

IMMERSING IN RWANDAN CULTURE

My Visit to Akagera Traditional Cultural Village



GEORGE BAGUMA

“

A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people.”

Mahatma Gandhi.

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+250 783 500 555



info@afrikanzuri.com



Afrika Nzuri Publishers



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EN ROUTE TO NYANKORA



I left Kigali after breakfast. My destination was a village known as Nyankora, located in Rwinkwavu Sector, Kayonza District. This ride was both scenic and refreshing, unfolding through rolling landscapes, rural settlements, and open countryside that invited unhurried reflection.

After cruising through Rwamagana, I entered Kayonza. From the downtown junction, turned right toward Ngoma. When I reached Kabarondo, I veered off the highway and joined Akagera Road.

Situated near the entrance of Akagera National Park, Nyankora enjoys a strategic location. I visited to explore Rwanda's rich heritage at Akagera Traditional Cultural Village and to witness firsthand how the community actively embraces conservation and takes ownership of its natural resources.

AKAGERA TRADITIONAL CULTURAL VILLAGE



Akagera Traditional Cultural Village is a community-based cultural center located in Nyankora, near the entrance of Akagera National Park. Designed as an eco-museum, it offers visitors an authentic introduction to Rwanda's heritage through hands-on experiences, storytelling, and everyday practices that have shaped Rwandan society for generations.

At its core, the village demonstrates how culture and conservation can coexist. By empowering local communities to become custodians of both their heritage and natural surroundings, the initiative shows how tourism can support conservation while creating shared value for those living near the park.

Beyond preservation, the village drives meaningful social impact. It empowers vulnerable community members—especially women and single mothers—through skills training, income-generating activities, and support for their children. Every visit contributes to this cycle of learning, dignity, and community resilience.

WEAVING BASKETS



Upon arrival, I observed women sitting comfortably on a traditionally woven mat, skillfully weaving baskets while exchanging jokes and laughter. Their camaraderie filled the space with warmth and energy, turning the craft into a lively, communal experience.

Beyond generating much-needed income, the traditional Rwandan basket carries deep cultural significance. Each pattern and shape tells a story, reflecting heritage, values, and identity, transforming a practical object into a living symbol of Rwandan culture.

Watching the women work, I gained a profound appreciation for the skill, patience, and tradition embedded in every weave. It was a reminder that even everyday tasks can hold beauty, meaning, and cultural memory, passed down from generation to generation.

SEWING



One of the economic activities carried out by women at Akagera Traditional Cultural Village is sewing, or tailoring. Here, women receive practical training that equips them with skills to produce a wide range of handcrafted items, from garments to decorative pieces. Beyond training, the establishment actively seeks markets for these products, ensuring that the women's work translates into sustainable income.

Beyond producing goods, this initiative showcases Rwandan culture through artisanal crafts, offering visitors a tangible connection to heritage. Each item reflects creativity, tradition, and identity, turning sewing into both a cultural expression and a livelihood.

More importantly, the tailoring program plays a vital role in empowering vulnerable women from the local community, particularly single mothers. By providing skills, income opportunities, and a supportive working environment, the village helps restore dignity, independence, and hope—demonstrating how cultural preservation and social empowerment can go hand in hand.

MILKING COWS



During this memorable visit, I had the chance to milk cows in a hands-on way, guided by experienced members of the community. The activity was fulfilling, offering a glimpse into the daily routines that sustain rural life in Rwanda.

Beyond its practical role, milk holds deep symbolic value in Rwandan society. It represents nourishment, prosperity, and communal care, often served in ceremonies and cultural expressions as a sign of wealth and hospitality.

Participating directly in this tradition gave me a profound appreciation for the connection between people, cattle, and culture. Every motion, from guiding the cows to collecting the milk, felt like a small step into a living legacy that has been central to Rwandan life for generations.

CHURNING MILK



As the tour of the facility progressed, I followed a demonstration of how women churn milk—a task traditionally passed down through generations and usually done by women in traditional Rwandan communities. As they worked, I watched how milk that has already begun to ferment is transformed through careful, rhythmic motion, separating butterfat from the liquid and creating rich dairy products in the process.

In traditional Rwandan practice, fresh milk is first left to ferment into *ikivuguto*, a cultured, tangy milk product beloved for its flavor and probiotic qualities. From there, women churn the fermented milk to produce butter and buttermilk, and sometimes further transform the butter into ghee or other dairy products with deep cultural relevance. This approach not only preserves milk but also yields items used for nourishment, rituals, and even skincare in some traditions, reflecting dairy's versatile role in daily life and heritage.

Watching this process unfold up close gave me a window into the skill, patience, and knowledge embedded in each movement. Even as a spectator, I felt connected to a living tradition—one where food, culture, and community merge seamlessly.

