

Gorilla Highlands Ambassador's Field Notes 1.0



written by ML Rwebandira & experts from around the world

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Why Do We Need GH Ambassadors? ... p4
What is GHE & Why Trust Our Advice? ... p5
Welcome, Our Guest, to This Stunning Region! ... p6
Tour Guiding Chapter ... p8
Media Chapter ... p64
Storytelling Chapter ... p86



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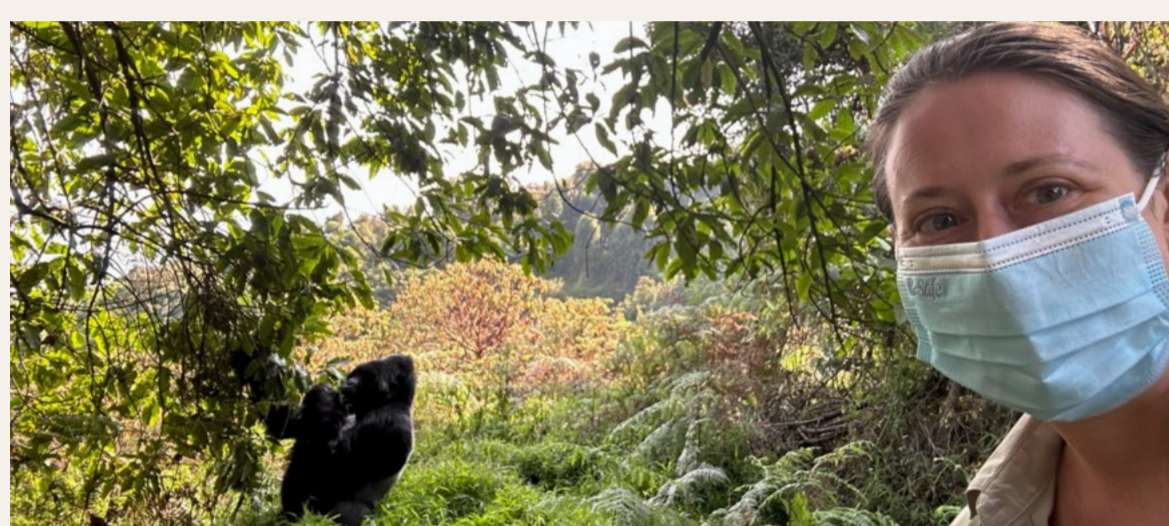
Gorilla Highlands Ambassador's Field Notes, version 1.0

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Why Do We Need Gorilla Highlands Ambassadors?

The Gorilla Highlands region [click on any underlined text for more info] sits in the very heart of Africa, and most of the world has no idea about it — or sees it as a scary place. It isn't hard to imagine why. Just think of how Rwandans and Ugandans see Congo; that is how people from elsewhere see Rwanda and Uganda!

Is it therefore silly that we call responsible tourism our region's most promising *export industry*? (Yes, tourism is an export because foreigners purchase the services.) Not at all. Our people are welcoming, our cultures are rich, our landscapes are spectacular, and our animals unique. We just need to convince a guest to come and enjoy it all.

That's why we need to bring the following people on board:

- those who have bravely decided to travel in Uganda/Rwanda/DR Congo and can tell others there's nothing to fear
- those who guide and host these courageous travellers and make them comfortable around the clock

- those who put videos, images and words on the internet for the entire planet to see

Yes, these *Field Notes* want to talk to international guests (including volunteers), tour guides, local hosts and media practitioners all at the same time! Since this is a diverse group, there will be text boxes specifically addressing one or another target audience, but the main readers are supposed to be tour guides.

Why? Because they are the ones professionally connecting the guests, the hosts and other local partners, and those who are in the best position to collect amazing footage on the way.

We are in this together, for good.

Our goal is to help create a cross-boundary area of peace and prosperity, and how we tell our stories matters a lot. It should be us sharing them — not outsiders who often misunderstand the bigger picture!

What is GHE & Why Trust Our Advice?



The main writer of the *Field Notes*, a central part of Gorilla Highlands Ambassador Training (GHAT), is ML Rwebandira. ML is a Ugandan/Slovenian who resides in Musanze, Rwanda, and has decades of experience in the fields of tourism and media. He is helped by a super team of consultants, part of the network of Gorilla Highlands Experts (GHE) ...

United in our belief that **wildlife can only thrive if nearby communities are doing well too**, GHE represents dozens of local and global specialists from a variety of professional fields. We promote and support the transboundary Gorilla Highlands region shared by Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The biggest GHE initiative is Illumineers, our way to pass the experts' practical skills onto the younger generation. It is primarily devoted to nature conservation, regional peacebuilding, civic

engagement and personal development. The GHE media team is behind the Pocket Treasure booklet and weekly posts on the website and social media.

Finally, Gorilla Highlands Limited is an award-winning tour company established by GHE. Here we have the opposite of what usually takes place. It is common for a tourism business to add a non-profit section or a project that it pumps some money into. In our case, it is the non-profit organisation (GHE) that is the real mother of the tour company.

Our tourism activities started with guided hiking and canoeing trips that take visitors to some of the most remote areas of Africa. This is adventure travel that brings income and pride to people who otherwise rarely benefit from tourism. It all began at Uganda's Lake Bunyonyi in 2005 but now these routes go as far as the Congo Nile Trail.

Welcome, Our Guest, to This Stunning Region!

Some years ago, when we started a more intentional approach to our guide training, Shannon McClain saw our materials and wondered whether we could do something similar for clients as well. She was from the US but a longtime resident of Africa, and she very much believed in travellers leaving a positive impact.

Shannon's idea has evolved into the Ambassador concept, where you, our guest, are gently invited to join us in transforming our region's global image. We are well aware that not everyone will have the time or the energy to take part, so the *Field Notes* have been prepared with different levels of engagement in mind ...

How to Use the Field Notes

The easiest way in is to look for the pink backgrounds; in the digital version, search for "Note for Guests". These are the essentials we believe enrich your travels.

Next comes the *Media Chapter* (p64), written for anyone who wants to improve their photos and videos.

If you feel like diving in seriously, read the *Tour Guiding Chapter* (p8). It will give you a deeper awareness of many issues, and plenty of conversation starters.

Finally, the *Storytelling Chapter* (p86) is high-level food for thought.

What to Mentally Prepare For

Cultural differences may play quite a large role in your experience with us. We would ask one thing of you: come ready to have your assumptions bent a little.

We all carry them. Prejudice is not a foreign disease, it is a human habit, and we are working on our own.

Everything in our region has its own logic and there is an explanation for it all, though it may not be the one you arrived with. If something puzzles you, ask somebody local rather than reaching for a quick conclusion. It takes energy to hold information that conflicts with what we already "know"; the mind would far rather file the new thing beside the old one and move on.

Hygiene

It takes a flexible mind to question your own culture, so let us start with something practical. Unless you spend the whole trip in luxurious lodges, you will probably notice how “dirty” local kitchens look. Strangely, visitors rarely fall ill because of them. Being hygienic matters, of course; it is also easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. Is our place too dirty, or yours too clean?

Time

Time gets a different treatment here. Few people live by the clock, which can be hard to grasp if you come from a city where train arrivals are counted in seconds. Accept it: life will be slower, and you may “waste” many minutes waiting for this and that.

Spend them resting or spend them working, but try not to think of them as lost. Time is a measure we agreed on rather than a thing in itself, and the fear of losing it is one of the great sources of stress. Consider the slower clock part of the holiday.

Truth

In most of Africa a person is above all a member of an extended family, a clan, a tribe. In a traditional society the group matters most and its peace should not be disturbed. Have a problem with someone? Solve it quietly. A public display of disagreement can mean humiliation and a loss of respect or authority. Is it perfectly clear that the other person is the villain of your story? It will not matter; the community will expect you both to carry some of the blame.

This shapes how people speak. Answers are often chosen to protect the peace rather than to deliver bad news, so you may be told what somebody believes you would like to hear, and there can be a gap between what is promised and what happens. Expect it and take it easy. A plan that quietly changes is not a lie, and pressing somebody in front of others is the surest way to get an answer that pleases you and means nothing.



Lake Bunyonyi ride; photo by ML Rwebandira

TOUR GUIDING CHAPTER

VIP Mentality

This chapter is meant for anyone wishing to take their tour guiding to the highest possible level; let's call it *VIP*, from "Very Important Person".

The goal is to prepare you for the best customers a guide can dream about, the ones who tip generously but expect the highest standards.

The beauty of reaching that level is that once you are ready for VIPs, you are ready for anyone. Let's admit it to ourselves:

every person would want to be treated like a VIP — and once you know how to provide that experience, it doesn't cost you anything to give it to all.

NOTE FOR GUESTS:

Honest feedback helps everyone.

When guides don't make you feel like a VIP, don't hesitate to openly share that with them. If the issue is pressing, pull them gently aside (our cultures are not used to direct criticism) and explain. If it can wait, do it at the end of the day/tour in a relaxed atmosphere.

What does one need for VIP guiding?

- right attitude (the main focus of this chapter)
- good general knowledge about everything + at least one specialist field you have fully mastered

As our Congo Nile Trail guest Lisanne Bosveld wisely commented:

“VIP guiding is not only about knowing the best routes, villages and history but also how to behave with the customers. For instance, how to communicate and be open and to be with people who may have a different opinion than you. You will guide people from different countries, cultures, religions and socioeconomic classes, so you should have the ability to adapt to different types of clients. You will spend full days with the customers, so you need to build trust and align expectations right from the beginning.”



NOTE FOR LOCAL PARTNERS (PAY SPECIAL ATTENTION TO GREEN BOXES IN THE DOCUMENT):

Be proud of what you have.

Please never be ashamed of any humble situations you may live in. To a VIP, getting to know you and being able to share your life for a moment can be the biggest luxury!

On the other hand, what you can actually control you should. For example, basic cleanliness and neatness will make your humble home look a thousand times nicer in your visitor's eyes.



NOTE FOR MEDIA PRODUCERS (YOUR COLOUR OF EMPHASIS IN THE FIELD NOTES IS BLUE):

Real respect creates real stories.

Do you strive for good general knowledge so that you talk about most topics with comfort? Do you treat the people you photograph/record as if they were VIPs? The right attitude will bring best media results.

Our Guiding Light: Responsible Tourism

The term *responsible tourism* is constantly on the lips of the Gorilla Highlands Experts team, but what does it actually mean? Let's see what the 2022 Responsible Tourism Charter has to say about it:

Responsible Tourism (2022 Charter)

- (1) **Recognises global environmental issues** that require local action
- (2) **Sets goals, measures and reports efforts** to minimise negative economic, environmental, and social impacts
- (3) **Generates greater economic benefits** for local people and enhances the well-being of host communities
- (4) **Involves local people in decisions** that affect their communities
- (5) **Makes positive contributions** to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage
- (6) **Addresses biodiversity loss** and is nature-positive
- (7) **Provides inclusive employment** irrespective of ability, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation
- (8) **Provides more enjoyable experiences for all** through more meaningful connections with locals and a greater understanding of context/issues
- (9) **Offers culturally sensitive experiences** engendering respect between tourists and hosts, and building local pride and confidence
- + (10) **Promotes animal welfare**

The last point (10) is a GHE addition and applies to wildlife and domestic animals. It demands decent treatment of all other living beings on Earth.

It goes without saying that both the people in the tourism industry and their guests have to **take responsibility for all of the above!**

Some Questions to Provoke Your Thinking

Hey, Mr/Mrs Guide, what about advising your clients on the morning of their gorilla tracking to try to respect the prescribed distance from the animals? Rangers are motivated to make the activity as wonderful as possible because of the tipping that will follow. They might turn a blind eye to the rule, but is there anything to lose if you yourself encourage the guests to follow it and protect the health of the gorillas?

Another provocation related to the point 10: How has your upbringing and how has your religion influenced your attitude towards animals? Does your behaviour make sense? The more scientists study the animal world, the more it becomes clear that we are one of them, just with a different operating system ... If you have ever dealt with the Bazungu (white people), you already know that mistreating a dog or any other “cute” creature in front of them is a **bad bad bad idea** — but why would a wise person do harm to any animal?

In a similar vein, littering of any kind with tourists present — whether it's done by you or by local partners — will automatically affect how they look at you. Yes, it's very much worth putting that garbage into your bag until you can dispose of it properly. And when you learn that it doesn't take so much effort after all, why not also do it when nobody is watching?

The same applies to leaving your parked vehicle on, spitting dirty fumes into the environment and disturbing your guests with noise. Have you asked yourself why you do it? Have you Googled it? Your mechanic might have outdated information about the benefits of it ...

NOTE FOR GUESTS:

It kinda goes without saying, but still: we need you to be serious role models when it's about littering and animal rights. Please talk to the guides about how your culture perceives these two issues. And as far as gorillas are concerned, please turn the page.



Mgahinga Gorilla National Park; photo courtesy of Yiannis Pepetsios

NOTE FOR GUESTS:

Have a look at the photo above. Would you say that the guest — who should actually be wearing a protective mask! — is 7 metres/23 feet away from the gorilla family? Doesn't look like it. In fact, researchers from Oxford Brookes University studied pictures on Instagram and concluded that the vast majority of visitors come within 4 metres/13 feet; a critical distance for potential transmission of disease and behavioural disturbances to the apes.

As mentioned on the previous page, this originates from park rangers wanting to make tourists happy. The people in charge are well aware of the risk but the tipping temptation is too much to handle; some would even ask visitors to delete incriminating photos! **Your firm refusal to come too close to the animals is the only practical way to assure their safety.**

Some rangers are also “too polite” to control their pushy guests. Don't hesitate to attempt to influence other visitors in your group (up to eight tourists may end up tracking gorillas together) to be respectful.

On Excellence

There is no way around it: to be good ambassadors, we need to **strive for excellence**. This is a common three-word combination that you have definitely heard before but perhaps have not had properly defined. Maybe we have a look at the dictionary definition?

excellence | 'ɛksəl(ə)ns | noun

• the quality of being outstanding or extremely good

Oxford Dictionary of English

strive | strʌɪv | verb

• make great efforts to achieve or obtain something

Oxford Dictionary of English

So, this is about putting a huge effort into doing our work the best we can. Sounds simple, right? Well, it isn't ...

Challenge #1: Generally Low Standards

The first problem is the “but I have tried” culture that is common in the Gorilla Highlands region. No, just trying is not going to be enough! We need you to truly push yourself beyond anything you have ever done. We need you to sweat it.

We need you to be better today than you were yesterday, and over time you will get truly great. There are no shortcuts.

For example, are you one of those who think “reading” ends when you graduate or drop out of school? Sorry, but in the fast-moving 21st century professional life of any kind demands constant learning and upgrading — or you are left behind ... This does not mean that you must love books (what a scary load of paper they contain, right?!) but it helps if you aren't scared of them.

A tour guide once came to a podcast recording with a book about Rwanda's home grown solutions. “Clients sometimes ask me for more details about this,” she explained. The lady took the initiative, imagine!

You can take it too, without ever entering a library or a bookshop: that phone in your hands is a shortcut to much more than the latest football scores. Inquire with Uncle Google and then don't stop

at the highlighted few lines that appear at the top of your search results. Tap on the links. Dive in. Take notes. Compare.

Challenge #2: Inability to Accept Responsibility

The second general cultural problem is not admitting one's mistakes. It's always easier to deny or to blame somebody or something else than to face the painful truth and say: I screwed up.

The situation is quite incredible in fact: one can find a thief with money falling from his pockets and he will swear on his mother's grave that he did nothing wrong! A possible explanation for this behaviour is that our children grow up afraid of the stick and of being found in a compromising situation — instead of developing a strong personal sense of what is right and what is wrong.

But you can always decide to be better than that! Yes, YOU. It's only YOU who can truly control, understand and upgrade YOU.

No, it wasn't the traffic, or the water heater that "refused to

work", or the friend who convinced you to take another beer last night ... It was YOU who reached the guests smelly, untidy or late. Until YOU are honest with YOURSELF and accept that YOU made the mistake of not getting out of bed early enough, YOU are never going to seriously improve.

NOTE FOR MEDIA PRODUCERS:

Disrespect for capital letters, punctuation and other "details" unfortunately screams

UNPROFESSIONAL

on the global scene. You are encouraged to have a detailed look at the *GHE House Style Guide* but here are some guidelines:

- A single space *follows* every punctuation mark: comma, full stop, colon, semicolon, dash.
- People's names are never written in all capitals; Christian/given name comes first.
- Don't capitalise generic words, even where local habit often does: gorilla, trek, tour, dinner, office, team, report

There's No Excellence Without Keeping Time

Paul Callcutt, a British tour agent who helps upmarket clients find unusual adventures around the world, can tolerate many imperfections.

