

GORILLA TREKKING IN *Uganda*

A visit to the Pearl of Africa enables tourists to get up close and personal with these gentle and intelligent creatures. **Sonja Newlands** tells us about her beautiful and humbling experience, one that she will cherish for the rest of her life.





From the moment you land at Entebbe's international airport, on the forested shore of Lake Victoria, it's clear that Uganda is no ordinary safari destination.

Ecologically, Uganda is where the East African savannah meets the West African jungle.

And where else but in this impossibly lush country can one observe lions prowling in the open plains in the morning and then track chimpanzees in the rainforest undergrowth that same afternoon? And the next day navigate tropical channels teeming with hippos and crocodiles before setting off high into the misty mountains to stare into the eyes of a mountain gorilla?

Uganda, the Pearl of Africa, has ten national parks showcasing the best of East Africa. Their Rift Valley landscapes and tropical forests make dramatic backdrops to an extensive variety of flora and fauna.

Managed by Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), the parks offer 'traditional' savannah safaris along with boat tours, forest hikes, mountain climbing and wildlife research activities. Uganda is unrivalled on the continent as a bird watching destination with over 1,000 species of birds – several of which are found nowhere else on the planet. It is also home to 13 species of primates including over half of the world's endangered mountain gorillas; and our closest relative – the chimpanzee.

Our first night was spent at The Gately Inn in Entebbe, a mere six kilometres from the airport, which was convenient for our early morning flight the next day, from Entebbe to Kisoro, Western Uganda. This was followed by a three-hour road trip through the countryside, eventually leading us to Gorilla Safari Lodge, tucked away on the boundary line of Bwindi National Park, home to the endangered mountain gorillas.

Soon after we arrived, an afternoon guided walking tour to the local village was enlightening. I have visited many African countries before and was intrigued by how clean this village was and how polite and wonderfully friendly the locals were towards us. Parents did not allow their children to run towards us and beg for

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sweets; instead they greeted us politely with a big smile and waved when we walked past. We visited the local primary school and handed over much needed stationery supplies to the headmistress and we were thanked with beautiful songs from the children. There is something about African voices singing that brings tears to my eyes.....

Bwindi Impenetrable National Park lies in southwestern Uganda on the edge of the Rift Valley. Its mist-covered hillsides are covered by one of Uganda's oldest and most biologically diverse rainforests, which dates back over 25,000 years and contains almost 400 species of plants. More famously, this "impenetrable forest" also protects an estimated 320 mountain gorillas – roughly half of the world's population, including several habituated groups, which can be tracked. This biologically diverse region also provides

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shelter to a further 120 mammal species, including primates and elephant, and 350 species of birds, including 23 endemic species. The park encompasses approximately 321 km² and is divided into four gorilla-tracking sectors, namely the Buhoma, Ruhija, Rushaga and Nkuringo sectors. The Rushaga sector boasts the highest number of gorilla families.

That night, as I settled myself in front of the fireplace that warmed the cool evening, I started to feel rather anxious about the next day... Finally I would be facing the

giant animals that brought me all the way to Uganda!

The next morning, the mist that had been lingering in the valleys cloaked the park in a mysterious atmosphere. Gorilla tracking is strictly limited to a maximum of eight people per group per day. Permits must be booked in advance, since they are in very high demand all year round and are non-refundable. Together with seven other tourists, all from Mexico, we were briefed by the rangers about our hike. We were warned that the hike could be tough, with



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lots of steep, muddy parts. However, I was determined that nothing would stop me meeting the gentle giants. Our group was accompanied by two rangers, an armed guard and porters to carry our day packs, which we were very grateful for. Although only just over two kilograms in weight with a packed lunch and two litres of water, I would highly recommend taking a porter as trekking can be hard going and two kilograms at the end of six hours feels like 20 kilograms.

