



## Uganda and Rwanda Gorilla Tracking Guidelines

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### HOW GORILLA PERMITS ARE PURCHASED

#### BUHOMA SECTOR – NORTHERN BWINDI

There are three gorilla groups in Buhoma, Northern Bwindi, with a maximum of 8 visitors allowed to each per day. These are the Mubare Group (M), the Habinyanja Group (H) and the Bitukura Group (B). The permits are sold in advance, but only to Tour Operators who are members of the Association of Uganda Tour Operators. 30% of the permits are sold 2 years in advance, 50% one year in advance and 20% 6 months in advance. The Bitukura group has only just opened, so permits for this group are currently sold not more than a month before the tracking date.

In This part of the park, there are a number of lodge options: Sanctuary lodges Gorilla Forest Camp is our first choice, followed by Wild Frontiers Buhoma Lodge, Volcanoes Lodge and the newly opened Geo Lodges Silverback Lodge in Bwindi.

#### NKURINGO SECTOR – SOUTHERN BWINDI

There is 1 gorilla family in Nkuringo, in the south of Bwindi National Park, with a maximum of 8 visitors allowed per day. Visitors are based at the top-class Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge, in the south west of Uganda, and this is accessed by air (1 hour 40 minutes to Kisoro and then 1 hours drive to Clouds) or by road (a 2-day journey over 536km).

The point at which clients begin tracking is right next to the lodge. If clients are flying up, we can only use the larger and more powerful 4-passenger Cessna 210, even for couples, due to the high altitude and challenging weather conditions at Kisoro. This makes a flying package to track gorillas in Nkuringo more expensive than an equivalent one in Buhoma, Northern Bwindi.

Tracking is as difficult as it is in Buhoma, but the gorilla group of 19 members is worth it, with 1 silverback in the group.

The permits are sold up to 2 years in advance, but only to Tour Operators who are members of the Association of Uganda Tour Operators.

Permits are sold for a specific person for a specific day, and cost US\$500 each. To reserve a permit, a deposit is required. As a company, The Far Horizon invoices for the entire permit price at once to save on the very high bank fees that are charged in Uganda on incoming foreign currency payments. Once a permit is paid for, the following cancellation policy applies:

Cancellations received

more than 90 days before the tracking date 25% cancellation fee  
46 to 90 days before the tracking date 50% cancellation fee  
9 to 45 days before the tracking date 75% cancellation fee  
0 to 8 days before the tracking date 100% cancellation fee

Percentages are based on the full current permit price of US\$500 per permit.

Permits cannot be transferred to another date, and the permit price is forfeited if the permit that has not been cancelled is not used on a certain day.

## **RWANDA**

In Rwanda, permits are generally easier to obtain, but this looks set to change as demand increases and more and more tour operators join the industry. Here, there are 7 habituated groups, which translates into 56 tracking spaces per day.

Permits are not bought for specific groups in advance as is done in Uganda, but are allocated on the day depending on trackers fitness levels and the demand for permits. In Rwanda, we also buy and hold stocks of permits in advance.

Tracking in Rwanda takes place on slightly more gentle slopes and in more open bush than in Uganda. However, the altitude here is much greater, with gorilla tracking taking place from 2500 metres to 300 metres rather than 1600 to 2000 metres in Uganda.

In Rwanda, if you wish to cancel a permit, then 1 transfer is allowed to an alternative date on payment of a US\$100 transfer fee. This therefore means that we will charge you a US\$100 cancellation fee and then try and use the permit for on of our other agents.

Accommodation options for Rwanda gorilla tracking are Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge, Mountain Gorillas Nest, Volcanoes, and opening in 2009, the Serena and Sarova Lodges

## **FURTHER INFORMATION ON ALL TRACKING DESTINATIONS**

Sometimes tour operators are left with stocks of permit they have not been able to sell, and they then cancel these at the Parks HQ, or sell them to other tour operators at face value through a central clearing house. If they do not manage to do either of these before the tracking date, the permit is forfeited, and the tour operator loses their money.

The bigger tour operators (The Far Horizon Included) do tend to buy permits 2 years out. If a tour operator quotes you a safari, they will either use permits from their stock (assuming the dates fit and the permits are available), or go out and try to buy them on demand (assuming availability is there). Due to the high value of the permits, and their short supply, a standard disclaimer all tour operators issue is "permits cannot be guaranteed until a cash deposit is paid for them".

