

Rendezvous with the Remarkable Gorillas in Remarkable Rwanda

Rwanda, a small country which lies just 2 degrees south of the equator is sure to surprise you, stun you with its beauty and ultimately transform you into a poet, writer or painter. It truly lives up to its taglines of, 'Remarkable Rwanda' and the, 'land of a thousand hills and a million smiles.' The 7 days that we spent in Rwanda, we lost all sense of time, such was the magnetic power of the place that I truly believed what a Rwandan saying states, 'God scans the world but comes to rest in Rwanda.'

As soon as we set our feet on the magical soil of Rwanda, we were all smitten by the arctic beauty of the land and the warm and loving hearts of the people. The experiences we had in Rwanda were all unique and touched the very core of our beings with their intensity. The experiences ranged from the devastatingly emotional experience at the Kigali Genocide Memorial to the adrenaline pumping experience of seeing wildlife up close at the Akagera National Park. One minute we were staring in awe at the panoramic views of the tea gardens stretched out in the valleys in front of us as we travelled towards Lake Kivu and at the other moment we were sweating it out in the intriguing uniqueness of the country.

If Rwanda is paradise, then undoubtedly the 'piece de resistance' of this paradise has to be the thrilling trek in search of Gorillas at the Volcanoes National Park.



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.

The D-day dawned, rather we were up before it was dawn as it was necessary to reach the Volcanoes National Park early in the morning. One needs to be there before 7 AM, so that you can set off on the track of the Gorillas while they are at breakfast and before they move deeper into the jungle.

We arrived at the main reception center of the Volcanoes National Park after a short drive which took us through some picture post card 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 center 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. The performance served to further buoy our already soaring spirits and we were ready to go to keep our rendezvous with the Gorillas.

We were divided into groups based on fitness levels and the level of difficulty of corresponding trek and each group assigned a guide. Each group was to trek to meet a specifically assigned Gorilla family. As

these 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 and our joy knew no bounds.

The experience was kicked off with our guide giving us an introduction and background of the Gorilla family that our group was going to meet. The name of the family was Nambara 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. The guide also gave us all the do's and don'ts to be followed on the trek.

We were off, our hearts doing a jolly trot as we piled up into a jeep that took us over a dirt road that literally shook our entrails 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 got our walking sticks, the handles of which were aptly shaped into the form of cute Gorillas and we set off in right earnest, following our guide like school kids, obediently following their teacher. We crossed a small village where the local kids came to wave us on giving us some of those million smiles for which Rwanda is renowned. 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 cracked and strained, our breath came in hurried bursts, the sweat flowed freely from our brows. It was tiring, but the spirits were high and we plodded on. We soon reached the top of one of the smaller hills and turned to look below, the view that stretched out below us was spectacular and marveled at the height that we had surmounted. Even as we were rejoicing at our triumph, the guide informed us that we were still only at the border of the forest and would be entering it now. We climbed a small ladder to climb a rock wall that bordered the forest and had to clamber down another similar ladder on the other side. An AK47 armed soldier 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 impenetrable 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 flanked by the green foliage. He seemed to barely notice us, as he was intent on having his breakfast,



Sandy & Vyjay

✎ Sandy & Vyjay are a travel/lifestyle blogging couple and traveling has been their passion and they love exploring together the world cultures, seas, mountains, nature, food, art, history and urban places. They both set up 'Voyager' blog as a place to share their stories and experiences of their amazing travel journeys and aim to inspire other travel lovers to see what this amazing world has to offer through their stories, videos, and photos.



Follow Sandy & Vyjay's journey on their blog and social platforms:

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which, thankfully was vegetarian! As I trained my camera to take some good shots of the Gorilla to lesser these unbelievable moments for posterity, another Gorilla brushed past me. We all froze, but the Gorilla went his way, not even slightly bothered by our presence.

Just a few meters away within point blank range sat a huge silverback, his eyes on us. He suddenly stood on his two legs, swished and beat his chest, letting out a cry of supremacy, a signal to us indicating that we were in his territory and better behave. That moment will remain etched in our minds for posterity. It is not every day that you can see a silverback do that, barely a few feet from where you are standing!

