

Everything I wish I knew Before Booking My Rwanda Safari



Ella McKendrick



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I'VE LEARNT THE HARD WAY SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO

I first set foot on the African continent back in 2012. Naive and ill-experienced, it would take trips until I realised that booking with an overseas travel agent wasn't actually the best option.

Sitting over a roaring fire in the bush of South Africa, I found myself talking to a couple who were also on safari. They told me that they'd booked their safari with a local tour operator and the difference in price compared to mine was staggering. I couldn't believe I'd been paying over the odds for so long!

Since that moment I have always booked my safaris through local tour operators. Though this wasn't the end of my struggles.

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of local tour operators available in each country, all seemingly offering the same services. As I quickly learned however, not all tour operators are created equal and careful research is required to find the best ones.

From ill-thought-out itineraries with more time on the road than on game drives to unfriendly guides,

bookings at run-down accommodations and so on, the tour operator that you choose is very important.

I've now got dozens of trips to Africa under my belt and been on hundreds of safaris across 10 different countries. I now have a rigorous process in place for finding the best tour operators and I've built up a list of tried and tested tour operators who I can trust. Contacts who you will hear from shortly! As well as putting you in contact with my recommendations, in this guide I'm going to give you dozens of tips and tricks to help you arrange the perfect safari of your dreams.



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MY RECOMMENDED TOUR OPERATORS

It's taken me hundreds of hours worth of research and numerous safaris to finally have a handful of tour operators who I feel confident recommending.

The first part of the process involved scouring the internet for every local tour operator in Rwanda, putting every single one into a spreadsheet and noting down key facts such as online reviews. My final list was several hundred tour operators long.

I then contacted every single operator, requesting a quote for my upcoming safari.

I reviewed every proposal meticulously, comparing them on factors such as price, attention to detail, accommodation choice, and simply if they've included everything I asked for (you'll be amazed how many didn't do that). Speed or response and friendliness was also important to me.

This process narrowed down my favourites considerably. But the search wasn't over yet.

I then went on safari with all of the tour operators who had so far passed my checks. There was a vast difference in the experiences I received and I knew that I wouldn't be comfortable recommending some of them.

My personal experiences gave me a small handful of tour operators who I trusted. However, the story doesn't end here.

I frequently review my recommended tour operators, ensuring their prices remain competitive and their reviews remain top-notch.

I also ask every customer at the end of their safari how they found the experience and even the smallest complaint is taken into account.

I'd also like to add here that I get contacted multiple times a week by tour operators who wish to be part of my recommendations. However, I'm passionate about only recommending the best so that you can have a seamless safari.



COST OF A RWANDA SAFARI?

The exact cost of your safari can vary depending on a range of factors, which we'll go into shortly.

The typical costs of a private Rwanda safari start at \$650 per person per day (assuming 2 people in your group). This price assumes budget accommodation throughout and that you'll include gorilla tracking in your itinerary.

Your price per day will then go up if you upgrade your accommodation or vehicle or fly between parks.

See the chart below to see how the prices increase depending your comfort level.

If you are a solo traveller the prices will be higher as fixed costs can't be split between you and anyone else, and if you are travelling as part of a larger group,

