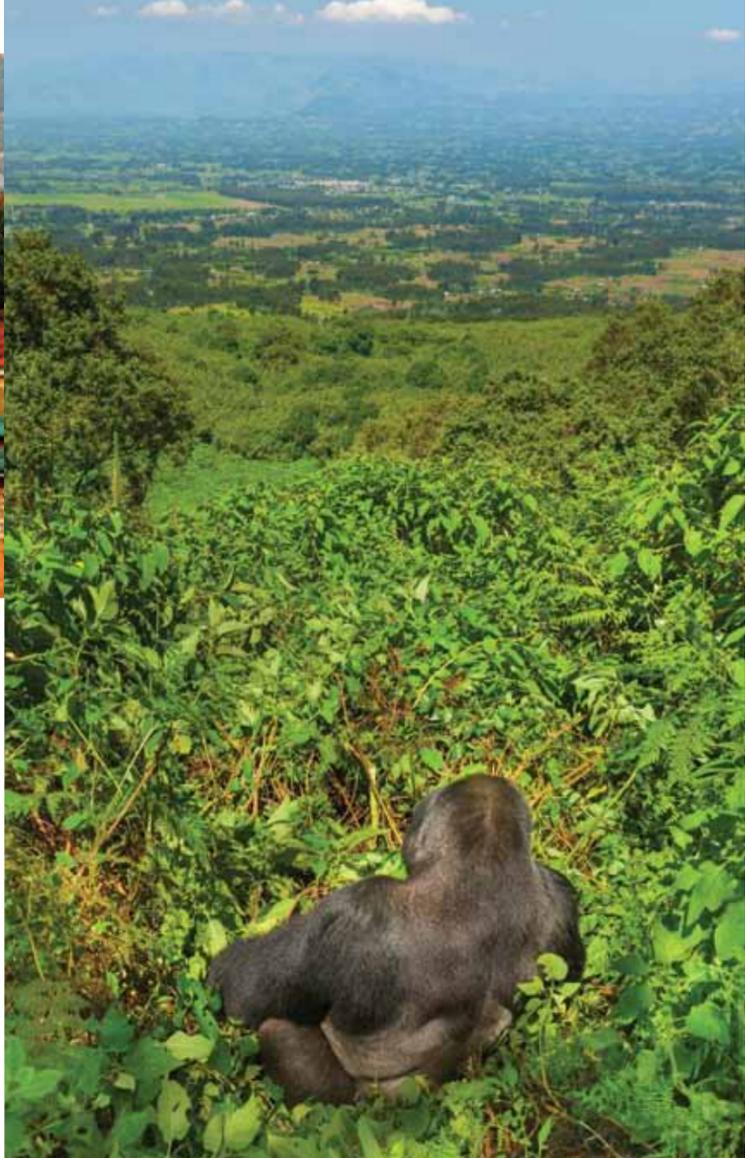
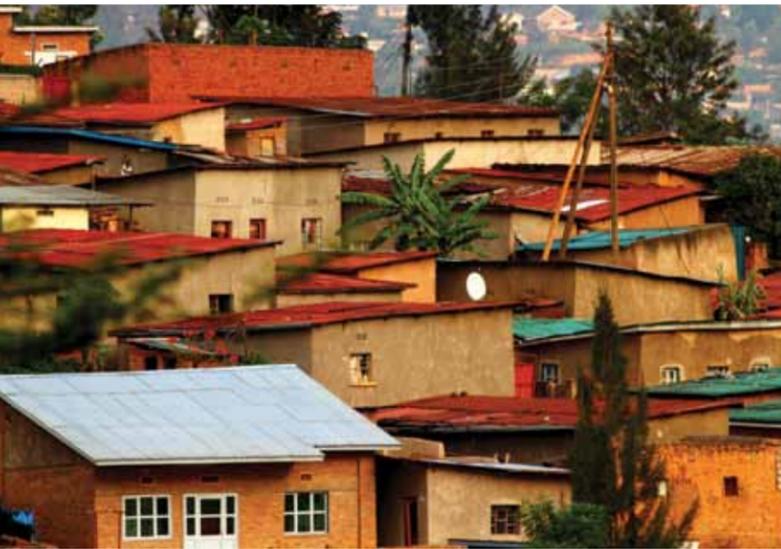


