

GORILLAS

A HAIR-RAISING EXPERIENCE

THERE'S LITTLE MORE THRILLING THAN COMING FACE TO FACE
WITH A MOUNTAIN GORILLA, DISCOVERS JOANNA BOOTH



Visiting family is often a valid reason for travel, but once clients have encountered our hirsute cousins, dropping in on the in-laws will never match up. Spoil clients for ever by sending them to Rwanda to experience friendly relations with the greatest of the great apes – gorillas →



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Ugenda is hungover. I can see it in the slump of his shoulders, in the slow way he raises his head and in the pained expression he shoots me when the baby starts playing up.

If you ever feel dubious when scientists say that humans and gorillas share 98% of their DNA, let me dispel those doubts right now. Having spent just an hour in the company of a family of these primates in a Rwandan jungle, I can tell you that you don't need to sequence a genome to see how similar we are. Frankly, I've had hangovers where I've looked less human than Ugenda.

Dropping in on a group of gorillas is like catching an hour of the world's best wildlife soap opera. The silverback has been hitting the intoxicating bamboo shoots too hard, and is suffering the morning-after-the-vegetation-before consequences. Sprawled on his face, he's buried his huge head in his equally massive hands. Nearby, two-year-old Sabbath is perched in a nest of branches. Sensing that he'll get short shrift from his father, he's turned to food for comfort, happily munching his way through handfuls of leaves.

But real action is happening with the girls. Ugenda's favourite female is lying next to him, proprietorially grooming his

fur. Her activities definitely tick up a notch when she notices a rival at the other side of the clearing. The new female keeps darting meaningful glances in Ugenda's direction, and then struts over and lies down next to the silverback, trying to catch his attention. It's the gorilla equivalent of sashaying past in a short skirt and high heels. Girlfriend number one is livid. Ugenda puts his head back in his hands.

Such high jinks make the allotted hour you're permitted to spend with the gorillas fly by, and justify the hefty-sounding permit cost of \$750. No fellow traveller we spoke to was disappointed with their episode among the apes – some had their legs cuddled by babies, while others had seen two silverbacks square up for a brawl. The rules stipulate you should stay seven metres away, but the reality is that the gorillas themselves don't always make this possible.

It's not just the entertainment factor that decides the price – permits are expensive because these creatures are incredibly rare. There are fewer than 900 mountain gorillas on the planet – that's about one per eight million people. They're sadly also critically endangered, and the money raised from tourists' permits goes towards protecting them from poachers. →



TOP: Two silverbacks
MIDDLE: A golden monkey
BOTTOM: Climbing Mount Gahinga
FACING PAGE: A baby gorilla

KIGALI

In Rwanda, the last Saturday morning of every month is dedicated to community service. Groups come together to work on projects – most often rubbish collecting. This policy is most evident in capital Kigali, which is spotless, even in comparison with London, let alone most African cities. A day in low-key Kigali as clients fly in or out of Rwanda is recommended – if nothing else, so they can visit the Genocide Memorial Museum. Alongside its gorillas, Rwanda will be sadly associated by many with this brutal period 20 years ago where, during 100 days of so-called ethnic cleansing, up to a million citizens were killed by their compatriots. The museum's exhibits are informative and well designed, and for most visitors it's essential, if harrowing, viewing. The 148-room Kigali Serena is a beautifully maintained five-star hotel that is just 10 minutes from the airport, but convenient for sightseeing. The rooms are large and recently refurbished, and the food is good, with Rwandan and international dishes on offer for dinner and at breakfast. The sun deck and swimming pool make the perfect hideaway for just-arrived or about-to-depart clients seeking a relaxing few hours.

serenahotels.com



Of the handful of places where mountain gorillas can be seen in the wild, Rwanda and Uganda have the most developed infrastructure. (It is possible to book gorilla-trekking trips to the Democratic Republic of Congo but tourism is still very much in its infancy there.)

Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park, an hour's drive from the capital Kigali, was made famous by Dian Fossey – it was here that the *Gorillas in the Mist* author lived, worked and wrote her book. The tourist experience is exceptionally well organised. After convening for a 7am briefing at the park headquarters, visitors are split into groups – the maximum size is eight – and allocated a guide and a gorilla family to track. After driving to drop-off points around the park, trekking begins, through farmland

and into jungle, and can last anything from a few minutes to many hours, depending on where the gorillas are based that day. Park staff try to match abilities with treks, giving older and less mobile clients an easier ride. But frailty need not be a barrier – we saw a couple with mobility issues carried almost all the way on stretchers packed with pillows and blankets by a team of porters, so they could walk just the final stretch.

I loved our trek – which was just an hour there and back – as it gave me the chance to learn more about the gorillas from our guide, Gus, and enjoy the beautiful Rwandan countryside. Rather than the sweeping plains that we tend to associate with east Africa, this region is one of emerald-green rolling hills, all cultivated within an inch of their lives



TWIST AND SHOUT: The Batwa people are renowned for their dancing



ABOVE: Mgahinga National Park
LEFT: Staff at Mount Gahinga Lodge

by a still-predominantly agricultural population, rising occasionally to more imposing volcanic peaks. Walking through the farmland, local children ran out to greet us, singing songs in English, before we moved closer to the park border itself, where the true jungle begins.

