

The Rubondo elephant herds live in relative safety from poachers thanks to the island's remoteness

AFRICA'S ARK

WORDS
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Since the 1960s an island in the south western corner of Lake Victoria has provided a safe haven for relocated chimpanzees, elephants and giraffes – and they are thriving on the solitude



AFTER TWO HOURS OF LEADING US DEEP INTO THE FOREST,

our tracker James suddenly dropped to his knees and gestured by hand signals for us to do the same. We instantly fell silent and crouched down. “Sokwe,” he whispered in Kiswahili, pointing to the trees. I peered into the mass of twigs, sticks and branches ahead of me but could see only shadows. Somewhere in their midst was a solitary chimpanzee, but it seemed to have vanished into the darkness as soon as James spotted it. He’d seen one earlier, too; a quick flash of primate blending into the forest.

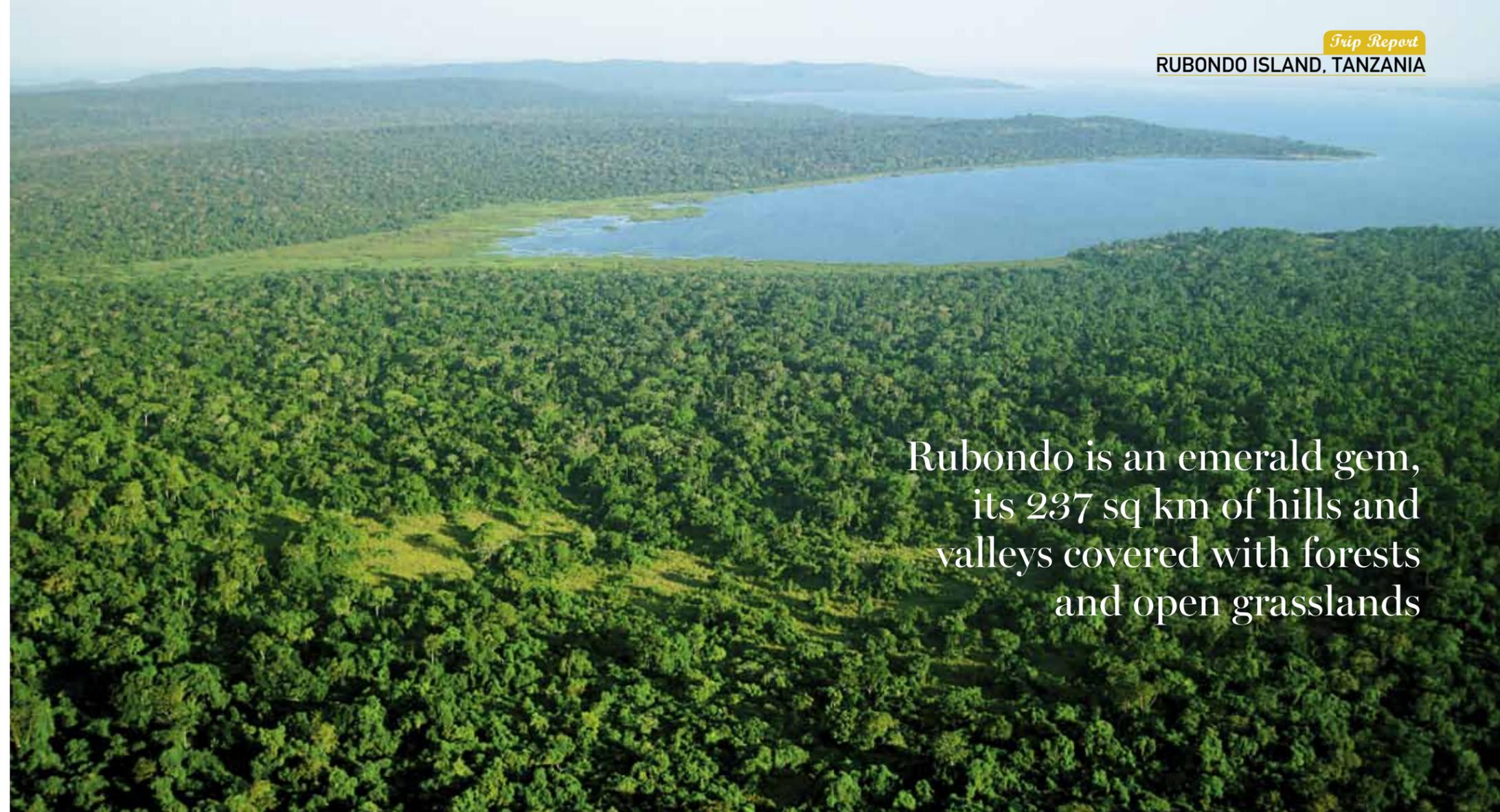
We waited motionless, listening for tell-tale signs of the chimp’s whereabouts, but heard only birdsong, the shrill buzz of cicadas like a choir of pneumatic drills, and a bushbuck’s distinctive bark. It was its alarm call, suggesting it might also have seen the chimp. Above us, high in the trees, were nests the size of giant pillows made of fresh green leaves and branches. Chimps build new nests every day and we’d already passed several dried ones on our forest walk.

