



## Humans and gorillas bask in Congo's calm

After years of conflict, life seems to be returning to normal in large tracts of the Democratic Republic of Congo

BY JEFFREY GETTLEMAN  
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Jean-Marie Serundori's eyes light up when he sees his old hulk of a friend Kabirizi. War, displacement and bloodthirsty rebels had gotten between them.

But for the first time in years, this section of a venerated national park in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) is rebel-free. Government wildlife rangers, like Serundori, are firmly in control — for the moment. And Kabirizi, a 227kg silverback gorilla with a head as big as an engine block, seems to be flourishing in his kingdom of leaves.

"Haa mmm," Serundori says, emitting a special grunt-like gorilla greeting that miraculously stops Kabirizi in mid-charge. "Haa mmm."

If the endangered mountain gorillas are any sign, things may finally be looking up in eastern DR Congo. In the past several weeks, DR Congo and its disproportionately mighty neighbor, Rwanda, have teamed up to sweep this area clear of rebels who had been at the center of a vicious proxy battle between the nations.

The enmity of DR Congo and Rwanda has been one of the most stubborn drivers of the bloodshed here, which has claimed millions of lives in the past decade. But if these two countries continue to cooperate, it could represent a significant step toward ending one of Africa's most vexing wars.

### WORKING WITH RWANDA

"This is really good news, that there's a serious improvement in relations," said Koen Vlassenroot, a professor at Ghent University in Belgium who specializes in eastern DR Congo. "But it's still rather confusing."

Vlassenroot and other DR Congo hands are warning that all the years of cross-border meddling and intrigue as thick as the jungle make it extremely difficult to tell whether the new Rwanda-DR Congo relationship is a genuine and lasting change, or simply more maneuvering.

The joint military operation has been somewhat successful, at least by eastern DR Congo's depressingly low standards.

The two former enemy armies fought side by side without massacring each other. They killed dozens of rebels, including some commanders, and exerted pressure on several hundred to leave the bush. They arrested Laurent Nkunda, the rebel leader and former general whose brutal tactics and Congo-size ambitions had threatened to plunge this entire region back into war.

But at least 100 villagers were killed, too, either in the crossfire or by fleeing rebels bent on revenge. And there may be more bloodletting to come.

Over the past several years, most of DR Congo has wearily climbed out of war. Large tracts of the country, despite all the headlines, are peaceful. But it is these very hills along the DR Congo-Rwanda border that have remained a lush green killing field, with Rwanda supporting one rebel force and DR Congo supporting another.

The ensuing violence has sucked up so many of DR Congo's political and military resources that the so-called wild, wild east has been like an intractable weight around the entire country's neck.

Today, the hills are quiet, which has allowed the wildlife rangers back into Virunga National Park, home to 200 of the last 700 or so mountain gorillas on the planet. Thousands of villagers around the park have

trudged home from displaced persons camps, another vote of tentative confidence.

"Business is picking up," said Bahati Banyele, who fixes radios in a little town called Kibumba, which had emptied out during last fall's fighting.

Nobody is celebrating yet. People here remember all too well the Sun City peace treaty reached in South Africa in 2002, which was supposed to rein in marauding militias but did not.

They recall the democratic elections in 2006, which cost more than US\$500 million and raised hopes but did not end the war.

And they remember the countless ceasefires and conferences at fancy hotels that spelled more fighting even before the delegates jetted home.

### KABILA'S GAMBLE

One of the biggest points of uncertainty right now is DR Congo President Joseph Kabila, who has gone out on a limb by inviting in the Rwandans, in the hope that this could break the deadlock between the countries.

Several former allies of Kabila among top lawmakers in the capital Kinshasa are now denouncing him as a traitor. They are demanding investigations.

Indeed, his precarious toehold on power could slip further if the Rwandan government, as many people here suspect, has not truly



severed ties to the rebels.

The presence of Rwandan troops in eastern DR Congo makes a lot of Congolese nervous. The little country next door invaded Congo twice, in 1996 and 1998, ostensibly to secure its own borders, though human rights groups have accused Rwandan troops of plundering Congo's rich trove of minerals and massacring civilians.

Top and far left: Virunga National Park in eastern DR Congo is home to 200 of the last 700 or so mountain gorillas on the planet. Above: Jean-Marie Serundori, a ranger in Virunga National Park. Rebel attacks forced him to flee Virunga in October.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



## [ TRAVEL ]

## A Green Island itinerary

BY CINDY SUI  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Even if you are accustomed to a hectic schedule, once you arrive on Green Island, the silence and slow pace of life will calm you and make you want to take your time, lingering by the rocks along the shore, enjoying the ocean breeze or taking photos atop the emerald hills.

