



UNDER AFRICAN SKIES: Vast Lake Victoria (top) is the world's fifth largest lake and the headwaters of the Nile River. (center) young gorilla romps with a playmate. (above) A Batwa native serves as a park ranger and guide for the gorilla trek.

Impenetrable Forest reveals ancient secrets

BY ESTEBAN PRECIADO | Staff Writer
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ESTEBAN PRECIADO

BWINDI NATIONAL PARK, UGANDA—
Hiking up the outside of an extinct volcano caldera in the tropical Impenetrable Forest of Uganda was like running on a stair climber in a sauna. Equatorial heat was oppressive and the humidity of the Bwindi mountainside made us feel as if we were steaming in a crock pot. During my five years in the United States Marine Corps we had gone on countless grueling hikes with heavy packs, but nothing like this.
It was worth every sweat-drenched, sun baked second. We had finally entered the ancient home of the Bwindi Mountain Gorillas.

Mother Nature is wise to keep the gorillas separate from humans. An adult male silverback can weigh up to 600 pounds of rippling muscle. A gorilla's waffle-sized hands can crush a human skull and snap arms like a wishbone. They can uproot trees like pulling weeds and press 1,000 pounds over their heads as easy as people put a can of soup on the top shelf of the pantry. When people surprise a gorilla it may be the last thing they ever do.
I wanted to see one up close, in its own environment.
I did, but not without an arduous, globe spanning journey.

SIMIAN DREAMS

Why would a kid from San Ysidro High School fresh out of the Marines want to go to the deepest, most remote part of Central Africa to commune with Mountain Gorillas? I don't even remember when the idea first entered my mind it had been so long. It felt like something I had always wanted to do.

Mountain gorillas, despite their enormous size and strength, share 98 percent of their DNA with humans. Next to chimpanzees and bonobos, they are mankind's closest relatives on the planet. We eat many of the same things and behave in ways reflective of each other. They can learn and pass along knowledge. They have a culture.



They are one of the most spectacular yet dangerous animals on Earth. They are also one of the rarest. I had to see them. And, for the first time in my life, I had the time and money to do it.

GORILLA TREK

Last July my journey began when I started researching the path of a "gorilla trek." An organization called Conservation Through Public Health was my guide. Founded by Dr. Gladys Kalema Zikusoka, CTPH is an environmental tourism organization that monitors the health of the mountain gorillas at the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest

as well as the wellbeing of native Batwa farmers. Environmental tourism organizations like CTPH have successfully made the case that it is in Uganda's best economic interests to protect its gorillas from poachers and habitat loss. Bwindi was sustained by gorilla tourism
My travel checklist was lengthy. I needed a "gorilla permit," a licensed tour guide, and a flight to Uganda. I needed a crash course in mountain gorilla behavior and, even more important, a lesson about how to behave around a temperamental 600-pound silverback male and his 400 pound mates.

Uganda is just about as far away from San Ysidro as any place on Earth. A flight of nearly 16 hours over the Arctic Circle crossed a lineup of time zones before touching down in Doha, Qatar for a nine-hour layover. Next was a six hour flight to Entebbe, Uganda and a two-hour cattle call through Ugandan immigration and COVID testing. I would have another layover of four hours before squeezing aboard a small propeller plane that would take me on a 1 hour, 10 minute hop to Kihiki. Uganda's lush emerald rainforests gave way to massive Lake Victoria, one of the world's greatest bodies of fresh water and the headwater of the mighty Nile River. Lake Victoria is Africa's version of the Great Lakes, so expansive that it felt like we were flying over an ocean. Even thousands of feet in the air I could not see the other end.

We landed in Kihiki to continue the marathon. It was a jostled one-hour car ride over roads with aged cracked pavement stretches that gave way to dirt. That got us to the town of Kabale. Though we were in the very heart of central Africa, tiny Kabale conjured one of those frontier western towns you might see in American movies, substituting the desiccated dust of the Wild West with luxuriant verdigris scenery of a beautiful rainforest.

After more than a day and a half of sleepless travel, I finally had a good night's rest at my cabin at the CTPH lodge. I dreamed of gorillas.

