

Modern outlook

Sixteen years after the genocide, Rwanda's economy is one of the fastest growing globally and the current generation are embracing creative careers, discovers Amy Guttman



Kigali central business district skyline.

Kigali isn't exactly renowned for its nightlife, or lively vibe. The common misperception is of a city that's conservative, quiet, some might say boring. But, young designers, pioneers in Rwanda's nascent fashion industry, are defying the stereotype, matching traditional cuts with vivid colours. Kigali's residents too, help dispel the myth of Kigali as a sleepy city.

My guide, Patrick Kwizera and I admire a high-end wedding dress in bright, primary colours, bejeweled in Swarovski crystals at one of Rwanda's new made-to-measure, and ready-to-wear fashion houses. Rows of tailors lean over sewing machines lining the backroom. A deep purple and gold patterned jacket catches Kwizera's eye and on impulse, he hands over \$50 cash for it. "Where will you wear it?" I ask. "Oh, to weddings, and clubs with my wife," the 44-year old answers. His gregarious nature, and penchant for loud clothing and loud music typifies the environment in post-conflict Rwanda, where healing from the 1994 genocide has been the collective work of an entire nation.

Kwizera survived the civil war that left more than 800,000 brutally murdered, and 95,000 children orphaned. His indulgent, spontaneous purchase is indicative of the huge strides Rwanda has made since that troubling time came to an end.

"Post genocide, people didn't have much. Sometimes they couldn't eat, so they weren't spending money on fashion, for sure," Kwizera explains. "It took until about 1999, when we achieved political stability, for people to have money to spend on clothing again."

Sixteen years later, through reconciliation, reconstruction

and targeted policies, Rwanda's economy is one of the fastest growing in the world. Annual GDP growth has averaged 8 per cent since 2008 and both domestic and foreign investors can register a business in 24 hours, for a payment of \$24. Rwanda's government is determined to establish a service-oriented economy with middle-income status. Low taxes and new laws allowing prospecting and exploration licenses to be merged have helped stimulate the country's mining industry, which makes up nearly 15 per cent of total exports. Tin, gold and tantalum are also mined. In 2012, Rwanda supplied about 12 per cent of the world's tantalum, used in mobile phones and video game consoles.

The process of starting a business has been fast-tracked, but infrastructure improved as well. Around 3,000km of fibre optic cables criss-cross the mountainous country, known as the 'land of a thousand hills', delivering 4G, which helps power laptops given to every school child – another government initiative to arm future generations with knowledge, and lay the foundation for a technology sector.

Joseph Nzaramba works for Datasystems,

a private, local company tasked with training more Rwandans in ICT. Nazaramba often spends his days at K-Lab, a tech hub in Kigali, that's free for entrepreneurs to collaborate at a co-work.

"There are not enough Rwandans trained in ICT. We are promoting ICT education through teacher training, helping primary, secondary and university teachers get laptops and paying for installment and computer skills. Every child has a laptop but we are advancing that knowledge to include e-learning and basics, like how to build websites."

Tech may be Rwanda's long play, but tourism is the country's top foreign exchange earner, taking in more than \$300 million last year. Most people come for the gorillas, but Ambassador Yamina Karitanyi, Head of Tourism at the Rwanda Development Board believes Kigali's new conference centre accommodating 2,600 people, as well as hotels and restaurants will create a broader business travel base.

"The plan is to look at capturing conference attendees and have an additional leisure product sold to them while they're still in Rwanda or have families meet ▶

Below from left to right: Downtown Kigali; Modern commercial building, CBD.





Above: The Kigali Convention Centre. **Below right:** One laptop per child policy, an initiative taken by the post-genocide government.

partners who have been attending conferences here," said Karitanyi. "We have to take advantage of this safe, secure, clean city by expanding it to people who would not otherwise look at Rwanda as a destination. MICE attendees tend to spend more than leisure travellers. We want to marry the two, adding extra nights naturally."

Rwanda is already drawing high profile conferences: the Interpol General Assembly, Africa Hotel Investment Forum, African Union Summit, and others. An increase in international airlines – from five in 2010, to nine this year, is also contributing to its convention success. Unlike its East African neighbours, both French and English are spoken, making Rwanda more marketable.

Despite its small market size, many see Rwanda, through its shared borders with Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as a gateway to Central Africa. Connections with the Gulf have been bolstered with flydubai starting three-times weekly flights last September.

