



# Detour: Democratic Republic of the Congo

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## Best of Nature

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## Best of Culture

- » Twa (Batwa) community visit (p495)
- » Eating *sambasa* (little fish fritters; p495)

## Why Go?

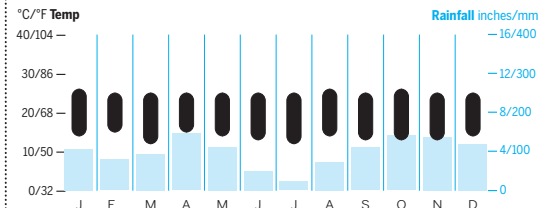
The haunting yet unforgettable setting of Joseph Conrad's classic novel *Heart of Darkness*, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC; formerly Zaïre) occupies a vast swathe of land in the centre of the African continent. The same size as Western Europe, most of the DRC falls outside of East Africa and this detour chapter only delves into the Nord-Kivu (North Kivu) province and its capital Goma.

After years of civil war, the Parc National des Virungas is once again open for business, and hard-core travellers are returning with stories of close encounters with critically endangered gorillas and tales of nights spent camped on the rim of a smouldering volcano, the night sky lit up by a witch's cauldron of molten lava below.

It's true, visiting the DRC isn't for everyone. The peace is young and fragile, but with a modicum of common sense, you could be blazing the trail that future generations of travellers will follow.

## When to Go

### Goma



**Year-Round**  
Swimmers take care. Lake Kivu's eruptions can release poisonous gases.

**Mid-Mar–mid-May**  
The long rains wash away roads and disrupt travel throughout the province.

**Jun–mid-Sept**  
Low rainfall makes this the ideal time to trek.



## Democratic Republic of Congo Highlights

- 1 Wipe the sweat from your brow, while staring slaw-jawed into the fiery bowels of the world's largest lava lake, **Nyiragongo Volcano** (p498)
- 2 Squat with your head bowed and your eyes fixed on the ground as one of the world's largest primates bursts from a bamboo thicket during **gorilla tracking** (p498)
- 3 Witness firsthand nature's awesome power and the locals' irrepressible determination to recolonise the lava-flooded streets of **Goma** (p494)
- 4 Realise that North Kivu isn't as dangerous as you had first feared and the **food** (p495) is actually pretty good
- 5 Finally be rewarded with your first glimpse of **wild chimps** (p499) after hours of scrambling through dense forest in the heart of Africa.

## Goma

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Goma is something of a modern-day Pompeii. On 17 January 2002, the Nyiragongo Volcano blew its top. While the lava moved slowly enough to give most residents time to evacuate (although 47 people did die from asphyxiation), 4500 buildings were destroyed, 120,000 people left homeless and much of the city, including the north end of the airport's runway, left buried under two metres of molten mess. Since then locals have been jackhammering their way through the lumpy rock, breaking it into manageable pieces and rebuilding their homes.

All tour companies listed on p497 can organise city tours, which incorporate some of the most badly affected areas and give you a rundown on how the disaster unfolded.

## 🏠 Sleeping

### La Brise Guesthouse

HOTEL \$

(209 94403000; labriseguesthouse@yahoo.fr; Ave la Corniche; r US\$30-50; 📶) Large rooms, tight security, semi-reliable hot water and a quiet lakeside location make this one of Goma's best-kept secrets (although the restaurant is insanely overpriced). Of the three room categories available, you'll want to shell out for a US\$40 or \$50 room; the cheaper US\$30 rooms don't have windows.

### Stella Matutina Lodge

BOUTIQUE HOTEL \$\$

(208 11510760; stellamatutina@yahoo.fr; Himbi; r excl breakfast \$65-100; 📶) The most comfortable rooms in town are at this luxurious lodge, set in the spacious grounds of a grand villa to the west of the town centre in the Himbi district.

### Ihusi Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(208 13129560; www.ihusi-hotel.net; Ave la Corniche; r incl full breakfast US\$75-200; 📶) Frequently by visiting dignitaries and politicians, this large hotel offers smart rooms across eight price categories and an open-air restaurant with sweeping views of Lake Kivu. It is regarded as *the* place to stay in Goma.

### Hotel des Grands Lacs

HOTEL \$

(209 97097959; hotelgrandslacs@gmail.com; Blvd Kanya Muhanga; r \$US60, excl breakfast US\$40; 📶) Once Goma's grandest hotel, this colonial relic would struggle to earn just one star