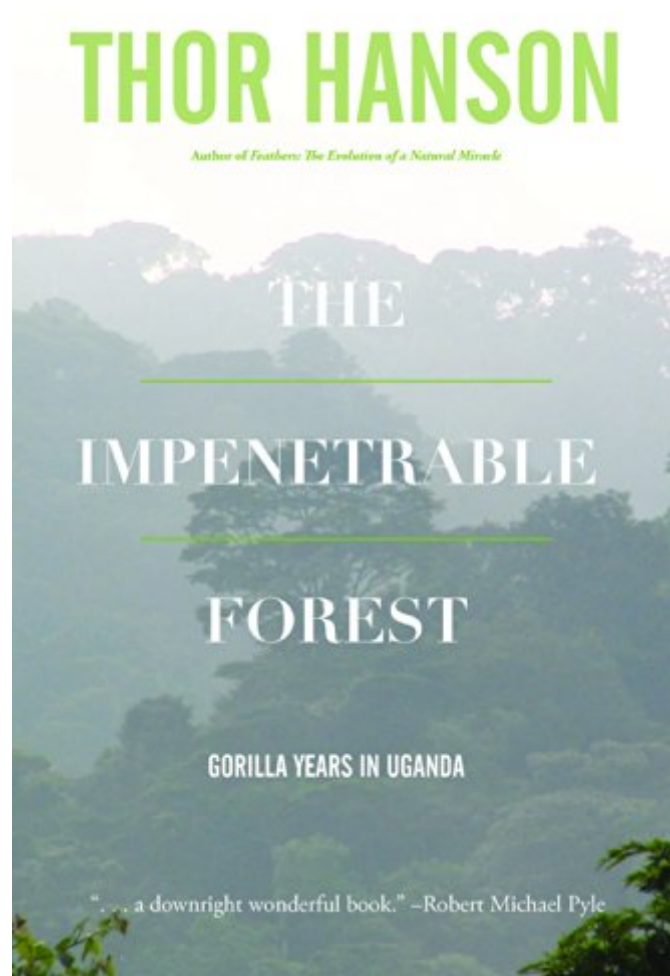




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# The Impenetrable Forest: My Gorilla Years In Uganda



## Synopsis

Lying in the remote hills of southwest Uganda, Bwindi Impenetrable Forest harbors elephants, chimpanzees, monkeys, and half the world's population of endangered mountain gorillas. For two years, Thor Hanson called that forest home, working with local guides and trackers to develop an ecotourism program for the newly-formed Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. Thoroughly researched and beautifully told, Hanson's story blends natural history with cultural insight to place the forest and the gorillas in the context of modern Africa. The Impenetrable Forest offers a rare glimpse into the world of mountain gorillas, and the human cultures that surround them. A must-read for anyone interested in gorilla tracking, endangered species, or travel to Uganda. Thor Hanson is a Guggenheim Fellow, a Switzer Environmental Fellow, and an award winning author and biologist. His books include *The Impenetrable Forest* and *Feathers: The Evolution of a Natural Miracle*, which won the John Burroughs Medal. Hanson lives with his wife and son on an island in the Pacific Northwest.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Dr. Hanson uses his experience as a Peace Corps volunteer to provide an engaging history of the conservation movement that has catapulted Bwindi (Buhoma), Uganda into a popular travel destination. His auto-biographical account is humorous at times and heart-wrenching at others. He provides details about mountain gorilla behaviors (and how they are impacted by humans), though he does not overwhelm the reader with scientific "facts". He presents the information in a very digestible way that allows the reader to feel they are observing rather than reading. He does this while simultaneously examining the socio-political and economic factors that shaped the region in the early 1990's, including the political turmoil in neighboring Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Zaire) and the impact of the AIDS epidemic on the local populations. I read this before spending several months in Buhoma as a volunteer at the Bwindi Community Hospital, and I recommended it to several other travelers while I was there. The hospital was not in place during Dr. Hanson's Peace Corps tour of duty (however, in the revised version, he does refer to it). Nonetheless, this is a lovely way for travelers with an interest in human or gorilla populations to become acquainted with the (semi-)recent local history. My only critique is that he does not really touch on the plight of the Batwa (pygmies) population that traditionally lived in the forest. They were forced to leave the forest (as conservation refugees) for the creation of the park and they now live on reservations. Of course, it is difficult to capture all of the complexities. Overall, Dr. Hanson does an excellent job presenting and contrasting issues that impact both humans and gorillas alike.

