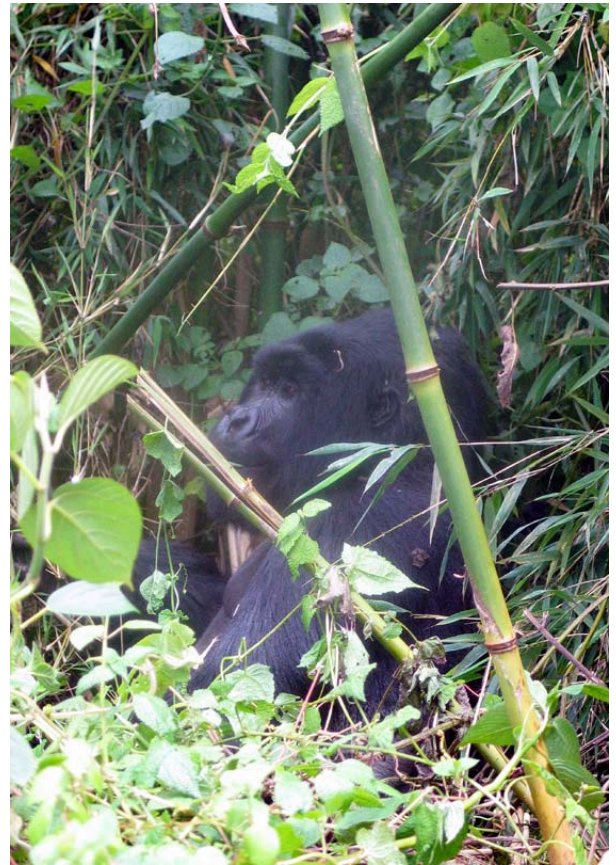


Photographing Mountain Gorillas

So you're off to Rwanda, Uganda or Congo to see the gorillas? You'll be taking a camera, then. You are also about to take photographs of one of the trickier wildlife subjects around – where it's not simply a matter of getting close to the subject, but of actually getting sharp and clear photographs of something dark and hairy that lives in a fairly dark and hairy environment. So this is a short note, derived from my own experience and mistakes, purely aimed at helping you decide what to take and what to do when you get there. First off then, equipment:

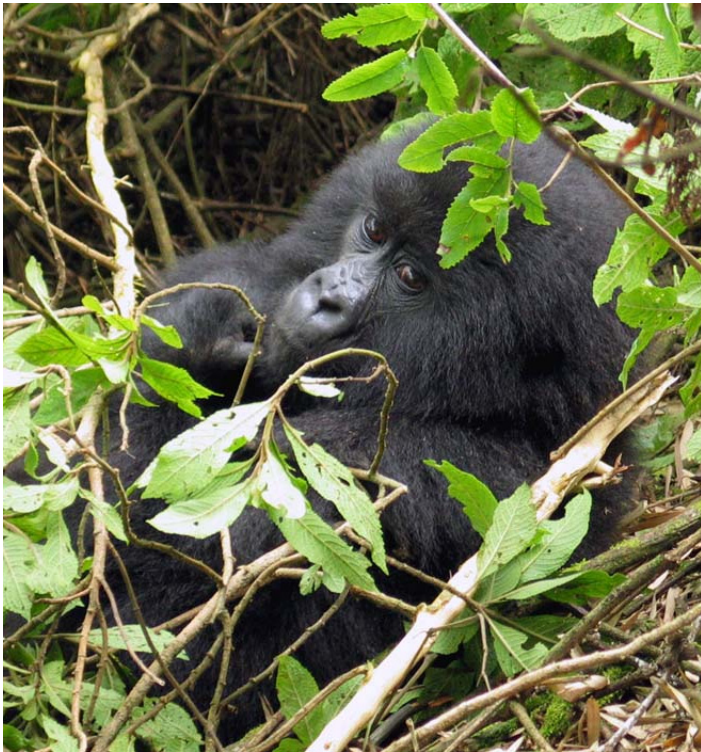
Cameras & Lenses: Unlike much African wildlife you are unlikely to need long lenses to get a decent shot – when you meet Gorillas, you'll be close and it'll be fairly to moderately dull. Park regulations say not to get closer than 7m to the beasts, to minimise the possibility of disease transmission from us primates to them. Even at 7m, you'll fill the frame with (say) a 70-210 or so zoom lens (or digital equivalent). Carrying supertelephotos around to photograph gorillas is a pointless exercise in masochism and guilt generation (the guides will usually take pity and offer to carry stuff for you when you collapse wheezing from the altitude and rough going). It's also worth carrying a wide angle for grabbing the wonderful panoramas of the Virungas. If you're using an ordinary zoom compact camera, you'll still have the chance of getting some good pictures – you may not be able to switch off the autofocus (see below), but as long as you use a reasonably fast film, there are good shots to be had.

