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**WHEN
MAHIMA NAMBIAR
SLAPPED
DINESH**

**MATCH
FINDING**

EVEN IN THESE
TIMES OF TINDER,
MR RIGHT COULD
BE SPOTTED AT A
CHILD'S BIRTHDAY

**RAPE
FEAR**
HOW TO RAISE
SONS AS
FEMINISTS





GETTING CLOSE TO GORILLAS

Visiting Volcanoes National Park in the East African nation of Rwanda, **Sandy and Vyjay** had a close encounter with a huge silverback





He looked majestic and huge. He gave us a disinterested look and turned sideways. The silvery hair on his back shimmered as a few rays of sunlight pierced the green foliage and fell on him.

It was then that he gave us a look that said in no uncertain terms, "mind your business," as he swiveled on his feet and beat his chest with both hands. A war cry usually the stuff of Tarzan movies and comics emanated from his mouth indicating his show of supremacy. In a few moments he calmed down and sat

facing us with a wary expression on his stoic face. He was a huge silverback. Silverbacks are adult male Gorillas.

We were right in the midst of a Gorilla family at the Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda, East Africa. Incidentally, the DNA of humans and Gorillas are similar and match as much as about 98 percent.

The Mountain Gorillas are a critically endangered species and today less than a thousand of them tread the earth. However thanks to the conservation efforts of the authorities the population of the Mountain Gorillas has more than doubled since 1981 when the population

was below 300. These Mountain Gorillas inhabit the Virunga volcanic mountains of Africa and are spread over the National Parks of three countries, Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The Gorilla trek at the Volcanoes National Park was the grand finale of our Rwandan odyssey and we all looked forward to this experience with bated breath. One needs to be up early to catch the Gorillas as they tend to have an early breakfast and then start moving deeper into the jungles.

Early Morning found us at the main

reception center of the Volcanoes National Park after a short drive which took us through some picture perfect countryside where emerald green fields

stretched on either side of the road and the peaks of the volcanic Virunga Mountains loomed in the background. There was a carnival like atmosphere at the reception centre with a group of Rwandan drummers and dancers giving a vibrant demonstration of the rhythmic, traditional Rwandan dance that seemed to seamlessly merge with the natural surroundings and strike a harmonious symphony with nature.

We were divided into groups based on fitness levels and the level of difficulty of corresponding trails and each group assigned a guide. Each group was to trek to meet a specifically assigned Gorilla family. As there are 10 Gorilla families accessible to tourists, a maximum of 80 persons can have the unique experience of meeting the Gorillas on any given day. We were among the chosen ones that day.

Our guide gave us an introduction and background of the Gorilla family that our group was going to meet. The name of the family was Ntambara and he informed us that the family consisted of 12 members and included two silverbacks or adult males with the characteristic silver hair on their backs.

We were off, our hearts doing a jolly beat as we piled up into a jeep that took us over a dirt road that literally shook our entails and was indeed a precursor of the forthcoming events. We soon arrived at the last pit stop which was the parking place where our jeep deposited us. Our trek began from this place.

WE SOON REACHED THE BORDER OF THE FOREST AND CLIMBED A ROCK WALL THAT BORDERED THE FOREST AND HAD TO CLAMBER DOWN ANOTHER SIMILAR LADDER ON THE OTHER SIDE. AN AK-47 ARMED RANGER WITH A SMILE THAT COULD KILL MET US

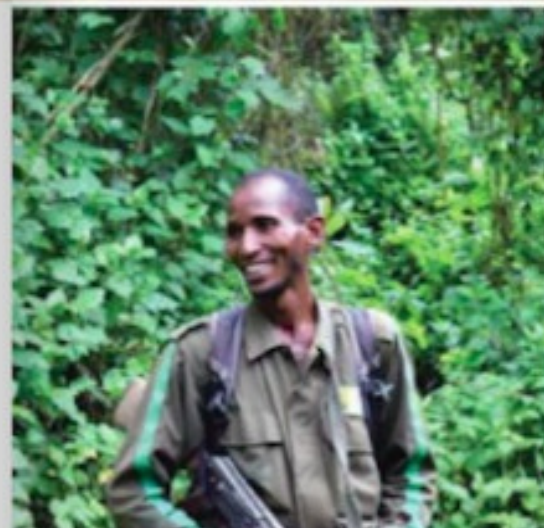
We got our walking sticks, the handles of which were aptly shaped into the form of cute Gorillas and we set off in right earnest.

