



The money from tourism builds our hospitals and our schools, and so we are all actively engaged in protecting the forest

AUGUSTINE, A LOCAL GUIDE

The Virunga Mountains near Volcanoes National Park (top); the lounge at the Nyungwe Forest Lodge (below); a guide leads tourists near the lodge (left)



Caplaki Craft Village, where a dozen brightly painted wooden huts are crammed with carvings, traditional masks, raffia baskets, jewellery, paintings and other delightful handicrafts, each stall holder is incredibly eager to sell, but nobody gives me undue hassle. One woman comes up to the door of the Land Cruiser when I have decided I have bought enough. I wind down the window. "I believe you forgot to come back for the calabash you so admired," she says, ever so graciously. I dig in my wallet for my last remaining francs.

I'm staying at the newly refurbished five-star Serena Kigali, a very smart hotel with a clientele of East African and Chinese businesspeople, and elegantly dressed leisure guests. The pool is refreshingly cool, and the loungers have big, plump cushions. There is a regular flow of beautiful people into the spa and gym, and at the poolside bar, I take out my laptop and make use of the free wireless internet. I could comfortably spend an evening in these plush surroundings, but I head out to get a flavour of the city.

The quickest and cheapest way to get around is to take a ride on one of the bright yellow motorcycle taxis: it's hair-raising, but thankfully you have a helmet to hide it. I head for the top-floor bars of the MTN Building, which are noisy with chattering and laughing locals. Here, the women are wearing short skirts and high heels, and drinking vodka and tonics, in sharp contrast to the cloth-wrapped women I saw out of town. There are perhaps no other tourists around, and everyone wants to buy me a drink and find out where I'm from. I meet journalists, translators and doctors – a young generation of Rwandans intent on making their country a better place.

Next morning, I have no time to shake off the residue of the local Primus beer that has settled in my head, as we have an early start on a

three-hour drive to Volcanoes National Park. I'm going to stay at the community-owned Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge, which serves as a model for how local people can directly benefit from the steady flow of visitors keen to catch a glimpse of the rare mountain gorillas. Sacola Community Trust leases the property to Governors' Camp, which runs it as a deluxe safari lodge with private butlers, roaring fires in the bedrooms and a daily changing menu using locally grown produce.

On our way, Jonson takes me to the Iby'Iwacu Cultural Village, an inspirational project initiated by Rwandan Edwin Sabuhoro, who won Young Conservationist of the Year in 2008. He said the way to stop gorilla poaching was to find a way for the community to benefit from their preservation.

Now, former poachers perform traditional dances and guide visitors around cultural and historical exhibits. By replacing the income they got from hunting with an income from gorilla tourism, Sabuhoro has succeeded in turning poachers into advocates of conservation. With his help I conduct long interviews with a couple of them. They describe the dangers of hunting in the forest and how much better their lives are now.

I am greeted with a welcome dance and then taken to visit a traditional healer and a blacksmith, and shown how to shoot an arrow. I am then guided into a grand king's hut, where they dress me in robes and make me the queen. A musician starts strumming on a local wooden guitar and sings soulful songs as rain starts to dance on the thatched roof. Soon we are joined by the dancers, keen to stay dry, and an impromptu party of dancing, singing and drumming starts up. This is a luxury I didn't expect, and I can think of no better way to pass the afternoon. The gorillas can wait until tomorrow. lifestyle@scmp.com

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How to get there

Cathay Pacific (www.cathaypacific.com) flies daily from Hong Kong to Johannesburg from where RwandAir (www.rwandair.co.uk) has four direct flights a week to Kigali.

Where to stay

- A luxury room at Nyungwe Forest Lodge costs US\$175 per person, per night (US\$25 single supplement) inclusive of meals and local drinks. www.nyungweforestlodge.com
- Bed and breakfast at the Kigali Serena costs from US\$325 per room, per night. www.serenahotels.com
- All-inclusive accommodation at the Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge costs from US\$384 per person, per night. www.governorscamp.com

Where to visit

- **Nyungwe Forest**
Nearly 1,000 square kilometres of mountain forest with a great selection of guided trails. Try the new canopy walk at US\$60 or experience a chimpanzee trek for US\$90
- **Iby'Iwacu Cultural Village**
For US\$35 you can spend as long as you like with this Rwandan community, learning about their history and customs, watching displays of traditional dancing and singing and even trying your hand at archery. All the money goes to support this community, once a haven for gorilla poaching. Nyabigoma, Kinigi, Musanze district, Northern province, cbtrwanda.org
- **Volcanoes National Park**
This well-managed park is home to the rare mountain gorilla. Park entry costs US\$30, and a gorilla-tracking permit costs US\$500, which gives you an hour with these rare beasts.

Guided tours

Rwanda Eco-Tours is entirely owned and run by Rwandans, with 20 per cent of profits going back into the local community. They organise tours, which offers a real insight into the country. Their 12-day Best of Rwanda Tour costs US\$6,152 and includes an English-speaking guide and safari vehicle, accommodation and meals. Also included are park entry fees, village visit and community walk, and one tracking/photography permit each for gorillas, Colobus monkeys, chimpanzees and golden monkeys, an Urwibutso project tour dealing with a economy of a community, a Kigali city tour and service charges. www.rwandaecotours.com



A baby mountain gorilla. Photo: AFP