



**BIRDING TOURS UGANDA:  
GENERAL INFORMATION**



## HEALTH AND SAFETY

Please read the Centers for Disease Control website's section on Uganda (<https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/uganda>) very carefully, noting that anti-malarial drugs are needed and that a yellow fever vaccination certificate is needed to enter the country. Insect repellent and quick-drying long-sleeved shirts are a good idea, not only to help prevent mosquito bites but also to protect against other (simply pesky) insects such as biting flies.

Avoid travelers' diarrhea by never drinking tap water or eating unpeeled fruit or salads. Unlimited bottled water is provided free of charge throughout the tour in the vehicles (we purchase this inexpensively at grocery stores; bottled water bought at restaurants is not covered).

In Uganda large animals such as elephants, hippos, lions, leopards, gorillas, chimpanzees, crocodiles, and others pose a risk and need to be treated with extreme respect. Small animals such as spiders, snakes, etc. can also, of course, pose a safety risk.

You'll find the people of Uganda to be extremely friendly and helpful, but (like in most parts of the world) crime is possible (especially in the big cities). Always watch your valuables (although we certainly have never had any problems on any of our tours to Uganda).

Steep trails (see for example the part on gorilla trekking below) can also be a hazard.

## GENERAL

Uganda, "the Pearl of Africa" is about the same size as the state of Oregon, yet boasts over 1000 bird species and Africa's greatest concentration of primate species! This spectacular faunal diversity is partly explained by the dramatic variety of habitats that change constantly (and sometimes rapidly) as one drives across the country. This diversity of terrain and habitats also means that birders visiting Uganda need to be prepared for all kinds of different temperatures and weather patterns. At arrival in the hot and humid Entebbe airport one does not necessarily realize that a couple of days later one will likely be wearing fleeces high in the volcanic mountains straddling the border with Rwanda and the DRC; despite being equatorial, it can get cold in both Bwindi Impenetrable National Park and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park (not usually quite as low as freezing point, though). It's best to bring many layers; while quite often conditions will be unpleasantly hot and humid, at other times people get surprised how cold it is. Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (especially its higher-altitude Ruhija section) and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park often leave people feeling markedly chilly.

The country of Uganda is full of water and has vast papyrus swamps (inhabited by an exciting variety of spectacular birds including Shoebill), shares a large part of Africa's largest lake (Victoria) with its neighbors, and has some verdant forest thanks to the good amount of rain it receives. This also means that one has to be prepared for the possibility of rain, drizzle, and mist, although often this does not pose a major problem as we do run our set departure Uganda tours in

the dry season, which covers the months from June to August. This is also when birds are in breeding plumage and singing and the intra-African migrants are present.

The “take-home” message is to bring layers, including waterproofs (which hopefully you won’t actually need, but which you certainly should carry, just in case, while gorilla trekking or on long birding walks). A nominal fee can be paid to porters for carrying gear during the longer birding walks and gorilla/chimp trekking. A waterproof day backpack is advised (whether you carry it or the porter does, during the birding and primate walks) – for waterproof layers, your water bottle, etc. Waterproof bags for placing cameras, cell phones, etc. into, in case that it does rain, are recommended.

Accommodation is by no means luxurious, and “load-shedding” is common – this is when the electricity supply is interrupted because of Uganda’s limited capacity for power generation. At other times electricity at some hotels will be from generators that are switched off at certain times (e.g. between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.). The guides will advise on the exact details/generator times during the tour. Rooms are not always heated and can actually get slightly chilly at night up in the mountains. At other times heat and humidity will of course be more of a problem.

Electricity in Uganda is 220 V and with UK-type plug sockets – full details are shown at <http://www.power-plugs-sockets.com/uganda/> . Please do bring adapters (and in some cases a currency converter in order not to damage camera or other equipment, noting that voltage is twice that in North America).

The Ugandan Shilling (see <http://www.xe.com/currency/ugx-ugandan-shilling> for exchange rate, etc.) is the currency. You can draw this local currency using major credit cards (especially Visa and Mastercard) at ATMs (which can be found at the airport and in towns along the way – please do ask the guides a couple of days in advance when you need another ATM stop to replenish cash!). Major credit cards can be used for some purchases and to buy drinks and get laundry done at some hotels – but a supply of local cash is also essential, as some of the accommodations are remote and do not take cards (and neither do folks selling gifts and souvenirs along the route). US dollar cash is easily exchanged for local currency. Traveler’s checks are no longer used much, are extremely difficult to cash, and are not advised.

In terms of books, “The Birds of East Africa” field guide and the associated app (detailed at <http://birdingecotours.com/field-guides-to-africa-what-to-take-into-the-field/>) are highly recommended for Uganda.

