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AFRICA | ASIA | SOUTH AMERICA | PACIFIC

GORILLA TREKKING PHOTOGRAPHY

TIPS



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AN INTRODUCTION TO GORILLA TREKKING

THE TREK

It can be a tough trek to reach the gorillas. Three hours of steep climbing through thick jungle at high altitude can take its toll, but it's so worth the effort. In fact, seeing mountain gorillas in their natural habitat is up there as one of the best wildlife experiences of all time. It's not only that they are so rare (there are only about 750 left in the wild) but also that they are so gentle, expressive and very human.

EQUIPMENT ADVICE

We recommend two SLR cameras – it's great to have a backup and have two lenses mounted at one time without having to do lens changes in humid conditions. The best lenses are those with a wide aperture such as f2.8 which allow in max light and are best in gloomy conditions. A 24 – 70 mm and a 70 – 200mm is a good combination. If you have space, then consider a 300mm and a wide angle but it's a steep walk so consider hiring a porter. A 50mm 1.4 lens is also ideal for low light shooting and something to consider as a standard lens.

You will not be allowed to take a tripod or monopod with you on the trek. But you will be issued with a wooden walking stick and this can be a great support if you are shooting in low light.

QUICK TIPS:

- Phone cameras are great for capturing short videos & personal moments, but poor substitutes for a proper digital camera (DSLR) on a gorilla trek.
- Compact cameras, such as the Canon Supershot, are good, especially for children, but again are no match for a DSLR if you are wanting to take high-quality images.
- Visit your local camera store to discuss your needs, explaining where you are going, your budget & what you are wanting to achieve.
- Cameras have myriad settings & features. If you are purchasing a new camera, do so well in advance, read the manual, & practice.
- Don't be afraid! Most cameras will have a fully automatic setting, so you don't need to be an expert.

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— ADDITIONAL EQUIPMENT —

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WHAT ELSE TO TAKE

You are going to need sturdy boots, long trousers, long sleeved shirt and waterproof poncho top which is great for going over your gear. It's misty up in the mountains and rain can come at any time. Gloves are also useful for the nettles.

You may want to carry your gear in a small backpack type camera bag, which should have a plastic cover in case of rain. It's also a good idea to have a few extra bags in case there is a downpour.

Bear in mind that when you find the gorillas you will likely abandon your bags for safekeeping and only take minimal gear for the close encounter.

For photography, make sure you have several batteries and that they are all fully charged. Likewise, a backup SD card is strongly advised and that all images from previous days have already been safely downloaded and erased from cards.

Most cards will have a reasonable capacity, even when shooting in RAW, but the experience warrants a flurry of photos and a spare card could well be the one that captures that one perfect moment.

EQUIPMENT TIPS:

- It does get wet in the mountains, even if just a light mist, so protective clothing is essential
- Likewise, the verdant jungle is filled with plants that can scratch & sting, so full coverage is also necessary
- You will take a backpack, but if you can find one that is waterproof, or at least weather-resistant, it will offer a little more peace of mind
- Back up photos to the cloud when at camp. Dropbox, Google Drive or Apple's iCloud are perfect for this
- A lens hood can also help to keep glare and rain spots from ruining an otherwise perfect shot.



CAMERA SETTINGS

FILE FORMAT

Shooting in RAW format is the way to go. A jpeg is compressed and discards a lot of information and so information cannot be retrieved if your exposure is slightly out. If you are shooting in jpeg (and we don't recommend you do) make sure your camera is set to the largest file size and set your white balance according to the light conditions.

ISO & SHUTTER SPEED

It can get dark in the forest – very dark. And gorillas are very dark subjects. If you have a Nikon D3x or D800 you can shoot at ISO 3200 and get away with it very well. Our recommendation however is to try to keep in the range of ISO 800 to 2000 for maximum quality of image. High ISO gives a faster shutter speed but can affect quality and cause noise. Keep ISO as low as possible without getting blurred images. A rule of thumb is do not shoot below 1/200th of a second with a 200mm lens. If you are using an 80 mm lens, then you can shoot at slower speeds of say 1/80th and so on. If the gorillas are on the move you should up your shutter speed to 1/1000th of a second or more.

METERING & PRIORITY SETTINGS

A good default setting is to use center weighted metering, aperture priority and an aperture of f5.6 or so. If there is a lot of dark gorilla in the viewfinder you will need to underexpose by up to two stops of light – 2 using your AE +/- button or you will overexpose your image. It is also a good idea to consider manual shooting if you are in fairly consistent lighting conditions. Your camera likes shooting subjects where the differences in exposure are not too extreme and its for this reason that cloudy or shady conditions are often best for shooting dark subjects like gorillas.

FOCUS

Single point focus is usually always best – you don't want the camera focusing on the tree instead of the gorilla and usually you will want to lock your focus on the eyes. If you have a group of gorillas that you want to keep as much in focus as possible then focus about 1/3 into the picture. You may want to change focus to multi –point if you have lots of moving subjects but suggest single focus points will give you more control. You will probably shoot on single shot but may want to change your focus settings to continuous focus and rapid fire if they are on the move and playful.



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— SHOOTING — TIPS

ADVICE ON PHOTOGRAPHING GORILLAS

When you are with the gorillas there is a 7-metre buffer rule between you and animals. The reason is that their DNA is so close to ours that it is very easy for them to pick up flu and colds. Gorillas don't know this rule and so don't be surprised if they do approach closer (and be ready for it with a wide lens available), but if the guides ask you to move away then always do so slowly and calmly with no sudden movements.

Your time with the gorillas is precious. Don't shoot away wildly. Plan your shots. Close ups, wide shots, angles and framing. Think about your options. Also, don't forget the wide-angle shots. Make sure that you don't spend the whole time looking through the lens. Sit and watch and consider the fact that you are watching one of the gentlest and most fascinating creatures on the planet.

As with all photography it's about the moment. Try to catch the little moments such as when the gorillas are interacting or when the sun catches their eyes. If you are travelling with friends or family, it is also nice to step back and capture them in the shot as a memorable documentation of this incredible experience.

Lastly, on returning to camp it can be incredibly valuable to make a short video of yourself and those you are with recalling the experience while fresh in your memory. This is wonderful to share with friends and family, but also as a visual reminder for yourself of this truly remarkable experience.

ADDITIONAL TIPS:

- Be sure to switch between landscape and portrait - portraits especially are often better vertical
- Take time to focus on the eyes; there is so much expression in them
- Take a notebook. Guides may share fascinating insights into the individuals you are photographing
- Remember the rule of thirds - mix your images up by framing the subject to one side of the frame, rather than dead centre
- If you have space, a beanbag can be helpful for large lenses, though you will need a friend's shoulder to rest it on!
- However, due to the trek itself, big, heavy lenses aren't advised.

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