“This is where they slept last night,” James informed us quietly.

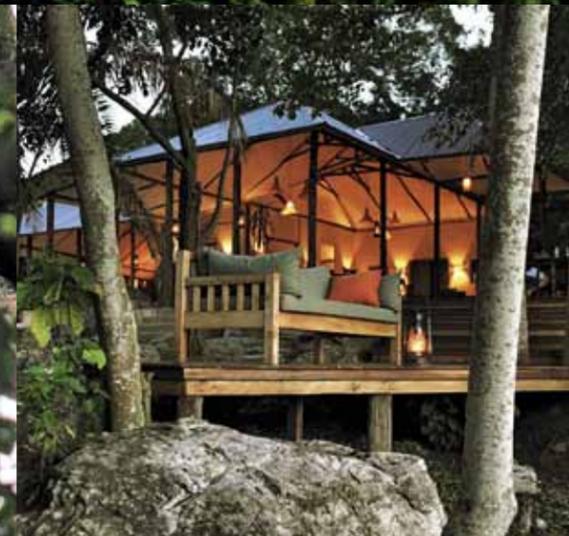
An island in the south-western corner of Lake Victoria might seem like a strange homeland for 40 or so chimpanzees, but Rubondo is no ordinary island. In the mid 1960s it became the setting for the world’s first attempt at rehabilitating captive chimpanzees. This was under the auspices of the renowned zoologist Dr Bernhard Grzimek, author of the ground-breaking book and Academy Award-winning film *Serengeti Shall Not Die*, that dramatically raised the profile of African conservation.

European zoos found themselves in a difficult predicament with our primate cousins – what were once cute and cuddly chimps became aggressive, dangerously strong and more sexually active as they grew older, and often had to be caged in solitary confinement for safety. Thus, in 1966, “Operation Chimpanzee” was born, initiated by game warden Peter Achard. Ten chimps, seven females and three males, were transported from Frankfurt and Antwerp Zoos to Rubondo, a game reserve free of both human and animal predators. In all, 17 chimps were brought here between 1966 and 1969. Today, their descendants roam wild and free on this beautiful forested island.

In his book *Among Animals of Africa*, published in 1970,



Rubondo is an emerald gem, its 237 sq km of hills and valleys covered with forests and open grasslands



Clockwise from left: a pair of chimpanzees study the people studying them; a walk in Rubondo’s forests is an opportunity to see a wide variety of African species; from the air the extent of the island’s dense forest is revealed; Rubondo Island Camp’s dining area

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Left: a shy bushbuck, indigenous to the island, peeps out from the shelter of the forest shrubbery

Grzimek wrote: "Achard knew what he was doing when he chose Rubondo. I immediately fell in love with the island."

It's easy to understand why he should feel that way. One of Tanzania's least visited National Parks, Rubondo is an emerald gem, its 237 sq km of hills and valleys covered with forests and open grasslands. The eastern shores are fringed with rocks and sandy beaches while marshes, date palms and papyrus hug its western coast. Together with another nine smaller islands, all uninhabited, the entire National Park covers 457 sq km. With just one luxury lodge, Rubondo Island Camp, owned by leading ecotourism company Asilia, it offers an unusual, undiscovered alternative to Zanzibar for some post-safari chilling.

