



PHOTOS BY NOMAD TANZANIA

ADVENTURE

Mahale: A Great Ape Escape

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BY SANDY WOOD

Mahale; the mere word conjures up mystery, I thought as I prepared for my visit to Greystoke Camp in the Mahale Mountains, southwest Tanzania. It's a bit of a trek to get here; three hours in a light aircraft with a fuel stop en route, followed by a 90 minute voyage by dhow across Lake Tanganyika, (Africa's deepest lake) but it is so worth the journey.

As I stepped off the dhow, to be greeted by the friendly, smiling faces of the Greystoke team, I felt as if I had been here before. Perhaps this is because as humans, our roots were discovered on this continent. The Mahale Mountains are home to our closest relative, the chimpanzee. Greystoke is named after the fictional character in Tarzan.

The site of the camp was chosen by Roland Purcell, one of the founders of Nomad Tanzania, back in the 1988. Having worked with Diane Fossey's gorillas, Purcell had become fascinated by primates and was

intrigued as to why the Japanese researching chimps in Mahale were getting no press.

Chimpanzee research in the Mahale Mountains began in 1965. Conservation efforts and the financial support of the Japanese government led to the designation of Mahale as a national park in 1985.

The Mahale project is the second-longest continuous field study of chimps after Jane Goodall's initiative begun in 1960. Purcell described the setting as a "lost world" and happily, in many ways it still is. As soon as you arrive, it is immediately obvious that you are in very remote location with no roads nearby and only mountains and chimps for company. In fact, Purcell chose the campsite because it was 60 miles from the nearest road, and very close to the Congo. In the 1,613km² of Mahale Mountains there are still no roads.

Visitors to Greystoke are responsible travellers, who love an adventure, looking to do something off the beaten track and away from crowded safari routes. "The air is scented with jasmine, the forest rich, the water of the lake gin-clear and slightly chilled," Purcell reflected upon his discovery: "If I dare put an

TOP LEFT

Trekking through the forest in pursuit of chimps.

TOP MIDDLE

A Greystoke dressing room.

TOP RIGHT

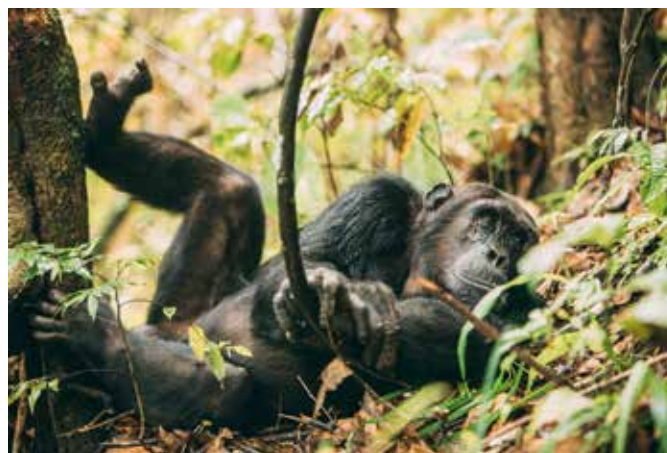
Sunlight bathing the bedroom.

BELOW LEFT

The iconic view of Greystoke from the lake.

BELOW RIGHT

Deck chairs and views for days.



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imprint on this paradise, I had better get it right.” The original camp was a Moorish style tent and the current thatched structure is not dissimilar in design. Set at the back of a small stretch of white sandy beach, with the Mahale Mountains rising high directly behind, it is an impressive, yet simple castaway camp.

The six A frame chalets are equally simple in style, built from dhow wood and set discreetly amongst the trees on the edge of the beach. Each offers barefoot luxury at its best; an en suite shower and flush loo, as well as a chill out area upstairs where guests can relax.

Meals are taken in the main mess or on the beach under the stars and guests tend to gather for a pre-dinner drink in open-air bar, set on the rocks overlooking the extraordinarily clear waters of Lake Tanganyika. Food is freshly made and simply delicious. I never cease to be amazed by the incredibly high standard of meals that are produced from remote African camp kitchens and the chef at Greystoke proves his to be no exception. English breakfasts, homemade muesli and tropical fruits are

offered in the morning. A variety of salads and assorted kebabs, frittatas and pastas are served at lunch. Afternoon tea is available as are "bitings"; snacks before the three-course dinners.

I am grateful for the promise of a good hike tomorrow to work off some of this deliciousness.

The key activity here is trekking to find the chimps, seeing eye to eye with one of our closest relatives. Greystoke is one of only a handful of places in the world where one can enjoy a very close encounter with these wonderful apes. The experience is made even more interesting by the team of guides here, who having been amongst these chimps for years, know them better than most of us know some of our own family members.

When the Japanese researchers arrived in Mahale in the 1962 they were welcomed by the Tongwe, local people with origins in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but who came to Tanzania centuries ago. The Tongwe have lived peacefully with the chimpanzees and never hunted them as they believed

LEFT
In the company of great apes.

TOP RIGHT
Masks are compulsory when visiting chimps.

BELOW RIGHT
Relaxed, happy and lounging in the undergrowth.

their ancestors lived on in the chimps. The Japanese were very impressed by the Tongwe people and their knowledge of the chimpanzees. So they worked together on habituating the chimpanzees.

The whereabouts of the chimps are radioed to camp, and only six guests at a time are escorted to see them. As you venture close to them, you are requested to don a mask, which is for their protection more than yours. You cannot use a camera flash so adjust your settings for low light if need be. An hour is the maximum time that may be spent with the chimps.

The guides even have a language with which they communicate with the chimps although I can attest to the fact that they understand us. I remarked that one of the males looked a bit grumpy; by way of a response, I had a small branch chucked my way with remarkable accuracy. Clearly, my comment was not appreciated!

Trekking the chimps is not for sissys and you need to be reasonably fit. In the latter months of the year, they are generally found close to the lake shore but at other times, they are higher up the mountains, foraging for food, so it can be a long and quite hard walk. Additionally there is a minimum age restriction of 12 (I was pleased to discover no upper age limit) and if you are sick, you will not be allowed to trek. Chimps, like gorillas are very vulnerable to human diseases; a dose of flu can be fatal to them.

Trekking is generally done in the mornings, leaving the afternoons free for other activities. Greystoke lends itself to the gentle art of doing nothing. No technological influences such as WiFi or cell phone service here to distract you; just Mother Nature at her best.

If you have to trek further into the mountains to find the chimps, you may be looking for something a bit more relaxing to do next. You have plenty of choices. I loved the late afternoon sail on the dhow to do a spot of birding, or catch a glimpse of the Colobus monkeys followed by a refreshing deep water swim in the lake. Kayaking is also available and guests can visit the local village



to see how life is in such a remote part of the world. Guests generally stay for three or four nights but I felt I could have stayed an age.

I don't believe Purcell had any idea, when he hit upon this site for his camp, what a favour he was doing those of us who have been to experience Greystoke Mahale, including Bill Gates and Harrison Ford. This could easily be combined with other Nomad destinations in Tanzania, including Ruaha or Selous. ●

TOP
A thorough guide briefing in progress.



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When to go

During the wet season, from November until May, the chimpanzees spend much of their time in the trees and can be difficult to find. In the dry season, June to October, the undergrowth is less dense and the chimps frequently come down near the main lodge to feed. Entry fees at Mahale Mountains Park are \$80 per adult per day. There are no additional advance permit fees as happens with gorilla treks.

