

## DRC: VIRUNGA



Navigate the dense jungles of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, home to the critically endangered mountain gorillas, and learn of the fight for peace and stability on the frontline of conservation. Join this expedition to explore Virunga National Park, and you'll hike to the smoking lava lake of Mount Nyiragongo to sleep on its crater rim before exploring the gorillas' natural habitat. Then to the soaring peaks of the Rwenzori mountains in Uganda with their glaciated summits, dubbed the Mountains of the Moon, for a full scale confrontation with the extent of Central Africa's dramatic scenery.

### Aim

This expedition aims to climb volcanic Mount Nyiragongo within Virunga National Park, to sleep on the crater rim above the world's largest lava lake before heading into the forests in search of the critically endangered mountain gorillas and the dedicated rangers who protect them.

The expedition's secondary aim is to trek into the little-visited Ugandan Rwenzori mountains, known as the Mountains of the Moon, to witness the world's last equatorial glaciers. Gripping the summit of Africa's third highest mountain, Mt Stanley, and its neighbouring peaks, the glacier's rapid degradation is one source of the longest river in the world – the Nile.

Due to the dynamic security of eastern DRC, if it is not possible to complete this planned itinerary there is a contingency plan in Rwanda and Uganda which has been developed to showcase the diverse nature of the region including volcanic summits in Volcanoes National Park, gorilla trekking in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, and trekking through the Rwenzoris mountains.

### Highlights

- Climb Nyiragongo volcano, overnighting on the crater rim.
- Take a gorilla trek in Virunga National Park.
- Explore the Rwenzoris in Uganda.
- Meet Virunga's brave rangers, protectors of the park.

- Multi-day trek to glimpse the world's last equatorial glaciers.
- See the world's largest active lava lake.
- Safari in Uganda's Queen Elizabeth National Park.
- Discover the ecological diversity of Africa's oldest national park.

## What our teams say

*"This expedition is intense on so many levels. Never before had I witnessed such natural beauty and untouched landscape. From the mountain gorillas and volcanic lava lake, to the very physically challenging trek to the top of the Rwenzori Mountain Range, the scale and scope of this expedition are truly spectacular,"* – Michael Kelley, 2017 teammate.

## Why go

### Virunga National Park

In eastern DRC, Virunga is Africa's oldest national park and the continent's most biologically diverse protected area. The park straddles the borders of DRC and Uganda to contain the soaring summits of the Rwenzori mountains, a little-visited region of giant plants, glaciers and mountain lakes. In 1979, it earned a position as a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is home to Africa's third tallest mountain, Mt Stanley, and of course, the enigmatic mountain gorillas.

### Frontline Conservation and Sustainable Development

Where blessings are a curse, the mismanagement of the DRC's rich natural resources are the among the deep-seated roots of the country's deadly civil war which has raged over the past two decades. Bridging the gap between extreme poverty and the country's natural wealth, the Virunga Alliance has set out ambitious targets to establish sustainable development and stability in the region, by developing opportunities for local communities.

For details on the region and the complex issues facing the park, [visit their website](#) or watch the Virunga documentary (trailer below and available on NetFlix).

### Wildlife

The world's entire population of endangered mountain gorillas live in the Virunga Massif and Bwindi which span over the borders of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Uganda. While the population was believed to be as low as 250 in 1971, thanks to the successful conservation efforts of the national park in 2018, figures are estimated to be as high as 1000, nearly half of which live in Virunga. A highlight of this expedition is a day trek to visit mountain gorilla families living on the lush volcanic slopes surrounding Goma.

Following the Rwenzori trekking phase in Uganda, your team will travel south for an afternoon safari in Queen Elizabeth National Park. Set against the backdrop of the Rwenzoris, this famously ecologically diverse park is known for its big game such as buffalo, hippos, elephants, leopards, crocodiles, chimpanzees and Uganda's famous tree-climbing black-maned lions.

### Volcanic Terrain

The Virunga volcanoes are a chain of eight which straddle the DRC, Rwandan and Ugandan borders. Within the Virunga National Park alone, are two of Africa's most active volcanoes, including Nyiragongo containing the world's largest lava lake. The region's tectonic movements have created enormously varied topography with fertile volcanic soils which promote the growth of diverse jungle habitats.

Although this expedition takes place during the dry period, teammates should still expect deep mud in the jungle and slow progress at times through the Rwenzoris mountains. The jungle vegetation at lower levels gives way to

African alpine vegetation and rocky lava flows at higher altitudes. Expect to forge your own path through the jungle and take on challenging scrambles as you trail blaze your route.

## **The Plan**

Secret Compass runs expeditions with framework itineraries, rather than guided tours with set daily plans. The following is the outline plan for this epic and incredibly varied expedition to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Rwanda. A fuller itinerary is provided in the Expedition Handbook which is available on request or upon application to join the team.

### **Teammates Arrive**

The expedition starts at 1800 on Day 1 at the team hotel in Kigali, Rwanda. Many incoming flights land in the early hours to allow sightseeing beforehand. The hotel offers free airport transfers, this element will be confirmed by Secret Compass once team members submit their flight details. After a welcome dinner and expedition briefing from the expedition leader at 1800, the group will have an early night before the drive to the DRC border at Goma. Crossing the border is an exercise in patience (and paperwork) before the group officially enters the DRC and heads out to buy supplies for the next few days exploring Virunga National Park from their safari-tent style camp.

### **On Expedition**

From camp, the team will meet rangers from Virunga National Park before heading onto forest trails in search of endangered mountain gorillas. Depending on the location of the family this can take up to four hours and serves as an acclimatisation trek ahead of the following day's ascent to Nyiragongo volcano to sleep overlooking the lava lake. This is the world's largest and indeed one of the world's few active lakes. Returning to Goma, the team will make preparations for the Rwenzoris phase in Uganda transferring to Kasese ahead of the trek into the Mountains of the Moon. From here you'll meet more National Park rangers and local porters for the trek into the mountains reaching altitudes of up to 4462m.

