

RE-ROUTING RWANDA

Popularly referred to as the land of a thousand hills, Rwanda can now lay claim to being Africa's newest luxury destination.

By **KALPANA SUNDER**

Coffee covered hillsides shimmer in the sunlight with white blossoms, framed by a panoramic sweep of the blue green waters of Lake Kivu, the largest lake in the country, helmed by mountains. Rwanda, the tiny land locked country in East Africa, is most famous for its population of mountain gorillas. But Rwanda also stuns you with its beautiful landscapes, rugged beauty and fertile volcanic land studded with lush banana plants, that's also great for growing coffee and tea.

Though most people associate the country with the tragic genocide of 1994, Rwanda is today one of Africa's fastest growing economies, known for its cleanliness, safety and most famously for its mountain gorillas. Travel through this country with winding roads, endless green hills, limpid lakes, grasslands and rainforests, staying at luxurious safari lodges and indulgent lakeside hotels is just a treat on the side. Enjoy a tryst with nature at Rwanda's four national parks—Volcanoes National Park, Akagera National Park, Nyungwe National Park and Gishwati-Mukura National Park. Each of these parks has a distinct ecosystem and ter-

rain and unique flora and fauna.

While we do recommend a walk on the wild side, when in Rwanda, begin by checking in to the five star Kigali Serena Hotel, just a five minute walk from the CBD, with plush rooms and suites decorated in bright colour palettes that reflect a Pan-African heritage with sophisticated furnishings, a swimming pool, spa and restaurants. (Room rates start at around ₹27,000 per night; <http://www.serenahotels.com/kigali>)

Spend a couple of days in the capital city of Kigali to delve into its history and culture. A visit to the Kigali Genocide Memorial is a painful, but important reference to the country's tragic past. The past may be grim, but Kigali's green spaces are a helpful pick-me-up. Idle through the Nyamdungu Eco Park, sprawling across 120 hectares with a medicinal garden, ponds and walkways, that is a restored urban wetland with a prolific bird life and biking trails. Follow it up with a visit to Umusambi Village on the outskirts, where rescued grey headed cranes find a unique sanctuary.

For an immersive art and craft experience, head to the gargantuan Ki-



* COURTING ADVENTURE

Clockwise from above left: Tea picking; Mountain Gorilla trekking; Cleo Lake Kivu is perched on a hill overlooking the lake and coffee farms; Suite at One and Only Nyungwe House set in a tea plantation.



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mironko market, that sells everything from fruits and vegetables to vibrant fabric and household goods. Make a dress from local kitenge fabric on express orders, buy colourful baskets and Imigongo art panels in geometric designs moulded out of cow dung and ash before being painted. Of course, nothing beats the glorious sunsets from the top of Mt Kigali for a magnificent bird's eye view of the city. For sating the soul further, relish the fine-dining offering at award winning Chef Dieuveil Malonga's Afro-fusion restaurant Meza Malonga. He visited 48 African countries to curate this special menu (<https://mezamalonga.com>).

In Search of the Reclusive Mountain Gorilla...

Drive to Kinigi (105 km from Kigali) to visit the Volcanoes National Park and check in to the luxurious Virunga Inn Resort and Spa, with a prolific bird life in the garden, delicious food, and large doubles with king sized beds, butler service, African art and balconies that look out into the impressive, all-encompassing wilderness. (Rooms cost around ₹80,000 per night inclusive of meals excluding safaris).

Another great option is the ultra-luxe Sabyinyo Silverback lodge, a top-rated classic safari lodge located at the foothills of Volcanoes National park with exceptional views of the Karisimbi volcanos. With six charming stone cottages, two luxurious suites with king-size four-poster beds and one spacious family unit with two separate bedrooms, lodging choices are aplenty. Meals at Sabyinyo are designed with sustainability in mind, using healthy, recipes using produce from their organic



A TANGO OF TASTE

Ripe coffee beans, tree tomatoes and processed coffee beans; Canopy walkway at Nyungwe National park (Opposite page)

gardens. (Room rates start at around \$1,500 (₹1.25 lakh per person per night, all-inclusive except gorilla permits.)

The Park, named after the dormant volcanoes, is cosseted in lush rainforests that make up the Virunga Massif. This is Rwanda's most famous national Park, and also the most heavily patrolled park in the world, apart from being the oldest on the continent. Also, along with Congo and Uganda, it serves as the world's only habitat of the endangered mountain gorillas.

Gorilla trekking is a once-in-a-lifetime experience (\$1500 (₹1.25 lakh per person), where the proceeds go towards conservation and protection of the endangered gorillas. There are 12 habituated gorilla families that one is allowed to visit, with just 96 gorilla-trekking permits for groups of 8 each, issued every day for an hour, to minimise the impact on the gorillas. Trekking through knotted vines, dense undergrowth of the African red wood trees, to meet with the Kwitonda family of gorillas, and spending almost an hour with them in the wild, definitely counts among the top most life-changing experiences of my life. Besides gorillas, the park is also home to endangered golden monkeys and ancient caves.

