

The rise and impact of GORILLA TOURISM

Seeing mountain gorillas is often ranked as the ultimate wildlife experience. It may also be the most expensive. Yet, is there a better example of how tourism can drive conservation and sustain communities? Reflecting on her treks in Uganda, **Sue Watt** looks at how your visits have transformed the plight of the greatest ape. What a difference thirty years makes →

Dark, foreboding clouds accompanied my first mountain gorilla encounter in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, echoing silverback Makara's angry mood. Minutes after our trackers found three gorillas from the Habinyanja family, the huge male broke our awestruck silence with a scream that shook us to the bones. He rushed towards us waving his fist in the air, his eyes full of fury.

Thankfully, he stopped just a couple of metres from us, then begrudgingly backed away.

"Something's wrong," our guide Gard whispered. "There should be 19 gorillas in this group. When the silverback's unhappy, he hides them."

With an almost human expression of petulance, Makara glared at us for a few minutes, then charged again. For four humid hours, we'd trekked along steep paths, through mud, tangled vines and dense vegetation with moss and beard-like lichen dripping from the trees, only to have less than half our permitted hour with the gorillas when Gard announced it was time to leave: "He's charged twice, and twice is enough," he said.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of gorilla tourism in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the heart of the Albertine Rift. Seeing these majestic primates face-to-face is the pinnacle of wildlife encounters and I'm privileged to have experienced this six times. Normally, it's a joyous hour: the gorillas are placid, calmly tolerating, even ignoring, their captivated human audience as they doze, play and munch on forest foliage.

That day in 2011 was anything but normal. We later learnt the reason for Makara's seething rage: Habinyanja's only blackback had been killed by poachers intending to snare antelope. Tragically, they had trapped Mizano instead.

Fortunately, such incidents are extremely rare. In the 1980s, just 400 mountain gorillas survived, of which around 120 lived in Bwindi. The increasingly vulnerable species were facing extinction through habitat loss, extensive poaching and civil unrest in their once volatile homelands. Today, over 1000 roam the rainforests of Bwindi and the towering Virunga Massif spanning the borders of southern Uganda, DR Congo, and Rwanda. They are found nowhere else on Earth.

Tourism has played a starring role in this conservation success. In 1979, Rwanda was the first country to habituate gorillas, gradually familiarising them to different people, initially for primatologist Dian Fossey's research then later for tourists. Bwindi followed, becoming a national park in 1991 to protect its primates.

"Bwindi's gorilla tourism had very humble beginnings. It started in 1993 when the Mubare group in the Buhoma sector were habituated; there were very few lodges then," Lilly Ajarova, CEO of the Uganda Tourism Board, told me.

By 2004, the Rushegura and Habinyanja families around Buhoma were habituated, along with the Nkuringo group, named after their home territory in the south. "Today, we have 22 habituated groups across Bwindi, and diverse accommodation offerings, from low-budget to over 30 luxury lodges," she continued.

Spanning 316sq km, Bwindi harbours over 400 bird species and 120 mammal species. But it's the mountain gorillas that bring in the dollars. In 1993, just 1313 tourists came, paying US\$360 per permit. In 2019, the



DANITA DELMONT STOCK / AWIL-IMAGES.COM

park received nearly 39,000 visitors. Post-Covid visitor numbers are rapidly recovering, with 176 permits at US\$700 each available daily and over 70 camps and lodges around Bwindi.

“Tourism has resulted in more revenue to invest in protecting the park and provides local communities with economic incentives to support conservation,” Lilly said. “But whilst this growth has positive impacts, it must be managed sustainably to prevent negative environmental consequences. We encourage lodges to protect the ecosystem and practice responsible tourism.”

Counterintuitively, tourism also endangers the gorillas, who share 98 per cent of our DNA, making them extremely susceptible to human diseases. Hence gorilla tracking is carefully regulated (see page 129).

“WALKING WITH GORILLAS” — THE STORY OF DR GLADYS

Multi-award-winning conservationist Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka has witnessed Bwindi’s dramatic changes firsthand since becoming Uganda Wildlife Authority’s (UWA’s) first vet in 1996. She’s recently written her story, *Walking with Gorillas: The journey of an African Wildlife Vet*, because “everyone knows about Rwanda’s gorillas thanks to Dian Fossey, but no-one really talks about Bwindi’s gorillas and they’re very special.”

