



TRAVEL JOURNAL

# Second gear through Rwanda

On an 18-month, 50 000 km journey from France to South Africa, **Patrick and Marie Gurney** explore Rwanda, the Land of a Thousand Hills.

Rwanda might be small, but it holds its own when it comes to sensational scenery. A little tired from all the game viewing in the dusty parks of Tanzania and Kenya, we were keen for some greenery in Rwanda.

We crossed from Tanzania via the Rusumo border post. All went smoothly with our EAC (East African Community) visa in hand, which we had bought when we arrived in Kenya. The EAC allows you to hop easily between Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda.

South Africans will know of the Valley of a Thousand Hills in KZN, but Rwanda goes one step further: It claims to be the *Land* of a Thousand Hills. Driving the first 70 km to Kibungo, which took three hours, we experienced this first-hand. Rwanda is a sprawling mass of hills. Our Hilux would struggle through the next three weeks in second or third gear, as we heaved our three-tonne weight around the country on a constant journey from valley to crest.



FIRED BRICKS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE



THIS WOODEN PUSHBIKE IS A KID'S PLAYTHING, BUT BIGGER VERSIONS ARE USED TO TRANSPORT HEAVY CARGO.



WILD CAMPING IN A STONE QUARRY

## Plastic-free pleasure

I could sense a different feeling when we crossed the border into Rwanda. Rural households and villages had immaculately manicured gardens in their front yards. People seemed proud of their country.

Only a little bigger than the Kruger National Park, Rwanda is the most densely populated country in Africa: 12 million people in 26 798 km<sup>2</sup>. Maybe being so small makes it easier to manage, and for the government to get citizens to comply with laws.

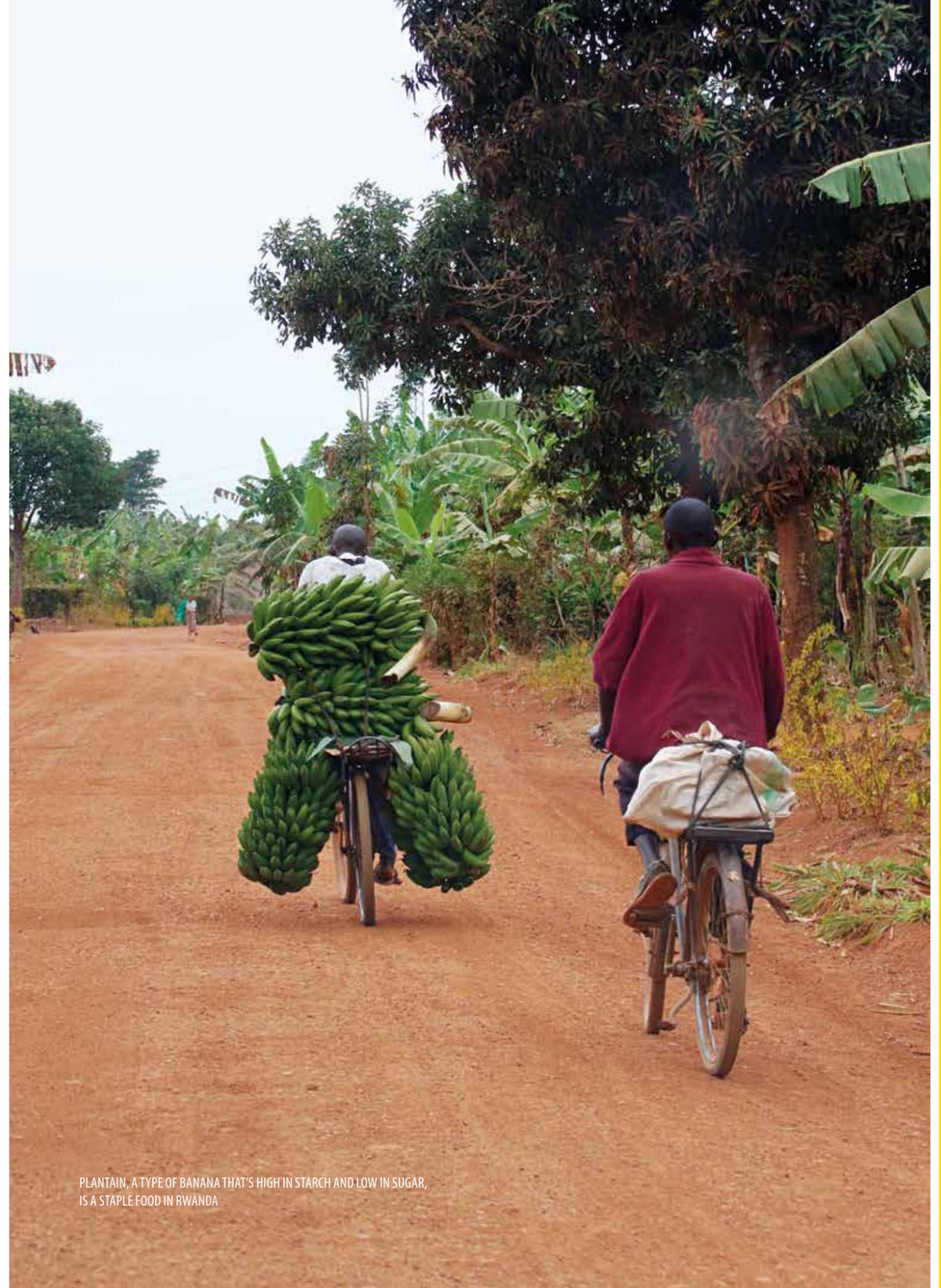
In 2008, the government declared Rwanda a plastic-bag-free zone. This was part of a broader national campaign to keep the country clean. Civic duty here is astounding: Every last Saturday morning of the month, locals come together to participate in *Umuganda*, which roughly translates as “coming together in common purpose”. It’s a day of community service, mandatory for all Rwandans between the ages of 18 and 65. From 8 am to 11 am, they clean streets, help neighbours or just meet to discuss important matters.

