

The beauty of the Land of a Thousand Hills hasn't changed, but economically and socially it's unrecognisable. Yet it is the country's emotional recovery that is most astounding



RESPECT YOUR ELDERS: Guhonda is the dominant silverback in the Sabyinyo group, which resides in Volcanoes National Park. At 46 years old, he is one of the oldest-recorded mountain gorillas

All eyes on Rwanda

Over the past 20 years, the country has transformed from a place of abject poverty and civil war to a progressive, stable nation. But what happens next?

Sue Watt finds out

Kurira was the first silverback I ever saw. Like a giant Sumo wrestler, he completely stunned me – sauntering around chomping at thistles and nettles, oblivious to their thorns and stings and seemingly to our presence. But for all Kurira's majesty, it wasn't him I'd been desperate to see back in 2004. It was his famous three-month-old babies Byishimo and Impano, the first twins to survive since gorilla conservation began in the 1960s. Being a twin myself, I was longing to see them but I knew it was a tough ask.

Having trekked five hours to reach the Susa group through dense rainforest and steep, slippery slopes, our permitted hour flew past as we watched enthralled by their human-like family scenarios – toddlers playing and squabbling, teenagers sulking and flirting, mums preening and protecting their babies. Yet the newborn twins had eluded us. As we were leaving, young mum Nyabitondore burst out from the bushes right beside me and scurried past, disappearing almost as quickly as she'd emerged, with her two fluffy little babies stuck to her breasts.

In 2004, just 10 years on from the devastating genocide in which 800,000 people, mostly Tutsis, were murdered by the Hutu majority, Rwanda was still raw with pain. The Kigali Genocide Museum had only recently opened, the country's tragedy laid bare within its sombre rooms, and the city was mired in poverty, with shacks for homes and few high-rise buildings or hotels to speak of.

The same could be said for Ruhengeri, now also known as Musanze, the centre for the country's nascent gorilla tourism. At that time, it was a one-street town with a handful of single-storey shops, a local bar and a couple of basic hotels. But things were slowly changing. Praveen Moman, founder of Volcanoes Safaris, was just opening Virunga Lodge.

"We were the first international company to come into the area after the genocide," he told me. "When I initially came to Rwanda in 1998, it didn't look like anything would ever settle. Ruhengeri was still a garrison town because of rebel activity and the hills were alive with the sound of gunshots."

In 2001, after detailed discussions with government and diplomats, Praveen took his first group of tourists gorilla tracking with the renowned primatologist Ian Redmond. ➔

WILL WHITFORD

"We had to go in convoy to the Park HQ in Kinigi, there was no office, no infrastructure; people hung around in the rain waiting for permits. Even then, Kinigi was dodgy. Someone would suddenly shout, 'Run!', and you would just bolt without asking why – there were rebels in the forest."

Convinced that gorilla tourism could help communities, Praveen decided to build a lodge. Two years later, having employed around 100 locals on the construction, Virunga Lodge finally opened with four simple cottages, kick-starting tourism in Volcanoes National Park.

Today, much about Rwanda has been transformed. But bursting with lush mountains, knolls and valleys reflected in glass-like lakes, the beauty of the Land of a Thousand Hills hasn't changed. Economically and socially, however, it is unrecognisable, and it is the country's emotional recovery that is most astounding.

"As Rwandans, we've accepted reconciliation," my guide Arthur Biraro explained. "*Génocidaires* have served their time, they've asked for forgiveness and we have to forgive and unite. It's the only antidote to revenge."

Through improved education, gender equality, healthcare and economy, President Paul Kagame's Vision 2020 programme is also aiding reconciliation. Today, Rwanda has one of Africa's fastest growing economies, free basic education, and widespread access to technology and Wi-Fi. Maternal and child mortality have been halved and Rwanda has more women in parliament than any other country.

Development was one of the key pillars of Vision 2020, and the country's evolving tourism strategy, with its emphasis on sustainability and poverty reduction, has fed into this. Over the years, the value of the tourism industry to the national GDP has increased phenomenally, from an understandably low 1.74 per cent in 1997 to 6.2 per cent in 2004 when I first visited, and up to 11.18 per cent last year.

Rwanda's primates have played their part in this recovery. In 2004, as tourism tiptoed back, just 640 mountain gorillas survived worldwide; today, they number 880. Volcanoes National Park now has 10 groups

habituated for tracking, from just four in 2004. The Susa group, having 42 members, has split into two. Remarkably Susa A, Kurira's group, has since had the world's second set of gorilla twins.

Now, each year in September, a gorilla-naming ceremony called Kwita Izina attracts thousands of visitors. Ruhengeri has risen to the occasion: today it's a lively, large town dominated by restaurants, bars and accommodation across all budgets. Virunga Lodge, too, has evolved. Exuding rustic luxury, it was named 'Africa's Best Romantic Retreat' at the 2016 World Boutique Hotel Awards.