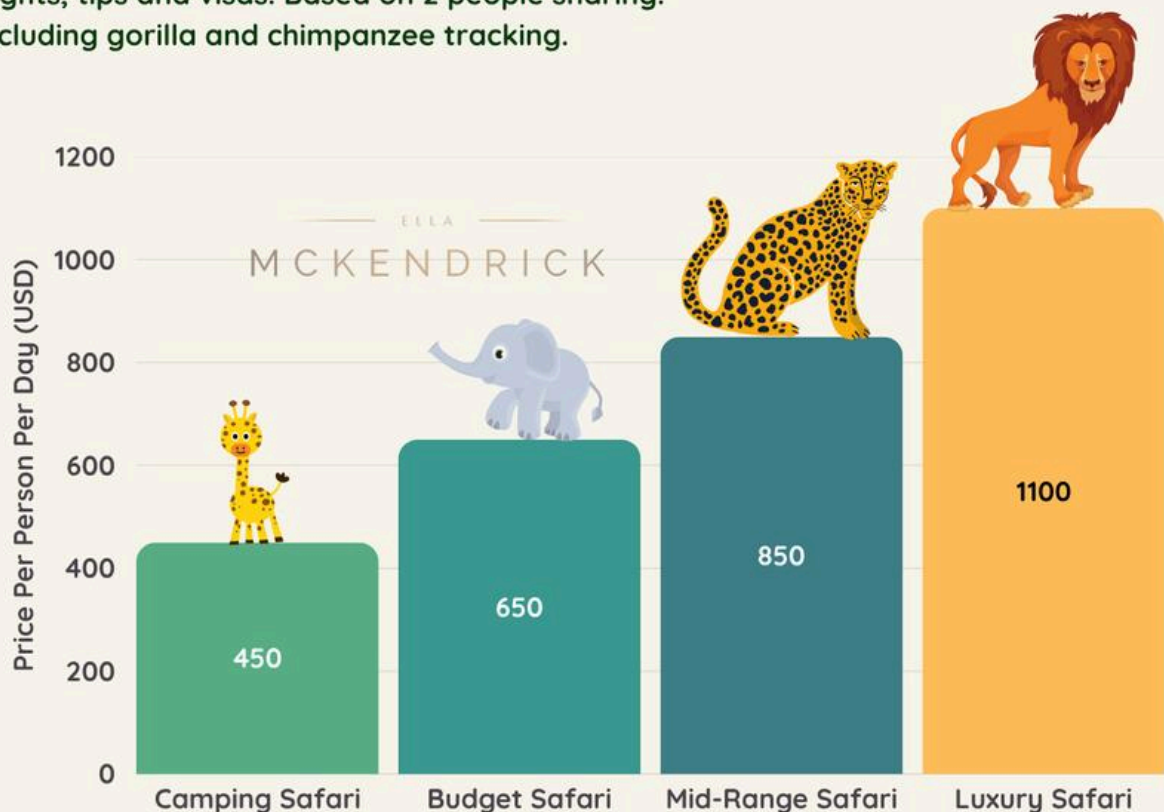
prices will be slightly lower. For example, your safari vehicle has a fixed cost per day, so the more of you there are, the more people there are to shoulder this cost.

