



Land of surprises

It is already two decades since the genocide that rocked Rwanda, and stories of a progressive, friendly and diverse country suggest the country itself has been on quite a journey. So we sent Sue Watt to see what awaits visitors in this mysterious, intriguing country. (Hint: we didn't send her for long enough!)

If asked to identify the country that has one of the fastest-growing economies in Africa, a health insurance system that is the envy of the continent, with plummeting child mortality rates, and more women in Parliament than any other country in the world due to its emphasis on gender equality, few would dare to suggest Rwanda as the answer. Yet this tiny country is brimming with surprises, and seems to revel in confounding expectations.

Arriving in the capital, the first thing everyone notices is how spotless it is. Unusually for an African city, downtown Kigali is impeccably clean, vibrant and modern, brimming with flowers, neatly manicured roundabouts and gleaming new tower blocks. Nyamirambo is the edgy part of town, mostly Muslim, with a small, hectic market, several mosques and a pulsating nightlife emanating from its many bars and cafes. "It's where I go when I want to feel alive!" our guide Arthur enthused, tempting us to explore. ►



ALL PICTURES: WILL WHITFORD

We chose to do a walking tour of the area with Marie-Aimee, who runs the Nyamirambo Women's Group. She showed us around market stalls selling everything from fruit and veg to flip flops and fabrics. Then, ambling along the streets, we called in at local stores, a tailor's workshop and a hairdresser's. "We have the best hair-braiders in the city here," she told us proudly.

It was slightly early to sample the local beers, yet lively African music throbbed out of the cafes on almost every corner. And back at the centre, we were treated to a delicious local meal that included *matoke* (cooked green bananas), sweet potatoes and *dodo* – a tasty concoction of spinach-like leaves with groundnuts, chillies and garlic.

In any other African city I would have felt somewhat anxious rambling around in the 'rough' part of town, but crime here is low and the locals relaxed and welcoming. A warm, quietly self-assured young woman, everyone knew Marie-Aimee, which made it feel like an afternoon stroll with friends, and the pride she felt for her city and country was tangible. She's not the only Rwandan feeling proud these days.

Telling Rwanda's story

"It's fabulous, given our recent history, that there is such national pride," Jacqui Sebageni, co-director of Thousand Hills tour operators and a leading figure in Rwanda's tourism sector, told me. "It lifts you. It gets you up in the morning; it keeps you running all day. In terms of sheer beauty, Rwanda is an easy sell," she continued. "But it's not just a gorilla destination; it's a whole story, our story,

and it's something I'm passionate about."

An inescapable part of that story is the genocide against the Tutsis in 1994, the history of which is relayed in the Kigali Genocide Memorial high on a hill overlooking the city. That this memorial exists at all is testament to the courage and determination of Rwandans to remember, to learn from their past and to seek reconciliation. Over 800,000 victims were massacred in the space of a hundred days, and some 250,000 of them are buried here in mass graves, among rose gardens and fountains and a beautiful sense of peace and serenity.

Inside, displays explain how Belgian colonialists created ethnic divisions in the early 20th century, leading to decades of political animosity and infighting between the Tutsis and the majority Hutus, culminating in the explosion of mass murder after President Habyarimana's plane was shot down on 6 April 1994.

Built to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the genocide by UK charity The Aegis Trust in 2004, the centre is playing a vital role in the country's 20th anniversary commemorations called Kwibuka20, that started in January and will conclude in July, the theme being, "Remember... Unite... Renew..."

Appropriately, the memorial has become a place for survivors and perpetrators to remember and reflect together, for visitors to learn, and for Rwanda's new generations to understand this devastating event in the history of their beautiful country and ensure it never happens again. ➤

The ghosts of the genocide, twenty years ago, are immortalised in the various memorials around the country (far right), and serve as a motivation for Rwandans to move forward peacefully. We are struck by how clean, friendly and safe Kigali felt.



SUE WATT fell in love with Africa on a gap year in 2004 and became a freelance writer soon after. This was her second visit to Rwanda. "Rwanda is one of the most inspiring places I've ever visited. Naturally, it will always be associated with the tragedy of the genocide, but today's Rwanda is very different. This beautiful country has moved on massively since then and it's time our preconceptions did too."



Plan your trip

Where to stay:

Rwanda offers a reasonable range of international standard hotels and lodges. Many are relatively new.

Sue Watt stayed at:

Ruzizi Tented Camp, Akagera NP (www.african-parks.org) This pretty camp has seven en suite tents on the shores of Lake Ihema.

Nyungwe Forest Lodge

(www.nyungweforestlodge.com) In the setting of Gisakura Tea Plantation, this luxury lodge has high-spec chalets, an infinity pool overlooking the rainforest, a gym and first-class service.

Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge

(www.governorscamp.com) Owned by SACOLA Community Trust and run by Governors' Camp, this is a beautiful base for gorilla tracking in Volcanoes NP.

Hotel des Milles Collines

(www.millescollines.net) This upmarket hotel in Kigali was the setting for the true story of the 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda*.

When to visit:

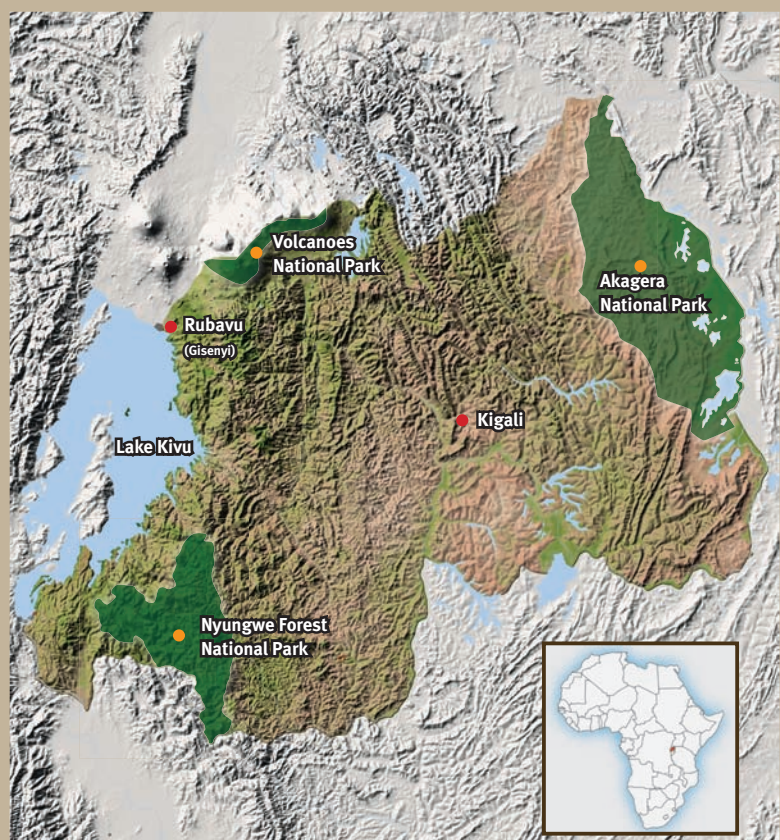
It's possible to track primates, including the mountain gorillas, throughout the year, but the rainy seasons in April, May and November can make the ground slippery underfoot. You'll need to book your permits well in advance through your tour operator.

Getting around:

Several tour operators offer trips to Rwanda. Sue travelled with Cox & Kings (www.coxandkings.co.uk) who had ground support from Thousand Hills Expeditions and the Rwanda Development Board.

