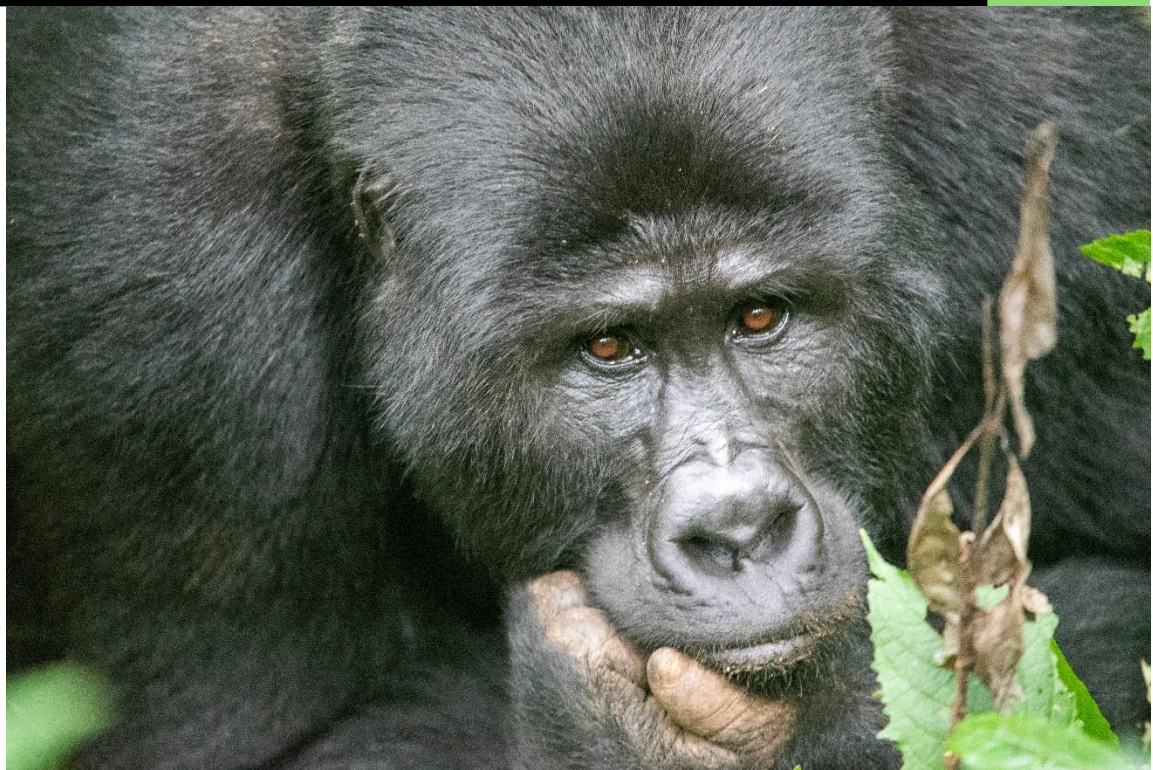


2026

# Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi



Scott Vanderpoel

Trip Report

1/13/2026

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## Trip Intro and Overview

My dad and I started off 2026 by crossing a major item off our both of our bucket lists - the opportunity to see gorillas and chimps in the wild. It's been awhile since I've had an out-and-out adventure. I've done a lot of work and personal travel in 2024 and 2025, but mostly of the long-weekend variety.

We booked a safari through [Kafu Safaris](#) after finding them on [Safaribookings.com](#). They're based out of Uganda and known as an inexpensive alternative to some other outfitters. One thing to note, is that compared to "traditional" safaris in East Africa and South Africa is that:

1. There's an absence of private game reserves. The vast majority of wildlife viewing is within the national parks
2. As such, there's no advantage in staying in high-end accommodations (from a wildlife perspective... from a luxury perspective I'm sure my wife would disagree 😊). The One&Only resort near Volcanoes National Park doesn't have resident mammals any more than Da Vinci Gorilla lodge does

Because of these factors, most safari outfitters are purely offering you a driver, a car, and on-the-ground coordination to hand you off to different lodges. In our case, we also had a dedicated birding guide since my dad is an obsessive birder. Our general itinerary was:

1. Kigali for 2 nights (not with Kafu Safaris)
2. Volcanoes National Park for 2 nights
3. Bwindi National Park for 2 nights
4. Lake Kivu for 1 night
5. Nyungwe National Park for 2 nights
6. Bujumbura, Burundi for 2 nights (not with Kafu Safaris)

Kafu certainly got the job done. Sure, you're riding in a 30 year old Toyota Landcruiser Prado, but they bent over backwards for us multiple times for the two weeks we were with them.

