

SHINING A LIGHT ON THE DARK CONTINENT

During a month exploring Uganda after volunteering wildernesses, **Mark Eveleigh** finds that the local wildlife seems to want to play a more 'paws-on' part in what has become one of the continent's biggest-ever cartographic and conservation drives



From somewhere out on the heat-rippled savannah, a harsh cough surprises me. I look up from my laptop monitor into the glare of the sun to see seven lionesses staring at me. They are spread across a rock not more than 70 metres away and have a look of hungry alertness in their amber eyes.

I have been working for more than an hour, feet up on the bullbars of the Land Rover, leaning back comfortably under the soothing heat of Uganda's highland sun. The lionesses are clearly not stalking me, but I get the impression that they've been watching me for quite some time.

One of my primary motivations for coming to the remote Kidepo Valley was to see some of the area's famous big cats. But apart from a fleeting glimpse of a shadowy pride stealing across the savannah on my first evening, this is my first clear sighting. And now, I have the unsettling impression that the watcher had become the watched; the hunter the hunted.

Kidepo Valley is often described as Africa's most beautiful national park. Its 1,442 square kilometres of lush green savannah and palm-fringed watercourses nestle among a sensuous curve of steely blue mountains. Kidepo is picture-postcard perfect in a technicolor, widescreen, *Lion King* sort of way, yet it is almost unknown, and attracts only a handful of tourists. We have come here as part of the MAPA Project (Mapping Africa's Protected Areas) with the express intention of shining some light on Uganda's unknown wildernesses.

As one of the country's darkest corners, Kidepo had long been considered one of the project's priorities. Throughout the previous year, teams in expedition-prepared four-wheel-drives had been skirmishing out from MAPA's South African headquarters to map all of the national parks and reserves in South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Zambia, Angola, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Kenya, Burundi and Rwanda. Our task is to map, document and photograph not only Kidepo but another 13 parks and reserves.

By the time of our run-in with the local lions, photographer Eric Nathan and I had already been on the road for more than three weeks. We had mapped the access roads to the famous Bwindi Impenetrable Forest and Ruwenzori Mountains (the 'Mountains of the Moon'), which are off-limits to vehicles, and we had covered every drivable kilometre in the huge Queen Elizabeth and Murchison Falls national parks. We had also explored several remote reserves that few people outside the Ugandan conservation community have even heard of.

MAPPING THE WILDERNESS

The MAPA Project is the brainchild of March Turnbull, who, as a student, left the UK for Cape Town and immediately fell in love with Africa. He worked as development director for the Peace Parks Foundation, but it was in his capacity as a freelance photojournalist that he conceived of the real need for detailed, reliable information on Africa protected areas.

'I started putting together a website that would showcase all of the information about all of the major parks,' he explains when we meet during one of his typically hectic stopovers in Rwanda. 'It was difficult, however, to find a way to recreate accurate, detailed maps until I got involved with the mapping team from Tracks 4 Africa, who create technically brilliant maps for GPS. Then we had a meeting with Google Earth and, with them on board, it sort of became a case of the tail wagging the dog.'



PREVIOUS SPREAD: at a makeshift campsite in Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda's largest national park, the author transmits the day's GPS data from the MAPA Project laptop using a satellite phone; **ABOVE:** one of seven lionesses from a pride that spent some time observing the MAPA team at its campsite in Kidepo Valley National Park, on the border with Sudan in northeastern Uganda; **RIGHT:** a giraffe strolls through Kidepo Valley National Park; **BELOW:** an elephant grazes at Ishasha in the far south of Queen Elizabeth National Park in Uganda. The park is on the shores of Lake Edward, one of Africa's Great Lakes, which was renamed Lake Idi Amin during the dictator's rule in the 1970s



ABOVE, FROM TOP: fishing boats on the shore of Uganda's Lake Albert, where life has continued almost unchanged for centuries. Since many remote fishing villages have never been accurately mapped, the outside world remains largely unaware of their existence; a Toyota Land Cruiser, one of two vehicles in the MAPA Project convoy, drives through the savannah of Kidepo Valley National Park; the MAPA Land Rover navigates its way through a herd of distinctive Ankole cattle along a dirt road between Lake Albert and Murchison Falls National Park in western Uganda



Soon, the entire project revolved around the creation of what have become the most accurate maps ever made of Africa's wilderness

areas. A year on, the MAPA Project has already built the biggest 'layer' of indepth conservation data on top of Google Earth's maps of any continent in the world.

