

ROAD WARRIORS *From top:* The main artery through Western Uganda; on the hunt for hyenas at Lake Mburo.



GOING APE

IT'S ONE OF THE LAST REMAINING REFUGES OF ENDANGERED MOUNTAIN GORILLAS, AND THEY DON'T CALL IT THE IMPENETRABLE FOREST FOR NOTHING

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRAD A. JOHNSON

MOSES GREETED ME WEARING KNEE-HIGH RUBBER GALOSHES AND WHAT LOOKS LIKE A MILITARY UNIFORM. HIS OUTFIT WILL CAMOUFLAGE HIM NICELY AS HE AND I HEAD OUT FOR A PRIVATE WALK THROUGH THE SWAMP-LINED SAVANNAH TO SNEAK UP ON HYENAS AND HIPPOS IN A REMOTE CORNER OF UGANDA'S LAKE MBURO NATIONAL PARK. AN AK-47 HANGS CASUALLY FROM HIS RIGHT SHOULDER.

I figure the gun holds at least 50 lethal rounds. It's 5:30AM and the rain is finally letting up as I climb out of our Pathfinder and step into a puddle of mud. I fleetingly question the success of a three-month-long shopping spree during which I sought to assemble the perfect safari look. But I decide the trade-off of looking stylish, as opposed to staying as dry as Moses, leans in favor of my new DKNY monkey boots.

I'm three days into a mountain-gorilla safari—knee-deep in the wilds of Africa—yet I am barely halfway to the apes. (Mountain gorillas, the largest of all primates, should not be confused with the much smaller lowland gorillas, which live in a variety of forests—and a few too many zoos. Mountain gorillas have never survived in captivity.) I arrived two nights ago in Entebbe and spent the first night in neighboring Kampala (where much of *The Last King of Scotland* was filmed) at the Serena Hotel, which opened last spring and is the city's most luxurious resort. The following morning, I met up with Sula, who will be my private driver for the next six days, and we set off on the roughly 350-mile, two-day drive into the aptly named Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, a remote mountain jungle in Southwestern Uganda, on the border of the Democratic Republic of Congo, near Rwanda. Lake Mburo, where I meet Moses, is the halfway point. It doesn't take me long to realize that getting to the gorillas is going to be as much fun as the final destination itself.

Before Sula picks me up at the Serena, I open the newspaper and browse the headlines. "MARKET RIOTS: Much of downtown Kampala remained closed yesterday due to a third day of riots..." "DRC TOWNS QUARANTINED FOR EBOLA VIRUS: Two towns in The Congo have been quarantined to contain an outbreak of Ebola hemorrhagic fever, a deadly disease for which there is no treatment..." "RWANDA OFFICIALS WARN JOURNALISTS: Reporters are not free to protect their sources and will be punished..." "MALARIA KILLS 320 DAILY IN UGANDA: But the number is decreasing..."

The road from Kampala is pocked with holes large enough to swallow small villages, but Sula steers us through the never-ending obstacle course at a surprisingly comfortable speed, always careful to avoid colliding with the constant parade of men who are pushing Cadillac-sized bundles of bananas on their bicycles along the road's rocky shoulder. Four-wheel drive and at least two spare tires are

essential—and we will have to repair both spares tomorrow morning before we set off again. Driving in the dark is utterly impossible (or, rather, just plain suicidal).

