

Gorilla Safaris

Gorilla Viewing Safaris



Encountering the gorilla in its natural habitat is an extraordinary experience. The distinction between the observer and the observed is blurred, and you never know just how near the gorillas will venture for a closer look! For animal and nature lovers, the opportunity to meet a mountain gorilla face to face can prove to be the experience of a lifetime.

A gorilla safari is not for the timid traveler. It is an extremely active journey in parts of the world that have been inaccessible to most travelers. In order to ensure a successful trip, you will need to do your homework before choosing a safari company that suits your needs. This TRO guide will provide you with the information you need to know to get a start on planning your African adventure. Please read this guide in conjunction with the more general TRO Safari guide for additional information.



There are two species of gorilla, the western gorilla and the eastern gorilla. In each of these broad classifications, there are two subspecies each. All are endangered, some critically. The western gorilla species is comprised of the Cross River gorilla and the western lowland gorilla. The eastern gorilla species is comprised of the eastern lowland gorilla and the mountain gorilla.



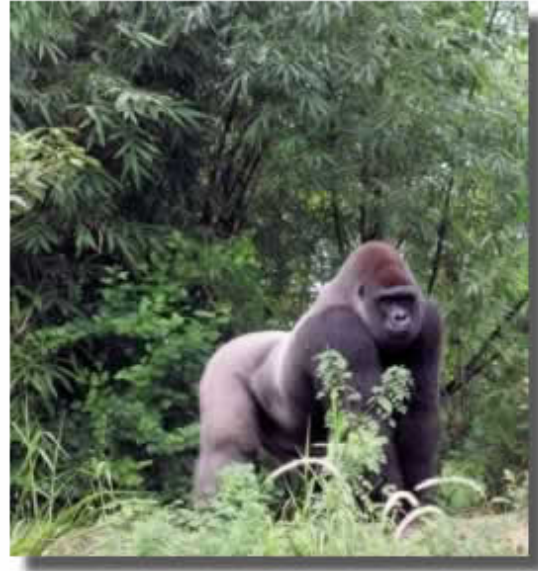
The western lowland gorilla, although endangered, has the highest population count and a wide range through the rainforests of Central Africa in Cameroon, the southwest corner of the Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Angola. The Cross River gorilla, however, is critically endangered with fewer than 200 animals living on the Nigerian-Cameroon border. The eastern lowland gorilla, also known as Grauer's gorilla, is found in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. With only about 650 left in existence, the mountain gorilla has struggled to survive in the region of Africa's Great Lakes, spanning Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic

of Congo.

The gradual deterioration of the habitat of each species endangers the viability of their populations. Likewise, the civil strife that has raged in these areas intermittently for decades has taken its own toll on the non-human primates as they have fallen victim to the poaching for meat and animal trafficking that has arisen with the lack of legal protection and lawlessness. Finally, the gorillas share a propensity to succumb to human illnesses, most recently to an ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Nevertheless, it is possible to view these tremendous animals safely and humanely, affording the local economies an incentive to protect the remaining populations.

A gorilla safari is particularly fulfilling because of the species' human characteristics: bipedalism, intelligence and expressive faces, to name a few. Further impressive is the gorilla's size. Male silverbacks can measure up to six feet tall when standing upright and weigh 400-500 pounds; the width of their chests spans up to five feet! Although historically depicted as vicious by Hollywood (The mountain gorilla served as the inspiration for King Kong.), the species is quite peaceful, spending most of its time eating vegetation, such as herbs, leaves and bamboo.

Because of their gentle nature, gorillas have responded well to habituation, or the act of making wild animals accustomed to humans over time. As a result, they act naturally while being observed by small groups of tourists. Be forewarned, however, that if the predominant male thinks his family (which includes his mates and their offspring) is in danger, he will not hesitate to attack an offending human.



