

PART TWO: IN PURSUIT OF GREAT ESCAPES



A baby gorilla peers out from the safety of the jungle's edge as its companions play in a clearing.

Ashya (above), Group 13's silverback, relaxes as his family naps, plays and explores near the Virunga Volcanoes in Rwanda. Iby'wacu villagers (right) dance in Parc National des Volcans. The villagers invite visitors to join them in activities that showcase Iby'wacu lifestyles, culture and traditions.



"I'll see gorillas in the wild." That someday came in Africa right after Christmas, the result of a chance meeting in India last spring with an expert guide named Allen Beckhy. The company with which Beckhy coordinates his safaris, Mountain Travel Sobek, bills his gorilla adventure as "the ultimate gorilla safari for anyone who has ever wanted to have one of the world's most incredible travel experiences."

Treks in Uganda, Rwanda fulfill the dream of a lifetime – an hour or two with the revered mountain gorilla families

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BETH PARKS | SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Gorillas

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Becky guides you through Uganda to the mountain gorilla stronghold in Uganda's Bwindi National Park. He then leads you into Rwanda and the spectacular misty Virunga Volcanoes region where Dian Fossey studied gorillas for 18 years until she was brutally murdered in 1985.

A word of caution: If you are seeking an easy, relaxing trek, don't even consider this one. Becky's gorilla safari is downright strenuous. Even so, I met motivated people over age 70 who had conditioned themselves properly and were able to track gorillas with no problem.

Bwindi National Park

We arrived in Bwindi National Park and settled in at the Gorilla Forest Camp, a rustic tented facility situated at 5,200 feet on a steep hillside overlooking gorilla territory. Excitement in the chilled mountain air seemed palpable as we grabbed our camera batteries and competed for vacant slots on the camp's grungy power strip.

The high altitude here would cause us to shiver as much as the hiking would make us sweat. Chilly nights invariably gave rise to pleasantly warm days. Even the driving afternoon thunderstorms didn't dampen our enthusiasm.

Only an estimated 700 mountain gorillas are left in the world. About half of these, distributed among some 30 families, live in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. Four families were open to trekkers when I was there. All had been scientifically habituated to tolerate human presence.

The place that adventurers met to get their assignments was just a few minutes' walk down the dirt road from our camp. Some 30 trekkers from around the world had gathered for orientation and to find out which gorilla families they would be visiting.

I sneezed once, cringing at the thought that I might be coming down with a cold. Humans can transmit diseases to gorillas, and even something as innocuous as a common cold can kill them. My ticks were allergic to something in the air. Whew! I was good to go.

After a few minutes, I received my assignment for "R," the Rushegura Group. You never know how long it will take to reach the gorillas or how difficult the climb will be, but trackers had already located the family about half an hour's walk away. The gorillas were just finishing their breakfast. We hustled to reach them before they could move deeper into the bush.

Bwindi Impenetrable Forest is a redundant term. The word "bwindi" means impenetrable, and hiking through the forest is no easy task. Guides hack their way through the dense tangle of vines and branches as the trekkers move in single file behind them.

Our human phalanx wound its way over a series of protruding ridges, down through deep, slippery fissures and up again over more ridges. Most trekkers happily paid porters a small fee to lug their gear and drinking water. I hired a porter but chose to carry my own camera equipment.

We traveled quietly, speaking only in whispers, before our guide

Gorilla facts

- After chimpanzees, gorillas seem closest to humans in their DNA sequence.
- Gorillas live only in Africa. Scientists disagree on their exact classifications. You will generally hear of mountain gorillas, and western and eastern lowland gorilla. I visited the mountain gorilla, *Gorilla beringei*.
- Gorillas are larger, quieter, and gentler than the smaller and more aggressive chimpanzees.
- Gorillas are generally vegetarians, with adults consuming some 50 pounds of fruit, leaves, seeds, and shoots and bark each day. Bamboo and thistles are favorite foods. They also eat ants and termites.
- Gorillas get the moisture they need from the foliage they eat, not from drinking.
- The gorilla's large head features a bulging forehead. The distinctive sagittal crest at the top of the gorilla's head is more pronounced in adult males.
- Gorillas can be identified by their nose prints, which are as unique as our fingerprints.
- Gorilla locomotion is similar to the knuckle walking of chimpanzees.
- With the exceptions of their faces, armpits, fingers and faces, gorillas are covered with black or brownish-gray hair.



A juvenile gorilla attempts to pick the pocket of Mary, a trekker with our group. This youngster clearly didn't understand that humans are supposed to maintain a distance of at least 21 feet from the gorillas.

