

GORILLA HIGHLANDS VOLUNTEER INFO



GREETINGS FROM MIHA

Hi, my name is Miha Logar, and I started Gorilla Highlands in 2011 as an initiative highly reliant on international volunteers. It is exciting to know that you are preparing to join us!

First, something about me: even though I am a proud owner of a Ugandan passport and Rwandan residency, I was born in Slovenia in 1974. That is a pretty Alpine country in the centre of Europe but just a tad too boring for my taste... I've been in East Africa since 2000, trying to keep my Slavic accent that helps locals understand me better, and doing many different things. Originally a journalist, I've obtained a Masters degree in Development Studies from Uganda Martyrs University, and learned from many years of practical experience.

You can get to know me better through my blog: www.gorillahighlands.com/miha. From the same website I suggest downloading the latest edition of the Pocket Guide (www.gorillahighlands.com/pocketguide) that will help you locate the place that is about to become quite important to you... Edirisa on Lake Bunyonyi. Your base. I hope you will feel comfortable and productive here; our life is pretty simple and the environment relatively basic.

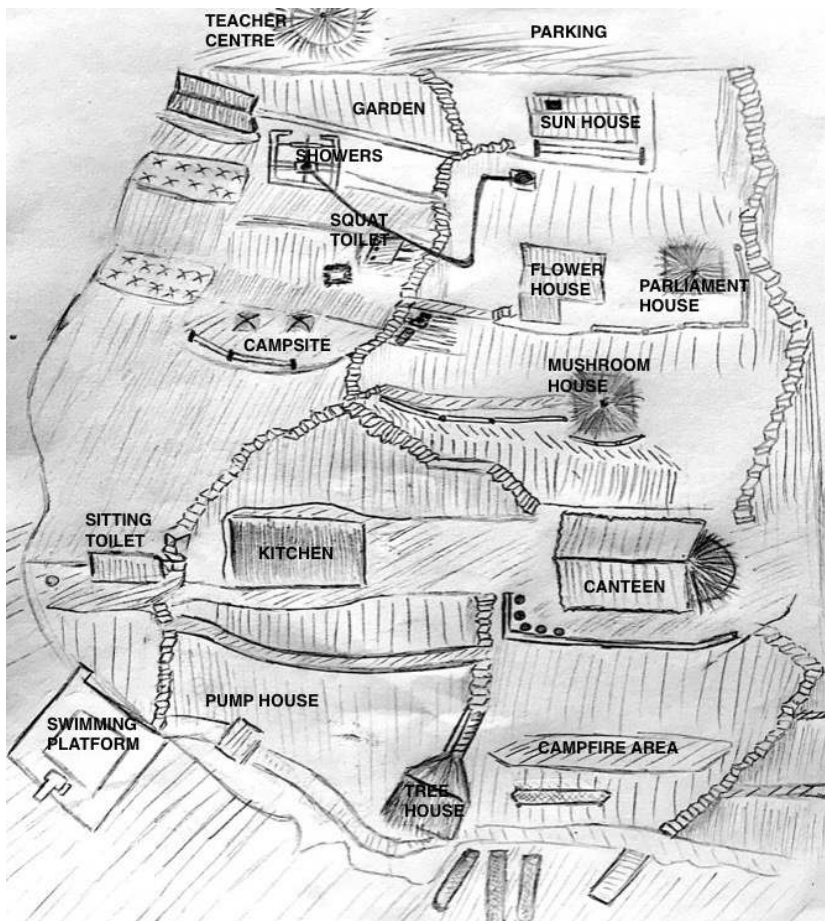
EDIRISA

Edirisa on Lake Bunyonyi (www.edirisa.org/ourbase) lies on a peninsula about 8 km away from Kabale Town in southwestern Uganda. It's pretty small: there is a grass-thatched mudhouse sleeping four people, one hut with a double bed, a house mostly catering for families with a double and twin room, a staff house, plus a campsite. Edirisa is open to travellers and they may share accommodation with volunteers.

No matter where you stay, you will need to walk to a squat/sitting toilet and an open-roof bathroom to do your things. We encourage our people to work from a communal building called "the canteen" where staff meals are served from and where wireless internet is strongest. When grid electricity is unavailable, we switch to a much weaker solar system; too much rain may sporadically bring about complete darkness.

