



Our story

Determination & Gorillas!

My name is Susan Baxter, I'm thirty years old and married to Gary who is forty; we have no children and love to travel...

On the face of it, I have a pretty normal life, except for one thing: I suffer from a condition called dystonia. Dystonia comes in many forms and in my case is due to brain damage caused as the result of a car accident when I was only five years old. I was in a coma for several days and apparently I am lucky to be here at all!

The effects of this condition are such that I have very limited use of my right side. I often have involuntary spasms and movements in my arm, hand and leg causing great difficulty in walking and many other simple day-to-day tasks.

My husband is a keen photographer and we share a passion for wildlife and dramatic landscapes. The constraints of my condition however have meant that until recently our travelling has been limited to 'user friendly' destinations; after all, it would never be practicable or safe to do things like trekking gorillas in tropical rain forest, over steep, muddy terrain for hours on end, would it? It may be difficult to believe, I still don't quite believe it myself, but in September this year, that's exactly what I did!

Gary and I had read countless stories of amazing gorilla encounters and watched all the wildlife programs enviously, until about a year ago we decided that we too really wanted to see these extraordinary creatures and perhaps we should investigate the chances of overcoming my disability. Sadly, none of the operators we looked at had a trip that matched our needs.



It was at this point that we contacted Chris Johnston at *Discovery Initiatives*. We explained my condition and its effects at the outset. Chris assured us that he could tailor make an itinerary for us and still keep within our budget. Not holding out much hope of this Gary asked Chris to go ahead and we waited to hear from him.

Shortly afterwards, a very detailed itinerary arrived in the post with lots of useful information about the areas we

would be travelling to. The *Discovery Initiatives* team had extensive knowledge of the areas and we were assured that with the aid of porters and guides, I would be able to trek in the rainforest. A small deposit later, and we were booked!

We have recently returned home from our Gorilla expedition to Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda and if I had to find one word to describe the experience, I couldn't do it. In the space of two weeks we have visited the elephants at Daphne Sheldricks amazing orphanage in Nairobi, got very close to some cheetahs at the Nairobi National Park, dined in a restaurant overlooking a spectacular crater lake on the edge of the Great Rift Valley. I have experienced that 'David Attenborough moment' whilst stood on piles of bat guano surrounded by thousands of the flapping mammals in a cave deep in the heart of the Maramagambo forest. All this and we had not even reached the highlight of the tour yet!

"I experienced that David Attenborough moment..."

Our story *continued*

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*Even the name, **The Bwindi Impenetrable Rainforest**, conjures up images of adventure; and it was to be here that we would come face to face with gorillas for the first time...*

Our tour guide explained my disability to the guides, which enabled them to decide which group of gorillas would be most suitable for me to trek and then we were put into our respective groups. Gary and I were assisted by two porters with the guide keeping a watchful eye. The terrain was hard going at times, being steep, muddy and overgrown with vegetation. Our porters were fantastic and it was in no small part due to them that I managed to complete the trek.

