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The Adventurous Honeymoon Destination for Wildlife- Obsessed Coffee Addicts

The java is as world-class as the animals and primates you'll see on safari or while trekking.

by Kathryn Romeyn | Updated 07/10/21



COURTESY OF UGANDA WILDLIFE AUTHORITY

If once in a lifetime is the goal for your honeymoon, there's one surefire way to accomplish it: Uganda. The lush East African country is on the other side of the world, yes, but it's like a treasure box filled with jewels so precious and beautiful they could change your life forever. What you'll see, feel, hear, and taste is not only a departure from your day-to-day norm but it's a step inside another world—a very exotic one at that.

Expect to tear up at the joy expressed during traditional dances and singing, as locals flail their bodies in all directions with incredible control yet happy abandon to the rhythmic beat of drums. And you can't help but smile at the enthusiastic toddlers waving and grinning ear to ear as you pass. It's impossible not to feel warmed by the vibrant fabrics covering women, and the sun beating down on palm trees, bougainvillea, and banana leaves. The fruit is in serious supply here, and you can enjoy “banana fingers” as well as cooked and mashed in *matoke*, brewed into beer, and even distilled into gin. And you can't view a mountain gorilla in its native habitat and not feel a primal connection and familiarity.

The number-one priority of many people coming to Uganda, and rightly so, is experiencing these mountain gorillas, endangered (the latest count has their total number at 1,004 in the world) and only existing in a relatively small forest that's shared by Rwanda and DRC. Visits to our closest cousins—they share more than 96% of our DNA—are highly controlled and are made to only families that have been habituated over a period of time by researchers (joining them for an experience with wild groups they're habituating is more costly but comes with a three-hour observation period making it incredibly worthwhile). The trek into Bwindi Impenetrable National Forest to watch them for one hour is \$600 (to compare, it's \$1,500/person in Rwanda), but it's likely to be the best \$600 you've ever spent.



COURTESY OF MAHOGANY GARDENS

You'll set out in the morning after a hearty breakfast at camp (Mahogany Springs in Buhoma, the gateway to Bwindi, is a particularly serene, spectacular lodge full of friendly staff and technicolor birds) to meet your guide and get briefed on the day's adventures. But what's to come is anyone's guess. You're venturing at altitude into a forest that does feel, at times, quite impenetrable and totally wild—there are even elephants there, though they're spotted only rarely. Trackers will have gone out before dawn to find the families and follow them, helping lead your group to them by whichever makeshift path you take. The hyper-green, gorgeous climb—and it's oftentimes quite steep because these are mountain gorillas, after all, that live in the mountains—can take anywhere from 15 minutes to five hours, but it's different every day. You might see a nursing infant, or a female picking ants off the rear of a silverback to eat. They might be lazing about snacking on vines, gazing contemplatively into the thick jungle canopy, playing with their children as if on a living jungle gym, or even mating (definitely a sight you'll never forget). The scenes are really no different from our own behavior on a Saturday, and it's remarkable to see it close-up and very personal. The only difference is the gorillas are not bothered by us staring at them as we would be by them.

The calm, humanlike giants are in stark contrast to another set of relatives: chimpanzees. Trekking to track down these hyperactive, oftentimes cruder and smaller yet no less impressive primates is also an adventure in and of itself, and can be done in a couple parts of the country, including Kyambura Gorge, adjacent to Queen Elizabeth National Park, known for another unique and stunning wonder: tree-climbing lions. The cuddly-looking big cats residing in this park have adapted distinctive behavior from those in most parts of Africa, namely they climb even cactus-like euphorbia trees, lie around on the branches, and spy on their prey from the heights. Volcanoes Kyambura Gorge Lodge, where all guests get complimentary half-hour massages near the free-form pool with epic views, is the ideal place to call home for a few days of exploring this region. You can even plant a tree there as part of their effort to expand the buffer zone that helps protect wildlife—dedicate it to your new union.



COURTESY OF UGANDA WILDLIFE AUTHORITY

For a more varied dose of wildlife, there's Murchison Falls National Park, an area packed with all the iconic safari suspects: hippos, baboons, antelope, lions, warthogs, and even a rare subspecies of graceful giraffe. (Fun fact: Kanye West recorded part of his latest album there.) Hop a Nile river safari from Baker's Lodge's private jetty to see massive elephants in their full glory enjoying the river's edge, watch exotic birds flit about, and wind up at the thundering waterfall whose mist makes rainbows. (One hour from there is another opportunity to trek for chimpanzees in Budongo Forest.) Lovebirds eager to go even farther afield can head north to Kidepo Valley National Park, home to the country's only zebras and also the Ik tribe, fascinating for culture lovers. And adrenaline seekers will find happiness in Jinja, the so-called adventure capital where whitewater rafting on the Nile is a must. You can even bungee jump over the iconic river's rapids, too. Stay on Wildwaters Lodge's private island in the middle of the Nile and you'll get to relax in a bathtub overlooking the incredible landscape.



COURTESY OF WILDWATERS LODGE

Wherever you are, it's likely you'll notice not just baskets, carved wood primates, and boldly printed fabric accessories for sale, but also brown bags of coffee with a gorilla imprinted on the front. Gorilla Conservation Coffee is the brainchild of gorilla researcher Dr. Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka, whose life's work surrounds protecting our closest relatives from us (gorillas can catch human diseases easily, such as scabies). To help educate the community and teach family planning, she founded the nonprofit Conservation Through Public Health in Bwindi. Uganda's highly fertile ground is perfect for growing coffee and tea, and initiatives like these and the Bwindi Coffee Farmers Cooperative have made it more profitable for the farmers, who are now paid fair wages for their painstaking haul. Coffee safaris are a fun pursuit to experience in Uganda as well—it's possible to walk the verdant fields and witness the entire process of hand sorting, shelling, and processing the robusta and arabica beans that became fragrant, fantastic coffee. (More coffee immersion is available in Sipi Falls, along waterfall hikes, too.)

Sold on Uganda? You can research and book a trip like this on your own, if you somehow end up with tons of extra time while wedding planning. The better idea is to let the pros do it for you. The hyper-luxury version can be arranged by Abercrombie & Kent, whose tailor-made journeys include both plush five-star lodges like Sanctuary Gorilla Forest Camp (actually inside Bwindi) and visits to philanthropic community projects, if you wish. Let's Go Travel is an operator coordinating immersive bespoke experiences for more approachable rates, as well as set safari itineraries offering great value. A must-visit for anyone going: Ride 4 A Woman, a beautiful nonprofit doing amazing work to support local women in Bwindi with micro-loans, weaving and sewing projects (it's impossible to leave the shop empty-handed), and even cooking classes.



COURTESY OF BOUTIQUE NO. 5 HOTEL

All flights arrive in Entebbe, and since many come in and depart late, it's usually necessary to spend a night at the beginning and end in the city on the world's second largest lake, Victoria. The Boma Hotel is a charming artifact-filled boutique-sized property, while No. 5 Boutique Hotel is the newest and chicest option in town (their multi-course gourmet dinners are a must). And many people add on Tanzania for a Serengeti safari or, if you're seeking a sandy beach, stick on a few days in Zanzibar to the end of your adventure—time to do nothing but relax in front of beautiful turquoise water and contemplate the magnificence of what you've just seen. The only risk of a honeymoon so out of this world? You'll want to go again...and again.