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FAMILY TREKKING ON MOUNT KARISIMBI

Trying to find a peak to climb in Africa is not that challenging. However, integrating such a venture into a family vacation and keeping the teenager son happy requires some planning. Originally we had planned to climb the DRC's Nyiragongo volcano (3,470m) in Virunga National Park, Africa's oldest park, as part of our family holiday in 2018. I camouflaged the trek with a visit to the majestic mountain gorillas that live in the mountainous triangle where DRC, Uganda and Rwanda meet. Regrettably, guerrillas (and not the gorillas) chose to kidnap a ranger and two foreign tourists a few weeks before our scheduled departure. This led the park's management to close the park for tourists until further notice.

As Uganda and Rwanda both have a minimum age of 16 years for gorilla tracking, with our young son we had no chance of "officially" meeting the gorillas. Therefore, we picked a trek up Mount Karisimbi (4,507m) on the Rwandan side of the Virunga range, which leads through Rwanda's main mountain gorilla sector where Dian Fossey had her research station. My gamble was that we might just encounter the gorillas on our way up or down the mountain. The trek starts at around 2,600m. Over the course of the day we hiked through a number of different vegetation zones, starting with bamboo forest on the lower slopes. On the higher slopes we found hagenia-hypericum forest with a low dense shrub layer. What a magical forest, where you expect a unicorn to cross your path at every turn! Then, higher still, the open hillside is dotted with giant lobelia and senecio. The Virunga Mountains are

home to a wide array of wildlife and birds. The species I found most intriguing were the mountain elephants, which are about half the size of their savannah relatives and whose tusks are shorter and bent downwards and inwards to allow the animals to slip through the forest without getting their tusks all tangled up.

Our camp for the night was at 3,700m, a basic mountain camp with small, backpacking-style tents, but very charming. The two dozen soldiers, who had accompanied us from the start and stayed with us for the whole trek, set up a safety perimeter around our camp. Our guide said this was necessary due to the proximity of the DRC border and the risk of gangsters crossing into Rwanda at night. The army contingent plus the porters, cooks and guide worked out to a ratio of around 12 men per tourist. If I say men, this includes the only female porter who carried more than her fellow male porters. The following morning, we rose well before dawn to a stunning sky full of stars for our push for the summit. Although no climbing skills are required, the final ascent is reasonably demanding due to the high altitude and limited acclimatization. We had clear weather and could enjoy the stunning views down to the flatlands and across into the DRC to the volcano we did not climb. On our descent we crossed a warm gorilla trail, but were, alas, not allowed to follow the fresh trail in search of the gorillas. I guess we will have to return for the official version of gorilla tracking.

Matthias Jäggi

Our guide on the summit (photo Matthias Jäggi)



View on Nyiragongo in DRC (photo Matthias Jäggi)