Martin, my host, woke me early. We ate breakfast and laced up for a short hike to the Bwindi Ranger Facility for a life-saving lesson on how to act around gorillas.

"Stay calm," the ranger told us. "The last thing you want to make mad is a silverback gorilla."
Visitors were admonished to avoid showing their teeth, not to beat on their chests and not to stare. If we made eye contact we were warned to quickly look away so the gorillas do not think you are staring at them. If an angry gorilla approaches we were coached to lie on the ground and act as small and unthreatening as possible.

My group of six trekkers included a married couple from Spain, a man from Seattle, and two German backpackers. We boarded trucks that took us 30 minutes east of Kabale to the starting point of the hike to the Bwindi gorilla reserve.

SOLDIERING ON

During my five years in the Marines I did a lot of hiking. We hiked up and down the muddy hills and mountains of Camp Pendleton with more than 60 pounds of gear slung over our backs. We kicked up dust in desert outbacks and struggled through the calf-burning sand dunes of beaches.
None of that truly prepared me for the gorilla march up to the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. It was the most difficult hike I had ever done. Muddy, slippery rainforest trails were all uphill and at altitude. We were constantly on the incline as we navigated deep ravines and narrow walkways clinging to hillsides.
Uganda's heat was searing and even your sweat seemed hot. It was relentless without even a snatch of relief under the canopy. My ego also wilted as we watched passing Batwa natives of Bwindi pass us by with a leisureliness that had us muttering in disbelief. They had worn out shoes and baskets packed with



fruits or piles of sticks skillfully balanced atop of their heads.
It was all worth it.

Bwindi’s rainforest was one breathtaking sight after another. Our erstwhile enemy, the Sun, was also a master painter. Its golden rays illuminated the lush broad leaves of the forest, and the azure sky complemented the emerald mountaintops on every horizon.

Our relentless ascent had stretched nearly seven miles before we reached the topmost edge of the caldera. Spread before us was an ocean of trees and verdance. It was a stunning reward for our efforts. Better still, we were finally hiking downhill.

GORILLAS IN OUR MIDST

Our ranger escorts announced what we were all waiting to hear -- the gorillas were not far. Their interpretation of “not far” meant at least three more hothouse miles through the dripping, teaming forest. We trudged on through a rainforest that was, in a word, alive. Life was as ubiquitous as the steamy air and thousands of animals squawked, called and squealed as if to welcome us or warn us. Even at our throbbing feet were beetles, centipedes, and egg sized insects. There were the tracks of jungle elephants, monkeys, big cats and, of course, mountain gorillas. We were walking in the eternal land of life, death, rebirth, extinction, evolution and hope. We were in humanity’s cradle, the same African heartland from which sprang our earliest ancestors before they roamed off the continent.

A rainforest canopy is a dense thatched ceiling that parses the sunlight judiciously. Few illuminating rays make it to the ground, but those that do seem to celebrate in a dance on the forest floor. These fleeting beams of light from Father Sun lit the stage for our hosts.

In the muddy darkness I got my first glimpse of a mountain gorilla.
It could have been my last.

I was in front of the group when I almost walked right into a grazing female. Her midnight fur somehow perfectly cloaked her 300 pound body in the thick vegetation. Luckily for me I was able to back away without spooking her. I collected myself with a deep breath and noticed the rangers pointing out the pack with two adult females and two babies.

Commanding the scene was the king of the jungle, an enormous male silverback gorilla. We moved off to a “safe” spot barely 10 feet away from the business-like mothers and the frolicking babies.

We had all done our homework on mountain gorillas, but that does not fully prepared you for your first moments with a gorilla family in a rainforest thicket. They are massive and muscular creatures that radiate strength and power. Their ebony fur is mottled with debris of the forest, including dirt and the pollen from the sea of plants and foliage they waded through. Adult gorillas have long ragged, matted hair that resembles obsidian blades of grass.

I was close enough to the females to see into their coal black eyes as they scanned their surroundings, making sure their babies are close by and safe. Baby gorillas have fur that is fuzzy and looks so soft you want to touch it.

You dare not.

