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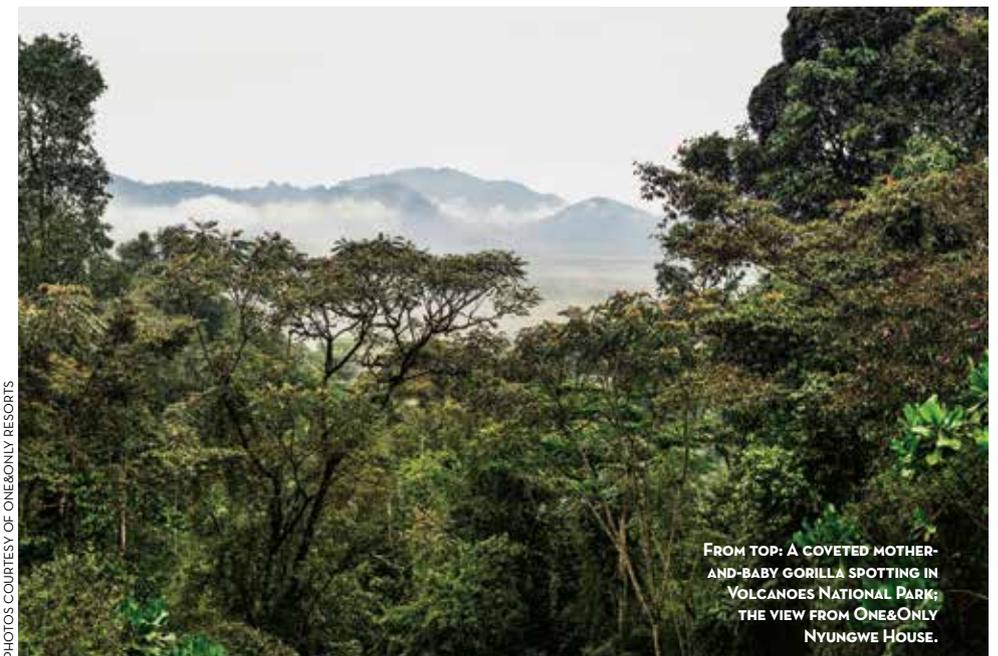
Rwanda's Rebirth

Majestic mountain gorillas, new ultra-luxe safari lodges, and a triumphant return of the Big Five—Rwanda is trending as Africa's latest safari hot spot

By Paul Rubio

My heart pounds and my legs shake as I scramble up a muddy, 65-degree slope in the thick of Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park. It's been an arduous three-hour ascent through mist-shrouded forest, blanketed in stinging nettles and prickly thistle plants, but the reward is near. I am just minutes away from consummating a wildlife lover's ultimate dream: face time with the critically endangered mountain gorilla. The excitement is palpable.

I'm glued to my guide, as something scurries through near-impenetrable thickets above. Our tracker machetes a narrow path forward and six members of the Agashya family come into view. Jolie vocalizes a series of guttural groans, informing the gorilla troop that we come in peace. Within seconds, the dominant silverback—one of three silverbacks in this family of



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FROM TOP: A COVETED MOTHER-AND-BABY GORILLA SPOTTING IN VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK; THE VIEW FROM ONE&ONLY NYUNGWE HOUSE.

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A KING ROOM AND TWO-BED-ROOM FOREST SUITE PLACE GUESTS IN THE TREETOPS AT ONE&ONLY NYUNGWE HOUSE; AN INQUISITIVE GORILLA IN VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK; GUEST ROOMS AT ONE&ONLY GORILLA'S NEST TAKE SHAPE AS FREESTANDING VILLAS WITHIN A 35-ACRE GARDEN OASIS.



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21—decides to investigate our presence. He comes as close as inches away, literally breathing down our necks. It's at once scary, surreal, exhilarating, beautiful, and inspiring. I've never felt more alive.

