

RWANDA'S ROAD TO RECOVERY

Lydia Bell discovers the joys of 'slow cycling' in what is now one of Africa's safest – and friendliest – nations

A bazungu! Abazzuuuunguuu!' In every village, one child heralds the arrival of 'foreigners!' and then all the children come, running alongside our bikes on dusty red earth until they have no breath left.

While most visitors come to Rwanda to discover its expensive lodges and observe gorillas, for seven days I am cycling with The Slow Cyclist on a trip that shines a light on lower-key highlights.

Cycling through tea plantations, Irish-green hills and volcanic lakes in the shadow of volcanoes in Rwanda's Northern Province takes some getting used to if you like to blend in. As a foreigner, in Lycra, you cannot. You'll attract a crowd every time you stop. But Rwandans are chatty, humorous and welcoming, making cycling here the most fun you can have in padded pants.

Rwanda is green, lush, and grandiose and, being of temperate climate and the 'Land Of A Thousand Hills', it's perfect for cycling. None of those hills are small, though, so I opt for an e-bike, as do the three spritely septuagenarians in our group.

While its name evokes memories of the horrific genocide of 1994, Rwanda has embraced recovery, reconciliation and stability, becoming one of the safest African countries.

At the Genocide Memorial in Kigali, a guide relays the many factors leading up to the genocide, adding that if it had not been for a Hutu man who hid him, he would not be here. Outside, the Garden of Memory is quiet, full of roses and bird-song. More than 259,000 people are buried here in mass graves. As the trip pans out, I realise that the brutality this bears witness to will not, miraculously, be my main takeaway.

Elsewhere in Rwanda's orderly, leafy, hilly capital we drink great coffee and visit markets, sucking the insides out of tree tomato fruit. We watch the schoolchildren dance at Kinamba Community Project, where the boys wear headdresses of long white grass that swirl frenetically.

Then we head to the Northern Province, to ride our hearts out. We grow accustomed to shimmering lakes and hazy mountains, volcanoes shrouded in

cloud and neat valleys as green as peahen's wings. Forests of fragrant eucalyptus, introduced by Belgian missionaries in the 1900s, produce the rich scent of Australia. Women wrapped in vibrant prints carry huge bundles on their heads, their babies strapped between shoulder blades.

Our lunches are vegetarian feasts: pickled radishes, country cheeses, spiced macadamia, beans in yellow garlic, houmous, seeded toast, garlic mushrooms and carrot dips, gazpacho, tomato relish, aubergine cheese stacks, lentils and salads.

Our accommodations swerve away from luxury to character. The first night we sleep in a convent overlooking Lake Ruhonda. After a feast of veal and roast potatoes, we retire to cells furnished with wild flowers and a single crucifix. Another night we sleep at remote lodge Byizo, its cottages overlooking a lake. Exhilarating gushayaya music and dancing greets us. The ground thumps with passion and energy as the dancers and singers jump and ululate. Then comes the ikinimba, a revered musical tradition telling of Rwandan heroes and kings, accompanied by ingoma drums and the iningiri, a string harp made of wood.

In Musanze, with its print markets, galleries and coffee houses, we are close to the Virunga volcanoes and border with Uganda, so two in our group shoot off to observe the mountain gorillas, to return breathless with excitement about their proximity to the silverbacks. Permits are £1,160 each.

On our last day we pedal on to Gisenyi, on the shore of Lake Kivu. It is almost conjoined to Goma, which sits in the Democratic Republic of Congo and, on our last night, we eat by the light of a bonfire on the lakeside beach of the aptly named Paradis hotel. The biggest memories of my jaunt: joie de vivre and joyfulness, to the irrepressible soundtrack of Rwandan ikinimba.

SERENE: A volcano shrouded in cloud and, below, a young local with his own bike

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JOYOUS: Dancers during a performance of traditional ikinimba

