

NYAMASHEKE

UNVEILED



GEORGE BAGUMA

“

Wherever you go, go with all your heart.”

Confucius

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INTRODUCTION

06

Found in the Western Province of Rwanda, Nyamasheke District is sandwiched between Lake Kivu and Nyungwe National Park. The strategically located district comprises fifteen administrative areas known as sectors. Eight of those sectors cover parts of the biggest lake in Rwanda, while the rest stretch deep into Africa's best-kept rainforest.

Apart from contributing to the development of tourism, the two attractions stimulate the growth of other sectors across the board. From the lake to the forest and everything in between, the district is striving to unlock its economic potential.

While in Nyamasheke, I toured the sub-destination extensively and created lasting memories. As I always say, good things are meant to be shared. These recollections are no exception.



NATURE WALK

SWALLOWED BY NATURE

I spent my first day in Nyamasheke gathering information and fine-tuning my itinerary. In the evening, I took a leisure walk on a beautiful lakeside footpath paved by Ishara Beach Hotel. From the beach, I strolled towards the small forest patch preserved by the hotel's management. Farther ahead, I deviated from the pavement and pursued a wider trail that led my steps to a creepy tunnel-like path. Shortly thereafter, I found myself completely swallowed by nature.

The designer of this unique structure is building a wooden family cottage where the dominion of Mother Nature rules supreme. Once completed, this nest will offer the ultimate wilderness experience to nature enthusiasts. The best is yet to come.



COFFEE

KIVUBELT COFFEE IS GROWN IN PARADISE



On the second day, I hit the ground running. My first order of business was to visit Kamujumba coffee estate in Gihombo Sector. On my way to Gihombo, the view of the lake attracted my attention, compelling me to go off the script. During this impromptu stopover, I spent a few minutes soaking up the beauty of Muzira Peninsula, Konyanamo Island and the backdrop of the surrounding hills.

When I approached Kamujumba Estate, I was awestruck by its beauty. From the distance, the plantation looked like an island. When I got closer, I saw a narrow entry point connecting the hill to the mainland. What looked like another tropical island is actually one of those picturesque peninsulas embellishing the shore of Lake Kivu.

The 9-hectare estate is owned by Kivubelt Coffee. If you consume this brand, the breathtaking peninsula is probably the genesis of the magic potion that kick-starts every day of your life.

In the nursery, I studied the germination of seeds. Then I joined plantation workers and experienced their day-to-day lives. Following instructions from the estate manager, I learned how to nurture tender trees and carry out regular maintenance tasks.



A coffee tree produces its first fruit-bearing flowers three to four years after planting. The fruits, commonly known as cherries, turn red when ripe enough for harvesting.

Before departure, I wandered around the farm and marveled at the lake and its environs. From my vantage point, I had a clear view of the neighboring Nyaruzina Estate.

After bidding goodbye to my instructor and his team, I returned to the highway and proceeded to Jarama washing station. Upon arrival, I picked up where I had left off prior to leaving the plantation.

At the washing station, I learned how beans are extracted from cherries. We call them beans because of their resemblance to legumes. Technically, they are seeds.

Kivubelt Coffee applies wet processing. Also known as washing, this method involves the use of substantial quantities of water. Wet beans are then spread out on open-air patios and exposed to the sun. Both wet processing and sun drying are common in Rwanda.

The shores of Lake Kivu are attracting investors in the coffee subsector, including Kivubelt Coffee. Its altitude level, humidity, equatorial mist, and rich volcanic soil create an ideal terroir for the production of high quality coffee.

TEA

TRACING THE GENESIS OF MY FAVORITE BEVERAGE

Rwandans started growing tea in 1952. For a long time, this iconic crop has been one of the top-ranked generators of foreign currency in the country. Over the years, annual production has increased from 60 to 30,000 metric tons. There are currently 24,000 hectares of tea plantations and 18 factories in Rwanda. The growth of this highly organized subsector has led to the formation of 21 cooperatives and a couple of companies providing outgrowing services.

Tea is grown on highlands and well-drained marshlands, between 1,500 and 2,500 meters above sea level. Highlands and drained marshlands describe the Land of 1,000 Hills pretty accurately. No wonder the famed green crop covers tens of thousands of hectares in Rwanda.

During my memorable tour of Nyamasheke, I visited two tea factories owned by Rwanda Mountain Tea. The two investments, namely Gisakura and Gatare, are found on the edge of Nyungwe National Park. For the record, the mountain rainforest is surrounded by sprawling tea plantations.





My tour was designed to provide a hands-on experience for the benefit of a curious tourist. This tailor-made excursion made me acquainted with the supply chain of the world's second-most consumed drink, behind water.

