





Black beauties

LANCE RICHARDSON'S WALK IN THE CLOUDS
LEADS TO AN INTIMATE ENCOUNTER
WITH RWANDA'S MOUNTAIN GORILLAS.

THERE IS NO HORIZON,
JUST LAND RISING AND FALLING IN WAVES OF STEEP HILLS
THAT SEEM TO STRETCH FOREVER.

Afrika, my driver-guide, lets out a staccato laugh and shakes his head beneath a straw hat. "There are hills everywhere in Rwanda," he says, miming a curve with one hand. "Even in your bedroom, you find hills!"

From our truck we see Kigali, Rwanda's capital, giving way to groves of eucalyptus trees imported from Australia to slow erosion. Fields of maize and potatoes are terraced down the hillsides. Everything is so tidy it has the sheen of a dream world, thanks to a law that compels all Rwandans to clean their country on the last Saturday of every month. Children wave from the sides of the road, shouting "Muraho!" (hello). Women hold up umbrellas against the sun. Men steer bicycles laden with jerry cans of water. Soon my ears pop; it seems we're ascending into the clouds.

Our destination is far north-west Rwanda, where an imposing chain of volcanoes, the Virunga Massif, sprawls across 450 square kilometres over the borders of three countries: Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo). Rwanda's section of the massif is called Volcanoes National Park. Afrika points through the windscreen, indicating dark peaks looming in the distance, and incants the magic words I've been waiting to hear since we left the airport: "That's where the gorillas are."

(Previous page)
Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park is one of the few locations in the world where mountain gorillas live

View of the Virunga Massif from the town of Gisenyi on Lake Kivu



Art Wolfe (previous page), Pablo Porciuncula

IT'S impossible to say exactly how many mountain gorillas remain in the wild, though current estimates put the figure at about 880. There are no mountain gorillas in captivity; the ones you see in zoos are lowland gorillas, a different subspecies. Mountain gorillas live nowhere in the world except in the Virunga Massif and Uganda's aptly named Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. Populations appear to have stabilised in recent years but the animals remain critically endangered, besieged by multiple foes.

One by one, the trees they rely on for shelter and food are being cut down. Poachers have stolen infant gorillas to sell on the black market as recently as 2013 and have inadvertently killed mountain gorillas in illegal snares intended for antelopes or bush pigs. Oil and gas exploration has become a serious concern. Disease and human warfare are perennial dangers. Almost all of these issues are focused in DR Congo, where more than 150 rangers have been killed in the past decade trying to protect Virunga National Park. "You must justify why you are here on Earth," a ranger declared as rebels closed in around him in the 2014 documentary *Virunga*. "Gorillas justify why I am here."

Unlike DR Congo, Rwanda is safe for foreign travellers. And, by coming here, travellers make the forest safer for gorillas. To visit the animals in Volcanoes National Park, non-nationals must secure an official gorilla permit from the government for \$US750 (about \$980). Visitors then provide money to local communities by purchasing accommodation and souvenirs. Given alternative sources of income, Rwandans are no longer forced to plunder their forest for resources or to clear even more gorilla habitat to plant pyrethrum, a white flower sold for insecticide production. In other words, tourism here has become a form of passive conservation. By visiting Volcanoes National Park, travellers affirm to Rwandans that wild gorillas have value in their own right. As Afrika tells me, "Gorillas are our gold."



SABYINYO SILVERBACK LODGE

So named because it sits near the base of Mount Sabyinyo, an extinct volcano in the Virunga Massif, Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge is remarkable for the view, which is so extraordinary it seems to be painted; for the service, which is so attentive the staff will scrub your muddy hiking boots; and for the fact that it's owned by local community trust Sacola.

The hotel, built by a partnership between the African Wildlife Foundation and the Rwanda Development Board, is not just a terrific accommodation option – fireplaces, hot water bottles, three-course dinners and good wine – but also a way of supporting the community. Money from each guest's nightly rate goes towards building schools, clinics and solar panels, as well as education about gorilla conservation.

On request, be paired with a guide for a stroll through town to buy from local craftspeople. You'll end up with an entourage of curious children – give out inflatable soccer balls if you want to brighten their day.

The morning after our drive across the country, Afrika takes me to Musanze, a bustling town not far from the entrance to the national park. He collects my passport to register me for the trek and I join about 30 other travellers gathered in an open-air pavilion. Fresh local coffee is supplied and everyone watches a group of dancers, though my eyes keep drifting beyond them to the volcano with a cloud perched on its summit like half an orange on a juicer.

Soon we're divided into groups of about six. Each group is assigned a Rwandan guide and a gorilla family (there are 10 families habituated enough to receive daily visitors). Our guide is Denise and the family we'll be hiking up to visit is Amahoro, which means "peace". Denise explains that Amahoro will see us for just one hour, as stress can shorten a gorilla's life span.

