

# IN PURSUIT OF GREAT ESCAPES

A yearning to see chimpanzees (and many other creatures) in their natural habitats leads to an adventurous safari in the heart of the Dark Continent

BY BETH PARKS  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Ever since the little knuckle walker J. Fred Muggs upstaged host Dave Garroway on NBC's "Today" show in the mid-1950s, chimpanzees have fascinated me. I had long wanted to trek for their larger cousins, mountain gorillas, and had been searching for the "perfect" safari for over a year.

I learned about a top-notch safari while trekking for tigers and rhinos in extreme northeast India near Bangladesh and Bhutan. I overheard an American guide teaching his clients about the local history and wildlife. Astounded by the depth and breadth of his knowledge, I asked him whether he knew of any guides who trekked for gorillas in Africa. "I sure do," he said. "Me."

The guide, Allen Bechky, operates safaris in association with Mountain Travel Sobek, a California-based

company known for its high-quality adventure travel. Bechky literally wrote the book — or rather, books — on adventure travel in Africa. His two volumes, "Adventuring in East Africa" and "Adventuring in Southern Africa," have become standard references for anyone traveling in those regions.

On my last trip to Africa, a blizzard in Boston forced me to miss my first day of safari in Kenya and Tanzania. Not wanting to repeat that disappointment, I chose to head for Uganda a day early so I could spend some time at the chimp sanctuary on Ngamba Island in Lake Victoria. The cruel December snows anticipated my plans, though, and enough white stuff dumped on Boston to mess up my connections a second time. Again I arrived in Africa a day late.

My luggage engaged in an adventure of its own somewhere between London and Amsterdam. Because I had crammed my carry-on bags with camera equipment, I landed in



Chimpanzees (top and above) appear to be at ease under the gaze of safari tourists in Kibale Forest National Park in Uganda, Africa, known to travelers as one of the best chimp trekking sites.

**INSIDE**  
Facts about these intelligent primates at a glance **C8**

PHOTOS  
BY BETH PARKS

Entebbe, Uganda, with only the clothes I had been wearing for almost three days.

Another member of Bechky's group generously lent me enough togs to get me by until my own stuff caught up with me nine days later. It felt great to be wearing shorts and a short-sleeved shirt in the equatorial heat, even if they belonged to someone else.

Our travel group consisted of Bechky, experienced African drivers Dennis and Edward, and eight intrepid adventurers. Each of us was eager to see what encounters and challenges the next 12 days would bring.

*See Chimps, Page C8*

## Chimps

Continued from Page C7

The first lodging of this trip was a hotel that sat adjacent to the palace once occupied by military dictator and former Ugandan President Idi Amin. The hotel provided convenient access to the Entebbe Wildlife Center, where we were able to preview many of the region's typical animals in their natural habitats.

I got my first good look at chimps at this excellent outdoor facility. We delighted in watching one young individual use a branch as a tool to fish an item he wanted out of a small pond.

It was in a papyrus swamp that I saw my first shoebill stork, also called a whalehead. You understand how this bird got its descriptive moniker when you see its huge noggin and odd, shoe-shaped bill.



Shoebill stork

Entebbe we boarded two Land Rovers and headed out into Uganda's lush countryside. This is the region that Winston Churchill dubbed "The Pearl of Africa." We passed dusty villages and bustling roadside markets, chatted with local residents and sampled their fare, and stopped to photograph birds and animals we had only read about in books and magazines.

I rarely see poisonous snakes in the wild during my travels. This time, however, we came across a green snake about 7 feet long lying in easy loops in the middle of the road. It was a Jameson's black-tail mamba that had made the fatal mistake of slithering out of the woods onto the warmth of the roadway.

The Jameson's mamba is not as feared or revered as the black mamba, considered one of the fastest and most poisonous snakes in the world. Nevertheless, the bite of a Jameson's can bring death to a human in as little as half an hour.

As we continued on our way, the landscape slid by us in a mosaic of farms, banana trees, wetlands, forests and bush. Flatlands rose into hills below the cloud-enveloped Rwenzori Mountains, also known as the Mountains of the Moon. The dazzling green carpets of tea plantations morphed into tropical greens and browns as we approached the fabled Kibale Forest.

**Kibale Forest National Park**

The rim of an extinct volcano provided the setting of our first night of actual safari. Situated high on a saddle between two crater lakes, our stone-and-thatch lodge provided a breathtaking view of 400-foot-deep Lake Nyanabuga and a bevy of extinct volcanic spatter cones.

Forget about electricity here, or the intrusive growl of generators. Candles and kerosene lamps softly lit our way through the dusk. Owls, frogs and the gentle flapping of wings by fruit bats filled the night with an ever-so-sweet symphony of the region's natural sounds.

We celebrated Christmas Eve and Day seeing the creatures we had come to meet: chimpanzees.

