

Knowing Burundi

Burundi, also known as “The heart of Africa”, is a landlocked country located in the African Great Lakes Region of Eastern Africa, sharing borders with Rwanda to the North, Democratic Republic of Congo to the West, and Tanzania to the East and South. Located in the universal time zone (UTC: +02:00), Burundi has no direct access to continental waters. Located approximative at 1,100 km from the Indian Ocean, and is more than 2,100 km from the Atlantic Ocean. Burundi’s lowest point is the Lake Tanganyika at 772 m and the highest point is Mount Heha with 2,670 m. In the regional dynamisms, Burundi and Rwanda are the closest nations from their unknown dates of foundation to the context of their state’s foundation.

For many years, Burundians and Rwandans built similar civilizations. Till recently, historical and economic trajectories of Burundi and Rwanda remained close to each other. Burundi shares a rich cultural heritage with Rwanda from the kingdom era since their creation in the 16th Century. Kirundi (mother tongue of Burundi) and Kinyarwanda (mother tongue of Rwanda), remain sister languages. The Rwanda-Urundi constituted one Belgian colonial rule until their Independence Day on July 1st, 1962. For many years after colonization, the two countries had embarked on same historical trajectories until the 1990s with the Genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and the political turmoil triggered in 1993 and ex. ended to 2003. The management of ethnic competition to power in the two countries has defined diverging paths toward their economic and political developments.

Rwanda has built an economic empire inspired by huge worldwide sympathy triggered by the genocide leading to a strong tourist attraction for learning purposes. On the Rwanda’s national parks with Volcanoes and Akagera national parks as popular tourist destination, Rwanda has added numerous historical sites to inspire on humanity development. On the other hand, Burundi has almost failed to raise the importance of its economy even after the integration of the East African Community block. Since 2010 to date, political radicalism has led to corrupt and bureaucratic practices and extremely narrowed the space for constructive debates stemming from diverging and innovative ideas. Where Rwanda rallied Rwandans on nationalist civilization driven by a strong economy with an undivided focus on tourism and high-class service industry, Burundi still suffers from poor yet vital infrastructures for modern economies including roads, electricity, and internet.

Yet Burundi is well positioned in the region with the Lake Tanganyika as the western border with Democratic Republic of Congo and Southern border with Tanzania. Burundi is transit path for visiting the continental Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for their diverse natural resources and mineral deposits and the renowned Republic of Tanzania for its attractive tourist sites including the Mount Kilimanjaro.

Quick data

- **Political Capital:** Gitega (During the colonial era and from 2021)
- **Economic Capital:** Bujumbura
- **Currency:** Burundi franc (BIF)
- **Area:** 27,830km² with
- **Population:** 11,18 million (2018)
- **Language:** Kirundi (official), French (official), Swahili (along Lake Tanganyika and in the Bujumbura area)
- **Religion:** Christian 67% (Roman Catholic 62%, Protestant 5%), indigenous beliefs 23%, Muslim 10%

Relief of Burundi

The topography of Burundi is defined by its location in the eastern flank of the Western Rift Valley resulting in a chain of mountains and high plateaus culminating to 9,055 feet (2,760 meters) at Mount Heha, the country’s highest point. In the northwest the narrow Imbo valley extends southward from Rwanda to Lake Tanganyika and includes the Ruzizi River as a natural border between Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Farther south and west, along the shores of Lake Tanganyika, the higher lands form the Congo-Nile divide, which reaches elevations of 8,500 feet (2,600 meters). Eastward of the divide, the plateaus slope to elevations of 5,000–6,000 feet (1,500–1,800 meters) to

