

GORILLA TRACKING GUIDELINES:

The Mountain gorillas you will track are at high altitude in the National Park. For many years, these groups have undergone an extremely delicate process that has gradually made them used to the presence of humans, and allowed a few privileged visitors to interact with them briefly in the wild. The gorillas, however, are by no means tame! Experienced guides will accompany you on your tracking, many of who have been involved in the habituation process themselves. These guides will brief you in detail on your arrival on the various aspects of 'gorilla etiquette', but the information contained in this set of guidelines is to help you arrive for your track well prepared and ready to enjoy this unique opportunity to the full.

- *Visitors may track for as many days as they like, on purchase of the required number of gorilla permits.*
- *Only persons over the age of 15 can track the gorillas.*
- *Viewing time is limited and persons are allowed to stay with the gorillas for only up to a maximum of 1 hour.*
- *Once the gorillas are located, your group will be allowed a maximum of one hour with them. After this, you will return to the park headquarters and your camp.*
- *Gorilla tracking involves walking long distances through thick vegetation, up steep, wet and muddy terrain which may be difficult for some visitors. We recommend you pace yourself; walk slowly and drink plenty of water.*
- *Gorilla tracking is a year-round activity, with no season as such.*
- *Tracking commences every morning from the park headquarters at 8:30 AM. Each group is accompanied by a guide and by porters who will carry your shoulder pack for you. The gorillas cover large distances overnight, and they are never constantly in one area. The guides will use their knowledge of the gorillas' habits and information from the previous day to locate the group's whereabouts. Because of this, the time taken to track the gorillas varies enormously, from as little as half an hour to as much as 9 hours before returning to camp. The terrain can be steep to extremely difficult (often steeper than a flight of stairs) covered in dense. In addition, the altitude of 5200 feet and more means participants do need to be physically fit to enjoy the track. Strong ankles in particular help with the trek.*

CLOTHING AND EQUIPMENT REQUIRED:

For the trek:

- *A small, lightweight, frameless, waterproof back/day pack*
- *Light, waterproof hiking boots or shoes with treaded soles.*
- *Thick socks.*
- *Good camera and lenses. You should be comfortable using your camera in low light conditions with no flash, as no flash photography is allowed on the trek.*
- *Leather or heavy canvas (gardening-style) gloves.*
- *Waterproof rain pants, a rain suit or poncho with hood.*
- *Short sleeved shirt or T-shirt under a long sleeve shirt (to stop being cut by the undergrowth).*
- *Long trousers should be the light-weight trekking variety*

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- *Light weight water proof jacket.*
- *A waterproof, squash-able hat.*
- *A water bottle – Bottled water and a packed lunch is provided by the camp*

For the hotel

- *Daytime casual. Evenings smart casual*
- *Long-sleeved shirts; long trousers.*
- *Short-sleeved shirts and shorts*
- *A down vest or pocketed safari jacket*
- *Sweatshirts/sweaters*

Health:

To minimize possible transmission of human diseases, maintain a distance of 7m (22 ft) from the gorillas. If you are sick with a cold, flu or other contagious illness, please do not visit the gorillas. Spitting in the park is strictly prohibited. Should you need to cough please cover your mouth and turn away from the gorillas. Do not litter. Eating and drinking near the gorillas and smoking anywhere within the park is forbidden.

General Guideline:

Tracking conditions differ greatly according to the location of the gorillas, so the exact level of difficulty for a specific trek is impossible to define in advance. On an excursion, it is entirely possible that you will find the gorillas quite quickly and be back at your hotel for lunch. It is also entirely possible that you will have to hike three or four hours (or sometimes even longer) each way and will make it back to your hotel just before dark.

