

# Rwanda targets wealthy tourists with new gorilla permit fees

The decision by Rwanda to increase the price of gorilla trekking permits is likely to benefit its neighbours Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where the world-famous mountain primates are also found.



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The Rwanda Development Board (RDB) has increased the fees for both local and international visitors effective from 6 May, when the announcement was made. Foreign tourists will now pay double from \$750 to \$1,500, while locals and East Africans will pay a similar amount from \$36.3, an over 4,000 percent increase.

RDB has also introduced a new package for tourists wishing to book an entire family of gorillas at a cost of \$15,000. The package includes exclusive personalised tour guide services, it says.

## Price increase aims to strengthen conservation efforts

The decision to review the charges upwards has elicited concerns from players in the tourism sector, who argue that the new fees will reduce the country's competitiveness. Though the rare primates are most popular in Rwanda, the volcanic Virunga mountains range that is home to the gorillas is also shared by Uganda and the DRC. It is feared that the new rates are likely to force tourists to abandon Rwanda in favour of its neighbours who have not increased their charges.

"We are targeting high-end tourists. I don't think the low prices in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo will divert the traffic to those countries," the RDB chief executive Clare Akamanzi told The EastAfrican.

She said the price increase aims to strengthen conservation efforts as well as revenue that communities living around the Volcanoes National Park receive for development projects.

## **Negative impact**

But the Rwanda Tours and Travel Association (RTTA) said that while it supports efforts to conserve the endangered species, the sudden increase of the permit fees will affect the industry adversely. "We believe an immediate doubling of gorilla permits will be taken negatively by the market, it will affect our businesses and the entire tourism value chain, and we risk losing substantial revenue for the industry and government as a whole," RTTA said in a statement.

The association accused RDB of failing to consult the stakeholders, adding that this will make it hard for the firms to "manage the sudden and abrupt change."

The concerns were reiterated by the Rwanda Safari Guides Association (RSGA), which expressed its frustration with the new development. "We were not given enough time to adjust to this abrupt change.

"As transporters, I can assure you that we are not amused by this change. We made big investments and the least we should have got is a question of what we think before the change," said Patrick Kwizera, the chairman of RSGA.

## **Locked out**

While RDB said the price increase will not affect tourists who had purchased their tickets before 6 May, the decision was met by criticism from hoteliers who said tourists have begun cancelling their bookings. Rwandans too criticised the move saying the sharp increase locked many of them out.

But Akamazi, defending the raise, said only about four percent of locals visit the Volcanoes National Park, an indication that they were not interested even when the prices were low.

Rwandans and other East Africans who have been paying \$36.3 will now pay \$1,500 per permit per visit. The gorilla permit for foreign residents has gone up 328.5 per cent from \$375 to \$1,500.

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