'In effect, we're building the world's biggest pinboard,' Turnbull says with a smile. 'It's all just shoulders for other people to stand on: conservationists and travellers can add their own rich content for free, and so can gain credible exposure for their projects, reserves and blogs. MAPA might have got one ball rolling, but I don't know the ins and outs of mandrill conservation in Nigeria, for example. More importantly, I'm not the dedicated person who is actually doing the saving. This project is for them... or, even more so, for the mandrills.'

We've rendezvoused in Kigali, Rwanda, to collect our expedition-prepared Land Rover Defender and to meet a team of South Africans who will be travelling in convoy with us. Deon de Jongh and Taryn Mitchell are going to map the Ugandan parks with us, but will also hit the road afterwards for another month to try to map the African giant, Ethiopia. This would signal the end of Phase One for the MAPA Project, but Turnbull is already making plans to get Phase Two (north and west Africa) underway for 2010.

Some of the areas we have to map are in remote and difficult country and would be foolhardy to attempt with only one vehicle. As it is, we still map alone, but it's reassuring to know that there is always another vehicle within a few hours' drive if we need to call them on the emergency satellite phone.

However, a more important reason for travelling in convoy lies in the route, which takes us through the 'bandit badlands' of northern Uganda. Word has it that the situation is still tense in the semi-arid bushlands that are home to the fierce Karamajong warriors, and where Uganda rubs up against the guerrilla country of southern Sudan and northern Kenya's Turkana territory. US marines are still in the Karamajong country, brokering disarmament agreements among the various cattle-raiding clans, and although Kidepo National Park itself is considered safe, both the Foreign Office and the US government are advising against travel through the area that surrounds the park.

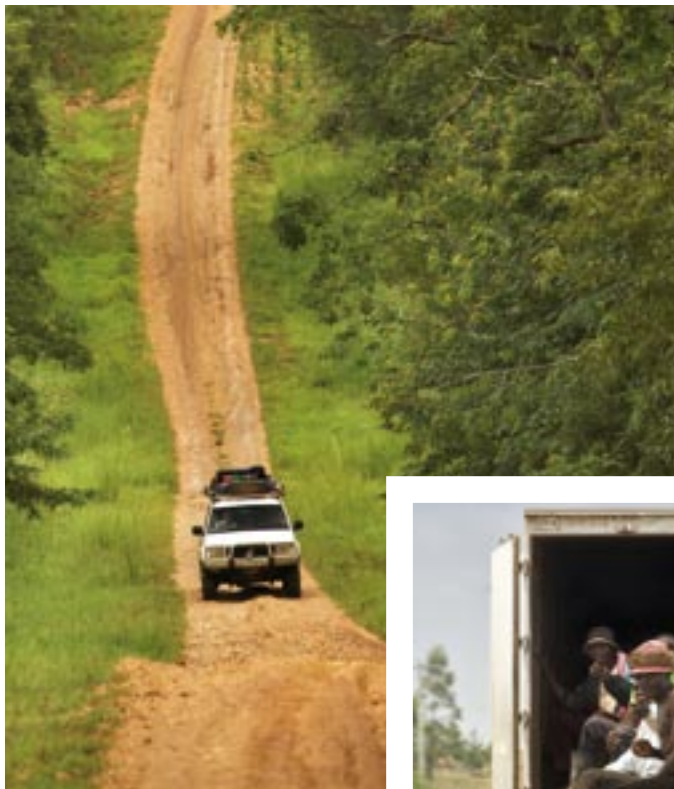
Even in the 'forbidden north', however, Uganda continues to be one of the friendliest countries in which I've travelled. The greatest danger lies in the need to drive almost constantly with one hand while your other arm hangs out the window, ever ready to respond to the frantic, cheery waves of every passer-by on the road. And your greatest worry is that, after days of these phenomenally effusive greetings, you're perhaps not responding with a sufficiently delighted and beaming smile to every random wayfarer who greets you from the roadside with a happy 'Hi *mzungu!*'

