**RWANDA**

 



**THE FACTS**

Rwanda is a landlocked East African country whose green, mountainous landscape has earned it the nickname “Land of a Thousand Hills.” Its renowned Volcanoes National Park is home to mountain gorillas and golden monkeys. Bordering Congo and Uganda, the park encompasses 4,507m-tall Mt. Karisimbi and 4 other forested volcanoes. Kigali, the nation's sprawling capital, has a vibrant restaurant and nightlife scene.

**CAPITAL**: Kigali

**POPULATION**: 11.78 million (2013) World Bank

**PRESIDENT**: Paul Kagame

**PRIME MINISTER**: Anastase Murekezi

**OFFICIAL LANGUAGES**: Kinyarwanda, English, French

**MAJOR RELIGION(S**): Roman Catholic 56.5%, Protestant 26%, Adventist 11.1%, Muslim 4.6%, indigenous beliefs 0.1%, none 1.7%.

**MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS**: Hutu (Bantu) 84%, Tutsi (Hamitic) 15%, Twa (Pygmy) 1%

**NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES**: Burundi, Uganda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania

**5 THINGS YOU PROBABLY DIDN’T KNOW ABOUT RWANDA**

1. **Rwanda was ranked as the 5thsafest country in the world by the Gallup Global Law and Order 2015 Report** with a score of 85 – behind Singapore, Hong Kong, Norway and Spain. People walk the streets safely in the middle of the day and at night, which you will not find in many African Countries.
2. **Kigali, the capital city of Rwanda, is the cleanest city in Africa.** Rwanda banned plastic bags in 2008. While you will find mountains of garbage in our neighbouring countries, Rwanda’s streets are clean. Every citizen contributes to this cleanliness. Every last Saturday of the month, from 8 am to 11 am, citizens ranging between the ages of 18 to 65 years come together for a compulsory community service called Umuganda. Umuganda in Kinyarwanda (the language spoken in Rwanda) means coming together in common purpose to achieve an outcome. This is a traditional concept of calling on all family members, friends, and neighbour’s to get a difficult task completed. This concept was utilized by the government to bring a torn country together to reconstruct itself.
3. **Rwanda ranks number 1 in the world with the highest number of women in national parliaments.** 63.8% of the Rwandan Parliament are women. Before the Rwandan Genocide in 1994, the parliament was made up of only 18% of women at most. The 2003 Rwandan constitution provides for a minimum 30 per cent quota for women in all decision-making organs.
4. **90.6% of the Rwandan population is enrolled in the national health insurance system called Mutuelle de Sante**. This community-based health insurance system was implemented in 1999, and has made tremendous impacts to the health of all Rwandans. This insurance is accepted at all health centres and accepted at some big hospitals in the country. This system is organized on a household basis, where it costs approximately $2 per family member annually. There is an additional 10% service fee paid up front at every visit to the hospital. Two decades after the genocide, the life expectancy has doubled up to 65 years.
5. **Rwanda has one of the fastest growing economies in Africa.** Its GDP growth rate since 2003 is 7% – 8%. According to McKinsey 7 Company’s report, Rwanda is ranked the 6th country in the world with the fastest growing economy. Rwanda’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased from 4.7% in 2013 to 7.0% in 2014. World Bank’s annual “Doing Business 2016” puts Rwanda as the 2nd easiest country in Africa to do business with in Sub-Saharan Africa, and first in Eastern Africa.

**CULTURAL NORMS**

**GREETINGS**

Men greeting Men – A handshake is appropriate in most situations.  Handshakes tend to be energetic and very often linger through the greeting process and sometimes the entire conversation which may include walking where it is common to continue hold/shake hands.  As a show of respect/ deference it is common to grasp the right forearm with your left hand when shaking hands.  In casual situations a low hand slap is common.  Many men also share a light touching of the side of forehead to the side of the other person’s forehead—first the right side, then the left.

Women greeting Women – A handshake and/or nod of acknowledgment is appropriate in most situations.  If you would like to show great respect you may also place your left hand over your right elbow/forearm when handshaking. Many times women will hold hands with other women, and often the handshake is prolonged into this hand-holding. . Close friends or family members usually hug and exchange kisses on the cheek, alternating sides.  If you are unsure what to do, just follow the lead of your Rwandan counterpart.

