

Encounters on the

MOUNTAIN

Tracking Uganda's rare, endangered mountain gorillas in a protected park is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

By Vawn Himmelsbach

We've only been hiking the mist-shrouded mountains of Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable Forest for a short time when our guide, Niyibizi Goreth, tells us our trackers have spotted the Rushegura family. A ripple of hushed excitement passes through the group — after all, this is no ordinary family. We go off-trail as Goreth — one of the park's few female rangers — slices through the foliage with a machete. That's when reality takes hold.

When I woke up that morning, I was excited by the prospect of seeing a gorilla. Now, out in the bush, it seems like a crazy idea. This is no petting zoo — these gorillas live in the wild, and there are no barriers to separate them from us. But when we spot a fuzzy brown mass hanging by one arm from a tree branch, all fear dissipates: there is only a sense of awe.



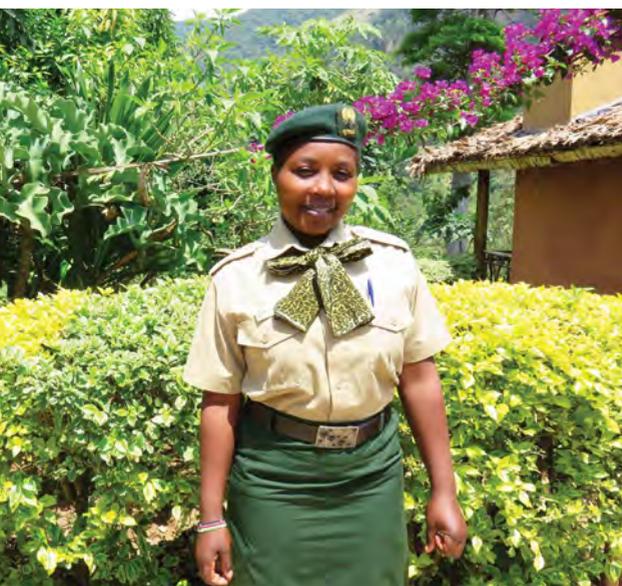
streak of silver fur running down his back, sits alone against a tree, eyeing us.

As one of the last remaining gorilla sanctuaries in Africa, access to this region is strictly controlled. You need a permit for gorilla tracking, and groups are limited to no more than eight people per gorilla family per day. Permits are limited and must be purchased in advance; they include the services of an experienced park ranger, trackers and porters.

While you're allotted about an hour to spend with the gorillas, you don't know in advance how long it will take to find them — half an hour or half a day. That's because gorillas are always on the move in search of food, and don't sleep in

the same place for two consecutive nights. Our hour flies by and, reluctantly, we head back to park headquarters, taking a shortcut by hopping over rocks in a rushing river. Suddenly, while waiting for my turn to cross, a hulking male gorilla stalks up the path behind me.

I'm rooted to the spot as he brushes past me — it's thrilling and terrifying all at the same time. I have to remind myself to breathe. Never in my life did I expect to be this close to a wild gorilla, so close I can feel his stiff fur against my pant leg. These gorillas may be habituated, but there was never any guarantee we'd see any, or that they'd let us get this close. I'm just a guest in this impenetrable forest, and I feel privileged — and humbled — to be in their presence.



Bwindi, a protected park and one of the oldest rainforests in Africa (dating back more than 25,000 years), is home to more than half of the world's remaining mountain gorillas. They can only be found here, as well as in neighbouring Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Presently, there are nine gorilla families in the forest that have been habituated by park rangers to tolerate the presence of humans — a process that takes several years.

As we stand quietly among the trees, we see other members of the Rushegura family: One young male slides down a branchless tree like a fire pole into a scuffle with a few other males — apparently over a piece of fruit. A mother carries a tiny fur-ball of a baby on her back; two others delicately groom each other. The silverback, identified as the leader of the group with a distinctive

WHEN YOU GO

Planning an astonishing experience takes extraordinary expertise — especially when it comes to trekking in the jungle. **Kensington Tours'** six-day itinerary, *Uganda Gorillas in Style*, combines luxury accommodation with thrilling outdoor adventures to make sure your once-in-a-lifetime trip goes off without a hitch.

STAY

When you're not on safari or ascending to great heights in Uganda's Impenetrable Forest, enjoy some authentic Ugandan hospitality at Mahogany Springs, where each suite features a terrace with jaw-dropping views of the natural wonders surrounding the luxury lodge.

PLAN

Perhaps unsurprisingly, gorilla-tracking can be a somewhat complex affair. Kensington Tours will arrange for the necessary permits on your behalf, and ensure you have a seasoned guide to get you the up-close and personal moment you desire.

PLAY

Have something even more special in mind? Kensington guests are able to customize their itineraries upon booking, so speak to your advisor about a tailor-made tour to suit your tastes when you book.