

JUST LIKE US

DEEP IN THE HEART OF UGANDA'S
QUEEN ELIZABETH NATIONAL PARK LIES A
REMARKABLE ECOSYSTEM THAT IS HOME
TO A UNIQUE GROUP OF CHIMPANZEES

Words → **CHARUKESI RAMADURAI**



NOTHING HAS PREPARED me for the strange kinship I feel with the chimpanzees in front of me. I know these primates share 98.8 per cent of their DNA with

humans, both believed to have evolved from a common ancestor millions of years ago. What I didn't know—until I see them in their own habitats—is just how humanlike their facial expressions, social interactions and communication patterns are.

I am in a quiet corner of Queen Elizabeth National Park in Uganda, the East African country known largely for its small population of endangered mountain gorillas. More specifically, I was in the area known

as Kyambura (pronounced *chum-boo-rah*) Gorge, a compact rainforest 100 metres below ground level. I am here to hike through this "sunken forest" in search of the isolated family of about 30 chimpanzees that have lived here for decades, cut off from other habitats and troops.

This family has been slowly and painstakingly habituated to human presence by the wildlife rangers and researchers. Visitors can now hike into the forest to search for them and spend an hour in their company. There are strict instructions we need to follow, like maintaining a safe distance from them and wearing a surgical mask in their presence (since great apes have been known to easily catch ailments from humans).



Around 30 chimpanzees live in Uganda's Queen Elizabeth National Park

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK



Each group consists of no more than eight people, accompanied by two experienced ranger-guides from the Uganda Wildlife Authority. Our guide for the morning hike is Judith Nyamihanda, who has been doing this for 24 years and says she can never get tired of it. “Every day is different, you never know what you are going to see and experience in the forest,” she says with a twinkle in her eyes.

My hike actually begins right outside my cottage at the Kyambura Gorge Lodge, a boutique property on the edge of the forest with just eight *bandas* (cottages) that come with expansive views of either the deep gorge or the open savannah. The lodge is

owned by Volcanoes Safaris, who are the pioneers of responsible wildlife tourism in this country and offer a range of activities that promote both wildlife conservation and community upliftment.

And so I set off bright and early, walking for an hour through the path leading from the lodge into the edge of the forest, where we fill in forms and get briefed on what to expect during the hike. That is where we meet Nyamihanda, who leads our group with confidence and optimism down into the gorge. A younger ranger, Nathan, brings up the rear, making sure nobody gets left behind. We are also given walking sticks and encouraged

to hire porters to carry our heavy backpacks and cameras, an activity that ensures that a bit of the tourism money percolates to people from the local community.

As we get ready for the tracking, my mind keeps going back to the documentaries I had watched on the primates of Uganda just before the trip, particularly the 2010 BBC film describing this chimpanzee family as living in a “lost world.” And indeed, descending into Kyambura Gorge is a bit like stepping into a fantasy land. I am surrounded by soaring trees that allow only the mellowest of sunrays to pass through the dense canopy. From a far distance, I can hear the gentle gurgle of streams and the relentless droning of cicadas.

We follow Nyamihanda in meditative silence, eyes and ears keenly open for any movement. We have barely walked for a few minutes into the gorge when Nyamihanda stops and points up a fig tree. I initially strain to see what she is seeing, but the hoots and screeches that suddenly rent the air reveal the first chimpanzee.

“His name is Kazinga,” she whispers. “He is the main bodyguard for the alpha male,” Nyamihanda adds, referring to the leader of this chimpanzee family. Kazinga seems relaxed, climbing up and down the tree in search of the juiciest leaves and fruit.

I don’t have to wait long to see his boss; a few minutes’ walk ahead, we spot Mweya sitting high up on a tree by the riverbank. Serenely surveying his kingdom from his lofty perch, he looks every bit the alpha male that he is. It is a title he has won after fighting and defeating several worthy opponents. “But he’s a gentle leader, he’s not one of the aggressive ones,” Nyamihanda explains, as I grapple with the idea of different leadership styles even within primates.