Find out more:

Rwanda, 5th Ed (Bradt Travel Guides) by Philip Briggs is an invaluable tool.
Rwanda Tourism: www.rwandatourism.com
Commemoration of the Genocide: www.kwibuka.org
Aegis Trust for the Prevention of Crimes Against Humanity: www.aegistrust.org
Nyamirambo Women's Centre: www.nwc-kigali.org





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Since the Akagera Management Company was established in 2010 to redevelop Akagera National Park, considerable progress has been made. The Bradt guide to Rwanda describes the park as “emphatically worth visiting... it ranks among the most scenic of Africa’s savannah reserves... the birdlife is quite phenomenal”. With such potential, Rwanda is emerging as a strong all-round wildlife destination in its own right.

East to Akagera

Rwanda’s beauty is evident the minute you leave Kigali, its countryside crammed with vivid green hills, volcanoes and crater lakes. During our three-hour journey to Akagera National Park, Arthur joked: “Whoever called this The Land of a Thousand Hills was lazy. He obviously gave up counting because there are far more than that.”

En route, a picture of local life emerged. The most densely populated country in Africa, Rwanda’s 26,338 square kilometres are home to around 11 million. Roads meander through towns and villages absolutely brimming with people. We passed cyclists balancing masses of green bananas on their bikes and men pushing wooden carts laden with freshly-picked crops. Women tended their squares of bright green tea bushes, carrying baskets full of leaves on their heads. Children played outside houses made of red mud with tin roofs shining in the sun, excitedly shouting “Abuzungu, Abuzungu” (white people) as we drove past.

Occasionally we saw teams of people dressed in orange or pale pink uniforms terracing the hills or clearing small fish farms – formerly genocide perpetrators and now prisoners working their time. Thousands of convicts have been released, however, many living back in the communities where they murdered their neighbours. The spirit of reconciliation is quite remarkable.

Hugging Rwanda’s eastern borders, Akagera has had a turbulent history. Returning to Rwanda after the genocide in need of land and food, thousands of refugees settled here, endangering its already fragile ecosystem. In 1997 a timely damage-limitation intervention by the

Rwandan government saved this 1120 square kilometre park, reducing its size by 50 per cent and allowing the returnees to stay in the de-gazetted region.

Today, Akagera’s future looks bright. It will soon be a Big Five destination, once rhino and lion are reintroduced by African Parks Network, the South African conservation organisation that is now managing this little-known yet

utterly beautiful reserve.

With visitor numbers and wildlife increasing, it should be on every traveller’s itinerary; its exquisite vistas of mountains and lakes,

papyrus swamps and savannah plains stretching across the horizon.

With around 8000 animals now living here, and 480 bird species, we saw far more wildlife than I’d anticipated on our game drives. Antelope were prolific and included fluffy waterbuck, topi, tiny oribi, klipspringer, impala and bushbuck, all quite calm thanks to the lack of predators aside from the occasional leopard or hyena. Over 100 giraffe saunter among acacia trees. Herds of elephant, buffalo and zebra frequent the northern savannah plains, while in the east the lakes are home to a mass of aquatic fauna that includes the rare shoebill. On a boat trip on Lake Ihema, we found baby crocs just 20cms long clinging onto branches in the water, abandoned by their mothers when their eggs hatched. Hippos bobbed underwater when we approached and pied kingfishers darted around the papyrus as fish eagles soared overhead.

African Parks’ new lodge Ruzizi lies on the shore of Lake Ihema too, with views panning across the water. We stayed for two days, and wished we’d had longer.

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Thinking of visiting Rwanda? An ‘Essential Rwanda’ feature, including an extended factfile and suggested itineraries, featured in issue 48 (Autumn 2009) and is available online (www.travelafricamag.com) or as a back issue.



WILL WHITFORD



ERIC GAUSS



WILL WHITFORD

The nature of Nyungwe

After an overnight stop back in Kigali, we headed south to Nyungwe National Park. "This is the point where I really feel nature," Arthur emphasised as we drove through the gates of the park, instantly leaving open expanses of crops and hills and driving into clouds, a torrential downpour and dark, dense rainforest.

