I WENT GORILLA TREKKING IN RWANDA – HERE'S HOW I DID IT!

Posted by Kwin Mosby | Sep 23, 2022 | Countries, Destinations, Experiences, Nature, Travel Interest, Wildlife | 2 💬

If you're an adventurous traveler who enjoys observing wildlife in its natural habitat, then you should consider adding gorilla trekking in Rwanda to your travel bucket list!

Bucket list experiences and exclusive outdoor excursions of a lifetime are plentiful in Africa. From tracking the Great Migration along the Serengeti in Tanzania to spotting the elusive white rhino on a game drive in the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya, Africa offers unique bucket list experiences that attract wildlife enthusiasts and conservationists from around the world. But one outdoor adventure in Africa that you can't miss out on, if given the opportunity, is trekking for mountain gorillas.

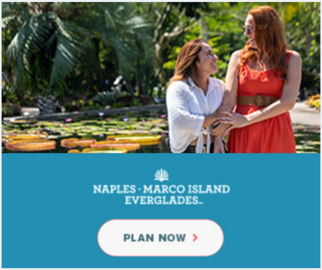
VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK
Welcome to Kinigi Head quarters

Volcanoes National Park Kinigi Headquarters (Photo Credit: MilanoPE / Shutterstock)

MOUNTAIN GORILLAS IN VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK

I recommend adding a mountain gorilla trek to your itinerary when visiting Rwanda. Why here? Because in comparison to Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, it's safe and relatively accessible to have an up-close and personal encounter in Volcanoes National Park, home to 12 gorilla families: Susa, Igisha, Karisimbi, Sabyinyo, Amahoro, Agashya, Kwitonda, Umubano, Hirwa, Bwenge, Ugyenda, and Muhoza.

The family groups (or troops) usually consist of one silverback along with several females and young gorillas. And if you're lucky, you may get the chance to not only attend the annual **Kwita Izina Ceremony** and meet one or more of the newly named baby mountain gorillas as I did. If the pics below of baby boy Baho of the Susa family won't convince you of that; I'm not sure what will.



(Photo Credit: Sucheta Rawal)

(Photo Credit: Kwin Mosby)

Gorilla treks are offered based on fitness levels.

BOOK YOUR TREK IN ADVANCE

The Rwanda Development Board organized a press trip that included a gorilla trek at the end of the trip. I was so grateful for the experience. Apparently, only eight tracking permits are issued per gorilla family per day to ensure the encounter is as intimate as possible. So, with only 96 permits available each day, I'd recommend booking a mountain gorilla trek in advance **online** or via a **reputable tour operator**.

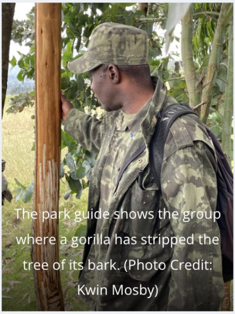
Ten percent of the revenue from the permits goes to local communities to build schools, health centers, and roads. There is also a compensation fund for local farmers should any gorillas damage their crops, which helps to ensure peaceful co-existence between the locals and the mountain gorillas.

One major tip to remember: be sure you check with your tour operator to ensure that your transportation has 4-wheel drive. During the rainy season, backroads – on the way to the starting point of your trek – can be muddy and impassible without it.

Ok, brace yourself for the sticker shock, but a guided gorilla trek costs $1500 per person, and the price does not include the $10 to $25 tip for the park guides, gorilla trackers, and porters.

Porters are available to lend a helping hand and carry your bags if necessary. (Photo Credit: Kwin Mosby)

Listening to gorilla protocols prior to crossing the park entrance. (Photo Credit: Sucheta Rawal)


The park guide shows the group where a gorilla has stripped the tree of its bark. (Photo Credit: Kwin Mosby)

VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK HEADQUARTERS

Depending on where your lodging is located, you should be prepared to wake up early in the morning to arrive at Volcanoes National Park headquarters in Kinigi at 7 am. If you're staying in Kigali, you should plan for a two-hour drive to the park.

When you arrive at park headquarters, your park ranger or guide will brief you and your group on protocols and rules for visiting the gorillas. While you're here, you can also rent and get fitted for gaiters – used to keep critters out of your shoes and pants – onsite at park headquarters for $5.

Hikers should use the restroom before leaving the park headquarters because the drive from Volcanoes National Park to the set location where your gorilla trek will officially begin can be more than a 30-minute drive. So, if you have to go, prepare to relieve yourself in the bush.

By the way, gorilla treks are based on level of fitness – easy, intermediate, and hard – and the level is also dependent on which specific family you want to see. Some gorilla families may be located in an area where you may have a long drive from headquarters and/or a grueling trek before you spot a furry primate. Hikes can range from 30 minutes to four or more hours, reaching an altitude of between 8,200 feet to 13,120 feet.