## Kigali

We had originally thought about going into Akagera National Park for our first day in the country. But after a brutal travel day (Denver > O'Hare > Brussels > Kigali) and staying up until 2am to watch my Indiana Hoosiers trounce Alabama in the Rose Bowl, we decided to sleep in and stay in Kigali. Not a bad choice. Kigali is shockingly modern, accommodating, and clean. In fact, Rwanda as a whole is incredibly clean. I could count on two hands the

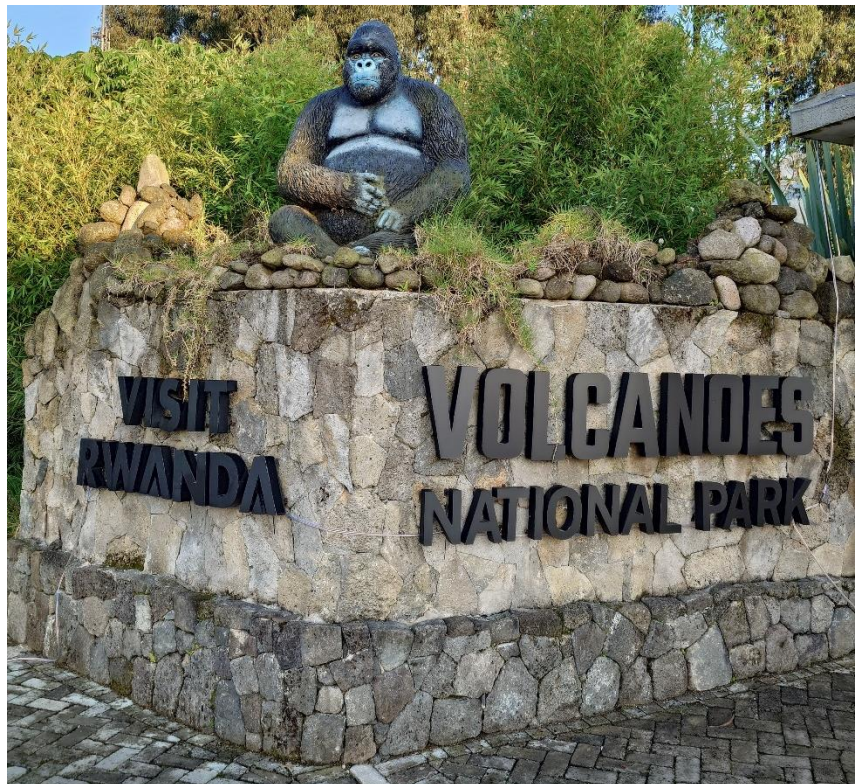
pieces of litter that we came across in Rwanda. Also, I highly recommend eating at either Kozo or Nyurah. Both restaurants were great.

We spent our one full day there at the Nyandungo Urban Wetland Eco Park that had some great ponds, good birds (per my dad), and plenty of Kigalians enjoying the park. No mammals, but a nice respite from the buzz of the city.

## Volcanoes National Park

The next morning, we were picked up at 4am for our journey to Volcanoes National Park. This got us there in time for the 7am briefing for our trek to see Golden Monkeys. It's remarkable that one could theoretically start the (early) morning in Kigali, see gorillas, and be back in Kigali that night.

Anyways, after arranging in our clusters based on our respective activities, we set out via a short drive to go see Golden Monkeys.







***Golden Monkey***

It didn't take long – we spotted some **Golden Monkeys** in a field en route. A few minutes later we arrived at one of the trailheads and cut through a farm to enter the boundaries of the national park. Within 300 feet of the boundary we met up with the troop of monkeys. They weren't terribly active, allowing some good photos. We also got a fleeting glance at a

**Black-Fronter Duiker**, but I was unable to take a photo.

My dad, who's 76, "flunked" the walking portion of the excursion, even though we didn't



***Scott & John preparing to gorilla trek***

have to go far to see the monkeys. However, the park rangers recommended that my dad take an "African Helicopter" the next day. I thought they were joking when they told me what it was – that 4 porters would carry him to the family of gorillas via a stretcher. But it turns out, that's a thing. So that's exactly what he did.





So we spent the next day trekking (or relaxing, in the case of my dad) to the Amahura **gorilla** family. Like the Golden Monkeys, this family was less than 1,000 feet within the park boundary.



The experience is pretty much everything you ever hoped for. 60 minutes with a family just observing and trying to take it all in. We watched some young brothers chase each other around a bundle of reeds. A silverback walked within inches of me. Another young gorilla grabbed my dad's pants.