TRAVAILS ON THE TRAIL

We are the 30th MAPA team to hit the African trail, and in the course of those 'tours of duty', there have been countless dramatic incidents. Vehicles have been bogged in Zambian riverbeds and overheated Toyotas added yet more steam to Ugandan



ERIC NATHAN



PREVIOUS PAGE: the author surveys the landscape from the campsite in the Kabwoya Wildlife Reserve on the shores of Lake Albert, Uganda; **FAR LEFT:** the MAPA Land Cruiser on a dirt road in Murchison Falls National Park; **LEFT:** labourers on the back of a logging truck heading out of Fort Portal, a town in western Uganda; **ABOVE:** a buffalo enjoys the attention of a group of oxpeckers on the savannah below Murchison Falls National Park

rainforests. There have been scary moments with blown tyres on Zimbabwean potholes, and one vehicle ended up on its roof on the shore of Lake Malawi. There were two cases of malaria and several charging elephants in Botswana.

The outside of these vehicles has taken quite a hammering and the inside has no doubt seen a fair few screaming arguments (and many more sullen silences) between co-drivers. At least one couple seem to have weathered the storm pretty well, however; they got married in Livingstone at the end of their expedition.

Turnbull himself was bitten by a night adder in northern Zambia and his foot swelled up like a balloon. But, as often happens in the bush, they were so far off the beaten track that there was nothing that could be done but to 'relax' and wait for the venom to disperse.

'At first, it didn't really occur to me just how much worry would be involved in sending all these people out into the wilderness,' Turnbull admits. 'Then the first team went out and there I was, hovering around my phone like a nervous parent, waiting for calls.'

'On the very first night, they called in to say that they were hopelessly stuck in a sandy riverbed. They hadn't even started digging yet and it was almost nightfall. I told them to get the important things out of the car and bivouac on the riverbank (they had roof tents, unfortunately). There was a long pause and they said, "Well, there are elephants here..."'

'I explained that it would be much more dangerous sleeping in a riverbed at the start of the rainy season. They said that they couldn't see any rain, and suddenly I realised

I was speaking to people who knew nothing about overlanding on an African scale. It could be raining way upcountry and you'd never know. They got the car out in the morning. I couriered some 4x4 DVDs up to them and by the end, they were fantastic. They just learned it.'

Technically, too, the MAPA work system requires a bit of preliminary training. A Garmin GPS logs every section of every driven trail, and while one of the team concentrates on driving, the other is responsible for logging junctions, viewpoints, campsites and anything else of interest as waypoints, and for shooting photographs of these landmarks and of the road in general.

At the end of the day, when camp is pitched, the first chore is to upload all of this information to the laptop and to send it back to MAPA HQ via a satellite-phone internet rig, along with a blog post of the day's events. There have been many evenings when we were still logging this information long after the equatorial sun had plummeted over the horizon and thrown us into an eerily abrupt darkness.

Many long days driving the dusty trails of the Ugandan wilderness are followed by evenings working in remote bushcamps amid the roars, bellows, coughs and honks of lions, elephants, leopards and hippos. Most nights in Kidepo, we work to the unforgettable sound of lions roaring out on the plains.

But then again, for the time being at least, lions are still more common than tourists in Uganda's remote and beautiful Kidepo National Park. And, as Turnbull points out, the work we were doing there was as much for their benefit as for the future visitors who would follow in our tyre tracks. **G**

— GET INVOLVED —
For more information on the MAPA Project, visit www.mapaproject.org. The project is keen to hear from anyone with something to contribute to conservation in Africa