"There's been a dramatic improvement in terms of Rwanda's political stability, security and day to day living," Praveen told me. "The government is determined to develop the country and it's all very positive. In terms of tourism, we're proud to have been there at the forefront, investing, sharing skills and seeing it grow into a world-class industry."

Some 22,200 gorilla permits were sold in 2016 but Rwanda isn't standing still. In May this year, soon after I'd returned, the Rwanda Development Board (RDB) shocked the tourism industry by increasing permit fees overnight, without notice, from US\$750 to US\$1500. Focusing on sustainable tourism, it also increased the percentage of permit fees earmarked to conservation and community development from 5 to 10 per cent.

However, there are concerns about the extent of the price hike and its consequences in terms of deterring visitors. "Doubling the permit cost is a bold move," →

Whether you're kayaking across Lake Kivu or tracking gorillas in the rainforest, Rwanda never lets you down

VOLCANOES ISN'T THE ONLY NATIONAL PARK FLOURISHING — HERE ARE THREE MORE

■ **Akagera National Park** Following the genocide, thousands of refugees returned to Rwanda, moving into Akagera. In 1997, the government reduced the park allowing the new settlers to stay in one half, while protecting the wildlife in the remaining 1120sq km. Hugging Rwanda's eastern border, it is Central Africa's largest protected wetlands and home to the rare shoebill. In 2010, African Parks took on Akagera's management. More than US\$17 million has been spent here: the reserve's resurgence has been phenomenal and, with the arrival of around 20 rhinos in

May, it's now a thriving — and utterly beautiful — Big Five destination.

■ **Nyungwe National Park** Gazetted in 2004 to protect its lush rainforest, Nyungwe spans just over 1000sq km of southern Rwanda. A primate paradise, it's home to 13 different species, including chimpanzees, huge troops of colobus monkeys and grey-cheeked mangabays. East Africa's highest canopy walk, Uwinka Overlook, can be found here, part of 130km of walking trails into its fairy-tale interior. A new super-smart lodge, the One&Only Nyungwe House within the Gisakura Tea Plantation, opens its doors this month.

■ **Gishwati-Mukura National Park** Rwanda's newest reserve was created in February 2016 to save the remnants of a beautiful primary rainforest. Once spanning 2500sq km, it succumbed to illegal mining, human encroachment and cattle grazing by returning refugees, leaving only 35sq km intact. Protecting its rich biodiversity, including populations of L'Hoest's or mountain monkeys, golden monkeys, chimps and some 130 species of bird, there are big plans for its restoration. These involve habituating chimps for tourism, resurrecting walking trails, and new lodges and camps.



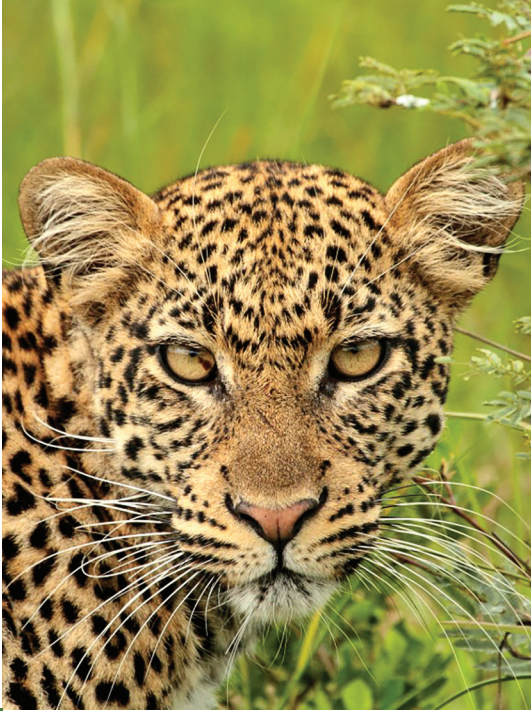
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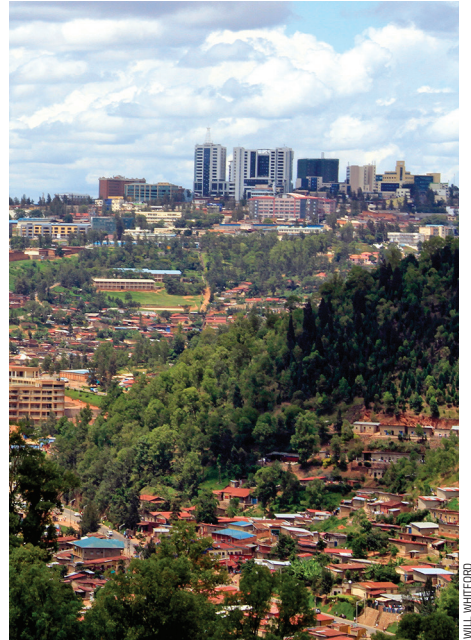
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Chris McIntyre, MD of tour operator Expert Africa, commented. “To date, the money raised has been critical in conserving these iconic gorillas and their habitat, and it’s also nourished an appreciative local economy beside the park. I hope the hike will help conservation, but I’m concerned that it’s so big it could actually harm both the local economy and the revenues that flow to conservation.”

