



# VISIT RWINKWAVU



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# VISIT RWINKWAVU



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**R**winkwavu is one of 12 sectors that form Kayonza District, found in the Eastern Province of Rwanda. The enchanting administrative area offers a unique blend of natural beauty, rich Rwandan heritage, and warm hospitality. Bordering Akagera National Park, Rwinkwavu is strategically located.

This booklet highlights the places I visited and the activities I enjoyed during my short stay in the area. There is so much more in store.

While in Rwinkwavu, I created memories I will cherish for the rest of my life. As I always say, good things are meant to be shared—these recollections are no exception. As you flip through the pages, I encourage you to visit Rwinkwavu and create your own memories.

## ROOTED IN MINING HERITAGE



The genesis of Rwinkwavu can be traced to the discovery of tin and tungsten in the 1930s. The mining concession attracted workers from across Rwanda, leading to the emergence of a settlement. When Rwinkwavu Hospital was launched in 1947, modern healthcare was brought to the growing community.

In 1974, Société des Mines du Rwanda (SOMIRWA) took over operations of the mine and managed it until 1985, when the global tin market collapsed. Although large-scale mining came to a halt, many residents chose to stay, turning to farming, small businesses, and artisanal mining to sustain themselves.

The arrival of private operators in the 2000s and improved public services breathed new life into the local economy. With Rwanda's decentralization policy and the new administrative system introduced in 2006, Rwinkwavu was officially established as a sector, further strengthening local governance. What was once a simple workers' camp has now evolved into a thriving small town, firmly rooted in its mining heritage yet sustained by diverse livelihoods and a strong sense of community.



## RUTETE ECO-LODGE



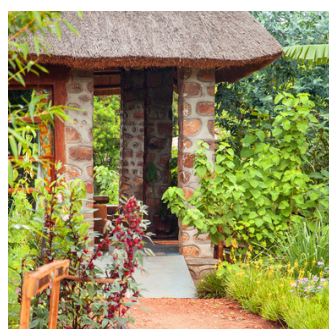
During my time in Rwinkwavu, I stayed at Rutete Eco-Lodge. Popularly known as “Kwa Rutete” (Rutete’s Place), this lodge gave me a deep sense of connection to the land, its people, and its history.

Rutete Eco-Lodge was founded by Julienne T. and her associates in 2021. It is a tribute to her father and the Rwinkwavu community. The idea was conceived during a heartfelt conversation between Julienne and her friend Olivier. While Julie (as referred to by her friends) was born in Rwinkwavu and spent her formative years there before leaving the country, Olivier grew up in the DRC. Despite their mixed heritage, the two friends share a deep passion for Africa.

Julie’s father, a mining engineer, came to Rwanda in the 1930s to build and manage the mine that would eventually lead to the emergence of Rwinkwavu. At the height of his career, Rwinkwavu was a prominent mining hub. Known for his generosity during times of famine, locals affectionately nicknamed him “Rutete,” meaning “big basket.”

After spending decades abroad, Julie returned home. Her homecoming was bittersweet. Yes, it was comforting to reconnect with the village that holds a special place in her heart, but seeing her childhood home in ruins was heartbreaking.

Today, Rutete’s home is a reflection of Rwinkwavu’s journey of resilience and transformation. Moreover, the lodge serves as a powerful reminder of our shared responsibility in environmental stewardship and sustainable living.



# RWINKWAVU STADIUM



One of the most captivating landmarks in Rwinkwavu is the oldest stadium in Rwanda, which dates back to the 1930s. Located at the entrance of the village, it was a befitting starting point for my memorable tour. Upon arrival, I joined parents and elders along the sidelines of the pitch that has seen better days.

It was a sunny Saturday morning, and the field buzzed with energy as dozens of kids ran drills and scrimmaged under the watchful eye of their coach, Egide Habineza. Despite limited resources, Egide leads a grassroots soccer development program with unwavering dedication, nurturing young talent and instilling discipline one session at a time.

Rwinkwavu Stadium was home to the first soccer team in Rwanda. In addition, the facility hosted the inaugural organized match in the country. During the earliest games, the stadium was graced by King Mutara III Rudahigwa. Local lore even suggests the king once “played” here. However, most believe it was a ceremonial kickoff as the guest of honor.

Over the decades, this storied ground has produced remarkable talent. Among its standout alumni is Louis Kirenga, a goalkeeper who rose through the ranks to play for Rwanda’s national team. More recently, 17-year-old Nelson Irumva emerged from the same pitch to earn a coveted spot at the Bayern Global Academy in Germany.

It’s time to put all hands on deck to restore Rwinkwavu Stadium’s lost glory. With collective effort, the cradle of Rwandan football can once again become a beacon of pride and possibility for generations to come.



## KOMERA LEADERSHIP CENTER



After a visit to Rwinkwavu Stadium, I crossed the road and stepped into the state-of-the-art Komera Leadership Center. What followed was an extensive tour of the center, courtesy of its Executive Director, Rosemary Musiimire. From her team's shared working space and a tailoring workshop to a spacious children's park and a calming wellness area, Madam Rosemary peeled back the layers of Komera's mission. At the heart of it all are three steadfast pillars: holistic education, community development, and health & wellness.