This normally means that the overseas agent has to pay the tour operator for the permits before the tour operator can reserve them. Once this happens, the permits are in the name of the local tour operator, but reserved for the overseas agent.

## **GORILLA TRACKING GUIDELINES**

Gorilla groups tend to move around a lot and their home ranges often overlap. For this reason, one group cannot be said to be easier to track than another.

For up to five years each, these groups have undergone an extremely delicate process that has gradually made them used to the presence of humans, and allowed a few privileged visitors to interact with them briefly in the wild.

The gorillas are by no means tame. They are completely wild animals, which even now tolerate human presence for an hour a day at most. Experienced guides will accompany you on your tracking, many of who have been involved in the habituation process themselves. These guides will brief you in detail on your arrival on the various aspects of 'gorilla etiquette', but the information contained in this set of guidelines is to help you arrive for your track well prepared and ready to enjoy this unique opportunity to the full.

Visitors may track for as many days as they like, on purchase of the required number of gorilla permits. The permits are in extremely short supply, and are often booked as much as 18 months in advance. Only persons over the age of 15 are allowed to track the gorillas.

Gorilla tracking is a year-round activity, with no season as such. The rain forest is moist, and it rains very often in Bwindi, even in the dry season. Tracking commences every morning from the park headquarters at 8:30 AM. There is a daily maximum of 8 visitors to each gorilla group, and each group is accompanied by a guide and by porters who will carry your shoulder pack for you. The gorillas cover large distances overnight, and they are never constantly in one area. The guides will use their knowledge of the gorillas' habits and information from the previous day to locate the group's whereabouts.

Because of this, the time taken to track the gorillas varies enormously, from as little as half an hour to as much as 9 hours before returning to camp. The terrain is extremely difficult, which steep slopes (often steeper than a flight of stairs) covered in dense vegetation that gives the park its name. In addition, the altitude means participants do need to be physically fit to enjoy the track.

Once the gorillas are located, your group will be allowed a maximum of one hour with them. After this, you will return to the park headquarters and your camp.

#### CLOTHING AND EQUIPMENT REQUIRED

##### **For the track:**

- A small, lightweight, frameless, waterproof back/day pack
- Light, waterproof hiking boots or shoes with treaded soles.
- Thick socks.
- High speed film – 400 ASA minimum, 800 ASA recommended (no flash photography allowed on the track)
- Leather or heavy canvas (gardening-style) gloves.
- Waterproof rain pants, a rain suit or poncho with hood.
- Short sleeved shirt or T-shirt. Long trousers should not be heavy, but should be the light-weight trekking variety
- Two sweatshirts/sweaters – not necessary on the track, as it gets very hot during tracking
- A waterproof, squash-able hat.
- A water bottle or canteen – Bottled water and a packed lunch is will be provided by your camp

##### **For the camp**

- Daytime casual. Evenings smart casual
- Long-sleeved shirts; long trousers.
- Short-sleeved shirts and shorts
- A down vest or pocketed safari jacket

- A travel alarm clock (for early-morning wake-up calls)
- Sweatshirts/sweaters

## ILLNESSES

Don't try to track the gorillas if you know you have an illness that is contagious. You may pass the disease on to the gorillas with disastrous results. If you suspect that you have such an illness, report it to our head office or to the guide at the park headquarters. There is a good chance that you will be refunded the cost of your gorilla permit. If you do not disclose your illness, and the guide detects it, you will be barred from tracking, and your permit price will definitely not be refunded. Illnesses in this case include colds, coughs, diarrhea and influenza.

## GENERAL GUIDELINES

Tracking conditions differ greatly according to the location of the gorillas, so the exact level of difficulty for a specific trek is impossible to define in advance. On an excursion, it is entirely possible that you will find the gorillas quite quickly and be back at your hotel for lunch. It is also entirely possible that you will have to hike three or four hours (or sometimes even longer) each way and will make it back to your hotel just before dark.

