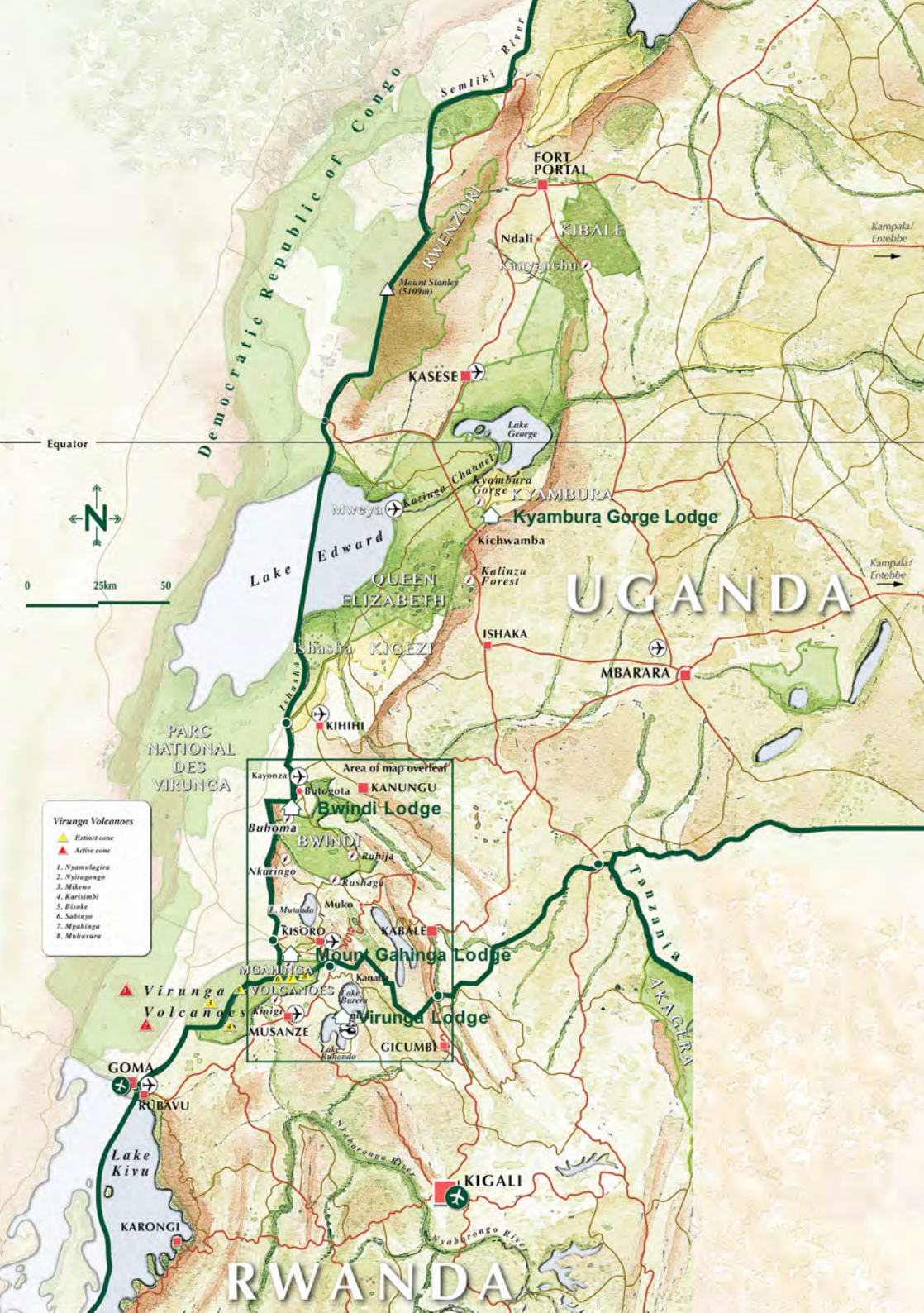




The Batwa of Gahinga: Honouring our Forefathers

Mount Gahinga Lodge, Uganda



THE GAHINGA BATWA VILLAGE

Opened on 31 May 2018 in the presence of

Jane Nyirangano · Chair Gahinga Batwa Community
Praveen Moman · Kevin James · Herbert Mfitundinda · Cyprien Serugero · Volcanoes Safaris
Giulia Ajmone Marsan · Ravi Govindia · Trustees VSPT
Dr Johannes Refisch · GRASP
Felix Holland · Studio FH
Kisoro District Officials
Uganda Wildlife Authority
Gorilla Doctors

