



# RWANDA OF THE WORLD

As the capital Kigali hums with new energy, a stunning lodge high in the misty hills near the Virungus forest is presenting its



**S**o, finally we are there. We'd been woken at 6am, signed in at the allotted meeting point, yomped up through potato fields and along avenues of eucalyptus trees, and then gingerly edged our way up through the dense tangles of greenery and bamboo that make up the Virungas equatorial forest in Rwanda; and there – suddenly – lurching around in the verdant bush is some 460lb worth of silverback mountain gorilla. It's what we'd come for, what the rangers had carefully tracked down for us; and yet still nothing prepares you for this moment when you look deep into the eyes of a wild primate that shares something like 98 per cent of your DNA. If there is a more intimate wildlife moment than standing less than a foot away from a family of mountain gorillas at play, I have yet to experience it.

The great David Attenborough thought his meeting with a Rwandan mountain gorilla family, as recounted in his 1978 *Life on*

*Earth* series, was "one of the most exciting encounters of my life". He went further: "There is more meaning and mutual understanding in exchanging a glance with a gorilla than any other animal I know." It is what everybody in our group seems to feel. Our guide tells us about a devoutly Christian Texan – a believer in creationist theory – who found that "for the first time in his life his beliefs were shaken and he could see evidence of evolution in front of his eyes". It is the sort of moment that everybody will remember for the rest of their lives.

The silverback (pictured right) we've come upon is the alpha male of the 12-strong Muhoza group; he "owns" all the females and is the only one allowed to mate with them ("though sometimes," says conservationist Bernice Iwacu, "the other males cheat with them, but if they get caught, they get punished"). Sometimes, too, some of the other males get fed up with not being allowed to

**From top: Bisate Lodge in the lush Virungas forest of Rwanda. An alpha-male silverback Muhoza gorilla and his 12-strong group. Lucia van der Post meets one of the group**









mate and wander off to form their own group, but Iwacu tells us, "they are not always very successful". Muhoza is just one of 12 habituated groups on the Rwandan side of the Virunga Mountains that can be visited by up to eight tourists for a single hour a day – for the other 23 hours they are left in peace. So attached to their gorillas are Rwandans that all the groups have names; every Rwandan will ask you which family you visited, as if the primates are people they know.

As we watch in rapt silence, the alpha male is soon joined by a mother and baby (pictured above), a blackback (the teenager of the gorilla world – "they are very crazy," according to Iwacu) and another female who plays with the baby until she gets a bit too rough, the baby cries, and the mother rushes to haul it back. All this while two conservationists and eight tourists look on in awe. Their size is wondrous to behold. One moment the gorillas appear not to notice that we're there; they play, they eat, they chase each other, they grunt. The next they seem to seek out our eyes, staring searchingly into our faces as if looking for some kind of recognition. They

and it is time to head back down through the trees and leave the gorillas to their forest and each other.

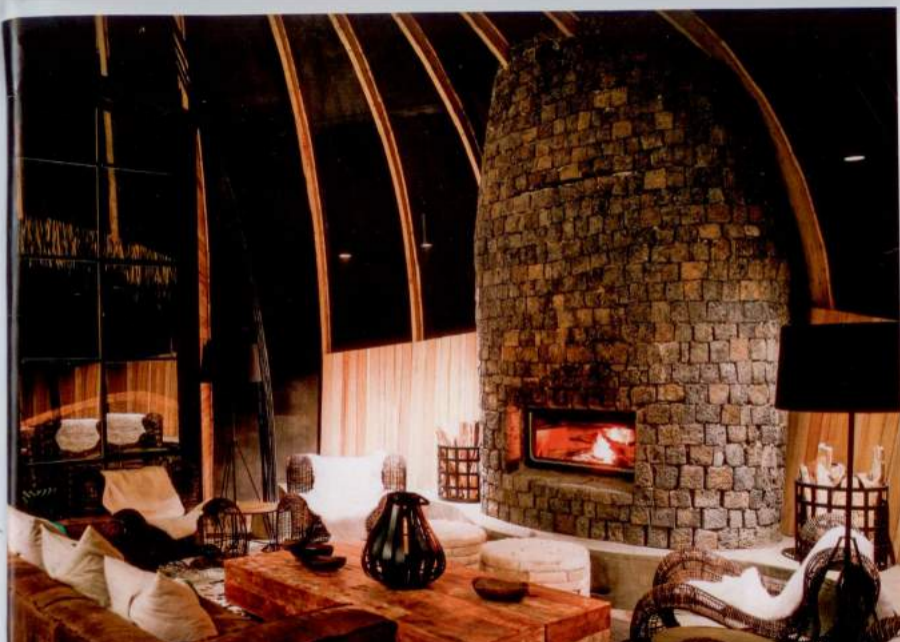
Tracking gorillas isn't new – in fact, it's long been the reason most tourists come to Rwanda – but what is new is that for the first time Rwanda has a truly luxurious lodge. Until now, those longing to see these primates have had to rely on a host of nice but fairly simple places to stay in. But Wilderness Safaris – famed for its gorgeous lodges in seven other African countries (most notably perhaps across Botswana and Zimbabwe, as well as at North Island in the Seychelles) – has just opened a stunning six-bedroom lodge called Bisate (pictured on previous page) on the slope of a small hill some 15 minutes' drive from the



From top left: a mother and baby gorilla. One of Bisate Lodge's six luxury bedrooms with interiors that reflect its colourful locale. All rooms have fireplaces as the

place at around 8,500ft. Of our group of eight (mostly middle-aged and older), three would not have been able to make the three-to-four-hour trek there and back without the kind, supportive porters who almost carried them for some of the way. So to be able to be based in a lodge with the kind of luxury that Bisate offers is a serious plus.

