



WHY RWANDA NEEDS TO BE ON YOUR BUCKET LIST: A FIRST- TIMER'S GUIDE TO 'THE LAND OF A THOUSAND HILLS'

TRAVEL

A dizzying capital, opportunities for tracking endangered gorillas in the mountains and to see the Big Five — plus spoiling stays. Rwanda is not to be overlooked, says *Gina Jackson*

GINA JACKSON
2 DAYS AGO



It may not be on everyone's radar as a [bucket list](#) destination — but there's plenty of reason why this tiny, landlocked country at the heart of [East Africa](#) deserves a spot on every discerning traveller's radar.

From tracking [gorillas](#) in the northern mountains to experiencing Big Five safari in Akagera's eastern plains, there's lots to keep adventurous types occupied — and that's before you lose yourself in the thrum of Kigali, [Rwanda's](#) dizzying capital.

Here's your itinerary for a whistlestop tour that encompasses all of the must-see sights.

Days 1 - 3: Volcanoes National Park

After landing in Kigali, most visitors' first port of call in Rwanda is Volcanoes National Park, known the world over as the go-to destination for gorilla trekking.



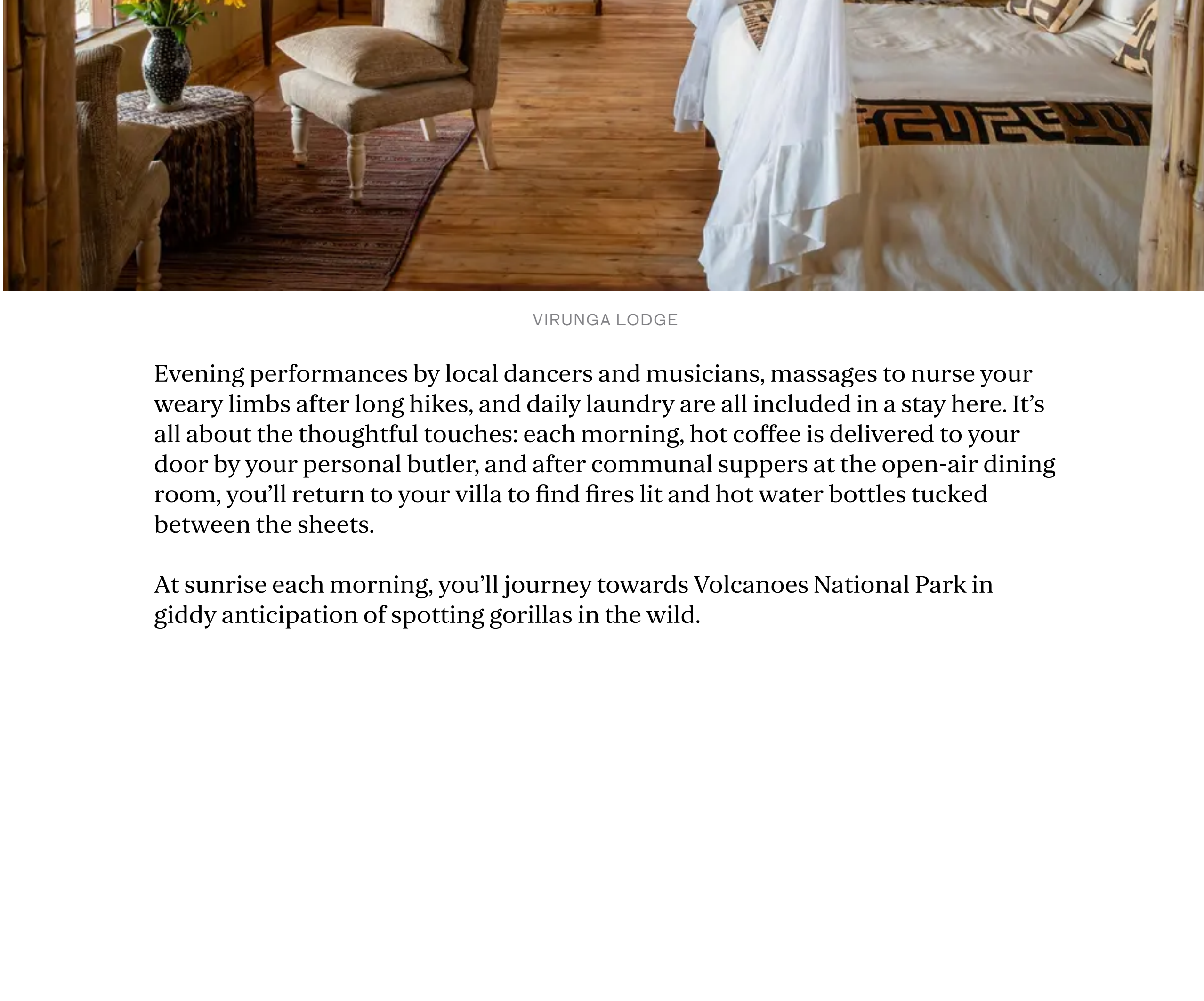
RWANDA VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK

This UNESCO World Heritage site borders neighbouring Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo: the only other destinations in the world where you can spot endangered gorillas in the wild.

Whiz northwards from Kigali (the journey to the Virunga Mountains takes approximately three hours), and the dense cityscape quickly gives way to endless, undulating mountains draped in lush greenery: it's easy to see why Rwanda is dubbed 'the Land of a Thousand Hills'.

As you wind through the rolling terrain, rice paddies give way to thick clusters of mango and banana trees, before gradually shifting into the rugged peaks of the Virungas. Settle in at [Virunga Lodge](#), a legendary mountaintop retreat recognised as the very first hotel in the region dedicated to gorilla trekking tourism.

Perched 7,000 feet above sea level, and flanked on either side by glistening lakes, 10 standalone villas are elegantly styled in Afro-chic decor: think rattan furnishings, four-poster beds swathed in linen, and spacious stone bathrooms.



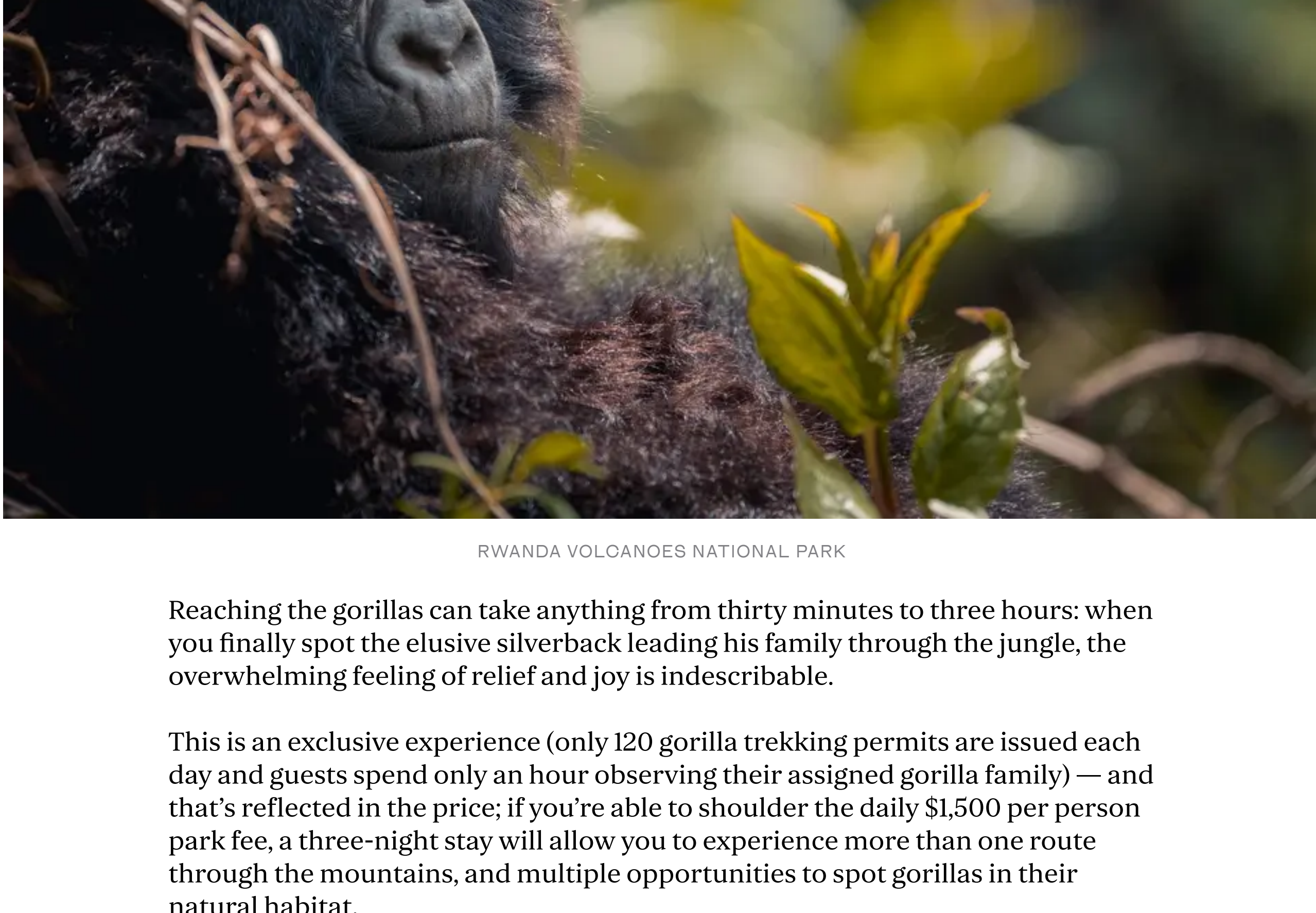
VIRUNGA LODGE

Evening performances by local dancers and musicians, massages to nurse your weary limbs after long hikes, and daily laundry are all included in a stay here. It's all about the thoughtful touches: each morning, hot coffee is delivered to your door by your personal butler, and after communal suppers at the open-air dining room, you'll return to your villa to find fires lit and hot water bottles tucked between the sheets.

At sunrise each morning, you'll journey towards Volcanoes National Park in giddy anticipation of spotting gorillas in the wild.

Visitors are organised into small groups of eight dependent on your preferred difficulty level, and led by an expert guide upwards into the park. The uphill climb is arguably the most gruelling part of the trek, but is rewarded by far-reaching vistas across rambling farmland and forest.

When you finally arrive at the border of the national park, the terrain transforms entirely: you'll find yourself navigating through thick, untamed jungle (home to more than 200 different plant species) and clambering over slippery rocks to keep up with the seasoned team of trackers leading you towards the specific gorilla family you'll be tracking that day.



RWANDA VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK

Reaching the gorillas can take anything from thirty minutes to three hours: when you finally spot the elusive silverback leading his family through the jungle, the overwhelming feeling of relief and joy is indescribable.

This is an exclusive experience (only 120 gorilla trekking permits are issued each day and guests spend only an hour observing their assigned gorilla family) — and that's reflected in the price: if you're able to shoulder the daily \$1,500 per person park fee, a three-night stay will allow you to experience more than one route through the mountains, and multiple opportunities to spot gorillas in their natural habitat.

