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Rwanda & Uganda

YOU ARE MOST WELCOME

Virunga Lodge



WORDS BY COURTNEY COX

Rwanda is known as “the land of a thousand hills” and it’s easy to see why after witnessing the rolling, lush landscape. However, I would like to propose an alternative nickname: “the land of a thousand welcomes.” I’ve traveled extensively and have never felt so affected by a local culture and its people. Rwanda’s neighbor to the north, Uganda, was much the same – beautiful scenery, amazing wildlife and locals who kept me smiling from ear-to-ear.

Volcanoes Safaris served as my gracious hosts for the “6-Day Gahinga & Virunga Safari.” The company specializes in honeymoon-worthy luxury safaris and eco-friendly lodges with three lodges in Uganda (Mount Gahinga Lodge, Bwindi Lodge and Kyambura Gorge Lodge) and one in Rwanda (Virunga Lodge).

KIGALI

Before setting off on your first adventure, I highly recommend a day in the Rwandan

capital. The Kigali Genocide Memorial is not only a place for remembrance and reflection; it’s also a respectful way to begin your journey. While hauntingly impactful, the memorial will bring to light the country’s progress and the resilience of its people.

MOUNT GAHINGA LODGE

After Kigali, hop aboard your Volcanoes Safaris’ Land Rover and head for the hills of Uganda. Located at the foothills of the Virunga Volcanoes, you’ll discover Mount Gahinga Lodge. En route, you’ll enjoy what I lovingly refer to as “Mother Nature’s massage” – a.k.a. one heck of a bumpy ride. It’s well worth the whiplash once you step foot in your private “banda” (imagine a thatched-roof bungalow). Mount Gahinga Lodge accommodates 18 people across six bandas, and the papyrus-thatched main lodge with its central fireplace is the comfy, social center.

MGAHINGA GORILLA NATIONAL PARK

Within walking distance of the lodge is Mgahinga Gorilla National Park – home to

Photos courtesy of (top to bottom): Volcanoes Safaris & Courtney Cox





Bwindi Lodge



Photos courtesy of (top to bottom, left to right): Volcanoes Safaris (1st & 2nd), Alexandra Avila (3rd) & Courtney Cox (4th & 5th)

the endangered golden monkey. There's roughly a 50 percent chance you will get to see these endangered beauties, so pack light (or hire a porter for 15 USD) and prepare for a potentially long hike. My group was lucky, we got the best trackers in the biz and spent one exciting hour amongst the elusive monkeys.

VIRUNGA LODGE

Back across the border and into Rwanda was our next stop: Virunga Lodge. Aside from the customary "you are most welcome," we were met with breathtaking 360-degree views. This luxury lodge features 10 bandas – five facing twin lakes and five facing the Virunga Volcanoes. For your honeymoon, be sure to book one of the two deluxe bandas.

Virunga Lodge has a unique aura about it...you feel like you're truly on top of the world. After a good night's rest atop the clouds, I rose early for the day we had all been waiting for – our gorilla trek. As I watched the sun rise over

the lake and dormant volcanoes in the distance, I knew it was going to be a day to remember.

VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK

As we drove toward the jagged peaks of Mount Sabyinyo, the excitement was palpable. Note: excitement, not fear. One of the most common misconceptions in the animal kingdom is that gorillas are inherently dangerous. The stereotype has been perpetuated over the years and given these gentle giants a bad reputation. So bad, in fact, that the mountain gorilla was nearly hunted to extinction. Now, through concerted conservation efforts by Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there are roughly 900 mountain gorillas in existence.

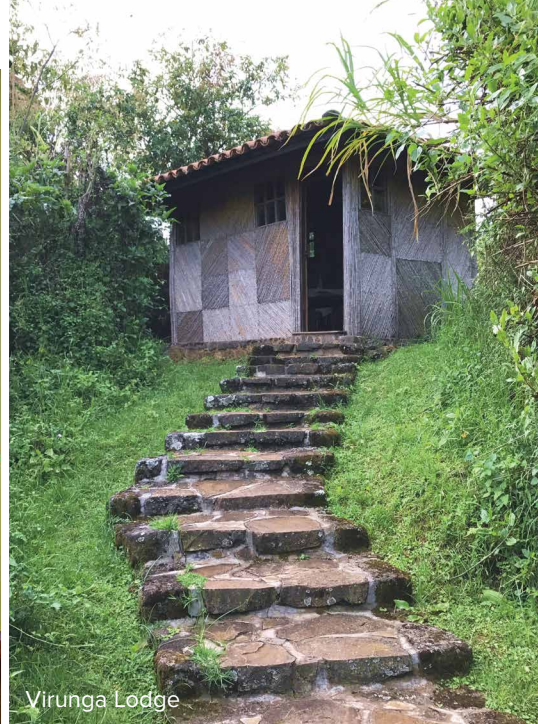
Following in the footsteps of the park's trackers, we headed into the heart of the jungle in search of our assigned, habituated gorilla family. The hiking can be hard work, but the journey through the bush



Virunga Lodge



Virunga Lodge



Virunga Lodge



Gahinga Lodge



Bwindi Lodge

is part of the experience. Thankfully, long sleeves and pants helped to protect me from the infamous stinging nettles. Our guide cleared a path by hacking through the dense vegetation with a machete. After 90 minutes, we were told that we were finally approaching the gorillas.

My adrenaline kicked in and I kept confusing the sound of creaking bamboo with the grunts of gorillas. Suddenly, the pace slowed and our guide began grunting as he cleared away the overgrowth. Then, just like that, I was face-to-face with Gahinga, the group's dominant silverback. Thus began the quickest hour of my life. I expected to view the gorillas from a distance as they peacefully posed. What I got was dramatically different and so much better! The 20-member group went about their business with nary a glance. I tried to stay out of their way and was even approached by a two

month-old baby gorilla. After an hour of weaving through the bamboo captivated by these wondrous animals, it was time to say goodbye. Teary-eyed and tingling, Gahinga saw us off by noshing on our nemesis: stinging nettles.

As we hiked back through swaying fields of chrysanthemums and eucalyptus, we were met with the chorus of children's voices shouting "hall-oh!" Once back at Virunga Lodge, we were encouraged to schedule a complimentary massage (a Volcanoes Safaris staple) before enjoying a performance by the local Intore Dance troupe. As the sun began to set, these amazing performers celebrated their Rwandese culture and I too felt like dancing. What a day!

Eastern Africa most likely doesn't come to mind when you think "honeymoon," but I can't imagine a better way to start

a life together. I was completely captivated by the raw countryside, beautifully spirited people and rare wildlife. Booking an itinerary via a company like Volcanoes Safaris is an absolute must. The all-inclusive pricing includes accommodations, meals, transportation and guides. Perhaps most importantly, all your park permits are taken care of ahead of your arrival.

Rwanda and Uganda are countries comprised of contrast: immense beauty and amazing people, but there's still work to be done. You can honeymoon with pride via Volcanoes Safaris, since community philanthropy and wildlife conservation are at the heart of what they do. You'll walk away from the experience with a fresh perspective on life, a new appreciation for each other and a positive outlook for your married life ahead. Trust me when I say, "you are most welcome."