Baby gorillas are much like human toddlers that require constant parental supervision. They are balls of energy that jump from trees, wrestle with each other, and pester their mothers with playfulness. They are extremely curious, which demonstrates their intelligence and also their naiveté. Like dogs, they stop and sniff nearly everything. They fondle and grab anything they can get their vise grip hands on such as sticks, rocks and bugs which they put in their mouths to taste. They even sampled some of our camera equipment

Their curiosity was contagious and almost got me in big time trouble with the scowling silverback.

Crouching silently about 10 feet from the pack among the ferns and broadleaf plants doing my best impression of a National Geographic photographer, I noticed one of the baby gorillas making his way



MOTHER KNOWS BEST: A 600-pound male and his 400-pound mate (above, l) keep watch over their baby. (top) A Batwa home in the Bwindi district. (center) A trekker with guides outside the Impenetrable Forest. (above) A young gorilla looking out from a tree.

CONT ON NEXT PAGE

DIAN FOSSEY PHOTO COURTESY OF GETTY IMAGES

KEEP CALM AND RESPECT GORILLAS

Mountain gorillas, despite their intimidating size and reputation for fiercely defending each other, are actually gentle creatures who follow a culture of live and let live. They are highly intelligent and curious. They lack a sense of territoriality that makes many other large African animals so dangerous.

That said, humans are no match for an angry gorilla. Humans can safely approach and observe gorillas in their habitat if they follow a few guidelines:

Small groups. Gorillas tend to live and travel in small packs, so they are generally accepting of small groups of 5-8 humans.

Short visits. Like most humans, gorillas do not like to be stared at or feel like they are being examined. Visits of about one hour reduce the risk of stressing or disturbing gorilla packs.

Free of disease. Gorillas share 98 percent of our genes and are susceptible to many of the same viruses and bacteria that sicken humans.

Keep clean. To reduce contamination and the spread of disease, visits should wash their hands before seeing gorillas and refrain from smoking, eating or drinking.

Silence is golden. Gorillas use vocalizations to communicate. Chatting and loud noises by humans confuse and irritate them.

Keep to yourself. Give gorillas plenty of space and avoid approaching them. Never attempt to touch a gorilla or any large animal in the wild.

Keep your mouth closed. Baring of teeth is considered a sign of hostility among gorillas.

Avoid eye contact. Silverback males, in particularly, consider direct eye contact a challenge. Visitors who accidentally catch a gorilla’s eyes should immediately look away.

Be respectful and humble. Gorillas sense intentions and will defend each other if they feel threatened. An angry gorilla will bare its teeth, roar or beat its chest. Human who see these behaviors should get on the ground, look away and “get small.” These behaviors indicate that the visitor acknowledges the gorilla’s primacy and does not wish to fight.

Sources: Mother Jones and the Foundation for National Progress, “Gorillas in the Mist” by Dian Fossey

DEFENDER OF GORILLAS PAID THE ULTIMATE PRICE

Californian Dian Fossey is the best known and most accomplished mountain gorilla primatologist. For 20 years until her murder in 1985 she lived among the gorillas of the volcanic mountain region of Rwanda, not far from the Bwindi gorilla populations of Uganda.

Fossey’s seminal book, “Gorillas in the Mist,” was a best seller and raised public awareness to the plight of the rare and precious mountain gorillas of Central Africa. Prior to her book, mountain gorillas were racing toward extinction due to poaching, war and habitat destruction by farmers and loggers. Fossey’s fierce defense of the Rwandan gorillas and her unorthodox ways likely led to her murder by locals who wanted her out of the way. There is no consensus as to who killed her and the list of suspects is long.

Africa’s gorilla population was estimated to have been less than 200 at the time of Fossey’s death, but her book, and a subsequent Oscar-winning film version of “Gorillas in the Mist” starring Sigourney Weaver as Fossey, brought global attention to the plight of mountain gorillas. Ecological tourism and the protection of gorilla habitats by the governments of Uganda and Rwanda are credited with a steady rebound in the gorilla population. Current estimates range from 750-1,000 mountain gorillas, still a perilously small number, but an improvement from Fossey’s time.