“But one thing I just can't stand,” stresses Paul, “is people who are late — especially if that happens regularly! Sometimes the situation is outside of one's control, and delays will happen. But that must be an exception.”

Paul continues: “In my opinion, being on time means being 10 minutes early. It's part of your *personal brand*. Even among my friends at home we have a few guys who we know will be the ones that are late. Because of that nobody really trusts them to handle anything important. Keeping people waiting again and again damages trust and confidence that is essential in the bond between guests and guides.”



Here are three situations that (*wink wink*) do not come from our experience organising trips in the transboundary region:

1) Your clients are in the car, all is set, the adventure is about to begin — there's just a little stop at the fuel station that will come first. But does it really need to? Didn't you get the budget for the fuel yesterday?

2) Your guests have finished their delicious lunch, the road is awaiting — right after the restaurant produces the bill and sends a staff member out to get small money from the nearby supermarket. But couldn't you have requested this 30 minutes ago?

3) Your people have put their luggage into the vehicle, ready to go — now we only have to get your mountain bikes onto the rack. But why not earlier? What stopped you from getting the bicycles on before the guests even left their rooms?

... It's these small episodes that lead your tourist to the big picture: your unfortunate lack of planning. A good guide always thinks ahead and respects his/her people's time.

When their time is disrespected, travellers may conclude that they don't have your respect in general!

The catch is that you need time to manage time. And focus. You must find the discipline to prepare for everything well in advance. If this means blocking out 30-60 minutes late at night or early in the morning, let it be so! Put your phone on silent, place it somewhere close enough to regularly check if there's anything new from the clients, and think through the incoming day. Your minutes devoted to planning and



NOTE FOR LOCAL PARTNERS:

An average guest is going to be much more understanding if the dinner you are making comes late than if that happens at a city restaurant. It's clear that you don't have electricity and modern kitchen gadgets, and that will impact your delivery.

But this is also your opportunity to impress, to totally exceed their expectations! That's what excellence is all about. Start cooking an hour or two earlier than you think is needed.

getting avoidable obstacles out of the way can result in hours saved for your guests. They will never know, but they will surely feel that everything is going smoothly when they are in your hands.

What about arriving at the hotel 30 minutes before the agreed time and spending the extra time on planning? You can stay in the vehicle or find another quiet place where nobody can disturb you, read through the itinerary, identify all possible bottlenecks and start removing them.

Poor time management can cost your guests and you more than minutes. Lisanne Bosveld again: “One of the guides on the Trail had a general problem listening to us. For example, he would not avoid the main road even after multiple

requests. On Day 3 he asked if we wanted to go to the guesthouse first and then to Mama Nelly for lunch. We agreed to go visit her later. After we arrived at Cyimbili, we were waiting for him to bring us to her. One hour later we found him in bed asleep. He told us going to Mama Nelly would mean 2 more hours of walking and that he had decided to skip her. He didn't even consider our hunger after 5-6 hours of walking! Don't be like him, try to avoid any misunderstandings. Check, check and double check.”

Managing time well will allow your guests to spend more hours at enjoyable places, miss nothing and get better experiences. It's at the very core of VIP-level guiding.

NOTE FOR GUESTS:

It's your holiday of course. You can always decide to sleep in or take a morning off, but do take into account the possible impact on your day's programme. And on your guide. Nobody enjoys working under pressure and attempting to reach your next destination before the night falls can increase road risks.

An ideal guest respects our guides and partners — their work and their time. It's fine to adapt the itinerary to get what you truly want out of your trip, but allow our guides to guide these decisions and coordinate properly with everyone involved to make it the best experience possible.

Make Excellence Part of Your Personal Brand

Did you notice the term “personal brand” in Paul’s thoughts that opened the previous section? It means the reputation that will follow you wherever you are and be attached to your name, not the company you work for. It does, however, also impact how your employer is perceived by clients, so pardon us if we touch upon your most intimate levels ...

Let’s start with how you *smell*.

Humans from different cultures are used to different smells. For example, people’s everyday diet impacts their odours. That’s why it’s essential to shower/bathe daily, to change clothes every day and to cover anything that could disturb your guest with a deodorant*. On the other hand, too much perfume or baby lotion can bring untold suffering to your fellow travellers ...

If you are joining your clients for dinner, please try your best to take a shower before the food is served and put on fresh clothes. Nobody

wants their eating disturbed by your sweaty fragrance or yellowish circles around your armpits.

While the deodorant can perhaps be new to you, the toothbrush can’t possibly be, right? You better brush your teeth — with toothpaste! — every evening and morning. It will help your dental health and save guests from any bad breath.

Does it even make sense to now go into how you *look*?

It’s quite impressive how everyone in the Gorilla Highlands region, even in the remotest areas of our mountains, seems to care about looking “smart”. That’s what you should be aiming for, not the often lower standards of your guests from other continents. If they don’t care, you still need to, we are sorry to say.

That care includes the condition of your vehicle, both inside and outside. Nobody will blame you if you can’t wash it while in the bush,

* Google this word if you don’t know it; deodorant use is essential!

but at least arrange everything inside nicely!

Finally, are you aware that your profile picture in any communications app is part of that smartness, of that personal presentation? Shouldn't it make you look like a professional guide as well?

And then we finally get to reputation ...

You know, that thing that we spend our entire lives building, always in danger of having it destroyed with one wrong move ... Personal branding is not easy.

Our advice is that at each and every junction you stubbornly resist any temptation to take shortcuts. For the sake of all of us who are still learning the English

language: we don't mean quicker roads to your next destination (those are great). We mean tricks and cheat codes that could get you to your goal faster, but rarely without bad side effects.

A part of you might think of your clients as something temporary, as some (naive?) people you will accompany for a brief period of time, and then they will be gone. Yet in today's world they possess powerful digital tools that can ruin your career forever ... Plus, don't ignore the fact that you are being observed by everyone else who works in the tourism industry! Who will give you your next job?

A truly intelligent person always takes the long-term perspective. When success arrives, it will be sweeter if you have toiled for it.



NOTE FOR MEDIA PRODUCERS:

We live in self-centred times. The main video format of today is somebody staring into the phone camera, covering all the screen and focusing on the personal. Fine. But as you build your personal brand, never forget that you are also meant to champion the regional brand through everything you produce. Then again, your ambassadorship doesn't mean that you must only say beautiful things about our region and avoid ugly truths. Put our reality into some context, so that everyone better understands why it is the way it is.

Excellence Demands Research

A big tour is approaching — where do you keep your research notes? On the phone, on the laptop, in a plastic folder? ... What do you mean, you have no notes? Are you trying to claim you already know everything?

The most obvious destination for learning new things is Wikipedia, where you can click on links and go deeper into any topic. As you do that, you will copy interesting facts and paste them into your notes. You shouldn't drop everything into one big file because that will be hard to manage, a separate note for each topic makes more sense.

In our example below, we are in Apple's Notes (Android has a bunch of similar apps) and looking at the note about gas in Lake Kivu. Our devoted researcher first took a photo of a billboard and then summarised the gist of it below. (He even converted metres to feet because he often entertains American clients.) In the menu on the left you can see his other research notes. They all start with 📌 so that he can easily find them among other stuff.

- 📌 LAKE KIVU: GAS
21:44 Lake Kivu is 1-5 million year...
- 📌 RWANDA: GENERAL
21:35 independence in 1962
- 📌 PRIMUS
21:35 | Style : Background17, Font0, Size1...
- 📌 DUIKER
21:35 live in monogamous pairs on small...
- 📌 QENP: GENERAL
21:35 1,978km2
- 📌 KAKIRA ART
21:34 | Style : Background17, Font0, Size1...
- 📌 INYAMBO COWS
21:34 | Style : Background17, Font0, Size1...
- 📌 VIRUNGAS
21:34 | Style : Background17, Font0, Size1...
- 📌 BABOONS
21:33 | Style : Background17, Font0, Size1...
- 📌 QENP: MWEYA
21:33 10km2 peninsula
- 📌 KITAGATA HOT SPRINGS
21:32 KITAGATA HOT SPRINGS
- 📌 QENP: RIFT VALLEY
21:32 RIFT VALLEY
- 📌 BILHARZIA

📌 LAKE KIVU: GAS



Lake Kivu is 1-5 million years old

max depth: 485 metres/ 1,600 feet

When you get tired of reading, head to YouTube and browse through its very many documentaries. When your eyes start burning, switch to podcasts (SEE AFRICA BREATHE AFRICA could be a start). Don't just watch/listen, of course, note down all that is new to you!

If you are shooting for true excellence, obtain the guide books you see clients carry around. (Especially reading Bradt's "Uganda" and "Rwanda" will be quite rewarding.) They will give you a good idea of what tourists (possibly) know and help you avoid embarrassment. Is there a more pathetic situation than a guest knowing more about your country than you do, constantly correcting and supplementing you?

While guests can beat you at reading, watching and listening, they do not have access to your special source: local people. You have to keep collecting stories from the elderly, wherever you are! Just keep in mind that oral histories can be less reliable than those that went through an editorial process and got published in a book.

As you research, you may run into interesting visual materials (cool old photos, an amazing colonial map, a drawing of an animal's digestive system, ...). Think of those as props/handouts you could share with your travellers — you can save them on your phone/tablet to show them at the right moment, or print them to give them out.

Don't forget that the act of taking notes is not enough by itself. It's smart to first just write down whatever comes to mind, with no concern for how it reads/looks. The second phase is to come back to the note when you have some free time, edit it and make it easy to digest in the future.

Finally, it's important to allocate some good time to rehearsing before you approach something that you will have to talk about (and you aren't 100% sure about). Better do it when your clients can't see you ...



On the shores of Lake Kivu; photo by ML Ruebandira

NOTE FOR MEDIA PRODUCERS:

If you follow what the journalists of our region publish and know the subject matter well, you can easily be alarmed. So many errors and omissions! We must inject a dose of excellence into what we are covering and demonstrate better media work is possible.

We can afford to advise tour guides to go to Wikipedia, but you need to be more thorough than that. As anybody can edit that website any time, you can never be 100% sure about the information there. Look for reference links on Wikipedia pages and compare anything to other sources. **Never ever use something AI offers you without triple checking it first — that technology often hallucinates (makes things up).**

It's better for everyone involved if you show your interviewee/sources what you have done before it goes public. It's simply too easy to misunderstand something or jump to conclusions! Putting your draft in front of knowledgeable eyes will save you from avoidable embarrassment and, who knows, maybe keep somebody else out of trouble?

Excellence Loves Preparation

Professional athletes commonly use *visualisation* before their big event — they imagine everything in their minds to better prepare themselves. Professional tour guides, especially those aiming for VIP guests, should do the same ...

Before you embark on a tour, go through it in your head, step by step, using the itinerary. For instance, in the evening of Day 3 you will be entering a national park. What will you say at that moment?

Such a speech is ideally **5-10 minutes long**. If you are shorter than that, it may sound like an unimportant by-the-way. If you take much longer, you could bore them. So how do you hit that sweet spot somewhere between 5 and 10 minutes? You train yourself with a timer in your hand!

... Has your mind just been blown? No, great tour guiding does not mean a diarrhoea of words flowing out of your mouth and it does not mean improvisation on the spot. Instead we want a series of superb little performances! For sure you don't expect an actor to come to a

stage and make the audience suffer through badly rehearsed lines? **The tour is your stage**. You don't need to memorise everything in every speech, but you do have to know exactly how you will begin and end it.



NOTE FOR LOCAL PARTNERS:

Since you are talking about your own immediate environment, your role is much easier than the one of a tour guide. However, it doesn't mean that you should take it easy. You also need to rehearse a bit before you stand in front of a guest, and use their feedback (spoken or unspoken) to improve your stories for the future.

Your goal as a guide is to know much more than what you are putting into your speeches. Think of all the questions a guest may have at every location, and prepare your answers in advance.

Some stuff you will only keep to wow clients with special interests; others don't need to hear it.

What to Pack

So many things depend on the supercomputer you have in your pocket, the smartphone. It has to be fully charged, with plentiful airtime and data — before and during your tour! A power bank or a solar charger must in fact be your first investment after you buy a phone. “I couldn’t _____ because my phone didn’t have _____” sounds very unprofessional. Print what you don’t want to lose access to in a dead phone.

Secondly, get your phone notifications under control. If it makes you happy to see every like of your social media output, that’s alright in your free time but totally not fine when you are with guests. Especially if you are a driver, you can additionally improve your performance when you set up your lock screen properly and only allow what’s important.

Thirdly, you have to have a first aid kit, no matter how adventurous the tour is. Yes, even on a leisurely city walk things can happen!

Fourthly, have small cash ready. You don’t want to delay your clients.

What to Do

Confirm every booking that depends on you well in advance. If you feel a need to re-confirm what the office has done already, be careful how you communicate it. You don’t want a partner worrying: “God Almighty, we have 10 clients coming with Gorilla Highlands Experts and 9 clients coming with Peter, where will we put them all?!”

Cross-check if any events or holidays clash with the itinerary. (For instance, Rwanda’s Umuganda every last Saturday can mess you up.)

Memorise your guests’ names and learn how to pronounce them. If their country uses non-English languages, identify theirs and look for a greeting in their native tongue to open the trip in a fun way. (Examples of how this can be complex: Guests from Barcelona will be thrilled to hear Catalan (not Spanish). People from Cardiff will appreciate Welsh.)



Young man from the Batwa "Pygmy" community of Ruwamahano; photo by Marcus Westberg

Start the Tour Right

You shall be judged before you even say a word of your briefing speech! The guests will notice if you arrived well ahead of time, how you look, if you smile genuinely, what your posture is, how you move, if you make eye contact, how much time you give everyone in the group, etc.

That's completely understandable. To survive, early humans had to rely on quick judgements when they encountered somebody or something new. (Those who didn't never managed to make babies, so their DNA is gone!) But the problem is that these **first impressions define you** for much longer than it would be reasonable. Once you are put in one mental drawer/category it's hard to change it. So you better give them your best!

Be fully available to clients at least 15 minutes before the official start.

This is not the time to make last minute arrangements, this is the time to be ready and free to casually interact, get to know your group one by one, deal with any

questions and concerns (like food allergies) and so on.

We once had a ridiculous situation of a group endlessly waiting for their guide — who was around! As it often happens to local guys, he wasn't treated that well by the hotel staff who directed him to keep outside while the guests get ready. They just never updated the clients! Instead of being shy, he should have entered the restaurant, shaken some hands, offered his help with anything, then stepped aside if necessary. (Feel free to show this PDF to any personnel if they try to stop you.)

The Briefing

Do not begin the briefing until you are granted complete silence. This is again something that has to do with first impressions. Your tourists have to internalise how things will work with you. If some group members can't get it, pull them aside and kindly explain why you need them quiet.

The top reason you are requesting their full attention is that the briefing will help everyone big time, by covering (in up to 15 minutes):

- (1) Who you are and what your connection to Gorilla Highlands Experts is
- (2) What the programme is and how long it will take (quite often guests don't know what they have signed up for)
- (3) Where the next meal, toilet and power socket are
- (4) What Gorilla Highlands Experts stands for and how you joined us (put a bit of your own personality into this part)
- (5) What rules, expectations and safety concerns may be involved (share the consequences of not keeping time, for example)
- (6) If they need cash for anything and how tipping works (on a Gorilla Highlands Experts tour you will stress that gratuities for local partners are included in the tour price and that no tips are required)

Mind you, if this is a multi-day tour you will need to get back to (2), (3) and (5) every morning, so there's no pressure to be too detailed now.

You will then open the floor for questions, and we know it's not always simple to get people to ask anything. The Lead Amazing Tours course offers a trick: write common questions (or questions you do want asked) on pieces of paper and give them to willing clients to read aloud. This will be especially fun for any kids in the group, and you can assure laughter if you make a child read things like "As a director of a huge company I need to be in touch with my managers all the time — how is mobile phone coverage?".

The briefing is your chance to really shine as a guide and get people excited. After they listen to you, they should be congratulating themselves for choosing our tour and feel reassured about you as their leader.

Therefore you better put some extra effort into preparing it!

Relating With Local Partners

... And here we are, on tour! It's our local partners that will make it more meaningful!

