



Gorilla Trekking – A True Safari Adventure

The Volcano of Nyiragongo



A safari to view gorillas in central Africa is one of those journeys that the adventurous and curious traveller simply has to complete in their lifetime. Typically, many think of Rwanda and Uganda as the bastions of these primate-viewing safaris. While both countries are wonderful choices, there is a “new” kid on the block fast becoming a sought after gorilla trekking and wildlife safari destination: the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The word “Congo” conjures up images of misty green swathes of rainforest. In these forests are elusive animals rarely seen by humans, gaudy birds more often heard than actually seen, and much else, from giant earthworms to bush vipers and exquisite flowers. The trees reach to the skies and the lakes plumb the depths of the earth. Add to this the people of the Congo – friendly and inviting, and their gentle welcoming made all the more amazing when you consider the trauma that has been inflicted on their country.

The DRC offers travellers a breath of fresh air and a new perspective, and it offers all of this while you’re hiking up steep volcanoes, gliding over enormous lakes,

and visiting parts of a continent not often seen by too many foreigners to spend time with the endangered Mountain Gorillas. This is exciting and moving Africa at its most authentic. The rains which fall much of the time add to the ambiance, with the shifting clouds and dramatic landscapes making for great photographic opportunities and unforgettable memories.

Much of the DRC’s conservation offerings are not new – the Virunga National Park, where one can enjoy some exceptional gorilla viewing, is in fact one of Africa’s oldest national parks and home to a healthy and growing gorilla population. This is of course good news for those wishing to come face-to-face with a great ape.

The landlocked DRC, Africa’s second-largest country, is often unfairly tarred with the brush of being unwelcoming, home to warlords and insurgents, unstable, and unsafe. While this can be true for some parts of the country some of the time, the eastern edge that is home to the Virunga National Park as well as the Kahuzi-Biéga National Park tends to escape the drama. Both of these national parks have achieved the status of UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Although there are some flights to Goma on the northern shore of Lake Kivu in the

eastern DRC (these flights are usually via Addis Ababa or Nairobi), the preferred route to access the reserve areas of the DRC is via Kigali, Rwanda. One is able to ease into the DRC safari programme from the Rwandan side of the border with a fascinating visit to the Kigali genocide memorial, followed by the very manageable three-hour drive across rolling Rwandan countryside to the border post.

The Gorillas

The Mountain Gorilla in the DRC is one of the two subspecies of Eastern Gorilla and can be found in the Virunga National Park. The other subspecies, formerly known as the Eastern Lowland Gorilla but now referred to as Grauer’s Gorilla, can be found in the Kahuzi-Biéga National Park on the south-western bank of Lake Kivu. Trekking can be done throughout the year, but dry season makes for easier hiking. The rule of thumb with gorilla trekking is that you have absolutely no guarantee of actually seeing the animals. They move in large, densely forested areas and their movements can be erratic and unpredictable. That said, the teams on the ground who are tasked with leading the treks and finding the gorillas are supremely skilled, and have a wonderful knack of finding these majestic animals.

The success rate of finding habituated families is high.

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No visit to the DRC will be complete without at the very least considering climbing the volcano of Nyiragongo to gaze down on the world’s largest lava lake. The climb up Nyiragongo does require a decent level of fitness however, as you will ascend 1,500 m in a single day. With the volcano topping out at 3,500 m above sea level, there is a small possibility of developing altitude sickness which will scupper the climb, so best do go prepared. The first half of the walk is however much slower, with plenty of stops to allow climbers to acclimatise. It is cold at the summit, despite staring down at the lava which has melted at 1,200 degrees Celsius. Your mountain chef will make delicious hot soups and warm curries to keep you fuelled while you are on top of the world. Morning views to Mount Mikenno and Karisimbi are spectacular.

Accommodation

While both Uganda and Rwanda have been welcoming tourists for much longer, the DRC is fast catching up to its neighbours when it comes to accommodation offerings in the reserves and surrounding towns. The

accommodation offerings are by no means five-star, but there are comfortable, clean, and well managed options that will ensure a relaxing and pleasant stay in the wilderness.

More Reasons to Visit the DRC

Gorilla permits are affordable here. All visitors are obliged to purchase a permit for the one-hour session with the gorillas. At time of writing this article, these permits cost \$1,500 per person in Rwanda and \$600 in Uganda (seasonal rate), while the DRC permit is the most cost-effective at \$400 per person. This adds further attraction to the option of a gorilla safari in the DRC.

The DRC offers the ability to have a wonderful lake experience on the mystical and sometimes tempestuous Lake Kivu, and includes the option of climbing Nyiragongo volcano. All this can be achieved in a fairly short itinerary – as few as three to six days.

Although the roads in the DRC aren’t fantastic, the distances covered from the cities to the parks are relatively short – one hour from Bukavu to Kahuzi-Biéga National Park, and two hours from Goma to Virunga National Park.

The locally-brewed Primus beer goes down exceptionally well after a strenuous walk in the forest.

For more on the ultimate in adventure safari and to experience an animal interaction second to none, get in touch with the team from Mammoth Safaris who regularly guide trips to this part of the world. Their expertise and experience ensures that trips here become unforgettable, life-altering experiences.

For more information, please visit mammothsafaris.com.

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