



Masking Up for Mountain Gorillas

Sue Watt heads into Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park to come face to face with the forest's mountain gorillas and to find out how we can best protect our closest cousins.



Below. Mountain gorillas live in the thick, highland forests of Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Bottom. Rangers monitor the movements of the habituated gorillas, ensuring they know where each group is before visitors start hiking.

Found nowhere else in the world, in the mid-1980s they were staring extinction in the face; their entire population was estimated at just 250. Extensive poaching, loss of forest habitat, civil unrest in their once volatile homelands and human wildlife conflict have all threatened these majestic primates.

Their survival is one of Africa's greatest conservation success stories and one in which sustainable tourism played – and still plays – a critical role, benefiting both people and primates. Essentially, the gorillas have become worth more alive than dead to local people, who in turn have become their protectors rather than poachers. Permit fees contribute to both conservation and community development; hotels, lodges and tourism provide employment; and often, visitors donate to projects like schools and clinics.

Lodges here also directly support local communities. I'm staying at the relaxing Volcanoes Safa-



Above. Mountain gorillas are critically endangered, partly due to deforestation and loss of habitat, but also due to human diseases.

Tall, dark and handsome, with gentle, chocolate-brown eyes and hair as black as the night, Kanyonyi is one cool, good-looking guy. And he knows it. “He’s a bit of a Casanova,” Benjamin smiles. “Always trying to steal the ladies and getting into trouble. See that notch on his ear? He got that in a fight when he was after another woman.”

I’m smitten as soon as I see the lovely lothario, but he shows little interest in me nor in the rest of my group who are tracking the Mubare mountain gorilla family in western Uganda’s Bwindi Impenetrable National Park with our guide, Benjamin. A blackback, four females and three youngsters surround Kanyonyi, their silverback, who’s sitting calmly just a few metres away from us, munching happily on stalks and stems. He pays no heed to our whispered ‘wows’ and our wide-eyed incredulity at his relaxed, almost nonchalant

demeanour, nor to our gasps at his family’s human-like expressions and breathtaking beauty.

We’ve walked for two hours in pouring rain, up and down muddy trails tangled with vines and vegetation to reach the Mubare group, but the reward upon seeing them more than makes up for our exhausting efforts. Named ‘Impenetrable’ for good reason, Bwindi’s 316-kilometre-squared rainforest is dense and diverse, its 400 or so species of plants providing sustenance to 350 bird species and over 120 species of mammal, including almost half the world’s mountain gorillas.

The fight for survival

Classed as critically endangered, only around 880 mountain gorillas roam Bwindi and the Virunga Mountains that span the borders of southern Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

ris Bwindi Lodge in Buhoma, with eight beautiful, eco-luxury stone cottages overlooking the forest. It supports several conservation and community projects through its non-profit Partnership Trust, including the popular Bwindi Bar in the village that provides hospitality training for young people.

But tourism has also brought with it a risk of harm to the vulnerable mountain gorillas – it is simultaneously protecting and imperilling them.

Often described as our closest cousins, mountain gorillas share 98.4% of human DNA, making them particularly susceptible to our diseases – yet they have no immunity to them. Being in close proximity to people can threaten their survival; a common cold could kill them. For this reason, there are strict rules governing our encounter.

Masking up

Arriving at 7am at the park headquarters, walking distance from our lodge, we're allocated one of Bwindi's 12 habituated gorilla groups for tracking. Each group is tracked once a day by a maximum of eight people, who can only stay in their company for one precious hour.

Benjamin briefs us on the rules before we leave, all designed to limit our contact with the primates. "You must stay at least seven metres from the gorillas. If you want to sneeze or cough, turn away from them. If you have flu, a cough or diarrhoea, we can't take you. And if we discover you're ill on the way, we'll have to stop tracking."

The chances of transmitting diseases are very real. Ugandan wildlife vet Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka discovered the first case of scabies spreading from human to mountain gorilla in 2000, when a young primate died of the disease after having come into contact with infected rags on a scarecrow. Realising that community health was inextricably linked to gorilla health when they live in such close environs, she now educates local people on health and hygiene through her Bwindi-based NGO, Conservation Through Public Health.

Last year, Gladys was invited to join the Mask Task Force, supported by the Greater Virunga Transboundary Initiative. Made up of government agencies, conservation NGOs and tour operators, it is looking at the issue of tourists wearing surgical masks when tracking gorillas to reduce the risks of infection transmission. Whilst it's compulsory to wear masks in DR Congo,

Bottom left. Volcanoes Safaris Bwindi Lodge is one of the luxury accommodation options in Uganda.

Bottom right. Bwindi Lodge is set on the edge of the forest in which the mountain gorillas live.

no such rule applies in Uganda or Rwanda, with both countries concerned that it might deter visitors.

Inspired by Dr Gladys' Tusk Conservation Lecture at the Royal Geographic Society in London last year, Jacada Travel started a campaign called 'Masking Up for Gorillas'. Encouraging their clients to wear masks, they aimed to show the authorities that visitors would happily do this if it meant added protection for the primates. In May, their campaign won the Innovation Award for Support Africa in the prestigious We Are Africa awards.

