



We learned that the poachers who once killed gorillas are now employed as guides – they find the gorillas so the tourists can visit them.

Intuition or fear?

Intuition is a traveller's closest ally.

by **Phillipa Huynh**

You can't go there! Don't you know what happened? Who knows what will happen to you there!?" I was completely taken aback by my friend's reaction after I told her I was going to Rwanda. She wasn't the only one. Having no reason to doubt my intuition, I pushed the words to the back of my mind.

As I walked onto the tarmac at Kigali airport, her warnings rang in my ears. When three Australian missionaries looked at us with horror when I told them I hadn't arranged a taxi to our hotel, I started to question if I was the one out of my mind. For their own peace of mind, they invited me to share their taxi.

Safely in my hotel that night, I checked in with myself. Was everything going to be okay? Was the concern of my friend warranted? Was I being flippant about visiting this country?

Our first morning in Kigali was actually hilarious. With my Irish-white skin, and my Vietnamese-descent husband we stood out like a giraffe in a pack of zebras!

Rwanda is clearly not a tourist destination. We lost count of how many motorcyclists nearly had collisions unable to take their eyes off us. Amidst

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much confusion, we found the bus depot and bought tickets to Ruhengeri, a small country town two hours north-west of Kigali and right near the Volcanoes National Park.

The bus ride was a highlight in itself with happy people walking along the roads, kids waving to us as we went by, up-beat music pumping out of the bus stereo and gorgeous rolling hills in every direction.

If they didn't often see tourists in Kigali, they sure don't see them in Ruhengeri! And with a lack of a decent map, it was entertaining asking for directions. The cheeky smiles on the locals' faces made us wonder if they were sending us on a wild goose chase.

That night, we watched the movie Hotel Rwanda, the true story of the horrific genocide of 1994. It was devastating. Terrifying. But most of all, it was sad, truly, utterly sad. How could this happen in the world in the 1990s?! But the world was deaf to their cries and up to 1 million Tutsi people were slaughtered.

The next morning we suddenly woke to what sounded like a riot. Fresh with the visions of a bloody massacre with an echo of my friend's warning we were, quite frankly, terrified. We hid behind the curtains in our room, bars across the windows thinking the absolute worst. And then it stopped.

When our driver arrived to take us to see the gorillas the next morning, I carefully asked what the noise would have been. He laughed and replied,

'It was the police doing their training drills'. Relieved but ashamed at our assumptions, we began asking him dozens of questions about life in Rwanda. We asked about the genocide, about daily life, about attitudes towards the rest of the world (given they were virtually ignored throughout the genocide), about why we saw no begging, about the state of politics and corruption.

That's when we began to piece together a very different story. We learned about the social justice system where a village chief is respected for being wise, firm and fair, and how anyone who does wrong by the village will be excommunicated. This rarely happens, but, because the village is so important to each person, it is a very strong deterrent.

We discovered it is not socially acceptable to beg - people are expected to earn an honest living. We discovered plastic bags have been banned since 2008 that is why there is no litter. We discovered that the US\$500 we paid to see the gorillas goes to real conservation and the local community.

We learned that the poachers who once killed gorillas are now employed as guides - they find the gorillas so the tourists can visit them. We learned about the active campaign against corruption to ensure that the lessons of yesterday would not need to be learned again tomorrow.

We also learned that tourists never travel alone.

We went on to see some gorillas up close. We saw the border of the DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo) and the beautiful Lake Kivu in Gisenyi. We spent nearly three hours at the genocide memorial museum. We even spoke to the very talented actor, Edward Norton.

But the real highlight of Rwanda was the people who lovingly embraced us and treated us like celebrities. We didn't want to be treated any better or worse than anyone else, but it's a part of their culture to take care of outsiders/strangers. Their cheeky nature and simple living make them some of the happiest people we have ever been blessed to visit in the world.

I left Rwanda with a sense of awe and wonderment. The Rwandans have come a long way since the atrocities of the 90s and their spirit stands strong and united. People are happy, kids smile and play. Their nature is warm and inviting.

The feelings of my friend were based on fear, not fact, and definitely not intuition. No, nothing happened to me. That was Rwanda's ugly past; not her charming present. ■

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Phillipa, a kinesiologist working in Park Orchards and Thornbury, Victoria, teaches you how to make your life 'fit' again. A big believer in positive change, Phillipa teaches you to find fresh perspectives.



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