



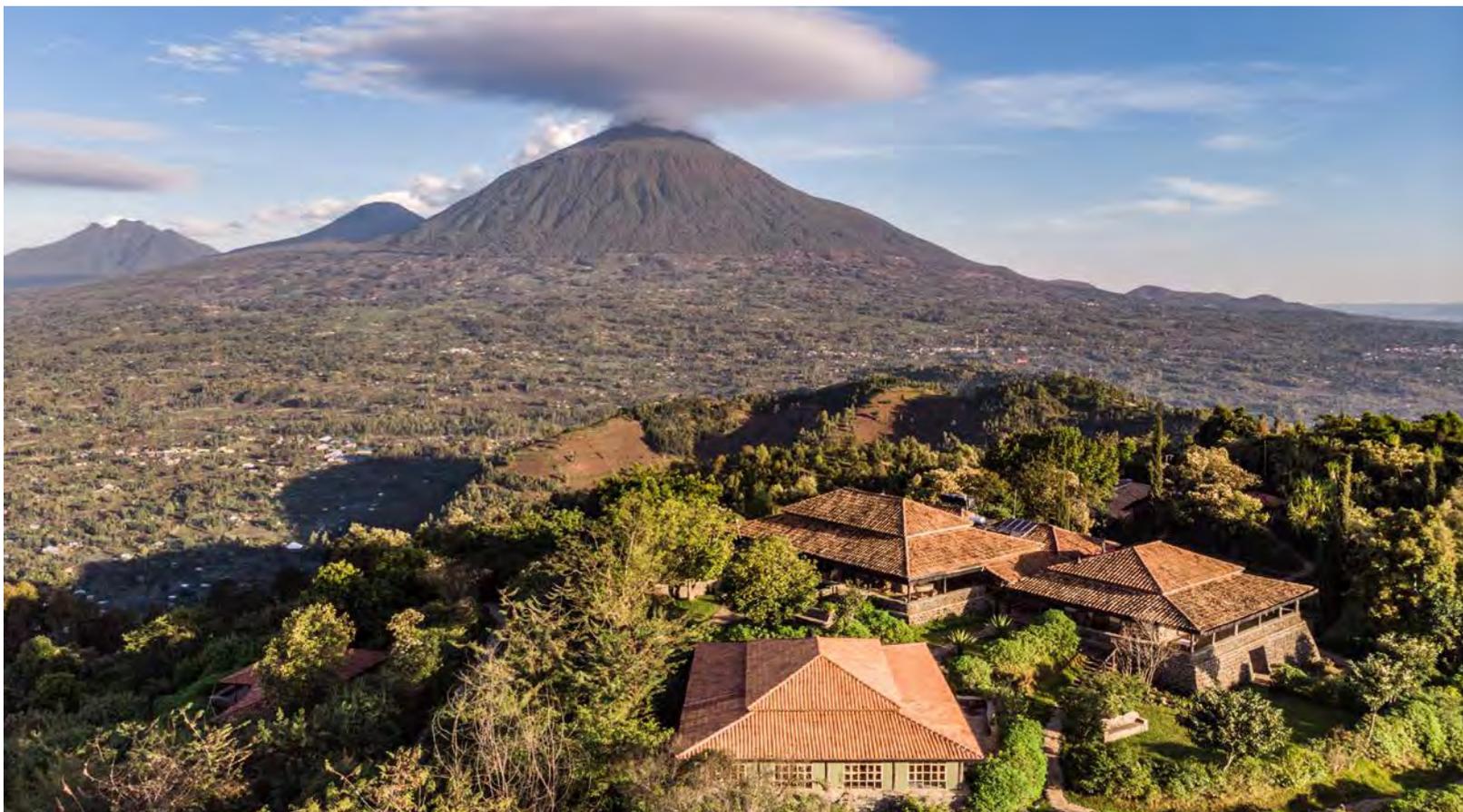
VOLCANOES SAFARIS

PAVING THE WAY FOR PRIMATE CONSERVATION

| BY HELÉNE RAMACKERS

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BLACK BEAN PRODUCTIONS, JAMES SUTER,
VOLCANOES SAFARIS, SINAMETELLA AND ROBIN FRANCOIS

With a history extending more than twenty years, [Volcanoes Safaris](#) has paved the way for ensuring the preservation of primates in their limited natural habitat. We spoke exclusively to Founder & CEO, Praveen Mo-man about being instrumental in allowing visitors to come face to face with gorillas, chimpanzees and the rare golden monkey, as well as the challenges facing these great apes today.



