RELISHING RWANDA

Tiny, tantalising and thoroughly unusual, Rwanda is very African – and not. The scenery’s Swiss, the wildlife rare and the people proud and resilient. It’s a special place that may touch you deeply

By Keri Harvey
Her soulful brown eyes peer warily from beneath a tower of green bananas stacked high on her head. She walks gracefully down the line of traders seeking a vacant patch of earth in the marketplace to set up shop, but before she does, an old man leaning lightly on a gnarled stick asks “Angaphali!” (“How much?” in Kinyarwanda). The woman turns to him slowly, greets him and gently sets down her load on the sand. They’re old friends and exchange news and smiles, before the old man pays and continues on his way with a portion of fresh green bananas for lunch.

Musanze market is much more than a place to buy fresh fruit and vegetables from woven baskets: it’s a meeting and mingling place to catch up on news and connect with the townsfolk. This is a thoroughly African town of vibrant, mismatched colours and animated conversation, with the scent of raw earth wafting through the air. Yet if you look up and around, the landscape’s not typically African at all. European maybe, Swiss, surely. Rwanda’s known as Africa’s Switzerland because of its mountains, though on the ground it’s only about half the size of Scotland.

The vibrant town of Musanze (previously Ruhengeri) lies at the base of the mighty Virungas, a chain of eight mostly extinct volcanoes that form the natural border between Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Musanze’s where the Karisoke Research Institute to protect mountain gorillas was set up by Dian Fossey and rangers still do daily patrols and monitoring of them. This is also the area for trekking these rare primates, which number just a few hundred in total. The Rwandan military, as they have for over a decade, also monitors and protects the gorillas from poachers – and they do a sterling job of it.

Most days, paying enthusiasts trek up the steep, verdant volcanoes through ferns and forest to spend an hour in the presence of mountain gorillas. The experience is humbling, looking into the eyes of a great ape that shares 97% of your DNA. Yet the gorillas go about their business as usual and the trekkers simply observe, as the apes chomp celery, teach tricks to their young or watch the silverback thumping his chest in a show of proud dominance. Only eight groups of eight people a day are permitted to trek mountain gorillas from the Rwandan side of the Virungas National Park, and wildlife-lovers come from around the globe to do so –
with guides and trackers leading up front and the military always close by. Nearby Lake Kivu, on the border with the DRC in the west, is the fishing ground of literal slapstick fishermen. It’s their traditional manner, which makes it no less bizarre. “You’ll definitely laugh when you see them,” smiles guide Laurent Bizabirtyo knowingly, “and there’s quite a noise too.” As we approach the shores of Lake Kivu – Rwanda’s inland ocean – a cacophony of voices bounces across the lake to the shore. The sight that greets us is strange. With their handmade, canoe-shaped boats parked in rows on the lake, the fishermen are wildly beating the surface of the water with long lances, talking and joking at the tops of their voices. “You see,” says Laurent, as he bursts into a fit of chuckles, “the noise attracts the tilapia fish to the surface of the lake and then they can catch them more easily.” We’re lost for words.

For lovers of wild places and majestic vistas, Nyungwe National Park in the south of the country is Nirvana. For 1 000km² this tangled forest – the largest mountain rainforest in Africa – rolls out, hiding beneath its canopy chimpanzees, black Angolan colobus monkeys and L’Hoest’s monkeys. The chimps are tricky to find across such a vast area, but simply being in such ethereal surroundings is reward enough.

Game-viewing, however, is the domain of Akagera in the east. This lowland, warm, woodland reserve is where unusual antelope live. Defassa waterbuck, topi, Roan antelope, Bohor reedbuck, oribi, sitatunga, hippo, elephant, giraffe and eland can be found in the park – and are easily seen. The reserve is Rwanda’s pride and joy. As we wind along the snaking mountain roads, back to the capital of Kigali, we pass through small villages and rural settlements, all clean and litter-free. People everywhere are busy, working or going about their business on bicycles – or uniquely handcrafted push-scooters. Made entirely from wood, but for the tyre tread wrapped around wooden wheels, the scooters are used to push heavy loads. Steering them requires some skill on downhills, but it seems to come naturally to locals. They’re workhorses in the countryside too, making their way between fields of
patchwork green, planted with beans, potatoes and mealies. At the heart of each farm is a dinky farmhouse built from mud bricks and with a pitched tiled roof in old red. It’s a little French colonial touch that stayed in Africa.