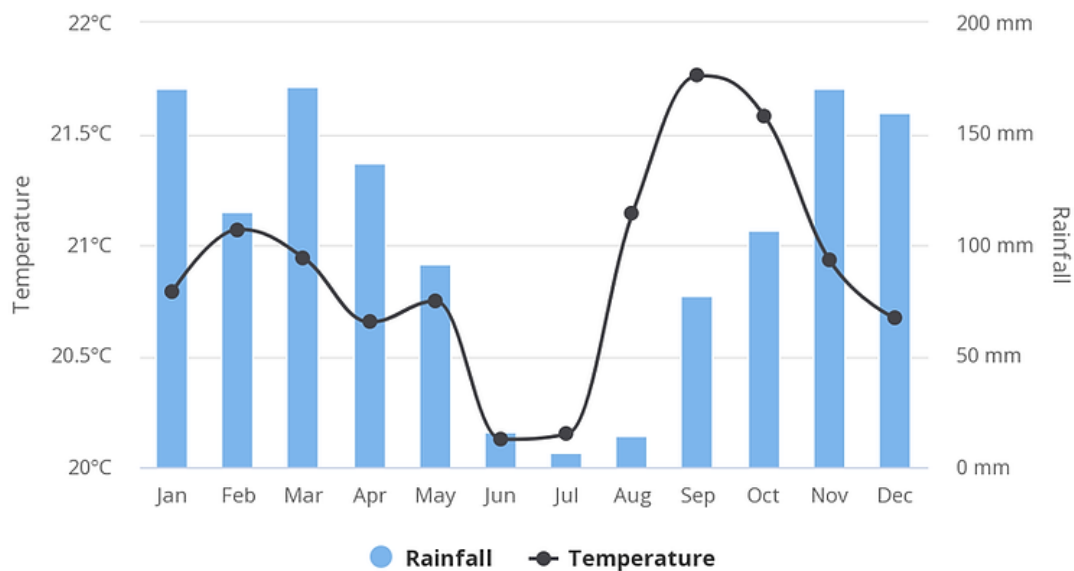
the southeast; the Ruvyironza River flows northeast, cutting through the plateaus. A few valleys and shallow lakes occupy the northern frontier near Rwanda.

Climate

Burundi's high elevation explains the relatively cool temperatures, which average only about 21 °C throughout the year in the central plateau area and usually drop to below 15 °C at night. At lower elevations the annual average is slightly higher, especially in the Imbo valley zone such as Bujumbura. Annual precipitation averages 1,500 to 1,800 mm in the highest-lying areas, is only about 1,000 mm on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. Normal seasons include a dry period between May and August. It rains heavily from February to April.

Choosing your time to visit Burundi

Average Monthly Temperature and Rainfall of Burundi for 1991-2016



Plant and animal life

Burundi remains with few natural forests especially reserved as national parks and reserves for animal preservation such as Ruvubu Park. But generally, natural vegetation has almost entirely disappeared from the landscape and is limited now primarily to higher mountain slopes. Plateaus host wooded savanna at higher elevations, giving way to more-open savanna on the lower slopes. Hunting and poaching have decimated the entire elephant population, leaving only warthogs, baboons, and antelope as the less endangered species.

Cultural dimensions

Rundi or Kirundi is the nationwide and mother tongue of Burundi. As a Bantu language, Kirundi shares most of its vocabulary with Kinyarwanda. Although recently declared as the official language, French remains the most used in official communication. Swahili is the language of trade regionally but French as medium of teaching, takes higher advantage in the service industry. The integration to the East African Community, whose founding fathers (Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda) were former British colonies, ignited some interest in the adoption English in a few universities and other service industries including tourism.

Ingoma (Drum) bears political and cultural symbolisms. Politically, drum symbolized the kingdom (Ingoma) as central to prestige and power. Culturally, Bashingwa (2021) pointed out the sacrality of the Burundi's cultural identity, with the ritualist clans of Abahanza, Abavumu, Abajiji, and Abashubi in the Burundi drumming. Drumming is an

entertainment performed during national ceremonies and feasts, but mainly for welcoming important visitors. Gishora, in Gitega remains the traditional locus of ingoma in Burundi and their performance remains unmatched.

Religion

Although aged of less than 150 years, Christianity quickly uprooted the ancestral religious practices, qualified as incompatible with Christian faith. The country hosts a large Christian population, with about 3/5 of Burundians identifying as Roman Catholics and more than 1/5 as Protestants. A large minority and claims their belonging to traditional religion. Islam claims less than 1/20 of the population. Out of a few exceptional periods, Burundi has maintained healthy relations with religions, making it to qualify as a constitutional theocracy. Only the government of the second republic (1976–87) attempted to curtail the social and educational activities of the Roman Catholic Church due to its constant closeness to the poor and underprivileged social groups. Although not widely shared, the church remains the most powerful institutions with its uncontested thought leading elites in philosophy, theology, and cultural and political anthropology, making it a subversive institution.

