



Sunrise view from Bisate. ©Dana Allen



Mountain Gorilla ©David Crookes



Young mountain gorilla ©Caroline Cuthbert

Mention Rwanda and two things normally spring to mind: magical mountain gorillas and the horrific genocide 25 years ago that ravaged the country. Today, the so-called “Land of a Thousand Hills” crammed with lush knolls, peaks, lakes and valleys, is one of Africa’s rising stars.

There’s more to this tiny, land-locked nation than great apes and a desperately tragic past. Think a pristine capital city of gleaming skyscrapers and dignified memorials; a Big Five safari in a glorious national park; hiking trails and chimp tracking in dense rainforest; and kayaking or jet-skiing on Africa’s sixth largest lake. Today’s Rwanda is renowned for its incredible reconciliation and regeneration and has reinvented itself beyond all recognition, but gorillas are still the stars.

GORILLAS IN OUR MIDST

Like a first love, you never forget the very first gorilla you set eyes on. Mine was called Kurira. In Kinyarwanda, his name means to weep – apparently, he cried a lot as a baby. Now a strapping silverback, the Big Daddy of the twenty-strong Susa group swaggered casually in my direction and with hands the size of baseball gloves delicately picked blackberries from the bush beside me.

Earlier that morning, at Volcanoes National Park HQ in Kinigi village, we were divided into groups of eight, the maximum allowed to track each gorilla family, then had a detailed briefing on tracking etiquette. When we reached our gorillas, we’d have just one precious hour with them. While in their company, we mustn’t point or make loud noises (both signs of aggression). We couldn’t eat or drink, nor go to the toilet near them (spreading our unwelcome germs). However tempting, we must never touch them – although they seem calm, they’re still wild animals. And we should keep a clear seven metres distance between them and us.

No one had told Kurira this. He came closer, engrossed in his blackberry selection. It was my turn to cry now, not from fear but from the sheer emotion of being so close to this humbling gentle giant. I stepped away nervously. I watched his gnarled leathery fingers picking the berries and was mesmerised by his contemplative, human-like expression and soulful brown eyes as he savoured each one.

This was my unforgettable reward after our gruelling five-hour hike on steep, muddy hills to reach the Susa group. They roam high up Mount Karisimbi, hence they’re the most challenging of the ten groups available for tracking in Rwanda.

In the 1970s and 80s, the Susa group was studied by famous primatologist Dian Fossey, who brought the plight of mountain



Diana Fossey established her research centre at Karisoke ©Dana Allen



Trekkers’ briefing at Volcanoes National Park ©Dana Allen



Silverback gorilla ©Russel Friedman



Trekking through community land ©Dana Allen

gorillas into the public spotlight. Then, under threat from habitat loss, extensive poaching and the crossfire of civil wars, just 250 survived in the world, living in the rainforests of western Uganda’s Bwindi National Park and the towering Virunga Mountains spanning Rwanda’s Volcanoes NP, southern Uganda and DR Congo. Today, in Africa’s greatest conservation success story, they number around 1000.

Visitors can take a tour of the Karisoke Research Centre initially set up by Dian Fossey. This year sees the start of an exciting new phase for Karisoke, thanks to Ellen DeGeneres and her wife Portia de Rossi, who set up the Ellen Degeneres Wildlife Fund in honour of the US celebrity’s 60th birthday. Through this, they are building a new campus for Karisoke, on 11 acres of land adjacent to the park, called the Ellen DeGeneres Campus of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund. It’s planned for completion in 2021 and will be home to hi-tech laboratories and classrooms for future conservationists and a state-of-the-art exhibition for tourists and local communities.

Gorilla tourism is a double-edged sword: it simultaneously makes these beautiful primates more vulnerable through the risk of infection but also helps to protect them. Sharing 98% of human DNA, gorillas can die from our diseases. Even our common cold could kill them, hence no one with an infectious illness is allowed to track them. Yet, the US\$1500 permit fees for these encounters help fund vital conservation. And this has been their lifeline.



It’s been a lifeline for Rwanda’s people too. Just a two-hour drive from the capital Kigali, gorillas were the draw for tourists returning here after the genocide, kickstarting the local economy. We stayed at the beautiful Volcanoes Safaris’ Virunga Lodge. Working closely with local people, it was the first to open when tourism started. Now an award-winning luxury lodge, it has beguiling views over the Park’s lakes and imposing volcanoes. With a new emphasis on high-cost, low-impact tourism, Musanze, the centre for gorilla tracking, is thriving with luxury lodges focusing on communities and conservation. They include Bisate, owned by Wilderness Safaris, which opened in 2018 and One&Only’s Gorilla’s Nest launching later this year.

