

RWANDA

Rwanda might seem a strange choice for a holiday, its name often associated with half-remembered news reports of trouble and the acclaimed movie that followed. Friends may look puzzled and ask: 'Why Rwanda?' The obvious reason is the mountain gorillas: sitting within a small group is one of the world's greatest wildlife experiences. Other natural attractions include wild chimpanzees, a host of other primates, the more conventional wildlife of Akagera National Park and the beautiful shore of Lake Kivu. But although Rwanda's natural history is often compelling, it's not the main reason why people remember it. In 1994, Rwanda's bloody civil war, known universally as 'the genocide', hit the world's headlines. Now the country is peaceful. Its broadly democratic government promotes harmony and its people look forward with optimism. Many are eager to tell the world what happened, to guard against it ever happening again. For the thinking visitor, Rwanda's history is as compelling as its gorillas.

Facilities and hotels here are often basic, albeit gradually improving. Service and food can be poor at times, but for a glimpse into contemporary Africa, some wonderful wildlife-viewing and a thought-provoking trip, Rwanda can be terrific.

KIGALI

Rwanda is a small country with its modern capital, Kigali, at the centre. From here the roads radiate outwards like the spokes of a wheel, so you may need to spend a night here as part of some itineraries.

Kigali gets relatively few tourists so don't expect organised attractions. Instead take a stroll around one or two of its lively markets; those keen to pick a few curios will especially like the Caplaki handicrafts co-operative, which offers a variety of items from Rwanda and Congo. There are also a number of good cafés and restaurants which make convenient staging posts as you walk around this buzzing city; you'll usually be met with great friendliness wherever you go. Visitors should also consider a visit to the insightful Kigali Genocide Museum, which not only details Rwanda's tragic history, but also documents the history of genocide around the world.

There are two good international hotels here, both centrally located. **The Hotel des Mille Collines** (as featured in the film, *Hotel Rwanda*) has a fantastic location right in the heart of town. The views over the city from

its main areas are lovely, and the pool and downstairs bar are usually buzzing with locals and expats in the evenings. This is a good hotel with pleasant rooms, though most notably it is very friendly with a nice relaxed vibe.

The **Kigali Serena Hotel** is smarter, more sophisticated and slightly more formal in comparison. The standard of food, service and accommodation is excellent and it is an efficient place to overnight. It also has an extensive spa and stylish pool area – a real treat if you have just come from trekking in search of the gorillas! This is generally regarded as the best hotel in Kigali and we would have to agree.

The **Laico Umubano Kigali Hotel** is another international-style option in a quieter part of town. Though it isn't quite of the same quality, it is a little lower in price and has extensive leisure facilities including a gym, tennis court and badminton courts. For those on a tighter budget, the **Manor House** and **Lemigo Hotel** are adequate mid-range options that don't have much in the way of style, but do have friendly staff.



A traditional 'Intore' dancer

NYUNGWE NATIONAL PARK

In the southwest of Rwanda and set within a protected national park established in 2004, Nyungwe Forest is an enormous tropical forest with a high canopy. Access is easy but start on one of the guided walking trails and you'll rapidly realise just how big it is. Tall old mahoganies, ebonies and giant tree ferns tower above you, whilst orchids and other epiphytes cling to every branch. Brightly coloured birds flit around, butterflies are everywhere and if you walk quietly, you may encounter larger forest residents.

Covering about 970km², Nyungwe is the largest swathe of montane forest left in East or Central Africa. It harbours about 300 different bird species, of which 27 are endemic to this section of the Rift Valley; hundreds of butterflies and orchids; and over 75 different species of mammal – including 13 primates (about a quarter of Africa's primate species).

Activities include a variety of excellent forest walks, lasting from one to six or even seven hours. We can arrange for you to track chimpanzees or search for Ruwenzori colobus monkeys, which can be

found in troops of several hundred. Birding walks are also possible, with giant hornbills, great blue turacos and red-breasted sparrow-hawks amongst the specials. The birds are spectacular, though as in most tropical forests, you'll have to look hard for them. Adventurous travellers may also try the canopy walk – a walkway raised high up in the canopy of the forest for a 'bird's-eye' view.

There are now a handful of accommodations in the area, aimed at travellers on varying budgets. Those trying to keep costs down have the conveniently located **ORTPN Resthouse** (also known as **Gisakura Guesthouse**), on the edge of the forest by the park headquarters. Aimed mainly at backpackers, it is operated by a friendly and helpful team, though its 12 rooms are very basic and not all are en suite.