Because it is impossible to predict the length and difficulty of any single tracking excursion, this program should not be attempted by anyone who is not in very good physical condition. Because of the climbing and bending required as you make your way through the thick foliage, gorilla tracking should not be attempted by anyone who has any kind of heart or back problem. Only those who are absolutely 100% fit and are capable of walking long distances at high altitudes over slippery, muddy terrain should attempt gorilla tracking. Tracking is likely to involve scrambling through, over, and under dense undergrowth with nettles, barbed vines, and bamboo thickets. Correct footwear and clothing are essential. It is recommended that you build up the strength and endurance of your leg muscles by walking, stair climbing, bicycling, knee bends, and similar exercises before you leave home. This should always be done under the supervision of your doctor.

PLEASE NOTE: Travelers with physical disabilities and those who require frequent or ongoing medical attention should advise The Far Horizon of their health situation at the time of booking (or at the time such a situation occurs should this be after the reservation is made).

Each traveler is assigned his or her own porter for the duration of a tracking excursion. Porters are completely optional, and the cost of porters are **NOT** included in your tour price. It is highly recommended that you take one, but you should remember that as they are drawn from the local community, and rely on tips for their income, you should be ready to tip them at the end of the gorilla tracking. An acceptable tip is US\$10 per porter or the equivalent in local currency (Uganda Shillings 20,000 or Rwandese Francs 5,000 at the time of writing) Please note that your porter can only carry one (1) bag, and any additional items you want to bring must be carried by you. Because of the potential difficulty of any trek, it is strongly suggested that you take only one (1) bag (to be carried by your porter).

As you set off from the starting point, the trackers will first lead you to the spot where the gorilla family was seen the previous day and look for clues as to the direction the group may have traveled since it was last observed. Your group's lead tracker will have his "own" gorilla family, which he visits each day and whose home range and travel routes are familiar to him. All trackers are experienced in looking for signs of the gorillas, such as footprints, dung, chewed bamboo and celery stalks, and abandoned nests from the previous evening. Gorillas soil their nests and then abandon them to build new ones each night, and trackers are able to tell the age of the nests as well as

which group made them. On days of heavy rain, it is more difficult to distinguish signs of the gorillas and the age of nests.

Gorillas do not live in the most easily accessible terrain, and some of it is virtually impenetrable. They prefer secondary growth vegetation with plenty of food plants near the ground and think nothing of climbing extremely steep slopes to get it. Unfortunately, this means that tracking gorillas can be difficult for humans. If the gorillas you are tracking have wandered deep into the forest, it is entirely possible that the trek to find them will take three or four hours (or sometimes even longer) in each direction. Additionally, you may have to overcome mud, stinging nettles, and some areas of elevated vines where your feet may not touch the ground. The trek can be difficult in both directions (out to the gorillas and back to the starting point).

Trackers generally do allow time to stop and rest along the trail. However, they tend to hike at a steady, somewhat upbeat pace throughout the excursion, for they must be mindful of the time to ensure that you will be able to reach the gorillas, spend a full hour with them, and make it back down the trail before dark. If you occasionally lag behind the group to take photos or are having difficulty negotiating a steep or slippery portion of the trail, your porter will stay with you to assist; but the group will most likely continue forward.

You will probably smell the gorillas before you actually see them. When you reach them, the tracker will move forward, making soft smacking and groaning sounds with his mouth to assure the group that friends are approaching. Although gorillas make very few vocalizations, this sound of reassurance is one that family members often use with each other.

If your trek to find the gorillas has not been unusually long, you are likely to visit them during their long midday rest and play period. At this time of day, the dominant male (usually a silverback) generally lounges on the ground or against a tree while youngsters roll in the vegetation and climb on trees, vines, and each other. Females nurse and play with their infants. Occasionally, a curious youngster may approach you or someone in your group. Though it is tempting to touch, this is **STRICTLY** forbidden.

Your tracking group will be instructed to stay together and crouch down while observing the gorillas so that the dominant male can see you at all times and the family does not feel threatened, surrounded, or overwhelmed. Never stare directly into the eyes of a gorilla, for a fixed stare is as aggressive to them as it is to most humans. Although you may find a gorilla looking directly at you, you should maintain a subservient stance and look at it sideways or from a lower height.

Sometimes, as a release of tension or as a display to the rest of the group, a male gorilla may charge and beat his chest, tearing up vegetation and hurling his tremendous frame directly at your tracking group. Despite the temptation to run, you must stand your ground, maintain a subordinate, crouching position, and do your best not to flinch -- for the gorilla will stop before actually reaching you and calmly return to his previous location, glancing back at you with smug satisfaction. Such displays may turn savage when used between males of different gorilla families but are simply a bluff when used with human observers on tracking excursions to habituated gorilla groups.

