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Mahale Mountains National Park

Exploring uncharted reaches of a foreign land holds its own special thrall of excitement, and especially when you discover hidden reaches as utterly beautiful as Mahale. This vast stretch of tropical forested National Park meets the lapping fresh waters of Lake Tanganyika along a pale sandy shore. Here visitors can combine an unusual and intense safari experience with an exceptional ‘beach’ holiday on the banks of the world’s longest freshwater lake, combining snorkelling and fishing with setting off into the forest to follow the trail of Mans’ primeval ancestors, Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii, more commonly known as chimpanzees. The sun rises over the lake and sets behind the steep rise of mountains, extending up to 2,462 m at Nkungwe Peak, and, as there are no roads in the park, all the trails that lead through its glades and distances are only open to those who will walk them. Numerous pathways and tracks allow visitors to enjoy truly beautiful forest walks and the chance of encountering some of the many different inhabitants of the lowland forests and higher brachystesia woodlands and savannahs. Hundreds of coloured butterflies (over 30 species) and forest birds dart across the sunlit paths, and the odd otter may be met near the lake. These paths are also foraged by warthog and bushpig, and while elephant, buffalo, yellow baboons and monkeys favour the cover of the northern regions, the lower, southern reaches are the terrain of rare roan and sable antelope, kudu and eland in the shadow of leopard and lion. The trees are the merry domain of giant squirrels and red-legged squirrels, and excitable troops of vervet, red colobus and white spot nose monkeys, as well as potentially a new subspecies of Angolan black and white colobus monkey found on Mt Nkungwe. But most who travel the distances to be here come to experience the unusual company of a larger primate, the chimpanzees. Their trails can be tracked through the forest, in the company of guides or occasionally a friendly local primatologist, who will teach intrepid chimp followers how to spot signs of recent activity and hopefully, eventually, discover a troop of feisty chimpanzees at play.

The Mahale Chimps

The population at Mahale has demonstrated a number of different characteristics from those at Gombe; they are more wild and vocal, and have demonstrated tool use in different ways...

The Mahale troops have also been the subject of extensive research by the Primate Research Institute, Kyoto University, Japan, who have been studying at Mahale since 1965, and in the company of these researchers Professor Michael Huffman has recorded extensive evidence of the chimps in the wild using certain plants for medicines. Younger chimpanzees observe their elders to learn which plants are beneficial. Interestingly, the

local tribes claim to have established their own traditional remedies for illness by watching and following sick animals, who guide them towards toxic roots and leaves with medicinal properties.

Birdwatching at Mahale

Although the very diverse species birds of Mahale are still in the process of documentation, the local researchers and scientists have made extensive progress, to which they invite all other enthusiasts to add their findings! Where the park meets the shore of Lake Tanganyika a number of grassland species have been noted, such as red-collared widowbirds (*Euplectes ardens*) making nests in the reeds. Speckled mousebirds (*Colius striatus*) favour the stands of oil palm around the former site of Kasiha village, and Bee-eaters and rollers can often be seen around the slopes of Mt. Nkungwe, where you might also glimpse an impressive crowned eagle (*Stephanoetus coronatus*). In the forests along the Kansyana Valley the brightly plumaged Ross's turaco (*Mussophaga rossae*) makes its nest in the high treetops, and guinea fowl, African snipe, green sand pipers and crested lark can often be seen slightly closer to the ground.