

INTO THE CLOUDS

It's called Africa's 'little Switzerland' for its lofty green peaks, but this high altitude slice of Africa is also home to rare endangered mountain gorillas. There's no better chance of seeing them than in Rwanda, where just a handful of them still remain in the wild. STORY

BY KERI HARVEY

It's a perfect day for climbing. Cool, still and overcast, the brooding chain of volcanoes – The Virungas – beckons us to its powder blue slopes. Their peaks piercing cloud, the volcanoes tower heavenwards, and this is where the last remaining wild mountain gorillas live. Some days they are on the lower slopes chomping on celery sticks and require little physical effort to see; other times they may be at the misty tops of the volcanoes at over 3 600 metres high. So an intrepid, limb-wrenching hike is needed to get to them.

Gorilla permits in hand and paperwork completed, we are ready to start climbing. Only eight people are permitted in a climbing group to each of the 10 habituated mountain gorilla groups that live on the volcano chain which forms the political border between Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda. Of course gorillas don't know borders, but when they reside on the Rwandan side they remain particularly well protected and monitored – less so in the neighbouring countries, where bush meat hunting is still a real problem.

"Today we are heading for the Sabinyo group," says seasoned guide Francois Biginmana to our small group of trekkers.

"They live on Mount Sabinyo, about 3 643m high, but they are not always right at the top," Francois smiles. "Trackers go ahead of us and relay messages back to us which direction to follow. So we don't know exactly where they are yet. It will be a surprise."

"Walk slowly," advises Francois, "the mountain is steep, and there may be a long way to go." We walk in silence, through fields of celery and other salad looking plants.

Everyone in the group is handed a freshly cut long bamboo pole, which will become our best friend on the mountain. Whoever admits to being the slowest person in the group walks in front with Francois to set the pace. The rest of the group follows in single file, tailed by porters carrying cameras and water. Lean, fit and sinewy, the porters are used to scaling these sheer mountains daily. To them, it's a gentle walk in the park.

"Walk slowly," advises Francois, "the mountain is steep, and there may be a long way to go." We walk in silence, through fields of celery and other salad looking plants favoured by gorillas,

but today they are not there. Through stinging nettles the gradient increases and the bamboo poles become essential tools to anchor and haul ourselves up the mountain. The walk has become a climb, and soon it will transform into mountaineering and a staunch hike for the average Joe.

With only about 750 mountain gorillas left on earth, this is a special journey too: one of acknowledgement and recognition for their importance on earth, and one of quiet apology for what man's brutality has done to bring them so dangerously close to extinction. Mountain gorillas share 97% of our DNA, which is very sobering when

they are still hunted for the pot in central Africa. Plus, adults are shot dead so that baby gorillas can be captured and sold as exotic pets to unscrupulous wildlife dealers. A quick buck is made and one of the rarest offspring on earth dies shortly after, because mountain gorillas do not survive in captivity.

We have been climbing in relative silence for two hours, when Francois turns to us and smiles. "Is everyone ok?" he asks, hardly breathing heavily and still clad in a sweater and scarf. The rest of us are bedraggled in sweat-soaked T-shirts. Simultaneously a tracker bobs back down the mountain and talks to Francois in the local language of



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Kinyarwanda. He points animatedly and Francois changes direction slightly en route up the mountain. "The Sabinyo group is not too far away," he says, as the tracker takes off again, back up the mountain to check on the gorillas' movements.

Another hour passes. Francois stops dead in his tracks and raises his hand for silence. "I hear them. They are very close by," he says. Please, no eating or drinking or flashes on your cameras, and if the silverback charges don't run, just cower down and show submission. He just needs to show you who's the boss." We have just an hour with the gorillas and must maintain at least a two-metre distance at all times. This to protect the great apes from human disease transmission, for which they have no immunity.

On a verdant, sheer mountainside, under a forested canopy, the massive black hulks of gorilla are silently picking salad greens for lunch. The stoic and sturdy silverback watches over his charges, while a jet black baby gorilla swings loosely from a tree by one

arm. Then he drops off the branch and lands on the soft undergrowth, a perplexed look on his face. His mother continues snacking from the surrounding salad bar, and the rest of the gorilla group appears oblivious to our presence.



TRAVEL TIPS

Best time:

July to September is the dry season and best for gorilla trekking.

Gorilla tracking:

It can be strenuous and trekkers must be physically fit and older than 15 years. Anyone with any sign of illness is not permitted to trek.

Currency:

Rwandan Franc. Take cash in US Dollars.

Health:

Most of Rwanda is too high and cool for malaria, but precautions are still advised. A yellow fever vaccination is compulsory (www.traveldoctor.co.za)

Clothing for gorilla tracking:

Lightweight rain poncho, long-sleeved shirt, waterproof trousers, hiking boots, leather gloves, sunscreen, and insect repellent.

Language:

Kinyarwanda, French and English.

Communications:

An excellent tarred road network; good telephone communication and cellphone reception.

Travel arrangements:

Gorilla permits cost \$750 and only 80 permits per day are issued.

For tailor made trips to Rwanda see www.destinationsabuzz.co.za or call 011 467 5713.

