

Anticipation

So there I was in Kisoro, Uganda waiting to start my gorilla trek. While trying to determine which overland safari to book, the ability to obtain a trekking permit was somewhat of a determining factor. For \$500 you're given an opportunity to see highland mountain gorillas. We had sent 2 groups the day before and they had a great time, got lots of close pictures so there was a certain level of certainty that we'd do the same.

I was asked the previous day if I was "excited" to be trekking and I guess I surprised the small audience by saying I was "optimistic". I guess by the time you reach 46, you've had plenty of instances where the actual event doesn't live up to the advanced billing. Since I don't really consider myself a great animal photographer, I was content to get a handful of "keepers" and leave it at that.

Kisoro, Uganda. I leave with a handful of compatriots for our gorilla trek. We get divided into two groups in search of two different gorilla "families". One family is robust, 22 in number. The other, basically the land of misfits, is only 6. Of course I get assigned to this family. The hike up was steep, the terrain living up to its name of the impenetrable forest. After an hour on the hoof, we reach our gorillas. Ridding ourselves of the hiking poles, backpacks and food, we go to meet our family. A 10-second encounter ends when one of our party stumbles on a bit of the impenetrable and yells out. The gorilla bolts, and we're in pursuit. Needless to say, the gorilla was better suited to move amongst the branches and overgrowth than 8 foreigners lugging cameras and lenses. Our guides did their best to clear a path to the still-moving gorilla, but the cause was lost. Several near sightings and some sound effects and after about 5 to 10 minutes of hazy viewing at best, our time with the gorillas was over. Disappointment didn't even cover it, since we had to retrace our haphazard path thru the brush to retrieve our bags, poles and lunch, then hike out. Dirty, exhausted and dejected, we poured back into the vans for the return trip to our lodging.

I had a sense that this outcome was a distinct possibility since nothing is ever guaranteed out in the bush, but I was frankly thinking this complete "shutout" was still unlikely. Thankfully my trip was built upon more than just a few odd moments spent with a gorilla, so the end-result won't be affected too drastically, but for others in our group this was something not exactly planned.

A week later we had just come off a decent tour of the Serengeti and were camping out on the edge of the Ngorogoro Crater. I had been here 9 years ago and had a wonderful day behind the lens. The lighting, availability to the wildlife and a capable driver all combined to make for a memorable trip. This time around, there were a lot more variables at play. Coming off the lackluster gorilla trek, I had hoped to rebound in the crater, but early on I knew this too would leave a lot to be desired. The temperature had dropped drastically and at high altitude I knew this meant fog at best, rain at worst. We piled into 4 Land Rovers and drove to the crater floor. Gone were the sunny skies, the availability of animals, though we still maintained a good guide. In our half-day tour we covered some ground, came upon a group of 6 lions, but that was about it. As we pulled up and out of the crater I again was struck by the weight of an opportunity lost. Thankfully I still have the negatives and prints from that first magical encounter and can now view them with the knowledge that wildlife is never guaranteed.

Both instances have reinforced the notion that while it's best to be prepared for greatness, almost as importantly is to keep an appreciation for what can end up happening once you hit the gate. The gorilla trek turned out to be about the reality not living up to a preconceived ideal, and with Ngorogoro, it was the thought that you can't catch lightening in a bottle.

Enjoy every sunrise and sunset. Occasionally leave your camera in the bag and let your eyes be your lens to the world.

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