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Ugandan-Tanzanian safari offers creature comforts and lots of creatures



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Taking a break
 (Phil Marty / Chicago Tribune)
 Lions rest in the shade atop rocks in the Namiri Plains area of the Serengeti.

By Phil Marty
 Chicago Tribune

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Sometimes on safari, the animals get closer than close.

AUGUST 12, 2015, 2:40 PM | BWINDI IMPENETRABLE FOREST, UGANDA

The park rangers had told us we shouldn't try to get any closer to the mountain gorillas than 20 feet.

Obviously, no one had told the gorillas.

Which explained the female that just walked by within an arm's length of me with her baby on her back.

I swiveled as they ambled away, firing off bursts of photos and trying to hold the camera steady in my excitement.

That's when an immature female bolted past, hitting me in the hip as she went by and almost knocking me to the ground.

All I could do was regain my balance and stand there with a huge grin, laughing.

This was early in a 10-day trip to East Africa in late February that was arranged by appropriately named Extraordinary Journeys. The gorilla experience had me wondering, how are you going to top that? But Africa being the amazing continent that it is, the remainder of our journey, at the very least, rivaled it.

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Before heading home, we'd spend time on an island national park in Lake Victoria and explore the Serengeti in Tanzania, where, believe it or not, lion, wildebeest, elephant and zebra sightings can become almost ho-hum.

Well, I guess they never really were ho-hum.

There are fewer than 800 mountain gorillas in the world, and half are in Uganda, primarily in Bwindi. Adjacent areas of the Virunga Mountains in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo also shelter them.

From our lovely cottage at Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge, it was an easy walk to the ranger station for Bwindi National Park. That was the end of the easy part. With a machine-gun-toting soldier at the front and one at the back to scare off charging animals if need be, our group of four tourists, two porters and three rangers descended from 7,000 feet to roughly 6,000 on a steep, rocky trail.

Other rangers had been keeping tabs on the location of the Nkuringo gorilla family, which we reached after about 90 sweaty, leg-aching minutes. The family of 11 was lounging in the foliage off the trail, casually eating whatever they pulled down and paying us no mind.

The rangers used their machetes to hack an entrance into the bush, and for the next hour — the limit for encounters — we were all in the family. A huge silverback kept his distance, but the others came closer. While the mother and the immature female reclined, eating, the baby grabbed a vine and, like a little kid, proceeded to hang upside down and show off.

Just 60 minutes, but memories to last a lifetime.

At Rubondo Island Camp in the Tanzanian part of Lake Victoria, the wildlife encounters were more subtle but no less memorable. As my companion, Patti, and I stood on the front porch of our cottage soon after arrival, a black-faced monkey strolled past, followed by a bush buck antelope that tarried along the shoreline.

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Over the next three days, our friendly and knowledgeable guide Elisante William, who had picked us up at the 20-foot-wide airstrip and served us a Champagne toast, treated us to a variety of experiences. A challenging drive through the buggy jungle by open safari vehicle was rewarded, just as we were about to give up, with a group of giraffes.



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Kayaking along the lakeshore brought sightings of bald-eagle-like fish hawks and tiny, colorful weavers, flitting about their small round nests made of grasses.

On a fishing trip onto the lake, we spied menacing-looking Nile crocodiles, and I caught a 2-foot-long Nile perch. On the way back, two hippos delighted us by surfacing and diving, surfacing and diving just before we hit the beach at the camp.

But, perhaps most memorable was the friendliness of the camp staff. On our second night, we were surprised at dinner when the chef and staff paraded out of the kitchen carrying a birthday cake for Patti, whose birthday had been the day of our gorilla trek. They danced around our table, singing a birthday salute in Swahili, clapping and smiling broadly.

Another priceless memory.

More memories awaited at Namiri Plains Camp, a setting of just eight luxurious tents in a portion of the eastern Serengeti that was formerly a closed cheetah preserve.

On the 11/2-hour drive from the Seronera airstrip to the camp, we were excited to get up close with three of Africa's Big Five — lions, elephants and Cape buffalo (leopards and rhinos complete the Big Five). The six lions looked almost huggable as they slept atop large rocks shaded by trees.

Over the next three days, lions would provide many memories. A morning drive across the sprawling plains led to a water hole where a dozen females slept. A pair of cubs play-fought each other when they weren't tormenting the sleeping cats or biting their mother's tail.

Another day we watched a pride of 11 females pad single file down a dusty track, parading right past our safari vehicle.

But the lion highlight came one day as we ate lunch under the shade of a tree at the camp. For more than an hour, we watched in fascination as a mother several hundred yards away made four long treks in the hot sun, each time carrying a relatively newborn cub by the scruff of its neck while she moved them from one hiding spot to a newer and safer spot.

Wow!

Another morning and more cubs, but this time cheetahs. For a couple of hours we shadowed a mother with three cubs hunting for breakfast. Mom would lead her troupe to a termite mound where they'd plop down and she'd scan the horizon. No lunch in sight, and they'd move several hundreds yards to another mound. Breakfast still hadn't materialized when we moved on.

And, so it went: days viewing hundreds of wildebeests kicking up dust as they galloped in panic mode; Cape buffalo, also by the hundreds, some with birds sitting atop their heads or backs; elephants with babies in tow, tossing dust on themselves for protection from the sun and flies.

And through it all, you could stand on the vastness of the Serengeti, slowly turn 360 degrees and see no sign of humans as far as the horizon — just the occasional clump of zebras or wildebeests or antelopes, and the grass waving in the breeze.

As our guide Erasto Macha told us, "When I was a child, I thought I could walk to the edge of the plains and touch the sky."

So it seemed.

Phil Marty is a freelance reporter.

If you go

Our 10-day trip was arranged by Extraordinary Journeys (212-226 7331, www.ejafrika.com) and cost about \$8,500 per person double occupancy. That included one night lodging in Entebbe, Uganda; two nights at Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge; three nights at Rubondo Island Camp; and three nights at Namiri Plains Camp. "Glamping" accommodations ranged from luxury tents to cottages. It also covered all meals and drinks, internal flights and guides. International flights are extra, as are visa fees, and the gorilla-trekking permit in Uganda is \$600 per person. Cost of international airfare will vary depending on starting and ending points because Extraordinary Journeys can customize any of its trips. So, for example, you might gorilla trek in Rwanda instead of Uganda, skip Rubondo and spend time at more than one camp in the Serengeti.

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Keeping his distance

(Phil Marty / Chicago Tribune)

The silverback member of the Nkuringo family keeps his distance.



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Lizard love

(Phil Marty / Chicago Tribune)

A staff member at Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge in Uganda gets friendly with a chameleon.



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Just passing by

(Phil Marty / Chicago Tribune)

A bush buck and a black-faced monkey pass at Rubondo Island Camp in Lake Victoria.



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Near Lake Victoria

(Phil Marty / Chicago Tribune)

Rubondo Island National Park in Tanzania's Lake Victoria is home to a variety of wildlife, including giraffes.



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Slipping in

(Phil Marty / Chicago Tribune)

A Nile crocodile heads into the waters of Lake Victoria near Rubondo Island.



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Cooling off

(Phil Marty / Chicago Tribune)

A hippo enjoys the waters off the beach at Rubondo Island Camp.



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Sunrise

(Phil Marty / Chicago Tribune)

An acacia is silhouetted by the rising sun near Namiri Plains Camp in the Serengeti.



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For safekeeping

(Phil Marty / Chicago Tribune)

A mother lion moves one of her cubs to a more secure place.



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The elephant contingent

(Phil Marty / Chicago Tribune)

Here come the elephants.