Let's wind up this section with some history: The place was established in 2002, then known as "The Heart of Edirisa". Bufuka Primary School allowed us to use its land, parents volunteered to level the ground, local artisans were hired to build the structures and I used my personal money to finance the project. But it only got really interesting once our first two volunteers arrived in January 2003: Jaka and Matjaz from Slovenia! They stayed for a year, finalised the structures and started the culture of volunteering at Edirisa. Volunteer numbers grew over time, often exceeding 10 at a go, and based on that we even tried to run an international commune in 2007-2009!

Those were the days of Edirisa's focus on primary education. Nowadays we primarily attract multimedia volunteers helping the Gorilla Highlands initiative; usually we host one or two at a time.



*Edirisa on Lake Bunyonyi
sketch by Anika Utke (Carpe Diem)*

*Sun House = former staff accommodation
(awaiting a rebuild, in the meantime the
house next to the showers is used)
Flower House = family house
Parliament House = double room
Mushroom House = dorm*

CULTURE ISSUES

Welcome to the central part of the document! Topics related to culture will play a large role in your daily life. If you only can, do prepare for cultural differences in advance by reading everything you find about Uganda, Rwanda, Congo and our local tribe, the Bakiga, on www.gorillahighlands.com and elsewhere on the internet. If you can't find that time, at least promise us something: that you will be willing to fight your prejudices.

Everything here certainly has its own logic, and there is an explanation for it all. And that explanation is not in the stereotypical perception of Africans that you most likely have. The picture is far more complex. If you don't understand something, ask someone local — please don't jump to quick conclusions. You have been conditioned to see Africa in a certain light throughout your life, and it takes energy to open yourself up to conflicting information. It's hard for a human brain to open a new area of thought, we try to get everything to reconcile with what we already "know".

Hygiene

It takes a flexible mind to question your culture. Let's use one practical example: You will see how "dirty" African kitchens are. Strangely, international visitors do not have to worry about illness due to these conditions. Yes, it is important to be hygienic but you can easily lose sight of the big picture. Has your culture maybe gone too far with cleanliness? Have you been obsessed with meaningless things? Is Africa too dirty or your home country too clean?

Time

An important fact about Africa: time gets a different treatment here. Few people are enslaved by the clock, something that is often difficult to comprehend for someone from a city where train arrivals are displayed in seconds... Prepare in advance: life will be slower here. You will "waste" many minutes waiting for this and that. You can spend them relaxing or being productive — just don't focus on "losing time". Remember: time is merely a concept, something some of us agree to measure even though it may not actually exist. Obsession with time is one of the main causes for stress, and everyone would like to escape stress, right? Taking a deep breath here and there could be worthwhile.

On a similar note, we hope you didn't come to Africa to change the world in two weeks; changes take ages, and we can't hurry other people. There is no hurry in Africa, as the saying goes.

Male/ Female Relations

Another traditional element, this time a very sad one, is the male superiority complex. Yes, you may say that men around you tend to show some of that too. That's a child's play compared to what you can encounter in the Gorilla Highlands region! The Bakiga are known as a tribe that actually gives women more respect than some others (the Baganda women, for example, kneel in front of their men). Still, a woman is seen as less valuable than a man. A young woman who has not yet "produced" (given birth) is a girl, therefore even lower in the system.

Most of our volunteers have been women, or to be more exact: "girls". It has been amazing to observe how local men found it hard to treat them as equals. Even those men who are allegedly more educated or open-minded! Ladies, mentally prepare for that. Find a good strategy. Think twice before you start fighting. If a man irritates you, better not counter him in public. Approach him in privacy, maybe send another man to mediate the situation. Women have over millennia developed very efficient approaches to get what they want. We know who actually runs this planet, don't we? ;-)

Mind you, we are not saying that you should give up, and accept this sexist rubbish. During a short stay confrontation will not achieve anything, and will only create tension. If you're here for longer, work on women's rights, but do it in style.

Girls: prepare for having to reject marriage proposals. Local men are crazy about the idea of having a white girlfriend — they are convinced white people are honest and would offer them a financially better life. Also, the ideal form of beauty is opposite to that in the West. If you are curvy, many will prefer you to slim women. If they call you 'fatty' or the 'big one', don't be offended, it's a compliment.

Flexibility with truth

Africa is community-based. A person is above all a member of his/her extended family, clan, tribe. In a traditional society, the group matters most. Nobody should disturb its peace. Have a problem with someone? Solve it quietly. A public display of disagreement may equal humiliation, loss of respect or authority. Is it totally clear that someone else is the bad guy in your story? Doesn't matter, the community will demand that both of you accept some of the blame.

It will help you immensely if you note that Africans treat "truth" in an elastic way. People will say what they think you want to hear.