Greetings between Men & Women – Appropriate greetings depend on the nature of the relationship and region. A handshake is usually appropriate but it is best to wait for the woman to extend her hand, otherwise a bow or a nod of acknowledgment will suffice.

Note: It’s a good idea to use your right hand when shaking hands. Shaking hands is expected in business or government meetings.

**COMMUNICATION STYLE**

* Rwandans tend to communicate more directly in certain situations and indirectly in others.  For example, people may ask whether or not you are married and/or have children, but may not directly voice their displeasure in a public setting.
* Rwandans may avoid telling the truth if it might hurt or upset the person they are speaking with.  While it may be seen as lying by some, most Rwandans feel that they are being sensitive to the person’s feelings.
* It’s best to avoid asking about someone’s ethnicity, making any referral to the war/genocide, discussing politics, or sex.
* If you ask about someone’s family, be prepared to hear that many may have been killed.  An appropriate response would be, “I am very sorry for your loss”.
* Good topics of conversation include: food, the Rwandan landscape, your home country, sports, and the weather.
* Humor plays a big role in communicating and most Rwandans enjoy a good joke.  However, it is best to avoid sarcasm as it may not translate well, if at all.
* Rwandans tend to be very indirect, talking around issues instead of discussing them directly. Conversations are usually preceded by questions about the family, etc. and other niceties.
* It's a good idea to learn some terms in Kinyarwanda. A simple “Mwaramutse” in the morning (or “Mwiriwe” in the afternoon) will make people smile and open up to you. Rwandans enjoy meeting foreigners who make an effort to learn their language and culture, both of which are marvellous. Learning even a little will go a long way with them.

**PERSONAL SPACE AND TOUCHING**

* Personal space tends to be very minimal.  People often talk very close to each other and less than an arm’s length is common in most situations.
* On public transportation, personal space is limited to non-existent.  It is common to see people crowded into a bus or taxi with no space in between.  This tends to be the case more in rural areas vs. urban.
* When two people of the same sex are talking, touching is acceptable.  It is common to touch the hands, arms, and shoulders as well as hold hand while walking.  This is seen as a sign of friendship.
* When two people of the opposite sex talk there is very little to no touching. The only appropriate touch is usually a handshake/greeting.
* One should avoid touching elders and superiors superfluously. Touching on the arm is quite common, but it should also be understood that touching someone of the opposite sex can easily be misconstrued as flirting.

**EYE CONTACT**

* Generally, people prefer indirect eye contact.  This does not mean you can’t look at somebody directly, but continuous eye contact during conversations is not a must.
* Overly direct eye contact can be considered aggressive by some. This is especially the case when speaking with superiors or elders.
* Women and children often will look down or away when conversing with men or with elders.
* Direct eye contact is not viewed as aggressive. In rural areas, visitors will find eye contact will not be as common as in Kigali. With government officials, this is expected.

**VIEWS OF TIME**

* In most situations, Rwandans do not tend to be overly concerned with being punctual.  People are expected to arrive within the first hour or two after the appointed time.
* Punctuality tends to be more valued in business situations, but deadlines are often not met.
* Generally speaking, people will give their time freely and are happy to accommodate unscheduled visits regardless of other plans.
* Time is fluid in this culture, but it also depends on the person with whom you are meeting. Government officials, even in rural areas, will almost always be on time. The government has emphasized punctuality as one of their main values.
* In interpersonal relationships, it is common for Rwandans to be 30 minutes to an hour late; flexibility is encouraged. Often, Rwandans expect foreigners to be on time, even if they are not.
* Rwandans tend to greet all friends and acquaintances that they pass, and exchange niceties; this can often slow them down to an appointment. They like to take their time; relationship building is very important in this culture, which is particularly understandable, given their divisive history.

**GENDER ISSUES**

* Rwanda is going through a transition when it comes to gender roles; however, it is still a male dominant society. Over the past several years, women have made dramatic gains in equality. In rural areas, women continue their traditional roles in raising children, preparing meals, and working in the fields. However, in Kigali , it is common to see women at all levels in business and government, and there are policewomen as well.
* In most rural areas women will most likely be housewives. They will be expected to cook, clean, do they laundry and take care of the children, as well as work their land.
* In urban settings it is more likely to find women who work and have a career. Although opportunities are becoming more varied, salaries and room for growth tend to be limited.
* Women have recently received the right to own land.
* The Rwandan Parliament boasts the greatest percentage of women of any parliament in the world. Foreign women are at no particular disadvantage in.
* Activities that tend to be unacceptable for women surround issues of drinking; there is a stigma against women who go to bars (in areas outside of Kigali).