Your tracking group will spend up to one (1) hour with the gorillas on each tracking excursion. This time limit is carefully observed and protects the gorillas from undue stress. If your group were to stay longer than this, the gorillas would probably end the visit themselves -- by simply leaving. Although they are getting used to being visited regularly and are curious about their human visitors, they are accustomed to one-hour visits; and their intensely shy and private nature will reassert itself in the end.

In the event a gorilla tracking participant is unable to complete a tracking excursion to the gorillas, he or she will either be allowed to immediately return to the base of the trail with a porter OR the participant will be asked to remain in place with a porter while the group continues its track of the gorillas, rejoining the rest of the group on its way back to the base of the trail.

Please keep in mind that gorillas are shy, wild animals. In addition, tracking in Uganda is a relatively new operation; and the gorilla families here have only recently been habituated to human visitors. At the start of the tracking day, there is no way of telling exactly where the habituated gorilla families are (even though trackers are very skilled at looking for signs of gorillas and their paths of travel). **With newly-habituated gorilla families there is a greater chance that even experienced trackers will not be able to locate them on a particular tracking day.** Also, because gorillas are wandering animals that favor areas of dense vegetation, **consistent, clear viewing at close range cannot be guaranteed.**

#### REGULATIONS AND RULES OF CONDUCT

It is important that all gorilla tracking participants familiarize themselves with the following regulations and rules of conduct:

- **You MUST, at all times, follow the instructions of your guide.** He is in contact with the gorillas every day and understands them well. Always remain in a quiet, compact group behind the guide, who will attempt to position you in such a way that the dominant male of the group can see you at all times.
- If the dominant male gorilla (usually a silverback) approaches very closely, or if he charges, it is very important that you do not move backwards. Remain exactly where you are, look downward, and adopt a submissive, crouched posture. **NEVER make any sudden moves or loud noises in the presence of the gorillas.**
- **If a young gorilla approaches, NEVER (under ANY circumstances) make any move to touch it.** Your guide, in certain instances, may take steps to discourage a youngster from touching you, as this could create a threatening situation with the dominant male.
- **If a gorilla stares at you, look away or down.**
- Avoid taking an excessive number of photographs, and **NEVER use a flash when photographing the gorillas.**
- **Only visitors in good health AT THE TIME OF THE EXCURSION will be permitted to track gorillas,** as gorillas are susceptible to colds and other respiratory diseases transmitted by humans. All visitors must be physically fit and capable of enduring a walk of several hours in difficult terrain (as previously described).
- **Each gorilla family may be visited only once each day,** during the morning hours.
- **At this time, all gorilla visits are limited to a maximum of eight (8) persons per gorilla family for a maximum length of one (1) hour.** Due to the already-limited number of persons allowed to visit the gorillas each day, **it is not possible to do gorilla tracking on a private basis.**

- **Smoking, eating, and/or drinking is not permitted within 200 meters of a gorilla family.**
- **It is prohibited to destroy any vegetation unnecessarily and to make open fires in the national parks and reserves.** The flora and fauna of national parks and reserves are strictly protected. **All visitors must carry their own litter with them out of the park or reserve, leaving NOTHING behind.**
- **Children under the age of fifteen (15) cannot be accepted on gorilla tracking excursions.**

As mentioned previously, travelers should be in excellent physical condition and be physically and mentally prepared to walk long distances over rough terrain if that is where the search for gorillas takes them.

You must also understand that The Far Horizon does not control the administration or play any part in the operation of Uganda's or Rwanda's national parks or reserves. These areas are the total responsibility of local authorities. If our local staff observes situations that merit improvement, they will request that local authorities make changes; but these authorities are under no obligation to do so. While The Far Horizon has cultivated an excellent relationship with local authorities and they are usually eager to help us look after our clients, it is they who operate the actual gorilla tracking excursions not The Far Horizon. It should also be noted that The Far Horizon does not employ any of the local guides, gorilla trackers, or porters and, therefore, cannot accept responsibility for the manner in which they operate. Travelers should keep in mind that the trackers are local, native-born people who have spent a lot of time in the forest with the gorilla families and that they probably have very good reasons to do things a certain way.