

# Making a connection

*Three decades ago, Rwanda's mountain gorilla population was facing extinction, and in the mid-Nineties its people suffered their own devastation. Now both ape and human have a role to play in the country's regeneration*

By GERRI GALLAGHER





Bisate Lodge in Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda

**D**id you know that gorillas can make 25 distinct sounds to communicate? A belch means they are content. A bark signifies curiosity. Screaming is bad, obviously (it means danger). But the most important sound for a human to master is a sort of low growl, a 'Grummm, ummm'. That, in gorilla-speak, means 'I'm a good gorilla and I'm absolutely no threat'.

I'm very keen to show that I'm a good gorilla when I spot my first one. We've been climbing for hours (more on that later) when the prompt comes from Fidele, our guide: 'Now!' We drop our rucksacks, grab our cameras and push through another snarl of bamboo. And there, in a grassy alcove 30 feet ahead, is my first gorilla. A silverback, no less: Akarevuro, the alpha male of the 29-member Kwitonda group. With heart thundering, trying to recall all the dos and don'ts of gorilla etiquette (first rule: stay at least 22 feet away), I stand and stare. He's beautiful, a 400-pound potbellied Buddha with silky black hair and hands like shovels. But it's his gaze that makes me catch my breath. His soft brown eyes fix on mine (one of the don'ts) and, for an instant, it's like looking in a mirror.

Our fleeting connection — profoundly moving, a little unsettling — is broken by the arrival of three rambunctious youngsters, clowning around, brushing past my leg as they shove each other and roll around in the undergrowth. The silverback couldn't care less and is as unfazed by their shenanigans as he is by ours — eight humans shaking with excitement, making reassuring 'Grummm' sounds and feverishly clicking our cameras.

Gorilla trekking is not for the faint-hearted — or the lazy. The day had begun with a very-early-morning check-in at the 62-square-mile Volcanoes National Park, a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Kigali. About 80 people are permitted each day, slotted into groups of eight depending on fitness. The guides, two to each party, work with armed rangers who keep track of where the gorillas are by GPS. It had started sedately enough, with an amble through terraced potato fields, past groups of women dressed in vibrant, patterned dresses, babies strapped to their backs, oblivious to us as we clambered over the buffalo wall and into the jungle.

Naively, I'd presumed there would be trails to follow. **WRONG.** The vegetation is thick, wall-like bamboo and the going slow, the only sound the thwack-thwack of the trackers' machetes. The jungle swallowed us up: black sludge underfoot, clinging stinging nettles, snagging thistles ▷





The villas at Bisate Lodge. *Far right, a bedroom. Below, Gerri, centre, with Denise and Henry at Akagera National Park*



## GOOD TO KNOW

Mountain gorillas are found in just three countries – Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo – all converging on the Virunga Massif. There are only 880 in the wild, 400 of which are on the Rwandan side, with 12 groups that have been habituated to visitors; the others are reserved for scientists who continue the work pioneered by Dian Fossey.

◁ and safari ants (they bite) on and up our trousers, while the lichen drip-dripped from the trees. As the density increased, so did my heart rate – at altitudes of 8,000–13,000 feet, the air is thin. But the sense of anticipation pushed us on. And boy, was the effort worth it.

Now we've found our group, Fidele moves us closer, and we spot a mother and baby snuggled in the deep grass, sleeping, and three males sunbathing on a ridge above us, arms akimbo. The gorillas go about their business, hooting at each other, crunching on wild celery, preening and grooming and completely ignoring us. But all too soon, the allotted hour is over and we are ushered away. Exhilarated and bereft, I take a final look before heading off after the others. Trudging back down is far less arduous, but the descent is bittersweet; the adventure is over. Which is why you want to base yourself at Bisate, the first Rwandan lodge from Wilderness, the high-end safari pros.

**B**isate is sensational: six thatched, beehive villas, ravishingly decked out with bold geometric prints, animal-hide rugs and wood-burning fireplaces. The food is off the charts: polenta chips with aubergine

dip and sweet-potato gnocchi with fresh green broccoli-like rabe gives just the carb hit I need post-trek. The staff are a dream – smiley, hospitable. I instantly connect with Alice, who was orphaned in the genocide and tells me that her proudest achievement is working at Bisate. It is the staff here who manage to transform a holiday phobia of mine – the communal dinner – into a highlight, a joyous evening of singing, dancing and local food.

It is Wilderness's engagement with the community that is the real game-changer. Bisate is built in the hills directly above a local village, on land bought from farmers. This is a poor agricultural society with no running water, so as well as training and employing 50 people from the village (many more were employed in the construction), the company is building a dam to trap rainwater and pump it to the villagers. They encourage guests to visit too – I walk down with Aline, Bisate's unofficial ambassador, and meet local women who make mats and baskets from sweetgrass, to be sold through a nearby cooperative.

Bisate is big on trees, too – the area has suffered huge deforestation over the years, so Wilderness have planted over 16,000 so far.



Gerri meets the gorillas





LEFT, GOLDEN MONKEYS IN VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK. RIGHT, A RHINO IN AKAGERA NATIONAL PARK



## Cocktail hour round the firepit sees hippos lumbering out of the lake making obscene hippo noises

Jean-Moise is Bisate's agronomist, responsible for growing the saplings and helping every guest plant their own tree. When we meet, he has already dug a hole by the volcanic rock pathway that leads to the lodge. Together we push the fledgling into the moist, black earth, Jean-Moise beaming like a proud father.

