



## 7 things you must do in Rwanda

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**Twenty years after Rwanda's darkest hour, Megan King lists seven reasons why the country should be top of your bucket list**

Right in the heart of Africa you can find the land of a thousand hills, a treasure chest of beauty and originality. Rwanda's landscape is beautifully lush and unfolding, and the people are some of the kindest I've met. Here are 7 highlights from my trip...

### 1. Put Rwanda's history into perspective

Rwanda is still healing from its devastating and complex history that destroyed an entire people. The Genocide Memorial Centre in Kigali documents the genocide through written and video testimonials, photographs and physical remnants of weapons used and possessions destroyed.

There are mass graves of over 250,000 people at the memorial. You can spend hours in the museum, hoping to understand the intricacies of fear and identity and the role of the colonial powers that contextualise the tragic massacre of a million civilians in 100 days.

This year marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this human disaster. The most humbling thing to remember is how far Rwanda has come to reconcile and rebuild itself. My experience at the Centre has been nothing but gentle, original and moving.

### 2. Sit down and speak to the locals

When I first arrived in Kigali I had the unjust impression that Rwandans were withdrawn. Although there is an air of seriousness in a country that is still in healing, my feeling changed quickly after being exposed to the gentle hearts and thoughtfulness of people.

Only when you begin to engage and consciously listen can you learn about the values and knowledge of a culture. My hostess told me a story about the *intashya* bird that weaves its nest under the roof of her patio. "If a guest or visitor destroys the nests they will return to rebuild it no matter how many times it is destroyed, without fail," she said. "But if the owner of the house destroys it, they will never come back."

It is with the people that my most vivid memories of Rwanda remain. I have never seen so many smiling children in one place, their eyes beaming with purity. I will never forget the time I went for a walk and got caught in a heavy downpour and a man ran out of his home with a big yellow umbrella. Although the umbrella didn't survive the rain, we sat under the tin shelter of the golf course and spoke to each other in soft smiles, waiting for the rain to pass.

### 3. Indulge in the local food and drink

Rwanda's food consists primarily of beans, bananas, and potatoes, with sorghum being a staple. The cuisine offers variety and nutrition, and it tastes delicious. Curries with dal and chapattis are a speciality too. In the cities, it's common to find sticks of goat meat roasting over charcoal burners.

Off the streets there is a great selection of restaurants offering hearty and healthy dishes. Ten-to-Two is a treasure that sits on the hills of Kacyiru, offering whole fish, basted and grilled on an open fire. Head there before the sun goes down for your food to be ready by dinnertime. It's at least an hour's wait, but well worth the feast and panoramic views.

For a unique combination of ingredients and instant service try Meze Fresh in Nyamirambo, a Mexican-Rwandan burrito bar where you can customise your order as it is prepared in front of you.

Besides an impressive menu, Rwanda boasts award-winning beer called Skol and speciality coffee that is being used by big coffee houses such as Starbucks.

### 4. Go salsa dancing

The Pasadena Bar in the Gikondo region of Kigali is *the* place to be on a Thursday night. Each week the Afro-Caribbean inspired hall draws together a hodgepodge of age and culture, from seasoned shakers to left-footed beginners for a marathon of uninterrupted salsa dancing. Dancers align behind the master of rhythm Jimmy Rudahunga, on the same dance floor where he learned to salsa over six years ago. Patrons follow him as he builds onto the basic left-foot-forward, right-foot-back movements with smooth sidestepping and spinning tricks.

The atmosphere is joyous, the energy is contagious, and by the end of the night you probably will have swapped partners with most people in the room. The more shy-footed can swig Skol and enjoy some good conversation while admiring the music and movement. The night gets into full swing at about 10pm, and I recommend stopping by Papyrus in Kimihurura for a rooftop drink and unfolding views of Kigali below.

### 5. Visit Kimironko Market

Kigali's Kimironko Market is a sensory rush of bright colours and strong smells.

The market houses plantations of fresh food, fruit and vegetables are laid out on tables and stacked to the ceiling. Patrons pick and choose what they need. Don't forget to try the *tamarillo* (tree tomato), a fruit with a slightly bitter and explosive taste; it's also great for making jam.

In the second half of the market you will find a variety of traditional and second hand clothes. My favourite part was walking in between the exquisite fabrics draped from stall to stall where vivid colours collide with geometric shapes and animals. With so many beautifully crafted textiles, I found it difficult to choose which one to take home with me. I finally opted for a wax print fabric known as *kitenge*, made by the process of imprinting a pattern of melted wax onto fabric before it is dyed.

### 6. See Rwanda's Art Renaissance at the Ivuka Arts Centre

The surge of public art that has cropped up over the last year is incredible and in part attributed to organisations like Ivuka Arts and its collaboration with local emerging artists and other community-based projects. **Kurema, Kureba, Kwigira** means *to Create to See, to Learn*, and is an expression-based public arts initiative urging people to address the current discourse of Aids through creativity and the deconstruction of stigma.

It was only about a year ago that the first large-scale mural was approved for painting on a ten-story hospital building on the streets of Kigali. The mural served as a catalyst for the public art scene in the city, with many more being curated by local artists and the emergence of a new voice, one a part from the usual government slogans and advertising boards.

Ivuka Arts invites local artists to do a residency where they hone their craft, experiment with media, and form a community of support and learning with other artists. The atmosphere is beautiful, with open studio spaces looking over lush green hills, and there is constant life with the Rwandan Dance Troop singing and drumming. The walls are draped with magnificent art and sculptures made from up-cycled materials. The centre is always open for visitors to stop by and browse the gallery or watch the community practice their dance and drumming performances.

### 7. Gorilla trekking

Gorilla tracking in Volcanoes National Park doesn't come cheaply, but it's good to know that the US\$750 you fork out for this adventure is going towards the preservation of these magnificent creatures.

With only about 5 metres between you, you are able to observe the complex social behavior of the animals, picking up on each one's distinct personality. Interestingly, a lot of the rangers were former poachers who have been educated on the significance of the animals and now depend on them for their livelihoods, acting as their passionate guardians.

The biggest threat to mountain gorillas in Rwanda is the destruction of their natural habitat by a growing and largely agricultural population. I learned about the naming ceremony called Kwita Izina where the President comes to the area each year to name each newborn baby.

The surrounding town of Masanze is very charming, scattered with great restaurants and every building is decorated with beautiful hand-painted signage. You can also visit the hotel where Diane Fossey lived during her pivotal research on mountain gorillas. Her room remains largely intact.



Based in Cape Town, Megan is also one of the founders of **Colourkamva**, a project that aims to create a platform for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds to explore transformation through creativity and connector between different groups of people. For more anecdotes from other lands, see her **travel blog**.

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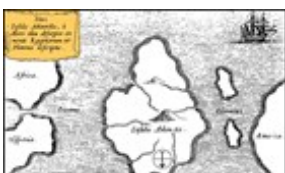
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