We walked across fields that ran parallel to the forest and soon began our ascent which was gradual initially and became steeper as we progressed. We climbed hills, clinging on to roots of creepers and rocks, gingerly stepping over loose rocks, looking for a firm footing. Our city bred muscles and sinews creaked and strained, our breath came in hurried bursts, the sweat flowed freely from our brows.

It was tiring, but our spirits ran high and we plodded on. We soon reached the border of the forest and climbed a rock wall that bordered the forest and had to clamber down another similar ladder on the other side. An AK-47 armed ranger with a smile that could kill met us, he would be our escort now as we trekked deeper into the jungle.

As we entered the forest, the lay of the land suddenly changed, almost impregnable walls of green vegetation loomed in front of us. Rangers using machetes cleared narrow paths that took us deeper and deeper into the forest. Our feet wrestled with challenge after challenge, sometimes sinking into black slush, sometimes getting entangled in wild weeds and creepers. But we pushed, our excitement growing by the minute and building into a crescendo. The sight of Gorilla poop soon confirmed the presence of the Gorilla family in the vicinity. Now we walked in silence, in single file, wary of every sound and every movement in the jungle.

And soon we heard them. The sounds of the Gorilla fighting or that is what we thought broke the silence of the forest with a deafening intensity. We froze in our tracks, but our guide



reassuringly asked us to keep moving, which we did obediently.

And then we had our first Gorilla sighting. A huge Gorilla sat motionlessly less than a few feet away framed by the green foliage.

As I trained my camera to take some good shots of the Gorilla to freeze these unbelievable moments for posterity, I felt someone brush past me. I thought it was someone from our group, but froze in my tracks when I realized it was another Gorilla!

The Gorillas are giants but gentle ones at that and will not physically assault humans without provocation. Gorillas also are vegetarians which seemed like a huge relief.

We spent an hour in the midst of the Ntambara Gorilla family as they went about their daily chores without caring for the group of human intruders. In one corner an adolescent Gorilla was swinging from a tree and enjoying himself. In another part of the clearing the beautiful sight of a mother Gorilla nursing a two-month-old Gorilla baby met our eyes. The baby looked at us with curiosity, innocence rife in its eyes as the mother protectively shielded it from prying eyes. Another adolescent Gorilla was trying to distract the mother and grab her attention in a show of sibling rivalry which looked so close to human behaviour.

We spent an hour watching silently, the antics of the Gorillas, watching a slice of their everyday life. The experience was strangely blissful and humbling at the same time. The calm, grace and peace that these giant Gorillas displayed seemed like a lesson to Man. We also felt sad that somehow we were infringing on the privacy of the Ntambara family.

A strange sadness could be seen in the eyes of Gorillas, especially in that of the silverback. The eyes continue to haunt to this day. Was the sadness a plea to mankind to save the species of the endangered mountain Gorillas? Was it sadness at the degradation of the environment that Man has resorted to?

We walked away from the Gorillas with hearts heavy and minds introspecting, the Gorilla trek in the Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda had been a unique and life changing experience in many ways.





- Rwanda is located just south of the Equator and is a landlocked East African country
- Kigali is the capital of Rwanda and Rwandair has direct flights to Kigali from Mumbai
- Rwanda is one of the few countries that has totally banned the use of plastic bags
- Rwanda has a rich biodiversity with landscapes ranging from savannahs, montane forests, rainforests as well as lakes, rivers, and mountains
- Rwanda has earned global recognition and awards for its efforts in protecting wildlife, environment, and promoting sustainable tourism
- The Gorilla permit for the Volcanoes National Park costs US \$1500 **!**

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