



WATIME OFF... RWANDA

Animal Magic

Adrian Mourby goes on the trail of mountain gorillas in Rwanda and sees how tourists are benefiting local communities

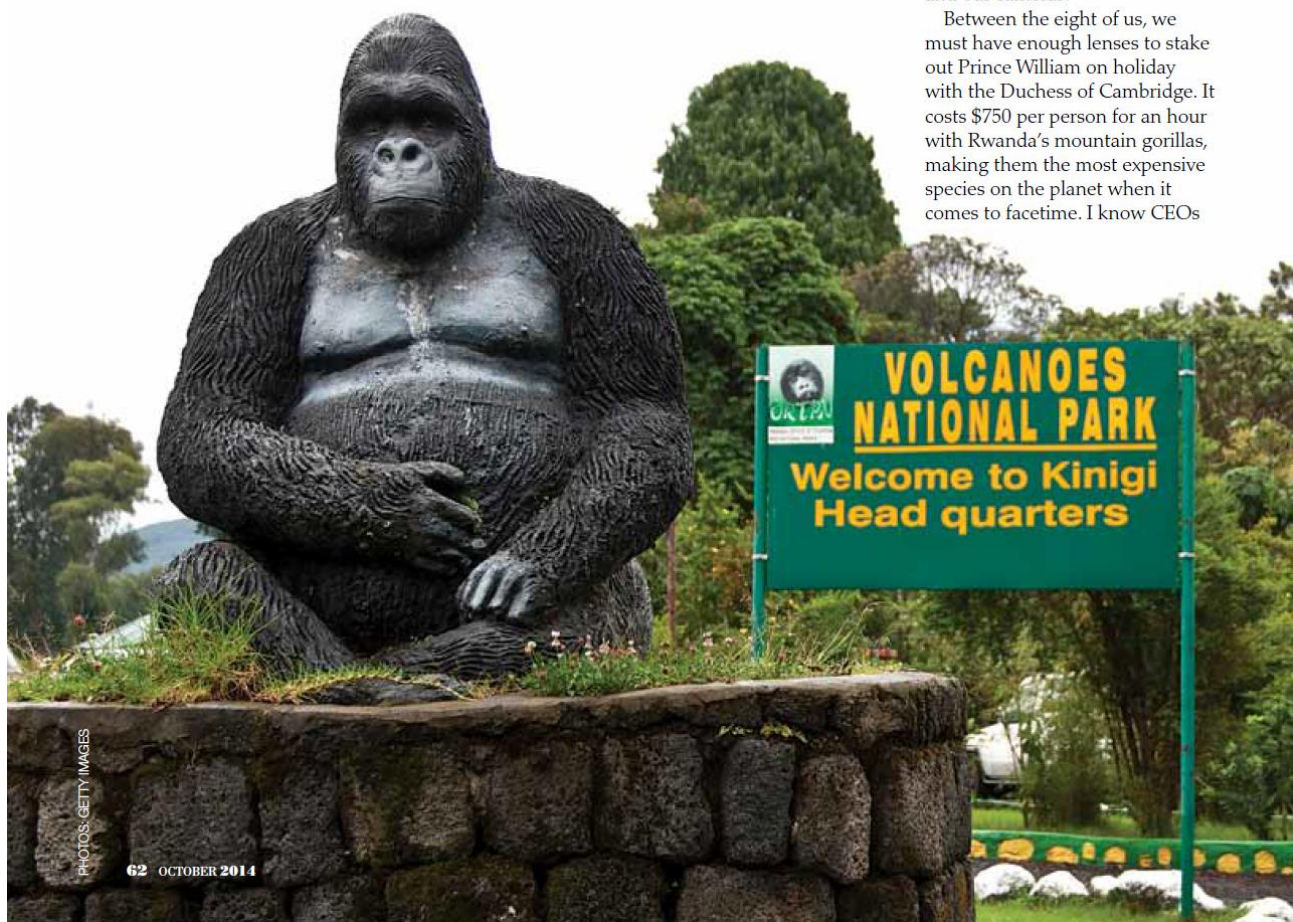
No-one said it was going to be easy tracking mountain gorillas. At 2,700m above sea level, the forest is dense and for the first few days you have the lung capacity of a chain-smoking octogenarian. Worse, flying ants

Below: Gorilla sculpture and sign at Kinigi Headquarters at Volcanoes National Park

have decided we're tasty. One of our party, a model from San Diego, screams silently as an ant disappears down her top. Adrienne's eyes pop but she dare not make a sound. We've been told the gorillas can smell us and we don't want to startle them. Already we've had to leave

our walking sticks behind with the porters because, according to Oliver our guide, mountain gorillas have a memory for spears. We've also left behind our backpacks and water bottles and, unfortunately for Adrienne, our insect repellent. From now on it's just us, Oliver, an armed guard and our cameras.

