

PHOTOGRAPHS: TOM PARKER (WOMAN WITH BANANAS, FIELDS, ANTELOPE, AERIAL VIEW); GUENTERGUNI/GETTY IMAGES (CHIMP IN TREE)

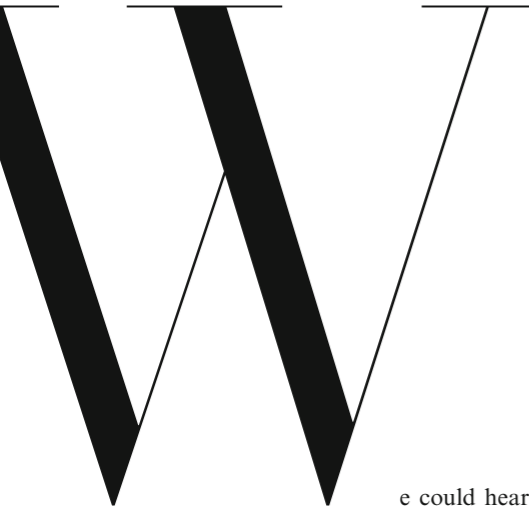


BRANCHING OUT

There is pride in the progress and promise evident nearly 25 years after the genocide

PRIMAL GREEN

Gorillas are the draw, but Rwanda astounds MICHELLE JANA CHAN with its timeless old-growth rainforest and a new generation driven to live a meaningful life



we could hear them long before we could see them, as they released a frenzied series of screeches and whoops, heightening in pitch and volume. I scrambled up the steep, forested mountainside and stared into the rustling canopy. There were a pair of playful Dent's monkeys, flashing their white bellies. One leapt through the air, akimbo for an instant, before crash-landing on a trampoline-like tangle of branches. Then, to their right, I saw the unmistakable silhouette of a chimpanzee against the slate-grey sky: the round head, the slouched posture, the prominent mouth. It walked along a branch, distinctively tailless, swinging its gangly arms back and forth, then grabbing at a slender tree limb and swinging across the gap like Tarzan, before shimmying up a trunk towards another cluster of fruit.

I inhale the earthy forest, heavy with oxygen, a rising smell of rain and mulch. It is a few hours after sunrise and I'm with a ranger and seven other tourists tracking chimps, crisscrossing the hillside, waiting for instructions on the walkie-talkie from trackers who are struggling to keep up with this scattered family. We giggle as we U-turn back and forth, keenly aware of the chimps' agility in the treetops, and our own limitations below.

But the primates here are a distraction for me. It is the wilderness that is so immensely impressive. This is Nyungwe, some of the most stunning mountain rainforest anywhere in Africa with old-growth mahogany, ebony and tree ferns, and gigantic ficus with their folded buttresses. In the gloom at ground level there might be the sudden flash of blue, or startling orange, of butterflies moseying around sprouting orchids clinging to mossy trunks; babblers, boubous and bush-shrikes call out, and there's the chirrup of a squirrel. It feels like the beginning of time here at the watershed of Africa's greatest rivers; raindrops landing on one side trickle into the Congo, on the other towards the Nile.

Further north I visit the Parc National des Volcans, part of Africa's first national park, gazetted in 1925, where there are ancient volcanoes—the Virungas—straddling the borders with Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Living among the high-altitude forests here are endangered mountain gorillas; there are fewer than a thousand in the world. A dozen families have been habituated in Rwanda—and, at the park station, I was allocated to track the largest group, Kwitonda, which comprised 29 individuals including a number of juveniles and even babies. That morning it was an unusually short hike to find them: just an hour or two from the starting point. Although I had met gorillas face to face before, it always causes the skip of a heartbeat to come across the broad shoulder of a shaggy blackback, who turns to lock gazes with its amber eyes. A massive silverback sat

nearby shredding wild celery, folding nettle leaves before gently inserting them into his mouth, chomping at bamboo. There was a weary female breastfeeding, while a few young ones played around her. One exuberant baby energetically beat its little chest with its little fists, perhaps hoping to intimidate us.

We moved between the individuals in wonder at how these creatures are so like us. The way their hands grab, the way their fingers clutch. A seeming thoughtfulness in a look. The chesty sound of a deep sigh. One mother swiped at her baby, tired of its pestering as she tried to eat. The alpha silverback suddenly raised itself and stood tall, an undoubted show of power, and we obediently, reflexively, cowered.

We were blissfully unconscious of time, which was passing rapidly. Permits allow for one hour in the company of gorillas; the clock starts ticking at first sight and the rangers wrap the experience bang on schedule. At \$1,500, or an even more alarming \$25 a minute, it might seem a high price tag in a country where half earn less than \$150 a month. But that's the point; someone has to pay for conservation. "Don't think of it as a park fee," one ranger told me. "This is your contribution towards the survival of the gorilla."

