Uganda

Country Facts
Population: 32,369,558
Languages: English, Luganda, Swahili
Predominant Religions: Christian, Islam, traditional
Voltage Requirements: 240 volts at 50Hz
Telephone Codes: 256, country code; 41, Kampala city code

Introduction:
Uganda has once again become an outpost of hope in East Africa. As it makes steady progress toward peace and works to improve its tourist facilities, travelers have returned in ever-increasing numbers to enjoy stunning landscape — green rolling hills, lush rain forests, snowcapped mountains, majestic rivers and massive lakes — and fascinating wildlife, including about half of the world’s remaining mountain gorillas.

Uganda has some of Africa’s major attractions. It is bordered to the west by the Ruwenzori Mountains, named a World Heritage Site for their eerie, craggy tips and giant vegetation; and the majestic Virunga volcanoes rise along the southwestern border with Rwanda. It is one of the sources of the Nile that empties out of Lake Victoria — the world’s second-largest lake — at Jinja. It is home to more than 1,000 species of birds, making Uganda one of the richest birding destinations in Africa, and its richly varied savannah wildlife — large herds of elephant, tree-climbing lions, snorting buffalo and peering giraffe — is complemented by one of the highest concentrations of primates on the continent.

Compassion in Uganda:
Compassion International’s ministry in Uganda began in 1980. As of 2010, more than 70,000 children participate in more than 265 child development centers. The Child Survival Program serves more than 1,730 mothers and caretakers and their babies through 42 centers. The Leadership Development Program serves more than 310 students. Compassion partners with churches to help them provide Ugandan children with the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and become all God has created them to be.

Cultural Information:
- Although there are many ethnic groups and various languages in Uganda, English and Swahili are commonly used across the country. (Luganda is the major language spoken in Central Uganda, where Kampala is located.)
- Ugandans treasure their heritage and place great importance on families and clans. In addition, they value economic prosperity, education, and spirituality.
- Handshakes are the standard form of greeting for business people although long-time acquaintances may embrace.
- Female visitors should offer their hand to Ugandan counterparts although locals may be a bit ill at ease during the first meeting.
• Ugandans tend to have effusive personalities and they are genuinely interested in the well-being of their visitors. After the initial greeting, they will make inquiries into health, hotel accommodations, travel problems, weather, and even the family of the visitors. Thorough, friendly answers will be warmly accepted, but curt replies are thought to be rude.

• When you move outside of the major cities and into the countryside, greetings may become more elaborate and ritualistic. Customs may appear odd to visitors, but these ritual greetings are part of a lengthy tradition where visitors are accepted by the group. Visitors should not trivialize these proceedings as this could seriously harm relationships. It may be encouraging for visitors to participate in some of the singing and dancing.

• Meals become simpler the farther one gets from an urban area, but the general theme of meat and starch pervades. Beef, goat, fish and chicken are mainstays, so vegetarians may find it tough going in the countryside. In the cities, most hotels and restaurants are owned by both Ugandan and Asian entrepreneurs, and this is reflected in the varieties of food. A wider variety of dishes (including vegetarian) are available, and larger hotels in Kampala and some other cities feature continental European fare. Note: Visitors with special dietary needs should make the restrictions known in advance.

• Uganda straddles the equator. Visitors to one of the many Ssese Islands in Lake Victoria can swim across the equator.

• A Ugandan bicycle taxi is called a boda-boda. The name literally means “border-border” and originates from the border towns where bicycle taxis are used to cross no-man’s land between the borders. In Kampala, motorbikes are used as boda-bodas and rides can be a little scary.

• Most Ugandans you will encounter speak English. You may find that small children will say “Good morning, teacher” to you. These are the first words of English they learn at school.

• The country of Uganda includes four ancient kingdoms — Buganda, Bunyoro, Ankole and Toro — all of which have oral traditions dating back to the mysterious Batembuzi and Bacwezi kingdoms, centered on Ntusi and Mubende in the 12th century. Uganda is a corruption of Buganda, whose people — known as the Baganda — make up more than one-fifth of the population. The Baganda monarchy was dismantled in 1967 by Milton Obote, but current President Yoweri Museveni reinstated the kabaka (king) in 1993, much to the delight of his people.

Dos and Don’ts:
• Do bargain if you go to the Nakasero Market in central Kampala.
• Don’t take photographs of the military or any government buildings, as your camera may be confiscated. There have been problems with this in central Kampala.
• Do take a bird-identification book for East Africa. Uganda has one of the highest concentrations of birds in the world.
• Do stop at all police roadblocks on the highways and show your passport or visa if requested.
• Do stop at the equator sign on the road between Kampala and Masaka to take a souvenir photograph.
• Don’t swim in freshwater lakes or rivers, as they may contain bilharzia, a liver-destroying parasite.
• Don’t use the mail service for valuables — it’s considered highly unreliable.

