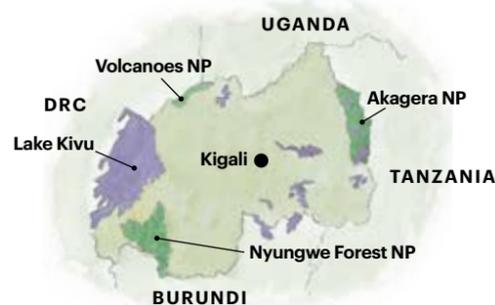


**SAFARI PLANNER**

**GETTING THERE:** RwandaAir fly from London and Brussels to Kigali and are planning a flight from New York.

**WHERE TO STAY:** One&Only Nyungwe House is a magnificent property that sits right on the edge of the forest. The mid-range Nyungwe Top View Hotel is in good proximity to the forest and camping options are available through the iRembo platform.

**HOW TO BOOK:** Tourist permits can be booked through Rwanda's iRembo platform, [www.irembo.gov.rw](http://www.irembo.gov.rw). Your specialist tour operator will arrange your on-ground services like



transfers and guides. The author used Songa Africa, [www.songafrica.com](http://www.songafrica.com).

**COVID:** All tourists must have a negative PCR test within 72 hours of entering the park, even if they have been vaccinated, because of the risk to chimpanzees. Consult your tour operator for general requirements.

and bromeliads, stretching like hands up to the heavens. We cross flowing rivers, pass small waterfalls and encounter several species of primates: silver and L'Hoest's monkeys, a decent-sized troop of black-and-white colobuses.

Just then, Peter stops and raises his hand, urging me to stay quiet. He points up ahead. Right there, sitting in the middle of our path, is a chimpanzee and her baby. Peter is incredulous. 'How can this be?' his furrowed brow says to me.

I stare on, stunned into silence, marvelling at our closest ancestor – but it lasts only a nanosecond before she disappears into the undergrowth. We walk briskly, desperate to get another glimpse – but they are gone and we are left, Peter as astonished as I. We had just witnessed the rarest of sights: a truly wild chimpanzee in one of Africa's last sacred rainforests.

As we trek homewards and return to the base station, we hear the din of voices – our first sight of other humans in almost seven hours. A few tourists are starting to come to the Uwinka viewing bridge, the only part of the forest that most visitors care to see,

Peter tells me. He thanks me for choosing the longest path, the one less trodden – he has not been that way for a long, long time.

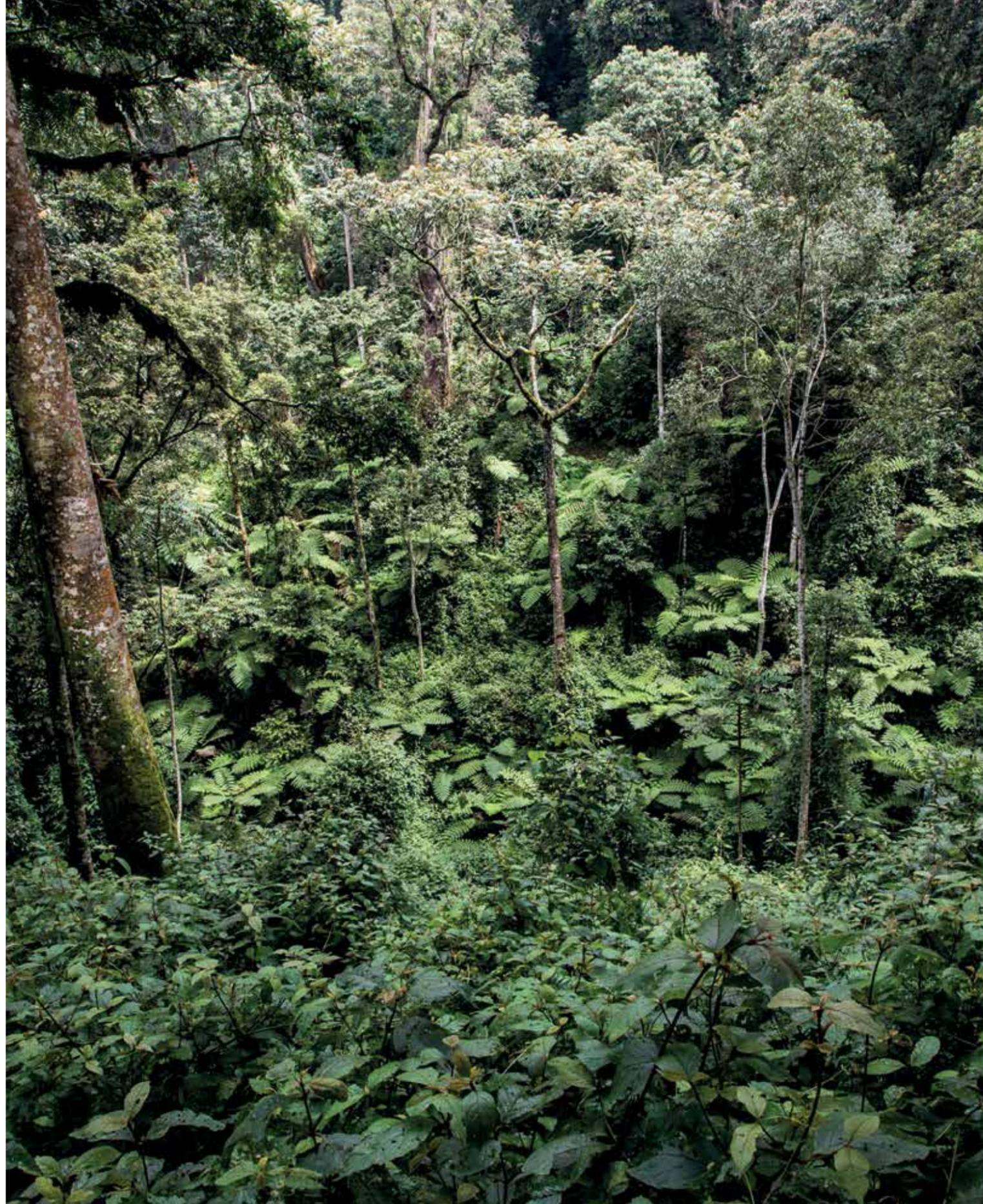
Back at the station, Denni is waiting. Smiling from ear to ear, he is happy that I have experienced another part of his country, one few tourists get to enjoy.