Spreading just over 1000 square kilometres, Nyungwe became a National Park in 2004 and 130km of trails now help visitors explore its interior. One of these offers an unusual perspective of the rainforest, a 'view from above' on East Africa's highest canopy walk, Uwinka Overlook. As I teetered nervously along a metal bridge suspended over a deep valley 50m below, the forest panned out like florets of gigantic broccoli below me. Within it live around 300 bird and 85 mammal species, including 13 types of primates.

Our 4.30am departure from the luxurious Nyungwe Forest Lodge, an hour's drive in darkness and a further hour-long slippery trail were soon forgotten when we reached the chimpanzees deep in Cyamudongo Forest. During our permitted hour, we watched seven chimps swinging in the trees, two youngsters descending to the ground and casually sauntering past us, four females running across our path, one carrying a baby on her back, and a female mating with two males high up in a tree, like a primate version of the Mile High Club.

The next day's trek to see colobus also proved entertaining: after a short, steep walk through tea plantations to the edge of Gisakura Forest we reached a group of around 35 monkeys, black with long white manes and beards, jumping, frolicking and almost flying between the trees. ▷

With 130km of walking trails, and abundant bird and primate populations (including the black-and-white colobus, **above**) Nyungwe is becoming a regular inclusion in most Rwanda itineraries. And for those with a head for heights, the canopy walkway (**below**) is a thrilling opportunity to experience the forest from a bird's-eye view.



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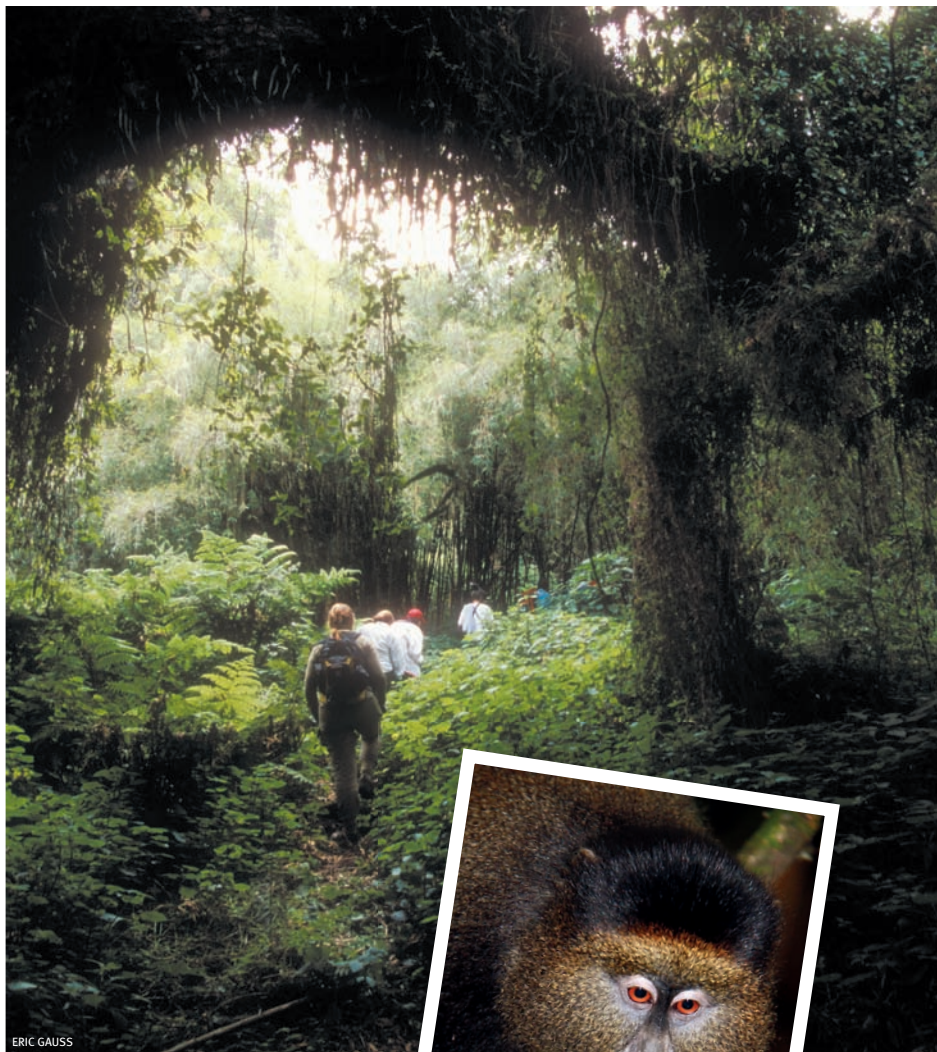
Gorillas in the midst

