

ALL TRAVEL, ALL THE TIME

 NATIONAL  
GEOGRAPHIC

# TRAVELLER

**7** *ICONIC ROAD TRIPS*  
NAMIBIA • AUSTRALIA • ITALY • KOSI BAY  
UTAH • COTSWOLDS • MPUMALANGA

**RWANDA'S REBIRTH**  
DISCOVER THE MOUNTAIN GORILLAS  
IN THE LAND OF HOPE FULFILLED

**ISLAND IDYLL**  
SIMPLE LUXURY IN SUN-DRENCHED SEYCHELLES

**48 HOURS**  
IN ROME, NEW ZEALAND, ANTANANARIVO

*SOUTH  
AFRICAN  
ISSUE*

**WIN** A TRIP TO MAURITIUS WORTH R50 000

SOUTH AFRICA SPRING/SUMMER 2011 R39.95 VAT INCL





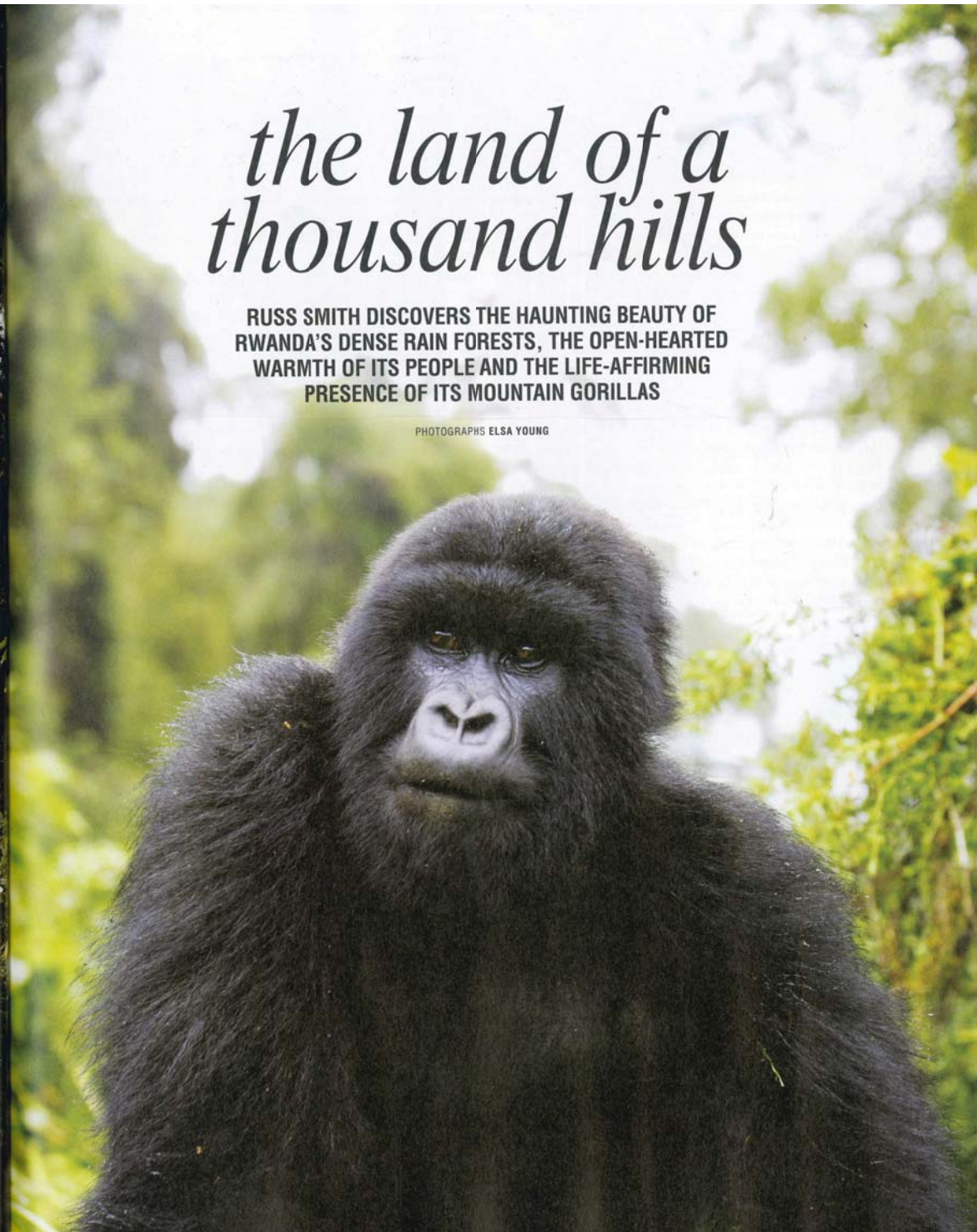
**JUNGLE FEVER**

THE PARK Nyungwe Forest – home to chimpanzees, leopards, 200 types of orchids, butterflies of every colour and a multitude of birds, mammals and reptiles  
OPPOSITE Mountain gorillas are identified by their nose prints – the topography of wrinkles above their nostrils – each individual having a unique pattern

# *the land of a thousand hills*

**RUSS SMITH DISCOVERS THE HAUNTING BEAUTY OF RWANDA'S DENSE RAIN FORESTS, THE OPEN-HEARTED WARMTH OF ITS PEOPLE AND THE LIFE-AFFIRMING PRESENCE OF ITS MOUNTAIN GORILLAS**

PHOTOGRAPHS ELSA YOUNG



*The village of Kareba nestles on the lower slopes of Mount Karisimbi, an extinct volcano draped in foliage and swirling mist.*

It is a quiet, peaceful place, strangely reminiscent of Tuscany with its rolling hills, tile-roofed cottages and verdant fields. It is a pastoral scene from just about any age and any country. With just one difference. A few hundred metres above Kareba on the forested slopes, and on neighbouring volcanoes, live more than half the world's population of rare mountain gorillas. We are on our way to find them.

Our journey began two days earlier when we flew into Kigali, the pristine capital city of Rwanda. Located in the heart of Africa, astride the Congo-Nile watershed, the name of this small country is derived from a word that means 'to grow'. And what a fitting name it is. Buildings are springing up wherever you cast your eye, every traffic circle in every town is covered in lush lawn and bordered by a hedge of Sheena's Gold, terraced fields carpet fertile hillsides and age-old mahogany trees grow out of endless rain forests, dripping in Old Man's Beard. There are more children attending school in Rwanda today than at any other time in history. And, unsurprisingly, tourism is growing: it is now the country's leading foreign-exchange earner.

But the modern-day country I'm describing is a long way from civil war and the appalling genocide of 1994 that left a million Rwandans dead. The best place to truly grasp the magnitude of this event is the Kigali Memorial Centre in the suburb of Gisozi. Built on a site where over 250 000 people are buried, it serves as a place for people to grieve

the loved ones they lost. The museum features a graphic history of the country leading up to and including the three-month-long genocide, and an exhibition on the history of genocidal violence around the world. We walk through the dark halls of the museum in a state of shock and sadness.

