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APE EXPECTATIONS

A new direct flight means gorillas are even easier to reach - but Rwanda, has more to offer, says **SARAH MARSHALL**

IT'S Saturday morning in downtown Kigali and the streets are curiously empty. There are no cars roaring along the smooth Tarmac roads, and only a few people milling in manicured parks.

There's not a spot of litter, either. No chewing gum underfoot.

It's not what you expect in a capital city. But Rwanda is full of surprises.

Just 23 years after genocide devastated the country, reducing the population of seven million by almost a third, the small East African nation has lofty sights set on progress.

There's a flashy new Radisson Blu convention centre, and national airline RwandAir has invested in a fleet of sleek new A330s to operate the first direct route between London and Kigali, which launched at the end of May.

Then there's the commendable commitment to conservation.

Umuganda, the obligatory monthly

street clean-up I'm witnessing, is all part of that. But one of the biggest surprises came last month, when the Rwandan Development Board announced the price of gorilla permits would double to \$1,500.

Gorilla treks make up the bulk of the country's tourism revenue, and the move has provoked mixed responses. The decision to keep visitors at a sustainable level and increase community investment is admirable, but there's a risk tourists will simply switch to cheaper neighbour Uganda.

Leaving Kigali behind me, we drive 100km east to Akagera National Park on the border with Tanzania.

It's Rwanda's oldest

park but years of poaching and conflict between community and wildlife as a result of cattle grazing, left it in decline.

Seven years ago, the park was

restored, with a recent relocation of 18 black rhino from South Africa giving it Big Five status - lions, elephant, buffalo, leopard and rhinoceros.

As part of the new gorilla permit scheme, tourists will receive a 30% discount if they stay three or more nights here, an incentive to get people exploring more of the country.

Lemon-yellow wildflowers waltz with wispy blades of long grass as we drive along one of two main roads in the scenic park, where hilltop views



cascade down to
lakes, savannah
plains and
swampland.

Lumbering buffalo
search for scraps of shade beneath a
wiry acacia tree, restless zebra dust
bathe in the sunset-red African soil,
and swarms of darting queria birds
form the only clouds in an

unadulterated cerulean sky.

Given the relatively small
populations (there are just 19
reintroduced lions, a fraction of the
300 poached to disappearance),
seeing big game isn't easy but we do
catch sight of a regal elephant as we
sensibly avoid the stony glares of
irritable hippos on a motorboat ride
across Hema lake.

Although currently lacking the
near-guaranteed drama of the
Serengeti or Maasai Mara, Akagera
does benefit from far fewer crowds
and lower prices.

Operated by African Parks, the fully
solar-powered waterside Ruzizi
Tented Lodge costs from just \$195
(£150) per person.

Getting the community onside has
been instrumental in restoring the
park, says Sarah Hall, tourism
manager for African Parks.

After the genocide, the government
granted half of the land for public
cattle grazing, and an electric fence
(solar powered, of course) was
installed in 2013.

Projects are also under way to help
local people reap the benefits of
tourism. Godefroid, one of 18
community freelance guides working
in the park, takes me to nearby
village Kageyo, to take part in one of
several new tourist experiences.

"People know Rwanda for two
things: gorillas and genocide," he
laments. "But we want them to learn
more about our country."

That said, he introduces me to the
art of cow milking. He tugs at the
satin udders with ease, although my
clumsy attempts are pathetic.

As a gesture of hospitality, I'm
invited to cup my hands around the
bowl of warm, frothing liquid and am
later shown how to transform it into
yogurt.

But most visitors will come to
Rwanda wanting to see mountain
gorillas, so I end my trip in the
highlands of Volcanoes National
Park.

My base is the ridge-top Volcanoes
Safaris Virunga Lodge, made up of 10
individual bandas, which easily has
the park's best view.

At 5am, I wake up to a thousand
hills draped with a fine spider's web
of mist, drifting into Lake Bulera
below.

Led by 20-year veteran Diogene,
who's had the honour of guiding
David Attenborough, we scramble
uphill for two and a half hours on a
muddy trail of dense bamboo forest
and angry stinging nettles.

All pain and discomfort (and
concerns of expense) evaporate
when we find our gorillas,
munching on leaves, tumbling over
toes, and locking our gaze with
stirringly human eyes.

There are undoubtedly still some
rumblings about the new permit
costs, not least among the actual
community who are worried the
tourists may no longer come.

But just like my trek to see Pablo,
fraught with difficulty and at times
near impossible, let's hope any
concerns about the controversial
price hike are, with time,
surmountable.

NEED TO KNOW

■ **SARAH MARSHALL** was a
guest of the Rwanda Development
Board and RwandAir.

■ Red Savannah offers five nights
in Rwanda from £5,225 per
person. Includes two nights in
Volcanoes Safaris Virunga Lodge,
two nights in Ruzizi Tented Camp,

one night in Radisson Blu Hotel
Kigali, return flights with
RwandAir from Gatwick to Kigali,
gorilla trekking permit, Akagera
National Park entry fees and 4x4
private transport throughout.

■ Call 01242 787800 or click
www.redsavannah.com

Akagera National Park, on the border with Tanzania, is Rwanda's oldest park



