



Into the Virungas

Rwanda-Uganda

In memory of my parents

Kuldip Rai Moman. Born near Jullunder, Punjab 1918, died London 2007

Kaushalya Moman. Born Lahore, Punjab 1921, died London 2013

A Conversation with Praveen Moman. Photographs by Michael Turek.



Into the Virungas

In November 2013 I visited Rwanda for the first time to see the world's last remaining mountain gorillas, of which there are only around 800 living between Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. But in visiting Rwanda, I also knew I'd have to address the deeper context of the genocide that took place in 1994. Yet on the repeated occasions I'd tried getting closer to the subject by reading the graphic record of events by Philip Gourevitch in his book 'Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families', I failed to get beyond the first two chapters. The events of that summer were too unthinkable. Instead I turned to Dian Fossey's story of living among the silverbacks (later turned into the 1988 Hollywood movie, 'Gorillas in the Mist'). This was the other narrative Rwanda was known for – and it was altogether more beautiful and uplifting.

It wasn't until I arrived at Virunga Lodge in Rwanda where I met Praveen Moman – the man who helped open up gorilla tourism after the genocide – that I realised how I needed to address both narratives more completely; between them, they make up modern Rwanda. As we sat on the terrace of Moman's Rwandan lodge looking upon what is surely one of the Earth's most beautiful landscapes – the Virunga volcanoes – I listened to him unravel the complex history. The following pages are an edited version of that conversation. Together with Michael Turek's images, I hope his words might encourage more people to visit this spectacular country while understanding the challenging context out of which renewal was born.

Sophy Roberts



Praveen Moman in conversation with Sophy Roberts. Photographed on the western terrace at Virunga Lodge, Rwanda, in November, 2013

Looking from Mount Gahinga towards
Kisoro on the Ugandan side of the
Virungas near the border with the DRC





Sophy: You talk about the Virungas as if they are a country.

Praveen: In my child's mind, I think that's what they are – a lost paradise. These eight volcanoes in the heart of Africa are covered by a strange ethereal afro-montane forest with huge bamboo and moss-covered hagenia trees. The Virungas, like Kashmir, also have a complex geopolitical position that come from straddling three very unique countries: Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DRC. The inherited colonial boundaries do not correspond to the ethnic or historical connections of the people, complicating relations between the modern states today. The Virungas – also a key watershed, their water flowing into the Congo and Nile – divide Anglophone and Francophone Africa. On top of all this, Eastern Congo is among the richest places in the world for gold, diamonds and tantalum, used in mobile phones. So with all these issues, much turns around these mysterious volcanoes. And despite it all the gorillas continue to survive and thrive.

What is it you love about the Virungas?

You only have to see them to understand. They rise dramatically straight out of the land like an Ansel Adams photograph. Speke first observed them in the late nineteenth century. They're also home to an extraordinary species: the mountain gorilla. Whereas the more populous western lowland gorillas occupy bigger chunks of forest in Central Africa, mountain gorillas are found only in the Virungas and one other island forest in Uganda (it's called the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest), which was probably joined to the Virunga volcanoes hundreds of years ago. The mountain gorillas are critically endangered, and their precise habitat requirements means they're found only here.

Right: Praveen photographed on the slopes of Mount Gahinga where Volcanoes Safaris is helping empower disenfranchised Batwa pygmies through tourism. Left: Volcanoes' properties, staff, and Virunga highlights, including the mountain gorillas





When did you first come to the Virungas?

I was about twelve, around the same time the National Geographic researcher Dian Fossey was living in the Virungas studying the apes. My father and I walked on the Ugandan side, around Mount Gahinga. My father was a great adventurer, forever chasing the blue skies of Africa. Like most of the colonial civil servants running the British Empire in East Africa then, he was from India, born in Punjab. I was born in Uganda and somehow imbibed his love for the continent. The family stayed in the country until I was a teenager when Idi Amin expelled all British citizens of Asian descent. The connection to Africa has never left me, despite this dramatic change.

What made you come back?

When I was 26, I became a policy adviser to the British Conservative group in the European Parliament, responsible for development. Visiting South Africa as part of EU political delegations to bring change to the apartheid system rekindled my connection with Africa. I couldn't stop getting on a plane whenever I could. But travelling in Uganda was challenging; the Amin conflict had destroyed the country of my childhood.