This is an amazing book about an amazing part of the world. I took this book with me when I visited Bwindi Impenetrable Forest a few weeks ago. While seeing the gorillas myself was wonderful, Thor Hanson's account in *The Impenetrable Forest: My Gorilla Years in Uganda, Revised Edition* really added depth to my visit. In the book, Hanson recounts his years as a Peace Corps volunteer helping to establish ecotourism in Bwindi (the same ecotourism I ultimately benefitted from). His book weaves observations of the gorillas with amusing anecdotes of the Uganda people, whom he describes as being amongst the kindest in the world (an observation with which I agree). Hanson really breathes life into the gorillas, describing the personalities of the individual families. One episode in particular really stuck out. Gorillas often mock charge humans. Once, when Hanson was observing a family, two aggressive males charged him and his group. However, another gorilla stood in between the aggressors and the humans, as if protecting them. This

heartwarming episode suggests some gorillas have empathy for humans. Through Hanson's book, hopefully more of us will have empathy for them. Hanson also provides an excellent overview of life in Peace Corps. While he admits his Peace Corps experience may have been more exciting (most volunteers end up teaching English), he shows the struggles some volunteers face immersing themselves into an entirely new culture. I was particularly struck by how volunteers sometimes felt they were never fully accepted into the community - that they often remained the "white curiosity". On that note, this book should be assigned reading for new Peace Corps volunteers. The Impenetrable Forest: My Gorilla Years in Uganda, Revised Edition is not just about gorillas, not just about Uganda, not just about Peace Corps - it's the combination that makes reading it such a joy. I wholeheartedly recommend it if you ever get to visit the gorillas and people in Bwindi - or if you are just looking for a good book.

I read Hanson's fine book before going to Uganda and Bwindi in 2005. It was an excellent and useful read then. Now, ten years later, I've read it again during my 6th or so trip back to Uganda, finding it even more interesting and insightful than the first time, in part because I've spent a lot of time with Bakiga people in Kabarole. Long ago I was a Peace Corps volunteer in India, and wish I could have interacted as deeply with the people there as Hanson did in Uganda, and written as eloquently and warmly he has about life, culture, mores, gorillas and the land.

I'm planning a trip to The Impenetrable Forest to see the mountain gorillas. This was an amazing story of how the gorillas were habituated so that tourists like myself would have an opportunity to view these magnificent creatures. Thor Hanson has a wonderful sense of humor and is an excellent writer. His experience was fascinating. He weaves history and culture together in such a way that I felt totally immersed in the story. It was hard to put the book down. I would recommend this book to anyone.

I bought this book with the expectation that I would learn lots of facts about mountain gorillas before heading out to Bwindi to see them in the flesh. But now, having just finished the book, I can't honestly say that I learned much about gorilla behavior. Hanson devotes maybe a third of the book to discussing gorillas, and even then, the emphasis is on the habituation process which he was involved in as part of his Peace Corps mission, not on gorilla ecology. The rest of the book covers Ugandan history, culture, the impact of the Rwandan genocide, and the struggle to convince the local people to see the parks as sources of sustainable income, rather than hunting and poaching

grounds. But the bulk of the story deals with Hanson's experiences and relationships with the Ugandan people - the friendships he formed, and the losses he suffered (mainly through the ravages of AIDS). Even though I learned little new about gorillas, I still recommend this informative and poignant book to anybody wanting to learn more about East Africa.

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