

Positive IMPACT:

PROTECTING MOUNTAIN GORILLAS

Found only in the rainforests of Rwanda, Uganda and DR Congo, mountain gorillas were facing extinction in the 1980s. Today, they number over 1000. Tourism plays a starring role in their survival, supporting communities living alongside them and contributing to their conservation. **Sue Watt** highlights some of the operators helping you play your part.

In the spotlight:

ALBERTINE
APES ALLIANCE

THE COLLECTIVE EFFORT DRIVING ONE OF AFRICA'S CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORIES

Volcanoes Safaris' founder Praveen Moman is passionate about protecting great ape homelands and supporting their human neighbours. Thirty years ago, he was among the first to open lodges in the region. More recently, he helped establish the Albertine Apes Alliance (AAA), an informal advocacy network bringing together community and conservation NGOs, government authorities and other stakeholders committed to safeguarding the future of Albertine Rift protected areas.

Participating NGOs include Conservation Through Public Health, Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund, Gorilla Doctors and the Jane Goodall Institute, among many others.

Kevin James, Volcanoes' Chief Operating Officer, explains: "Set up in 2022 at Mount Gahinga Lodge, the AAA is a forum for communication and for collaboration between the various stakeholders, with Praveen as its Chair. It seeks to create greater awareness and dialogue on the increasing pressures facing protected areas from



Inspiration. Mountain gorilla near Mount Gahinga Lodge, where the Albertine Ape Alliance was formed in 2022.

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human and economic development, and to help protect the biodiversity of this unique area through: ● collaboration and advocacy ● best practice protocols for gorilla and chimpanzee trekking ● education, training and improved livelihoods for local communities, and ● supporting habitat protection and

effective protected area management.

"This year is significant for AAA: Parc National d'Albert, today known as Parc National de Virunga in DRC and Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda, was created a century ago, on 21 April 1925, by King Albert of Belgium and was the first national park in Africa."

THE VIRUNGA FOUNDATION (DR CONGO):

Home to one third of the world's mountain gorillas, Virunga National Park in DR Congo is a precarious region rife with political conflict and armed militias. There are few lodges here but those that exist, from the luxury Mikenso Lodge to basic tented camps, are non-profit, benefitting the park and its people. At present, the region is closed to tourists, but the work of the Virunga Foundation, a British charity that manages the park, continues. Every day, 98 community trackers monitor the 12 habituated gorilla groups, removing snares and protecting their habitat. While you may not be able to visit, you can still contribute to this vital conservation effort through donations (www.virunga.org).

Right: **Jacques Katutu**, Head of Gorilla Monitoring in Virunga National Park



ROBIN LAIME / VIRUNGA NATIONAL PARK

Wild Frontiers (Uganda)

Tour operator Wild Frontiers has been operating in Uganda for over 25 years. "We feel we have to give back in a way that is really beneficial to the communities," explains general manager Jane Goldring. Among the many projects they support are the Bwindi Community Hospital and the Batwa Empowerment Village (BEV).

"The hospital helps thousands of people and our contributions spread through the community," says Goldring. "We have singled out the pre-natal ward for additional support as it gives new babies a better start in life.

"The Batwa couldn't continue their traditional ways of life when the National Park was declared. We try to help with alternative forms of income and means of health and education so that they can remain living beside the National Park, hopefully doing more than just surviving."

WILL WHITFORD



Above: **Batwa Elfas** climbing for honey at BEV's Batwa Experience
Below: Guests at **Red Rocks** making banana beer, a traditional activity in Rwandan culture



RED ROCKS



Basket weaving at the Ride 4 A Woman workshop in Buhoma

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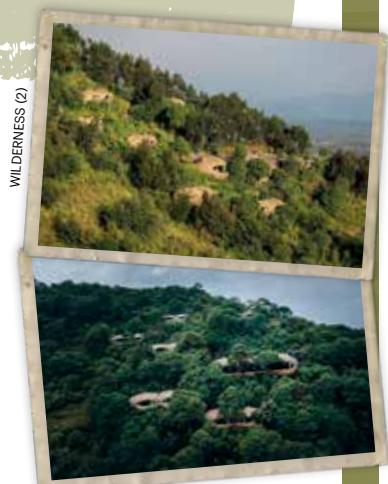
RIDE 4 A WOMAN (UGANDA)

Ride 4 A Woman began 15 years ago as a bicycle rental shop for tourists run by women. Founded by Evelyn Habasa, it has evolved into a fabulous project at the Bwindi Women's Community Centre in Buhoma. Guests at their colourful B&B can learn to dance, cook, weave and sew, with profits to date going towards:

- Training 100 women and employing 60 in sewing and weaving, selling their crafts at the cheerful R4W centre workshop or in their own businesses.
- Supporting over 200 women in microfinance initiatives to run their own ventures
- Sponsoring over 250 children in education
- Since 2023, lighting up over 60 homes with solar panels
- Providing seeds, tools and training to 120 women to grow their own crops. Each woman then trains another, to spread skills
- Building one primary school for children in need, to be run by R4W women. Land has been purchased and they're now raising funds to make it a reality.

Wilderness Bisate (Rwanda)

Guests staying at Wilderness Bisate and newly-opened Bisate Reserve can contribute to a vibrant reforestation project by planting their own tree in the 42-hectare site just outside Volcanoes National Park. Since 2018, 100,000 indigenous trees have been planted with the help of community members, guests and Wilderness' agronomist team based in the onsite nursery, aiming to restore habitat and reintroduce fauna and flora. With tree species selected as food sources and shelter for local wildlife, golden monkeys, side-striped jackal, serval, tree hyrax, chameleons, birds and even mountain gorillas have been caught on trail cameras.



WILDERNESS (2)

Regeneration. Wilderness Bisate Reserve in 2018 and 2024; the reforestation effort has made a noticeable impact

RED ROCKS (RWANDA)

Just outside Musanze, Red Rocks is a vibrant hub with tents, cottages and a hostel, which focuses on sustainable community development and conservation. Its activities include banana beer-making, cooking lessons, basket weaving, homestays, tree planting, heritage walks and the Red Rocks Annual Cultural Festival in September, showcasing Rwandan traditions. Winner of UNWTO Best Tourism Village Award in 2021, it works with NGO Red Rocks Initiative for Sustainable Development. This year will see the inaugural five-day Red Rocks Eco-Tourism Festival in May, featuring local artisans, performers and eco-tourism activities.