

# BILLIONAIRE



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**GOLDEN SILENCE** • Unearthly stillness at Amangiri, Utah  
**PRIMATE PARADISE** • Conserving mountain gorillas in Rwanda

**FJORD FANATIC** • Exploring the Norwegian island of Senja  
**WEIGHTLESS WALK** • Defying gravity aboard a Zero-G flight

**NEXT GEN** • Life as an heir to a Giving Pledge signer  
**THINKING HUTS** • 3D-printing schools in Madagascar

# Primate Paradise

Rwanda takes a giant leap forward in safeguarding its gorillas and chimpanzees.

by Clara Le Fort

Watching a massive silverback gorilla lead his family through the forest to splurge on bamboo shoots is simply the experience of a lifetime. But since the effort started to defend these animals, protecting the almost extinct mountain gorillas wasn't an easy task. "It takes between two and three years for them to accept humans," our guide Diogene says. "The first groups were exposed daily to human presence after genocide and war. We had a dream of having peace. And we did, in a way, for the last recorded poaching incident in Rwanda was in 2002," he adds.





Thanks to conservation efforts, Rwanda's mountain gorillas are growing in numbers.

With a method of its own, Rwanda has, over the past two decades, made a giant leap forward in safeguarding its great apes. “Rwanda as a country has made a remarkable stride in terms of conservation and seen the numbers of endangered gorillas and chimpanzees rise significantly thanks to a unique mindset,” says Marie-Louise Noujaim, founder of Tselana, a high-end travel agency that specialises in African destinations. “Not only did Rwanda put anti-poaching and forest conservation programmes centre stage, but it also considered it a priority to systematically involve local populations in conservation strategies. Measures to protect biodiversity were first issued and pushed by the government but success came as soon as economic measures serving the population directly were put in place. Today, Rwanda clearly stands out; more, it paves the way, globally, for the future of sustainable tourism,” Noujaim adds.

Prosper Uwingeli, Volcanoes National Park’s warden, has been involved in conservation for the past 25 years. “Today, growing gorilla families need a larger habitat, which will prevent an increasing number of infanticides among them. As gorillas contribute a large amount to the country’s economy, our aim is to find solutions for the gorillas and the people. We are simultaneously looking at increasing the park by 23 per cent and reducing wildlife and human conflicts by improving the fencing system. The poorer communities — who have been pushed to live close to the park’s boundaries — are the ones that suffer the most: they need to be part of the solution and benefit from it,” he says.

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— Keith Vincent.

Opposite: Living inside Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda, 18 gorilla families are habituated for scientific research; 12 of them have been habituated for tourism.





“Working and partnering with the local communities living on the boundaries of parks and wild areas is critical: we must take their participation into account, and not only employ them locally but guarantee them a solid revenue. In return, they actively participate in protecting the land,” says Keith Vincent, chief executive of Wilderness. The conservation-led company runs a handful of lodges and conservation projects in Rwanda, including Bisate Reserve on the edge of Volcanoes National Park, plus the Forest of Hope Lodge in Gishwati.

Looking at Bisate Reserve, Wilderness’s latest project in Rwanda, the land is now home to 65 bird species (against seven, initially) and that, on a lucky day, gorillas roam freely around the newly planted bamboo forest. Opened in September, the four-villa lodge draws inspiration from the King’s Palace in Nyanza. Designed by Nicholas Plewman Architects, the wooden arched structure and rounded recycled plastic thatched roofs were built in just over a year.

“The construction of Bisate Reserve employed up to 500 local craftspeople: experienced masons sculpted the volcanic pathways; local bricks were individually baked to build walls; grass matting was woven in long sections to isolate the walls; armchairs and cushions featuring bamboo, African redwood, thistle and primrose drawings were locally hand-embroidered to pay tribute to the local environment; and typical black-and-white Rwandan patterns and forest greens were used across the lodge to set us apart. It also fills us with joy to know that skilled local craftsmen will be further employed to replace and renovate. Every day is about continuity and building strong relationships with our skilled neighbours,” say Ryan Dewes and Tiffany Franks, Bisate Reserve lodge managers.