We saw this practice in action. A whole community came together to clear and prepare a neighbour’s farm for planting. There must have been more than 50 people and they finished the job in two hours. *Umuganda* is a practice that the whole world could learn from.

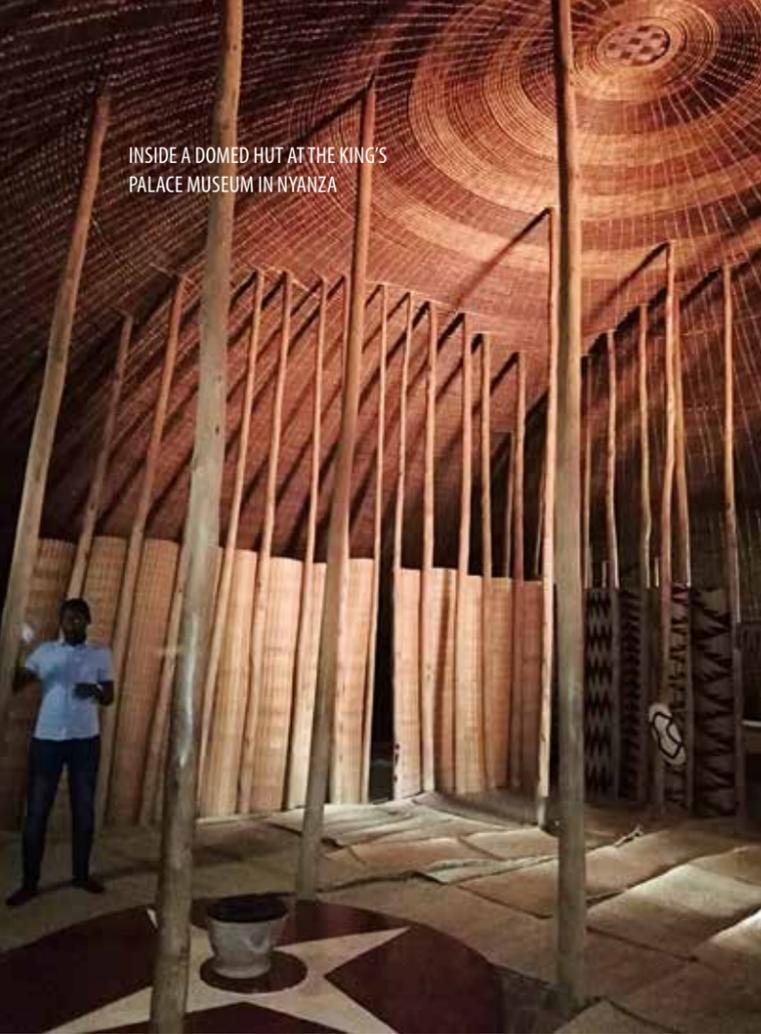
**We cut across the country** towards Nyungwe National Park, which is in the far south-west corner of Rwanda. The 10-hour (250 km) journey was split over three days. Tanzania had drained our budget, so it was back to wild camping. Twice we camped in disused stone quarries – the best option in such a densely populated country.

