
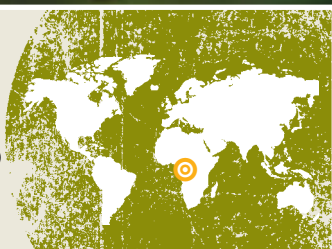


## Congo

 Sapping, sweaty, tough - but incredible, unmatched wildlife encounters

 Fly UK-Brazzaville via Paris (approx 11 hrs)

 May-Oct: dry season. Best for those amazing gorilla trekking experiences



# HEART OF LIGHTNESS

The darkness Conrad found in Congo can still be felt, but as new lodges open for sustainable and incredible gorilla tourism, things look far brighter...

Words **Mark Stratton**

**Gorgeous gorilla:**  
A western lowland gorilla walks through a cloud of butterflies





‘In the swamp forests we followed the muddy tracks of elephants, red river hogs and a python with a body the width of a car tyre’

“S

tand still and don’t back away,” urged Etienne, my guide, as the marantaceae forest began thrashing wildly.

Unsure of what unseen forces surrounded us, I felt I’d stumbled onto the pages of Joseph Conrad’s enigmatic Congo odyssey, *Heart of Darkness*.

Conrad’s central character, Marlow, went in search of Kurtz, a rogue ivory trader driven insane by the depravations and possibilities of the vast Congolese forest. My search was not for Kurtz but a shy denizen of this primordial wilderness – one with which I was about to be acquainted in a moment of tense anticipation and utter astonishment.

Mayhem suddenly exploded onto the path metres in front of us as a muscular silverback powered through Ngaga’s foliage. Those few seconds alone would’ve etched an

everlasting memory, but then a second larger silverback emerged. This one stopped and stared us down. His hazel-brown eyes looked excitable and, before retreating, he delivered a booming guttural roar that chilled my perspiration to a sudden cold sweat. For the next five minutes he growled and pummelled the vegetation unseen. We weren’t welcome.

“He was chasing the other silverback away,” said Etienne who, like me, was hyperventilating with something between excitement and fear; he thought the gorilla might be defending his family against a challenger to his dominance. But, he added, “I’ve never witnessed this before.”

Last chance to see?

I figured Congo owed me this sighting. Ten years earlier I’d been in Central Africa’s rainforest belt in neighbouring Gabon, writing for *Wanderlust* about a new lodge offering trekking to see western lowland gorillas. I left without seeing any... and with malaria. Back then, this region’s biting insects and sapping impenetrability found accord with Conrad’s nightmarish travels: a place capable of breaking both mind and body.

During this past decade, western lowland gorillas have declined dramatically: the less-furry cousin of the famous mountain gorilla has endured bushmeat hunting and successive Ebola virus outbreaks. The latest estimates suggest that in the ape’s northern Congo stronghold alone, Ebola may have decimated numbers from 120,000 to just 50,000. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) projects an 80% decline across their Central African range between 1980 and 2046.

So my attentions returned to this region with news of a seed of hope being sown inside Republic of Congo’s Odzala-Kokoua National Park.

Congo’s government agreed a 25-year lease of Odzala-Kokoua with a South African environmental management organisation, African Parks, to rehabilitate this heavily poached area. Part of its plan is to utilise ecotourism to generate an alternative income from Odzala-Kokoua. With private funding, luxury bushcamp specialists Wilderness Safaris were brought in to build and manage two properties, at Lango and Ngaga. The latter was already base to renowned Spanish primatologist Magdalena Bermejo, who was habituating several gorilla families for research and tourism. The camps formally opened late 2012.

My journey began in the south, in Congo’s capital Brazzaville, alongside the great River Congo, which coils around the city in a messy deluge of islands, sandbanks and channels. On the opposite bank is Kinshasa – capital of Congo’s unstable big brother, the Democratic Republic of Congo; by comparison, the former French colony is easy going. I enjoyed an unhurried morning strolling around Poto-Poto district, soaking up the Francophone atmosphere of the city’s 1930s-40s modernist architecture and feeling like an ingested Jonah within the wishbone-ribbed nave of Brazzaville’s cavernous Sainte-Anne Basilica.

Essential luxury

Odzala-Kokoua lies in northern Congo, usually a 15-hour road journey from the capital. However, Wilderness Safaris transfers guests to its new camps via a scenic two-hour light aircraft flight. The Congo Basin’s immensity is realised below in an unbroken green expanse of broccoli-like canopy bursting stereoscopically skywards.

