



IMAGES: GETTY; MOUNT GAHINGA LODGE

# WE ARE



# ONE

The mountain gorilla moves with quiet majesty through Uganda's highland forests, while across the country, communities are stepping up as guardians of their survival, shaping a conservation story that begins at home

WORDS: CHARLOTTE WIGRAM-EVANS





THE GORILLA IS GARGANTUAN. THERE'S A PROMISE OF RAW POWER IN ITS CHEST, SUPREME AGILITY IN ARMS THAT RIPPLE WITH MUSCLE, AND WISDOM IN ITS DARK, DEEP-SET EYES.

It looms larger than the trees, taller than the mountains, dwarfing even the sun — a canary yellow sphere sketched in the corner of the page.

Ten-year old Akankwasa's drawing captures a mythic vision of the forest, winning first prize in a local competition run by the Gorilla Organization. The charity's Ugandan arm works from a simple conviction: that change begins in classrooms. With fewer than a dozen staff, they support 28 schools that cling to the edges of the gorillas' kingdom, the mist-cloaked slopes of Mgahinga and Bwindi National Parks in the country's south west.

Their work is practical as well as poetic, from funding water tanks and building new classrooms to organising quizzes, storytelling sessions and art competitions. The aim: to teach children why the forest matters, nurturing a generation of conservation champions. And yet Akankwasa's gorilla, for all its wild imagination, wasn't conjured from daydreams alone.

"To become passionate about something, you need to see it, to feel it," Francis says as we wander round Nyagakenke school, set in a fold of Mgahinga's countryside stitched with cabbage patches and roamed by gangs of overconfident goats. "We take children into the jungle to meet the gorillas for themselves. Once you've seen them in the wild, it's impossible not to fall in love."

Francis heads up the project, an inspiring figure and one of many I'll meet on my mission to learn about the people powering Uganda's conservation success story. The children clearly know him well and we're trailed by dozens of pupils in pristine purple uniforms, their wide eyes full of shy curiosity. With gentle persistence, he coaxes even the quietest into conversation.

"We've learnt that gorillas love sugarcane and that they can laugh, but sometimes they are sad like people," one girl says, stealing glimpses of me through her eyelashes and fiddling nervously with a shirt button. "I'm not scared of them,"

a boy barely taller than my waist chimes in, before adding that he dreams of becoming a tour guide when he grows up — proof the seeds Francis is sowing are already taking root.

**A FORCE OF NATURE**

The following day I meet Mgahinga's gorilla family and at once understand what Francis meant about falling in love. Awe overwhelms me, so intense I'm momentarily struck dumb. The 10-strong group are grazing in a forest glade, surrounded by ferns rising in delicate fans and dew-laden saplings bowing under their own weight. Mark is head of the family, and while he may not tower above the canopy as Akankwasa's drawing depicts, he commands the jungle with such authority that it feels as though the clearing exists solely for him.

His amber eyes burn with a fierce intelligence and when he moves, sunlight skims across his back, gleaming like silk stretched over steel. Beside him, two more silverbacks shift their weight, each one a living wall of power. Weighing close to 500 pounds and including — my guide Hosea reveals nonchalantly — the biggest gorilla Uganda, they seem less like animals and more like moving fortresses, the forest floor trembling beneath their tread.

"It's almost unheard of to have three males in one group," Hosea explains. "When their backs turn from black to silver it marks maturity and most will leave to start their own family. Mark's a friendly guy though — he took in that 27-year-old over there, and the other silverback is his brother; they're close buddies."

It's a pleasing revelation, and I wonder if Mark's placid nature has anything to do with the wild opium leaves he's munching on. He's stripped an entire plant since we've arrived, stems splintering beneath his huge fingers as he crams fistfuls of foliage into his mouth. "It does chill them out," Hosea says with a smile. Mark certainly seems relaxed, and suddenly, as if casting off his mask

Clockwise from top left: Volcanoes Safaris has four lodges in Uganda, all of which employ locals and support Indigenous communities; the number of female guides has risen sharply in the last decade; female gorillas typically only have one baby every four years, making every infant even more precious Previous pages from left: Silverbacks are capable of lifting up to 10 times their body weight; guides start tracking gorillas at dawn, following clues like nests, footprints and chewed bamboo to locate them before tourists arrive

IMAGES: VOLCANOES SAFARIS; MATT MIDWORTH; ALAMY







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From top: The beautiful rooms at Mount Gahinga Lodge are built from locally sourced materials; the Batwa used a deep ancestral knowledge of plants and animals to survive without damaging their environment

of masculinity, he sprawls on his back and lets out a long, satisfied fart, legs splayed, eyes closed, his belly lifted towards the sky.

