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Mixing Business with Pleasure: Creating a Trail Guide for Rwanda's Nyungwe National Park

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Mixing Business with Pleasure

Creating a trail guide for Rwanda's Nyungwe National Park

Doreen Bolnick, with Bruce Bolnick



THE PHONE CALL WAS FROM AN UNKNOWN NUMBER, SO I ALMOST didn't answer. However, when I did, I was asked a very unexpected question: Would I be interested in hiking for three weeks in a mountain rainforest in Rwanda? Yes, that's the same country where some 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and their Hutu sympathizers were slaughtered in 1994. I didn't have to think about the answer: You bet I would! The phone call was from a contractor for the United States Agency for International Development who is developing ecotourism in Nyungwe National Park. Located in southwestern Rwanda, Nyungwe has 600 square miles of pristine rainforest, lying between 6,000 and 10,000 feet at the edge of the eastern slope of the Albertine Rift Valley, immediately abutting the borders of Burundi and the Congo. My part of the bargain would be to produce a tourist guide, including trail maps.

As I replied, "Yes! Of course!" and began to discuss the trip, vivid images of the Rwandan genocide came into focus in the back of my mind. Was it dangerous? And what sort of tourist would want to go there anyway? Before my trip, any mention of "Rwanda" conjured up vivid scenes from *Hotel Rwanda* of mutilated bodies stacked on the road, and old news stories of a school where thousands of Tutsis were promised protection, then betrayed, and slaughtered. News reports in autumn of 2007, when I received the offer to go to Rwanda, suggested that the situation was now quite stable. The contractor assured me that he had been there numerous times, and that there were no security problems. The fact that I had lived in four other African countries added to my comfort level. With my husband, Bruce, I had hiked in many other African rainforests, including Mounts Kenya, Kilimanjaro (twice), Meru, and Mulanje. Aside from my familiarity with Africa, my qualifications for the job included coauthoring with Bruce a hiking guide to the *Waterfalls of the White Mountains* (Backcountry Publications, 1990) in New Hampshire, including creating all of the trail maps. In addition, I wrote and illustrated wildflower guides for Zambia and Mozambique, acquiring along the way an excellent knowledge of botany for the region.

My biggest concern about accepting the assignment was that I had never tried making trail maps from scratch, that is, without the benefit of seeing earlier maps for reference. A little research made it appear that I could produce them using a global positioning system, though I had never used one before and had no time to master it before departure. Thank goodness I

The Congo-Nile Divide Trail is visible through the trees. DOREEN BOLNICK

had the foresight to purchase and bring along a highly sensitive GPS rather than rely on assurances that a GPS for the project would be awaiting me at Nyungwe. It turned out that the project GPS was useless in dense tree cover and deep ravines.

By coincidence, Bruce had a business trip in Mozambique and could join me for two weeks! Bruce is an expert at African birds, and he offered to write the short section on birding at Nyungwe, which has 26 endemics. He turned out to be indispensable for other unexpected reasons as well. I'll get to those shortly.

A second coincidence had me seated, for the long flight from Brussels to Kigali, next to Bill Weber, an author and conservationist who had been deeply involved in setting Nyungwe on track to become a national park in 2004. After Dian Fossey (the gorilla zoologist) was murdered in 1985, Bill and his wife, Amy Vedder, proved to surrounding communities that it was in their own financial interest to conserve the gorilla habitat. *In the Kingdom of the Gorillas* (Aurum, 2002) describes their long-term residency in the park devoted to achieving this end. Tourists pay \$500 for one hour of gorilla viewing, and there is often a waiting list for the privilege.

The United States Agency for International Development's primary objective at Nyungwe is to attract international visitors to hike and observe its thirteen species of primate. The park had a long history of poaching and pushing back its boundaries by cutting trees and planting gardens. Adding jobs at the park and opportunities to sell crafts and supplies and run cultural exhibitions there will help protect it. Not least, tourism may help to keep Rwanda stable.

