Lake Bunyonyi, Uganda; photo by Marcus Westberg

Nyungwe National Park, Rwanda; photo by Marcus Westberg

Lwiro Primate Rehabilitation Centre, Democratic Republic of Congo; photo by Marcus Westberg
Overview of the Gorilla Highlands Region

Travellers from all over the world come to the Gorilla Highlands region for the epiphany of staring into the eyes of our giant relatives, Grauer’s and mountain gorillas. Yet the region offers much more: vibrant cultures bubbling through the surface and a landscape that opens your heart to adventure.

This cross-boundary space is defined by the Virunga volcanoes — some of them still active — and ancient rainforests with precious endangered primate species. From the countless islands of Lake Bunyonyi to the seaside feel of Lake Kivu, water bodies are sprinkled all over the valleys, interrupted by beautifully terraced hills.

The original inhabitants of these lands were Batwa hunter-gatherers who lived in egalitarian communities that roamed its endless forests. Bantu farmers started arriving from western Africa about 2,000 years ago, followed in the 19th century by Swahili-Arab traders from the shores of the Indian Ocean, and eventually Europeans as well…

The colonisers divided the Gorilla Highlands region into countries, but in actuality it is held together by strong geographical, historical and cultural connections. One can loosely define this area as Uganda west of the mighty Nile, the whole of Rwanda’s thousand hills and the riches of eastern DR Congo.

If you ever had interest in the heart of Africa but wondered about its security, infrastructure and other traits, you now have a team of experts to rely on…
Virunga Volcanoes shared by the three countries; photo by Marcus Westberg

A movie night with the Batwa of Echuya Forest Reserve, Uganda; photo by Marcus Westberg

Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, Uganda; photo by Marcus Westberg
About Gorilla Highlands Experts

United in their belief that wildlife can only thrive if the communities around national parks are doing well too, Gorilla Highlands Experts (GHE) are 20+ local and global specialists with deep love for the transboundary region. Their professions range from culinary arts and education through music and national park management to primatology and social development, and more.

Formalised as a Rwandan non-governmental organisation in 2022, GHE builds on links strengthened during the Covid pandemic, and on two decades of working together in the three countries.

The biggest GHE initiative is Youth Spaces, a powerful way to pass on the experts’ practical skills that lead to personal development, civic engagement and regional peacebuilding. Upcountry-based youngsters aged 15-30 are invited into the program after submitting business and project ideas with a substantial environmental component.

Best known for its annual cooking competition Gorilla Highlands Silverchef, GHE also publishes a podcast about responsible tourism, prints a pocket guide to the region and runs tour guide training that is open to everyone.
Ambrose Kibuuka (youth empowerment), Amy Porter (primatology), Charlotte Beauvoisin (digital marketing), Gloria Mwenge (ecotourism)
Joe Kahiri & Miha Logar (media), Jolly Senyange (financial strategy), Jon Lee (linguistics), Julius Wetala (coffee)
Marcus Westberg (photography), Moses Turinawe (gorilla tourism), Mugarura G. Aimable (cultural industry), Mussa Bigumirabagabo (pottery)
Patrick Devyust (chocolate), Penny-Jane Cooke (renewable energy), Prince K. Kaleme (biology), Prosper Uwingeli (conservation)
Samo Ačko (visual communications), Sarah Hall (park management), Shiv Shah (science writing), Stephanie Brancaforte (climate action)
About Gorilla Highlands Ltd

Among Gorilla Highlands Experts there are a number with tourism and hospitality backgrounds — the team behind the sister organisation Gorilla Highlands Ltd. This responsible tourism company was registered in 2016 and is based in Musanze, Rwanda. It makes unique itineraries that uncover the very best of the Gorilla Highlands region: in a jeep, on a mountain bike, on foot, or in a dugout canoe.

Its specialty lies in hiking and cycling trips, a small-scale alternative to commercial tourism for a traveller who wishes to treat the cultures and natural environment with proper respect and learn something on the way. The company’s focus has always been culturally sensitive economic development of remote communities that have few other opportunities.

Started at Uganda’s Lake Bunyonyi as a way to orient international volunteers, the concept of “canoe trekking” has been particularly important to Gorilla Highlands Ltd. It has become a well-known activity with a simple premise: experiences as far away from touristic areas as humanly possible. This has developed into a system of guided Gorilla Highlands Trails that were finally, in 2019, connected to Rwanda’s famous Congo Nile Trail.

These days treks and cycling trips are just one of the ingredients in the itineraries Gorilla Highlands Ltd makes for guests from around the world. Some actually opt not to hike or bike at all — but those who do, get something extraordinary!
Hiking Realities

Around Lake Bunyonyi in Uganda, tented homestays are the rule of the day. Because host families do not have guest accommodation, hikers camp in fully-equipped tents (pitched by Gorilla Highlands Ltd staff). Comfortable foam mattresses to sleep on, sheets and blankets for additional cover are provided — one’s own sleeping bag is completely optional. Simple pit latrines are available as well as invigorating showers. Guests will be in remote rural areas with limited or no electricity so it is smart to pack a source of light and extra batteries.

With some itinerary adjustments, accommodation upgrades to lodges/hotels around Bunyonyi are possible. Elsewhere in the region a full spectrum of overnight options can usually be found wherever the sun goes down. Visitors are likely to be impressed by the quality of local cooking, the richness of breakfasts and picnics and the tasty cuisine of the restaurants.