But who are these **locals** that we are referring to? Once upon a time there was a familiarisation trip for tour operators taking them close to Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. There, a local leader gave a speech in which he emphasised the importance of local people being the absolute top beneficiaries of gorilla tourism.

"Do you mean Ugandans?" asked a tour operator from Kampala. "No, I mean Rubugurians!" he replied.

Rubuguri is a rural town and we should go even deeper into the villages to demonstrate what we mean by local. If point (3) in *Our Guiding Light* (p10) made you think about your own journey, let's clarify: if you are from Kigali, Kampala or Bukavu we weren't talking about you. In urban areas you have many opportunities and it just happened so that you chose the travel fraternity.

Upcountry, the situation is definitely different ...

It is of vital interest to our region that residents of the areas surrounding protected areas find success in tourism. They are the best possible guardians of the wild and we need to be on the same side with them.

That calls for patience and respect.

"These Batwa are different, they are not aggressive," a driver guide once remarked. He was seeing the results of our partnership at Echuya Forest, built on years of working together with the community of Rwamahano.

Of course our Rwamahano friends act differently than those Batwa who are frequented by exploitative tour guides. How many times has a guide collected a small fortune to "see the Pygmies", to then only throw some thousands the community's way? How often have they been made to feel inferior because of the way city folks interact with them? ... How do you therefore expect them to be friendly when you show up?

 NOTE FOR LOCAL PARTNERS:

We call you “partners” instead of “service providers” because we are building a partnership with you. Please keep in mind that you are directly working with the Gorilla Highlands Experts office, and need to feel free to share with us your observations and concerns. If our guides or guests behave in a way that needs improvements, the office should know about it.

 NOTE FOR GUESTS:

Our local partners are generous hosts; the more you meet them halfway on culture and custom, the better the visit becomes for everybody. Dressing well is how respect is shown here, and it is returned. People iron their clothes and polish their shoes wherever you go, so the standards are high. Shorts are accepted but not admired, as they are thought of as children’s wear; tops that cover the shoulders and skirts that reach the knee are appreciated, and men are asked to keep their shirts on.

If it is hard to imagine how a bare shoulder could distract anybody, picture a completely naked person in front of you. Would that not change your conversation a little? It is only ever a question of what one is used to.

Some things will ask for patience from your side as well, and a few may distress you. Children are raised differently here, and you may see a child beaten in a way that would be a criminal matter at home. Two things are true at once. Shouting at a parent in front of the neighbours humiliates everybody, changes nothing and can leave the child worse off once you have gone. Yet “it is their family, leave it alone” is not our position either; a child being hurt is not a custom to be respected. So do not take it on yourself in the moment. Tell your guide, or any of our team around you, the same day. We know these families, and we can raise it in ways a stranger cannot.

Please stay out of your hosts’ private rooms; a bedroom they have not had time to tidy will embarrass them. When you see people slipping off their shoes at a doorway, do the same without asking. You will hear it is not necessary ... it is.

The Batwa are an extreme case because of the disrespect they get from “more civilised” compatriots all the time. What about other “villagers”? Be honest with yourself and reflect on your own behaviour towards them, perhaps starting with your maid ... Feeling superior to anyone is a horrible way to approach a partnership! Imagine how it is to be in their position and you will understand their thinking better.

When working with locals who don't speak your clients' language, you are in a particularly problematic situation. This is when your job becomes to interpret and serve as a bridge between the two worlds. It's not your show anymore, you have to become a kind of a VJ — see *Storytelling* (p86).

The Begging Challenge

What will you do when a local partner spends 10 minutes explaining how poor and needy he is? Ignore what you don't like and summarise the rest in one sentence? No, your client will likely find that ridiculous. Please do translate in (almost) full but also

add essential explanations, put it in some context for your guest. Then later on find some time to talk to the beggar in private and make him see how tired visitors are of being asked for something all the bloody time.

As Gorilla Highlands Experts we always strive to give local partners a fair compensation for the time they spend with our guests. We therefore find it unacceptable when clients encounter begging or pressure to buy something/ support somebody. As a tour guide you need to manage this wisely, as we know how quickly such stuff enters local talk ...

A gentle American hiker once shyly complained to us that an overnight stay made him feel a bit uncomfortable. The reason? He was shown a new house being built and asked — directly or indirectly — to contribute. Perhaps his host (who spoke perfect English) thought it was just a joke? Well, it was an unfortunate one because it resulted in client discomfort!

Relating With Guests

Volunteer Maria Janosova summarised her experience on tours like this:

“There is typically little contact with the tour agency unless the client has a question, or changes are needed. The client may book straight away on the website or they may submit an inquiry. They then receive information via email or other written media, a booking agent answers any questions. Once the booking is made, the confirmation email is sent. Then the relationship develops on tour — it's typically the guide/driver who spends the time with the clients and develops the relationship by providing a great service and creating an enjoyable experience.”

At this stage of the development of Gorilla Highlands Experts, we still manage to build personal relationships with our guests, but a time shall come when our traffic will be too big to allow such luxury ... Sooner or later we will get closer to the way Maria describes

it, and the guide will become the face of GHE.

That will be an enormous responsibility and we must prepare you well. Our concept of a guide is not one of a performer faking it, we are looking for somebody authentic and real. When they move around with you, our guests should feel special because they are being introduced to a culture by a very knowledgeable and approachable local professional.

Language That Connects

That starts with your usage of language. In short, guests should hear you talk English (or another language they understand) as much as possible — yes, even when you discuss something with a vendor, a ranger or a colleague you shouldn't switch to the vernacular unless that's all they know. Exclusively operating in a common language comes across as honest and allows your tourists to get involved whenever they want.

 NOTE FOR GUESTS:

We can't possibly demand this from you, but we can encourage it: if English isn't your native tongue, still try to use it when in the company of guides and local partners. This helps with trust and bonding and doesn't exclude anyone. (You can always share humorous observations about the ways locals do their things later, in private.)

Limits of Friendship

Secondly, you should always be friendly ... but **never act like a client's friend**. You are a pro, your job is to deliver a superb service equally to all. You are welcome to include personal stories if they illuminate an aspect of the life here — but never to make your clients feel sorry for you!

It may be normal in your culture to “bring a friend along” but to even ask an incoming guest to allow somebody else's presence on a tour is a **total no-no**. You are putting them into a situation we simply don't want them to be in, you are asking them for decisions that can be stressful.

If your clients invite you for a meal, feel free to accept but under the condition that the next one will be

on you. They should never feel like they are supporting a hungry African! (If you don't want to get into such complexities, you are allowed to say that you are on some specific diet and politely decline.) **Such meals should not include alcohol**. You are working, remember, so drinking is problematic even if at dinner time.

 NOTE FOR GUESTS:

On Gorilla Highlands Experts trips the feeding or accommodating guides is never your responsibility. If you feel like inviting them to join you at eating time, be well aware of the fact that this may be their only private time available in the day — and that their tastes and table manners might differ.

You must not take a tourist to visit your home/family unless they request that by themselves and you get the company's permission. (You will have to explain how the request came about.) You are also not allowed to accompany anybody to their rooms alone ...



NOTE FOR GUESTS:

In our region we have a *little* problem with the male superiority complex. You may well say that men from your own culture show some of that too, and you would be right; here it simply runs at a different intensity.

Generally speaking, a woman is seen as worth less than a man. One who has not yet *produced* (given birth) is a *girl* in local eyes and stands lower still. The further you go from the main road, the more openly you will see it, and it is uncomfortable to watch.

Think about this before you meet it rather than after. If a man irritates you, countering him in public rarely ends well for anyone; take it up privately, or ask your guide to step in. Staying longer with us? There is always somebody from our team nearby; speak to them early rather than after weeks of putting up with something.

Be ready to turn down marriage proposals. A foreign girlfriend is an object of fascination for many local men, who imagine she is honest and would open the door to an easier life. A polite, firm no is not rude here; it is simply necessary, and you may have to give it more than once.

Night life needs care for the same reasons. Go to bars and clubs with your guide or with our team, and hold your boundaries firmly on the dance floor. Foreign women are often taken to be more available than they are, and some men will treat a hand on your body as permitted. It is not. Tell your guide or our team; sorting such things out is part of our work, and you will not be making a fuss.

When It Gets Dangerous

“The **golden rule** in tourism is to never engage in personal relations with a guest — a rule from my very earliest days and long before me indeed,” writes our trainer Andy Ault. “If you had so much fun on safari — and sparks flew and the heavens opened for you in her/his eyes — it was considered perfectly acceptable to exchange contacts at the end and continue your communications privately after that — after you had fulfilled your obligations as a professional guide and safe escort.”

And Andy has more for you: “Add to this the risk of being ‘hoodwinked’ by con artists more clever than us! They book a full safari with VIP suites, helicopter flights and all the best things. Then one of the ‘wives’ becomes hungry for the guide’s attention and she is too beautiful to resist ... Only to be caught in the act by the ‘husband’. Of course when the wife has been romantically entangled with the guide, the ‘husband’ refuses to pay for the trip!”

Is your mouth wide open now?
Let’s close it with a less extreme bit

of advice from our trainer Julia Lloyd: “Cheeky comments by the lads to the young ladies can make some feel uncomfortable and then the guide loses their good personal reputation and messes with the reputation of the company they work for. They think it is harmless and they can’t see the problem or contain themselves ... Tourists can be very friendly and warm, which can confuse the guides — and then it all backfires.”

We have a story of this kind from our team, unfortunately. A silly guide once decided, in his free time, to come from Rwanda and join a group of British students his colleagues were leading through Kisoro. He probably thought he was entertaining when he offered to take the girls out and claimed he was a student of medicine to get his hands on somebody’s legs. The result: the students’ NGO demanded we never use him again!

If that still sounds a little too much, let us serve you a more subtle team anecdote without cross-cultural complications: A couple of us are sitting at a table and chatting. The only girl among

us orders food. When it's delivered, one of the boys decides to take a bite from her plate. Just like that, without asking. He doesn't even notice her discomfort.

Our dear males, women like their personal space and want to be treated with respect — in your words and actions! You need to overcome any cultural or religious baggage that makes you think that you are somehow more. **Our dear females**, we have some words of caution for you too: When you believe you are only being friendly, you might be misunderstood ... Once you are dealing with somebody from another culture, you can never be sure how your behaviour is going to be interpreted.

Any kind of touching is especially dangerous because it is almost guaranteed to mean something else to the other person.

It is no secret that for some guides the ultimate life goal is to get a spouse from abroad. They may even be working in the travel industry specifically to achieve that! But there is a dramatic twist: if you look too eager to connect you are least likely to succeed. Girls and boys who seem too easy to get will most likely be played with ... and thrown away. Polite and humble professionalism is much more promising!

To summarise: no matter what your deepest intentions and desires are, as a tour guide you are representing your tour company, your transboundary region and your national flag. The only professional way is to strictly separate your personal and business worlds ... and to never assume you are being cool when you are in fact being ridiculous.



Remember Whose Ambassador You Are

Let's conclude with what should be obvious but often isn't: it is completely inappropriate to try to sell any of your private/other services when you work as our guide. **You are GHE and only GHE** when you are with guests. You are promoting the region, not yourself.

This extends into the post-tour period ...

There are tour companies that would not allow a guide to be in touch with a client using his/her private phone number. We feel that is impractical and believe our guides can show enough self-discipline. This is especially important after the trip is done but the guest's number is still in your contacts ... How tempting!

We expect you to never start a conversation with clients brought to you by GHE once your tour is completed. If they remember you, please do reply. If they offer to help you financially or in any other way, tell us about it first. We don't want to take a cut, we just need to know what is happening and protect the guest. On the other hand, if you

yourself ask a client for financial or other assistance during or after any trip, you are in severe danger of never working with us again.

The same applies to utilising photos of guests after the tour — it is unacceptable to use GHE clients for your personal marketing unless you have obtained specific permission from both the organisation and them; for more about the image taking side of Ambassador's life see the *Media Chapter* (p64).

Finally, if service providers give you kickbacks (appreciation for bringing clients to their place, i.e. souvenir shops) we won't stop you from profiting, but we do have to know about any arrangements of that sort in advance. Why? Because **we need our guests to be taken to great places that are going to be to their benefit** — and those are not always the places that bribe guides best ...

More Information Is Better (for All)

Unlike the people of our region, foreign visitors usually want to be in total control of their environment. They feel a need to always know what is happening and what the plan is. Even if you just stop the vehicle to pee — you have to announce that upfront. Even if they are paddling in a canoe without any way of changing its direction — they will feel better if they are aware of where they are going. If you can see your destination or a major landmark on the horizon, point at it and explain.

In *Start the Tour Right* (p26) we noted that the day's programme, the durations, the technicalities and alerts have to be covered every morning of the multi-day

tour. It doesn't hurt if you give them a little update at lunch time as well. Unlike what your culture may believe, **more information is better than less information** in the minds of your clients.

NOTE FOR MEDIA PRODUCERS:

It's good to remember that your viewers/listeners/readers also wish to know where you are taking them with your narration. The picture in your mind is much less important than how your audience sees and understands it. Try to be user friendly and offer guidance — with what you are saying and with the visuals you use. A confused consumer of your media all too soon becomes a lost consumer.



Walk through a rainforest; photo by M.L. Ruebandira

The photo on the previous page is from a 2026 walk through Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. The ranger, Isaac Kukundakwe, took great care of keeping his tourist updated with simple facts like: “We are done going up, from now on the walk is downwards” and “We’ve reached three quarters of the way”. It was obvious the man had been trained well!

On the other hand, we recommend that technical stuff receives only the quickest summary in the evening (for example, advice on next morning’s footwear). The night should be for deeper conversations, for expanding on the topics of the day, for mentally preparing the guests for anything challenging that follows, for socialising.

If you are one of those sad creatures who pull out a phone at dinner time and zone out as guests chat in their own language, that is profoundly unprofessional. **You will attend to your private messages and social media only after you leave the clients.** As you dine or relax around the fire, take them on a journey into your culture instead, show them what

you know, be open to their questions of any kind. (If they themselves ask for technical details of the upcoming day, you will of course not tell them to wait for the morning but deliver all the answers they are hungry for.)

In a group of people who don’t know each other you should use the first evening for **introductions**. Provoke a conversation by not only inquiring about their names and countries but also adding questions that lead to interesting answers and reflections. (What’s the coolest thing about your town? What movie did you enjoy most this year? What is your greatest hope on this tour?)

NOTE FOR GUESTS:

The evening/night time is ideal for inquiries about anything that caught your attention during your day. It’s challenging for a person from one culture to know what somebody from another culture will find fascinating — our tour guides and local partners learn from your feedback.

How to Identify & Manage Expectations

The last among the questions proposed above will help you meet client expectations. You have to know them all. While studying every detail of the itinerary will assist you in knowing what the company has promised to your tourists, this is not always sufficient. A devoted guide will also check what is highlighted on the website, how the tour is marketed and what may have been put in the company's terms and conditions.

Your clients have to perceive you as totally reliable. You are not only there to deliver on the company's promises, you will sooner or later make your own. When you promise that you will do something by a specific deadline, don't just get quiet if you fail to deliver. For example, if you say you will get information about their lost luggage by 2pm, you must provide an update at 2pm (even if it means admitting you can't get the airport people to pick up the phone).

Here comes the toughest part ...
You have to learn how to say a

polite no to things you know you can't do or that simply cannot be part of your job description — to the client or to the company that hired you. Once you say yes and commit to something, it's too late. For instance, don't promise a special service to an individual when it's already clear you will be too busy with the rest of the group.

For the same reason always be honest about any unfortunate facts (i.e. something is closed today) because setting expectations right will save you from trouble later on.

NOTE FOR GUESTS:

For many ethnic groups of the Gorilla Highlands region, it doesn't come easy to disagree with somebody or deliver any bad news. You can help by trying your best not to overreact to this reality. It isn't really your guide's fault that he or she has been born into a society that places a high value on harmony and avoiding direct confrontation.



Learn How to Listen

Being talkative is one of the basic tour guide expectations. But it may be even more important to know when to shut up ... Think of the characters in your life who have a habit of saying “yes yes yes” to whatever you are telling them, without truly listening. Aren't they annoying?!

Well, also remember those times you stopped paying your attention to what your clients were saying because it was about some movies you didn't watch or experiences you didn't have? What a missed opportunity! How will you understand your guests well if you don't become a master of their

civilisation, if you don't learn about their childhood, preferences and everything else that defines them? Instead of closing your ears you should sharpen them! Ask questions when you don't get it!

