

# The Dallas Morning News

## East Africa tour encounters gorillas, hippos, lions, Cape buffaloes

A 10-day tour leads to encounters with gorillas, hippos, lions, Cape buffaloes

The Dallas Morning News 21 Aug 2016 By PHIL MARTY Special Contributor Phil Marty is a Florida writer and photographer.

An acacia is silhouetted by the rising sun near Namiri Plains Camp in the Serengeti.



## EAST AFRICAN TREK

An acacia is silhouetted by the rising sun near Namiri Plains Camp in the Serengeti.

BWINDI IMPENETRABLE FOREST, Uganda — The park rangers had told us we shouldn't try to get any closer

to the mountain gorillas than 20 feet.

Obviously no one had told the gorillas, which explained the female that

walked by within arm's length of me with her baby on her back.

I swiveled as she ambled away, fir-

ing off bursts of photos and trying to hold the camera steady in my excitement. That's when an immature female

bolted past, hitting me in the hip, almost knocking me to the ground. All I could do was regain my balance and stand there with a huge grin.

This was early in a 10-day trip to East Africa that was arranged by appropriately named Extraordinary Journeys. The gorilla experience had me wondering, "How are you going to top that?"

Africa being the amazing continent that it is, the remainder of our journey at the very least rivaled it.

Before heading home, we'd spend time on an island national park in Lake Victoria and explore the Serengeti in Tanzania where, believe it or not, lion, wildebeest, elephant and zebra sightings can become almost ho-hum.

There are fewer than 800 mountain gorillas in the world, and half are in Uganda, primarily in Bwindi. Adjacent areas of the Virunga Mountains in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo also

shelter them.

From our lovely cottage at Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge, it was an easy walk to the ranger station for Bwindi National Park. That was the end of the easy part. With a machine-gun-toting soldier at the front and one at the back, our group of four tourists, two porters and three rangers descended from 7,000 feet to roughly 6,000 on a steep, rocky trail.

Other rangers had been keeping tabs on the location of the Nkuringo gorilla family, which we reached after about 90 sweaty, leg-aching minutes. The family of 11 was lounging in the foliage off the trail, casually eating whatever they pulled down and paying us no mind.

The rangers used their machetes to hack an entrance into the bush, and for the next hour — the limit for encounters — we were all in the family. A huge silverback kept his distance, but the others came closer. While the mother and the immature female reclined, eating, the

baby grabbed a vine and, like a little kid, proceeded to hang upside down and show off.

Just 60 minutes, but memories to last a lifetime.

### **Monkeys, hawks, crocs**

At Rubondo Island Camp in the Tanzanian part of Lake Victoria, the wildlife encounters were more subtle, but no less memorable. As my fiancée, Patti, and I stood on the front porch of our cottage soon after arrival, a monkey strolled past, followed by a bush buck antelope that tarried along the shoreline.

Over the next three days, our friendly and knowledgeable guide Elisante, who had picked us up at the 20-footwide airstrip when we flew in, treated us to a variety of experiences. A challenging drive through the jungle by open safari vehicle was rewarded, just as we were about to give up, with a group of giraffes.

Kayaking along the lakeshore brought sightings of bald-eagle-like fish hawks and tiny, colorful weavers, flitting about their small round nests made of grasses.

On a fishing trip onto the lake we spied menacing-looking Nile crocodiles, and I caught a 2-foot-long Nile perch. On the way back, two hippos delighted us by surfacing and diving just before we hit the beach at the camp.

More memories awaited at Namiri Plains Camp, a setting of eight luxurious tents in a portion of the eastern Serengeti that was formerly a closed cheetah preserve.

On the 90-minute drive from the Seronera airstrip to the camp, we were excited to get up close with three of Africa's Big Five — lion, elephant and Cape buffalo (leopard and rhino complete the Big Five). The six lions looked almost huggable as they slept atop large rocks shaded by trees.



Clockwise from above: A baby from the Nkuringo family hangs from a vine. Mountain gorillas spend much of their time resting and eating. Here come the elephants.

Over the next three days, lions would provide many memories. A morning drive across the sprawling plains led to a waterhole where a dozen females slept. A pair of cubs play-fought each other when they weren't tormenting the

sleeping cats or biting their mother's tail.

Another day we watched a pride of 11 females pad in single file down a



dusty track, parading right past our safari vehicle.

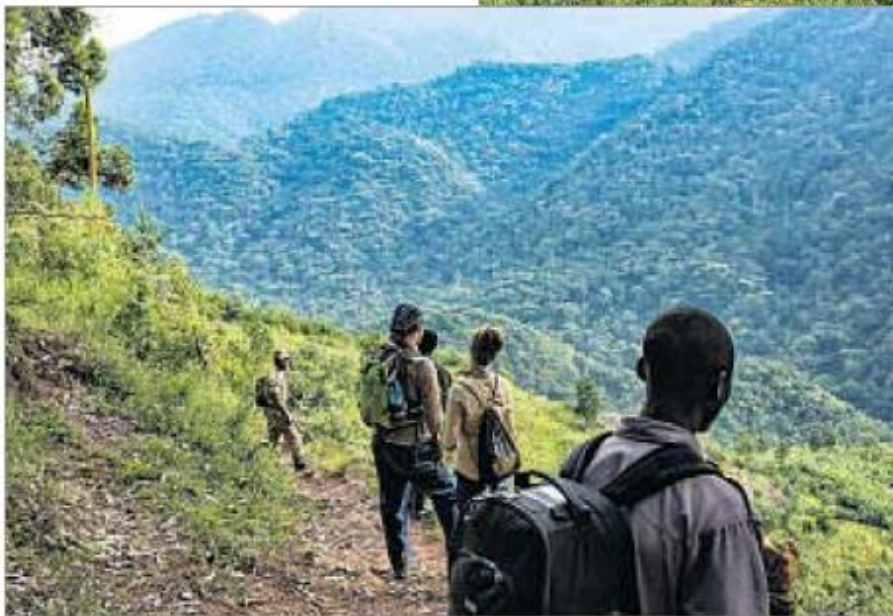
### Lions and wildebeests

But the lion highlight came one day as we ate lunch under the shade of a tree at the camp. For more than an hour, we watched in fascination as a mother several hundred yards away made four long treks in the hot sun, each time carrying a relatively newborn cub by the scruff of its neck while she moved them from one hiding spot to a newer and safer spot.

And, so it went: days viewing hundreds of wildebeests kicking up dust as they galloped in panic mode; Cape buffalo, also by the hundreds, some with birds sitting atop their heads or their backs; elephants with babies in tow, tossing dust on themselves for protection from the sun and flies.

And through it all you could stand on the vastness of the Serengeti, slowly turn 360 degrees and see no sign of humans as far as the horizon — just the occasional clump of zebras or wildebeests or antelopes, and the grass wavering in the breeze.

As our guide, Erasto, told us, "When I was a child, I thought I could walk to the edge of the plains and touch the sky."



Tourists head down a rugged trail to find the Nkuringo gorilla family in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest.