


Around the Globe

T+E

# Gorilla Encounters

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**Like a lot of Canadians, I've read Roméo Dallaire's *Shake Hands with the Devil*. As a result, I thought I had a pretty good idea of what Rwanda is all about. I thought wrong.**

Dallaire's book is a tough read – a journey through the Rwandan genocide that took place exactly 20 years ago. Between 10-20 per cent of the population was slaughtered in the ethnic violence, and the millions of survivors endured unspeakable crimes. All of this was in the back of my mind as we made arrangements to travel to Rwanda to see mountain gorillas in the land of Dian Fossey (a zoologist who studied there over an 18-year period). What we saw instead was an African country working hard to put the past behind it, with a warm and friendly people who care deeply about the protection of their land, culture and gorillas.

All trips to visit the gorillas in Volcanoes National Park first take you through the capital of Kigali. My husband George and I flew in all alone on a 12 seat turboprop from Tanzania and were picked up by our guide, Theo, from [Primate Safaris](#). All trips to see the gorillas require advance planning - Rwandan visas, applications and permit fees for visiting the gorillas, transportation from Kigali to the park, and the booking of accommodations. While we usually organize and book our own trips from start to finish, this one required someone on the ground to make the applications and arrangements, and Primate Safaris did a great job.





Theo's welcome was a warm one and within about 2 minutes of learning that we were Canadian, it was like we were best friends. Being from the country of Roméo Dallaire has its benefits, as Dallaire is revered in the country for having spearheaded a U.N. team that saved tens of thousands of Rwandans from the genocide. Theo didn't shy away from talking about the realities of his country's recent history, but he also went out of his way to point out the great strides taken by the country in terms of ethnic Tutsis and Hutus learning to live together as "one Rwanda". And for travellers like us who have seen many parts of the developing world, the cleanliness and relatively modern infrastructure present throughout the country was a revelation. While Canada is definitely a developed country in comparison, we could do well to learn from Rwanda, where plastic bags are outlawed in order to keep garbage to a minimum.





No visit to Kigali is complete without a visit to the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre, the site of a harrowing and yet utterly necessary and compelling museum. The Memorial Centre contains several mass graves which house over a quarter of a million victims of the genocide. To this day, bodies are still being found throughout the countryside and interred at the Centre or at one of the countless genocide cemeteries scattered across Rwanda.

After a day in Kigali, we head north to Volcanoes National Park. The park is one of three parks that contain the great mountain gorilla, with similar parks in neighbouring Uganda and Congo. While one can stay in lodging in the town of Ruhengeri about 30 minutes outside of the park, we elected for **Mountain Gorilla View Lodge**. The hotel is located inside the park with a magnificent view of the volcanoes we'd be climbing in search of gorillas. While the stone buildings can get chilly at night due to the relatively high altitude (2,500 m), all of the rooms have fireplaces. And the warmth of the staff, together with the smiles of the young local dancers who perform in the shadow of the mountains each afternoon, made the lodge a wonderful place to stay.

On gorilla day we were up and at it early, along with all of the other lucky souls who had been fortunate enough to obtain a permit. The government limits the number of permits issued each day to about 60 people, and then divides the holders into groups of eight.





Each daily encounter with the gorillas is limited to one hour. There are eight families or groups of gorillas on the Rwandan side which can be visited, with the remaining 10 families researched by the [Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund](#). Rwanda's efforts to research and monitor the gorillas as well as to educate visitors in small numbers is important, given that there are fewer than 1,000 mountain gorillas left in the wild.

Just as people have busy lives and are always on the go, the gorilla families are constantly on the move. Trackers follow them around the clock in order to protect them and in order to send word down the mountain to advise where each family has moved to since the previous day. Sometimes you can catch a family chilling out at the edge of the jungle just 30 minutes from the gate, and other times you can hike uphill for hours through the bamboo forests, wondering where they've gone to. On our first day we thought we were heading towards a nearby group but after two and a half hours of slogging uphill, it was clear that the gorillas had decided to move onwards and upwards.

The altitude kept us from getting too warm, but it was a tough climb. Huffing and puffing and wondering whether we'd ever see a gorilla, we were suddenly stopped in our tracks and told to leave our backpacks on the ground and to approach quietly.





I had been joking for weeks about what would happen when I finally found myself face-to-face with a gorilla, but I was unprepared for the awe-inspiring enormity when it finally happened. As we headed out from the last of the bamboo into an open grassland near the summit, an enormous silverback sat right in front of us, calmly munching on the greenery around him. The silverback was the undisputed leader of the Agashya Group, an extended family of about 25 members.

Weighing in at about 300 kilos, the silverback could have made small work of our entire group if he had wanted to. But mountain gorillas are vegetarians and don't attack unless threatened. As the silverback sat eating, other family members wandered out of the jungle to join him. Mothers with babies, and youngsters playing tag and wrestling, the combinations were ever-changing and more fascinating to watch than I ever could have imagined.

Officially, visitors are instructed to not get closer than seven metres to the gorillas, but the gorillas showed no fear and often got within a few feet of us before running off again. Watching them was like watching one's own kids at play – uninhibited, joyful and oh-so-very human. Even if you're not religious, a visit with the mountain gorillas is incredibly spiritual and moving.





We were very blessed in that we got to spend not just one day with the gorillas, but two. Our second day was spent in the bamboo forest with the 16-member strong Hirwa group – a completely different experience than the day before and yet equally magnificent. While our adventure sadly had to come to an end after just two days, we crossed paths with an Italian who was spending eight days there and planned to visit each family, and an American who had returned year after year after year to get her fix.

Spending time with the gorillas in Rwanda is one of those things which was atop our bucket list for years and now, having experienced it, I can see how it becomes a passion that people want to return to again and again. A breathtaking experience in a lush, green, friendly and now safe part of Africa – get there if you can. It will change your life for the better. ■





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