"It's amazing when you think where we've come from," muses Denni. "We started from zero after the genocide".

He's right – it's been just 16 years since the Rwandan genocide ended, making the progress of this small nation all the more extraordinary. The scars are still there and the military presence is hard to ignore – but the country's lack of corruption, universally upbeat outlook, and enveloping hope for an even brighter future is refreshing and infectious.

On our way back to Kigali, I have time to relive my experience. In a densely populated, tiny country, Nyungwe is a bastion of Rwanda's success in conservation. As the emerald curtain fades into the distance, the thought of Nyungwe Forest staying intact for another 100 years to come is a fitting comfort.

AFRICAN PARKS / SCOTT RAMSAY



## nature's embrace

Moments to savour, by Sue Watt

Arthur broke into the broadest of smiles as we drove into the mist greeting us at the gates of Nyungwe. "This," he said, "is where I really feel nature."

Our guide seemed to know every inch of Rwanda, every twist of every road hugging its thousand hills, and this dark, dense rainforest is his favourite place.

The next day, I understood why, feeling that sense of nature for myself. After heavy overnight rains, the morning had brought with it a beautiful clarity. Trees, ferns and vines sparkled as shards of sunlight pierced through the forest with flashes of bright blue skies just visible through gaps in the canopy.

After strolling and sliding along muddy paths, I teetered across Uwinka Overlook, a gently swaying suspension bridge some 50m above the forest. As I stood high above towering ebonies and mahoganies, the rainforest panned out below me like a field of giant broccoli as far as the eye could see. I tried in vain to take in Nyungwe's vastness and verdure. Alone on the walkway, all I could hear was birdsong and distant waterfalls; all I could see was green interspersed with the bold red flowers on top of symphonia trees that monkeys love to eat. From up here, they looked tiny. I breathed in the cool moist air, exhilarated, feeling as if I had the whole rainforest to myself.

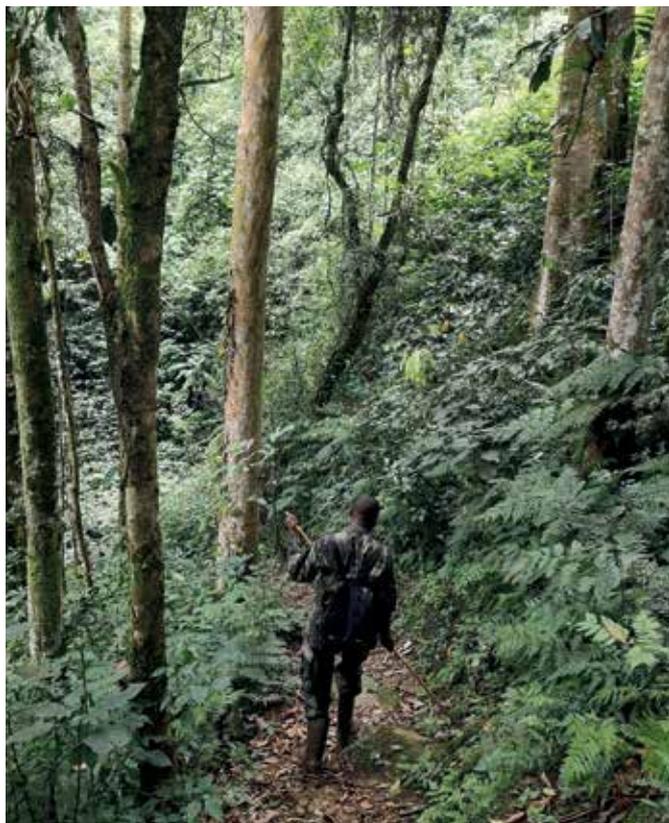
Back on terra firma, we wandered silently through a magical fairy tale world of luxuriant rainforest bursting with life, full of dangling vines, giant lobelias and fantastical ferns, moss-cushioned boulders and trees dripping with dew. Now and then, flashes of colour would dart through the greenery in the form of tiny regal sunbirds, dazzling green, yellow and red, and vivid blue Rwenzori turaco, showing off brilliant red underwings as they flew away.

