

PREPARATION | GORILLA TREKKING

In the whole world, you can only see the mountain gorillas (Gorilla Berengei Berengei) in Uganda, Rwanda and Congo.

In Rwanda, these primates can be seen in the Volcanoes National Park. As of 2015, there are 7 mountain gorilla groups habituated making it 56 gorilla permits for visitors to Rwanda available every single day. 8 people per group can trek these endangered apes. With a gorilla permit costing US \$ 750 per person per trek, part of your contribution goes to conserving these mountain gorillas.

What to Expect

- You have to wake up early morning, meaning that you must find accommodation closer to the park entrance.
- Your African gorilla guide will be briefing you at 07h00 about safety precautions as well as the etiquette.
- Together with other members of the group, you proceed to the forest and start the hike which may be tiring depending on your physical strength.
- Remember they are called mountain gorillas so an element of hiking is a must.
- The adventure takes anything from 30 minutes to a couple of hours.
- The English-speaking forest guides are amazingly good, and will lead you to the specific 'habituated' mountain gorilla group, which certainly will be accustomed to human presence.
- A mature silverback male gorilla may weigh as much as 200kg, or even 3 times the overall weight of an average man, however the anxiety normally disappears once you set eyes on the group.
- Normally the gorilla group will be scattered over a small area of thick vegetation.
- They will carry on with their interactions and even feed without any concern of their human visitors although they will be observing you with interest.
- Rarely one, normally a playful youngster, will boldly approach you with inquisitiveness, at times coming really close that you will need to move away. (You are not allowed to move less than 7 meters close to them; this is to safe guard the gorillas from contagious human diseases.)

What to Wear

It's all about protection – so wear sturdy clothing to help keep you safe from scratches, the rain and tough terrain. We recommend long sleeve shirt, trousers, good lightweight walking shoes or boots, protective leather gloves or gardening gloves and a pair of gaiters if it's raining! Temperatures vary too so take a fleece and poncho or waterproof jacket. A small backpack is useful to carry water, snacks, camera and binoculars. Walking sticks are available at the park head quarters.

Rwanda

In Rwanda, you may only track gorilla within Volcanoes National Park (Parc National des Volcans), a section of the bigger Virunga mountains.

Approximately 480 mountain gorillas live in the Virunga complex and reside on the altitude range of 2,300 to 4,500 metres in the southern area of Virunga National Park (in the DRC), as well as the Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda, and some in Uganda's Mgahinga National Park.

Rwanda Gorillas are divided into 2: those for study or research purposes which are strictly accessed by scientists plus researchers only. Among these are Beetsme and Pablo's Shida's, which have the highest number of gorillas.

There are also ten habituated gorilla families that are for tourism purposes, so these are available for trekkers to visit.

At most 8 people may visit each of the gorilla groups every day and you may spend at most one hour.

Among these gorilla groups are the: Uganda, Umubano, Susa group, Karinsimbi, Sabinyo, Hirwa, Amahoro, Bwengye, Group 13 (the Agasha group) and the Kwitonda.

1. **Susa Group (Susa A Family)** – this is the gorilla group that was researched by Dian Fossey.

It derived its name from River Susa, which flows in the home range of these gorillas. The family is the most challenging to trek since it normally stays up in the higher ranges of the mountains however the RDB's Tourism and Conservation trackers will know in advance how the group is located the day before in advance for the next trackers. Sometimes tourists have been barred from tracking the group because of its distant location.

This group is very impressive with a family size of 28 gorilla individuals with three Silverbacks. This was the biggest gorilla group prior to separating into two. The group had 42 individuals and when visited people would see so many gorillas scattered in the entire area. This group is renowned for its infant twins; Byishimo and **Impano**, which are pretty playful. It as well has one of Rwanda's oldest habituated gorillas like Poppy who was born in 1976. Poppy is thought to be among the gorillas, which were in the initial gorilla group that Dian Fossey's conducted her research.

Normally, a mother dumps one of its twins, since it is nearly hard for her to take care of the two infants. As we observed the mother – Nyabitondore, take good care of her twins, Impano and Byishimo, we occasionally imagined that she would ran mad from this big task. However now you can see the twins playing around amidst other gorillas.

2. Karisimbi Family (Susa-B)

This family separated from the initial Susa (Susa-A) family and today it is referred to as Susa-B or the Karisimbi Group. It has 15 individuals and normally found on the slopes of Mt Karisimbi Volcano (4507Meters) the highest peak of Rwanda.

Karisimbi Group is better appropriate for serious hikers. It seems that they have formed their home in the higher mountain slopes of Karisimbi caldera. So visiting this group may take a full day hike.

The group at times moves to higher altitude making the tracking pretty challenging. But, RDB tourism plus conservation guides will be aware of the location of the gorilla group the previous day. Tracking the gorilla family at times can be stopped due to its faraway location.

