

Island of the apes: meeting the lucky chimps of Lake Victoria

In the 1960s, a pioneering conservationist began sending rescued animals to a remote island sanctuary. Now tourists can join them.



Nigel Tisdall - JANUARY 4 2019

Am I about to meet the luckiest chimpanzees in the world? As I fly over the ruddy hills of south-west Tanzania in a tiny single-prop aeroplane, my background reading certainly suggests so. In 1966, 10 of these most engaging primates were rescued from European zoos and taken to Rubondo, a remote, uninhabited and predator-free island on Lake Victoria, where their descendants survive. The mastermind behind this madcap adventure in rehabilitation was Professor Bernhard Grzimek, a German conservationist who was the director of Frankfurt Zoological Society for 29 years. He received an Academy Award for his 1959 documentary *Serengeti Shall Not Die* and penned some 20 books that reveal both his passion for wildlife and his unorthodox methods for studying it. One bizarre and highly dangerous experiment involved placing a large inflatable lion, elephant and rhinoceros in front of their living counterparts, apparently to discover “what goes on in animals’ heads”. Chimps were a particular obsession. In 1945, after Berlin Zoo had been destroyed by bombing, Grzimek took several into his flat, resulting in “numerous scars”.

He made his 16-year-old son, Michael, spend a month transporting a giant male chimpanzee back from Ivory Coast, only for it to die on arrival. Both father and son loved to fly around east Africa in a Dornier 27 painted like a zebra. In 1959 it hit a vulture and crashed, killing Michael. Fifteen years later, Grzimek married his son’s widow. Travelling in this forgotten corner of Tanzania still has a feel of those freewheeling times. “I envy you staying on Rubondo,” admits Tron Williams, the South African co-pilot on my early flight east from the Rwandan capital, Kigali.

“The island looks like something from Jurassic Park,” he enthuses, “just a mass of green forest with a little air-strip.” Not that I can see it, for as we draw near a thunderstorm erupts, sending the plane lurching as lightning dances over what now looks like a gloomy Scottish loch. Lake Victoria is the world’s second-largest lake, its somnolent shores and islands sprinkled with tin-roofed villages and wooden jetties where fishing boats cluster. It seems woefully under-appreciated, and must have seemed an ideal place to play Noah’s Ark half a century ago. Grzimek’s assorted chimps had originally been abducted in infancy from the forests of west Africa, then spent from three months to nine years in various zoos. Most were now fully grown and sexually mature — so no longer the mischievous youngsters the public liked to see. The photos of them being released here from wooden crates after their five-week, 16,000km journey from Antwerp have an entertaining sense of “light touch paper and retire”. One male had to be shot after attacking a warden, but the rest thrived in their 237 sq km island sanctuary. (Chimps can’t swim, although as they share 98 per cent of our DNA, I’m not ruling out the possibility they might learn.) Grzimek didn’t stop there. Another six chimps were brought to Rubondo, along with 20 black-and-white colobus monkeys, 16 full-grown rhinos, 12 giraffes and two pairs of roan antelopes. In 1973 six young elephants were added, followed in 2000 by a flock of grey parrots from Cameroon that were seized in Nairobi while being smuggled to Asia.

What became of this strange menagerie? That is the wonder of Rubondo, and a chief reason to visit. There has been a small camp here since 1997, which in 2012 was bought by Asilia, an Arusha-based safari company with a taste for out-of-the-way locations — other properties include The Highlands, a cluster of geodesic domes in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area set at 2,660m, and Namiri Plains in the cheetah-rich grasslands of the eastern Serengeti. Today Rubondo Island Camp has eight thatched cottages set beside a 200km sandy beach, with a small pool and decked restaurant. The style is unpretentious, off-radar and supremely restful. During the past six years Asilia has donated more than \$180,000 towards the habituation of Rubondo’s chimps — the process of gradually getting the animals accustomed to human observers, so they can be studied in the wild. Run in conjunction with the Tanzania National Parks Authority and the conservation NGO Honeyguide, the project has been so successful the camp has now launched a three-night “habituation experience” offering guests the chance to be a part of this process. “Most of our guests see the chimps,” confirms my guide, Dunia Lukongola, as we set off with an armed ranger to try our luck. There are now about 60 chimps, split into two groups, but as Rubondo is 26km long they can be hard to find, and the 12-strong habituation team take pride in never offering them food or using sound to draw attention. The best time to visit is in the dry season from June to September but encounters are never guaranteed. Yesterday’s violent storm hasn’t helped, so we’re instructed to climb up a ridge and await instructions. Three hours later, I’m still there.