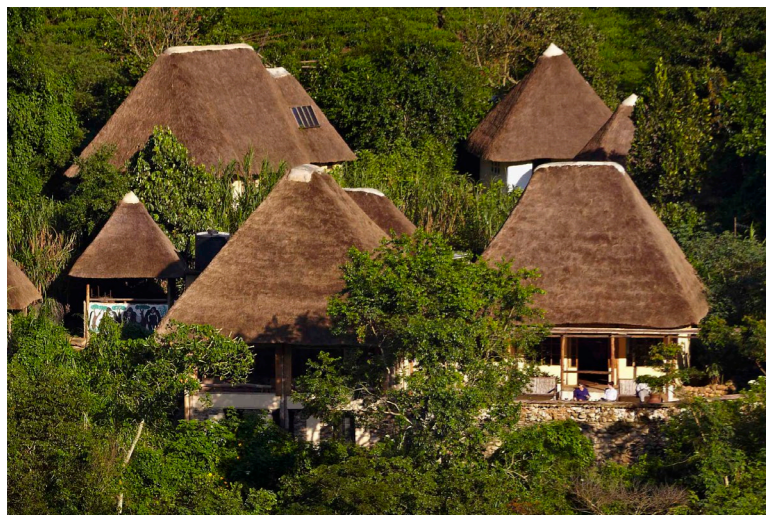
"Rules have been developed to minimise disease transmission," Dr Gladys tells me. "However, gorillas are now 'breaking' those rules. They often wander much closer than the permitted seven metres to tourists and sometimes even touch them. Conservation agencies and tour operators, including Jacada, are working with the governments of Uganda and Rwanda to make mask-wearing compulsory. It's a prudent precaution for minimising fatal disease transmission from humans to critically endangered gorillas."

There is concern in some quarters that more analysis is needed on the health benefits to gorillas in regions

where mask-wearing by tourists is already common practice. Meanwhile, the use of masks during gorilla visits is included in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park's ten-year General Management Plan, approved in 2014; hence, it's likely that rules will be introduced before 2024.

Dr Gladys explains the current situation to me. "Tourists in Uganda can wear masks if they want to, but it is not yet compulsory. Some visitors have said they're willing to wear them, especially those who've been to other great ape sites where masks are compulsory, including Mahale in Tanzania and Tai Forest in Ivory Coast, which both offer chimpanzee tourism."

With this in mind, I've brought a surgical mask for my encounter, a plain, off-white paper one that you can buy in chemists. Before our briefing at the Park HQ, Geoffrey Twinomuhangi, Bwindi's Assistant Warden, confirms his approval for me to use it. But my fellow trackers at first appear bemused. "Isn't that a bit extreme?" one comments. When I explain the issues, they accept my reasoning and I slip it on when we reach the Mubare group.





Above. A baby gorilla sits by his watchful mother.

Close encounters

I'm instantly engrossed. Having first fallen for Kanyonyi, I move on to watch Malaika quietly peeling a plant resembling sugarcane to savour its sweet juices. Her name means Angel and she does look angelic, keeping an eye on her two-year-old playing tag with other toddlers. The three youngsters jump onto a sapling that sways and bends until it snaps under their weight and they all come tumbling down, landing on a lush green cushion of ferns. Mitunu, a hefty female, sits on the ground feasting on ants, a good source of protein for gorillas, while a young mum nurses her tiny nine-month-old baby with a tenderness that brings tears to my eyes.

So mesmerising is this maternal scene, I fail to notice the gorgeous Kanyonyi moving towards me, almost within arm's reach. "Kneel down and stay quiet," Benjamin whispers. I swear the silverback can hear my pounding heart, but he saunters casually past



Top. Local children are being educated about how to live in harmony with the gorillas, reducing the risks for both animals and people.

Left. Getting so close to the gorillas brings home how important it is to protect these primates from our diseases. A common cold could be fatal for a gorilla.



as if I wasn't there. Thrilled at this close encounter, I have the biggest, most ridiculous grin on my face. Only then do I remember that I'm wearing my mask and no one can see my smile.

All too soon, our time is up. "That was the quickest hour of my life," a member of our group comments, still in awe of these gentle, giant apes. As we walk back to Buhoma, my fellow trackers agree they would happily don masks. "I think we should all wear them," one lady remarks. "It just makes sense. After all, we've come here as tourists to help conserve these amazing animals."

Without sustainable tourism and the benefits it brings to communities and conservation, mountain gorillas would struggle to survive. As I fly back to Entebbe over Bwindi, I see the gorillas' home panning out below me, a carpet of lush dense forest surrounded by a patchwork of crowded farmsteads and *shambas*

(plantations). "Bwindi Forest is a living island in a desert of destruction," Geoffrey Twinomuhangi tells me. "Many people see the forest as a wasted resource, they want to cut down the trees and use the land for crops," he explains. "Uganda is densely populated; encroachment is increasing as the population increases."

Thankfully, Bwindi's gorilla population is also increasing. In an unprecedented baby boom, 29 have been born in the groups used for tourist tracking during the last two years alone. "We have to preserve their forest," Geoffrey says emphatically, "and protect our mountain gorilla cousins for future generations."

Pack your bags

Spend four nights in Uganda, including three nights in Bwindi National Park tracking gorillas, from US\$6,000 per person. For further information, contact Africa travel designer Byron Thomas (byron@jacadatravel.com).