



After falling in love with Africa on a gap year in 2004, **Sue Watt** became a freelance travel writer. She is a regular contributor to *Travel Africa* and newspapers such as *The Independent*.



Bwindi

and the

Batwa

I hadn't expected to shoot the tiny duiker right in the neck. Despite two elders patiently teaching me their techniques with a bow and arrow, I had fully expected my first shot to flop listlessly onto the ground in front of me. Judging by the shrieks of delight and spontaneous applause from the dozen or so Batwa Pygmies gathered around me, they were as surprised and amazed as I was at my hunting prowess.

Thankfully, though, the petite duiker didn't fall, bleed or show any sign of injury. No surprise, I guess, considering it was a static wooden model used by the Batwa Pygmies to demonstrate their age-old hunting techniques. This ancient tribe had lived in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable Forest for over 4000 years before being evicted when the area became a national park in 1991. Conservation of wildlife, in this case endangered mountain gorillas, can often come with a human cost, and here in Bwindi it was the Batwa Pygmies who paid the price. The tribe received no compensation for the loss of their land.

Ironically, they were in many ways the true protectors of the forest, with an intimate knowledge of its flora and fauna, its medicines and myths – they lived in it and off it for millennia. It's no wonder that they found adapting to life outside the forest so difficult, to the extent that by the year 2000 their average life expectancy had fallen to a shocking 28 years. Living in poverty, uneducated and stigmatised by other communities, the Batwa were dying out along with their extraordinary heritage. >

Before the creation of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, the now famous forest used to be home to more than just endangered mountain gorillas – it was the homeland of the Batwa Pygmies. **Sue Watt** looks into how this dispossessed tribe is now trying to save its traditions with the help of tourism.



Left: Hitting the mark, Sue's arrow strikes the wooden duiker

Opposite page: Remembering better times, a Batwa elder smokes a pipe



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▷ Today however, largely due to the efforts of American Dr Scott Kellerman, their circumstances are improving thanks to health clinics at Bwindi Community Hospital, schooling and housing. The population of some 1000 Batwa around Bwindi can never return to live in the Bwindi forests, but visitors (and more importantly, the Batwa children) can see how the tribe used to live by visiting 'The Batwa Experience', a new cultural preservation project, which has been set up on a 40ha stretch of forest adjacent to the national park.

From the terrace of Mahogany Springs, the newest lodge in Buhoma village, we had views stretching across Bwindi's 327 square kilometres of impenetrable forest. The Batwa land alongside it looked tiny in comparison. About an hour's walk from Buhoma we met up with four tribal elders, and over the course of some five hours they proudly explained how they used to live.

Although even smaller than my diminutive 157cm-tall frame, they had the strength of giants, rushing up and down the hillside to show us shelters they would have used in rocks and caves, and climbing breezily up trees to demonstrate how they collected honey by smoking out bees. They taught us how they used forest plants for medicines and food, and took us to the shrine to their god. In a thatched banda we were even treated to a mesmerising performance of traditional

stories, songs and dances, all of which illustrated their deep pride in their culture. While they prepared a typical lunch of goat stew and *matoke* (cooked bananas), we visited their forest dwellings, climbing up sturdy ladders made of sticks to their homes high up in the trees. Finally, they demonstrated their ancient hunting techniques and invited us to have a go, culminating in my successful slaying of the wooden duiker.

Although traditionally hunter-gatherers, the Batwa never hunted gorillas – in their culture, it was absolutely taboo. However, as gorillas share 98 per cent of DNA with humans, the Batwa were evicted from their land as the risk of great apes catching potentially fatal infections from them was deemed too high. Sadly, the removal of the Batwa from the Bwindi equation has still not ensured the safety of the mountain gorillas. A poignant reminder of this reached me while I was with the Batwa – Mizaano, a handsome young black-back, strong and stocky at 12 years old, had just been killed in park.