Odzala-Kokoua is one of Africa’s oldest and least-explored national parks. Designated under French rule in 1935, just 3% of its 13,600 sq km can be accessed, by >



Clockwise from top left: Tracker Gabin on the trail; forest buffalo and forest elephant are smaller than savannah species; butterflies dot the bush; Lango Lodge is a comfortable haven amid the swamp (far left); meeting Ngaga’s gorillas





◀ clayey roads. In southern Odzala-Kokoua we flew into Lango camp’s 60,000 hectare tourism concession, a mosaic of swamp forest, savannah and shimmering saline wetlands known as *bai*. South African Fraser Gear and his partner Sandra, the camp managers, waited to greet us. Guests spend three nights at both Lango and Ngaga camps, immersed in very different habitats. Because of the flooded forest sheltering it, Lango is raised on a stilted boardwalk that connects six spacious en-suite canvas-lined thatched huts to a central dining-room, bar and fire-pit. Each evening, French chef Jerome announced dinner courses as if holding court at a Michelin-starred restaurant. Lango is undoubtedly upscale. But, insists Fraser over duck with mango reduction, in such a fragile environment there was no option but to offer high-yield low-impact tourism. He explained that only small groups can gorilla-watch at any one time; plus this project needs to demonstrate to Congo and other Central African governments that ecotourism offers a lucrative and sustainable alternative to selling off rainforest to Chinese loggers.

## ‘The savannah was studded with ochre termite mounds shaped like evil castles’

“Back in 2010, Odzala-Kokoua was in trouble. African Parks arrived to find elephant carcasses poached for ivory while manioc had been planted in bais once rich with wildlife,” Fraser told me. Lango Bai, which the lodge overlooks, still sees little game. “I think in a few years time, when wildlife realises it won’t be hunted, we’ll see elephants and gorillas coming out of hiding in the forest to use this bai.” Lango’s moonshine cabaret endorsed Fraser’s hopes. Under cover of darkness, forest elephants (a distinctly smaller pachyderm with straightened tusks, engineered for forest dwelling) frolicked and trumpeted in the muddy bai, while hyenas howled – perhaps salivating over airborne aromas of Jerome’s Irish liqueur and chantilly cream dessert? We were awoken every morning at 5am, and each day featured two wildlife-watching activities, from wading through liquid swamps to savannah game-drives and boat trips outrunning tsetse-flies down the River Lekoli. In the swamp forests we followed the muddy tracks of elephants, red river hogs

and a python with a body the width of a car tyre. We encountered abundant chestnut-coloured forest buffaloes (smaller than Southern African cape buffaloes) while exuberant trogons, hornbills, kingfishers and palm-nut vultures featured among Odzala-Kokoua’s 430 bird species. The park also boasts 31 species of primate. Shaggy black-and-white guereza colobus devoured fruits around the camp while putty-nosed monkeys did great renditions of Jimi Hendrix going ape on his wah-wah pedal. We eventually intercepted a small she-herd of elephants during a sundowner savannah drive. Being almost submerged by tall straw-coloured bush, the females had their trunks raised like periscopes. We also got a taster of what lay ahead at Ngaga Camp. Within minutes of entering one rainforest stand, pandemonium erupted. “Listen. Chimpanzees calling,” shushed Fraser. “What those?” pointed out a guest. “No... shit... they’re gorillas, small ones!” Fraser exclaimed, as two of them hurriedly shinned down parallel trees, 30m away. The hunt seemed on until elephants gatecrashed

the party with rotten timing. Unseen in the tall floppy marantaceae, they noisily forced us into retreat because Fraser couldn’t be sure how close they were. **Man vs forest** But my Central African great ape voodoo was about to be spectacularly exorcised at Ngaga, where the wildest ape encounters on earth awaited. Ngaga Camp is a four-hour drive west of Lango, towards Gabon, across national park savannah studded with ochre termite mounds shaped like the evildest of Transylvanian castles. The only settlement on route is Mbomo, a mud-brick village where Ebola outbreaks in 2002-3 claimed many lives – both ape and human. It’s a village where the local Congolese exist harmoniously alongside their primate neighbours, which live some 8km away in Ndzehi Forest – where we were headed. Ngaga Lodge is located in a forest clearing inside Ndzehi and resembles Lango’s set-up. Six huts are linked to the main dining platform by paths cut through the vegetation. The whole camp is surrounded