The project provided a vehicle and driver for the six-hour trip from Kigali to Nyungwe. I sat back and relaxed, absorbing what I could of rural Rwanda streaming past my window at 50 miles an hour and realizing how apt is the national slogan: "Land of a Thousand Hills." The road wound in serpentine curves around one hillside after another, each covered in a mosaic of cultivation plots, villages, and groves of fast growing (but non-native) pine and eucalyptus. I studied the rural dwellings, the charming little courtyards and the people busy in their daily routines, observing their faces and dress with an artist's eye. Superficially, at least, life looked so normal.

We passed several roadside memorials to the 1994 genocide, but it was the unintentional mementos—vacant homes with weedy yards and blank windows—that affected me most. These places must have heartbreaking stories to tell. I had expected that every reminder of the 1994 genocide would

be erased, so people could *forget*. Instead, I was astonished to see in Kigali, and later at Nyungwe, T-shirts and baseball caps for sale with a remember-the-genocide theme. Who would want to wear anything bearing the word *genocide*? Having a better grasp of the situation today, I wish I had bought some myself. There also were many books and posters on the subject and a new museum on genocide episodes worldwide. I understand now that the idea is to remember and never let it happen again.

Reaching the park at dusk, we drove all the way through on a narrow, pot-holed road with hairpin bends, finally arriving at Gisakura Guest House, a quaint tourist center and research station set in a tea plantation bordering the park. I had dinner with two friendly Canadian consultants for the project, who were scouting for the best place to construct what is now one of the few canopy walks in all of Africa. Not only will it attract more foreign tourists, but it should also draw more Rwandans to the park.

Out in the damp, chilly night, under brilliant stars, the scent of eucalyptus drifted down from tall, dark trees at the edge of the lawn as I returned to my cottage. I was thrilled to be back in Africa and nostalgic for my first African home in Kenya. Everything seemed perfect. Eucalyptus logs were crackling in the fireplace. In addition, Bruce was due to arrive the next evening.

I woke up my on first Nyungwe morning with the dawn bird chorus coming in through my window. I pushed aside heavy woolen blankets and stepped onto the cold, concrete floor to look out at “my” backyard. There were flowerbeds attended by dozens of colorful sunbirds, surrounding a neatly cropped lawn of Kikuyu grass. Through a border of eucalyptus trees, I could see rows of tea shrubs. Although I prefer wilderness (to me, even the Taj Mahal is not an improvement over whatever the landscape looked like originally), I had to admit that the emerald-green tea fields on the hillsides, under limitless blue sky, were stunningly beautiful. The early morning sun highlighted brightly dressed tea pickers in the narrow lanes between the rows of shrubs tossing tender young leaves over their shoulders into giant baskets. In a few days, I would discover vantage points there, with fabulous views of the Albertine Rift Valley and Lake Kivu to the west.

After breakfast, I received a neatly packed box lunch and was directed to my driver, Peter, who would take me to the park reception center at Uwinka. “Mwaramutse! Amakuru?” I said. (Good morning! How are you?) “Mwaramutse! Ni meza. Amakuru?” he replied, smiling. (Good morning! I’m fine. How are you?) I was finding everyone in Rwanda so pleasant. Where were