Digital: If you can, shoot at the highest resolution your camera will support (RAW mode if you have it – helps keep the hairy bits looking sharp) and either carry plenty of memory cards or use a Microdrive. Although the gorillas don't seem to be bothered about a bit of noise, it seems only courteous to switch off the assorted synthetic beeps, clicks and whirrs that a digital camera can make. Having a digitised cock crow for the shutter release is right out. If you can change the sensitivity of your camera's sensor (asa equivalent), then set up to something usefully fast – 200-400asa or greater, remembering that, as with film, the faster you set it, the more digital “noise” will appear in the final picture.



For the geek amongst you, I got some good results shooting on a four-megapixel Canon G3 at 200/400asa, in RAW and Superfine JPEG modes, with extra saturation, sharpness and edge enhancement switched off – the last of these particularly can cause strange artefacts with hairy subjects – I'd rather do any post-processing in Photoshop. On my next trip, I'm going the full monty with my new Olympus E-1.

Accessories: One above all – a monopod. Don't even think about carrying a large tripod. In fact, think as much as you can about not carrying very much at all – it bulks you out, slows you down and loses photographs while you're working out which camera/lens/film/lipstick combo to use. This from the man who did his first gorilla trip carrying: digital camera; telephoto lens for same; tripod (small); monopod (large); multiple films, batteries (lots of) and filters; SLR, 70-210 zoom; 28-85mm zoom; 24mm wide-angle. Now remember that you'll spend a lot of time bent double, ducking under branches and swinging around trees – I got quite impressively wedged on a couple of occasions, thrashing around like a bad day on the Pequod until a machete-wielding companion rescued me, while displaying admirable restraint on the sarcasm front. And do remember to take something waterproof to store everything in – one of my telephoto lenses took a month to dry out from my second trip. On that one I left my trusty T90 behind and went all-digital, taking my G3, telephoto lens, filters (UV and circular polariser), lens hood and monopod. I'd like to say that I'd learnt my lesson, but I'd arrived in Rwanda by bicycle and had had perforce to leave the heavy stuff behind in England.



Film: I used Fuji Provia 100asa transparency film, pushed by one stop to 200asa. I was using a monopod to support the camera, but could still have done with 400asa for a little more flexibility. 800 and 1600asa films can also prove useful, but I'd rather carry and use a monopod with slower film than accept the quality trade-offs of the very, very fast films. It's a personal thang, though...

Now for some thoughts on technique:

Autofocus: This does not, by and large, work well when photographing Gorillas, for two reasons, one obvious and one strange. The obvious reason is that the Gorillas hang around in thick foliage, and autofocus systems will cheerfully lock onto and provide beautifully sharp images of foreground twigs, leaves and branches, while the dark fuzzy blur in the background could be anything vaguely mammalian. The strange reason appears to

be that the Gorilla is a stealth animal – autofocus relies on contrast differences and sharp edges to work out what to lock on to – a Gorilla is low contrast and fuzzy of edge: Once again, a random blurred shape that may or may not be of this planet. Moral: where possible, go manual.

Flash: This is not allowed when photographing the gorillas – so if your camera will not allow you to disable the flash, don't use it. Simple as that.

Exposure: If you are photographing a general forest scene that happens to include a gorilla (such as those cropped images included here), your camera's built-in metering system should cope tolerably well. It gets a little trickier if you're completely filling the frame with pure, unadulterated gorilla though – in case you hadn't noticed, they're pretty damned dark in colour, and this can sometimes trick camera light meters into thinking that the scene is actually in worse light than is the case, and over-exposing the photo, I played safe and was finding that 2/3 of a stop of underexposure was adequate – keeping detail in the gorilla without washing out the background. For anything where the beastie only occupied part frame, I was shooting with uncorrected exposure.

There's one last thing here – you're going to see some of the most astonishing creatures on the planet – don't spend all your time taking pics and, above all, don't have all your memories framed through the viewfinder of a camera. Get some shots, get a few more, then by all means switch the technology off, put it away and just spend time looking, and thinking. They'll be doing the same.

I hope this helps – please however don't let my ramblings override your own judgement and experience!

Richard

