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UGANDA & RWANDA: KEEPING CONTACT WITH THE GORILLAS

With the Great Lakes region struggling to maintain a stable political environment, tourism continues to offer the greatest hope for Africa's mountain gorillas. Over the following pages, we assess the current situation regarding gorilla tourism, starting with a visit to see Rwanda's animals.

We left Kigali before dawn, following the road north as it edged round the mountains, climbing to viewpoints from where I could glimpse blue-grey hills stacked up to the horizon in rows. The roads were crowded with people taking their goods to market. One woman carried a treadle sewing machine on her head, bicycles transported two or three passengers plus their loads, and children were almost hidden under baskets of fruit.

At Ruhengeri we collected our permit and continued to the park headquarters to meet our guide, John (English-speaking) and his Francophone colleague.

John asked whether we were suffering from colds or other infectious diseases which could be passed on to the gorillas. If so, we would have to stay behind. In any case, he explained, we must keep a distance of seven metres from the animals. "Sometimes difficult - the gorillas don't know these rules and they like tourists!"

The term "gorilla tracking" is evocative but inaccurate: these days the hard work is done by a team of trackers with walkie-talkie radios. By the time the tourists have signed in at the National Park headquarters and been briefed on gorilla etiquette, the guides know exactly where the animals are. We were exceptionally lucky - Group Thirteen was only fifteen minutes inside the park boundary.

We set off past fields of pyrethrum and other crops, practising our Kinyrwanda greetings on the farmers and their children, beneficiaries of local community projects financed by the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund. There is no mistaking the park boundary - cultivation gives way abruptly to bamboo thickets and the broad track narrows to a trail. But the walking was easy; the sun skipped among the clouds, dappling the forest with numerous greens, and the earth gave out that unmistakable rainforest smell of damp lushness.

We barely had time to appreciate our surroundings before John stopped and whispered that we were near the gorillas. He reminded us to keep our voices low, to avoid sudden movements and to leave our gear with the trackers. Then we pushed through a curtain of vegetation and found ourselves a few metres from an enormous silverback.

Ukwamumane snapped off the obstructing bamboo shoots so he could get a better view of us. For a few seconds we stared at each other, the imperious gorilla chief and his puny human visitors. My response was unexpected (to me) but apparently common - tears flooded into my eyes and down my cheeks. However much you have been anticipating your first sight of a wild gorilla, nothing prepares you for the surge of emotion when you look into its eyes.

Satisfied that his audience was properly assembled, Ukwamumane rolled onto his back and glanced into the bushes. A small black figure burst out of the shrubbery and flung himself onto his father's huge sofa-like chest. Dad reached forward and pulled Mararo towards him, an arm as thick as a tree trunk gently holding the infant while he nuzzled his neck and ears.

The playful four-year-old broke away to indulge in his favourite game - climbing on and somersaulting off his father's belly. Occasionally Ukwamumane grabbed him for another kiss and cuddle. Then a younger sibling arrived and wanted to play too. There was a tangle of limbs, as father couldn't resist enfolding both infants in his arms. When he sat up they found a new, even better game. Dad's broad grey back made an excellent slide if you clambered up to the level area between his shoulders. One after the other they climbed up, slid down, climbed up again...

We were so engrossed that we almost missed the smallest baby of all, Gwira, who was just a month old. Her mother sat suckling her at the edge of the clearing, ready to retreat if necessary. Every now and then we caught sight of that wizened, surprised little face which is characteristic of all young apes, or a tiny foot as mum turned her over to groom her back.

Then I ran out of film - fortunately. I put down my camera and for the remainder of our visit I just observed as the gorillas flaunted their parenting skills, using my binoculars to study detail: the huge hands which looked as though they were wearing furry black fingerless gloves; the chipped fingernails, the callused knuckles. I looked at the ears, so familiarly shaped, and at eyes that gazed back with such intelligence that I looked away uneasily, not wishing to be rude. Some features are just like ours, but others - such as mouths and shoulders - are utterly different. Thank goodness: I needed this difference to avoid feeling like a voyeur.

The time that humans spend with gorillas is limited so the animals never become stressed. After an hour, we left the scene quietly to let the family continue their day's activity: a late-morning nap, perhaps more games before lunch, with all the time in the world for socialising, for play - and for love. I think it is the recognition of this perfect world which seems beyond our human reach, despite our aspirations, which makes a visit to the gorillas such an emotional experience.

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