


On all Fours

Gorilla tracking in Rwanda



A young gorilla with dark, shaggy fur and striking reddish-brown eyes is peering through a dense thicket of green leaves and brown tree trunks. The gorilla's face is the central focus, looking directly at the viewer. The background shows a forest floor with a patch of red earth and more trees.

Towards the end of June our Bush Editor left on an epic trip all the way to Uganda and back. This is his first piece from the road – in subsequent issues you'll get to read more about this great journey. But let's begin with the monkeys, the really big ones...

I daren't stop to catch my breath, even though we're almost 3 000 metres above sea level on the slopes of the Bisoke Volcano, one of the five major volcanoes found in the Virunga Mountains. I'm in the 13 000 hectare Volcanoes National Park, which lies in the remote northern reaches of Rwanda. I'm trying to stay in the shadow of our guide, Fidele Nsengiyumva, as this experience – seeing the rare mountain gorilla – is one of the highlights of my 7 000 km journey.

According to a recent census, there are just over 700 mountain gorillas left on our planet. About half of these are in the Virunga Mountains, which stretch across Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC, while the other half are in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. When we began planning this expedition, the idea was to see the gorillas in Uganda, but trying to get a US\$500 permit there proved difficult. It was actually a blessing in disguise



Caption xxxx caption xxxx

as we would later find out, Rwanda turned out to be of those rare African success stories.

We've been trekking for about two hours, accompanied by soldiers and our guide. While we were still having breakfast this morning, a group of trekkers was already up here trying to locate the Umubano group of eight gorillas. The trekkers scout around beforehand so that we can walk directly to the gorillas, as our guide and the trekkers are in constant radio communication with each other. They have to do this as many of the visitors are, how shall we say, rather large in girth and somewhat unathletic, so if the guides don't plot the shortest path many visitors would run out of steam before they got near the beasties.

The forest is dense and claustrophobic. The gorillas feed on over 58 plant species found here, but

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Johan de Villiers (right),
on the gorilla experience:
From the courteous guides to the
friendly villagers in Ruhengeri, the total
experience can only be described as a
“must do”.



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the only one I'm concerned with is the nettle, as it burns the hell out of any exposed skin it comes into contact with. Fidele shows us a homeopathic remedy in the form of a plant that takes away the sting if rubbed onto the skin.

Shortly after this lesson I almost walk straight into a gorilla who has made our path his home – or rather, in whose home we've made our path. Before you can say Dian Fossey, I have my camera in the

shooting position and fire off a few frames while Fidele pulls me towards him so that the rest of the group can follow. The first rule of gorilla trekking is that the whole group of trekkers, never numbering more ▶