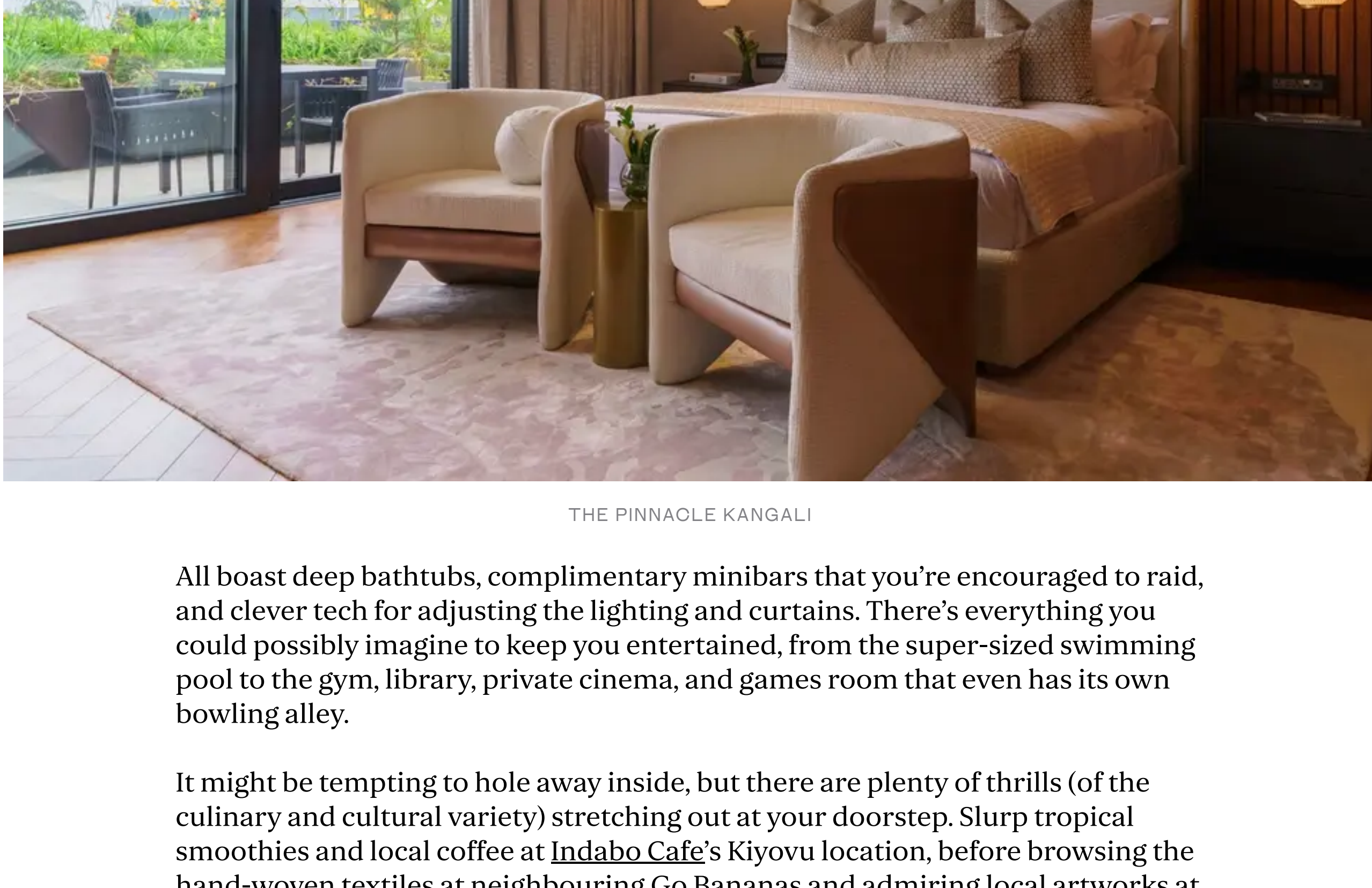
A visit to the Dian Fossey Fund is also a must: founded in honor of Dian Fossey, who is often credited with saving gorillas from near-extinction, the museum showcases her role as the pioneering force behind Rwanda's conservation efforts.

Today, thanks to her work, approximately 1,063 gorillas inhabit the vast massif that spans Rwanda, Uganda, and the DRC, with about half the population residing in Kigali alone. In the years to come, expanding the acreage where these majestic animals can roam freely remains a top priority.

Days 4 - 5: Kigali

From Volcanoes National Park, it's a three-hour drive to Rwanda's capital, Kigali. We're transported by Rwandan tour operator [ETS](#), and our lively driver, Pacifique, keeps the ride engaging by enthusiastically pointing out local landmarks along the way. After a few days spent within the secluded depths of the rainforest, returning to the chaos of the city almost feels like an assault on the senses. The stillness of the mountains is replaced by the blare of car horns, and motorcyclists weave deftly between the colourful market stalls and glossy skyrides.

Among the shiny new-builds sits [The Pinnacle](#), an uber-luxe stay that's recently opened in Kigali Hills: the city's answer to Beverly Hills' 90210. There are just nine bedrooms at this private members' club come hotel, each kitted out in colourful interiors inspired by the owners' varied travels: expect artworks sourced from across east Africa, and expensive-feeling fabrics in every room.