The cool, fresh air had turned humid by now. Sitting quietly on a fallen log, I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply. The forest smelled earthy and moist. Sometimes, I heard sweet birdsong, sometimes the squeal of a monkey unseen, echoing from some faraway tree, or a buzzing insect or croak close by. And sometimes all I heard was dew dripping softly from the leaves.

Utterly at peace, absorbed by nature and the simplicity of that moment, I felt the forest embracing me, like a mother gently cradling a child.



PAUL NEL



**NYUNGWE  
IN NUMBERS  
PROVIDES  
70%  
OF RWANDA'S  
FRESHWATER  
1019  
sq km  
IN EXTENT  
1068  
RECORDED  
PLANT  
SPECIES  
322  
BIRD  
SPECIES  
75  
MAMMAL  
SPECIES**

farming and beekeeping. Communities will also benefit from increased tourism, a key factor in the park's future. A new, more affordable and eco-friendly lodge along the lines of Akagera's Ruzizi is planned. It will be managed by the park so that profits are channelled directly back into Nyungwe. African Parks' arrival has also piqued the interest of other operators.

"We must manage tourism development in the right way. We don't want it to be random," Jes tells me. "We also want tourists to have more activities, to spend more time in and around Nyungwe. We want to make visitors aware of what Nyungwe is about."

The labyrinth of hiking trails is getting a massive make-over, improved guidebooks are being produced, the reception area is being revamped and freelance guides are being trained to escort walkers. "We've trained seven from a group of 20 and we'll train the others next year. They're our ambassadors in the community."

New trails are being created too, including a casual two-hour walk to the beautiful, recently-discovered Ndambarare waterfall, and a shorter orchid loop. "We really think night walks would be a good addition," Jes says. "There are some great amphibians, frogs, hyraxes, bats and bush babies."

Thirteen primate species thrive in this rainforest – a quarter of all Africa's species – including L'Hoest's and Hamlyn's monkeys, both Albertine Rift endemics. Most visitors, however, come for chimpanzee tracking. "We want a better hold on the chimpanzee management," Gruner explains. "We're just using one group in Cyamudongo, a remnant forest. We want to track the other two habituated groups in the park, to avoid always relying on Cyamudongo."

"Other primates are habituated too – mangabeys, the L'Hoest monkey, blue monkeys and colobus," Jes adds. "They're all very calm."

He's also keen to create more child-friendly activities, including rope activities in the trees and vines. "There is something phenomenal about little kids walking through the forest and looking up at these massive trees," he adds.

Looking ahead, Nyungwe might even become a UNESCO World Heritage Site: the park joined its Tentative List this year. "It's a long process," Gruner confirms. "But it will make Nyungwe stand out on the international scene."

This magnificent fairy tale forest certainly deserves that. 

## future-proofing nyungwe

The plan to protect and develop the park, by **Sue Watt**

Montane rainforest and marshland come together in Nyungwe to create spectacular biodiversity, a home to endemic primates and birds. But its vast size, extensive borders and challenging topography render it vulnerable to poaching, illegal mining and encroachment from agriculture. To safeguard against this, in October 2020 the renowned conservation non-profit African Parks took on the management of Nyungwe for 20 years, in partnership with the Rwanda Development Board, and its future now looks bright.

"Right now, we're in transition," African Parks' Jes Gruner tells me. He's CEO of the new Nyungwe Management Company (NMC), responsible for running the park. "Our new all-Rwandan Park Management Unit will work on law enforcement, conservation, tourism, and community development."

As ever, community buy-in is vital. "There's a big community around here and they've been very good in supporting the protection of Nyungwe.

They hadn't benefitted much from the park before, apart from the government revenue sharing scheme," he continues. "We took on over 150 casual staff who are helping build a new HQ and we now have 170 full time staff. Local employment is a huge benefit and it helps ensure community collaboration."

Some 40 ex-poachers have also been employed in a classic 'poacher-turned-gamekeeper' scenario. "They've been helping us identify where they set snares, and they're now clearing the trails and access roads which were impassable."

Poaching here was rife and Nyungwe's border with Burundi creates further law enforcement issues. "We've already increased our ranger team and we're just starting two months of basic training, totally upskilling our rangers," Gruner says. "It's not poaching in the sense of ivory or rhino horn. It goes from squirrels and Gambian rats to duikers and bush pigs, which they sell in the villages."

Hence, NMC are trying to divert poachers to alternative income-generating projects including pig