When the encounter is over, we begin our slow descent from the mountain and to distract myself from the ache of leaving the family behind, I quiz Hosea on the situation of gorillas today. Confined to a small area across the volcanic ranges of Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the mountain gorilla is the only great ape whose numbers are rising. Fewer than 300 in 1991, their population has climbed to more than 1,000 today.

The magic I felt watching them only makes this number more moving — it’s significance impossible to overstate — and it’s clear much of the credit belongs to local people who have taken conservation into their own hands. “My work is everything to me,” Hosea says simply. “But here, we also know what helps the gorillas, helps us. Tourists come to Uganda to see them. They’re the country’s golden ticket and protecting them is the most important thing.”

PEOPLE OF THE FOREST

Hosea’s words ring true. While the guests at Volcanoes’ Mount Gahinga Lodge gush about the landscapes (“so green, so lush”) and the people (“the nicest we’ve ever met”), most are here for one thing: gorillas. I fall into conversation with an American couple, John and Colleen, in the sitting room as raindrops the size of acorns soak the earth and thunder growls throatily overhead.

The wild weather makes the room even more inviting. A fire crackles, the sofas are so soft it’s hard not to sink into a stupor, and tea arrives courtesy of a team who seem to know exactly what you want before you ask. On the walls, the art is a shrine to gorillas: faces stare out from photographs, ranges are traced on framed maps of the country’s national parks and their presence is immortalised in a row of remarkably lifelike wooden masks.

For an hour, we marvel at our encounters; their soulful expressions, how even a casual back scratch feels profound. But when cameras are lowered and conversation turns to economics, the mood shifts. Twenty percent of park entry fees go to surrounding communities, John confirms after a quick Google, but not everyone feels the benefits. Behind the success story of gorilla tourism lies another less celebrated tale: that of the Batwa, a people who have shouldered the hidden cost of conservation.

One of Africa’s oldest forest-dwelling tribes, the Batwa lived in harmony with mountain gorillas for centuries, sustaining a hunter-gatherer culture deep in the heart of the jungle. When the land was declared a national park in 1991, they were forcibly — and controversially — evicted without compensation. Cast out from their ancestral home, the so-called ‘pygmy people’ have faced bullying and exclusion, struggling to find a place in society.

When the storm subsides and birds once again take up their tuneful whistling in the lodge’s gardens, I head out to meet the Batwa for myself. The village of 32 families was funded entirely by Volcanoes, many of whom are now employed by the safari business. My guide, Deus, is one of them, a smartly dressed 18-year-old with serious eyes and a stoicism that seems to define this community.

“My parents were born in the jungle,” he says. “We didn’t need to be taught about conservation, my people lived and breathed it. We respected the forest and the forest respected us. We’re used to our lives now but my mum still misses the wild honey; she’s determined nothing else tastes the same.”

We stroll between mud-brick homes, pausing first to greet Jane, the village chairwoman, before stopping beside a lady peeling potatoes beneath the shade of a thatched roof. Cloaked in a colourful shawl, she works with steady rhythm while two piglets snuffle at her feet, grunting with pleasure as they gobble the scraps she tosses aside.

“The gorillas were our neighbours,” she reminisces. “When I used to pick passionfruit for my family, I’d often stand beneath the trees and the gorillas would drop them down to me. One for them, one for me. We just knew that when they made their beds in the evening, that was the time to keep our distance. After all, everyone wants a good night’s sleep.”

The story is extraordinary — proof of the bonds that are possible with these great apes and a reminder of just how human they are. This startling familiarity follows me when I next venture into the forest, this time in Bwindi, a bone-rattling four-hour drive north.

UNLIKELY PROTECTORS

Led by a rifle-wielding guard and followed by sure-footed porters carrying our rucksacks, we’ve been walking through Bwindi Impenetrable Forest for over an hour. The name is apt. The jungle here feels indomitable, a living being that tests every step and swallows our voices whole. Above, the canopy



GORILLAS SHARE MORE THAN 98% OF THEIR DNA WITH HUMANS, MAKING THEM OUR SECOND-CLOSEST LIVING RELATIVES AFTER CHIMPANZEES. THEY LAUGH WHEN TICKLED, SULK WHEN UPSET AND SHOW AFFECTION BY HOLDING HANDS — A REFLECTION OF JUST HOW THIN THE LINE IS BETWEEN THEIR WORLD AND OURS

IMAGE: MATT MIDWORTH



arches like a vast ribcage, while roots coil beneath my boots in knotted veins, and sinewy vines spill from trees covered in thick, mossy pelts.