In stark contrast, **Nyungwe Forest Lodge** opened in 2010 as a smart and high-quality option. Situated in a tea plantation, it has 20 well-appointed rooms and two suites, each with a private terrace. The lodge also has an outdoor heated pool, indoor and outdoor eating areas, a small gym and spa. With quite a glossy feel, air conditioning and TVs, it won't be to everyone's taste – but the standards of food and service are among the best you'll find in the country.

New in 2011, **Nyungwe Top View Hill Hotel** has a stunning vantage point, high on one of the hills near Nyungwe Forest. The central areas boast impressive views, and on clear days you can see Nyungwe National Park and even as far as Lake Kivu, the volcanoes and Idjwi Island. The 12 chalets are spacious and comfortable, and though they do make an attempt at being stylish, they remain quite simple.



Ruwenzori colobus monkeys in Nyungwe

THE SHORE OF LAKE KIVU

Rwanda's western side is bounded by Lake Kivu, one of the freshwater lakes of Africa's Great Rift Valley. There are three main towns on the shore – Gisenyi, Kibuye and Cyangugu – and the real joy of this area is driving between them.

The road gently weaves through hills and mountains. Eucalyptus trees line the way, while every inch of the hills is terraced with banana trees. Villagers smile and wave – you'll feel like royalty at the end of the trip! It's about a 3–4 hour drive between Gisenye and Kibuye, and also between Kibuye and Cyangugu.

GISENYI

At the northern end of Lake Kivu, just over the border from the DRC's town of Goma, Gisenyi was once a colonial beach resort of note. Its waterfront area is lined with fading mansions and a few old hotels, all overlooking a lovely sandy beach.

There is one very comfortable option here. The smart **Lake Kivu Serena Hotel** is an international-standard hotel with 66 modern rooms, a swimming pool, gym, tennis courts, good restaurant and a lake-view terrace. On the private beach in front you will find a watersports centre hiring out windsurfs, kayaks, sailing boats and even jet skis. At the weekend the Serena fills with expats and locals on mini-breaks and becomes quite a lively spot, but during the week it is usually a quieter retreat, and unless there is a conference on you will find only a few people around the pool. The Serena is in a convenient spot on the edge of town and so perfectly located for walks along the public beach, or into town to try out one of the local restaurants.

About 7km south of Gisenyi's centre, the very friendly **Paradise Malahide** is a simple and rustic guesthouse which we first visited

in 2011. Its six round stone bungalows and four apartments are all fairly basic and functional, but comfortable and spotlessly clean. In front of the rooms there is a small private beach for residents of the guesthouse and, if the clouds clear, you will get a lovely view of the sunset. We especially liked the manicured gardens bursting with bougainvilleas, the open-sided bar and the garden benches by the lakeshore.

KIBUYE

In the middle of Rwanda's lakeshore, Kibuye is probably the prettiest of the lakeside towns: a verdant, tropical spot, surrounded by hills covered in eucalyptus and pine. In August, you may see thousands of yellow-billed kites on their annual migration. A short boat trip to nearby Napoleon's Island, with its large fruit-bat colony, is a must – and stop by the unexpected beach bar on Amahoro Island!

All of Kibuye's hotels face the sunset from great lakeside locations. The newest addition and by far the best option is **Cormoran Lodge**, which offers seven

wooden huts raised on stilts and cantilevered to a steep hillside. All are spacious, modern and very comfortable, with fantastic views of the lake. There is a small man-made beach here and it is possible to hire kayaks to take out on the lake. We loved Cormoran and found the quality of food and service to be very good. Though slightly more costly than the other hotels in the area, it still has a modest price tag, and so is great value for money.

Run by the Pentecostal Church, **Béthanie Guesthouse** has 42 fairly standard rooms, with polished concrete floors and en-suite bathrooms. Most of these older rooms are very basic and quite small, but Béthanie recently added a further 14 rooms all set within a large new three-storey block. These are much bigger and brighter, with tiled floors, comfortable beds and quite modern en-suite bathrooms. For those who choose to stay here we would always recommend these rooms.

Moriah Hill Resort is much smaller with just 18 rooms. While all look over the lake, and have a very pleasant terrace with lovely views, the rooms themselves are very worn and lack any character. Indeed, the whole resort has seen better days, and suffers from questionable levels of service. When we were last here we felt that the recession had bitten quite badly, and what had once perhaps been quite a nice place to stay had fallen into a state of disrepair. As well as a restaurant and bar, Moriah has a man-made beach, and can easily organise excursions.