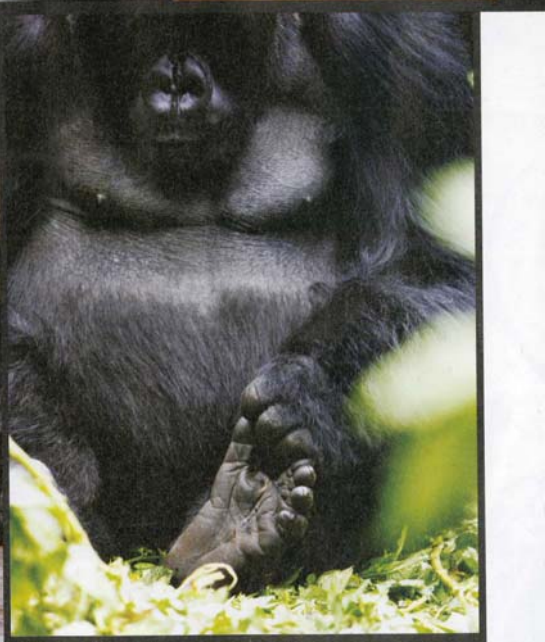
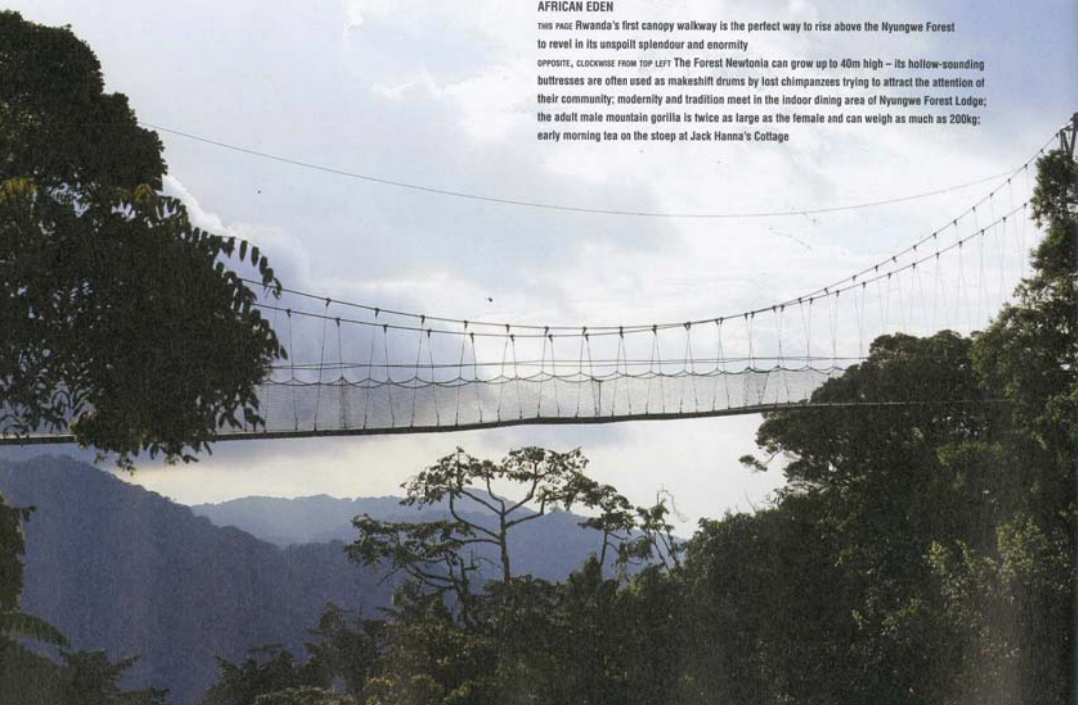
Although not a priority, the welfare of the mountain gorillas was of great concern during the civil war. Not only were land mines planted in the area by various factions and the mountains used as an escape route by fleeing refugees, but the headquarters of Volcanoes National Park were attacked and all tourist activities stopped. The fate of the gorillas hung in the balance. Unbelievably, after the end of the violence, only four gorillas were found to be missing, two of which were very old and could easily have died of complications relating to their ages.

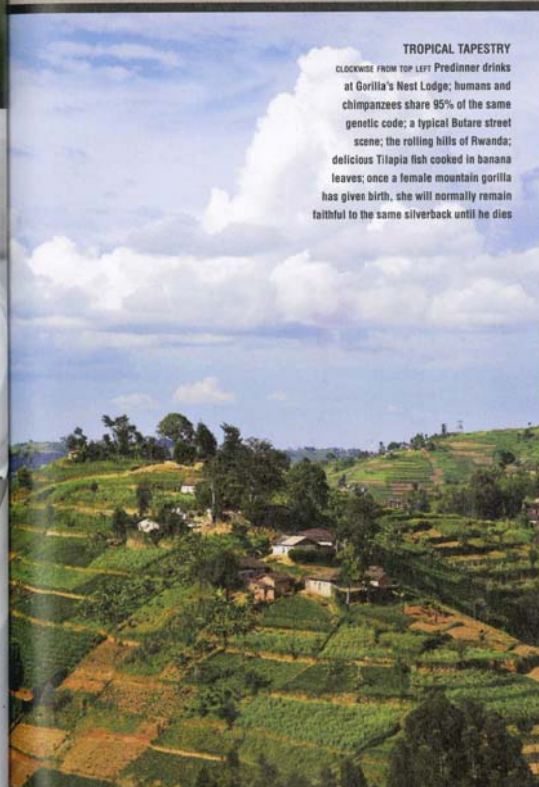
After visiting the Genocide Memorial Centre, we set off to fulfil our dream of seeing these magnificent creatures in the wild. We meet our driver, Hussein, who works for tour operator Thousand Hills, a quiet, friendly man who is fazed by nothing. No matter how many times we ask him to stop the car, to reverse to get a better photograph, to wake up before sunrise, to translate a greeting thrown at us as we pick our way through a village, to turn his taped Swahili music up louder or to beat his chest as we all practise our chimpanzee calls, he does it unquestioningly and with a smile.

