“What took you so long?”

If I were given to anthropomorphism I could well have imagined the silverback asking me this question as he stared me down from hardly three feet away after an impressive chest-beating entrance from the thick greenery of the Rwandan rainforest.

The rule is, no one gets closer to the gorillas than fifteen feet but a silverback does what he wants to do. After all he is the 400 pound gorilla in our midst. (The so called “800 pound gorilla in the room” does not exist but, trust me, 400 pounds is enough to make one cower).

So, if he really asked the question, what would my answer have been?

Why did it take me so many years to get to the mountain gorillas in the Virungas? After all, I have probably seen everything there is to be seen in Africa’s animal kingdom over many years as an incurable safari addict, averaging two to three trips a year.

I had my plans almost set to journey to Rwanda’s Volcanoes National Park in the nineties when violence erupted resulting in the slaughter of close to a million Tutsi and Hutu sympathizers. In March 1999, just when it seemed as if sanity had returned to the region, eight tourists on the Ugandan side of the Virungas were killed by a band of rebels armed with automatic rifles, machetes and spears. The killers were said to be remnants of the very same ethnic Hutu militias that carried out mass killings in Rwanda in 1994.

So gorilla trekking remained on my back burner for some time until a year ago when a fellow safari addict insisted that I do myself the favor and visit with the gorillas, who, he pointed out, were now, mercifully, freed from the other guerillas.

“Nothing that you have seen so far,” he claimed, “compares with a visit to the mountain gorillas in their natural habitat. You simply have to go. I guarantee you. This is a life-changing experience.”
“I have been with the chimpanzees at Mahale Mountains several times,” I protested. “How different can gorillas be?”

“Just go and see for yourself.”

Visiting with the gorillas in either Rwanda or Uganda requires planning well in advance. Permits are in great demand, especially during the dry months from July to September. Only eight visitors are allowed per day per habituated family group for one hour.

Through Volcanoes Safaris that operates several upscale lodges I booked a “consultation” with the gorillas in Rwanda—$750 for an hour. If this fee seems steep, keep in mind that a lawyer may charge you more for a much less enjoyable experience. Above all, this money goes for a good cause: The protection of a very endangered species.

Formed in 1991 to promote the conservation of the mountain gorillas, The International Gorilla Conservation Program (IGCP) is a coalition of several well-respected non-profits, including the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Permit payments and donations go towards funding 24/7 patrolling to prevent poaching as well as assistance to subsistence farmers along the slopes of the Virungas to discourage them from expanding into the rainforest region.

Without the likes of Akeley, Schaller, Fossey and a few other lesser known researchers and activists, there would have been no need for an IGCP to protect the mountain gorillas. They might well have followed the Dodo bird or the Passenger Pigeon into oblivion, leaving us with a few museum mummies.

The first sighting of a mountain gorilla by a European was documented by Captain Friedrich Robert von Beringe in October 1902 after he scaled the slopes of Sabinyo with an entourage of soldiers and porters—a machine gun.

He shot what he described as “a big, human-like male monkey of one and a half meters in height and a weight of more than 200 pounds.” On the journey back, part of the skin and one of the hands of the animal that von Beringe collected were taken by a hyena but the rest finally arrived safely at the museum in Berlin. It was later identified by the curator as a new subspecies of gorilla and named _Gorilla Beringe Beringe_ after the captain.

The so-called lowland gorilla (_Gorilla gorilla gorilla_) had been sighted and shot in West Africa and shipped to the United Kingdom by explorer Paul du Chaillu as early as 1861. Today these lowland dwellers number an estimated 100,000 (as opposed to only 800 mountain gorillas) and seem to be thriving despite ongoing poaching for their meat and export of infants to zoos.
MEANINGFUL PERSONS ALONG THE MOUNTAIN GORILLA TRAIL

Top row from left to right: Captain Robert von Beringe; Carl Akeley’s sculpture of a mountain gorilla; Carl Akeley

Above, George Schaller today and, right, in the Virungas during the fifties. Left, Dian Fossey shortly before her death and below left with her beloved gorillas. Below right, Sigourney Weaver as Fossey in the blockbuster movie, Gorillas in the Mist.
To date all efforts to transplant mountain gorillas to zoos have failed miserably. Infants die before they reach maturity. Lowland gorillas, however, seem to tolerate an existence behind bars and there have been cases where some have reached a ripe age of fifty.

