

'The First Gorilla I Saw Was the Alpha Male'

The director of Diane Keaton-starrer *Poms* and a Dian Fossey doc shares her experiences in the wilds of Rwanda *By Zara Hayes*



1 The documentary crew of *Dian Fossey: Secrets in the Mist*.
2 A mountain gorilla in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park.

On a trip to Rwanda to direct a miniseries about conservationist **Dian Fossey** for National Geographic, I got to meet mountain gorillas in their habitat. There are none in captivity; they exist only in the wild in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park and in the Virunga Mountains in Rwanda, Uganda and DRC. Gorilla tourism is huge in Rwanda: When a baby gorilla is born, its naming ceremony is a state affair.

I arrived at Kigali airport on a sticky evening. Kigali is a beautiful city sitting 5,000 feet above sea level on green hills. My producer and I drove to Musanze, which at an altitude of 9,000 feet is the gateway to Volcanoes National Park, and home to Fossey's former camp (stays from \$75; governorscamp.com).

Our gorilla trek was led by **Felix Ndagijimana**, the first Rwandan director of Karisoke, the research center that Dian Fossey established. There are several "habituated" gorilla groups that accept humans in their presence. The park staff know each individual by sight and are attuned to their behaviors. Felix prepped us for the encounter: No sudden moves or eye contact, and showed us how to make groaning "contentment" sounds to indicate we're not a threat.

We trekked into the forest and when we heard bamboo crunching, we were told the gorillas were close. The first gorilla I saw was the alpha male, the silverback, lying on his side with one arm under his head, chomping on bamboo as his male offspring playfully climbed up on him. So nonchalant!

My favorite moment was observing a mother with her 2-year-old juvenile. The young one kept wandering off only to be followed by his mother, who grabbed him and brought him back to the group. It was a delight, so reminiscent of a human toddler testing the boundaries. We watched a young male show off by swinging from branches above our heads, and were startled by another male's chest-beating as a display. Being close to such huge wild animals who gracefully accept your presence is a transcendent experience.

Today, mountain gorillas are still endangered, but their numbers are four times more than when Fossey died in 1985. I think she would be proud but say that there's a lot more work to be done to preserve this majestic species. THR

I had arranged for a hot air balloon ride, and we had to get up at 4:30 a.m. (from \$4,107 with Serengeti Balloon Safaris). In the pitch black, wrapped in blankets to keep us warm, we sped along dirt roads. Suddenly, the driver came to an abrupt stop. In front of the vehicle, gigantic dark figures moved silently across the road. Grace whispered, "Dad, elephants at dawn! My wish came true!" The majesty of those elephants is a memory that will stay with Grace and me for a lifetime.

The hot air balloon itself didn't disappoint: the roaring, flaming burners and then the breathtaking quiet as we gently traveled across the Serengeti. It was stunning to watch the sun rise and the animals begin their day from an entirely new perspective.

Our final days were filled with countless more magnificent moments, including a gathering of some 50 elephants surrounding us while leisurely socializing and snacking. For Grace, it was a joyous introduction to Africa and the Serengeti, while the purity of the animals' lives inspired me in so many profound ways. THR

Harrison Ford's Tanzania hangout, Greystoke Mahale Camp. **2** Botswana's Abu Camp. **3** Hot air ballooning over the plains at Kenya's Angama Mara. **4** Elephants visiting the pool at South Africa's Royal Malewane, a favorite of Elton John.

SOUTH AFRICA "The staggering beauty and extraordinary attention to detail make Royal Malewane one of my favorite places on earth," says **Elton John** of the site of an "annual pilgrimage" for his family. The plush Royal Portfolio property in famed Kruger National Park (from \$1,794; theroyalportfolio.com), which has also boasted **Jeff Bridges** and **Bono** as guests, revealed a brand-new lodge in May, called The Farmstead at Royal Malewane. Within it is the three-suite Farmhouse featuring private bush walks, a butler, over-the-top spa treatments and tailored dining experiences (from \$12,915). THR



4 Elephants visiting the pool at South Africa's Royal Malewane, a favorite of Elton John.

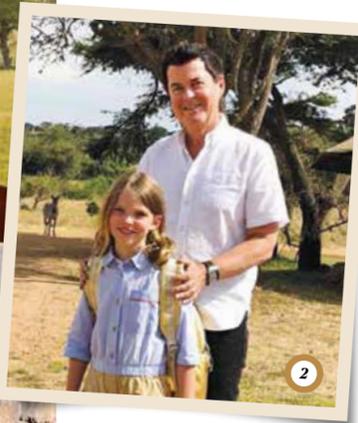


1 "It is a world within a world where you get to witness the lives of animals and see things you never have imagined before," says producer Simon Fuller of his trip to the Serengeti, where he enjoyed meals near grazing zebras at Singita's Sabora Tented Camp. **2** Fuller and his daughter, Grace. **3** Private and luxurious accommodations at the Camp. **4** An elephant on the Grumeti Reserve.



vehicle. We were very fortunate to be there during the great migration. From the lodge you can see thousands of animals in the valley below, a most spectacular sight. We drove down to be among them, and the sound coming from this endless sea of animals is utterly extraordinary.

Singita has other properties, including Faru Faru Lodge, and Grace and I spent two nights at the amazing Sabora Tented Camp (from \$1,475 per adult). For our last few days, Grace's biggest wish was to see her first elephant at the break of dawn. After watching hippos play in a small lake, seeing two young male cheetahs, and getting very up close and personal with a slightly grumpy herd of buffalo, we turned in to prepare for a very early morning treat.



