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Rebuilding Rwanda

Having endured one of the worst genocides in history, this tiny African nation is making a remarkable economic comeback and Coloradans are playing an important role.

By Lisa Marshall

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KIGALI, RWANDA — It's been just 48 hours since I stepped off the plane at Kigali International Airport, and already, my preconceived notions about Rwanda have been replaced by a kinder, more hopeful reality — and an understanding of why a growing group of Colorado entrepreneurs are compelled to invest here.

The streets are immaculate, with freshly planted palm trees lining the medians, cascading waterfalls adorning the traffic circles and old women in colorful head scarves sweeping the sidewalks with straw brooms. The people are warm and helpful, and thanks to an abundance of omnipresent police clad in bright yellow jerseys, downtown Kigali feels remarkably safe — even to a woman traveling alone.

My local host for the morning, a sharply dressed Kenyan-American builder named Nathan Loyd, pulls up to my hotel in a sleek silver BMW 600 and off we go, through verdant green banana plantations and endless hills covered in tea and coffee crops, to a scenic 8-acre property marked with 29 wooden stakes.

In a few days, he tells me, the bulldozers will be at work here, building a plush 29-home middle-income subdivision — the nation's largest privately owned housing development to date — all with money from Colorado investors. Within months, it will be sold out, he assures. Within a year, those investors will see at least a 30 percent return on their investment. And soon, he hopes, he'll break ground on another one — this one hosting 1,000 homes.

"It's the right place and the right time," says Loyd, 37, noting that as hordes of dispersed Rwandese return to their homeland and investors flock here to cash in on the massive rebuilding effort, local agencies estimate that 2,500 houses per year will be needed. "The first picture that comes to anyone's mind is the genocide. Naturally it was a very horrible event. But because of that barrier I think people are missing out on understanding the current position of Rwanda."

Indeed. Fourteen years after Rwanda endured one of the most savage genocides in human history — an unfathomable 1 million Tutsis and moderate Hutus slaughtered, largely with machetes, in 100 days — the country appears to be outliving the gruesome legacy portrayed in the 2004 film "Hotel Rwanda." The economy is growing at an impressive 7 percent per year clip. Tourism is booming, drawing \$36 million in 2006 - up a whopping 30 percent from the previous year. President Paul Kagame, a former leader in the revolutionary army that helped end the genocide, is broadly lauded as aggressively anti-corruption and skillfully pro-business. And investors and other businesspeople from Colorado are taking notice.

Since 2004, when DTC developer John Dick struck up a friendship with Kagame and invited him to Denver for a series of business meetings, the Rwanda-Colorado connection has flourished. Dick, who now lives on the Jersey Islands of the United Kingdom, has been instrumental in wiring much of Rwanda with fiber-optic cable, radically boosting the number of phone and Internet users.

The Rwandan government has since hired Denver/Boulder-based Oz Architecture to craft Kigali's master plan for the coming half-century. Third-generation Denver native Gaylord Layton, founder of Formation Technologies, just opened a luxury tourist lodge for those who want to track the rare mountain gorillas. Rob Fogler, a Denver attorney, has launched Thousand Hills Venture Fund, expressly for those who want to invest in Rwandan enterprises, such as Loyd's housing development. And numerous other Colorado players, nonprofit and for-profit alike, have forged lasting ties there.

They contend that Rwanda is not a crippled nation, but rather the emerging economic bedrock on an African continent riddled with problems.



(Photo courtesy of EDAAW)

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"A lot of people come in with this mindset that they want to save Rwanda," says Fogler, a 39-year-old father of two who left a career as a corporate lawyer to run Thousand Hills Venture Fund. "What I hear in Rwanda, whether it's from government leaders or business people is: 'We are not looking for charity. We are not looking to be subsidized. We want to be taken seriously as a destination for investment.'"

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Starting from scratch

Initially, though, the terms "investment" and "Rwanda" seem hopelessly mismatched.

The three-month 1994 genocide — a ruthless effort by majority Hutu militias to "exterminate" the Tutsi minority — left the nation's infrastructure and psyche in tatters. Schools, hospitals and places of business were shuttered. Thousands of doctors, teachers, business leaders and other educated Rwandans were either killed, committed murder themselves, or fled.

"The reality is that reconciliation in my country and the rebuilding of the nation — which lost a million people in 100 days — is not magic," Anglican Bishop John Rucyahana of Rwanda said during a recent visit to Denver. "We are faced with true human loss and human emotions, human hurt, human guilt It's something that you engage with the will to face it constantly and keep your hands on it in order to make the transformation."

Add to the challenges that the country is landlocked and tiny (about the size of Vermont), has the most dense population in Africa (nearly 10 million people), and only 5 percent of the population has electricity, and one might question what people are getting so excited about.

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