Then by the mid-nineties I was working as a Political Advisor in the British Government and was considering running for elected office in England. That's when the Rwandan genocide happened. It was deeply upsetting to be in London seeing the events unfold on television. The sheer scale, speed and horror of what was coming out of the region was difficult to comprehend.

That summer I tried to fly out to Rwanda to do voluntary relief work. It didn't work out. In 1995, I travelled to the Ugandan side of the Virungas for the first time since childhood. It was both magical and anguishing. This is when I recognised I couldn't not work in this part of the world. Although I had an ambiguous connection to Africa given what had happened to my family, I also had a strong empathy with what people had gone through; my mother's family had lived through the partition of India.



Left and Right: The cloud-misted Kisoro Valley, dividing Uganda from the DRC, photographed from the heavily terraced slopes of Mount Gahinga



Except the problems in the region didn't stop in 1994?

For some years afterwards the vortex of the storm ran through all three countries. Two million Rwandan refugees in the Eastern Congo eventually returned home in 1998 and brought some stability, but with the death of Mobutu (who was the President of the Congo) Uganda and Rwanda got embroiled in the DRC. The Gahinga and Kisoro area, where I had once walked with my father, was full of soldiers, refugee camps and convoys of UN trucks. When I witnessed all this, rather than make me go away, it made me determined to stay.

That was when Volcanoes Safaris was born?

Yes, as Uganda stabilised in the late 1990s, the idea of building lodges in the Virungas was born, first on the Ugandan side, and later in Rwanda and the DRC. I believed we could use gorilla tourism to rebuild communities, create hope and provide employment. Before I knew it, I'd left my job in London in 1997 and was setting up an office in Kampala, buying land in Gahinga and Bwindi, getting safari cars, and hiring staff.

Which begs the question: does peace bring tourism, or tourism bring peace?

Setting up tourism in post-conflict zones can definitely re-connect an area to the world. Initially it was sometimes touch-and-go with rebels spilling across borders with lots of 'activity' happening in and around the Virungas. After the 1999 attack by militia in Bwindi in southern Uganda, the Rwanda and Uganda sides were definitely on the path to stability. The DRC remained, and has remained, more changeable.

Left: The Sabyinyo group of mountain gorillas, photographed with porters and guides in the bamboo forest of Parc National des Volcans, Rwanda

If events in Rwanda inspired your return to Africa, why did you start with your first lodge on the Ugandan side of the Virungas?

As I said, to me the Virungas are one space, and taking on one country is like taking on all three. So I started where I could – building a camp in Gahinga, Uganda, in 1999. After conducting a number of recces into Rwanda, we saw the situation was stabilising in 2000. We worked actively with the government, the military (who were professional and co-operative) and the diplomatic missions to understand the security and ensure there were safe *couloirs d'accès* to the park. Soon we started taking guests staying at Gahinga on a three-hour bumpy drive to see the gorillas on the Rwandan side. With this small move we in effect became the first international company to start taking guests to Rwanda, relaunching gorilla tourism after the genocide. That's something I feel very proud of. But in truth, the park was barely functioning, with an improvised office in the Mayor's office in Ruhengeri, where we had to wait in the rain while the permits were written and paperwork done. Despite the difficulties, we kept going. My wife and I had to sell properties in London to help fund the company, since commercial borrowing wasn't possible.



When did you decide to commit investing in bricks and mortar in Rwanda?

In 2001 we opened a small office in Kigali. More flights had started coming in and it was a quicker drive from Kigali than from Gahinga. But there was no quality accommodation near the park, so I began scouting for a site. I drove for hours on rocky tracks and then walked endlessly around the volcanoes. No site seemed to work. I'd end up in or near a refugee camp, an inaccessible mountain peak or a swamp.

Meanwhile, without trying to dramatise the situation, I'd see refugees coming back from the Congo dying in front of me. That made everything I was trying to do seem even more urgent. After two years of traipsing around the Parc National des Volcans I was about to give up when a local contact, Canisius, said he'd found a spectacular site.

