

Garillas *in the* Mist

For decades, the traditional African safari to observe the Big Five was a once-in-a-lifetime trip. Now it seems everyone's done it and asking, what's next? Put gorilla trekking at the top of that bucket list. It's no longer just an inspirational film.

Excerpted from an article by Larry Olmsted



As we sit or kneel in a rough circle around a mother gorilla clutching her baby, just a few feet away, clicking with everything from pro-quality, long-lens cameras to phones, a sudden noise reveals a huge male silverback—the biggest primate on Earth—who has silently crept up to less than a yard behind us, not out of curiosity or malice but rather because we've squatted in front of an especially tasty bush from which he is breaking off snacks. It's an over-the-top wow moment that defines gorilla trekking.

"I was walking down the trail and suddenly I was pushed aside, gently. I thought it was my son Tristan, impatient with my slow gait, but it was a gorilla, who simply nudged me out of his way, passed, and continued down the trail. These are creatures who could crush us in a second, and it's amazing how close we are to them, both physically and as animals. It was one of the most moving and memorable moments I've ever had in Africa." That's really saying something for Dennis Pinto, who runs his 52-year-old family business, perennially top-rated tour operator **Micato Safaris** (micato.com). Pinto has been going to Africa since he helped guide tours as a high school student decades ago, and has been on safari nearly 200 times. He waited to do the gorillas until last year because his children needed to reach the minimum age of 15. "It's easily one of the top wildlife experiences on the entire planet," he says. "Gorillas don't have to be your first trip to Africa, but they have to be one of them."

There are just 880 mountain gorillas left alive in the wild, all of which live in three adjacent countries: Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Just over half occupy the volcanic Virunga massif where Fossey did her research, which straddles the borders of all three nations. The remaining 400 are in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in southwestern Uganda. Safety and infrastructure concerns have resulted in few Americans visiting the DRC, while Rwanda is easily the top choice, with by far the best lodging, accessibility, and national park programs. Because the gorilla experience itself is just three to four days including travel, most luxury travelers pair gorillas in Rwanda with a more traditional African wildlife safari in Kenya or Tanzania, an added stopover in Europe, or, increasingly, a beach vacation in the Seychelles. While all gorilla safaris are physical and involve hiking, the Uganda side of Virunga is more arduous, less touristically developed, and

considerably less expensive. It attracts budget travelers as well as avid ape enthusiasts who combine both countries into a single primate-centric trip, often with additional days to see chimpanzees and various monkeys.

Interest in all African wildlife has been on the rise, and new hot spots Botswana, Zambia, and Namibia have emerged as competition for classics Tanzania, Kenya, and South Africa—but several things set the gorillas apart from all other safari options. While Land Rovers and other open-air vehicles let you get very close to majestic lions, leopards, or brutal hyena packs, no one is going to let you get out of the car and walk among them. If a large predator touches you, something has gone terribly wrong.

In sharp contrast, barrier-free interaction is the key factor that makes meeting the gorillas a transcendent, life-changing experience. Plus, the intellectual, humanoid connection between the two species is impossible to miss. While lions hopefully ignore visitors, gorillas seem to be simultaneously enjoying a human-viewing safari of their own. The fact that you must work for the experience also makes it more rewarding, with hikes typically requiring one to three hours through sometimes very dense, rugged, mountainous terrain.

The most surprising thing to visitors is how concentrated and emotionally powerful the entire experience is—with days of travel, ultra-high expectations, and the physical labor all distilled down into a single hour spent in the company of gorillas. Very few of us would fly halfway around the world and spend a small fortune to see half a movie, no matter how good. Yet virtually no one who meets the gorillas leaves disappointed.

Even the logistics are much different from other wildlife trips. Fast-growing demand, not just from the United States but from emerging upper classes in China, Russia, Brazil, and other countries, combined with very limited availability make this a trip that must be planned carefully and well in advance. Micato's Dennis Pinto recommends planning 12 to 18 months out for bespoke itineraries, though tour operators often have spaces with secured permits on scheduled group trips with a much shorter lead time. In all of Rwanda, there are just 10 gorilla troops available to tourists, with another reserved strictly for scientific research. With no more than eight trekkers per group, the permitting process allows a maximum of 80 guests per day to meet the gorillas, and always sells out. Last year the national park doubled the permit price overnight from \$750 to \$1,500 per person, per day in an attempt to slow demand (in Uganda permits are still \$600). But numerous luxury travel agents and safari specialists say this had zero impact on their clients' plans, and interest in the coming luxury properties is continuing to drive up demand. In fact, while most European and South American travelers do just a day with the gorillas, many Americans double down and do it twice, something experts recommend.

"Most visitors do just one day, but it's a long way to go just for gorillas. Just about everyone who travels with us does it for two, and we feel that is a much better experience: You always see a different troop, you know what to expect, and it can rain there so you have a better shot at one day of good weather," says Pinto.