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Hey Adventurers, Here's How to Explore the National Park of Oscar-Nominated Virunga

Travel Guide

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Among the Oscar-nominated films that inspired wanderlust over the past year, the most unlikely might be *Virunga*, a powerful documentary that chronicles the tribulations of Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The park, home to mountain gorillas, otherworldly landscapes, and some of the most committed conservationists in Africa, was drawn into the violence that ravaged the area in 2013, when the documentary was filmed. Still, despite the tanks and RPGs, the images of the park were hypnotic. *Virunga*, Africa's oldest national park, has been legendary among Africa and wildlife enthusiasts for decades, both for its vast and varied terrain and its important population of mountain gorillas.

The good news: since the movie was filmed, the conflict has settled and Virunga has reopened to the public. That's not to say that all is well. The park's rangers still need to fend off poachers and international companies that want to exploit its resources. That's where travelers come in, bringing valuable dollars that can be put to conservation efforts—and, more broadly, demonstrate the benefits of protecting the park. Rwanda generates millions of dollars from its gorilla permits each year. The hope is that Virunga could provide the same crucial economic engine for the strife-ridden DRC.



Since Virunga reopened in January 2014, travelers have been trickling in. And now, New York-based luxury safari operator Extraordinary Journeys is ready to bring guests in as well. The company is offering a six-day trip that departs from Kigali, Rwanda and takes travelers over the border to go gorilla- and chimpanzee-trekking in Virunga, before ending at a luxury hotel at Lake Kivu in Rwanda.

It's a trip only for the more adventurous, of course. (The Department of State still has an official Travel Warning for the DRC.) But it's one that puts travelers at the forefront of conservation in Africa. Nights in Virunga are spent at a new lodge and tented camp run by the park service, ensuring money goes back to its important work. Travelers can even meet the rangers and visit the gorilla orphanage featured in the documentary. There are many companies today that offer people the opportunity to change the world through travel—but few have quite the immediacy and urgency as this.