Soon enough, the silverback returns to the other gorillas, and we officially commence our single precious hour observing the family, a time limit set by the Rwandan government to minimize human-gorilla interactions. In that hour, I forge a lifetime of memories, enamored by young blackbacks wrestling and tumbling down the slopes, elders foraging for food, and an inquisitive newborn sneaking a glimpse of the commotion from his mother's clutch. I watch my greatest *Planet Earth* fantasies unfold in real time—and this live show doesn't disappoint.

The following day brings a search for the Amahoro family, another of Rwanda's 20 known gorilla troops, through the jungled thicket of northern Rwanda's volcanoes. The physical journey to reach them is less difficult than the previous one, but the emotional journey is equally poignant.

As recently as a few years ago, such epic gorilla experiences were the extent of Rwanda's safari footprint. But so much has changed in so little time. In the last decade, the "Land of a Thousand Hills" has risen above a rocky past to become the African continent's biggest success story in terms of safety, economic growth, and as an exemplar of wildlife tourism and conservation. Case in point: I'm on a two-week custom Rwanda safari with outfitter Micato Safaris (micato.com), often named the world's top safari company. My national itinerary includes not only gorilla trekking but also chimpanzee trekking, a Big Five safari, and luxuriating in some of the newest—and best—lodges on the entire African safari circuit.

Prior to arriving in Volcanoes National Park, I had basked in the glory of Rwanda's secret, enchanted forest: Nyungwe. Following my mandatory one-day quarantine in the capital city of Kigali, Micato arranged a helicopter transfer to western Rwanda and a stay at the One&Only Nyungwe House (oneandonlyresorts.com), a stunning 22-room



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SINGITA



property set within a working tea plantation at the edge of Nyungwe National Park. Here, the search for smaller primates headlines the daily agenda thanks to an impressive 13 species, including Earth's largest troop of Angolan black-and-white colobus monkeys (more than 500 strong), thriving populations of L'Hoest's monkeys, and two families of chimpanzees. There's also exceptional bird-watching, with more than 300 species represented, including 28 endemics like the red-collared mountain-babbler and the breathtaking Rwenzori turaco.

More than action-packed wildlife spotting, One&Only Nyungwe House promises an exotic African escape steeped in wellness, culture, and style. The infinity pool, spa, and dining areas are positioned such that the sights and sounds of towering forests and undulating tea hedges continuously feed the soul. Stilted, tree-top guest rooms and suites house outdoor salas, idyllic for pairing jungle immersion with morning coffee and evening wine. Interiors reflect Rwandan charm, underscored by grand displays of *agaseke* (traditional Rwandese basket work) and *imigongo* (a geometric art form exclusive to Rwanda).

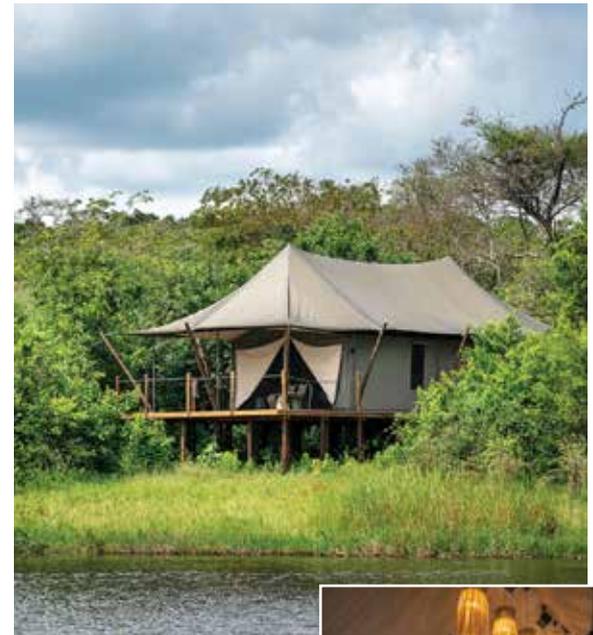
From Nyungwe, I venture north to Volcanoes National Park alongside my personal Micato driver and safari director—such personnel plus a private 4x4 are standard on a Custom Micato Safari—and begin an extended stay in prime gorilla real estate, splitting my time between One&Only Gorilla's Nest (oneandonlyresorts.com) and Singita Kwitonda Lodge (singita.com). Gorilla's Nest is arguably One&Only's most luxurious (and priciest) property to date, a 35-acre garden oasis near the foothills



