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Travel

How to Plan an Unforgettable Gorilla Trekking Adventure Through Africa



Courtesy Sanctuary Retreats

In Uganda and Rwanda, a new generation of safari lodges offers up-close experiences with local wildlife, also helping to grow these thriving communities.

By Sophie Friedman on June 05, 2018

Praveen Moman of [Volcanoes Safaris, Luxury Lodges in Uganda & Rwanda](#), the mastermind behind some of the world's first "trekking lodges," is fanatic about gorilla conservation. He describes seeing them as like looking in a mirror. "You feel these people are related to you. You're connecting to your cousins, and the

gorillas recognize this. Their behavior is so human, and that's what makes seeing them such a life-changing experience.” It seems unfathomable that just three hours from Kigali, Rwanda’s burgeoning capital city, you can walk right up to these critically-endangered gentle giants. There are only 880 mountain gorillas in the entire world, and all make their homes in Uganda’s [Bwindi Impenetrable National Park](#), and in the three parks that span dormant volcano chain [Virunga Mountains](#)—the tiny [Mgahinga Gorilla National Park](#) in Uganda, [Volcanoes National Park](#) in Rwanda, and [Virunga National Park](#) in the DRC. Now, exclusively for DEPARTURES, is the ultimate list of where to stay in luxury when gorilla trekking through Uganda and Rwanda.

Uganda

[Bwindi Lodge](#) sits right on Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, so close it’s common to see gorillas wandering through. Bwindi’s design is contemporary but warm, the central fireplace and communal wooden dining table spreading enthusiasm among guests (those seeking a romantic tête-à-tête need only ask for a table for two). Each of the eight thatched-roof *bandas* (cottages) is furnished with a handsome hand-carved Ugandan four-poster bed and has its own terrace; the views of ethereal Bwindi National Park just dreamy. A personal butler brings in morning coffee and packs your trekking kit. After a somewhat strenuous hike, avail yourself of the Forest Spa, where the eucalyptus, tea, and lemongrass used in treatments are grown in the lodge’s garden.



Robin Francois

Community projects: [Volcanoes Safaris Partnership Trust](#) runs outreach programs at each lodge, with \$100 from each booking going towards these. Bwindi Bar, serving the frothiest cappuccino this side of the national park, provides hospitality training to young locals, who intern here for two months before taking longer internships at the surrounding lodges. Bwindi also partners with local tea farmers and runs tea tours for guests (2018: \$450/540; 2019: \$495/595).

[Sanctuary Gorilla Forest Camp](#) sits on the lip of Bwindi National Park, and gorillas make themselves at home at the lodge. Eight luxury tents, gauzy mosquito netting hanging from four-poster beds, have stone-walled bathrooms with freestanding tubs that beckon for a soothing soak. Utilize the terrace for a good sunrise stretch (yoga kits provided). Come evening, guests gather around the campfire, sundowner in hand, and reminisce about the day's gorilla sightings. Gorilla trekking requires a reasonable level of mobility, but Sanctuary makes it accessible with its sedan chairs, which can be carried into the forest.

Community projects: Sanctuary partners with Bwindi Community Hospital and Nursing School, providing scholarships to nursing students. They also support the local nursery and primary school, improving building infrastructure and contributing supplies and teacher salaries (2018: \$380-635; 2019: \$295-690).



Courtesy Sanctuary Retreats

At 6,561 feet above sea level, [Clouds Mountain Lodge](#) is the highest in Uganda. Its style is "ski chalet in the East African jungle": all vaulted ceilings, exposed wooden beams, and picture windows. The seven stone cottages look out onto the Virunga Mountains. Each has hand-woven carpets, paintings from Ugandan artists, and a fireplace and deep couches that beg a siesta.

Community projects: The lodge itself is one, a partnership between [Africa Wildlife Foundation](#), [International Gorilla Conservation Project](#), and the Nkuringo community, who technically own the lodge, with the aim of protecting the gorillas' habitat and supporting the Nkuringo (2018: \$539-834).

Rwanda

[Virunga Lodge](#) brought gorilla trekking tourism back to Rwanda. It's the easiest to reach, just 20 minutes by helicopter from Kigali. Its height of 7,200 feet above sea level affords sweeping views of the Virunga Mountains, Musanze Valley, and lakes Bulera and Ruhondo. Each of the 10 stone cottages has a terrace and is kitted out in colorful Rwandan textiles, wooden four-poster beds, and fireplaces that your butler—who also packs your kit and cleans your boots after trekking—will light. In between gorillas and sundowners, cozy up in front of the fireplace with Dian Fossey's *Gorillas in the Mist*.



Courtesy Virunga Lodge

Community projects: Many, including donating clean water tanks and sheep to surrounding villages. The tastiest: Virunga built a space in which oyster and button mushrooms grow, tended by locals from the neighboring Sunzu, Nyagatoki, and Bugeyo villages. Villagers then sell these within the community

and to Virunga, where they're served to guests (2018: \$910/\$1,090; 2019: \$1,000/1,200).

[Bisate Lodge](#)'s six thatched villas are luxury treehouses nestled in an eroded volcanic cone. Each has a bamboo balcony facing active volcano Mount Bisoke. The interiors throughout the lodge are bang-on trendy—concrete floors, exposed brick, glass bottle chandeliers, birdcage lights, and cowhide rugs.



Courtesy Wilderness Safaris

Community projects: Guests can plant their own tree as part of reforestation of 103 acres, the bamboo and hagenia and dombea trees leading to reclamation by the area's endemic wildlife (2018: \$1,155-1,470; 2019: \$1,300-1,654). Singita Kwitonda Lodge, opening late 2019 and named for a silverback gorilla who lived in Volcanoes National Park, will have eight suites and one villa, each with views of volcanoes Sabyinyo, Gahinga, and Muhabura. (\$1,500 – \$1,750)