RWANDA

Coming of age

Twenty one years since the genocide, Rwanda has reinvented itself as a serious contender for exclusive safaris.
By **Sue Watt**





“**R**WANDA IS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER AFRICAN COUNTRIES,” Jacqui Sebageni tells me over dinner in the trendy Republika restaurant overlooking the sparkling lights of Kigali. Jacqui is director of our tour company, Thousand Hills Expeditions. “It’s not just a gorilla destination, it’s a whole story. That’s why visitors are so mesmerised.”

The country certainly captivated me when I visited in 2004. On a gap year touring Africa, I’d spent just three days here, travelling in an overlander truck to track the unforgettable mountain gorillas. But Rwanda’s soul and spirit were equally unforgettable, beckoning me to return.

Ten years on, I’m back in the aptly-named ‘Land of a Thousand Hills’. It’s as beautiful as I remember, almost squashed full of verdant knolls and valleys and mirror-glass lakes reflecting them so vividly. But economically, socially and emotionally, Rwanda is almost unrecognisable. “We’re moving on from the genocide now,” Jacqui explains. “We’re a stronger nation. We’re coming of age and we want the world to celebrate with us.”

It’s hard to believe 21 years have passed since 1994, when those images of Rwanda’s horrific genocide flashed onto our TV screens, when in just 100 days, 800,000 people, mostly Tutsis, were murdered by Hutu militia. In 2004, Kigali was still a troubled city. People avoided eye contact and the air was heavy with sorrow, shock and despair as we drove to the then

newly-opened Kigali Genocide Memorial. Walking in silence, sometimes in tears, around the museum, I learnt about the genocide through documentary exhibits, newspapers and video footage explaining events in chilling facts and figures. But what moved me most were thousands of family photographs of the victims, ordinary people just like us, trapped in such dreadful tyranny.

Yet this is more than a memorial for the dead. It’s a lesson for the future. Today, beautiful rose gardens surround the centre, representing unity, division and reconciliation and offer a peaceful, reflective sanctuary overlooking Kigali, now a modern, vibrant capital.

Akagera National Park in eastern Rwanda is also coming back to life. Our three-hour journey from Kigali passes through bustling villages of mud houses and tin roofs shimmering in the sun. In Africa’s most densely populated country, there are people everywhere, working the fields and walking the roads, balancing bags of freshly-picked tea on their heads, or cycling precariously with unfathomably large loads of crops or wood.

BALANCING NEEDS

Akagera is enchanting, like England’s Lake District combined with a mini-Serengeti, with Central Africa’s largest protected wetlands thrown in. Since 2010, it has been managed by African Parks, a non-profit organisation that restores depleted parks. “It’s a miracle Akagera exists,” reveals African Parks tourism manager Sarah Hall. “The government rescued it just in time. After the genocide, thousands of returning refugees needed land and settled within the park, poaching wildlife and destroying

the ecosystem through cattle-grazing.” Balancing the needs of an impoverished population with conservation, the government in 1997 reduced the park, allowing the new settlers to remain in one half, while protecting the wildlife in the remaining 1200km². Today, it’s home to over 8,000 large mammals and 480 bird species, including the elusive shoebill.

African Parks plans to reintroduce lions and rhino this year, making Akagera a ‘Big Five’ destination. But there’s already plenty to see on boat trips and game drives. We watch elephant and buffalo herds roaming its plains and notice that, without too many predators, the game here is weirdly calm. Normally skittish impalas, waterbucks and zebra stand and stare rather than scamper away. Warthogs stay crouched on their knees munching grass and giraffes look chilled, gazing at the rolling green hills from their lofty vantage point. Our lodge, Ruzizi, seems to take its relaxed vibe from the wildlife too and we dine under stars on its wooden deck on Lake Ihema’s shores.

Wildlife in Nyungwe Forest National Park, in Rwanda’s south-west, is decidedly more raucous. After stopping overnight in Kigali, a comfortable four-hour drive takes us to a magical fairytale world of dense, dripping rainforest bursting with life. “This is where I really feel nature at its peak,” our guide Arthur enthuses, as we drive into the mist. A cacophony of croaks, squeals and birdsong welcomes us, and the air smells earthy and moist.

