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Living in Burundi

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Introduction

Burundi, set in the heart of East Africa's Great Lakes region, is a land of contrasts and captivating beauty. For the adventurous expatriate, it offers a mix of challenge, discovery, and reward. This book, *Living in Burundi: A Guide for Expats*, is crafted for those considering making Burundi their new home, whether for work, adventure, or the chance to immerse themselves in a truly unique cultural landscape.

Moving to Burundi can feel daunting. The country's history, marked by resilience in the face of adversity, impacts both the daily experience and broader context of life here. Yet, beyond the headlines of political instability and economic struggle, there lies a nation of welcoming people, stunning scenery, and opportunities for meaningful connection. From the vibrant streets of Bujumbura to the peace of misty hills and the shores of Lake Tanganyika, Burundi reveals itself in layers to those with an open mind and heart.

This guide aims to serve not just as a practical manual but also as a cultural companion. It covers essential topics—visas, housing, cost of living, health, safety, working arrangements, and more—providing up-to-date, realistic advice for navigating Burundian life. Even as you prepare paperwork and pack your suitcase, understanding the rhythms, customs, and expectations of Burundi will smooth your transition and help you build lasting relationships.

Equally, this book celebrates Burundi's culture: its warm hospitality, communal values, music, dance, and culinary traditions. Through exploring etiquette, language, and family life, you'll be better equipped to understand and embrace your neighbors, colleagues, and new friends. As an expat, knowledge of these social nuances is as vital as knowing where to shop or how to access healthcare.

Every expat experience is different, shaped by personal interests, family needs, and professional commitments. Whether you are a solo traveler, a family moving for career opportunities, or someone joining a humanitarian mission, *Living in Burundi* seeks to answer your questions and address your concerns. By highlighting both the challenges and the distinct joys of life here, this book encourages you to approach your new adventure with both realism and optimism.

We hope this guide provides the foundation for a successful move and a fulfilling stay. Welcome to Burundi—a country ready to surprise, challenge, and inspire.

CHAPTER ONE: Overview of Burundi: Geography, History, and Demographics

Burundi, a small, landlocked nation, is often referred to as the "Heart of Africa" due to its central location in the Great Lakes region of East Africa. It is a country of breathtaking beauty, characterized by its mountainous terrain, high plateaus, and deep valleys. The topography is quite dramatic, with a chain of mountains and high plateaus formed from ancient Precambrian rock. Mount Heha, the country's highest point, reaches an elevation of 2,760 meters (9,055 feet). These geographical features not only shape the landscape but also significantly influence the local climate and agricultural practices.

To the west, Burundi shares a border with the Democratic Republic of Congo, while Rwanda lies to the north, and Tanzania to the east and south. A significant natural boundary is Lake Tanganyika, which stretches along Burundi's southwestern border. This vast lake is Africa's deepest and the world's second-deepest freshwater lake, offering stunning vistas and serving as a vital resource for fishing and transportation. The country's western flank is part of the Great Rift Valley, with the narrow Imbo valley extending from Rwanda to Lake Tanganyika, featuring the Rusizi River that separates Burundi from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The country is relatively small in land area, approximately 27,830 square kilometers (10,745 square miles), making it one of the most densely populated countries in Africa. This dense population, coupled with its reliance on agriculture, means that much of the land is used for subsistence farming and grazing. The hilly nature of the country has historically led to dispersed family compounds rather than concentrated villages, a characteristic that some suggest has contributed to isolation and even ethnic conflict.

Burundi's administrative divisions were reformed in 2025, reducing the number of provinces from eighteen to five. These new provinces are Buhumuza, Bujumbura, Burunga, Butanyerera, and Gitega. Gitega serves as the political capital, rich in cultural and historical significance, while Bujumbura, located at the northern tip of Lake Tanganyika, holds the distinction of being the economic capital and largest city. Expats will likely find themselves spending a significant amount of time in Bujumbura due to its urban amenities and opportunities.

