

In Rwanda, you're either going up, or you're going down," jokes my guide, Alex Kagabo, while driving into 'the land of a thousand hills'. As we rise and fall down burgundy-red roads lined with purple jacaranda trees, it seems to be one of those rare travel phrases that actually rings true.

The same observation might be made about the country's own journey. Mention you're going to Rwanda and people will say one of two things: gorillas or genocide.

Happily, the Rwanda of today is so much more than both of those, with huge progress made since the horrors of 1994.

For those that want to understand more about the period when 800,000 Tutsis died at the hands of Hutu countrymen, there are memorial museums. My visit to Murambi, home to a technical college where 65,000 perished, is made even more eerie by its serenity today, surrounded by birdsong and village chatter.

Driving away, I ask Alex – a man in his 60s with the exuberance of someone much younger – if he was affected. He says he was lucky to escape into Burundi with his mother, father and young child. But he says: "My sisters and their husbands didn't."

If you're thinking Alex, and Rwanda, hasn't moved on, though,

you'd be wrong. Today, the country is among the most progressive in Africa on certain issues. Every child receives a free education up to 18, and in 2009 the government introduced 'Umuganda', a designated day each month when locals gather to clean up. "We treat Rwanda like our personal property," explains Alex. "We have pride in it."

As a result, Rwanda is free of the rubbish that blights other countries. Better still, it feels safe and the locals welcoming – contributing factors to a 20% rise in UK visitors last year.

New arrivals

Big-name hotels are arriving too, including the landmark One&Only Nyungwe House. Located in the southwest, it lies within the Nyungwe Forest National Park, a vast area where two of the continent's great rivers – the Nile and the Congo – converge.

This tea-plantation-turned-luxury hotel opens up a region previously overlooked. Before, travellers flew into Kigali, went to see the gorillas and left for a safari in Kenya or Tanzania. With One&Only on the map, Rwanda-only itineraries become viable. And so they should, because the gorillas aren't the only primates demanding attention.

The Nyungwe National Park is home to 500 chimpanzees too, →



OPPOSITE: FIRST ROW: One&Only Nyungwe House; chimpanzee trek; **SECOND ROW:** A cultural dance performance; writer Laura Holt with a gorilla; tea-picking at One&Only Nyungwe House; **THIRD ROW:** group of local children; **FOURTH ROW:** Nyungwe National Park; Lake Kivu. **Credits:** Shutterstock/Maria Galina; iStock/Bigworth; Roger Pese

flying HIGH

RWANDAIR



If more proof were needed that Rwanda is going places, you need only look to flag carrier Rwandaair, which launched a three-times-a-week direct service from Kigali to Gatwick in May 2017 and has plans for a non-stop New York link too. On my 10-hour hop from the UK, via a short stop in Brussels, the business-class cabin (pictured) on the Airbus A320-300 offered a 1-2-1 staggered configuration, meaning everyone had wide access. Being a relatively young airline – launched in 2002 – the aircraft was clean and well cared for, and the Thompson Vertigo XL seats, located in the green of Rwanda's hills, made for comfortable flying thanks to fully flat beds, USB ports, overhead lamps, headphone docks and onboard Wi-Fi. The food and entertainment was less inspiring but, all in all, the service made for easy access to one of Africa's most exciting destinations.

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and rising early on my first morning, I head out to track them. Tracking groups are never more than eight people, so you're assured an intimate experience. And we don't have to wait long. I'm almost disappointed the chimps don't play harder to get, but local trackers – former poachers, re-educated to protect the chimps – are experts in spotting them.

Anyone who watched David Attenborough's *Dinosaurs* will know how enthralling (and sometimes unnerving) it can be to view an animal that shares 98% of our DNA. But seeing them in the flesh is another level. Their foot-tapping out around the forest as they feed on the upper branches of fig trees, spitting the pips out with disdain. Babies cling to their roaming mothers. But it's when three large males shuffle down and run metres away from me, fists clenched, that I get a sense of how powerful these creatures are.

Luxury developments

Of course, you can't come to Rwanda without seeing the main event: gorillas. We drive north towards Volcanoes National Park via a stop in Lake Kivu, a body of water that separates the stability of Rwanda from the civil-war ravaged shores of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The simple set-up at Common Lodge, with its raised lakeside cabins, breaks up the six-hour journey, but the area has a long way to go to match the rest of Rwanda's development.

That may change when the country's fourth official national park, Gishwati-Mukura, opens later this year, having been subject to investment

since it was designated in 2015. For now, though, Common Lodge is merely a perfunctory pause on the road to Volcanoes National Park.

But the luxury offering is definitely on the up in Rwanda. In August, Singita will open Kwartinda Lodge on a 178-acre patch near the park HQ, and One&Only's second property, Gorilla's Nest, will follow later this year. The new openings join Wilderness Safaris' Bisate Lodge. But it doesn't stop there, with Wilderness also opening a sister property, Magashi Camp, in Akagera National Park at the end of last year.