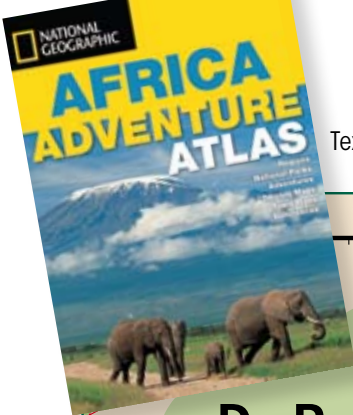




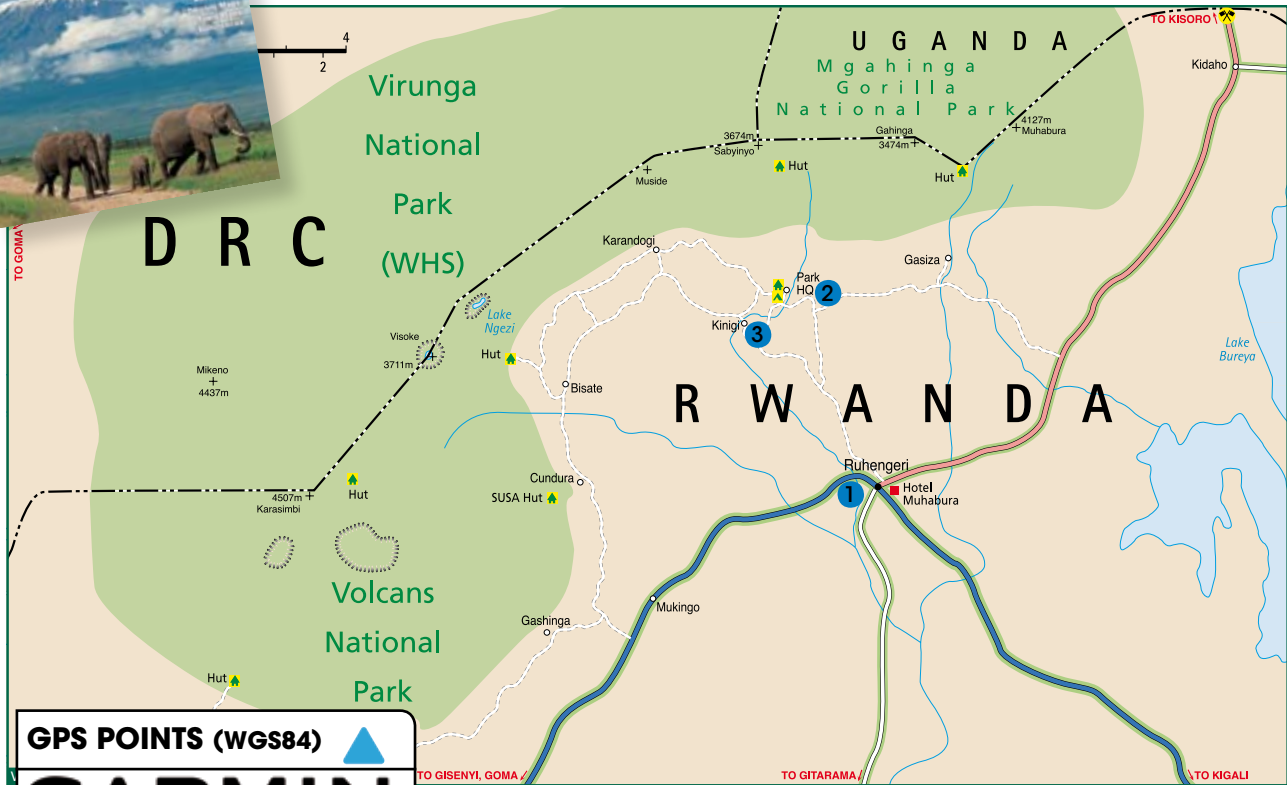


**The
hour
proves
to be
one
of the
most
memorable
of my life**





Text about the book



GPS POINTS (WGS84)

You will be lost without it.

- 1 Musanze (most guide books still refer to this town as Ruhengeri)
S 1° 30.238' E 029° 38.105'
- 2 Volcano Park HQ
S 1° 25.941' E 029° 35.689'
- 3 Kinigi Village Guest House.
S 1° 26.870' E 029° 35.307'

(gorillas and humans thus evenly matched), Charlie – a silverback – is the alpha male.

Once we make contact the stopwatch starts – we have exactly one hour with them. This is done to keep the gorillas’ environment as natural as possible and keep their stress levels down. They spend most of the hour eating, and then move on in search of more food. We move with them through the thick scrub.

I’m so excited I don’t feel the nettle stinging away at my exposed legs. What is it with South African men and their shorts? The hour proves to be one of the most memorable of my life, as I’m allowed to observe, marvel and photograph these rare primates up close.



Kristen Lachenicht on the cost:
Five hundred dollars is a small price to pay to have those large shining hazel eyes staring at you, and to think that they are attached to a pair of hands only marginally chubbier than your own. It left me with a massive grin on my face.

than eight, moves together. This way, the gorillas are more comfortable with the close human interaction.

There are several groups of gorillas; we’ve been assigned to the group named Umabano, which in English means “friendship”. Umabano numbers eight individuals



This is exactly the same Pajero we used while doing the *Tracing the Zambezi* feature for the August edition of *SA4x4*. When we picked it up it had just 58 km on the odometer, now it's covered 12 000 km and we still have to drive home.