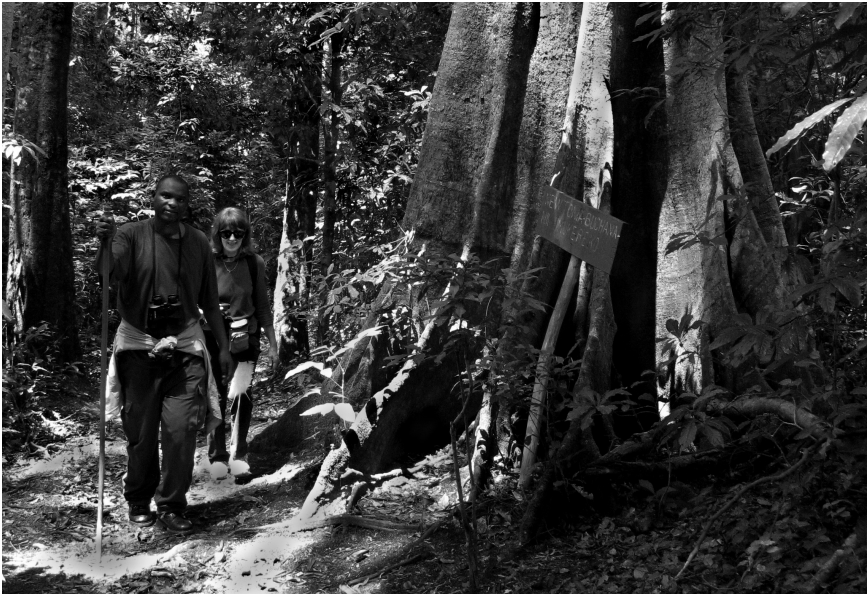
all those people who chopped up their neighbors with machetes, or turned a blind eye?

The park road was in many places a mere shelf carved into the mountain-side. Nyungwe's forests owe their survival to the mountain terrain, which was too sloped for cultivation. Lichens, ferns and flowering lianas draped the uphill side of the road cut, while the downhill side dropped precipitously to forested valleys and ravines, partly obscured by rising wisps of cloud.

I had seen many photos of Nyungwe before my trip, and even a DVD. The scene that most appealed to me suddenly appeared on my left, creating one of those vivid "I can't believe I'm really here!" moments. I was looking down on an eight-square-mile wetland encircled by verdant peaks, the whole shaped like a volcanic caldera. This is Kamiranzovu Marsh, which means "swallows elephants." The park once had many forest elephants, but after years of poaching, the last one died in the 1990s. At some inaccessible spot on the northwestern edge, the marsh drains between two peaks, flows through two miles of forest and shoots over the rim of a water-carved amphitheater, forming the most beautiful waterfall at Nyungwe. Though only 55 feet in height, it flows with tremendous force, creating a misty updraft that keeps the ferns and flowers on the canyon wall in constant motion. Crabs scuttle on the wet rocks below and giant tree ferns lean out to catch any sun that finds its way to the bottom of the ravine.

The trail to Kamiranzovu Waterfall was one of thirteen hikes on my "work program," along with three compulsory sessions of primate viewing, a tour of a tea factory, and a visit to a local community, leaving a couple of "free" days to work on my notes and maps. Once I reached Nyungwe, however, I discovered three other trails not on the list, so I did these on my "free" days. One of them, the Uwinka Trail, turned out to be my personal favorite because it was so long, and rarely used. Official park guides are required on all hikes, and the national park service attempted to assign me a different guide each day. They were uniformly delightful trail companions, well trained in local natural history (including scientific names) and traditional lore.

My very first hike was the popular Umuyove Trail, known for its towering mahogany trees, beautiful vistas, and a small waterfall. I registered at the main desk and studied a topographic map affixed to the wall, wishing I could get my hands on a copy to use as a reference. Vedaste Mpakaniye was my first guide. After confirming I had proper gear, including a walking stick to avoid slipping on the slick, clay trails, he led me across open lawn, past a tiny research facility and picnic tables, where other guides chatted while waiting



Doreen Bolnick hikes with a guide past a Newtonia tree, Newtonia buchananii.

BRUCE BOLNICK

for clients. We then passed through an orchid garden (actually, a home for fallen orchids) to reach the trailhead. I was already madly scribbling notes.

At the trailhead sign, I switched on my GPS. The trail, like the road into the park, was cut into the mountainside. This allows visitors to feel as if they have walked into a living, breathing, and cutaway illustration of all the levels of a rainforest. One can be dwarfed by the buttresses of a giant mahogany (which chimpanzees use for drumming), then moments later peer at eye level into a tree canopy festooned with epiphytes. Vedaste identified trees, herbs, and shrubs, telling me their uses for construction, food, medicine, magic, and music. I was especially impressed by huge, fantastically shaped strangler figs, and the guide identified the “mother trees” if there was still any sign of them inside. I was also fond of wandering into groves of giant tree ferns because of the Jurassic Park atmosphere they lent to the scene.

