



Rwanda's magnificent green hills are one of this petite central African nation's most defining characteristics. Even the fast-expanding capital is built into the slopes. Walking up and down these inclines, marvelling at views over

the city, where modern buildings, red-roofed homes and hues of green converge with tangerine sunsets, is one of my favorite ways to experience Kigali.

When I first landed here in the spring of 2015 – a stopover on route to northwestern Tanzania – I never imagined that this small, lush and completely foreign city would eventually become my adopted hometown. But the relaxed pace of life, close-knit community and abundant nature provided an ideal base in which to explore projects in writing, conservation, gender equality, entrepreneurship and refugee rights.

Over the past six years I've borne witness to Rwanda's commitment to development

MY HOMETOWN

Kigali has gained a reputation as one the cleanest and safest cities in the world, and is rapidly becoming an important regional hub. With tourism on the rise in Rwanda, most visitors spend some time in the capital. **Alicia Erickson**, who first moved here in 2015, offers an insider's view why you should linger longer

and innovation as Kigali has forged ahead in cultivating a reputation as a hub for culture, creativity, and enterprise. Narrow dirt paths have blossomed into major roads and tall, modern structures – including the obscure Convention Centre, which is illuminated in bright yellow, blue and green at night – have joined Kigali's skyline. New restaurants and cafés have enhanced the dining scene. And yet, among all this, lush fields remain cradled in its valleys and small milk bars and buffet eateries thrive in more traditional neighbourhoods.

Kigali can be somewhat of a mystery to first timers. It is not a city of extremes, and its calm demeanor and quiet streets aren't what one might expect from an East African capital.

Rwandans are impossibly polite and have a tendency to be reserved, which makes for less hustle than you often find →



elsewhere but also stands as a barrier to assimilating fully into local culture.

Kigali is gentle on one's senses. The spotless streets and commitment to order and safety are the city's pride and glory – testimony to Rwanda's dedication to development over the past twenty-something years. Across Rwanda, the last Saturday of each month is known as *umuganda*, which is a day of community service. The streets are impeccably clean and safe – the reputation exists for a reason. If you find a beautifully curated park here, steer clear of the grass because it is illegal to step on it. And unlike many neighbouring countries, Rwanda lacks street food, as this is typically regarded as being unclean.

But tucked within these unassuming streets are culinary, artisan and entrepreneurial initiatives that are ever-evolving. Kigali is a hub for opportunity and hope, a canvas on which possibilities can be explored and flourish.

Like many rapidly developing capitals, Kigali is a colourful collision of old and new. Neighbourhoods with pot-holed dirt roads, makeshift fruit stands and densely-packed houses blend with suburbs lined with cobblestone streets, gated homes and restaurants and cafés tucked in quiet gardens. There is an increasingly cosmopolitan city centre, located in what is known as 'town', as well as the newer Kigali Heights area.

For a city that feels quite small, Kigali sprawls over numerous hills and valleys. There can be quite a distance to travel between certain parts of the city. The fastest, cheapest and most exciting way to navigate the city is on a motorcycle taxi, hailed at the roadside. In my opinion, nothing beats the experience of walking – which you can do without worry for safety or hustle – allowing you to watch one section of Kigali spill into the next.

BEYOND THE GUIDEBOOK: INSIDER'S SUGGESTIONS

True to the vivid hues that bring Rwanda to life, Kigali is filled with peaceful gardens abloom with orange and red bird-of-paradise flowers. In many of these green, idyllic hideaways, one can sip on a cup of Rwanda's famous brew while listening to birdsong. These spaces are particularly prevalent in Kimihurura and Kiyovu.

In the former, walk cobbled streets lined with trees and magenta and violet bougainvillea. For a cup of ginger and lemongrass tea or a plate of local food, stop by the brand-new Gate 10, where tables in a shaded garden make for the perfect spot to read a book. Poivre Noir, an intimate French-Rwandan fusion eatery, is another favourite in Kimihurura that is set in lush gardens illuminated by candlelight at night. For a more energetic spot, head to Repub Lounge, which offers a selection of grilled meat and vegetable dishes with live music playing on the weekends. Small artisan shops selling baskets, paintings, pottery, and kitenge clothing are sprinkled throughout 'Kimi'.

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From here, continue walking to Kiyovu. Follow roads that dip into a lush valley of untamed greenery and plant nurseries, climbing back up the hill on the other side into Kiyovu's long, winding streets.

One of my favourite spots to enjoy lunch, tea or a cocktail is Indabo Café, set in an expansive garden beneath palm trees. The connecting concept shop, Go Bananas, offers a chic selection of woven baskets, natural bath products and other artisanal goods. Baso, a Belgian-Rwandan patisserie, is another frequented spot in Kiyovu that serves buttery croissants and mouthwatering pastries in a garden with views over the city.

Possibly the best coffee in town can be enjoyed at Question Coffee, a café and cooperative in Remera that empowers Rwandese women. Choose from a selection of medium or heavy roasts, or even partake in a coffee-cupping class. Pre-Covid, Remera had some of the best spots for live music in the evenings.

In a country renowned for its basket weaving – an age-old-tradition that has united women for generations – Kigali has numerous cooperatives selling colorful baskets. Talking Through Art, whose studio is located down a bumpy road in Gikondo, supports disabled women who previously were unable to find work. The gallery showcases some of the most innovative designs and the cooperative invites guests to spend an afternoon learning the art of basket weaving in their sun-drenched garden.



ALICIA ERICKSON

Above: Motorcycle taxis on the road between Kimihururua and Kiyovu
Top right: Question Coffee, a café and cooperative for women; street art on a residential block
Middle right: French-Rwandan fusion eatery Poivre Noir
Bottom right: Fabric stall in Kimironko market; ginger tea at Gate 10 cafe; a weaver at Talking Through Art



ALICIA ERICKSON



POIVRE NOIR



ALICIA ERICKSON (2)

For more crafts, head to Kimironko, the city's biggest market and one of the few places in Kigali that can feel overwhelming. Winding rows of stands selling bananas, mangos, pineapples, potatoes, beans, fish, and all sorts of other food fill this dense, open-aired space. There are also stalls where homeware, tools, bright kitenge fabric, Congolese masks and Rwandan peace baskets can be bought.

One of my favorite neighbourhoods to walk in is the predominantly Muslim suburb of Nyamirambo. Start up by Mt Kigali, where paths wind through forests and villages with views over the city, and arrive in the heart of Nyamirambo. This has an energy unparalleled in the rest of Kigali, with restaurants, beauty salons and small markets lining the cobblestone streets. Stop by Kuruhimbi Milk Bar for a traditional glass of fresh milk, or head to Panorama Ten to Two for a meal of grilled fish and potatoes that is best washed down with a cold bottle of Mutzig or Virunga beer. Nyamirambo Women's Centre runs walking tours and cultural activities, and hosts a shop that trains and supports Rwandese women.

To end your time in the city, I would recommend Choose Kigali, founded by renowned artist Emmanuel Nkuranga and set in a peaceful garden high into the hills of Kiyovu. With an impressive contemporary gallery inside, Choose provides a vanguard food and art experience, combining sweeping views over the cradle of Kigali with a tribute to the culinary and innovative creativity that thrives in this quiet, burgeoning city. 🐾



TALKING THROUGH ART