Tanzania's national parks and reserves cover a massive 25 per cent of the country, with famous names like Serengeti and

training, no one knew about Rubondo and we never came here. But now I've seen it, I love it."

Fortunately, Victoria has an excellent knowledge of birds, because Rubondo is a haven for over 200 species, including the largest population of fish eagles in Africa. On a boat trip to the west of the island, I lost count of the various birds we saw, ranging from the tiny, vividly coloured African pygmy kingfisher hiding among reeds to the gigantic goliath heron descending like a miniature plane over our heads.

Great and long-tailed cormorants stood atop bushes, panting rapidly with wobbling jowls, a cooling device to help them cope with the sultry afternoon heat. Relaxing on the beach by Rubondo Island Camp, I watched black kites ➤

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Conserving our closest cousins

Returning chimps to the wild is not an easy exercise



Chimpanzees share 98.4 per cent of our human DNA and you only have to spend a short time with them to see the similarities between us. They smile, laugh, scowl and sulk just like we do and their intelligence extends to making tools to help them catch their food. They can also catch our diseases, yet don't have our defence mechanisms to fight them – even the common cold can have

disastrous consequences on their community. And sadly, classified as Endangered in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, they're not clever enough to rise above the threats to their survival without human intervention.

A hundred years ago, around one million chimps lived in Africa's equatorial forests, spread over 25 countries. Today around 150,000 survive in 21 countries and, without our help, it's estimated that numbers will diminish by 80 per cent within 30-40 years. These engaging apes are struggling against loss of forest habitat, the effects of armed conflicts, the bush-meat trade and cruel capture as pets or circus animals.

Africa has several sanctuaries where

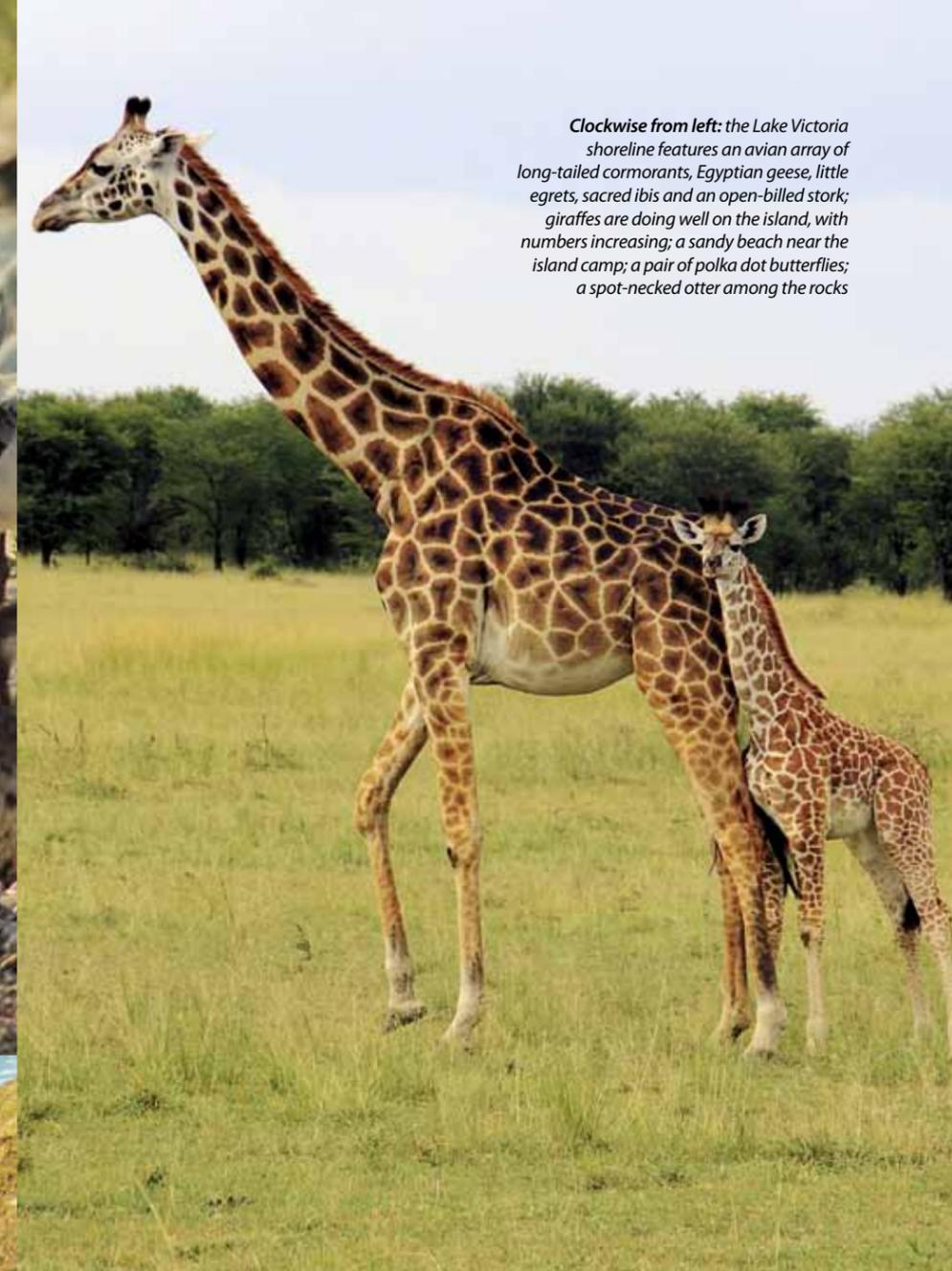
rescued chimps are looked after on an individual welfare basis, some with outreach programmes educating and working with local people to help protect the primates. But releasing them back to the wild is fraught with problems. Integrating chimps, particularly males, into a chimpanzee community is difficult because of their strong patriarchal hierarchy. Conflict with human neighbours can be equally challenging when both are competing for the same food supply.