3. Sabyinyo Gorilla Group

Sabyinyo can easily be reached and a strong silverback Guhonda leads it. This is the biggest silverback of all the gorilla groups, since it is very massive in physical appearance. Actually Guhonda has maintained his main competitor, Ryango, from his group as a solitary silverback. In comparison to other gorilla families, Sabyinyo has fewer members although it is similarly impressive.

This group derived its name from Sabyinyo volcano and it actually means an "old man's teeth". The Sabyinyo is among the groups found nearest to the border of the park with 8 individuals that include one Silverback (which is the biggest in the entire park); three Adult females; a youthful female; two Juveniles as well as a Baby gorilla.

4. Amahoro Gorilla Group

Amahoro, which means "peaceful group", is the most calm gorilla group. This group has seventeen individuals: a Silverback; two Black-backs; five Adult females; 2 Sub-adult males; 2 Juveniles as well as 5 Babies. Nonetheless, the peace comes at a good price. Ubumwe, the silverback of this group is peaceful, really easy going as well as serene, he has sadly lost some group members to the Umubano group led by Charles.

To see the Amahoro you should maneuver over the somewhat steep climb but the climb is worth it when you finally find this amazing group.

5. Umubano Group

Which means “neighborliness”, the Umubano family comprises of eleven individuals: a Silverback; a Sub-adult male; three Adult females as well as six Babies. Umubano were initially members of Amahoro group however separated following Ubumwe the then dominant silverback being overpowered by Charles who is the current leader of Umubano.

As Charles grew into an adult silverback just as Ubumwe, he couldn't stand taking orders around so he decided to fight and eventually challenged Ubumwe. this fight went on for some weeks and nearly months. Eventually, Charles was able to take a couple of females from Ubumwe hence forming a group; the Umubano.

From that time, he commands a lot of respect and appreciated by Ubumwe. On a number of occasions interactions between these two silverbacks have been witnessed, however, no fights has been witnessed since that big fight.

6. 13 Group (the Agasha Group)

during its first habituated the group had 13 members. Today the group has nearly 25 members: a Silverback; twelve Adult females; two Sub adult female; three Juvenile as well as seven Babies.

Previously this group was led by Nyakarima who was overpowered by Agashya whose name means “the news”. In fact Agashya made headlines by first observing and estimating the strengths of Nyakarima and finally challenged him to a brutal fight taking away his entire group.

This greatly shocked Nyakarima and was an extraordinary event in witnessed gorilla history. Then Agashya shifted up the volcano to safe guard his group and ensure that Nyakarima didn't find them.

Since then, Agashya has increased the number of members in his group by snatching some from other groups and incorporating other solitary gorillas, speedily the group expanded from 12 up to 25 individuals.

Agashya is also known, at any first sign of danger, to take his entire group to the peak of the volcano. One time, while some tourists had gone to observe the Group 13 this identical scenario occurred. Agashya imagined that there was an opponent silverback, which was about to fight him. In reaction, he led his group to the volcano. Whenever we closed in to the group they would go further away until we couldn't go any further. So this is another challenging group to see.

7. Kwitonda Family

This group has 18 members and it is led by Kwitonda the silverback whose name means the “humble one” it also has 2 silverbacks plus a blackback.

It moved from the DRC, and normally stays far away which makes it challenging to trek. This along with the Susa B are some of the most challenging groups to find on the mountains.

8. Hirwa Group (which means “lucky one”)

This group became renowned on 17th June 2006 after trackers witnessed its creation when some members from 2 separate families the Group 13 and the Sabyinyo group joined to form a smaller group at the time.

Fortunately some other gorillas also joined this group and today the Hirwa group has nine individuals: one Silverback; three Adult females; two Sub adult females as well as 3 Babies.

Although it is the newest gorilla group, Hirwa shows strength and well safeguards its members

9. Bwenge Family

This family has 11 members with one Silverback. It is majorly seen in the Slopes of Karisoke Volcano. Bwenge is the silverback that leads the group, which was established in 2007 after he left his birth group and was joined by other females coming from other gorilla groups.

The group has faced some challenging times; which included the death of six infants. Today this group is becoming strong with two successful births in the past couple years as well as a strong silverback leader. This trek to visit the group is challenging and includes an ascent of nearly 3 hours. The trails at times are muddy and pretty steep. It seems this is the group that featured in the legendary movie ‘Gorillas in the Mist’.

10. Uganda Family

This Group lives in Rwanda’s Karisimbi area. It comprises of 11 gorillas including 2 silverbacks. The name of this group means “being on the move” and it is obvious how it got its name. Very challenging to find, this group are constantly moving from one place to another to ensure its safety and access to good feeding areas.