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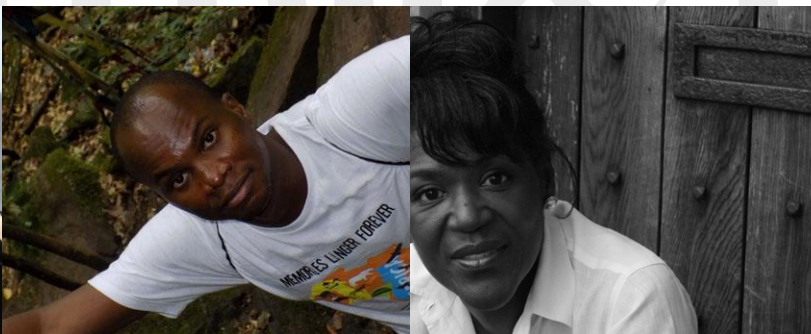
A Glimpse into Africa's
Unexplored Gem



JOHANNA READ

PG 38

Johanna Read is a Canadian freelance writer and photographer specializing in travel, food, and responsible tourism. Writing for a variety of Canadian and international publications, she likes to encourage travel that is culturally, economically, and environmentally sustainable. Links to all her travel stories are at www.TravelEater.net.



EFETOBO AWHANA

PG 50

Efetobo Awhana is the founder of Naijaholidays.com and CEO of Avantgarde Tours. He loves photography and learning about people and nature one place at a time. He is passionate about travel to and within Africa and began writing to share his passion for the beautiful continent. When he is not travelling or designing memorable itineraries for clients he loves to spend time with his wife and two kids.



SARA GENENE

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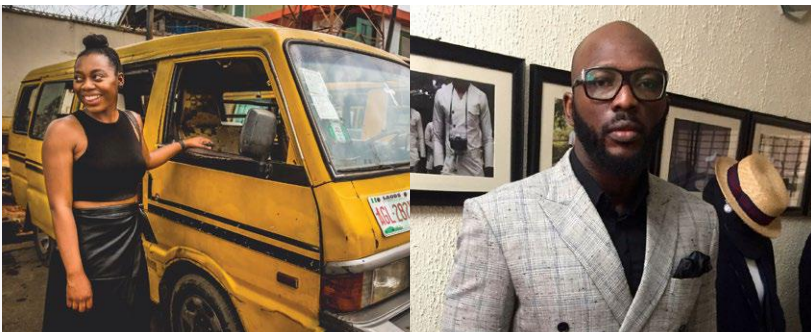
Sara Genene is an Ethiopian travel blogger/writer who is a firm believer that beauty lies within mundane details and is an enthusiast in unveiling the eloquent sides of Ethiopia and the exotic beauty of Africa to the world via her blog www.ethiopianwonderlust.com



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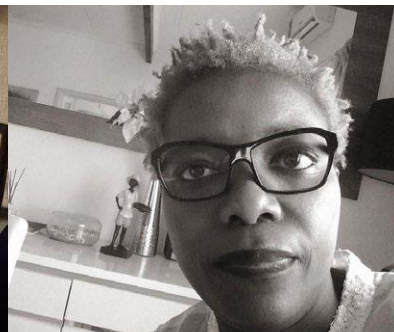
Jerry Uwaifo is a fitness and wellness expert and the CEO of Body Laboratory LLC. His qualifications include a BSc in Microbiology and a Masters degree in Geology and Environmental Contamination. His journey into the fitness industry which has spanned over a decade was born out of his passion for it.



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PG 76

Sandra IDOSSOU is an Afropolitan hotelier, trainer, mystery shopper, consultant, writer, author, traveler, publisher who has been expatriate in 8 African countries since 2000. She is very passionate about everything African, Quality of Service, Tourism & Hospitality, Branding, Sales & Marketing, Communication, Consumers rights, Capacity Building especially among youth and entrepreneurs.

UGGA



INDIA

EXPLORE THE PEARL OF AFRICA



THE PEARL OF THE PEARL OF AFRICA:

UGANDA'S MOUN

Over half of the world's **880 mountain gorillas** live in Uganda, in 30 different families. They are divided between **Mgahinga Gorilla National Park**, in

the Virunga Mountains bordering Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and **Bwindi Impenetrable Forest**. I was lucky enough to spend a morning learning about, tracking, and seeing them in the rainforest of **Bwindi**.

