

African Sojourns

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RWANDA TRAVEL INFORMATION



In preparation for your Rwanda Sojourn please find below some interesting facts about the country. For further information you can visit the official Rwanda Tourism Authority's website: www.rwandatourism.com



Country information:

A tiny, landlocked republic in Equatorial Africa, Rwanda lies on the eastern rim of the Albertine Rift and the watershed between Africa's two largest river systems, the Nile and the Congo. Often called the "land of a thousand hills", Rwanda is a mountainous country with a moist, temperate year-round climate.

Originally the domain of hunter-gatherers, Rwanda emerged into a centralised state with a feudal monarchy in the fifteenth century. It became a German colony in 1890 and was mandated to the Belgians after the First World War. In 1962, under Prime Minister Gregoire Kayibanda, Rwanda gained independence. Ten years later Major General Juvenal Habyarimana came to power. His death in a plane crash in April 1994 unleashed the genocide in which about one million Rwandans are thought to have been killed and nearly twice as many fled into exile. In recent years, as peace and stability have returned under President Kagame, many Rwandans have come back. Local elections were held for the first time in 35 years in 2001 and are an encouraging sign of the steady return of stability to the country.

In 1959, three years before independence, the majority ethnic group, the Hutus overthrew the ruling Tutsi king. Over the next several years, thousands of Tutsis were killed, and some 150,000 driven into exile in neighbouring countries. The children of these exiles later formed a rebel group, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and began a civil war in 1990. The war, along with several political and economic upheavals, exacerbated ethnic tensions culminating in April 1994 in the genocide of roughly 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The Tutsi rebels defeated the Hutu regime and ended the killing in July 1994, but approximately 2 million Hutu refugees - many fearing Tutsi retribution - fled to neighbouring Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zaire, (Democratic Republic of the Congo) (DRC). Since then most of the refugees have returned to Rwanda. Despite substantial international assistance and political reforms - including Rwanda's first local elections in March 1999 - the country continues to struggle to boost investment and agricultural output and to foster reconciliation. A series of massive population displacements, a nagging Hutu extremist insurgency, and Rwandan involvement in two wars over the past four years in the neighbouring DRC continue to hinder Rwanda's efforts.

Rwanda has a number of unique delights to offer travellers. Parc National des Volcans in the Virunga volcanoes is home to the Mountain Gorillas to which Dian Fossey dedicated her life. Nyungwe Forest, one of the largest montane forests in Central Africa, is renowned for its large troops of colobus monkeys and rich variety of orchids. Akagera National Park is a savannah park with elephants, hippo and crocodile. Lake Kivu is a beautiful inland sea enclosed by steep terraced hillsides. There are a large variety of birds.

Culture:

Rwanda has a rich culture with its second city, Butare, having one of the finest cultural museums in Africa. Rwanda is the most densely populated country in Africa. French, English and Kinyarwanda are the most widely spoken languages and the population of about 10 million people is largely Christian with some Muslim and Animist communities.

The Hutus, who comprise nearly 90% of Rwanda's population, were originally Bantu-speaking farmers who for most of the past five centuries found themselves under the regal thumbs of the minority Tutsis. A large cross-section of the Hutu tribe was responsible for the attempted genocide of Tutsis and the murders of Hutu moderates in Rwanda in 1994 - in the past, they have themselves been the subject of Tutsi-orchestrated killings in Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi.

Tutsis, who make up less than one-fifth of the population, were originally nomadic pastoralists who wandered down into Rwanda in the 16th century and quickly asserted control over the local Hutus. Bolstered by support from Belgian colonialists in the early 20th century, Tutsis continued to rule the ethnic roost until Rwandan independence in 1962. Last but by no means least, the Twa pygmy group - the original inhabitants of Rwanda - make up the remaining 1% of the population.

Kinyarwanda is the language most widely spoken in Rwanda, though you won't find it being spoken in any other African countries. English and French are tied for second place linguistically, though French probably has the au-dessus main. Swahili is also useful in some parts of the countryside.

Christianity dominates in terms of religion, adhered to by two-thirds of the population thanks to the influx of Christian missionaries under German colonialism in the early 1900s. Tribal religious beliefs occupy another 25% of Rwandans, while 10% of residents are Muslims.

Music is a mainstay of local festivals and ceremonies, with drums being the dominant instrument, while traditional dances are similar to those staged in Burundi due primarily to Tutsi influences.