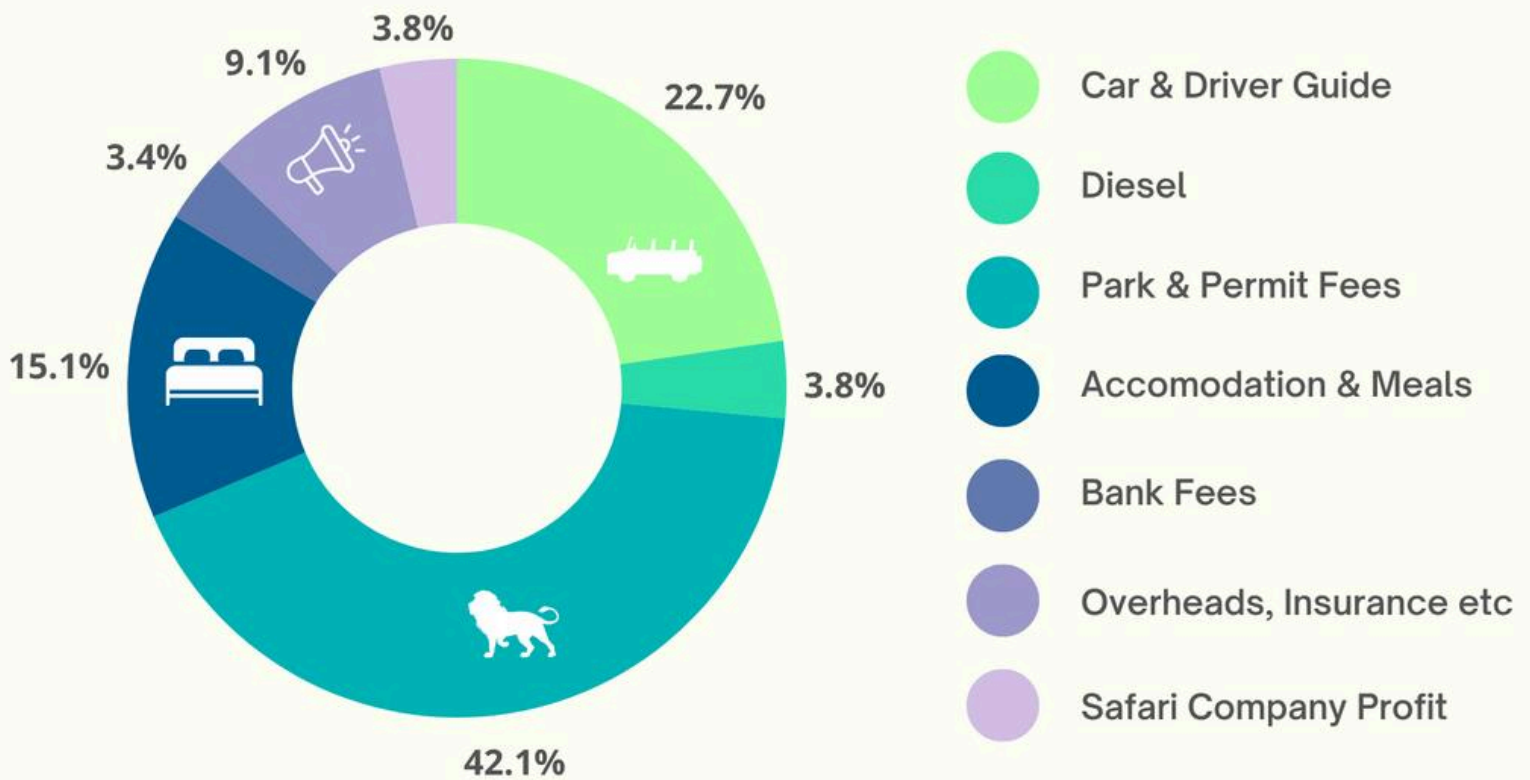
I'll go into more detail on the breakdown of safari costs on the following page but the overwhelming bulk of the cost is made up of park fees and accommodation costs.

Booking your safari through a local tour operator is, in my opinion, the perfect balance between cost-effectiveness whilst still enabling you to have a stress-free experience. It's a lot cheaper than booking through an international tour operator and only costs a little bit more than organising a DIY self-drive safari.

Rwanda Safari Costs By Type

Typical full board price per person per day, excluding international flights, tips and visas. Based on 2 people sharing. Including gorilla and chimpanzee tracking.





Based on a mid-range safari for 2 people

DETAILED SAFARI

COST BREAKDOWN

The above chart shows the rough cost breakdown of a safari booked with a local tour operator (based on 2 people in your group). As you can see, park fees (including permits) make up the bulk of your safari cost, coming in at over 40% of the total cost.

Your car, driver and accommodation costs make up around 37%. The remaining 33% is split between fuel, bank fees, the local company's overheads and finally less than 4% profit for the local tour operator.

Let's run through the costs of a typical day on safari in Rwanda to give you an example of these costs in play.

A day spent gorilla tracking is first made up of permits. It's \$1,500 per person to go on a gorilla trek.

Lodges near Volcanoes National Park typically start at \$50 per person per night on full board.

Our costs for the day are already up to \$1,550 per person without even adding on the price of the car, driver, fuel and the company's overheads (for example, the salary of the safari consultant who helped you

book your trip).

Gorilla tracking is the most expensive part of a safari in Uganda. Chimpanzee tracking fees are \$250 per person and park fees for game reserves are around \$45 per person.

At this point you may be wondering why the gorilla and chimpanzee tracking permits are so high.

Gorilla and chimpanzee tracking permits are limited. Yet the permit fees go towards conserving the animals and their habitat and so costs need to be enough to cover the cost of this.