The rainforest impression that remains most vivid in my mind is from my first footsteps into it, because it was in such contrast to any habitat I had been in since visiting Mount Kenya in 2001. First, an updraft of cool moist air brushed against my hands and face. Moments later, I felt submerged in a world of shimmering greens from billions of leaves in a great variety of shapes

and sizes. Looking upward, I noticed leaves in the canopy moving soundlessly. Flowers of every hue dotted the undergrowth, scrambled up other vegetation, or perched in the treetops. The humidity magnified the rich scents of damp earth, fragrant blossoms, and aromatic leaves. A faint sound of water falling on rock came from far below. Exotic forest birds, flashing colorful wings, called from every direction, including Mountain Orioles, Regal Sunbirds, and several amazing species of Turacos. Now and then, monkeys or chimpanzees called or leapt through the treetops, raining down plant debris on the trail, all of these sounds amid a fabric of calls from tree frogs, crickets, cicadas, and other forest insects. I can't help but think about my favorite quote, from David Livingstone's journal: "In the quietest parts of the forest there is heard a faint but distinct hum, which tells of insect joy. One may see many whisking about in the clear sunshine in patches among the green glancing leaves; but there are invisible myriads working with never-tiring mandibles on leaves, and stalks, and beneath the soil. They are all brimful of enjoyment. Indeed, the universality of organic life may be called a mantle of happy existence encircling the world . . ."¹

This was Rwanda, as I knew it now: A place of great natural beauty, serenity, and harmony, with warm-hearted, friendly people.

At our far point and lowest altitude on this first hike, there was a small waterfall by a grove of giant tree ferns. The adjacent mist zone was full of magenta impatiens (*Impatiens stuhlmannii*). Before the trip, I managed to get a rare, out-of-print set of Georges Troupin's *Flore du Rwanda* (Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1978–1987), which I used to identify some of the more conspicuous flowers found along the trail. I realized now that I was paying far too much attention to flora, at the expense of other trail details. This had to stop, but it wasn't easy because I am accustomed to sketching every new flower I see. This park had more than 200 species of orchids alone, so maybe for my sanity, it was just as well. On one trail, I was fortunate enough to meet a German botanist who was the world's leading expert on wildflowers of Nyungwe, having made 80 trips over many decades. He led me to an unnamed orchid that he had just discovered, which I had no time to draw. Alas! However, I could tolerate the frustration because I was spending every day in magnificent rainforest, and most of the information fed to me by the guides had to do with plants!

¹ David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1858, page 652.

Like the Umuyove Trail, most of the other hikes descend into a valley and return uphill. The guides told me amusing stories about tourists insisting they were fit enough to go all the way down, and then having to struggle to go back up the mountain long after dark, by flashlight. I happen to live at 300 feet above sea level, and had not hiked in months. In addition, I was nearing 60. This made me worry about being winded, but I found that I could recover in a minute any time I was out of breath. I also found excuses to slow down the pace and catch my breath by looking at plants through a magnifier, studying an insect crossing the trail, observing bird behavior, retying a shoe, sketching a monkey, and so on. There were frequent clearings through the forest canopy, and many of these had rest benches. One could have a snack while peering into the Democratic Republic of Congo; bask in sunlight while gazing south to Burundi; sip water while looking northward to the faint blue profile of Volcanoes National Park, with peaks reaching to nearly 15,000 feet; or look east for a bird's-eye view of a small village with a patchwork of coffee plots and family gardens.

All very beautiful. But on that first hike, I suddenly realized that the automatic tracking function on my fancy GPS was not registering the trail. To compensate, I had been marking waypoints, but that would not give enough detail to produce quality trail maps. Trouble. When Vedaste and I finished our hike and returned to Gisakura, Bruce was there to greet me. That evening, while I entered the day's notes in my laptop, Bruce reset the GPS and got the tracking feature to operate.