Ethnic regional staples are in abundance – try (tilapia) (Nile perch) or the ubiquitous Ethiopian dishes of (wat) and (injera). The local firewater, (konyagi), is widely available, as are people who have suffered intense hangovers after drinking too much of it. As alcoholic alternatives, you can also get South African or European wines and the locally favoured Primus and Mulzig beers.

Visa's:

Most visitors, except nationals of a few exempted countries can pay for a visa on arrival (USD 30 per person subject to change and payable in exact cash). Other visitors are advised to apply for their visas online prior to arrival at www.migration.gov.rw

You must have a valid passport that does not expire for at least six months after your return home date. Please ensure your passport has sufficient blank pages for any visas required and for entry/departure stamps. If returning to or via South Africa, you must have at least 2 blank visa pages (not endorsement pages) to enable the entry visa to be issued.

Health:

A Yellow Fever inoculation certificate is mandatory. We strongly suggest that you see your doctor about malaria precautions. Drink bottled or boiled water only. Medical services, especially up-country, are basic. Ensure the insurance cover includes medical cover.

Money:

Relative to other African countries Rwanda is an expensive destination. The unit of currency is the Rwanda Franc. The US dollar is the hard currency of preference. Very few places in Rwanda accept credit cards. If they do take credit cards only Visa and MasterCard are accepted. We recommend that you carry cash in notes that have been issued no earlier than 2006 and that are in excellent condition. Carry a mixture of notes from USD1, USD5 and USD20 to USD 50 and USD100 notes. You can draw local currency from the ATM machines which are in the main cities. Please advise your bank that you are travelling to Rwanda so they do not block your card due to suspected fraud. We suggest paying for local goods in Rwanda Francs to get a better rate.

Electricity:

230/240 volts at 50 Hz. 2-pin (round) sockets and visitors from the United States should bring electrical appliance adapters with them. Some camps do not have power but arrangements for recharging batteries can usually be made.

Insurance:

It is a condition of booking that all clients must have adequate insurance for the duration of the tour. Such insurance should fully cover death; personal injury; medical expenses; repatriation in the event of accident, illness or death; cancellation or curtailment of the tour by the company or client; and loss of, damage to, or theft of the clients' personal property. Activities with a greater inherent risk, such as mountaineering, animal tracking on foot and white-water rafting should be covered. Theft, personal injury or any disruption to arrangements should be reported immediately to the company and where necessary to the nearest police station. Credit card insurance is not sufficient.

Luggage:

Luggage should be kept to a minimum, and is best restricted to one main soft-sided piece and an overnight bag. Clients on flying safaris should note that weight restrictions apply, which vary according to the aircraft.

Security:

Rwanda is considered the safest travel destination in the region. Basic precautions should be taken, as in all countries, and common sense used. Do not carry excessive jewellery and money or leave them lying around. Use safe deposit boxes where available; secure travel documents and valuables. Avoid walking unescorted at night. If in doubt seek local advice.

Telephone Communications:

Rwanda has an excellent cell phone network covering almost the entire country. International phone calls can be made easily. Appropriate SIM cards for the network are readily available everywhere, even in remote towns, and cell phones can be purchased or rented from major shops in Kigali. Most towns of any size will have several Internet cafes and computer centres.

Time:

Rwanda is two hours ahead of GMT. Sunrise is around 0630 hours and sunset at 1930 hours. This varies slightly, depending on location within the country and time of year.

UMUGANDA (Social Work Day)

Every last Saturday of the month, from around 0800 hrs to 1230 hrs, all Rwandans of all walks of life take a break from their everyday chores and come together within the neighbourhoods and villages to do communal work together, for the benefit of whole society. Work often includes general cleaning and other activities like breaking fallow ground for farming, unblocking trenches and roadside drains, sweeping the streets, etc. After the work, communities have a short meeting, Inama to discuss general societal issues and then go back home. The afternoon is free to revert to personal engagements.

Weather:

Due to a combination of tropical location and high altitude ensures that most of Rwanda has a temperate year round climate. Temperatures rarely stray above 30oC by day or below 15oC at night throughout the year. The exceptions are the chilly upper slopes of the Virunga Mountains, throughout the country, seasonal variations in temperature are relatively insignificant. Most parts of the country receive in excess of 1,000mm of precipitation annually, with the driest months being July to September and the wettest February to May.