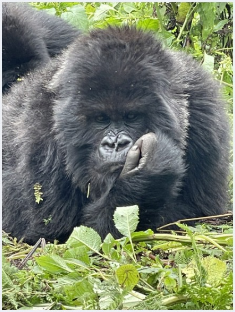
Susa Family of Mountain Gorillas (Photo Credit: Kwin Mosby)

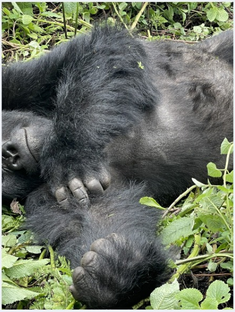
THE MOUNTAIN GORILLA TREK

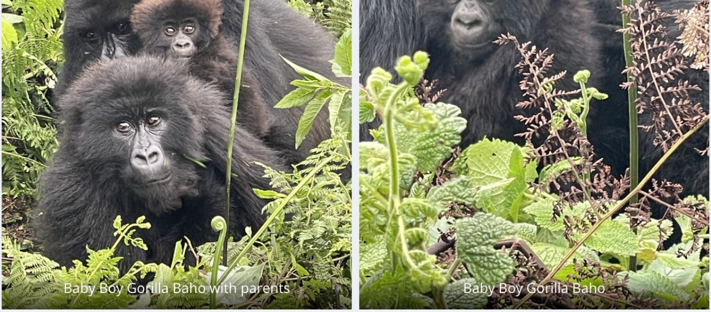
I was with a group (no more than eight people allowed) that did the easy trek to see the Susa family. After about a 30-minute drive from park headquarters, we started our 40-minute climb to the park border. The park ranger was good about breaking up the gradual steep incline with a few stops along the way to talk about agriculture, beekeeping, local community, and visible clues where gorillas had been. The short informative chats provide a break for people who need to take a breath, especially as the group ascends to higher altitudes. Remember that porters are available to provide a helping hand and carry your backpack, bag, and camera if necessary.

A mountain gorilla tracker met us at the stone entrance of the park, but before leading us through the park entrance onto the Uruvumvu Trekking Trail, the park ranger (our guide) gave us a few tips before our gorilla encounter: no pointing, keep talking to a minimum (whisper), stay 21 feet (7 meters) away from the gorillas, and make specific sounds to communicate to the mountain gorillas that we were friendly and not a threat to them.

The tracker cleared our path with a machete as we followed through a path of overgrown bush and we were told not to touch the stinging nettle plants, known to burn your skin. After 10 to 15 minutes of trekking, the ranger alerted us to stop for a water and snack break because we were near the Susa family of gorillas. We left our backpacks and hiking sticks with the group of porters, and in less than a minute, we were face-to-face with mountain gorillas.





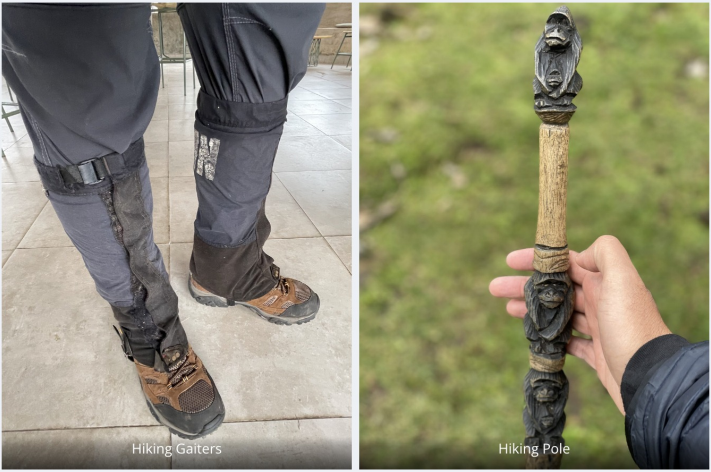

Baby Boy Gorilla Baho with parents

Baby Boy Gorilla Baho

(Photo Credit: Kwin Mosby)

It was an incredible experience to be so close to them as they lounged around resting, sleeping, or grooming one another. And as I mentioned before, the best part was also seeing the baby boy gorilla who had been named Baho only nine days earlier at the Kwita Izina Gorilla-Naming Ceremony. The ranger and tracker were quick to tell us to keep our distance if we got too close and also made audibles to signify to the family that we were non-threatening and friendly.

My gorilla trekking adventure was an unforgettable experience that allowed me (and other members of my group) to observe mountain gorillas in their natural habitat, unphased by an inquisitive group of visitors. If you visit Rwanda, this is a must-do activity that you should definitely add to your trip itinerary. You'll thank me later!


Hiking Gaiters

Hiking Pole

Gaiters and a hiking pole are just a few items to pack for a mountain gorilla trek in Rwanda. (Photo Credits: Kwin Mosby)

Gorilla Trekking Packing List:

- Sturdy or heavier clothing
- N-95 mask (protect gorillas from COVID-19)
- Comfortable, breathable socks
- Sturdy waterproof hiking boots
- Hiking gaiters
- Lightweight waterproof rain jacket or poncho
- Sun hat or cap
- Wear glasses instead of contact lenses
- Garden clothes (to avoid direct contact with stinging nettle plants)
- Drawstring bag (for water bottle, snacks, sunscreen, and insect repellent)
- Walking stick or hiking pole (usually provided)
- Cash to tip the porters, guides, and trackers

Check out Visit Rwanda's website for more information about gorilla trekking and other outdoor adventures Rwanda has to offer.

Editor's Note: *In Rwanda, homosexuality and homosexual acts are not illegal; however, the subject is taboo and there is no legislative protection for LGBTQ+ citizens. Same-sex marriage is also not recognized. As with any travel planning, you should research any desired destination (LGBTQ+-friendly or not) before your visit – using your best judgment based on your comfort level and research is paramount.*