

Uganda's prime gorilla-tracking location, the densely vegetated Bwindi Impenetrable Forest is home to three families of habituated primates and more than half the world's wild mountain gorilla population of around 700. Tracking in groups of eight, you only have one hour with the animals once they're found and there are strict medical criteria – you're strongly urged not to track, for instance, if you have any contagious illness. Hiking through the rainforest can be tough, but encountering the gorillas is an intense and rewarding experience. The US\$500 (AU\$450) permit is rarely begrudged by people who glimpse the animals, particularly since it contributes to their conservation.

THE BATWA EXPERIENCE

An ancient tribe that lived in Uganda's forests for more than 4,000 years, the Batwa Pygmies became conservation refugees when they were evicted, without compensation, from Bwindi National Park in 1992 to protect the gorillas. Stigmatised and living in desperate poverty, the tribe, along with their unique heritage and intimate knowledge of the forests, was dying out. Today, visitors can spend a day with the Pygmies in a "living museum": a stretch of forest adjacent to the national park that preserves examples of traditional Batwa culture for the tribe's children. Batwa communities benefit from tourists' fees.

KIBALE FOREST NATIONAL PARK

Chimps are among the 13 primate species that have made their homes in Kibale, along with red and black-and-white colobus monkeys, vervet monkeys and olive baboons. Guided walks to track habituated chimps take place twice a day from Kanyanchu River Camp, and sightings, though not guaranteed, are frequent. Adjacent to the National Park is Bigodi Wetland Sanctuary, where walks around the fascinating Magombe Swamp are led by local guides with intimate knowledge of the area and its monkeys, rare birds and myriad butterflies. All the money raised goes to local communities. •

Photography by Will Whitford.

travel facts

GETTING THERE

Under a code-share agreement, South African Airways (SAA) and Qantas fly direct from Perth and Sydney to Johannesburg. From here, SAA have connections on to Entebbe/Kampala in Uganda.

- Qantas. 131-313; qantas.com.au
- South African Airways. 1300-435-972; flysaa.com

Kenya Airways offers daily flights from Sydney to Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, with onward connections to Entebbe/Kampala. 1300-787-310 or 61-2/9767-4310; kenya-airways.com

GETTING AROUND

Tour companies offering guided trips around Africa include:

- Adventure World. 1300-295-049; adventureworld.com.au
- Creative Holidays. 1300-747-400; creativeholidays.com
- Rainbow Tours. 44-20/7226-1004; rainbowtours.co.uk
- Wildlife Safari. 1800-435-972; wildlifesafari.com.au
- Wild Frontiers. 256-414/321-479; wildfrontiers.co.ug

WHERE TO STAY

- Gorilla Forest Camp. 254-20/695-0002; sanctuaryretreats.com
- Ishasha Wilderness Camp. 256-414/321-479; wildfrontiers.co.ug
- Jacana Safari Lodge. 256-414/258-273; geolodgesafrica.com
- Kibale Primate Lodge. 256-414/267-153; ugandalodges.com
- Mahogany Springs. 44-20/8736-0713; mahoganysprings.com
- Ngamba Island Tented Camp. 256-414/320-662; ngambaisland.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

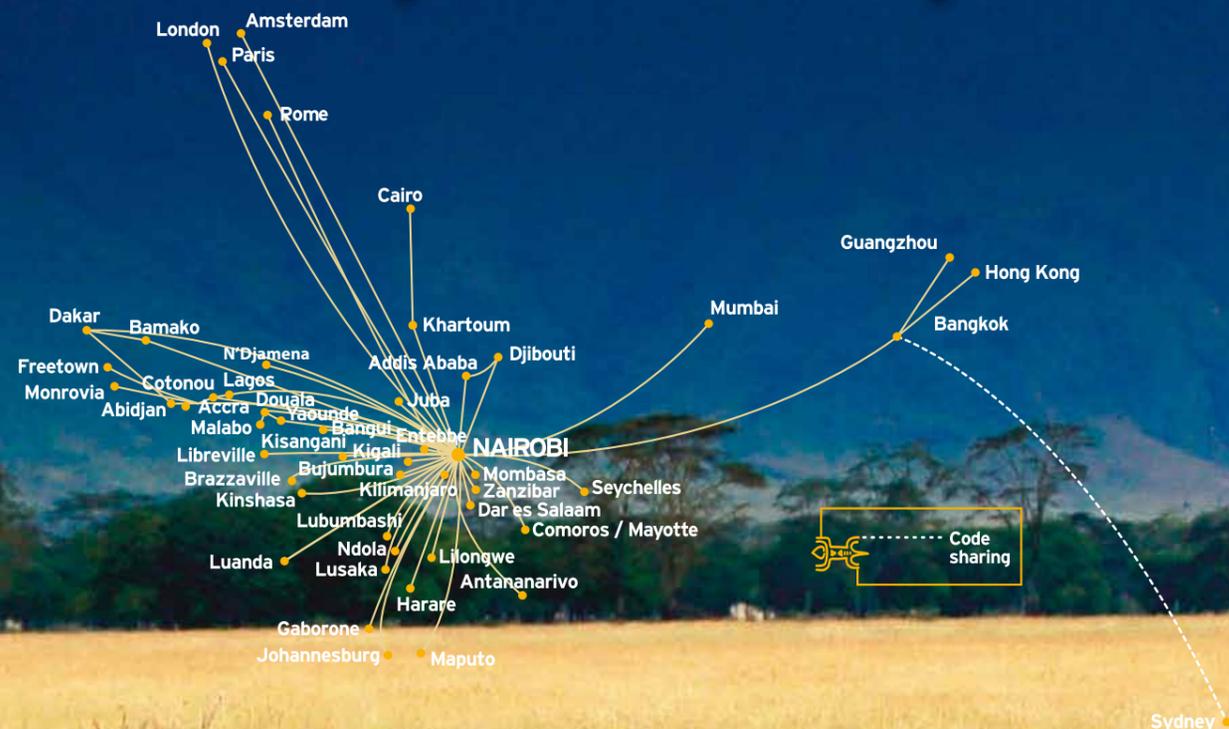
Before visiting Ngamba, be sure to check the island's website for guest medical requirements: these include a negative test for TB, proven immunity to measles and current vaccinations against yellow fever and seasonal flu, tetanus, polio, Hepatitis A and B, and more. Ngamba Island Chimpanzee Sanctuary & Wildlife Conservation Trust: 256-414/320-662; ngambaisland.com

For Uganda's National Parks, including QENP, Bwindi and Kibale, contact the Uganda Wildlife Authority: 256-414/355-000; ugandawildlife.org

For the Batwa Cultural Experience: 256-77/739-6256; batwaexperience.com

For Bigodi Wetland Sanctuary guided walks: 256-77/246-8113; bigodi-tourism.org

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