Multinational chains such as Marriott and Carlson Rezidor

(Radisson) are planning openings in Kigali. The 40-year old, legendary Hotel Rwanda, officially known as the Hotel des Milles Collines Kempinski, is getting a head-to-toe makeover. The refurbishment will see it transform from a property with rooms largely left in the past, to a luxury destination hotel. The idea, General Manager Christophe Strahm says, is to create an urban resort.

"We're aiming for leisure travellers, CEOs, the Hermes crowds... that will help us stay out of price battles and the conference competition."

Ambassador Karitanyi is convinced higher standards will help. The missing link is hospitality and practical experience, and Karitanyi wants to see a greater emphasis on customer service. "People focus on the hardware but they don't plan for the soft skills, which is required for sustainability."

Akilah, a private training school for women, is addressing those needs with a

three-pronged curriculum devoted to hospitality, entrepreneurship and ICT. Aline Kabanda is Akilah's Country Director.

"The approach was to go to the private sector to find out the skills gaps and then build a model around that," said Kabanda. "We want to provide students with technical abilities and knowledge but also a can-do attitude and mindset. We want students who see themselves as leaders of tomorrow who will be part of Rwandan society going forward."

With 100 per cent job placement, and strong partnerships with



Marriott International, and the Kigali Serena hotel offering students practical, on the job, work experience, Kabanda says her graduates represent a new Rwanda.

"Those atrocities of 1994 shook Rwandan society. One generation was just wiped out. This is the process of rebuilding with real progress."

The first post-genocide generation is forging their own path, abandoning traditional jobs for creative careers. Sonia Mugabo buys fabric for ready-to-wear and bespoke garments produced in her small workshop. The 25-year old designer is one of at least a dozen in an emerging industry. Rwanda's annual fashion week and festival is open to the public and is supported by New York's fashion week. Mugabo wears an Anglo-African outfit – a collared, blue button down shirt, tucked into a pleated bright yellow and white skirt.

"I interned at Vogue in New York," she says, which makes her stand out among her peers. Most of them are propelled by a passion for design, rather than any formal training or education. They hire tailors who excel at copying designs, rather than inventing them.

Rwanda doesn't have a history of fashion, nor are there design schools yet. But Mugabo, and others in their 20 and 30s are helping Rwanda blossom in a way no one could have anticipated. As the first post-conflict generation, they are the first who can afford to pursue futures that give them pleasure, rather than sticking to pragmatic vocations. "I was four years

old during the conflict. This is part of the reawakening of Rwanda. The time is now for us to follow our passion and our careers," Mugabo explains.

Many fled the country, living in exile for years before coming home. The diaspora returned with a we-can-do-anything outlook. They're establishing a creative community supportive of one another. Mugabo is part of a collective that includes a handful of fashion, jewelry and menswear designers. They even host their own, independent fashion show every autumn, and participate in pop-up shops.

Mugabo says an expanding local market is an indication of the country's growth.

"Rwanda's economy is becoming stable. People can afford these luxury goods. Ten years ago there were other things they had to focus on. Now, they have jobs, they want to look good."

Her customers are between 22 and 35 years old. They choose Mugabo's designs for their feminine cuts, and day-to-night versatility. Accessories are finding a home among Rwanda's stylish set for the first time, too. Teta Isibo watches as half a dozen older women browse her jewellery shop, trying on big bangles wrapped in silk threads of hot pink, turquoise and gold. The 31-year old moved back to Rwanda in 1996.

"When we moved home it was all about the basics. It shows how far Rwanda has come. The country is like a blank slate. We don't have a history of fashion,

so we are forging our own way."

It's not only the country that's a blank slate. Isibo and others are discovering they can choose their own futures. Isibo used to be an urban planner.

"We are the last generation where our parents say 'be a doctor, a lawyer'."

For Rwanda's young designers, Isibo says, the attraction is their role in a bigger movement. "Africa is trending, so 'made in Africa' has a certain cache. It's about building a brand." ■

The writer was a guest of Uberluxe Safaris (uberluxesafaris.com), Hotel des Milles Collines Kempinski (kempinski.com) and Kenya Airways (kenya-airways.com).



Below from left to right: Women making traditional handcrafts; The designs of Sonia Mugabo, a member of Rwanda's emerging fashion industry.