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## Gorilla Trekking in Uganda: On a Budget

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*Rod Waddington/flickr*

Gorilla trekking in Uganda is a bucket-list trip, but many people write it off because they think it's financially out of reach. But not if you travel during the off season.

In November, April, and May, the price for gorilla tracking permits, which normally cost about \$600, go down to \$450 for the day. And not only are permits cheaper; they are also easier to obtain.

"Most permits — about 85 percent — are sold through tour operators, so you need to book in advance to get them. If you're not traveling through a tour group, only 15 percent of the permits are available to you," says Dr. Benard Jasper Sebide, a veterinarian who cares for the gorillas as part of the [Gorilla Doctors](#) team. Traveling in low season means it's easier to get a permit regardless of whether you're booking through a tour operator or flying solo.

Further, trekking groups are typically limited to eight people once a day; but since fewer people are traveling during these months, there's a very good chance your group will be much smaller, which means more personal interaction with the gorillas.

Room rates are also much cheaper during low season. For example, if you want to splurge on super luxe accommodations, like the [Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge](#), a double room that is \$610 in high season is almost half the cost — \$395 per night — in low season. At [Mount Gahinga Lodge](#), a more affordable property, rates are \$180 in high season and just \$135 in low season.

OK, we know what you're thinking: Isn't this the off-season for a reason?



Yes. The off-season *is* rainy season, and many people worry that this means the weather will be miserable. But this is far from a sure thing.

On a recent trip in November, for instance, we found that it did not rain once during our trek (although we still recommend packing a poncho, just in case). And as weather patterns around the world continue to shift, rainy and dry seasons are almost impossible to pin down anyway.

Even if it does rain, Mike Cranfield, executive director of the [Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project](#), still maintains that this is a great time to visit. “Everything is very green and lush. It’s not dusty — the air is crisp.” It may rain a little bit each day, he notes, but it’s certainly not a wash out, so don’t fear long, heavy downpours.

## What to expect on your trek



You can see mountain gorillas in two places in Uganda: Bwindi and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park. Most travelers flock to Bwindi because a larger number of gorillas reside there. However, we like Mgahinga — there's only one gorilla family here, but it includes five adult silverback males, which is the highest concentration of silverbacks in any gorilla family in all of East Africa. It's a bit more under-the-radar, too, and as such, it feels like a more private and personalized experience rather than a canned tourist attraction. So while everyone else flocks to Bwindi, you'll feel like you have the park to yourself.

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Trekking here can take anywhere from thirty minutes to a few hours. Trackers are sent out ahead of time, so your group is not just aimlessly wandering the national park. Once you spot the gorillas, you have an hour to observe them at close range. You're not allowed to come within twenty-three feet of them, but the gorillas are free to approach you. Often, the younger juveniles will get pretty close to visitors, as they are curious and playful. You'll be surprised at just how human-like their movements and mannerisms are — they do share 98 percent of our DNA, after all.

After snapping pictures and watching the gorillas interact, you'll be surprised at just how quickly your allotted time is up. Don't worry, though, we assure you: The memories will last a lifetime.