Bwindi is a **330-square-kilometre national park** and has the largest number of gorilla families habituated to humans. This

UNESCO World Heritage site is home to an impressive list of animals: 350 species of birds (23 endemic to the Albertine Rift), 310 butterflies, 51 reptiles, and 120 mammals including the largest primate, the mountain gorilla.

Mountain gorillas are critically endangered and are one of the rare world creatures that can't be seen in zoos. Scientists don't know why, since their lowland gorilla cousins even breed successfully in captivity.

In order to protect them, the rules surrounding seeing mountain gorillas are strict. These protections seem to be working -- their numbers are increasing. An information sign from 2006 at

Bwindi's Ruhija basecamp describes the population of mountain gorillas. In 2012 someone took a black pen and wrote in an update by hand. The sign now reads "In **Bwindi** we have approximately 300 - 400 gorillas". The correction is heartwarming. It's hoped that the census in 2017 will confirm even greater numbers.

THE RULES

"I see by your faces that you are all obedient citizens," says Benson, the park ranger giving an orientation to our group. He explains the gorilla-trekking rules:

- * Follow all instructions of park rangers.
- * A maximum of eight visitors can observe each gorilla family per day, for one hour.

Visitors must have a gorilla trekking permit (**\$600 USD**).

- * Speak quietly within 200 metres of gorillas.
- * When approaching gorillas, leave your walking stick with the trackers (gorillas can get aggressive when they see sticks).
- * Don't use flash photography.
- * Don't smoke, eat, or drink in front of gorillas.
- * Don't leave any garbage in the park.
- * Try to keep a distance of seven metres, although the gorillas are free to move around as they wish.

The biggest risks to gorillas are habitat loss and human disease. Tourism helps preserve the forest, but minor human illnesses can kill gorillas. Park rangers ask visitors not to trek if they feel unwell. They will arrange a new

TAIN GORILLAS

By Johanna Read

trip or refund 50% of the cost of the trekking permit. Should rangers deem someone too sick to participate, there is no refund.

For our safety and comfort, Benson asks us to tuck our trouser legs into our socks to prevent safari ants from stinging or biting. "They're not poisonous, but they make people dance," he explains with a grin. Long sleeves and, for those of us that brought them, gardening gloves also protect from the forest's stinging nettles. Good hiking boots, rain gear, and, of course, a camera, are other essential equipment.

Benson reminds us to ensure we each have at least two litres of water and a packed lunch. We don't know how long we'll be in the rainforest and we don't know how many hills we'll need to climb.

THE EXPERIENCE

The trek to see mountain gorillas can be challenging. **Bwindi** National Park is at altitude and the lower pressure and oxygen levels make exertion harder. Some groups find their gorilla family in less than an hour, while others take a whole day. Almost everyone, though, manages to see them.

The majority of our trek is through dense forest amongst gorillas' favourite foods. Our ranger, John Tugumisirize, needs to clear a path with his machete. The terrain is rough. Peaks and valleys undulate through the forest thanks to its volcanic origins. "**Bwindi**", from the Kitara language group of western Uganda, means "impenetrable",

and the forest almost is. Without the help of our guides we have no chance of finding our way in or out.

We walk through dried leaves and around ferns, small bushes and trees, vines, bamboo, and vast hardwoods. The vines come in handy. We grab them to lower ourselves down and to pull ourselves up the steep slopes. Slips and falls aren't unknown.

Once we find the gorillas, the difficulty is forgotten.

Gorillas are beautiful. Looking into the brown eyes of a 150-kilogram female, I can see intelligence. I wonder what she

thinks of our group trying to photograph her and her one-year-old baby in the dim light of the forest.

While the older gorillas eat, the juveniles charm us with their acrobatic tricks. They slide down vines, turn somersaults, and wrestle. None seem at all bothered by our presence. As they move through the forest to find food, several gorillas come far closer than the prescribed seven metres. Sometimes they even sit down right in front of us.