Gladys’ father William Wilberforce Kalema, a cabinet minister, was murdered by Idi Amin’s army when she was two. “I wanted to continue my father’s dream of developing Uganda through my passion for wildlife,” she explained. “I thought maybe as a vet, I could bring the country’s wildlife back to its former glory, and then tourism could support communities and conservation.”

In 2000, Gladys discovered the first case of scabies spreading from human to mountain gorilla when a young primate died of the disease after touching dirty rags on scarecrows intended to deter apes from crop-raiding. To simultaneously help alleviate poverty and protect gorillas, she founded Conservation Through Public Health (CTPH,

“We can’t protect gorillas without local people. They have a bright future because people support them: today, communities have a lot of stake in conservation.”

www.ctph.org), following ‘One Health’ principles that focus jointly on human, animal and environmental health.

The NGO monitors mountain gorilla health for human-related diseases at The CTPH Research Centre in Buhoma, which welcomes visitors. Its Village Health Conservation Teams reach some 25,000 people in 44 communities, improving general health and access to family planning, helping to reduce the average family size from seven to four children in nearby districts. CTPH’s Human Gorilla (HUGO) Conflict Resolution teams deter hungry primates from crop-raiding, chasing them back to the forest. And its social enterprise Gorilla Conservation Coffee employs some 500 former poachers and widows in harvesting Kanyonyi Coffee, named after Dr Gladys’ favourite gorilla, the silverback of Mubare group.

KANYONYI, THE LOVABLE LOTHARIO

I met the charismatic Kanyonyi in 2017, in a classically serene encounter totally devoid of the tensions with Makara. This time, the gaze of the silverback’s soulful brown eyes sent very different shivers down my spine.



CHRISTIAN KOBER / AWL-IMAGES.COM

Left: Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka collecting fecal samples for her research, in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park
JO ANNE MCARTHUR

After a detailed briefing on gorilla-tracking etiquette at UWA’s visitor centre, a gentle hour’s walk took us to the Mubare family. Mothers watched over three boisterous toddlers playing tag — they laughed, sulked and smiled just like children — and new mum Mitunu tenderly suckled her nine-month-old baby. But it was Kanyonyi who stole the show. Tall, dark, and handsome, he was one cool, good-looking guy, albeit constantly chomping on leaves and farting loudly. “He’s a real Casanova,” our guide said. “Always trying to steal ladies from other groups and getting into trouble.”

Sadly, a few months later, Kanyonyi died from injuries caused

through fighting. At least, as Dr Gladys said, his death happened through normal gorilla behaviour when silverbacks compete for supremacy, unlike Mizano who died at the hands of humans.

CONNECTING CONSERVATION, COMMUNITIES AND TOURISM

“We can’t protect gorillas without local people,” Dr Gladys said. “They have a bright future because people support them: today, communities have a lot of stake in conservation.”

That includes UWA’s revenue-sharing scheme, through which communities receive 20 per cent of park fees and US\$10 from each gorilla permit, to fund infrastructure, healthcare and education initiatives. Then there are the jobs that both tourism and conservation bring and, beyond that, many lodges and their guests support local projects like CTPH that themselves positively impact on Bwindi’s people.

One of the pioneers in Albertine Rift ecotourism was Volcanoes Safaris, which currently has three lodges across Uganda with one in Rwanda. “In the late 1990s, the two countries were just coming out of conflict and the political situation was precarious. It was unclear when

things would stabilise and tourism could start,” Ugandan-born founder Praveen Moman told me. “We needed to invest cautiously. I started with mobile tents and today our lodges are world-renowned.”

Volcanoes Safaris’ basic camp opened in Buhoma in 1999. By 2017, when I stayed, it had evolved into the luxurious Bwindi Lodge, overlooking the rainforest with a rustic-chic charm and monkeys playing in the garden. Nearby, their non-profit Volcanoes Safaris Partnership Trust had opened the award-winning, funky Bwindi Bar, perfect for a cold beer after tracking gorillas, where disadvantaged young people are trained for careers in hospitality. “We connect each lodge to community and conservation projects through our Trust, protecting habitats, reducing human-wildlife conflict and enriching the livelihoods of local communities,” Praveen explained.

A ten-minute walk from Bwindi Lodge lies Mahogany Spring, its gardens all lush and green with dazzling orange marigolds and trumpet lilies leading down to the river. Owner Barrie Gotch first came here in 2006 and dreamt of creating a stylish lodge which would give back to the community. “The people here are special. Everyone is like a family,” he said.