The trail we followed disappeared after a while and we were soon cutting our own path through the thick tangle of the forest. It was simply breathtaking! The sounds and smells of the forest made me curious as to what lay behind the abundant jungle cover of vines, bamboo and huge trees. After three hours our guide gave us a sign and whispered "There they are." My heart

*I held my breath as a **big Silverback gorilla** came to sit about **two meters** away.*

stopped as I realised we had come face to face with a group of mountain gorillas. I forgot about everything around me and only had eyes for those immense dark shapes, sitting peacefully together. Quietly we moved nearer, as the impressive silverback male gorilla watched us closely. Gentle and intelligent creatures, gorillas are so strong and yet so vulnerable. A baby gorilla stared curiously at our group; other gorillas were sitting in the dense undergrowth, not disturbed by our

presence at all. Suddenly, the big Silverback moved in my direction, and my natural instinct was to retreat, but the guide placed a firm hand on my arm and reassured me that everything was okay. I held my breath because this big Silverback came to sit about two meters away, and started eating from the shrubs around him. His eyes, black and gentle, made me feel very humble. Somehow, I lost track of time, and it came as a surprise when the guide called an end to the magical moment by signalling that it >>

international destination

was time to go. An hour had passed – without a doubt the fastest hour of my life – and I reluctantly backed away.

I still find it hard to believe that I had actually spent time with the gorillas; that they had allowed me into their world for a while. Being there with these gentle apes, surrounded by the African jungle, left me with feeling incredibly privileged. Their apparent kindness, peaceful nature, and amazingly human features had left a lasting impression. It was a beautiful and humbling experience that I will cherish for the rest of my life.

While in the area

After the gorilla trek we spent a further few days journeying to the Queen Elizabeth National Park, Fort Portal (in the shadow of the Mountains of the Moon), Kibale National Park and the Murchison Falls National Park. At all of these locations, we were blown away by the scenery, the warmth of the people and the fantastic wildlife sightings. Dramatic waterfalls and game drives on the banks of the Nile contributed to this unique adventure into the heart of Africa.

It was soon time to go home, and hard to believe that ten days had gone by so quickly. Our flight took us back to Entebbe, where I was shocked by the noise and commotion of the city after the peace and tranquillity of the last few days. Matatus and boda-bodas, used for local transport, passed other vehicles where, and however they could, and coupled with people walking down the road, shouting greetings at each other, it created an atmosphere of noisy, friendly chaos.

But there is more to the country than wildlife – far more! There is the mighty Nile, which is punctuated by the spectacular Murchison Falls, and offers some of the world's most thrilling white-water rafting. There are the snow-capped peaks of the Rwenzori, forest-fringed crater lakes and beautiful islands in Lake Victoria and Lake Bunyonyi. Uganda is a cultural melting pot, as evidenced by the more than 30 different indigenous languages, which stem from five distinct linguistic groups. Having the reputation as "Africa's Friendliest Country" stems partly from the tradition of hospitality common to its culturally diverse populace and partly from the remarkably low level

A visit to the Batwa or Pygmy people was of particular interest to me, as this is a culture I knew very little about before visiting Uganda. The Pygmy peoples of central Africa are traditionally hunter-gatherers living in the rainforests, and identify themselves as "forest people" due to the fundamental importance of the forest to their culture, livelihood and history. Current estimates put the population of the Pygmy peoples at about half a million.

of crime and hassle directed at tourists. Educated Ugandans are generally fluent in English, which is the official language.

Best time to visit

Uganda can be explored at any time of the year, although mountain hikes, gorilla tracking and other forest walks are more challenging during the rains, which generally peak during mid-September to November and again from March to May. The dry season is officially from June till mid-September and from December till February. However, like in any other country of the World, the climate does seem to be changing. The temperature is fairly constant at temperatures between 23 and 28 degrees Celsius, throughout the year. Take some warm gear with you though, as it can get cool at night, particularly in the mountains. ●

More information

Contact info for one of the many companies offering tours to Uganda:

Africa tour

Email: info@africatour.co.za

Website: www.africatour.co.za

Gorilla permits are \$600 per permit per visit

Tours vary from 4-10 day trips and vary in price according to accommodation choices

Fights Johannesburg to Entebbe on SAA approx. R6000



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