



Uganda – the pearl of Africa



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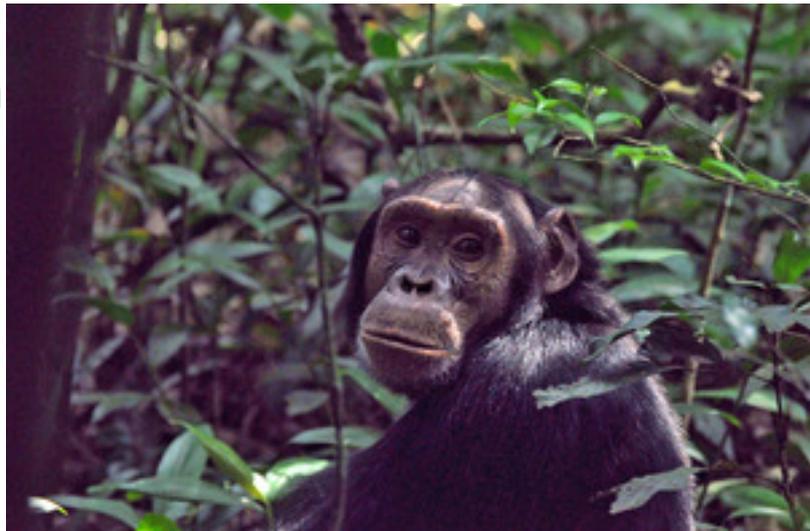
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Professor Ian J Deary talking about life expectancy in our recent report analysing the travel and holiday habits of the over 50s tells us “Stay curious; stay fit; stay engaged; look behind you”. Well in a recent trip to Uganda I can safely say I ticked all those boxes whilst gorilla tracking through the Bwindi Impenetrable National Forest. As for looking behind me, it's probably wise that I didn't, here I am being photo bombed by one of my



distant ape cousins! However, don't be fooled by the Hollywood image of gorillas (as depicted by King Kong, *Kong: Skull Island* a reboot of the classic is currently showing in cinemas) they truly are gentle giants. Mountain gorillas spend half of their day eating and a third of their day resting - a true life of leisure. Meanwhile, a recent survey revealed that tracking gorillas in the wild is amongst travellers top 3 bucket list experiences and it's not difficult to see why.

I was with a group, gorilla tracking in Uganda. Not as simple as it sounds but involving an extremely challenging three hour trek in the Ruhija district of Bwindi Impenetrable National Forest. We were told we would be tracking the Oruzogo group, a family of 17 habituated gorillas. Little did we know that upon arrival this group of 17 gorillas would soon turn into 18. Excitingly this endangered species is currently enjoying an amazing baby boom, with numbers now approaching 900. That's a great conservation success and tourism has played a surprisingly important role, causing Rough Guides to declare Uganda as Africa's No.1 destination in 2017.

My trek to see the gorillas was from the Ruhija district of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park but it is much easier and more popular to visit them from Buhoma, a small village at the entrance to the park and where most of the lodges are based. I can recommend a stay at Volcanoes Bwindi Safari Lodge where it's been known for the gorillas to sometimes cross the river and explore the lodge's garden! Along with Mahogany Springs. From Buhoma a trek of no more than an hour can normally guarantee a sighting, whilst you'll be helped along the way by a local porter to carry any bags, cameras if necessary and push and pull you through the forest. Trackers will have left earlier to locate where the gorillas are and are constantly in touch with your guides.

Chimp trekking offers a different kind of reward. Uganda's Kibale Forest National Park has the greatest variety and concentration of primates found anywhere in Africa. There are almost 1500 chimpanzees and with a community of 120 habituated chimps you can spend an adrenaline fuelled hour with our closest relatives. They are highly mobile and active as they move around in their social groups, so keeping up with them



is no mean feat. You hear the chimps before you see them, their distinctive cries can be heard throughout the forest. Chimpanzee trekking in Kibale began in 1991 when the first family of chimpanzees had been successfully habituated to the presence of humans. Back then the chances of a sighting were less than 20% but it is now over 90% and another huge tick on any adventurers list. This really is the sort of once in a lifetime trip for the active over 50s. It's not cheap, permits alone for both gorilla tracking and chimp trekking cost several hundred pounds but money very well spent.

Uganda is well known as the 'Pearl of Africa' and has 10 national parks. These include Bwindi Impenetrable National Forest, home to the mountain gorilla; Queen Elizabeth National Park, rich in game and home to the tree climbing lion, the lions of Ishasha shelter from the fierce rift valley sun on the boughs of ancient fig trees; Murchison Falls National Park where the mighty Nile squeezes through a narrow gorge before it falls over 140ft; Kidepo Valley National Park and Jinja, the adventure capital of Uganda and the source of the River Nile.

The 45m Murchison Falls are impressive to see from both top and bottom with the latter coming at the end of a boat safari along the game and bird filled banks of the River Nile. However, it was the connection with The African Queen, partly filmed by the falls and in this section of the Nile that most got my interest. Who hasn't loved or seen the film of the gin-swilling riverboat captain (Humphrey Bogart) and the strait-laced missionary (Katherine Hepburn) and been inspired to reenact the

turbulent journey or at the very least see where it was filmed. Also of interest, the river trip points out where the ultimate silver traveller Ernest Hemingway survived a horrific plane crash in 1954. Hemingway, his wife, and pilot spent the night huddled on the riverbank below Murchison Falls before being rescued by a passing boat.



From bungee jumping to quad biking, from horse riding to speed boat trips, the centre of many of Uganda's adventure activities is in and around Jinja and it was

here that 4 extremely intrepid grandmothers recently filmed for the Sky One ratings winner '50 ways to kill your Mummies' The super grans prove that you are never too old for an adventure. Ann, 77, and Joy, 73, both from London and Roz, 65, from Singapore, joined Irish daredevil Nancy Ashmawy, 74 to battle the white waters of the Nile rapids. Nancy who is a grandmother of 7 said it was good to face your fears and hoped that their exploits would inspire others.

Somewhat calmer, Uganda is also arguably Africa's richest birding destination with an impressive 1063 species identified. Bird watching was recently voted the 8th most popular pastime in a survey for the over 50s and mega ticks (the fraternity's name for prized sightings) include Shoebill Storks, Rwenzori and Great Blue Turacos, African Finfoots and African Green Broadbill amongst many, many more.

I still have many more bucket list dream experiences to do but recreating my own David Attenborough moment, taking the ultimate selfie, posing with a silverback was one very special one ticked off. Experiencing an unfathomable connection during a magical hour in the company of mountain gorillas was the ultimate privilege, a rare treat and one, once in a lifetime experience that I can highly recommend.

Petra travelled with [The Explorations Company](#).