Conservationists on Rubondo Island, with its natural lakeside buffer zone, lack of human or predatory residents, and plentiful supply of fruit and food, are hoping it can become a safe haven for chimps returning to the wild. But Rubondo Island alone is too small to entirely solve the problem.

“On a boat trip to the west of the island, I lost count of the various birds we saw”



Clockwise from left: the Lake Victoria shoreline features an avian array of long-tailed cormorants, Egyptian geese, little egrets, sacred ibis and an open-billed stork; giraffes are doing well on the island, with numbers increasing; a sandy beach near the island camp; a pair of polka dot butterflies; a spot-necked otter among the rocks



swooping down to catch fish, and little egrets paddling and preening themselves in the waves, occasionally flashing the unusually yellow feet which are part of their breeding plumage. More colourful varieties included brilliant yellow lesser-masked weavers with their nests hanging like Christmas tree decorations in the papyrus, pretty European bee-eaters and aptly named red-billed fire finches, little red-chested birds that roamed outside our room for breakfast.

Rubondo is a haven for crocodiles, too, and however tempting a cooling swim in Lake Victoria might seem, it's an activity best avoided – they'll soon sense you wading in the water. We saw several from the boat, seemingly willing us to dip our hands into the vast inland sea. Hippos also bobbed up and down, only their cartoon-like eyes and ears visible above the waterline. Otters ducked in and out of the lake, possibly looking for fish – there's plenty here, including huge Nile perch weighing up to 80kg, with three-day permits available for keen fishermen.

Back on land, we frequently saw Bambi-like bushbucks and sitatunga, indigenous to the island, frolicking by the roadside. Along with chimps, roan antelopes and rhinoceros were also brought here, but were wiped out by poachers. Relocated giraffes and elephants have fared better. You wouldn't necessarily know they were here – a lack of roads and relative inaccessibility of parts of the island, particularly in the south,

mean that for now, the giraffes, numbering around 40, are rarely seen. However, the tracks planned by Asilia and TANAPA in areas they populate will undoubtedly improve sightings. In contrast, the island's 80 elephants certainly make their presence known – they may not be spotted easily but we heard them trumpeting in the night and saw their tracks on the road when morning came.