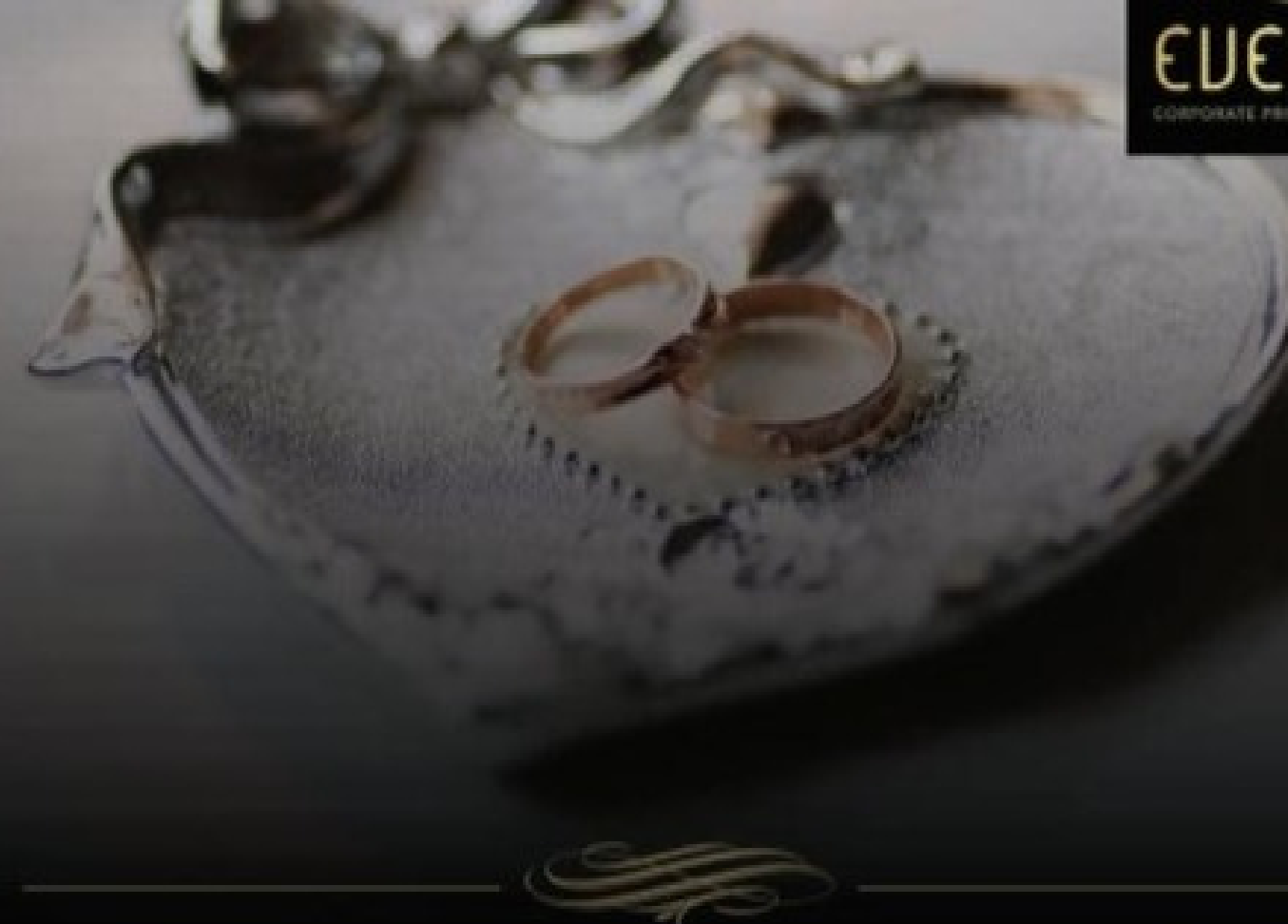
Our eyes then turned towards a female Gorilla nursing a two-month old Gorilla baby. The love and protection that she showered on the baby was something that would bring tears in the eyes of the most hard-hearted person on earth.

We spent an hour watching silently, the antics of the Gorilla, 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 Numbasa family. The other thing that haunted us and still haunts is the look of sorrow that we saw in the eyes of the Gorilla. We bade the Gorilla farewell and headed back to civilization, our hearts written by the haunting eyes of the Gorilla.

The Gorilla trek in the Volcanoes National Park was an experience that exceeded our expectations a manifold time. It was in many sense a very unique experience and something that we were not likely to experience again in our lifetime, unless, we returned to the paradise called Rwanda and went Gorilla trekking again. Something that all of us would love to do!

The land of a thousand hills and a million smiles beckons and one wants to return there again and again!



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