All around us, chimps are constantly communicating with each other through high-pitched shrieks and thumping drumbeats on tree trunks as they jump from tree to tree and run through the forest floor. A couple of young ones prove more entertaining

THESE PRIMATES SHARE 98.8 PER CENT OF THEIR DNA WITH HUMANS, BOTH BELIEVED TO HAVE EVOLVED FROM A COMMON ANCESTOR



Judith Nyamihanda, a ranger-guide, has been conducting chimpanzee hikes for 24 years

than the adults, engaging in mock fights and swinging dangerously from branches. As we watch, Mweya clammers down the tree and walks calmly in front of our mesmerised group to the river for a drink of water. Thirst quenched, he sits back and looks thoughtfully around him. I wonder what is going on in his mind.

Somewhere in the distance, I can also hear other sounds—low honks and grunts that are distinctly unlike what I’ve heard from these primates so far. As it turns out, these are coming from a pod of hippos lazing in a pool not far from where we are standing, admiring our chimpanzee family. There seems to be no end to the surprises this forest holds.

The hour passes quicker than I expect, and all too soon, it is time for us to head back. I take one last look at Mweya and his troupe, wish them well for the future, and turn to follow Nyamihanda. They need all the luck they can get, given that being separated from their larger clan has caused a severe restriction to their gene pool, which is cause for some alarm.

But it has been a fascinating hour. At the end of it, I can understand what conservationist and chimpanzee champion Jane Goodall meant when she said: “Chimpanzees, more than any other living creature, have helped us to understand that there is no sharp line between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom.” ►OT

TRAVEL INFORMATION



HOW TO GO

Uganda Airlines offers direct flights from Mumbai to Entebbe, from where Kyambura Gorge Lodge is an eight-hour drive (about 400 km), or a short flight to Kasese airstrip with Aerolink Uganda followed by a two-hour drive (55 km).



WHERE TO STAY

Kyambura Gorge Lodge offers a prime location overlooking the gorge, with rates starting at approximately USD 950 (INR 80,000) per person. This includes all taxes, meals, drinks, guided activities, laundry, and a daily spa massage. While the package covers a range of inclusive services, the chimpanzee tracking permit, a key highlight of the experience, costs an additional USD 100 (around INR 8,500) per person.



WHAT ELSE TO DO

Volcanoes Safaris operates four lodges in Uganda, two dedicated to chimpanzee and gorilla tracking. Each activity offers a unique experience, so be sure to allow enough time to enjoy both.



Kyambura Gorge Lodge is a boutique property on the edge of the forest with eight cottages overlooking the grassland savannah and volcanic crater fields

PHOTOGRAPHS: CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

FORM IV (See rule 8) OUTLOOK TRAVELLER	
1. Place of Publication	: New Delhi
2. Periodicity of Publication	: Bi-monthly
3. Printer's Name	: Indranil Roy
Whether Citizen of India ?	Yes
(If foreigner, state the country of origin)	Not Applicable
Address	AB-10 Safdarjung Enclave New Delhi - 110 029
4. Publisher's Name	: Indranil Roy
Whether citizen of India?	Yes
(If foreigner, state the country of origin)	Not Applicable
Address	AB-10 Safdarjung Enclave New Delhi - 110 029
5. Editor's Name	: Anindita Ghosh
Whether Citizen of India	Yes
(If foreigner, state the country of origin)	Not Applicable
Address	AB-10 Safdarjung Enclave New Delhi - 110 029
6. Name and addresses of Individuals who own the newspaper and the partners of shareholders holding more than one per cent of the total capital	OWNER Outlook Publishing (India) Private Limited Shop No.8, Ground Floor, Sai Dham SRA Sambhajai Nagar, Sahar Road : Andheri (East), Mumbai 400 069 SHAREHOLDERS 1. Matsyagandha Investments & Finance Pvt. Ltd. RAHEJAS, Corner of Main Avenue & V.P. Road, Santacruz(West), Mumbai-400 054. 2. Bloomingdale Investments & Finance Pvt. Ltd. RAHEJAS, Corner of Main Avenue & V.P. Road, Santacruz(West), Mumbai-400 054. 3. Hathway Investments Private Limited RAHEJAS, Corner of Main Avenue & V.P. Road, Santacruz(West), Mumbai-400 054.
I, Indranil Roy, hereby declare that the particulars given are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.	
Dated : March 1, 2025	sd/- Indranil Roy PUBLISHER