Inspired by

Mahatma Gandhi and Guru Nanak

Funded by

Volcanoes Safaris
Volcanoes Safaris Partnership Trust (VSPT)
Guests
The Adventure Travel Conservation Fund

In memory of

Giorgio and Umberta Ajmone Marsan
Kuldip Rai and Kaushalya Moman

Photos by Michael Turek, with additional images from
Black Bean Productions, Craig Howes, James Walsh and
Volcanoes Safaris Archive.

A Conversation between Praveen Moman and Sophy Roberts.





"We are grateful for the support we receive from Moman. He found us when we had nothing and now we have homes, land and respect from our neighbours. Some of our children have jobs at Mount Gahinga Lodge. We appreciate that he thinks deeply about us. We feel we are making progress and we hope to live a good life so that other Batwa and communities are proud of us."

— Jane Nyirangano, Chair of the Gahinga Batwa community

"The Batwa Village is an important step forward for this marginalised community. We are privileged to work with them and help support them to find a new respect, a new life and to earn a living. We are keen to support their cultural heritage while helping them adapt to the modern world."

— Herbert Mfitundinda, VSPT Gahinga Project Coordinator

"This is a historic day for the marginalised Batwa community. This is a landmark project and it is a privilege to be able to support the Batwa in a new beginning. Finally, they have a home in the shadow of their beloved volcanoes. The Batwa are our forefathers and we need to honour their place on the Earth. In seeking to support gorilla conservation, we need to change the paradigm. We need to make local communities the focal point. Then I am sure they will do their best to support the gorillas."

As a leading ecotourism company offering unique great ape and cultural experiences for our guests, we believe it is vital to support communities around our lodges. We are excited to see this project come to fruition after many years of working with the Batwa and trying to understand their culture and desperate needs."

— Praveen Moman, Founder of Volcanoes Safaris, speaking on May 31, 2018 at the launch of the Gahinga Batwa Village



The Batwa are one of the oldest surviving indigenous peoples in the Central African forests. They are our forefathers. Over millennia, the Batwa of the Virunga mountains developed a unique culture based on their life in the forest. They survived by hunting small game and gathering plants and fruit. They lived in caves — like the Garama cave in Mgahinga — or in huts constructed from leaves and branches.

For centuries, the Batwa lived in harmony with the mountain gorillas in the forest, unlike the hunter gatherers in the Congo Basin who have historically hunted primates as bushmeat.

The existence of the mountain gorillas was recorded in the Virungas by 1902 by Robert Von Beringe on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) side of the volcanoes. Subsequently, thanks to the efforts of Carl Akeley from the American Natural History Museum, King Albert of Belgium was persuaded to designate the Congolese and Rwandan part of the Virungas as a national park in 1925. Parc National d'Albert became the first national park in Africa. Today the Congolese side of the mountain is called Parc National de Virunga; the Rwandese side is called Parc National des Volcans.

In the mid-1950s, Walter Baumgartel, a German adventurer in Africa, became the accidental owner of the Travellers Rest Hotel in Kisoro near the Mgahinga side of the Virungas in Uganda. Together with his local guide, Rueben, they started following the gorillas regularly in the Mgahinga area, with the help of the Batwa people who lived in the forest. The knowledge the Batwa had acquired of gorilla behaviour was crucial to the primates' nascent acceptance of human presence. With these early gorilla encounters, Baumgartel became the father of gorilla tourism. He was also instrumental in getting dedicated researchers brought to the Virungas, including Dian Fossey.

In the 1960s the Moman family used to stay at the Travellers Rest. By coincidence, when Moman started setting up tourism around Mgahinga in the 1990s, the hotel was being rebuilt after the conflict with assistance from the Austrian government and from 2001-2003, Volcanoes Safaris had the privilege to manage the hotel.



From the 1950s, with the continuing work of conservationists such as George Schaller and then later Dian Fossey, international attention surrounding endangered mountain gorillas increased. The Karisoke Centre, founded by Fossey in 1967 in Rwanda, began the first long-term research project on mountain gorillas.

