

Rwanda

APE ESCAPE

A lush land of prehistoric rainforests and mist-draped volcanos, Rwanda is home to the last remaining mountain gorillas on earth. Here's how to get up close and personal with the greatest of the great apes

Words by NICOLE TRILIVAS

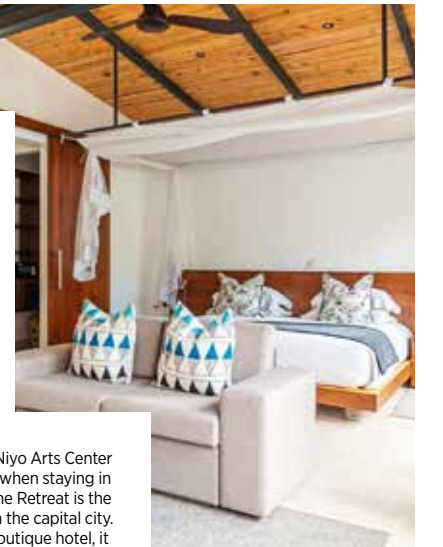


“Run! Run! Run!” It’s the one word – or three – that you don’t want to hear when you’re deep in the shadowy, rain-flooded jungles of Nyungwe National Park, one of Africa’s oldest rainforests, but here we are. My guide doesn’t have to tell me twice (let alone three times), and I gracelessly hurdle after him through the boot-suctioning mud and tangles of Tarzan vines. He points down, and it turns out we’re not being chased by some ferocious primate; instead, it’s a contingent of fire ants that we have to contend with.

Spoiler alert: We make it through the fire ants unscathed, but it won’t be the last time I’ll feel that head-rushing mix of adrenalin, excitement, and fluster. In fact, Rwanda offers this kind of natural high on tap.

Like most visitors, my trip starts in the hilly capital of Kigali where I get the lay of the land by wandering the labyrinthine Kimironko Market; eating my body weight in oversized Rwandan avocados; and checking out the kaleidoscopic street art at Niyo Arts Center. The city is a joyful one, spectacularly clean and somehow calm. A chic boutique hotel with new private-pool suites (two of which were recently booked by Charles and Camilla), The Retreat is the place to stay with dressing gowns of floaty kitenge prints and modern rooms swathed in mosquito nets and swirling overhead fans.

The challenging-but-unmissable Kigali Genocide Memorial is best explored at the start of any trip because only after learning the full, unflinching history of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi can you put the story of Rwanda – and its unfathomable recent successes – into context.



The colourful Niyo Arts Center is a must-visit when staying in Kigali, while The Retreat is the place to stay in the capital city. A charming boutique hotel, it features a saltwater, solar-powered swimming pool and recently added eight one-bedroom villas. Each one comes outfitted with individual heated plunge pools and outdoor showers



After Kigali, most visitors head to the far northwest to the gorilla-trekking HQ of Volcanoes National Park, but there's no shortage of other natural wonders (and primates) to see. I opt for Nyungwe, in southwest Rwanda, which – along with fire ants – is home to the country's largest population of chimpanzees. Chimpanzee trekking is often thought of as harder than gorilla trekking because chimps are so active and thus more elusive. I luck out, spying several chimps before they almost instantly disappear into the shadowy canopy. For a moment, one dangles right above my head in an ancient Mahogany tree with all the playful effortlessness of a child on a jungle gym. With a smile, my guide reminds me to close my mouth.

Back at the hotel, One&Only Nyungwe House, the hillsides are quilted in tea plants that date back to the 1960s and grey-cheeked mangabey monkeys tap-dance on the roofs of the 23 rooms, each a mini-lodge in of itself connected by lantern-lit boardwalks and adorned with private terraces, wood-burning stoves, and baths shielded by plantation shutters. It's a peaceful reprieve filled with ginger-infused drinks sipped in front of the fire, leisurely lunches of fresh salads slathered in tea-leaf pesto enjoyed al fresco, and giggly conversations with the local staff.

But we are here for gorillas – the undisputed main event; and next, I'm in Volcanos National Park on the border of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Nyungwe House's sister property, One&Only Gorilla's Nest is a 35-hectare resort protected behind gates that look straight out of Jurassic Park. Here, mornings smell of wood-burning fireplaces and dew-wet eucalyptus trees and banana palms. I wake up early for my gorilla trek, and in anticipation, I've laid out my clothing the night before. In the main lodge, I'm outfitted with boot gaiters for the mud-slicked terrain, and I pack the vintage-style khaki safari hat that One&Only has left in my room (as well as a not-so-cute poncho). Armed with this pro-level outdoor wear and snacks of dried sweet mango and homemade energy balls (again, thanks One&Only), we set out as a group of eight visitors, which more than doubles to 17 once our guides and porters are factored in.



