

TRAVEL

Gorillas in the Mist

*Uganda is a treasure-trove of nature
with half the world's gorillas in
its rain-forested midsts*

Fans of the movie *Gorillas in the Mist* will remember the fascination that American primatologist Dian Fossey had with these incredible, now-critically endangered creatures – there are less than 5,000 mountain and eastern lowland gorillas left in their natural habitat.

Growing up to 200kg, the world's largest primates, and our closest living relatives after chimpanzees and bonobos, have fascinated nature-loving wanderers and it's no wonder that there are few trips more awe-inspiring than going to see these stocky, family-focussed animals and locking gazes with one of these vegetarian beings who share our intelligence. Gorilla

trekking gives new meaning to the often-hackneyed phrase bucket-list adventure.

Mountain gorillas are found in the dense, lush forests and volcanic domes that lie at the edge of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda, with the latter two locations offering up the most sophisticated and easiest-to-book treks.

Uganda has half the population – about 400 animals – in its side of the thick greenery; the aptly, atmospherically named 124sqkm Bwindi (literally meaning 'darkness') Impenetrable National Park, a UNESCO protected site. That's why most trekkers opt to start out from there for their up-close and personal, once in a lifetime encounter. ▶



Queen Elizabeth Park offers up a multitude of animal sightings including buffalo (top), gazelles (above) and elephants (right)

SILVERBACK LODGE

The main port into Uganda is via Entebbe International Airport which has a wide range of flights feeding into it. A short one-hour chartered plane connection (or a ten hour drive) from here takes you as near as it possible to get to the Kihiki airstrip, a mere hour to the edge of the Bwindi National Forest, the start point for the gorilla trek.

Marasa's Silverback Lodge is perfectly perched at the edge of the forest, just a five minute walk from the main entrance to the park. From its unique vantage point at the top of the hill you can take in the thick ferns and trees, steep hills and dense undergrowth that is the natural habitat of these great apes. This is pure, raw jungle and serves up serious naturalist thrills.

Cosy, spotlessly clean with hot showers, large mosquito nets and verandas that offer up beautiful views around, this is the perfect pre-trek pit-stop. Don't expect five-star luxury – but do expect exceptionally hospitable staff and all the creature comforts you might need for your upcoming journey. Make sure you sample the

chef's local curries, served with hot chapatis, they are the highlights of the menu!

The park authorities have habituated four families of gorillas so that they are used to onlookers and aren't startled or scared by tourists. A gorilla permit (obtained via Marasa) costs AED2,203/US\$600 per person and gives you the opportunity to trek into the forest, complete with guides, guards and porters. These permits are strictly regulated and only eight trekkers are allowed to visit a family per day.

The park trackers know their gorillas and follow them from first light when they head off from their overnight nests so that they can give the tour guides rough directions as to where to take visitors. Tourists are divided into groups, usually with an indication of trekking ability, before being taken into the lush interior of the forest in a trek that can last anywhere from five to seven hours and take you up steep slopes and muddy inclines or a fairly sedate, more well-trodden path.

Once you see the preceding trackers you know you are in the vicinity of the creatures. The hour you are strictly allowed to spend in

their presence will seem to pass in seconds.

ROYAL FOCUS

Going to Uganda, without exploring the country's other natural wonders – from chimpanzees at Kibale Forest to Ishasha's tree-dwelling lions and the majestic Murchison Falls where the Nile thunders down 140ft through a 23ft gap – would be a travesty.

Follow in the footsteps of Queen Elizabeth II – after whom the former Kazinga National Park was renamed – and head to Mweya Safari Lodge for a very different kind of river safari experience that skirts a mighty channel, teeming with wildlife both in it and at its edge.

Your five-star lodge, located in the heart of the vast park, has a monopoly on channel-tastic views of the rift valley, and the best viewing sites. Visitors to your hotel door might include warthogs, over 600 species of birds, and even the hippos that emerge at night to mow the verdant hillside grass.

The two-hour river cruises are not to be missed and are a unique attraction to this park, beckoning nature lovers. A slow trip down the



Silverback Lodge (above) looks onto the lush Bwindi Impenetrable Forest and is minutes away from the trek start-point. For luxury in the midst of Queen Elizabeth National Park, Mweya Safari Lodge (right, below right) can't be beaten

channel takes you surprisingly close to unconcerned pods of hippos, lazy crocodiles, Uganda kob, Cape buffalo, water-fowl and elephants. Ready to splash out? Then don't miss out on a tranquil hot air balloon ride (ugandaballoonsafari.com) over the vast savannahs; as you glide up at sunrise, the sheer expanse of the park amazes and the birds-eye view of animals, who seem utterly unconcerned by those peering from on-high, finished with a silver-service bush breakfast, is unbeatable.

DETAILS

The full trip, including permits, safaris, internal flights and accommodation can be arranged by Marasa.net, reservations@marasa.net, Tel: +256 (0) 312 260260, Mweya Safari Lodge rates start from AED988/US\$269. Silverback Lodge rates start from AED775/US\$211.

Internal return flights by Aerolink Uganda from Entebbe to Bwindi are AED1,697 /US\$462.

TOP TIPS

- 1 • Don't skimp on your kit. You will need proper hiking shoes with grip, long sleeved shirts and long trousers so that no skin is exposed as en route you will find forest ants, stinging nettles and mosquitos. A back-pack for water and lunch is also needed.
- 2 • These treks assist the local communities so opt for a porter to help carry your sack – you'll also want your hands free for photography. Bring exact notes to tip (AED75/US\$20 is advised for your porter).
- 3 • Permits are strictly controlled so book in advance if you are going in high season. During the 'long rains' of late March to early May, hiking is at its toughest. November is the short rainy season. Peak season is July and August.



WORDS: NATASHA FARUQUE. PHOTOS: ISTOCK