As we drive into the Volcanoes area we see women in colourful fabrics and waving children. Rwanda's main tourism hub is buzzing with prosperity. It had a head start: conservationist Dian Fossey put the area on the map in 1967 and the 1968 film *Gorillas in the Mist* cemented its status.

Gorilla trekking

There are 1,000 gorillas left in the world, spread across Uganda, Rwanda and the DRC. Since gorilla trekking in the Congo has been suspended due to safety concerns, that leaves Rwanda or Uganda. Rwanda may be more expensive – permits range from \$1,000 to \$1,500, compared with Uganda's \$450-600 – but the high-end, low-impact tourism strategy is benefiting the gorillas and community.

As guide Edward Bahizi explains: "At least 10% of every permit goes to the local community for housing and schools, and 5% goes to farmers for the loss of crops caused by wildlife. We only issue 96 permits a day, split into 12 groups, who each get one hour with the gorillas."

Edward has 19 years' experience in gorilla trekking. He's also a character, so after an elaborate display of what different gorilla grunts mean, we head off. We've been assigned the Sabyinyo group: a community of 19 named after the volcano around which they live. The group includes the largest silverback, a 35-stone →



FROM TOP: Ceremonial platform at Volcanoes National Park; Wilderness Safaris' Bisate Lodge; a baby gorilla
Credits: Amanda Wigworth, Shutterstock

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ABOVE: Mountain gorillas in Rwanda's Gashyamba National Park

giant named Guhonda, and a bald blackback called Mr Ben.

After a short but scenic trek, we reach a clearing where we leave our bags. The trackers had located the group in a bamboo forest just ahead, which is kind of like entering a primate pub, as the shoots have an alcoholic effect. Keen to avoid a bar brawl, I stick close to Edward.

"There's one," he whispers, as I focus my eyes on the near distance. "No, there!" he points, just a metre away where a camouflaged female stares at me nonchalantly. We're meant to observe a strict seven-metre distance, but sometimes the gorillas don't abide by the rules.

Over the next hour, we move around watching a mother nursing a tiny newborn, fluffy juveniles flopping on their stomachs, and finally Mr Ben getting amorous, with mooves best

set to a Marvin Gaye soundtrack.

Eventually, the gorillas turf out into a grass clearing. It's here we get the best view: Guhonda sitting casually on his backside, barking at the youngsters when they get out of hand, beating his chest to show who's boss and making a sound that fuels adrenaline in all who hear it.

This is one bucket-list encounter that doesn't disappoint. ●

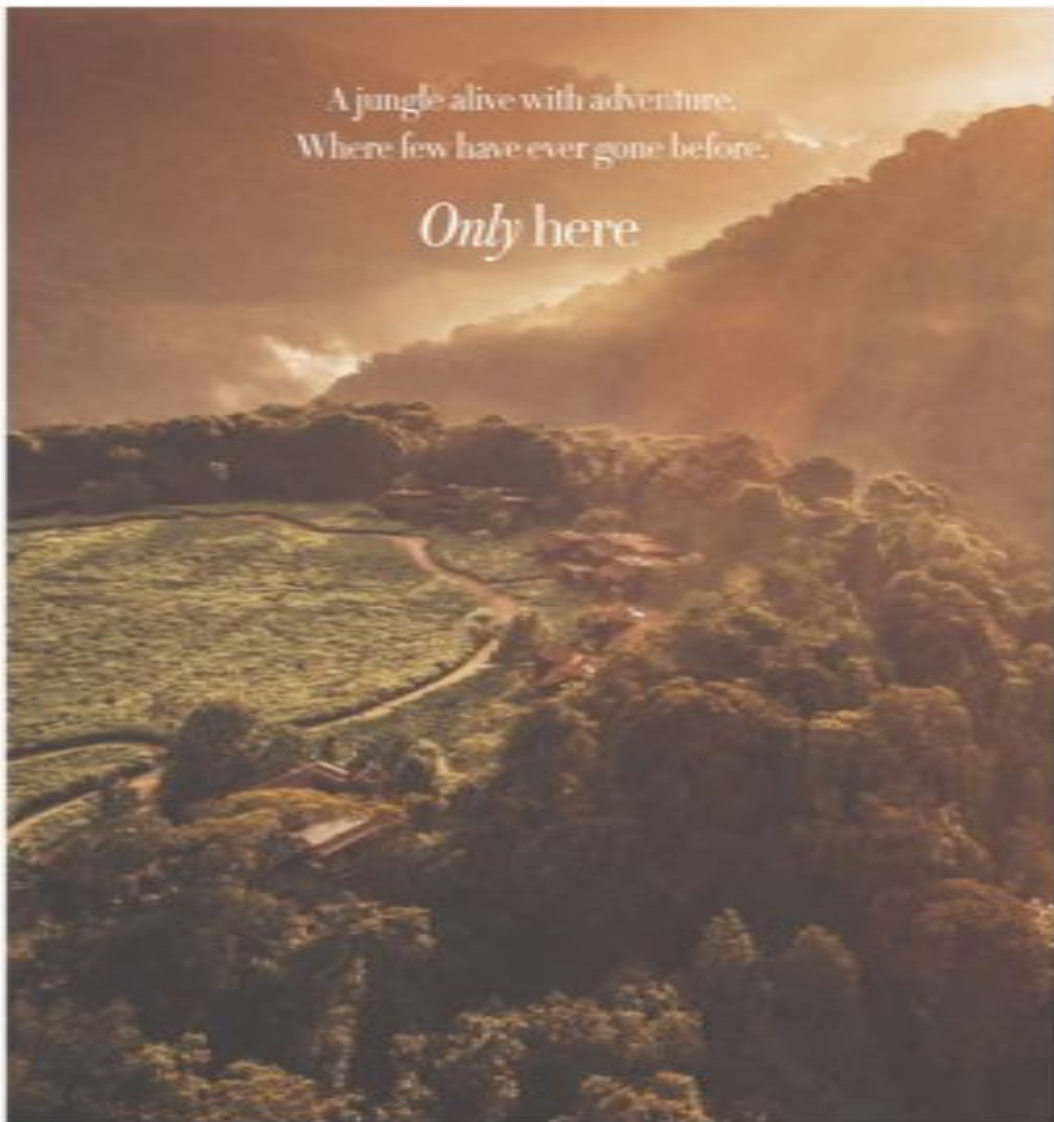
BOOK IT: *Red Savannah* offers six nights in Rwanda from £2,992, including full board at the Gashyamba Nyungwe House. *Greenland Only* is £460-£500, *London - Kenya* is £450-£500, *London - Kenya* is £450-£500. *Red and Green Savannah* includes hotel in Kigali. Gorilla and chimpanzee permits are included, plus sleeping in £460-£500, *Greenland Only* is £460-£500.

