



BEST ANIMAL ENCOUNTERS

# RWANDA'S MOUNTAIN GORILLAS

BY TEAGAN CUNNIFFE

**M**y grandmother was 73 when she made the trek to see the mountain gorillas of Rwanda. It was something that she had always wanted to do and, when my intrepid Aunt suggested that they go, she gamely agreed despite being worried that it would be too physically taxing.

I don't remember much about the story of their trip besides my grandmother later saying 'I made it up those mountains only through myprodol, voltarin, and prayer'.

Her words came back to me as my friend Darrel and I wheezed our way up the mulchy slopes of Volcanoes National Park. The earth was black and loamy, bursting with fertility and oversized earthworms, and sweat drenched our shirts. We were likely walking on the same mountain range as my grandmother had done all those years back. I imagined her determined frame hunched over the path as we were, one foot trudging up past the other and at the back of her mind the same burning question: would we find them?

See, buying a gorilla permit does not guarantee you seeing them in your allocated time. There are ten gorilla families in the Volcanoes National Park, an area of 125 sq.km and home to six volcanoes, three of which are still active. Endangered golden monkeys swing through its depths and jungle elephant walk quietly between trees. There are

bushbuck and black-fronted duiker and buffalo, but the main reason that people visit is to see the gorillas. These primates bring thousands of visitors through Rwanda's borders each year and are revered amongst the population as both an employment opportunity and a symbol of hope after the atrocities that it has seen in the past. Gorillas adorn bank notes and gaze benignly from billboards. Tourists use the capital city of Kigali as a one-night layover before making the two-hour pilgrimage to the town of Musanze, their hearts set on seeing gorillas.

In 1967 world-famous primatologist Dian Fossey made the prediction that wild gorillas wouldn't see the turn of the 21st century. After giving her life, sadly literally, to the protection of these great apes, she'd be elated to learn that despite the odds their numbers have grown to an estimated 800-1000 individuals - 340 of which can be found in the Volcanoes National Park. The park is bordered by the Virunga National Park in the Congo and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda, and altogether form the Virunga Massif at 450 km2.

It's not often that endangered numbers grow up, and the success of the mountain gorillas is linked with efforts to involve the community, giving them a sense of ownership over Rwanda's flagship animal. Locals are trained as guides and porters and poachers are re-educated before being set in place as trackers heartened by a steady income and a fulfilling purpose. Emmanuel, our guide, was a perfect example of how such tourism had changed lives.

Growing up in the foothills of the Mount Sabyinyo and Mount Bisoke, his childhood was typical for children in the area. Days were spent herding cattle and setting snares for meat (gorilla were sometimes a by-catch), but with a major difference: they also included defending his parent's potato fields against the marauding apes. After training as a guide his perception of the furred beasts changed from carb-loving freeloaders to that of important income-generating livelihoods. His love for the gorillas flourished, evident in >

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Teagan Cuniffie



the chirruping way he mimics their sounds and calls each by name. He was named Rwandan Guide of the Year; a prize that saw him visiting the thick jungles of concrete Tokyo and returning with widened eyes and perspectives.

'Without the gorillas,' he said, 'I'd still be working those fields.'

Instead, he's just a short way up the path ahead, muttering into his radio in communication with the anti-poaching guards that protect the families that make this park home. Giant Lobelia grew oversized above us while lichen patterned rocks and tree trunks alike. A storm rumbled in the distance above. We fervently hoped that we'd see the gorilla family 'Sabyinyo' in time before the rains hit. There were six of us in the group, all of varied nationalities: South African, Swiss, American and Ugandan. Gaius from Uganda had made this journey multiple times, and Sally the American was attempting it with only one lung.

We passed the sign leading to Dian Fossey's grave. My understanding of her story is based on the movie rendition of her life, and it was sobering to see the physical signs of her resting place, alongside her favourite gorillas. After taking in the view and some water, we continued the

walk before Emmanuel raised his hand, calling us to a sudden stop beneath the twisting limbs of an African redwood dripping with moss. Our group looked at each other. Was this it? Had we found the gorillas, or had Emmanuel called a time-limit on the hike?

Emmanuel swung his panga wide, clearing stinging nettle and brush from the path, and gestured for us to follow him.

And there they were. Four round-bellied females reclined in the undergrowth, their bodies making hollow coves in the foliage. A mother sat bent over her baby, holding it close with forehead pressed into its fur. Another baby tottered towards us. It had wispy hair on its head and big, round eyes in its old-young, wrinkled face. We held our breath, hoping that it would stumble on over to our shoes and onto our laps but Emmanuel hissed at us and we moved quickly out of its reach, belatedly remembering that human touch can carry deadly bacteria and disease. A silverback sauntered by, his sloping back and broad shoulders beefed with muscle. Trapped up against the mountain we could do nothing but lean as far back as possible and hold our breath as he passed. Stinging nettles were forgotten in the tension. He gave us a haughty stare and grunted before baring his teeth in a gum-black yawn.

