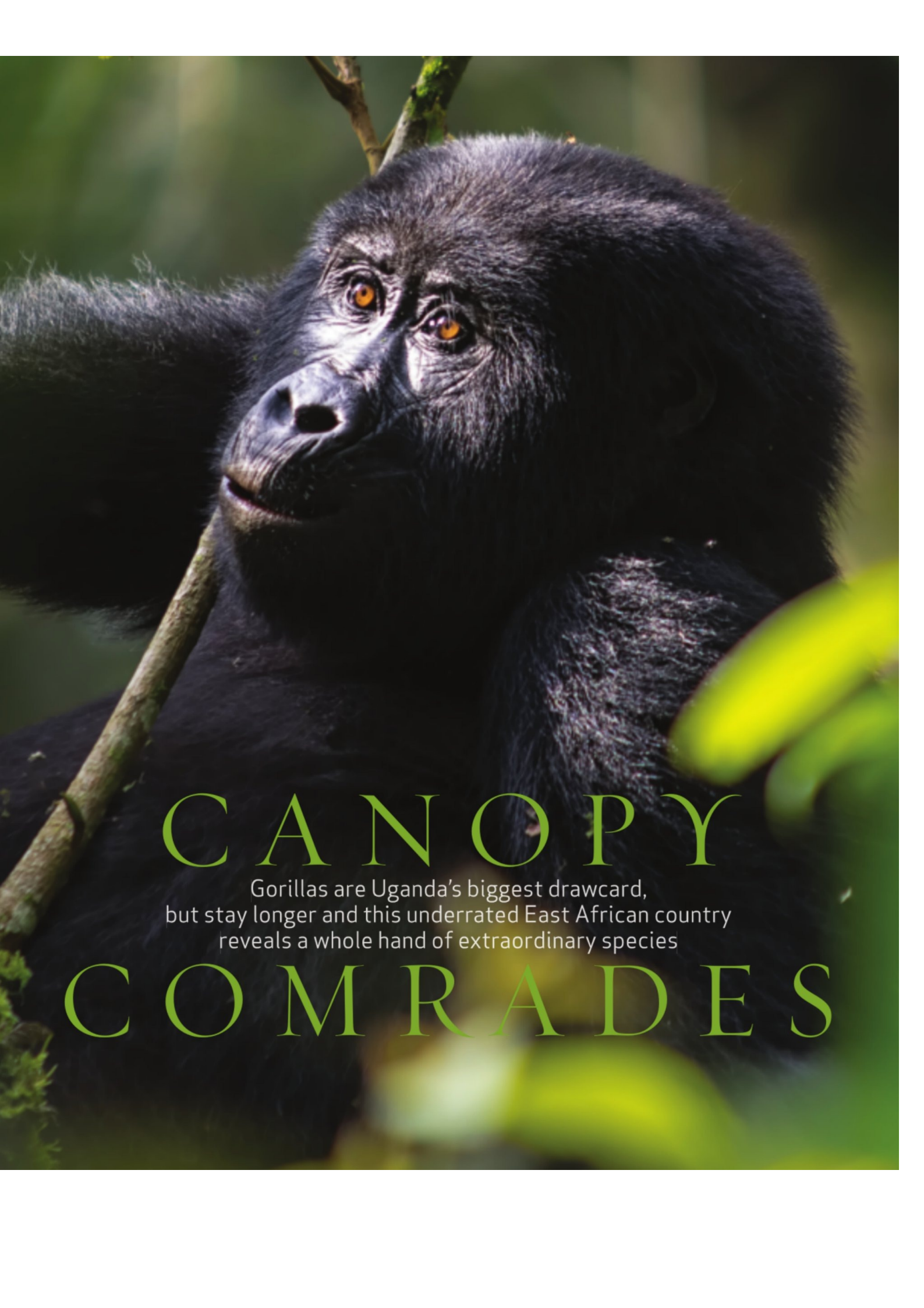




WORDS

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IMAGES: Gallo Images/Getty Images



CANOPY

Gorillas are Uganda's biggest drawcard,
but stay longer and this underrated East African country
reveals a whole hand of extraordinary species

COMRADES

THE APTLY NAMED BWINDI IMPENETRABLE FOREST NATIONAL PARK

is home to half of the world's population of mountain gorillas. Kitted up in long trousers, socks pulled up over the hems to prevent biting ants from getting in, we set off to find them.