- Adult male gorillas develop a saddle of silver hair on their backs when they reach the age of about 12. A family may have more than one silverback, but only one silverback leads each family group.
- Before he develops his silver saddle, a young adult male gorilla is known as a blackback.
- Female gorillas groom each other, and their offspring and the males. The silverback does not groom other family members.
- Gorilla communication is complicated and consists of a

- large number of postures, sounds and gestures.
- Gorillas mate year round. Females begin to reproduce at age 10-12, with pregnancies lasting a little over 8.5 months.
- A female breeds about every fourth year, but will breed sooner if her youngster dies. Females typically give birth to three to five babies in their lifetimes. Twins are extremely rare.
- Gorillas construct new bowl-shaped nests of leaves and other vegetation every night. A mother shares her nest with her baby.
- A young gorilla stays with its parents for about three years.
- Adult male gorillas stand about 5 1/2 feet tall and average around 200 pounds. Females are about a foot shorter and weigh about half as much.
- Gorillas usually live about 35 years in the wild and about 50 years in captivity.
- Man is the gorilla's only enemy. Man's poaching activities, habitat encroachment and illegal hunting and trading have led gorillas to the brink of extinction.
- Only eight trekkers per day are allowed to visit a gorilla family.
- You must purchase a permit each and every time you track gorillas. Whether in Uganda or Rwanda, each permit costs \$500 and will buy you one full hour with gorillas in the wild.

begin emitting a staccato of low grunts. My porter explained that he was alerting the gorillas to our presence. The guide cautioned us to be quiet and signaled for us to grab our cameras.

And then we were among them. When people tell you that seeing gorillas in the wild is a life-altering experience, believe them. The sheer intelligence that gorillas emit when their eyes meet yours will cause your knees to buckle.

Our hour with the gorillas slipped by in a flash. We watched the family go about its business of living, always under the watchful eye of the dominant male silverback. Mothers cradled and carried their young, adults napped, and juveniles climbed trees or swung through the forest on vines.

One trekker intentionally started into a young male gorilla's eyes and then had to turn his back quickly when the juvenile lunged toward him in a challenging threat. When the man yielded, the gorilla stopped short and returned to his activities.

A smaller youngster brushed by me and approached a young man from Holland who was standing with his foot almost touching mine. The little gorilla reached out and tugged the man's pants. The Dutchman was still flushed with excitement when we got back to the gathering place over an hour later.

Heavy forest cover made it impossible for us to count the exact number of individuals in the "R" family. A photo I later purchased from the park showed 15 members. Since this group occasionally moves back and forth across the border into the Democratic Republic of the Congo, I can't be sure how many gorillas we actually saw that day.

This first trek was much easier

than I had expected, and I was back at camp in plenty of time for lunch. Flash cameras had been banned in the forest. That was great for the gorillas, but bad for me. With bitter disappointment I discovered that many of the 387 photos I took that morning were too dark and grainy for publication.

The rest of the afternoon included a three-hour hike through the rolling farmland. We visited a medicine man, also called a traditional healer, and got a good look at the herbs he uses to treat the ailments and diseases of local residents.

We also spent some time with a family that made banana wine and a burn in the charred hulk of a gnarled tree. Being adventurous, I sampled the stuff in a wooden mug that we passed among us. Months have passed and I still can't get that awful taste out of my mouth.

The remaining members of our group, exhausted and bedraggled from their far more difficult trek to another gorilla family returned to camp later that day. Some were able to join us in visiting a nearby community of Batwa pygmies.

Pygmies are an ancient people known to inhabit the Ugandan forest for thousands of years. They traditionally survived by gathering plants for food and by hunting small game with nets or poison-tipped arrows.

As part of the steps taken to ensure survival of the mountain gorillas, the Batwas were moved

from the forest's depths to their new homes along its fringes. Some appeared to miss their hunter-gatherer existence. Others seemed to be enjoying the higher quality of living that tourist dollars now afforded them.

I had always thought of pygmies as being extremely short in stature. While older adults seemed to average between 4 and 5 feet in height, younger people appeared considerably taller. A local guide explained that the Batwas' improved diet in recent years has enabled each new generation to grow taller than its predecessor.

The next morning we were off on another hike to see gorillas. This time I was assigned to track the Habiyanja group. Moving through the tangled forest was considerably more difficult than the previous day. However, we later discovered that our trek was relatively easy compared with those of other trekkers.

The time I was thrilled to have a porter carry my camera gear, water and lunch. Both my hands were now free to maneuver the walking stick I had carefully selected at the gathering place. I needed the stick to brace myself during the difficult climb up and down the nearly vertical muddy slopes.