In 1909, Carl Akeley accompanied President Theodore Roosevelt on a year-long expedition to Africa, funded by the Smithsonian Institution. A man of many qualifications, including taxidermist, sculptor, biologist, conservationist, inventor, and nature photographer, Akeley returned to Africa in 1921 to study the gorillas in the Virunga Mountains. After having shot five gorillas for the American Museum of Natural History, Akeley set aside his rifle and persuaded King Albert I of Belgium to establish the Albert National Park in 1925—since renamed Virunga National Park. Akeley died of fever in the Congo during his fifth expedition to Africa. He is buried in the Virungas on the Congo side, just miles from where he encountered his first gorilla. (He also left behind a magnificent sculpture of a mountain gorilla).

*Gorillas in the Midst*, a blockbuster movie based on the book by Dian Fossey served to bring the plight of the mountain gorilla to the attention of millions and resulted in governmental and private initiatives to save them from extinction. Ironically, Fossey was strongly opposed to the idea of exposing “her gorillas” to the general public when the International Gorilla Conservation Program (IGCP) came up with the visiting permit plan to raise funds. Fossey also found her final resting place in a grave at her camp on the slopes of the Virungas. She is presumed to having been hacked to death on 26 December 1985 by the same poachers responsible for the slaughter of several of her favorite gorilla friends.

In the late sixties when Fossey was assigned by Louis Leakey to live among and study the mountain gorillas—in the same fashion as Jane Goodall with the chimpanzees in Tanzania—she had at her disposal an extensive account by George Schaller. Today, still active from his home base in Connecticut, Schaller is recognized as the world’s pre-eminent field biologist, having studied wildlife throughout Africa, Asia and South America.

In 1959, when Schaller was only 26, he set up camp in the Virungas where he spent more than two years among the mountain gorillas. In two landmark publications—*The Mountain Gorilla: Ecology and Behavior* and *The Year of the Gorilla*—he conveyed to the general public just how profoundly intelligent and gentle gorillas really were—contrary to the common stereotype of aggressive and dangerous King Kongs.
Before I left for the Virungas in August 2014, I read both Schaller’s books, reread Fossey’s, and also consulted a slew of others on the topic. I was particularly struck by Schaller’s description of his first encounter with a gorilla family more than fifty years ago and kept it on hand to compare it with my own impressions after my upcoming visit:

“Accustomed to the drab gorillas in zoos,” Schaller wrote in *The Year of the Gorilla*, “with their pelage lusterless and scuffed by the cement floors of their cages, I was little prepared for the beauty of the beasts before me. Their hair was not merely black, but a shining blue-black, and their black faces shone as if polished.”

“We sat watching each other. The large male, more than the others, held my attention. He rose repeatedly on his short, bowed legs to his full height, about six feet, whipped his arms up to beat a rapid tattoo on his bare chest, and sat down again. He was the most magnificent animal I had ever seen.”

“He gave the impression of dignity and restrained power, of absolute certainty in his majestic appearance. I felt a desire to communicate with him, to let him know by some small gesture that I intended no harm, that I wished only to be near him. Never before had I had this feeling on meeting an animal.”

The Rwandan capital Kigali is the most convenient transit point to reach the Virunga Mountains. My flight was on Ethiopian Air via Addis Ababa but there are numerous alternatives via Europe, South Africa, the Middle East on major carriers ranging from KLM to Emirates, Lufthansa and British Airways. There are also charters and inter-African air services between safari destinations in East Africa and Kigali International Airport.

My accommodation was in a comfortable, upscale banda at Virunga Lodge, perched high on an escarpment between Lakes Ruhondo and Bulera. My journey was three hours by road with Moses, my driver/guide, who, I would discover over the next few days, spared no effort to be the best and might even have tried to part the Red Sea if I asked him to do so.

There is the option of going by helicopter from Kigali Airport to the lodge as well. However, given the interesting sights and sounds and interaction with people along the way, I believe everyone should at least go by road once.

Gorilla trekking starts with a wake-up call at 5 in the morning, followed by a hearty breakfast and a half hour drive to the staging area at park headquarters. Imagine the farmer’s market in your home town and you get the picture. Patrons are treated to coffee, snacks and an energetic performance by a local tribal dance ensemble while the guides sort out the groupings for the day—eight per gorilla family group.
Passports are required to confirm the identity and date of birth of each permit holder and normally efforts are made to group people of the same age and ability together. Despite rather ludicrous claims in some guide books that certain gorilla families are within easier reach than others, today’s “easy” group is tomorrow’s “difficult” group. Gorillas move up and down the slopes at free will.