**GESTURES**

* When gesturing or beckoning for someone to come, you should face your palm downwards and make a scratching motion with the fingers.
* It is rude to point at people, as pointing is reserved for dogs, so usually the whole hand/arm is used.
* Rwandan gestures tend to be the same as mainstream American and French gestures. To beckon someone (as in a restaurant), the formal call is “Bwana” (pronounced “Bgana,” not the Swahili “Bwana”), and informally, Rwandans will hiss repeatedly. Hissing is the way to call moto-taxis and taxi-cars.

**TABOOS**

* Avoid asking about someone’s ethnicity or referring to someone as Hutu or Tutsi.
* Rwanda is a delicate country whose deep wounds are healing. The government is working hard to ensure that Rwandans heal together, so as to avoid another conflict in the future. To do so, they have emphasized the idea that ethnicity no longer exists, that everyone is simply Rwandan. As a result, it is illegal to discuss ethnic groups in outside sanctioned discussions, such as those held during Genocide Memorial Week every April. Otherwise, such conversations could be perceived as promoting “genocide ideology,” which is a punishable offense.
* Almost every Rwandan has a story related to the 1994 genocide. The trauma was so severe that it is difficult for many to cope. As a result, it is improper to ask people what happened to them; rather, once Rwandans build a relationship with foreigners (or if they feel comfortable talking about it), they will open up.
* Dress appropriately. People in Kigali take pride in their appearance, and tend to dress up. Visitors should make an effort to dress well in the capital (i.e. no safari wear). Do not wear shorts—shorts are only worn by Rwandan schoolboys.
* While it is rare for Rwandan women in rural areas to wear pants, it is perfectly acceptable for foreign women to wear pants in the field and in Kigali . When outside the capital, it is acceptable to wear more rugged clothing (with the exception of shorts).

**LAW & ORDER**

* Penalties for the possession, use or trafficking of illegal drugs are severe and convicted offenders can expect lengthy prison sentences and heavy fines. This is an extremely serious offense.
* Photographing government buildings is prohibited.
* The legal drinking age is 18, but it is not enforced, and younger people are served. The smoking age is also 18. It is not enforced, either.

**OTHER**

* It's a good idea to learn some terms in Kinyarwanda. A simple “Mwaramutse” in the morning (or “Mwiriwe” in the afternoon) will make people smile and open up to you. Rwandans enjoy meeting foreigners who make an effort to learn their language and culture, both of which are marvellous. Learning even a little will go a long way with them.

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**Below is a great summary of cultural norms, traditions, taboos and superstitions from “Helaina’s Blog” a teacher in Rwanda from November 23, 2010 blog by Helaina**

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What fascinates me about experiencing other cultures are the everyday norms and rules, some subtle and some obvious, that differ from my own culture. Here are some interesting insights I’ve picked up so far throughout my time in Rwanda. They come from conversations with Rwandans, personal experiences (often in the form of trial and error or faux‑pas), and my own observations.

I’ve grouped them together under different category headings.

**Food**

It is considered extremely rude to eat in public; meaning in the street, on public transportation, and sometimes even at large parties where strangers are present. In addition, adults don’t eat in front of their in‑laws. In the past, adults didn’t even eat in front of their own children and would often take their food into their bedroom.

Some men will only eat their wife’s cooking and will refuse to eat any food cooked by a housekeeper.

Something that really surprised me is that adults here do not typically eat sweets. They consider cookies, cakes, chocolate, ice cream, etc. to be for children. I learned this the hard way when I gave a batch of homemade cookies to the vendor who gives me free chapatti and brochette only to find out from a friend later that it was mildly insulting to do so. It’s true, ever since then he just hasn’t been as generous with the free food…

It was said in the past (and sometimes still today) that women are not supposed to eat goat meat, for two reasons:

1) It will make them grow hairs on their chin, and

2) It will make them stubborn.

However women tell me that that “rule” was invented by greedy men who wanted all the good meat.

It is said that if a couple eats their dinner lying down in bed, their children will be selfish. As is the case in many African countries, being fat is considered a good thing. It reflects wealth and power. It is not uncommon for a Rwandan to pay someone the compliment “you have grown fat!”