Since the 1980s, mountain gorillas have become one of the biggest success stories in African conservation. Their number has doubled and continues to rise in a small but steady way. Rangers guard their forest habitats while dedicated teams of vets monitor their health.

A thriving, niche tourist industry has sprung up around gorilla tracking, bringing significant revenue each year to Uganda, Rwanda and the DRC. Communities have seen major benefits from growing gorilla tourism — guides, trackers, porters, lodge-workers, souvenir-sellers. Even children have learned that their pencil-scrawled gorillas can garner a couple of dollars from an enchanted tourist. This income has also helped fund schools, clinics, roads and community centres. But there is a hidden side to the success story of the mountain gorillas.

In 1991, the government of Uganda gazetted the forests of Bwindi and Mgahinga — previously forest reserves — as national parks. Uganda made a huge step forwards in its conservation agenda, moving from protection of timber resources to habitat and anti-poaching protection for gorillas and other wildlife. For the first time, the Virunga forests became protected in all three countries: the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda.



At the same time, the Batwa hunter-gatherers were forced from the land, evicted at gunpoint. They were offered no compensation, no land and no support. In effect they became ‘conservation refugees’, displaced from their ancestral homeland. They had no knowledge of the world outside their forests. With limited education or skills, adapting to their new environment has been a difficult journey. Even today, most Batwa communities suffer from acute poverty, malnutrition and poor health. Instead of being hunter-gatherers in the forest, they have had to earn a living in other ways.

About 500 Batwa were evicted from Mgahinga. They moved to areas where there was unused wasteland that was not owned or occupied by settled peoples. Some moved to the nearby town of Kisoro, to neighbouring DRC, Rwanda, or to other forests.

Praveen Moman — founder of Volcanoes Safaris — has been involved with the story of the Batwa of Gahinga since 1997, when he set up Mount Gahinga Lodge in Mgahinga.



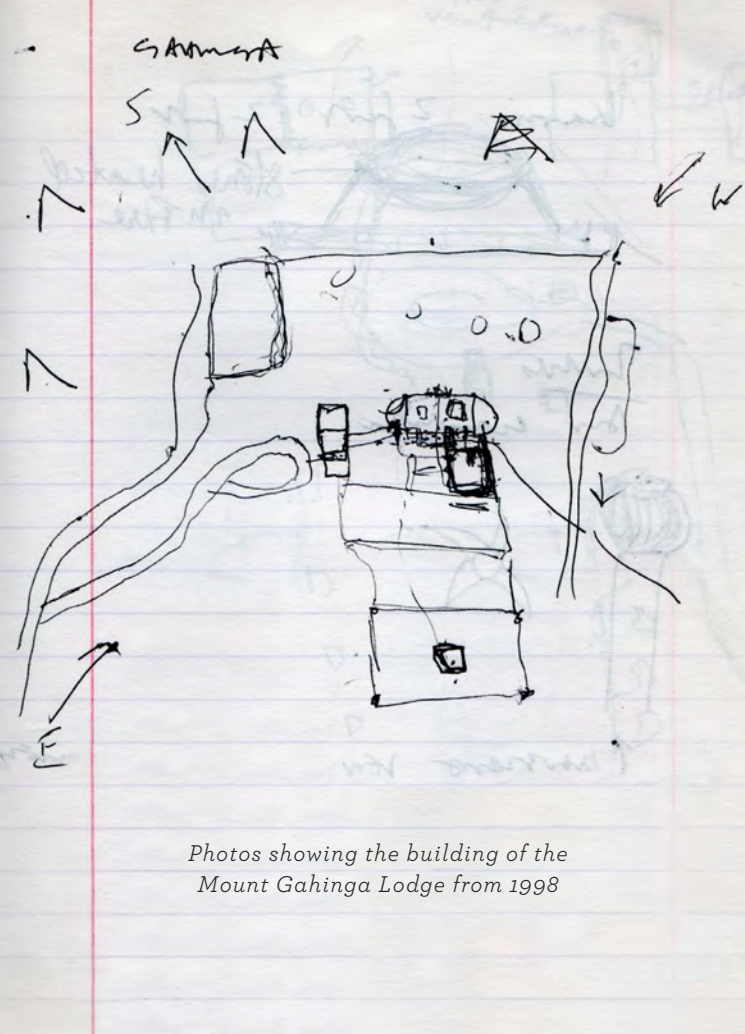
When did you first encounter the Batwa?