A view of the rainforest from the hotel's main pool

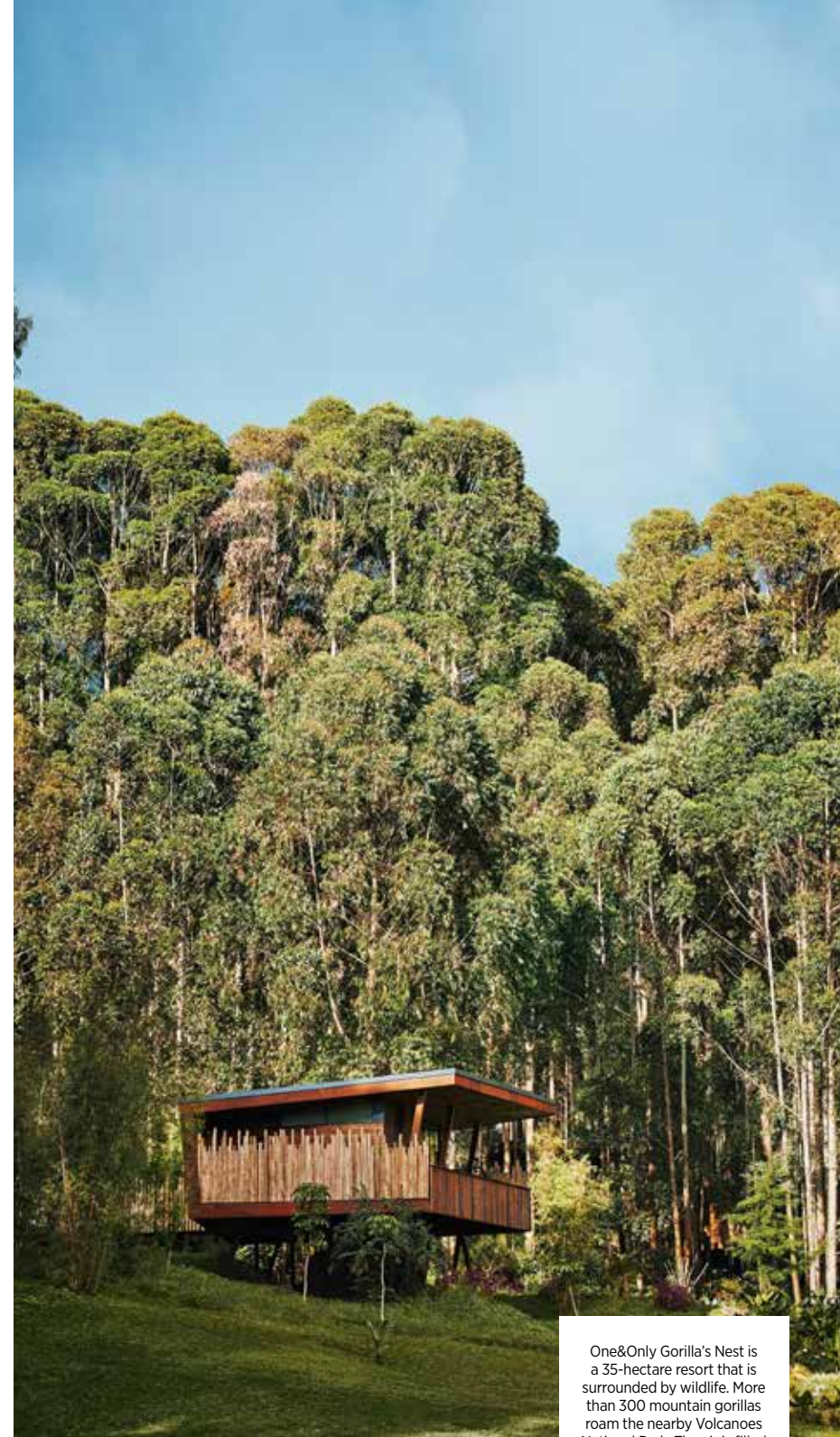


The One&Only Nyungwe House is located in the remote Rwanda wilderness, on the cusp of the Nyungwe National Park. But it features all the creature comforts the luxury traveller might crave, including arriving for your stay via helicopter. The hotel is nestled amongst the tea plantations of Gisakura and beautifully blends in with its lush surroundings

The luxury hotel sits on a hillside and features mini-lodge accommodations



Each room comes with a private terrace for moments of quiet communing with nature



One&Only Gorilla's Nest is a 35-hectare resort that is surrounded by wildlife. More than 300 mountain gorillas roam the nearby Volcanoes National Park. The air is filled with the music of over 300 different species of birds and the terrane is a rich verdure teaming with life



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Compared to the chimpanzee trek in Nyungwe, gorilla trekking is indeed a breeze for my group (though every trek is different). Instead of scampering up vertical hillsides and watching guides hack through the bush with machetes, we spend our time marvelling at Sabyinyo, an extinct volcano shrouded in blue-grey morning mist, and taking turns holding toy-like coarse chameleons.

At the helm of our troop is the legendary Francois Bigirimana, who has been a guide for just about every visiting VIP from Rwanda's beloved President Paul Kagame to American TV star Ellen DeGeneres, who recently opened the nearby multimillion-dollar Ellen DeGeneres Campus of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund.

Francois pulls me forward when we spy our first gorilla – a handsome silverback standing in a cathedral of sunlit bamboo. I gasp aloud, but Francois covers it up by “speaking gorilla,” a language of moans and groans; whimpers and wails. Visitors are only allocated an hour with the gorillas, and it goes by in a blink. For

the rest of my life, I suspect I will remember it in hallucinatory snippets, in flickering, fleeting film stills. The slow-batting eyelashes of a sleepy baby. The purposeful, swaggering stride of an adolescent blackback. The hollow, rapid rat-tat-tat-tat of a silverback beating his chest, echoing through the forest.

Famed primatologist and author of *Gorillas in the Mist* Dian Fossey spent 13 years in these jungles; Francois was her guide. “Dian liked gorillas better than people,” he tells me, as we walked back through the farmlands, which edges the national park. A group of school children gather, shyly waving at us. I ask Francois who he likes better, gorillas or people. “Both,” he tells me. “I like both.” ■

Black Tomato offers trips to Rwanda including trekking permits and stays at The Retreat, One&Only Nyungwe House, and One&Only Gorilla's Nest, blacktomato.com. Rwandair has non-stop flights from Dubai to Kigali, rwandair.com/ book. For more information see visitrwanda.com.