Gratifyingly, the population is on the up in Rwanda. At the time of the last census, the numbers had grown by 17 per cent since the previous. Critically, a large proportion of the funds are channelled to surrounding communities so they can feel the real benefits of tourism and understand the value of gorillas alive, free to roam and with their habitat intact.

After my hour is up, I retreat to Bisate Lodge, a new property by Wilderness Safaris (Mombo, Segera, North Island) on the fringes of the park. Dotted about a hillside are six thatched rooms, like birds' nests or the oval-shaped beehives locals fix in the trees; in fact, the inspired architecture echoes the palace in which the former kings of Rwanda resided at Nyanza. Closer up, the locally fired red-clay brick-faced walls and chiselled lava blocks provide a backdrop for pendants of recycled glass hanging above the bar, bamboo twine railings on the balconies, and textiles with traditional graphic prints of diamonds and chevrons. The cupped ceilings are layered with woven panels called *isisenge*, patterned with spirals of burnt wicker that were popular in erstwhile royal homes. After dark, when the hotel's lights go on—a soft orange glow of lamplight in the blurring mist—locals in the nearby village come out to gaze at electricity in action.

The property is raising standards in the area—from a conservation perspective, too. Wilderness Safaris is reforesting surrounding land, which will increase the park's size by 2.5 per cent; that's enough new habitat for an additional gorilla group to flourish. There will be two more high-end hotels opening in the Parc National des Volcans soon: one by Africa's finest, Singita, and another by One&Only (the latter who are also opening in the forest of Nyungwe). It is no coincidence all this investment is being made at the same time. Rwanda is setting itself apart as a stand-out beacon of conservation in the central and east African region.

The creativity is fizzing, too. Back in the capital Kigali, I have organized a roundtable of young artists and designers; they're part of a group called Collective RW that holds fashion shows, live installation art and pop-ups. We meet in the café on the top floor of the national library. The views across the red rooftops of low-rise Kigali are stormy and, inside, the room is also electrifying.

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID CROOKES

"I'm proud of something that's made in Rwanda," says Linda Mukangoga, 33, who has her own fashion brand Haute Baso. "I want to be a part of something that pushes this country forward."

Teta Isibo, a jewellery designer, also 33, echoes her friend's sentiment. "For our parents it was all about survival and school fees," she says. "But we have a better life; we're the generation with the freedom to do what we're passionate about. And because of our history, because everything is new, there are no traditions and no limits."

Fashion designer Sonia Mugabo, the youngest of the three, was four years old at the time of the 1994 genocide. "My cousin was the same age as me—we were just a couple months apart—but she was killed and I survived," she says. "I owe it to her, and to everyone who died, to live a meaningful life."

This is the generation benefitting from living in a country that is being lauded as corruption-free (Transparency International says incidents of bribery are negligible), clean (plastic bags were banned 10 years ago), the ninth safest in the world and with the highest percentage of female parliamentarians anywhere. They might seem like a random collection of statistics but it is what people talk about here with pride. And why not? All this progress and promise nearly 25 years after the country was in tatters.

In 1994, 800,000 people were killed over 100 days and two-thirds of the country displaced. The international community labelled it "bloody ethnic violence" at the time, but it wasn't. It was genocide—and its memory is writ large on the conscience of Rwanda and its landscape. There are memorials, mass graves and museums everywhere I travel from one side of the country to another, and that's because the genocide affected every person in every village in some way.

Visiting these sites is unbearably hard, and it is meant to be. There are walls of photographs of smiling children—some of the victims, a reminder of how no one was spared. There are skeletons doused in lime unearthed from pits so large the perpetrators used bulldozers to make them. There are looped videos of interviews with survivors and some of the last words of victims inscribed on museum walls: "If you had known me, and known yourself, you would not have killed me." It is essential to come here and remember how the international community failed this country, and how Rwanda failed itself.

From Kigali, I travel east to Akagera on the border of Tanzania. This national park was decimated during and after the genocide. Returning refugees and land pressures shaved its size by a third. The last rhino was spotted in 2007, the last lion even earlier. The

THE ALPHA SILVERBACK RAISED ITSELF AND STOOD TALL, AN UNDOUBTED SHOW OF POWER, AND WE OBEDIENTLY, REFLEXIVELY, COWERED



THE BIG ONE

Permits with high price tags allow for one hour in the company of gorillas—a valuable contribution to a successful conservation story



“After dark, when the hotel’s lights go on, locals in the nearby village come out to gaze at electricity in action”



MIST OPPORTUNITIES

Beehive-style thatched rooms of Bisate Lodge (above); clouds bubble up in the folded landscapes

THE WILDERNESS IS IMMENSELY IMPRESSIVE. IT FEELS LIKE THE BEGINNING OF TIME HERE AT THE WATERSHED OF AFRICA’S GREATEST RIVERS

most common mammal seen back then was the cow.