On our second day, we were introduced to Rwanda’s treacherous clay soil roads. It had rained lightly and as we descended towards a low-level river crossing, we could already feel the Hilux sliding. Climbing the 100 m incline on the other side was impossible. We waited for an hour and a half for the road to dry out and then proceeded.

Rwandans are super helpful and hospitable. They assisted us to get out of the slippery section without asking for a dime. The route (mainly dirt) was a great introduction to rural Rwanda. On our third day in the country, we came to a conclusion: All Rwandans are banana farmers and brick-makers. Most households had a small plot of land on which plantains flourished, and a smouldering pile of recently fired bricks at the ready. I’m sure most villages could collectively build the Taj Mahal in a month if they had to!



PLANTAIN, A TYPE OF BANANA THAT'S HIGH IN STARCH AND LOW IN SUGAR, IS A STAPLE FOOD IN RWANDA



INSIDE A DOMED HUT AT THE KING'S PALACE MUSEUM IN NYANZA

## Into the forest

Nyanza was our first cultural stop. Nyanza has long been the heart of Rwanda, home to what was once the oldest African monarchy (established in 1081). At the King's Palace Museum, a guide showed us inside huge, beehive-like, domed huts – expertly crafted reconstructions of the traditional royal residences. We met the royal herders and saw the famous long-horned cattle, known as Inyambo (a type of Ankole cattle). It's a beautiful creature, with a regal elegance you don't usually expect from a cow. They're part of the royal heritage and still play a role in important ceremonies.

Rwanda ceased to be a monarchy in 1962, when it gained independence from Belgium. The last king, Kigeli V Ndahindurwa, fled Rwanda in 1960 and died penniless in America in 2016.

The Ethnographic Museum just outside the town of Butare was a great surprise. It's excellently curated and well lit, and its seven galleries are home to one of Africa's finest ethnographic collections. It gave us a rich insight into Rwandan agriculture, animal husbandry, hunting, weaving, pottery and woodwork.

From Butare we headed west, towards Nyungwe National Park. Our destination was the Uwinka Visitor Centre where we planned to camp for two nights. The final 30 km section of winding forest road was stunning. The banana groves made way to reveal huge trees, ferns down in the valleys and mist rising from ridges. A prehistoric feeling took over.

We drove past many armed guards, eventually counting 40, stationed every 500m by the roadside. "Slight overkill for chimpanzee security, don't you think?" asked Marie. Later we found out that because Nyungwe Forest borders Burundi, these guards were ostensibly acting as a human border fence.