### **Goal Achieved**

After the challenging trek to gaze on some of the world's last, equatorial glaciers, you'll descend to the ranger station for an evening of celebration. The following day involves driving a transfer to Uganda's Queen Elizabeth National Park for an afternoon safari on the Kazinga Channel. Driving back to Kigali, the expedition returns to the team hotel for a final celebration meal. You're free to depart any time on the final day of the expedition (including in the early hours of the morning though the expedition officially ends after breakfast) with airport transfers arranged by the hotel.

### **Plan B**

Secret Compass closely monitors the security situation of all its expedition locations, and as such, if closer to the departure date it is decided for any reason we deem this planned itinerary not possible, there is a contingency plan in place. This Plan B itinerary takes in the Volcanoes National Park, gorilla trekking in Uganda and a diverse trek through the Ugandan Rwenzoris with wide-ranging views of Mt Stanley.

### **Fitness**

Secret Compass expeditions are achievable by anyone with a healthy lifestyle and a good level of general fitness. The most challenging element of this expedition to the DRC is likely to be the rough and exploratory trekking and scrambling.

Applicants will receive a Virunga & Rwenzoris Expedition Handbook with further expedition information. View Secret Compass's suggested Expedition Training Advice and get in touch with any fitness, health, training or kit questions that remain.

Teammates who arrive without meeting the agreed minimum fitness requirements can jeopardise themselves and the expedition's goal so do take training seriously, prepare as appropriate and arrive fit and ready to go!

Teammates must be comfortable with the following.

### Minimum Fitness Requirements

- Trek: up to 25km a day with small scrambling elements.
- Daily activity: between approx. six and 10 hours per day.
- Carry: up to 20kg in a rucksack.
- Terrain: challenging at upto 4600m. Includes narrow, uneven paths; rocky, mountainous and occasionally exposed ascents; descents potentially in poor visibility; and a variety of volcanic terrain. There will be some scrambling.
- Climate: temperatures ranging +10C to 30C with cooler evenings at altitude and high humidity.
- Swim: there will be some river crossings.
- Age: 21+

### Included

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- Professional Secret Compass expedition leader with full communications and medical kits.
- In-country local guides and drivers.
- All meals.
- All transport as outlined in the itinerary.
- All specialist and safety equipment.
- All accommodation including tents.
- All local permits.
- DRC visa (through the National Park. Secret Compass will arrange this for you but ultimately the final decision on whether a visa is issued or not rests with the DRC government). Visa advice will be given to booked teammates in a timely manner.

#### Not Included

- International [flights](#).
- [Travel insurance](#) (obligatory).
- Local airport taxes.
- Visas for Rwanda and Uganda.
- Tips to local guides (discretionary but always appreciated).
- Beverages and any costs of a personal nature.
- Personal equipment (your Handbook will contain a kit list).
- Any accommodation or transport outside of the Secret Compass itinerary.

### Exped FAQ

On application, potential teammates will receive a detailed Expedition Handbook. Here are some expedition-specific questions and our general FAQ will answer many other questions. Get in touch if your question remains unanswered.

#### Will we definitely see gorillas?

We definitely hope so! One of the highlights of the expedition is joining the national park rangers to spend an hour with one of the gorilla families, whilst we can't guarantee that your trip will be successful it is very rare for a group to miss out on this amazing experience. Secret Compass cannot guarantee gorilla sightings.

### **What if the park closes?**

Virunga National Park has had to close to tourists either partially or in its entirety, several times over its history. If this occurs, an interesting alternative itinerary will be provided in Rwanda and Uganda which fits the same dates and start/end location for minimal disruption to team members. This option has been thoroughly recce'd by Secret Compass and offers a diverse experience through the Rwenzoris Mountains, Volcanoes National Park and Bwindi Impenetrable Rainforest. If the decision is taken to use the Plan B itinerary, all arrangements will be taken care of by Secret Compass except for visas for Rwanda and Uganda.

### **Is it safe?**

Secret Compass takes a comprehensive approach to risk management, from pre-expedition planning to our highly qualified and experienced leaders on the ground – you can read more about our approach to risk [here](#). If the situation deteriorates in DRC and we make the decision to no longer use the planned itinerary, we have robust contingency plans in place including an alternative itinerary.

### **Can I charge all my electricals?**

There will be charging facilities at the hotels in Kigali and Goma (as long as there's no power cuts!) but none during the trekking section of the expedition – you will need to be prepared with extra batteries or solar panels.

### **I'm a vegetarian. Can I join?**

Teammates with dietary requirements are welcome to apply for this expedition and should state their specific requirements when applying. The food situation is outlined in the Practicalities tab and Secret Compass may request further information before approving your application.

### **Will there be telephone signal?**

There should be mobile signal in towns but you are unlikely to have any coverage in the mountains. Secret Compass carry a comprehensive emergency communications kit including a satellite phone.

### **What if the volcano erupts?**

Secret Compass have robust contingency plans and alternative routes for each aspect of the expedition and the volcanoes are constantly monitored by experienced park officials.

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### **Can I arrive a day late?**

As The Plan outlines, there is a chain of transport to get teammates into DRC so late arrivals cannot be catered for. If you wish to arrive in Rwanda in advance of the trip or extend your stay at the end, you are welcome to do so but please make sure your visa covers your entire stay.

### **How can I find out more?**

Get in touch with SCHQ to receive a copy of the Expedition Handbook with further details on this upcoming expedition and the next steps to joining the team.