Big stable dugout canoes and large boats are used, with life jackets included. There has never been a case of a vessel tipping over. No dangerous animals are present in the mountain lakes of the Gorilla Highlands region, so swimming is completely safe.

The weather is a mixed bag and far from the common perception of hot Africa — warm sweaters and rain jackets are as advisable as shorts and sun-block. Even though one can generally walk around in any shoes, soles with a good grip are highly recommended.

Children are, as they love to say in the region, “most welcome”. A visiting family will generate smiles and wonder and be the news of the week for the villages on our way. The guide team will gladly lift a tired or bored child on their shoulders whenever the need arises and if long-distance carrying is needed a local person can easily be hired.

A moment on Lake Kivu, Rwanda; photo by Marko Čurin
Paddling back from Tom's Homestay, Uganda; photo by Miha Logar

Second day of a canoe trek, Uganda; photo by Sven Hamich

Additional activities organised for school groups, Bushara Island, Lake Bunyonyi, Uganda; archive photo
Winners of Responsible Tourism Awards

At the 2022 World Travel Market in London, Gorilla Highlands Ltd won two Responsible Tourism Awards: the global “Contributing to Cultural Heritage” category and gold in the “Rest of the World” competition.

The judges appreciated the company’s partnership with indigenous Batwa “Pygmy” communities, the cooking competition bringing together chefs from Congo, Rwanda and Uganda and the homestays and remote hiking routes developed in Uganda and Rwanda.

The panel wrote about the Batwa: “Gorilla Highlands encourage them to share their traditional beliefs and skills, ensuring that their guests are not going to mock them as backward (just the opposite). Countering the prevalent Disneyfication of Batwa experiences, the activity is focused on the people’s present life instead of costume-based historical performances. The chat between the community and the visitors starts with introductions of everyone and can then take any direction the visitors or the Batwa are interested in.”

[Image of Batwa people receiving awards]

Batwa of Rwamahano near Echuya Forest, Uganda, receive the banked 50% of their community fees; photo by Owen Bright
Echuya Forest Reserve and its central swamp are behind the hikers, Uganda; photo by Georg Schaumberger

Imbabazi Centre of Hope, Rwanda; photo by Miha Logar

Grauer’s gorilla in Kahuzi-Biega National Park, Democratic Republic of Congo; photo by Marcus Westberg
Gorilla Highlands in the Press

Wildlife tourism reimagined

Hudson Valley’s sculpture parks are monumental attractions

See also

gorillahighlands.com/globalmedia
Testimonials

East African Playgrounds (PlayAction International) is a UK charity that annually sent 150-200 trekkers and volunteers to the Bunyonyi region to take part in a 4-day charity trek. The whole program was developed alongside Gorilla Highlands who helped run the treks from start to finish. We loved working with them. The guides were awesome and great fun, the region is one of the most beautiful in the world and the Gorilla Highlands team have such a great network and knowledge of the area and its wonderful history, culture and nature.

Tom Gill, founding director, UK

As an inclusive tourism professional, I was very impressed with the Gorilla Highlands. This regional initiative is all about connecting the tourism industry with communities for rural development. A totally unique and innovative model, not only in Uganda and Rwanda, but worldwide as well. They are definitively the region’s experts and quite reliable. You will not be disappointed and will want to come back again!

Juan Garrido, consultant, Spain

Our tour with Gorilla Highlands was the highlight of our 3-week stay in Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda. Arranging it online was smooth and confidence-inspiring. I organised our whole trip myself, spending many hours on my laptop researching options and tour operators. Gorilla Highlands passed my test so I committed online; then they came through with a fantastic adventure for our family of four. Every person involved in each part was welcoming, interesting, knowledgeable, and fun to be with. The hike from Lake Kayambu to Lake Bunyonyi was spectacular. Gorgeous scenery, lovely people, and the best guide we had in Africa. And I’ll never forget our night on Tom’s Island - sitting by the bonfire listening to a spritely and entertaining old-timer play a traditional stringed instrument and sing. It was magical. My only regret is that we didn’t allocate more time to our stay in Uganda.

Kirk Lilley, traveller, USA

We have been working with Gorilla Highlands for a decade. The guides are reliable and passionate and have provided unique experiences to countless clients of ours. The team has an extremely diverse and detailed knowledge of the destination, and it is always a pleasure to work out new tours with them.

Sven Gillian, Matoke Tours sales manager, Germany

I was looking for a holiday for me and my two teens that would combine some adventure, holidaying, safari, seeing gorillas, all in two weeks. A tall order I thought. Gorilla Highlands replied quickly and proposed a few scenarios; the best one soon crystallised. It was an excellent experience all around.

Tina Grosel Davies, translator, Luxembourg

I had a wonderful trip organised by Gorilla Highlands. It is nothing like a typical tour operator. They knew exactly what I wanted and took care of everything. They made sure that I got an authentic experience. I highly recommend them!

Jiro Ose, photographer, Japan
Non-Hiking Moments From Our Tours

Photos by Alexander Bakke Bergh, Marko Ćurin, Miha Logar, Tomaž Malovrh

The rate card with package descriptions, contingency plans and other documentation available on request.

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