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A vertical photograph of a dense, green forest. In the foreground, two people are walking away from the camera on a narrow, grassy path. The person on the left is wearing a dark t-shirt and dark pants, while the person on the right is wearing a dark blue polo shirt and light-colored trousers. The forest is thick with various types of trees and undergrowth. In the background, a mountain peak is visible, partially shrouded in mist or low clouds. The overall scene is vibrant and natural.

The Trip of a Lifetime in Uganda

PATH OF DREAMS

BY PATRICK SYMMES ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOOK

Four Gorilla Safaris Worth Taking

BROWN & HUDSON

This outfitter can arrange tailor-made trips to Uganda, Rwanda, or both, with gorilla tracking at the core of flexible itineraries. Clients meet esteemed researchers and conservationists, including Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka, a veterinarian and founder of the nonprofit Conservation Through Public Health. Customized departures year-round from \$12,750. 44/(O) 20-3358-0110, brownandhudson.com

EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEYS

Along with treks in Rwanda and Uganda, Extraordinary Journeys' newest itinerary brings visitors to the secluded Odzala-Kokoua National Park in the Republic of the Congo. A maximum of 12 guests per day can depart on foot directly from Ngaga Camp, located within the home forests of three families of western lowland gorillas. Departures May-December 2013 from \$4,235 for six nights, including gorilla permit. (212) 226-7331, extraordinaryjourneys.net

MICATO SAFARIS

The five-day Tracking Majestic Mountain Gorillas itinerary in Rwanda begins with a tour of the capital, Kigali, before moving to the upscale Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge, where cottages look out on the Virunga volcanoes. Guests also have the chance to speak with former poachers who are now conservationists. Customized packages year-round from \$3,185. Gorilla permits cost \$750 per person per day. (212) 545-7111, micato.com

VOLCANOES SAFARIS

Patrick Symmes and Patrick Otim traveled with Volcanoes Safaris. The outfitter operates four lodges in Uganda and Rwanda. A portion of each safari fee is donated to the Volcanoes Safaris Partnership Trust, a community-based nonprofit whose projects can be seen during a tour of a nearby village. Departure dates year-round from \$2,389 for four days, including one gorilla permit. (866) 599-2737, volcanoessafaris.com

When to travel

Departure dates are flexible, although it's advised to avoid the wet season, March through mid-May. June through September are ideal months for travel. Gorilla permits can be hard to obtain, so book well in advance. —Jessica Silber



TEN YEARS LATER, on the morning of his M.D. ceremony in Kampala, Patrick told me that the experience of having to leave school after passing his exams had been the most bitter moment in a life of bitter moments. "It was too much for me," Patrick said. "Here I was, I knew I could study in any school and make it. I knew I could get into a university and make it. But I didn't have any means to do it."

He told me that he had considered suicide. It contradicted his Christian upbringing, but he felt trapped.

"You are the only person I have told that to," he said.

In late 2002, my sister-in-law, Amy Segal, received some news: Uganda. That was the destination of her first assignment for Doctors Without Borders. Refugees, regional conflict, and disease outbreaks made Uganda an intimidating first assignment, but most of the problems were in the north. "Don't worry," a friend with experience in Uganda told me. "It's not like they're going to send her up north."

They sent her north. Amy landed in Arua, a sprawling city near the tripartite borders of Uganda, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. A transnational conflict burned in the region, at times involving rival Sudanese groups, Congolese army deserters, and the warlord Joseph Kony, subject of the viral video campaign "Kony 2012," the man who had raided Patrick's refugee camp on the night that hard bedding saved his life. Luckily, Amy was in the northwest, which was considered a relatively stable environment largely protected from violence by a large, impassable river.

Amy arrived in early 2003 to work on a pilot program for HIV treatment. At some point a local staffer mentioned a boy with good grades who had been in and out of school because he couldn't afford tuition. That was Patrick Otim. Amy reached out and met Patrick's family and school headmaster and agreed to pay his tuition for the next semester. After that semester, my wife, Amy's twin, offered to sponsor the remainder of his high school education. With support and hope, Patrick worked obsessively, earning the fifth-best test scores in the region. From our home in New York, Beth shepherded Patrick toward a small medical school in western Uganda, a satellite of Kampala International University. He got in.

Suddenly, my wife had to pay for medical school in Africa. For the first year, she paid bills herself and poured time into fund-raising to pay for future tuition. Meanwhile, Patrick studied—biology, anatomy,

wrong medicine, or no medicine at all. "So I began chasing a dream. I would become the doctor he needed." Patrick was 9 or 10 years old.

In search of better conditions, the family decamped for Uganda in 1994, when Patrick was 12, riding for three weeks on the back of a Leyland truck and sleeping under mango trees. They settled at Adranga 1, a large refugee camp near Arua in northern Uganda. He started school over again, this time in his fourth language, English.

But money was always a problem. In 1997, Patrick, then 15 and the eldest child, had to quit school to support his family. He loaded pickup trucks for tips and carried fish in the local market. His determination impressed a local man, who paid \$500 to enroll Patrick for a year in a boarding school. Leaving his family behind, Patrick moved hundreds of miles across northern Uganda to the town of Gulu.

By 2000, Patrick's \$500 worth of tuition was exhausted and he returned to the refugee camp where his family waited. A private school—"no library or lab and a leaky roof"—accepted him. Patrick paid his school fees in labor, fetching water and hauling bricks on weekends. Even this impoverished school was "a chance to continue to dream," Patrick recalled. In 2001, he passed his first Ugandan exams, but money had run out, and once again he was forced to quit school.