

# A F R I C A R I S I N G

IS WILDLY BEAUTIFUL RWANDA THE MOST INSPIRATIONAL PLACE ON THE PLANET? IT MAY WELL BE...

WORDS *by* SUSAN WARD DAVIES    COLLAGES *by* GUS & STELLA



NYUNGWE FOREST  
Canopy walks, wildlife and waterfalls in this National Park



## RECLAIMING THE WILD THE ENCHANTED FOREST

You don't expect a hipster breakfast of mashed avocado on sourdough toast in the middle of an African rainforest, but you get used to surprises like that in Rwanda. We are staying in one of the country's fanciest hotels, the One&Only Nyungwe House ([oneandonlyresorts.com](http://oneandonlyresorts.com)) in Nyungwe Forest National Park, and a decent breakfast is just what you need after a 5am start to go trekking. After three hours slip-sliding up and down muddy paths that snake through giant tree ferns and towering bamboo, you reach a death-defying jungle canopy walk. I didn't think I had a problem with heights until I attempted the 200m-long rope bridge that sways high above the trees. Only 40cm wide and held together by wire cables, it swings alarmingly with every hesitant step I take, as if it will flip up and over like a skipping rope, leaving you dangling 60m above the forest floor. It doesn't, of course, but the feeling of possibility adds to the thrill.

There are plenty of other thrills at Nyungwe: a rainforest trail near the hotel is a two-hour tramp through an Eden-like lost world, where waterfalls thunder down rock faces, strange creepers wrap themselves around impossibly tall trees, and great blue turacos and white-tailed flycatchers chirp and caw. Or you can set off from the nearby Uwinka trekking centre on a three-hour forage into the undergrowth, where black-and-white colobus and L'Hoest's monkeys scamper around, and families of chimpanzees frolic in the trees above you.

And then there's the hotel itself, one of the most beautiful I have seen. Set in a tea plantation, there's a small outdoor pool, a tiny spa and a semi-open main building housing the bar and restaurant, fronted by a huge deck overlooking the tea bushes. The 22 bedrooms are set in large cabins, each with a four-poster

bed, white walls and colourful local art, a wood-burning stove (nights are cold), bamboo floor and a balcony overlooking the forest.

Meals, too, are exquisite. There is no menu, just organic produce from the hotel garden used in dishes such as broccoli salad with mint, goji berries and pineapple. This is not traditional Rwandan food, which is quite heavy (cassava, maize dumplings...), but the chef is the inventive 26-year-old Treasure Makwanise, whose bio includes fleeing Zimbabwe at 16, sleeping on Cape Town streets and ending up at the One&Only Cape Town – so you'd expect him to break the rules a little.

BE INSPIRED

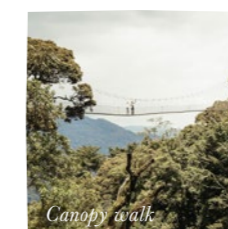
## THE BACKSTORY

A lot of Rwanda is unpredictable like that. Of course, you come for the wildlife, especially the gorillas. Everyone does. But it's not just the animals that make this country so impressive, nor the magical 'Land of a Thousand Hills' scenery, with its volcanoes, rice terraces, green valleys clouded in mist and 1,000-year-old trees reaching 55m into the sky. What is really extraordinary are the 12 million Rwandans living in what looks – and feels – like peaceful harmony, just 25 years after one of the world's worst genocides.

You wouldn't think any country could recover from that kind of horror, but with the aid of reconciliation committees, often led by women, the banning of the terms 'Hutu' and 'Tutsi' ('We are all Rwandans now'), and President Paul Kagame's determination and ingenuity, Rwanda seems to have done just that. I was always wary of coming here, despite hearing how beautiful it was, because I thought I would feel the ghosts of all that pain and terror. But for an inspirational lesson on starting over and forgiveness, this is where the world should look.

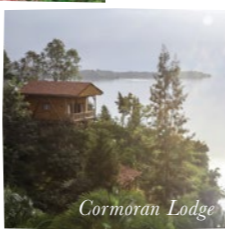
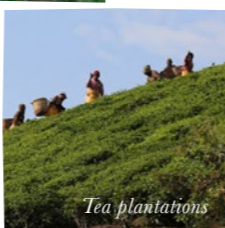
Rwanda is now the ninth safest country in the world, according to the World Economic Forum (the UK ranks a sorry 78th), the fourth best for gender equality and one of only two globally with as many women as men in government. Plastic bags were banned in 2008, and everyone (the president included) takes part in a monthly national clean-up day. >

"DISCOVER A LOST WORLD, where WATERFALLS THUNDER DOWN ROCK FACES"





BASE CAMP  
Stay at Sabyinyo  
Silverback Lodge  
(above) or  
Cormoran Lodge (right)



CLOSE ENCOUNTERS  
GORILLAS IN  
THE MIST

From Cormoran, it's a spectacular three-hour drive to the Volcanoes National Park for the grand finale: the gorillas. It's said that 480 of the world's surviving 1,000 mountain gorillas live here, of which 12 families are habituated to humans. We're staying near the park entrance at Amakoro Songa Lodge (songafrica.com), a pretty, cottage-style hotel.