Clothing:

The emphasis on clothing is comfort. If gorilla tracking or chimpanzee tracking, something sturdy is recommended to protect against scratches, a good pair of walking boots and, ideally, a good pair of protective leather gloves should also be worn. Safari wear should be loose fitting and relaxed in style with warm clothing for the colder evenings at the Volcanoes Park. Most hotels and lodges have laundry services, so an excessive amount of clothing should be unnecessary. Rwandans appreciate those who maintain a sense of decorum. Cotton clothing is the most comfortable during the day. Uganda and Rwanda are warm in the plains but often cold in the hilly and mountainous areas; a rain jacket, heavy sweater and boots are therefore essential.

Equipment for Gorilla Tracking:

Warm clothes, fleece or light wool sweater, moisture wicking undergarments, lightweight wool socks, long-sleeved shirt, strong waterproof walking boots, sturdy trousers, sunglasses, a torch, fast film, binoculars, sun screen, a sun hat, a breathable lightweight rain poncho or parka with a rain hat, gloves to grip vegetation and a small backpack to carry water and a packed lunch. It is best to have layers of clothing as temperatures tend to change. The guides will make you a walking stick if needed.

Gorilla Parks/Families:

The gorillas live in four parks in Uganda, Rwanda and the DRC. In Rwanda they can be tracked in the Parc National des Volcans (PNV) where Diane Fossey conducted her research.

Parc National Des Volcans (PNV) in Rwanda has ten habituated gorilla families (Agashya, Susa, Hirwa, Amahoro, Sabinyo, Umubano, Kwitonda, Kalisimbi and two more without official names as yet). Most groups are half-day walks but Susa can take around 7 hours. There are 80 permits available each day, which splits up into 8 permits for each group. Tracking in PNV and Mgahinga is usually easier than Bwindi as the afro-montane forest is lighter. Djomba in the DRC also has a number of habituated gorilla families but Volcanoes does not currently take clients there.

Gorilla Tracking and Permits:

Each gorilla park has different numbers of permits, separate procedures and tariffs. Permits are non-refundable except for medical reasons and a medical certificate has to be provided.

- *Gorilla viewing can be denied at short notice because of national park or border closures, security changes or gorillas going out of range. In such circumstances refunds are at the discretion of the authority and are not within the company's control. Obtaining a gorilla permit therefore is not a guarantee of seeing a gorilla.*
- *One hour is allowed with the gorillas, at a distance of at least 5 metres.*
- *Flash photography is not allowed.*

- *Tracking in thick forest at heights up to 3,000m traversing steep-sided mountains and ravines can be tough, arduous and wet.*
- *Part of the gorilla permit fee goes to communities living around the gorilla parks.*

General Packing List (please refer to separate gorilla tracking equipment list on gorilla tracking guidelines):

- *Binoculars*
- *Sunglasses- preferably polarizes and on a string.*
- *Hat/ cap*
- *Khaki / neutral coloured casual clothing for safari (3 changes)*
- *2 shorts: 2T – shirts/short sleeved shirts: 1 pants/ light jeans, 1 long- sleeved shirt.*
- *Casual clothes (2 changes)*
- *1 pair thick – soled shoes (tennis / running shoes)*
- *1 pair shoes for evening wear*
- *Sweatshirt, fleece or sweater*
- *Light wind breaker / jacket*
- *Gloves / mittens – (important in the months of June/ July/August to dress in layers)*
- *4 pairs of socks and underwear*
- *Bathing suit*
- *Flashlight that take at least 2 batteries, plus extra batteries*
- *Basic medical kit: antiseptic cream; 1 course of antibiotics; Tylenol/Advil; laxatives; anti –diarrhoea; anti- histamine cream; Band Aids. (There are first aid kits in all camps and lodges);*
- *Eye drops*
- *Personal medications*
- *Small bottle of mosquito/ insect repellent (the camps usually have spray in rooms)*
- *Malaria tablets*
- *Suntan lotion and moisturizing cream*
- *Day backpack (small) – for use in the vehicle and on walks.*
- *Personal toiletries: small shampoo, shaving cream, skin and hair moisturizers, etc. Most camps and lodges supply small quantities of soap and shampoo.*
- *If you wear contact lenses we recommend that you bring along pair of glasses*
- *Tissues/Kleenex/”Wet Ones”*
- *Camera: charger/ converter/ adapter for 220/240AC voltage + 3 batteries. Cigarette lighter adapter*
- *Visas, tickets, passports, money*
- *A photocopy of your passport, visas, credit card numbers and insurance documents*
- *Large plastic zip-lock bags*
- *Tevas/flip-flops – optional – but they are useful.*