Between the eight of us, we must have enough lenses to stake out Prince William on holiday with the Duchess of Cambridge. It costs \$750 per person for an hour with Rwanda's mountain gorillas, making them the most expensive species on the planet when it comes to facetime. I know CEOs



PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

who don't earn that. So if your outlay is that huge, you really need a backup camera, just in case.

Rounding a clump of bamboo, I see our first primate, a two-and-a-half year old swinging nonchalantly from a branch above our heads. At this distance he – or she – resembles a fuzzy black barrel with long loping limbs.

"Female," whispers Oliver, as the child gazes down unconcernedly. Thankfully, mountain apes have no fear of us, although they have an intense dislike of doctors, associating them with pain. You never send the same vet twice to a family as they will drive him, or her, away aggressively. Before we know what is happening, the mother ape comes barrelling through the bushes, followed by a younger child. An adult female is not a big creature. Running on all fours she only comes up to my knees, but her shoulders are broad – and powerful – like a boxer's. On average a female weighs 120 kilos. That's a lot of muscle for someone just over four feet tall.

Cameras go into a frenzy but only one flash goes off, by mistake. Gorillas have no fear of the noise modern cameras make – in fact they probably think it's how humans talk to each other – but they will shout if your camera flashes.

We move on, ducking, stretching and weaving our way through the undergrowth until suddenly the silverback is before us. Boy is he big – 220 kilos says Oliver – and unlike his wives, he looks every kilo. His name is Karevuro (all the gorillas in Rwanda are named by their local communities) and if he stood upright he'd be about six feet three inches. But Karevuro isn't getting up any time soon. He is sitting with his back to us being groomed by two much smaller males.

Once again, cameras go into overdrive but Karevuro just chews on his root. A silverback gorilla consumes up to 35kg of vegetables a day. This is why there has been such a campaign to preserve their habitat. In Rwanda every bit of land is cultivated for subsistence

cropping. Fields become almost vertical as they edge up mountains that so a wall has been built, 74 metres long, to keep the animals – buffalo, gorilla and elephant – inside the national park but also to tell local farmers they can't fell trees or plant anything beyond this point.

Everyone is squatting down now to be photographed with the back of Karevuro's head. We're supposed to keep a seven metre distance between us and any gorilla, but that is not possible in this crush and in any case, no one has told the gorillas. One of the young males comes over and takes hold of Adrienne's leg out of curiosity. Oliver grunts at him, making the gorilla noise for "back off". The youngster scampers away on all fours. "He touched me!" whispers Adrienne in delight.

Now Karevuro decides to change position and shuffles round, shedding those who are grooming the fleas off him. He manifests no interest in us. With our tiny heads, ►

A silverback gorilla consumes up to 35kg of vegetables a day. This is why there has been such a campaign to preserve their habitat. In Rwanda every bit of land is cultivated for subsistence cropping.



Right: Karevuro is sitting with his back to us being groomed by two much smaller males



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feeble shoulders, pale skin and ridiculously long legs, we must seem puny. But we're all entranced. That massive head which merges into the biggest shoulders I've ever seen commands respect. Karevuro yawns showing huge canines that he uses only in fighting (they cut deep like a knife wound) and picks up a length of bamboo. One of his fuzzy acolytes – a child of three feet nothing – stands up and beats his chest to impress us, but Karevuro flicks him away with a huge black hand. There is only one alpha male in this part of the forest.

Half an hour later we are back down at the wall exhilarated, having seen 11 gorillas in total. They are magnificent creatures to look at, relaxed and playful with facial expressions that so closely resemble ours you're sure you know exactly what they're thinking. Best of all it's good to see creatures in the wild who have no fear of us. I got the feeling they quite liked Oliver bringing them some humans to look at every morning.