Bisate is a huge departure for Wilderness. Most of its lodges – as the name Wilderness Safaris implies – are in remote areas. Here, guests are almost embedded in the local community. "When you wake in the morning," says Ingrid Baas, who manages Bisate with her husband Rob, "you might hear a goat or a cow, and you will see Rwandan rural life all around you." The lodge has been built on land bought from farmers and Wilderness



almost 16,000 have been planted and, in Rwanda's lush soil and benign climate, are growing fast.

The South African architect Nick Plewman (to declare an interest: he is a cousin of mine), who already has several stunning lodges to his name, most notably Sandibe in Botswana, drew on local culture for inspiration. The spherical, thatched structures of the rooms and the communal living and eating area are inspired by the design of the old King's Palace at Nyanza, the former capital. The shapes also echo the rounded hills found all over Rwanda. A host of local materials, from bamboo to volcanic rock, were used, while Rwandan weavers wove the cladding, the floor mats and the wall and ceiling linings. Plewman's goal was to provide a "contemporary architectural response to the stimuli of a primordial volcanic landscape, the great primates that dwell here and an all-but-lost human heritage".

Every room has spectacular views of Mount Bisoke, an active volcano (pictured overleaf) straddling the border of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo; and all have fireplaces (evenings can be chilly at altitude). The interiors (pictured above and left), designed by the South African firm Artichoke, reflect the rich, earthy colour of the soil, while the emerald green in the fabrics recalls the forest and the verdant fields.

To make this project work, Keith Vincent, CEO of Wilderness Safaris, knew that a "charismatic creature"



equal to the large mammals of the savannah was needed. "The mountain gorilla certainly fits this brief, and we knew that if we organised a lodge circuit around this species, we could bolster tourism numbers to the region." Eventually, he says, "the big dream is for us to help expand the National Park through reforestation."

The positive effects of such an injection of money and



250 to 300 people worked on the site every day, carrying every brick, stone and piece of wood; and about 50 local people have been offered permanent jobs at the lodge.

What is perhaps as exciting as Bisate's arrival here is that Wilderness is planning to open a tented camp soon, in Akagera National Park, which is Rwanda's only savannah game reserve, where guests will be able to see the big five (lion having recently been reintroduced to it). Given that in late 2017 One & Only is due to open a top-end lodge here in the Nyungwe Forest National Park to the southwest – where there are chimpanzees to be seen, along with 13 other primate species, including colobus monkeys and the rare L'Hoest's monkey – there will soon be a rather thrilling circuit for wildlife lovers who like to travel in style.

But while it is gorillas that bring most people to Rwanda, "many of them fall in love with the country, and wish they could see more of it," says Manzi Kayihura, joint founder of Thousand Hills, who looked after us on our journey. It's best, if you can, to do the falling in love before you arrive and arrange to stay longer, for there is so much more to Rwanda than its primates. There's the fact that any tourist who stays on for three days in another part of Rwanda can claim a 30 per cent discount on the gorilla permit. Since these now cost \$1,500 per booked visit, and most of our group

**From top: guests can visit the gorillas for an hour daily. The Lodge looks out to Mount Bisoke, a volcano straddling Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo**

wanted to visit them at least twice, it is well worth considering. And from Bisate Lodge itself there are other things to do – nature trails to follow, social centres to visit, hikes up to the grave of Dian Fossey (of *Gorillas in the Mist* fame).

And then there is Kigali itself – an astonishingly well-kept and verdant town (plastic bags are banished, and for half a day on the last Saturday of each month every citizen, from the president downwards, is obliged to help clean the streets; this means not only that the cleaning gets done but also that there is also a healthy incentive not to trash it in the first place). The memorial to the terrifying 1994 genocide, when 800,000 people, mostly Tutsis, were murdered in 100 days, is movingly done. And it is genuinely unmissable – it is almost impossible to appreciate the huge achievements that one sees all around without having seen what came before, and for understanding the

people one meets, it provides both context and empathy. Some 80 per cent of Rwandan children experienced a death in the family in 1994; most of them saw unimaginable horrors. "Our greatest problem," writes one of the witnesses quoted at the memorial, "was the brokenness of our hearts". Of the three Rwandans who looked after us the most, all had had to spend vast numbers of years abroad for fear of being murdered; but all returned and are thrilled to be back – helping to make the new Rwanda a thriving, vibrant, safe and extraordinarily inspiring country. ✦

#### PRIMATE PROPERTY

Lucia van der Post travelled as a guest of **Africa Travel** (+4484-5450 1535; [africatravel.co.uk](http://africatravel.co.uk)), which offers a four-night trip to Rwanda, staying one night at the Kigali Serena Hotel and three nights at Bisate Lodge with all meals, drinks and activities, for £5,595 per person sharing, including direct flights from London, a Kigali city tour and one gorilla viewing permit. **Wilderness Safaris**, [wilderness-safaris.com](http://wilderness-safaris.com).

