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RWANDA

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 \(kgm.rw\)](#)). 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.

SOUTH AFRICA

Alex Rautenbach, Product Destination Manager based at our Cape Town office, got to explore the Overberg region, and had the opportunity to overnight at Abalone Lodge in Hermanus and Mosaic Lagoon Lodge in the Stanford area.

Abalone Lodge

Amazing sea views from the ocean-facing suites. The property is located right on the cliff path, with lovely fynbos vegetation in front and the vast ocean views beyond. During whale season you can watch the whales from your balcony. We were lucky to see a huge pod of dolphins frolicking, surfing and jumping right there in front of the lodge. Have never experienced such a good sighting along the coast before. The hotel also offers some standard garden-facing rooms (no sea views) but these are interleading, so ideal for families. But for couples / FITs, it's all about the view, so would recommend booking the ocean-facing suites. Dinner and breakfast were excellent, and they have partnered with Creation for their house wine. Creation has been voted the best vineyard in Africa, and #4 top vineyard in the world! My personal favourite: their Viognier. Outstanding. The general manager is a charming gentleman, and his staff complement very friendly and professional. Nice gem in Hermanus.



Mosaic Lagoon Lodge

This lodge is located on the Klein River Lagoon, approx. 40 mins drive from Hermanus via Stanford. The last few kilometres are on a gravel road, so you really feel removed and in nature. It has a true lodge feel, with the main area being cosy and inviting. It consists of an open-plan lounge, dining and bar area, with a large fireplace and beautiful views over the lagoon. With only 5 units, it's an intimate and private lodge. Four chalets have lagoon views, and one is tucked into the milkwood forest but has a hot tub, which is a real winner. There are talks of expansion and adding on an additional 2-bedroomed family unit.



Nice activities include nature walks, drives, beach excursions, a sunset cruise on their barge, canoeing on the lagoon, fishing and quad-biking. Great for families with older kids/teenagers who will love quad biking and canoeing. Rooms have all the creature comforts, lovely amenities, indoor and outside shower – great lodge feel.

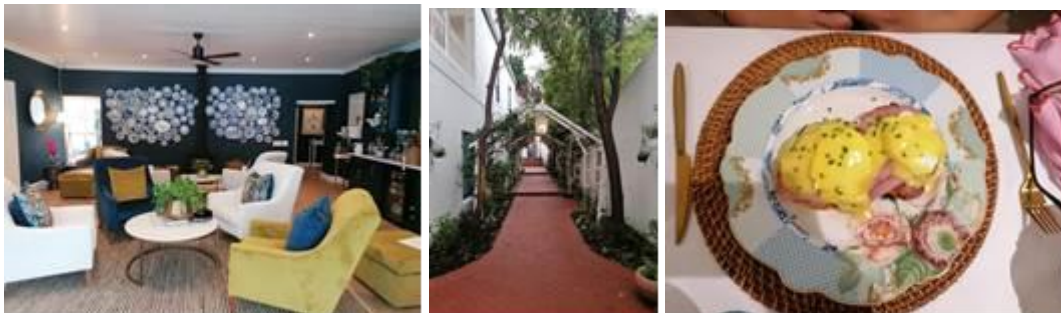
Some of our Cape Town-based staff went on a whirlwind Winelands mini-educational and visited properties around the quaint towns of Stellenbosch and Franschhoek. Participants: Rochelle, Deidre, Tumi, Liezel, Soraya, Brendan and Alex. Herewith some brief impressions:



The Last Word Franschhoek

The hotel was closed for several months for re-construction and renovations after being badly affected by the 2023 winter flood. It was great to overnight and experience the “new” hotel all fresh with lovely décor and accent colours. It has a very homely feel to it. Guests can easily mingle in the open-plan lounge/bar area, which opens up to the swimming pool deck. The rooms are very spacious and offer all the mod-cons. Some rooms have private patios with a seating area, and two rooms also have their own private plunge pools. Note that bathrooms in some of the bedrooms are quite open-plan.

The breakfast was plentiful with both the continental and English breakfasts served plated. The location is very good, in the middle of town on the main road, surrounded by all the great restaurants.



Delaire Graff Estate

This hotel has also recently undergone extensive refurbishments and the addition of extra rooms. The rooms have dark wooden, contemporary furniture with stunning art and accent pieces giving them an edgy and modern look and feel. The complimentary wet bar in each room includes lovely artisan gins and gourmet treats. The marble bathrooms are beautiful, and there is a pillow menu. Hoseki is their new Japanese restaurant, which serves breakfasts and dinners. Hoseki means jewel.

