





The world's mountain gorillas live in three neighbouring countries. Rwanda, top right, is home to the most famous population, thanks to the movie Gorillas in the Mist. Uganda is home to two large groups, and the rest reside in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where active volcano Mount Nyiragongo, below, also draws adventurous travellers. PHOTOS BY STUART BUTLER

## Face to face with greatness

Getting close to the world's endangered mountain gorillas is not cheap or easy, Stuart Butler writes. But it is worth it

he cloying, knee-deep mud felt as if it was alive. It sucked Welly boots off feet, grabbed at legs and caused its victims to tumble face down into a dense, knotted undergrowth. I was just trying to work out whether that last fall had been the eighth or ninth time I'd tumbled into a patch of nettles when my guide paused, cocked his head and listened, "They're just up ahead," he whispered to our small group. We all craned our necks in the general direction in which he pointed. Nothing happened. Then, cautiously at first, the undergrowth moved, leaves parted and the dark shaggy face of a critically endangered mountain gorilla locked his piercing orange-red eyes onto us.

To stand eyeball to eyeball with Africa's great apes is unquestionably one of the greatest wildlife experiences on Earth, but one that requires careful planning and consideration. Here's what you need to know before rushing out on your own King Kong adventure.

WHERE AND WHEN

Mountain gorillas live in the cool, upper reaches of a handful of volcanoes and mountains in Uganda, Rwanda and the massive Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The parks in which they're found abut each other, but the viewing experience varies greatly between each country. Although it's possible to visit any time of year, the best period is roughly between June to January, which corresponds to the dry sea-

COST

In Rwanda, gorilla tracking permits currently go for US\$1,500 (\$1,990) a person. Uganda charges US\$600 and in Congo it's a comparatively reasonable US\$400. Bargain hunters take note. Between mid-October and mid-December, Congo offers cheaper permits for US\$200. Your time with the animals will be limited to just one hour, which is valid only for the day stated on the permit. (If you're worried about not finding the gorillas on the day of your visit, then fear not. They are tracked by rangers constantly and you will see them). The only exception to this rule is in Uganda, which offers an experience (US\$1,500) where just six guests a day get to spend around four hours with a group of gorillas in the final stages of the habituation process (getting them used to the presence of people for tourism and research purposes).

Most travellers to East Africa arrive through Europe or the Middle East. Numerous specialist tour operators offer gorilla safaris, but one of the best regarded is the award winning Natural World (naturalworldsafa-Safaris ris.com). Many of their primatewatching tours include multiple countries, but they also offer

more focused itineraries. An eight-day Uganda safari starts at £5,035 (\$8,837), while the same length for Rwanda begins at £10,890 (both rates per person, based on double occupancy; flights not included). If you're headed to the Congo, Kivu Travel (kivutravel.net) is a market leader (2019 tours relaunching soon).

## **RWANDA**

The original home of those Gorillas in the Mist of Hollywood fame, Rwanda is the country most closely associated with the big apes. There are 10 families of habituated gorillas in Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park, and they are so accustomed to tourists that they almost seem to regard people as an everyday part of the forest. This means that they'll sit there happily chewing jungle leaves while you click away with a camera from a few metres away. Increasingly aimed at a top-end tourism market, everything about primate viewing in Rwanda is easy and comfortable. For example, if you don't have the stamina to hack through montane forests for hours on end, you can normally find a group just a short walk from the national park entrances. Other plus points are that the gorillas are only a twohour drive along good quality highways from the international airport in the capital, Kigali.

## WHAT ELSE?

When you're done with the gorillas, other activities such as tracking groups of beautiful golden monkeys and cultural village visits can easily fill another couple of days in the park.

## WHERE TO STAY

In terms of accommodation, no other gorilla country does it quite as well as Rwanda. Its growing ar-