Again we trekked in single file. The porters directly to my front and rear worked in tandem to pull and push me up the difficult slopes. They also provided balance as we cautiously moved from

rock to rock while crossing a rushing stream.

The porters were quick to caution us to step over the seemingly endless lines of safari ants that marched across our path. Up to 50 million individuals have been documented in a single column, so I'm not exaggerating when I say that the lines seemed to go on forever. Although they are easy to avoid if you are paying attention, these small reddish-brown ants can inflict painful bites with their pincerlike shearing mandibles.

The trackers had gone out at first light to locate where the Habiyanja family had nested for the night. Because gorillas are wild and free-ranging, there was no way to guarantee they would stay where we could get to them before they finished their breakfast and moved out for a day of foraging.

But we were lucky once again, and we gained access to the gorillas in less than an hour. Moments after relinquishing my walking stick I came within a few feet of Rwenzigari, the dominant silverback. A female lay napping in the bushes just a few feet off to our left, while assorted youngsters cavorted in the trees.

The Habiyanja gorilla family was considerably larger than the

Rushegura Group, and it included perhaps 25 individuals. Whenever a better view was to be had, our guide quickly hacked away the tangled vines and led us to it. The gorillas didn't seem to mind.

The light was quite good here, if spotty as we moved beneath the forest canopy. The strenuous hike had led me to sweat profusely though, and the warm moisture from my body and breath condensed on my camera's lens in the morning chill. I had carelessly left my anti-fog solution in my backpack some distance from where we stood. I wasted precious picture-taking time wiping moisture from my lens.

We had been instructed to stay at least 21 feet away from the gorillas, but the gorillas apparently didn't get the word. Curiosity drew them ever closer. The highlight of the morning was when a juvenile approached Mary, a fellow member of our safari. She dutifully turned her back to the little guy and ignored him. Undaunted, he walked up behind her and did his best to pick her pocket.

For the second time, my group was the first to return to camp. Our compatriots straggled back several hours later, disheveled and beat.

Virunga Volcanoes and more gorillas

The next day was New Year's Eve. Reluctant to leave this beautiful place, we got a bit of a late start. Nevertheless, we piled into the Land Rovers and began a slow crawl up Bwindi's mountainous spine.

This full day's drive was downright spectacular. We stopped from time to time to photograph tropical birds, blue monkeys and assorted other wildlife. We began to get good looks at volcanoes that towered as high as 13,500 feet before we finally crossed the border into Rwanda.

Our home while trekking in Rwanda was the Gorilla's Nest Lodge, a comfortable set of buildings with grass-thatched roofs and lodge-generated electricity. A bit less rustic than other places we had stayed, the lodge overlooked an expanse of green lawns, pyrethrum farms and a eucalyptus forest.

On New Year's Day we trekked for gorillas at Parc National des Volcans, just a 20-minute drive from the lodge. The park gets its name from eight volcanoes that make up the Virunga Mountain Chain. The mountains are a branch of the Albertine Rift and sit along the borders of Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Two of the volcanoes erupted as recently as 1996.

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Gorillas

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Despite the short drive and the spectacular setting among the volcanoes, our wait to be assigned to the tracking groups seemed interminable.

If anticipation was ever worth the reward, however, it came on this day. I was assigned to the delightful Group 13 gorillas, named for the 13 members originally identified when the family was discovered some years ago.

Our hike again was relatively easy, and the gorillas were out in the open in excellent light. They romped and played, lounged and groomed, socialized and napped. Youngsters took turns cuddling with and climbing over the reclining silverback, and he tolerated them admirably.

Several rambunctious juvenile gorillas found a mound of earth in the midst of the clearing absolutely irresistible. Time after time they played king of the hill in pairs, scaling the mound's crest and wrestling until one or both would somersault or tumble to the bottom. Then they'd start all over again.

Their youngsters' play continued almost for the entire hour. Finally, the silverback rose from his resting place and made it clear that it was time to move on.

If there is such a thing as a natural high, we trekkers experienced it that morning. The air virtually rang with our joy as we ambled back toward park headquarters.

Becky was with five of us, and as we walked back along dirt road he suggested that we stop and visit a local village that had opened its gates to tourists. The village residents welcomed us and entertained us with a really nice show. We explored the king's thatched hut, watched a lively dancing exhibition, listened to the traditional healer explain his medicinal herbs, tried our hands at making flour, shot arrows and danced with the villagers to the spirited beating of their drums.

The remaining three members of our group had succeeded in getting assigned to track the Susa gorillas on the slopes of Karisimbi. At 14,787 feet, Karisimbi is the tallest volcano in the Virunga chain.