TOURISM HELPS PROTECT MOUNTAIN GORILLAS

Tourists' interest in mountain gorillas provides funding to keep the animals and their habitat safe from threats like deforestation, >

OF THE PEARL OF AFRICA'S MANY TREASURES, THE MOST MAGNIFICENT AND UNIQUE ARE ITS MOUNTAIN GORILLAS.





political strife, and the antelope snares of poachers.

It can take two years to habituate a family of gorillas to humans. Once habituated, trackers spend about four hours every day with each family.

Shortly after the sun rises, groups of trackers, one for each habituated gorilla family, set out from the **Ruhija** base camp. They walk through **Bwindi** back to the spot where they left the gorillas the day before, removing any snares they may find.

From there, they search for the trails the gorillas left -- crushed vegetation from where they walked or sat, footprints in the sometimes muddy ground, droppings, and branches stripped of the tastiest leaves.

The trail eventually leads to the spot the gorillas slept. As the day ends, each gorilla over the age of three makes a nest out of leaves and branches. The trackers count

these nests to be sure they've found "their" gorilla family, and not stumbled onto the nests of an unhabituated group. The trackers follow the trail again until they find the family, and then radio the rangers waiting with their eight excited tourists.

Trackers can tell when they're getting close to gorillas. They hear movement through the trees (which they hope is not a forest elephant) and sometimes hear the gorillas' calls and grunts. Swarms of gorilla flies follow the animals (but don't seem to bother gorillas and, thankfully, rarely come close to humans).

The trackers know their gorillas well. They look for signs of illness and disharmony, and report this to park rangers. Veterinarians are called in to treat injuries and illnesses that don't seem able to heal on their own. Trackers also report changes in group membership (silverbacks can steal females from other groups), deaths, pregnancies, and births.

Without tourism, the population of critically endangered gorillas would be decreasing, not increasing.

MOUNTAIN GORILLAS HELP PROTECT UGANDA

Gorillas and other tourist attractions are not competitors for resources but should be a means of improving the lives of the people who live near them. The survival of rare animals like gorillas depends on the well-being of their human neighbours. Ensuring that tourism benefits local communities is essential for a sustainable tourism industry.

People who are not economically self-sufficient inadvertently put gorillas -- and tourism -- at risk. For example, they cause further parkland deforestation because they need firewood and land for subsistence farming. Requiring protein, some turn to poaching and their snares intended for antelope can injure gorillas. When people face poverty, difficulty accessing clean water and education, and have little ability to improve their means, they can become resentful of tourism. Tourists -- and governments -- who care about gorillas will ensure that citizens are not disenfranchised.

Fees for Uganda's popular gorilla treks not only help fund other national parks, but **20% of the \$600** gorilla permit goes directly to local communities, funding essential services like schools

and health clinics.

The areas near gorilla-trekking have a particularly vulnerable group. The Batwa people (pejoratively called Pygmies) were displaced from the forests when the national parks to protect gorillas were created. Traditional hunter-gatherers, some Batwa were able to find land and become subsistence farmers. Others have not and rely on community supports. Separation from their traditional ways of life has led to inequality with other citizens and to social and economic problems.

NGOs like the United Organisation for Batwa Development in Uganda work toward improving the lives of the Batwa. Tourists can help.

After my gorilla trek, I meet Paulson and Ruth from Ruhija Community Cultural Walk With A Batwa - Via Paulson and other ambassadors, we learn about Batwa history, heritage, and traditional practices. Our fee provides needed funds to the community, and our presence and interest help preserve and protect Batwa cultural heritage -- key components to achieving equality and economic self-sufficiency. Tourism should always benefit local communities.

Derrick, a Ugandan I meet in **Bwindi**, tells me "Uganda is blessed with more than nature. We have 52 different tribes too." Tourism is essential for protecting all of these national treasures. 🌿

Uganda's Gorillas provide **EMPLOYMENT**

in a region where there are few other jobs. Bwindi National Park employs over 300 people directly. The 50 staff at remote Ruhija station where I trekked include park rangers, trackers, and police officers. Tourists can also hire porters to carry their bags, and even to help push and pull them through Bwindi's rough terrain. Hotels provide local jobs and artisans create products for tourists to buy.



