

GORILLA TRACKING

in Rwanda

A high-altitude trek in a remote African bamboo forest puts our correspondent face-to-face with humanity's closest relatives.

by Margie Goldsmith



THWACK, THWACK, THWACK. THE TRACKER USES his machete to slice through dense brush in Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda, where I have come to see the gorillas. The terrain here in East Africa is steep, muddy and slippery and the uneven earth is covered with stinging nettles, fire ants and poison ivy—not a good place to fall. At least I'm over my jetlag, having arrived two days ago after a 19-hour flight from New York; a night in an airport motel; a flight the next morning from Uganda's Entebbe to Kigali, the capital of Rwanda; and a four-hour drive to the Volcanoes Virunga Lodge.

Already, I've had quite an experience at this luxury resort, which is perched on top of a hill with panoramic views of three soaring volcanoes and two glistening lakes. On my first night here, I savored a gourmet dinner of pumpkin soup, grilled salmon and a decadent chocolate-filled dessert. Then costumed members of the local Intore tribe offered a dancing and drumming performance on the lawn, after which I walked along a winding path to my private banda (cottage) and stood on the veranda to gaze up at a universe of giant stars. The next morning, I had a deep massage and toured a school where the children greeted me with, "Good morning, visitor," and sang to me in Rwandan.

Right now, though, I'm immersed in the main event, the one I've traveled halfway around the world to experience: tracking gorillas. We walk up a steep incline and I stumble on a root, but the porter is right there to stop my fall. I had no intention of hiring a porter to carry my backpack—I consider myself adventurous—but we've been warned that we could

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FOTOLA

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be out a long time looking for the primates, so my backpack is loaded down with water bottles, extra clothing layers and raingear. The porter helps me across ravines and up steep embankments, pushes hanging vines away from my face and keeps me from falling. Hiring a porter is the best \$10 investment I've ever made.

"Stick close together," says our guide, Fidel ("not Castro," he keeps repeating). There are eight of us, plus Fidel, the trackers and our porters. The altitude is more than 8,000 feet and it's slow going, but I'm not complaining: I know every step will be worth it once we see humanity's closest relatives, who share 97 percent of our genes.

Of the 700 mountain gorillas left in the world, more than half are here at Volcanoes National Park, which was made famous by *Gorillas in the Mist*, a 1983 book by Dian Fossey and 1988 movie starring Sigourney Weaver. Ten groups of habituated gorillas (meaning they aren't frightened by humans) live in this park. Each day 80 lucky permit holders in groups of eight go with a guide and trackers to look for one of these gorilla families. Additional trackers assigned to each of these families leave early every morning to find and radio the primates' location, and the guide then leads visitors to that spot.

This is not a zoo, however, and the gorillas don't appear on cue—even after the tracker radios the location, the animals are constantly moving and you have to find them. Usually, guests do so after a two- or three-hour hike, though one day, a group of Spanish tourists still hadn't come upon

any gorillas by 4 p.m. Fidel suggested they go back the next morning free of charge (a one-person permit costs \$750), but they had an airplane to catch, so they stayed and eventually found the primates, though they had to walk back through the forest in the dark and didn't return to their vehicles until 10 at night. I hope that's not our fate.

We are tracking the Hirwa group, which means "lucky one." This family came together eight years ago, made up of gorillas from two other families. There are now 12 gorillas in the Hirwa group, among them a Silverback, mothers, teenagers and babies. The Silverback, Munvinya, originally belonged to the Susa group (one of the



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TRAVELER FAST FACTS

WHAT IT IS:

Rwanda, located a few degrees south of the equator in East Africa, is one of the few countries where visitors can track habituated gorillas. Ten gorilla families live in Volcanoes National Park, which offers the choice of easy, medium or advanced terrain to find them.

CLIMATE:

The best time to visit the Virunga area of Rwanda is during the dry seasons, from mid December through February and from June through October. There's little reason not to come during the rest of the year, however, as it most often rains only briefly in the afternoons. It gets chilly in the mountains at night, so bring a sweater.

GETTING THERE:

Fly to Kigali International Airport or to Entebbe and connect to Kigali—an 18- to 21-hour flight from the U.S. East Coast. Then drive four hours to Ruhengeri or charter a chopper directly to the Volcanoes Virunga Lodge heliport with Akagera Aviation (phone: +250-280280600). Private jets fly into Kigali International, which has an 11,483-foot runway. Landing fees and diplomatic clearance may be required. For information, email the Rwanda Airport Authority at raa@rwanda1.com or call +250-83441/85845.

WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE YOU GO:

Visas aren't required for U.S. citizens. Safari lodges cover most costs. For personal expenses, figure \$30 to \$50 per day. The U.S. dollar, which equals about 660 Rwandan francs, is accepted everywhere. (Bills must be in excellent condition with no stains or tears.) Anti-malaria tablets and mosquito repellent are essential and yellow-fever vaccination is strongly suggested.



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families that Fossey studied), but he mated with some of the group's females, causing a rift with the Susa Silverback. One day Munvinya took two females, left the group and moved to another part of the forest; along the way he collected more females, including one that gave birth to twins.

We slog along for about an hour and then Fidel's walkie-talkie beeps. He speaks into it in Rwandan and grins. "The gorillas are very near," he says. "Put down everything you're carrying except cameras. Remember, no flash. Stay close together and follow me quietly." The only sound comes from our boots crunching leaves and twigs as we move single file toward a clearing in a bamboo forest.