In short, be curious. When there's something that your mind can't process and accept, still be respectful. And always always always be open-hearted (kind, loving, honest). ... These three elements come from Radical Listening, a one-hour free online course we need you to do independently (as always, underlined words are links — tap on them). It covers:

Layer	Activity	Practices to Apply
Becoming Present	Practice focusing your attention on the here and now	1) Focus on senses 2) Embrace interconnection
Listening to another	Practice listening so that a speaker feels listened to	1) Signal with your whole body 2) Observe body language and emotions of speaker
Listening to a group	Practice listening to all speakers as parts of a greater whole	1) Observe patterns of communication 2) Take notes

It asks you to first become present, truly open to the world around you, by slowing down, relaxing and focusing on your senses. Then it teaches you how to listen to an individual (including what your body is shouting) and eventually to a grouping of people so that they **feel listened to**.

The course offers many practical techniques and useful advice and expects you to interact in an online global community. Don't skip any of those elements, they will help you on the way (and during the Ambassador exams).

Don't be surprised when the groups they use as examples are in fact indigenous peoples, not international travellers. Firstly, quite similar principles apply to any person or group. An upset team of travelling Germans will not be that different to handle than a Lake Kivu fishing community. Secondly, in *Our Guiding Light* (p10) and *Relating With Local Partners* (p28) we already stressed how important our great relationships with the rural poor are ...

In the introduction to the course they touch on colonial attitudes.

Don't assume this has nothing to do with you. Many among us are coconuts, black outside and white inside, because they have internalised some disturbing Western mentalities. Remember, for instance, how the Batwa are often treated by other tribes and you will notice a coloniser mindset.

It is useful to take notes when listening to many people and exposing yourself to potential confusion. Such an activity also helps you zero in on what they are communicating, avoiding getting lost in your own thoughts. Definitely **ask for permission** before you begin.

Unless your conversation partners have very private matters to talk about, they will probably appreciate that you find their information significant enough to jot it down. Do this on paper, you can copy it into your phone later, if that's where your note-taking usually takes place. **Guests should never ever see you with a phone in your hands unless it's an urgent call.**

Create Magic on Your Tour

You may recall that we have committed to striving for excellence (see *On Excellence*, p13), that we are meant to forge deeper connections with local communities (*Our Guiding Light*, p10) and that we have talked about client expectations before (*More Information is Better*, p37). This is the part where we should bring it all together, aiming to fully **exceed expectations**.

A company can of course prescribe each and every thing on the itinerary, and then you just go and deliver. We can show you an edited example from a manual by our consultant Jure Gašperšič:

In almost every evaluation, guests write that they love picnics because they know the guides put so much effort into them. Some helpful hints:

- *Rather than just throwing cold cuts on a plate, roll them, place them in a wheel on a serving plate, and decorate with tomatoes or cucumbers*
- *Pick some fresh flowers, put them on the table and on serving plates*
- *Set out the cheese last because it starts to sweat in the heat*
- *Don't put out dessert (chocolates/biscuits/...) until the very end*
- *Keep your tablecloths, boxes, packages etc. out of sight or hidden because if guests see these things, it ruins the picnic*
- *Start serving drinks as people arrive, wait until everyone has loaded up before you dig in and while you eat you still have to refill client drinks*

Cyruza island treats; photo by ML Rwebandira



Notice the attention to every detail? How something small turns special? But do you wonder why a guest would prefer this to a fancy restaurant?

Well, what you personally dream about they already have, possibly too much of it ... It's natural, unique, local things that will impress them.

We have shown you an example not to copy it blindly but to use it as your inspiration. Because we need you to get creative, to showcase your personal touch and go beyond what your company defines. Our guests crave special and intimate experiences and love it when you have close relationships with local partners. They hope you will win them privileged treatment and access not available to other tourists. They want to enjoy things they couldn't organise themselves.

Ask yourself: Is there a unique setting I can utilise, a mind-blowing atmosphere I can create? Do I know of a secret place or ritual? How can I best surprise a guest? How can I make it feel like it's once in a lifetime?

An ideal magical moment engages all senses. Much too often guides focus on what a client can see and hear; what about what they can touch, taste, smell? What can you do to turn something ordinary into much more?

Small Things That Can Spoil It

It's also essential that you don't do things that kill the magic. We have mentioned it before, but it's worth stressing: your phone has the biggest potential for spoiling your clients' moments. Think of the picnic on the previous page, with a staggering volcano view, just with a guide who is making arrangements on his phone while pouring drinks — baaaaaad!

Magic cannot be rushed. If you are in a hurry to finish something, never make a client feel your impatience. (And please never text your guest "I'm waiting" because that implies that they are late.)

To the drivers who only have one music playlist ... It might be your favourite songs but for sure they will get annoying to your passengers if you keep repeating them. (Foreign minds are wired to appreciate variety.)

Finally, don't stick to some rules just for the sake of the rules. There are rules that cannot be broken and there are rules that can. For instance, if a receptionist is stopping your guests from enjoying the sunset by insisting on

registration first, better talk some sense into them ...

The images below show the feel of a simple room at Bushaho Safari Lodge (Nkuringo) magically transformed by a towel decoration.



photo by ML Rwebandira



Navigate Political Minefields

Guides are normally advised to stay away from political topics. That is a no-brainer when it's about **your clients' political views** — **don't ask them** who they support in their own country and avoid saying anything that would provoke those kinds of debates. But when we think about politics and the Gorilla Highlands region, it gets complicated.

There's point (8) in *Our Guiding Light* (p10) that says that we should give tourists more meaningful trips through greater awareness of context/issues. Suddenly we are one step away from:

It may be impossible to understand our region and its issues without getting into politics ... We can agree that **party politics is out** because your guest does not need to know who you vote for. But when we touch upon governance within and political relations among the three countries of our region, we will automatically get political.

If you present the situation as perfect, most of your clients will not take you seriously. They know too well that no country or no leader is ever without faults, so if you pretend yours is, they will doubt your honesty.

politics | 'pɒlɪtiks |

plural noun

- 1 *[treated as singular or plural]* the activities associated with the governance of a country or area, especially the debate between parties having power: *the party quickly gained influence in French politics | thereafter he dropped out of active politics.*
 - the activities of governments concerning the political relations between states: *in the conduct of global politics, economic status must be backed by military capacity.*
 - the academic study of government and the state: *[as modifier] : a politics lecturer.*

- a particular set of political beliefs or principles: *people do not buy their paper purely for its politics.*
- (often **the politics of**) the principles relating to or inherent in a sphere or activity, especially when concerned with power and status: *the politics of gender.*

- 2 activities aimed at improving someone's status or increasing power within an organization: *yet another discussion of office politics and personalities.*

PHRASES

play politics

act for political or personal gain rather than from principle

But you still need to be a patriot, right? Yes, if your patriotism means devotion to your country (instead of a political party) and if you don't blindly use it against any of the other two countries. You should appreciate all that is good about every one of them, and not shy away from what isn't. The picture we are presenting to our visitor should be a balanced and detailed one.

The point of the Gorilla Highlands idea is to work towards peace and prosperity in the transboundary region, and that won't happen if we don't fully understand each other, listen and read a lot. **Don't be a bigot***.

We would, of course, not want you to get into any trouble with the authorities. It is **your personal decision** how to go about this strategically. But it should be clear that customers don't choose to travel with Gorilla Highlands Experts to only look at wildlife or to be exposed to excessive political propaganda.

This is a heavy topic but we can at least end it with a funny anecdote ... The origin of our activities was at Lake Bunyonyi some 20 years ago. The area is dominated by one landlord, Church of Uganda, also involved in a couple of tourism businesses. When we tried to explain our more cultural and complex approach to tourism to a Diocese official, his reply was: "Nobody is going to be interested in that, people come here to look at flowers!" ... Tourism can indeed mean different things to different people!

**NOTE FOR MEDIA PRODUCERS:**

You better be very careful about how you approach political topics in the media you post.

A face-to-face chat with an outsider is a very different situation than publishing something the whole world can see, and use against you — today or 20 years later!

* bigot = somebody stubbornly or unreasonably attached to a belief, opinion or faction, especially one who is prejudiced against or antagonistic towards a person or people from a different group

Impress Special Guest Categories

Children

In a guide's mind, the “kids” category should include anyone under the drinking age (that's 21 in America!). It comes with an obligation to act as their parents. Younger guides sometimes turn into “cool” buddies of visiting students, and that's totally wrong. You are responsible for them, you are at work!

When introduced to smaller kids, lower yourself to their eye level as you first greet them. Then take them seriously, always. Local cultures have a regrettable attitude towards kids, assuming they are too young to get it — yet it is possible that this child already knows more than you do as every new generation tends to have sharper brains. **Respect them** but don't forget they are minors. Inappropriate/violent topics must not be discussed around them.

Parents will love you if you make the tour interesting for their little ones. In most cases if something is entertaining to a child, it will amuse adults too. For example,



Musanze sightseeing; photo by ML Ruebandira

reminding yourself that you have kiddos in the group will keep you away from boring facts and make you a storyteller. Everybody enjoys a good story! Be playful. Encourage children to act as if they are a character in the story.

Elderly/Disabled People

They will not appreciate you if you assume that they are not capable of something. The best judge is not you — it's themselves — and you are merely an advisor. Provide all the details, good and bad, and let them decide if they can do it or not. Adjust the pace and the route as much as possible, and incorporate sufficient breaks. Alert them about slippery surfaces and other dangers.

Overweight People

A chubby guest can surprise you with their fitness; it's tricky to jump to any conclusions based on somebody's appearance. Apply the same advice as above. But there's more. A partner organisation once emailed us:

“We’ve had reports of [guide] being a bit rude (we feel this is cultural misunderstanding) as he called a

number of people fat, which is not always appreciated! Example: ‘This one is heavy, so she should sit here!’”

Don't be foolish and bring anyone's attention to any extra kilograms, even if you believe that's a beautiful feature. Few words can hurt your guest's feelings more than “fat”, “heavy”, “overweight” and similar. In their culture, if you aren't slim you are most probably perceived as lazy or unable to control your appetite.

And do you still recall what we said about language under *Relating With Guests* (p31)? Well, sometimes it's best if your clients don't know what locals are saying. Here's a story: We were once hiking under the Rwandan volcanoes, and some girls deep in the village looked really interested in interacting with the visitors from abroad. But they didn't know any English. The guide chatted with them and translated: “They said they wanted to talk to the fat person.” In this case, the “fat” part should have better been skipped

...

Gay People

When we get guests who are homosexual (that's more often than you think) they are usually quite worried about entering Uganda, because the country is notorious for its antigay laws ... We assure them they will be safe and that nobody will notice and then we normally say nothing about it to the guide. Somebody's sexuality shouldn't be other people's business, in short. Please assume every client is potentially gay and don't utter any silly words related to anyone's sexual orientation. (Tap here if you wish to open your mind.)

NOTE FOR GUESTS:

Local *gaydars* are weak and Ugandans are actually tolerant people. It's the politicians who try to score points by painting "homosexualists" as evil people coming to Africa to convert innocent youth and destroy families. And it's American fundamentalists who brought these theories to Africa! By the way, when you see local men holding hands or otherwise very physically close to each other, that's friendship.



Bird sighting; photo by ML Rubeandira

Big Groups

With too many clients to handle, you are most likely to run into an issue that otherwise applies across the board: people hate waiting around and the most frustrating thing is not knowing how long the wait will be. Give good estimates and always consider the interest of a group versus the interest of an individual. More often than not it's a tough balancing act.

It's super important that you are fair to all group members and that everyone can hear you well. When people in front wait for any late ones, make it special for them with a story, an experience, something to see.

The L.A.U.G.H. Method

Oh oh, look at that — despite all our efforts your guests are here with a big complaint! This is serious, so please do not laugh but use the L.A.U.G.H. method instead (shared with you by our friends at Guest Focus):

L — Listen and Empathise: Stay quiet and let the upset people talk with no interruption. They want to tell their story and unload the burden! Use your active listening skills, like maintaining eye contact and nodding, and refrain from challenging them in any way.

A — Acknowledge the Wrong and Apologise: Guests complain because they feel they have been wronged or victimised. The first thing they seek in the situation is acknowledgment by the guilty party (you/our partner/the company), then hear an apology and see that you are prepared to put things right. An apology doesn't imply your guilt!

Some language to use:

"I'm so sorry to hear that ... that must have been really frustrating."

"I hear you and will make it right."

"I see what you are saying ..."

"I am so sorry to see you upset by this — this was not the plan."

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention, let's see how we can fix it."

"Thank you for letting me know."

(Notice how you are supposed to stay away from the responsibility-sharing "we" in these examples and use "I" instead?)

U — Understand the Problem: Calm them down by proving that you really understand. Ask questions to get to the bottom of it. Great probing questions are the five Ws: who, what, when, where, and why. Examples:

"When did this issue arise?"

"What exactly was promised to you?"

"Any ideas as to why this may have happened?"

"How can we make this right?"

G — Give Solutions: The last thing they want to hear is excuses or explanations! They have no interest in knowing about your problems, they simply want their

problem fixed. The task of the person receiving the complaint is to identify the problems the guests have and look for ways to fix them! Please involve them in the process of working out the best solution, such a cooperative approach will make a big difference.

You could talk like this:

“What can we do to resolve this?”

“We could talk to the office now or, if it is ok with you, we could call them after the tour?”

“I will personally find the answer to your question and get back to you in the next 15 minutes.”

H — Hit Home with a Follow-up and Learn from the Mistake: Make 100% sure that both the problem and guests have been sorted out. This means checking back with them after the problem has been fixed and analysing how you might prevent this problem from arising ever again. Like:

“Hey Steve, I just wanted to follow up regarding our conversation this morning. Are you satisfied with the outcome? Is there anything else we can help with at this time?”

Common Mistakes with the L.A.U.G.H. method:

- Not following the order. It is super important to go step by step.
- Skipping steps. Each letter is vital and needs to be done in order.
- Most guides rush right into offering solutions. While it is human nature to want to help people as fast as possible (and also get out of awkward situations), you need to take the time to acknowledge what the guest is feeling and offer an apology before you move onto solving the problem.

PS: Even if your guests tell you there is no need to involve Gorilla Highlands Experts we still need to be informed about the complaint/problem as soon as possible.



Herbalist action; photo by ML Rwebandira

How to Overcome Challenging Situations

In this section we will run through three scenarios but it's great for you to try to visualise others as well (see *Excellence Loves Preparation*, p23) ... If there's a worry, we should be 100% prepared for it in advance.

Bad News From Home Has Reached You

Andy Ault advises:

"I have had to guide safaris in the past where sometimes terrible or tragic news has been communicated to me from home. This is most difficult to cope with because while on a trip, my guests are all happy and enjoying, and I want them to. But it becomes a real challenge when I am aware that there are problems for my loved ones. Regardless of my personal issues and worries the tour must continue in the same joyful and enthusiastic spirit that it started. ... It can also be very challenging when people at home are suffering with financial issues. **Our guests are not our counsellors.** They should be focused on their

safari and the landscapes and activities that are planned ... and sharing our private issues with them can have a dramatic effect on the quality of their experience.

When a guide is feeling down it is very easy to open up to a sympathetic voice, or a question asked kindly and out of genuine goodwill and concern by a guest. However — as tempting as it may be to share your worries — it is something that has no place on their tour. Should the news received be of such a drastic nature that you feel that you cannot maintain your cheerful and professional disposition, it should be your responsibility to communicate that to your employer (NOT YOUR GUEST) and arrange for another guide to meet you and continue the safari while you take time to arrange your personal affairs. Any client questions should be responded to with a neutral response ('personal problems' or 'a family emergency' or 'something needs my immediate attention') without any unnecessary detail."

Your Guest Has Had a Medical Emergency

We shall assume that you have packed your first aid kit and that you have done a good first aid course and at least one refresher course. Have you dealt with the most urgent part of the emergency and stabilised the situation? If you are the only guide on tour, it's now time to think of your other clients. Is there a local chief or a receptionist who could help lead? A senior group member? You will need to have somebody to serve as your link to the rest of the team as you rush to the medical facility, one to become a leader and a channel for future communication — other guests will expect to be updated on what is happening with their colleague.

You will have to write an accident report in which you have to focus on facts (not your interpretations), so use any idle time to jot down the basics like the times, locations, circumstances, injuries/symptoms, the sequence of your actions, names, titles and contacts of people involved.

NOTE FOR GUESTS:

In our region it's rare for rain to persist; it comes in short bursts.

