Near-disastrous African trek sets duo on journey to save gorillas

It was a spur-of-the-moment decision that nearly cost Mark East his life. Mark, a Microsoft regional business leader, was speaking at a conference in Uganda and had a free weekend. He had never been on a gorilla trek, so he hopped on a bus for the six-hour journey to the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, where he soon found himself out of sync with the other tourists. “They all had these huge cameras with big lenses. All I had was a little pocket camera. I guess I hadn’t planned very well,” he laughs. The group started the climb up the mountain with the warning, “Whatever you do, don’t look the gorillas in the eye,” ringing in their ears.

Joshua to the rescue

It was a long hike, but they finally found a family of gorillas led by a big silverback called Kanyonyi. Everyone started taking pictures, including Mark with his little pocket camera. “I forgot about the guidance as I was trying to get a good souvenir picture and got a little too close,” says Mark. “That’s when Kanyonyi started coming towards me.” Mark explains that on these treks, tourists are assigned porters, usually local students, to look after them. Mark’s porter was named Joshua. “As the silverback came towards me, grunting in a very unfriendly way, Joshua pushed me to the ground and covered my body with his. He then started making these funny purring noises, which I was later told helps calm the gorilla.” It worked. The silverback turned and walked away. “If it wasn’t for Joshua,” says Mark, “I probably wouldn’t be here talking with you today.” The two became friends, and Mark learned that Joshua was struggling to find funding to continue his education. “He just needed help, so I said I’d fund him. After he graduated, Joshua went back and became one of the Bwindi rangers looking out for the gorillas.”

Saving vets a trip

Over the years, Joshua told Mark about the challenges he and other rangers faced, one of which was the difficulty of securing a place where veterinarians could work while providing care for the gorillas. “Rival silverbacks tend to fight and get injured,” says Mark. “When vets are needed to treat them, they have to travel from one of the major towns, so it takes a while for them to arrive—sometimes too late.”

Mark suggested he and Joshua work with the community to acquire land on the borders of the park and build a center where the vets could work and live while in Bwindi. So far, they have acquired five parcels, most of the money coming through fundraising among friends and family, with one more parcel needed before they can start building. “We also plan to invite local villagers to the center to learn about the gorillas and how damaging their habitat and killing them for meat isn’t in their best interest.”
There's much more to his story, which Mark talks about in the *Powered by the People* podcast, such as construction of a school he funded on the island of Mfangano in Lake Victoria in 2006. “In my role at Microsoft, I often visit schools in my region. I’m often taken to the best ones,” says Mark. “When I was in Kenya, I asked to see a typical school rather than the best. We traveled to Mfangano, where they had a primary school, but secondary school students were being taught under a tree.” As he was leaving, the head teacher put his hands in Mark’s and said, “Don’t forget us when you’re gone.” Mark didn’t, going on to raise nearly $25,000 to build a secondary school for the islanders. “My philosophy is if you get the feeling you’d like to do something to help others, just go and do it. No matter how small it is, it can have a big impact on people’s lives.”