FOTOLIA

SUDDENLY FIDEL SIGNALS US TO FORM A semicircle in a little clearing and sit down. I gasp. In front of us are 10 gorillas that obviously know we're here but don't seem to care. We are allowed to watch for one hour and are supposed to remain no closer than seven meters (about 23 feet).

Some of the gorillas groom each other; one chews bamboo leaves, then farts; another, the size of a washing machine, moves to within six feet of us, pounds his chest and lumbers off. A female nurses twin babies. Another young one, hand gripped tightly around a bamboo stalk, tries to swing onto a vine. He makes a few attempts, succeeds and then swings back and forth, as cute as a toddler.

A gorilla sprawls on his back, hands clasped behind his head and feet crossed as though he were sunbathing on a beach. He uncrosses his legs and scratches one foot with the other. His feet look human except his toes are as long as my fingers and his big toe looks like a large thumb. The primates' expressions seem human: serene, pensive and curious.

One gorilla that has been sitting quietly, his mouth fixed in a yawn, stands up, pounds his chest, catches my eye and starts to run straight toward me. My heart is in my throat and I can feel my skin prickling. I push my hands hard into the ground, ready to spring up and make a run for it but at that moment, Fidel steps between me and the gorilla, and the primate backs off. "He's just trying to show his superiority," Fidel says.

A medium-sized gorilla scratches his arm as another moves in my direction. I look for Fidel to save me again but he is not close enough this time. "Don't move," he whispers. I avert my eyes and the gorilla grunts. Then it moves away. I am still shaking as I raise my camera to take a photo of a young gorilla grooming his mother. There's a rustling sound above us. Birds? Monkeys? I look up to a black furry blob. It's a gorilla in the tree. Will it fall on me?

Suddenly a black gorilla with a silver saddle lumbers through the bamboo trees. He must weigh more than 400 pounds. It's the silverback, Munvinya. He grunts, then



VOLCANOES SAFARIS



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brushes past us and disappears into the bamboo shoots. “Come,” whispers Fidel.

We follow him down a hill as steep as a ski slope, clinging to vines and tree branches. I have a gut feeling we won’t find the Silverback because the bush is so thick, but just then Fidel stops. There, in a small clearing about six feet from us, is Munvinya mating with one of the females. A young gorilla just a few inches away pays no attention. The act goes on for a long time; when it finally ends, Munvinya clambers off his mate’s back and sits on the ground.



THAT NIGHT AT THE LODGE, WE ALL BRING our laptops to dinner and compare photographs. They serve as proof that this was not a dream—we truly saw the gorillas. The next morning, on the drive back to the airport, I gaze out at field after field of rice paddies and crops of sorghum and Irish potatoes and corn surrounded by soaring volcanoes. Along the side of the road is a continual parade of Rwandans: young boys carrying huge piles of branches on their shoulders, women with heavy cassava leaf bundles balanced on their heads, young children walking by their sides. Rwanda is now a peaceful and safe country where everyone lives in harmony. We stop at a roadside stall for succulent fresh-roasted corn and steaming hot sweet potatoes. A man walks by, pushing his bike, which is laden with five huge sacks of potatoes.

Back in the vehicle, we drive past a field where three majestic herons are perched in the grass, each standing on one leg. Herons, in Africa were thought to communicate with the Gods, an apt ending to my Rwandan adventure. ■

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TRAVELER REPORT CARD

ACCOMODATIONS (A):

I stayed at the luxurious Volcanoes Virunga Lodge. Perched high on a ridge with magnificent views of the volcanoes and twin lakes below, this eco-friendly resort features 10 standalone cottages with terraces and full baths. The \$3,797 high-season and \$3,417 low-season rates are per person, based on double occupancy, and cover a three-night, four-day stay with full board, massages and a gorilla permit. Another excellent resort is Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge, which is not quite as opulent but close to park headquarters.

FOOD (A):

Meals at Virunga Lodge are delicious and plentiful with picnic lunches available for excursions. Three-course dinners include westernized specialties such as ravioli with roasted pumpkin and ginger and the popular “Taste of Rwanda” (banana and beef stew, red beans, cassava and rice with peanut sauce). All bread is homemade as are the gorilla animal crackers.

ACTIVITIES (A+):

Visitors come to track the mountain gorillas in Volcanoes National Park as well as to track golden monkeys. You can hike (six to eight hours) to Dian Fossey’s grave, climb Visoke Volcano (five to eight hours at high altitude) and visit the Mwiko Primary School to help students practice English. A great add-on destination is Mt. Gahinga Volcanoes Safari Lodge in Uganda, less than two hours away by car. There you can track gorillas and golden monkeys, hike up volcanoes and interact with the Batwa pygmies during a not-to-be-missed cultural-heritage experience that includes a dance/drumming performance. Epic Road customizes Rwanda gorilla tracking tours with lodges of the customer’s choice and will combine Rwanda with a traditional game drive safari in Tanzania (visitors can fly from Rwanda direct to Serengeti).

QUIETUDE (A+):

At the Virunga Safaris Lodge, guests generally hear nothing but wind rustling through the trees and birds singing. As noted in the accompanying story, though, my first night here featured a half hour of thunderous drumming, singing and dancing by the local Intore tribe.



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