For the most part, however, they're sort of a lazy bunch. Mostly docile



despite the fact that they're slowly on the move throughout the day.

The final day in Volcanoes National Park, my dad did some birding while I summited Mount



***Scott @ Mt Bisoke summit***

Bisoke, which was aerobically challenging with slick footing. Very similar in elevation profile to a Colorado 14er. We saw no mammals on the hike, although apparently it isn't uncommon to encounter a gorilla family en route.

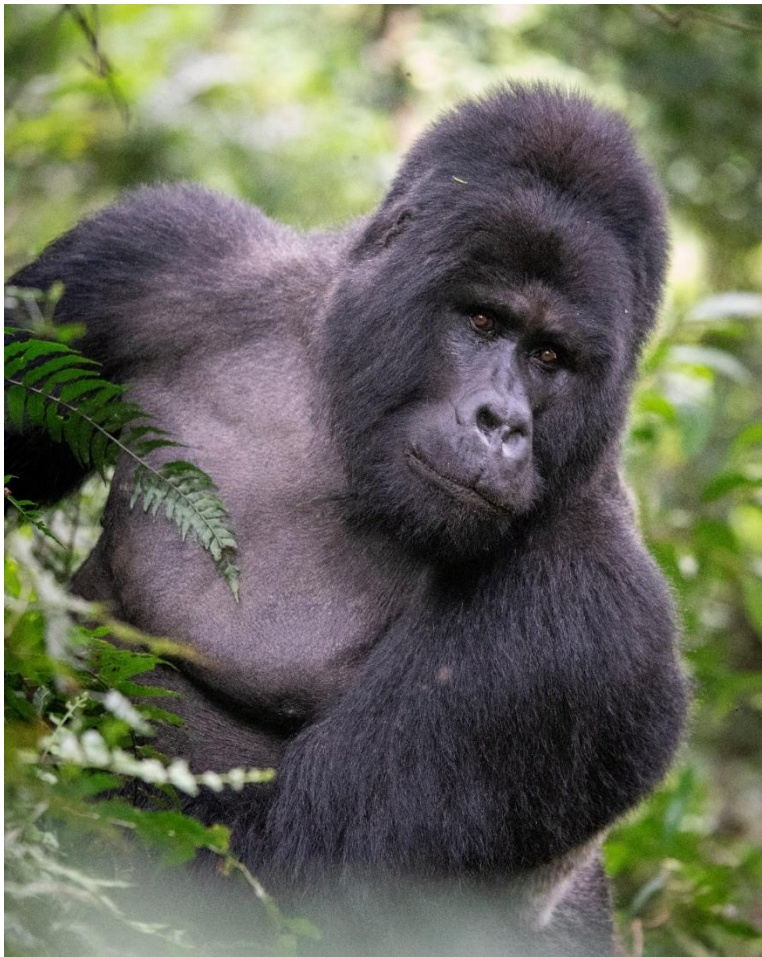
Just a side note on accommodations. We stayed at the Da Vinci Gorilla lodge. Nice digs. Not extravagant. Decent food. Very hospitable. Had a nice garden where my dad could bird.

## Bwindi National Park

From my hike of Mt Bisoke we hightailed it for a long and grueling drive to Bwindi National Park in Uganda. The border crossing was fairly painless. And the infrastructure in Uganda is fine for the most part. As you approach the national park it transitions to dirt roads (in contrast to Volcanoes which is paved right up to the visitor information center).

Whereas Volcanoes has a singular, centralized visitor center, Bwindi has four different sections, each with their own visitor information center. Anyhow, we were headed to the Ruhija section in the northeast part of the park, where we stayed at the lovely Bakiga lodge which had individual huts with incredible views.

The next morning I set out to do another round of gorilla trekking – my old man sat this round out to focus on birding. The orientations at Bwindi and Volcanoes are pretty different – Volcanoes is to-the-point and very organized. Bwindi is a little looser and there's typically a cultural song/dance from a local tribe that gets things started.



I enjoyed the overall Bwindi experience much more to Volcanoes. The topography is undulating hills, there's vast foliage and a thick canopy compared to Volcanoes' bamboo reed shrubbery. The trek to the Bitukura **gorilla** family therefore seemed much more authentic. And you have to earn it more that you do at Volcanoes.

While I had concerns that the canopy would give my camera fits, the consistent lighting and the fact that gorillas are on the ground and not in the trees, gave me a chance to get some killer shots with my 100-300 lens.