**AFRICAN EDEN**

**THIS PAGE** Rwanda's first canopy walkway is the perfect way to rise above the Nyungwe Forest to revel in its unspoilt splendour and enormity

**OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** The Forest Newtonia can grow up to 40m high – its hollow-sounding buttresses are often used as makeshift drums by lost chimpanzees trying to attract the attention of their community; modernity and tradition meet in the indoor dining area of Nyungwe Forest Lodge; the adult male mountain gorilla is twice as large as the female and can weigh as much as 200kg; early morning tea on the stoop at Jack Hanna's Cottage





**TROPICAL TAPESTRY**  
 CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Pre-dinner drinks at Gorilla's Nest Lodge; humans and chimpanzees share 95% of the same genetic code; a typical Butare street scene; the rolling hills of Rwanda; delicious Tilapia fish cooked in banana leaves; once a female mountain gorilla has given birth, she will normally remain faithful to the same silverback until he dies

We arrive at our destination, Gorilla's Nest Lodge, as the sun is setting. Waiting for us in the fading light is a tray of granadilla caipirinhas and a troop of traditional Intore dancers, who start singing to welcome us to their patch of this wonderful country. Their enthusiasm and energy is genuine and infectious, and within minutes we are pulled into their group to join the fun. We are to spend two nights in Jack Hanna's Cottage, a luxurious stone bungalow with a wraparound stoep overlooking a nine-hole golf course and a segment of forest built by its namesake, America's favourite zookeeper and an active supporter of the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project. The five-star cottage has two en-suite double bedrooms, an open-plan living room with overstuffed couches and a blazing fireplace, plus a dining room and kitchen. Complete with a private butler and two chefs to cater to every need, the cottage is a relaxing oasis and a home away from home (except here, someone else always does the washing up). Unfortunately, most of Gorilla's Nest Lodge was burnt to the ground in April – plans are in place to rebuild the lodge with a four-star rating. In the meantime, Jack Hanna's Cottage is the perfect place to stay close to Volcanoes National Park, home of the Rwandan mountain gorillas.

One hundred and thirty square kilometres in size, the park hugs the slopes of the Rwandan side of the Virunga mountains, which are made up of six extinct and two active volcanoes. About 480 mountain gorillas – over half of the world's population – call the Virungas home, and Volcanoes National Park proudly boasts 18 of the 36 families, the rest living on the sides of the range belonging to Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Ten of the families are research groups, while the remaining eight are habituated and can be visited by tourists. A maximum of eight permits per day are allocated for each of the eight groups, issued far in advance of a trip for US\$500 per permit, and visitors are allowed to spend only one hour in the presence of the mountain gorillas. We meet up at 7am at the park headquarters at Kinigi, a few minutes' drive from our lodge. It is here that we are allocated our gorilla family for the day, a decision made by the park rangers based on each visitor's fitness level, as some gorilla families live further away than others and are more difficult to reach. Much to our delight we are given the Susa Group, originally studied by Dian Fossey and the largest family, made up of 30 individuals, of which one is a three-week-old baby and two are the park's oldest surviving twins. Susa is the most remote group and the most difficult to reach, living on the slopes of Mount Karisimbi, the highest volcano in the Virungas.

