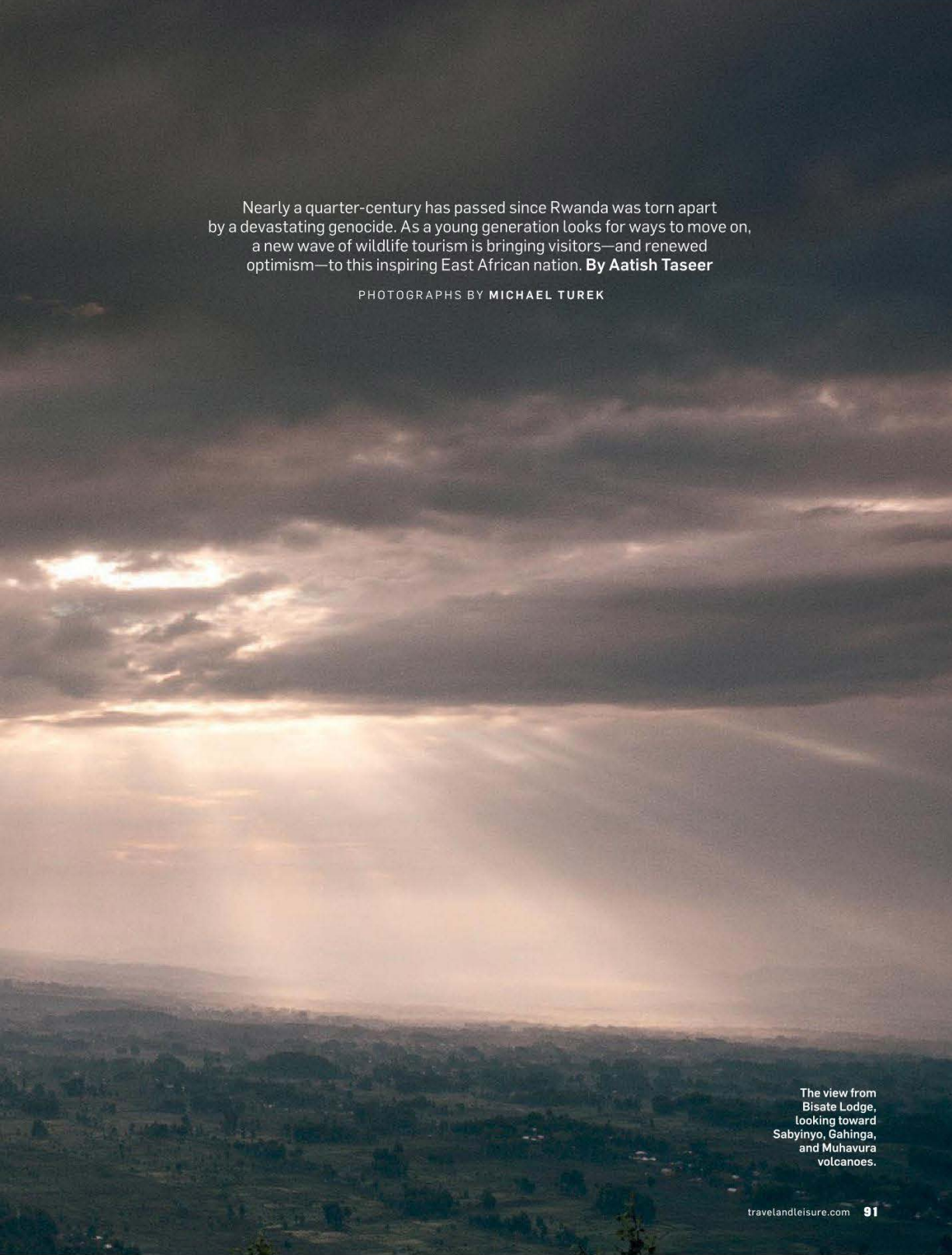


THE GRIEF AND THE GLORY





Nearly a quarter-century has passed since Rwanda was torn apart by a devastating genocide. As a young generation looks for ways to move on, a new wave of wildlife tourism is bringing visitors—and renewed optimism—to this inspiring East African nation. **By Aatish Taseer**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL TUREK

The view from
Bisate Lodge,
looking toward
Sabyinyo, Gahinga,
and Muhavura
volcanoes.