PRAVEEN, TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF.

I grew up in the wilds of Uganda, where my family was part of the pioneering Asian community that was central to opening up East Africa. We then moved to the UK as our family became refugees with the Amin expulsion. This was followed by a career as a political and policy adviser in the European Union and the British Government.

WHEN AND WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO START VOLCANOES SAFARIS?

I founded Volcanoes Safaris in 1997, which was at the forefront of reviving gorilla tourism in Uganda and Rwanda. My vision was to design and build four unique lodges near the great ape parks – Virunga, Mount Gahinga, Bwindi and Kyambura, while being sensitive to local culture and aesthetics, the post-conflict context and the need to use resources responsibly. I'm proud to employ local people who have been trained and empowered to run and manage the lodges. Twenty years later, we are still guided by this vision although the basic camps have evolved into the leading lodges of the region.

I ASSUME TREKKING TO THE GORILLAS IS ON EVERYONE'S BUCKET LIST. WHY SHOULD PEOPLE DO THIS AND WHAT RISKS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THE EXPERIENCE?

Seeing is believing. When you see a gorilla, you see something of yourself. The emotions and connection are inevitably strong. It is magical because you share something of your past together. Gorilla trekking is a raw experience for travelers, who haven't seen apes outside of captivity. Gorilla permits give you one hour with a group of habituated gorillas, allowing you to intrude in their unique world in a sensitive and controlled way.

In 1960, there was said to be around 300 gorillas in the Virungas. That number has grown to 600, but it still remains a precarious number, as this small habitat for a few families of gorillas are surrounded by cultivated land and dense villages. Overall, between Bwindi and the Virungas there are now just over 1,000 mountain gorillas which are a real success story. People need to see to believe the need to support the gorillas from the dangers of encroaching villages, poaching and diseases.

GIVE US YOUR BEST SALES PITCH – WHAT MAKES VOLCANOES SAFARIS UNIQUE AS OPPOSED TO OTHER COMPANIES OPERATING IN THE SAME REGION?

As the pioneers in great ape tourism with twenty years of operations across Rwanda and Uganda, Volcanoes Safaris is positioned to provide guests a luxury safari experience, in the most authentic and sustainable way to see the famous Virunga Mountain Gorillas. Our safaris provide a special insight into the world of the

mountain gorilla, while our properties give you world-class hospitality and connect you to the conservation of gorillas and to the communities who live around the gorilla parks.

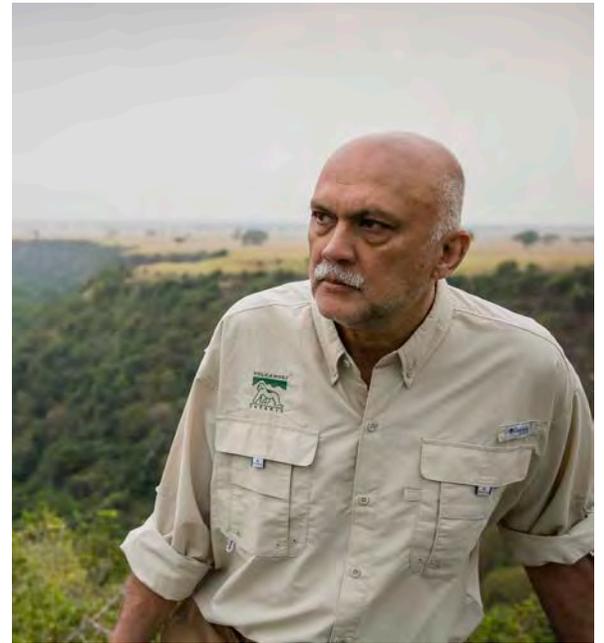
WHAT CAN PEOPLE EXPECT FROM A GORILLA EXPERIENCE?

As part of the reservation process, we help navigate your gorilla trek planning, which includes securing your permits and coordinating the level of physical ability from easy to hard, as some gorilla families require longer treks to reach.

The day of your trek, you will receive an early wake-up call and breakfast, before being transferred to Park Headquarters to meet your group, which is no bigger than eight people.

Your guide and rangers will take you through the lush mountains in search of your designated family. Porters are available for a nominal fee to help carry your bags or assist you during your hike. Taking a porter allows you to focus walk and gets them an income. And the porter is good at giving you a hand up the hill if needed! Once you reach your gorilla family, you are allowed one hour to observe them, and of course, take photos. Each gorilla family has their own personality and are incredible to witness.