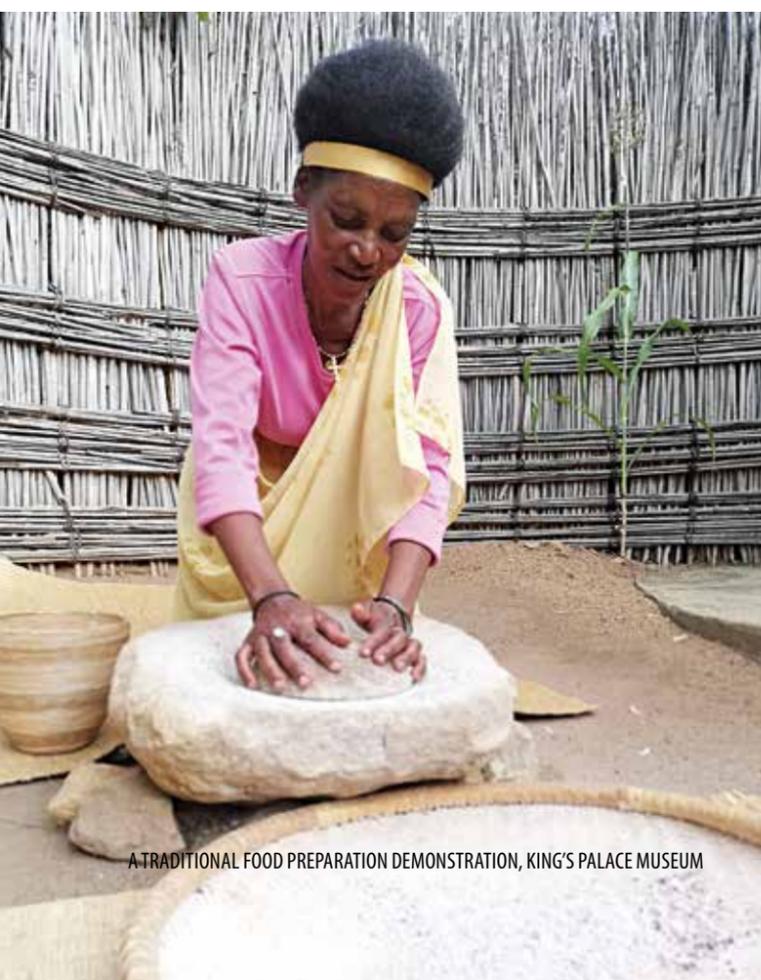
At Uwinka, we paid US\$60 for two nights of camping. We quickly learnt why a rainforest has that name – it rained a lot! We ate sandwiches, drank a quick coffee and made a dash for the tent.

The following morning, we did the Igishigishigi Trail, which includes a canopy walk. If you're afraid of heights, forget it! The 2.4 km trail takes about an hour and a half to complete. The scenery is amazing, especially the canopy section where you stand 70 m above the forest floor at the highest point. We saw black-and-white colobus monkeys and colourful turacos. Nyungwe is home to the endemic Rwenzori turaco, and the great blue turaco. Both have distinctive calls, which makes it easier to find them in the dense forest canopy.

Nyungwe could have kept us busy for weeks – there are 130 km of hiking trails, 120 species of butterflies, 275 species of birds and 13 species of primates to look for – but sadly we had to get going. We drove out on the western side of the park and before we could properly say goodbye to the forest, it ended abruptly in massive, manicured tea plantations. It's crazy to think that the industry that once threatened the forest has now created an effective barrier to further human encroachment.

Our ultimate destination was the capital, Kigali, but first we spent time in the holiday resort town of Kibuye. It's on the shore of Lake Kivu and it's as picturesque as it gets, with sparkling blue water and lush green hills. The road there is 120 km long and it's so twisty that it almost made Marie ill with motion sickness. We spent two nights camping at Bethany Hotel, catching up with the usual overlanding chores.

Rested, it was time to tackle the next 130 km, three-hour journey to Kigali.