There is much to see and even if you take your time, you can manage to see practically all of it because the island is so small.

Getting around the island—which is just 4km long and 3km wide—is easy so there is no need to figure out where to go or find public transport. The island is so tiny that you can drive around it on the 20km round-island road in about an hour. Golf carts can be rented for about NT\$1,000 a day. Scooters and bicycles are also available.

But walking around the island is quite doable if you like taking your time, and it will allow you to

enjoy the island's main attractions at a leisurely pace.

You can start by walking from Nanliao Harbor (南寮漁港), where the ferry docks, north to Nanliao Village (南寮村) or Zhongliao Village (中寮村) where a row of mostly seafood restaurants give you a lot of options for lunch.

After eating, you can check out the Green Island Lighthouse (綠島燈塔) nearby. The 33m-high landmark was built after a US vessel ran aground on coral reef during a violent storm in 1937. Moved by local residents' brave rescue attempts, the Americans paid for the construction of the lighthouse the following year.

If you keep walking along the main path, you'll get to the old Green Island Prison (綠島監獄), which has been converted into a museum.

While visiting a prison may not be on the top of your agenda during a vacation, this one is worth checking out to gain an insight into Taiwan's history.

The seaside Green Island Human Rights Memorial Park (綠島人權紀念公園) erected outside the prison is dedicated to the hundreds of political prisoners once held here and elsewhere in Taiwan. Names of the prisoners are inscribed on the memorial's walls, as well as words that poetically recount the sorrow of mothers of the detainees praying that their sons will survive.

Further along the road is the Sika Deer Ecological Park (綠島梅花鹿生態園區), a 23-hectare park that supposedly is aimed at educating people about the animal species native to Taiwan, but seems geared more towards commercial purposes. It has a KTV, a restaurant and a somewhat incongruous area for play warfare, complete with uniforms for rent and toy guns.

Sika deer are not native to Green Island but were brought there by locals for their antlers, which are infused in a locally made wine.

While they are not an endangered species, some local



Among Green Island's attractions are some of the best coral reefs in the country, lush ocean views and one of only three saltwater hot springs in the world. PHOTO: CHANG TSUN-WEI, TAIPEI TIMES

restaurants serve deer meat, and the deer's population has also declined over the years, said Lin Su-ling (林紓琳), recreation section chief of the Tourism Bureau's East Coast National Scenic Area Administration.

Continuing along the path, one will arrive at another point of attraction — Kuanyin Cave (觀音洞, Goddess of Mercy Cave) — where devout Buddhists still participate in blessing ceremonies. According to one local legend, the cave was

discovered about 100 years ago when a fisherman lost at sea said he saw a strange light emanating from the hillside where the cave is located, which allowed him to safely reach shore.

Trying to find the source of light, local villagers later discovered the cave and the statue-like object inside — which is actually a 1m-tall stalagmite. The stalagmite is sometimes dressed in a deity's cape and worshipped as a manifestation of the goddess, according to a

Tourism Bureau magazine.

From here, walking south along the eastern side of the island will present visitors with views of some of the oddly shaped rocks, including Pekinese Dog (哈巴狗), and Sleeping Beauty (睡美人), which are near each other, as well as Confucius Rock (孔子岩) and Turkey Rock (火雞岩) further south. The Visitor Center near the airport has a map that identifies which rock is which.

Near the southeastern tip of the island, the Jhaorih (Morning Sun) Hot Spring (朝日溫泉) is another major tourist draw. Facing the rising sun in the east, it's unique because it's next to the sea and is one of only three saltwater hot springs in the world, the other two being in Japan and on a small island off the coast of Sicily.

Those who feel energetic and inspired by the easy and scenic walk along the coastal road can try the Across Mountain Ancient Trail (過山古道, 1.85km) and the Across Mountain Trail (過山步道, 1.84km), which offer hikers gorgeous views of the island and its surrounding ocean scenes. The trails were blazed by early

inhabitants who used them to cross the island before vehicles were available and the round-island road was built.

Perhaps one thing Green Island lacks is preservation of its Aboriginal culture. Most Taiwanese would say there are no indigenous people on Green Island, in contrast to Orchid Island or other parts of the country.

But the island was home for thousands of years to various Aboriginal groups, including the Amei, before Han Chinese from Siao Liouciou Island (小琉球), off Pingtung County, migrated there in the 19th century.

Employees at the Visitors Center said the indigenous people fled due to conflicts with the Han Chinese and little remains of their history on the island.

The island had an Aboriginal name in the past — Sanasai, which means "a resting place." Aborigines used to see Green Island as a stopping point on their trips to and from other parts of Taiwan, such as Orchid Island or Taiwan proper.

For the fun of it, try and ask if anyone you meet on Green Island knows the island's original name.