I HAVE HEARD IT'S QUITE A COSTLY EXCURSION; WHAT MAKES IT WORTH THE \$1,500 FOR A PERMIT IN RWANDA



FOR 1 HOUR, AND \$600 IN UGANDA FOR THE SAME AMOUNT OF TIME? WHAT OTHER COSTS ARE THERE IN ADDITION TO THE PERMIT?

In Rwanda, the focus is on high-end tourism. In Uganda, they want to attract a wider spread of travelers. The number of guests is less than 100 per day and that is essential to control access to the gorillas so that they do not get overstressed and exposed to human diseases. A proportion of the funds generated by the permits go directly back into the park to protect the gorillas and provide ongoing research to support the population growth. The gorilla experience in the parks in Bwindi in Uganda or the Virungas in Rwanda or Mgahinga is different because of the forests, but equally enriching.

Other costs would be the nominal fee for a porter to assist you with your bags during your trek, as well as tips for the trackers and rangers. Your Volcanoes Guide stays with you for the whole day and takes you back to the lodge.

APART FROM HABITAT LOSS AND POACHING, WHAT OTHER THREATS DO THE GORILLAS FACE?

The habitat is tiny, which is a major issue. The presence of high densities of human populations around the forest is another issue as the gorilla-human conflict increases as well as disease transfer. It is essential to control tourism to ensure gorilla health is safeguarded.

THE KYAMBURA GORGE ECO-TOURISM PROJECT SOUNDS VERY EXCITING.

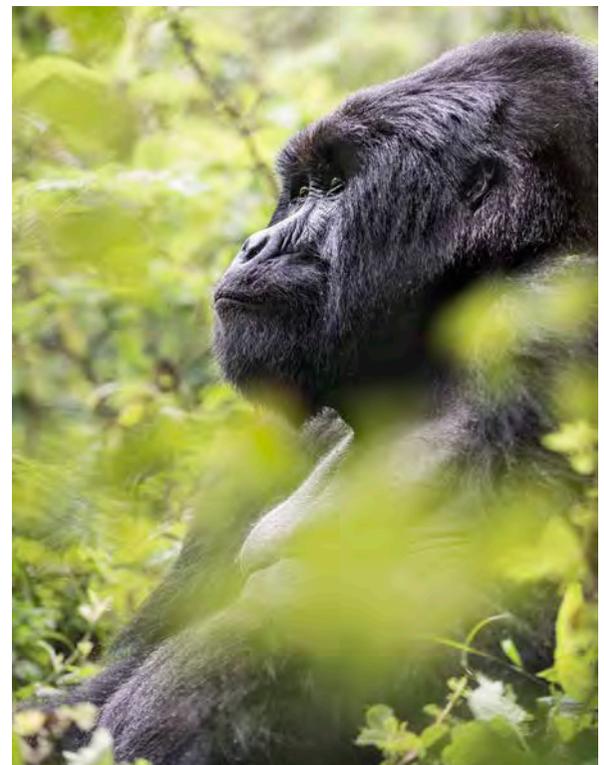
The Kyambura Gorge Eco-tourism Project has undertaken a series of activities since 2009 to safeguard the Kyambura Gorge ecosystem.

Today, Volcanoes Safaris (VS) and Volcanoes Safaris Partnership Trust (VSPT) are the single largest stakeholders in the Gorge ecosystem after the Ugandan Wildlife Authority. Without the intervention of VS and VSPT, the survival of the gorge and the small community of chimps who would live there would be under severe threat.

Through these activities and the strategic assembling of four adjoining sites next to the Gorge over the last ten years, the VSPT helps to link Kyambura Gorge Lodge to the local community and promotes sustainable eco-tourism and conservation in one of the most important areas for avian, primate and wildlife biodiversity in Africa.

Initiatives include purchasing a 3km long buffer along the northern part of the Gorge and providing guests to partake in a three-hour guided walk that offers scenic views over the Gorge, the Park and Kyambura reserve, and the chance to experience the local homesteads.

With the help of the community and of guests, approximately 3,000 indigenous trees have been planted in the Kyambura Buffer area. The project is the first of its kind in the area and is an example of the pioneering work conducted by the VSPT.



PLEASE TELL US MORE ABOUT THE DIFFERENT VOLCANOES SAFARIS LODGES.

