

ASSOCIATED PRODUCT

News and Updates

RWANDA
April 2024

FIRST-HAND FEEDBACK

Dewald Snyders, Ianka Van Wyk, Reda Abdelaal, and Tania Ackerman embarked on a journey through Rwanda, experiencing its stunning beauty. Their adventure not only inspired them but also left a lasting impact on their hearts and souls.

To say we were all excited does not do justice to how we all felt when we heard we were going to Rwanda! We had to pinch ourselves and we counted down the days until D-Day.

We departed OR Tambo International Airport at 03:10am for Kigali on RwandAir, arriving at 07:00am. We were met upon arrival as we entered the terminal building by an Akagera Aviation representative, who assisted us through customs & then took us to the Akagera Lounge by Radisson to freshen-up while they collected our luggage. The lounge is comfortable and exactly what we needed after being awake so early the morning before – with complementary drinks & snacks plus a beautiful bathroom to freshen up was most welcomed.



We were then escorted through the security area, and to the parking/waiting area where we met up with Fidele, our Wilderness guide. And off we went. We departed the airport for a short city tour en route, with our first stop the Genocide Memorial ([A place of remembrance & learning - Kigali Genocide Memorial \(kgm.rw\)](https://www.kgm.rw)). This tour is a must for all travellers to Rwanda to try and understand and appreciate what the country went through in 1994. The memorial is the final resting place of over 250 000 victims of the Genocide of the Tutsi. Traveller's tip – pack tissues as this was an emotional rollercoaster.

We made our way to **The Retreat Hotel** where we had a one-night stay. It is nestled in the beautiful heart of Kigali and blends tranquillity, Rwandan charm, and vibrant urban energy. This is a stunning property and definitely recommended. We were also able to see the Retreat by Heaven situated next door as well. The staff were friendly, the food was great, and the Villas are beautiful. A nice treat was the complimentary 30-minute massage. Who could say no to that?

The Retreat started the Vulnerable Youth Education fund, which currently supports 10 staff members in continuing education programmes, and provides essential support to 8 vulnerable youth, covering their education, food, and housing. The hotel runs off solar panels and they have gas in the kitchen – and yes, all produce is local, as they support farmers in the area, purchasing all their fresh ingredients. They also have a gallery which supports local artists and their artwork. The curio shop also supports local ladies' initiatives.



The following morning, we departed the Retreat for the 4-hour drive to Akagera North Gate and Wilderness Magashi (3 hours on tarmac & 50 minutes on gravel roads); some beautiful scenery along the way and we were able to stop en route for about 30 minutes to use the bathroom facilities, and had the opportunity to buy some freshly brewed local Rwandan coffee. Yummy 😊.



Once we arrived at Akagera National Park, Isaac, our **Magashi** guide drove us to camp. It took approximately 90 minutes, with some spectacular views along the way. We were fortunate to stay for 2 unforgettable nights.



What an amazing area! Unlike any other region Wilderness is located in. The wildlife experience was good but scenery, varied/combination of activities with drives and water is what stood out to us. We thought it was a nice touch, having the wildlife sighting board in the main area, so when you get back to camp from drives you can mark where you saw a specific animal. Fishing on the lake was also great, we caught tilapia and catfish. Rooms are spacious and very comfortable, WIFI worked well too.



However, the staff are the stars of the show, with warm friendly smiles and nothing was too much. They went above and beyond for us, and made us feel like family. We didn't want to leave, and definitely a minimum 3-night stay here is recommended.

The next part of our Rwanda journey began, and we were off to **Wilderness Sabyingo**, the total drive time from Magashi camp to Sabyingo being about 5 hours. It was a lovely drive and recommended to experience the country's beautiful scenery. You can see why it's called the Land of a Thousand Hills.



Wilderness Sabyingo is very homely and intimate. Somehow, we had the feeling of being in a country homestead in the Drakensberg. What a great location and base for gorilla and golden monkey trekking, as well as bird watching and cultural tours. The recent soft refurb gave the lodge a facelift, with a great choice of colours. The rooms are very well appointed and extra spacious, with facilities that made our stay a memorable one. The veranda offers a great vantage point to enjoy the wraparound gardens and birdlife. Staff are extremely friendly and warm, which resonates in their outstanding service.



While all markets are suitable for Sabyinguo, and guests will truly enjoy the serenity of Sabyingo, something to consider for elderly guests or those with mobility challenges is the number of steps (189 in total – at altitude) to access the lodge, and can be tricky if the buggy is not working. However, the staff are amazing and will assist. Food was delicious and we even ate avocado chocolate mousse – yummy and we asked for the recipe!

To really enjoy what Sabyingo has to offer, a minimum stay of 3 nights is recommended.

Our excitement grew as our gorilla trek was in sight now. But first we had more hotel site visits, with our first stop being Singita Kwitonda. After a warm welcome and a hand-cleansing ceremony using coffee grounds, we were escorted to the lodge. Opulence at its best, with beautiful wide windows to showcase its location. They had a dedicated trekking room with all the equipment, and a lovely kitchen concept. Beautiful lodge and true to the Singita brand.

