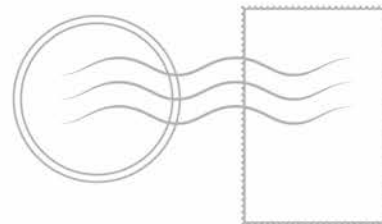


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Gorilla trekking through Bwindi Impenetrable National Park is nature at its most primal, discovers **Meera Dattani**

It's only a silverback – just one of the world's largest living primates. He's a few metres away, chomping on leaves. He looks content, but we hikers are beaming.

That's why gorilla tracking is so sought after – it feels primal, standing this close to a creature that shares 95% of your DNA. We fall silent as he knuckle-walks along the forest floor. Our guides spot a mother and her babies, with only the click of cameras interrupting the spell cast over us.

It is magical, but with permits costing \$600 (\$700 from July 1), facts and expectations are paramount. About 150 permits are available daily, with no group exceeding eight people, so booking ahead is key.

There are two populations of mountain gorillas in the world: a 604-strong group in the Virunga mountains, across Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo; and about 400 in Bwindi. Clients set off from one of four trail heads, then trek to the gorilla families and spend an hour with them; more expensive habituation experiences give you more time.

It's high-end ecotourism that funds conservation and guide training. Gorilla numbers are rising, and their status has changed from critically endangered to endangered, though guides, trackers and porters still earn very little.

There has been a human cost too: creating the national park meant relocating the forest-dwelling Batwa tribe or pygmies into villages. A few have been compensated but for many, it's been a harsh adjustment to a very different lifestyle. Batwa cultural experiences provide an interesting and important perspective.

Treks vary in difficulty, but it's worth paying a porter – \$15 to carry your daypack can be the difference between enjoyment and endurance. Hikers can also request less-challenging treks to easier-to-find gorilla groups. Trackers go out daily to monitor locations, but nothing's guaranteed – one group spotted gorillas within 60 minutes, while we spent seven hours in the forest.

One word of advice for clients: take a few snaps for Instagram, then put the phone away and enjoy the thrill of being so close to one of man's closest relatives. **TW**



BOOK IT

The price of a gorilla-tracking permit rises to \$700 on July 1, with habituation experiences from \$1,500, plus a \$40 park entrance fee. Operators such as Rainbow Tours, Somak, Abercrombie & Kent and Tucan Travel generally include permit fees with trekking experiences, but clients are advised to book well in advance.

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TOP: A mother gorilla and baby
ABOVE: Meera with one of the guides