Burundi's history is as rich and complex as its geography. Unlike many sub-Saharan African nations whose borders were drawn by colonial powers, Burundi's boundaries largely reflect a state that was developed by the Burundian monarchy. The Twa, Hutu,

and Tutsi peoples have inhabited the region for at least 500 years. The early history is often debated among academics, particularly concerning the roles and origins of these three dominant ethnic groups.

By the 16th century, the Kingdom of Burundi had emerged as an independent kingdom, characterized by a hierarchical political authority and a tributary economic system. The king, or *mwami*, was typically Tutsi, with a princely class (*ganwa*) acting as intermediaries between the monarch and the Hutu and Tutsi masses. This pre-colonial state was one of the few in Africa to be a direct territorial continuation of a pre-colonial era African state.

In 1890, Burundi, along with Rwanda and Tanganyika, became part of German East Africa. This marked the beginning of European colonial influence. After Germany's defeat in World War I, the League of Nations mandated Burundi and neighboring Rwanda to Belgium, forming a combined territory known as Ruanda-Urundi. During Belgian rule, particularly in the late 1920s, the administration reorganized the traditional leadership structure, eliminating most chiefs and sub-chiefs. The Belgians also introduced race-based identity cards in 1933, which intensified societal differences and divided the population along ethnic lines.

Burundi gained independence from Belgium on July 1, 1962, initially establishing itself as a constitutional monarchy with Mwami Mwambutsa IV as king. However, the path to independence was marred by political assassinations and growing ethnic tensions. Prince Louis Rwagasore, a charismatic leader of the multi-ethnic Union for National Progress (UPRONA) party, was assassinated in October 1961, just months before independence. This event plunged the nascent nation into a crisis from which it has struggled to recover.

The post-independence era was characterized by significant political instability and ethnic conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi populations. In 1966, a coup d'état led by Tutsi officials overthrew the monarchy, replacing it with a one-party republic and ushering in a period of military rule under President Michel Micombero. This era saw a genocide of the Hutu population in 1972, with an estimated 100,000 people killed.

Subsequent coups and changes in leadership continued throughout the late 20th century. In 1993, Melchior Ndadaye became Burundi's first Hutu president in the country's first multi-party presidential election, a moment that offered a brief glimmer of hope for democratic progress. However, his assassination three months later sparked the devastating 12-year Burundian Civil War, which resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths and widespread displacement. During this conflict, both Hutu and Tutsi populations experienced mass killings.

The Arusha Accords, mediated by figures like Nelson Mandela, eventually led to power-sharing agreements and ceasefires, paving the way for elections in 2005 that installed

Pierre Nkurunziza as president. While this marked the end of major fighting, Burundi continued to face political challenges and human rights concerns, particularly after Nkurunziza's controversial bid for a third term in 2015. The political capital was transferred from Bujumbura to Gitega in 2019. In 2020, Evariste Ndayishimiye became president.

The population of Burundi is estimated at around 14 million people in 2025, making it one of Africa's most densely populated countries with approximately 560 people per square kilometer. The majority of the population lives in rural areas, with just under 15% residing in urban centers. Bujumbura remains the largest city, though Gitega is the political capital.

The population is primarily composed of three ethnic groups: Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. The Hutu make up approximately 81% to 85% of the population, the Tutsi around 14% to 18%, and the Twa less than 1%. Despite historical tensions, Kirundi is a common language spoken by both Hutu and Tutsi, a linguistic homogeneity that is quite rare in sub-Saharan Africa. This shared language, along with French and more recently English, are the official languages of the country. Swahili is also widely spoken, particularly in Bujumbura, serving as a language of trade.

Burundi's demographics also show a young population, with approximately 45.3% of the population below the age of 15 in 2020. The median age in Burundi is 16.4 years, highlighting the country's significant youth demographic. While these figures speak to potential for growth, they also underscore the need for continued development in education and economic opportunities.

Despite its complex past and ongoing developmental challenges, Burundi is a nation with immense natural beauty and a resilient population. Understanding its geography, the tapestry of its history, and the composition of its people provides a crucial foundation for any expat seeking to live and work within its borders. It's a place where the landscape tells a story as compelling as the history etched into the hearts of its inhabitants.

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