A TRADITIONAL FOOD PREPARATION DEMONSTRATION, KING'S PALACE MUSEUM



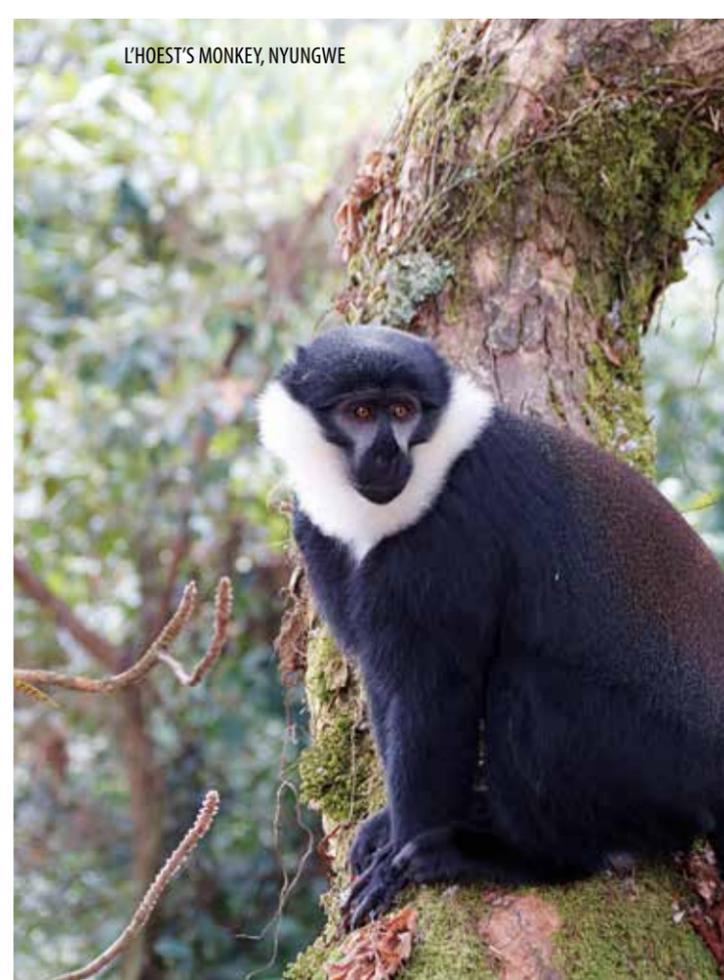
PATRICK WITH A ROYAL HERDER AND HIS INYAMBO COW



NYUNGWE NATIONAL PARK



CANOPY WALK, NYUNGWE NATIONAL PARK



L'HOEST'S MONKEY, NYUNGWE



TEA PLANTATION ON THE EDGE OF NYUNGWE FOREST



## People healing people

Our visit coincided with the 25th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda, one of the darkest chapters in human history. Between April and July 1994, more than 800 000 people – overwhelmingly Tutsi, but also moderate Hutu, Twa and others who opposed the genocide – were systematically killed.