The brutal truth is that we've pounded this vehicle like no other. We tried to drive along a river where sometimes there are no roads, and if there are, no-one has been on them for *yonks*. Then we drove that horrible stretch of road from Livingstone to Zimba - 70 km of potholed hell - not once, but *four* times! That was followed by the horrible corrugated stretch that takes one into the heart of the Serengeti, if you drive this one, make sure your goods on your roofrack are securely fastened otherwise they'll surely be lost.

The road from Kisoro in southern Uganda to Entebbe near the capital is not much more than 500 km, yet it took us 12 hours due to the terrible road conditions. Each of the 421 675 bone-jarring potholes were absorbed by the Pajero, and if we'd been in some of the other vehicles we encountered on this treacherous road, it might well have been a two-day drive!

There are several 4x4 reasons why I'd like to applaud the makers of this latest version of the Pajero. The first is that you can change from 2WD to 4WD on the fly at speeds of up to 100 km/h. With constantly varying road conditions, this function is a massive plus. The second plus is the four auxiliary power points. This means you can charge your phone, run your Waeco fridge and run the Garmin GPS all while listening to your favourite music via your iTrip, which also needs a power point. Sounds trivial, but when on a 15 000 km trip, this is actually most useful.

The most important feature is the protection plate underneath the nose of the vehicle. Some of the tracks we drove had a pretty high and rocky *middelmannetjie*, which meant the plate took a huge pounding. Taking 12 rounds with Mike Tyson would have been less brutal. Without this plate we definitely wouldn't have made it to where we did.

Another plus point is the position of the spare wheel, neatly mounted behind the back door. I have my reservations about how long the door hinge will last with constant opening and closing (Ed: It must be noted that Pat owns an old Defender so his fears in this regard might be misplaced), but when travelling in Africa you want the spare to be secure, and as I type this in Uganda, ours is still safely attached. Removing the spare requires a special spanner, so this would seem to rule out opportunistic theft. Having the spare on the back door also makes it easy to access the roofrack if you don't have a ladder - just close the back door, hop onto the spare and then clamber up onto the rack.

We added several pieces of off-road equipment to our Pajero to ease our passage (these will be discussed in a future article), but I'm confident that a stock-standard Pajero straight off the showroom floor would've been able to do the same trip. I'm now beginning to understand why Pajeros dominate events like the Dakar Rally - they can cruise comfortably and quickly along tar, yet when the going gets tough, they don't stand back for anyone.



The best part of the hour is when No Problem – the second-youngest member of the group – playfully chucks a piece of wood, which lands on the ground right in front of me. He then proceeds to run after it in an effort to retrieve it. I'm lying on my stomach photographing him and suddenly he's right in my face with mom keeping a suddenly watchful eye in the background. For a second I feel uncomfortable, but then he moves back to the rest of the group. The hour passes way too quickly, but Fidele lets us hang around a few extra minutes. Then it's time for the long hike down again. The trekkers stay behind to monitor the movement of the gorillas until just before sunset – this is so they'll be able to find them quickly the following day with the next party of tourists.

The descent is slow due to the physical (in)capabilities of our group, and we take just as long to get down as we did to get up. Just after

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READERS ON THE ROAD



Who: Charl and Erica van der Merwe of Naboomspruit.

Where we met them: Kinigi Guest House, Musanze, Rwanda.

How long have you been on the road? Three weeks.

Where are you headed? Our northernmost point will hopefully be the Murchison Falls in Uganda.

How long is your trip going to last? Three months.

Highlight of your trip so far: The gorillas in Rwanda, and South Luangwa National Park in Zambia.

Any tips for fellow travellers? Don't take anything on this kind of trip without properly testing it first – we've struggled with our GPS and camera battery charger. Secondly, make the effort to meet locals.

What are you driving? Land Cruiser 69 Series.

How much did you pay for your vehicle? R250 000 in '06.

What wouldn't you leave home without? Our Radical Top Safari Camper.

What's your favourite section of SA4x4 magazine? Readers' travel stories.





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crossing the stone wall that marks the park boundary, we find ourselves walking through the local villagers' fields. They're friendly and their kids run up carrying pictures they've drawn of the gorillas. None of them beg or ask for money, which is rare for our continent.

