

# Virunga Mountains



## Further Links

- Viewing the Mountain Gorillas
- Beautiful mountain scenery
- Golden Monkey trekking

## Situation

Northern Rwanda, bordering Uganda & Congo.

## Activities

Gorilla trekking, forest hikes.

The Virunga Mountains are a range of six extinct and three active volcanoes on the border of Rwanda, Uganda and DRC. Within them lies the Volcanoes National Park (Parc des Volcans) protecting the mountain gorillas in Rwanda.

The tallest of the mountains which is Karisimbi at 4507m, though they are all over 3000m tall. The landscape and vegetation is similar all sides of the borders, with swathes of bamboo forest and montane forest. This was the park in which Dian Fossey worked in her study of mountain gorilla behaviour, until she was murdered at Karisoke Research Centre in 1985. The park was closed in 1994 due to the genocide in Rwanda, but reopened in 1999.

The volcanoes are really more individual cone shaped mountains than a mountain 'range' as they sit on the fault line which shaped the African Great Rift Valley. The names of the mountains translate into local perceptions for example, Sabyinyo translates as 'old mans teeth' which relates to the jagged tops of this mountain. Muhabura is 'the guide' and is an example of a perfect cone, which glowed at night to light the way.

Vegetation on the volcanoes is similar to other East African mountains although much of the lower slopes is now cultivated by farmers. There is semi-deciduous forest up to 2800m then bamboo forest and tall hagenia woodlands. At higher altitudes there is a cover of moorland, grassland and marsh with giant lobelias towering above you, similar to the Ruwenzori Mountains in Uganda or Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. There are a total of over 1260 plant species across the range of mountains including plenty of Albertine

## Rift endemics.

The gorillas are obviously the main attraction in the Virungas, where about 480 of these endangered animals live, spread across 420km in three countries on the slopes of the six dormant volcanoes. There are also enjoyable nature walks and other quite strenuous hikes to take here including a 'Golden Monkey' hike which takes about 2-5 hours and visits a troop of animals which have become used to humans, there are about 40 animals in the group. There is also a strenuous hike to Karisoke, the remains of Dian Fossey's research station and grave site which takes about 6 hours or you can do a nature walk on Mt Bisoke which is done with a parks guide as wild animals such as buffalo may be found along the way.

The terrain in the Virungas is hilly, very muddy and tracking gorillas can involve climbing through dense vegetation - be prepared for a tiring day and the trek could take anything up to 8 hours (though they are usually found in around 2-3 hours). See separate trip details for more about the actual gorilla trek.

