



Mark driving his Land Rover through the wilds of Kidepo Valley National Park



FACE TO FACE WITH SEVEN LIONS

KIDEPO VALLEY NATIONAL PARK, UGANDA



It was mid-afternoon and I was battling siesta-hour drowsiness under the hot equatorial sun. My feet were up on the bumper of the Land Rover, and I'd had my head down in my laptop screen for well over an hour. I knew there were hypnotic views down to the shimmering plains, but I was in Kidepo Valley National Park as a volunteer, and I needed to get map data uploaded if I had any chance of exploring the area that afternoon.

Suddenly a harsh cough broke my concentration, like claws slashing a mosquito net, and I instinctively looked up to find myself staring straight into the amber eyes of a lion. It was less than 50m (160ft) away, and after a quick scan of the granite outcrops, I realised it was not alone... there were six others.

Yet, given their relaxed, lazy-looking state – paws coyly crossed – I didn't make a dash for it. That would have felt rather melodramatic as they'd clearly been there a while. Instead I slowly sidled around the Land Rover to ease the door open for a bolthole. I then aimed a hissed whisper over my shoulder towards the tents where my three teammates were dozing: 'Hey guys... some visitors here you might want to meet...'

The lions remained at ease even when we started barbecuing sausages as dusk fell, though they must have been hungry as I was woken that evening by the bellowing of a panicked buffalo being taken down by this Kidepo pride.

By Mark Eveleigh

The Take Away

I realised that I was too often oblivious to life's dramas happening around me. Here I'd not only been blind to the beauty of Africa's most spectacular national park, but I'd allowed an entire pride of lions to walk up to me unnoticed. Looking up is never a bad idea!

The Build Up

Tucked into Uganda's far northeastern corner, Kidepo Valley National Park remains one of Africa's hidden wildernesses. These spectacular plains and valleys cover an area that is only slightly smaller than Greater London. Yet you're a long way from traffic jams here; in fact, it's rare to see another vehicle. That said, Kidepo can get spectacularly congested with herds of elephants, antelope, zebra and marauding lions. The park is also home to 500 bird species and 86 species of

mammal, 28 of which can be found nowhere else in the country. Herds of more than 4000 buffalo often seem to stretch right across the valley to the foothills of Morungole, the sacred mountain of the mysterious Ik tribe.

Kidepo's isolated position, wedged between South Sudan and Kenya's Turkana region, means most visitors opt for a charter flight here rather than the 12-hour road-trip from Entebbe international airport. Either way, it's an adventure, and the remoteness is what makes Kidepo so exciting. Stay at the luxurious Apoka Safari Lodge (wildplacesafrica.com; US\$1170 for an all-inclusive double) or the more affordable Uganda Wildlife Authority *bandas* (ugandawildlife.org; doubles from US\$15).

Below: one of the lions that were rather interested in Mark and his camp