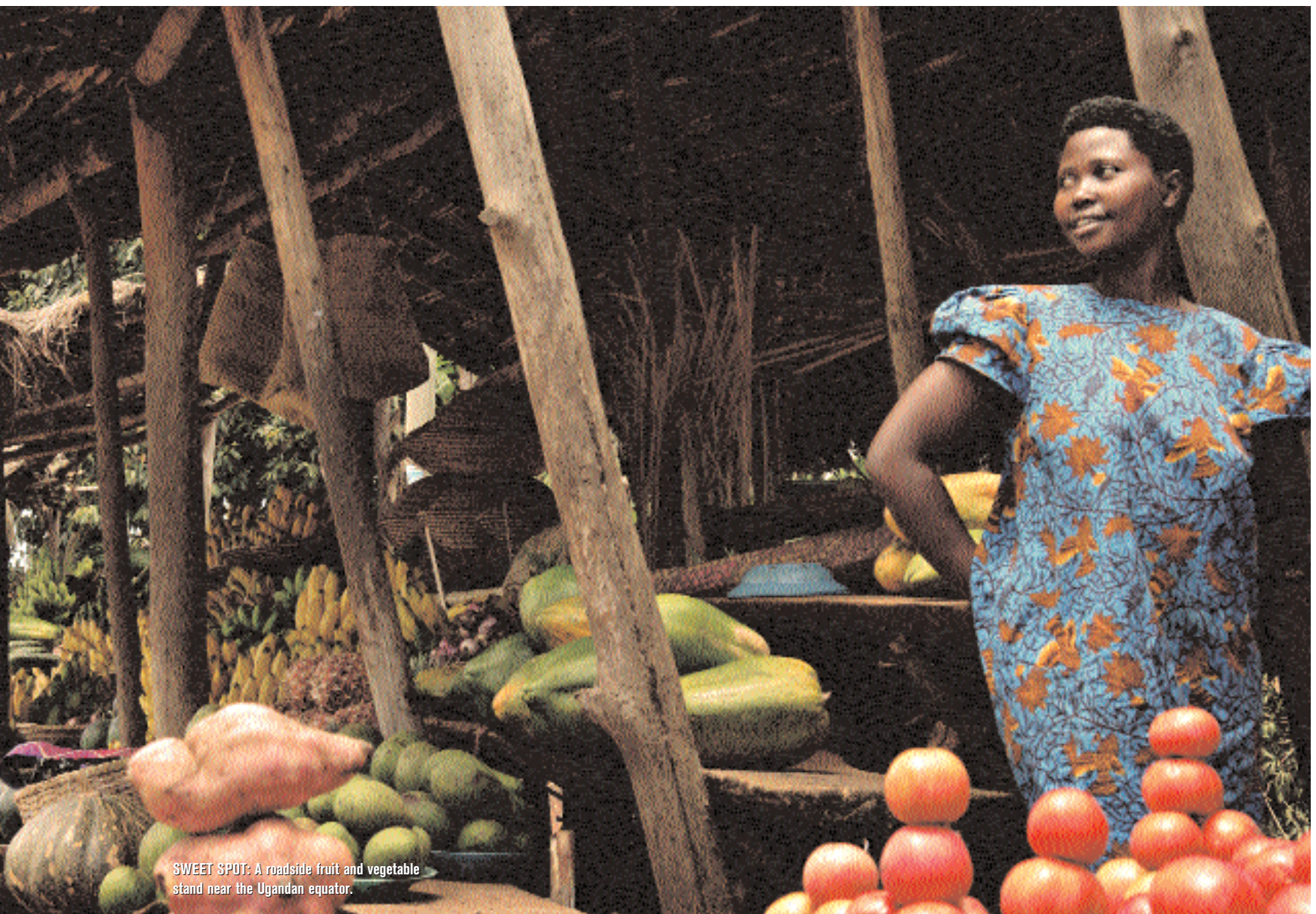
At 26, Sula is too young to remember anything about the late Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. Gracefully shy, he doesn't look at anyone without smiling at them. He loves Uganda and is immensely proud to be showing me around, but he is somewhat reluctant to elaborate about the time when, as a teenager, he was shot at by rebel guerillas in the rural area where he was raised—not far from where we're headed. It's a subject I sense he wishes he hadn't brought up. So I have plenty of time in silence to contemplate the passing scenery. The landscape is lush, dotted with log huts, tin huts, mud huts, huts woven from straw and the occasional lavish, gated suburb. We come to a stop several times when cows wander onto the road, cows whose massive horns defy the laws of biology and gravity. We pass a 5-foot-by-10-foot shack with smoke billowing out of its small chimney—a barbecue restaurant with a sign that reads "Jesus is the way!"