DANA ALLEN, COURTESY OF WILDERNESS SAFARIS

of the national park, strewn with 21 freestanding lodges and suites. Each unit is a masterpiece in transitional indoor-outdoor design, framed in elaborate woodwork and adorned in modernist furnishings and patterned soft goods that define African chic. Winding pathways lead to a boutique spa, multiple restaurants, and experiential venues, including the past residence of famed wildlife expert Jack Hanna and a boma used for dance performances.

On the opposite end of the national park, the eight-suite Singita Kwitonda Lodge also wows as a series of minimalist, jewel box-like sanctuaries, hewn from volcanic rock, river stone, handmade ceramic tiles, and oven-red clay bricks made by surrounding communities. Suites and common areas maximize volcano views through wide glass expanses and exude romance in the mist thanks to private heated plunge pools, outdoor fireplaces, and cozy nooks (don't miss sampling a few glasses of South African reds in the wine cellar). Singita's vegetable garden yields pristine ingredients that the lodge's chefs theatrically prepare in an interactive kitchen. While



DANA ALLEN, COURTESY OF WILDERNESS SAFARIS



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A BATHROOM AND OUTDOOR DECK AT SINGITA KWITONDA LODGE BOAST VIEWS OF VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK; ONE OF SIX LUXURY TENTS AT MAGASHI; EARTH TONES AND HINTS OF PINK PREVAIL AT MAGASHI, ALONG WITH RWANDAN HOSPITALITY; SAFARI HIGHLIGHTS AT MAGASHI; A GORILLA SIGHTING DURING A MORNING TREK.

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gorilla trekking initially anchored my stays at both properties, each merits classification as a restorative nature retreat, not just a posh base for bucket-list wildlife outings.

Riding high from epic primate trekking and unparalleled pampering, I round out my Micato Rwanda journey by heading east to Akagera National Park, near the border with Tanzania. Much of the 433-square-mile park was destroyed during and after the civil war in the 1990s, but by 2010 the Rwanda Development Board and the African Parks Network were rehabilitating the land and restoring Central Africa's largest protected wetland to its former splendor. With the 2017 reintroduction of the black rhino, Akagera officially regained Big Five status. Nowadays, it's entirely possible to enjoy a quintessential East Africa safari and witness the fruits of conservation in action at Magashi, a haute tented camp by Wilderness Safaris (*wilderness-safaris.com*). Given the mix of savannah, montane, and wetland habits, expect excursions by both 4X4 and boat, in search of water-loving species



MAGASHI OFFERS EXCURSIONS BY BOTH 4X4 AND BOAT TO DISCOVER A MYRIAD OF WATER-LOVING AND SAVANNAH ANIMAL SPECIES.

DANA ALLEN, COURTESY OF WILDERNESS SAFARIS

such as hippos, crocs, and fish eagles along with savannah superstars like elephants, lions, and leopards, which have adapted to a diet of catfish from Lake Rwanyakazinga as a main source of protein.

Notwithstanding the country's new identity, mountain gorillas—and our intrinsic desire to observe them—will continue to anchor safaris in

Rwanda. This up-close wildlife encounter truly merits labels like “life changing” and “once in a lifetime.” However, new itineraries by the likes of Micato Safaris, primate walking safaris in the west, and classic savannah experiences in the east—complemented by a boom in ultra-luxury lodging—collectively showcase Rwanda's rebirth into today's ultimate safari destination. «