

# **Why Rwanda Isn't An Add-On Destination**

Suddenly there is nothing but mist. A thick blanket of cloud has whisked in like magic and completely swaddled us. Visibility zero.

Then as quickly as it arrives, the rain foreteller evaporates and the peaks of Mount Bisoke and Mount Karisimbi reveal themselves again. In the distance, there's a white carpet of wild pyrethrums which resemble overgrown untamed daisies. And then green. Every

single possible shade, from silvery eucalyptus to bright bamboo.

We're at Bisate Lodge, the teacher's pet of the glossy magazine world, and deservedly so.

Bisate is an architectural gem, discreetly embedded into the hillside as if it's existed there since the beginning of time. It is a world-class property and rivals any of the continent's top safari lodges in terms of style, attention to detail, cuisine, and the wonderful, warm people who work there.

Yet, the purpose of this post is not to shine a spotlight on Bisate Lodge, neither the brand new One & Only Gorilla's Nest (we were some of the first through the doors), nor Singita Kwitonda Lodge.

These stars of the luxury travel world have already earned Academy Award equivalents for their performance where press coverage is concerned. Each one is suited to its own audience and we will expand on the nuances separately.

For now, our focus is on the resilience, diversity, and extraordinary natural

beauty, which should end the misconception of Rwanda being an add-on destination and showcase her as a leading lady.

Arriving in Kigali on a Sunday morning, the streets are empty. Every so often, we pass ladies wearing green traffic vests, leaning over handmade straw brooms as they sweep the streets.

The city is immaculate, and there's a game to be made from scanning the roadside curbs for litter. Not a trace. There is a strict ban on plastic bags and tidiness has become a culture infused

through the entire country. On the last Saturday of each month, Rwandans take to the streets for Umuganda, a mandatory community workday when citizens do their bit to help clean up. The result is a spick-and-span environment, noticeably well-maintained and refuse-free.

I was a teenager when the Rwandan Genocide officially started. I say “officially” because civil war had been brewing long before. In fact, it was the night of my birthday, 6th April, when the plane carrying then-President Juvenal Habyarimana was shot down, signalling

the commencement of three months of terror and depravity, which claimed the lives of more than a million people.

As a young adult, I read books such as "Left to Tell" by Immaculée Ilibagiza and Gil Courtemanche's "Sunday at the Pool in Kigali", and recoiled in horror at the contamination of humankind.

Fast-forward twenty-five years, and my Rwandan age mates - people who might have been at school with me - would most likely have grown up with absent parents, siblings, friends and neighbours. "Before Genocide" and

“after Genocide”. Unsurprisingly, it was clear from the get-go that this is the point of reference for every Rwandan.

And yet, the overriding mindset in today’s Rwanda is very much “after” Genocide. The population is mostly young, and they are on a mission to unshackle themselves from a bleak history and move forward into a bright future. It was a deeply impressive and humbling experience being surrounded by such steadfast optimism alongside the energy of progression.