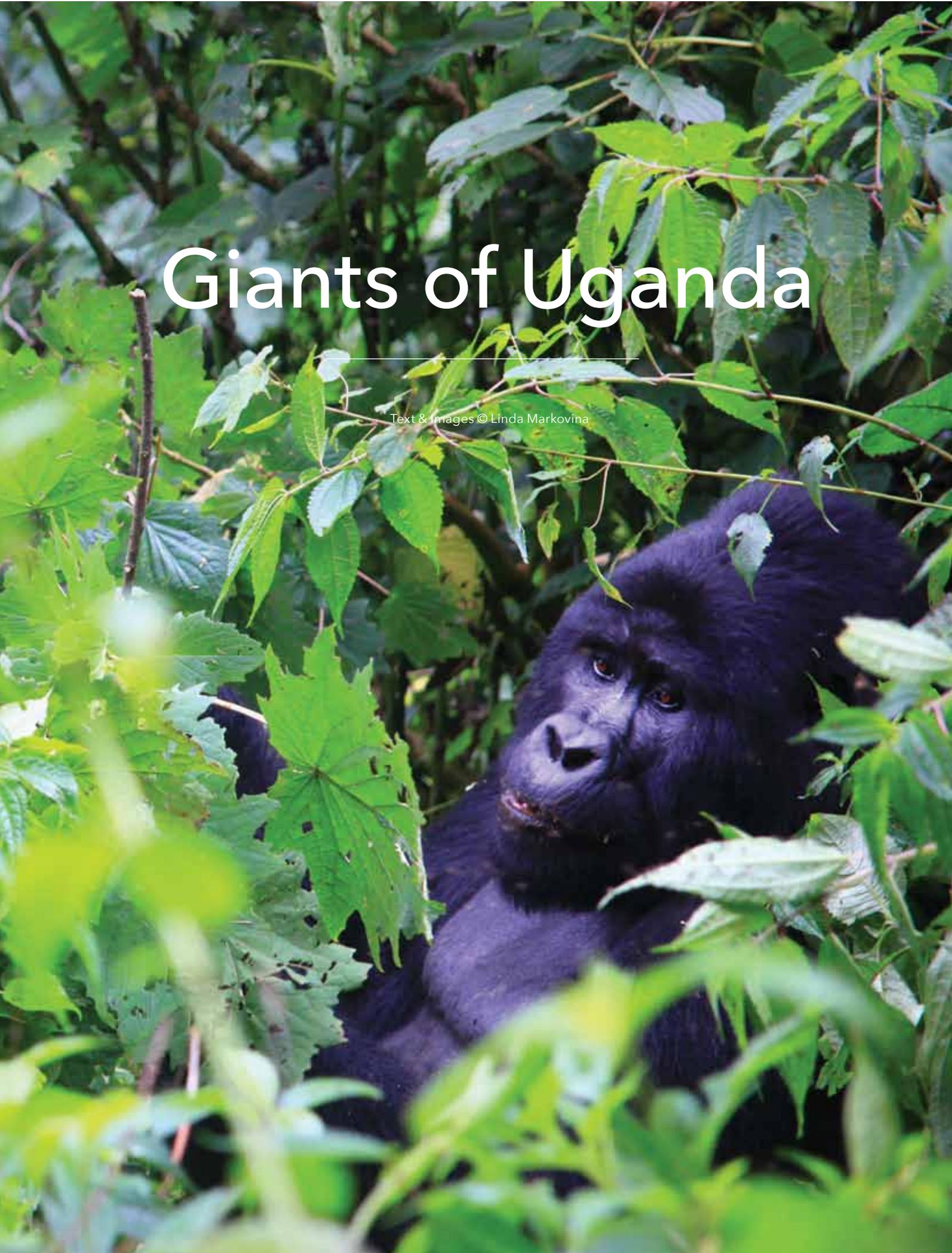


# Giants of Uganda

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**Living** in what can be regarded as one of the richest ecosystems in the world are the mountain gorillas of Uganda, who attract hundreds of tourists up the rugged hillsides of the country's national parks and reserves each year. Uganda has become *the* destination for gorilla trekking in 2015.