Left: Women walking beside the road between Kigali and Volcanoes National Park. *Opposite:* Thatched villas built into the mountainside at Bisate Lodge.

**‘It showed me life and man as the mystery,
the true religion of men, the grief and the glory.’**

—V. S. NAIPAUL

From a basement in Amsterdam’s Schiphol airport, I caught the day flight to Kigali, Rwanda. All the usual suspects were aboard: American missionaries, humanitarian workers of every stripe, Indian and African businessmen, families returning home, a few gorilla tourists like myself. Mid-flight, a Uganda-based pastor from Oklahoma rose and began, unsolicited, to lecture the cabin on the love of Jesus.

“He loved us so much that He died for us”—his words rang through the cabin in a piercing drawl—“but He didn’t stay dead...”

Silence ensued, then from the gloom of the cabin came a lone voice: “How do you know?”

I looked to see who had spoken. A young woman with light brown skin and high cheekbones looked up intently at the pastor.

“Oh, I know!” he said, a little deflated. “I’ve been a pastor for thirty years.”

The girl rolled her eyes; I laughed, and we got to talking. That was how Chantal Batamuriza Mrimi gave me my first taste of how everyone above a certain age in Rwanda has a story.

Chantal is a Tutsi. Her father fled Rwanda in 1961, during the first wave of Hutu violence against her tribe. She grew up a stateless refugee in Kisangani, the busted boomtown in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that V. S. Naipaul fictionalized in *A Bend in the River* as “a place where the future had come and gone.”

I knew a little about the violent antagonism that had torn Rwanda apart. I knew that an ancient but fluid difference existed between Tutsi and Hutu people since premodern times. Tutsis raised livestock; Hutus tilled the land. Tutsis were said to possess classically Abyssinian features, akin to Chantal’s; the Hutus, in comparison, were shorter and darker. But the two groups had intermarried. They had the same religion and language. They were so similar, in fact, that people would joke that a bad harvest could make a Tutsi a Hutu; a windfall, turn a Hutu into a Tutsi.

All that changed under European colonial rule, which began with the formation of German East Africa in 1884. In the early 20th century,





The gorillas are a symbol—of hope, of the return to normal life. They are the face with which Rwanda can look at the world again.

Europeans were obsessed with ideas of racial purity. They conjectured that the Tutsis were a lost tribe from the civilized north, white under their black skin. The Hutus embodied their idea of eternally savage Africa. After World War I, Belgium became the reigning authority, and less than a decade later issued both groups identity cards, thus permanently dividing Rwandan society. Then, following that old colonial credo of divide and rule, they used the Tutsis to govern the Hutus. And so, what had begun as a mutable boundary hardened into an inescapable social fact. The ground was prepared for a violent animus, which erupted in the years leading up to independence in 1962. That was why Chantal's family had been driven out.

But why was she going back?

"We returned after the genocide," she said. "For my parents, Rwanda was a promised land. But my memories of it are very bittersweet."

The genocide Chantal was referring to was, in speed and scale, an atrocity like none the world has seen in recent memory: up to a million dead by machete and other crude instruments in a mere 100 days, from April to July 1994. The Interahamwe—a Hutu paramilitary organization responsible for the bulk of the killings—ruled the streets, and every bond of humanity was negated. Hutu husbands killed their Tutsi wives, priests their flocks, teachers their students. The slaughter ended only when an army composed of Hutu moderates and Tutsi exiles like Chantal's family, led by the current Rwandan president, Paul Kagame, invaded from neighboring Uganda. It is from this terrible history that this country of 12 million has spent the past two decades healing.

Chantal, who now lives in Scotland, said, "I'm not totally sold on this 'new Rwanda' mythology."

We began our descent into Kigali. Outside, a silver band of sky lay flat over a bank of charcoal cloud. The wet season was almost here.

Out of the blue, Chantal asked if I was going to see the gorillas.

"I wept when I first saw them," she said. "They're more human than us. That recognition! It was too much."

It was strange to talk of the humanity of the gorillas, when we had just been talking about the inhumanity of human beings. But the gorillas are a symbol—of hope, of the return to normal life. They are the face with which Rwanda can look at the world again. As Manzi Kayihura, co-owner of a tourism company called Thousand Hills Africa, said to me, "We are famous for two things: gorillas and genocide."