Barrie contracts the excellent women’s empowerment project Ride4AWoman (www.ride4awoman.org) to make the lodge’s beautifully bright soft furnishings. “We also fully support Agaba Moses, one of our staff, who set up the award-winning Bwindi Plus School and Orphanage in 2015,” Barrie told me. “It now looks after 200 children and his mission is to open its doors to many more children in need.”

People in Bwindi’s southern sector also benefit from tourism, which kickstarted when gorilla groups here became habituated for tracking from 2004. Lydia Mpanga, a Ugandan businesswoman, opened her backpackers’ campsite in 2007, now transformed into Nkuringo Bwindi Gorilla Lodge, with staff from the community and mesmerising views of distant volcanoes. She set up Nkuringo Walking Safaris, employing local guides to draw tourists to the area’s mystical lakes and forest trails, and the Gorilla Junction Foundation (www.gorillajunction.org), helping the community, especially women, to earn sustainable incomes through better farming, craft-making and coffee harvesting.

THE NEXT THIRTY YEARS

Meanwhile, the mountain gorilla success story rolls on, with next year’s census expected to show Bwindi’s population rising to around 500. Africa’s human population is also predicted to double by 2050, so what does the future hold for Bwindi’s primates and people?

“It will be challenging for these small and unique ecosystems, unless local people can derive a living from the wildlife,” Praveen Moman told me. “We urgently need a concerted long-term plan for working with local stakeholders.”

Last year, he hosted a retreat with 25 leading partners in tourism, government, and conservation, among them Dr Gladys. Looking ahead to 2050, they formed the ‘Albertine Apes’ group, aiming to create a strategic vision to safeguard the future of great apes in the Albertine Rift.

More immediately, UWA is pioneering new ways of raising revenues by tracking gorillas in the virtual world. Subscribers to an app called My Gorilla Family can follow the gorillas’ daily activities, celebrate their birthdays and receive updates from rangers.

It will never beat the sheer joy of seeing mountain gorillas in real life, but will at least spread the word about these truly special primates and help towards protecting the descendants of Mizano and Kanyonyi against the challenges of the future.

BEFORE GORILLA TOURISM

BY PHILIP BRIGGS

Uganda in 1988 was a very different travel prospect to what it is today. Then recently emerged from a brutal 15-year cycle of dictatorship and civil conflict, the country had a shattered infrastructure and tourism was almost non-existent. My visit was absolutely spontaneous, a morning-after decision, at a hostel in Nairobi, inspired by a conversation with an enthused Canadian backpacker who had recently tracked gorillas at Ruhija, in what was then Bwindi Forest Reserve (it was not yet a national park).

There was no formal facility for gorilla tracking in Uganda at that time, but my Canadian pal gave me all the information I needed: a contact in Kabale who bounced a tractor and trailer along the dirt road to Bwindi twice a week, details of a cheap forestry resthouse at Ruhija, and the name of a researcher who could arrange a gorilla visit for the princely sum of US\$1.

So it was that a guide and I set off from Ruhija to look for gorillas one sunny morning in July 1988. It took an hour to walk to the trailhead, then another hour in the forest before we located a gorilla family. Back then, however, the apes were not at all habituated, and they proved reluctant to show themselves. A lot of bushes shook on the slope below us. Some impressively dissuasive chest-beating and vocalisations took place behind them. But, as the guide explained, we were only likely to actually see gorillas if we were on the opposite slope to them, at a bit more distance, and unfortunately this was too close for mutual comfort.

After a while, the bushes stopped shaking, the gorillas went their way and we went ours, following a ‘short cut’ that has left me forever suspicious of those two words. For the next few hours, we hauled ourselves up and slithered down a succession of those steep tangled slopes for which Bwindi (literally ‘Impenetrable’) is named, to arrive back at the resthouse at dusk. It was an exhausting day, but I had a lot of excitement at the nominal asking price — and my failure to properly see gorillas made it all the more sweet when finally, about 12 years later, I did come face-to-face with a silverback on a formal tracking activity.



VOLCANOES SAFARIS

WHERE TO SEE GORILLAS

Which will best suit your itinerary?