Most of the bananas here are mini, about a third of the size of American bananas. They come as a bushel, and sometimes two mini bananas grow to become fused together. If a woman eats a double banana, it is said that she will give birth to twins.

Going out to eat at restaurants is actually a fairly new concept that has only taken hold with the influence of foreigners. In the recent past, if a man or a couple went out to eat, it meant that the wife was a bad cook or that the man did not have a wife at all. Even today there are many Rwandans generally do not dine out, either for financial or cultural reasons.

Rwandans say that if you eat fish brains, the devil will come visit you that night. Some Rwandans refuse to eat beans because they say that eating beans makes one’s skin become darker. If someone has very dark skin, Rwandans will say that s/he must have eaten a lot of beans. People say that eating green bananas causes people’s butts to become fat.

Similar to a Jewish dietary rule, it is forbidden to eat milk and meat together. In the past, it was considered taboo for in‑laws to eat at a married couple’s house. It was also taboo for them to stay the night and they would have to find another place in the neighbourhood to stay.

If someone is able to creep up behind you and make you bend by pushing on the back of your knees, it means that you can’t make good ugali (a doughy dish made from different types of flour and dipped into sauce).

**DRINK**

Rwandans say that drinking milk makes women beautiful. When there is a beautiful woman, Rwandans might say that she must have drank a lot of milk.

If you invite someone or even multiple people out to dinner or drinks, it is expected that you will pay for them. (I learned that one the hard way.)

Two of the main beers here are Primus and Mutzig. It’s said that men typically drink Mutzig and women drink Primus. However I’m partial to Mutzig and one of my good Rwandan male friends is partial to Primus, so I’m not sure how serious that tendency is. When Rwandans are served a bottle of beer with a glass, they will sometimes pour a few drops into the glass, swish the liquid around, and then pour it on the ground behind them. This serves two functions: it symbolizes sharing the drink with ancestors and also helps clean out the glass.

When a guest stops by for a visit to a friend or family member, it is expected that the host will offer him or her something to drink – most common is Fanta or beer. It is considered very rude to offer water, at least not until the guest has finished the first drink. There is an expression in Rwanda that means something along the lines of “water is empty.” (I find this eschewal particularly ironic in a region that most of the world sees as lacking access to reliable clean drinking water.)

**GENDER RELATIONS AND FAMILY LIFE**

When a married couple has children, their names essentially change to reflect the identity of their first‑born child. For example, my parents are named Joshua and Gloria. In Rwanda, as soon as I was born everyone who knows them (friends, family members, community members, neighbour’s, perhaps even colleagues) would start to call them Papa Helaina and Mama Helaina. It provides for interesting commentary on the location of identity and the importance of procreating and having a family.

When a couple is planning a wedding, the man and the woman separately hold numerous “planning meetings” at which they meet with their friends and family to organize and finalize the details for the marriage. I attended one but wasn’t able to contribute much besides a smile and the occasional excited nod of understanding. One of the ways that the family of a bride prepares for a wedding is to plant a few banana trees along the road leading to their house. In the past this was done to show that the family was relatively wealthy, because it was implied that they could also supply their guests with banana beer from the banana trees.

As soon as a couple gets married, the woman is expected to get pregnant. If she doesn’t get regnant within a few months the entire family and community will judge and assume the couple is impotent.

When a couple shares a bed, the man always sleeps on the side away from the wall so that he can protect his wife/girlfriend in the case of an intruder or problem.

It is considered a serious taboo for an unmarried man to spend the night at an unmarried woman’s home. However it is a bit more acceptable, though still sometimes gossip‑inducing, for an unmarried woman to spend the night at an unmarried man’s home. This is part of a larger discussion about gender and double standards/disparate access and opportunities: it is not acceptable for women to go out dancing without men. If they do so, they will be considered prostitutes.

Traditionally, women in Rwanda are fairly meek when they are in public. There is a saying that my students told me – “a good woman is a silent woman.” Fortunately that paradigm is changing today – and I do my best in each class session to pull the girls out of their shells. Sometimes it feels like pulling teeth instead. However I’ve seen a gradual improvement in their confidence and willingness to volunteer their ideas, which is encouraging. I have observed at large parties or meals that women generally wait for the men to take food before serving themselves. This I assume is an extension of domestic hierarchy and deference on the part of women.