Mizaano's name meant 'playful', and it gave an instant insight into his well-known character. One of only 700 or so mountain gorillas left in the world, his death seemed a heartless waste of a rare and extraordinary life. It seems that poachers had set illegal snares in Bwindi's forest, hoping to catch antelope. But snares are indiscriminate and Mizaano had been trapped instead, and he may have reacted aggressively towards the poachers' dogs. Choosing to save the dogs rather than Mizaano, the poachers speared him and left him to die. He belonged to the Habinyanja, one of three habituated groups in Bwindi, and his death may have explained a lot about my encounter with them a week earlier. ▷

Above: Visitors to 'The Batwa Experience' cultural conservation project can see how the Batwa once lived sustainably within Bwindi

Opposite page: The endangered mountain gorillas are now the only permanent occupants of the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest



▷ The night before my trek to the Habinyanja, while enjoying a sundowner by the campfire at Gorilla Forest Camp in Bwindi, my biggest worry was the rumour that we might be facing a tough day's tracking. We'd just been told that rangers on the previous day had taken five hours to reach the group, who are known for roaming deep into the forest. On the day before that, they couldn't be found at all.

Before leaving, our group of eight tourists were briefed on how to behave in the company of gorillas. "If one charges, don't worry," Gard, our guide, had said. "Just stay still." I wondered whether it was physically possible to stay still whilst being charged by a 200kg primate, but deep down, I never really believed I'd need his advice.

In the forest, we walked through vines, branches and shrubs that needed to be hacked away with machetes to make them passable. Gard had been liaising by radio with trackers who'd gone ahead in search of the gorillas, but after two hours of steep uphill walking, we stopped. "We can't find the gorilla tracks," he informed us and pointed to the dry leaves underfoot. "It's impossible to see where they've gone." So while the rangers sought to rediscover the tracks, we waited in the cool shade of the forest. An hour later, a voice in the distance called us to move.

We smelt the gorillas long before we saw them, the acrid odour of strong urine a sure sign that they were near. Suddenly we spotted three dark silhouettes among the trees a few metres ahead. "They're here," our guide whispered, motioning us closer. Just then the silence was broken by a visceral high-pitched scream. Seemingly out of nowhere, a huge silverback charged towards us, stopping right in front of Gard, who was just in front of me. I froze instantly and instinctively, only later recalling his intuitive words of advice.

We stood dead still until the silverback called Makara started walking further into the forest. We then followed nervously. The three gorillas we'd found in the trees had scurried ahead, but the rest of Habinyanja's nineteen members were nowhere to be seen. In hushed tones, Gard explained: "The silverback's chased the others up the hill and he's hiding them. Something's wrong."

As if to emphasise the point, Makara rushed towards us then swung a gnarled vine in our direction, before charging again with a flash of anger in his eyes and a roar even louder than the first. Gard looked visibly shaken – the air seemed choked with tension. The silverback sat down behind a tree, folded his arms across his chest and sulked with an almost human expression before turning his back on us. Still guarding his group, he was letting us know the show was over.

With hindsight and the sad knowledge of Mizaano's murder, the silverback's unusual aggression now seems totally understandable – poachers may well have been active in the days preceding the killing. Despite all conservation efforts, the world's mountain gorillas remain desperately vulnerable. Yet just as it would be tragic to lose the mountain gorillas, it would equally have been tragic to lose the secrets of the Batwa. Together their stories show the delicate balance that has to be found between wildlife conservation and communities sharing the same environment. 🐼



Elias' dance illustrates his deep pride in the Batwa culture

Plan your trip

Getting there

Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) flies to Uganda's Entebbe Airport via Nairobi. British Airways (www.ba.com) fly directly from London to Entebbe five times per week. Bwindi is a ten-hour drive from Entebbe, although charter flights are available.

When to visit

The best months for tracking gorillas are from June to October.

Visas

Most visitors (Irish excluded) are required to pay for a tourist visa. Check with the nearest Uganda embassy or high commission as prices can be cheaper if you acquire your visa before departing. A three-month single entry visa for UK visitors is £25

at the Uganda High Commission in London, while it's US\$50 at the point of entry in Uganda.

Books

Bradt's *Uganda* by Philip Briggs (6th ed, 2010) is a comprehensive guide to Uganda, complete with excellent background reading on both the mountain gorillas and the Batwa.

Find out more

The Batwa Experience (www.batwaexperience.com)
Uganda Wildlife Association (www.ugandawildlife.org)

Author tip

If you want to give a tip at the end of your stay, hand it directly to the Batwa elders who will distribute it.



* Sue Watt travelled with thanks to Rainbow Tours (www.rainbowtours.co.uk), Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com), Mahogany Springs (www.mahoganysprings.com) and Gorilla Forest Camp (www.sanctuaryretreats.com).