



In Uganda and Rwanda, Gorilla Trekking Enters a New Chapter

by Andrea Whittle • March 28, 2017

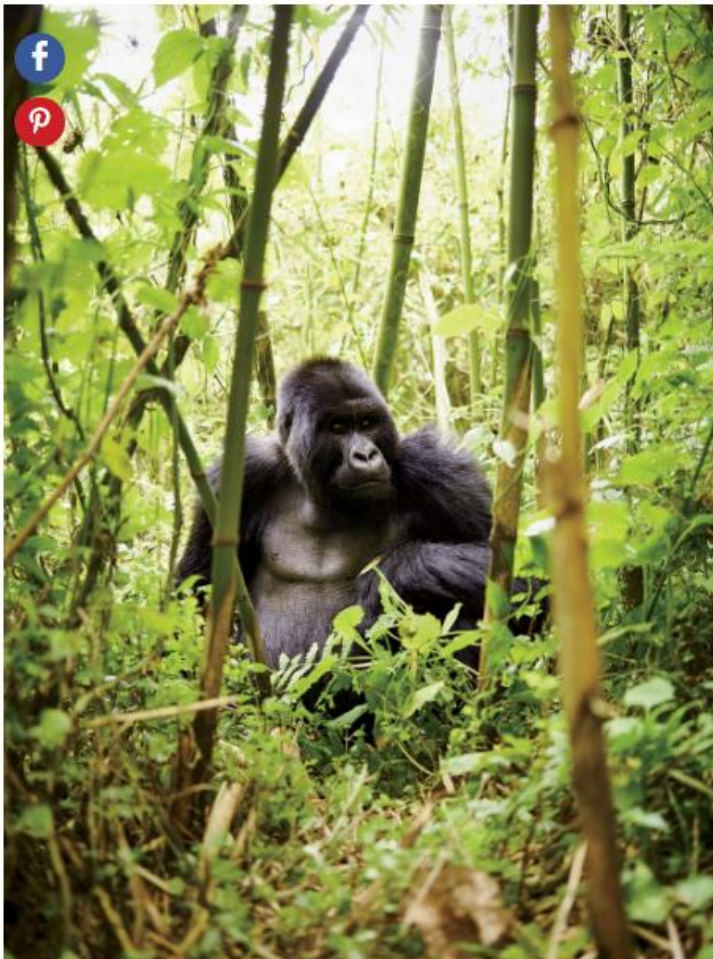


Photo by Christopher Churchill

A silverback in a bamboo grove. To relax the gorillas, guides use what Fossey called "belch vocalizations."

You'll come close (really close) to giant silverbacks in these volcanic jungles on the rebound.

Any walking safari requires more than a casual acquaintance with the treadmill. But try trekking for two to four hours at 9,000 feet, up steep muddy trails and over fields of stinging nettles, stopping to take photos of cloud-ringed Mount Sabyinyo as an excuse to catch your breath. Just then, your guide machetes through a bamboo curtain to reveal what you've been climbing for: a 400-pound silverback napping in the shade, mothers ambling with babies on their backs, and an adolescent who daringly taps your leg as it darts by.

There are roughly 880 mountain gorillas left in the wild, nearly all of them in the protected forests of [Uganda](#) and Rwanda. But that's a couple of hundred more than 20 years ago, after the 1994 Rwandan genocide, when more than a million mostly Tutsi minorities

were killed over 100 days by Hutu nationalists, a conflict that spilled over into neighboring Uganda. Today, both countries have bounced a long way back, with major luxury hotel openings, a busy optimism in Rwanda's capital of Kigali, and a new East Africa visa that allows for easy border hopping.

That said, coordinating a trip like this isn't easy—you'll need a guide and permits—so [recruit a specialist](#) to help. Start in [Rwanda](#), where the terrain is easy to navigate. From the airport in Kigali, it's a three-hour drive to Volcanoes National Park. The charmingly rustic [Volcanoes Virunga Lodge](#), which pioneered tourism in the area with its bang-on views of Lake Burera, will be feeling the heat in June, when Wilderness Safaris opens [Bisate Lodge](#) and six modernist thatched villas nearby.

Only 80 trekking permits are given out each day, which limits the crowds. Just plan on more than one outing in the event of lousy weather or luck—though the trackers who climb up early generally do deliver. And yes, you'll want to do the day hike to the crater lake atop Mount Bisoke and the cabins at the Karisoke Research Center, founded 50 years ago by primatologist Dian Fossey, who's buried there.

Save at least some gorilla-trekking mojo for Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, a six-hour drive across the Ugandan border (you'll break that up with lunch on Lake Bunyonyi). As the name suggests, hacking through Bwindi's tangled undergrowth and thick tree canopy will give you Mowgli vibes, but you'll have the jungle pretty much to yourselves. For more of a "ski in, ski out" approach, stay at [Buhoma Lodge](#), a polished tree house-style compound so close to the park that gorillas use it as a backyard. Three nights will give you ample time to check out the lakes, [waterfalls](#), and cheeky families of golden monkeys—plus, you'll have the evenings for a well-deserved massage and nap by the fire.



Getty

Drive from Rwanda to Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park to see even more wildlife and live out your *Jungle Book* fantasies.

Everything You Need to Know

Days: 8

When to Go: June to mid-October

Book with: Michael Lorentz, [Passage to Africa](#)

Pre-Trip Prep

Read Dian Fossey's intimate (and surprisingly funny) *Gorillas in the Mist* and Philip Gourevitch's harrowing on-the-ground account of the genocide in Rwanda, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*.

Bring This Genius Bag

Tamrac's snug little [Hoodoo 18 daypack](#) is water-resistant and has pockets for everything—even a padded one for your camera.

Save a Day for Kigali

Rwanda's capital is a tidy, accessible city with European colonial flair (crêpe shops abound) and a gleaming new \$300 million convention center. The Kigali Genocide Memorial is a must, with its thoughtful exhibit on the 1994 tragedy. The Hôtel des Mille Collines (a.k.a. the Hotel Rwanda) is a testament to the country's recovery— stop by for a club sandwich and to watch city dwellers, politicians, and conservationists come for meetings or a dip in the pool. In Kimihurura, or restaurant row, hit [Repub Lounge](#) for live music and ginger rice, [Sundowner](#) for roasted goat, and [Question Coffee](#) for the local brew. "When we moved to Kigali 12 years ago, visitors came to see the gorillas and reflect on the past, but they didn't stay very long," says Alissa Ruxin, co-owner of [Heaven Restaurant & Boutique Hotel](#) and the Retreat, a luxury lodge opening in July. "Now, there's live music spilling out of the cafés. Don't miss Nyamirambo, the city's vibrant Muslim quarter, and check out the Kimisagara Market. The Women's Center there does walking tours."

Stay Longer

If you want to track giraffes, elephants, leopards, and lions, too, hop a 1.5-hour charter flight from Bwindi to Murchison Falls, on the White Nile, a favorite haunt of Winston Churchill and Theodore Roosevelt. Stay at [Baker's Lodge](#), where eight suites overlook the river.