But the park is recovering—and the landscape is astounding: wide-open savannah with elephant, zebra and antelope; papyrus swamps with sitatunga and shoebill, and bushy terrain where black rhino have found a new home. African Parks, the not-for-profit organization that helps manage Akagera (and 11 other parks across Africa), have recently released 18 rhinoceros, translocated from South Africa. Already a baby has been born. They have also reintroduced lions, which are thriving. Poaching is down. Since the start of their involvement in 2010, visitor numbers have doubled and revenue has grown seven-fold. Much of the income is from guests staying at Ruzizi, the only tented lodge in Rwanda, which they have built on the shores of Lake Ihema. I took a boat ride here and the captain and I were the only people out on the water. There were crocodile, hippo and the haunting cry of the African fish eagle. Wilderness Safaris want to open a lodge here in Akagera, too, and other operators have also expressed interest.

In an effort to encourage tourists to explore the wider country, the government announced last year it will reduce the cost of gorilla permits by a third for anyone who visits another national park in the low season. It might help reduce target fixation on the Big One—that is, the gorillas—and it should.

Travel around Rwanda is easy. The country is small—a 20th of the size of Kenya—and journeys are not long and on excellent roads with little traffic, past folded landscapes of green hills and red earth covered alternately in terraces of tea or coffee, glinting leaves of banana plants, and fields of rice, cassava and maize. Clouds bubble up during the day, making way for afternoon showers, and the black asphalt steams as you drive on. Everyone walks—on roads lined with trumpet lilies and flame trees. Men push bicycles laden with sacks of potatoes; women in brightly-patterned kitenge carry scores of bananas on their heads; uniformed kids walk to school holding hands, or with their arms around each other’s shoulders.

Above all, it is ultimately the people that are the country’s greatest draw: full of drive, full of determination. I meet up with Jean-Pierre “JP” Sebageni, an organic coffee farmer on the banks of a glittering Lake Kivu. In the distance the volcano Nyiragongo is smoking. “Other countries have had their time

in history when things align, when there is cohesion, and now it’s Rwanda’s,” he says, plucking a red coffee bean for me to taste. “I don’t want to miss out on that.”

Another day, I meet a music teacher, Mighty Popo, who welcomes me into a classroom to hear his students jamming. “So what’s the Rwanda sound?” I ask him.

“This is a hip-hop country,” he says, “but our sound is militant, forward-looking. It says, ‘Let’s fix this country.’”

I also pass by the national cycling team base, which was in great shape—literally. Magnifique Manizabayo is the one to watch—as she should be with a name like that. Cricket has also

been introduced—as a tool in post-genocide healing—and there’s a brand new international stadium in Kigali with serious statement architecture. The most promising star is the women’s captain Mary Maina. Note that 20 years ago neither sport existed in Rwanda.

Amid the successes, or because of them, the politics is impossible to avoid. The president of the country, Paul Kagame, was the man who ended the genocide and became leader in 2000. As the end of his two terms was approaching, the country held a referendum on changing the constitution allowing for a third presidential term; 98 per cent of people voted yes. The same percentage of the population voted Kagame back in.

It was hard to find anyone to offer a nuanced judgment of the man except one, who said: “Our

president is not afraid of anything. Is that a good thing, or not?”

Not just the president. Rwanda doesn’t seem afraid of anything. One day I watched men dressed in orange suits working in the fields, others helping to dig ditches on the side of the road. “Prisoners,” a local told me. “Criminals or perpetrators of the genocide; they should be working for their country, not sitting in jail.” He added that the lyrics of the national anthem were written by a prisoner. Now that’s fearless. □

Africa Travel (+44 845 450 1535; africatravel.co.uk) can arrange a tailor-made trip to Rwanda staying for two nights each at Bisate Lodge and Ruzizi Tented Lodge, full-board including all activities, and one night with breakfast at both the Lake Kivu Serena Hotel and the Kigali Serena Hotel, from £6,945 per person sharing. The price includes direct flights from London Gatwick with Rwandair, private transportation, and a gorilla tracking permit.



PHOTOGRAPHS: DAVID CROOKES (BISATE LODGE); REMARKABLE RWANDA (NYUNGWE NATIONAL PARK); GREG FUNNELL (BRIDGE IN NYUNGE)