



WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS: SHANE QUINNELL

Protecting our predecessors

South African adventure couple Shane and Tarryn Quinnell – Team Tane – is on an expedition across Africa to encourage environmental and cultural awareness. In this photo-essay, they share their encounters with gorillas in Uganda



▲ **BRIDGING THE GAP**

Author AD Williams said: “When I look into the eyes of an animal I do not see an animal, I see a living being. I see a friend. I feel a soul.” This quote is never truer than when looking into the eyes of a mountain gorilla. Man’s closest relatives after chimpanzees and bonobos, gorillas are a link between us and the animal kingdom. Looking into their eyes is a profound experience, which proved to me that all creatures on earth are connected.



▲ **THE REMAINING DOMAIN**

Mountain gorillas are rare, incredible creatures that have adapted to the high-altitude, often cold rainforests. Once threatened and still extremely vulnerable, there are only 880 left in the world – all in East Africa. This photo of Shane on Mount Sabyinyo in Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, Uganda, shows some of the primates’ territory outside Bwindi. On the right of the peaks is Rwanda’s Volcanoes National Park and on the left is Mgahinga Gorilla National Park.

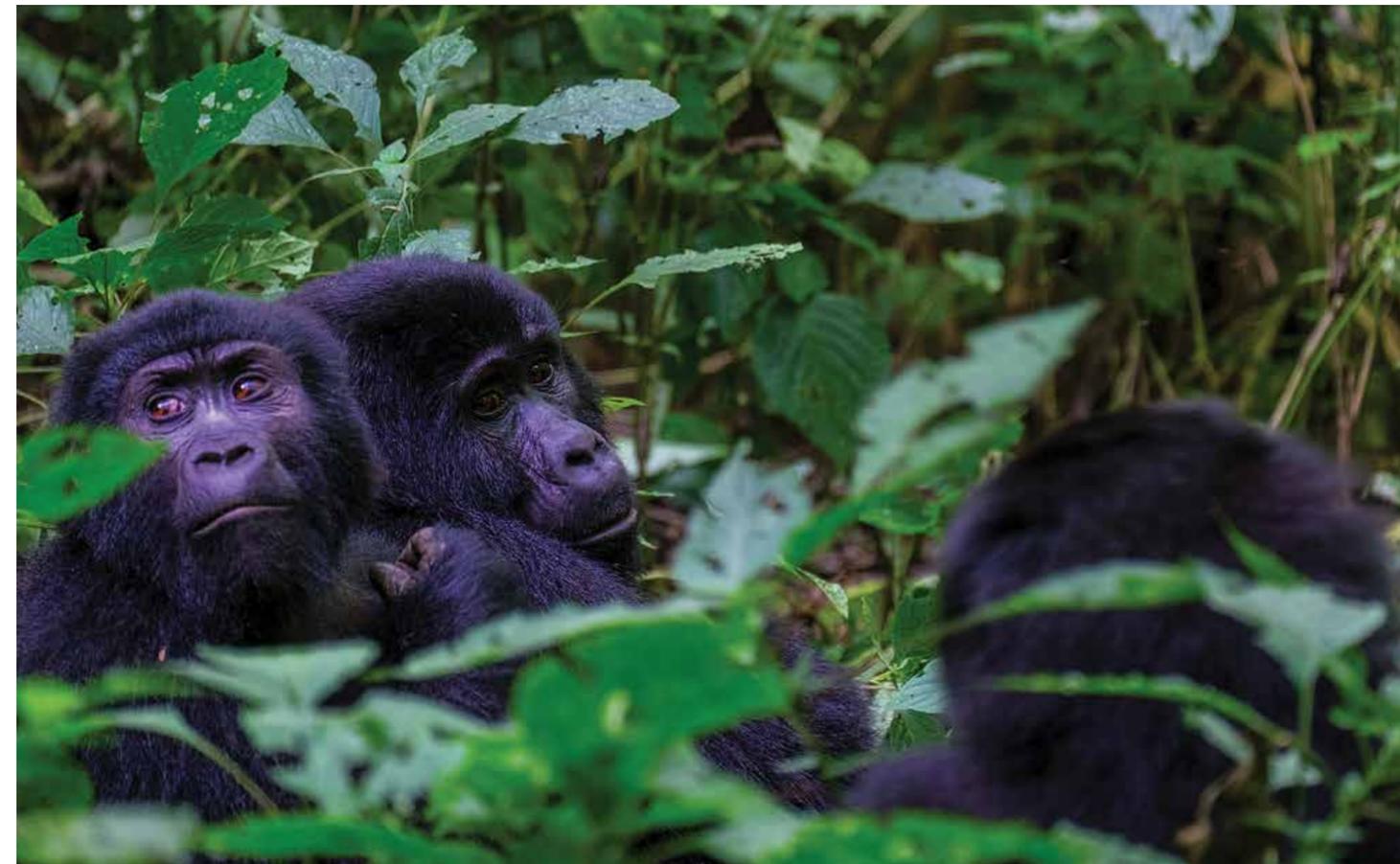


▲ **FAMILY TIES**

A typical troop of gorillas comprises 10-20 members: the dominant silverback, several females and their offspring. There were 12 gorillas in the Mukiza family we saw, including a number of hyperactive, super-cute youngsters. The habituated family ignored us completely as we watched them eating, sleeping and then eating some more.