I asked for the most interesting family and was assigned the Titus group headed by Turakola, son of the legendary King Titus. Star of several blockbuster TV productions, Titus ruled supreme for seventeen years in the Virungas. He was a favorite of Dian Fossey, David Attenborough and other celebrities. He was named Titus by Kelly Stewart (daughter of actor James Stewart) after Titus Groan, the book by Mervyn Peake, that she was reading when she saw him first as a newborn. Stewart was working for Fossey at the time.

Afterwards in discussions with other trekkers my own age I discovered that I was the only one paired with folks that could have been my grandchildren. It took us three hours to reach the Titus group while other less prominent family groups were hardly a half hour away. As the saying goes: Be careful what you ask for. Still, the experience was worth every step along the way.

Before the journey starts, you will be offered a walking stick and the opportunity to hire a porter. I took both and discovered that especially the services of the latter are indispensable for anyone over fifty. He not only carries your backpack with your camera equipment, water bottles and lunch but lends a helping hand on steep inclines and slippery patches.

The two armed guards are not optional. While there have been no instances of gorillas attacking visitors, the park authorities are taking into account the possibility of an encounter with the elusive buffalo and elephants in the area.

The first hour and a half the trail winds across farmland with crops varying from pyrethrum to potatoes. We also encountered a few young herders with cattle and sheep.

"See those sheep all tied up," our guide, Felicien, remarked, “There have been cases where the gorillas came down and untied them thinking that they were caught in poachers’ snares.”

Volcanoes National Park is separated from farmland by a simple stonewall but there is no doubt that you have entered gorilla-land when you climb
across. Suddenly you find yourself in thick jungle and
the machete comes out to chop through new growth
along the narrow path.

In now familiar fashion, we were assured that
the Titus group “is not far away.” However, it takes
us another hour and half before the long awaited
announcement came.

“We are very close now,” Felician announced as a
tracker emerged from the thicket, smiling reassuringly.

We are instructed to leave our backpacks and sticks
behind before we proceed. “The gorillas may look at
the sticks as spears,” Felicien explained. “They still
remember the days when the locals hunted and killed
adults to capture and ship off the infants to buyers in
Europe.”

Just to be sure he quickly went over the rules of
engagement once again: Talk softly. Don’t go closer
than fifteen feet from them. When they approach you,
stand still and when the silverback imposes himself be
submissive.

We will soon discover that the gorillas have not been
informed about these rules and have no fear of going
close to the *homo sapiens* in their midst.

I am armed with my video camera in hand while
David, my porter, carries my still camera.

We are now literally forcing our way through the
thicket into uncharted territory, following close in
the footsteps of the tracker hacking a path with his
machete. Suddenly there is a clearance and we spot a
partly hidden dark face about thirty feet away.

My first gorilla sighting!

No sooner had we come to a stop when we heard
chest thumping and saw the silverback crushing past
us and, seemingly out of nowhere in the undergrowth,
family members emerged.

There were several “charges” by the dominant
silverback, Turakola, once almost stepping on us and
staring us down from barely three feet. There were the
antics of a three-year-old imitating Turakola’s chest-
thumping and climbing in the trees. And the mother
nurturing and embracing her four month old infant.

I switched between my video and still camera,
shooting away in awe the scene playing itself out in
front of me.

The hour was over all too soon.

I could have spent a whole day, no, several days, with
these wonderful creatures—simply observing and
enjoying their presence. Somehow they seemed so
much at peace with themselves in sharp contrast with
the world that we have made ours outside this forest.
So how did my experience compare with that of George Schaller more than fifty years ago?

He said it all: “Never before had I had this feeling on meeting an animal.”

My visit with the Titus family in Rwanda’s rainforest will remain etched in my memory forever.

By the way, you don’t have to be super-fit to trek up the mountain. Simply have yourself paired with people your own age to qualify for the “easy groups” and, if you have any physical issues, avail yourself of the option of four porters carrying you up the mountain. It will only set you back a mere $200 for the excursion.

When you are ready, let me know and I will arrange this memorable experience together with a safari in neighboring Tanzania or Kenya.

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