“We wouldn’t exist without our community,” adds Franks. “We have so many amazing stories of thriving staff members like Joe, our senior executive chef, who joined us in 2017 as a scholar. Today, he trains chefs in other Wilderness lodges across Rwanda. And what



is equally nurturing is that our local community relies on us to support projects that matter to them: a sports ground, a new water tank, school grants, they come to ask us for what they need. Ours is a form of symbiosis where we support them as much as we can — like buying fresh produce weekly from local farms to provide them with a reliable income year-round — and they welcome new projects and guests in return.”

Wilderness’s latest project in Rwanda centres around the expansion and reforestation of the Gishwati Mukura National Park. Thierry Aimable Inzirayineza, head of the Forest of Hope Association (FHA), says: “A century ago, the region was home to a chain of mountains, volcanoes and lakes that





*As the mist rises over the primary forest, one hears chimpanzees calling in a bonding ritual. Visions of a once lost paradise come to mind. Today, Gishwati is a vibrant paradise with a bright future ahead.*

Clockwise from top left: Eco-designed Bisate Lodge operated by Wilderness was opened in 2017 on a barren hill. At Bisate Lodge and Bisate Reserve, rooftops have been designed as a tribute to traditional homes.





spread, uninterrupted, from Uganda to Burundi and Lake Tanganyika: the rich forest complex covered much more than the existing national parks today. It was home to the most extraordinary and diverse biodiversity, and a vast population of great apes and monkeys. Today, the remaining forests are not only fragmented but the surface of primary forests available for wildlife is too scarce. We estimate that only 2 per cent is left.”

In partnership with the Rwanda Development Board and Wilderness Rwanda, the FHA’s long-term mission is to engage local communities in the conservation of protected areas through forest protection. Vincent says: “Home to an isolated group of about 36 chimpanzees, Gishwati Forest has lost 98 per cent of its area since the 1970s, resulting in severe environmental degradation, including landslides, erosion, loss of biodiversity, flooding and silted rivers, causing a loss of livelihood in local and downstream communities.”

Established in 2016, the Gishwati Mukura covers 1,570 hectares. Inzirayineza says: “It is home to families of endangered golden monkeys, L’Hoest mountain monkeys and eastern chimpanzees. As the Gishwati forest lost a consistent part of its biodiversity and trees, primates kept concentrating in the remaining areas. Food availability became an issue and as they got closer to the forest’s boundaries, many got killed.







From left: Inside Wilderness's newly opened four-villa Bisate Reserve, the interiors were inspired by Rwanda's King Palace in Nyanza. Below: Service and attention to locally sourced products make for an exceptional food and wine offer.

The first census in 2007 reported that there were only 13 chimpanzees left."

In 2019, Wilderness purchased 10 hectares of land on the border of the Gishwati Mukura (which will, in time, be donated to the park) and committed to help co-manage the conservation efforts, which means reforesting using endemic species and restoring birds and wildlife habitat. Vincent says: "Working with local trackers, we have also initiated a monitoring and habituation programme for the resident chimpanzee population. Not only will this help us to understand and protect these animals, but, in time, we aim to develop a chimpanzee-based tourism offering in Gishwati that will not only help protect the precious forest but benefit the local communities directly."

Today, the two en-suite bedrooms at the Forest of Hope guesthouse welcome guests, forest and primate lovers alongside scientists. In a few seasons' time, Wilderness wants to open and operate a lodge of its own to increase conservation revenues and direct economic benefits to local communities.

As the mist rises over the primary forest, one hears chimpanzees calling in a bonding ritual. Visions of a once lost paradise come to mind. Today, Gishwati is a vibrant paradise with a bright future ahead. ◇

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