Lake Mburo is where we stop to get off the road before night falls. We shift into four-wheel drive and climb to the top of the highest visible peak to Mihingo Lodge, an eight-room tented camp of chic Flintstonian design with hot showers (heated by charcoal), flushable toilets, a rainwater infinity-edged pool and some very enjoyable African wines. The bartender hails from a nearby village and writes deliriously charming poetry about the local zebras,

Before we set out to find the gorillas, the trackers lay down a few rules. Rule No. 1: If a gorilla charges... DO NOT SCREAM. DO NOT RUN. Gorillas love a good chase, and they love to pick a fight.

CLOSE ENCOUNTER: Face-to-face with a mountain gorilla in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable Forest.





SWEET SPOT: A roadside fruit and vegetable stand near the Ugandan equator.

warthogs and monkeys. Opened last summer, this is—from what I can gather—the most luxurious safari camp in the region. Getting to my cabin entails a tenuous five-minute climb down a steep, slippery incline from the main lodge. “Be mindful of that snake,” the manager says, nonchalantly, as she shows me the way. My cabin, named Watering Hole, overlooks just that, a natural trough for buffalo, impala, klipspringers and something that snorts and ruts just outside my canvas walls and mesh windows in the middle of the night. (I am convinced that whatever it is has its face pressed against the screen, watching my every move—but the darkness is so black, I cannot see my hand in front of my nose.) Returning to the main lodge in the dark to grab another glass of wine—an advanced lesson in blindness—proves impossible without the assistance of one of the resort’s nimble night watchmen (from a local, indigenous tribe) and his kerosene lantern.

Leaving Lake Mburo, the second half of the drive into the Impenetrable Forest involves mostly dirt roads—heavily eroded by last night’s rains—and

a few questionable bridges that conjure Indiana Jones. At one of the route’s most thrilling hairpin curves, Sula stops to buy a sack of guavas from a couple of children who’ve appeared suddenly out of the misty abyss. He seems to have been expecting them, and they him. He negotiates a deal for their entire inventory, which he’ll share with other drivers once we reach camp.

Bwindi Impenetrable Forest is a heavily guarded park with highly restricted access. This remote puzzle piece of questionable borders (along with two nearby reserves) is one of the last refuges of the endangered mountain gorilla. The Ugandan and Rwandan governments estimate the total population of these primates to be around 700, divided into 20 to 30 different families. But the rangers who follow the apes and track their movements tell me they think the total census is closer to 800 this year, thanks to aggressive conservation efforts.

Only 24 preapproved and licensed visitors (three groups of eight, at most) are allowed into Bwindi each day to see the gorillas, and once the apes

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BIG TENT: A room at Mihingo Lodge at Lake Mburo.

are found, viewing is restricted to a maximum of one hour—or even less if the animals become agitated. Needless to say, permits aren't easy to come by. I was warned in advance that this would be an extremely strenuous adventure. Gorillas are wild, unpredictable beasts that rarely sleep in the same place twice. They are constantly on the move. Each family's patriarch—the 800-pound silverback or, the next best thing, a 500-pound blackback (not yet old enough to be a silverback, but still one hell of a badass)—occasionally feuds with the leaders of other groups. Jungle law dictates that the losing family must flee, and sometimes the entire family (10 to 30 members strong) will run for an entire day. Of the dozens of gorilla families in the region, only four are habituated to humans, which leaves 600 to 700 gorillas that are not necessarily apathetic toward tourists. So it is only these four families who are tracked for viewing, and if any of them gets into a fight today, finding them tomorrow could entail a 10-hour hunt through rugged, unforgiving jungle along a trail that's chopped on the spot by machete-wielding rangers. Near-vertical inclines and rushing rivers don't slow the gorillas down, either.