Since mountain gorillas have been meticulously observed since the 1950s, their location is pretty well known. About half of the population resides in an extinct volcanic region called the Virunga Range. This area boasts three parks that feature mountain gorilla tracking: DRC's Virunga National Park, Rwanda's Volcans National Park, and Uganda's Mgahinga National Park. The rest of the mountain gorilla population lives in Uganda's Bwindi-Impenetrable National Park, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Please be aware that the gorilla groups are nomadic and do not stay in one area of the park. And when, for example, the gorillas move from the Ugandan area of the park to the Rwandan area, tracking in Uganda is postponed. Because of civil unrest, TRO can not recommend any travel to the DRC. However, both Uganda and Rwanda offer mountain gorilla safaris accompanied by military guard in the national parks. Lowland gorilla safaris in Gabon and Cameroon are popular and in regions that are politically stable for viewing lowland gorillas.



Travelers should be aware that a vigorous debate surrounds gorilla safaris and habituation. There are those who argue that tourism exploits the gorilla populations and deprives them of the sanctity of their habitat. However, it is the opinion of TRO that tourism may well be the last hope of these great animals. For years, poachers have ruthlessly hunted the gorilla to for food as well as their hands and heads for souvenirs. Poachers have sold off baby gorillas in illicit trade. Tourism brings much needed dollars into the local economies and gives the government a reason to protect the gorilla as a resource. So long as only healthy humans visit the gorilla populations in controlled situations, tourism protects the

gorilla.

All African countries require passports of visitors and most, but not all, require visas from most foreign visitors. While travelers can often obtain a visa upon arrival, it is recommended that they obtain a visa beforehand. And as with any active vacation, travel insurance covering trip cancellation, trip interruption and medical emergencies is suggested.

Unlike other safaris, gorilla tracking typically requires rigorous hiking in undeveloped terrain. Thus, it is important that a traveler be in adequate physical condition to cope with the demands of the itinerary. In addition to considerations of the physical demands of a safari, the traveler should be aware of the necessity to protect against indigenous disease such as malaria. As early as possible in the planning stage, the traveler should consult a physician to determine what shots and other precautions should be undertaken prior to travel.

Travelers are well advised to book a mountain gorilla safari as far in advance as possible, especially because of the limited number of gorilla park permits, which are needed for tracking. This will allow plenty of time to get the best possible airfares and rates on guides, as well as to make appropriate preparations for vaccinations against indigenous diseases, such as malaria, hepatitis and yellow fever.

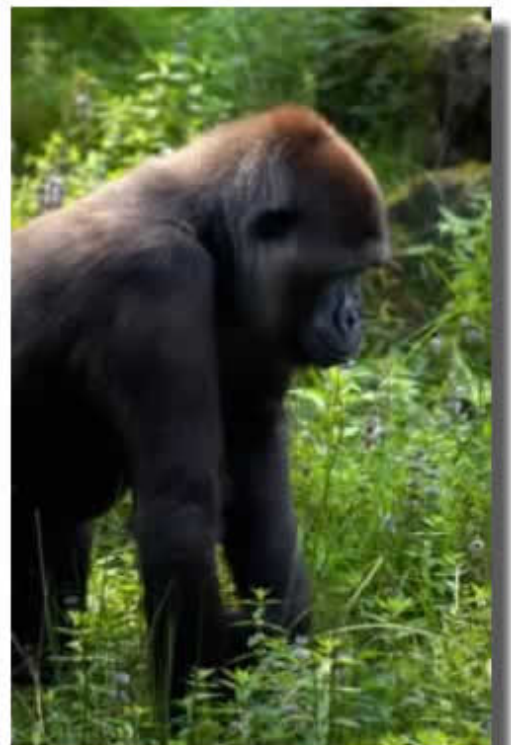
Travelers planning a safari have many options. First, you need to decide if you would like to track animals other than the gorilla. There are tours designed for tracking several gorilla varieties as well as chimpanzees and other primates. Or you may want to add larger game to your safari, such as lion, elephant, Cape buffalo, leopard and rhino, also known as the "Big Five." The itinerary is up to you. Keep in mind that as you track mountain gorillas, you should see many bird varieties and a multitude of other animals.