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Rwanda

LOCATION: Could there be a more quintessentially Rwandan scene than the tea plantations and misty mountains that encircle One&Only Nyungwe House? This landmark new property sits on the western edge of Nyungwe Forest National Park, a vast tropical montane rainforest, five hours from the capital Kigali, that's home to 300 chimpanzees, colobus monkeys and more wildlife, which you can trek out to see on designated trails. The hotel also offers its own extensive adventure programme, including nature walks and nocturnal strolls beneath the equatorial sky.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS: Snaking down the drive and into the working tea plantation, past brightly dressed pickers bearing leaf-loaded baskets, the first thing that strikes you is how understated the main building is. This is a hotel that lets the landscape do the talking.

THE FACTS: The single-storey building was created by a former head of tourism in Rwanda, who happened upon this scenic picnic spot and decided to build a property. Having taken over management in 2017, One&Only has invested heavily, evidence of which can be seen in the faultless 22 rooms and suites, the new spa and restaurant. The staff are special too. The head chef, Treasure Makwase, has an interesting life story to tell. Ten years ago, he fled the unrest of his native Zimbabwe and ended up living on the streets of South Africa. He got a placement in what was then Gordon Ramsay's kitchen at One&Only Cape Town, had stints at Jai Victory in Abu Dhabi and Fregate Private Island in the Seychelles, and

finally returned to Africa to head up the kitchen at One&Only's new Rwandan retreat. The food is just as noteworthy. The green goddess pasta was dressed in tea pesto made from the estate, while a simple broccoli salad mixed with pineapple, goji berries, mint and homemade mayonnaise had us requesting recipe tips from Treasure. A cookbook must be in the making?

EXPLORE: Tea has been grown on the estate for more than 50 years. It's a tradition which One&Only keeps alive with a tea lounge, tea-infused cocktails and expert-led tea ceremonies, where guests can pick their own. Rare primates, such as mangabey, owl-faced monkeys, colobus and chimpanzees, can also be spotted on tracking trips organised by the hotel. One of the most popular is the moderate Igihigishig Trail, which includes a canopy walkway, while the more strenuous Kamuranzovu Trail takes you past banks lined with begonias and wild orchids to a waterfall whose name is a nod to the elephants which once stamed here.

WOW: Rising early each day to watch Rwanda's iconic mist rise over the mountains was a highlight. Closely followed by glimpsing monkeys gamboling above the hotel's infinity pool, and ending each day stoking the fire in our suite as darkness fell over the forest.

BOOK IT: *Rooms at One&Only Nyungwe House start from £450, including full-board meals, non-alcoholic drinks and ten daily activities per person.*

ONEANDONLYRESORTS.COM

Laura Holt



PHOTOS: JAMES HARRIS