Economy

Agriculture is the economic mainstay of the country, with industrial activities accounting for less than 1/4 of the gross domestic product. Staple food crops are beans, corns, cassava, sorghum, and very recently, rice and palm trees. Coffee and tea are principal export products and source of foreign exchange. Fishing is a dominant activity along the Lake Tanganyika in the Imbo region extended between Bujumbura and Makamba via Rumonge. Burundi produces number of fruits including banana, avocado, pineapple, orange. Due its high birth rate, current Burundi's forested area covers less than 3% of the total land area.

The Banque de la République du Burundi (BRB) is the central bank of Burundi, and as such, the BRB issues the Burundi franc (BIF), leads economic policy spheres through regulation of national and foreign banks. Since the independence, Burundi widely remained a poor country with constantly growing trade deficit and increasingly heavy dependence on foreign aid that continued into the 21st century. In 2005 Burundi benefited from international debt forgiveness, but the trends hardly changed till today. Burundi depended on imported foodstuffs, capital goods, and petroleum products. Burundi started to open to global trade. The World Bank reveals that foreign trade represented 29% of the country's GDP in 2021 with coffee and tea as the main export products representing 24.8% and 21.3% respectively. Key imported products are refined petroleum (17.8%), pharmaceutical products (4.8%), cement (3.9%) and motor vehicles (2.9%).

Foreign Trade Indicators	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Imports of Goods (million USD)	793	887	909	1,030	1,206
Exports of Goods (million USD)	180	180	162	165	199
Imports of Services (million USD)	229	263	248	291	333
Exports of Services (million USD)	105	79	85	106	82
Imports of Goods and Services (Annual % Change)	19	17	3	3	7
Exports of Goods and Services (Annual % Change)	11	-0	-15	3	6
Trade Balance (million USD)	-496	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Foreign Trade (in % of GDP)	27	29	27	29	28
Imports of Goods and Services (in % of GDP)	21	24	22	24	23
Exports of Goods and Services (in % of GDP)	6	5	5	5	5

Source: World Bank

Health

Be aware of possible health risks in Burundi

Yellow fever - The yellow fever virus is found in tropical and subtropical areas of Africa and South America. The virus is spread to people by the bite of an infected mosquito. There is no medicine to treat or cure an infection. To prevent getting sick from yellow fever, use insect repellent, wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants, and get vaccinated.

Zika Virus - Zika is spread mostly by the bite of an infected *Aedes* species mosquito. These mosquitoes bite during the day and night. Zika can be passed from a pregnant woman to her fetus. Infection during pregnancy can cause certain birth defects. There is no vaccine or medicine for Zika.

Malaria - Malaria is a serious and sometimes fatal disease caused by a parasite that commonly infects a certain type of mosquito which feeds on humans. People who get malaria are typically very sick with high fevers, shaking chills, and flu-like illness. Although malaria can be a deadly disease, illness and death from malaria can usually be prevented.

If you visit Burundi, consider the following areas and occasions:

Here are some of the best things to see and do when visiting Burundi:

- **Visit Lake Tanganyika:** This is one of the largest and deepest lakes in the world and is located on the border between Burundi and Tanzania. Visitors can enjoy swimming, kayaking, and boat tours on the lake.
- **Explore national parks:** Burundi has several national parks, including the Kibira National Park, the Rusizi National Park, and the Ruvubu National Park. These parks offer opportunities to see a variety of wildlife, including primates, elephants, hippos, and crocodiles.
- **Visit historical and cultural sites:** Burundi has a rich history and culture, and visitors can explore sites such as the Gitega Museum, the Burundi National Museum, and the Murambi Sacred Forest.
- **Go hiking:** Burundi is known for its scenic landscape of hills and mountains, making it a great destination for hiking. The Kibira National Park and the Karera Waterfall are popular hiking destinations.
- **Attend traditional festivals:** Burundi has several traditional festivals throughout the year, including the Royal Drum Festival, which showcases traditional drumming and dancing.
- **Visit the Livingstone-Stanley Monument:** This monument marks the spot where explorer Henry Stanley met Dr. David Livingstone on the shores of Lake Tanganyika in 1871.
- **Relax on the beach:** Burundi has several beaches along the shores of Lake Tanganyika, including Saga Beach, which is a popular destination for swimming and sunbathing.
- **Try local cuisine:** Burundi has a unique cuisine influenced by its African and French heritage. Local dishes to try include brochettes (meat skewers), matoke (steamed plantains), and isombe (cassava leaves with beans).
- **Attend a cultural performance:** Burundi has a vibrant cultural scene, and visitors can attend traditional dance and music performances, such as the Intore dance, which is performed by the Burundian Royal Court.

