

AFRICA UNTAMED

Virunga National Park
after years of civil war,
lovers. Expect gorillas,

by Martin Fletcher

in the Democratic Republic of Congo has reopened
It is a thrilling destination for wildlife and adventure
volcanoes and an authentic African experience



“Every time I see gorillas it blows me away how human they are”

MIKEY CARR-HARTLEY

For 40 minutes we hiked up the steep, forested flank of the Mikeno volcano through a green tunnel of trees, ferns, vines and creepers, formed by a dry river bed, scattering flamboyant butterflies and listening to a chorus of cicadas that seemed to fill the jungle.

Then we rounded a corner and saw three rangers who had been sent ahead of us. They had their hands up, telling us to stop and be silent. Put on your face masks, they whispered. As we did so, there was a rustling in the vegetation and a young male mountain gorilla appeared, its coat of dense black hair gleaming in the dappled sunlight. It stared at us and we stared back, astonished. Then it loped away.

What followed was unforgettable. A few minutes later we encountered a 400-pound silverback called Nyakamwe, the patriarch of a family of nine mountain gorillas, nonchalantly munching leaves as he sized us up. The rangers made grunting noises to reassure him. Nearby younger males stood on their back legs and beat their chests to impress us. The infants play-fought with each other, rolled on their backs or climbed trees as their mothers looked on. One executed an elegant little pirouette as he brushed right past us. We were supposed to stay six meters away from these great primates, but they blithely ignored the rules.

The gorillas inspected us as closely as we

inspected them, and showed great interest in our cameras – probably because they could see their reflections in the lenses. They were astonishingly human, not just in their facial expressions and dexterous use of fingers and thumbs, but also in their behavior towards each other. They were affectionate, petulant, protective, irritable, mischievous, deliberately off-hand. A few were clearly showing off.

Watching those gorillas was unlike watching any other creature. I could sense the almost-human intelligence behind their eyes, and I experienced a feeling of connection, of kinship. Which was hardly surprising considering that

the family tree split a mere 9 million years ago, making gorillas some of our closest cousins.

We were so utterly absorbed that the hour we were allowed to spend with them passed in a flash. “Every time I see gorillas it blows me away how human they are,” said my companion, Mikey Carr-Hartley, a fourth-generation Kenyan whose company, the Safari Collection, offers private, bespoke tours to different parts of Africa. It is one of only a few companies guiding guests in one of the continent’s least visited destinations.

There are fewer than 900 mountain gorillas left in the world, all concentrated in one small region of Africa where Uganda, Rwanda and the infamous Democratic Republic of Congo (not to be confused with the smaller Republic of Congo across the Congo river) meet. They have long been the center of sizable tourist industries in both Uganda and Rwanda, where Dian Fossey wrote *Gorillas in the Mist* before she was murdered there in 1985. But the exciting development is the re-opening of the southern section of the DRC’s Virunga National Park, which contains roughly a third of the gorilla population, after two decades of almost non-stop war that turned the country into a synonym for violence and bloodshed.

The park is Africa’s oldest, a stunning Unesco World Heritage site with 3,000 square miles of snow-capped mountains and glaciers, savannahs and swamps, lakes, rivers and volcanoes. It was the epicenter of a conflict between rival militias and rebel groups that left up to 5 million people dead and was labeled Africa’s World War.

Thousands of elephants and hippopotami were lost, but, amazingly, the mountain gorillas survived thanks to the bravery of the rangers who ventured out daily to monitor the precious primates. “It was the greatest miracle in modern conservation,” says Emmanuel de Mérode, the British-educated, Belgian prince who is Virunga’s director, although 140 rangers were killed in the course of the war.

It is not hard to see gorillas in Uganda and Rwanda, but there is now a powerful case for traveling to the DRC, especially for the wealthy and adventurous. Since November 2013, a fragile peace has taken hold. Virunga’s gorillas are far less accustomed to humans. You can watch them alone – not in large, regimented tourist groups – and you will do so in a raw, untamed land, but one where you can now stay in relative safety and comfort. Moreover your tourist dollars are vital for Virunga’s conservation efforts. And you should expect to spend a lot. A one-day gorilla trekking permit costs \$465.