Rangers and trackers go out each day to secure the area and to check on the animals, vets are called if a gorilla or chimpanzee is sick and local communities are compensated for living alongside wild animals which sometimes damage their crops. So whilst the costs are high, they are truly going towards a worthwhile cause.

YOUR SAFARI COSTS

Curious to know more about the factors determining your safari cost? I'll detail the biggest variables that have an impact on your safari cost below.

Your Comfort Level

This will have the biggest impact on your safari cost. Opting for budget accommodation choices rather than mid-range can decrease your safari costs by as much as \$100 per person per day.

I will caveat here that the food for your safari is provided by your accommodation so the better the accommodation, the better the food.

Group Size

The bigger your group, the bigger your savings (up to a full vehicle). Solo travellers have it the hardest and as they have no one to share their fixed costs with. Note however that some key costs such as gorilla permits don't change with group size so there's a limit on how much you can save here.

The Activities You Do

Gorilla and chimpanzee tracking are the most expensive activities you can do in Rwanda. By omitting these from your itinerary, focusing instead on golden monkey trekking in Volcanoes National Park and a safari in Akagera National Park, you can save significantly.

The Time of Year

Accommodation fees vary depending on the time of year that you visit. You can save as much as 40% off some lodges by visiting out of season. Note savings are higher for more luxurious accommodation choices.

Mode of Transport

Rwanda offers a range of different vehicles that you can go on safari in, including regular SUVs, minivans and Land Cruisers. Land Cruisers are more luxurious but cost over \$100 per day extra.

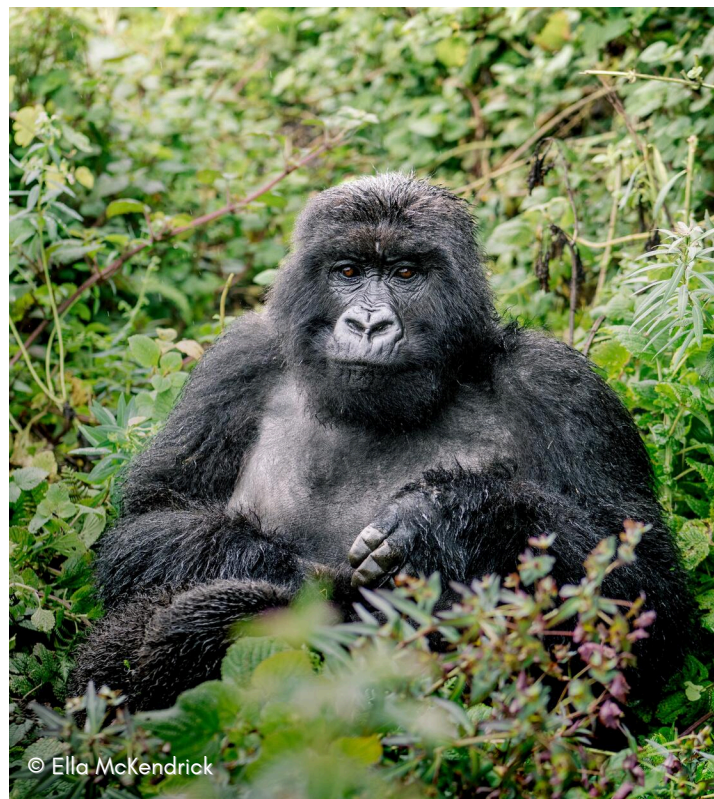
Domestic flights between locations would increase costs again. At present, internal flights are limited, but I can see a time in future where it's possible to fly between parks.