Heavy Rain Doesn't Stop

First of all, this is your opportunity to impress, to share all the stories you have collected and games you have played as a child (and those you have packed in your luggage specifically for such a situation). Your guests will notice that you are prepared and appreciate you for that.

Secondly, your attitude will play a central role in how your guests feel about the weather conditions. You have to identify the brighter side of life and talk about it, instead of lamenting what can't be done. Will this rain allow you to get closer with your hosts? Offer you a chance to check on a place no other group sees? Will there be fantastic views after the storm clears the air? Talk about these blessings in disguise! If any of the guests is particularly miserable, give him/her some additional attention. All in all, help everybody stay positive.

End the Tour Right

We are returning to the lessons from the Lead Amazing Tours course.

The Closing Speech

These are the last official words you will speak to the group — but they should not feel official. They should be **casual, warm and introspective** (inward-looking, reflective). Customise the speech to the very people you are with, and thank them for giving you the opportunity to guide them. Your goal is to make them feel uplifted. Remind them of what you have been through together, highlight some special moments and open your heart as well (what made you enjoy your time together?). If you have been on a multi-day trip, you can mention something remarkable from different days. Ideally connect such memories to *Our Guiding Light* (p10).

Based on where they are and what their plan is, you should **gently promote** any other Gorilla Highlands Experts activities that might suit them. You certainly

NOTE FOR MEDIA PRODUCERS:

If you are working on something longer, consider ending with a conclusion that resembles the closing speech. This is also your best chance to include an effective *call to action* — you are telling your audience what you would like them to do next.

don't do that with a group that is on a longer tour with us or just about to fly out — but they can still be encouraged to tell their friends about the Gorilla Highlands region and what we do.

You don't want to bore anyone with this tour closure — especially if there is no way of doing it while sitting comfortably — so end it early enough. Wish your guests well and announce that you will still be around for another few minutes if anyone has any questions/needs ... You will finally **distribute evaluation papers** while explaining that any feedback will help you and the company improve.

Mind you, you are not allowed to say anything whatsoever about tipping you. This may actually be to your advantage, as some people will purposely not give you money if you push for it. Those who are habitual tippers will tip no matter what.

To emphasise again: throughout the tour your guests must not hear a thing about you getting any extras from them. This includes “jokes” like “what have you brought for me?” and similar verbal vomit. (For more on how we treat gratuities see the following section, *Our Tipping Policy*).

Your Guests' Feedback Is a Gift

The way we do evaluations — on paper and returned to you personally — has always been primarily directed towards your own improvement. Study what your guests have told you. Don't try to hide if it is bad and don't think that we will blame you. It will only be a conversation starter.

We once received an evaluation paper that was clearly written by a local person, not a tourist. The guide never worked with us again. “Losing” a paper can also backfire because the company stays in touch with clients.

Think of an honest evaluation as the best a guest can possibly do for you. How else will we strive for excellence?

Counting at old Crema; photo by ML Rwebandira



Our Tipping Policy

Is there a more unprofessional and embarrassing situation than a tour guide/service provider awkwardly waiting around to be tipped? While American guests will take it lightly and do the needful, people from other continents may instead roll their eyes and give you nothing ...

The reason for that difference in attitude is the American way of presenting prices: in their culture even taxes are excluded from what you see on the price tag — and tipping is compulsory to supplement low wages. Europeans, on the other hand, assume the price includes everything and that salaries are decent — tipping is an optional thank you for a job well done.

Many Americans dislike the way tipping works in their country and enjoy being in a different economic environment, so no matter what passport your client holds the rule is simple: **never expect a tip** or, God forbid, plan in advance what you are going to do with it!

NOTE FOR GUESTS:

It is your own decision to tip and how much you tip but it's always nice to show your appreciation or to make somebody's day with an amount that is likely to be minimal to you. These are some general suggestions in our region:

- **tour guide/driver:** USD 5-10 per client per day
- **park ranger:** USD 10-20
- **gorilla tracker:** USD 10-20
- **porter on a trek:** USD 15-20
- **porter at a hotel:** USD 1-2
- **restaurants:** 5-10%
- **hotels or lodges:** use the group tip box; the total could be USD 5 x staff involved

In most cases, the receiver will cherish it more if the gratuity is given in the local currency. Small US dollar notes fetch poor exchange rates, especially in remote areas.

Please do follow any gratuity (that's a fancy word for a tip) with a warm thank you — it's a welcome extra no matter how high or low it may be.

What IS NOT a Tip

It is extremely impolite to attempt to tip yourself by keeping any balance from monies that clients have given you to buy something for them.

Even if the change is pathetically small, always immediately return it to the guests without being asked. If they finally tell you to keep it, feel free of course — what we must avoid is clients' discomfort when they know you have their money but are shy to request it back.

You should not be one of those locals who believe that money grows on trees where your visitors come from. They probably had to work pretty hard to put together the budget for their African adventure. Moreover, they likely do not consider themselves rich at all. (And don't forget that truly wealthy people are often affluent exactly because they care about every coin!)

In the same manner, if a guest has decided to pay for your lunch that cannot mean that you will take anything for granted. You will not

forget to thank him/her and you will make sure you have no expectations next time a meal is served ...

It is actually impressive — but should be common — when a guide simply puts the money for his meal on the table once the bill is served, before anyone says anything. We expect our guides to act as proud professionals instead of behaving like just another “I am so poor, help me Muzungu!” character guests run into far too often.



Making clients happy; photo by M.L. Ruebandira

Before We Move On: One Last Reality Check

Almost every guide in our region loves the idea of having his/her own tour company. Imagine the money when nobody else is involved! But running a business comes with all kinds of office work that is far less exciting yet needs to be done, and done in time ... Taxes you never considered become a headache. Sooner or later you have to start hiring staff, and that pulls you into the muddy world of people management. It's hard to find good employees — and even harder to keep them.

Honestly, this may not prove to be your dream life ... Wouldn't you prefer to be in the wild, entertaining clients who can't wait to tip you handsomely instead of sitting alone at a computer and answering emails?

However, one day you will perhaps make the jump and eventually start hiring guides yourself.

You will choose freelancers who:

- communicate well
- follow the itinerary and the associated budget
- prepare clear reports that are delivered on time
- appreciate office staff as colleagues on the same team
- keep personal problems to themselves
- do not gossip or bitch about other personnel
- never blame or badmouth the office when something goes wrong

If the office-guide collaboration isn't good, it can make everybody miserable and impact client experience. **Guests will admire a united and professional team.**

Back to Real Life

In the introduction above we looked into your potential future as you are likely a tour guide at the moment ... and your situation isn't a very advantageous one!

In the Gorilla Highlands region it is much easier to get a decent driver guide than a decent tour consultant, a decent operations manager or (if God is great) a decent accountant. That's why it is you who is likely to lose if you get into unnecessary conflicts with the office!

Be the smart one, be of help and mentor office people until they get comfortable with the business you are in. When you feel that the office is doing it wrong, first make sure that it isn't you who is stuck with the old way "things have to be". Exhaust all other channels and possibilities before you complain to the boss — but finally do share if a staff member is making your life unnecessarily hard.

When the office is dealing with many tours at the same time, the staff can get exhausted because of the issues other freelancers are causing. They may be impatient with you even though you did nothing wrong, and you should not take it personally.

A practical example from our work:

It's past midnight and three people are awake just because a driver guide went to sleep before updating anyone. He is supposed to take our client to track chimps early in the morning but during the long ride to Nyungwe National Park he didn't bother to be in touch with the office. When he reached the lodge, he was briefly online — and still it didn't cross his mind to inquire about the activity start time (that varies in Nyungwe a lot) and payment situation. Our staff members get help from another guide, thankfully. He uses his extensive local connections to update the driver and the client ... after a sleepless night.

Would you be surprised if the office team, following such an ordeal, was a bit grumpy next morning?





Video production in a Musanze forest; photo by ML Ruebandira

MEDIA CHAPTER

Focused Mentality

Why does one need a licence for a gun but not for a smartphone?

This chapter advises you on how to best use your phone to produce great photos, videos and more, but let's first deal with how dangerous this gadget can be ...

Social media companies and other app makers are happily taking advantage of our primitive brains. The human mind perceives phone notifications as sweet little rewards and finds them totally irresistible!

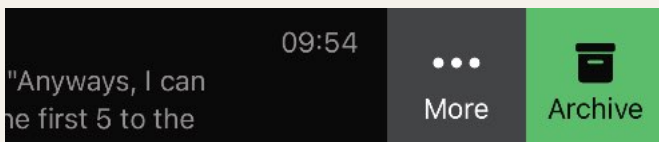
Does it *actually* matter that somebody has just liked your post on Instagram? It most probably doesn't.

But your grey cells release a pleasurable chemical called dopamine when the gadget beeps or its screen blinks. Why? Because the anticipation is exciting — not knowing what the notification will be about, the brain is hoping for something cool. By doing that it takes your attention away from what *actually* matters. And then you waste precious time before you can find your focus again.

But you are better than this! You can refuse to be an attention zombie and a slave to Facebook/Instagram, TikTok, ... You can take your notifications under control.

... Did you tap on the link above? It's a high-quality gift from a reputable source and it even has "Vacation" in the title! It will turn your phone into an ally, into your focus keeper. Because when we are media producers, we should switch the outside world off.

... Have you tapped and read? Now go into the settings and try it out. Finally visit your favourite apps and also work on notifications there.



For example, on WhatsApp (see above) you should mute (it's under "More") most of the contacts and possibly even "Archive" them.

Thank you. Now there will be nothing unnecessary showing up on your screen when it should be 100% devoted to the *content you are capturing*. (In plain language this means anything you are photographing or filming.)

NOTE FOR TOUR GUIDES **(YELLOW WILL BE YOUR COLOUR):**

When you are guiding a person on a vacation, you have to become a seamless part of that holiday, protecting your VIPs from any distractions. Whenever you are on your phone, you aren't mentally with your guests. You are allowing the outside world (see the text on the left) to rudely interrupt their experience. One "harmless" notification can pull you into an app that will want to keep you in.

The following page talks about your guests' photo consent. Once you are assured they are happy with being in photos (not just tolerating you) you still need to get the phone out only occasionally and never in a manner that compromises your primary role: being their guide.

As a bonus, a quote from our expert Paul Callcutt who had this to say about the previous chapter: "I loved the repeated comments about phone use. I hate it, really hate it. It's right up there with poor time keeping for me. Obviously we all need the things to operate these days, but 95 percent of the time we spend on them is wasted time, and mindlessly scrolling around guests is a big no no."

Second Biggest Danger: Permissions

Unless the person in front of your camera is a social media influencer, always assume they do not want their photos taken. You have to politely ask first.

Getting consent is complicated and it could tempt you to never take any photos. Yet that wouldn't be great for anyone involved! A nice action shot can promote our region and create unique memories.

NOTE FOR GUESTS:

Yes, it's OK to occasionally steal a photo moment, especially if you are taking a picture of a crowd of people who can't possibly all give you their consent, or a shot from behind where subject can't be identified. But that needs to be an exception. We don't support giving money to your local models (it can lead to issues in the long run) but we certainly support interacting with them! Please converse a bit at first, buy something from a market woman — and then a photo session may become acceptable. Do you know how to ask for a permission in the local language?

NOTE FOR TOUR GUIDES:

Imagine you are on holiday yourself and the person who is supposed to guide/drive you keeps taking images of you, without your permission. How would you find it?

If there's a person in your group who doesn't want to be in photos, make sure not to include them or take the photo from behind so it's impossible to see their face.

Even if you get the OK for a couple of shots, that still does not mean the pictures are yours to use freely! Before any of them show up on any channel, the guests appearing in the photos will need to be consulted — the permission GHE should ask for, not you.

But what about if you want to use those pictures for your own social media? Well, then you actually need to ask the company first! More specifically: if you are guiding people sent to you by GHE, it would be a serious mistake to then use the photos for your personal promo without prior authorisation. (Tagging isn't enough, you have to get a proper go-ahead first.)



The Importance of Being There

After some warnings about the trouble the phone can get us into, it's time we talk about what makes it great: it's always there, in the pocket, and it doesn't look scary.

Just like you! Your main advantage over a professional photo- or videographer is that you are at home in our region and get more time and opportunities to shoot. Your presence is also less distracting than somebody loaded with gear.

A much cooler looking pro can tell you that a *real* photo camera comes with many upgrades — its:

- sensor (the capturing plate) is bigger and can collect more light, allowing for more colour range and better shots when it's dark
- zoom capabilities are usually superior and you can change its lens (*telephoto* for a distant bird or predator, *macro* for a scary closeup of a termite, *wide angle* for a rainforest landscape, etc.)
- manual controls, autofocus and burst speed beat the phone (even if you use a great app)
- battery is bigger and replaceable

But that means little compared to simply being there at the right moment! You are the best the Gorilla Highlands region has.

Don't let "business as usual" discourage you. Something that you find common and therefore not interesting can be quite exciting to a person who didn't grow up in your village. Look at two examples from our blog: a video recording of collecting sticks for climbing beans and some market shots led to two nice articles about life on Lake Bunyonyi.



*Great Yields, Terrible Manners:
Antisocial Climbing Beans*



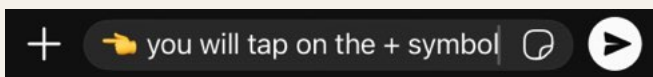
*Rutinda: Lake Bunyonyi's Capital
of Dugouts & Drinks*

How to Best Store the Moment

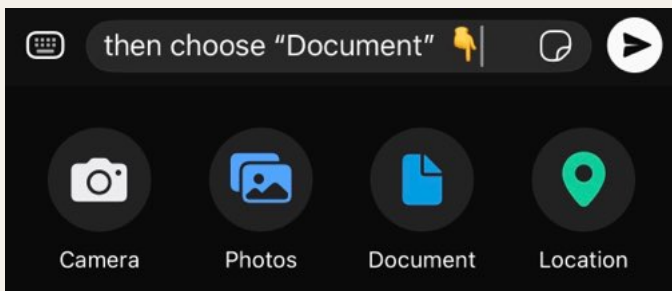
We are all painfully aware that bad things can happen to phones, so making sure the captured moment doesn't get lost is critical.

First WhatsApp it to the GHE office number. The app automatically compresses everything — makes files smaller by reducing quality — so we may request to get it as a “document”.

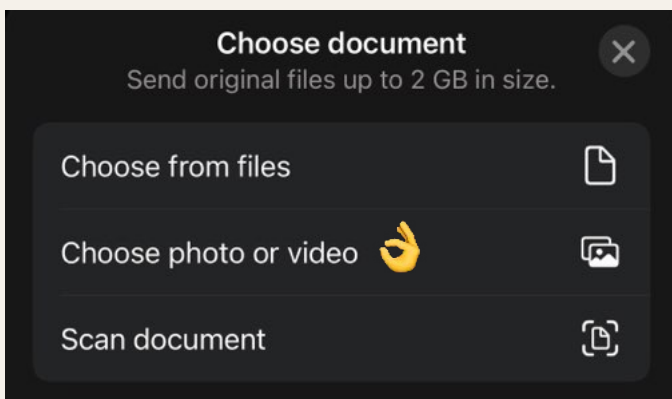
Step 1 (follow the yellow hand):



Step 2:



Step 3:



NOTE FOR LOCAL PARTNERS:

That bird that visits only at times, that funny market moment, that sunset that looks more awesome than any other — if you don't capture it, nobody ever will!

Are you preparing for hikers who are reaching in the evening? Why not record what you are cooking, for instance, whetting their appetite? Only you can do that.

Similarly, an old person from your parish may only be here today while tomorrow .. who knows? A living library of local knowledge or expertise may close forever. If you/they don't feel like their stories should be recorded on video, your phone also has the voice note capability — audio is useful too.

... That's it, and it's all happening right at the bottom of your WhatsApp. This procedure is telling the app to treat your photos/videos as something that shouldn't be reduced in size and quality; as a “document” in short.

Improve Your Photos & Videos — The 8 Basic Rules

The difference between a so-so shot and an impressive one is almost never the camera; it's all in **your care and commitment**. Are you ready for eight simple rules?

1 *Keep the Lens Clean*

A smudge from your pocket or a thumbprint can quietly ruin every shot of the day. A five-second wipe on a soft, clean material (the inside of your t-shirt) before you start is a habit worth building.