And, sure enough, the family (the Habinyanja Group) that I am to track on my first day is one that found itself on the retreating end of a fight two days prior. Yesterday's trackers left camp at 8AM and didn't return until two hours after dark. It rained most of the day, too. They arrived looking like endurance mud-wrestlers. They appeared dazed, confused and hungry—but not defeated. Beneath the mud and tears, there was elation in their eyes, a lingering reflection of the wild creatures they had eventually found after a brutal, punishing search.

Fortunately, the Habinyanja family was too tired to run any farther last night, so we're able to pick up their trail almost exactly where yesterday's trackers left off, a mere 20-minute climb from one of the few meandering dirt roads that hasn't yet been washed out. My second day of tracking (following the Rushegura family) tests my endurance only slightly more than the first. The gorillas' fresh trail (footprints, poop and a distinctive feral scent) leads us twice across a swift-moving river—with water up to my thighs. Even Moses' boots would have proved inadequate here.



GORILLA INFANTRY: A nine-month-old gorilla in Bwindi.

Before we set out to find the gorillas for the first time, the trackers lay down a few rules. Rule No. 1: If a gorilla charges... **DO NOT SCREAM. DO NOT RUN.** Be docile. Don't stare into his eyes. (It's almost certain to be a male who charges.) Look down and crouch to the forest floor in a nonthreatening position, and let it go around. Do not touch the animals. Gorillas love a good chase, and they love to pick a fight. But if you don't run—and as long as you appear to be nonthreatening—chances are the great ape will quickly lose interest. Gorillas are 99 percent vegetarian, but they will eat you if they're really pissed off and hungry enough.

The other nine rules deal mainly with jungle etiquette—don't leave any trash behind, keep your voice down, avoid sneezing on plants (gorillas are susceptible to our germs and diseases; they share something like 95 percent of our DNA), never use flash photography (they hate that as much as we do), etc. But my mind glosses over the subsequent rules because I'm still hung up on the one about gorillas loving a good chase.

Later that day, when the 800-pound gorilla does charge us, he is no more than 20 feet away. We surprise him—and he us. Our ranger has just swung his machete to clear some thick, Tarzan-type vines, and as the vines fall away, the silverback stands up, unamused. He screams like a banshee on steroids and hurtles himself, airborne, straight at us—the seemingly effortless result of a single, simultaneous thrust of four massive legs. I try with all my might to be frozen and invisible, to bow my head and slither quietly to the ground. But my body's natural reflexes have something else in mind. Before I know what is happening, I feel myself springing backwards, as if I'm being fired from a slingshot—a pure adrenaline response to a life-threatening situation. As I'm flying backward, I hear a sound I've never heard before echo from deep inside my throat, like a Beatles record played backwards, **GOING APE** CONTINUED ON PAGE 190...

ABOUT TOWN



Jim Klasser (far left) of Klasser-Klar Exterior Design, California Dreamin' by Jimmie Klasser, Exterior Designer and Kelli Kuma, Exterior Designer and Pacific Outdoor Living

THE EVENT

In October, elite crowds flocked to the prestigious Beverly Hills Garden and Design Showcase to see the unbelievable transformation of the Historic Greystone Estate. LA's best landscape exterior designers were specially selected to culture the gardens into beautiful, sustainable masterpieces, tailoring to their special theme of "Beverly Hills is Going Green."

THE HIGHLIGHT

The Ibin Living Room Salon, by Thom Filicia, is sophisticated, authentic and multi-layered defined by effortless elegance and purity in design.

THE SCENE

The eco-friendly vignette promoted native change, planting a decorated heel into the greener city of tomorrow. The most highly sought out ASD interior designers each undertook one of the 66 mansion rooms. Special celebrity guest interior designer Thom Filicia from the Style Network mesmerized audiences with his sophisticated main living room salon.