### **PARTICULARS OF THE SHOEBILL AND ALBERTINE RIFT ENDEMIC TOUR**

Most of the trip is not very strenuous. However, there are several walks that take at least half a day, sometimes the whole day. Gorilla trekking can take 2 to 14 hours, depending on where the gorilla family is on the day you do the trekking (it’s all about luck, or lack thereof!). The gorilla

trekking is in a mountainous area, so expect to walk up and down a lot. Most of the time one has to leave the trail completely to get to where the gorillas are. This can involve some serious “bush-bashing” through the undergrowth; proper hiking boots with good grip are essential. Snakes and forest elephants lurk in the area; this is wild Africa. So be prepared, with proper clothing. For those folks who have problems walking, if you’re willing to pay at very least double the price of the gorilla trekking, you can be carried on a stretcher to see these great apes! So, if money is less of an issue, even this day does not have to be strenuous as the porters will prepare a stretcher for you on the spot. Strictly one hour is spent with the gorillas after meeting up with them – this is to keep disturbance to a minimum.

Chimpanzee trekking is usually quite a lot easier, as it is over flatter terrain. Of course, it still can involve quite a walk through a humid forest.

Those opting out of the gorilla and chimp trekking can catch up on rest and “regroup” at the lodge or will be taken birding if preferred.

The birding hike down to Mubwindi Swamp is one of the most exciting birding walks of the entire trip, as one often sees a constant stream (kept up through much of the day) of Albertine Rift endemics, the top one being African Green Broadbill, which is unfortunately right at the bottom around the swamp. One spends the whole morning slowly walking down; some people then struggle, as the entire afternoon is spent walking back – a long uphill for several hours! Mgahinga Gorilla National Park (near the start of the trip) is also strenuous but involves walking uphill first, then downhill later. The extension is not particularly strenuous but a moderate level of fitness is ideal nevertheless for birding walks at the Royal Mile and other places.

Those folks who are unfit (or who prefer just to have more of a vacation) can certainly feel free to opt out of the strenuous activities. The lodges are pleasant places to spend the occasional day relaxing, and we have found that photographers sometimes get quite good bird pictures by staying behind at the accommodations while the others embark on long walks. Some folks also opt out of pre-breakfast birding or night owling if they want a less tiring trip. We have found that a mix of hardcore birders and relaxed birding spouses have thoroughly enjoyed this trip to Uganda in the past since it is, on most days (except when driving between sites), easy to opt out of activities (for the less hardcore folks) and to enjoy “off” time around the hotels.

There are some boat trips on this tour. The trip to look for Shoebill at the Mabamba Swamp is in small dugout canoes (due to limited space in each “mokoro”, the group splits up into different canoes, which, however, stick close together as they travel out onto the water to seek Shoebill). Other wildlife-viewing boat trips such as on the Nile at Murchison Falls are on larger boats with cabins.

Sun protection (sunglasses, sunblock, hats/caps) are essential on the boat trips and on some of the walks.

A change of shoes is always good in case your boots get soaked from rain or walking through damp areas – a pair of lighter walking shoes is good to have along on the trip as a backup and for



shorter walks. A third pair of shoes in the form of flip flops is nice to have for longer vehicle journeys and for relaxing around the lodges.

There might be swimming pools available, so swimwear can also be packed.

There are a few long drives during the tour that can take half a day or more between sites. Road work has been ongoing for several years in Uganda, so do be prepared to travel along the unpaved side of the road for many miles at times – this gets dusty.

### **SOME THINGS WE RECOMMEND YOU BRING**

(GENERAL LIST FOR ALL TOURS – SPECIFIC DESTINATIONS MAY NEED FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS)

Binoculars (the guides cannot lend theirs)

A spotting scope and tripod or window mount (optional)

Field guides

Any other birding equipment

Photographic equipment (optional)

Spare batteries for photographic and other gear

Flashlight/torch/headlamp with spare batteries

Toiletries

Personal medication (including anti-malaria drugs). We recommend packing important medication (and a change of clothes) in your hand luggage in the unlikely event of lost luggage

Some countries might require a valid yellow fever certificate, and we advise visiting a travel clinic or your family doctor and visiting the Centers for Disease Control website for health advice

Rain gear

Walking stick that can be kept in the vehicle?

Alarm clock

Passport and, if required, visa

Copies of passport, medical insurance policies, and other important documents that can be left with the Birding Ecotours office or at your home

Money for alcoholic beverages, gifts, tips, items of a personal nature, etc. Traveler's checks are often difficult to use except in the USA, but Visa and Mastercard are widely accepted including for drawing local currency at ATMs

Hiking boots plus another pair of shoes and sandals

Swimming wear

Cap/hat and sunglasses

Sunscreen

Mosquito repellent

Long-sleeved clothes as a precaution against biting insects