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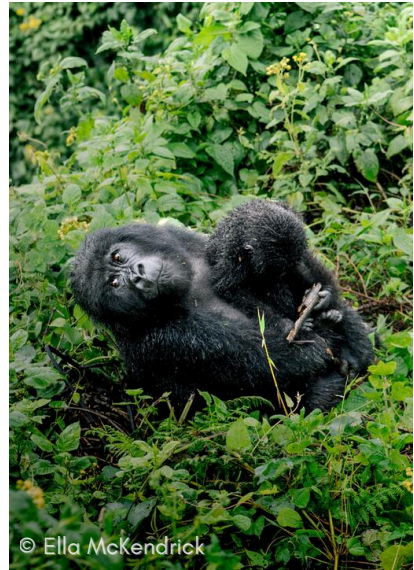
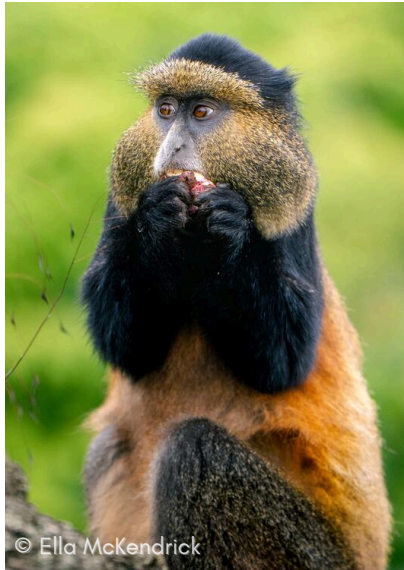
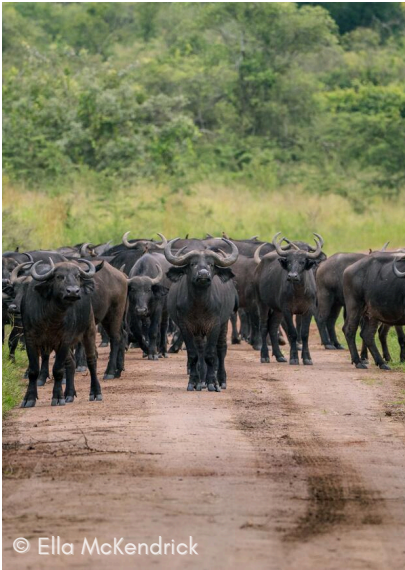


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WHEN SHOULD YOU VISIT RWANDA



Rwanda has four distinct seasons, each determined by the rains. In my opinion, the only time of year that I'd recommend you potentially avoid is the long rainy season. Every other time of year is a good time to visit.

I'll delve into the pros and cons of each season below to help you make the right choice for you.

The Long Dry Season (June - mid-October)

Pros: the best weather, dryer conditions make for easier gorilla and chimpanzee treks

Cons: parks are busy, costs are high

The long dry season yields dry, sunny days with low chances of rain. The vegetation has died back, making animal spotting easy. The dry ground makes gorilla and chimpanzee trekking easier. These benefits make it by far the most popular time to visit and you can expect parks to be busy and costs to be at their highest as a result.

The Short Rainy Season (mid-October - December)

Pros: parks are quiet, prices are lower than the dry seasons, rain is typically limited to the evening

Cons: chance of rain each day

The arrival of the short rains makes the vegetation thicken and turn green. Lots of babies animals start being born as a result.

The rains are typically limited to the late afternoons meaning that most of the day is still pleasant, and the wildlife sightings are still great.

Less visitors in the park means that sightings are more exclusive and lodge rates are lower than in the dry seasons.

The Short Dry Season (January - mid-March)

Pros: good weather, quieter than the long dry season

Cons: some rain still possible

The weather is better than the short rainy season but chances of rain are higher than the long dry season.

Whilst not as busy as the long dry season, this is the second busiest time of year and prices reflect that.

The Long Rainy Season (mid-March - May)

Pros: the quietest and cheapest time to visit

Cons: lots of rain, some lodges close completely, roads can become impassible

This time of year typically has the worst weather. However, the long rains have become more unpredictable in recent years. They sometimes don't come at all whilst sometimes, they cause extreme flooding.

Due to the bad weather, this is the quietest time of year and as a result has the best prices.

Wildlife viewing is still good at this time of year but the unpredictability of the weather can make visiting a bit of a gamble.

HOW TO CRAFT THE PERFECT RWANDA ITINERARY

Deciding on your safari itinerary is in my opinion the second most important factor in having a great safari, after choosing your tour operator. Your itinerary of choice determines how long you spend on the road, which parks you visit and how long you spend in each one. All of these choices can affect your enjoyment and what animals you see.

