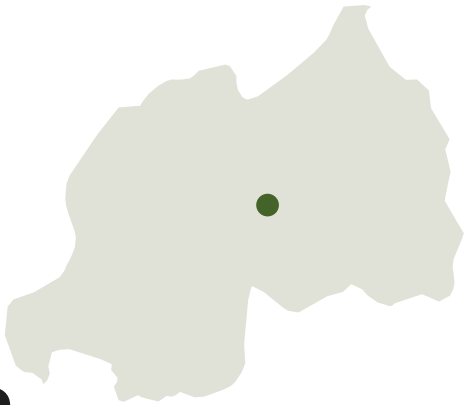


RWANDA

# Track Mountain Gorillas *in* Primate Paradise



**NOTHING BEATS YOUR FIRST** spine-tingling glimpse of mountain gorillas. Roaming their lush rainforest homelands, with gentle mums suckling their babies, mischievous toddlers tumbling around and a mighty silverback watching over them all, this is the ultimate wildlife encounter.

Volcanoes National Park in the tiny East African country of Rwanda, aptly known as the ‘Land of a Thousand Hills’, is home to 12 gorilla groups habituated to human visitors. From a population of just 400 in the 1980s, over 1000 are today thriving in the rainforests of Uganda, Democratic Republic of the Congo and northern Rwanda, thanks to astounding conservation efforts. Some gorilla families stay on the volcanoes’ lower slopes, but others venture higher, wandering through the mists of Mt Karisimbi, sometimes taking visitors three to four hours to reach – prepare for an arduous trek through dense vegetation with vines, ferns and nettles the size of dinner plates. When your trackers find them, you’ll have just one magical hour with these enigmatic animals, but it’s worth every muddy, tiring foot-step you’ve taken. Watch primate family life playing out in front

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Opposite: tree canopy trail in the Nyungwe rainforest; This page top: downtown Kigali, Rwanda’s capital; Bottom: a gorilla enjoys a snack in Volcanoes National Park

## AT A GLANCE

### EAT

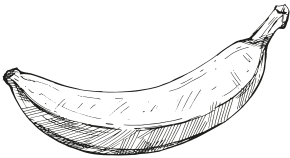
Try a traditional cooking class at the Nyamirambo Women’s Centre in Kigali’s oldest neighbourhood. Enjoy delicious *matoke* (fried green bananas), *ibihaza* (pumpkin with beans) and *dodo*, a garlicky, chilli-infused spinach dish.

### DRINK

Banana beer, or Urwagwa, is a popular alcoholic beverage, made with fermented banana juice and sorghum. Make it yourself at Red Rocks Rwanda in Musanze or at the Heaven Restaurant in Kigali.

### STAY

For sheer indulgence, stay at one of Musanze’s ultra-luxury lodges whilst tracking the gorillas. Wilderness Bisate, Singita Kwitonda, Virunga Lodge and One&Only Gorilla’s Nest all have conservation and community projects at their core.



### EXPERIENCE

In Volcanoes National Park, don’t miss a (far simpler) trek to see golden monkeys – they are both endearing and entertaining, swinging through the bamboo forests like acrobats on overdrive.

### SHOP

Kigali is fizzing with creative talent, best seen at the Inema Arts Centre. Home to 10 contemporary artists-in-residence, it shines a light on African talent in art, crafts, dance and music.



## A Traveller’s Tale

Like a first love, you never forget the first gorilla you see. Mine was called Kurira. The strapping 440lb (200kg) silverback, tall, dark and handsome with hair as black as the night, swaggered casually in my direction, oblivious to the excitement and trepidation soaring through me. Every nerve in my body had zapped into life. As I backed nervously into brambles, he stopped at the bush beside me, crouched quietly on his haunches and studied the blackberries, contemplating which one to pick as if choosing his favourite treat from a box of fine chocolates. Kurira’s gnarled leathery fingers delicately plucked off a single fruit, tiny in hands the size of baseball gloves, and popped it into his mouth, savouring every bit before choosing his next juicy morsel. Entranced by his human-like expressions, his gentleness and strength, and his soulful brown eyes, I was completely smitten.