For the full hour, we watch in awe as the mountain gorillas forage, play and nap. Even Francois and the trackers are still captivated by them every day, though they have all been tracking mountain gorillas most of their lives. "I often wonder who is watching who," says Francois in a whisper. "Because if you look into their eyes, you see yourself. I think the gorillas are just as amused at seeing us, as we are at seeing them."

And then slowly and silently, our awestruck group falls back into single file to head down the mountain. There's no need to ask for quiet, for everyone is lost in their own thoughts, of what it means to be great ape and human, and how very little there is between us. Getting down the mountain is much easier, though jelly knees take over once on level ground. It takes just an hour to descend from the clouds and cool mists of the mountain to the base below and the rambling village of Ruhengeri. So close, yet a world away from the mountain gorillas in their lofty home in the volcano tops. It is the mountain gorillas that are Rwanda's unique attraction, along with the elegant, warm-hearted people who live in this 'Land of a Thousand Hills' that looks so much like Switzerland. ☺

TOUR OPERATORS

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Visas:

No visas are required by SA passport holders for a stay of up to 90 days. ALL African nationals will be issued a visa on arrival. NB: Visas will not be issued to people with a criminal record

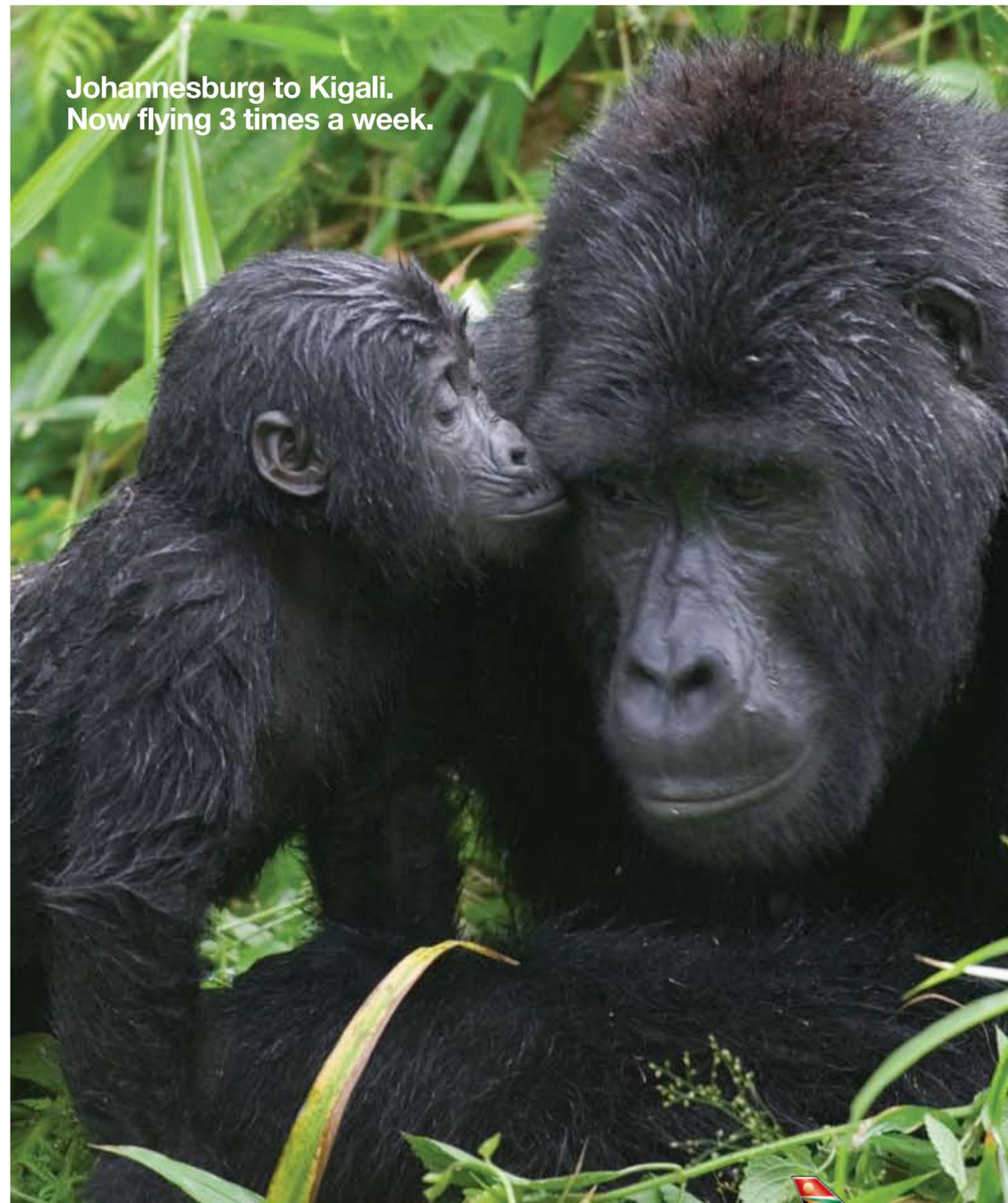
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