We drive for an hour to the parking area at Kareba village, before starting our trek through the small houses and fields to the boundary of the park, designated by a low stone wall that keeps elephant and buffalo in and the encroachment of human settlement out. As soon as we climb over the wall, the landscape changes dramatically and we enter a dark world of giant bamboo pick-up-sticks, sunlight piercing the green air in shafts as sharp as knives. It's absolutely beautiful, this bamboo forest, the shoots of which are one of the gorillas' favourite foods, apparently making them a bit tipsy. After we carefully squeeze our way along a narrow track for about an hour we surface higher up the slope and enter the montane forest that I associate with gorillas: broad-leafed herbaceous shrubs crowded under tall, slender Hagenia trees with peeling bark and draped in vines, the scream of a golden

monkey piercing the air. It is not long before the path disappears under the thick foliage and our trackers need to start cutting a fresh one using their machetes. They are in constant contact with other trackers who set out earlier that morning, as they do every morning, to find the gorillas. The hike at this point starts getting a lot steeper and infinitely more difficult as we stumble over roots and sink into layers of deep, decaying vegetation. Stinging nettles are found here in abundance, even scratching through our trousers – luckily, we'd been advised to bring gardening gloves to save our hands from the worst of it.

After two and a half hours of trekking, we reach the first group of trackers who tell us that we are very close to Susa Group, and that we must leave our backpacks, hiking poles and any food or drink behind before continuing with our climb. I notice that each man carries a gun and is dressed in uniform. They set out early each morning to track the gorillas before they leave their overnight resting place and stay close to the gorilla group throughout the day to protect them and also to help lead that day's tourist group in the right direction. These guards leave the gorillas only as night falls, making their way back up the volcano the following morning. Due to this vigilance, the financial benefits of tourism to neighbouring communities and ongoing education, gone mostly are the days of specific targeting by poachers, meaning that the gorillas' numbers in the Virungas have almost doubled in the past 30 years. This is great news, but for an endangered species that is still extremely vulnerable, any change in the status quo could have devastating results. Some of their biggest threats are the traps that are being laid by poachers trying to target other animals in the park, the ongoing violence in the DRC and the continuing threat of

land encroachment – Rwanda is the most densely populated country in Africa and available arable land for farming is fast running out, as is available timber. How long can these national parks retain their boundaries before the needs of the country's people become too great?

The first thing I see is a head, black against the bright green foliage, brown eyes staring. We are finally here. I quicken my pace as we step over trampled ground cover, round a bush and then stop metres away from a magnificent female sitting slightly raised off the ground in her nest, a young baby cradled in her arms. She does nothing except watch us and seems completely unperturbed by our presence. To her left, further up the slope, sits a huge silverback male surveying the scene, and a bit further down I can spot two smaller animals. Within minutes it starts to rain and the mist swirls in, obliterating visibility. All the gorillas, barring the mother with her baby, make for cover and disappear into the thick foliage. Our guide Oliver tells us not to worry, that the rain will clear and only then will the group reveal itself to us. In the interim, we focus on the maternal scene in front of us, keeping to the stipulated distance of seven metres, mother and baby now dripping wet and fast asleep. At the first sign of sun, the forest floor comes alive and within seconds we seem to be surrounded by gorillas of all shapes and sizes, literally tumbling out of the undergrowth. There is a tiny black powder puff climbing a tree and licking gum from a piece of stripped bark, two adolescents who rush forward to get a better view of us and who try to grab our legs, another mother holding her baby, two young blackback males exposing their bellies to the sun, and the dominant silverback mewling appreciatively as he feasts on a stick of wild celery, the grey on his back looking as though he has just leant

against a freshly painted white wall. There are at least 16 members within metres of us, most of them completely disinterested in anything but themselves!

Mountain gorillas are highly sociable and are often seen wrestling, chasing and grooming one another. Severe aggression is rare except when two silverbacks from different groups meet, sometimes fighting to the death. Most families are composed of one adult male – the silverback and undisputed leader of the group – and a number of females, although some contain more than one adult male, often younger blackbacks. Due to the large size of the group, Susa has three silverbacks. A female gorilla reaches sexual maturity at the age of eight and will typically raise six offspring to maturity within her lifetime.