2 *Chase the Light, Not the Man*

Light is free and it's everything! Face the subject of your photo or video towards the light; shooting into the sun or a bright window will turn people into dark shapes (good only if you want to get silhouettes). Early morning and late afternoon light is soft and flattering (the golden hours), while harsh midday sun carves ugly shadows across faces. Overcast skies are a gift, not a disappointment — that soft light is what professional photographers pay pretty assistants to imitate with reflectors.

3 *Cherish the Horizon*

This is the single most common beginner mistake, so let's make it a rule: a tilted lake or a leaning house is not artistic (we aren't at that level yet) but a sloppy mistake. Before you press the shutter or start recording, glance at the horizon and ask: is it flat?

4 *Move Your Feet First of All*

Beginners find one spot, point the phone and shoot. Instead, walk around your subject. Try low. Try high. Try from the left, then the right. The best angle is rarely the first one you tried. People's portraits should be eye-height, unless you are going for a dramatic effect, like making someone look dominant with a shot from below.

5 *Get Uncomfortably Close*

Most beginner shots have too much empty space and too small a subject. Unless it's a wild animal, walk toward what you're capturing until it fills the frame, then bravely take one more step. It won't bite.

6 *Hold Still*

Taking photos of something fast or in bad light? Put two hands on the phone, elbows tucked into your sides. For video, hold each shot for several seconds before moving on; a static shot is far more usable than a shaky one, and it's the single biggest difference between footage that looks professional and footage that doesn't.

7 *Use What You've Invested In*

Set your phone to shoot at its highest available resolution and check your camera settings once, then leave it there. Sure, a bigger image will take more space on your card ... but please see rule **8**. Never use digital zoom (pinching to “zoom in”); it just blows up pixels and looks blurry, in a photo or a video. Zoom with your feet, not your fingers.

8 *Review, Back Up & Learn*

Develop a daily routine of checking what you've captured. If you have access to a computer, do use its bigger screen for this review, otherwise remember to zoom in

and see how sharp your photos and videos actually are. But that's of course not everything you are checking for! Have you respected the rules? What have you learned? **Save whatever is good to at least one more machine** (you can also email it to yourself) but for a proper backup two other saves are the minimum. Mercilessly delete what isn't good enough — and you may never run out of space on your device. (If the only problem is the horizon, that can likely be fixed, so don't throw the photo away.)



NOTE FOR LOCAL PARTNERS:

Video sometimes needs a scene repeated multiple times to get it right, whether that's a speech or a walk down a path; this isn't a sign you did it wrong the first time, we are probably just in need of more takes (options). The same goes if a guest or guide asks to move something in a shot — a chair, a pot, yourself; it's rarely a criticism of how things are, it's usually about composition and light. Feel free to ask why, if you're curious, since most media producers don't mind explaining their thinking.

Improve Your Photos & Videos – Add Fire Power

Once the eight rules are second nature, these tricks are what separate a good shot from a memorable one.

🔥 *Get Into the Thirds*

Turn on your phone's grid lines (see below) and enter the world of the thirds. Place your subject's eyes, or the main point of interest, on one of the intersecting points rather than the exact centre; it's a small habit that instantly looks more considered. A dead-centre subject reads as a passport photo, not a scene. Once the habit becomes automatic, feel free to break it deliberately for symmetry or

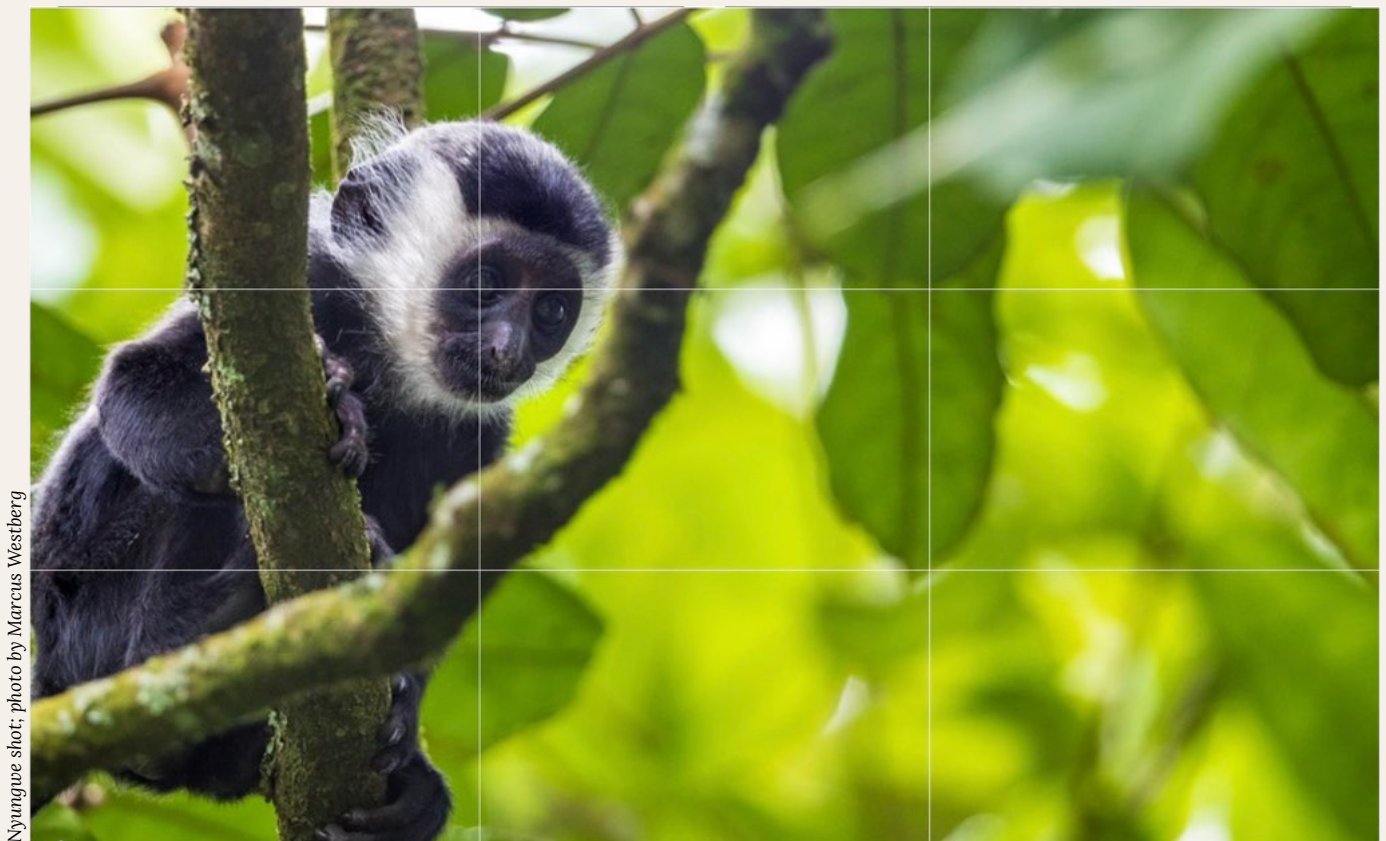
drama, but **know this rule before you bend it.**

How to do it:

- iPhone: Settings → Camera → Grid;
- Android: open the Camera app, tap the gear, see “Grid lines”.

🔥 *Give It Depth*

A flat shot has one plane (layer): subject against background. A shot with depth has something in the foreground, something in the middle, something in the distance. Before shooting, ask: what's in front, what's in the middle, what's behind?



Nyungue shot; photo by Marcus Westberg

photo by Brent Taylor



This staircase photo from Mt Sabyinyo is a good example: a hiker gripping the railing fills the foreground, a ridge of climbers on a distant trail sits in the middle, and a foggy peak closes the shot in the background. All three planes together are what makes the mountain feel that big.

🔥 *Follow the Leading Lines*

A path, a canoe's ripple, a fence — anything that draws the eye from the foreground toward your subject

adds depth and direction. Look for these lines before you shoot, and position yourself so they lead into the frame rather than cutting across it.

The photo above actually does double duty, beyond the depth: its railings run straight from the bottom corners of the frame up toward the hiker and the ridge beyond, pulling the eye up the mountain exactly where the shot wants it to go.

Move Like You Mean It

Don't whip your camera between subjects mid-recording. If you want to show two things, pick one, hold it steady for several seconds, then move slowly and smoothly to the other; never a quick swing back and forth. A fast, jerky pan makes footage close to unusable for editing, no matter how good the moment was. If a subject is moving, let it move through your frame rather than chasing it with the phone.

Discover the Hidden Modes

Both iPhone and Android phones hide real capability behind the default mode.

For example, the *Night mode* uses several tricks to save low-light shots that would otherwise come out dark and grainy. Rather than one quick snap, the phone takes the photo for much longer, sometimes several seconds, boosting brightness and detail digitally along the way. This means you need to hold the phone extra still (or rest it on something solid). *Portrait mode* nicely blurs the background for a person or a close

object. *Pano* is great for landscapes and group shots too wide for a normal frame. *Slow motion* can turn an ordinary moment, such as a bird taking off or water splashing, into something mesmerising.

On the iPhone, open Camera and swipe left or right on the row of mode names below the shutter button (Slo-mo, Video, Photo, Portrait, Pano); Night mode isn't a manual switch but a moon icon that appears automatically in low light, top-left, which you tap to adjust.

On Android, swipe left or right on the viewfinder itself, or look for a "More" tab beside Photo and Video; Night mode usually has its own icon in that row.

Experiment & Play

Explore your phone. Take the same shot five different ways. Walk around something twice before deciding it's not interesting.

The media producers who improve fastest aren't the ones who read the most about photography; they're the ones who experiment the most on the ground. The playful ones.

Improve Your Photos & Videos: Learn From Dom



During the May 2026 in-take, Dom Caristi shared his practical tips on photography and video; please watch the entertaining and advice-packed recording of that session.

As a retired professor of video journalism he of course has much more to share, so he prepared these pointers for you:

👁️ *Understand the Human Eye*

- **Our eye never zooms in.** This is very unnatural. Zoom in only when the drama of the situation calls for it. Otherwise, cut from the wider shot to the closer one. (Example.)
- Our eye almost never pans. If we look left to right, we rarely see what's in between. Reserve pans for panorama shots, when you're trying to show a wide, beautiful area. (Example.)
- If for some (unlikely) reason you must pan or zoom, **do it slowly.** If

you think it's the right speed, you're going too fast. (Example.)

- The "cut" is the most natural transition there is. When you blink, you go from one shot to the next. (Examples.)

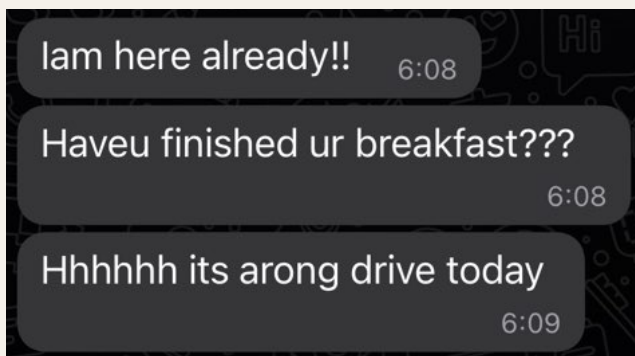
🎧 *Take Care of the Sound*

- Audio can add a lot. When recording video, *be quiet*. It's easy to add narration to the video later, but almost impossible to remove the narration and still leave the natural environment sounds. (Example.)
- Having said that, keep in mind that a good portion of your audience will watch your videos with the sound off. While audio should add to the production, it usually shouldn't be essential. **Show don't tell.** If your video is only understood with the narration, you're telling instead of showing. (Example.)

How to Text Professionally

If we return to the dangers of the smartphone for a second, here's another example of how it can harm your reputation ...

As a media producer you are on the other side of the camera, but you still try to look professional enough, right? And then you go to WhatsApp and start typing to your business partner:



Oops. Not looking that professional anymore! The problems:

1) machine gun texting — three messages when one could do the job (do you love it when your notifications go blink-blink-blink-blink-blink?)

2) unfortunate punctuation (“!” can mean that you are shouting, so “!!” could easily be perceived as your impatience with the person; there is never a good reason to put more than one “?” either)

3) mixing up “l” and “r” (makes it harder to understand if your receiver is not from around)

4) lack of spacing between words

Side note: outside of Rwanda people normally write “Ha ha ha” not “Hhhhhh” when they want to indicate laughter. 😊

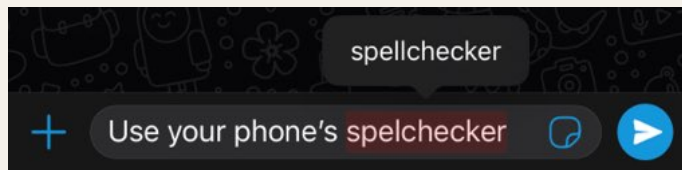
The neatness of your writing is as important as the neatness of your appearance. It says: I am a serious professional who wants to make sure I am fully and easily understood.

Please always read what you have typed before you send it (or, God forbid, export it as your video titles). Ask yourself if what you have written will be crystal clear to the one who will read it. Shorten

NOTE FOR TOUR GUIDES:

How your messages appear on a client's screen is part of your VIP approach to guiding. An average guest prefers to be handled by a fully literate person who thinks twice before sending a text.

your sentences as much as you can. Capitalise what is supposed to be capitalised. And for sure:



Do also keep in mind that WhatsApp is handy *asynchronous* technology. That means that people don't need to be online at the same time; you can leave your message and your recipient(s) will read and reply when convenient. To therefore just write "hello" and wait for a response before you add anything useful is strange — or perhaps even annoying?

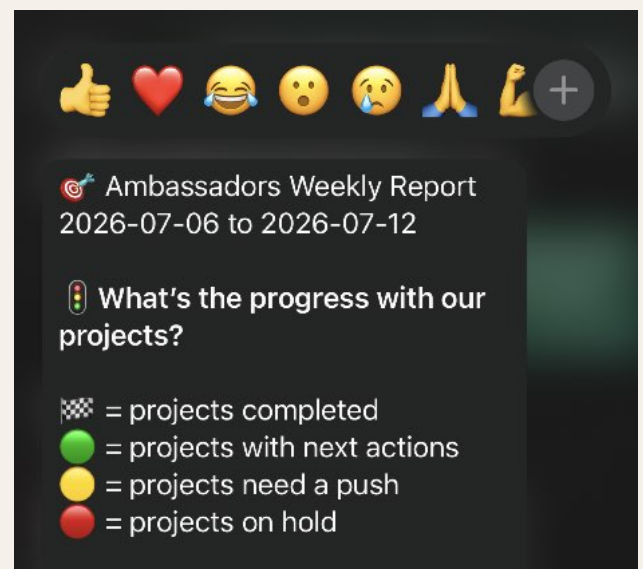
Good Behaviour in Groups

Is it possible to truly love WhatsApp groups? Probably not, but we need to live with them. If they are of professional nature, we better handle them with care.

The following text is based on the GHE *Communication Charter* (you can find it in the description of the group you are in). Our WhatsApp groups exist to share information, knowledge and opinions — for teamwork and everyone's growth. We believe in sharing useful info as

much as possible. That also means that just watching without engaging is bad manners. Check in regularly — once a week should be the minimum before messages pile up — and react. **Before responding, read everything new.** Skipping messages is disrespectful and hurts the conversation.

We recommend that you use emoji reactions to other team members' messages as much as possible. All you have to do is tap and hold a message until a menu appears at the top:



GHE has some agreed reactions:

👍 = Seen and understood (if you don't, please ask — we need to be on the same page)

👉 = Working on it

✅ = Done

Other emojis are of course also welcome as reactions, but not as standalone messages. Why?

Because it doesn't make sense to add yet-another message that can overwhelm our member if you have nothing substantial to say.

Instead of messaging "Cool!" you can simply react with ❤️ or 😎, right? If you just want to thank someone, 🙏 could do, no? And so on — your phone can search among available emoji, and allows you to be quite creative.

Before posting to a group, ask yourself at least two questions:

- 1) Who would benefit from knowing this? Not who needs to know — who would value knowing! Put it into the right group.
- 2) Is it for one or two people only? Direct message (DM) them instead.

Last but not least, do break long messages into logical chunks — it makes them easier to respond to.

Dear, Miha Logar
My name is XXXXX sales Executive at YYYYY. I am reaching out on behalf of YYYYY. We are deeply inspired by Gorilla Highlands Experts' (GHE) commitment to "Nature. Culture. Together." across Uganda, Rwanda, and the DRC. YYYYY offers high-impact videography, photography, and branding to elevate your digital presence, marketing, and community storytelling. What YYYYY Can Do For Gorilla Highland experts

- * Cinematic Videography
- * Professional Photography
- * Strategic Branding.