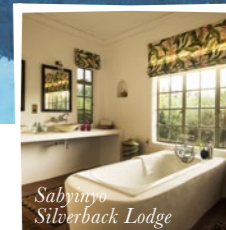
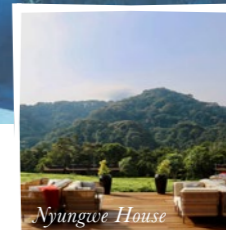
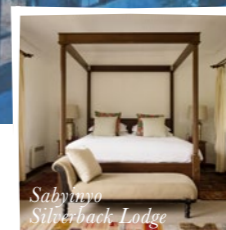
We have to be at the park by 7am for a briefing. Our guide, Edward Bahizi, lists the dos and don'ts: no coughing or sneezing (gorillas are very susceptible to human diseases), no shouting, no eye contact. As a group, we must stick together and, if anything happens, we must act submissively, not panic and show no fear. Edward runs through his gorilla noises for us to copy: 'oo-oo-oo's' to warn off, grunts to show we're friendly. Our gorilla family is about 90 minutes away – to reach them, we'll trek along overgrown jungle paths.

It is hot, and at an altitude of 2,000m, hard going. As we close in silently, I spot a beady eye in a bush, then the massive head and huge jaws munching on bamboo leaves. It is the oldest silverback; the head of the family. Along the path, a mother plays with her baby, until the silverback lumbers through the bushes and starts canoodling with her. We're too close, and he gets irritated and charges, knocking two people over. 'Don't move,' Edward hisses, and after a few tense minutes, the silverback bounds off. Hard to top that, we think. But towards the end of our hour, the whole family, including three silverbacks, have regrouped. A teenage gorilla keeps thumping his chest and running at us. Then, suddenly, they are all circling us, mock-charging. We stagger backwards, and I'm clenching Edward's hand, totally failing the 'show-no-fear' rule. Then, just as suddenly, they run off – leaving us limp with relief. And that is Rwanda all over: exhilarating, dramatic and unpredictable. There really is no way to top it. *Redsavannah.com* arranges bespoke trips to Rwanda with *rwandair.com*. *Visitrwanda.com*

"I SPOT A  
BEADY EYE  
IN A BUSH,  
THEN THE  
MASSIVE  
HEAD, JAWS  
MUNCHING"



MIX IT UP  
After all the adventure,  
chill out at  
The Retreat (below)  
in Kigali



ON THE MOVE  
THE  
ROAD TRIP

I love being on the road, especially in something rugged like our big 4x4 Jeep, driven by the inimitable Alex. I love the stopping at random cafés, the strange snacks, the clambering in and out to take photos as the scenery turns from rainforest to urban sprawl to lush coffee plantations and rolling green hills. We pass schoolchildren in neat uniforms; excitedly shouting 'abazungu!' ('white people') when they spot us; market traders in colourful head wraps; men pushing ancient bikes up steep hills (in Rwanda, the saying goes, 'You're either going up a hill or down one'), overloaded with bananas or huge sacks of potatoes. The weather is like a British summer: one minute a fierce rainstorm drums against the windscreen, the next, corrugated-iron roofs glint silver in the bright sunlight, as elegant cranes fly over Lake

Kivu, the shoreline of which we follow for the last hour before arriving at Cormoran Lodge (cormoranlodge.com), Kibuye, at dusk.

Cormoran's seven wooden cabins perch on stilts on a hillside overlooking the lake, which, at more than 1,000 square miles, is Africa's eighth largest, one of a string that runs the length of the great Rift Valley, forming part of the border between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The lodge may be a little rough around the edges, but it is peaceful and scenic, with large rooms, mosquito-netted beds and verandas overlooking the water. In the bar/dining room we down Virunga beer and deep-fried sambaza (like sardines), while Laura, a 23-year-old British expat, confirms our positive impression of the country. She works in Kigali

and regularly walks home at night, or takes Uber motorbike taxis, and finds it hassle-free.

There are some dangers here. At 485m, Lake Kivu is so deep that normal currents don't reach the bottom, which becomes stratified, trapping large quantities of CO2 and methane. There are plans to mine this gas for fuel – and safety, as every 1,000 years or so lakes like this can erupt. But we're not going to dwell on that as we head out on kayaks after breakfast, paddling across the placid waters.

At dusk, fishermen set out in wooden boats with massive arched eucalyptus fishing poles, which stretch from one boat to another, supporting huge nets. As night falls, they place lanterns in the water to attract sambaza and tilapia (a freshwater fish), transforming the lake into a galaxy of twinkling lights.

"IN RWANDA,  
THE SAYING  
GOES, 'YOU'RE  
EITHER  
GOING UP  
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DOWN ONE' "

Photographs: Jan Masters, Red Savannah, Getty Images