In the morning, I rolled up my sleeves and plucked leaves. Then I donned a white laboratory coat and reported for duty at the green leaf reception. After a visual inspection procedure known as leaf analysis, I delved into a detailed step-by-step processing journey.

Finally, I popped into the tasting room. Also known as cupping, tasting is the best way to establish quality control. While processing is aided by different machines, tasting relies on human sensory organs.

Under the watchful eye of Stephen Wahome, the factory's manager, I used a spoon to fetch freshly brewed tea and slurped it into my mouth. Then I sensed my tongue's taste receptors before spitting the sample into a spittoon. The tasting experiment gave me a better understanding of the criteria used by producers to grade their final products.

As Rwanda positions itself as an investment magnet, more and more chunks of land are expected to be converted into tea plantations.

I mentioned on Page 6 that Nyamasheke District lies between Lake Kivu and Nyungwe National Park. While the lakeside part is ideal for the production of coffee, the mountainous areas near the park are expansive tea zones.

The two cash crops promote Rwanda abroad and transform livelihoods in the local communities. In the tourism sector, crop-to-cup coffee and tea experiences are contributing to product diversification.

As a regular consumer of both beverages, I was eager to find out what happens before the finished products are placed on the shelves of supermarkets. I found answers in Nyamasheke.

CONSTRUCTION

INSPIRED BY TRADITION



During my stay in Kanjongo Sector, I had the opportunity to work in a traditional housing project and learn valuable lessons. My construction site was an extension of Kumbya Kivu Life Ecolodge. The facility is owned by a local investor determined to make a difference in his community.

Over the centuries, housing has evolved to suit the advanced needs of modern societies, but the traditional Rwandan house will remain a powerful symbol of cultural significance.

Our forefathers incorporated cultural norms into their architectural designs. There was meaning attached to the dimensions, measurements, and materials used.

The traditional Rwandan house is re-emerging in contemporary architecture. For example, the designer of the Kigali Convention Center's dome was inspired by tradition. It is encouraging to see the traditional house holding its ground amid the unprecedented Westernization of the construction sector.

KUMBYA RETREAT CENTER

A PLACE OF RELAXATION, RESTORATION AND RENEWAL



The history of Kumbya Retreat Center dates back to 1935, when the Alliance of Protestant Missions in Rwanda and Burundi was formed. A year later, a conference dubbed East African Revival took place in Rwanda.

The dream that ultimately gave birth to Kumbya Retreat Center was conceived in 1941. One year later, missionary Hazel Adamson and his Kibogora-based colleague saw Gako Island while paddling their dugout canoe. They fell in love with the island and submitted a formal application to the government, which in turn, granted them permission to work on their project. However, the acquisition of Gako Island was reversed in 1943 when Luella Brown of the Friends Mission convinced her fellow missionaries that Kumbya Peninsula was a better location.

Finally, their newly constructed center was launched in 1944. Two years later, the facility hosted the first edition of the Kumbya Convention that attracted about 100 missionaries from Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo.

Over the years, the center served as a place of relaxation, restoration and renewal for drained missionaries from Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo. Coincidentally, when I showed up during this tour, I found a small group of salesmen who distribute imported products in the three neighboring countries.

Like the old spreaders of the word of God, this crew of worn-out traders turned to the center for relaxation, restoration, and renewal. Different teams, different eras, same motive.

BOATING & CANOEING

SAILING AROUND THE LAKE AND ITS STUNNING ISLANDS

While visiting the enchanting Kanjongo Sector, I chartered a boat and sailed to Kirehe Island. Standing on the highest point of this magical creation, I had an unobstructed view of Nyabitekeri Peninsula and Idjwi Island. The latter is in the DRC. It is the biggest island in Lake Kivu and the second-biggest lake island in Africa, behind Ukerewe Island.

After a brief stopover on Kirehe Island, we cruised to Kihene and Tareri islands. Then we proceeded to Mushungwe and Mushava before bypassing Kabi Island and docking briefly on Rubona Island.

When we returned to the shore, I had lunch at Kumbya Life Eco-Lodge. In the evening, I rented a small wooden canoe and paddled in the vicinity. Guided by a couple of young men propelling their own canoes, I burned calories while enjoying the thrill of sailing on shuffled waves.



ROYAL COURT

RESIDENCE OF KING KIGELI IV RWABUGIRI

Before heading to Nyamasheke, I visited Bumbogo bwa Nkuzuzu in Gasabo District. It was at this site where King Kigeli IV Rwabugiri married Queen Kanjogera. I left Bumbogo with a newfound interest in the story of the legendary king. During his reign, he built a formidable army and established a highly organized system of governance.

