

Keeping the World's Last Mountain Gorillas Safe During COVID-19

By Jennifer Flowers

Gorilla trekking in Rwanda—with a number of new rules in place.

Just 10 minutes after climbing over the volcanic stone wall, we found the mountain gorillas.

I was on the outskirts of Volcanoes National Park, a 62-square-mile rain forest in the Virunga Mountains of northwestern Rwanda, home to some of the world's last remaining great apes. I was joined by four other wide-eyed trekkers and our porters—one of them the barrel-chested Francois Bigirimana, a former porter for the famed late primatologist Dian Fossey. Bigirimana's perpetual smile emanated from crinkled eyes above his face mask.

My eyes fell first on the silverback male of the 16-member Muhoza family, one of the park's 20 resident families.

Marambo was surrounded by his wives and children, napping face down, his enormous thumb—so humanlike—propping up his forehead. Even from a few dozen feet away, the massive creature felt so close to me, with nothing between us but a tangle of green foliage.

Then, out of nowhere, one of the baby gorillas ran toward us, and my heart stopped in my chest. Before we could react, Bigirimana deftly hacked a path for us with his machete in the uneven forest terrain that led us away from the curious baby. Stinging nettles grazed my leg as I scrambled up a small incline to get out of reach, but the words of Bigirimana from our briefing earlier that morning kept me moving.

“If people catch coronavirus, they go to the hospital,” he had said. “If gorillas get coronavirus, they can't go to the hospital. They live in the jungle. If one dies, another dies, and another, until they're finished.”

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If someone had told me earlier this year that I'd be going on my first-ever gorilla trek during a pandemic, I would have laughed. But when Rwanda reopened its borders on August 1, thanks to successful COVID-19 case management and strict new health and travel protocols, my inner conservationist felt compelled to



travel there to get a firsthand look at Rwanda's new precautions to keep the virus from spreading to the vulnerable great apes—of which there are only 1,063 left in the world, spread out within habitats in Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda.

After navigating the [new realities of travel to Rwanda](#) with Nairobi-based **Micato Safaris, I set off for the tiny East African nation in September.**

COVID-19 isn't the first time mountain gorillas have been threatened by human disease, according to Tara Stoinski, president, CEO, and chief scientific officer of the [Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund](#). The potentially deadly coronavirus outbreak has, however, posed a serious new threat to the endangered apes.

“Because gorillas share 98 percent of our DNA, they are highly susceptible to human respiratory viruses,” says Stoinski, whose nonprofit group continues Fossey's conservation work in Rwanda and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. “COVID-19 has just made people more aware of what has always been a challenge with great ape tourism.”

For years, experts have continued to look for new ways to [reduce the risk of human respiratory viruses on great apes](#). [Up to 20 percent of deaths](#) among mountain gorillas are caused by respiratory illnesses, [according to gorilla doctors who work in the region](#). A flurry of YouTube videos in recent years depict curious gorillas touching humans who allow them to move close, which [some say](#) fuels a desire for uninformed viewers to have the same experience.

When the pandemic first appeared in Rwanda in March, new protocols for gorilla encounters began immediately at the research level. Gorilla experts and government officials considered the monitoring of the well-being of individual gorilla families essential work during the coronavirus, so they worked quickly to revise and enforce stricter new rules. When domestic tourism opened on June 17, the same protocols for researchers applied to recreational park visitors, according to Prosper Uwingeli, chief park warden of [Volcanoes National Park](#) since 2008.

“Experts say COVID-19 is not going anywhere, and no matter what, there will be other outbreaks after COVID-19,” he says. “We are not just waiting for the vaccine to come. We are thinking about all these precautionary measures now.”

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Since June, Volcanoes National Park has required proof of negative COVID-19 test results at the visitor center, a face mask at all times, and temperature checks and mandatory hand sanitizing at both the visitor center and at the park's entrance. Just before crossing into the park, and right before leaving it, guides now use spray bottles containing alcohol to sanitize the shoes of trekkers. Once inside and right before approaching a gorilla family, trekkers must put on new surgical masks provided by guides and sanitize their hands. (There is a strict no-contact policy with the gorillas, but this is an extra precautionary measure.) At the sighting itself, the old distancing rule from gorillas had been 23 feet, and now it's 33. And where the previous rule for visiting a single gorilla family was one group of up to eight people per day, the limit is now six so that guides can better manage the new distancing rules and sanitizing procedures.



For international travelers, the process begins long before entry into Volcanoes National Park: Foreign visitors must present two COVID-19 tests, one within 120 hours of departing for Rwanda, and one upon landing, which requires a quarantine of up to 24 hours until results come back. (The Rwandan government also tests all travelers 72 hours before their departure, to ensure that visitors didn't contract anything in-country.) According to Uwingeli, it's too early to say whether these new rules, which are reviewed every two weeks and adjusted if necessary, are here to stay following the global distribution of a COVID-19 vaccine, citing the fact that the park is only a few months into implementing them. But he emphasized that the health of the mountain gorillas—and the tourists—would remain the primary goal.

