



Trekking the mountain

« NGARAMA CAVE IS A 200-METRE LONG LAVA TUBE BENEATH MT. MGAHINGA IN KISORO DISTRICT, WITH DARK CHAMBERS »



A local tourist outside the cave



The writer (left) chatting with Batwa guides at the entrance of the Ngarama Batwa Cave

Over the last month, we have written about the Batwa, a small forest tribe across south western Uganda. **Hope Mafaranga** recently visited the Ngarama Cave of the Batwa clan in Kisoro

At first, I was enthusiastic to trek the dense forest at the foot of the Virunga Volcanoes, which was home to the Batwa people.

My day started at Muhavura Base camp in Kisoro district at the footsteps of the mountain, with a briefing from my would-be tour guide.

Shortly, a group of four men appeared, fully dressed in skins and hides. They looked unique, though scary.

In fact, if I had been alone, I wouldn't have gone with them into the dense forest that was once home to the Batwa people, until 1992 when they were evicted by the Government and the area

gazetted as a national park. They are taking us on a tour of the Batwa Trail, which runs across the lower slopes of the Muhavura and Gahinga Volcanoes in Mgahinga Gorilla Safari Park. The forest is home to a variety of wildlife, but the Batwa Trail is far from being a conventional nature walk.

With the help of Batwa guides, one sees the forest as a larder, pharmacy, builder's yard, tool kits they used and above all, a home.

The Batwa cultural trail was launched on June 7, 2011 to preserve the Batwa culture and heritage.

Commonly known as "the original dwellers of this ancient jungle", the Batwa were known as "The Keepers of the Forest" and they survived by hunting small game animals using arrows or nets and gathering plants and fruits in the rain forest.

They lived in huts constructed using leaves and branches, moving frequently

EXPERIENCE

Trek
The cave, according to Serutooky, a Mutwa tour guide, was once home to the Batwa King, where the women of the community performed a sorrowful song.



Serutooky, the guide

The writer with other tourists inside the Ngarama cave



in search of fresh supplies of food. The Batwa lived in harmony with the forest and its creatures, including the mountain gorillas, for millennia. Some anthropologists estimate that pygmy tribes, such as the Batwa, existed in the equatorial forests of Africa for 60,000 years or more.

BAMBOO WALKING STICK
After the briefing, a walking stick made out of bamboo was handed over to me. I wanted to reject it, thinking the Batwa trail was just as flat as my home area in Kashaari, Mbarara.

But, Stephen Serutooky, one of the

Batwa tour guides, assured me and other tourists, who included officials from the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) that we would need the sticks as the areas have slopes and are sometimes slippery.

Serutooky informed us that in ancient days, the Batwa were hunters, fruit gatherers and brave warriors.

Their lives depended on the forest for shelter, food and traditional medicine and they largely depended on ancient knowledge to detect dangers, marriage and treasured raw meat and honey, which Serutooky demonstrated to us. Being my first time to go for the Batwa