Complementing RDB’s new strategy of high-income, low-impact tourism, three upmarket companies that champion conservation and local communities are opening high-end — and very expensive — lodges in Volcanoes National Park. Wilderness Safaris’ Bisate Lodge has recently opened, with One&Only’s Gorilla’s Nest following in 2018 and Singita’s 10-room lodge opening in 2019.

But what about less affluent tourists — will they stay away or will they simply rule out the gorillas and look to other Rwandan attractions? Over the years I’ve been travelling here, I’ve seen how the country has been developing its tourism offering, focusing on areas such as Akagera National Park, now a Big Five destination, and Lake Kivu, the landlocked country’s equivalent of a beachside resort. Even in Ruhengeri (Musanze), there are now various attractions beyond gorillas such as golden monkey tracking and cultural tourism.

“Rwanda isn’t all about gorillas,” Greg Bakunzi told me. He’s the founder of Red Rocks Rwanda, a funky hostel, campsite and cultural centre outside Ruhengeri. “There are so many unique experiences around our traditions through music, dance, art and our way of life.” A staunch supporter of cultural tourism, his monthly events involving both communities and guests include talent shows, children’s summer camps and various festivals focusing on aspects of local life such as harvests, poetry and song, films and banana beer. “Rwanda has so many things to offer and they don’t need to cost US\$1500.”

Steve Venton, director of Kingfisher Journeys, agrees. His new company specialises in boat trips around Ruhengeri and Lake Kivu. “With our new 10-day kayaking adventure now costing less than an hour with gorillas, it’s a superb way to see more of this beautiful country and I hope people would see it as reason enough to come here in its own right,” he commented. “People will be looking for alternatives to seeing the gorillas, and we’re very excited about how we could be involved in offering a new vision for tourism in Rwanda.”

Whether you’re canoeing across Lake Kivu or tracking gorillas in the rainforest, Rwanda never lets you down. Returning to find the twins again, now 12 years old, we couldn’t see Impano but Byishimo was every bit the star I’d hoped he would be. Brimming with confidence, he rolled in the long grasses, played with toddlers and, doing his own take on gorilla gymnastics, performed strange backflips, seemingly posing for the camera like a true celebrity.

For me, seeing Byishimo over the years has been as special as he is, but would I go back if I couldn’t see him? Absolutely. 🐼

PREVIOUS PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Kayaking on Lake Kivu; a colobus monkey, one of 13 primate species in Nyungwe Forest; an Intore dancer; Rwanda’s capital Kigali is growing rapidly; Kazeneza Falls in the Gishwati-Mukura National Park; Uwinka Overlook, Nyungwe’s famous canopy walk; a squacco heron on Nyirabiyoro Island, Lake Ihema; people on the streets of Nyamirambo, Kigali’s vibrant Muslim quarter; a leopard in Akagera National Park. **RIGHT:** The Rwenzori colobus, an acrobatic, arboreal monkey

SAFARI PLANNER

■ **Getting there** RwandAir started direct flights to Kigali in May this year. Kenya Airways and Ethiopian Airlines also fly to Kigali via Nairobi and Addis Ababa respectively. Many reliable travel companies now operate in Rwanda. The writer travelled with Expert Africa, which can organise everything for you, including full-board accommodation, international flights, a private vehicle and a driver/guide for the duration of the trip, Akagera park fees, golden monkey permit and a gorilla permit.

■ **Where to stay** The writer stayed at Virunga Lodge, part of Volcanoes Safaris’ portfolio, which is a beautiful base for gorilla tracking in Volcanoes National Park; Kigali Serena Hotel, which has a relaxing vibe with excellent facilities and a central location; and Serena Lake Kivu Hotel on the lakeshore, a great stop for some post-trekking R&R. In Akagera, she stayed at Ruzizi Tented Lodge — on the shores of Lake Ihema in the south. The seasonal Karengwe Bush Camp, in the northern savannah region, opens June–August and December–February. For budget travellers, Red Rocks Rwanda, just outside Ruhengeri (Musanze), has good-value hostel rooms and campsites.

■ **When to visit** It’s possible to track primates, including mountain gorillas, throughout the year but the rainy seasons in April, May and November can make the terrain slippery underfoot.

■ Things to do

Gorilla tracking Permits are available from the Rwanda Development Board (rdb.rw) or are more easily obtained through your tour operator. RDB is also the contact point for the Kwita Izina ceremony that usually takes place at the beginning of September each year.

Kayaking Kingfisher Journeys offer kayaking trips in Lake Kivu and around Ruhengeri (Musanze) for all levels of experience.

Cultural experiences Red Rocks Rwanda runs cultural events and festivals throughout the year. Go to the Kigali Genocide Memorial while you’re in town.

■ **Read more** Bratt’s *Rwanda* (6th edition) by Philip Briggs is the best guidebook on the region; visit the Rwanda Tourism website at rwandatourism.com.



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