The white lights of Kigali pierced the dark, hilly terrain. We touched down at an altitude of some 5,000 feet, and walked into the fluorescent-lit terminal. The air on the tarmac was cool and smoky, and reminded me of the onset of winter in northern India, where I grew up.

“Welcome to Heaven,” I heard again and again on my first morning in Kigali. And from the terrace of Heaven—a wonderful boutique hotel owned by an American couple—I could see the city of red hills and red sloping roofs, its broad arterial streets coated in fine red dust. That redness, despite my best efforts, made me think of what James Baldwin once wrote of the rust-red soil of Georgia: “I could not suppress the thought that this earth had acquired its color from the blood that had dripped down from these trees.”

Chantal had warned me not to speak of the genocide in Kigali, but that proved impossible. It is the city's main tourist attraction. My driver, Henry Mwumvaneza, a studious-looking young man in a bright-green T-shirt, began to discuss it before we had even left the airport. There are genocide memorials and a museum. The Hôtel des Mille Collines, which the film *Hotel Rwanda* is about, is down the road from Heaven. It is

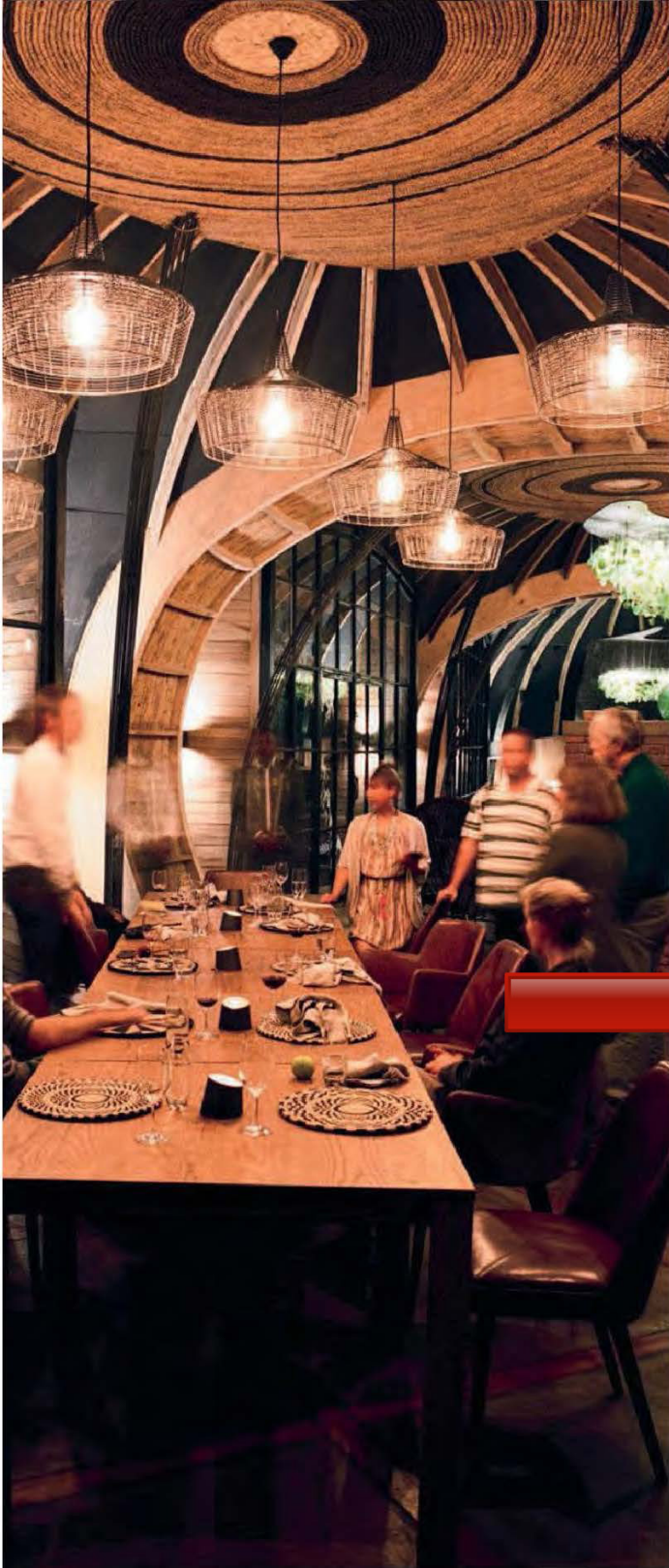
Opposite: A silverback, or adult male mountain gorilla, in his nest in Volcanoes National Park.