"Is this the way to the bus station?"

"Yes, yes!" ...

"Oh my, I am late, I went the wrong way! Have I missed the bus?"

"It may still come."

At the end, the situation will likely become problematic. Perhaps even explosive. But we are in Africa, it is *now* that matters, not tomorrow. There can also be a difference between what people say they will do and what they do in reality. Expect it, and take it easy.

Polite informality

While Rwandans tend to be reserved, Ugandans are widely known to be extremely welcoming and friendly people. Bakiga are considered too straightforward and rough by other tribes of Uganda, but they are not so bad at all. Don't be concerned because of the stern faces you might encounter, they have nothing against you. As most other African groups, they are informal and demand a relationship first. Do not expect to have something done simply because a person is paid to provide the service! Develop a friendship and build on it.

After you spend some time in Africa, you will understand how impolite it is to approach somebody without a greeting. In Uganda you cannot ask what time it is without a prior exchange of pleasantries. Even if you think that you are in a hurry. (By the way, don't be shocked if somebody wears a broken watch - it's for decoration.)

Children will normally love to be in your photos, but others will be offended if you don't ask first. There is a common belief that tourists sell the pictures for big money, so demands for some coins are understandable. A better alternative might be to spend some time with the person, converse, buy something from a market woman — and then a photo session may become more acceptable.

As a Mzungu (a white person) you will be expected to be eccentric. You are an alien after all, a visitor from another planet. If you, on the other hand, want to be respected, wear decent clothes. Outside of your volunteer bubble, shorts are acceptable but not appreciated (they are children's wear here), women's tops should hide shoulders and skirts cover knees. Because even a Ugandan in the remotest village manages to flat iron his clothes and polish his shoes, the standards are pretty high.

Feel free to hate the missionaries who brought such ideas to Africa. But think twice before you say it. Any religious doubt will easily result in a long discussion with only one aim: to show you the right way and convert you. Ugandans will not scream if you tell them you are not a believer, however, they will consider it their duty to help you see the light.

Physical things

Ask your (great) grandparents how they feel about nudity and kissing on the streets, and you will understand Africans better. Locals are happy to touch, hold hands, put a sleepy head on a stranger's lap — there is no concept of private space. But there must be nothing sexual, passionate about this. Friends will walk hand in hand on the street, lovers never. It's the western world turned upside down: you can be cosy with somebody only if you are not a couple!

You will see men very close to each other. Don't misunderstand. Homosexuality is a crime here. Africans believe that it was introduced by the whites, that foreigners come here to convert innocent people into "homosexualists". If you have such preferences, keep them to yourself. You could be playing with your life!

Smoking

Tobacco is Satanic, marijuana only for criminals. Enough said. Quit or do it in privacy.

Food

People here focus on quantity, not variety. They don't like new things. Prepare for monotonous food if you don't frequent restaurants targeting tourists. Travellers' stomach normally isn't an issue because locals cook everything, even salads (unfortunately).

Shocks

Have you ever seen a child browsing through trash for food? A disabled person whose only option is to beg? Children wearing something that maybe resembled clothes two generations ago? This is a very fertile and potentially rich region, yet still many people are very poor. Is your idea of African wildlife something like ... a lion? You will see many more rats and catch fleas, even in a good hotel. As for snakes, you will likely see none.

Are you used to silence? It can be overwhelming for some. And the conditions in the village could be much too basic. Visualise a pit latrine to which you will need to stumble with a torch, and then squat, not sit. Can you handle it?

Do you believe that leadership should be democratic and that any use of force is repulsive? Here children are beaten at school. Students' strikes at secondary schools automatically end up in destruction. Adults vote for generals. There must be "a stick" somewhere, a strong leader — or there is no respect. We need to comply, compromise our beliefs. On the other hand, for people of the same rank, decisions can be made by long discussions and much compromise, so prepare for slower-paced meetings.

It is very possible that you are heading for a severe culture shock. That's understandable; we have been there before. Do not blame yourself. You are not spoiled, you are not to blame if you can't adjust. Talk, let it out. It will get better.



TRAVEL ADVICE

First of all, don't miss www.gorillahighlands.com/travel-info.

Secondly, to learn more about the Pearl of Africa (Uganda) and the Land of a Thousand Hills (Rwanda), please become a devoted reader of Bradt's "Uganda" and "Rwanda" books. No kidding, purchasing such a book (the latest edition possible) will save you more money than you will spend on the guide.

However, we will still try to give you all the essential information right here...