DR CONGO

www.visit.virunga.org
 Tourism activities in Virunga National Park (gorilla tracking and Nyiragongo volcano treks) are currently suspended (October 2023). Visit their websites and social media to look out for announcements on when they will resume, and check travel advisories. To contribute to the ongoing conservation efforts in Virunga, follow the Support Us page at www.virunga.org
Number of groups: 12 **Trails:** Virunga's trails are generally shorter than elsewhere, taking one-to-three hours to reach the gorillas from either Bukima or Kibumba trailheads.
Accommodation: With fewer tourists, options are more limited and are non-profit, ranging from luxury at Mikeno Lodge to basic tented camps. **Access:** Bukima is an hour's drive from Goma Airport, or a four-hour drive from Kigali. The security situation is often volatile: check travel advisories. **Cost of permits:** US\$400. **USP:** The only region with two great ape species: it's also possible to track chimpanzees here.



VOLCANOES SAFARIS

Gahinga Lodge

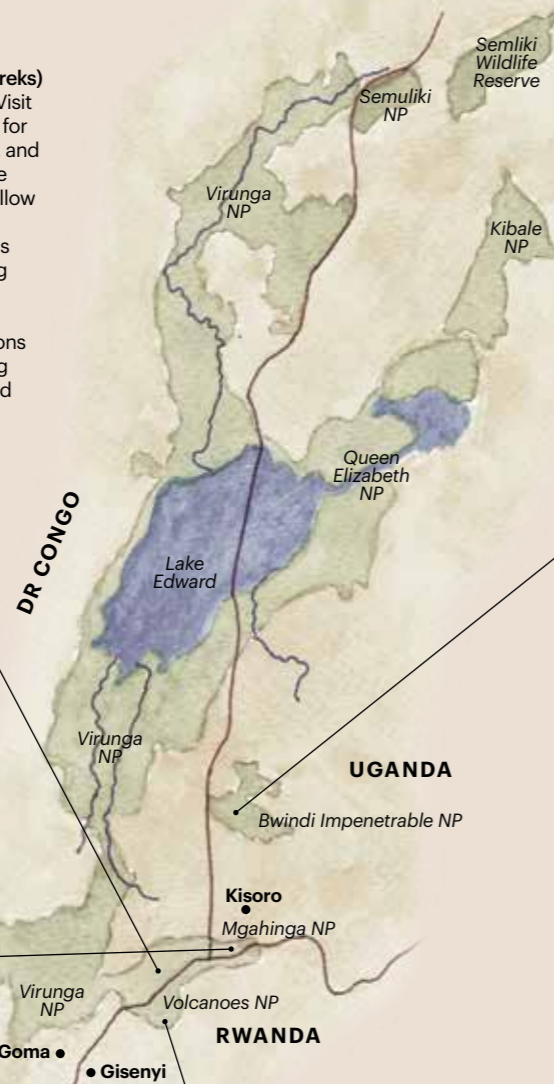
MGAHINGA NP, UGANDA

Number of groups: 1 **Trails:** Tracking starts from Ntebeko
Accommodation: Stay at Volcanoes Safaris' Gahinga Lodge



WILDERNESS

Wilderness Bisate



UGANDA

www.ugandawildlife.org
Access: From Entebbe International Airport, fly to Kihhi for north Bwindi and Kisoro for Bwindi's south or Mgahinga. It's then a two-hour drive to either park. Alternatively, both parks are 8-10 hours' drive from Entebbe. Mgahinga is closer to Kigali in Rwanda, taking three hours by road.
Cost of permits: US\$700



VOLCANOES SAFARIS

Bwindi Lodge

BWINDI IMPENETRABLE NATIONAL PARK, UGANDA

Number of groups: 22 **Trails:** Bwindi has four sectors. Buhoma, the tourism hub in the north, has generally shorter, less arduous trails. The quieter area Ruhija lies in the east, and both Nkuringo with expansive Virungas views, and Rushaga with more challenging, steeper trails, are in the south.
Accommodation: For luxury, try Mahogany Springs and Bwindi Lodge in Buhoma, or Clouds Lodge and Nkuringo Gorilla Lodge in Nkuringo. Support Bwindi's projects by staying in guesthouses at Ride4AWoman, CTPH and the guesthouse at the Bwindi Community Hospital.
USP: Bwindi offers a unique habituation experience costing USD1500, allowing four hours with a group where the gorillas aren't fully habituated.

RWANDA: VOLCANOES NP

www.visitrwanda.com
Number of groups: 12 **Trails:** Regarded as sometimes easier than Bwindi, some families such as the Sabyinyo group stay on the lower slopes. But others venture higher, particularly the Susa and Igisha families on Mount Karisimbi. **Accommodation:** Volcanoes NP is known for ultra-luxury lodges, including Singita Kwitonda, Wilderness Bisate, One&Only Gorilla's Nest and Volcanoes' Virunga Lodge. Red Rocks is an excellent budget option. **Access:** Musanze town is a two-hour drive from Kigali Airport. **Cost of permits:** US\$1500 with discounts if also visiting Akagera and Nyungwe national parks. **USP:** Every September, baby gorillas are named at the Kwita Izina ceremony, a popular conservation event.