In a great central chamber, fires burned on both sides. There were books, and animal skins, and a bar where the flow of drinks was endless.

possible to visit the wreckage of President Habyarimana's plane, which was shot down on April 6, 1994—by the Hutu insurgency, many believe—sparking those 100 days of carnage.

Henry spoke of that time with a detachment that belied the fact that it was still part of living memory. The Rwandan genocide, unlike the Holocaust, was not carried out by a faceless state-run apparatus. It is believed that as many as a million people participated in the slaughter. As Philip Gourevitch put it in his landmark book, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*, there was hardly a Rwandan “who was not related (Continued on page 99)



How to Experience Rwanda

What you need to know to put together a trip that includes a stay in the capital, Kigali, as well as gorilla-tracking in Volcanoes National Park.

GETTING THERE

Connect to Kigali International Airport through major hubs including Brussels and Doha, Qatar.

VISAS & PERMITS

U.S. passport holders can obtain a visa on arrival at Kigali International Airport for a \$30 fee. Gorilla permits in Volcanoes National Park cost \$1,500 per person per day. Permits can be bought through the Rwanda Development Board (rwandatourism.com) or through a tour operator.

TOUR OPERATORS

Micato Safaris
Rwandan expeditions with this decorated company—a nine-time winner in our World's Best Awards—range from gorilla-tracking in the Virunga volcanoes to city tours of Kigali. micato.com; four-day trips from \$3,950, excluding gorilla permits.

TRAVEL ADVISOR

Dan Achber
An experienced East Africa guide (and long-standing T+L A-List travel advisor), Achber creates custom Rwanda itineraries that combine urban exploration and wilderness experiences. 416-628-1272; dan@trufflepig.com.

LODGES & HOTELS

Bisate Lodge
Less than 10 miles from Volcanoes National Park, these discreet villas on a lush mountainside overlooking Bisoke volcano make the perfect launchpad for a gorilla safari. Each thatched-roof dome is modeled after historic Rwandan royal-palace architecture, while the interiors feature traditional fabrics and decorative motifs. wilderness-safaris.com; doubles from \$1,150.



(Rwanda, continued from page 96)

to someone who had either killed or been killed." Though there were decades of hearings and punishments, the scale of the crime was too great for there to be any real justice. In its place came remembrance: from April to July each year, a ritual 100 days of mourning are observed.

Remembrance is also a way of moving on. The country is young—79 percent of the population is under 35. "This is our time," said Friday James, a spruce young Rwandan TV anchor I met in Kigali one afternoon. "We've been held back by history," he said. "Now let's move ahead." Friday, who was three years old and living in Uganda when the genocide took place, was full of what the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch might have described as "militant optimism." He said he wants to understand the "pain he saw in adult eyes," but he is impatient with the old tribalisms. Kagame's government has abolished identification cards and made it illegal to ask whether someone is Hutu or Tutsi. As Friday, a poster child of the forward-looking PK (Paul Kagame) generation, said: "This is something that is not even of interest. We want jobs, we want to buy land, build a house, buy a car."

Today, Kigali is booming. There are new hotels, new restaurants, a flood of tourists. There are delightful open-air bars like Sundowner and Repub Lounge and a flashy new convention center. What I loved most about the city was the easy style of the streets. The beer bars enveloped in a permanent air of afternoon. The *salons de coiffure*. The women carrying babies in brightly colored slings. The idle young men walking with arms draped over one another. It is a city that manages to be energizing without being enervating;

it has none of the frenzy of Cairo or Mumbai. Rwanda also has among the best social indicators in Africa. One report rated it the safest country on the continent, the ninth-safest in the world. There are more women in parliament than in any other country; the number of university graduates has increased 14-fold in the post-genocide years.

As Henry, who was himself completing a master's, said, "We say that we gained our independence in 1962, but we were reborn in 1994."

The gorillas live in the northwest of the country, in Volcanoes National Park, on the border of Uganda and the DRC. Henry and I drove north on a winding road. Kigali fell away in a matter of minutes, and we found ourselves in a beguiling landscape of terraced hills, eucalyptus forests, and banana groves. There were mud-brick villages, their tiled roofs steaming from a recent downpour, and brawling streams of ferric red. The patchwork of green and rust was interrupted by the occasional crimson bougainvillea or spiky *Erythrina abyssinica*, sometimes known as the red-hot poker flower.