Health

A certificate indicating vaccination against yellow fever is required, although hardly ever checked at the border. For other recommended vaccinations consult your nearest health institution. Make sure you acquire the information early, as some vaccinations must be received at least three months before leaving your country, or received more than once.

Malaria is a serious risk, and appropriate prevention tablets, sleeping under a treated net (almost all accommodation

providers offer them) and the use of insect repellents are a good investment. Mephaquin tablets (similar to Lariam) are cheap and widely available everywhere, so don't purchase too many at home. Insect repellents are very costly, so it is advisable to bring them with you. The same applies to sunscreen.

It is not safe to drink local water. It should be boiled or bought bottled.

Uganda is a success story in terms of HIV prevalence. Nevertheless, be mature and don't "play" (as Ugandan's say) "live" (unprotected) sex.

Be careful when treating bleeding wounds. We recommend that you bring surgical gloves and bandages with you, especially when working with children in areas with no medical facilities.

Shoes and clothes

Shoes: it is wise to have good sport or trekking shoes because of the rainy days and the resulting mud; also a pair of light summer shoes are necessary, and sneakers if you want to do some sports (like jogging). Locals wear flip-flops most of the time; you can buy them cheaply here. High heels — only if you have too much space in your backpack.

Clothes: the weather quickly changes from cold, rainy, autumn-like to very hot summer temperatures but most of the time it's something in-between. That's why you need a waterproof jacket, a warm sweater, long trousers (skirts) and also shorts, T-shirts, a hat ...

Because of dust and mud we don't recommend night gowns, tuxedos and white clothes, still do bring some smart (church-compatible) clothes. You can buy nice second-hand clothes very cheaply in Kabale. Don't forget your swimsuit!

Technical and other accessories

We have electricity at Edirisa but none of the solutions is 100% reliable and no place here is completely without dark areas. Bring a torch and invest in extra batteries for your gadgets.

Even though we have some company computers, 99% of our volunteers bring their own laptops, making everyone's life easier. Still, if you come without, you can empty the contents of your camera onto our computers and save them onto a flash disk.

Binoculars and good lenses should certainly be in the luggage of bird lovers, there are certainly hundreds of species around the "lake of many little birds".

A tent can be useful if you intend to travel around. A sleeping bag is optional; we provide sheets and blankets even during treks (www.gorillahighlands.com/canoe-trekking).

Food, drinks

In Kabale Town almost everything you dream of is obtainable and reasonably priced (OK, maybe not your favourite flavour of particular lollypops). You can find a couple of well-stocked supermarkets so you don't have to carry a three-month supply of cosmetics with you. You will eat well at several restaurants.

At Lake Bunyonyi, the choice is more limited. You can buy certain things at the Rutindo trading centre and at Bunyonyi Overland Resort, but it is wise to come from the town well-stocked.

Communications

Mobile phones (if you cannot live without them) can be used, at Bunyonyi all major networks are available. Don't joke with roaming, you can cheaply buy a SIM card from one of local mobile phone providers.

Postal services are quite reliable. It takes a letter about 2-4 weeks to reach Europe, and some weeks (or months) in the opposite direction. Every package arrives open, and some little things might get "lost". Edirisa's address: P.O. BOX 77, Kabale, Uganda.

Money

Be careful with American dollars: nothing dirty, torn or printed before 2009 will be accepted and notes smaller than \$50 will fetch a lousy rate. If you are Australian, take into account that Africa isn't Asia and that Australian dollars just won't kick it. (We wouldn't write this obvious fact if an Aussie didn't request it! ;-)

Plastic money can be useful not so much for paying but for withdrawing cash from. You will get money from any card but a VISA/MasterCard debit card seems to be the best option. A spare card makes a lot of sense.

Finally, if you don't have it yet, it is wise to arrange an Internet banking solution before your departure. Africa is amazing, you might end up spending more time here than expected!

Visas and arrival

The visa you most likely need is the East African Tourist visa (\$100). If you are arriving through Rwanda (highly recommended), you will get it on arrival without any prior application.

IMPORTANT: Remember not to mention volunteering, that would only mean complications. Be a tourist and nobody will be bothered.

FINALLY

Our volunteers have been blogging about their life at www.gorillahighlands.com/category/volunteering; that may well prove the most useful resource for you!

Gorilla Highlands

Magical Mountains of Rwanda and Uganda

discover our region - explore it deeper - have an adventure -

Volunteering



Good Kind of Crazy: Volunteering and Hiking in Uganda and ...



Behind the Scenes of Our Social Media Photo Month