

RENEWED RWANDA HAS COOL, CLEAN URBAN SCENE

Tidy Kigali offers good hotels and dining, hot nightlife, thriving arts and more



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The central African country of Rwanda is the personification of progress. It has transformed over the past 30 years while it healed from a brutal civil war and reconciliation brought people together. Now Rwanda is well-known for safari tourism, especially gorilla trekking in remote jungles, and the capital city of Kigali has become a gateway to the wilderness adventures. But Kigali also has developed its own urban scene, for locals and visitors from around the world. The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) held its first African global summit in Rwanda, and it was a golden opportunity for the burgeoning country to show off its modern accomplishments to more than 1,500 delegates from nearly 50 countries. “We are delighted to be the host city for WTTC’s first African summit,” said Francis Gatare, the CEO of the Rwanda Development Board. “We are marking a milestone.” It was a solid choice. Rwanda is a tiny jewel — clean, safe and organized. To generalize, the people are gentle, friendly, mostly Catholic and soft-spoken in Kinyarwanda, English and/or French.

Revitalization: Kigali has a sampling of what many international cities have: Good hotels, cool restaurants, local fashion shops, a tech sector, contemporary art, a hot nightclub scene, sport stadiums popular for soccer, cricket and basketball, and beauty salons doing hair extensions and gel manicures. In short, the modern part of Kigali is almost like home — with some exceptions. Among the things that Kigali does not have is litter. Residents do community service once a month tidying their neighbourhoods. Single-use plastics are banned and since smoking in public is illegal, there are no butts on the streets. On the civic side, Rwanda has improved roads, added strict speed limits, introduced car-free days and supported e-vehicles, including buses, cars and motor-bike taxis. There is subsidized medical care (free if you are over 50) and three months of maternity leave (one week for fathers). Rwanda is the sixth most gender-equal country in the world according to the World Economic Forum, and women work in everything from farming to finance. Scores of women’s co-operatives fabricate crafts and clothing, and voters have elected a Parliament that is 65 per cent female, arguably the largest proportion in the world. Yvonne Makolo is CEO of RwandAir and also the first female chair of the International Air Transport Association



The World Tourism and Travel Council held its first African Global Summit in Kigali, Rwanda, at the contemporary Radisson Blu Hotel, left, with the Convention Centre, right, lit in the colours of Rwanda’s flag. RADISSON BLU HOTEL AND CONVENTION CENTRE, KIGALI

IF YOU GO
World Travel & Tourism Council: wttc.org.
Rwanda tourism: visitrwanda.com.
(IATA), whose head office is in Montreal. RwandAir, clean and efficient, flies to London, Paris, Africa, the Middle East and throughout Africa, and has plans for expansion. It also is partnering with Qatar Airways, rated the best in the world seven times in the past several years, to build a larger airport. For now, Kigali’s existing terminal is compact, with five gates and two business lounges. The tantalizing duty-free shops sell artisanal products, plus Rwanda’s excellent coffee and tea, as well as gin, rum and chocolate liqueur made by 1000 Hills Distillery. **Hotels:** David Marriott, chairman of Marriott International, the world’s largest hospitality company with nearly 8,600 properties, addressed the WTTC virtually: “Marriott helped to co-found WTTC nearly 30 years ago and we have goals in common around the world. The key to the hotel industry is that public and private sectors can co-operate and build together.”

Kigali’s major hotels are well-maintained and up-to-date, many with swimming pools, spas and TV with Disney and comedy channels. The major establishments merit a rating of between 4 and 4.7 (out of 5) by North American standards. The business and leisure duo of Kigali Marriott and the new Four Points by Sheraton Kigali are among the city’s highest-profile properties, both with lots of dining and outdoor lounges. The contemporary Radisson Blu Hotel & Convention Centre is a modern destination for conference-goers. Hotel Milles Collines was portrayed in the 2004 movie Hotel Rwanda when it was a safe haven during the country’s conflict, although most of the scenes were filmed elsewhere. Having marked 50 years in 2023, the Milles Collines was Rwanda’s first posh hotel and it still is valued for its swimming pool, local art and evenings of Indigenous cuisine and dance. (Rwanda is known as “the land of 1,000 hills.”) The Kigali Serena is a deluxe full-service hotel wrapped around a ravishing courtyard of tropical landscaping, with waterfalls and a swimming pool. It has an excellent front desk staff and extras like Maisha Spa & Health Club, a unisex beauty salon and a gift shop with local crafts.

The poolside bistro Sokoni has great cocktails, South African and international wines and urwagwa (banana beer). Watch for happy hour with a live band, plus an African buffet on Fridays and a family barbecue on Saturdays. *Among the things Kigali does not have is litter. Single-use plastics are banned, and since smoking in public is illegal, there are no butts on the streets.* Serena’s tantalizing buffets are loaded with meat, tilapia, tropical fruits and juices, zingy salads with avocado and tomatoes. Rwandan dishes include peanut soup, isombe (a vegetable stew of cassava leaves and spices), sambaza (tiny sardines from Lake Kivu) and nyama choma (grilled beef or goat). rochelle@rochellelash.com

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