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Banana republic: in search of gorillas in the Ugandan rainforest

A new programme allows visitors to spend hours alongside the animals in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest



A gorilla in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable national park © Richard Denyer



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NOVEMBER 4, 2016 by: **David Pilling**

It normally takes four or five hours at most to locate a family of gorillas in the glistening, livid-green mountain rainforests of western Uganda. For me, it took 32 years.

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As a student, back in 1984, I found myself hitchhiking through the then troubled central African country when I heard tell of a man expert at tracking the rare and elusive mountain gorillas. There were probably no more than 400 in existence, secreted in the virtually impenetrable jungles that traverse the volcano-ridged landscape along the borders between Uganda, Rwanda and what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo.

I had somehow located this pioneer of gorilla tracking, mainly by word of mouth, and he had agreed to the expedition. His name

slipped my memory years ago. I stayed in his hut one night and early the next morning we set off, at blistering pace, together with an assistant carrying a rickety old rifle. After several hours we entered the undergrowth, the guide hacking a path with his machete.

Inside the forest tangle, we followed as he looked intently for clues. He would stop abruptly to sniff the air, scan the ground and scour the canopied treetops. Occasionally, his eyes would twinkle. He would look at me intently and whisper “gorilla droppings” or “gorilla nest” and we would plunge into the foliage with renewed urgency. After an entire day of slithering and slogging up and down the mountainside, hopes raised and then dashed and raised again, our guide intoned the dreadful words, “No gorilla today.” We slumped off home.

The experience, exhilarating if ultimately disappointing, was to form the material for my first newspaper article, a modest personal triumph that launched my life in journalism. I revealed at the article’s conclusion that, judging by the tracker’s guest book, his success rate was less than good. Guest after guest reported they had been unlucky. The article was entitled “Gorilla Tomorrow.”



Thirty-two years later, I am back in Uganda to finish what I started. The country is transformed. In 1984, it was in the throes of a gruesome bush war as the forces of Yoweri Museveni sought to topple the then president Milton Obote. Museveni ultimately prevailed. In a Kennedy-esque inaugural speech, he promised a new style of leadership and pledged to leave office before long. Today, his photograph is everywhere. And so is he. He is still president.

Uganda may not be a model democracy but it is stable and, by its previous standards, prospering. If there were one word to describe it, for me, it would be “green”. I have never encountered a more fecund landscape, nor realised how many hues of green there are, from ferns and heliconia leaves to lichens and twisting vines. Even the ubiquitous banana palm exhibits several shades, from its yellow-green stalk to the fluorescent outpouring of its leaves. If the Inuit have 50 words for snow, the Ugandans must surely have 100 for green.

I remember, back in 1984, bouncing over treacherous roads through the Queen Elizabeth National Park. Before, I was told, it had been teeming with animals, until Idi Amin's troops had emptied it of wildlife. In a month back then, I saw not a single wild animal worthy of report, unless you count the ungainly wattle-necked marabou storks pecking, like tuxedoed gentlemen, through the rubbish heaps of Kampala.

Uganda in 2016 is another country, criss-crossed with slick Chinese roads and pulsing with commerce. Animal numbers have recovered. During my week-long trip — visiting Queen Elizabeth and Kibale Forest national parks, before heading south in search of gorillas — I see majestic herds of elephants, 30- or 40-strong, and lions lounging in the branches of a sycamore fig tree (as a way of escaping the attention of tsetse flies). Returning from a boat trip on the Kazinga Channel, a stretch of water bristling with Nile crocodile, water buffalo and one of the world's largest concentrations of hippos, a leopard streaks in front of our vehicle. We screech to a halt and, after some contemplation, it flops down within a few metres and stays there, preening its splendid coat as nonchalantly as any house cat.



The view from the lodge across the national park

But it is the mist-enveloped, jungle-choked mountains that take one's breath away. Our vehicle climbs along red-earth roads gashed into the hillside, past terraced plots where farmers cultivate cassava, maize, sorghum and rows of neatly planted tea. Beyond the steeply undulating hills are forested upthrustings formed by volcanic eruption. There lies the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, some 330 sq km of protected land, where most of Uganda's mountain gorillas live.

Clouds pool like dry ice in the valley. As I take in the majesty of mountains and rainforest, a sound slowly forms in my head: "Zacharia". Instantly I know it to be the long-forgotten name of my guide from 30 years ago, restored by the landscape to my consciousness.

I stay in two lodges in the Bwindi forest — Bwindi Lodge and Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge — both beautifully designed and impeccably run by liveried staff, like Claridge's in the jungle. Outside the casement windows, the rainforest presses in.

The good news is there are more gorillas now, though their numbers are still worryingly small. Bwindi has now been designated a national park, protected from encroaching farmland. The first census in 1997 suggested the forest contained 294 gorillas, a number that had edged up to 408 five years ago. A census being carried out now is expected to show 500 or more.



A bedroom at Bwindi Lodge

A reason for the steady recovery is that gorilla tracking is now big business. Tourists purchase a \$600 permit entitling them to visit the gorillas for a strict limit of one hour. Numbers of visitors are restricted to eight per day. Even so, each gorilla family is bringing in \$4,800 daily in permit-fees alone. And in Bwindi, there are a dozen families available to visit. (There are about 20 more wild gorilla groups.)