Three large chimp communities, each with more than 100 individuals, reside in Kibale National Park, which sits at an average elevation of about 3,300 feet and extends out from the great rain forests of central Africa.

The Uganda Wildlife Authority

### CHIMPANZEES AT A GLANCE

- ✓ **Chimpanzees are classified as hominids, along with humans, gorillas and orangutans.**
- ✓ **Of the hominids, chimps appear to have a DNA sequence most similar to ours.**
- ✓ **A chimp's brain is about half the size of a human's.**
- ✓ **Chimps and humans both have opposable thumbs that help them grasp objects easily.**
- ✓ **Chimps usually walk on the soles of their feet and use the knuckles of their hands for support. They can, however, walk for short distances on their hind legs while carrying objects in their hands.**
- ✓ **Chimps communicate with each other through vocalizations, body language, facial expressions, grooming, kissing and clapping their hands.**
- ✓ **Only two chimp species exist, the common chimpanzee, *Pan troglodytes*, of**

- western and central Africa and the bonobo, *Pan paniscus*, of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire). The latter is known as the pygmy chimpanzee. The Congo River forms a natural barrier between the two species.
- ✓ **Male chimps normally stand 4-5'1" tall and weigh around 20 pounds; females are smaller.**
- ✓ **Bonobos are somewhat smaller and thinner than common chimpanzees.**
- ✓ **Chimps have no hair on their faces, hands or feet. Long black or brown hair covers the rest of their bodies.**
- ✓ **Chimps have no tails.**
- ✓ **Chimps are omnivores and eat just about anything that's available to them. They sometimes hunt small prey.**
- ✓ **Chimps live in communities made up of family groups. Families usually consist of**

- six to 10 individuals, and a single community may have more than 100.
- ✓ **An alpha male usually dominates the common chimp community. A dominant female tends to rule the nonviolent bonobos.**
- ✓ **Female chimps are 12-15 years old before they give birth. A baby clings to its mother's underside as she travels through the forest.**
- ✓ **Babies stay with their mothers for about four years, but may bond with them for a lifetime.**
- ✓ **Chimps are an endangered species. People have hunted them for bush meat and to protect crops; people also have destroyed much of the chimps' habitat.**
- ✓ **Chimps can be dangerous and do not make good pets.**
- ✓ **Wild chimps live about 40 years, while captive chimps can live to about 60.**

carefully regulates visitors' tracking activities. Only 16 visitors are permitted each morning and afternoon, and they are divided into groups of four. A ranger-guide and a tracker accompany each group.

Trackers can easily locate chimpanzees by their pant-hooting calls, which can be discerned despite the forest's density. I can tell you that nothing is quite as loud or exciting as the sound of a band of screeching and hooting chimps.

The racket starts when one chimp punctuates the forest's tranquility with a few resounding hoots. As if unable to resist the urge to respond, the other chimps join in until the screeching becomes an ear-splitting cacophony. Then, as quickly as it began, the hoots dwindle off and the forest returns to relative silence.

Chimpanzees tend to huddle together in and beneath the fruiting fig trees to feed, lounge and socialize. Although somewhat shy, they seemed less wary of us than we were of them. Giving chimps the recommended berth of 15 feet was sometimes impossible if the animals initiated an approach.

Flash cameras are banned here, frustrating efforts to get high-quality still photographs of chimps in the dappled light beneath the forest canopy.

Chimps eat just about anything, including fruit, bugs, leaves, bark and insects. They also hunt such small prey as red colobus monkeys and the nocturnal primates known as bushbabies.

To our amazement, a young chimp and a young red-tailed monkey the latter usually considered a tasty chimp snack, roughhoused together in the trees. The chimp seemed fascinated by its playmate's tail. A primatologist who was part of our group claimed that such behavior had been documented only once in the literature. Luckily for the scientific community, another member of our group captured the two youngsters' antics on video.

We easily found the chimp groups during our two trips into the forest. The guide and tracker made certain we had a full hour with the animals, but they watched closely to be sure that we didn't intentionally get too close.

Chimpanzees are wild animals and can be potentially dangerous. They are not hairy little humans. The distance we maintained from them was for our safety as much as for theirs. Our trek took place about six weeks before the brutal attack on a Connecticut woman in which a pet chimp tore at her face.

Chimps carry a reputation that prompts some Africans to

classify tribes of people as chimpanzees or gorillas. Chimp people tend to be argumentative and hard partiers, and they seem to delight in stealing and fighting. Gorilla people come across as more reserved and relaxed, preferring to cooperate and live in harmony.

Our knowledge of chimp behavior in no way undermined our fondness for them, and we found it difficult to leave once we had made contact. I had the good fortune some years ago to attend a presentation by chimpanzee expert Jane Goodall at the Maine Center for the Arts. I can understand now why she devoted her life to them from the time she began studying them on the shores of Lake Tanganyika in the summer of 1960.