I was ill with a high fever in a hotel room in Kigali but still went. We had to walk for the last few kilometres. It had rained. The earth smelled fresh. Then we got to the highest point, seemingly eye level with the volcanoes - and overlooking the magical crater lakes of Bulera and Ruhondo. It was a perfect place, like the lost paradise my father would talk about when I was a child.

All around us, people were rebuilding their lives, constructing basic shelters, walking miles to collect water, and cultivating their rocky land. They greeted me as *padre*, thinking I was a priest.

I started negotiating for land, building a five kilometre road, imagining a lodge in this celestial spot. In 2003 we began the build. We also led a wide-ranging partnership project to kick-start tourism around the gorilla park with the support of the UK government. We helped train the staff of the Muhabura Hotel and the national park rangers. The area started to open. Confidence started returning. The shops and local hotels started working. Soldiers disappeared from the streets of Musanze.

In June 2004 we opened our first four cottages, or *bandas*, at Virunga Lodge. They were nothing fancy: large but simple rooms, locally made furniture, local *kitenge* cloth curtains, hurricane lamps, with very basic bathrooms (since getting water was a big issue, we had dry toilets and bush showers). But still, it was a very grand project on a very grand site while people around us were still struggling to survive.



Virunga Lodge, photographed from above, with Lake Ruhondo in the far distance

So not The Ritz, then?

Far from it! At the time a Ritz-like luxury project was unthinkable to me. The context was wrong – in philosophical, financial and practical terms. This was Rwanda, within a decade of the genocide. Many people could not have a square meal. They did not have clean water. Children wandered around listlessly. We wanted to fit in with our neighbours, show solidarity.

The buildings were sketched out on scraps of paper, laid out with stakes. Like most of our lodges, I designed and built Virunga Lodge myself, with input from others, building by eye, improvising with what we had (by *aandaza* and *jugaad* as it's called in Hindustani). I had to rely on the simple *fundis* we could find in the village, with a few basic hand tools. Somehow it worked. The tourists came; they liked what we were doing; they said it was the most beautiful site in Africa. Our staff were keen to make it work too, and very soon we were the best show in town. Many others contributed in different ways. Robin Pendleton did the initial interior decoration without a real budget. Prabhat Poddar advised on building in harmony with the earth, in line with *Vasthu*. Yusuf Mulima and Ravi Govindia, Co-Directors, provided support. My wife, Giulia, of course helped enormously – with design, looking after our son Partha and coping with this new changed life. About a hundred local people were involved in the building. Some are still with us: the construction team supervisors – Ssemanda, Cyprien, and Nelson, who are all from different sides of the Virungas, and Ruzibiza and Theobare, who are our best carpenters. Maria Thanase used to grout the tiles and today is head of laundry. Our manager, David, started as a waiter.

But the lodge is no longer as basic as you describe its earliest iteration?

Over the years as tourism has opened up, we have progressively upgraded the lodge to accommodate our guests – many of whom are VIPs. The buildings are still local and low impact, in keeping with our eco-principles of using solar power, harvesting our own rain water, recycling where we can and using local materials. We still employ, train and empower local people to be the core workers. Our hospitality is still eco-luxury – remembering where we started, and the fact we share the planet with people far poorer than our guests.

Right: Main sitting room and terraces at Virunga Lodge



Left to Right: The VSPT-trained Batwa dance troupe performing for guests of Gahinga Lodge, Uganda. The sitting room at Gahinga. The lodge under the shadow of the Virunga volcanoes



Would you say you're here more for the people than the wildlife?

It's not that simple. As you know, the concept of protecting wilderness spaces, of national parks, developed in Europe and North America and became the basis of protected areas in Africa. The Congolese and Rwandan sides of the Virungas became the first national park in Africa in 1925, some twenty years after the discovery of the mountain gorilla. This romantic dream of protecting wilderness, described by Ansel Adams as 'a religion, an intense philosophy, a dream of ideal society', is what I was inspired to cherish by my father.

Today this romanticism needs to be tempered with the realities of poor people who live near parks. They want a slice of the growing wealth of rich countries, education and health. So conservation and tourism must find a way of delivering bread on the table if they are to stay relevant in the dramatically changing Africa of the twenty-first century. If we want the gorillas and forests to survive, we need to focus on the people. And that is the Volcanoes great ape ecotourism model. As part of this philosophy, we've just created a new cultural experience with the landless, disenfranchised Batwa pygmies near Mount Gahinga Lodge in Uganda so they can earn money from tourism. On both sides of the Virungas we continue to deepen our practical partnership with local people.