NOTE TO THE WISE Proper attire with garters, waterproof coats, boots and other gear is essential for this trek.

The Culture Culture

If the gorilla trek is an essential part of the Rwanda experience, so is a



visit to the Gorilla Guardian's Village (a cultural village that rehabilitates reformed poachers of the national park) to try your hand at archery, tasting the local brew, banana beer, and watching a performance of Intore dancers (the energetic local folk dance that involves jumping high and twirling mid air; Entrance cost \$35 (₹2,917).

Tranquil Time, Lake Kivu

After the hectic gorilla tracking, it's time to cool your heels in the resort town of Karongi. The luxurious Hotel Cleo Lake Kivu, set on a hill overlooking the lake, is a decadent but delightful choice. With luxurious doubles decorated with bright African fabrics and art, as well as a balcony and a bathtub with views of the lake, and gourmet meals to boot, you'll soon realise that the charms of Rwanda stretch much beyond the lure of its dense green. (Cost are upward of ₹35,000 per night for a double; <http://cleohotel>)

This gargantuan lake, shared by both Rwanda and the Democratic republic of Congo, stretches for 89 km, and is Rwanda's largest lake. Enjoy a leisurely boat ride to enjoy the cool breeze, and the water that's a deep shade of green, with small volcanic islands, surrounded by terraced hill slopes with macadamia, coffee and banana plantations. Resort towns with beaches and a laid back vibe, line the shores of the lake and are a popular getaway destination for the locals of this landlocked country.

On a Coffee High

Rwanda produces some of the best Arabica Bourbon coffee in the world with a silky creamy body and hints of lemon and orange blossom, and caramel. Take a bean-to cup tour at Boneza Coffee at Kinunu, on the shores of Lake Kivu, 165 km from Rwanda's capital Kigali, where coffee is grown at high altitudes of 4,000 to 6,000 feet. Get in on some behind the scenes action of your cuppa Joe—from picking the beans to soaking, washing, drying, segregating, to finally roasting and powdering the beans. The coffee-tasting session at the end—where the guide shows you how to roast beans the traditional way, in a clay pot on hot coals—is the cherry on the cake. The coffee, as expected, is divine.

COST The Coffee tour lasts for about an hour and a half and costs around ₹2,000.

The canopy at Nyungwe

Drive to Nyungwe National Park, Rwanda's newest UNESCO site with ancient rainforests—200 km from Kigali—and check in to the luxurious One and Only Nyungwe House that is cosily ensconced inside verdant tea plantations of Gisakura, on the edge of the Nyungwe National Park. Kick back in large luxury villas with an open fireplace, a terrace and large soaking tub in five striking wooden villa clusters, secluded in wonderfully untamed surroundings on a working tea estate. Listen to bird song or enjoy farm-to-table dining that manages your

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GOOD FOOD GUIDE

Delicious recipes showcasing harvests from the organic kitchen gardens served at the One & Only Nyungwe House.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

The best time to visit Rwanda is in the dry season from mid-December to February or over the long dry season—June to September. It is easy and straightforward to get around the small country, with most places of interest located within a few hours' drive from the capital Kigali.

daily desires and dietary preferences. Unwind with regionally-inspired beauty treatments like African potato and Marula oil wraps at their luxury spa. (Costs are upward of ₹1.80 lakh per night for a double;

<http://www.oneandonlyresorts.com/nyungwe-house>)

MUST-DO A trek on the Igishigishigi trail from the Visitor Centre, crisscrossing giant teak and mahogany trees, tree ferns and orchids, to the Canopy Walkway, which is a steel suspension bridge, linked by platforms, over the tops of trees, draped in

clouds, offering an ideal vantage point to spot golden monkeys or birds such as the blue turaco, babblers and sunbirds. Only, watch out for sudden showers and carry an umbrella or raincoat, just in case.

Join the Tea Party

Nyungwe is also flanked by verdant tea estates that act as a buffer zone. Trek through the emerald green tea estates to the edge of the forest, to see a colony of black and white colobus monkeys. Or take a tea tour with IVOMO, a community tourism social enterprise that empowers tea pickers and their families. The misty tea estates at Gisakura, with its immaculate rows of tea plants, are the perfect learning ground to hone your leaf picking skills; pick the tender ones, collecting them in baskets strapped to your backs, while interacting with local women. Don't forget to taste Dawa, which means medicine in Swahili, and is a ginger tea made with black tea blended with ginger, honey and lime. It's a soothing pick me up.

COST The IVOMO Tea tour costs USD \$ 30 (approx. ₹2,500) per person.