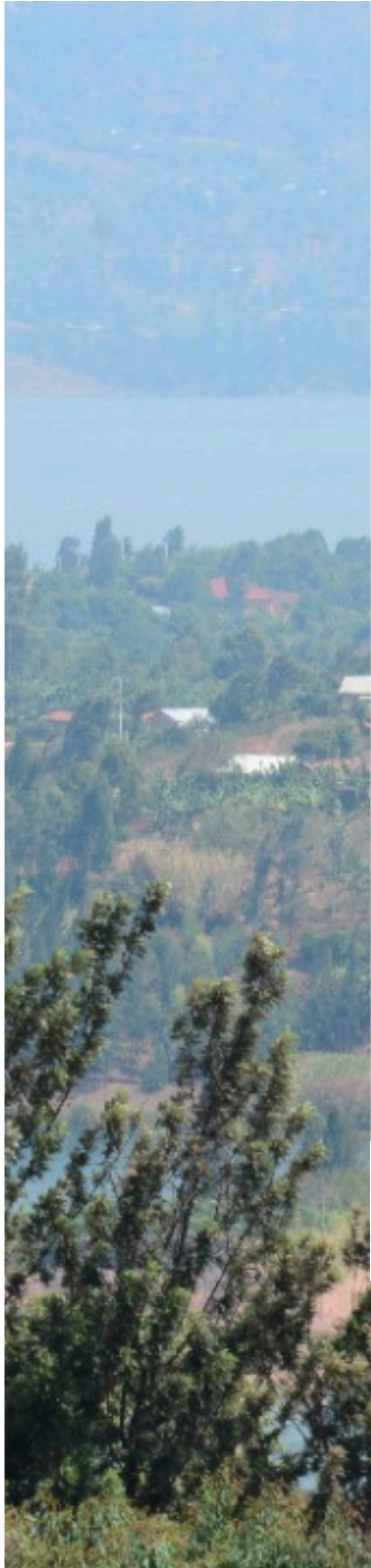
In Nyamasheke, I stumbled upon another place he called home. How many homes did he have? As I keep visiting different parts of Rwanda, I am sure I will set foot on more pieces of land he once lived on.

King Rwabugiri's account of defense and conquest sounds like an excerpt from an action movie's script. However, his story is not a mere blockbuster thriller. It is a demonstration of patriotism and the utmost sacrifice for the nation.



STOLEN ISLAND

THE MYSTERIOUS VILLAGE THAT USED TO BE AN ISLAND




Until 1973, Murwa Village was an island. It was separated from the mainland by the shallow waters of an area known as Mujabagiro, within Kagano Sector.

"We used to walk to and from the other side through Mujabagiro while navigating the depth ranging from knee to waist levels, depending on one's height." Says Hakizimana Lawrence, a resident of Murwa. "I was young and energetic. I remember carrying people on my shoulders, helping them to traverse the Mujabagiro barrier without getting wet." He added.

As hinted above, Murwa was connected to the mainland in 1973. This happened when a dry path was built. The project, which separated water like the rod of Moses, is the reason we can drive straight to Murwa today.

On my way to Murwa, I looked at the narrow Mujabagiro entry point and imagined how things used to be. Part of me wished the village was still an island, but I also recognized the need to remove the old logistical hurdle.

Murwa is a beautiful peninsula, surrounded by equally attractive geographical features. While exploring the village, I couldn't stop marveling at the neighboring Nyabitekero Peninsula and Idjwi Island.



NYUNGWE NATIONAL PARK

HIKING AND CANOPY WALKWAY



As expected, I didn't leave Nyamasheke without visiting Nyungwe National Park. Initially, the plan was to ramble along the Kamiranzovu Trail all the way to the waterfall. Unfortunately, I couldn't make it to the park in time for the last tour of the day. When I missed the 1 P.M. Kamiranzovu hike, I proceeded to Uwinka. Upon arrival, I booked the 3 P.M. canopy walkway and laced up my hiking boots.

The 2-km Igishigishigi Trail, serving as the path to the canopy, is the shortest track in the forest. Although tourists toil along an inclined terrain during the return leg, its level of difficulty is below moderate.

I had crossed the canopy several times before, each time feeling like the first one. I will never get enough of this thrilling activity. Walking on top of the lush rainforest is otherworldly. That explains why I am always looking forward to the next canopy adventure.

The suspension bridge swings with every step one takes. At some point, it feels like the whole thing is about to turn upside down. To maintain balance, tourists walk while holding handrails. One trembling step at a time, I made it to the other side.

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