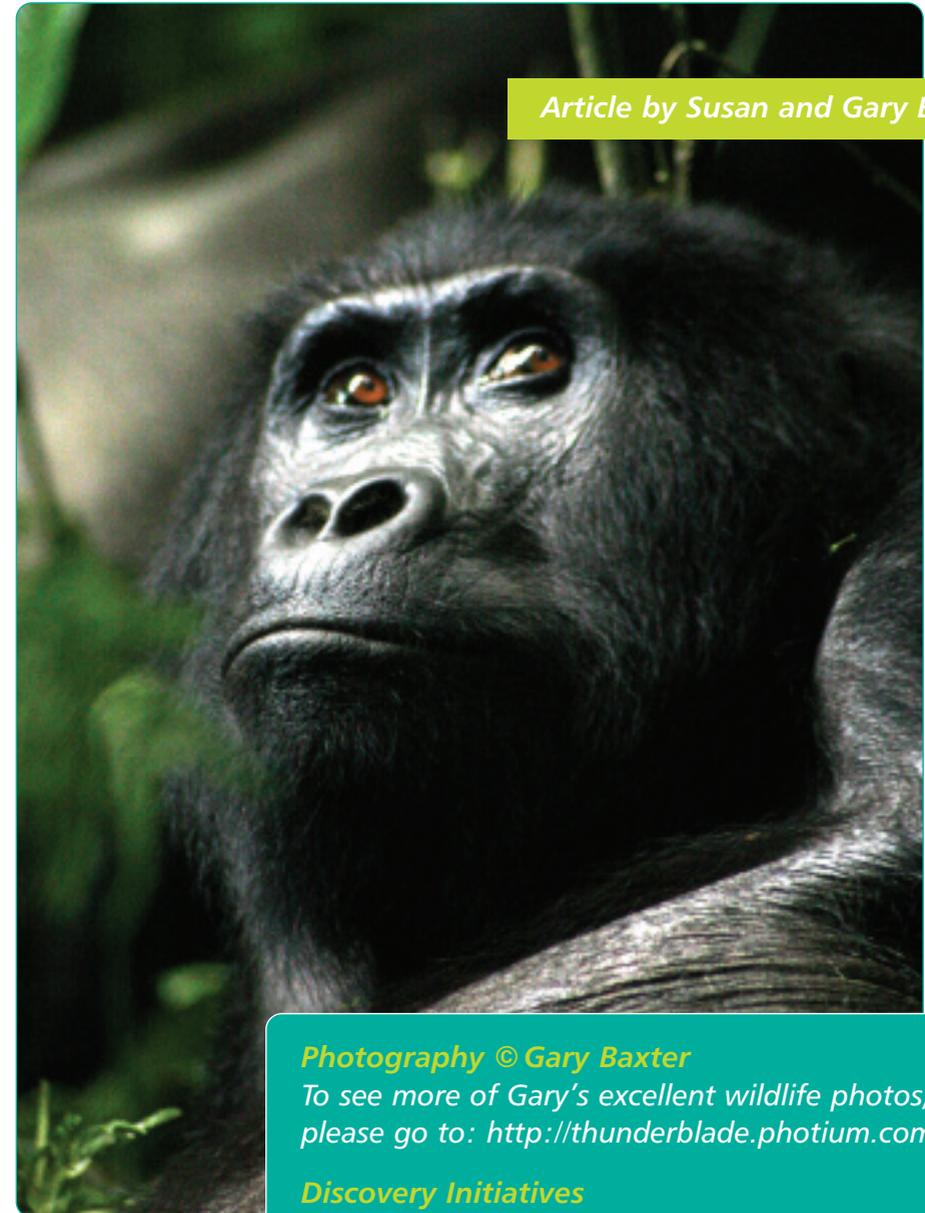
It took nearly two hours to reach our destination, often waiting whilst the guide cleared a path for us; until suddenly, we were only metres away from a huge silverback! I felt that 'David Attenborough moment' all over again as we counted seventeen gorillas of varying ages from the big male to a youngster of a few months. The older gorillas hardly paid any attention to us, whilst the youngsters seemed as curious about us as we were of them. We watched in complete awe of this incredible sight for an hour, before being instructed by our guide to step back and slowly make our way out of the rainforest.

"I was face to face with the most amazing creatures on earth..."

We travelled on to Rwanda where we completed two more treks, each one completely different to the others. Several weeks after returning home and I'm still buzzing with the adrenalin rush of being face to face with one of the rarest and most endangered, (and also most amazing,) creatures on earth.

Despite my disability, despite all my fears and concerns beforehand; with the help and guidance of *Discovery Initiatives* and the superb people out in Uganda and Rwanda; I can honestly say, this was the stuff that dreams are made of. **FANTASTIC!**

Article by Susan and Gary Baxter



Photography © Gary Baxter

To see more of Gary's excellent wildlife photos, please go to: <http://thunderblade.photium.com/>

Discovery Initiatives

For more information please call 01285 643333 or go to: www.discoveryinitiatives.com