2 Fuller and his daughter, Grace.

a truly remarkable view overlooking the Serengeti plains below. It's a colonial-style manor house with every amenity you could wish for. The accommodation I most love is the serene Serengeti House — exquisite, understated luxury at its absolute finest. (The private site sleeps up to eight, has an 82-foot lap pool, fire pits, eat-in kitchen, media room, full gym, staff and full-time guide for customized activities and meals; from \$6,565 a night.)

Over the next few days on game drives, we saw every animal Grace could dream of, from the biggest male leopard I'd ever seen, dozing in a tree by the river, to a pride of nine lions strolling past our

dazzle of zebras. It was a short drive to Singita Sasakwa Lodge, and our guide stopped several times to point out a loping giraffe, grazing deer or a determined dung beetle struggling to push 10 times his body weight.

Singita Sasakwa Lodge is a magnificent hotel set on the highest point of the reserve, with

joy I felt taking Grace to Africa for the first time made the trip especially meaningful.

After flying in from London and a good night's sleep at Hemingways Nairobi (from \$325), we headed to Singita Sasakwa in the remote Grumeti Reserve via private charter. We were greeted by a most gracious staff and a



no longer exists." Says **Julianne Hough**, who booked at Angama Mara (from \$1,250; angama.com): "Being [in Africa] shows what life can be like, surrounded by nature, wildlife and different species of animals coexisting." In Nairobi, boutique hotel Giraffe Manor (from \$1,240; thesafaricollection.com) has giraffes poking their necks into the dining room, delighting **Ellen DeGeneres**. Nearby, **Lupita Nyong'o** visited orphaned elephants at the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust (davidsheldrickwildlifetrust.org).

RWANDA **Nikolaj Coster-Waldau** and **Idris Elba** both recently visited Africa's safest country, according to the World Economic Forum, while **Portia de Rossi** took DeGeneres to see endangered gorillas at Bisate Lodge, with its opulent villas inside a volcanic cone (from \$1,299;



wilderness-safaris.com). Rossum and Esmail resided in a stone banda cottage with fireplace at Virunga Lodge (from \$1,000; volcanoessafaris.com). "I was in awe, humbled by their size and power," says Rossum of meeting gorillas. **Ben Affleck** patronized Sabinyo Silverback Lodge (from \$655; governorscamp.com). One&Only debuts its breathtaking Gorilla's Nest later this year, encompassing the Jack Hanna Guesthouse where **Bill** and **Melinda Gates** have stayed, and villas amid an ancient rain forest, advanced wellness offerings and locally grown cuisine (from \$3,910; oneandonlyresorts.com).

TANZANIA **Josh Duhamel** calls visiting the Grumeti Reserve during this summer's great migration, when millions of wildebeest, zebras and gazelles move across the

SINGITA FULLER CAMP, UGANDA, COURTESY OF SUBJECT; GREYSTOKE MAHALE CAMP, TANZANIA, COURTESY OF GREYSTOKE MAHALE CAMP; ABU CAMP, BOTSWANA, COURTESY OF ABU CAMP; HOT AIR BALLOONING, KENYA, COURTESY OF ANGAMA MARA; ROYAL MALEWANE, SOUTH AFRICA, COURTESY OF ROYAL MALEWANE; GORILLA, UGANDA, COURTESY OF BUNDA GOV. PHOTOGRAPHY IMAGES



'Dad, Elephants at Dawn!'

The *American Idol* creator and producer of Discovery's *Serengeti*, premiering Aug. 4, writes about taking his daughter on the ultimate safari: 'We saw every animal Grace could dream of' *By Simon Fuller*

Nothing compares to Africa — in particular, the Serengeti, where you witness the lives of animals, from family bonds to courtships to a zest for fun. My visit last year with my daughter, **Grace**, then 7, was extra special: When I was her age, I lived in Ghana, where my father had a school. The pride and

How Hollywood Safaris

By Kathryn Romeyn

Africa is one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen," says **Emmy Rossum**. The star, who visited Rwanda and Tanzania on her 2017 honeymoon with *Homecoming* creator **Sam Esmail**, says, "I don't think you know what the sky actually looks like until you see it in Africa." Just in the past year, **Kanye West** recorded in a studio built at Uganda's Chobe Safari Lodge in Murchison Falls National Park alongside the elephant-frequented Nile River (from \$397 a night; chobelodgeuganda.com); **Danai Gurira** highlighted anti-poaching efforts in Zimbabwe with the group WildAid; and luxury operator andBeyond debuted a 10-day, \$17,750 Kings of the Jungle itinerary for East Africa, inspired by *The Lion King*. Other hot destinations:

KENYA At Cottar's 1920s Safari Camp, a family-owned, 7,600-acre conservancy, **Prince William** vacationed with **Kate Middleton**, as have **George Lucas**, **Keira Knightley** and **Don Cheadle** (from \$2,554; cottars.com). **The Obamas** planted trees outside Masai Mara National Reserve from a riverfront tent at Basecamp Masai Mara (from \$375; basecampexplorer.com). Campi Ya Kanzi is a luxury ecolodge with views of Mount Kilimanjaro on a private reserve in the Chyulu Hills (from \$825; campiyakanzi.com), where every stay includes a \$115 donation to Maasai Wilderness Conservation Trust, headed by president **Edward Norton**. "Those animals are of our ancestral imagination," says the star. "Imagine if you had to point at a picture of a lion and explain to your son why that animal