***Le'Hoest's Monkey***

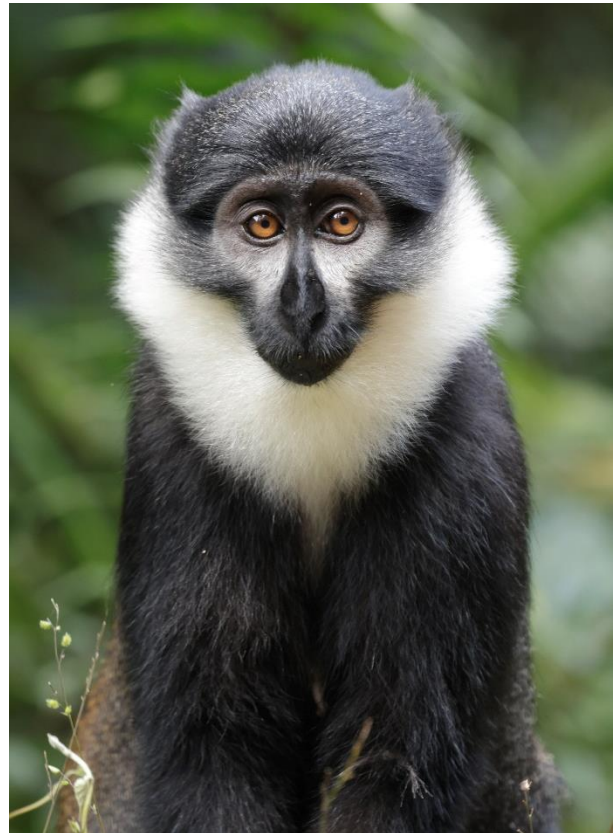
That afternoon we transitioned to the Buhoma section of the national park in the northwest – which apparently was good for birds and changed our accommodations to the Ride 4 Women Guesthouse which was very pleasant. On the ride we encountered multiple **Le'Hoest's Monkeys** off the side of the road, and a **Grey-Cheeked Mangabey** frolicking in the trees. On the frontier of the park, we encountered our first group of Olive Baboons.

The next morning I hiked the Munyanga River trail to see a series of cascading waterfalls. I had the trail

completely to myself, aside from the guide and ranger that accompanied me. En route, we saw 3 **Black-Fronted Duikers** and a few troops of **Red-Tailed Monkeys**. After the hike, I returned to the visitor information center where a family of **Black & White Colobus Monkeys** were camped out.



***Grey-Cheeked Mangabey***



***Le'Hoest's Monkey***



## Lake Kivu

After wrapping up the hike to Munyanga Falls, we began another brutal drive across the Rwandan border to Lake Kivu, arriving at about 10pm (Uganda is also an hour later than Rwanda).

Fortunately, the next morning we had some time to dilly dally so I kayaked around the lake where I saw a Malachite Kingfisher, and then did some light snorkeling, but not really seeing much.

Lake Kivu is absolutely beautiful, though. The first of the African Rift's great lakes that I've seen and well worth the descriptor. The shores are lush, at least on the Rwandan side. Although they aren't lush with natural vegetation – it's either farmed or residential – it provides excellent vistas in every direction.

Oddly enough, Lake Kivu doesn't flow north to link up with the White Nile basin. It flows south via the Rusizi river down to Lake Tanganyika which flows into the Congo basin and into the Atlantic