We stopped for lunch in Nyirangarama, a one-horse town that Sina Gerard, one of Rwanda's most famous businessmen, put on the map. Sina built an empire from a weapons-grade chili oil called Akabanga. The hot-sauce magnate, mustached and aloof, greeted me with a smile of papal beneficence, then seemed to offer me his hand to kiss. I politely declined, and sidled off to gorge myself on a buffet of rice and beans, beef and cassava. It was my best meal in Rwanda. Chantal had spoken of a local stew called *isombe* made of cassava leaves, and it was every bit as delicious as she described, especially when sprinkled with a few radioactive drops of Akabanga.

We pressed on. The rain came and went. The earth grew dark and volcanic. Lowering clouds turned the verdure a deep, sulky green. I felt myself leave the sphere of the human story in Kigali and enter slowly into the world of the gorillas. But even here, deep in this interior pocket of

Africa, bounded by five volcanoes, the genocide resurfaced in surprising ways. "Have you noticed," Henry said just before we reached Bisate Lodge, "that there are no dogs in Rwanda?" I hadn't, but he was right: I hadn't seen or heard a single one. Why?

His explanation chilled me: dogs ate the dead, and in 1994 soldiers had killed them all for dishonoring the memory of the fallen. Dogs were a casualty of the human drama, condemned for succumbing to a temptation they should never have been exposed to.

It was evening when the yellow lights of Bisate Lodge appeared through a veil of mist and rain, like something out of an equatorial *Star Wars*. The villas, which cling to the mountainside, are modeled on the old king's palace in Nyanza, in southern Rwanda, and their thatched appearance makes them look like the handiwork of a flock of giant weaverbirds. At the foot of a staircase made from volcanic rock, we were met by Ingrid Baas, the lodge's Dutch general manager, and a welcoming party of Rwandan staff. Upstairs, in a great central chamber—part Xanadu, part *Beowulf*—fires burned on both sides; there were books, and rugs, and animal skins, rattan chairs on a terrace, and little bits of green glass that danced enticingly over a bar, where the flow of drinks was endless.

We were at 8,000 feet. The air was thin. In my room, a two-faced fire roared between the bathroom and bedroom. The wooden ribs of this cavernous pod, designed by the South African architect Nick Plewman and breathtakingly luxurious, brought on a childish feeling of wonder akin to stories like *The Swiss Family Robinson* or Jonah in the belly of the whale. But a belly equipped with deep bathtubs, soft beds, and sweeping views. For all its comfort, though, the villa was an observation post. The main attraction was the volcanoes: Bisoke and, farther in the distance, Karisimbi, the summit of which, in the cold season, is covered in snow. The purple masses of the two peaks, both of which sloped down into the DRC, seemed to still the land around. I felt their solemnity like a weight on my chest. The sky grew dark, and a fleeting pink light →

played about the base of Bisoke. Then, as night began its swift descent over the land, a scrawl of lightning ran across the sky.

Bisoke is where Dian Fossey carried out her groundbreaking work habituating the great ape. Fossey lived in Rwanda on and off for 18 years, until her mysterious murder in 1985, likely at the hands of the poachers she had spent her life protecting the gorillas from. Fossey is a legend in these parts, but there are some who now believe her attitudes were too uncompromising, and that her reluctance to allow tourists into the park did the gorillas more harm than good. "She wanted them all for herself," one local said to me. "They were Dian Fossey's gorillas." Primate numbers have increased in recent years, as poaching has declined. There are now plans afoot to increase the size of the park to cope with the growing population.

Downstairs in the great hall, guests were gathering for cocktails. It was cold and wet, and fires burned brightly. On the menu there was *kuku paka*, a coconut-based chicken curry, which tasted like a bit of India smuggled into Africa. There was South African wine and Rwandan coffee. It was all perfect, but the intimacy of the lodge—it sleeps only 12—felt at times a little stifling. From the communal dinners to the daily exchange of photographs and gorilla stories, I felt as if I had gate-crashed a Thanksgiving dinner, or a family Christmas.