Most tourists fly in for two to three days to see the gorillas, then fly out again, but at £1,135 per gorilla permit, it's worth knowing that you can get a 30 per cent discount if you spend at least three more days in another part of Rwanda. Soon, there'll be more reasons to stay. It's been 23 years since the genocide, when 800,000 people, primarily Tutsis, were slaughtered in 100 days. But for the Rwandans, that's the past. Now it's about bringing back visitors – with the help of new five-star lodges (Wilderness plan to open another camp in Akagera National Park in 2019, and One&Only Nyungwe has just opened in chimpanzee-trekking country, to the south).

I'm keen to see more, so my trusty driver Henry and I head east to Akagera National Park, Rwanda's only savannah game reserve.

The twisty mountain roads are soon replaced by dusty terracotta-red dirt tracks, but what they all have in common is that the traffic is INSANE. Cars, motorbikes, trucks, buses, pedestrians, bicycles... Rwanda is one of the most densely populated countries in Africa and there's not a single stretch of tarmac that isn't teeming with humanity. Full points to Henry for getting us around without any scrapes.

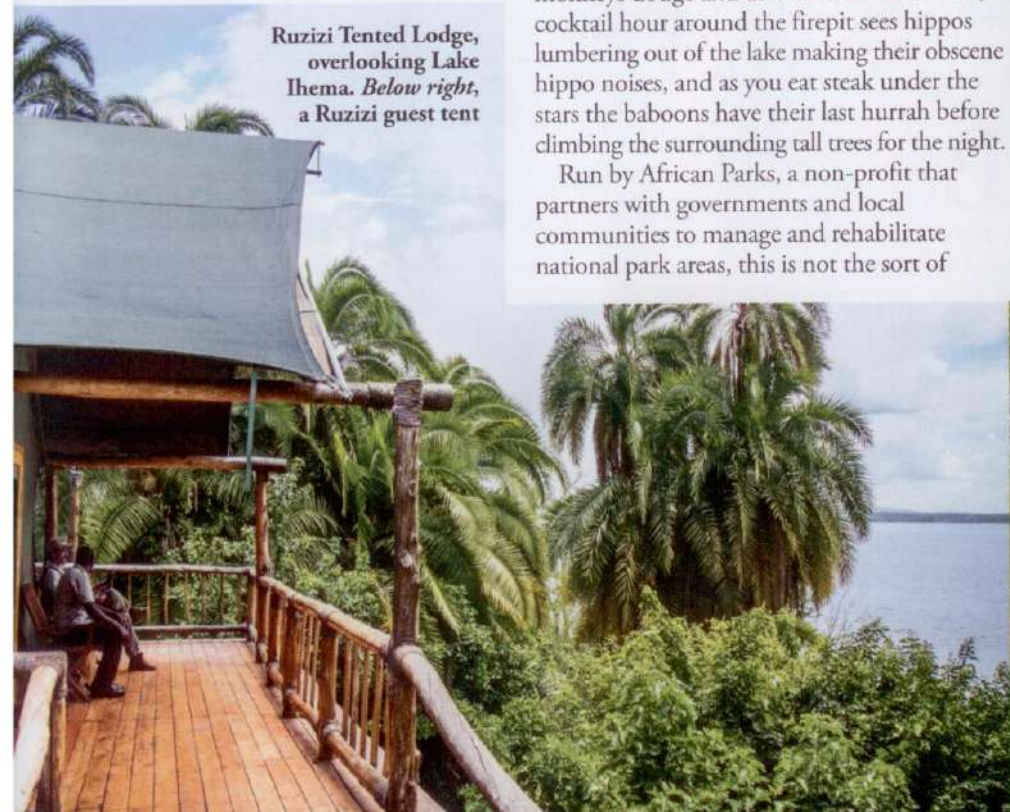
**A**kagera, which borders Tanzania, is a beauty. Rolling, low mountains of acacia bush, panoramic views across grassland, patches of thick forest and a labyrinth of swamp and lakes along the Akagera watercourse. The only place to stay (for now) is Ruzizi, Rwanda's first tented safari camp, smack on the shores of the vast, misty Lake Ihema. The nine tents are charming and simple, and you couldn't get closer to nature. Vervet monkeys dodge and dive on the boardwalks, cocktail hour around the firepit sees hippos lumbering out of the lake making their obscene hippo noises, and as you eat steak under the stars the baboons have their last hurrah before climbing the surrounding tall trees for the night.

Run by African Parks, a non-profit that partners with governments and local communities to manage and rehabilitate national park areas, this is not the sort of

place you visit to tick off the Big Five. But you will be in with a chance of seeing zebra, giraffe, elephant and nearly 500 bird species. And they've recently reintroduced lion and rhino, both of which had been wiped out.

Akagera is another very Rwandan success story – one of recovery, regeneration and hope. And now is the time to visit this remarkable country. Just make sure you perfect your gorilla noises. You don't want to piss off a silverback. □  
*Africa Travel (africatravel.co.uk; 0845 450 1535) offers two nights, full board, at Bisate Lodge, including activities; three nights, full board, at Ruzizi Tented Lodge, including game drives; and one night, including breakfast, at the Kigali Serena Hotel, from £5,995, including flights, transfers and one gorilla-viewing permit.*

Ruzizi Tented Lodge, overlooking Lake Ihema. *Below right, a Ruzizi guest tent*



**GORILLA ETIQUETTE**

Maintain a distance of 22 feet – to prevent exchange of airborne germs. Quite impossible, though, as gorillas don't know what 22 feet is.

**No eating, spitting or smoking in the presence of the gorillas.**

If you need to cough or sneeze, cover your mouth. Gorillas are vulnerable to human disease and respiratory infections cause a fifth of all sudden deaths among mountain gorillas.

**If a gorilla charges, follow your guide's example (crouch down slowly and wait for the animal to pass). Do not attempt to run away because that will increase the risk. No flash photography. When taking pictures, move slowly and carefully.**