Through leadership summits, reproductive health training, and sports for empowerment, Komera is equipping young women with more than knowledge. It's giving them a seat at the table and the confidence to play roles previously reserved for men.

Later on, I had the privilege of meeting Mamy Uwineza, a young lady whose life has been reshaped by Komera's programs. Once marginalized, unsure of her place in the world, Mamy now speaks with clarity and conviction. Her story wasn't rehearsed. It was real, raw, and powerful. A living, breathing reminder that when girls are given the right tools, they thrive.

## AKAGERA CAFÉ



**W**hen I stepped into Akagera Café, all I needed was a cup of coffee. Nothing more, nothing less. However, I discovered a story rooted in purpose, innovation, and community transformation. What I initially thought was just a cozy coffee spot turned out to be the gateway to a much bigger vision.

Behind the inviting aroma of fresh brews lies Akagera Coffee Project (ACP), a social enterprise that's growing Rwanda's coffee industry from the ground up. From its humble beginnings, ACP has grown into a powerhouse for change. Through investing in local cooperatives, building washing stations, and empowering farmers, ACP is improving livelihoods in the community.

Furthermore, ACP has built early childhood centers, supported women through vocational training, and launched life-changing initiatives like "Cow for Coffee Farmer," all while maintaining a strong commitment to quality and traceability in coffee production.

Sitting there with my cup in hand, I realized I wasn't just savoring my favorite aromatic beverage. The stopover introduced me to a powerful lesson that coffee can do much more than uplift my mood.



# RWINKWAVU COMMUNITY LIBRARY




While in the library, the wonder hidden within the pages of a good book came to life. I traveled the world without leaving my chair. Each page became a journey through time, space, and diverse cultures. The book I picked from the shelf revealed the lives of characters I have never met and the beauty of places I have never visited. It's a unique form of exploration that doesn't require movement, just the act of reading and immersion in a story.

In this quiet adventure, the thrill of discovery came from how vividly the words painted a world in my mind. I felt the excitement of new horizons, the emotions of different lives, and the allure of the unknown. My experience at Rwinkwavu Community Library showed me the magic found within the pages of a book.



# HIRWA CHILDREN'S FOUNDATION



 It wasn't my first time here; I had visited the foundation several times before. Every time I dropped by, I noticed something new. Whether it was a newly added classroom, a revamped chicken coop, a catchy artwork, or cozy rooms, there was always something new and better. It felt as though the place was quietly evolving, each visit revealing another layer of progress.

At the heart of this establishment is John Habihirwe, the founder whose story moved me deeply. Growing up in poverty and walking 14 kilometers daily just to attend school, John's life has been shaped by resilience. From humble beginnings as a houseboy in Akagera National Park to eventually becoming a park guide and hospitality professional, he never lost sight of his dream: to support children facing challenges similar to those he once endured.

Today, that dream has taken root and flourished. Since its launch in 2018 with only one classroom and 15 students, the foundation now serves over 300 children. More than just an education center, it's a powerful reminder that when hope meets action, real change is possible.



## GREENING DRY HILLS



From my base at Rutete Eco-Lodge, I set off with no grand plan. Driven by a curious urge to see where the hill behind Rwinkwavu would lead me, I headed toward Rwinkwavu Hospital but didn't make it all the way there. Just before reaching the youth center, I took a right turn and veered off the tarmac.

With each step, I felt the rhythm of Rwinkwavu slow me down. Children playing along the roadside waved and greeted me with wide smiles. Adults going about their day offered nods, warm salutations, and short conversations that reminded me how deeply rooted kindness is in this part of Rwanda.

As I ascended, Rwinkwavu unfolded behind me. The rooftops, the popular Akagera Road, and the patchwork of cultivated fields painted a picture of rural life shaped by resilience and progress.

What struck me most was the transformation happening on top of the hill. Just a few years ago, this hill was barren and dry. Today, it's draped in a lush green forest, a quiet testament to Rwanda's reforestation efforts. I've seen this greening drive in different parts of the country. It is an ambitious, collaborative push by the government and its partners to restore landscapes and protect the environment. But here, standing at the top of a once-dry hill now bursting with life, it felt more personal. More powerful. My short hike had turned into a journey of reflection.

The urgency of Rwanda's reforestation efforts becomes even more apparent when you consider regions like the Eastern Province, where Rwinkwavu is located. Unlike the misty mountains of the Northern Province or the fertile hills of the Western Province, this area is predominantly savannah. It is drier, more exposed, and historically more vulnerable to soil erosion and land degradation. Greening these hills isn't just about aesthetics or climate goals; it's about restoring ecological balance, protecting livelihoods, and building resilience in communities that have long contended with environmental strain.



## WALK THE FENCE LINE



As an avid trekker, I had a great time exploring the hidden trails of Rwinkwavu and soaking up the breathtaking views of the surrounding landscapes. The highlight of my trekking outings was an activity known as "Walk the Fence Line Tour". This vigorous activity involves walking along a trail that hugs the electric fence of Akagera National Park. Spanning a distance of 7 kilometers, the path offers a glimpse into the animal kingdom.

