

Gorillas in our midst in Rwanda

THE INCIDENTAL TOURIST

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IT is the most expensive hour I have ever spent but the company is worth it. Beside us, a couple of females are lounging, grooming and cuddling a six-month-old baby and, nearby, a young silverback rolls lazily on to his back in the sun, munching a crunchy thistle stalk and scratching his privates. "Typical male," murmurs one of the women in our group.

We are in northwest Rwanda, in the Volcanoes National Park, with the Kwitondo family of mountain gorillas. As we trekked here through the forest, our guide, Olivier, demonstrated the gorillas' feeding method by stripping the prickly leaves from a thistle before delicately peeling the juicy

stalk and munching on it with contented grunts; he is fluent in gorilla-speak for "yummy".

Now he is grunting reassuringly as we approach the main party of the 21-strong family. There is a disturbance behind and Olivier shoves us aside as another silverback charges past. We could have touched him but this is forbidden due to concerns gorillas could catch human diseases.

Tourists are not allowed to approach closer than 7m but the gorillas don't know the rules, and if they want to move, no puny human is going to get in their way. Silverbacks can reach 200kg and it is an awesome experience to have one crash past you.

We tiptoe past a couple snoozing in the undergrowth, their feet intertwined, and then we meet Kwitondo. He is a magnificent sight, enormous and seemingly unflappable. He saunters into view, glances at us and settles down on his buttocks, arm resting casually on his bent knee. This undisputed 35-year-old patriarch

surveys his family group before again turning his attention to us, his more distant relatives.

Only 56 permits are issued a day for a maximum of eight tourists to visit each of the seven habituated groups scattered through the forest. Although they cost \$US500 (\$485) each, these permits are generally booked up months in advance.

Gorillas are Rwanda's second-biggest foreign currency earner and such a precious resource needs to be guarded. The permit revenue pays for a dedicated band of trackers who stay with each group from dawn to dusk. Conveniently, this allows them to alert the tourist guides to the gorillas' location each morning but, more important, local employment is provided for men who might otherwise be poachers.

All too soon our hour is up. Leaving the gorillas immersed in their salad bowl of greenery, we trek down through the forest to our waiting cars and then bump along rocky tracks, past vigor-

ously waving children. Despite the wonderfully fertile volcanic soils, this is an impoverished part of Rwanda. Most houses are basic wattle and daub structures and the ragged children show obvious signs of malnutrition. For one hour with the gorillas we have spent the equivalent of 10 months' starting salary for a primary school teacher and probably far more than most of these subsistence farmers will see in a year.

Nonetheless, benefits do flow to the local people.

Not only is there employment for trackers, porters, guides and souvenir sellers, but a percentage of the revenue earned is set aside for community development projects such as schools, health centres, road maintenance and water tanks.

The vast discrepancy between our relative wealth and the poverty of the local people may make us feel uncomfortable, but both the gorillas and their human neighbours face a more uncertain future without tourism.