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the trip

PHOTOS BY SHARON LINDORES / NATIONAL POST



Elephants are just one of many animals you can see in Uganda.

Uganda calls itself the primate capital of the world — and while endangered species such as mountain gorillas and chimpanzees live in the wild here, so too do lions, elephants and hippos making it an excellent place to see a range of wildlife.

Add to that an array of landscapes from dry savannahs to dense rainforests and the scenery itself is reason enough to explore this country.

And what better way than on a road trip?

I join a group of six others on the Culture and Wildlife of Uganda and Rwanda trip. Run by Toronto-based travel operator G Adventures, it's one of 20 journeys in the Jane Goodall Collection, which focuses on protecting wildlife and has been endorsed by the world-renowned primatologist.

We set off in a bright, yellow Safari Land Cruiser. Driving out of the capital Kampala's suburbs, we pass seemingly impromptu markets at the side of the rusty-red road, people with bananas on their heads, and majestic-looking marabou storks.

SCENIC COUNTRYSIDE

The colourful outskirts of the city then give way to countryside with rolling hills, palm trees and occasionally baboons at the side of the road. There are some businesses too — with names like Hope Café, God's Barber and Destiny Financing.

Eventually I arrive at Kibale National Park — a massive forest that's home to 13 primate species, including more than 1,450 chimpanzees, 335 kinds of birds and 230 different types of trees.

Guide Alex Twinomugisha sports bright, turquoise rubber boots and carries a big gun as he takes my group into the rainforest in search of chimps. The gun is a precaution to keep us safe — if threatened he can shoot into the air to scare off any potential elephants or buffalo that might get too close.

But the only thing I see and hear are birds as we hike through the sun-dappled forest, over tree roots and under a bright green canopy of leaves. And then, before I know it, we find a group of chimpanzees. We wander around a small wooded area and find some sitting on logs, climbing trees and walking on all fours.

It's amazing to see them in their natural habitat. Some are on their own and some in groups of two to five — I lose track of how many I see, but am captivated by them all.

I'm still in awe when we return to the park's main entrance and I discover a handful of safari ants have come with me. The little critters (which bite) climbed over my hiking boots and have stubbornly glued themselves to my thick socks. It was a fantastic hike, but now I know why Twinomugisha wears tall rubber boots. The ants were the most threatening predator we came across.

In actual fact, hippos are among the country's and the continent's most deadly animals. I see them south of Kibale hanging out in Lake George in Queen Elizabeth National Park.

COOLING OFF

With their bulgy eyes and snouts bobbing above the water's surface they look innocent enough. I suppose in the midday heat the hippos really aren't bothered by my group on land. They're happily chilling in the lake. And they are chilling — it turns out that hippos don't swim. They can't even float, but they can stay almost completely submerged in water for a long time.

The third-largest animal after elephants and rhinoceros, they weigh about 3,300 to 4,000 pounds (1,500 to 1,800 kilograms) and stand about 4.5 feet (1.5 metres) tall. They spend most of the day bathing and venture out at night to graze. But if they want, they can run up to 15 km/hr in the water and 30 km/hr out of water and they will kill out of self-defense.

Queen Elizabeth Park is a marvel — its 1,978 sq. km area runs by the Rwenzori Mountains, along the flats of the East African Rift Valley and cross the equator. It boasts 95 different kinds of mammals (more than any other park in the country) and more than 600 species of birds in the savannah, forest and lakes.

The yellow van cruises around and my group all looks for wildlife. We're rewarded by seeing a number of large groups of cobs (African antelopes), water buffalo and even warthogs.

But the two lions, the leopard in the acacia tree and the elephant mother with her calf really took my breath away. To see them in the vast wilderness was remarkable.

And just when I thought it couldn't get better than this, it did.

I boarded a boat named Hippo and cruised along the banks of the park's main river passing even more

elephants, water buffalo and birds. Here I could move around the boat and I never had to be on the lookout because there was always something to look at either in the river, or at the water's edge.

Guide Brian Baturana pointed out everything including small crocodiles, the Nile monitor lizard and pelican fishers. Plus, there were elephants and water buffalo galore.

Between all of these activities, my group drove through the beautiful countryside, met friendly people and ate the local food — everything from rolexes (an omelette wrapped in a chapati) to goat curries and a variety of potato and banana dishes that seemed to accompany most meals.

Our main guide and unflappable driver, Sam Bagyenda, pointed out animals, places of interest and told us about traditional kingdoms. As G Adventure's chief experience officer, he made sure we learned about life in his country and kept us smiling despite some bumpy roads and short downpours (we were after all in rainforest territory).

As we drove south toward Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, my anticipation continued to grow.

In total, there are about 1,000 mountain gorillas left in the world and half of them live in this biodiverse hotspot — with more than 200 species of butterflies, 120 different kinds of mammals and a large number of endangered species.

TREKKING

Gorillas are threatened by illegal poaching and humans encroaching on their land. And the chance to see them is rare. A limited number of permits are granted and gorilla trekking is carefully monitored. In an effort to preserve their natural way of life only one group of eight or fewer people is able to visit each gorilla group for an hour a day.

Before setting off, I learn the mountain gorillas only live in Bwindi, near-by Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda (which is part of the Virunga Conservation area) and Virunga National Park, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The Bwindi rangers carry AK-47s in case they come across any aggressive animals that they may need to scare off by shooting into the air. I hike through a pond, over hills and along some muddy paths.

Our guide Benjamin Byamugisha has been coming here for 25 years. He leads the way, occasionally using his machete to cut through the bush. He explains that virtually all poaching has stopped in this area and that some money from all of the treks goes to local communities.

After hiking for about an hour-and-a-half, he tells us we're close.

We then move, as quietly as possible, through the bush and suddenly we are just a few metres away from a couple of gorillas. At that exact moment, I'm stung — not once, but twice — by wasps. And so too are a few of my friends. We grimace through our smiles and try to stay quiet.

Luckily, the distraction of seeing these gentle giants focuses my attention. The wasps disappear. And we quietly follow a few of the gorillas through the forest for a very quick 60 minutes.

I was incredibly lucky to see the Kahungye Group of about 20 gorillas, eating in the trees, on the ground, sitting still, grooming each other and rushing into the bush. The few times when I locked eyes with one of them were among the best. And, as with all my wildlife encounters, my time with them was as magical as it was fleeting.

Byamugisha said it was time to leave and we hiked back, but the gorillas stayed on my mind as we returned to the western edge of the Rift Valley, looking out on the lush rainforest and the Virunga volcanoes in the distance.

There was one more day of adventure. The little, yellow van cruised through the southwestern tip of the country and crossed over into Rwanda, which was equally beautiful with lush, green tea plantations and rolling hills.

After a sombre visit to the genocide memorial in the capital Kigali and a traditional lunch at the Nyamirambo Women's Centre, a Rwandan not-for-profit organization that also makes crafts and clothes, our tour came to an end.

But the exhilarating experience of learning about and seeing the gorillas, chimps and elephants in the wild remains.

Weekend Post

The author was a guest of G Adventures. The organization did not review this article.

LIFE on the WILD SIDE

A trip to Uganda will leave a lasting memory when you lock eyes with a chimpanzee or a gorilla Sharon Lindores



Water play for hippos.



A gorilla in Bwindi.