Mutual benefit. Communities like this, on the border of Bwindi Impenetrable NP, must derive value from tourism if they are to protect the gorilla's habitat

CLICKALIPS / AWL-IMAGES.COM

GORILLA TRACKING: NEED TO KNOW

Best time to go: December to February and June to September, although it can rain at any time.

Age limits: No under 15. No upper age limit.

Fitness levels: Although not essential, you should be comfortable hiking for a few hours. The fitter you are, the more you'll enjoy the trek.

Essential regulations: You must wear face masks when tracking gorillas and don't participate if you're unwell. A maximum of eight people (six in DRC) spend one hour in their company, keeping 10 metres' distance. Don't use flash photography, don't eat around them, and follow your guide's instructions.



Porters help trackers cross a stream in Bwindi Impenetrable NP

SUPERSTOCK / KAEHLER, WOLFGANG

BEYOND BWINDI...

There's more to Uganda than mountain gorillas. "We have many other riches, but they're often overlooked," says Amos Wakesa of Great Lakes Safaris. Among them are:

10 national parks and 1100 species of birds (11 per cent of the world's species).

5000 chimpanzees, with 1500 in Kibale National Park.

The world's most powerful waterfall, Murchison Falls.

Africa's third highest peak in the Rwenzoris, with glacier-topped summits on the equator.

The world's largest tropical lake, Lake Victoria.

Unique people and cultures that differ from region to region.

Wildlife viewing in national parks offering hiking, boat cruises, canoeing, cycling, riding and quad-biking.

TOP TIPS FOR TREKKING

Hire a porter, even if you're fit — the US\$20 fee contributes hugely to local economies | Take **gardening gloves** for the thorns, wear long sleeves and trousers, and good hiking boots | **Don't spend your whole hour behind the camera.** Take in the bigger picture too | **Take cash** in small denominations to buy crafts and children's pictures at the trailhead | **Stay longer**, visit community projects, go shopping, birding, hiking, try a coffee safari — the dollars you spend help local people to value gorilla conservation.

YOUR EXPERIENCES

Readers share their advice and encouragement

PERFECT POSING

Two of our four treks particularly stand out. In Uganda, we watched a baby gorilla just 12 hours old being cared for by its mother and a helper female gorilla. The next day a fellow traveller reported that the silverback was very protective of the baby, blocking any photos. In Rwanda we saw a large family of gorillas with many youngsters playing. When the games became too wild, the silverback issued a loud grunt and every youngster sat down. After about five minutes they quietly began moving away from the silverback before resuming their play. At the end of our visit, the silverback turned onto his belly, supporting his chin with the palms of his hands and posed, as if to say: "I know what you came for and I'll give it to you." The most amazing thing about mountain gorillas are the expressions on their faces and in their eyes. They seem like old souls. I will always want to go back to see them again.



ILONA STRULL

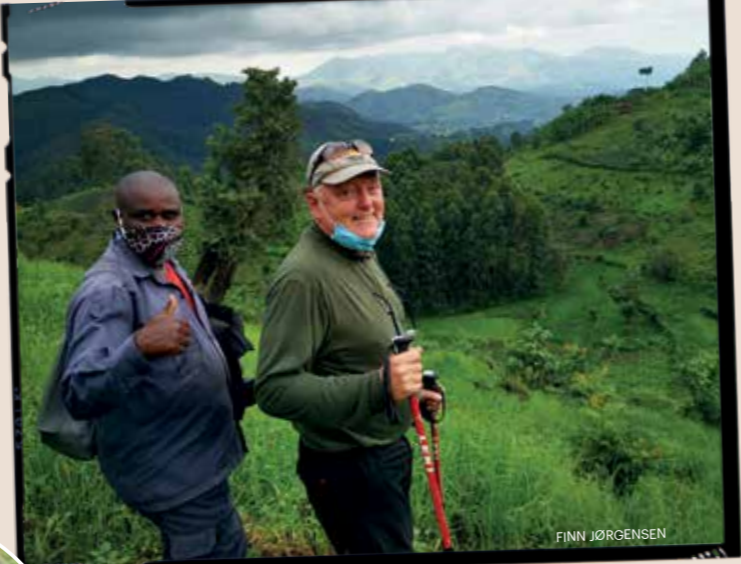
ILONA STRULL, USA

If your budget allows, book permits for two days. On our first day we had an amazing experience, but on the second we didn't see gorillas at all. It is rare, and you do get a percentage of your permit back if you don't see them, but it's no compensation for missing out when you have travelled so far.

