

Courage under fire

In the shadow of an active volcano,
the rangers of Virunga National Park
quietly go about dangerous work

*Hiking in the
Rwenzori Mountains –
Photograph courtesy
Lewis Mudge*



As director and chief warden of Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Emmanuel de Merode is preserving one of the continent's greatest treasures for generations to come.

Many people who come to Africa fall in love with the continent and decide to stay. For Emmanuel de Merode, who was born in Tunisia and spent his childhood in Kenya, his love for Africa is the reason he never left.

"I was privileged to have been brought up in eastern Africa," he says. "And like so many people of my age in that part of the world, national parks were everything and wildlife was what we loved more than anything. And of course that's what I wanted to do for the rest of my life."

After his education abroad, De Merode travelled to the Democratic Republic of Congo. With its abundance of mountains and volcanoes, forests and wildlife, it's a country he describes as a mythical and magical place. "When I first came to Congo 23 years ago, it was with limited funding," he recalls. "I bought a motorbike in Uganda, rode across the Western Rift Valley, and then down into this incredible valley that was Virunga. And what I saw there was everything I could hope for."

Team effort

The Virunga National Park stretches from the Virunga Mountains in the south to the Rwenzori Mountains in the north. Established in 1925 and declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1979, it contains half of all biodiversity in sub-Saharan Africa, including the famous mountain gorillas.

"While it was the wildlife that brought me there, what kept me in Virunga for all this time were the people I met; in particular, this unique and remarkable team of

"There is no park on Earth where the sacrifice has been greater" – Emmanuel de Merode

Andre Bauma with gorilla orphan Ndakasi, Virunga National Park – Photograph courtesy LuAnne Cadd



rangers,” De Merode says. “When I arrived, they had essentially been abandoned by the rest of the world. And because of that, they paid a huge price.”

The country’s first civil war started in 1996 and, with state infrastructure collapsing, the army and many public servants fled. But even though the park rangers were no longer receiving salaries – many didn’t have the essential equipment, uniforms, or even shoes – they stayed on at the park.

“I’ve often thought about what could be the reasons for that and one of them is the great tradition that exists in Congo for wildlife conservation,” he says. “And the huge advantage I had were the people I was able to lean on for support in trying to carve out a strategy that

would help us confront these challenges that Virunga was facing.”

Character-driven narrative

Given that the park covers 7,800km², it is divided into three sectors to make it easier to manage. Each sector has its own warden, much like a park in itself, including Innocent Mburanumwe, who looks after the southern sector.

“He doesn’t have a formal education but he has a deeper knowledge of gorilla ecology and behaviour than any PhD you’ll find anywhere,” De Merode says. “His father was a ranger, his grandfather was a ranger, and his brother became a ranger like him. He lost his brother

Mountain gorilla baby – Photograph courtesy Imaire Depoli



Virunga National Park: fast facts

- The closest international airport is at Kigali in Rwanda.
- Single-entry 14-day visas are required to enter Congo.
- Permits are required for the various activities you can take part in. A mountain gorilla trekking permit costs \$400 (R5,700) per day, a chimpanzee habituation walk costs \$100 (R1,450), and a Nyiragongo volcano trekking permit and overnight in summit shelter costs \$300 (R4,270).

For more details, go to visitvirunga.org.

during the war, but he continued the fight and came up through the ranks to become a senior warden.”

Another deputy warden is Rodrigue Mugaruka Katembo, who was the central character in the recent Oscar-nominated documentary about the park. He spearheaded the investigation into a company that was illegally exploring for oil. Doing so led to his unlawful arrest.



“He was detained and tortured for 17 days,” De Merode says. “Because of that, we had to get him out. He’s now serving as a senior park warden on the other side of Congo. But it meant that I lost one of my most talented wardens for Virunga.”

High-risk lifestyle

A third key member of staff is Atama Madramdele, who De Merode first met the day he arrived as a ranger. Through the several years they spent together, Madramdele taught him a lot about living and working in a park.

“I was naïve when I first arrived and he got me through those initial steps,” De Merode says. “And he, like the other two, worked his way through the ranks to become a senior warden. But as he was returning to the park station three years ago, he was ambushed by militia, shot in the back, and died two days later.”

For De Merode, instances like this are a reminder that, given the fragility of the systems, the remarkable people who put their lives on the line are hanging on by a thread. Indeed, over the period of armed conflict, 154 of the 400 rangers were killed. De Merode himself was also the victim of an assassination attempt in 2014, having been shot several times during an ambush. He returned to work the following month.

“There is no park on Earth where the sacrifice has been greater,” he says. “It’s a simple fact that when you choose to become a ranger in Virunga, your chances of suffering a violent death as part of your work is between 30 and 40%. No military force on Earth suffers that level of fatality. And yet what’s unusual is the continuity about it all and the commitment on their part. That’s what’s carried me through.”

Text | **Eugene Yiga**

Park rangers on patrol – Photograph courtesy Paul Taggart