

# Amid Congo's brute forces, volcanic beauty

By Jon Rosen

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GOMA, Democratic Republic of Congo — To the throgs of late-night revelers, the eerie orange glow on the horizon was hardly a reason to traipse into their city.

This lakeside commercial hub, known to the world for its proximity to eastern Congo's humanitarian crisis, is locally famous for its nightlife. Seven nights a week, men and women from Congo and neighboring Rwanda flock to Goma's discompact main thoroughfare, seemingly oblivious to the reality that just a stone's throw up the road sits the local headquarters of the world's largest United Nations peacekeeping mission.

For our five-person crew of backpack-toting Westerners, Goma was a mere crossroads in our pilgrimage to the fiery peak that looms just 10 miles outside town.

For the true adventure-seeker, we had been told, it was hard to beat a trek up Mount Nyiragongo, one of two active volcanoes in the Virunga Mountain chain that straddles the borders of Rwanda, Uganda, and Congo. Unlike Tanzania's famed Mount Kilimanjaro, which requires at least four days of hiking and is beyond the price range of the average budget traveler, Nyiragongo can be conquered for approximately \$300 in one 24-hour outing. And it offers a reward that Africa's highest peak does not: a night at the edge of one of the most spectacular lava lakes on the planet.

That said, we were well aware that Nyiragongo had its threats. Until a month before our visit, the volcano had been off-limits for more than a year, as militiamen lurked on its forested lower slopes and pillaged nearby villages. Though we were assured that a recent army offensive had taken care of any rebels, natural dangers remained. In 2002, with little warning, Nyiragongo erupted from a fissure in its side and leveled a fifth of Goma, killing dozens and leaving behind a trail of blackened lava that is now being used to rebuild the city. Though monitoring of the volca-



PHOTOS BY JOHN TULL

At Nyiragongo's rim, tents were pitched between the crater, to the left, and a steep escarpment. Against the nighttime sky, the magma inside the volcano stirred and spewed fumes.

no has since intensified, scientists fear the next blow could be worse. In 2002, the lava was thick and sluggish, giving most Goma residents time to escape its path. Past eruptions — long before Goma was a mushrooming city of 1 million — have emitted a much more fluid lava, capable of racing downhill at speeds of up to 60 miles per hour.

On the morning of our trek, undeterred after a pleasant night at the lakeside Hotel Ihusi, we piled into a rickety van to the trailhead and were greeted by our guide, Emmanuel Munganga. A former teacher, Munganga had migrated to tourism because of the poor salaries paid Congolese public servants. Despite his boyish appearance he was more than qualified, naturally inclined to storytelling, and conversant in eight languages.

The day before, Munganga had led us on an improvised tour of Goma, showing us the town's lava-scarred sights as we stopped for various acts of officialdom. We swung by the bank to pay the \$200 national park fee, the Congolese Wildlife Authority to collect our park passes, and a supermarket with aid-worker-targeted prices to buy water, bread, and canned fish — the carte du jour for our Nyiragongo night.

After a few delays, we set off from Virunga National Park



headquarters around 11 a.m., breaking a sweat in the initial slog through dense jungle, then cooling off as we climbed higher, the vegetation thinned, and the terrain opened up into increasingly steep, loose volcanic rubble. With porters doing the hard work, and armed rangers in tow (the rebels were gone but who knew for sure?), we inched toward the now visible summit, occasionally glancing back for a bird's-eye view of Goma sprawled along the shore of Lake Kivu.

Chilled by intermittent showers, we trudged on, and after six hours reached the 11,385-foot-high rim — a narrow strip of flat rock wedged between a steep escarpment and a slight lip up to the edge of the steaming caldera. It was still daylight, and the much anticipated lava was obscured in a cloud of sulfur-scented gases. We set about arranging our camp: Tents were pitched carefully on the flat ledge, leaving just enough room for guarded

maneuvering, and causing slight worry over what could result from a strong gust of wind.

