

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

Rare Breeds

Rwanda's endangered gorillas are luring an increasingly upscale crowd—eager to fulfill a bucket-list ambition

By DEBORAH DUNN

I'D BEEN IN Volcanoes National Park, a sliver of jungle in northern Rwanda, for all of 30 minutes, when a fur ball the size of an ottoman came barreling toward me. To be fair, I was on his turf. I had been spying on the fur ball's family—nine mountain gorillas, including the roughly 400-pound patriarch, a massive silverback with a towering forehead and meaty hands twice the width of mine. The apes were scattered around a tangle of tree branches and bamboo stalks rooted on a mud-packed slope, while I'd been lurking about 30 feet away with six other tourists. We all wore shades of fresh-off-the-shelf khaki, with camera-phones or zoom lenses at the ready. A young couple from Mexico City had Go-Pro video cameras strapped to their wrists.

I was crouched next to a tree—eager to avoid annoying the silverback—when King Kong Junior rushed me, crashing out of a stand of bamboo. He tried to yank me away by the sleeve. Just as swiftly, Placide Nkurunziza, one of our group's two guides, grabbed my other sleeve and gently grunted (primate-speak for “scream”) at the little guy, who promptly released me and sprinted back down the hill to find more willing playmates. I'd paid \$1,500 to spend an hour with the gorillas. The near-kidnapping was a bonus.

At last official count, 604 mountain gorillas—more than half of those left on the planet—live in the Virunga Mountains, of which Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park occupies a fraction. Neighboring national parks in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo share the Virunga territory, along with the rare apes. But Rwanda, far more ambitiously than the other two countries, has turned the gorilla sightings into a luxury commodity, complete with extremely high-end lodges.

In an effort to protect the meager number of endangered mountain gorillas, park officials allow just 96 tourists a day to see them—divided into groups of eight, plus guides, trackers and optional porters—and restrict the human-ape rendezvous to an hour. In 2017, the cost of the trekking permit doubled, from \$750 a person a day to \$1,500. “We weren't sure how our clients would react when the price went up,” said Linda Friedman, owner of Maryland-based Custom Safaris, who arranged my trip. “But they didn't blink.” The number of international visitors to Rwanda rose to 1.7 million last year, up from 1.3 million in 2015. “People think, I've always wanted to do this. I'm not putting it off until I'm 65,” said Ms. Friedman.

Treks themselves can take a few hours or all day, depending on where the gorillas are hanging out that day, how much foliage the guides need to machete through to reach them, and the weather (rain is common). My trek, on a cool, sunny day, was a relative



MONKEY BUSINESS From top: Singita Kwitonda lodge opened in August outside Volcanoes National Park; a park resident and star attraction.



breeze, lasting about three hours, much of that spent on a wide, slowly sloping path that winds around rustling eucalyptus trees and the flower-speckled potato fields that abut the park. Once we crossed the low rock wall that borders the park and started climbing up to meet our gorilla family, the terrain became steeper and somewhat slippery. My porter, Arthur, stayed by my side to help negotiate the way. He also carried my backpack, stuffed with trail snacks my hotel, Amakoro Songa Lodge, had provided: hard-boiled eggs, tiny bananas, passion fruit and marble cake. I couldn't help but imagine how amused—or appalled—Dian Fossey would be if the late zoologist, who spent 18 years studying primates in the rainforest, could have seen my pampered party trooping up the mountain.

A small, landlocked nation of velvety green peaks, terraced farmland and Nile-fed grasslands, Rwanda is a place of tremendous beauty, yet unsurprisingly it's a latecomer to the luxury travel circuit. Many people associate this East-Central African country with the 1994 genocide in which between 800,000 and a million Rwandans were killed over a 100-day span. Twenty-five years later, Kigali, the capi-

tal, is a fastidiously clean conference hub, and the Rwandan government makes maintaining the peace a priority. (Though armed conflicts do occur periodically, including an attack last month near Volcanoes National Park, the U.S. State Department maintains a Level 1 travel advisory for Rwanda, the same designation it issues for Ireland and Canada.) Under President Paul Kagame's regime, gorilla tourism is highly profitable and tightly controlled, an economic necessity given that tiny, heavily populated Rwanda lacks the space and mineral resources of its neighbors. “The government's aim is to conserve the gorillas, not to sell tourist packages,” said Rosette Rugamba, former head of Rwanda Tourism and National Parks, when we met in Kigali last year.