Gorilla tracking is offered year-round, but the hiking is much easier if you avoid the rainy seasons, March-April and October-November. Your tour operator should be able to obtain the gorilla park permits (costs vary by country), and tours of 6-12 travelers leave with a local guide each morning for an excursion that usually lasts 4-5 hours. Since the majority of that time is spent hiking through rugged terrain, gorilla trackers must be in good physical shape. Neither can travelers carry any illnesses or diseases. Most tour companies have a minimum age requirement of 18, while others lessen the requirement to 15. One hour is usually the maximum amount of time you may spend with the gorillas. Tracking for private groups can also be arranged.

Your gorilla-tracking safari can be as comfortable or as rugged as suits your preference. This is why the assistance of a good travel consultant is highly recommended. Reputable travel consultants have a variety of tools at their disposal which not only find the best possible values on the market, but which also match the traveler's preferences to a suitable tour operator.

Most gorilla safaris include accommodation. There are hotels, lodges and campsites available near the gorilla parks. All accommodations (including campsites) run the gamut from budget to luxury. Some of the campgrounds and accommodations are in the game parks, while others are outside of the boundary of the officially designated parks. Note that not all types of safari accommodations are offered at all parks or by all tour operators.

Tented safaris are camping excursions with tents and mobile locations. There are well-defined tent areas where the parks permit camping. Tour operators sometimes offer variations of luxury in tents, from bare canvas tenting to deluxe permanent tent structures. This is the traditional mobile safari where the traveler crosses the countryside in a four-wheel drive vehicle supplied by the tour operator.



Most tours include transportation from airports to the gorilla parks. If you are traveling independently, you can ride the public bus from Uganda's capital, Kampala, to Buhoma, and then take a taxi to Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. This journey averages 10 hours. When traveling to Mgahinga National Park, you will take a bus from Kampala to Kibale (6-8 hours), then another bus to Kisoro, which is six miles from the park. If traveling independently, know the bus timetables in advance and expect delays. Traveling to Rwanda's PNK is considerably easier. From the capital, Kigali, it is a 45-minute trip to Ruhengeri, a town just outside the park.

Travel in Africa is often unpredictable. Be prepared for delays and relax knowing that you have set off on an adventure that most only imagine.

Safari travelers should pack as lightly as possible. Safari veterans recommend bringing one backpack and one daypack. A good pair of boots will be appreciated, as will a hat and other protection from the sun. Do not forget the sunglasses and sunscreen! Loose clothing that can be layered and shed as the day warms works well. It is a good idea to take long sleeve shirts and light jackets for the evening cool and to protect against mosquitoes during the night. Insect repellent? Yes! Neutral colors help the traveler to blend in and are less likely to attract insects. "Convertible" shirts and pants are favorite garments owing to their versatility. Your tour operator will provide a complete list of recommended clothing and gear.

Be sure to bring ample camera film and batteries as there will be countless photo opportunities, although flash photography is not allowed near the mountain gorillas. It is also a good idea to keep your camera in a sealed bag to prevent damage due to water or dust. And be aware that film development in Africa is more risky than in the U.S.

Is a gorilla safari safe? Any travel entails some degree of risk. However, hundreds of lucky individuals go on gorilla treks each year without incident. Here are a few tips can ensure that you enjoy your safari with the maximum value and minimum risk:

- Prepare for the trip with a visit to a doctor to make sure you are prepared physically and that you have had recommended shots and anti-malarials.
- Listen to your guide! Do not, under any circumstances over-rule your guide. Listen to them and follow their sage advice.
- You will be provided with very specific instruction on how to safely view the gorillas you encounter. Any failure to follow instruction can be dangerous to you and the gorillas and may result in your dismissal from your group.
- Watch other animals from a distance. You want to look neither threatening nor tasty. If you encounter an animal at close distance unexpectedly, leave it plenty of room for escape and begin walking away quietly and slowly. Stay with your guide.
- Stay inside your tent at night. Enough said.
- Stay hydrated. Drink water throughout the day, even if you are not thirsty.
- Respect the local inhabitants. You are their guest. Again, your guide is your best friend.
- As with any active vacation, travel insurance covering trip cancellation, trip interruption and medical emergencies is a good idea.