The forest began as soon as my tracking party and I passed the low wall of loose stones that runs around the perimeter of Volcanoes National Park, less than an hour's drive from the lodge. One minute we were among mud houses and fields of pyrethrum, a white flower used to

make insecticide; the next, we had entered the sunless enclosure of the saddle area, the dense forest that surrounds the upper part of Bisoke. We were in search of the Pablo group of gorillas, a family led by two silverbacks that Dian Fossey herself habituated. The climb was precipitous: 2,000 feet in less than an hour. We had to beat our way through ferns and nettles. One fellow guest briefly succumbed to altitude sickness, then rallied.

The forest grew dark and entangled; leopard spots of sunlight flashed overhead. The great architectural trees of the saddle area appeared around us: there was *Hagenia*, with its flaking cigarette-paper bark and its fountain-shaped canopy of ferny leaves; there were haunting groves of St.-John's-wort, or *Hypericum*, a slim-limbed tree whose long branches hung with *Usnea* lichen, which looks like a kind of Spanish moss; every now and then, we came upon the majestic sight of *Lobelia gibberoa*, a giant fern, the leaves of which the gorillas use to make their nests.

The trackers, who had gone on ahead of us with walkie-talkies, soon sent word that they had located the Pablo nesting area. It meant the gorillas were near. We passed an alcove of *Lobelia* leaves covered in fresh gorilla dung. The forest became so dense, so full of nettles, that even machetes could scarcely clear a path. We fought our way out into a sloping meadow, and had barely found our footing when we almost stepped on Dushishoze, a magnificent silverback gorilla. He lay sprawled out in the sun, grooming a juvenile, while the many members of his family—I think I counted 23 in total—lay in a comatose heap behind him.

A moment of pure religious elation came over our group. We fell to our haunches in exaltation, in alarm, in awe. The gorillas, though clearly enjoying a siesta, eyed us with that mixture of curiosity and contempt that astrologers, doctors, and men of God adopt for the pilgrim hordes who come to see them. Then they went about their business of stretching, yawning, shredding stalks, and removing nits from the

sleek black fur of their brethren. The longer we stayed, the more active they grew. They gamboled down the hillside in clumsy somersaults; they made little grunts of contentment to signal their willingness to tolerate our presence.

We were told not to hold eye contact, but it was impossible to look away. Their faces were so old, and so knowing. Chantal was right: there was something infinitely human in those black and amber eyes, a deep atavistic sense of recognition that was present even in the face of little Ururyange, who was scarcely six months old and for whom there had just been an elaborate state-sanctioned naming ceremony. At \$1,500 for a one-day permit—the price recently doubled—the gorillas are a source of hard cash, and witnessing them is no doubt out of reach for the majority of Rwandans. But they are a symbol of recovery, the keepers of a lost humanity. It was to them the country turned after men had done what no beast was capable of—the systematic eradication of one group by another that lends a unique taint to human history.

Rwanda is a hard country. It forces you to balance many opposing ideas—hope and despair, death and rebirth, humanity and bestiality, exploitation and opportunity, the grief and the glory. The temptation is to avert one's gaze from what lies below the surface: to parachute in and parachute out. But it is in reckoning with contradiction that the true wonder of travel lies.

I had been thinking of Chantal throughout my time in Rwanda. Then, on my last evening in Kigali, an extraordinary coincidence occurred. I was waiting in line outside the airport when a car pulled up next to mine: it was Chantal! I could hardly believe my eyes; it was as if I had conjured her up. We both got out, and marveled at the strange synchronicity. I asked Chantal if she was flying out, too; she said no, she was dropping off a friend, but would be leaving in a few days. A fleeting look of sadness entered her eyes as she spoke. When I got home, Chantal's self-published →

memoir, *The Journey of My Life from Rwanda*, was waiting for me. “Yet there is hope for Africa,” she had written, marveling at the way her homeland turned a moment of utter ruin into one of regeneration. It was an alchemy Chantal had practiced in her own life, working through pain to a place of strength and emotional wisdom. It’s said that the past is never dead, and in Rwanda, history casts a longer shadow than in any other place I have been to. But what I also saw was that those who are willing to confront the past boldly, as Chantal surely had, can set themselves free of its bonds. ■

Aatish Taseer is a contributing opinion writer for the International New York Times. His recent novel, The Way Things Were, marries a family’s narrative with the history of India, where he grew up.

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