Decent walking shoes are a must, as are long sleeves, to protect against insects and scratchy plants. It sounds strange, but do recommend that clients pick up a cheap pair of gardening gloves to take with them – mine saved me from nettle stings as I grabbed handfuls of undergrowth to push them out of my way.

This isn't somewhere for last-minute bookings. Permits sell out well in advance, and I'd recommend clients purchase more than one. Not because there's a chance they'll miss

seeing the gorillas on their first go – it's extraordinarily rare for this to happen – but because they may feel, as I did, that once isn't enough. I'd have cheerfully stumped up another \$750 on the spot to go again the next day, but this isn't possible unless you've bought another permit.

There are plenty of other activities, however, including hikes of varying lengths. We chose to track a troop of pretty golden monkeys, which swung through the trees and came within inches of our cameras, displaying no fear.

We were also pretty keen to spend some time in our lodge. Gorilla specialist Volcanoes Safaris operates Virunga Lodge, a property with an idyllic location on a hill with 360-degree views of the twin lakes Bulera and Ruhondo. →

MOUNT GAHINGA LODGE, UGANDA

Just over the border from Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park, clients can also see gorillas in Uganda's Mgahinga National Park, where we stayed in Volcanoes Safaris' Mount Gahinga Lodge.

Nine rustic, but charming, stone-built bandas are tucked away in flower-filled gardens, and an atmosphere of peace pervades. The team, led by manager Amron, offered a service so personal and warm you left feeling like a friend, as clichéd as that sounds. We'll never forget our wedding anniversary cake, and the song that accompanied its delivery.

We spent a day scaling the 3,474-metre volcano Mount Gahinga – not an easy climb, but a rewarding one. We trekked up through bamboo groves and mountain woodland, clambering up wooden ladders and along uneven paths until we reached the summit, where the crater is an eerily beautiful swamp filled with giant lobelia flowers.

The lodge's newest activity is a visit to a Batwa community – a disadvantaged tribe displaced from its original lands. The lodge supports them by selling their crafts, organising visits and raising money to help them buy land. I didn't have high expectations – such visits often feel contrived – but it turned about to be a real highlight. The one-on-one interaction through our guide Herbert was genuine and profound, and the tribe's dancing – it is renowned across the country – was beautiful and moving, and provided a uniquely human aspect to a trip that can otherwise prioritise animals over people. VOLCANOESSAFARIS.COM



SAMPLE PACKAGES

NATURAL HIGH

Natural World Safaris offers an eight-day package from £5,175 including two nights' half-board at the Kigali Serena, three nights' full-board at Virunga Lodge and two nights' full-board at Mount Gahinga Lodge. The price includes a private driver/guide, two gorilla permits per person plus other activities, and flights from Heathrow.
naturalworldsafaris.com

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE

African Pride's eight-night Essence of Rwanda itinerary includes two nights in the Volcanoes National Park, two nights in Nyungwe Forest, where clients can track chimpanzees, two nights in Akagera National Park for classic safari game drives, a night on the beach at Lake Kivu and a night in Kigali. The price, including flights from Heathrow, all transfers, accommodation and tours, but excluding gorilla and chimp permits, starts at £3,689.
african-pride.co.uk

SPREAD YOUR WINGS

Cox & Kings offers a 10-day Wings Over Kenya & Rwanda private tour from £4,395 on a full-board basis, including international and internal flights, transfers and activities. The trip features three nights each at Governor's Camp in Kenya's Masai Mara, and at Virunga Lodge, where the price also includes gorilla trekking and a massage.
coxandkings.co.uk



ABOVE: Volcanoes Safaris' Virunga Lodge

From misty dawns to the fiery skies of sunset – including the sun-kissed, blue-and-green colour scheme the landscape takes on in between – there is no danger of getting bored with this vista. It helps that there are so many lovely spots to view it from: with a cool G&T on the main lodge's terrace bar, at lunch from the dining room's outdoor tables or from the utter privacy of our cottage. We stayed in Ibiyaga, one of the newest of the 10 'bandas', and loved the luxurious African-styled decor, the spacious living area with its own fire and our private terrace.

It's an incredibly laid-back and low-key haven. Service is exceptionally friendly and genuine, and we found the food excellent, especially the local dishes that you can select for dinner, alongside European options. Regular traditional dance performances by a youth group give an insight into local culture. Otherwise, entertainment consists of swapping gorilla stories with other guests and relaxing in front of

the fire with a drink. (Though warm by day, this hilly area is chilly at night and clients will need layers.)

From the Volcanoes National Park, we crossed the border into Uganda (*panel, page 59*), but as Rwandan tourism develops, it is also perfectly possible to create a diverse itinerary within its borders. The Akagera National Park provides classic safaris, with the recent reintroduction of lions and black rhinos giving the chance to tick off the big five in some varied terrain – its network of waterways has led to it being called a mini-Okavango Delta. Visitors can track habituated chimpanzees in Nyungwe Forest National Park, and relax on the sandy beaches that line the shore of the massive inland Lake Kivu.

Gorillas will always be Rwanda's most intoxicating draw, but there's more than enough here to create a heady cocktail for Africa-phile clients. ●

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rwandaresources.com