

FREE
to Take
Home!

Connecting Africa to the World

MSAFIRI

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A woman in a vibrant red, feathered dress is captured in a dynamic dance pose against a weathered, textured wall. She has her right leg raised high, foot pointed, and her left leg extended downwards. Her arms are outstretched, and she has a joyful expression with her mouth open as if laughing or singing. The background is a wall with peeling paint and visible pipes, adding an urban, gritty aesthetic to the scene.

Just Dance!

**In High
Spirits**

Festive season
in London

**Coastal
Escape**

Beyond Dakar's
busy streets

 **Kenya Airways**
The Pride of Africa

INTO THE WILD

In 1966 a group of CHIMPANZEES from European zoos were resettled on RUBONDO ISLAND in Lake Victoria by a conservationist with a big dream. Today, the colony is flourishing and open to visitors.

text Nigel Tisdall







“We were rewarded with a glimpse of five chimps including a baby”

Seeing chimpanzees in the wild is one of Africa’s many great animal encounters; providing you’re up for some hot and arduous trekking. Given a bit of luck, travellers can spot them swinging through the trees in various national parks in Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania, but the most intriguing place to track them has to be Rubondo, a remote island in the southwest corner of Lake Victoria.

CROSS-CONTINENTAL JOURNEY

Covering 237 sq km, this forest sanctuary in Tanzania is the scene of an unusual conservation project that began in 1966 when 10 of these engaging primates were rescued from European zoos and transported here on a 16,000-km journey via Antwerp and Dar es Salaam. Six other chimps followed later. The mastermind behind this well-intentioned but unorthodox relocation was Professor Bernhard Grzimek, a German conservationist who was director of the Frankfurt Zoological Society for 29 years.

What inspired him to do this? Chimps can’t swim, so Rubondo made





a natural haven. It's also free of large predators, making it a place where "rare animals could be settled without risk of being killed the next day". Grzimek also shipped in rhinos, giraffes, roan antelopes and black-and-white colobus monkeys, hoping to later add gorillas, bongo antelopes and okapis to his Noah's Ark-like menagerie. The naturalist was passionate about Africa and its wildlife, winning an Oscar in 1959 for his documentary, *Serengeti Shall Not Die*, and he hoped his refuge would encourage tourists visiting Tanzania to do more than pay "lightning visits" to well-known attractions, such as Ngorongoro Crater and the Serengeti.

FREE AT LAST

Once released from their wooden crates, which were placed on the shores of Rubondo after five weeks in transit, the chimps initially showed a reluctance to be free, but in time, they disappeared into the forests and became acclimatised. Now, 54 years later, the island has 75 chimps that are thriving here in two groups, one of which is the centrepiece of an ambitious habituation project that's a joint operation between the Tanzania National Parks Authority, the conservation NGO, Honeyguide, and Asilia Africa, a safari operator based in Arusha that manages a small, upmarket camp here.

Habituation, which in this case means getting the chimps used to the presence of humans and developing a trusting and stressless relationship, is a long game. The island has a 12-strong team of trackers and observers who are accompanied by an armed ranger (there

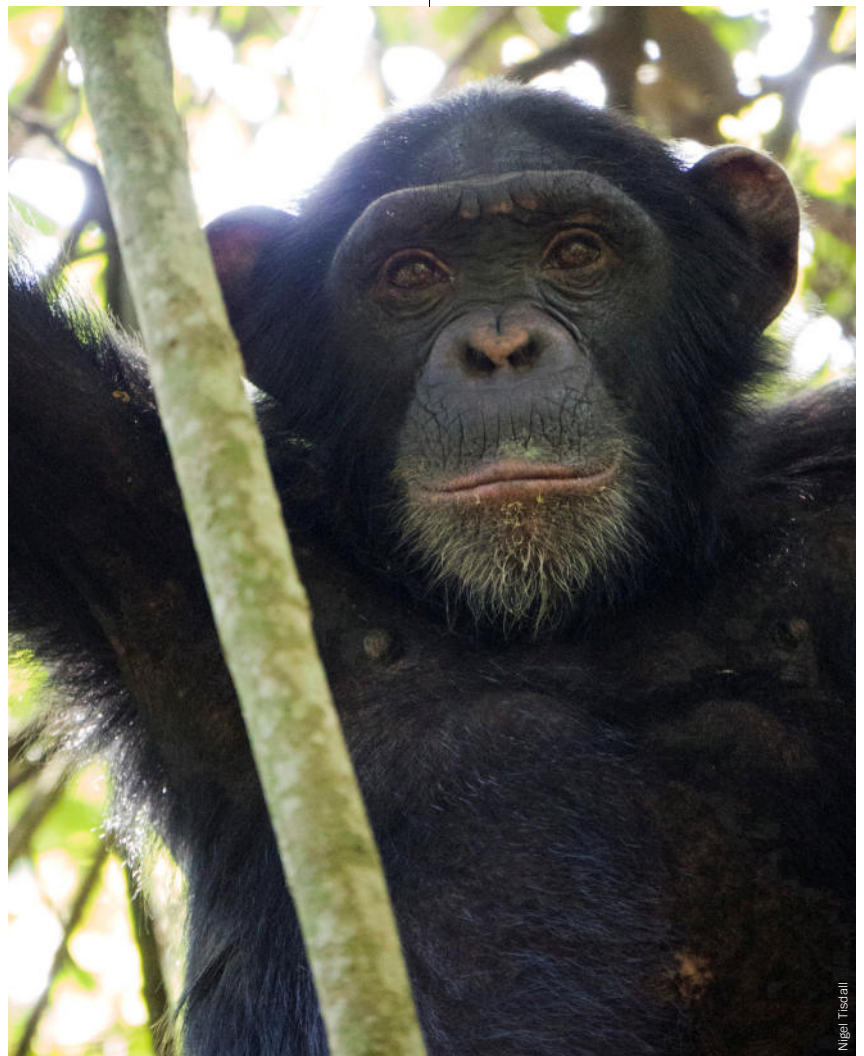
are also elephants on the island). They take pride in neither offering the great apes food, nor using sound to draw their attention.

