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AFRICA | ASIA | SOUTH AMERICA | PACIFIC

GORILLA & CHIMPANZEE
TREKKING



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AN INTRODUCTION TO GORILLA & CHIMP — TREKKING —

ABOUT GORILLA & CHIMPANZEE TREKKING

While not the conventional safari experience, many visitors to Africa highlight gorilla and chimpanzee trekking as some of the most memorable and life-changing adventures they have ever undertaken.

Some of our closest living relatives, not only are gorillas and chimpanzees incredibly impressive, they also convey many human-like mannerisms and expressions and are acutely intelligent. This makes viewing these magnificent creatures in the wild invariably an incredibly moving experience.

Once heavily poached, they are now fiercely protected, often by the very same individuals who once hunted them, thankfully seeing a more viable opportunity in tourism and conservation.

Though their numbers are steadily increasing, populations of both primates remain immensely fragile, but unified protection programs between Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DMC) are providing optimism and their greatest chance of survival.

Though chimpanzee trekking is generally a little less taxing, these mountainous hikes can be arduous and challenging, and are not recommended for those with less than average fitness or physical disabilities.

QUICK FACTS:

- Gorillas can be found in three countries, though we arrange itineraries to only two: Rwanda & Uganda
- Chimpanzee trekking can be easily combined with the gorillas in Rwanda, with a small population also existing in Tanzania
- There is estimated to be a little over 1,000 mountain gorillas remaining in the wild, making them critically endangered
- Chimpanzees are significantly more prolific, with up to 300,000 remaining, though poaching, hunting & habitat loss still pose a very real threat
- Both primates share 98% of our DNA, making them two of the three closest living relatives to homo sapiens

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— GORILLA TREKKING —

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WHAT TO EXPECT

There are two primary locations for gorilla trekking: Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda, and Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda. Though each differs somewhat, this is an example of what to expect:

On the day of the trek, you'll be woken early and offered a light breakfast before your dedicated private guide escorts you from your lodge to the park headquarters or visitor center. Here you'll be introduced to one of the excellent gorilla-trekking guides, many of whom have spent years watching the individual gorilla groups.

You'll be allocated a gorilla family and be placed in a group of a maximum of eight people, accompanied by your trekking guide and armed park rangers. You'll also have the choice to advise on the level of difficulty for trekking.

After a briefing on safety and gorilla-tracking etiquette, you'll be taken to the start of the relevant trail to reach the mountain gorillas. Your guide will then lead you along generally clear paths up into the forest, in radio communication with the trackers who stay with the individual groups so that they can be located.

The duration of your trek will depend on the location of the gorilla family you're heading to, but can take from 30 minutes to several hours. Once you reach your designated group you'll be allowed a maximum of an hour with the gorillas. That said, should they decide to move during that hour, you will normally be allowed to follow, with the clock stopped during the time you are walking to the new location, so you don't lose time to observe them at rest.

Although the gorillas are used to human visitors, many trekkers are a little apprehensive, especially as a large silverback male can weigh up to 440 pounds (200kg). Guests are instructed to stay at least 35 feet (10m) away.

Sitting in silence on the ground of the forest for 60 minutes while observing these magnificent creatures in their natural environment is an unforgettable experience and a privilege that few people can enjoy.

Often the gorillas will be spread around a small area of dense vegetation. They'll continue with their feeding and interactions, nonchalant about their visitors, though watching you with interest. Occasionally a playful youngster may approach you with curiosity – sometimes coming so close that you'll be asked to move away.

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— CHIMPANZEE — TREKKING

WHAT TO EXPECT

There are also two destinations for chimpanzee trekking, one in Nyungwe Forest, Rwanda, the other in Tanzania's Mahale Forest. Again, there are some differences between each experience, but this is roughly what to expect:

You will be woken before dawn and served a light breakfast before being taken to the Nyungwe's park headquarters or Mahale Forest by your dedicated guide. In Nyungwe, you will also be accompanied by a trekking guide and rangers from the park, and will be allocated one of the two chimpanzee troops.

Each trekking group has a maximum of eight people. In Nyungwe you'll have the opportunity to hire a porter to accompany you, which can be useful if you have a large bag or camera kit, or if you want someone to help you along the muddy paths.

You will usually venture to the forest at around sunrise. With rugged terrain and dense vegetation, the trek can be quite strenuous but the pace is slow and the rainforest environments – with their array of birds and other wildlife – are captivating.

Your guide will be a wildlife specialist, and you'll have plenty of time during the trek to ask questions.

In Mahale, it's important to note there are no guarantees. A leisurely 20-minute walk may take you directly to them, or you may find yourself on a more strenuous hike that lasts the better part of the day.

The duration of your trek in both locations depends on the location of the chimps; although trackers go out ahead to locate the troops, it can take from 30 minutes to several hours to find them. Once you encounter the chimpanzees, you'll normally have an hour to observe them, maintaining a minimum distance of about 23 feet (7m), with any conversation kept to a whisper. If the chimps are on the move during your hour, you may be able to follow them a short way before departing.

Trekking Mahale is not for the faint of heart. Expect to walk anywhere between 1-6 hours a day, sometimes through steep, humid mountainous conditions. Generally, a moderate level of fitness goes a long way on Mahale. Lightweight hiking shoes with good traction are a must.

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WHAT TO PACK

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GORILLA TREKKING

We would advise that you wear light clothes in neutral colors, with long trousers and long-sleeved shirts, as there can be thorns and thick vegetation en route; some people take thick gloves too (garden gloves will do). A waterproof jacket is a good idea, as even in the dry season there may be occasional downpours.

We would recommend against a poncho as these can be noisy and will disturb other guests, but most importantly you will miss out on all the sounds of the forest.

A light pair of trail running shoes (good traction) will do if you do not want to take bulky hiking boots on safari that you may only wear once.

CHIMPANZEE TREKKING

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A pair of binoculars would be a good idea, especially if you encounter chimps high in the tree tops.

Plenty of water for your trek is recommended and there will be porters available to help carry extra water should you need. You will not have lunch on the trek so ensure that you have a good breakfast before departure from the lodge. Lunch will be served on your return.



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— ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS —

GORILLA TREKKING

Tipping

Tipping can get confusing when you have so many guides, trackers and porters, so we suggest tipping your main guide directly after the trek, and if you wish to tip a porter that may have assisted, you may also do so at the end of the trek.

Please note, with our itineraries for the Rwanda trekking, the porter fees have been included in the cost.

Age Limits

All participants must be at least 15 years of age.

Most Lodges will provide a packed lunch and this will be enjoyed at a designated area with your guides. You may not eat any food while with the gorillas.

Face masks may also be required to prevent the spread of disease.

CHIMPANZEE TREKKING

Mahale Facts

Mahale is extremely remote, almost as remote as it gets while still being in Tanzania, and is unreachable by car. Visitors must take a charter flight, then a boat across Lake Tanganyika to reach the park. Depending on the weather and availability, you may travel by speedboat or traditional wooden dhow, meaning the ride can take anywhere from 20 minutes to 2 hours.

Age Limits

All participants must be at least 15 years of age in Nyungwe Forest, whereas in Mahale the minimum age is 12.

Best Times for Chimpanzee Trekking

During the drier months, between December and February, and from about June to mid-September.