Laurent’s deep in thought when he asks if we’ve seen a genocide memorial. “It’s important, if you’re to understand the people of Rwanda,” he says. So we do – and are chilled to the marrow. Lime-dusted corpses, twisted and contorted, lie on racks freeze-framing the horror of their brutal deaths in the genocide of 1994. One million people died in 100 days. Husbands killed wives, sons killed sisters and the rivers ran red with blood. Laurent lost his wife and raised his young children alone. “But it will never happen again,” he says definitively. “We won’t allow it and the genocide memorials will remind us. But enough sadness for today. Let’s get to Kigali before the sun goes down.”

USEFUL CONTACTS
Akagera National Park:
- www.rwandatourism.com or www.african-parks.org
Nyungwe Forest National Park:
- www.rwandatourism.com
Parc National de Virungas:
- www.rwandatourism.com

“THE GENOCIDE WILL NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN. WE WON’T ALLOW IT AND THE MEMORIALS WILL REMIND US.”
On a sunny morning I’m strolling through the hustle and bustle of Nyamirambo, Kigali’s energetic Muslim quarter, stopping to hunt down second-hand bargains in shops called Kigali-Montreal Design. (The Nyamirambo Women’s Centre offers walking tours of the area.) “It’s the part of Kigali that never sleeps,” a Rwandan friend tells me later as we sip coffee in Bourbon, a local chain, at the MTN Centre in Nyarutarama, gazing out at the never-ending hills of green lushness.

This city may not stun tourists with the nightlife or organised chaos that Kampala and Nairobi, its Ugandan and Kenyan counterparts, offer. But what you get instead – clean, pothole-free, uncluttered streets and roads; safe public transport; world-class dining; reliable Internet and an emerging arts scene from a country that was ripped apart by genocide only two decades ago – will certainly impress.

Indeed, of all the visitors Rwanda hosts each year, more than half are said to visit the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre in Gisozi, which stands on the site of 259 000 mass graves.

“Every visitor who lands in Kigali is surprised by the city’s freshness, safety and natural beauty,” says Ambassador Yamina Karitanyi, Head of Tourism and Conservation at the Rwanda Development Board (RDB). “We’re working to transform the city into a regional hub for conferences and meetings, as several world-class hotels have joined the list of international brand names setting up operations in Rwanda,” she adds.

The Radisson Blu is due to open early next year, followed by the first Marriott Hotel in sub-Saharan Africa, at the end of 2015. But the Rwandan capital is already home to a Serena Hotel and, of course, the Kempinski Hotel des Mille Collines (“Hotel of a Thousand Hills”), made famous by the film Hotel Rwanda.

It’s in Kigali, unlike neighbouring Kampala, that the omnipresent mototaxi-drivers are forced to don safety vests and helmets, and carry helmets for passengers. Plastic bags are verboten and the capital benefits from Umuganda (“coming together” in Kinyarwanda), a national community workday on the last Saturday of each month, which involves cleaning streets and cutting grass. On a speedy motorbike trip around Kigali, I...
whizz by the results of this. 
But who says safe and tidy means dull? Kigali’s Ivuka Arts Centre in Kacyiru displays the likes of a giant heart stitched together from condoms and an enormous pot constructed out of discarded plastic bottles. Opened in 2007, Ivuka’s been described as a sanctuary for the 15 or so artists who have a workshop there. The Inema Arts Centre is based in the same neighbourhood, but recently Heaven, a Kiyovu social enterprise and eatery, opened a permanent exhibition, in conjunction with the centre, to promote Rwandan art. It includes artists painting on site. 
Heaven’s Restaurant, which offers locally influenced dishes such as goat brochettes, is popular among both locals and visitors. Heaven also has a three-roomed inn for nightly or weekly visits. On the food front, Kigali boasts everything from New Cactus (the prickly plant is part of the setting, but menu-wise, there’s a lot of Italian cuisine) to Khana Khazana, an Indian restaurant and Mr Chips, if you’re relishing burgers and fries. Korean bakery RZ Manna became a favourite of mine for its churios and other sweet treats. 
Many Kigalians and others outside the capital have a particular entrepreneurial flair.