Before we dive into the pros and cons of each location, let's first discuss distances between each park to see what's do-able given the desired length of your trip.

The below map gives you the top destinations in Rwanda so you can see their relative locations to one another. The distances between each location by road are as follows:

Kigali to Akagera: 3 hours

Akagera to Volcanoes: 8 hours

Volcanoes to Lake Kivu: 3 hours

Lake Kivu to Nyungwe: 3-4 hours

Nyungwe to Kigali: 5 hours



H H P A K V SHOULD YOU VISIT?

Volcanoes National Park ★★★★★

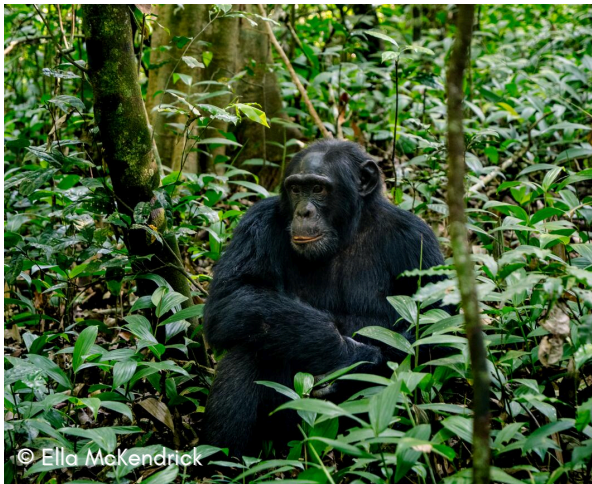
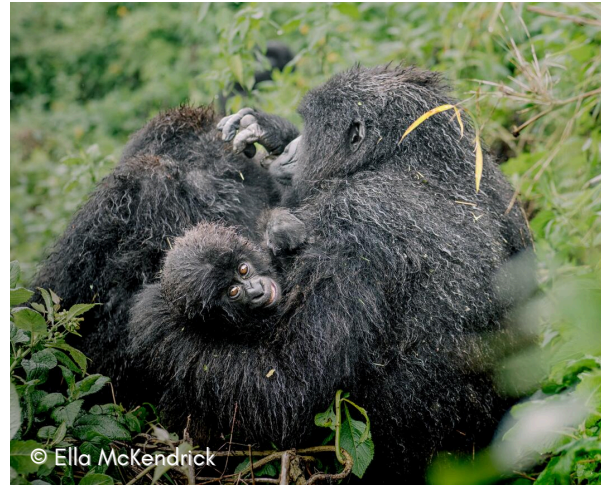
Highlights: mountain gorillas, golden monkeys

How long to spend here: 2 nights minimum

Distance from Kigali: 5 hours

Distance to Nyungwe: 7 hours

Tips: Gorilla and golden monkey trekking both only take place in the morning so if you wish to do both, you'll need 2 full days in Volcanoes National Park.



Nyungwe National Park ★★★★★☆

Highlights: chimpanzees, canopy walk

How long to spend here: 1 night minimum

Distance from Akagera: 8 hours

Distance to Kigali: 5 hours

Tips: Chimp tracking starts at 5am so arrive the night before. It's possible to do chimp trekking and the canopy walk in a day but it's tiring so allow for two nights here if you want a more relaxed pace.

Akagera National Park ★★★★★☆

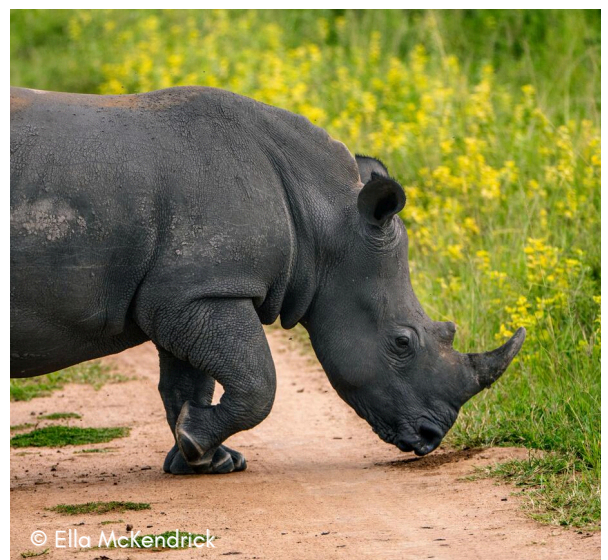
Highlights: Big Five, Lake Ihema boat cruise