Historically known as "The Pearl of Africa", Uganda is a country where East African savannah meets West African jungle, and more than half of the world's dwindling mountain gorilla population has found a home.

For a small country, Uganda packs a big tourism punch. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the country's travel and tourism sector brought in nearly \$1 billion in 2013, a figure which has been forecast to rise by 5.8% per annum until 2024. Recording the highest tourism growth on the African continent in 2012 and with over 1,3 million visitors in 2014, there is no sign of this trend abating.

These are all very positive developments, considering the turmoil that once spread across the land. In the 1960s, tourists flocked to the country's forests in their thousands, but they all but disappeared during the 1970s and 1980s under the dictatorships of Idi Amin and Milton Obote. It is reported that as many as half a million Ugandans were killed in the state-sanctioned violence that has left a palpable scar, albeit a faded one, across the land and its people.

The legacy of maladministration and political unrest in the country has placed some serious challenges on conservation efforts. Uganda is one of the most densely populated countries on Earth. The 350 km<sup>2</sup> Bwindi National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Southwest, is surrounded by 200 to 400 rural people per square kilometre, putting gorillas and humans virtually on each other's doorsteps.

The livelihood of the mountain gorillas is under threat as a result of deforestation

(itself the result of an uncontrolled and illegal charcoal production industry) and subsistence farming. Environmental groups in Uganda have the difficult task of getting the local people to accept that the limited resources available are necessary to the survival of the gorillas as well as themselves.

The fact that Uganda is blessed with a plethora of diverse wildlife and some spectacular scenery has however meant that even after many years of civil unrest and these resulting conservation challenges, the country is once again vying with Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania as a premier wildlife destination in Africa.

Bwindi Impenetrable Forest is home to the family of highland gorillas called Bitukura, one of three families habituated in 2009. Living in the steep ridges and valleys, 300 of a worldwide count of only 700 gorillas make up the Ugandan population. To entice visitors, the normally astronomical price of the gorilla permits (currently standing at \$700 for one hour of viewing) gets dropped during the low season in order to boost the profile of the country's number one tourist attraction and to entice more local Ugandans to enjoy the experience.

In order to protect this endangered species it is important to understand the huge economic benefit that gorilla tourism brings to local communities (more than 50% of the total tourism revenue), and to support projects that allow gorillas and locals to exist harmoniously. A host of opportunities related to gorilla trekking is available to local Ugandans, including guiding, porting, and creating and selling gorilla-related crafts; not to mention jobs in the sectors supporting tourism more generally (such as accommodation, catering, and transport).

Gorillas can cast quite a spell on observers, from their powerfully built bodies that can lift more than a ton to

their deep soulful eyes, which reflect our 98.4% identical genetic makeup.

While the gorillas are a major attraction, they are just one part of an ecosystem that makes up the landscape of Uganda - politically, environmentally, socially, and culturally. Travel should be something that improves rather than exploits a destination. With this in mind, visitors to Uganda should make use of responsible tour operators and support community-based projects aimed at achieving a sustainable future for both the local people and the precious wildlife.' ■

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#### Where to see gorillas

Gorilla trekking can be done in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable Forest and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, or at Volcanoes National Park in neighbouring Rwanda.

#### When to see gorillas

Trekking takes place all year round, but it is best to go between June and September or December and February to avoid the major rains that can often make it a slippery and very humid business. Be sure to check the government websites and information lines as every now and then the price of the trek permits is reduced for special occasions or low season.

#### How to see gorillas

You have two options when it comes to trekking. You can go with a tour company such as Nomad Adventure Tours, who will handle the entire booking and itinerary for you, or you can go by yourself and make your own travel and accommodation arrangements. If you decide to go it alone, remember that you must purchase a permit in advance at the Uganda Wildlife Authorities Office in Kampala or the Office for Tourism and National Parks in Rwanda.

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