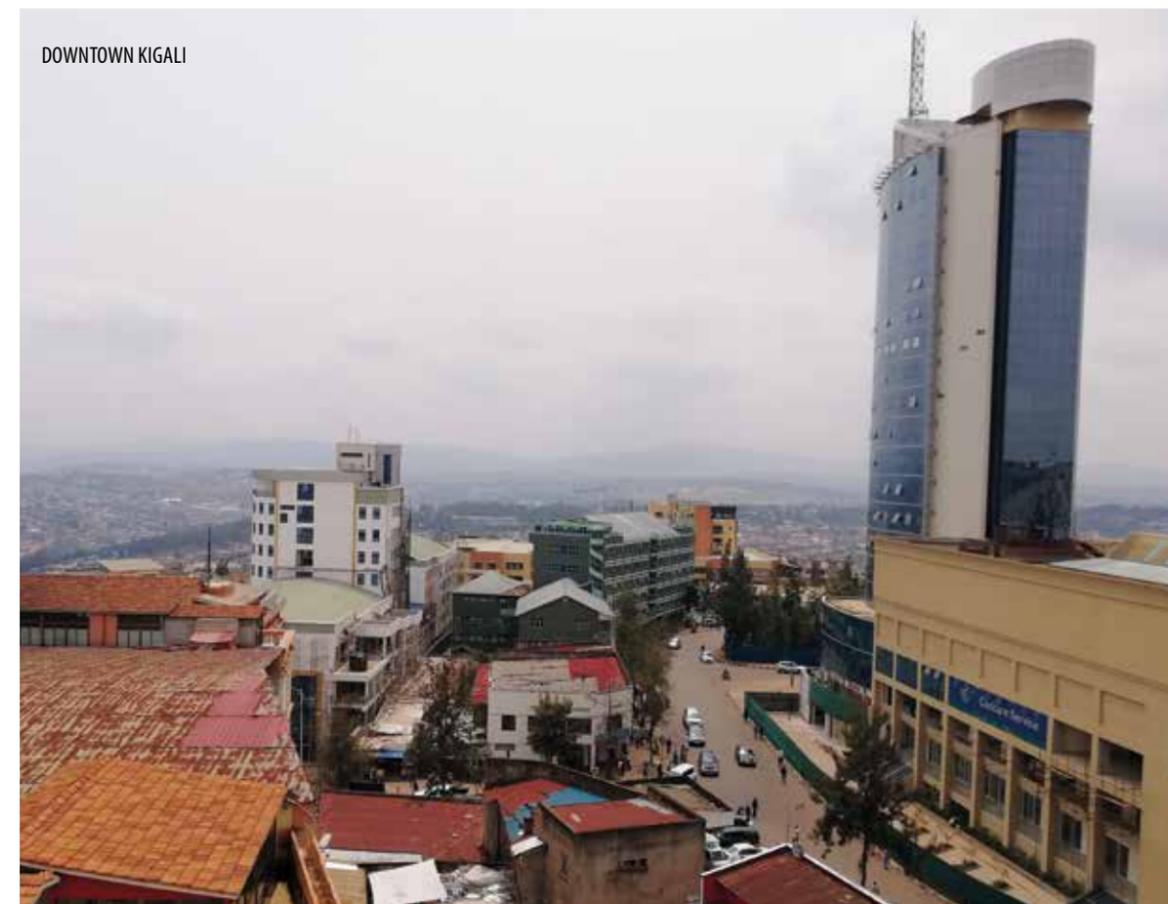
Everywhere we went, we saw advertisements and banners proclaiming “Kwibuka 25”, which urged citizens to “remember, unite and renew”. It served as a reminder that every village was affected by the genocide. It’s difficult to comprehend the level of trauma experienced by this tiny nation. A UNICEF trauma survey found that 80% of Rwandan children experienced a death in their family in 1994; 70% witnessed someone being killed or injured; 90% believed that they themselves would die.

The Genocide Memorial in Kigali is a must-visit, so as to better understand the genocide and its effects. The exhibition starts with an emotional 30-minute video, during which survivors tell their stories. Both Marie and I needed tissues...

The main exhibition took us a few harrowing hours to get through. It’s comprehensive and shows the historical and socio-economic background of the Hutu and Tutsi, and how propaganda and psychological games were used to motivate ordinary people to kill their neighbours. We learnt how distrust between Hutu and Tutsi was fostered through a traditional class system, which was then exacerbated through ethnic classification by the Belgian colonial rulers.

It was sad to learn how the international community turned a blind eye towards the events in 1994 – disturbing how humanity can turn against itself so violently.

During our travels through Rwanda, we could still sense some distrust among people. Even though Rwandans say all is okay now and band about the term *ubumuntu* (which means “humanity”, similar to “ubuntu” in South Africa) it’s clear that emotions are still raw when you speak to a survivor. It will take generations for these emotions to settle.



