



Make contact with the Ntambara gorilla troop. PHOTO BY PAUL RUBIO.

Gorilla Trekking in Rwanda

Writer **Paul Rubio** braves the jungle to hang with mountain gorillas in Africa's newest safari hot spot, a transformed country now ready to lure luxury travelers. Sound spine-tingling enough for the adventurer in you?

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I'm drenched in sweat, ascending a near-vertical muddy slope, holding onto a walking stick in one hand, a flimsy Hagenia tree in another. My guide, Francis, motions me to stop as he takes an incoming radio call. Finally, the magic words we've been waiting for all morning: "The trackers have found our gorilla troop, about another 500 meters uphill."

Like that, the adrenaline takes over and the group I'm traveling with — Francis, two other travelers, two porters, and one park ranger — scurries through the imposing terrain. I'm minutes away from consummating a wildlife lover's ultimate bucket-list experience: face time with the critically endangered mountain gorilla, one of our closest living relatives in the animal kingdom. The excitement is palpable.

We're in the thick of northern Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park searching for the Ntambara family, one of 20 gorilla troops living within the park. In our quest to find this fast-moving troop, one of the original families studied by famed primatologist Dian Fossey, we've already endured an arduous three-hour climb through dense forest, blanketed in stinging nettles and crowned by ancient trees. Once we reach the gorillas, we'll have a single precious hour to observe them, a time limit set by the Rwandan government to minimize human-gorilla interactions.

Bisate Lodge's hillside villas
PHOTO BY CROOKES AND JACKSON.

How to Safari in Rwanda

As in neighboring Kenya and Tanzania, luxury outfitter **Micato Safaris** ranks at the top of the food chain for upscale wildlife endeavors in Rwanda. The company handles all logistical details, such as booking accommodations, arranging luxury transportation within the country (a driver and vehicle is required to get to and from Volcanoes National Park, even when staying at places such as Bisate Lodge), securing advance permits to see the gorillas, and tipping drivers, lodge staff, porters, guides, and park rangers. You're assigned a personal safari director who ensures a flawless experience. For example, he plays a key role the morning of your gorilla trek — his haggling with park authorities determines which troop your group sees. In my case, I requested the more demanding trek the first day to see a lesser-known family, and the next day I wanted to snap prize-worthy shots of the largest and oldest silverback and female in the Sabyinyo troop. My director made both these wishes reality. 800-642-2861; micato.com



We hear some rustling in the bushes, and through a clearing I make eye contact with a baby gorilla firmly clutched to his mother's back. I'm overcome with emotion. It's at once surreal, exciting, beautiful, and inspiring. But before I can even catch my breath and swap my camera lens for a smaller zoom — we're that close — out races the dominant 450-pound silverback, who nearly topples me. Though his mock charge should frighten me — he's literally breathing down my neck — I feel confident under Francis' instructions and quickly realize it's just his way of feeling me out. Soon after, he's wrestling with other silverbacks and younger blackbacks in the troop and climbing the trees above. I'm watching my greatest *Planet Earth* fantasies unfold in real time — and this live show doesn't disappoint.

The following day, I set out again into Rwanda's jungle-clad volcanoes, this time a 90-minute search of the Sabyinyo family, a troop of 17 gorillas with a home range on the opposite side of the park from the Ntambara troop. We endure a physical journey far less difficult than yesterday's, but the emotional journey's equally poignant. Two babies surround me, and the youngest uses my limbs as a ladder to reach a higher tree. He starts causing a bit of a ruckus. I stand there quietly, carefully watching mom nearby, who goes about eating her stash of prickly thistle plants and nodding at me with approval. But, soon, eight other gorillas descend from the trees above to see what the fuss is all about. I'm cornered, far outnumbered and loving every second of it.



PHOTO BY PAUL RUBIO.

Just 25 years ago, rampant poaching, habitat loss, and civil unrest had all but sealed the mountain gorillas' fate: extinction. Rwanda itself evoked images of civil war, genocide, and environmental despair, all of which quite naturally scared tourists away. But not anymore; so much has changed in so little time. This "Land of a Thousand Hills" — often described as Africa's model nation and the continent's biggest success story — is now luring travelers back with its clean and safe streets, thriving economy, wildlife-rich national parks, and fast-growing luxury tourism offerings.