Travel Tips

Personal Safety:
Street bombings and threats against the U.S. Embassy raised questions about the safety of travelers in the late 1990s, but the situation has calmed down. Petty crime, such as purse snatching and pickpocketing, is not unheard of in Kampala, but overall crime is less of a problem than in many African capitals.

Two major areas of insecurity in Uganda are in the north, near the border with Sudan, where the rebellion of the Lord’s Resistance Army has flickered off and on since the late 1980s, and in the west, near the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the turmoil of that country might occasionally spill over.

Be aware that rebel activity occasionally forces the government to close national parks, particularly Ruwenzori National Park, in the western Rift Valley. In addition, car-jackings have occurred in several parts of Uganda, and travel by road should be considered unsafe at night. Road conditions worsen considerably during the rainy season.

Leave at home all unnecessary credit cards, social security card, library cards and similar items you may routinely carry in your wallet. Do not take more cash than you reasonably require for that day. Use the room safe or hotel safe to secure valuables as well as additional cash. Secure cash in multiple locations – wallet, various pockets, money belts. Carry items in front pockets, not back pockets. Do not display large sums of money in public; only make visible the amount of money that approximates your purchase. Maintain a close awareness of your purse, wallet, backpack, etc. as well as the people around you. It’s a good idea to keep one hand or arm in constant contact with these items especially in areas of high people traffic. Never leave items with cash in them (purse, wallet, backpack, etc.) on a bus, car, or any other location, even if the vehicle is being watched by Compassion staff or Compassion-hired contractors. Stay alert and be cautious at all times. Don’t take safety & security for granted.

Health:
Sanitary conditions in most restaurants in Uganda can pose problems for some travelers. Most hot, freshly cooked food should be safe; peel fresh fruit and raw vegetables before eating, choose meat that is cooked thoroughly, avoid local dairy products, and assume the water is unsafe (stick with prepackaged or boiled drinks).

Bring all prescription medicines needed for the trip. Hospitals in Kampala are perpetually short of supplies, and there are few medical facilities outside the capital. Consult your physician about obtaining malaria suppressants, and take along plenty of insect repellent. Malaria, including chloroquine-resistant strains, is present in all parts of the country. Be sure to consult
your physician about polio, typhoid and hepatitis vaccinations before departure, as the diseases are present in Uganda. Cholera is also present, though vaccinations for this disease are often ineffective. Several outbreaks of the Ebola virus have been recorded, with most cases in the town of Gulu [in the northern area] and Mabara and Masindi [in the western area].

Be wary of local animals, including domestic cats and dogs, as rabies is a problem. More than 1 million people in Uganda are estimated to be HIV-positive. If you need a blood transfusion, you’ll be better off, statistically speaking, to seek a donor first among other travelers. Skin infections are common: Even the smallest wound should be disinfected and covered with a bandage. The sun can be very strong, so use sunscreen liberally and wear a hat.

We strongly you to contact the CDC [www.cdc.gov] or check with your personal physician for more information about your specific health needs while traveling, including any recommendations for immunizations. Polio, typhoid, hepatitis, and cholera vaccinations may be recommended, as well as anti-malarial medication.

Money:
Uganda’s currency is the Uganda shilling. Exchange rates have been reasonably steady against the U.S. dollar, U.K. pound and euro in recent years. Don’t count on using credit cards in Uganda except at the up-market hotels. Outside of Kampala there are very few ATMs. Traveler’s checks are accepted in some banks, provided that you carry proof of purchase, but not at private exchange bureaus. When changing cash, dollar bills attract a lower exchange rate than larger denominations. Look closely at what you’re given when you change money. Many counterfeit U.S. banknotes, printed on plain paper, are circulating in Uganda. Because of this, Ugandan banks and wildlife authorities do not accept pre-2002 U.S. banknotes.

Weather:
The best times to visit are December through March and June through September. It can be somewhat rainy then, but not as much as in the rainy season, March through June. December through February and June through July are the driest times, when things can even be a bit dusty. Although the country lies astride the equator, most of Uganda is on a plateau 3,600-6,000 feet/900-1,830 meters above sea level, and evenings can be cool.

Dress:
Light, casual clothing is the order of the day, and at night you might want to cover up with long trousers and sleeves, socks and shoes to minimize mosquito bites. A light sweater will come in useful in the highlands, as will a waterproof jacket during the rainy season. Shorts on men are acceptable in informal circumstances, but many Ugandans consider them inappropriate for men whose schooldays are long past. Women should avoid skin-baring attire, especially in towns and villages, where it may give offense.

All information taken from Weissmann Reports, the World Factbook and Compassion International.