Because it is impossible to predict the length and difficulty of any single tracking excursion, this program should not be attempted by anyone who is not in very good physical condition. Because of the climbing and bending required as you make your way through the thick foliage, gorilla tracking should not be attempted by anyone who has any kind of heart or back problem. Only those who are absolutely 100% fit and are capable of walking long distances at high altitudes over slippery, muddy terrain should attempt gorilla tracking. Tracking is likely to involve scrambling through, over, and under dense undergrowth with nettles, barbed vines, and bamboo thickets. Correct footwear and clothing are essential. It is recommended that you build up the strength and endurance of your leg muscles by walking, stair climbing, bicycling, knee bends, and similar exercises before you leave home. This should always be done under the supervision of your doctor.

Please note:

Travelers with physical disabilities and those who require frequent or ongoing medical attention should advise African Sojourns of their health situation at the time of booking (or at the time such a situation occurs should this be after the reservation is made).

Each traveler is assigned his or her own porter for the duration of a tracking excursion. Please note that your porter can only carry one bag, and any additional items you want to bring must be carried by you. Because of the potential difficulty of any trek, it is strongly suggested that you take only one bag (to be carried by your porter).

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As you set off from the starting point, the trackers will first lead you to the spot where the gorilla family was seen the previous day and look for clues as to the direction the group may have traveled since it was last observed. Your group's lead tracker will have his "own" gorilla family, which he visits each day and whose home range and travel routes are familiar to him. All trackers are experienced in looking for signs of the gorillas, such as footprints, dung, chewed bamboo and celery stalks, and abandoned nests from the previous evening. Gorillas soil their nests and then abandon them to build new ones each night, and trackers are able to tell the age of the nests as well as which group made them. On days of heavy rain, it is more difficult to distinguish signs of the gorillas and the age of nests.

Gorillas do not live in the most easily accessible terrain, and some of it is virtually impenetrable. They prefer secondary growth vegetation with plenty of food plants near the ground and think nothing of climbing extremely steep slopes to get it. Unfortunately, this means that tracking gorillas can be difficult for humans. If the gorillas you are tracking have wandered deep into the forest, it is entirely possible that the trek to find them will take three or four hours (or sometimes even longer) in each direction. Additionally, you may have to overcome mud, stinging nettles, and some areas of elevated vines where your feet may not touch the ground. The trek can be difficult in both directions (out to the gorillas and back to the starting point).

Trackers generally do allow time to stop and rest along the trail. However, they tend to hike at a steady, somewhat upbeat pace throughout the excursion, for they must be mindful of the time to ensure that you will be able to reach the gorillas, spend a full hour with them, and make it back down the trail before dark. If you occasionally lag behind the group to take photos or are having difficulty negotiating a steep or slippery portion of the trail, your porter will stay with you to assist; but the group will most likely continue forward.

You will probably smell the gorillas before you actually see them. When you reach them, the tracker will move forward, making soft smacking and groaning sounds with his mouth to assure the group that friends are approaching. Although gorillas make very few vocalizations, this sound of reassurance is one that family members often use with each other.

If your trek to find the gorillas has not been unusually long, you are likely to visit them during their long midday rest and play period. At this time of day, the dominant male (usually a silverback) generally lounges on the ground or against a tree while youngsters roll in the vegetation and climb on trees, vines, and each other. Females nurse and play with their infants. Occasionally, a curious youngster may approach you or someone in your group. Though it is tempting to touch, this is STRICTLY forbidden.

Your tracking group will be instructed to stay together and crouch down while observing the gorillas so that the dominant male can see you at all times and the family does not feel threatened, surrounded, or overwhelmed. Never stare directly into the eyes of a gorilla, for a fixed stare is as aggressive to them as it is to most humans. Although you may find a gorilla looking directly at you, you should maintain a subservient stance and look at it sideways or from a lower height.

Sometimes, as a release of tension or as a display to the rest of the group, a male gorilla may charge and beat his chest, tearing up vegetation and hurling his tremendous frame directly at your tracking group. Despite the temptation to run, you must stand your ground, maintain a subordinate, crouching position, and do your best not to flinch -- for the gorilla will stop before actually reaching you and calmly return to his previous location, glancing back at you with smug satisfaction. Such displays may turn savage when used between males of different gorilla families but are simply a bluff when used with human observers on tracking excursions to habituated gorilla groups.