Amahoro recently had 18 members, Denise says, including three silverbacks. The leader is Mr Gahinga. Denise points to his dark face on a photographic family tree, which reminds me of the opening credits of *The Brady Bunch*, albeit a tragic version. "Ubumwe died," she goes on, running her finger from one square to the next. "So his brother, Kajoriti, became leader but he has a missing hand – poaching – so then Gahinga became leader. His brother, Miriero, became angry with that and left, followed by Kajoriti. Then Kajoriti returned. The family hated him, though, and beat him so badly he left again."

Our group climbs into trucks and we drive 50 minutes to the base of Mount Bisoke, an active volcano that straddles the Rwandan-Congolese border. Bisoke looks perilously steep, its summit rising 3700 metres above sea level. Already feeling the onset of altitude sickness, I accept a walking stick. A porter named Innocent shoulders my camera bag. Afrika just smiles. Serenely, he takes a Bible from the dashboard and nods towards a mud church filled with the sounds of hallelujah. "While you are struggling with gorillas," he tells me, "I will struggle with Jesus."

The hike is breathtaking – literally. The air is thinner than I like my air to be. I begin to sweat as I trail Denise through fields of pyrethrum. A man in a blue suit wanders by, oblivious to the muck sloshing over his leather shoes. Some children fly a makeshift kite. A young boy pushes a toy truck made from a milk carton, calling "*Murakaza neza!*" (welcome).

Volcanoes National Park is divided from the human world by a wall of piled stones. A ranger sits on the top, waiting for us. There are buffalo in the park, Denise explains, when I ask why the ranger is carrying an enormous rifle. "You can never be too careful," she says.



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The bamboo forests and hagenia woodlands of Volcanoes National Park are home to 10 habituated mountain gorilla families



In my notebook, the next two hours are mostly a blur. Mud splatters the pages, signalling where I slip and fall on the ascending track. Where the pen strokes jerk, it means “ant bite” or “stinging nettle infiltrating my pants”. One page is wiped out by a branch. A giant earthworm lies in the sun but, for the rest of us, the hike is about as relaxing as a visit to Jurassic Park. When the Ngezi trail reaches a high point, the view opens out over an impenetrable coat of forest, as though the volcano itself has fur. Mount Bisoke inspires awe in the strictest sense: reverential wonder tinged with fear. I find the jungle both beautiful and terrible.

Eventually, trackers appear on the path ahead; the men have found the Amahoro family and radioed the gorillas’ location to headquarters so we know which trail to follow. Denise raises her hand, warning that we should “be prepared”: we will see the gorillas in a few minutes. Then she goes over the rules a final time. Do not bring anything except your camera. Maintain a safe distance. “If a gorilla attacks you, maybe doesn’t like you, your beard [she gestures at me], don’t panic. Submit. Make this sound.” She lowers her head and grunts dolefully. “Got it?”

Not really. I’m not prepared; I think preparation is mostly impossible in a situation like this. One moment you’re walking along a difficult trail, trying not to fall over, and the next minute there’s a presence all around you.

We creep into a dim thicket of bamboo. In the moment it takes for my eyes to adjust, a black shape spins past me in playful circles. When I focus, I see it’s a small gorilla. More than a dozen older ones sit around as quiet as buddhas. It’s as though we’ve stumbled upon a meditation practice.

I feel my body begin to numb as if I’m going into shock. They are so close I could touch them. Within seconds, however, the gorillas retreat into foliage, vanishing as if by magic, one after the other. Determined not to lose them, we break through the grove into a clearing as a large silverback

moves purposefully to a new vantage point. Suddenly, he stands up and takes hold of a branch with a hand uncannily like my own. I step backwards – and Denise reaches out to grab my shoulder. “Excuse me, Mr Lance,” she says. “Please do not move. She is right behind you with a baby.”

Slowly, I turn my head. A mother is pressing her body against my calves, wanting to get past. With all the deference of a servant towards the Queen, I move aside, lowering my head. Please, after you! The mother drifts past as her baby eyeballs me suspiciously.

The other gorillas reappear as quickly as they left. There’s a tangle of black fur wherever I look. Some of the animals huddle together. Others splinter off to graze alone. They know we are here, of course, but it’s the way humans are with birds: we see them but don’t mind their presence – unless they try to steal our food. Denise ensures we stay away from the feast of grass so there’s no misunderstanding.

By the end of the hour, I sense something has changed. My hands are shaking. I’m lightheaded. My heart has that unsteady murmur that comes with too many espressos. I think of altitude sickness, by now invading my senses like water soaking into a sponge. But I understand something else: after an encounter almost defying description, this is what it means to feel overwhelmed. ●

Bench Africa (benchafrika.com.au) offers a three-day itinerary in Rwanda to see the gorillas, including accommodation in Kigali and at Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge (see previous page), some meals, local drinks, park fees and airport transfers. The gorilla permit is not included and only 80 are issued per day so you need to book in advance.



Flight path

KGL

Qantas flies to Dubai from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, with connections via partner airlines to Kigali. qantas.com