

Visiting Rwanda

Things to Consider and Questions to Ask When You Arrive Behind the “Banana Beer Curtain”

Rwanda, much like some of the Soviet satellite states during the Cold War, makes a great effort to control visitor’s perceptions of the country. In many ways, Rwanda has a “Banana Beer Curtain” comparable to the old “Iron Curtain,” with the government carefully controlling outside perceptions of the country and its citizens. In fact, Rwanda is a nation governed by a very small minority of primarily ethnic Tutsis who lived in Uganda before the genocide in 1994. Visitors will typically only be allowed to see the “story” of Rwanda that is approved by the governing elites, and average Rwandans will often be fearful to contradict the official party line.

For instance, irrespective of whether the individual is a foreign dignitary, backpacker, tourist, or gorilla watcher, every visitor is urged to visit a genocide memorial. Some visitors may visit out of a sense of obligation to pay their respects, while others are urged to by the Rwandans they meet. The majority of visitors see the memorial museum in the Gisozi District of Kigali, the most well-known memorial site in the country. A tour guide will tell you that over 250,000 bodies are contained in the mass graves outside the museum, and bodies are still being excavated from the hillsides.

However, as the public has come to learn over the last several years, the events and history presented to visitors are only a part of the story, and, in some cases, are either untrue or very one-sided accounts. This short and far from exhaustive guide is intended to provide visitors to Rwanda with a “checklist” of some things to consider and watch for as they spend time in the country.

1. Languages – Take note of what spoken language you are hearing as you talk to the Rwandan people, both in official and casual settings. Also take note of what language Rwandan people nearby are speaking to each other. English is spoken most often by Tutsis returned from Uganda and their children. While asking an individual about their ethnicity is considered taboo (though they may willingly offer the information anyway), you can ask them where they come from originally, and if they have lived in/or grew up in Uganda. The French-speakers are primarily educated Hutu that are older, though some younger French speakers can be found. Street children and the uneducated speak Kinyarwanda only.
2. Often, English-speaking visitors who are wandering around will “randomly” encounter seemingly friendly Rwandan street vendors or people who will offer to show you around town. They will suggest the genocide memorial, but they also may show you several other sites and/or landmarks that you ask to see. These people may interface with the Rwandan military intelligence and you can usually get a feel for their affiliation by asking some critical questions, but be aware that you may do so at your own risk. For example, you can discuss elections, and ask them if they feel comfortable voting for anyone other than the RPF party. Ask them if they know who their parliamentarian is. You could also ask them about their opinion of Paul Rusesabagina and the movie *Hotel Rwanda*, both frequently maligned by the government, or if they feel that they are able to speak out against their government freely without fear of reprisal.

3. The 1994 Genocide - The tour guides at the memorial sites also can be asked critical questions. For example, you could ask about the genocide survivor programs, and ask why the Hutu survivors do not receive any benefits from the Rwandan Government and its organizations. Many Hutus were killed along with Tutsis in the genocide, but this is not officially recognized in government policies. The memorial sites have the bones of victims on public display, particularly in the rural sites and in the churches. You could ask the tour guide(s) if it is difficult for genocide survivors to see the victims preserved in this way and how they feel about it. You can also ask about the excavating projects that are reportedly going on, which some families view as further desecrating the remains of their loved ones, and how they are keeping track of all the victims.
4. Education – Ask to tour a school or university if possible. Ask your guide how they feel about French being taken out of the curriculum. Ask them about the “genocide ideology” and how it applies to students and teachers at the various education levels. Genocide ideology is a term used by the government to describe anyone who disagrees with the official view of the genocide, with Tutsis as the only victims, and is increasingly used as a negative label against any political opponent of the governing regime. Ask them about the rural community’s access to education, which is very poor. While the government is supposed to provide education to all students, local fees and inadequate funding often prevent this from occurring. If at a primary school, ask if the rural children can afford their books and uniforms. Ask about the “solidarity camps” students must attend after secondary school, and ask about what is taught at the camps. Ask about the Rwandan history lessons taught in the school.
5. When in the rural areas, watch for local defense forces on patrol. These are effectively local militias, organized and armed by the government, who control the local population and limit the possibility of dissent against the regime. In the south, on the road to Nyungwe Forest, watch for the peasant farmers on the side of the road who were relocated off their land as part of the *Imidugu* process. Take note to see if there are any adult males present besides the possible military patrol. If there are very few, ask where the men are now.
6. Pick up a copy of the Kigali *New Times* newspaper, the official paper approved by the government. Look for any articles critical of President Kagame or his administration, and if you do not find any, ask your local guides or others about this. Ask if the press is free to criticize politicians, including the President. It is typical that the only politicians who will be spoken of negatively in the *New Times* are those who lose favor with the governing regime.
7. Visitors may also find the English-speaking Rwandans asking them questions. Typically, they will ask visitors what they think about the country. While it is important to be reasonably cautious, you may be able to use this as an opportunity to ask the hard questions about what you have seen or heard.