The Kibale equatorial rain forest reputedly serves as home to the world's highest concentration of primates. Although chimps were the main reason for our visit, we also saw red-tailed monkeys, black-and-white colobus monkeys, vervet monkeys, gray-cheeked mangabeys and olive baboons.

And then there was that other primate, man. One, a friend of our guide and our driver, invited us to lunch. The women of his family set about preparing pumpkin soup, corn, beans, sweet potatoes and other traditional African foods over an open fire. Course after course was served to us as we sat cross-legged on the woven straw mats that lined the floor of the communal hut.

We ignored our bulging stomachs and the urge to nap, choosing instead to hike through a papyrus swamp that led into a series of fields, wetlands and forests. This was bird heaven. Here we encountered bush shrikes, turacos and countless other avian species. Various monkeys looked down on us from the trees, but they tended to keep their distance.

We were in for a special treat on Christmas night at Kibale. The young English squire who owned the lodge where we stayed insisted that we share a traditional turkey banquet with him and his personal guests. He upped the festive spirit by presenting us with party hats and a selection of unique gifts. His hospitality stifled any homesickness that we travelers might have experienced over the holiday.

As we headed on our way the next morning, we had a chance to get a good look at some of the ventures undertaken by the young Englishmen's relatives. We visited their vanilla fields and learned how the workers harvested, dried and prepared the vanilla for market. We also saw how they were beginning to grow Arabica and Robusta coffee for distribution and sale.

### Queen Eliz. National Park

From Kibale we drove along the western branch of Africa's Great Rift Valley escarpments to Queen Elizabeth National Park. Now and again the Rwenzori Mountains peeped out from under their cloud mantles, glacier-covered peaks glistening in the equatorial sun.

Our home for the next couple of nights was the Mweya Safari Lodge, a lovely facility perched high on a peninsula overlooking the hippo-filled Kazinga Channel and the tranquil waters of Lake Edward.

My favorite critters at Mweya were the small carnivorous banded mongooses. They seemed to scamper everywhere at certain times of the day, poking along the walls and shrubs in search of creepy-crawlies to eat. Every now and again a group would dog-pile into a squirming mass of infants, juveniles and adults.

Warthogs also roamed the Mweya's grounds, as did other wild animals. A huge surprise was when an enormous hippo began grazing within inches of the table where we ate our dinner. We had just celebrated my birthday, and having a hippo approach within arm's reach was perhaps the most unique birthday present I ever received.

With Mweya as our base, we began exploring Queen Elizabeth National Park. The park serves as home to almost 100 species of mammals and more than 600 kinds of birds.

Early morning and late afternoon game drives on the plain



A curious banded mongoose stares into my camera lens. Mongooses eat birds' eggs. They also are known to kill cobras.

north of Kazinga Channel brought us up close to elephants, antelopes such as the Uganda kob, topi and waterbucks, buffalo, giant forest hogs and a host of other critters.

I saw no leopard on this part of the journey although we were constantly scouting trees in which leopards typically stretch out on a limb. Folks in our other Land Rover were luckier and spotted one — no pun intended.

Becky and our drivers emphasized safety during the game drives, and they had the good sense to back off if danger seemed imminent. One time we beat a hasty retreat to avoid being charged by a huge male elephant that was protecting a group of females and their young.

Just as we reached a safe dis-

tance and heaved a sigh of relief, a dust-laden car roared up from the opposite direction and screeched to a halt. An African man and his family hopped out of the clunker and began running toward the pachyderm herd to get a closer look. The big tusker turned toward them, flinging his trunk vigorously from side to side.

"You stupid, stupid man!" Dennis shouted at the other driver. "Get back in your car! You're all going to get killed!" Fortunately, the people quickly returned to their vehicle and departed as quickly as they had come.

While we typically traveled safari-style by Land Rovers, we also took a boat ride in the Kazinga Channel between Lake Edward and Lake George. Hippos, elephants, crocodiles and birds such as fish eagles and saddle-billed storks were so numerous in the water and along the shore that it seemed as if they were Disney World animatronics. I've seen a lot of animals in my travels, but never this many species in such a short period of time.

The plains in the southern Ishasha Sector of the Queen Elizabeth National Park provided a great place for us to look for lions. We had reasonably good luck, although we failed to see the tree-climbing lions for which the park was noted. Because the big cats blend in so well with their surroundings, you often can pass within feet of them and not even know they are there.

At lunchtime we picnicked along the shore of a stream bordering the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo. I busied myself photographing a marabou stork feeding on a hippo carcass in the middle of the stream.

As we left Ishasha and headed up into Rwanda's hill country, we passed a shabby refugee camp set in what otherwise might have been an idyllic valley. It served as a grim reminder of the ongoing political conflicts inside the Congo and between the Rwandans and the Congolese.

The time had arrived for us to brush up on our French and get used to the idea of having armed guards accompany us on the rest of our hikes.

Beth Parks is a former wildlife biologist and educator at the University of Maine. You may reach her at bparks@maine.edu.