Fossey is greatly admired today for her vision, scientific talent and staunch advocacy for Africa’s wildlife, but she was intensely disliked by many Africans and Europeans during her years in Rwanda. She battled African poachers, trophy hunters from Europe and North America, potion sellers from China and zoos in developed countries. She spoke out against habitat destruction by energy companies, loggers and corporations harvesting the natural wonders of Africa.

Ironically, Fossey also opposed the burgeoning eco-tourism movement, which she predicted would slowly overwhelm gorilla habitat and interfere with the research of primatologists. She also feared human visitors would infect gorillas with disease. In retrospect, Fossey was prescient to warn of these outcomes, though a new generation of environment activists argues that eco-tourism motivates nations to protect and maintain its natural resources because it is profitable to do so.

Sources: “Gorillas in the Mist” by Dian Fossey, “A Forest in the Clouds” by John Fowler, Mother Jones Magazine and the Foundation for National Progress



HANGING OUT: A baby gorilla investigated the author’s backpack and camera gear, then grabbed his shoulder before climbing a nearby tree after its silverback father expressed its roaring displeasure.

towards me. I thought nothing of it at first because I was concentrating hard to get the best pictures I could. I figured the baby gorilla, despite its curiosity, would not approach a strange and unknown figure.

I was wrong. Behind me I heard little footsteps and rustling. A little gorilla approached me and reached out to touch my sweat drenched shirt. This small baby gorilla probably had the grip strength of a man because when he grabbed my shoulder I felt it.

Our training from the rangers kicked in and I remembered the admonition to remain calm. I was strangely at peace in this transcendent moment. I had a wild gorilla examining me. I was not afraid and strangely serene. I actually felt honored.

Thankfully I did not get too caught up the moment. I was able to turn my camera into selfie mode and capture my brief encounter with this magnificent creature.

Seconds later came a stern warning from a ranger to back away. I immediately understood why. One of the most protective mothers in the animal kingdom was not even 20 feet away. A lordly silverback was just a few feet further.

Silverback mountain gorillas are built like tanks. They are 500-600 pounds of muscle that a bodybuilder would envy. Their bite force is about 1,300 pounds per square inch, biological jargon for “they can bite through almost anything.” They have more power in their jaws than even lions and grizzly bears. Their glistening silver hair is an indicator of their age and status.

Then a nearly fatal mistake. A roar shattered my reverie and I unintentionally made brief eye contact with the silverback, which they consider a threat. It opened its cavernous mouth and brandished its dagger-sized teeth. He looked into my very soul. He did not seem to like what he saw.

For the split second I saw this angry display and heard the thundering roar a primal feeling welled up in my chest. I was at the mercy of an animal that could rip me apart like a steamed chicken. There was nothing I could do but hold very still and hope he lost interest.

Even as I wondered if I was about to be dismembered, I felt blessed. Pumped full of fearful adrenaline, I paradoxically felt fortunate for this most genuine moment in the web of creation. Billions of humans through millennia lived and died without experiencing this kind of moment. I was reminded that the world is so much bigger than I thought it was and that I am but a minuscule part.

Lucky for me, my existence in this world continues. The baby scampered away and father silverback did nothing else, turning its fierce gaze toward its meal. I spent one more hour communing with the majestic animals as the mothers tried to manage their younglings and the prevailing silverback munched on fruits and leaves.

We watched in wonder as the pack moved away deeper into the dense underbrush. The silverback gave us a final reminder of his preeminence when he effortlessly uprooted a small tree I had leaned my 200-pound frame against minutes earlier. He pulled up the tree just because it was in his way.

RETURN TO MY FUTURE

We turned and headed back, still deep in the Bwindi rainforest, but already feeling like we had departed the surreal meeting grounds of the mountain gorillas. Hiking back was surely the same distance and strenuous, but none of that mattered. Our transcendent and humbling experience made us feel blessed and light.

It was a mere two day later -- just a pair of revolutions by our vast yet tiny planet -- that I was back in the United States. My 16 hour, 15 minute return trip was a non-stop reel of dreams as gorillas foraged, played and raged in the secretive, sacred forest that now lives in my memory.