Indicative costs when visiting Burundi

Travelling to Burundi cost relatively expensive due to low inflight movements, the season of travel, mode of transportation, accommodation, and activities. Once in country, though, visiting Burundi becomes significantly cheap. Here are some estimates to help you plan your budget:

- **Flights:** The cost of flights to Burundi varies depending on where you're traveling from. On average, a round-trip ticket from Europe or the United States can cost between \$700 to \$1,200, but prices can be higher during peak travel season.

- **Accommodation:** There are a range of options for accommodation in Burundi, from budget guesthouses to luxury hotels. Budget travelers can expect to spend around \$10 to \$20 per night for a basic guesthouse, while mid-range hotels cost between \$50 to \$100 per night. Luxury hotels can cost upwards of \$150 per night.
- **Food and drinks:** The cost of food in Burundi is relatively cheap, and a meal at a local restaurant can cost between \$2 to \$10. A bottle of water costs around \$0.50, and a beer costs around \$1.
- **Transportation:** Taxis are the most common form of transportation in Burundi, and a short trip can cost around \$2. However, it's recommended to negotiate the fare before getting into the taxi. Public transportation such as buses and minibuses are also available and are cheaper than taxis.
- **Activities:** There are several tourist attractions in Burundi, including national parks, museums, and cultural sites. Entrance fees can range from \$5 to \$20 per person, depending on the attraction.

Overall, a budget traveler can expect to spend around \$30 to \$50 per day in Burundi, while mid-range travelers can expect to spend around \$100 per day. Luxury travelers can expect to spend upwards of \$150 per day.

Some tips for travelers to Burundi

- **Obtain a visa:** Visitors to Burundi need to apply for a visa before arrival via [Formulaires-demande de visa - Ministère des Affaires Etrangères du Burundi \(gov.bi\)](https://www.mae.gov.bi/). It's recommended to apply for a visa at least a month before your planned travel date to allow for processing time.
- **Be aware of safety and security:** Burundi is relatively a safe country with some rare security incidents. It is good to check security updates on the country.
- **Pack appropriate clothing:** Burundi is a culturally conservative. Women are expected to wear dresses or skirts that cover below the knees or just trousers. Wear shorts in specific areas only such as on the beach. It's recommended to dress discreetly, especially in public areas. Lightweight clothing is recommended for the warm and humid climate, but it's also a good idea to take a sweater or jacket for cooler evenings.
- **Drink bottled water:** It's recommended to drink bottled water or boiled water to avoid contracting waterborne illnesses.
- **Carry cash:** Credit cards are not widely accepted in Burundi, and it's recommended to carry cash. It's also a good idea to exchange money at a bank or official exchange office to avoid scams or counterfeit currency.
- **Learn some French or Kirundi:** French is the official language of Burundi, but Kirundi is also widely spoken. Learning some basic phrases in French or Kirundi can help you communicate with locals and make your travels easier. It's common to hear curious children greeting Western visitors. "Amahoro!" means "Peace" but serves as greetings to mean "hello! Bonjour!"
- **Respect local customs and traditions:** Burundi is a conservative country with strong cultural traditions. It's important to respect local customs, dress modestly, and be respectful when visiting cultural or religious sites.
- **Plan your itinerary carefully:** Burundi is a small country, but traveling can be slow due to poor infrastructure and road conditions. It's recommended to plan your itinerary carefully and allow plenty of time for travel between destinations.
- **Get vaccinated:** It's recommended to get vaccinated for yellow fever, typhoid, and hepatitis A and B before traveling to Burundi. It's also recommended to take malaria medication and to use insect repellent to avoid contracting malaria.