These days, with the arrival of increasingly luxe accommodations, the country draws the kind of well-heeled, gin-and-tonic-swilling visitors who have long been a fixture on the Serengeti or the Okavango Delta. A pioneer on the accommodations scene, Virunga Lodge opened in 2004, perched on a mountaintop with panoramic views of six volcanoes and two crater lakes. After the treks, guests tend to get massages at the lodge's spa, then assemble around the stone fireplace for cocktails before dinner. Much more recently, three of Africa's poshest hotel brands—Wilderness Safaris, Singita and One & Only—opened outposts just outside Volcanoes National Park. Each offers a small number of rooms at a sizable price tag. Rates at the 8-suite Singita Kwitonda Lodge, which debuted in August, run \$3,300 to \$6,600 a night for two, including all meals but excluding the permit for gorilla treks.

Tara Stoinski, the president of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund, one of the leading conservation nonprofits in the country, commends Rwanda's high-end, low-impact approach. “It was a strategic decision by the Rwanda government to lessen the pressure on the gorillas,” she said, referring to the gorilla permit's price hike, “but also have a chance to increase revenue.” And the model

appears to be working. “The gorilla population is doing well,” said Prosper Uwingeli, the chief warden for Volcanoes National Park, citing the birth of some 30 infants this year (model Naomi Campbell and singer Ne-Yo attended the September baby-naming festival at the park headquarters). Mr. Uwingeli also points out that 10% of the park's tourism revenue pays for local schools and health clinics, among other community projects, as a way to curry local support and protect the gorilla habitat—farmers and 400-pound wild animals don't always make the friendliest neighbors.

The gorillas are also getting an assist from Ellen DeGeneres and Portia de Rossi. Last year, the couple raised more than \$5 million dollars, through their new wildlife foundation, the Ellen Fund, to help build the Ellen DeGeneres Campus of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund just outside the park. Slated to open in 2021, it will serve as the new Afri-

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can headquarters for the Fossey organization and house a public exhibit. Ms. DeGeneres and Ms. de Rossi made their first visit to Rwanda in May 2018. Earlier that year, Ms. de Rossi set up the foundation as a 60th birthday gift to her wife. “She idolized Dian Fossey,” said Ms. de Rossi, “so I reached out to the Gorilla Fund and said ‘How can we help.’? A few months later, the two went on their first gorilla trek. “Seeing this massive creature right next to me was the most shocking, exhilarating experience of my life,” said Ms. de Rossi. “When you see something that could easily tear you apart with their bare hands choose to just tolerate you—it's like no other experience. We're planning another trip next year.”

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THE LOWDOWN/ SPYING ON GORILLAS IN RWANDA



SNEAK PEAK The view from Rwanda's Virunga Lodge, at the top of a bone-rattling mountain road. One of the first high-end hotels in the region, the lodge now has company, but few offer vistas that can compete with this.

Staying There Several of the 35 hotels—and counting—near Volcanoes National Park contribute to various community and conservation projects. Among them: Virunga Lodge, about an hour's drive from the park, offers 10 elegant cottages with private terraces (from \$1,210 a night for two, volcanoessafaris.com). More modest but exceed-

ingly comfortable, Amakoro Songa Lodge is just 10 minutes from the park entrance. Opened in 2016 by Rosette Rugamba, former head of Rwanda Tourism, it wraps around a serene garden dotted with lava rocks (from \$1,100 a night for two, songafrica.com/amakoro-songa-lodge). Also well located, Bistate Lodge (from \$2,600 a night for two,

wilderness-safaris.com) and Singita Kwitonda (from \$3,300 a night for two, singita.com), are both exceptionally stylish and have cult followings.

Trekking There You can buy gorilla-trekking permits online (irembo.gov.rw) or through a tour operator. Each permit costs \$1,500 per person per day for a group trek.

Too shy to trek with strangers? You can pay \$15,000 for a private excursion. Among U.S. tour operators, Custom Safaris knows the country particularly well and can arrange transportation to and from Kigali, the capital, and Volcanoes National Park (about a two-hour drive), as well as accommodations near the park and the country's two other national

parks. If you're lucky, you'll wind up with the amiable Paul Ndengeye as your guide/driver (customsafaris.com). Visitors are allowed to visit 12 habituated gorilla families—and some of those families are easier to access than others. Let your guide know how much of a workout you prefer and you'll be placed in the appropriate trekking group.