THE PINNACLE KIGALI

All boast deep bathtubs, complimentary minibars that you're encouraged to raid, and clever tech for adjusting the lighting and curtains. There's everything you could possibly imagine to keep you entertained, from the super-sized swimming pool to the gym, library, private cinema, and games room that even has its own bowling alley.

It might be tempting to hole away inside, but there are plenty of thrills (of the culinary and cultural variety) stretching out at your doorstep. Slurp tropical smoothies and local coffee at [Indabo Cafe's](#) Kiyovu location, before browsing the hand-woven textiles at neighbouring [Go Bananas](#) and admiring local artworks at David Mugire's gallery.

For lunch, stop by [Repub Lounge](#) for a fresh Rwandan fare (where you'll feast on karanga, fragrant grist rice, and fresh plantain) before losing yourself among the stalls at Kimironko Market, and foraging for souvenirs and hand-crafted jewellery at Abraham Konga Collections. Art enthusiasts can spend the afternoon browsing the galleries at [Inema Art Center](#).

Of utmost importance for any first-time visitor to the capital is the [Kigali Genocide Memorial](#). This is a country profoundly shaped by division and colonialism — yet a remarkable resilience has emerged over recent decades, significantly transforming Rwanda's social fabric. The Memorial's exhibits, centered on the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi, offer a deeply moving and essential insight into the nation's past and its journey toward healing.

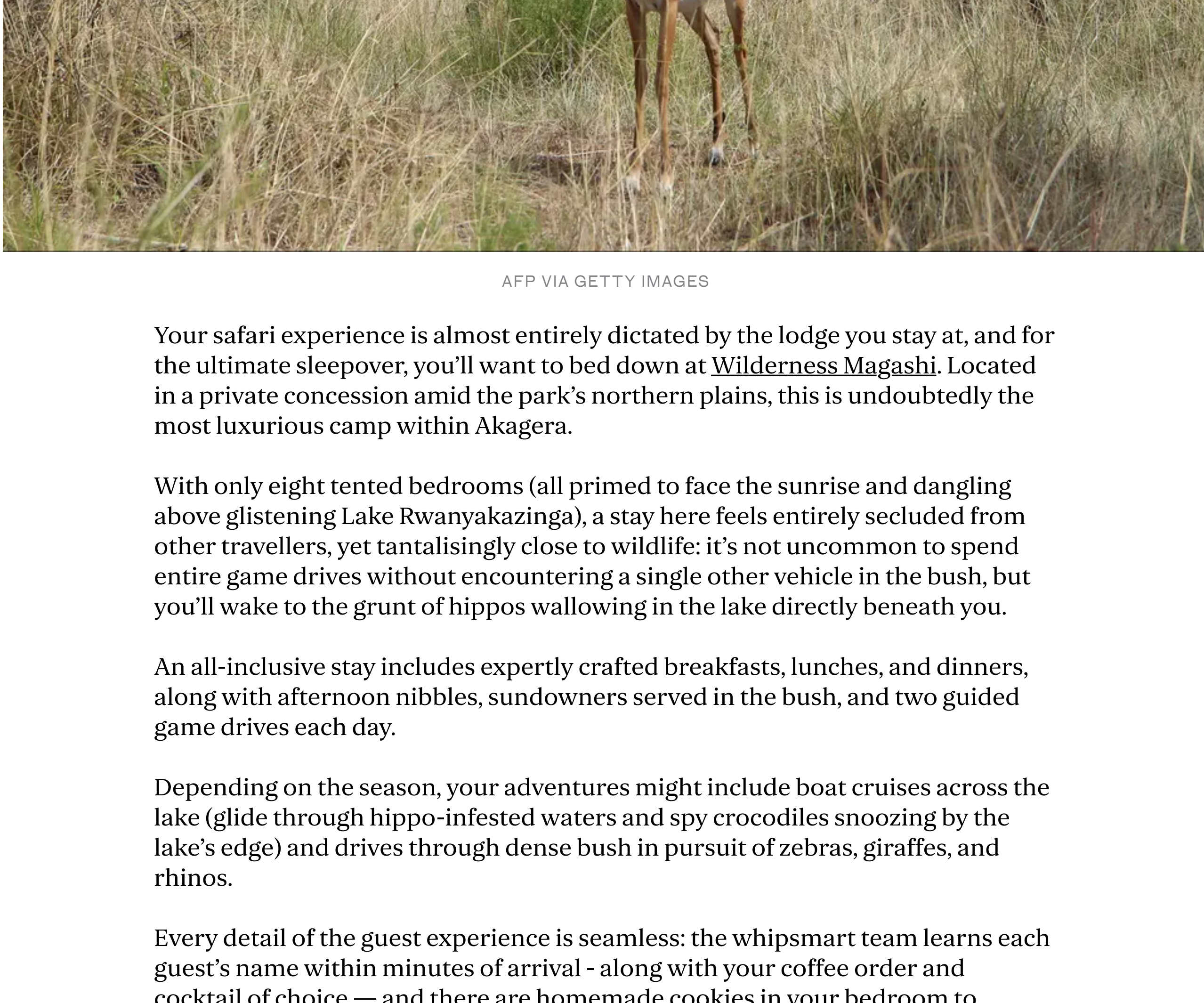
Another must-visit is Nyamirambo Women's Center, an NGO founded in 2007 to tackle gender-based violence, discrimination, and inequality; through education and training, over 6,000 women have been equipped with hairdressing, sewing, and styling skills. The centre offers guided walks through Nyamirambo neighbourhood, where you can witness firsthand some of the women in action.