CYANGUGU

At the southern tip of the lake, the fading façades of border town Cyangugu (pronounced 'Shangugu') tell of its past as a vital trading gateway. Base yourself here to combine a stay on the lake with visits to Nyungwe National Park, which is only 45 minutes away. The only reasonable option here is the very friendly and rather charming **Peace Guesthouse**, which stands in a quiet spot near the port. It is church run, with 22 fairly simple but clean rooms (most are en suite but some share a bathroom), and a restaurant with a terrace which offers beautiful views over the lake. The service and food are good, though the restaurant doesn't serve alcohol.

At time of press, Gisenyi and Cyangugu are considered safe to visit. However, with both so close to the DRC it's wise to check the FCO's travel advice before visiting either.



The pool at the Serena Hotel has lovely views over Lake Kivu



A hippo grazing on the shore of one of Akagera's many lakes

AKAGERA NATIONAL PARK

Bordering Tanzania, Akagera covers about 900km² of fairly low-lying grass and woodlands, similar in feel to the 'traditional' safari reserves of East Africa. To the west of these plains are mountains, whilst to the east, the Akagera River feeds into a series of lakes, marshes and papyrus swamps. For a small park, there is a wide variety of habitats and some lovely scenery.

Birding is particularly good and short boat trips to islands commonly result in sightings of fish eagles, marabou storks, crowned cranes, open-billed storks, cormorants, herons and egrets. Shoebill storks are said to be resident – although in a very inaccessible corner of the lake.

The game includes many plains species: impala and topi are dominant, with eland, oribi, Maasai giraffe, Defassa waterbuck, reedbuck, bushbuck, sable and roan antelope also present. Burchell's zebra, hippo and crocodile are common; elephant are less so. Lion and sitatunga are reported, but very rarely seen. You'll visit with your own driver guide and a ranger

from the national park, although it's worth noting that, while friendly and keen, neither will be highly trained or knowledgeable on the wildlife, and certainly nowhere near the standard you'd expect from other safari destinations.

Akagera's game densities aren't high, though there are pleasantly few other visitors so it's worth the drive from Kigali. It can be visited on a day trip, but we have always recommended staying at the park's only lodge, **Akagera Game Lodge**. This has a great location high on a hill, overlooking Lake Ihema. Renovations were started in late 2008, but were halted soon after, so at present it is only partially



Agamas feed mostly on ants

complete, with half of the lodge unusable. We're told they're due to resume work at some point, but the timetable is uncertain, so call us to ask us about the latest status of this lodge.

VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK

The great volcanic massif of the Virunga Mountains straddles the borders of Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC, covering a huge area of over 8,000km², and encompassing six active and three extinct volcanoes. Much of this is protected by national parks, including the Volcanoes National Park (Parc National des Volcans) on the Rwandan side, which was made famous by Dian Fossey's work and the film *Gorillas in the Mist*. Many primates occur here, including rare, endemic golden monkeys and about 350 mountain gorillas; that's more than half of the world's population – and this is the best place to see them.

Even without the gorillas, this park would be fascinating. Its altitude ranges from about 2,500m to Karisimbi's peak at 4,500m, encompassing extensive bamboo forests and some of the planet's last remaining afro-montane forest. The vegetation is rampant, covering a variety of different zones including, on higher slopes, an almost other-worldly habitat of thick moors with endemic giant lobelia and groundsel. These various ecosystems harbour a spectacular array of animals, including forest elephants, buffalo, giant forest hogs (Africa's largest swine), bushpigs, bushbucks, black-fronted duikers and spotted hyenas.

In the last few years, as Volcanoes has become better known and tourism has started to grow, the range of places to stay here has started to change fast.

Closest to the park headquarters is the very basic **Kinigi Guest House**. However very nearby is the **Gorilla Mountain View Lodge**

which is a good, mid-range lodge with 30 individual cottages, a restaurant and bar, all with views of the surrounding hills and volcanoes. The rooms are comfortable and extremely spacious, though simply furnished. We loved the fire that was lit for us at night and the hot-water bottles put into our beds during dinner. This lodge is friendly, very relaxed, affordable and within 15 minutes' drive of the park HQ. It is by far our most popular option and having stayed there a few times we know why!