As the sun set, we dug into our bread and canned fish, and readied our cameras for the main attraction: the maelstrom of primordial fire half a mile below us. Beneath a thin, semi-hardened crust, the lava shone through in snaking orange fissures — luminous streaks that would bellow into fiery plumes and then settle into momentary stillness. With rangers on high alert — one tourist, we were told, had been so mesmerized she had jumped in — we crept to the ledge and stared into the magma, which purred with soothing resonance while glowing a deeper red against the darkness.

After an hour or two of lava gazing, I climbed down the 15-foot slope to the edge of our campsite, where Munganga, despite the nighttime chill, had begun a lecture on the tragic history of the Congo.

A land of precious minerals and rich volcanic soil, this country the size of Western Europe should be one of the most prosperous in Africa. Instead, exploited by Belgium's King Leopold II, and thrust into decrepitude by long-time dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, it was already one of the world's most hapless nations when war came to its resource-

## If you go . . .

### Getting there

Goma is most easily (and safely) approached from Kigali, Rwanda. Buses run every half-hour from Kigali to Gisenyi, Rwanda (4 hours, \$4 one-way), which is one mile from the Goma border crossing. US citizens do not need a visa to enter Rwanda, but do need a visa for Congo. Prices change frequently and visas issued at the border are often subject to bribes. You may wish to secure a visa ahead of time from the Embassy of the Democratic Republic of Congo in Washington, 1726 M St., NW, Suite 601, 202-234-7690, [www.ambardcusa.org](http://www.ambardcusa.org).

### What to do

#### Nyiragongo Volcano Trek

Munganga Tours

011-243-994-328-077

[munganga\\_joseph@yahoo.fr](mailto:munganga_joseph@yahoo.fr)

#### Hakuna Matata Tours

011-243-997-743-710

[www.hakunamatatours.com](http://www.hakunamatatours.com)

Both companies offer 24-hour overnight hikes, with pick up

from your hotel in Goma or Gisenyi, Rwanda. A permit to enter Virunga National Park is \$200; guide, rangers, porters, transport, tent, and sleeping bag rental add approximately \$100 per person.

### Where to stay

#### Hotel Ihusi

Boulevard Kanyamuhanga

011-243-813-129-560

[www.travelpod.com/hotel/Hotel\\_Ihusi-Goma.html](http://www.travelpod.com/hotel/Hotel_Ihusi-Goma.html)

Modern lakeside hotel, \$55-\$110.

#### VIP Palace

Boulevard Kanyamuhanga

011-243-813-180-999

[www.travelpod.com/hotel/VIP\\_Palace\\_Goma-Goma.html](http://www.travelpod.com/hotel/VIP_Palace_Goma-Goma.html)

\$55-\$225.

### Where to eat

#### Petit Bruxelles

Near the Central Roundabout

Grilled fish, goat brochettes;

\$10-\$15.

#### Coco Jambo

One of Goma's hottest night spots, \$15-\$20.

rich east in the mid-1990s. Ever since, eastern Congo has been home to a web of conflicts involving eight African nations and scores of rebel armies — an imbroglio of death, destruction, and rampant sexual violence fueled by regional and ethnic power struggles, a vacuum of state authority, and minerals-linked criminal rackets.

As he recounted all of this misery, Munganga's trademark grin did not once vanish, and it struck me how detached he seemed, as if our Nyiragongo night left us all impervious to eastern Congo's tragedy. Somehow, when confronted with the brute force of nature, the human world below seemed trivial.

I pondered this as I crawled into my sleeping bag, wearing all the layers that my porter had carted on his head for six hours. Unable to sleep on the hard and

frigid ground, the feeling of escape from material reality lingered until Munganga pulled me aside on the hike down the following morning.

"Right here, in 2008," he said as we rounded a bend, "rebels attacked a group of Belgian tourists. They took everything. Money, clothes, even their underwear. They had to walk down naked."

"Thanks for telling us this before," I shot back.

"Don't worry. The volcano is safe. Very safe," he repeated. "That is why the volcano was closed. But the rebels are gone now."

In a night that we would not soon forget, we had made it to that orange glow and returned to park headquarters, underwear intact, to tell about it.

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