We then drove to **One&Only Gorilla's Nest**, and hands down the best welcome. It has a resort feel and has over 100 gardeners just to maintain the gardens. We can see why people would love to stay here – friendly staff and lots to do including yoga, cycling, spa, restaurants, archery, gym, boxing, and coffee tasting, to name a few. But the one offer where we all got stuck was the Temptation 24-hour Bar, which is constantly stocked up with all sorts of sweets and treats. The fudge was amazing.

Our last 2 nights in Rwanda were completed at **Wilderness Bisate Lodge**, a quick 30-minute drive from Sabyinyo. Surrounded by the majestic peaks of the Bisoke, Karisimbi and Mikeno volcanoes, it's a luxurious camp which provides a tranquil retreat amidst breath-taking scenery.

Bisate offers an authentic Rwandan experience, blending luxury accommodation with sustainable ecotourism. Each of the 6 villas offers a private sanctuary, complete with modern amenities and panoramic vistas of the surrounding wilderness. This photo was taken on one of the mornings and it captures exactly what we felt, awe inspiring beauty that we had to pinch ourselves to remember we were finally here.

The camp is true to its name; it is beautiful and uses all its spaces within the main area to showcase its location. We enjoyed most of the activities on offer, including a community tour, but the standout was the nursery, from where we all planted a tree – we had to be a part of the Volcanoes National Park reforestation. Also, a nice touch to make you feel extra special, is to enjoy your own personalised cappuccino.



The day before our trek, Fidele, our Wilderness guide, asked what our medical requirements were and if we would you like a short, medium or long trek (they vary from 1 up to 4 hours one way). Apparently, you can mention if you would like to trek a family with many babies or extra silverbacks too. This is not guaranteed and will only be confirmed by park rangers on the day of your trek. He also explained how the day would unfold, and what equipment we needed, so that the lodge could arrange this the night before, or morning of, the trek.

The equipment included gaiters, gloves, a backpack, and shoes (if you don't have the correct ones, as trainers won't work – hiking boots are recommended).



The day arrived and we were going to trek gorillas! Excited much! It was an early departure from camp at 06:30.

Once we arrived at the Volcanoes National Park headquarters at 07h00, we were given complimentary coffee/cappuccinos before we met our Park Rangers for our briefing. We were then advised that we were allocated to the Kwitonda Family. It was a mere 25 minutes' drive from headquarters to the starting point of our trek, but the roads are very bad, with a combination of tar and gravel, and can see why you need a Wilderness Guide and 4x4 vehicle. At the starting point we met our trackers who had located the gorilla family that morning – and then we were off. Our trek started and we were ready!

We were lucky (good and bad here) as we only walked a further 25 minutes until we found the family. They were actually not in the park and had come out to feed on the eucalyptus right in the middle of farmlands. We spent the next hour with them after masking up and taking hundreds of photos and watched them as they fed and interacted with one another as a family.

The hour went by so fast and before we knew it, we were already walking back via the park wall to the vehicle, which took 45minutes – 1 hour. We understand now why it's recommended to do 2 treks when staying here.

In total we walked approx. 3.8km, which added up to about 3 hours, including a lunch/snack stop.

It truly was a once-in-a-lifetime experience... the Kwitonda Family comprises 19 gorillas in total, including 2 silverbacks.

What a privilege to have been able to see the mountain gorillas in their natural habitat! Afterwards, Fidele met us and had set up a drinks table and we raised a glass to toast to the gorillas. We slept well that night with happy, full hearts!



On our day of departure, we got to experience the Bisate Kwanda lounge, it is a sanctuary tucked away in an organic garden, the perfect place to unwind, freshen up and enjoy a meal before heading back to Kigali on the day of departure. It offers 4 day rooms with showers, complimentary WIFI and a beautiful curio shop for some last-minute shopping.

The camp's commitment to conservation and community empowerment is evident in its partnership with local communities, fostering a sense of environmental stewardship and cultural exchange.



We loved our stay, and the staff went above and beyond, we are truly grateful to have experienced Bisate and we can all sell this amazing camp with confidence.



Bisate, Magashi and Sabyinyo all separate their waste. Compostable waste is used for the indigenous tree nursery or vegetable gardens. Other compostable waste is shared with the surrounding villages to feed their pigs. Glass, tins, milk cartons are recycled or upcycled.

Since Rwanda does have strict policies for the use of single-use plastic we have almost no plastic wastage. We used no plastic bottles for soft drinks or for water (unless an exception) as all is provided in glass bottles.

Bisate has a water-saving initiative where they harvest rainwater for use at camp and staff village. They also try to reduce the usage of water in kitchens, staff villages and in general camp usage.



As we made our way to the airport, we did a quick stop at the Ellen DeGeneres Campus of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund, and spent about an hour walking around and learning about the amazing things she did to protect the gorillas. If you able to go, it would be highly beneficial to stop here to learn about the impact she had, and how she died saving gorillas. Our drive back to the airport took about 4 hours, with a quick but in-depth security check of the vehicle and luggage by x-ray machines before checking in for our flight back home.

Rwanda you are a beautiful country and you have crept into the hearts of 4 Wilderness staff members whose memories are cemented to last a lifetime.