Despite their size, mountain gorillas are primarily herbivorous. They eat bark slabs, nettles, thistles, blackberries and bracket fungus, plus the leaves, shoots and stems of 142 plant species, as well as worms and grubs. Surprisingly, gorillas are very scared of certain reptiles, particularly chameleons. Celery, like many other of their favourite foods, is very succulent – this is why mountain gorillas are so rarely seen drinking. They are diurnal and build sleeping nests for themselves each night out of the surrounding vegetation, the adults on the ground due to their immense weight and the younger animals often higher up in the trees. Their fur is thicker than other gorilla species, which enables them to live at high altitude where the cold and mist are often brutal.

After a magical hour with these calm and fascinating animals, it is time for us to leave them and make our way back down the mountain. A lot of questions have been raised about the ethics of gorilla tourism: the fact that these habituated groups are no longer completely wild,

that getting the gorillas used to people makes them more vulnerable to poachers, and that a human disease can be passed to a gorilla, which could potentially wipe out an entire group (tourists with a cold or the flu are not allowed to visit). However, without the revenue generated by gorilla tourism, these animals would be of little benefit or concern to the local communities. The national parks would cease to exist due to lack of funds and the land they occupy would be destroyed by agriculture, the wild animals disappearing forever. I would rather be able to see these majestic gorillas habituated but living their lives in their natural environment pretty much as they always have, as opposed to not having them around at all. The park seems extremely well organised and the passion the authorities and rangers have for these animals is very evident in the annual gorilla-naming ceremony called Kwita Izina, a major event held in mid to late June in which all the baby gorillas born in the past year are given formal names.

Although gorilla trekking is the mainstay of tourism in Rwanda, the country has so much else to offer. At the moment a fair number of international tourists pop in to see the gorillas for a few days en route to or from more well-known destinations such as Kenya or Tanzania, but 10 days to two weeks are really what's required for Rwanda. From three-day boat trips on stunning Lake Kivu in the west, overlooked by a smoking volcano, to buffalo, elephant, giraffe and hippo in Akagera National Park in the east; from golden monkey trekking and an overnight ascent to the top of Mount Karisimbi in the north to the huge expanse of Nyungwe Forest and chimpanzee tracking in the south, Rwanda has a huge amount to offer the adventurous traveller. And we are off to see more...

#### TRANQUIL HAVEN

Nyungwe Forest Lodge is an architectural triumph and an oasis of luxury close to the Nyungwe closed canopy rain forest, home to 13 species of primate



*We step over trampled ground cover, round a bush and stop metres away from a magnificent female gorilla sitting in her nest, a baby cradled in her arms*

Our drive to Nyungwe Forest takes six hours. Some of the roads are perfect, but others are in a state of disrepair, with large chunks of tarmac missing. It's obvious why this country is referred to as the Switzerland of Africa: green undulating hills disappear into the distance all the way to the horizon and often a scene of a tile-roofed stone house on a steep slope, nestled in a copse of cypress trees, is entirely reminiscent of Europe. But within seconds another picture presents itself, entirely African: women with woven baskets on their heads, children carrying plastic drums filled with water, men in fields wielding hoes, a woman outside a wooden shack sewing on an old Singer machine.

It's only when we enter the Nyungwe Forest that I realise just how busy and populated rural Rwanda is. The sudden lack of people is overwhelming. Where minutes before almost every metre of road had someone walking along it, where every piece of land was cultivated, where every glance caught something man-made, now there is one of the most awe-inspiring natural vistas I have ever laid my eyes on. Rain forest as far as the eye can see. In every direction. Tall mahogany and cedar trees covered in moss. Giant tree ferns cascading down slopes so steep that they have naturally protected the forest for this long because the incline is impossible to cultivate (luckily, since the forest has only been under a coordinated protection plan since 1984). Orchids, screaming monkeys and 278 species of birds. And the only people in sight are those few who are driving on the road that bisects the forest on their way to or from the DRC. This is the dense, jungled Africa I dream about. Where waterfalls plunge into fast-running mountain streams, chimpanzees hoot and vines massage your shoulders as you pass beneath the forest canopy. Nyungwe is the largest remaining tract of medium-altitude forest anywhere in Africa, extending for 1 015km<sup>2</sup>, and is also one of the oldest forests on the continent. It provides water to 70% of the country and a spring on the slopes of Mount Bigugu has been found to be the most distant source of the Nile.