About an hour's drive from the HQ, **Virunga Lodge** has a spectacular location – high on a ridge overlooking lakes Burera and Ruhondo. It has eight spacious stone cottages, all with wooden floors, chunky timber furniture, large verandas and an ensuite flush toilet and hot shower. The main restaurant and bar are housed in two separate buildings, both with a stylish African feel, and cosy fires for the evening. Aside from gorilla-tracking, massages are

available and a local 'Intore' dance troupe performs occasionally.

Owned by a community trust, and managed by a top Kenyan-based team, the **Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge** is the area's most luxurious lodge. It has eight different rooms: five cottages, two suites and a family cottage. All have a sitting room with a fireplace, a separate dressing room, a large bathroom with a bath and a good hot shower, and a veranda with stunning views. It is a steep walk from the car park up to the lodge – good training for gorilla trekking.

Gorilla Groups

The locations of these gorilla groups will obviously vary; often they climb higher in the dry season and descend during the rains. It's possible for our guide to request a specific group for you on the day, but this can never be guaranteed. Currently there are officially eight main accessible groups:

The **Sabyinyo Group** has about 13 individuals, including one silverback, and is usually found relatively close to the edge of the forest (about 20–40 minutes' walk), between Sabyinyo and Gahinga. The **Agashya Group** (formerly known as Group Thirteen) lives close to the Sabyinyo Group. It has 25 individuals, and the silverback here is usually particularly relaxed.

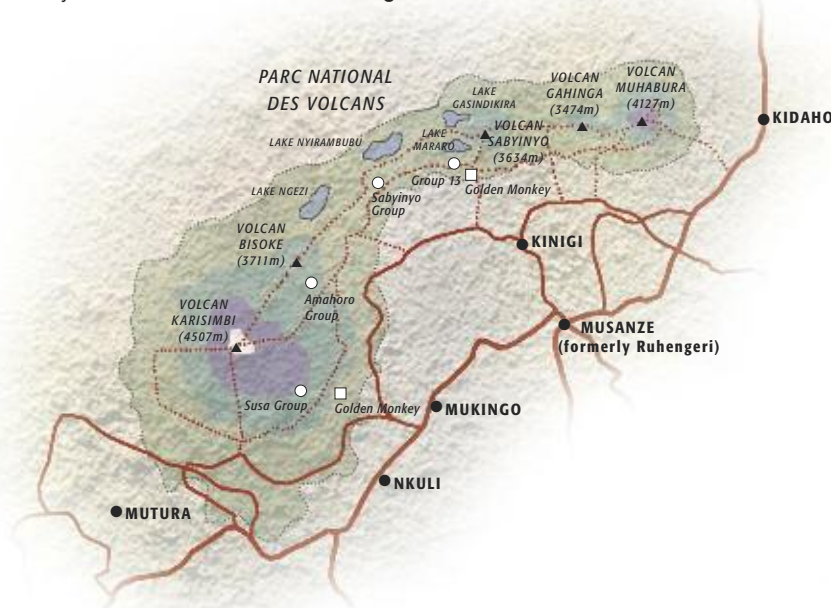
Mostly living between the Karisoke and Visoke peaks are the **Amahoro Group**, with about 18 individuals, and the **Umubano Group**, which currently has 13 members. Both are often further from the park headquarters than the Sabyinyo and Agashya groups, but easier to reach than the Susa Group.

Originally studied by Dian Fossey, the **Susa Group** was the largest group – with about 42 individuals, including four silverbacks. However, having split and reformed again several times, this group has now definitely divided into two separate groups. 'Susa-A' has kept the name **Susa Group** and 'Susa-B' has been renamed the **Karisimbi Group**, as this family live in the Mount Karisimbi area. The new Susa Group has 30 members and is usually found relatively low down in the forest, whilst the 'new' Karisimbi Group, with 15 members, is better suited to visits from more serious hikers. It appears that their home range is quite high up on the slopes of the Karisimbi caldera, so visiting this group can make for the best part of a full-day hike.

The **Hirwa Group** has 16 members including one silverback that came from the Susa Group. An eighth group, the **Kwitonda Group**, has 21 members that were habituated in the DRC. They crossed the border into Rwanda in 2005 and have since remained here. During the high season of 2011, the Rwandan Tourist Board, in conjunction with the Dian Fossey Research Project, opened an additional two habituated gorilla groups to visitors – previously they had only been visited for research purposes. This created an extra 16 permits a day, taking the total daily permits up to 80. As yet, these two extra groups are not permanently available to tourist visitors, but it's looking likely that they will be for 2012; ask us for the latest details.