ALISON DEWAR, UK

The day starts early, and you're likely to experience different weather, so wear layers you can reduce as you go. Have everything you need in a backpack as anything larger must be left at the start. Be honest about your health and fitness: I'm in my 60s and was in a group that visited a troop fairly low down, but my phone showed that in about an hour of tracking we'd climbed the equivalent of 11 flights of stairs. Some people are out all day before they find a troop. In Rwanda they guaranteed you would see the gorillas or you had a free trip the next day. It seems there is a 97 per cent success rate, so you may want to allow an additional day in the area just in case.

RICHARD PURSER, UK



FINN JØRGENSEN

In Bwindi, 2021, we had the most wonderfully intimate experience with these relaxed animals. Prepare yourself by walking a lot as the climb can be quite steep. It took us almost four hours to get there, and the walk down can be just as challenging. Check out and support the work of Gorilla Doctors (www.gorilladoctors.org)

FINN JØRGENSEN, DENMARK

"The vegetation was a real surprise. [In Rwanda] we were amongst dense vegetation taller than my head, treading precariously on a bed of vines and shoots that covered muddy underlay. Some sections were through giant nettles ten times the size of their British relatives. The natural trip hazards and moist inclines were keen to catch out anyone with an unsure footing and the guides were fantastic at lending a solid and supportive hand. The encounter was everything I could have dreamed of. Utterly magical. One of the best experiences of my life."

TERESA ALLEN, UK (READ HER FULL REPORT AT [BIT.LY/TAGORILLAS](https://bit.ly/tagorillas))

"Strenuous" doesn't cut it. As a pretty fit under-40, having done the London Marathon, I still found myself clawing up muddy banks, wading through streams and descending through a blur of dense undergrowth. Time with the gorillas flies by, and it is tricky for photography. They move constantly, their fur is black, the light isn't great in the forest and other trackers jostle for position, under pressure to get the best possible photos. But standing metres away from these endangered animals is awe-inspiring. A gorilla trek is worth every penny.