Only in 2016, after three years of patient stalking, watching and remaining visible but unobtrusive, did Asilia Africa reach a point when it felt it could offer guests a three-night "habituation experience" in which they spend time with the team trying to spot, admire and learn about the chimps.

Initially, there were disappointments, but this summer, 9 out of 10 guests had successful encounters, including witness-

ing chimps mate, hunt and feed on baby bushbuck. The dry season from June to September is the best time for this, although sightings are by no means guaranteed. My small group had an exhausting day and a half of sweaty hikes through the thick forest before we were rewarded with a glimpse of five chimps including a baby. One mischievous six-year-old male, Mgwesa, had a fine time sending twigs and branches crashing down on our heads before he bounced away to join his mates.

Chimpanzees share about 98 percent of our DNA. They kiss and hold >



"One mischievous six-year-old male had a fine time sending branches crashing down on our heads"

So much to see

Rubondo Island is a true wildlife haven. About 80% of the park is covered by dense forest. In addition to chimpanzees, the island is home to over 200 elephants, some 60 giraffes, as well as sitatunga (a semi-aquatic antelope) and over 40 species of orchid. Look up in the trees and you might well spot grey parrots; a flock of these gorgeous birds with bright red tail feathers was brought here in 2000 after being confiscated in Nairobi during illegal shipment to Asia. It is just one of the 300-plus resident and migratory bird species. Out on the lake, fishing for Nile perch is a popular activity, but don't try swimming – the water is full of hippos and crocodiles.

hands and make tools, so it's no surprise that getting close to them brings an electric rush and, perhaps, a mutual sense of wonder. The experience is even more memorable in the wild, rather than at a zoo, because you meet them on their own terms; and when you see the speed and agility with which they move through the forest, it's abundantly clear who's king of these jungles. "The similarities between chimps and humans never ceases to amaze me," says Daniel Juma, manager of Rubondo Island Camp. "Whether it's caring for their young or drumming on a tree for entertainment, to watch them behave just like us is deeply moving."

What does the future hold for Rubondo's chimps, now that the world is learning about their remarkable story? Without doubt, they're exceedingly

fortunate, with little to fear, plenty of space and lots to eat. This is good news because chimps are endangered. A century ago, there was probably a million of them; now the World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF) estimates that their numbers are down to between 172,700 and 299,700.

"Habituation is both conservation in action and a unique opportunity for wildlife enthusiasts," says Gordie Owles, an Asilia Africa director who has been working on this project since its inception. Over the last seven years, his company has donated more than US\$255,000 to the habituation of Rubondo's chimps.

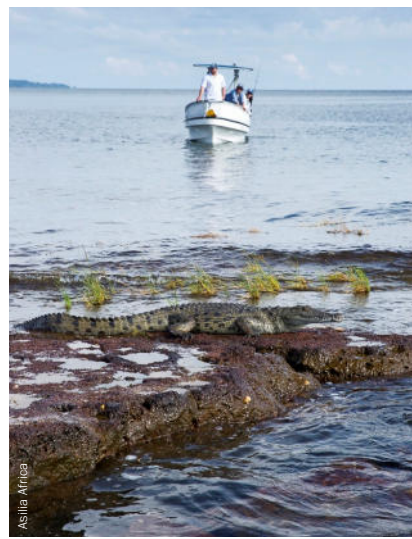
ON THE UP

"Visitor numbers are climbing," says Owles. "But, we can only claim success when the revenue they create can fully fund the running of Rubondo Island National Park and bring benefits to the surrounding communities." At present, the camp employs 34 mostly local workers, while the park supports a staff of 70.

Of course, Rubondo's chimps know nothing of such issues as they snooze and play in the trees; nor do they realise how they're now attracting travellers, exactly as Grzimek intended. Or do they? When you look them in the eye, with their wide grins and old-man faces, it's impossible not to feel a connection with our closest living relative from the animal kingdom. I like to think we're all working together on this because, as the strange tale of Rubondo Island proves, dreams can come true.



George Turner



Asilia Africa



“With their wide grins and old-man faces, it’s impossible not to feel a connection”