Moving on to the far north of the country, Rwanda's renowned mountain gorillas might hog the limelight in Volcanoes National Park, but they're not the only primates here. We spent a magical hour with around 30 golden monkeys, rarely seen beyond the Park's Virunga Mountains, where two groups have been habituated for tracking. After ambling for an hour through mesmerising pale gold and green bamboo forest, we watched these playful little creatures cavorting around us like a troop of trapeze artists, somersaulting, swinging and chasing each other in circles. One juvenile caught sight of his reflection in a puddle and poked it in the face, bemused at the ripples he caused.

With glossy reddish-gold coats and gorgeous expressive faces, mums carried babies no bigger than my hand close to their chests while broody males – bigger, stronger and normally excluded from the group – hung around in hope because it was breeding season.

For a human perspective on life in Volcanoes, the Cultural Centre in Kinigi offers frenetic intore (warrior) dancing, basket weaving and carpentry demonstrations, as well as village walks to the blacksmith, beer-makers and traditional healers. Our beautiful Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge, with views spanning the Virunga volcanoes, is owned by SACOLA Community Trust and has the added feel-good factor of benefiting some 52,000 locals, financing the cultural centre, new homes, educational scholarships and employment opportunities, funded through a proportion of the room rates.

Thankfully, the genocide barely touched the gorilla population here. Today, the Virunga Mountains that span the borders of Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are home to 480 mountain gorillas, with another 400 in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. Volcanoes NP has ten groups for visitor tracking, and we were allocated the Susa group – the biggest with 40 members and renowned for being the most difficult to reach because of their high location



on Mount Karisimbi. In the wet season, however, they move lower down the slopes and we found them within an hour, far earlier than we'd expected, in a sunny clearing of bamboo forest.

The Susa group is unique, having two of the world's three surviving pairs of mountain gorilla twins, and watching them was a true privilege. Byishimo was the star: a charismatic, ten-year-old black-back, he constantly demanded attention, parading around, shoving youngsters out of his way, rolling on his back, and gazing at the camera with doleful eyes.

His twin sister Impano wasn't around, but two-year-old toddlers Impeta and Umudende made up for her absence, playing king-of-the-hill and tumbling around in front of proud mum Ruvumu. Kurira, the mighty silverback, sauntered into the shrub on all fours as one of the little twins jumped on his back then promptly slid off onto a bed of flattened nettles. It was a beautiful, special sighting, one that Arthur, who'd tracked gorillas before, described as "the best ever".

All too soon it was time to go home. I felt genuinely sad leaving, but full of hope for this brave and gracious country. Driving to Kigali, Arthur spoke of his childhood growing up as a refugee in Uganda after his parents fled Rwanda in the 1950s. "If you go back, go as a Rwandan, not a Tutsi," they told me. It's very difficult sometimes," he explained.

"You might have people who killed your family and are now your neighbours. But the only way you can break the cycle of genocide and move on is to forgive. Revenge is no good. We're not Tutsis or Hutus anymore. We're all Rwandans now." ✎



Tracking into the Virungas to spend time with mountain gorillas has been the mainstay of Rwanda's tourism industry – and essential in the effort to conserve the endangered animals and their habitat. It is an intense wildlife experience, also allowing the opportunity to see other primates, such as the golden monkey (inset).



On the App

An extended picture gallery of Rwanda is available on the App. Search the iTunes App Store for 'Travel Africa magazines'.