Before we can drive off the mountain in our Pajero, we attend the certificate hand-out ceremony. Each person who has successfully hiked and seen the gorillas is given a certificate with his or her name on it. Although there are no guarantees that buying a permit will get you a sighting, so far this outfit offer a 100% success rate. All you have to do is hike up a little 3 000-metre mountain. The drive off the mountain is so slow that the soldiers who accompanied us on the hike up overtake us – on foot! Once the rocks disappear and the terrain flattens out, we overtake them again.

Back at the Kinigi Guest House, it's time to check out and head north towards Uganda. The border post we're meant to cross is only an hour away. The trekking began with a 07h00 appointment at Park HQ, but by lunchtime – and some US\$500 later – it was all over. Some might say that the price is steep, but after experiencing the gorilla trek for myself, I'd say it's worth every inflated cent – especially if you do it in Rwanda. Go for it, I say!



Bertus Hanekom *on the forest:*

These were the most beautiful natural forests I have ever seen. Real Tarzan stuff. I walked around like a zombie and could not stop appreciating my surroundings.

WHERE WE STAYED

Kinigi Guest House

Yes one can stay in one of the expensive lodges, but we opted for the R80 pppn option at the Kinigi Guest House. That got us a bed in a dorm that sleeps four. This guest house is only a few hundred metres from the Volcano National Park entrance, they also offer camping for about half the price of this accommodation. Their food is edible – there's a good nightly buffet – but, disappointingly, the showers aren't always hot. We complained and the showers went from cold to lukewarm. Overall Kinigi is good value for money, ideally located and relatively comfortable, so we recommend it. For more details visit www.rwanda-gorillas.com or call +250 546 984 or +250 08533 606.



GORILLA TRACKING PERMITS

JK Safaris

Many thanks to Kris Zachrisson from JK Safaris who not only arranged our gorilla permits at short notice, but also kindly hosted us while we were in the city of Kigali. JK Safaris specialise in gorilla viewing trips to Rwanda and Uganda. For a fee, they can arrange permits for self-drive clients like you and I, but also do fly-in packages for those not wanting to drive so far. For more details visit www.gorillasafaris.net or call +250 08 46 68 61.

What if I can't get a permit?

We met a South African couple at the Kinigi Guest House who didn't have a gorilla permit – I suggested they accompany us to the Park's HQ the following morning just in case someone didn't show up. It worked, and they both secured permits for that same day. I recommend you first try and secure a permit before leaving SA, but if you can't and you have time and find yourself in the vicinity of Rwanda, try the above tactic.

Seeing the gorillas in Rwanda or Uganda?

The Virunga Mountains lie in the DRC, Uganda and Rwanda, and one can see the mountain gorilla in all three

of these countries. After our gorilla trekking experience we made our way across into Uganda and travelled through the town of Kisoro, from where the Ugandan gorilla trekking is done. The first thing one notices when crossing between the two countries is the cleanliness.

As mentioned previously, Rwanda has to be one of the cleanest countries in Africa. We enjoyed the place, not only for the trekking, but also for the people, the good coffee, the improved roads and the fact that there are so few tourists.

We also enjoyed our week in Uganda, especially our time in Jinja. The countries are situated in close proximity to each other, so I'd recommend trekking gorillas wherever you can get a permit. If you happen to decide on Rwanda, you will not be disappointed. If you happen to decide on Uganda, don't forget it's going to cost you an extra US\$50 for visa fees if you're travelling on your South African passport!

OTHER ACTIVITIES IN THE VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK

The park is no longer just about mountain gorillas and one could stay for a week without running out of things to do. We arrived two days before our gorilla trek and decided to trek the rare Golden Monkeys for US\$100. Just like the gorillas, once you locate the Golden Monkeys you get to spend one hour observing them.

There is also the two-day ascent of the Karisimbi Volcano, but one needs the correct equipment for this. For those wanting something a little gentler, there is the two-hour ascent of Mount Visoke. Another popular option is the hike to the grave of Dian Fossey, the American primatologist whose pioneering mountain gorilla studies have made the world become more conservation-minded towards them.