Before dawn, we tear ourselves away from the luxurious Nyungwe Forest Lodge ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Kigali; gorilla watching; Nyungwe Forest Lodge; local woman; on foot with a guide

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Economically, socially and emotionally, Rwanda is almost unrecognisable from the grief-stricken country of 21 years ago



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The genocide memorial; Nyungwe Forest Lodge; canopy walk; golden monkey



ABOVE: There's more to game viewing in Rwanda than spotting primates

to track chimpanzees in Cyamudongo Forest, an hour's drive away, and the rising sun reveals a carpet of dew sparkling like diamonds on the fields and tea plantations.

"Chimps move on every day," our guide, Cesar, explains at the trailhead. "We know where they spent the night but we'll have to be quick to reach them before they leave." We slide along forested, ochre-coloured paths for 40 minutes when frenetic squealing rings out and around 30 chimps descend from their tree nests. Five large males remain, feasting on figs, when a female suddenly joins them in the tree, proceeding to mate for a few brief seconds with one chimp and then another. "When they're in oestrus, females mate around 50 times a day, with up to 15 different males," Cesar whispers. "I'm glad I'm not a chimp," I think out loud.

A labyrinth of hiking trails penetrates the 1,000km² park, taking between two hours and four days. We choose the short but spectacular Igishigishigi Trail that includes East Africa's highest canopy walk. Some 70 metres high, I sway gently in mid-air on the steel suspension bridge, utterly elated at my birds-eye view of nothing but vast, luscious rainforest below.

Visitors to Rwanda rarely see Nyungwe's special rainforest: most track gorillas then promptly leave. For all their magnificence, gorillas aren't the only attraction in Volcanoes National Park. We track a group of 30 gorgeous golden

monkeys deep in bamboo forest, swinging and flying through trees all around us and bounding back when they fall, like hyperactive children in a bouncy castle.

TALL, DARK AND HANDSOME

Young mountain gorillas seem childlike, too, somersaulting in bracken, playing hide-and-seek and cuddling mum for comfort. Tracking the Susa Group in 2004, I was entranced by Byishimo, a baby no bigger than my hand, and his tiny twin sister, Impano, suckling on their mother. Now after 50 minutes trekking on Mount Karisimbi, we find Byishimo again. Tall, dark and handsome, he's an enchanting and boisterous black-back strolling so close to me I could stroke him – if only gorilla tracking rules would allow.

Africa's mountain gorilla numbers have increased to 880 from 640 10 years ago, proof that gorilla tourism and conservation

work hand-in-hand. Rwanda is, however, as much about people as it is about primates. In Kinigi, near the Park headquarters, we visit SACOLA Community Trust's Cultural Centre. SACOLA also owns the beautiful Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge, where we are staying, and benefits 52,000 people providing homes, scholarships and jobs. At the Centre, we meet women weaving baskets, sample sorghum beer and watch blacksmiths and carpenters at work.

Before we leave, Intore (warrior) dancers and drummers perform for us. The ground thumps as they jump and beat in passionate rhythm. Men wear headdresses of long white grasses that swirl as they toss their heads; women look radiant in long pink dresses. Their proud, fervent singing mesmerises me, sending shivers down my spine. "What's this song?" I ask Arthur. "It's called *Our Rwanda*" he replies. "It's about how beautiful our country is." ①

WAY TO GO



Sue Watt travelled with **Cox & Kings** and **Thousand Hills Expeditions** (thousandhillsexpeditions.com; 020 7873 5000, coxandkings.co.uk). A 10-night tour including Akagera, Nyungwe and Volcanoes National Park costs from £4,785 including flights. An eight-day guided tour of Rwanda with **Tribes** features Kigali and Nyungwe Forest National Park; from £3,990 including transfers and accommodation (01473 890499, tribes.co.uk). **Trip Africa** offers tours to Rwanda including nyungwe and Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge (01638 500133, tripafriatour.com). **Kenya Airways** flies from London to Kigali via Nairobi (kenyaairways.com).