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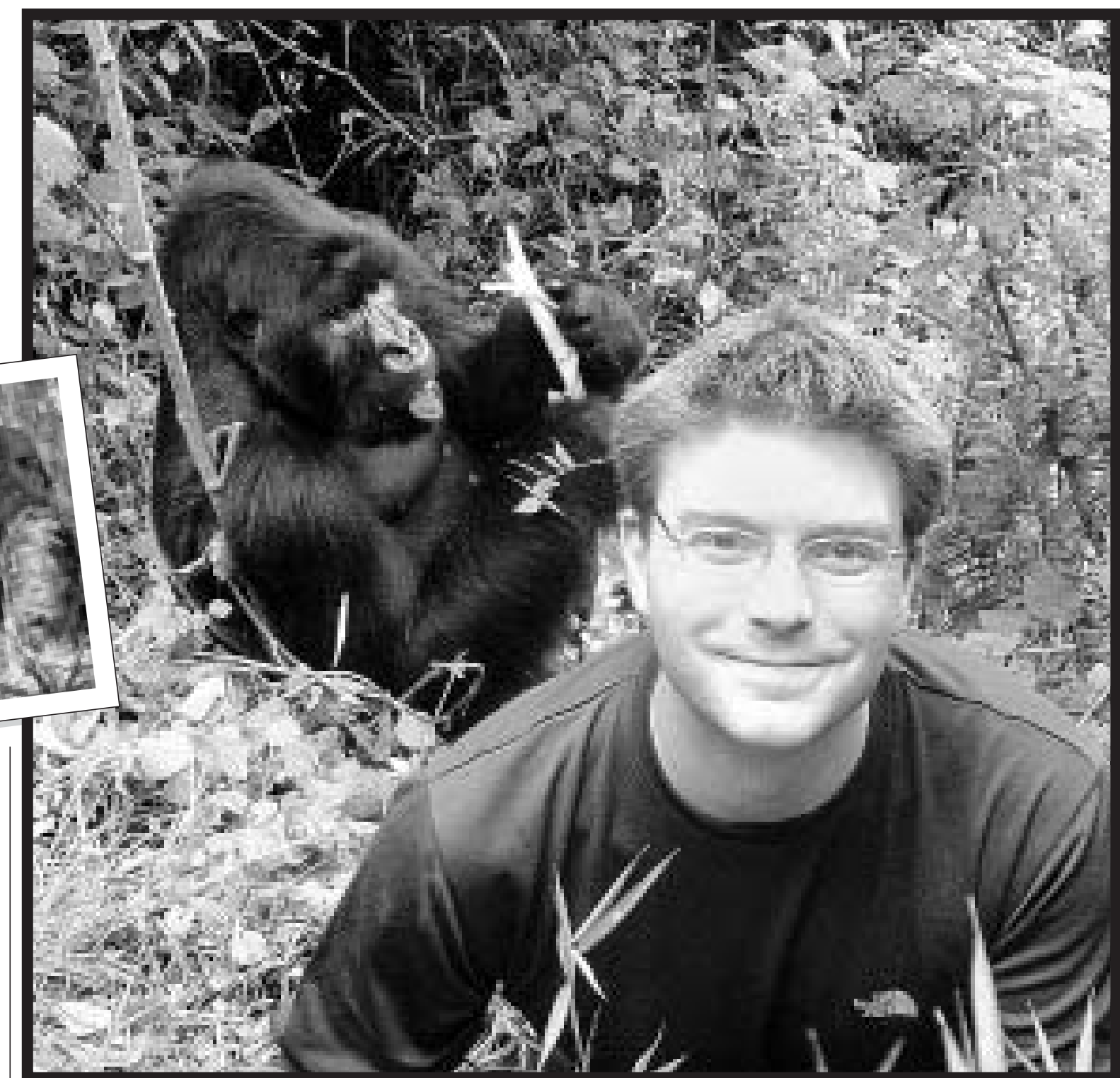
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# Travel

EDITED BY JANE MEMMLER

While the movie world goes wild at the sight of a giant ape perched atop the Empire State Building, NAT BARNES visits Rwanda to catch a rare glimpse of the mountain gorillas



AWE-INSPIRING: The gorillas were completely at ease as Nat Barnes enjoyed his jungle experience. Inset, the new King Kong blockbuster

**O**UR GUIDE Diogene raises his right hand in front of us and turns, putting his index finger to his lips: "Keep your voices down, we are almost with them." Everyone looks at each other tentatively, the air understandably thick with both excitement and nerves for we are about to come face to face with a group of 40 mountain gorillas - some of the most powerful animals in the world.

Our first sighting leaves us more speechless than scared. As we make our way through the final sections of the thick Rwandan forest after a two and a half hour trek, we see a mother happily sitting eating bamboo while her young infant feeds nearby. It is a picture of such natural beauty that our group are paralysed by the scene before, one by one, we slowly remember to reach for our cameras to record the experience.

David Attenborough - who came here to shoot that famous Life On Earth gorilla sequence in 1979 - is one thing, seeing a gorilla for yourself, close up, is quite another. After all, here is an animal that is so immensely strong that it can snap through thick bamboo shoots as if they were twigs. Yet at the same time it is caring for its young with staggering dexterity and finesse. That such a gentle animal could thrive in a country with such a gruesome recent history as Rwanda is one of life's great paradoxes. That the country is so stunningly beautiful, with surprisingly lush green forest everywhere you look, is another.

Of the 700 or so mountain gorillas left in the world, more than half are in Rwanda, in these forests in the Virunga Volcanoes National Park in the north-west Ruhengeri region.

Thanks to the gorillas Rwanda is starting to hit the headlines for all the right reasons. The 1988 film about Dian Fossey, Gorillas In The Mist, was shot on location here. Lead actress Sigourney Weaver made a return trip in May this year to see how much has changed since then. More recently, Andy Serkis, star of the forthcoming new King Kong epic, came to Rwanda to study the gorillas' mannerisms before filming.

In fact, it doesn't take long among the gorillas to realise just why they are so popular. The Susa group that we have been tracking is the largest of the five groups

within the national park. It comprises 40 gorillas, including four of the dauntingly large adult male silverbacks and a set of twins. With 30 baby gorillas born in the park in the past three years, it is clear to see that they are thriving.

But it's the head of the Susa group, a silverback called Kurira, that stops us in our tracks. As we make our way into a clearing he's sitting down nonchalantly eating his way through the nearby foliage.

Male silverbacks grow until they are 25 years old - but even at 24 it's hard to imagine Kurira any bigger. Even sitting down he's easily as tall as me (6ft 1in) and must weigh at least 300kg (47 stone). But while his size is awe-inspiring, it's not intimidating, even when the other gorillas walk past us at less than arm's length. And with the constant threat posed by poachers stealing baby gorillas, they have every right to be afraid.

After an all-too-brief hour, it is time to move on. Visits are kept short to avoid stressing the gorillas and protect them from human infections, such as colds to which they are very susceptible.

That doesn't stop their popularity though. Around 10,000 people are estimated to have seen the gorillas in 2005 (limited to 40 places per day) and in the high season the treks can

TURN TO NEXT PAGE

# Meeting the real KING KONG