Eight of us fall into line behind Katungi Said, our machete-wielding Uganda Wildlife Authority guide. It is named "impenetrable" for a good reason, and we wear gardening gloves too as protection against the fine needle-like coverings of forest ferns. It can take anything from 25 minutes to five hard hours to find a gorilla family. What nobody admits though about an encounter with these shaggy-haired primates is their tendency to pass wind.

Fortune favours us, and a short half an hour into the tracking, there she sits. A female



gorilla (far smaller than Hollywood's King Kong films would have me believe) totally unobstructed in the middle of the trail. It is the reverent scene I had always imagined. Her coffee-coloured eyes match the dirt, and she gazes calmly over her shoulder at us, while pulling foliage from the shrubs that cushion her seat. Without a flicker of bother, she let rip. She's 98% human, alright.

To be honest, it was a relief when the gorilla farted. There is something downright peculiar about a creature that is so startlingly human and simultaneously so very exotic. That release of noisy gas levelled the genetic playing field. In 1981, environmentalists estimated that just 240 mountain gorillas roamed wild in the world. "They have just finished a census, and we are waiting for final stats to be released," Said says. A guide for over seven



Previous pages, from left: view across the islands in Lake Bunyonyi, southern Uganda; the Bwindi Forest National Park is home to half of the world's population of mountain gorillas; above: the crowned crane is the national bird of Uganda, and this pair was spotted in Queen Elizabeth National Park; opposite, from top, clockwise: a banana vendor transporting the fruit by bicycle to the market along the road from Mbarara to Kabale; a lion in Bwindi; a tea plantation in Uganda; this hammock, and Crater Safari Lodge, overlooks the second largest crater lake in Uganda; next page: a mountain gorilla in the rain forest in Bwindi

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THE BWINDI FOREST WAS ONCE HOME TO THE BATWA TRIBE





HIRE A PORTER TO SUPPORT BWINDI'S SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES

years and tracking them four times a week, he reckons there are about 400 gorillas currently in Bwindi. We sit with eight of them – seven females and their docile silverback. Together, they make up the Mucunguzi family, and we watch them with rapt attention for a full hour. “Thank you,” Said shares at the end of our trek. “Coming here plays a big role in conservation. Twenty percent of the permit fee is deducted and distributed to communities around the forest. You should count yourselves lucky – and don’t tell everyone it was so easy!”

Among East African forests, Bwindi is one of the most diverse, boasting more than 100 types of ferns, and over 200 tree species. This forest alone makes up more than 50% of Uganda’s total tree varieties. It would be irresponsible though not to mention the other forest inhabitants that once lived amongst these trees. Before Bwindi National Park was gazetted and protected, it was home to the Batwa tribe. The “pygmy” people were forced from the forests in 1991 without any land compensation, becoming conservation refugees and squatters on the fringes. The best way to support Bwindi’s surrounding communities? Hire a porter on your gorilla trek (an inexpensive \$15 fee) to aid you through the slippery, chocolate-ice-cream mud of the rainforest.

Trees became an ongoing theme during this trip. Our next arboreal address was Kibale National Park, but Queen Elizabeth

National Park provided a fitting overnight stop on the way. The park is a classic big game-viewing destination, but with one animal anomaly thrown in. The southern section, Ishasha, is renowned for its population of tree-climbing lions.

I had anticipated the riveting mountain views of Uganda, and dazzling lakes of the Great Rift Valley, but not the excellent wildlife sightings – and without any crowds to boot. The only car is the one we are travelling with, and our timing is terrific as lions tend to take to the trees during the heat of the midday. Kiwanuka Joseph (my guide from Crystal Safaris) and I dig into a memorable packed lunch while watching a pride lazing on fat fig tree limbs. Later, Joseph locates Uganda’s national bird, the regal grey crowned crane. There are also elephant bulls with long tusks, buffalo herds, bee-eaters, giant forest hogs, as well as topi and kob antelope grazing the savannah plains, peppered by an unmistakable safari icon, umbrella acacia trees.