It is completely acceptable for men to hold hands in public here. On one street I can usually count at least ten pairs of men (of all ages) holding hands and walking together. On top of that, men also walk arm in arm or arm over shoulder, share seats, sit on each other’s laps, dance very close, and do their intimate things that would peg them as homosexual in the U.S. However here in Rwanda, homosexuality is an extreme taboo so I suppose that’s why men can be so intimate. On a similar note, when men who are close friends greet each other, they embrace very intimately in what I like to call a “forehead kiss”: with eyes closed they touch opposite sides of the forehead twice and then once in the middle, while shaking hands or holding each other’s shoulders. It’s very sweet and endearing to watch.

It is forbidden for a married person to say the name of his or her mother‑in‑law or father‑in‑law.

When greeting them or even describing them to others, people cannot say their name and have to describe them instead.

**LANGUAGE**

Rwandan English: There are certain words that have been appropriated here to have different meanings or different weights. For some reason, they all start with s:

– Serious: Used very commonly here to mean a person who is respectable, trustworthy, and reliable. It has a lot of weight and is a very serious word. One of the gravest insults to someone is calling them “not serious.”

– Stubborn: This essentially means the opposite of serious; someone who is not respectable or reliable.

– Smart: Used as a compliment to mean that you are dressed very well. It took some adjusting to get used to hearing “Helaina, you are smart today!”

– Somehow: Appropriated to mean “somewhat.” Example: “I am somehow hungry.”

– Saloon: Appropriated to mean “salon” as in “hair salon.” The area where I live, Nyamirambo, is full of saloons.

– Sambusa: Used to mean what I know of as a “samosa.” The term is also used in Ethiopia and

Somalia.

**MISCELLANEIOUS**

On someone’s birthday, friends pour a bottle of water over his or her head as they sing “happy birthday” in Kinyarwanda. I also learned that one the hard way.

A superstition I have heard students tell me is that people with small handwriting are considered lazy and selfish, while those with big handwriting are considered generous and courageous. If you drop things and have bouts of clumsiness, Rwandans’ often instinctive response is to say “you eed a husband/you need a wife.”

If a Rwandan lends something to a friend and s/he loses it, it is considered a taboo to ask the friend to replace it or pay for it.

Rwandans just forget about the lost thing and move on.

If a bird poops on your head, it means you will get rich.

If you see a cat in the morning, your day will be bad.

If you say the word “needle” (“urushinge”) before breakfast, you will have a bad day.

If someone causes you to have an accident, either on purpose or by mistake, Rwandans believe that saying that person’s name in the morning is bad luck and, similar to the needle issue above, will cause you to have a bad day. For example, one night last week I was walking with some friends and I turned my head to answer my friend Amani’s question. As I did so, I didn’t see a shallow gutter (luckily empty) in front of me and fell down, cutting my toe. A Rwandan friend told me that I should

not say Amani’s name in the morning. Instead of the saying the unlucky friend’s name,

Rwandans say “umutavugwa,” which means something like “speak badly” (or as I like to think of it, “he‑who shall‑not‑be‑named”).

When Rwandans wish you good night, they say “Sleep in a hard place.” The reasoning for this is that

if you sleep in a soft place you will be so comfortable that you’ll never wake up.

When someone is at home sick, it is expected that friends, family members, and even co-workers will come to pay him or her a visit. (This is markedly different from the general American mentality of “leave me ALONE to sleep, relax, wallow, and clean up after my own bodily functions.”)

Many Rwandans believe very seriously in spirits and curses performed by traditional healers/sorcerers. Several friends have told me stories of people they know who have been cursed to become crazy after breaking up with a resentful boyfriend or girlfriend. In particular, the town of

Kibungo in southeastern Rwanda is considered to be the hub of dark magic where many traditional

healers/sorcerers reside.

If a woman sews at night or in the dark, people will discourage her by saying that she is sewing her parents’ eyes shut. This is most likely to prevent women from straining their eyes by sewing under weak light.

Whistling at night is considered a taboo because Rwandans say it summons snakes. It is also a taboo for a woman to whistle any time of the day, because it means she is a prostitute. (I made the mistake of whistling at night…)

When you have the hiccups, Rwandans say that someone is talking about you.

When you have a twitch on your eye or face, people say it is a good omen.

Children up to age 10 were required to take a nap every afternoon after eating lunch and before returning to school. Even some adults still have this habit.