

# Mountain to climb

Rwanda is putting its turbulent past behind it and reinventing itself as a high-end destination for ecotourism, writes **Antonia Windsor**

I'm taking an early morning stroll through vivid, peridot-coloured tea plants to have a dip in an infinity pool with uninterrupted rainforest views. A sunbird is hopping along the path beside me, cocking his petrol-blue head inquisitively. I could be in Sri Lanka or China, but actually, I'm at the new five-star Nyungwe Forest Lodge in Rwanda.

This is an opulent place, with individual wooden chalets boasting king-size beds, huge tubs and terraces facing the forest for a spot of early morning monkey watching. Financed by Dubai World Africa, the lodge is one of the more recent luxury offerings in a country that is achieving its goal of attracting the high-end market.

When Rwanda relaunched itself as a tourist destination at the turn of the century, it was keen to protect its national parks by keeping visitor

numbers low, while also satisfying a mandate to use tourism to alleviate poverty. By focusing on people who spend more and stay longer, it is succeeding.

"In 2000 we set a target to achieve US\$100,000 in revenue from tourism. In 2001 we generated US\$8 million and by 2010 tourism generated US\$200 million – double what we had hoped for," says Rica Rwigamba, head of the department for Tourism and Conservation.

For many, Rwanda is seen as one of Africa's success stories. Seventeen years after the genocide that killed about 800,000 in 100 days, the country has achieved stability, economic growth and international integration. A programme of reconciliation has seen killers rehabilitated and living back in the local communities. Treatment for HIV is free to all, and education levels are rising. The country has made less progress in the areas of political rights and freedom of the press, and Human Rights Watch was concerned about the lack of competition in the 2010 elections, in which President Paul Kagame was re-elected. However, the World Bank last year praised Rwanda's policies on conservation and tourism as a model for poverty alleviation and the opening up of Nyungwe Forest is part of that plan.

One of the largest remaining cloud forests in Africa, it stretches for nearly 1,000 kilometres and is home to 13 species of primates, including the world's largest troop of black and white Colobus monkeys, while the varied flora attracts close to 300 species of birds. A breathtaking canopy walk was launched last year, from which you can look out through the clouds across the treetops below, while a group of chimpanzees has been habituated to tourists for close contact. It is enough to make the area an attractive location to spend a few days and is extending Rwanda's celebrated model of eco-tourism that it developed with the gorillas in Volcanoes National Park.

"Five per cent of total park receipts are distributed among communities around the national parks," explains my guide, Augustine, as I sit huddled beneath a ficus tree, waiting for the troop of playful chimpanzees to scamper into the branches to feed. "The money builds our hospitals and our schools, and so we are all actively engaged in protecting the forest." An estimated US\$1.6 million has so far



been distributed this way, according to Rwigamba, and the increased tourist activity also provides much-needed employment for the local community. With the help of Augustine, I spoke to all my trackers and porters and they explained that the only life available to them previously was as subsistence farmers; now, with tourists in the area, they hope to receive at least a US\$10 tip each time they take a group into the forest, generating enough income to put their many children through school and improve opportunities for the next generation.

Back at the lodge, while I work my way through a fresh fruit platter, the manager tells me how many of the staff were originally part of the construction company that built it. "They enjoyed being here, and they could see there were opportunities to improve their career prospects," he explains.

The next morning, as I check out, I ask the receptionist if he thinks working for the lodge has improved his life. "Absolutely," he says. "Before, I was a stonemason on construction sites. Now I am getting good money and I'm working with people I respect. In 10 years' time, I would like to be a manager of a property like this one."

I encounter this optimism often during my visit. The next morning, a classic Toyota Land Cruiser pulls up, and I am met by my guide, Jonson, from Primate Safaris, who is going to drive me north. During our journey he explains to me how he used to be a soldier and how much better his life is now as a safari guide. "I have seen many things I would rather not have seen," he says, pensively. Now he gets to see the beauty of his own country. As he negotiates the potholes and bends in the road, my attention is drawn to a bird that has landed in a rice field below. "That's an African pied wagtail," he says. With his encyclopaedic knowledge

of the flora and fauna, Jonson quickly becomes an invaluable travelling companion.

Known as the land of 1,000 hills, Rwanda is an exceptionally beautiful country. Each slope is a patchwork of planting, and around every bend is the smiling face of a Rwandan, perhaps on a bicycle carrying gravity defying sacks of potatoes, or walking along the roadside. Many stop to wave as we pass.

To show me a different side of Rwanda, Jonson bears the honking traffic to take me into the capital, Kigali. I am surprised by how clean the wide boulevards are, and Jonson explains that the country has a ban on plastic bags and a country-wide community clean-up day every month.

Surprisingly, during our journey, we are not stopped once by a roadblock with a police officer seeking a bribe. "We have a zero tolerance on corruption," Jonson says proudly. The people are polite and respectful of tourists. At the