LAKE KIVU

The shores of glorious Lake Kivu are Rwanda’s beaches. The relaxed lakeside towns of Gisenyi and Kibuye are only two-three hours’ drive south from Kigali or Musanze, and beckon well-heeled city dwellers for weekend breaks. We strolled on the beach, had lunch at a waterside bar to a soundtrack of mellow jazz and just chilled, watching people jet-skiing, kayaking, and playing beach volleyball beside the tropical gardens of our hotel, Lake Kivu Serena.

NYUNGWE FOREST NATIONAL PARK

This vast fairy-tale forest is a four-hour drive south from Gisenyi or a half-hour flight from Kigali. With over 130km of hiking trails, you’re immersed in lush nature here. I felt giddy as I swayed gently on East Africa’s highest canopy walk, Uwinka Overlook, teetering some 50 metres high on a steel suspension bridge with the forest like a field of giant broccoli below. A primate paradise, it’s home to 13 different species and you can track chimpanzees, colobus monkeys and grey mangabeys. A new uber-luxury lodge, the One&Only Nyungwe House opened here in October.

AKAGERA NATIONAL PARK

One of my favourite parks in Africa, Akagera’s scenic beauty alone merits a visit: imagine England’s Lake District crossed with a mini-Serengeti. Two hours drive from Kigali, it hugs Rwanda’s north-eastern border. Wildlife here was decimated when thousands of refugees returned to Rwanda following the genocide, moving into Akagera. Now managed by conservation NGO African Parks, Akagera’s resurgence has been phenomenal. Lions and rhinos have been translocated here and it’s a thriving Big Five destination. We stayed at the tranquil Ruzizi Lodge on the shores of Lake Ihema. The new luxury Wilderness camp Magashi and Mantis’ Akagera Game Lodge, will both open mid-2019.

KIGALI

Nowhere is Rwanda’s regeneration more apparent than in its capital, Kigali. The spotlessly clean city has gleaming new skyscrapers and a distinctive, dome-shaped US\$300 million convention centre with five-star hotels like Radisson Blu, Marriott and Serena. For a more personal experience, stay at the luxury Retreat by Heaven boutique hotel in Kiyovu, with superb fine dining, a mix of African and International cuisine, in its poolside restaurant, Fusion. Head to the roof-top bar in downtown Ubumwe Grande Hotel for cocktails and impressive views of this hilly city. And explore the Nyamirambo district, Kigali’s oldest quarter, for a true African vibe and lively local bars.

The capital pays dignified homage to the past. Kigali Genocide Memorial recounts the tragic events of 1994, the country’s darkest days. Thought-provoking and emotional, with family photographs of ordinary people killed in extraordinary circumstances, I’ve never left here with dry eyes. To visit the memorial is to understand the history behind the horror of the genocide and to appreciate just how far this country has come over the past 25 years.



Children gather for their CITW Eco-Club ©Dana Allen



Community visit at Bisate ©Dana Allen

VOLCANOES SAFARIS VIRUNGA LODGE

<https://volcanoessafaris.com/virunga-lodge-rwanda/>

WILDERNESS BISATE LODGE AND MAGASHI CAMP

<https://wilderness-safaris.com>

PERMITS FOR TRACKING GORILLAS

<http://rwandatourism.com/things-to-do/gorilla-tracking/#tab-1-2>

DIAN FOSSEY GORILLA FUND INTERNATIONAL

<https://gorillafund.org/who-we-are/faq-on-ellen-degeneres-campus/>

THE ELLEN DEGENERES WILDLIFE FUND

<https://theellenfund.org>

SERENA HOTELS (KIGALI AND LAKE KIVU)

<https://www.serenahotels.com/>

ONE&ONLY NYUNGWE HOUSE

<https://www.oneandonlyresorts.com/one-and-only-nyungwe-house-rwanda#>

MANTIS AKAGERA GAME LODGE

<http://akageragamelodge.com/mantis-collection/>

RUZIZI TENTED LODGE

<https://www.africanparks.org/the-parks/akagera/visit-the-park/ruzizi-tented-lodge>

THE RETREAT KIGALI

<https://www.heavenrwanda.com/retreat.php>

KIGALI GENOCIDE MEMORIAL (kgm.rw)