It’s all-four-limbs work, our hands groping for branches as we scramble up mudbanks left slick by a morning downpour. Our guide Sylvia, however, is as formidable as the forest, marching ahead with her machete and hacking down anything bold enough to bar her path. “Watch that ant trail,” she calls over her shoulder. “Step on it and you’ll be dancing without music. And look up — there’s L’Hoest’s monkeys in the mahogany.”

Torn between earth and sky, I risk the driver ants’ wrath and watch as the troop swaggers loose-limbed along a branch, their black-and-white fur frizzy with mist. “We’re close to the gorillas now,” she calls, taking a great swipe at the spiked stem of a giant lobelia. “The trackers are up ahead. We call them the heroes; they’ve been out since dawn to find this family.”

This time, there’s no open clearing to lounge in. The gorillas are buried in undergrowth so thick that when two babies come barrelling out from behind a tree and crash straight into my legs, I’m as startled as they are. Delighted by their discovery, they wobble back over, tiny hands reaching to cling onto me again.

“Careful, they’ll have your phone in a minute,” a tracker named Godfrey says with a laugh as I back away. “That teenager over there stole mine once; it took me hours to find him and when I did, he’d somehow got onto Spotify and was listening to reggae.”

Godfrey, I quickly learn, is the joker of the group. “Who was that, come on own up,” he teases as a fart ripples through the undergrowth. Behind the laughter, though, lies pride: he’s Batwa, intent on turning his ancestral knowledge into purpose. “I used to come to the jungle so often with my father that this job just made sense. Plus, I love the gorillas. Now I spend every day with them, knowing my work helps secure their future.”

We spend an hour with the family, a living tableau unfolding beneath the trees. Babies wriggle in their mothers’ arms, the phone-thieving teenager earns a cuff from his father after snatching at some eucalyptus, and low rumbles pass between them, a constant chorus of domestic chatter rolling through the jungle. “They’re very talkative today,” Sylvia grins. “The silverback is making sure they’re all content and close.” It’s family life at its purest — tender, chaotic and profoundly human.

My final meeting proves just as inspiring, introducing me to perhaps the most unlikely gorilla guardians of all. At the park gate Francis greets me with his broad, familiar smile, Brenda beside him. Both belong to the Gorilla Organization and together we drive to the outskirts of Rubuguri village, where a huddle of men in their Sunday best waits to greet us. Ten years ago, they were poachers, dodging forest patrols, slipping past herds of territorial elephants and hunting bushmeat to sell on the black market.

“We spent a long time teaching them why conservation matters,” Brenda explains. “But we also bought land for them and trained them in organic farming. Why would you stop poaching if you’re desperate, if there’s no other way to feed your family?”

The men stand beaming, gesturing proudly to neat rows of Irish potatoes, lines of baby aubergines and sprawling beds of onions. “We were wild, living like the animals we hunted,” Kanezio says, adjusting his bowler hat and straightening his bomber jacket. “Look at us today though. We sell what we grow, we can send our children to school, and we teach other men that’s there’s a way out.”

What was once a tide of poaching has ebbed to a trickle, just two percent of its former scale and a change shaped largely by men like these. “We know our communities, we can get through to them,” Kanezio continues. “We also alert rangers when something’s amiss or when we hear rumours poachers are trying to enter the park.”

Now, the group stands not as predators but as protectors — a living reminder of how lives and outlooks can be transformed. When I ask Kanezio how he sees gorillas, he smiles. “Today, we are friends,” he says softly. “Today, we are one.”

**HOW TO DO IT:** A stay at Volcanoes Safaris’ Mount Gahinga Lodge, on the edge of Mgahinga National Park, costs from around £570 per person in low season, including full board and lodge activities. [volcanoessafaris.com](http://volcanoessafaris.com) Gorilla-trekking permits are around £600 per person and include park entry. The easiest way to reach Bwindi and Mgahinga is via Entebbe International Airport. Uganda Airlines flies direct from London Gatwick, while internal connections to Kisoro and Kihiki airstrips — the closest to the gorilla parks — are offered by Aerolink Uganda, reducing the journey from a ten-hour drive to under an hour. [ugandairlines.com](http://ugandairlines.com) [aerolinkuganda.com](http://aerolinkuganda.com)

**To support the work of the Gorilla Organization and help secure the future of mountain gorillas, visit [gorillas.org](http://gorillas.org)**

Clockwise from top: With its volcanic soils, abundant rainfall and year-round sunshine, Uganda can grow almost anything; Kanezio turned away from poaching and is proud of the farmer he’s become; the terrace at Mount Gahinga Lodge looks out towards Mount Sabyinyo, a peak shared by Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo

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