We pass all the way through the forest, a trip that takes just less than two hours, to arrive at our destination for the next few nights, Nyungwe Forest Lodge. It's a beautiful, modern hotel sitting proudly in the middle of a working tea plantation at the very edge of the rain forest. Completed in 2010, the five-star lodge is an absolute haven of calm. We are greeted as we climb out of the Land Cruiser with hot towels and a cool drink, and feel immediately refreshed. Our suite is ridiculously impressive: wooden floors; a roaring fire in both the lounge and bedroom (nights get chilly at this altitude); slick, modern furniture; a full bathroom complete with a shower with views of lobelias and monkeys; a guest bathroom; a terrace with seating for four; and an entire wall of glass literally touching the forest edge, giving the

impression that we're staying in a very luxurious tree house, high up in the canopy. The lodge boasts a spa, 22 spacious rooms and two suites, all housed in plantation log villas apart from the main building. This dynamic structure is crafted out of glass, wood and stone, and seems to float like a ship above the undulating sea of tea that surrounds it on all sides. Expansive rooms lead seamlessly to outdoor nooks and terraces dotted with stone fireplaces, and traditional Rwandan graphic art called Imigongo lines the walls. In the near distance, ridge after ridge of forest is shrouded in swirling mist.

We spend four days at Nyungwe Forest Lodge, and I will be staying longer on my next trip. We spend a morning hiking through the forest on a guided walk to a waterfall, searching en route for the outrageously coloured blue turaco bird, and finding chameleons and butterflies instead. One afternoon we explore the recently completed canopy walkway, a swaying steel structure 160 metres long, high up in the tree tops. Other days we lie by the heated outdoor pool. Nights we spend sampling delectable international and local cuisine in a cavernous dining room or outside around a raging bonfire, one evening dining romantically by firelight in our suite.

The day we see chimpanzees in the wild is an unforgettable one. We set out long before sunrise to try to catch them before they stray too far from their overnight nests, and drive for an hour into the national park before heading out on foot with a guide and a few other tourists. After an hour's walk through the forest we spot our first male. He is sitting high up in a ficus tree gorging himself on the delectable fruit, and it's not long before he is joined by two others. There are around 400 chimpanzees living in Nyungwe, not cohabitating in troops like other primates but in extended communities of individuals. Although habituated, the chimpanzees of Nyungwe are not as relaxed around humans as the mountain gorillas are and tend to keep their distance. Their hoots are chilling, and I am once again reminded of exactly where we are: in this hauntingly beautiful country in East Africa.

No longer should the country be associated only with genocide and gorillas; it should be celebrated for the strength of its people, the variety of its wildlife, the clarity of its conservation vision, the pride of its forward-thinking citizens and the beauty of its undulating landscapes. It is entirely fitting that Rwanda should be called The Land of a Thousand Hills. I think it should be thought of too as The Land of a Million Smiles. Time to book your flight, pack your bags and head over to this jewel of a country. I'm going back.

#### TRAVEL DETAILS

**STAY Gorilla's Nest Lodge** From R1 020 per person per night, including all food and selected drinks. For more, go to [www.gorillasnestlodge.com](http://www.gorillasnestlodge.com) or [www.mantiscollections.com](http://www.mantiscollections.com).

**Nyungwe Forest Lodge** From R1 190 per person per night, including all food and selected drinks. Contact [reservations@nyungweforestlodge.com](mailto:reservations@nyungweforestlodge.com) or visit [www.nyungweforestlodge.com](http://www.nyungweforestlodge.com) or [www.mantiscollections.com](http://www.mantiscollections.com).

**PRIMATE TRACKING Thousand Hills Expeditions** To book a tailor-made safari or for more information, call Jacqui Sebageni +250 252 504330; [www.thousandhills.rw](http://www.thousandhills.rw).

GETTING THERE: Best price Rwanda Air flies on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday (returning on same days) from Joburg to Kigali, from R3 933 to R4 199 return. Call 011 390 2456; [www.rwandair.com](http://www.rwandair.com).