▼ **PENETRATING THE FOREST**

Our gorilla experience took place in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda. As its name suggests, the park is a heavily vegetated tropical rainforest. Groups of eight, plus a guide, hike for between one and two hours through magnificent scenery to reach the gorillas’ territory. As the wonder on my wife Tarryn’s face suggests, the hike is an adventure in its own right.



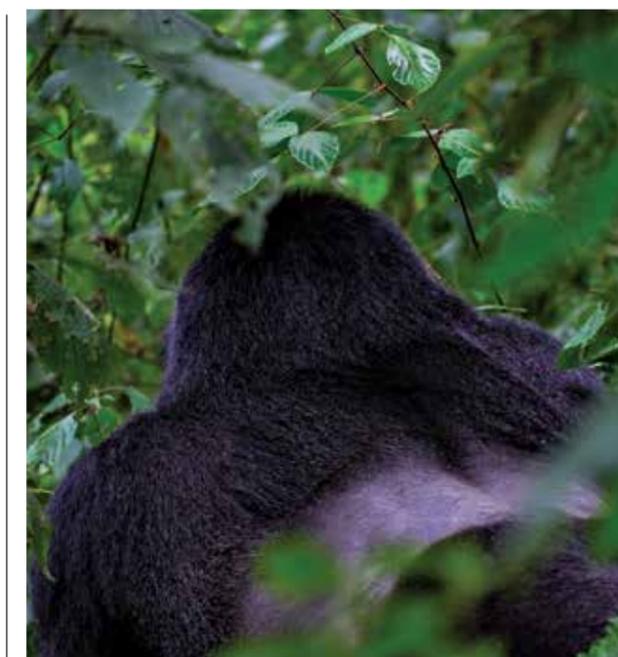
▲ **BOISTEROUS BABIES**

Gorillas can live to around the age of 40 and generally start reproducing at the age of 10. The average gestation period is about eight-and-a-half months, which is notably similar to that of humans.

These youngsters – as highly energetic as their human counterparts – romped around and played for the entire time we watched them.

▼ **THE MIGHTY VEGETARIAN DIET**

Anyone who thinks vegetarianism can’t lead to bulk needs to take a look at mountain gorillas, which are almost solely vegetarian. Silverbacks can reach around 200kg, according to the World Wildlife Foundation. As we saw, getting this big requires the gorillas to spend much of their day eating.



▲ **THE KING WITH THE SILVER BACK**

For many people, the term “silverback” has become synonymous with the entire species, but in reality only adult males develop this marking. At approximately 12 years of age, males develop a saddle-shaped patch of silver fur on their backs. There is usually only one silverback per troop and he is the patriarch and chief.



WHERE TO GO

Mountain gorillas can be seen in national parks in three African countries:

- Bwindi or Magahinga Gorilla National Parks, Uganda: 2017 pricing is US\$600 per person. The rainy season is from March-May and October-November. The best time to visit is December- late February and June-September. Friends of ours went off-season and rain did dampen the experience. Permits can be obtained at UWA offices in Kilembe or Kampala or through a number of tour companies and must be obtained before going to the parks. Ideally contact UWA before arriving in Uganda, via: <http://ugandawildlife.org/>
- Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda: Pricing here recently doubled to US\$1 500.
- Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): Pricing here is cheaper than elsewhere at US\$400 per excursion, excluding transport. Due to low confidence in the stability of the area there are apparently far fewer people on the DRC trips. The park is also allegedly less regulated, so visitors can get closer to the animals. Visit: <https://virunga.org/>

▲ IN NEED OF PROTECTION

Like many of the world's more exotic creatures, the fate of the noble mountain gorillas is teetering on a knife edge. According to the Ugandan Wildlife Association (UWA), there are many threats

affecting the gorillas' future. Resource scarcity and poverty mean that the boundaries of all national parks containing gorillas are constantly encroached upon for illegal hunting, deforestation for subsistence farming and poaching.



◀ THE GORILLAS' GUARDS

Unfortunately, as is commonly the case these days, force is required to ensure the gorillas' safety. Brave and passionate people like this UWA ranger, risk their lives to protect them. While the AK47 he holds is mostly used for scaring off aggressive animals, he told us that during his time with the UWA, there have been altercations with poachers.

People like him deserve our undying respect.

- *Through Team Tane, an organisation Shane and his wife Tarryn started, the South African adventure couple is trying to encourage environmental and cultural awareness. Their current expedition – Suzuki Africa Sky High – has seen them journeying through Africa in a Suzuki Jimny. Follow their trip at: www.teamtane.com and on Facebook: @TeamTane 🇷🇺*

PAID THE PRICE

The expensive entrance fees must be understood in the context of conservation within the African environment. With masses of underprivileged people to uplift, conservation often comes last. As a result, most money for organisations like the UWA is generated externally. The funds generated from Bwindi makes up 80-90% of Uganda's conservation income and, in turn, its budget.

Organisations like UWA do a great job of safeguarding Africa's natural wonders through activities like law enforcement, eco-tourism, community education, research and general care. The experience is incredible and well worth it and we paid it happily, considering it a donation toward African wildlife conservation.