POUNDING MILLET AND GRINDING SORGHUM



The rhythmic sound of wooden pestles striking a mortar welcomed me as I approached the area for pounding millet. Guided by experienced hands, I took part in the process, learning the technique and feeling the physical effort required to turn raw grains into flour. The repetitive motion connected me to generations of Rwandan farmers who rely on this task to sustain their households.

Nearby, women demonstrated how sorghum is ground on a stone slab. Though I didn't try it myself, I had a front-row seat to watch their skill and precision. The activity, traditionally done by women, revealed the artistry and cultural significance embedded in everyday chores—every movement purposeful, every rhythm honed through experience.

Participating in millet pounding and observing sorghum grinding gave me a deep appreciation for the labor, patience, and tradition behind these tasks. It was a lesson in both practicality and cultural heritage, showing how routine work carries meaning, sustains communities, and preserves ancestral knowledge.

THE ART OF BLACKSMITHING



The heat from the forge crackled and danced as I rolled up my sleeves and stepped into the world of traditional Rwandan blacksmithing. Under the guidance of skilled artisans, I learned how fire, charcoal, and rhythm come together to transform raw metal into useful tools. Every strike of the hammer on the glowing iron felt like a conversation with history—an echo of generations who learned this craft long before modern machinery existed.

In Rwanda's cultural traditions, blacksmiths were once pivotal members of society, shaping iron into hoes and machetes essential for farming, as well as weapons that sustained communities and defended territories. Their craft was more than a trade—it was a symbol of innovation, self-reliance, and survival, passed down from elders to apprentices who stood by the forge, learning through observation and repetition.

The hands-on experience deepened my appreciation for this ancient art. Understanding how raw material yields to fire and skill reminded me that traditional crafts are living legacies. In that moment, I wasn't just learning how to forge metal—I was connecting with a practice that forged tools, sustained lives, and shaped community identity through the ages.

BREWING BANANA BEER



After trying my hand at forging metallic tools and weapons, I rolled up my sleeves once again, this time to participate in brewing banana beer. We began by peeling ripe bananas harvested from the backyard farm, then mashed them by hand and filtered the juice, learning the foundational steps of this traditional process.

Since fermentation takes several days, we didn't complete the full process. Instead, our host served us previously brewed beer, allowing us to appreciate the final product. This method remains widely practiced in rural Rwanda, especially in the Eastern Province, where most households are surrounded by banana farms—explaining the drink's popularity in the area.

The experience gave me a deeper appreciation for how traditional knowledge and natural resources come together to create not just a beverage, but a meaningful cultural practice.

GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY



Beyond cultural demonstrations and economic activities, I witnessed something deeply profound at the village. Children from vulnerable single-mother households in the surrounding community were present—learning, being cared for, and receiving meals free of charge. It was a quiet but powerful expression of compassion woven into the daily life of the establishment.

This initiative reflects the village's commitment to giving back to the community. By creating a safe space for learning and nourishment, Akagera Traditional Cultural Village extends its impact beyond tourism, investing directly in the well-being of the next generation.

In this way, every visit carries meaning. By visiting the site as a tourist, one contributes not only to the preservation of Rwandan culture but also to a system of care that uplifts families and strengthens the community as a whole.

KITCHEN GARDENS



Before leaving the site, I took time to learn how destitute single mothers are trained to grow vegetables in their kitchen gardens. Through practical guidance, they are taught how to utilize limited spaces around their homes, turning backyards into productive sources of food.

The knowledge shared enables women to grow a variety of vegetables and fruits, improving household nutrition and food security. These gardens are not just about subsistence; they represent a practical response to everyday challenges faced by families with limited resources.

By selling surplus produce, the women are also able to earn a modest income, further strengthening their independence. This initiative reflects the village's holistic approach to empowerment—combining knowledge, sustainability, and dignity to help families thrive from the ground up.

CULTURAL FAREWELL

My last experience at the village was centered on entertainment, shared with other guests in a vibrant theatrical setting. We were treated to an electrifying traditional dance performance by the talented Nyankora kids. Their energy, rhythm, and confidence instantly filled the space with life and joy.

Beyond the popular Rwandan traditional dance, the young performers showcased poetry and other traditional forms of artistic expression. Each performance reflected talent, discipline, and pride, revealing how culture is nurtured and passed on to the next generation through creativity and participation.

It was the perfect way to cap the visit. The performances brought together everything I had witnessed throughout the day—heritage, community, and continuity—leaving me with a lasting impression of a culture that is not only preserved, but joyfully lived.

In those final moments, watching the children perform with confidence and pride, I was reminded that culture endures most powerfully when it is taught, practiced, and celebrated by the next generation.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Akagera Traditional Cultural Village for sponsoring this unforgettable tour. Your support made it possible to experience Rwanda's rich cultural heritage in such an immersive and engaging way.

I also extend my heartfelt thanks to Akagera Homestay for hosting me after the visit. Having a comfortable place to rest after an action-packed day allowed me to reflect on the experiences fully without the need to ride back to Kigali immediately. Your hospitality and care added a meaningful personal touch to this journey.