How long to spend here: 2 nights minimum

Distance from Volcanoes: 8 hours

Distance from Kigali: 5 hours

Tips: Spend at least one night in the south and one night in the north as each section has different highlights. Arrive in time for a sunset boat cruise on Lake Ihema and then journey to the north the following day.





Lake Kivu



Highlights: Napoleon Island, Monkey Island

How long to spend here: Half a day

Distance from Volcanoes: 3 hours

Distance to Nyungwe: 3-4 hours

Tips: Located between Volcanoes and Nyungwe National Parks, Lake Kivu makes a wonderful lunch-time stop-over to break up the journey. A boat tour takes around 3 hours.

FAQS

WHAT ARE RWANDA'S ENTRY REQUIREMENTS?

To enter Rwanda you need at least 6 months left on your passport. Many nationalities, including UK citizens, and other Commonwealth nations are entitled to 30 days visa-free. Other nations, including USA can obtain a visa on arrival. There are no mandatory vaccinations for entering Rwanda unless you are travelling from a country with a risk of Yellow Fever. More information on this is provided in my *'Good To Know Before You Go'* guide which you'll receive once you've booked with one of my recommended tour operators

IS THERE MALARIA IN RWANDA?

Yes there is a risk of malaria in Rwanda. I'd recommend wearing long-sleeved clothing and bug spray to decrease your risk of bites. I also recommend consulting your doctor about the possibility of anti-malarial tablets.

IS RWANDA SAFE?

I have always felt completely safe in Uganda. Just take the usual precautions when out in busy towns and cities, such as not flashing valuables or walking after dark to avoid petty crime. More information in my *'Good to Know Before You Go'* guide.

DO I PAY MORE BY BOOKING THROUGH SAFARIS BY ELLA?

No. I have an agreement with each of my recommended tour operators which promises you a best price guarantee.

This means that the price that they give you is their best price and you won't get a better price by contacting them directly through their website.

HOW HAVE OTHER PEOPLE FOUND THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH YOUR RECOMMENDED TOUR OPERATORS?

Feedback from customers who have booked with my recommended tour operators has been overwhelmingly positive. But don't just take my word for it, you can [read over 150 reviews here](#).

I ask every customer for feedback at the end of their safari and each piece of feedback I take onboard. Whilst 98% of the of feedback is 100% positive, any critical feedback I receive, no matter how small, is noted down and passed to the tour company's owner for them to ensure it doesn't happen again. For example, someone told me that their guide seemed tired and so I passed the feedback to the tour operator who told me they'd implement more time off for guides between safaris.

If I receive the same complaint on two occasions, I will then review the tour operator and ultimately if they don't fix the issue, I would have to stop recommending them. However, the tour operators have been extremely receptive to feedback and I've never received the same complaint about one of them twice as the tour operators are passionate about providing the best services possible.

DO YOU KEEP IN TOUCH THROUGHOUT MY SAFARI?

Yes! You get my help and support throughout the whole booking process and safari experience. I have direct access to the tour company owners and so can ensure speedy responses and resolutions to any queries you may have.

For example, a few months ago one of my recommended tour operators informed a customer of a lodge change due to recent reports of the food going downhill, but due to the last-minute nature of the change it took some time to find a new lodge to match the customer's specifications. The customer let me know she was worried and I was able to speak to the company owner. Once aware of the situation, the owner swiftly got involved and started messaging the customer and the situation was resolved incredibly quickly. The customer went on to have an incredible safari and loved the new lodge.