Next morning, we set off on hike number two, the Umugote Trail, with Nyungwe's top birding guide, Claver Ntoyinkima, a great opportunity for Bruce to add some endemics to his Africa list. After supper that night, when I downloaded the tracking files from the GPS, I was alarmed to see a map with three sets of tracks forming an irregular braid, figure-eight-shaped tracks where we had wandered up and down narrow ravines, and complex star patterns where we had stopped to rest. There seemed to be no explanation in the manual for these bizarre results. Consulting the manufacturer's customer service hot line was out of the question from our remote location. How could I possibly create accurate maps out of such confused data? I was in way over my head and started to feel panicky. I tried to remind myself that I was a mere speck in the universe and that this looming, personal disaster was not worth being too stressed about. I wondered how many years it would be after the fiasco passed before I could once again make peace with myself.

Fortunately, Bruce was still earth-bound. He took the GPS out to the tea plantation and wandered around to watch its reaction while I numbly typed up my latest set of trail observations. He tried every combination of button options in the gadget and every software option before working out how to clean up the errant readings and average the multiple tracking points. Problem solved. Better yet, Bruce also worked out how to produce impressive little elevation profiles for each hike and calculate the elevation changes. The GPS was now my beloved trail friend. I felt bereft when I finally had to hand it over to the project office back in Washington.

After rescuing me from disaster, Bruce's special reward was a three-day trek on the new and not-quite-finished Congo-Nile Divide Trail, which had been added at the last minute to my "work plan." We were the first foreign visitors to do this 26-mile, three-day trek, straddling the divide marking the two most important and legendary river basins in Africa. As we started on the trail, we were amazed to think that raindrops falling to the left would flow into Lake Kivu, then to Lake Tanganyika, the Congo River, and on to the Atlantic, while raindrops falling to the right flow to Lake Victoria and then down the Nile to the Mediterranean. Nyungwe contains the actual source of the Nile River. It was thrilling to be on this amazing trail along the high mountain ridge through the heart of the wilderness, eager to see the endlessly fascinating views around each bend. The Congo-Nile Divide Trail should become a strong attraction for adventure hikers coming to Africa. For our taste, the venture was a little too colonial, as we were accompanied by a guide, a naturalist (both wanted to see the trail themselves), a cook, several porters (including one old man who knew the route because he had been head of the trail crew), and a gun bearer (in case of an unlikely encounter with poachers).

Every morning at Nyungwe, I awoke in happy anticipation of exploring yet another trail. The park is also one of the best places in Africa to view primates. A few troops have been habituated by park rangers to tolerate human visitors for research purposes, and for tourism. One guide told me that many visitors find primate viewing to be an especially tranquil experience. Tourists tend to want to see the chimpanzees most of all. They were riveting to watch, but most of all I loved sitting back in the soft undergrowth to watch troops of a hundred or more black and white colobus monkeys hang out in the treetops. I played Jane Goodall for an hour, taking notes on their behavior, watching as they ate, groomed, nurtured young, exchanged affections, squabbled, played, and leaped between the trees. I sketched a dozen comical ways in which they

drape their limp bodies over branches to daydream languorously or doze off for a treetop nap.

Two tasks remained requiring information and photographs for the guide. First, I had to tour the nearest local village to describe a “community walk” where tourists can view rural life up close. Second, I had to go on a tea plantation excursion, walking through the tea fields, observing the collection of tea leaves, visiting a tea factory, and witnessing the fine art of tea tasting. I’ll never again take a cup of tea for granted. It even makes me feel guilty to drink it, now that I have experienced the contrast of stepping from an untamed rainforest, home to thousands of wonderful species, into a manicured tea plantation that replaced the original forest with an impoverished species inventory dominated by two plants: tea, and the eucalyptus used for fires to process it. Hard to believe, but some of the tree plantations around Nyungwe have been reduced to a single species: pine. Make that two, if we want to count the humans who pass through the unnaturally dead silence of this artificial ecosystem.