Your tracking group will spend up to one (1) hour with the gorillas on each tracking excursion. This time limit is carefully observed and protects the gorillas from undue stress. If your group were to stay longer than this, the gorillas would probably end the visit themselves -- by simply leaving. Although they are getting used to being visited regularly and are curious about their human visitors, they are accustomed to one-hour visits; and their intensely shy and private nature will reassert itself in the end.

In the event a gorilla tracking participant is unable to complete a tracking excursion to the gorillas, he or she will either be allowed to immediately return to the base of the trail with a porter OR the participant will be asked to remain in place with a porter while the group continues its track of the gorillas, rejoining the rest of the group on its way back to the base of the trail.

Please keep in mind that gorillas are shy, wild animals. At the start of the tracking day, there is no way of telling exactly where the habituated gorilla families are (even though trackers are very skilled at looking for signs of gorillas and their paths of travel). Also, because gorillas are wandering animals that favor areas of dense vegetation, consistent, clear viewing at close range cannot be guaranteed.

REGULATIONS AND RULES OF CONDUCT:

It is important that all gorilla tracking participants familiarize themselves with the following regulations and rules of conduct:

- *You MUST, at all times, follow the instructions of your guide. He is in contact with the gorillas every day and understands them well. Always remain in a quiet, compact group behind the guide, who will attempt to position you in such a way that the dominant male of the group can see you at all times.*
- *If the dominant male gorilla (usually a silverback) approaches very closely, or if he charges, it is very important that you do not move backwards. Remain exactly where you are, look downward, and adopt a submissive, crouched posture. NEVER make any sudden moves or loud noises in the presence of the gorillas.*
- *If a young gorilla approaches, never (under ANY circumstances) make any move to touch it. Your guide, in certain instances, may take steps to discourage a youngster from touching you, as this could create a threatening situation with the dominant male.*
- *If a gorilla stares at you, look away or down.*

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- *Avoid taking an excessive number of photographs, and NEVER use a flash when photographing the gorillas.*
- *Only visitors in good health AT THE TIME OF THE EXCURSION will be permitted to track gorillas, as gorillas are susceptible to colds and other respiratory diseases transmitted by humans. All visitors must be physically fit and capable of enduring a walk of several hours in difficult terrain (as previously described).*
- *Each gorilla family may be visited only once each day, during the morning hours.*
- *At this time, all gorilla visits are limited to a maximum of eight (8) persons per gorilla family for a maximum length of one (1) hour. Due to the already-limited number of persons allowed to visit the gorillas each day, it is not possible to do gorilla tracking on a private basis.*
- *Smoking, eating, and/or drinking is not permitted within 200 meters of a gorilla family.*
- *It is prohibited to destroy any vegetation unnecessarily and to make open fires in the national parks and reserves. The flora and fauna of national parks and reserves are strictly protected. All visitors must carry their own litter with them out of the park or reserve, leaving NOTHING behind.*

You must also understand that African Sojourns nor their partners control the administration or play any part in the operation of National Parks or Reserves. These areas are the total responsibility of local authorities. If our local staff observes situations that merit improvement, they will request that local authorities make changes; but these authorities are under no obligation to do so. While African Sojourns and its suppliers have cultivated an excellent relationship with local authorities and they are usually eager to help us look after our clients, it is they who operate the actual gorilla tracking excursions not African Sojourns and their third party suppliers. It should also be noted that African Sojourns and its third party suppliers does not employ any of the local guides, gorilla trackers, or porters and, therefore, cannot accept responsibility for the manner in which they operate. Travellers should keep in mind that the trackers are local, native-born people who have spent a lot of time in the forest with the gorilla families and that they probably have very good reasons to do things a certain way.