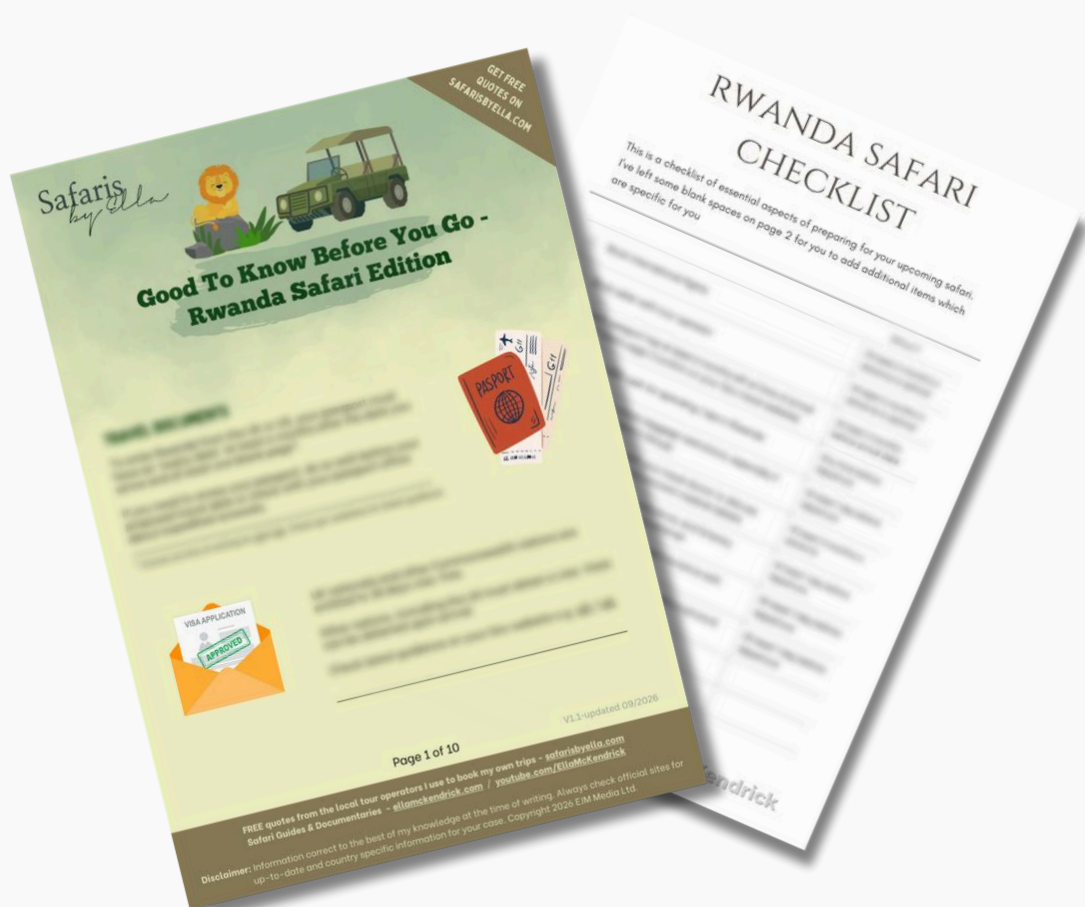
ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE

If you've found this guide helpful, you'll be pleased to know that there are more guides on the way!

Once you've made your booking with one of my recommended tour operators, I'll send you the next guide in the series: 'Good To Know Before You Go*'.
*

This 10 page guide contains everything you need to know about preparing for your upcoming safari, including entry requirements, a packing list, device charging guidance, tipping guidelines and much more.

I will also provide useful checklists so you don't forget a single thing!



*If your safari is taking place within 12 months of booking, let me know as soon as you've booked by replying to any email from me, to ensure you get your guide asap.

**FREE quotes from the local tour operators I use to book my own trips - safarisbyella.com
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Disclaimer: Information correct to the best of my knowledge at the time of writing. Always check official sites for up-to-date and country specific information for your case.



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