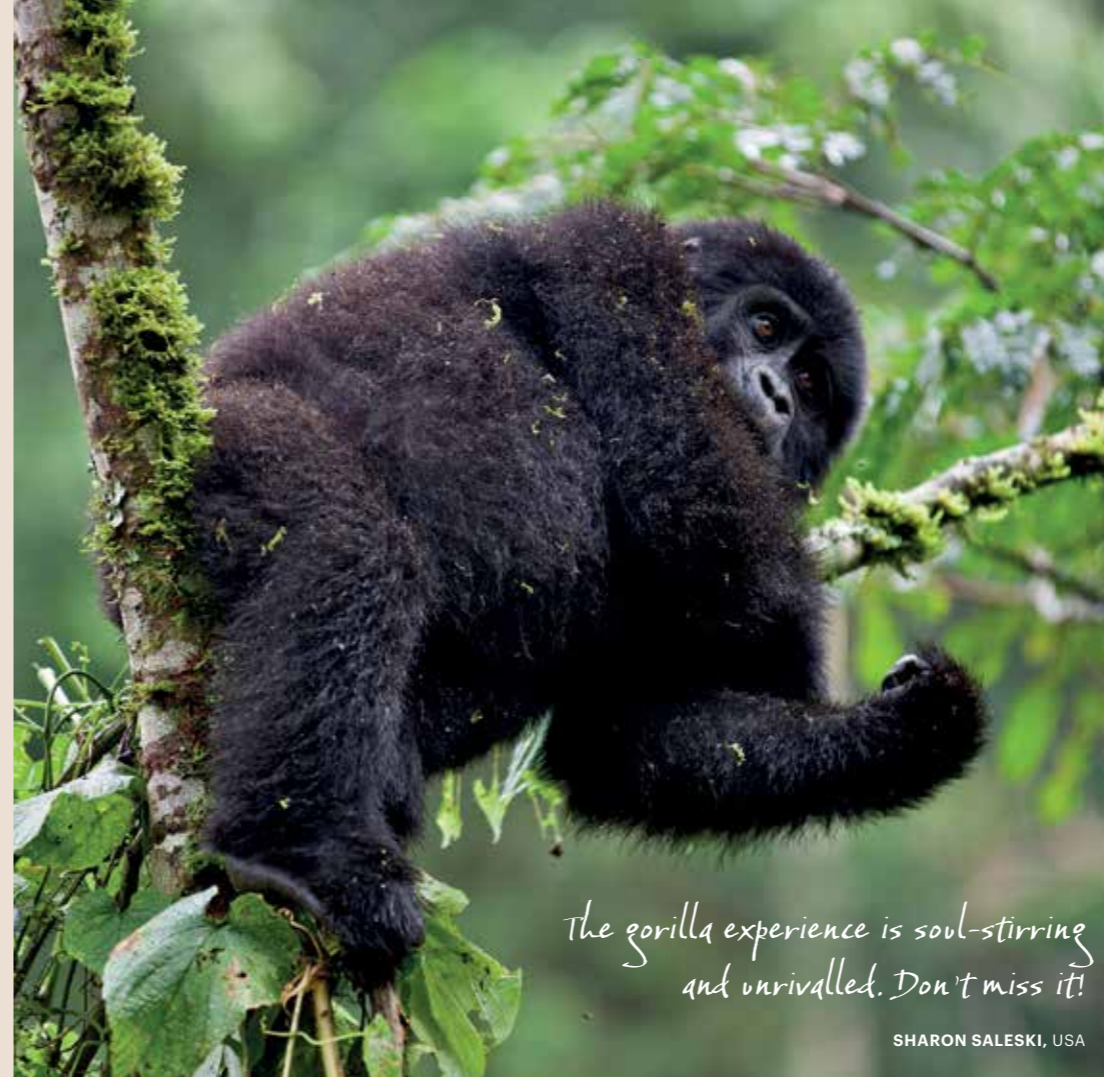
DANI RAYNER, UK

I visited the gorillas in Bwindi with my two daughters and it was the most amazing wildlife experience I have ever had. The best advice is to hire a porter – they carry your rucksack but will also help you negotiate the steep and often difficult terrain, sometimes quite literally holding your hand! This also provides employment and supports conservation.

PAUL WALDEN, UK



PAUL WALDEN



The gorilla experience is soul-stirring and unrivalled. Don't miss it!

SHARON SALESKI, USA

DD KINGSCOTE



NIGEL PAVITT / AWL-IMAGES.COM

WET WET WET

If going when it is really, really wet, be prepared. We were drenched to the skin. Take a neoprene camera cover, a dry bag and a mac that can cover it, and have someone with a poncho so you can take photos from underneath it. I had to put my camera in a bag of rice for several days to dry out.

DD KINGSCOTE, OUTPOSTS TRAVEL AFRICA, UK

FOREVER MOMENTS

I have visited the gorillas in Uganda and Rwanda... both times thrilling. In Rwanda we were climbing the trail when our guide raised his hand to warn us to stop. A loud yelp and a female gorilla came tumbling down from her bed high in the bamboo, within a foot of my head. Off she scurried as I collected my composure. Within moments a silverback ambled over to sit near me. I will carry that experience the rest of my days.

MARY LOUISE HALM, USA

Hire a porter. It is a minimal cost and provides much-needed employment. He will carry your bag, help you through difficult areas, avoiding the stinging nettles. Even if it is dry weather, wear long waterproof trousers and jacket, long sleeves, waterproof boots and gaiters. If you are thinking about it, just do it. It is absolutely the best thing I have ever done.

RACHEL PALMER, UK

My first gorilla trip was over thirty years ago, in then Zaire (DRC). It was life-changing. I have been nine times since (including once for the lowland gorillas) and each has also been moving, incredible. My tips: (1) Wear long sleeves and pants to protect against stinging nettles. Use waterproof clothing. I took trousers that zipped up and down the sides for air circulation; (2) Gaiters will keep the mud out of your boots; (3) Garden gloves will help if you have to grab plants or vines; (4) Train before you go, up hills or flights of stairs. You don't want to be breathless when you reach the gorillas; (5) Don't just look through your viewfinder. Put your camera down and be present for the time you are with the gorillas. You might miss some photo opportunities, but you will be much richer for the experience.

LISA ROBERTI, USA

Shortly before leaving for the gorilla trip, one of our clients tore the meniscus in his knee and thought he would have to cancel. Rather, we made a plan for him to be carried up to the gorillas on a stretcher, by porters who were happy for the job. I have had other clients hire several porters to pretty much carry them into the forest to see the gorillas.



