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Gorilla Watching Etiquette

Spending time with these extraordinary creatures requires that you respect some basic rules designed to minimise the risk your visit poses to the gorillas, and for your safety:

Gorillas are very susceptible to human illnesses. If you are feeling unwell or carrying a contagious disease, volunteer to stay behind. An alternate visit will be arranged for you or your money will be refunded. If you are found to be unwell during the trek, your guide has the right to refuse permission for you to visit the gorillas and your money will not be refunded.

Always wash your hands before heading out to the gorillas.

Stay in a tight group when you are near them. Keep your voices down at all times (but it's alright to ask the guide whispered questions). After the visit remain quiet until you are 200m away from the gorillas.

Do not eat or drink near them. Crumbs or drips increase the risk of disease transmission.

Do not leave any rubbish: foreign materials can harbour diseases and contaminants. Whatever you bring into the forest should be carried back out with you.

If you need to cough or sneeze near the gorillas, turn your head away and cover your face in order to minimise the spread of germs. Never spit in the forest.

Keep a minimum of seven metres from the gorillas and never try to touch them. This is to protect them from human diseases and for your safety.

They are wild animals and can sometimes charge. If this happens, crouch down slowly, do not look the gorillas directly in the eyes and wait for them to pass. Don't try to take pictures and don't run away. Running away will increase the danger.

Flash photography is forbidden. When taking pictures move slowly and carefully. Point-and-shoot cameras are inadvisable as picture quality will be poor in these conditions and the flash may go off inadvertently.

The maximum time you can spend with the gorillas is one hour. However, if they become agitated or nervous, the guide will finish the visit early. Only eight people per day may visit each group of gorillas (or six if the gorilla group is small). The minimum age for participants is 15.

It is worth knowing the following:

In Rwanda, the \$250 fee for gorilla-watching is payable in cash at the Rwandan National Parks Office (ORPTN) in Kigali.

A gorilla visit can entail anything from a thirty-minute to a six-hour trek (sometimes steep and muddy) through a forest of overhanging vines, moss-covered Hagenia trees and giant Lobelias.

Groups are led by experienced trackers who speak both French and English. A contingent of RPA soldiers will provide security during the trek. Other wildlife may be spotted en route, including Golden monkeys, Forest buffalo, duiker and assorted birdlife.

The altitude may cause difficulties for some visitors, so pace yourself, drink plenty of water, make sure you eat well the day before your trip and have a substantial breakfast. Guides have been known to carry exhausted or even hurt (twisted ankle or knee problems) visitors back to the park entrance.

Any visit is unpredictable, so a lot of patience is required. The gorillas don't necessarily stay in one place - you may find yourself hiking further than expected if the group you're visiting is active. But it's worth the effort for the privilege of watching them in their daily routine: feeding, playing and resting. This is what kept Dian Fossey living in the forest for almost 18 years.

If you find yourself hiking further and longer than expected, ask the guides to start leaving the park by at least 3:00pm to ensure that you are out by dark.

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