Visiting the gorillas, you get very close





Jack Hanna's House is a private house that previously formed part of the old Gorilla's Nest Hotel. With two bedrooms, a lounge and kitchen, it's a good option for families or small groups who are looking for exclusivity and privacy.

Alternatively, the hotels in the town of Musanze (formerly Ruhengeri), 20 minutes' drive from the park's headquarters, are always a more distant possibility.

GORILLA TRIPS

Trips to the gorillas are well organised and clearly structured, with numbers limited to eight people per group per day. Permits cost US\$500 per person. This is a lot but don't begrudge it; the money provides Rwanda with a compelling economic reason to conserve the park and pays for a guard for each gorilla group. (Armed teams almost constantly track each habituated group – like royal bodyguards in the UK!)

You meet early in the morning at the park headquarters. After a briefing on safety and

gorilla etiquette, you're led in a small group along clear paths up into the forest. The altitude is over 2,500m, so although the pace is unhurried, the hike is tiring, taking from 30 minutes to a few hours. Your English-speaking guides are very good and will be taking you to a specific group of 'habituated' gorillas, which they know well and which are used to human visitors.

Most people are a little apprehensive – a large silverback male can weigh up to 200kg, or three times the weight of the average man – but you soon forget this when you see the group. Often the gorillas will be spread through the dense vegetation and will continue with their activities regardless of any visitors.

Occasionally a playful youngster will approach you with curiosity – sometimes coming so close that you'll have to move away. (To protect the gorillas from catching human diseases, you're not allowed closer than 7m.)

Look into the eyes of a large silverback and he'll stare back. It's a thinking, intelligent

gaze, mindful that you're another individual. It's an encounter that transcends any other 'wildlife' experience that we know.

OTHER TRIPS IN THE FOREST

Before visiting the gorillas, a guided hike into the mountains is a good way to acclimatise. It also allows you to get a better understanding of the forest's ecosystem, and the other forms of wildlife to be found here.

A more gentle option is a guided trip to a troop of habituated golden monkeys on the lower slopes. You won't get as near to the monkeys as you would to the gorillas, but their antics are fun to watch and the bamboo forests, which they inhabit, are an interesting environment.

There are several more strenuous hikes in the forest, including interesting trails with national parks' guides to Dian Fossey's grave and to the top of the Bisoke Volcano, which has a picturesque lake inside its crater and views across the national park.

Mother and baby from the Susa group



Golden monkey amongst the bamboo

TRIP IDEAS FOR RWANDA

Mountain Gorilla Safari

Private guided safari: **6 nights / 7 days**

4n Volcanoes NP – Gorilla Mountain View Lodge (fba)

Tracking permits included: 1 golden monkey & 2 gorilla

L'Hoest's Monkey Safari

Private guided safari: **9 nights / 10 days**

2n Nyungwe Forest – ORTPN/Gisakura GH (fba)

Tracking permits included: 1 chimpanzee and 1 colobus monkey

2n Lake Kivu – Béthanie Guesthouse (fba)

3n Volcanoes NP – Gorilla Mountain View Lodge (fba)

Tracking permits included: 1 golden monkey & 1 gorilla

Golden Monkey Safari

Private guided safari: **14 nights / 15 days**

1n Kigali – Kigali Serena (bb)

4n Volcanoes NP – Gorilla Mountain View Lodge (fba)

Tracking permits included: 1 golden monkey & 2 gorilla

2n Lake Kivu – Lake Kivu Serena Hotel (fba)

2n Lake Kivu – Cormoran Lodge (fba)

3n Nyungwe Forest – Nyungwe Forest Lodge (fba)

Tracking permits included: 1 chimpanzee and 1 colobus monkey

Mona Monkey Safari

Private guided safari: **11 nights/12 days**

1n Kigali – Hotel des Milles Collines (bb)

3n Volcanoes NP – Gorilla Mountain View Lodge (fba)

Tracking permits included: 1 golden monkey & 1 gorilla

3n Lake Kivu – Paradise Malahide (fba)

2n Nyungwe Forest – Nyungwe Top View Hill Hotel (fba)

Tracking permits included: 1 colobus monkey and 1 canopy walk

Gorillas and Serengeti Safari

Private guided safari: **11 nights / 12 days**

4n Volcanoes NP – Gorilla Mountain View Lodge (fba)

Tracking permits included: 1 golden monkey & 2 gorilla

1n Kigali – Hotel des Milles Collines (bb)

2n Serengeti – Serengeti Safari Camp (fba)

2n Serengeti (Loliondo) – Nduara Camp (fba)

This trip combines gorilla tracking in Rwanda with game viewing in the remote northern Serengeti in Tanzania. It includes an overnight stop in Kigali, necessary to join the direct, early-morning flight from Rwanda to the Serengeti.