“Looks like this was a small breeding herd,” suggested Marcus, Asilia's lead guide, using string to measure a footprint in the sand. “If you multiply the circumference of the front foot by two and a half, it will roughly give you the shoulder height of the elephant. It's an old hunting technique. This one would be about 2m tall, too young to be alone.” Much as I wanted to see the herd, I was secretly relieved they'd moved on – Rubondo's elephants can be moody, as testified by chimpanzee trackers after tricky encounters in the forests.

Grzimek clearly had a vision for Rubondo all those years ago. In 1970, echoing today's responsible tourism ethos in *Among Animals of Africa*, he wrote: “Success in settling species of animals not found elsewhere in the National Parks of East Africa could mean that in five or 10 years' time, visitors will be boarding ultra-modern steamers and sailing across Lake Victoria to Rubondo. Our object was to render assistance not only to animals but also to a poor but dynamic country which does a great deal for its wildlife.”

Today, 32-year old Josephine Msindai from University



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College London, together with five trackers, is helping to achieve his objective. Her PhD studies focus on chimps' nesting habits and architecture, but her work also involves habituating them for research and ecotourism, aiming to start visitors tracking over the next year or two. The team set out daily to find chimps and record behaviour, collect samples of scat for DNA analysis and study their nests.

"It's a challenge," Josephine told me. "It's quite frustrating when we don't find them, but when we do it's even more rewarding. At this stage it's unlikely that someone on a walk would see chimps because it's early days. But you never know, if they're lucky..."

Shortly after James' second chimp sighting on our forest walk to learn about their habits and habitats, we heard a piercing squeal in the trees, and then another, and another. They finally reached a crescendo like naughty children screaming in a playground. This was the chimps vocalising, calling to each other before nesting at night, and the deafening noise echoed and reverberated all around.

Just 25m ahead of us were five chimps and one baby. I had trouble making them out in the dark, dense forest but they were there alright. With every squeal, you could feel a tension, an edge. Not yet habituated, these chimps were still wild, still unknown personalities, and that lent an excitement and a kind of purity to the encounter not usually experienced.

It may be nearly 50 years since the chimps' relocations, and visitors may be coming by plane rather than by steamers, but it seems Grzimek's vision for Rubondo is finally coming to fruition...

Above: the chimpanzees of Rubondo are gradually getting used to visiting researchers; James, one of the chimp trackers, marks a nesting tree



TRIP ADVISER

COST RATING ★★★★★☆

SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR: Expert Africa offers tailor-made packages to Tanzania. Rubondo Island is a destination that combines well with, and provides a contrast to, a Serengeti safari.

A package including three nights at Asilia's Dunia Camp in Central Serengeti and four nights on Rubondo Island, staying at Rubondo Island Camp, costs from £3,978 per person. This includes international flights with Kenya Airways (via Nairobi), full board accommodation and most drinks, park fees, game drives and activities. Also included in the price are the internal flights with Coastal Airways and all vehicle transfers.

GETTING THERE: There are daily flights from London to Tanzania. Sue flew with Kenya Airways on an indirect flight via Nairobi to Kilimanjaro International Airport. Prices start from £695 return. She then had a vehicle transfer through Expert Africa to Arusha Airport, which takes around one hour, for her flight to the Serengeti. Coastal Airways offer daily flights to Rubondo Island either from various airstrips in the Serengeti, or from Arusha via Mwanza.

VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK: British passport holders require a visa to enter Tanzania. This can be obtained from the Tanzanian High Commission in London costing £38 or can be bought on arrival at international airports for US\$50.

TIPS & WARNINGS: Anyone entering Tanzania from a country where yellow fever is present is required to have a Yellow Fever Vaccination Certificate. There is a risk of malaria that is resistant to chloroquine so consult a doctor or travel clinic for advice on this and other inoculations in plenty of time before you go.

Note that there is a weight limit of 15kg on domestic flights so pack lightly. A decent pair of binoculars is a must – if you don't have any, they can be hired for £25 per week plus £25 deposit from The Safari Store, www.thesafaristore.co.uk

WHEN TO GO: The rainy season from March – May is best avoided. If you want to see migratory birds from West Africa, the best time for viewing these is between December and February.

TOUR OPERATORS

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