Close the day with dinner at [La Creola](#), a buzzy bar and restaurant that serves Rwandan-fusion cuisine, or dial it up a notch with the chef's table experience at [Kozo](#), where executive chef Sakorn Sombon's atlas-spanning career results in an exquisite tasting menu blending Asian and African flavours.

Day 6 - 8: Akagera National Park

After 48 hours of city exploring, round off your week in Rwanda by heading east to spot untamed wildlife in the rolling savannahs of Akagera National Park. In comparison to the well-trodden safari routes through Kenya and neighbouring Tanzania, Rwanda remains a relatively under-the-radar safari destination.

This sprawling national park on the cusp of Tanzania is the only location within the country where travellers can experience Big Five safari, with lions, leopards, elephants (and more!) roaming the vast swathes of savannah and marshy swamp.



AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Your safari experience is almost entirely dictated by the lodge you stay at, and for the ultimate sleeperover, you'll want to bed down at [Wilderness Magashi](#). Located in a private concession amid the park's northern plains, this is undoubtedly the most luxurious camp within Akagera.

With only eight tented bedrooms (all primed to face the sunrise and dangling above glistening Lake Rwanyakazinga), a stay here feels entirely secluded from other travellers, yet tantalisingly close to wildlife: it's not uncommon to spend entire game drives without encountering a single other vehicle in the bush, but you'll wake to the grunt of hippos wallowing in the lake directly beneath you.

An all-inclusive stay includes expertly crafted breakfasts, lunches, and dinners, along with afternoon nibbles, sundowners served in the bush, and two guided game drives each day.

Depending on the season, your adventures might include boat cruises across the lake (glide through hippo-infested waters and spy crocodiles snoozing by the lake's edge) and drives through dense bush in pursuit of zebras, giraffes, and rhinos.

Every detail of the guest experience is seamless: the whipsmart team learns each guest's name within minutes of arrival — along with your coffee order and cocktail of choice — and there are homemade cookies in your bedroom to welcome you, along with hot water bottles to warm the bed.

As if the experience could be any more spoiling, the lodge is soon expanding to encompass Wilderness Magashi Peninsula: a clutch of super-luxury villas, each boasting private pools and far-reaching views across the peninsula.

The details

Nightly rates at [Wilderness Magashi](#) start from £673 per person sharing, including all meals, twice daily scheduled camp activities, park fees, laundry and local drinks

Lead in rate for [Virunga Lodge](#) is £845 all-inclusive per person sharing

Rooms at [The Pinnacle Hotel](#) start at £1,890 a night based on two people sharing

Getting there: [Rwandair](#) flies daily from London Heathrow to Kigali with return fares including all taxes and charges starting from £679 in Economy Class and £2,200 in Business Class

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