Volcanoes Safaris is the only African safari company to have built its own exclusive luxury safari lodges near a selection of the gorilla and chimpanzee parks of Uganda and Rwanda. All of our luxury lodges in Africa are carefully built to echo local techniques and design, to fit in with the local area while providing the luxury accommodation that Volcanoes are renowned for.

The unbelievable views, high standards of service and a wide variety of activities available from each safari lodge make Volcanoes Lodges all you could wish for on your African primate safari adventure.

Virunga Lodge: the Luxury Gorilla Experience in Rwanda. The magnificent Virunga Lodge is the premier luxury gorilla lodge of Rwanda and one of Africa's finest and most renowned lodges. The lodge is perched high on a ridge with stunning views of the Virunga Volcanoes and the Musanze valley to the west and Lake Bulera and Ruhondo to the east. It offers the finest views in Africa, uniquely decorated rooms in the Rwan-dese style, fantastic food, and exceptional and personalized service by our carefully trained staff. It is the first accommodation choice for the luxury traveler tracking the endangered mountain gorilla.

Mount Gahinga: the Batwa Culture and Hiking Lodge in Uganda. Nestled at the base of the Virunga Volcanoes, Mount Gahinga Lodge is a stunning luxury adventure lodge hidden in the southern corner of Uganda. Its rustic charm is inspired by traditional design and building techniques. Gahinga Lodge is the perfect base to go gorilla tracking, track the rare golden monkey, climb a volcano, walk through local villages and most of all to share the culture of the Batwa, the oldest inhabitants of the Central African rain forest.

Bwindi: the Jungle Gorilla Lodge in Uganda. Overlooking the primeval Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, Volcanoes Bwindi Lodge is the finest luxury lodge at Bwindi. With dramatic intense views of the forest canopy across a serene stream, it is one of Africa's unique properties. The gorillas frequently come to relax in the verdant bush around the lodge! The lodge is perfectly located for a Uganda jungle gorilla tracking experience. The luxury forest lodge in Bwindi, fully renovated in 2018, now features a redesigned guest lounge and dining area that bring the feel of the forest into the stylish interiors.

Kyambura Gorge Lodge: the Contemporary Chimpanzee and Wildlife Lodge in Uganda. This eclectic contemporary safari lodge, fully upgraded during 2018 with entirely remodeled public areas and gardens, has been converted from an old coffee store to create a breathtakingly beautiful space. The lodge is located on the edge of Queen Elizabeth National Park with sweeping views of the rolling savanna, the distant mountains of the moon, and the sunken Kyambura Gorge. The lodge is the ideal location for tracking the lost chimps in the sunken forest of Kyambura Gorge nearby and seeing the amazing game in one of Africa's most beautiful and varied parks, centered around the waterway of the Kazinga Channel where animals come to bathe. The park has six hundred amazing bird species, the highest in an African park.

VOLCANOES SAFARIS IS RENOWNED FOR THEIR COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND ECO-TOURISM.

The Volcanoes Safaris Partnership Trust (VSPT), established in 2009, is a non-profit organization that connects Volcanoes' Rwanda and Uganda luxury lodges to the neighboring communities and conservation activities. The VSPT receives funding through Volcanoes Safaris, which contributes \$100 from safari bookings, as well as private donations by our guests and others.

The VSPT aims to create long-term, self-sustaining projects that enrich the livelihoods of local communities, promote the conservation of the



great apes, restore natural habitats and work with communities and institutions to reduce human-wildlife conflict. As part of their stay at Volcanoes Lodges, guests get an opportunity to visit VSPT projects and to share the lives of the local communities.

Bwindi Bar, near Bwindi Lodge, a bar which gives training in hospitality to local disadvantaged youths, won the 2016 PURE Community Engagement Award!

Volcanoes Safaris is thrilled to announce that the launch of the Gahinga Batwa Village, a permanent village for one of the oldest surviving indigenous people in the Central African Forest, the Mount Gahinga Batwa Community, took place in May 2018 in Gahinga, Uganda.

The Kyambura Gorge Eco-tourism Project was launched in February 2019. VS and VSPT have been working to safeguard the gorge ecosystem for over ten years, and today are the largest single stakeholders in the gorge ecosystem after the Uganda Wildlife Authority.

EXCITING PROJECTS FOR YOU AND VOLCANOES SAFARIS?

We're excited to bring Volcanoes Safaris into a new era of elevated amenities and services on the property, as we have invested in refurbishments across all the properties, which include new deluxe bandas at Gahinga, Kyambura and Bwindi debuting in June 2019. ■

www.volcanoessafaris.com