SUE WATT

“Volcanoes National Park, aptly known as the ‘Land of a Thousand Hills’, is home to 12 gorilla groups habituated to human visitors”





of you. Just like their human cousins, there'll be wise grown-ups, flirty or sulky teenagers, and youngsters smiling, laughing even, as they chase each other playing peek-a-boo and swinging through the trees.

Gorillas aren't the only primates in Rwanda, though. The fairy-tale rainforest of Nyungwe National Park in the south is home to masses of monkeys, and between the two national parks lies Lake Kivu, hugged by some of the country's myriad hills, draped in patchworks of greens. To reach Nyungwe, cruise the entire length of the lake on the luxury houseboat *Kivu Queen uBuranga*, exploring tiny islands en route and listening to the tuneful traditional singing of fishers at sunset. Then immerse yourself in Nyungwe's verdant nature, home to 13 of Africa's primates, including cheeky chimpanzees and black-and-white

colobus – with long white beards, they look like ageing hippies. Teeter across Uwinka Overlook, a gently swaying suspension bridge some 164ft (50m) above the national park's towering ebonies and mahoganies; all you'll hear is birdsong and the call of monkeys. Or try the new three-day Cyinzobe hiking trail, passing waterfalls and spectacular vistas and sleeping in eco-log cabins along the way, before heading to Kigali, Rwanda's dynamic capital.

The city is teeming with art galleries and craft markets, excellent restaurants and bars, gleaming skyscrapers and manicured gardens. Don't miss the Kigali Genocide Memorial, a surprisingly peaceful haven with sweet-scented rose gardens, where the history of the genocide that devastated the country in 1994 is sensitively told.

*This page:* rare mountain gorillas inhabit Volcanoes National Park in the Virunga mountains

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## PRACTICALITIES

### GETTING THERE

#### AND AROUND

Kigali International Airport is Rwanda's primary port of entry and home to RwandAir, with a network of routes around the world. National parks are all within easy reach of the capital by car and most visitors hire a driver/guide (through a tour operator) for that invaluable local perspective of Rwandan life.

### WHEN TO GO

December to February and June to September are the best times for gorilla tracking, although it can rain at any time. Every September, baby gorillas are named at the Kwita Izina ceremony, a popular event that attracts thousands of people.

### THINGS TO NOTE

On the last Saturday morning of every month, all Rwandans take part in Umuganda, working for their communities: shops and museums stay closed until 11am. Gorilla-tracking permits cost US\$1500, with discounts if visiting Akagera and Nyungwe National Parks; book well in advance, ideally through a tour operator (or direct via [visitrwandabookings.rdb.rw](http://visitrwandabookings.rdb.rw)). Children under 15 are not allowed to track gorillas. You'll need to be able to hike for a few hours.

*For further information see [visitrwanda.com](http://visitrwanda.com)*

## Two Week Itinerary

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Imagine Rwanda as a wheel, with its excellent road network like spokes emanating from the capital Kigali. Safe and spotlessly clean, the city merits a couple of days' easy exploration.

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On your third morning, drive two hours' north to Musanze (also known as Ruhengeri), the gateway to the mountain gorillas. Here and around the nearby village of Kinigi, home to Volcanoes National Park HQ, you'll find top-notch lodges, restaurants and art galleries. Many people visit the gorillas twice if the eye-watering permit cost isn't prohibitive – fees go towards conservation and community development – or you can go biking, hiking and canoeing. Spend at least three days here.



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On day six, a two-hour drive takes you to Gisenyi on Lake Kivu's shore to meet your houseboat *Kivu Queen uBuranga*. Two relaxing days later, you'll disembark at Nyamashoke (also called Kagano) for Nyungwe National Park, thirty minutes' drive away. Spend five days here, spotting monkeys and chimpanzees, and immersing yourself in resplendent rainforest on a three-day hike, before driving back to Kigali.

### MORE TIME?

Head east to Akagera National Park, a two-hour drive from Kigali. It's home to the Big Five wildlife, and its lakes, hills and savannahs make this one of Africa's prettiest parks.