I remember first seeing the Batwa as a child growing up in Uganda in the 1960s, near the forests next to Fort Portal. They — the so-called ‘pygmies’ — lived near the hot springs on the edge of the Semliki forest. On the one hand, it was magical to see this community still connected to their forest life. It was also demeaning: for the most part, interaction with them was based on the Batwa being paid to drink and dance.

What drew you to Mount Gahinga?

Mgahinga is part of the Virungas, located in the furthest southwestern corner of Uganda, at the crossroads of Rwanda and the DRC. My father was a colonial civil servant in Uganda and I first went walking with him in Mgahinga in 1966. I was about twelve years old so my connection with this area goes back a long time. It’s like a forgotten place on the Earth. The landscape retains an Arcadian appeal, with extinct volcanic craters, lush crops and pastoral sweeping landscapes — it is often called the Switzerland of Africa. Along with forest elephants, buffaloes, and rare golden monkeys, a single group of habituated gorillas currently reside in the park; it’s called the Nyakagezi family, and moves between the Mgahinga and Muhabura volcanoes. When I started building Mount Gahinga Lodge in 1997, the Great Lakes area was still in turmoil from the Rwandan genocide, so it took some four years to build. Mount Gahinga was Volcanoes Safaris’ first lodge and with it began our long, pioneering journey with great ape ecotourism, centred around the four lodges we have created near gorilla and chimpanzee communities over the last twenty years. It is a special pleasure to carry on the early gorilla tourism work started by Walter Baumgartel in Mgahinga.





Photos showing the building of the Mount Gahinga Lodge from 1998



When did you start getting involved with the Batwa of Gahinga?
 When I started building Mount Gahinga Lodge in 1997, it was a few years after the Batwa had been expelled from the park. I saw the Batwa were in a desperate state, surviving on handouts. Around 80 Batwa — roughly 18 families — were living at Musasa, outside the park boundaries, in an informal settlement on rocky land measuring about 30 feet by 20 feet. They had gathered whatever materials they could — tree branches, old tarpaulin and bits of rusty corrugated iron — and built themselves a basic shelter. Some were casual labourers; others worked in the fields; some of the women worked as prostitutes.

As tourism increased in the Mgahinga area, I expected the Batwa would benefit from visitor revenues. But this did not happen. In 2009, we set up the Volcanoes Safaris Partnership Trust (VSPT) — a non-profit organisation to work with local communities and conservation issues. My colleague Herbert Mfitundinda began engaging with the Batwa and seeing how we could work with them. In 2013, we created a Batwa Heritage Site at Mount Gahinga Lodge so the Batwa could share their life in the forest with our guests. The heritage trail has a traditional herbal garden where the Batwa explain the medicinal properties of the herbs; they have built traditional huts, and demonstrate how they used to live, hunt, and collect honey and other resources from the forest. It gives the Batwa an opportunity to preserve their culture, as well as share it with guests of the lodge. Nearby, we set up a Batwa Vocational Centre, where around thirty women sell baskets, lava stone carvings, clothing, beeswax candles, bangles and fire-making sticks, as well as small gorilla figurines made by the children. They use the income from selling their products to buy food, medicine and other essential items.

Photos to the left show the Batwa settlement before the Gahinga Batwa Village was created.





What was your motivation to get involved?

As I became aware of the plight of the Batwa — sadly it's similar to many indigenous communities who have been expelled from their homeland — I felt we had to do something. I believe that to conserve a landscape and protect wild animals, the local communities need to be a central part of the conservation chain. The rights of the people need to be safeguarded; they must have an economic stake in the wilderness and wildlife. Influenced by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and Guru Nanak, I also believe we have a duty to support marginalised people.

What are the challenges faced by the Batwa?

The Batwa are hunter-gatherers who have lost their place in the forest but have not yet found a role beyond the forest boundaries. They are often misunderstood and some consider them subhuman. Their settled Bantu neighbours are themselves struggling to make a living, so they don't have much interest in the Batwa's problems. Everyone is competing for limited resources.