JIM HOLDEN, HOLDEN SAFARIS, USA

50-YEAR COMPARISON

In December 1971 I climbed Mount Visoke in Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda, searching for gorillas. There were no trained guides nor animals habituated to human presence. I found nests and dung but saw no gorillas. In late January 2022, I trekked with my wife and two friends in the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. There were few tourists in Uganda because of Covid and relatively few gorilla trackers. Scouts had located our group at daybreak, but it still took several hours to find the gorillas. The relatively undisturbed forest was silent — hardly any birds — and the ground strewn with vines, roots and rotting branches.

The trek almost exceeded my septuagenarian capabilities and my wife struggled. Our troop consisted of a silverback, four moms and four youngsters and we were fortunate to see the gorillas drink in a stream — an unusual behaviour.

I am interested in all wildlife, and it seemed natural to go on a gorilla trek though I had no particular interest in seeing them. Ultimately, I was exhilarated to spend time with them and it was the apex of our Uganda safari. My advice is to physically prepare so that you can focus on being in the forest and enjoying the gorillas.

CRAIG S HARRISON, USA

I have seen gorillas on four trips and am looking forward to my fifth next year. On one occasion we were able to crawl on our stomachs to see a female and her newborn baby in a cave. A young gorilla also seemed to take a liking to my son, offering him some of his lunch. Amazing experiences!

LARANE RODNICK, USA

Take the time now, ASAP, to visit the gorillas. It will move your heart, mind and soul to a greater appreciation of all this beautiful planet has to offer that must be preserved. GO!!

SUSAN GRIFFIN, SUSAN'S CUSTOM TOURS & TRAVEL, USA

UNFORGETTABLE

Our encounter with the silverback family was magical, words can't describe. The limited time to spend with the gorillas made the experience all the more special. It is not like any other big cat or wildlife sighting. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so if you have the funds and the physical strength to do the hiking, then don't look back: it's truly sensational.

ANINDYA MUKHERJEE, INDIA

We were told to keep seven metres from the gorillas, but they don't observe that! Passing us on the trail, a gorilla stepped on my foot! The climb was a lot more arduous than I expected, but the team of guides and porters were excellent and good company.

CARY SPARKS, USA

Seeing the gorillas is truly a life-changing experience. It can give you a new perspective and understanding of nature. Being so close to such a remarkable and endangered species makes you think about our place in the natural world and how we must try to protect them. It is certainly a humbling feeling. To see how the gorilla families interact with each other and how similar it is to a human family is fascinating: tired, weary-looking parents, playful teenagers, naughty kids... Do at least two treks if you can, to see different families — no two treks are the same. Try not to spend the whole time looking through your camera and respect the rules: don't get too close to the gorillas and wear a mask. Tip your guide, ranger and porter.

KEVIN JAMES, VOLCANOES SAFARIS, UK



VOLCANOES SAFARIS



ROGER TULL

As my husband had had a knee replacement, we went to Kahuzi-Biega National Park in the DRC to see the lowland gorillas. It would be a shorter walk and not too much uphill. Our guide picked us up in Kigali and assisted with the visa required for the DRC, and the rangers and porters made sure we had a truly lifetime experience: they assisted on the trek, carried backpacks and even took pictures while we enjoyed the gorillas. I would love to go back.



GERI (AND BRUCE) HANEY, USA

SHARED MOMENTS

It's a unique experience and one I enjoyed in June '22 in Bwindi. An early start, a dos-and-donts briefing, a drive to the trail head and we were off, with porters and walking sticks (essential for all but the very fit — oh, to be young again!).

Our trek took us down a steep slope, but wasn't too bad if you paid attention to avoid low branches, nettles, roots and ant nests underfoot. We were lucky to locate 'our' gorilla family within an hour.

The highlight came near the end of our permitted hour. The gorillas decided to lead us up the hill, so our return took some time. I was at the rear of our group and during a rest stop a ranger pointed behind me. I turned to see a silverback

coming up the path and watched with intrepidation as he advanced and then sat down five metres away. When we continued, he followed. We stopped again. So did he.

Then he decided we were too slow and proceeded to crash through the dense undergrowth, passing barely two metres to my left. Wow! Further up he sat to eat some berries, allowing me a profile photo opportunity.

As a group we all agreed that the trekking aspect to locate the gorillas was an important part of the experience and made you feel you had earned the privilege to visit these gentle giants.

ROGER TULL, UK