


# Cinderella

## makes it to the ball

There's something big brewing in little Rwanda. And it's not a small distraction on the fringes of the main event: it's taking its place at the heart of the party.

**Sue Watt** went to see for herself.



**T**he people of Rwanda share a secret that is barely known to the outside world. It's called Akagera, a little-visited reserve that hugs the country's northeastern border and is the Cinderella of their three national parks. Not that the others are ugly sisters – anything but – but with Volcanoes National Park's celebrated gorillas and Nyungwe's lush and extraordinary rainforest, Akagera lives very much in their shadow, quiet and unassuming yet full of beauty.

Refreshingly for an African national park, more than half of Akagera's visitors are locals. They're not divorced from their own natural heritage here, nor excluded by extortionate park fees that often only visitors can afford. "There's a real sense of pride in Akagera, and a strong sense of ownership," Sarah Hall, the park's Tourism and Marketing Manager, told me. "It's all part of the national pride people have in Rwanda."

I wanted to explore what the country had to offer beyond its mountain gorillas, and arrived at the park headquarters after a mere two hours' drive from the capital Kigali. Akagera can be explored on game drives, night drives and boat trips, and I soon discovered that, for a small park spanning 1120 square kilometres, it punches well above its weight in terms of diversity.

Celebrating its 80th anniversary in November, Akagera is Central Africa's largest area of protected wetland, with a third of the park covered in lakes and papyrus swamps. The north hosts Rwanda's only protected savannah region, a mini-Serengeti home to herds of plains animals including zebra, buffalo and elephant.

Overlooking the plains and wetlands are undulating highlands – the Mutumbu Hills reach over 2000 metres – and the landscape, particularly in the south, is a patchwork of lakes, woodland, golden grasses and neon-green valleys with swathes of terracotta-coloured roads swirling through. Akagera's scenic beauty amazed me and would be reason enough to merit a visit even if the park were devoid of wildlife.

But there's plenty of wildlife. It may not always be in-your-face, but Akagera is home to over 8000 animals and a staggering 500 species of birds, including the famously elusive shoebill concealed among the papyrus. On a boat trip on Lake Ihema, Rwanda's second-largest (and very beautiful) lake we saw an enormous variety. The jacanas looked as if they were walking on water, white-breasted cormorants splayed out their wings to dry in the sun, the ever-graceful African fish eagle perched atop trees, and yellow lesser-masked weavers busily built their ball- →



**THIS PAGE:**  
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**SAFARI PLANNER**



■ **Where to stay** Ruzizi Tented Camp ([www.african-parks.org](http://www.african-parks.org))

■ **When to visit** Akagera is open throughout the year. The rainy seasons are in April-May and October-November, when some roads become more difficult to navigate.

■ **Getting there** Several tour operators offer trips to Rwanda. Sue travelled with Cox & Kings ([www.coxandkings.co.uk](http://www.coxandkings.co.uk)) who had ground support from Thousand Hills Expeditions and the Rwanda Development Board.

■ **Read more** *Bradt Guide to Rwanda* (5th Edition) by Philip Briggs

■ **Tourist info** Rwanda Tourism recently launched its **Remarkable Rwanda** campaign in the UK. For more information visit [www.rwandatourism.com](http://www.rwandatourism.com) or email [info@rwandatourism.org](mailto:info@rwandatourism.org)



**Plans are afoot to reintroduce lions and rhino, thus making it a 'Big Five' destination**

shaped nests to impress their ladies. In the water, tiny crocs looked more like lizards straddled on logs. And a baby hippo belly-flopped into the lake from the papyrus banks to join others bobbing up and down as we approached.

Akagera's most renowned resident is Mutware, a grumpy fifty-something elephant brought here in the mid-1970s. An orphan, he was hand-reared and became semi-habituated to humans. Tuskless and notoriously anti-social, when we saw him on our game drive he was mooching quietly along the lakeshore munching grasses, his placid demeanour belying his fiery temper.

"He once pushed a safari Land Cruiser into the lake because he was annoyed that it was on the campsite," our guide Denyse Umugwaneza told us. "Luckily, there was no one inside." With little persuasion, we made a unanimous decision to move swiftly on.

In fact much of the wildlife here is surprisingly placid. Giraffes sauntered towards our Land Cruiser, as curious about us as we were about them, and impalas simply

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ignored us as we drove past. Six topi, with striking purple-brown shimmery hides, stood calmly around two babies that looked more like goats. Even normally skittish little oribi and fluffy waterbuck looked blissfully relaxed. "It's because there are few predators," Denyse commented. "At the moment we have just leopards and hyena. They won't be so relaxed when the lions arrive!"

The cats in question are due to appear in the next couple of months. African Parks, a South African not-for-profit organisation that restores depleted parks, shares the management of Akagera with the Rwandan Development Board and plans are afoot to reintroduce lions and rhino, thus making it a 'Big Five' destination.

Akagera has had a troubled history. In the aftermath of Rwanda's devastating genocide in 1994, hundreds of thousands of refugees who'd left in the late 1950s returned home. But in sub-Saharan Africa's most densely populated country, space was scarce. Many settled in Akagera, destroying the ecosystem through cattle grazing and depleting the wildlife through poaching. Once occurring here in good numbers, the lion population diminished as farmers poisoned them to protect their cattle and killed their prey for food.

In 1997 the government reduced the park by half, providing permanent homes for refugees in one section whilst protecting the remaining wildlife in the other. As ever, communities are vital to conservation and African Parks, who joined Akagera in 2010, work closely with them to ensure that local people benefit from wildlife tourism through education, healthcare and income generating projects.

Getting locals to accept lions as new neighbours required careful preparation. To help educate them about the species, an Akagera version of *The Lion King* was produced, using local students as actors and explaining the park's history of the cats, their significance to tourism and ultimately to their own livelihoods. The play toured nearby villages and was seen by nearly 6000 people, as was a series of wildlife documentaries on lions and relocations.

With interest in Akagera increasing, a new lodge is planned in the north of the park. Campsites are also available for low-budget or more intrepid travellers. I stayed at the lovely Ruzizi Tented Lodge on Lake Ihema's shores. Opened in 2013, it has nine comfortable ensuite tents including a new luxury treetop suite four metres above ground, and comes with the feel-good factor of knowing that all profits are ploughed into Akagera's conservation and communities.

While we relaxed at the end of the day, our dinner was served on Ruzizi's wooden deck that straddles the lake, in the glow of the campfire and under a canopy of stars.

Like Cinderella, it's now Akagera's time to shine - no wonder Rwandans are so proud of their rising star. 🐾



**TOP:** Grumpy and tuskless; Mutware has lived through Akagera's ups and downs

**RIGHT AND ABOVE:** Ruzizi Tented Lodge offers guests views across Lake Ihema



**ON THE APP**  
More images of Akagera are available online and on the *Travel Africa* magazines App on Newsstand.

