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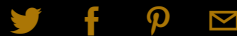
Gorilla Trekking in Uganda: Up Close with Silverbacks

by J U D Y K O U T S K Y

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A once-in-a-lifetime trip to see mountain gorillas in the wild of Mgahinga Gorilla National Park.



Ever since my first trip to **Africa**—1997, to Cote d’Ivoire—I’ve been drawn back to the continent, again and again. I’ve visited more than 20 times, each trip different than the other, but trekking to see the mountain gorillas in East Africa has always remained just out of reach, a trip back-burnered behind simpler excursions to **Kenya**, **Tanzania**, and **South Africa**. Only three countries in the world are home to mountain gorillas: Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). About 18,000 permits were given out in Uganda last year to see these gentle giants, with about 30,000 permits given in Rwanda. In total there are fewer than 900 gorillas in the wild—fewer than the white rhino (20,000), and fewer still than the Bengal tiger (2,500). They remain critically endangered due to poaching and humans moving in on their territory, and the chance to see them, to understand them, is increasingly rare. That’s why, this past fall, I finally took the opportunity to visit the gorillas of Uganda.

When it comes to gorilla trekking, many wonder if they should go to Rwanda or Uganda. The experience in each country is similar: Tours are small, no more than eight people, with one guided hour with the gorillas. I arranged a tour through the Uganda Wildlife Authority, which is responsible for all gorilla trekking excursions; you can also work with a tour operator (and they will book through UWA). Destination: **Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda**, part of the Virunga Conservation Area that covers a mountain range extending across Uganda, Rwanda, and the Congo. The volcanoes in both Uganda and Rwanda provide an amazing backdrop for the whole experience, and due to conflict in the DRC, most tourists choose one of the other two countries to see the gorillas.

Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda is home to the Nyakagezi gorilla family with its five silverbacks (adult males). It holds a certain allure, boasting one of the highest concentrations of silverbacks within a family in all three countries. So with a guide, a group of five, and a pack on my back, we set out on a 90-minute trail hike, over rocks and steep inclines, before off-roading in search of the Nyakagezis. (Tip: If you're not an avid hiker, you can hire a porter for \$15 to carry your day pack. An older woman who told me she had balance issues had a porter guide her over some of the more challenging parts of the trail.)

Trackers went ahead to look for the gorillas, and then radioed the guide to tell him the coordinates. Sometimes the trackers find the gorillas, sometimes the tourists. It's a game of luck. In our case, the trackers caught the first glimpse, so our guide whacked through dense bamboo and montane vegetation to get us to our final destination. Along the way, the sounds of overlapping bird calls provided the soundtrack (there are about 80 species found in the park).

We stopped in a small clearing so our guide could give us instructions on proper etiquette, a conservation and safety measure for both the gorillas and tourists: While the gorillas are somewhat **touchable** to tourists, they still need a wide berth. We were told to stay seven meters away—but the gorillas, of course, could do what they want. And they did. A playful young juvenile came up to me to explore. He touched my pant leg—gently fist-bumping my thigh—before squealing and then, like my seven-year-old back home, he made faces at me before doing a series of somersaults down the hill.

While it was fun to watch the juvenile frolic and play with his brother, it was seeing the adult silverback males in action that moved me. Pounding their chests, making conversation with guttural sounds, climbing effortlessly up the bamboo trees to build a nest—the 60 minutes we were allotted to watch and photograph these graceful animals went by way too quickly.

It wasn't our proximity to these beautiful creatures—or actually being **touched** by one—that was most surprising; it was the reminder that the mountain gorillas share 98 percent of our DNA. We looked into their eyes, watched them groom each other, and followed their playful actions—tugging on each other's arms, wrestling and playing what looked like a game of hide and seek: It was as real an education as there is, and well worth the wait.

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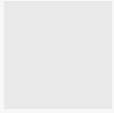
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