My assignment in Rwanda was the best job and one of the best vacations I have ever had. Even the weather cooperated. The trails can be treacherously slick when wet, but I had encountered only one brief downpour in three weeks. I would not have missed it because of the delightful experience of watching the sparkling, wet forest come back to life when the sun returned.

I became very fond of the staff at Gisakura Guest House and was deeply touched when two of them gave me Christmas presents, though they were struggling on the edge of poverty themselves. Everyone was so nice that I could not reconcile these friendly faces with the trauma of genocide. Neither Bruce nor I dared to ask about their personal experiences. Many of them must have lost friends and relatives, and some even may have taken part. Only one guide referred to the genocide obliquely when he explained the folklore about a liana called *Sericostachys scandens*. Related to pigweed, the liana had long been kept in check by the elephants. It produces flowers about once every fourteen years, providing an abundant source of nectar for honeybees. But the elders consider the flowers a bad omen and consult traditional medicine practitioners who may recommend slaughtering an animal or drinking a traditional mixture to ward off trouble. The plants, it seems, bloomed just before the 1994 genocide. Also, on the return drive from the Congo-Nile trail, we found the rough back road blocked at several points by fallen trees. We watched, wide-eyed, as the rangers



A chimpanzee sits in a tree in a separate patch of the Nyungwe National Forest, the Cyamadongo Forest (pronounced “Chamadongo”). BRUCE BOLNICK

who were with us hacked away at the trees with machetes, wood chips flying. In minutes, the logs were off the road. It was impossible not to think about the use of machetes during the genocide. In fact, we learned that terrible slaughters took place not far from Nyungwe, though the park itself was a vital but temporary haven for refugees. Akagera National Park, on the other hand, seems to have lost about two-thirds of its land to settle displaced refugees.

When I returned to the United States, Bruce was away again on business, leaving me free to sacrifice sleep, food, exercise, and a clean house to finish the maps and trail descriptions on schedule. By that time, the project had morphed from a simple trail pamphlet into a small, full-color book, scheduled to be in print sometime in 2011.

Now, when I think of Rwanda, I envision trails descending into a luxuriant forest of huge mahoganies and yellowwoods. I smell the pungently aromatic leaves of *Mimulopsis* shrubs and hear the ringing sound of the Chestnut-throated Apalis. I look across a sea of ridges of the greater part of the park I never got to explore. Above the clatter of kitchenware, I hear the staff at Gisakura sharing a joke. I want someone to phone and ask me to go back.

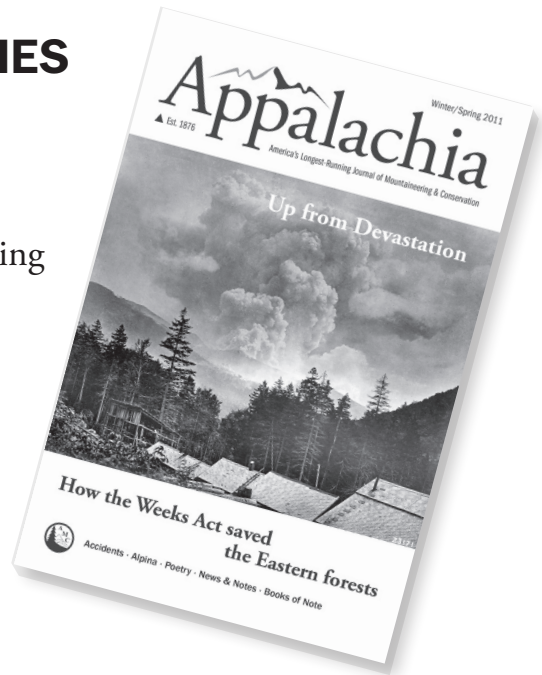
DOREEN BOLNICK is an illustrator with considerable field experience in Africa and the United States. With her husband, Bruce, she authored *Waterfalls of the White Mountains* (Countryman Press).

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