The gorillas you can visit have all gone through a five-year process known as “habituation”, through which rangers gradually accustom them to humans. Park staff spend hours each day crashing after the animals until, finally, the great apes learn to ignore, or at least tolerate, human presence.

People who spend an hour with gorillas often describe the brief experience in almost religious terms. With luck, I am about to go one better. Under a new programme, visitors to Bwindi can spend four hours with the Bikingi family group, which is midway through the habituation process. That means the gorillas are shier, wilder and more unpredictable, though visitors can take comfort from the fact that even a 500lb silverback with an arm-span of eight-and-a-half feet is vegetarian at heart.

We depart at 6am, driving higher into the terraced hillsides to meet the rangers. My guide will be Augustine Muhangi, a 34-year-old dressed in army-style fatigues. He is accompanied by two machete-carrying trackers and another man armed with a gun to scare off any prone-to-charge forest elephants. There is one other tourist, a lawyer from California. We set off and, after an hour of panting uphill to a height of about 2,000 metres, we enter the “impenetrable” forest.



A terrace at Bwindi Lodge

It is darker and cooler under the canopy. The ground beneath is spongy with leaves. Augustine says there are at least 21 gorillas in the family, which makes it a large group. There may be more, since many in the group are still timid of humans. The family has one silverback, Rushenga, which Augustine translates as “one who breaks up the forest”. It is, he says, the biggest silverback he has ever seen — “a monster”.

Augustine knows where the gorillas were yesterday, so now it’s a question of finding where they spent the night. “We’re looking for droppings, broken vegetation and leftover food to see the direction they’re travelling,” he says. Once the nests are located, the gorillas, which generally don’t move more than 1km a day, won’t be far away.

A radio coughs into life. “The trackers are telling me they can hear them,” Augustine says. Before long, there’s a strong smell of urine and he spots the nests — hastily assembled piles of broken branches laid out on the ground “like spring mattresses”. Excitement levels mount. We push forward in silence. The only sound is the swoosh of machetes. Suddenly, there’s a noise like the crackle of artillery; breaking branches. There, just five or six metres away, is Rushenga, possibly one of the largest silverbacks alive, lying on his back, stripping leaves from a branch. His banana-sized fingers clutch vines and branches. When he lumbers off, with that unmistakable ape-gait, his silvery back ripples with muscle.

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Suddenly there's a growl and Rushenga mock-charges out of the greenery. Even the tracker backs away in fright

He stops again and leans against the mountainside like a Buddha on his vegetal throne. The trackers squat, like subjects before their king, making submissive grunts. They pick leaves, press them to their mouths and make chewing motions. “We are telling him we are so friendly and we do as he is

doing,” explains Augustine. The silverback looks on with seeming contempt, but tolerates our presence. When he scratches his skin, it makes the sound of someone grating carrots.

Augustine says Rushenga is 25 to 30 years old, and in his prime. Eventually, he'll be challenged for supremacy, at which point, if he loses, he'll need to submit or leave the group. After a while, there's an eruption of splintering wood and he lollops off, crashing into the thickest part of undergrowth.

We clamber after. In the impossible tangle of green all around us, the trackers lead us over what looks like the edge of the mountainside and on to the treetops themselves. The branches are springy underfoot and it is impossible to tell where the ground is — a few feet, or a few dozen feet, below. Only the sight of the trackers ahead of us, bouncing along the vegetation like the flying protagonists of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, tells us it is safe to follow. It is, I think to myself, like being a gorilla for a day.

After a while, we find other members of the family. All around is the sound of cracking and crunching and munching. There must be eight or nine gorillas, including a mother with a baby, only a week old and as yet unnamed. One of the gorillas moves towards me and just keeps coming. Compared with Rushenga she is small, but at nearly 300lbs she has my full attention. I lean back into a tree and she brushes within a few inches of my legs.

The gorillas have stopped moving and we spend a few hours watching them playing, swinging and wrestling. We even catch one juvenile briefly practising a drumroll chest thump.

The silverback is gone and I presume we won't see him again. But the trackers have other ideas and they hack into the undergrowth, bidding us follow. I'm writing something in my notebook when suddenly there's an almighty growl and a doglike yelp. I look up to see Rushenga mock-charging out of the greenery. Even the experienced tracker backs away in fright. Our four hours have flashed by in reverie. We must go, says Augustine.

Walking back, I think of Zacharia, my guide from 1984 who, I learn from the rangers, died six years ago. A pioneer of tracking, he is still held in respect in these mountains. It took a while, but thanks to him, I saw gorillas today.

David Pilling is the FT's Africa Editor

Main photograph: Richard Denyer

Details

David Pilling was a guest of [Natural World Safaris](#) and [Kenya Airways](#). Natural World Safaris offers an eight-day trip from £6,235 with four nights in Bwindi Impenetrable national park (staying at Bwindi Lodge and the Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge, with permits for the gorilla habituation programme), one night at Ndali Lodge in Kibale Forest national park, and two nights at Kyambura Gorge Lodge in Queen Elizabeth national park (with a boat trip on the Kazinga Channel). It includes transfers, all meals and a domestic flight. Flights from London on Kenya Airways cost from £750