

Rwanda: the Switzerland of Africa

As part of Rwanda Tourism Week, the Chamber of Tourism Board invited Rwanda to the country. TRAVEL INSIDE reporter Silvia Mettler was there.



Saturday morning 9.00 a.m. in Kigali, the capital of the East African country with around 13.2 million inhabitants. It is eerily quiet, the streets are empty. Apart from a few policemen checking road users, there is no one to be seen. What is going on there, the worried tourists ask themselves.

Henrik, the guide, explains: "Today is Umuganda". Every last Saturday of the month, all inhabitants of the whole country are asked to do community service for two hours at a central location in their community of residence. The tourist group is about to witness this. A few youths deviate from the path of virtue. They are roughly "encouraged" to work by the police.

Umuganda is state-imposed, is part of Vision 2050 and also reflects the atmosphere in the country. President Paul Kagame has been in power since the 1994 genocide and has taken the country to a very different level surprisingly quickly. "No one is alone, we help each other".

Land of 1000 hills

"We are the land of 1000 hills but also the land of 1000 tourism opportunities." With these words the Minister of Tourism opened the Rwanda Tourism Week in which mainly African countries participated. And she is right.

The various national parks such as Akagera and Niyugwe Forest Park are definitely worth a visit. Unfortunately, the 'Big Five' were not fully sighted, but the breathtaking suspension bridge in the lush mountain forest in Yungwe Forest National Park consoles over that. It offers just as much of an adventure. Rwanda is like Switzerland: green hilly to mountainous and full of natural beauty. That is just one of the parallels to our country.

In the footsteps of Dian Fossey

And suddenly there he is: a mountain gorilla and a silverback at that, male and over 12 years old. He rears up and shows himself in his full size and beauty. The encounter with the mountain gorillas in Volcanoes National Park is as mystical as it is overwhelming.

Even when the entire group pulled out their mobile phones, he remained calm as a cucumber. The gorillas rescued by Dian Fossey in the bamboo forest are probably the highlight of any Rwanda trip. The ranchers maintain a very careful tour management. Only about 100 people experience this adventure every day. This probably also justifies the price: the guided trekking costs around CHF 1500.

As diverse as Switzerland

The journey continues to the western part of the country, which covers some 26,338 square kilometres. Lake Kivu is hardly to be surpassed in beauty and somehow reminds one of Lake Lucerne. Rwanda does not (yet) have many hotels: hotel chains have long since established themselves and eco lodges can be found everywhere. However, there is a lack of middle-class hotels.

A special highlight in terms of luxury is the Cleo Hotel on Lake Kivu. A super-class hotel, also in terms of cuisine. Further up on Lake Kivu, where you can swim all year round, is the vibrant tourist town of Rubavo with beautiful beaches. The prospering tourism there is visible at every turn. Encouraging development, also for the head of tourism Frank Gisha Mugisha: "We are ready to receive Swiss guests."

Switzerland, by the way, has provided a lot of development aid; some parallels to our country are unmistakable. The multilingualism, the landlocked nature and last but not least, Rwandans tend to belong to the reserved African. One more reason to visit this enchanting country.

- Silvia Mettler, Kigali

Jackie Helfenberger: official contact person for Switzerland

Jackie Helfenberger has been active in Rwanda for a long time. She works with the government and the Rwanda Chamber of Tourism and is therefore the competent contact person for Rwanda business.

She knows the tourism infrastructure very well and can offer valuable support to tour operators and retailers. She is also available for tour guides. She helps the Chamber of Tourism to develop the market in Switzerland. In the near future, she will organise a trip on behalf of Rwandan tourism. Anyone interested in Rwanda is in good hands with Jackie Helfenberger.

In addition to her advisory work, Helfenberger is president of the Sangira Association. The association is committed to professional vocational training in the hotel, gastronomy, carpentry and horticulture sectors. In October 2022, for example, a gastronomy course started in the south of Rwanda with 140 students who complete a one-year training course with practical training. In addition to the school institute, a school restaurant is also being planned, as well as a school hotel in the distant future.