And so we sat on our haunches and watched as the gorilla family largely ignored us, privy to the natural flow of their day. Our allocated hour felt like all of five minutes. Before we knew it Emmanuel was calling us back to our backpacks and onto the return journey. We reached the bottom of the mountains and crossed back over onto agricultural land before being given a certificate with our names on it stating that we'd seen the gorillas. It all felt a blur.

After returning to South Africa I phoned my grandmother and asked her what she had thought of the experience. Her voice became animated.

'That was ten years ago already. Gosh, I can't believe it! Hang on, let me get my notes,' she said, before returning to tell me about the family that she'd sat with. They'd been just 8m away on a hillock and, a psychologist by profession, she'd been fascinated by the human-like behaviour that they'd exhibited – or perhaps it's the ape-like behaviour that we exhibit. That we share 98% of our DNA with these creatures is clearly apparent.

With time, you forget the discomfort of travel – for instance, of labouring up a hill with one lung, or propping yourself up with painkillers, or paying the hefty price of the permit - and instead remember the



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## TRAVEL PLANNER

### WHY RWANDA?

Uganda and the Congo may be cheaper alternatives for gorilla trekking, but Rwanda is a country worth visiting in itself. Kigali is clean and safe, and the Kigali Genocide Memorial is a heart-numbing but important visit. The proceeds from the sale of gorilla permits benefit the community directly, from job creation through to service providing.

### STAY HERE

You'll need to get to the park headquarters by 7am. Stay overnight near Musanze and arrange a transfer with your

hotel for the following day. The 3\* **La Palma hotel** has views out over Sabyinyo volcano, so you can see where you will be trekking the following morning, and rooms are simple but clean. From \$40 per person including breakfast. <https://lapalmehotel.net/>

### DO THIS

Gorilla trekking permits cost \$1500. Get a 30% discount if you pair your visit with a 3-day visit to another of Rwanda's national parks during the low-season of November to May. [rwandatourism.com](http://rwandatourism.com)



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# LEMURS AND OTHER ENDEMIC

BY TEAGAN CUNIFFE



Madagascar is one of the most biodiverse places in the world. It's been isolated geographically for over 150 million years, and this has resulted in a multitude of species that can be found nowhere else on Earth. About half of the world's chameleon species live here, along with the delightfully named satanic leaf-tailed gecko and the muscular fosa. The animal synonymous with Madagascar, however, is the lemur. The theory goes that they (or their distant relatives, rather) floated to Madagascar on rafts of vegetation thousands of years ago - I find the idea of them floating on rafts almost as entertaining as lemurs are in real life - evolving and adapting over time into a wide range of 111 species and sub-species. The comedians are constantly on the go, swinging from the canopy using their hands and using a range of visual signals to communicate.



Caption caption Conet estia sequo occab id que pore et et vitae volectati omnisin nulparumet molum veniet quibus molum nulparumet.

## TRAVEL PLANNER

**DO THIS**  
Listen for the haunting call of the critically-endangered indri, in Andasibe-Mantadia National Park just 150km from Madagascar's capital, Antananarivo. Entrance fees from 25 000 ariary (R96) per person and exclude the cost of a guide.



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# SKELETON COAST'S DESERT-ADAPTED ANIMALS

BY TEAGAN CUNIFFE



My guide from Wilderness Safari's Hoanib Skeleton Coast camp, Herunga, knows his desert elephants. He parked our safari vehicle beneath a sand dune and warned me to get prepared. I adjusted my exposure and set my composition - just in time. A herd of elephants poured down the lip of the dune in a cloud of dust, coming straight towards the vehicle. Herunga stood up and clapped his hands, warding off the matriarch just before she reached our car. The stream of elephant diverted and when the dust settled our hearts continued to pound - what a beautiful, beautiful sight

that had been. The animals along the Skeleton coast seem to be prettier than elsewhere. Elephants are smaller, with rounded foreheads and big eyes, and the lions have handsome faces and untarnished, sand-coloured coats. Animals out here are playing life on high difficulty mode. They've had to change both behavioural patterns and physical attributes in order to adapt to water and food scarcity. To the ignorant visitor, life seems impossible. But make it they do, and it's a privilege to see them in this desolate landscape, fiercely defying the odds of survival.

Caption caption Conet estia sequo occab id que pore et et vitae volectati omnisin nulparumet molum veniet quibus molum

## TRAVEL PLANNER

**DO THIS**  
Camp at Elephant Song Camp, a community-initiative with limited facilities (water supply, shower stand and dry toilet). Take a drive along the dried Hoanib Riverbed 4WD Trail to cross paths with giraffe, elephant and lion - but please keep to a single track and don't make any new roads. Tyre marks stay for up to 10 years in this delicate area. N\$50 per person, [info-namibia.com](http://info-namibia.com)