My proximity to an electric fence evoked a mix of safety and caution. Its occasional crackling or humming heightened my awareness of the delicate balance between security and danger.

I rambled from Ihema Lodges to the park's South Gate. Although I only spotted baboons and a variety of bird species, the possibility of a lion lurking just yards away sent chills down my spine. That mix of fear and fascination is exactly what made the experience unforgettable.



# AKAGERA TRADITIONAL CULTURAL VILLAGE



My visit to the Akagera Traditional Cultural Village was a true immersion into Rwanda's rich heritage. Nestled at the Nyankora junction, this eco-museum offered more than a glimpse into the past—it opened a door into the rhythms of life in a traditional Rwandan society.

Upon arrival, I rolled up my sleeves and dived into a wide range of activities. Guided by experienced hands, I brewed banana wine using age-old techniques, milked cows like a seasoned pastoralist, and pounded cassava with a rhythm that connected me to generations before me.

Though I didn't personally take on the tasks traditionally reserved for women, I had the privilege of watching the demonstrations up close. I observed how sorghum is ground on a stone slab and discovered that weaving baskets is more than just a craft—it is storytelling in motion. With each loop and twist of fiber, I saw symbolism, patience, and precision woven into the art form. When a humble woman from the local community showed me how my grandmother used to churn milk, I couldn't help but admire the expertise.

Later, trying my hand at blacksmithing forged a powerful connection to the past. This skill once enabled my forefathers to craft agricultural tools that sustained livelihoods and weapons that protected and expanded their territory. Standing there, hammer in hand, I realized I wasn't just learning a trade—I was reliving a legacy that shaped the course of our history.

As the day came to a close, the courtyard came alive with the sound of drums and the sight of a mesmerizing traditional dance performed by local children. Their vibrant movements, filled with joy and pride, breathed life into the space. This was beyond entertainment—it was a living expression of culture, passed from one generation to the next.

When I finally left the village, I carried with me more than memories. I walked away with a renewed commitment to embrace my culture and contribute to its preservation.



## TURNING PAGES



As usual, I spared some time to conduct a book club session. This gathering was part of the implementation of an initiative dubbed Turning Pages. During the session, the serene garden of Akagera Transit Lodge was transformed into a symposium of discovery, conversation, and reflection.

This session was special. It featured a book titled *The Akagera Expedition*, a product of an unforgettable tour across the park's rolling savannahs, shimmering lakes, and tranquil campsites. What made this meet-up truly unique was the participation of Akagera Transit Lodge's staff members.

The host of this session, along with Ikaze Rwanda Tours & Travel and Royal Balloon Rwanda, sponsored the tour that led to the creation of the book in question. To dissect the book within the very establishment that served as a launchpad for that adventure gave the event a deep sense of poetic closure. The story had indeed come full circle.



## AKAGERA COMMUNITY CENTER



**B**efore I left Rwinkwavu, I paid a visit to the Akagera Community Center, where I was introduced to the community attendant, Kutibuka Ettienne. The knowledgeable young man guided me through the tour of the center's museum and shared the complex history of Akagera National Park.

Founded in 1934, Akagera was much bigger than it is today. Over the years, population growth and the return of refugees led to land utilization challenges. Poaching and other illegal activities became rampant. Eventually, the park lost a big chunk of land and a significant percentage of its flora and fauna.

The last couple of decades have seen successful efforts to turn the situation around. When the government joined forces with partners and members of the surrounding communities, the ensuing ecological and economic revival was nothing short of spectacular. For Ettienne and other members of his community, it finally makes sense to protect natural resources as opposed to depleting them.

## WHERE TO STAY



### RUTETE ECO-LODGE

Website: [rutete.com](http://rutete.com)

Nestled in the heart of Rwinkwavu, Rutete Eco-Lodge offers a perfect blend of history, nature, art, and sustainability. This elegantly designed lodge is an embodiment of ecological hospitality.



### COCO PARK HOTEL

Website: [cocoparkhotel.com](http://cocoparkhotel.com)

Perched opposite Rwinkwavu Hospital and just half a kilometer from the Rwinkwavu Sector Headquarters, this hotel is an ideal choice for both Akagera-bound tourists and business travelers on professional missions.



### AKAGERA TRANSIT LODGE

Website: [akageratransitlodge.com](http://akageratransitlodge.com)

Located near the entrance of Akagera National Park, this lodge offers easy access for tourists eager to start their safari early—without the hassle of a pre-dawn drive from Kigali.



### AKAGERA PARK INN

Website: [akageraparkinn.com](http://akageraparkinn.com)

Built a stone's throw away from the park's entrance, Akagera Park Inn offers spacious rooms, a swimming pool, and scenic dining area. Its expansion plans include a cultural village designed to allow tourists to blend safari experiences with cultural immersion.



### AKAGERA HOMESTAY

Website: [afrikanzuri.com/where-to-stay/akagera-homestay](http://afrikanzuri.com/where-to-stay/akagera-homestay)

This modest homestay, near Akagera National Park, offers an affordable option for budget travelers and drivers. Akagera Homestay also provides authentic experiences in the local community.





