

Cultural Guidelines for Visiting Rwanda

Culture and Ethnicity:

- Rwanda is a purposefully multicultural country following the 1994 Genocide of the Tutsi
 - It is forbidden in Rwanda to use ethnic distinguishers and labels today except for educational purposes
- Generally, Rwandans are very proud of their leadership and culture
- Kinyarwanda is the local language

Communication:

- Think before you ask a personal question. A seemingly simple question might be a loaded question here. Don't let this stop you from socializing and speaking to people. Tip: ask open ended questions
- Conversation in Rwanda is typically conducted at a comparatively low volume.
- Delivering speeches at events/gatherings is very common.
- Rwandans have two names: a Kinyarwanda name, which is not necessarily a family name, and a "modern" name which is typically borrowed from other languages.
- Rwandans often comment on physical features, but it is not meant offensively. For example: they might say "you're big"— they are not calling you fat, just noticing that you are eating well, which is meant as a compliment.
- "You look smart" is the Rwandan way of complimenting your look.

Body language and greetings:

- Rwandans typically shake hands when greeting each other or hug and shake hands (demonstrate)
- When Rwandans shake hands with an older or more senior person, they use their right hand to shake hands with their left hand underneath their right arm.
- Physical contact is more frequent in Rwanda than in America, and has fewer connotations than it does in America. You will see kids in the Village, as well as adults, hugging and holding hands, regardless of gender. Hugging is very common and is a sign of platonic affection, both in work and casual environments. If it makes you uncomfortable, always feel free to say so or shake hands instead.
- Rwandans do not typically smile as a way of greeting as some Westerners do. Rather, they wave.

Punctuality:

- Rwandans appreciate punctuality but may not reciprocate it. Try to be flexible and recognize that this isn't intended – in any way – as disrespect.
 - For example, it can take over an hour for food or coffee to arrive after being ordered, so be mindful when you have free time.
 - Meetings in the Village can sometimes run hours longer than scheduled/be organised last minute

LGBTQI+:

- Rwanda is a relative safe haven for East African LGBTQ communities. However, Rwandans tend to value religion and tradition highly, and there is minimal visibility of LGBTQ individuals in public spaces. Rwanda is considered a generally safe and welcoming place for LGBTQ people, and one's sexual preferences are generally of no interest to others. However, topics of homosexuality and LGBTQ rights, as well as public displays of affection (between couples of any gender) have been widely considered taboo, particularly in rural areas, so be aware and cautious of this. For more information, check out <https://www.expertafrica.com/rwanda/info/lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-lgbt-travel-to-rwanda>.

Skin Colour:

- Rwanda is a black-majority country, and non-black individuals are likely to receive more attention. Kigali is a diverse city, so locals may be more used to seeing people from different backgrounds, compared to rural areas. It is common for white people to be called 'muzungu', and kids may shout this in rural areas especially and sometimes the kids might want to touch you or follow you. The term is not meant as an insult, simply as an observation of difference. As most Rwandans are more accustomed to seeing white travelers, some mixed race or Asian travelers may be asked questions about their ethnicity or background, out of curiosity.

Religion:

- Rwanda has a Christian majority, and a Muslim minority, and religion is highly valued, often informing social views.

Food:

- Rwandan cuisine is simple but unique, based primarily on beans, rice and starchy vegetables (e.g. green bananas, cassava, potatoes).
- In the Village, ASYV kids come from a variety of backgrounds and many are not used to having three consistent meals a day. Due to this and the fact that they are growing teens, you will notice plates piled high with food.
- Drinking and eating in the streets and in public is not common practice. Be prepared to share if you are eating in public.
- Do not give food to children you see on the street – some will dodge school if they are able to get food in this way

Drugs & Alcohol:

- Drug possession is strictly prohibited. Penalties for possession, use, or trafficking of illegal drugs include long jail sentences and heavy fines.
- The legal drinking age is 18 years old.

Photos:

- Ask permission to take photos to give people dignity and respect – think about what you would do in your home country. Some people you see will be in their home or workplace and we should ask before snapping.
- Photographing military, government buildings, or border crossing points is prohibited.

Girls' Hair:

- Female students have short hair in line with the government mandate for schools.

* Information included in this document includes notes taken from *Rwanda Cultural Awareness: A Guide to Understanding Rwandan Culture (2nd Edition)* by Justin Ngoga and Right Seat Consulting.