Following an evening at Ishasha Wilderness Camp, we forge on towards Fort Portal, a town roughly 300 kilometres away from Uganda’s capital, Kampala. Crater Safari Lodge is surrounded by a series of curious lakes formed over 8 000 years ago, and it overlooks the second-largest lake of its kind. However, visitors are not here for water.

We hear the troop before we see them, whooping eerily from high above in the canopy. There are five kinds of chimps in

the world, and Kibale National Park is home to the Eastern chimpanzee, plus 350 tree species, some of which rise over 55 metres high. I regret not bringing binoculars. Craning my neck back, I follow the dark, furry lumps as they forage for figs in the early morning. We try to dodge their droppings too, but one of our walking party isn't so lucky. Chimp trekking is the more affordable ape alternative at \$150 per person, but it is no less exhilarating than seeing the gorillas.

Heeding the advice of our guide Kwatampola Benson, I sit on a fallen log as the chimps holler and hover above us. Benson is an advocate of the universal law: what goes up, eventually has to come down. Patience pays off. One by one, the apes drop down, and we follow the last male as he moves swiftly through the dark undergrowth.

Chimpanzees share almost 99% of our DNA. They are the most abundant and widespread of the great apes, but they are still classified as endangered on the IUCN Red List. "Kibale has the greatest variety of primates on the planet," Benson says. Including us, I think as we crouch on our haunches beside the chimpanzee. The creature stops to feast on the forest abundance, in a way that once upon a time, we probably did too.

Even though the bigger gorillas tend to trend on the international travel scene, I can't help but agree with primatologist Dr Jane Goodall when she said, "The more I came to learn about chimpanzees, the more I came to realise how like us they are... Finally, we realise we are a part of the animal kingdom, not separate from it."

After all, the apple does not fall far from the tree.



THE ESSENTIALS

WHEN TO VISIT

Gorilla trekking is best during the two dry seasons: between January and February, and from June to September. Game viewing is also best at the end of the dry seasons (February and September) when wildlife is concentrated around water sources. It rains heavily in April and May.

WHAT TO PACK

Gardening gloves, waterproof shoes, gaiters, long socks, raincoat, and quick-dry trousers or gym tights are essentials for a pleasant trekking experience. Prepare to be caught in the rain, and bring dry bags for camera gear.

GETTING AROUND

The quickest way from Entebbe Airport to Bwindi is to fly directly to Kisoro Airport. From here, a guided drive in a comfortable 4x4 is the easiest way to get around Uganda. Book accommodation where your gorilla-trekking permit is issued (this needs to be done in advance), or ask at your accommodation for help to arrange the permits. Sun Destinations arrange accommodation, chimpanzee and gorilla experiences, plus transport. sundestinations.co.za

STAY HERE

Gorilla Safari Lodge has 18 luxurious cottages set in lush, colourful gardens overlooking the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, which is a five-minute stroll away. Memorable touches include a complimentary shoe-washing service, hot water bottles at turndown, and a cosy indoor fireplace. gorilla-safari-lodge.com

Ishasha Wilderness Camp is a classic tented camp on the banks of the Ntungwe River, situated inside the Queen Elizabeth National Park. Listen to hyenas while sitting at the campfire, and wake to the sight of elephants drinking water. ugandaexclusivecamps.com

Crater Safari Lodge boasts incredible views of the crater lake region, and is surrounded by abundant coffee and tea plantations. Neighbouring the Bigodi Wetland Sanctuary, there is wonderful birdlife, and 13 primate species to tick off at the nearby Kibale National Park. crater-safari-lodge.com



GETTING THERE

•• **FLY** SAA serves Entebbe daily, except Tuesdays, with flights from Johannesburg operated by Airlink. Visit flysaa.com

saasawubona.com