DOWNTOWN KIGALI

MURAMBI GENOCIDE MEMORIAL CENTRE

There are genocide memorials all over the country, but besides the big one in Kigali, the only other one we visited was the Murambi Genocide Memorial Centre en route from Butare to Nyungwe Forest. It was also a harrowing experience. Quite honestly, there’s only so much you can take.

**Kigali was great to visit** – it felt like central Africa’s stress-free zone. It’s clean, the vibe is calm, and the city is beautiful with a mix of old and modern buildings. Hooting was almost non-existent. There was none of the frenzy we’d become accustomed to in other big capitals during our trip. We checked into a hotel to get a break from camping, which also allowed us to explore the city without the fuss of driving. Motorbike taxis called *boda-bodas* are the best way to get around and only cost R20 for up to 5 km.

We visited the Inema Arts Centre, a little oasis for up-and-coming artists. There was some interesting art (with crazy prices) including a famous gorilla made from computer circuit boards. We also explored Caplaki Craft Village, which has about 70 stalls – and nobody hassles you!

Elsewhere in the city, we sipped Rwandan coffee in trendy, Fairtrade coffee shops, and we lunched at the German Butchery, feasting on specialty sausages, pork escalope and local Mützig beer.

A lot of tourists visit Rwanda just to see the mountain gorillas in Volcanoes National Park (in the north-west of the country) and they miss many of the other sights. Rwanda was easy to explore by car. Our route took us through some epic landscapes, and warm smiles greeted us around every corner.

Our time in Rwanda was up. We had a date with the gorillas and chimpanzees in Uganda, Rwanda’s northern neighbour (Mgahinga Gorilla National Park is a cross-border extension of Rwanda’s Volcanoes National Park) and we had to get a move on. Our son Callum (18) had just flown in to join us for the next part of the adventure, so we picked him up from the airport and headed off to Uganda for a primate extravaganza.

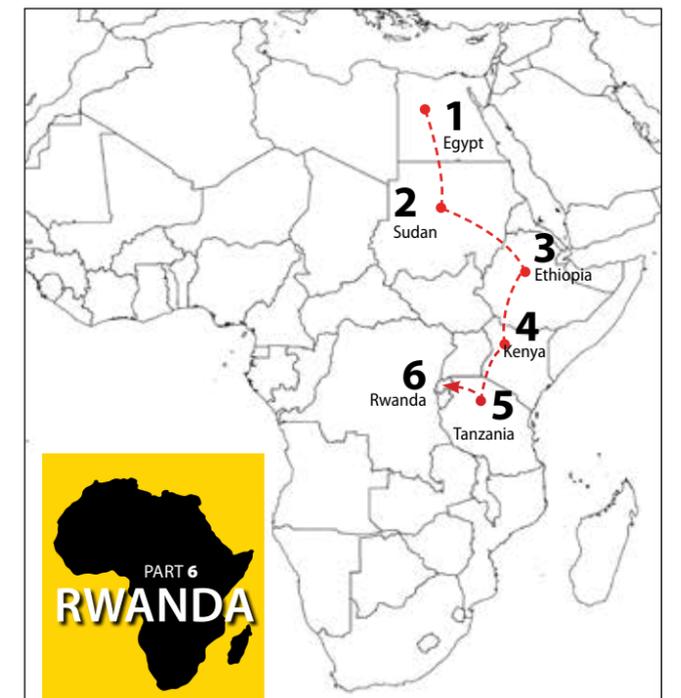


A MEAL AT INZOZI NZIZA RESTAURANT, BUTARE

## PATRICK & MARIE GURNEY

They departed Valence in France (where Marie hails from) on 3 June 2018, with the aim of driving to their home in Johannesburg over 18 months. By the time they reached Rwanda, they had been on the road for 15 months, having driven through France, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania.

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**NEXT MONTH:** Patrick and Marie explore Uganda (Part 7).  
**Previous stories:** Egypt (Part 1, go! #158), Sudan (Part 2, go! #159), Ethiopia (Part 3, go! #160), Kenya (Part 4, go! #161) and Tanzania (Part 5, go! #162).