If peace holds, it should eventually be possible for a private plane to fly directly from



INSPIRE CONGO



Above Mikeno Lodge. **Below** A spectacular extinct volcano

Nairobi to the dirt airstrip at Rumangabo, the park's headquarters, but it isn't yet. Carr-Hartley, who invited me to join him on a reconnaissance mission before bringing paying clients to the DRC, arranged for us to take a Kenya Airways flight to Kigali, the Rwandan capital, then a three-hour taxi ride to the Congolese border town of Goma, which is still filled with UN peacekeepers and NGOs.

The park authorities arranged our visas, and sent a four-wheel drive with armed guards to collect us. For another two hours we drove north, up what was once a paved road, but is now a rutted ribbon of mud. It was flanked by lush vegetation, rough shacks lacking water or electricity, vibrant markets, army posts, rusting artillery pieces and a river of humanity. Colorfully dressed women balancing huge bundles on their heads, men transporting fruit and vegetables on giant wooden scooters (called chukudus), barefoot children playing soccer with balls of rolled-up plastic bags. There is nothing remotely bland or westernised about the DRC.

The last bone-shaking hour took us high into the mountains to Virunga's brand new Bukima tented camp – the starting point for gorilla treks. It's not quite luxury, but that night we drank excellent Congolese beer (one of Belgium's more welcome colonial legacies) around a roaring camp fire, and ate a good, but hardly gourmet, dinner before retiring to our clean, comfortable tents.

We woke in the morning to breathtaking views across a fertile valley of no fewer than three volcanoes – Mikeno, which is extinct, and Nyiragongo and Nyamuragira, which are

emphatically not. They have erupted more than 80 times since the 1880s, and from their cones great clouds of white vapor billowed high into a perfect blue sky. While the day was still cool, we hiked across that valley to Mikeno, past mud-and-bamboo huts and locals tilling their fields. It was afternoon by the time we returned, exhilarated by our encounter with the gorillas.

Late in the day we bumped and scraped our way back down to Rumangabo, the park headquarters and the very welcome luxury of Mikeno Lodge – the only accommodation available in the park apart from Bukima camp. The lodge was opened during a lull in the

fighting in late 2011, but mothballed six months later when the M23 militia resumed battle (the staff hid in the wine cellar as the fighting raged outside). We were greeted warmly by Richard and Gilly Thornycroft, the dispossessed Zimbabwean farmers who now run it. We had drinks and dinner on a veranda the size of a tennis court, as monkeys cavorted in the trees.

In the pitch-black African night we retreated to thatched guest cottages where roaring fires burnt in the grates. "If you hear prolonged gunfire, stay in your bungalow, turn off the lights and our rangers will come and collect you," the written instructions said, but the beds were so comfortable that it would have taken more than a war to wake me.

To see the gorillas alone was worth the

journey – and there were four more of them at Rumangabo in the world's only mountain gorilla orphanage. But Carr-Hartley had one more adventure in store for me. Early the following morning we drove to the base of the 11,000 ft Nyiragongo volcano. There we were joined by no fewer than 10 porters and seven rangers, armed with AK-47s to protect us from the few rebels still camped on the volcano's far flank.

We spent the next five hours hiking through tropical forest, across fields of crumbling lava deposited when Nyiragongo last erupted in 2002, to the barren black cone itself. On exhausted legs we hauled ourselves up the last few yards, peered over the crater's jagged edge and saw – nothing. It was like the edge of the world. The sheer walls plunged down into a swirling white nothingness of mist and vapor. We could hear a roar, feel the heat, smell the sulphur and hear the hiss of escaping gasses. But the world's largest lava lake was hidden.

It was freezing and darkness was falling. We pitched tents on a ledge and heated food on a fire. Then we noticed an orange glow above the crater. We scrambled back up and gasped. The mist had cleared. Far below a great cauldron of red magma boiled, bubbled and spurted. "The devil lives down there," a porter declared as we watched, mesmerized, late into the night.

By dawn the mist had returned. The lava lake had vanished. It was like Virunga – a wonder only fleetingly visible to the outside world. But for now the park is open, and in our three days we enjoyed experiences possible nowhere else on the planet. As Carr-Hartley said, "Virunga is like a lost jewel that has been rediscovered."

Martin Fletcher stayed with the Safari Collection (thesafaricollection.com) on a three-night, privately guided, trip to Virunga \$3,450 per person including transfers from Kigali, permits, meals and lodgings.