But do the gorillas really need you?

It's true that since Fossey's time, the mountain gorillas have become one of the great success stories in African conservation. In 1967 there were maybe 300, and now there are about 800. But still, it's precarious; it could end badly and quickly. A simple human cold could wipe them out. With no tourism, no-one will take an interest in the forgotten forests of Africa. Local people have to make money from the gorillas, or they will simply cut down the creatures' habitat and plant more crops.





Is it true you don't employ any expats?

Our philosophy has been to focus on training and empowering local staff. Today they run and manage our lodges. They have a genuine pride and passion in their work, and are a constant reminder of how far this community has come since the troubled times. We have always had some expats working in our offices and in the field. Ross Langdon helped design and build our lodge at Kyambura Gorge in Uganda, and contributed to the others before sadly being killed in the Nairobi mall attack in 2013. Oli Dreike and Maxine Silsby have supported us with hospitality training. Nicole Simmons heads up our non-profit programme.

Is the benefit to locals just among those who are directly employed?

Around Virunga Lodge we are the biggest employer. About 35 people work full-time; many others are part-time. Then there's the construction team. So we support several hundred families in different ways. There's also our not-for-profit outreach programme, the Volcanoes Safaris Partnership Trust. We support the local school and now a library and set up the Intore dance performances by the local teenagers. We have a beehive programme, a mushroom growing project and a basket making group. In May 2014, we connected 60 homes to the electricity grid. More projects are planned.

But everything is so intertwined. With permits to see the gorillas costing \$750 per person an hour, we're also helping the bottom line in terms of great ape conservation and the benefits that brings to the people living in the shadows of the Virungas. In just 2013, Volcanoes clients contributed over US\$ 1.2 million to Rwanda through permits. On top of all of this is the powerful support we've had from guests who've stayed and spread the word.

Do you feel it's been worth it?