TOP LEFT The main living room that Thom Filicia from Style Network and Green Eye for the Grand City theme designed.

TOP RIGHT Thom Filicia (left) with Mike Meyer (right)



BOTTOM LEFT Landscape Designer Kristi Biddis, (From Santa Barbara) & Landscape Design Committee Member Kelli Kuma, (Boston Creative Image PR)

only stranger. The ranger, now kneeling, turns and gives me the international hand signal to shut up and be still. "Dude, that's exactly what I am trying to do," I mouth back, silently, mortified at my body's betrayal of my wits. I inch ever-so-slowly behind a large tree with another member of our group (I wasn't the only one to jump), and the beast soon realizes that none of us has any intention of answering his challenge. Disappointed and suddenly bored, he walks away on all fours. Trees and vines snap and crack in his wake.

The charging silverback aside, the rest of the gorillas prove surprisingly docile, exhibiting meek demeanors that belie their frighteningly large teeth. They are very aware of our presence—we are merely 15 feet away most of the time—and seemingly unbothered by it. A nine-month-old baby crawls on top of his mother's head, beats his chest and poses for a picture. The others simply ignore us (although at least one gorilla at all times keeps watch). Mostly they just cram sticks and bushes into their mouths—their jaws acting like trash compactors, able to crush sturdy limbs as if they were potato chips (an adult gorilla can eat 45 pounds of vegetation a day). At one point, the family we are viewing decides to pick up and move while we are ensconced in their midst. "Be very still," our ranger tells us as the gorillas begin to pass. One by one, five females and a couple of babies walk within an elbow's length of where I am doing my best Dian Fossey impression.

In Uganda, hospitality and tourism are still very young, thus service tends to be somewhat immature—and pampering, relative. But the Ugandan people are unshakably nice (this is often called the friendliest country in Africa), so any service deficiencies are quickly made up for in kindness. Plus, unlike other countries where safari groups by the busload literally bump into each other on the trail, here you can go for days on end without seeing more than two or three other tourists. In Lake Mburo, I saw only me, my tracker Moses, my driver Sula and the animals. In the Impenetrable Forest, the gorillas far outnumber their visitors, and, fortunately, Bwindi has no plans to increase the quota of viewing permits any time soon.

There are several quaint lodges at the base camp in Bwindi, the nicest of which is plainly named Gorilla Forest Camp. This is a series of permanent tents crafted from logs, adobe, sturdy canvas and thatched roofs, which don't put up much resistance to the damp chill that envelops the jungle at night. It can get achingly cold, too, so the watermelon-sized hot-water bottles tucked beneath the sheets at turndown service are a welcome touch, and the hot breakfasts are always excellent. Showers and toilets, while private and sufficiently modern, don't have solid walls, so if it's raining outside, it's probably raining a little in the bathroom, too.

One night, I hear a baboon rearranging the chairs on my porch. There are no phones, and there is only so much electricity that can be generated on-site each day (not enough to run a blow dryer, and batteries for iPods and cell phones have to be recharged at the front desk). But guests are given walkie-talkies. It's the only link with room service, but it's an efficient way of communicating in the jungle. In the morning, there's a soft knock on the door that serves as a wake-up call. Sometimes knocking doesn't do the trick, though. "Helloooo! Good morning, Mr. Brad? Helloooo!" It's still dark outside, and my personal valet is at the door with a pot of ridiculously good Ugandan coffee. And he's brought my boots, too, freshly cleaned and dried and warmed, ready for another unpredictable day with the gorillas.

GETTING THERE: Mountain Travel Sobek (www.mtsobek.com, 888.687.6235) is America's preeminent outfitter of luxury mountain-gorilla adventures, with unparalleled contacts and partners on the ground in Uganda. Rates from \$12,195, not including airfare. There are no direct flights from the U.S. to Entebbe, but South African Airways (www.flysaa.com, 800.722.9675) offers three flights per week from Johannesburg. **A**