Case in point: For my gorilla trekking, I've settled into the six-villa Bisate Lodge (from \$1,155 per person per night, sharing; wilderness-safaris.com), which debuted last June just beyond the boundaries of Volcanoes National Park as the first of Rwanda's ultraluxurious lodges and a testament to the country's new status as Africa's hottest safari ticket. As a "Premier Camp" under Wilderness Safaris' esteemed portfolio of safari lodges, Bisate serves as a posh base for the gorilla experience and more. While there, you can take guided walks through the local community, participate in habitat restoration projects, embark on a Volcanoes National Park safari in search of golden monkeys, and hike to the top of Mount Bisoke volcano or to Fossey's grave.

That said, some simple down time just admiring the intricate design and surrounds is never frowned upon. Etched into a hillside in close proximity to the national park, the outward-facing spherical villas dole out jaw-dropping views of Rwanda's iconic Bisoke, Karisimbi, and Mikeno volcanoes. Thatched exteriors blend into the natural landscape while bold interiors reflect a new chapter of African chic. Within the arched bamboo walls lies a stone fireplace that divides the colossal bathroom and living/sleeping area. Hand-woven stick-work and straw-work complement modernist furnishings embellished by emerald green, black, and white iterations of Rwandan *imigongo* (a geometric art form). Common areas include an emerald-tiled bar and lounge (stocked with an endless pour of fine South African wine) and a wine cellar-library hybrid, idyllic for both private dining experiences and good reads.



PHOTO BY PAUL RUBIO.

Current president Paul Kagame deserves much of the credit for the country's dramatic transformation. Kagame commanded the rebel force that ended the genocide in 1994, and he now serves not only his country but also the entire 55-country African continent as head of the African Union. Through the will of the people, Kagame has made an optimistic vision for Rwanda reality — an education-driven society; advanced access to resources such as health care and clean water in the countryside; and wildlife tourism, the primary driver of economic growth and an exemplar of wildlife conservation. This commitment to conservation, namely with regard to the awe-inspiring mountain gorilla, has propelled Rwanda into modern-day safari stardom.

When the dust settled from civil war in the mid-'90s, the post-genocide regime made it a top priority to create a safe haven for the some 320 remaining mountain gorillas living within its borders, and international nongovernmental organizations eagerly helped. The mission — to increase security and patrol frontiers in Volcanoes National Park (Rwanda's swath of the greater Virunga Massif that also spans the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda), nurture an environment conducive for gorilla repopulation, and foster the growth of high-end tourism through up-close encounters with this inspiring creature that shares 98 percent of its DNA composition with us.

Today, the positive impacts of this mission are profound. The mountain gorilla population continues to grow, with 20 gorilla troops or families roaming the picturesque peaks and valleys of Volcanoes National Park, up from only seven a decade ago. A poaching incident hasn't occurred in 15 years. The Rwandan government has even embarked on a program to expand the national park to accommodate the growing gorilla population, adding 69 acres this past January, with plans for future extension.

Notwithstanding Rwanda's new lavish identity, it is — and will continue to be — humans' intrinsic desire to observe mountain gorillas that anchors safaris to Rwanda. This up-close wildlife encounter moves most — not just me — to tears and truly merits labels such as "life changing" and "once in a lifetime."

RWANDA'S LUXURY LODGING BOOM: WHAT'S COMING

In Rwanda, top-tier safari lodges such as Bisate are finally replacing backpacker-style lodging to accommodate clientele willing to pay the pricey \$1,500 per person per day fee to go gorilla trekking in Volcanoes National Park and to meet travelers' demands to discover two of the country's other national parks, Nyungwe Forest and Akagera.

Set to join Bisate in Volcanoes National Park's ultraluxe market are the multitenant **One&Only Gorilla's Nest** (866-552-0001; oneandonlyresorts.com) by the end of the year, and the eight-suite/one-villa **Singita Kwitonda Lodge** (singita.com) in summer 2019.

The 24-unit **One&Only Nyungwe House** will open late this year in the country's southwest reaches, on the edge of Nyungwe National Park, where chimpanzee trekking headlines the daily agenda. 866-552-0001; oneandonlyresorts.com