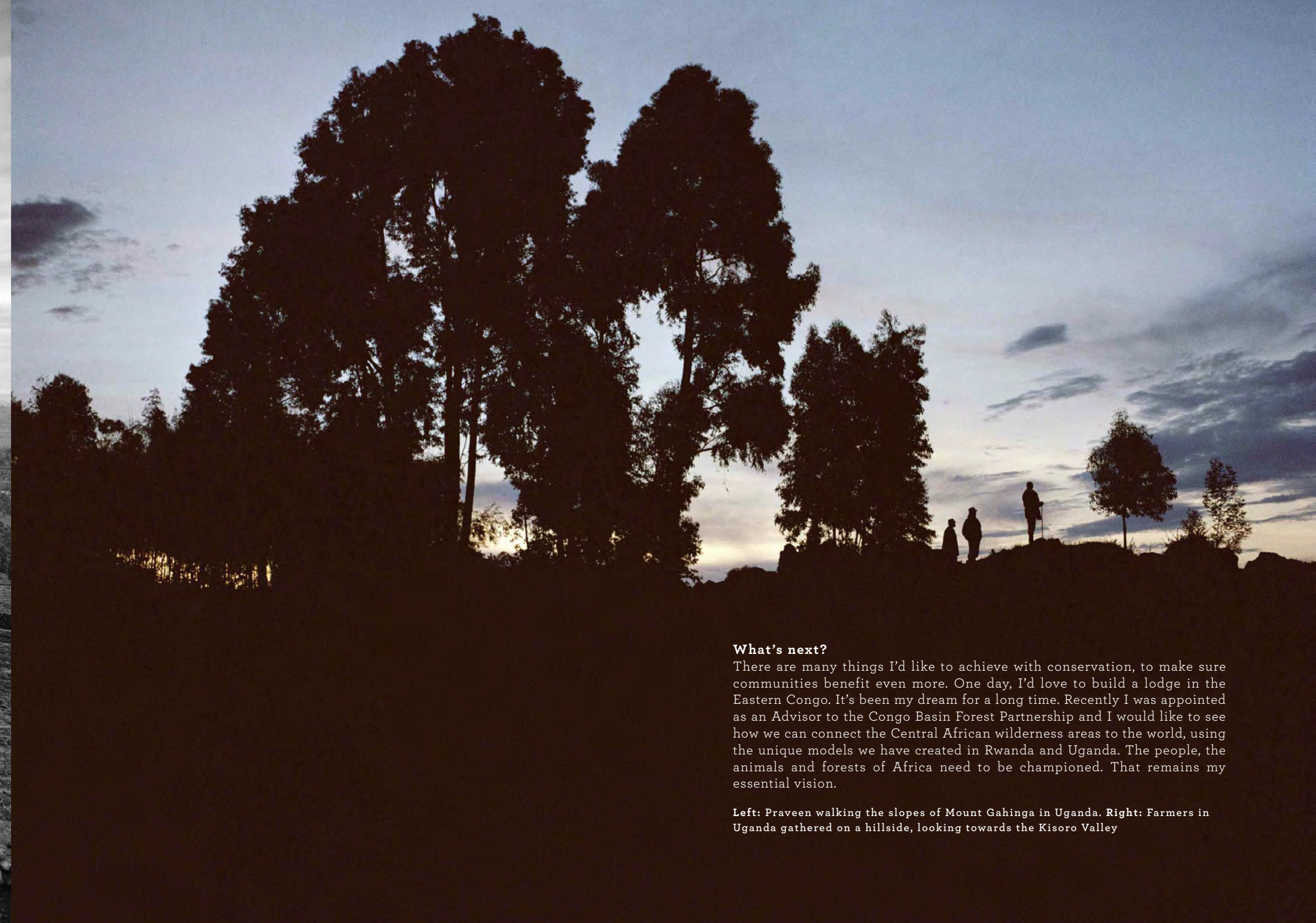
Yes, in every possible way, even if 15 years ago things looked very bleak indeed. In 2014 those times are mercifully well behind us. Virunga Lodge is flourishing. Our lodges in Uganda - Gahinga, Bwindi and Kyambura - have won international recognition not only for their special locations and design, but for our staff. The VSPT is doing innovative work around each lodge supporting communities and conservation. That is the biggest achievement in some ways, changing the lives of local people in a tangible way.

Left: The treehouse feature on the The Batwa Heritage Trail at Gahinga Lodge, Uganda. Right: A member of the Sabyinyo group of mountain gorillas in Parc National des Volcans, Rwanda



How do you think people picture the region now?

Gorilla tourism, and the positive PR this brings, has certainly helped Rwanda and Uganda not to be seen as conflict zones. The early risks that we took as a small company working in this complex part of the world means travellers can visit in comfort and safety. No-one can forget Rwanda in 1994; the Kigali genocide memorial is an essential stop. But in 2014, the story is a very positive one. And celebrating the tenth anniversary of Virunga Lodge is a very special milestone. Today, thanks to the staff – many of them displaced from regional conflict – we have a world-class property.



What's next?

There are many things I'd like to achieve with conservation, to make sure communities benefit even more. One day, I'd love to build a lodge in the Eastern Congo. It's been my dream for a long time. Recently I was appointed as an Advisor to the Congo Basin Forest Partnership and I would like to see how we can connect the Central African wilderness areas to the world, using the unique models we have created in Rwanda and Uganda. The people, the animals and forests of Africa need to be championed. That remains my essential vision.

Left: Praveen walking the slopes of Mount Gahinga in Uganda. **Right:** Farmers in Uganda gathered on a hillside, looking towards the Kisoro Valley



IN MEMORIAM

The people who suffered in the conflicts of the Great Lakes region of Uganda, Rwanda and the DRC, especially in the expulsion of the Ugandan Asians in 1972 and the Genocide in Rwanda in 1994. We pray these conflicts can never happen again.



Volcanoes Safaris Lodges: Opening Dates

- Mount Gahinga Lodge, Mgahinga, Virunga Volcanoes, Uganda 1999
- Bwindi Lodge, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Uganda 2000
- Virunga Lodge, Parc National des Volcans, Virunga Volcanoes, Rwanda 2004
- Kyambura Gorge Lodge, Queen Elizabeth National Park, Uganda 2011

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