It wasn't always so. The mountain gorillas in the Virunga area that straddles Uganda, Rwanda and DR Congo were only

Top: Number one Silverback Mountain Gorilla (Gorilla gorilla beringei) of Kwitonda Group, Virunga Mountains, Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda

Top right: Porters carrying camera gear and day packs to visit the mountain gorillas

Right: Intore dancers at the annual gorilla-naming ceremony in Volcanoes National Park



discovered in 1902 and as a result of intense farming, hunting for trophies and capture for zoos, their numbers dwindled down to 300 when Dian Fossey took up their cause in the 1960s. The 1988 film of her book *Gorillas in the Mist* alerted Africa and the world to their plight. Now it is estimated there are 880 across the three countries.

That afternoon I meet one of the pioneers of gorilla tourism, Praveen Moman. As a child Praveen used to come to this area from his home in Uganda, at about the same time that Dian Fossey was doing her ground-breaking work (though he never met her). Praveen and his family were expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin in 1972 and he worked as advisor to the British government

and UN until he saw the 1994 Rwandan Genocide unfolding on television and knew he had to come back and do something.

He built lodges and trained staff so that Westerners could come and see the one great national resource that Uganda and Rwanda hadn't squandered: the mountain gorillas.

"In those days the hills were alive with the sound of bazookas," says Praveen with a smile. "I had to wait for the soldiers to tell me an area was safe for our guests and then we'd have to queue up for permits and drive in convoy with military escort."

Since Volcano Safaris took their first guests into the mist in 2000, Praveen has seen his business thrive but he admits it was a huge gamble.

"When I set this up we had ►

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to sell properties we owned in London because no one will lend you money in a conflict zone except at 20 per cent interest – with western property as collateral! My wife thought I was crazy. But if I'd taken on other investors, Volcano Safaris would have had to reflect their ideas too, and what I wanted to do was very personal and idiosyncratic."

Praveen admits that at first he wanted to recreate the Africa of his Ugandan childhood for guests with drop toilets, no electricity and rainwater showers. "Having seen the valley here full of refugees when I first arrived – people were coming through in their thousands and literally dying in front of me, I didn't feel we could make the lodges too refined, but I had to realise I wasn't the client."

Virunga and the three other eco-lodges that Volcanoes operate offer considerable comfort these days. "What people want is a mud hut with the Four Seasons inside," he laughs.

It's a complex undertaking providing solar-powered luxury at the end of extremely long lines of communication. "We are a 10-room hotel in the middle of nowhere," says Praveen. "And yet what I'm running is the Hilton Group with Land Rovers. Every

day we are inventing the wheel. Recently when designing window blinds for the new honeymoon suites I had to ask someone in London to buy eyelets in Rome and send them over."

But the most important challenge for Praveen has been getting the local community committed to its gorillas. "This is one of the most populated parts of Africa so it doesn't seem odd to me that you have to work with people. You have to give them an incentive to safeguard the animals. The local people here are not pro-animal. To them gorillas and buffalo are just creatures that come and eat their crops. We had to find ways to connect man and animals better."

One idea was to introduce beehives at its lodge in Kyambura. "If the elephants pass through the trees they disturb the hives and that causes the bees to attack them and so the elephants keep their distance from the village. Otherwise the people will kill the elephants."

For every visitor to one of his four lodges, Praveen donates \$100 to the local community and this is paying for electricity to be installed. "We have shown, I think, that the animals are what brings in the Westerners, and with Westerners comes the money to



improve village life because with electricity comes email and email enables youngsters to contact the outside world. When you walk down the street now people ask your name and then your email address and the next thing you know you are getting an email urging you to help with the cost of their education".

For a man who has risked his own livelihood to improve the lives of others, Praveen is remarkably light-hearted. "One old man thanked me for the electricity recently and said: "For years we used to sleep in darkness. Now we sleep in the light!" – I'm not sure how I feel about that, but life never turns out how you expect. I wanted to change the world and I've ended up running a global company!" ■

Above: Mountain Gorilla (Gorilla gorilla beringei) family socializing, Parc National des Volcans, Rwanda

Top: Virunga Lodge; Rooms