Group Susa is the largest gorilla family and features up to 39 members with three silverbacks, five younger blackbacks and a set of twins. The terrain is notoriously difficult, and tracking Group Susa is not for the faint of heart or weak of limb. Although I wanted to go, Becky advised me against it.

The Susa trekkers returned late in the day exhausted but exhilarated. They had been drenched with rain and pelted by a surprise with three silverbacks, but their efforts had paid off. One of their greatest rewards was seeing Poppy, a gorilla born in 1976 and believed to be one of slain researcher Fossey's original study animals.

As we reveled in the day's good fortune, Gilbert, an African friend of Becky's, invited all of us to his home for dinner. There we crammed around a long table with Gilbert's friends to celebrate New Year's with a feast of traditional African food.

If this day was not the best for me, the next promised to be one of the worst. I was thrilled with my assignment and eager to depart, however, an official met with Becky and they asked if one of us would be willing to go with another group.

A naps, had I wanted to give his fiancée the gorilla experience as a birthday present, so they needed two slots. Because we had only seven people in our party eight being the limit, I voluntarily switched to another group so the couple could stay together.



A Batwa Pygmy toddler clings to his mother's skirt as a group of adults prepares to dance and sing for us.



A gray crowned crane with its spectacular golden crest struts in Rwanda. These birds stand more than 3 feet tall and are found primarily in Africa's savannas. They are the national bird of Uganda.

through nettle after patch of stinging nettle that punctured our clothing and produced massive, itchy welts on our skin.

Far worse than the stinging nettles was the limited opportunity to take high-quality pictures on this trek. The gorillas were so close to us in the forest that they often walked right across my feet. I was immediately behind the guide, who insisted I keep moving. The people farther back in the line ignored him and paused to take pictures whenever and wherever they wanted.

This was the only guide I encountered on our treks who seemed unaware of a photographer's need for good position and lighting. The other hikers didn't seem to mind, but they carried only cell phones or cheap point-and-shoot cameras. Despite the guide's instructions and warnings, most of them didn't even bother turning off their flashes.

I returned to the lodge alone and disheartened. I then missed lunch when the dining room closed early because Becky and the rest of the group were still out in the field.

Things got better when a band of gray crowned cranes roamed close to my cottage. The large birds with their showy crowns of golden feathers were relatively tame, and I was able to approach them easily. I then met a bunch of African graduate students in the lounge and brushed up on my

conversational French. When I finally reviewed my gorilla photos later in the afternoon, I discovered that some of them were actually pretty good.

As it turns out, I had a much better day than the folks who tracked the gorillas to which I had originally been assigned. They spent long hours hiking over rough terrain, with a less-than-spectacular payoff for their efforts.

Lesson learned: You sometimes make out better when you don't get exactly what you wanted.

Goodbye, gorillas

We reluctantly said goodbye to the gorillas and the Virunga Volcanoes as we drove out through the portion of Rwanda known as "the land of a thousand hills." Vegetable gardens, sorghum fields and banana plantations slid by as we made our way toward the city of Kigale, Rwanda's capital.

The conversation during this part of our journey focused mostly on Rwanda's 1994 genocide, when Hutu extremists slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Rwandan Tutsis and moderate Hutus over a period of about 100 days. I would have visited of Hutu genocide museum, but traffic was so heavy that we had to drive directly to the airport. I said goodbye to everyone, grabbed a bite to eat and caught my flight to Kenya.

I had been on an extended safari through Kenya before, but this time I simply took a daylong minisafari in Nairobi National Park. If you ever get to Nairobi, don't pass up this excellent opportunity to see Africa's characteristic flora and fauna. You may find it a bit unsettling, though, to see the long necks of ostriches and giraffes silhouetted against Nairobi's city skyline.

The Nairobi Safari Walk adjacent to the park is also a wonderful place to visit if you have limited time. One of the workers allowed me to grasp the hips of a cheetah while it was gorging itself on a rack of ribs. As dangerous and stupid as that encounter sounds, the cheetah cat didn't seem to care. Spotted, even when cornered, usually won't attack a person.

I wouldn't trade that experience with the cheetah for anything. Except, perhaps, for another round with gorillas in the wild. Are you out there, King Kong?

If you would like to track mountain gorillas with Mountain Travel Sobek, visit mtsobek.com. This highly reputable company offers more than 100 active small-group adventures worldwide. Or call Babette Ladd O'Dwyer at Hurley Travel Experts in Portland. Her toll-free number is 800-874-1743. Beth Parks is a former wildlife biologist and UMaine educator. She may be reached at bparks@maine.edu.