For millennia, the Batwa lived a low-impact way of life in the forest, living off plants, honey and small game. They lived in balance with nature. Their own culture and own way of living is not valued, yet they have a lot to teach modern human beings who waste so much.





In 2018, you opened the Gahinga Batwa Village — a landmark achievement for your non-profit, the Volcanoes Safaris Partnership Trust.

As I said, when we first became aware of the Batwa, we assumed that gorilla tourism revenue would help support them, eventually providing livelihoods. As this did not happen, we gradually started working with them in different ways. In addition to setting up the Vocational Centre and the Heritage Site, we used to take guests to the community's rough settlement. Their bleak circumstances were a real eye-opener to our guests. But in the long term, I didn't think it was a very useful activity, as it was a voyeuristic sharing of human misery. My wife, Giulia, and I decided the best solution was to enable them to have a village of their own. In 2016, VSPT started acquiring about 13 acres of land to build the Gahinga Batwa Village.

How did the plans for the village evolve?

My colleague, Herbert Mfitundinda, who heads the VSPT's non-profit work at Gahinga, set up informal discussions with the leaders of the Batwa to plan the village. They did not want homes made from twigs and grass as they had in the forest. They wanted more durable homes with tin roofs and stone foundations so that they would last well in the rainy mountains. They were enthusiastic and committed, actively working on building the village. The Batwa were adamant they wanted to build new lives. The Gahinga Batwa Village is not a replica of their past but a village that reflects what they need now.





Who lives in the Gahinga Batwa Village?

The core of the community is formed by those that lived in the informal settlement at Musasa. Some come and go between the Batwa Village and the area near the volcanoes on the Democratic Republic of Congo, where they also live, farm or marry. Today there are over 100 people who live in the village, with roughly 45 adults and 40 children and youths, settled in 18 family units. The population has already increased — eight children have been born since the village opened.

What support is offered to the Gahinga Batwa Village?

As a focal point, we built a Community Centre for the village, designed in partnership with Studio FH from Kampala, where the community can socialise and have educational sessions. The district nurse and doctor come to help with health issues. Rainwater tanks have been built to ensure they have clean drinking water. The VSPT also offers adult literacy training as well as support on alcoholism, hygiene and family planning. It's important that we build their trust and they learn how to look after their welfare rather than having a culture of dependency.







What's the future?

The Batwa are becoming settled. They are pleased that there has finally been a big leap forward in their prospects, and they have shelter and land to cultivate. The village has given the Batwa a sense of pride. They share legends of their origins on the Earth; about their great bow and arrow hunters, about the whispers of the forest and the secrets of the gorillas. These stories help keep the last vestiges of their culture alive. They are trying to adjust to a settled life, learning how to cultivate the land or working as labourers in exchange for food or small amounts of money.

We hope that with a new start, a home and quiet support, the Batwa will slowly gain a better foothold in the modern world. With rich land to cultivate, they should be able to feed themselves. There are schools nearby and some Batwa children are starting to attend classes.

Batwa culture is centred around their connection to the forest. They share this rich culture with visitors through dance, music, and stories — just as they used to perform for local chiefs and kings.

We want to build on our relationship with the Batwa community, helping them become self sufficient, improving health and education opportunities. Above all, we want to help ease the transition of the Batwa's separation from their forest homeland.





Mount Gahinga Lodge

Guests of Volcanoes Safaris staying at Mount Gahinga Lodge are encouraged to visit the Batwa Heritage Centre at the lodge to see how the Batwa used to live. Guests can also visit the Vocational Centre, helping the women earn a livelihood. Most of all, we recommend that guests visit the Gahinga Batwa Village where the community now lives. Here, guests can experience the culture and stories of the Batwa for themselves.

We ask that visitors behave in a respectful way when interacting with the Batwa so that they and their families are not disturbed in their homes. To discourage a culture of dependency, we ask that you do not give any money or gifts to the Batwa. If you wish to take pictures with the Batwa, please do so in a considerate way. Donations to support the VSPT and the Gahinga Batwa Village are welcome and should be made at www.volcanoessafaris.com. Please do not give cash to the Batwa or any member of Volcanoes staff. Enquiries from individuals and organisations who wish to partner with us are welcome.





For further background:

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