Even with these extra protocols and procedures, the benefits of tourism, when done right, far outweigh the risks.

"Tourism fuels conservation in Rwanda," says Stoinski, whose team in Rwanda is continuing its work through the pandemic to [launch its first permanent home](#), with a state-of-the-art research center and public exhibits, right next to the park in the second half of 2021. "It not only supports the parks where the gorillas live, but it also supports the other three national parks in Rwanda. And on top of that, it's a critical source of employment and income for the local communities that live near the gorillas who are guides or porters or work in hospitality."

According to [Visit Rwanda](#), the country saw more than 17,000 visitors to Volcanoes National Park in 2019; the revenue for gorilla tourism alone, which brings in the most park revenue by far, was \$107 million, up 59 percent in 2019 compared to the previous year. The majority of that income came from international gorilla trekking permits, which cost \$1,500 per person for a single hour with the gorillas. Ten percent of the revenue coming from gorilla permits goes directly to local communities in order for them to build local infrastructure such as schools and roads, and another 5 percent of permit revenue is set aside for compensation for crop damage due to wildlife.

This win-win relationship among tourism, communities, and gorilla conservation, led by President Paul Kagame—just 26 years after the genocide that killed close to 1 million people—has become a global role model for community-driven, government-supported wildlife conservation that, in nonpandemic times, also [fuels the country's overall economy](#). All decisions about tourism are approved by the Rwanda Development Board, a government-run organization responsible for encouraging growth in the private sector, under the advice of experts. In 2019, tourism made \$498 million in revenue and brought 1.6 million people into the country.

"There's recognition by the leadership of the country, all the way up to President Kagame himself, that nature is one of their most strategic assets," says Fred Swaniker, the Nairobi-based founder of [African Leadership University](#), an institute of higher learning with campuses in Rwanda and Mauritius, and satellite campuses across the continent, designed to teach ethical leadership and entrepreneurial skills to Africa's brightest young minds. "We need to look at nature as an economic asset and not just something that makes us feel good. If you are investing in something, it means you make it more abundant."

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Few people understand the advantageous connection between Rwandans and mountain gorilla conservation better than Uwingeli. Over the two decades that he has worked in Volcanoes, he has witnessed the park's evolution from a threatened area to a world-class tourism destination where locals benefit directly.



“There’s excitement from everyone now about the gorillas,” Uwingeli tells me the evening after my trek as we sat by the fireplace in the book-lined Conservation room at Singita Kwitonda Lodge, one of the newest luxury retreats to open next to Volcanoes. “The community now associates the park and the gorillas with schools getting built, new water tanks, electricity, roads—all of these things came right away. Not only have we seen government policies that work [for gorilla conservation], but we have also seen policies that care about people.”



When COVID-19 shut borders, there was concern that a lack of jobs could result in illegal bushmeat poaching in Volcanoes. (In Rwanda, there is no culture of hunting great apes for food, but often they are injured or killed by

traps set for other smaller forest animals.) So far, officials have not reported any significant upticks in poaching attempts since the pandemic began. Uwingeli isn’t surprised: Mountain gorillas have become such an important symbol of the nation’s identity and economic prosperity that each year the country holds a high-profile baby gorilla naming ceremony called [Kwita Izina](#). In 2019, more than 20,000 Rwandans were in attendance and Naomi Campbell, who made an appearance, named one. This year, the event was held virtually due to the pandemic, and most of the naming honors of the 24 new gorillas went to men and women who work in the park.

According to Uwingeli, 2020 was supposed to be a banner year for tourism to the park. To make up for lost international revenue, Rwanda has been more heavily promoting tourism to local audiences—[part of a broader trend in sub-Saharan Africa](#) to incentivize more domestic travelers to go on safari while international travel remains slow. Until December 31, 2020, the park has significantly discounted gorilla permits for Rwandans and Rwandan expats (currently they pay \$200 and \$400, respectively, down from the original \$1,500); international visitors still pay the full \$1,500.

The biggest profits won’t return until international travelers do, and so far, foreign visitors are a fraction of what they were. It’s raising larger questions about how Rwanda might protect its parks and surrounding communities in the event of another interruption in tourism. With this in mind, Rwanda’s Development Board is working to find new revenue streams outside of tourism to bridge those gaps. Such methods in discussion include joining an international fund, such as the [Global Environment Fund](#), a sustainability-minded private equity fund manager that could help with long-term financial planning for basic operations such as anti-poaching when tourism dollars aren’t coming in; there’s also talk about entering the carbon market.

Regardless, Rwanda’s ongoing efforts to evolve its sustainable tourism model reflects what Swaniker hopes to see on a broader level in Africa. COVID-19 is offering important lessons to all nations about the vital role tourism has in the future of the continent, he says.

“I think COVID-19 will end up being a wake-up call for governments in Africa that tourism is such a crucial part of the economy,” says Swaniker. “This moment is also reinforcing the need to look more broadly beyond tourism for conservation and to really think about all the different ways that you can build a wildlife economy.”