Rubondo Island Camp © Nigel Tisdall Fortunately, Rubondo has much in the way of compensation. While the island’s rhinos fell victim to poachers, today there are more than 100 elephants, along with a similar number of giraffes enjoying a stress-free life in which snakes represent their only threat. A game drive reveals an abundance of fish eagles, sitatunga and bushbuck, while fishing for Nile perch at sunset brings satisfying results. When I spy another boat trying for a whopper (the record is 104kg) I’m shocked — I’d assumed we had the place to ourselves. In fact some 50 people live here, mainly camp and park staff. The island gets about 1,000 visitors a year, with inexpensive accommodation also available in self-catering bandas run by the park authorities. Rubondo was declared a game reserve in 1966, then a park in 1977, and there is nothing to remind visitors of the 400 Banyarubondo people who fished and farmed here before this.

“There was no compensation,” reflects David Tibanywana, a retired schoolteacher who was forced to leave the island at the age of 18. Now he lives in Muganza, a 15-minute boat ride away, and while he is nostalgic for his lost home such displacement has been common in the creation of Africa’s parks. His nephew, Emmanuel Itamula, now works as a boatman for the Asilia camp, and local farmers are employed to grow its vegetables. An elephant on the trail

The next day we climb a different hill, and the moment we reach the summit there is an excited call — the trackers have found a party of 17 chimps. We’re in the wrong place, though, so down we go again and after a hectic 45-minute drive we plunge into the forest on foot. “We’ll need to step up the pace!” urges Hamza Raza, another expert Asilia guide, but there are no paths through the tangled branches and I’m painfully aware how much easier it is for chimps to swing and leap through the trees. At one point Dunia’s radio picks up their screeches and hee-hees, which seem to mock our hot and flustered pursuit. Two-and-a-half hours and 10km later, we stop for a breather. Have they beaten us? Luckily, the chimps have had enough of this runaround too. “Come — we’ve found five with a baby!” a tracker whispers urgently. The thick vegetation makes a sighting and photography tricky, but we gradually creep within 10 metres of a six-year-old male, Mgwesa. Stretched out on some leaves, he yawns lazily, baring his teeth as a member of the habituation team makes notes. “Does he know we’re here?” I ask naively, at which point Mgwesa stands up and gives us a good hard look. There is a piercing thrill when you go eye to eye in the wild with our closest relative in the animal kingdom. It is a mutual sense of wonder, like trying to place a face through the mists of evolution. Then suddenly Mgwesa’s off, up into the trees to snack on mbungo fruits and crash around so that twigs, branches and eventually a mighty log come tumbling down, forcing us to pull back. It is a clear lesson in who is king of this jungle, after which Mgwesa nonchalantly swings off to find his mates. Driving through the forest for some game spotting It has been a memorable meeting, but begs the question where, for the traveller, is the sweet spot in the process of habituation? Now, I would suggest. Two years earlier, I might not have seen anything.

A decade on, will Rubondo’s chimps be so used to visitors they become just another turn-up-and-click experience? Grzimek would surely welcome such developments, for his aim was to encourage travellers to Tanzania to do more than pay “lightning visits” to its flagship wildlife-viewing arenas, the Ngorongoro Crater and Serengeti. The location of Rubondo and its chimps means the island could become the midway stop on a bucket-list itinerary combining those classic sights with the mountain gorillas of Rwanda. It is also a viable alternative to Zanzibar as a place for some downtime, even if swimming is out of the question thanks to hippos, crocodiles and the risk of bilharzia. “I wanted somewhere to relax that was still close to nature,” explains a fellow guest, Punit Mehta. A New York banker, he was visiting for a few days after climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. “So far I’ve seen a python and crocodiles, caught a massive Nile perch, glimpsed a chimp and fallen in love with hippos.” Asilia has plans to build a second camp further north at Masekela, which will be closer to the habituated chimps and have luxuriously appointed tree houses, but for the moment Rubondo remains a blissful spot to escape the safari circus. On my last morning, Hamza points out a tiny, white-bearded face high in the fig trees. It’s a magnificent black-and-white colobus monkey with a long train of white fur descending like a waterfall. Close by sits a fine pair of grey parrots, their red tail feathers flashing bright — had life taken another course they would now be pets in a cage.

Tinkering with the natural world is always hazardous, but in the curious case of Rubondo, Professor Grzimek's intervention has had clear rewards. Details Nigel Tisdall was a guest of Asilia. Three nights at Rubondo Island Camp costs from \$2,109 per person, including full-board with drinks and most safari activities. Park fees are \$30 per person per day and a chimp tracking permit \$90 per person. Coastal Aviation has daily flights to Rubondo from Kilimanjaro and Kigali