Why Choose YYYYY? [...]
* Purpose-Driven Creators, Our core focus is ethical storytelling that respects local communities, empowers indigenous guides, and drives conserv

We would love to discuss how we can support your upcoming projects.

👉 This was not a WhatsApp text, it was an email GHE received in early 2026. But it's still a great example of how sloppy typing or editing can cost you a business opportunity. Notice the spaces sitting before commas and full stops throughout — a space always follows punctuation, never precedes it. Add careless line breaks and even the potential client's own name misspelled, and you get a pitch that quietly undermines its own promises: why would a serious company entrust its branding to a team that can't be bothered to get these basics right?

Know Your Social Platforms

We've taken nice photos and videos, we've learned about the significance of writing neatly, so the next step should be showcasing our skills! For an Ambassador, the point is putting our region in front of as many global eyes as possible. A pretty evening walk, a colourful roadside scene, a peaceful boat on a lake — none of it does any good if it's sitting on your phone unseen.

In this section we list every social media platform that we believe could serve that one goal: getting our region noticed globally, by people who have never heard of it and might one day come see it themselves, or those who have already visited and need their hearts warmed again. Whatever channel you use, do make sure you include this text in your caption:

@gorillahighlands region

Don't put it separately at the end, integrate it in a sentence. The first part is a tag that will make the app alert us. The "region" part clarifies that we are promoting a geographical area, not Gorilla Highlands Experts itself.

Facebook

Facebook rewards a mix: a photo, a short video or even just well-written text with no image at all can all perform. Horizontal images sit most naturally in the feed and photo collections are attractively presented. This platform's main strength is Facebook groups and sharing; a post that a friend shares into their networks often reaches further than the original post ever would on its own.



Facebook post with a horizontal image

Instagram

On Instagram it's all about the visual, as it started as a photo

sharing app. Horizontal images still sit comfortably in its feed, but in the grid the current preference for the vertical is obvious.



Instagram's grid with vertical images (main GHE account)

Jealous of TikTok's success, Instagram decided to heavily emphasise Reels — short videos in a vertical format. Instagram Stories (disappearing after 24 hours) are vertical too, and they best suit in-the-moment or behind-the-scenes moments that don't need to live permanently on the grid. Text is a second class citizen in this app, and the captions are limited to 2,200 characters.

Pinterest

Pinterest is closer to a visual search engine than a social feed, and it rewards tall vertical images. A

single strong pin can keep attracting clicks for months or years after posting, unlike almost every other platform on this list.

TikTok

TikTok is all about vertical video, full stop, and it has the most aggressive discovery algorithm of any platform here. A video from an account with almost no followers can still reach thousands of strangers if it holds attention in the first few seconds.

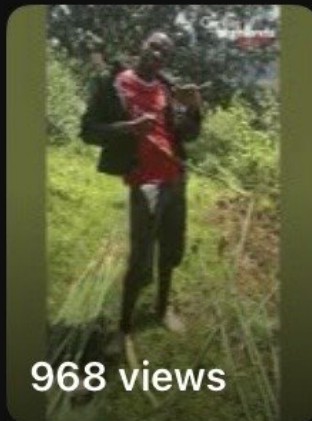
X/Bluesky

Both are text-first platforms where images and video support the words rather than replace them. Horizontal images display best. Reach here depends heavily on conversation; a reply or a quote post often travels further than the original post alone.

YouTube

YouTube is the place where horizontal video still rules. Like Pinterest, **it rewards patience**: a well-made horizontal video can keep earning views for years. As the world's second-largest search

Top Shorts



Top videos and live streams



Gorilla Highlands...

17.2k views · 10 years ago



Kabale Town

17.2k views · 12 years ago



Kisoro Town

7.8k views · 12 years ago

YouTube shorts (vertical) and usual videos (horizontal) from the GHE account

engine (after Google.com), YouTube rewards a helpful, searchable title. But YouTube has embraced vertical video too — through its Shorts.

PS: *LinkedIn*

We've listed the many social media channels alphabetically, so why is LinkedIn at the end? Because it's a different animal altogether!

LinkedIn serves a different crowd: not guests, but tour operators,

conservation partners, donors and journalists. Horizontal images and documents perform well here. This is the space for the organisational side of us: conservation outcomes, the Illumineers programme, partnerships announcements, ... Such content would feel out of place in a guest-facing Instagram feed but could matter greatly to the people who fund, refer, or collaborate with GHE.

Give Our Social Media a Push

Did you take note of the YouTube views presented on the previous page? They aren't embarrassing but they are also not impressive, and as an Ambassador you could give them a push.

Everyone Sees a Different Feed

Here is something worth understanding properly: no two people see the same version of Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok. Each platform runs an algorithm (an automated process) that decides, individually for every single user, what shows up in their feed and in what order; it is not simply “what was posted most recently by people I follow.” The algorithm is guessing, constantly, what will keep that particular person scrolling.

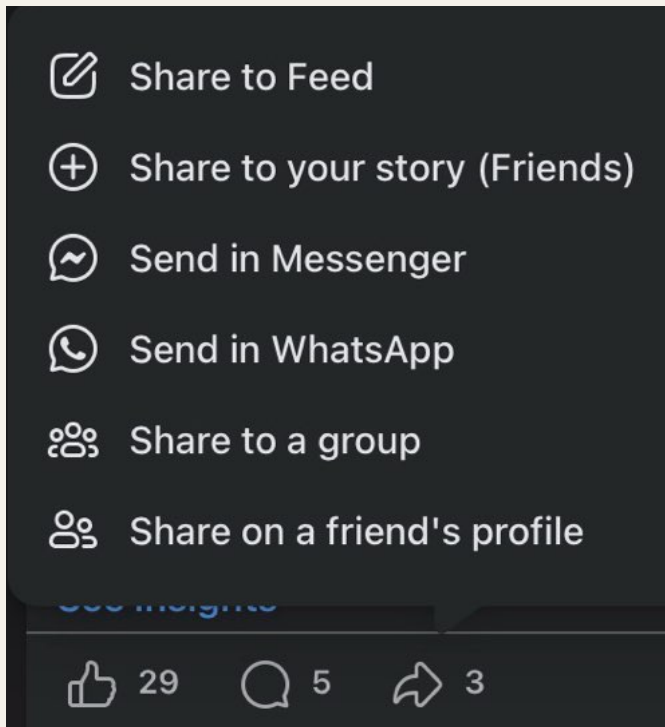
This means a GHE post is never guaranteed to reach anyone at all, no matter how many people follow the account. The algorithm decides who sees it first, based on how people react to it early on, and then either keeps showing it to more people or quietly stops.

You can make a difference once something is published, by supporting it. A share, a comment, and a like are direct signals to the app that a post is worth showing to more people.

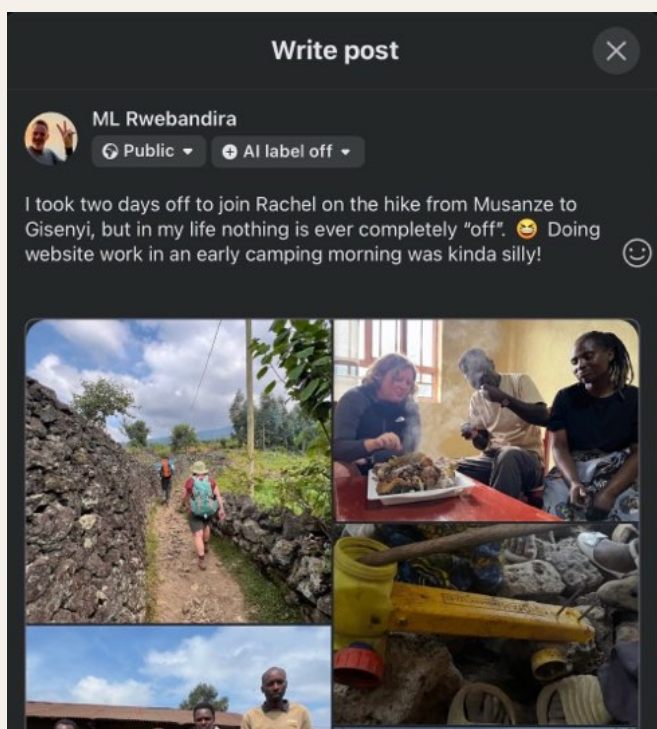


In the Facebook example above, the 29 likes are easy and clear, aren't they? All you have to do to be the 30th liker is tap there.

To add yours to the five comments, you will also just need to tap and write something in. Please avoid “cool!”/“nice” and such one-word comments. Tell us something truly yours — in the case of our hiker Rachel, maybe what you think of Rwanda's teacher uniforms?



The third option to give a post some love may look like the most complicated one, but it's also the most powerful. *Share to Feed*, for example, will show it to some of your followers — it will be stronger if you add some of your own words.



The earlier and stronger those “I support this” signals arrive after something is posted, the further the algorithm will push it. A GHE post with fifty genuine comments and shares in its first hour will reach vastly more people than the same post with none, regardless of how good the photo or video actually is. An organisation's posts are treated by algorithms with more suspicion than a genuine person's engagement, so the same item shared to your own network, in your own voice, carries weight that a repost from the GHE page cannot match on its own.

In short, when GHE publishes something you believe in, don't just scroll past it. Like it, comment something genuine, and share it to your own page or story. Do this within the first hour if you can. If you do this consistently, GHE's reach will multiply amazingly, and it costs nothing but a few seconds of your attention.

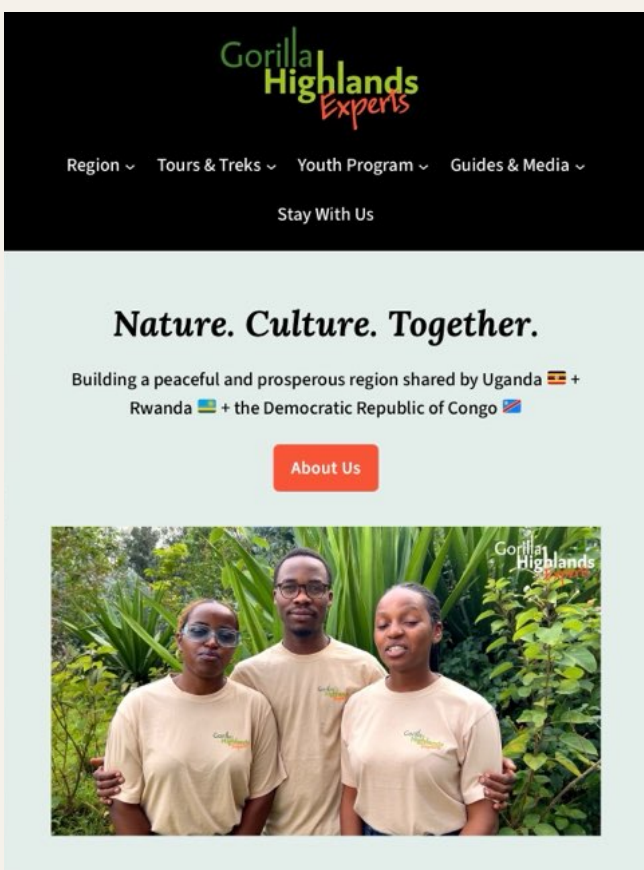
NOTE FOR GUESTS:

Your help is particularly important as it takes our media output to new countries and communities.

Why We Still Do Websites & Think Horizontally

After all the social media talk about vertical images and videos as the ones that work best, why will we still tell you to please prioritise horizontal ones?

Our website gorillahighlands.com is the only channel GHE fully owns and controls. Social companies can change their rules overnight, bury GHE's materials, or vanish entirely, and there's nothing we could do about it. The website can't ever be taken away, so everything gets published there first as the permanent version. And horizontal visuals simply work better on the web!



That said, GHE does not treat social media as a mere signpost pointing back to our site. The reality is that most visitors will never click through to gorillahighlands.com at all. For many of them, the Bluesky post or the Instagram photo is the entire experience of GHE they will ever have. That means every piece posted on social media has to stand completely on its own, telling a full story and looking good, rather than functioning as a teaser.

This shapes our text. Instagram's 2,200 character limit means that even on the GHE website we write with that in mind from the start; the same words that work as a complete blog post can then be dropped onto Facebook or Instagram largely as they are, arriving in full.

A horizontal photo or video will work best on the website and be most at home on YouTube, while still adapting reasonably well to most social platforms. So unless we are targeting Reels or TikTok, we will shoot mostly horizontally.

Before We Move On: Who is Paying?

Before we close the chapter, we must look into a question that is essential for our Ambassadors as informed citizens. It's about the media of course and it's pretty simple: "Who is paying?"

You will understand life better if you ask yourself just that every time you consume anything on social media, from the TV or in a newspaper.

That cool influencer ... who is paying her? Probably not Instagram or TikTok but her advertisers. And since she receives money from them, she can't give you a fair review of their services or products.

That government-funded TV station ... Can they truly be critical of our political leaders, even when they deserve it?

That journalist who was invited to cover an event but the travel costs are covered by an organiser ... Will you really get a realistic picture of what happened?

While it is quite clear what being an African national television means — who is paying — it is much more complicated on social media channels. People are supposed to clearly declare who is paying, but in practice they often don't.

When You are the Product

But the most challenging part of it all is that when you aren't paying, when you are using something for free, then **you are the product being sold**. The money comes from selling advertisers access to your attention, and to your data. You're not the customer being served; you're the resource being harvested and offered to the highest bidder (the one who offers most to get you).

That's why it's paramount to do what we recommended right in the beginning: be focused and do what is right for you. Instead of allowing others to sell us, let's rather purposely sell the region we are lucky to be part of!

On the shores of Edirisa; photo by Crescent Kanyesigye



STORYTELLING CHAPTER

VJ Mentality

What do all good VJs do? They take us on a journey through the movie we are watching and hold our hand whenever necessary. When there's a boring or heartbreaking section they lighten it up. If something calls for a recap, they gladly provide it. Any strange story elements get fitting local explanations.

Now it's time we grab the VJ microphone — as tour guides, local partners or media producers — to talk to a *target audience* that doesn't understand our culture, environment ... or history.

NOTE FOR GUESTS:

Video Jockeys (VJs) originate from video halls — or, better, shacks — where a paying audience gets a live local language interpretation of screened movies. A VJ becomes a coauthor of the storytelling experience as this is much more than just dubbing. It delivers the needed context, the humour, the interaction. These days it's most common to get performances by celebrity VJs baked into pirated disks and streams. Even customers who understand English perfectly often prefer the VJ version.

When you say “during Obote II” or “before Kings Rwabugiri and Musinga” to somebody from abroad, it’s like the VJ got silent when you needed him most. The numerous Rwandan royals are a particularly useful example: there’s no way your listeners will be able to follow when you passionately venture into the 30+ kings.

As a VJ you simplify and adapt to make something more interesting and memorable. You can add as much humour as you are comfortable with, as long as you stay true to yourself (forced jokes are never truly good jokes).

As a VJ you provide the ongoing narration that connects it all into an attractive package.

The Problem with Facts

There’s one exception though ... A movie VJ is first of all there to entertain, so facts aren’t as important as having fun. Your Ambassador role — and it doesn’t matter if you are a guide, a host or a podcaster — is a little bit different. **You can’t make stuff up.** A little embellishment for the sake of

storytelling is alright here and there, but your audience has to trust you and that gets difficult when you aren’t truthful.

Instead of changing the facts you know, carefully decide which one is important to your audience, and which isn’t. You would bore them to death if you listed every number (altitude/weight/year/...) in your memory. A human brain has a limited capacity for taking new information in, and you have to be selective.



NOTE FOR MEDIA PRODUCERS:

Big media houses employ fact checkers whose only role is to make sure everything in the stories they publish is correct. As much as GHE tries, we can’t reach that level, so it matters even more how correct the narration you submit is. Don’t rely on what you heard; look things up online and ideally in more than one source.

