Rwanda

Country Facts
Population: 10,473,282
Languages: French, Kinyarwanda, English
Predominant Religions: Christian, traditional, Islamic
Time Zone: Two hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time
Voltage Requirements: 220 volts
Telephone Codes: 250, country code

Introduction:
Notorious for the gruesome 1994 genocide, Rwanda, the “land of a thousand hills,” is now a reasonably safe and increasingly popular travel destination. The country’s main attraction, the mountain gorillas, have miraculously survived — even thrived — despite a devastating civil war that brought poachers, settlers and rebel soldiers into their rugged park refuge.

The ethnically motivated war, which attracted worldwide media attention and eventually was documented by the movie Hotel Rwanda, resulted in the massacre of at least 1 million people between April and July 1994. Since then, however, the news out of Rwanda has mostly involved positive change and gradual reconciliation. Local and international tribunals have dealt with the perpetrators of the genocide, and the country held its first elections in 1999, paving the way for the unveiling of a democratic constitution and peaceful presidential election in 2003.

The Volcanoes National Park, home to the rare mountain gorillas, reopened in July 1999, and travelers can once again visit these gentle giants made famous by Dian Fossey.

Compassion in Rwanda:
Compassion International’s work in Rwanda began in 1979. As of 2010 more than 50,700 children participate in more than 190 child development centers. The Leadership Development Program serves more than 35 students. Compassion partners with churches to help them provide Rwandan children with the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and become all God has created them to be.

Cultural Information:
- Kinyarwanda, French and English are Rwanda’s official languages. Kiswahili is also sometimes used in commercial centers. Kinyarwanda is a tonal language. It uses the same alphabet as English, but without the letters q and x.
- Rwandans are considered more reserved than many people groups of East Africa.
- They value respect for others — especially elders and those in authority.
- Greetings are an important part of Rwandan culture. When being introduced for the first time, or when greeting a professional colleague, Rwandans shake right hands and may place the left hand under the right forearm as a sign of respect. Close friends and family greet one another with a hug.
• When communicating, body language, gestures and facial expressions are used to convey meaning, respect or emphasis. When an individual is interacting with a superior or elder, he or she usually avoids eye contact.
• The distance between people when they converse indicates their relationship: friends require little or no distance, while interacting with superiors or new acquaintances calls for more.
• Music is an important part of Rwandan life. Drums are the dominant instruments. At festivals and ceremonies, music and traditional dancing play a central role.
• Cattle are integral to Rwandan culture. How many cows a family owns has much to do with its economic – as well as social – standing. The subject of cattle comes up often. Discussing how many cows something (or someone) is worth is a Rwandan way of determining the importance of the item (or person).
• In any country, locals appreciate it when visitors make an effort to learn their language. Here are a few Kinyarwanda words you might find useful:
  o Hello – Muraho
  o Goodbye – Mwirirwe or Muramukye
  o Good morning – Mwaramutse
  o Good night – Ijoro ryiza
  o Please – Mubishoboye
  o Thank you – Murakoze
  o Yes – Yego
  o No – Oya
  o Man – Umugabo
  o Woman – Umugore
  o Girl – Umukobwa
  o Boy – Umuhungu

Dos and Don’ts:
• Do be aware that you’ll need cash for almost everything in Rwanda, including air tickets. Credit cards are accepted at only a few hotels in Kigali, and then it’s only MasterCard.
• Don’t expect to find anything in Rwanda the same as it was before the civil war. For example, the grounds of the once luxurious Rebero Horizon Hotel have been converted into the National Memorial Cemetery for genocide victims. Even the shops in Kigali that might look unchanged probably have new owners — with former owners having fled or been killed.
• Don’t refer to individual Rwandans as Hutu or Tutsi and avoid probing too deeply into the past of the Rwandans you meet — most of whom may have lost family members during the genocide.

Travel Tips

Personal Safety:
Contrary to outside perceptions, Rwanda is a comparatively safe country compared to many in Africa. The security situation has improved considerably in recent years, and most warnings
against travel to the country as a whole have been lifted. Violent crime aimed at tourists is unusual, but you should still take common sense precautions, such as safely locking away your valuables when you go out at night.

Leave at home all unnecessary credit cards, social security card, library cards and similar items you may routinely carry in your wallet. Do not take more cash than you reasonably require for that day. Use the room safe or hotel safe to secure valuables as well as additional cash. Secure cash in multiple locations — wallet, various pockets, money belts. Carry items in front pockets, not back pockets. Do not display large sums of money in public; only make visible the amount of money that approximates your purchase. Maintain a close awareness of your purse, wallet, backpack, etc. as well as the people around you. It’s a good idea to keep one hand or arm in constant contact with these items especially in areas of high people traffic. Never leave items with cash in them (purse, wallet, backpack, etc.) on a bus, car, or any other location, even if the vehicle is being watched by Compassion staff or Compassion-hired contractors. Stay alert and be cautious at all times. Don’t take safety & security for granted.

Health:
Sanitary conditions in tourist-oriented restaurants and hotels are close to Western standards, although — like anywhere in Africa — not obsessively sanitized. Most hot, freshly cooked food should be safe, but peel fresh fruit and raw vegetables before eating, choose meat that is cooked thoroughly, avoid local dairy products and assume the tap water is unsafe (stick with mineral water or other prepackaged or boiled drinks).

Most hospitals and clinics were destroyed during the 1994 civil war, but things have gradually returned to normal. Nevertheless, if you have very specific medicinal needs, it’s best to bring what you’ll need. Cholera and malaria, including the chloroquine-resistant variety, are present, so ask your doctor about precautions. Vaccinations for yellow fever are mandatory for travelers to Rwanda.

Bring plenty of insect repellent. Skin infections are common; even the smallest wound should be disinfected and covered with a bandage. For the latest information, contact your country’s health advisory agency.

We strongly advise you to contact the CDC [www.cdc.gov] or check with your personal physician for more information about your specific health needs while traveling, including any recommendations for immunizations. *Yellow fever vaccinations are mandatory for entrance into Rwanda; Cholera vaccinations and anti-malarial medication may be advised.*

Money:
The local unit of currency is the Rwandan Franc [RF]. Hard currency can be exchanged at a number of banks and so-called *forex bureaux* in Kigali and other large towns. Traveler’s checks and credit cards are not widely accepted and should not be relied upon except in an emergency.
Weather:
Rwanda is only 2 degrees south of the equator, but its high altitude means temperatures are seldom extreme [generally in the 70s F / 22-27 C during the day and the 60s F / 16-21 C at night — expect frost in the high mountains]. July through September and January are the dry seasons. During the rainy seasons, heavy downpours occur almost daily, but after the showers are over, the rest of the day may be sunny.

Dress:
Bring plenty of light clothing for the day but also some warmer apparel, such as sweaters or sweatshirts, for the [sometimes quite chilly] evenings. Between dusk and dawn, wear long sleeves, long trousers and socks to minimize mosquito bites. For hikes in the mountains, sturdy shoes and rainproof gear are strongly recommended, as well as a hat and sunscreen.

All information taken from Weissmann Reports, the World Factbook and Compassion International.