*Lake Kivu*

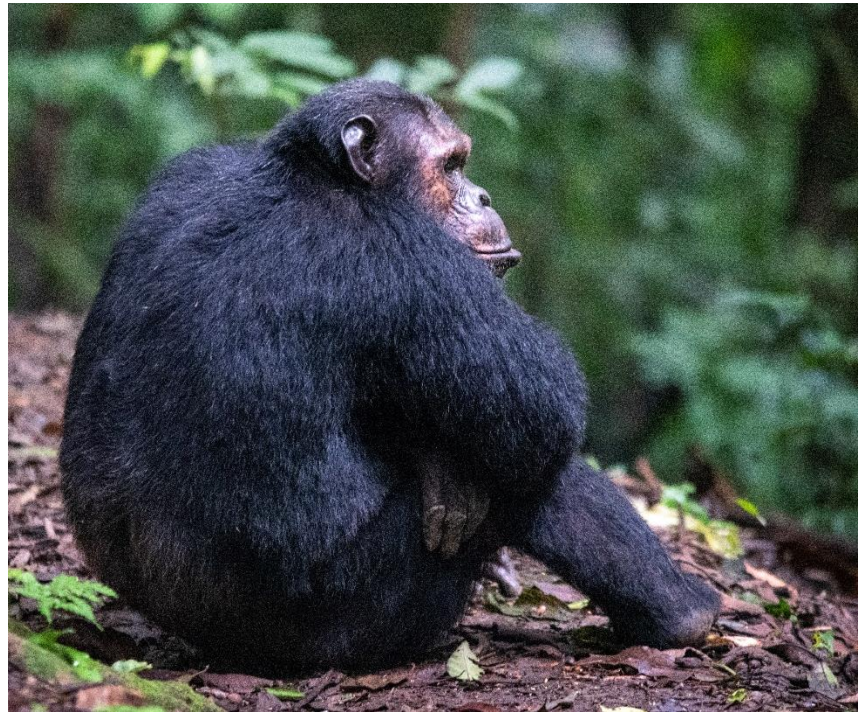
## Nyungwe National Park

Despite the unhurried morning, we still had to keep the train rolling as we were on to Nyungwe National Park further south. We settled into the Nyungwe Top View which was another nice bit of accommodations. Not fancy, but sizeable rooms and some trees to look at from the back balcony.

That evening we did a night drive into the park, which isn't gated like Bwindi is. We were able to see **Bushback** as well as two more **Black-Fronted Duikers**. We also saw a troop of **Angola Colobus** (B&W without the incredibly bushy tails that the ones in Bwindi had).

Obviously the primary goal of any trip into Nyungwe is **Chimpanzee**. I got a 5am start to the morning and taken to the Cyamudongo section of Nyungwe National Park. It's a 4mi<sup>2</sup> enclave that is completely separate from the rest of the park.

I had mistakenly thought to myself that *"if it's only 4 square miles, the trek can't be that bad, right?"* It turns out that chimp trekking is much more grueling, active, and ankle-breaking than even Bwindi gorilla trekking was. I ended up with maybe one good solid photo since they're always on the move. Still a great experience and definitely "earned" it.



There were a few **Dent's Mona Monkeys** that seem to like being on the periphery of chimp activity. Also saw a Black & White Casqued Hornbill which is a cool bird.



On the way out, we saw a **Blue Monkey**, which is apparently a Silver Monkey subspecies (as is the Golden Monkey, per some).

Back at the Top View lodge, we saw our first family of **Vervet Monkeys** on the trip.



*Dent's Mona Monkey*



*Vervet Monkey*

## Rusizi National Park

When originally researching this trip, I thought it'd be easy to pop across the border from Rwanda into Burundi since it's not too far from Nyungwe National Park. Unfortunately I found that the land border has been closed since 2024, which made logistics hard. But I've dammit, when would I have the chance to go to Burundi, the poorest country in the world, again? So despite the fact that the land border is closed, I headed there anyways, but flying from Kigali instead.

Burundi is a grave departure from clean, modern, fresh Rwanda. In fact it's a lot different than the hustle and bustle of Uganda. I stayed at the Hotel Du Lac Tanganyika which occupies a fantastic spot on Lake Tanganyika. It tries hard and the service was nice, but (like Burundi itself) has seen better days.

Regardless, I took the opportunity the next morning to take a boat ride into Rusizi National Park that was coordinated by the hotel for \$100 plus \$20 per person national park fee. The boat departs from the Hotel's "dock" if you want to call it that, and works its way west to the mouth of the Rusizi river, where dozens of **hippos** and a few crocs are out and about.

Certainly an enjoyable time for the two days I had there.

Side note: there's a craft brewery in downtown Bujumbura called Le Croco that's awesome and completely unexpected. Its cartoon logo features the famed "Gustave" a croc that's supposedly killed 200-300 people over the years in these waters.





## Species List

Species	Location
Golden Monkey [ <i>Blue Monkey Subsp.</i> ]	Volcanoes NP
Mountain Gorilla	Volcanoes NP & Bwindi NP
Grey-Cheeked Mangabey	Bwindi NP
Le'Hoest's Monkey	Bwindi NP
Olive Baboon	Bwindi NP & Nyungwe NP
Black-Fronted Duiker	Volcanoes NP & Bwindi NP
Red-Tailed Monkey	Bwindi NP
Black & White Colobus Monkey [ <i>C. guereza</i> ]	Bwindi NP
Bushbuck	Nyungwe NP
Angola Colobus [ <i>C. angolensis</i> ]	Nyungwe NP
Chimpanzee	Nyungwe NP
Dent's Mona Monkey	Nyungwe NP
Silver Monkey [ <i>Blue Monkey Subsp.</i> ]	Nyungwe NP
Vervet Monkey	Nyungwe NP
Hippopotamus	Rusizi NP