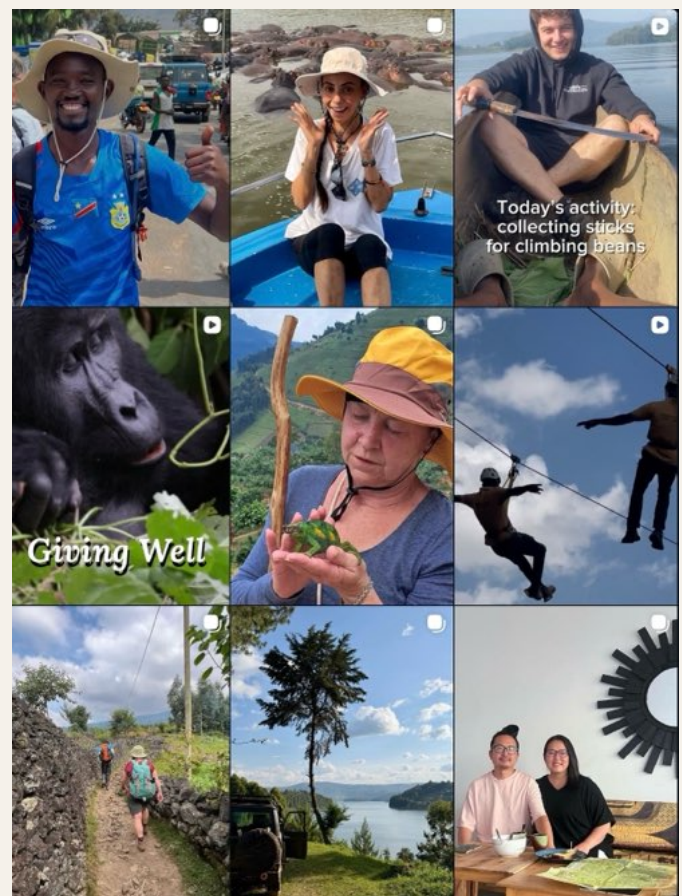
It All Begins with the Target Audience

In the introduction you read the term (*target*) audience a couple of times, and it's high time we get a full understanding of what it means. It's foundational for sure.

To simplify as much as we can: these are the people you are making something for. The *target* part of it is crucial, and it comes from aiming — like an arrow pointed at a specific spot, not just thrown anywhere. So “target audience” means you’re aiming your message at one specific group instead of sending it out to everyone.

But why decide on a segment of people if we could reach out to the eight billion humans on this planet? Because they are extremely unlikely to notice! Instead of hoping someone catches our stories, we purposely make them for very defined people.

Recall the Children bit of *Impress Special Guest Categories* (p48)? Kids in a travel group are already an example of a special target audience. Secondly, have a look at two of our Instagram accounts: Illumineers (left) and GH Experts (right). There are few posts that



end up on both pages — because Illumineers is targeting the university students and young professionals of our region. (The Japanese couple may look out of place on the Illumineers side, but that's a post about our Office-Home that was important for our local audience to see too.)

Our Target Audiences

As Ambassadors we are oriented towards the outside world, and for historical and practical reasons the West predominates this category. We define our target audience as “travellers who want to leave a positive impact” and then further separate them into five categories (see below). To add an age category to this, 30-65-year-olds are more interesting to us than younger populations. We expect them to be

independent-minded slow travellers who want much more than track gorillas and love to go deeper into the cultures they visit.

This can go very detailed — we wrote a target audience *persona/ avatar* that goes like this:

Nick, a 47-year-old secondary school teacher from an English city, loves to organise educational and active travel to unusual destinations for his students. Throughout the years his school groups have been all over the world. Nick is ready to take his youngsters to Africa for the very first time, and our region is one of the options he is considering. He needs a partner who can help him put together something really special that will convince the school, the parents and the kids.



Meet Mary

When we created Nick, we didn't know the M23 rebellion and ebola would come back to the DRC and affect the other two countries badly too. The last few years have not been the right time to invite school expeditions — what would the parents think?!

Instead we will introduce you to Mary ... She is another made-up person who helps us put a face onto a target group.



Mary, 50, is a family doctor on the east coast of America. She has heard about mountain gorillas

and is now researching how to see them. Her hubby, a retired engineer, has recently taken up birding, so that's another reason for them to want to visit our region. She has no idea what else is available in the region. On the other hand, she might want to track gorillas twice! She worries if she's fit enough for gorilla tracking and if hotels will be at suitable levels — but isn't interested in paying thousands of dollars per night.

Again, it's better to repeat: Mary does not exist. The photo of "her" is borrowed from another friend of ours. Mary just represents a group of travellers with similar interests.

We will use Mary in this chapter as an example, because it's easier to imagine that we are telling stories to her, compared to "middle-aged American first-time visitors".

Outside of the *Field Notes* you can think of anyone you have ever met (or imagined meeting!) and keep them in front of your eyes as you craft your words and images. Let everything you are preparing be for somebody specifically, not for 8.3 billion people, OK?

Different Cultures Tell Stories Differently

Mary didn't grow up the way you did. You might have experienced storytelling as something communal and interactive — a bunch of kids laughing and commenting while sitting around their auntie — but her childhood was different, being the only kid of two busy parents. In her culture, stories usually focus on one hero who overcomes an obstacle and learns something from it. They move from an introduction through rising action to one clear climax and resolution; straight from A to B to C. Think of any American movie and it's probably just like that.

In many Bantu traditions, storytelling is a transaction. It

normally opens with a call, a question the listeners are to answer; the repetition that follows helps everyone catch up. Characters go through the same/ similar thing about three times and substories and related proverbs usually feature too. If Mary's expectation of a story is linear, yours is probably more like a spiral (see the graphic below).

If you expose Mary to the good old African way, that will work great as a curiosity around one campfire. Anything more than that will likely be too slow and repetitive for her. Your task as her VJ is to minimise repetition (in everything you say or write) and help flatten the spiral.

Two shapes of a story

WESTERN DRAMATIC ARC · ORAL CALL-AND-RESPONSE

Linear

Tension is banked, spent once, released.



Spiral

Tension is released and rebuilt, pass after pass.

● the call
permission asked and given

1 first pass
the attempt fails

2 second pass
it fails wider

3 third pass
wit wins

○ refrain
everyone sings it back



“and that is why ...”
proverb → the audience argues it out

The Power of Storytelling

The challenge of adjusting stories to Mary's needs will be big, but it should not discourage you. You are both recreating the oldest human experience ever: we use language to share a tale. Over thousands of years our brains have evolved around storytelling, and that's why it's the easiest way for our heads to understand and remember.

Not separate facts, anecdotes or numbers — stories that connect it all are an Ambassador's most powerful weapon. Unlike an Instagram "story", a real story won't go away in 24 hours; it will stay in our minds, and hearts, forever.

Let's take the example of Katuregye (pictured on the right, explained overleaf), a rebel leader whose activities shaped the present of Lake Bunyonyi. It's much stronger if you tell his story than to list separate facts about different islands!



Katuregye Rucumitana Akasimba Ka Musigi (1870–1915)

Katuregye was a leader of the Bakongwe clan. He was the son of Rwamushwa and Chandungusti, Nyabingi mediums. Born around 1870, Katuregye was raised in his father's home with Batwa children who taught him the arts of hunting. From 1895 he led many campaigns of conquest against neighbouring clans and by 1900 controlled a large territory. The nearest clans were forced to migrate while those further away gave tribute, including girls for marriage; he ended up with 40 wives.

The arrival of the Europeans was a blow to Katuregye's ambitions. He lost his southern lands to German Rwanda and was restricted to his native Bufundi by the English. He was made a subcounty chief and had to suffer the indignity of having a Baganda agent tell him how to rule. In 1913/14 the English arrested his mother, who was around 65 years old at the time. They never gave any reason for her arrest but it was probably part of the general round-up of Nyabingi leaders. She died on the way home in 1914.

Katuregye's revenge was to sink all the canoes that he did not need on Lake

Bunyonyi, set up camp on Bwama Island, and then, accompanied by his Batwa allies, attack military convoys and clans who cooperated with the British. The impact was so bad that the colonial forces conducted a campaign of destruction and confiscation that swept down the shores of Lake Bunyonyi, burning Batwa and Bakongwe villages and taking away their cattle. They then transported a huge canoe from Lake Chahafi over a 2,000m/6,600ft pass to Bunyonyi, using 100 porters. They eventually managed to get together 13 canoes to row to Bwama — only to find Katuregye's base deserted!

Katuregye escaped to Rwanda but on return he made the mistake of raiding fellow clansmen for their cattle. They betrayed his headquarters in Echuya Forest and a mixed military unit armed with a Maxim machine gun was sent to attack. He was wounded in the thigh and despite the best efforts of several medicine men he eventually passed away. It was 1915. Six years later, the empty Bunyonyi islands — a direct result of Katuregye's battles — provided a suitable location for Dr Sharp's leprosy colony.

Stories Engage

We've devoted a full page to Katuregye and you will have to agree that he was a fascinating hero; without that we wouldn't have much to work with.

But is that page filled with text a story? Not really. It's a long list of numbers, names and actions in chronological order. It's the movie before the VJ picks up the microphone. Nobody has decided yet what will surely touch Mary and what likely won't.

40 wives? Most definitely. The machine gun? Probably not — unless you want to stress the power imbalance of a wooden bow against the mechanical Maxim.

Your starting point will be to **make the hero relatable**, and what the British did to his mother should be just that! Every human has parents and can imagine how it feels to lose them. Mary's empathy will pull her into the story, her body will react and connect her with you.

Secondly, you will do your best to fill Mary's brain with questions that pull her further into the story.

Two examples:

- Why arrest a 65-year-old woman and give no reason? (This one she will ask herself quietly, and you will provide an answer as the story goes on.)
- If you had a thigh wound in 1915 and no surgeon, what would you want your medicine man to do? (This one you will ask her aloud, letting her answer it as a doctor.)

The goal is to make Mary feel like a story participant, not a listener, viewer or reader.

Thirdly, we have been ignoring Mary's husband, who is following the narration too. Done well, your storytelling will bring them together in a shared experience and help them bond. Given his engineering background, the Maxim sounds like his way in! A little extra research will let you explain how the gun worked, and you should show him a picture of it as well (it might interest Mary too).

Remember: keep the details that let the listener feel something they have felt themselves.

Who, Why, What?

Mama Bena; photo by ML Rwebandira

Time for the next step! We are leaving Katuregye behind and will help you create your own stories. These three questions are key:

Who?

The hero of the story. Somebody who is easy to love or hate, somebody relatable. People find it easiest to connect with people, so this should be a person or have human-like characteristics.

One strong character — complex, interesting, curious — always works better than a group of characters as he or she is easier to identify with. It's totally fine, on the other hand, to have several characters, as long as one of them is the lead one.

As the story goes on, it has to become very clear what the hero's wants and desires are, and the reasons behind them.

Example: Mama Bena's unique house comes to life most when you talk about its builder: her dad. Can you find other similarly interesting personalities? Have you asked the locals about what they know?



Why?

What's the reason this is worth sharing and will make the audience care? How does it relate to their lives and interests? How well does it build on what you've told them before?

This doesn't always need to be something huge. Maybe you want to make them laugh? Understand the place or the local mentality?

You do need to have several stories ready and use them as they fit.

What?

This is finally the structure of your story, with a **clear beginning, middle and end** (Mary needs that very much, remember, and expects it all to go in a straight line with no unnecessary repetitions).

1. Beginning: gives the audience the minimum they need to engage and makes them curious — hungry for more:

- opens with a **hook**: you only have 7-8 seconds to win your audience's attention and give them an idea about what the story is going to be about; for an example, imagine a movie starting in the middle of action
- sets up the main character, his/her location (in both space and time) and desire (big dream)
- identifies the obstacle on the way to the desire — **the conflict** — and asks the **central question** (sometimes the same as the hook) that can be simplified to: will s/he make it?

2. Middle: you're taking the audience on a journey to answer the central question. There will be tension and several challenges on the way to the **climax** (for a visual

of this peak moment see *Different Cultures Tell Stories Differently*, p91). It will be very clear what the stakes are: what happens if our hero fails?

Each carefully chosen stage of the story will have to move it all forward (never back) until the main event is reached — like getting to fight the ultimate boss at the end of a video game.

3. End: the resolution that follows the climax. It provides the answer to the central question and shows what has changed in the world and in the character. Your chance to point the story towards something bigger and answer the “why?”.

Musanze wedding; photo by ML Rwebandira



How to Enhance Your Storytelling: Videos/Photos

The advice so far has been as general as possible, to help a tour guide and a media producer at the same time. Let our Dom Caristi now assist a video- and photographer with some specifics:



Work the Angles

- For the purpose of your best storytelling, be sure you **get a mix of camera perspectives**. Use *wide shots* to establish the location/situation, *medium shots* for relationships (like people standing next to each other) and *close-ups*. It might surprise you to find that most of your shots should be close-ups, especially for people watching your videos on a tiny phone screen. (Examples.)
- Make a collection of *high- and low-angle shots*, in addition to the standard eye-level video. The majority of the shots will of course be eye level, but the other perspectives give you a great chance to add detail. (Examples.)
- Don't confuse your viewer by breaking the *180-degree rule*. If you

show a car moving left in the frame and in the very next image the same car is moving to the right, the eye loses track. You can avoid this by editing in a neutral shot (like someone standing beside the road) between the two shots of the vehicle. (Example.)



Speak the Video Language

- *Fading in and out* tells us we are at the beginning or end of a section. In storytelling it's like the beginning or end of a chapter. (Example.)
- *Dissolving* usually tells us there has been a transition in time or place. For example, if a pot of food must cook for 30 minutes, instead of watching the pot we can dissolve from the pot cooking to a shot of someone taking it off the stove. If we just cut between the two shots, viewers might think it happened immediately. (Example.)
- When we see words fly across the screen, we know the end is near. Even a child who can't read recognises *credits*. (🔥 Example.)

How to Enhance Your Storytelling: Writing

! *Simple & Clear Always Wins*

Don't complicate just because you are writing. Your story isn't an official letter; it just records a tale. Example: How would you say it when chatting with a friend?



The General is Your Enemy

Avoid generalised and vague info. Your strength lies in your specific local knowledge.

Examples: Never use “many” when you know the real number or “always” when something has happened once or twice.



The Details are the Sweetest

Bring something to life with detailed descriptions. The more you focus on one subject — instead of trying to cover five things at the same time — the easier it will be. Examples: What did your hero put on and how did her home look, smell, feel?



Full Info Begs to be Recorded

When collecting information or quotes, note down people's full names, ask for their place of residence and, if appropriate, age. Example: It wasn't “John” who said it but “John Mbabazi, 62, Kigali”.



Conventions are Neat

Saw that we didn't write “MBABAZI John”? The GHE convention is to always put first names first, and there are other rules like that. Every medium has them, and any true professional respects them. Example: 1 June, not June 1st.



The Well-Known is Boring

Ignore obvious stuff your audience could find everywhere. Example: Why talk about the length of the Congo Nile Trail yet again?



Copying is Bad Bad Bad

Avoid copying from books and websites. You might want to collect some numbers or facts (don't forget to state where they are from) but your audience is most eager to learn what you know and what your community tells you.



AI Melts Our Brains

Ignore AI; it should be an editor's tool, not yours. Who will remove all the AI nonsense: fancy words that you don't understand, unnecessary repetitions and sentences turned into questions for no good reason? Your poor editor? AI can be a pain. We need you, not the machine.

The Final Word (Very Clearly Spoken)

Whatever you do, keep in mind that an Ambassador is a *regional* storyteller. We cover three countries, so always imagine talking to guests who aren't from your home and sharing a story that should help them understand something better in a way that is entertaining and memorable. The region is, of course, the "Gorilla Highlands" and using this term consistently helps us brand it.

Potential visitors come with all kinds of questions and our first opportunity — and obligation — is to answer them well. What are our guests most worried or confused about? If we provide them with answers well packaged as stories, we will be most effective.

As you take the audience on a journey into the culture or environment you were born into or know well, **try to inspire**. Your

future guest has to want to visit because of a unique cultural practice, a remarkable creature, magnificent scenery, or a chance to help uplift a community. A visitor should feel part of it and enriched through the power of your words.

But What if They Don't Get You?

That is all for nothing if your Mary doesn't understand what you are saying ... A VJ is there to make something easier, not harder to get.

This is not about the education you've received but how well you listen today. **Fine-tune your ears and mouth** and try to speak closer to the way a language is used where it comes from. Don't fake an accent but focus on how words are pronounced originally and aim for that. Will you be *fast* or *first* to do it? Doesn't matter. Your audience will love you for it.

The Virungas; photo by Marcus Westberg

... So, this is how we do it in the Gorilla Highlands! Wish to keep hearing from us and our region?

Email experts@gorillahighlands.com for brief weekly news, monthly Zoom calls or a long-form quarterly newsletter.