We were hosted to a lovely wine tasting accompanied by elegant charcuterie platters. Delaire is an ideal fit for your sophisticated traveler.



La Residence

The driveway has been rebuilt after it was swept away by the 2023 winter flood that hit Franschhoek. The grounds are incredibly maintained and manicured. The interiors feel otherworldly, and there is a sense of escapism through the collection of richly textured fabrics, colourful artworks, enormous Persian carpets, gilt-edged mirrors, ornate vases, lamps, and sculptures. There are 11 rooms in the main property, as well as 5 Vineyard Suite Villas (these are great for families). Each is unique and oozes the same sense of opulence. With peacocks roaming around the gardens, a lovely pond and so much beauty around you, it is a very romantic space. Perfect for honeymooners.



La Petite Ferme

We were invited to dine at their renowned restaurant, which has the most magnificent views of the Franschhoek Valley, and it met our high expectations. The hotel is situated at the end of Franschhoek that heads up the Franschhoek Pass road, so guests do need a car or transfer to get to the centre of town. The beautiful rooms are decorated in neutral colours with beautiful splashes of greens, blues and rusty reds. All rooms have fantastic views of the valley. The rooms emanate a sense of peace and tranquility, with understated elegance. This property will appeal to the discerning traveller.

They can accommodate children of all ages, but the property is best geared for couples and honeymooners. A real gem of a property.



Avondrood Guest House

Part of the Oyster Collection, this is a charming Cape Victorian-style guest house located in the historical part of Franschhoek, and an easy walk to the main road with all its restaurants, galleries and shops. Even though we just did a quick site inspection we picked up that staff seem very professional, confident and friendly. From the moment you step into the cosy lounge with its inviting fireplace you feel at ease and at home. Very deceptive from the outside, it's set on large grounds with the rooms surrounded by beautiful gardens. The large swimming pool is tucked away in a tropical private corner.



The rooms are spacious, individually decorated with an old-world charm, a lot of character and fine touches. They also offer a 2-bedroomed unit, which is ideal for families. Guests can make use of the red bicycles to explore town. This too is a great little gem in its own league.

La Fontaine Boutique Hotel

Also part of the Oyster Collection, one gets the same sense of professionalism of a well-run establishment. The style here is more quirky, modern and contemporary. The lounge and bar area offer an avant-garde and stylish area for cocktails before heading out to one of the many restaurants for dinner. The hotel boasts 17 rooms over 2 beautifully refurbished heritage buildings. The rooms have spotless plush carpets, some have private little gardens, and upstairs rooms have views of the mountains. The spacious dining room serves breakfasts and lunches. We saw the breakfast buffet laid out, and it looked very extensive and delicious. Nice pool in a private part of the garden. Guests can make use of the blue bicycles to explore town.



We also visited the hotels within the Leeu Collection, all of which offer beautiful, unique art pieces chosen according to the specific style of the hotels. For guests interested in art, both Leeu properties, as well as Delaire Graff offer collectors' pieces.

Le Quartier Francais

This is a charming and quirky hotel with a phenomenal location in the middle Franschhoek, but with the added serenity of gardens and a large pool tucked in the middle of the property. It's the type of property that appeals to young and old, families, honeymooners and small groups. And they have the facilities to cater for all these scenarios and various markets. Comfortably appointed rooms, some with gardens, and top floor rooms with mountain views. Two great restaurants: Protégé is a casual fine-dining style eatery, and Epice is an intimate fine-dining restaurant that takes you on a spice journey.



Leeu House

This is a sophisticated small boutique hotel. They don't take guests younger than 18 years, so this is ideal for guests who want a quiet stay without any noisy kids around them. They have a lovely garden with a very large swimming pool. Ideal to lounge around all day with amazing mountain views. The rooms are neutral in colour with a relaxed but refined style. The Conservancy serves breakfasts and lunches. Guests from both Le Quartier and Leeu House can make use of the extensive spa at Leeu Estates.



Leeu Estates

This is their flagship property in Franschhoek, and in a league of its own. The rooms and bathrooms are massive, and beautiful. The grounds are perfectly maintained with exquisite gardens and art sculptures. The dining room is only open to resident guests. La Petite Colombe, which is also on the grounds of the estate, but well removed from the main hotel, is open to the public. The spa is a wellness sanctuary, and the gym is high tech with lovely views of the garden. Additional to the hotel rooms, they have a number of villas (from 2 – 4 bedrooms) which are ideal for families. The Wine Studio offers immersive Mullineux and Leeu Family Wines tastings. There are three tasting options to choose from: Signature, Single Terroir and Leeu Passant. One complimentary signature tasting is included for guests staying at the hotel.