View of the volcanoes from Gorilla Mountain View Lodge

Trips Include

These trips include flights between London Heathrow and Kigali, via Nairobi, with *Kenya Airways*. These are overnight from London, arriving in Rwanda the following morning. At Kigali Airport you are met by your private guide and 4WD, which stays with you for your whole trip, guiding you to many places in addition to the highlights mentioned above. Trip prices will reduce if more than two people travel together.

You can also opt for a daytime flight to Nairobi with *British Airways*. These arrive too late to connect on to Kigali, so it's necessary to spend a night in the Kenyan capital and fly on to Rwanda the following morning. For this, add an approximate cost of £98 per person for 14 Jul–18 Aug, and £326 for the rest of the year, on top of the prices shown opposite. We can also arrange trips excluding flights if you are based outside of the UK, or would rather arrange them separately.



Nyungwe is famous for tea plantations as well as primates

Upgrading your Lodge

In Volcanoes National Park, to upgrade from *Gorilla Mountain View Lodge* to another lodge, apply the following supplements to our safari prices:

To **Virunga Lodge** (all year) add £328

To **Sabyinyo Silverback** (Apr–May) add £121

To **Sabyinyo Silverback** (Jan–Mar; Jun–15 Jul; Nov–14 Dec) add £270

To **Sabyinyo Silverback** (16 Jul–Oct) add £334

All supplements are per person sharing per night.

Rwanda: the Facts

Currency: The Rwanda franc (Rwf) is the currency. At the time of writing, US\$1 = Rwf594; £1 = Rwf955.

Visas: Travellers with British/American passports generally do not need a visa; passports are just stamped on arrival.

Health: There are Western medical facilities in Kigali; elsewhere facilities are rudimentary.

Language: Kinyarwanda is universally spoken, French is widespread and English is spoken by many in contact with visitors.

Food: This varies from mediocre to good in hotels and lodges. The fresh fruit and some of the Belgian-inspired cuisine is good; otherwise, whilst hygiene standards are generally fine, results are variable.

Climate: For details of Rwanda's climate, and the best times to visit, see the section on 'When to go' on pages 23–25.

Travel: With your own vehicle and driver, travel is fairly easy – although roads in the more rural areas can be in poor condition.

Prices are for January–December 2012; contact us for 2013 prices.

Accommodation Codes

bb... bed & breakfast

fb... full board

fba... full board and activities



An adult silverback can weigh up to 200kgs

RWANDA SAFARI PRICES

	Safari duration	1 Jan - 31 Jan	1 Feb - 14 Mar	15 Mar - 31 May	1 Jun - 30 Jun	1 Jul - 31 Oct	1 Nov - 15 Dec
Mountain gorilla Safari *	6 nights / 7 days	£2,735	£2,735	£2,735	£2,735	£2,735	£2,735
L'Hoest's monkey Safari *	9 nights / 10 days	£3,130	£3,130	£3,130	£3,130	£3,130	£3,130
Golden monkey Safari *	14 nights / 15 days	£5,154	£5,154	£5,154	£5,154	£5,154	£5,154
Mona monkey Safari *	11 nights / 12 days	£3,850	£3,850	£3,850	£3,850	£3,850	£3,850
Gorillas and Serengeti Safari * ~	11 nights / 12 days	£5,629	£5,629	£5,258	£5,443	£5,629	£5,258

* There is a **flight supplement** of £515 per person from 14 Jul–18 Aug.

~ For the **Gorillas and Serengeti Safari**, Nduara is closed from 13 Apr–15 May.

- Prices are quoted per person, based on two people sharing a room; single supplements are available on request.
- Departure date generally determines pricing. If your trip straddles two pricing bands, then request a precise quote.
- Credit card payments will incur a 2% processing charge (3% for AMEX). This may change if the credit card companies change their charges. You will always be advised of this at the time of payment.
- An additional voluntary amount (currently £21) will be automatically added to your invoice. This is to offset the carbon emissions caused by your international flights and to support the Travel Foundation. This is not compulsory; if you do not wish to pay it, then simply subtract it from your final payment. You can read more about these voluntary donations on page 277.