by skyscraper rainforest gift-wrapped by straggly lianas. Primatologist Magda Bermejo relocated to Ndzehi four years ago. The area has an estimated gorilla population of 105 spread over six families, and Magda has been patiently habituating two gorilla families to human contact. The clans are named after their alpha-males: Jupiter is a reclusive 180kg silverback but star of the show is 27-year-old Neptuno and his 16-strong family. It was Neptuno we sought early next morning with local tracker Gabin and Swiss guide, Etienne Rochet. Etienne explained that strict guidelines exist for contact with gorillas: you must approach no closer than 7m; you get only one hour with them; there must be no backing off when Neptuno charges – as apparently he always does, egged on by his senior spouse, Roma. Success or failure, however, can easily influence perception of these mighty rainforests. At first it was a genteel stroll examining vivid butterflies, leaf-imitating katydids, golden tree-fungus and nibbled fallen fruits. All the while Gabin, with inbuilt GPS precision and the forensic analysis

of disturbed grass, led us deeper into the rainforest towards Neptuno’s overnight nests. But after two hours, the atmosphere changed. Gabin had difficulties tracking the gorillas because they were moving unpredictably. Usually they move slowly to new feeding ground but now they were panicked and fleeing fast. “He’s picked up the spore of another silverback pursuing them,” Etienne announced to us. Why doesn’t Neptuno stand up to his pursuer, I wondered. “He has everything to lose – his life and his family – if this silverback is stronger,” hazarded Etienne. For five hours we thrashed our way around in circles through disorientating face-slapping marantaceae. Swarms of sweat bees darted at our eyes, requiring head-nets to be worn; we paused for a second, and fire ants launched stinging invasions up our trouser-legs. The sticky humidity eventually sapped our resolve. Conrad’s Congolese hardships resurfaced; his words rang in my ears: ‘We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed ▶



**Picture perfect**  
A western lowland gorilla poses for a portrait

Anup Shah/naturepic.com



# ‘The silverback sat like a pot-bellied Buddha - he seemed calm but suddenly bounded towards us, roaring aggressively’



◀ inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil'. We found the Neptuno clan eventually. They'd escaped the pursuer but were exhausted. A few pairs of eyes listlessly glared through the green gloom. "Let's leave them, they've had a bad day," advised Etienne.

### Glimmer of hope

Spirits are easily revived at Ngaga, however. Over pre-dinner G&Ts, Magda addressed us about her work. Located for 20 years in Central Africa, she is a modest woman who has never courted Dian Fossey's celebrity. After years studying western lowlands at nearby Lossi, she relocated to Ndzehi with husband German because in 2002 – a year after I'd first met her in Gabon – an Ebola outbreak eradicated 95% of Lossi's gorillas.

"In one day we discovered 60 carcasses. It was very difficult having worked with them for so long," she said. "We chose Ndzehi because of the special relationship local people have with gorillas. They coexist together; I heard a story of a bushmeat trader being chased out of town when he tried to sell gorilla meat. They say the dead gorilla was buried like a relative at the cemetery."

She intends local communities to benefit from this new venture as Ugandans and Rwandans have with mountain gorilla tourism. "This project is a pioneering way to save Central African forests and better local communities," she said. "We must not fail."

Magda also reassured us we'd have better sightings – Ngaga's gorillas typically move less than 10 sq km each day due to abundant food. "What is unique here – in comparison with mountain gorilla watching – is you can observe their behaviour in the early stages of human interaction," she added.

### Supercharged sightings

It thundered down with rain overnight. The next morning the damp earth smelled pungent and rainwater cascaded off the foliage as we set off on our second attempt. Within an hour Gabin located Neptuno's overnight nest. They hadn't moved far, still tired from the previous day.

Our hour started ticking away upon first encountering two juveniles, Nona and Caliope, feeding high in a fruit tree; their fur

is surprisingly reddish, almost henna-tinged. We wanted closer sightings so pressed on into thick marantaceae.

With 15 minutes to go, Etienne motioned us forward urgently. I adjusted my eyes down a green tunnel and, sitting like a pot-bellied Buddha, was Neptuno the silverback. He seemed calm but suddenly bounded towards us to roar aggressively. Then he ambled back with what I was sure was a smirk.

"It's a display, not a charge – he always does that," dismissed Etienne, who added that Neptuno was fascinated by blonds and more antagonistic towards larger people. Size matters in Neptuno's world.

The protagonist behind his antics, the even more rotund Roma, ambled out to gawp. She carried a year-old baby tucked under her armpit like a handbag; its little eyes sparkled like pearls from within her dark fur. Other less senior gorillas came and went, including Pan, a two-year-old juvenile: he shuffled along a branch overhead to steal almost guilty glances at us, as if only partially recalling a lecture from his mother not to stare at strangers.

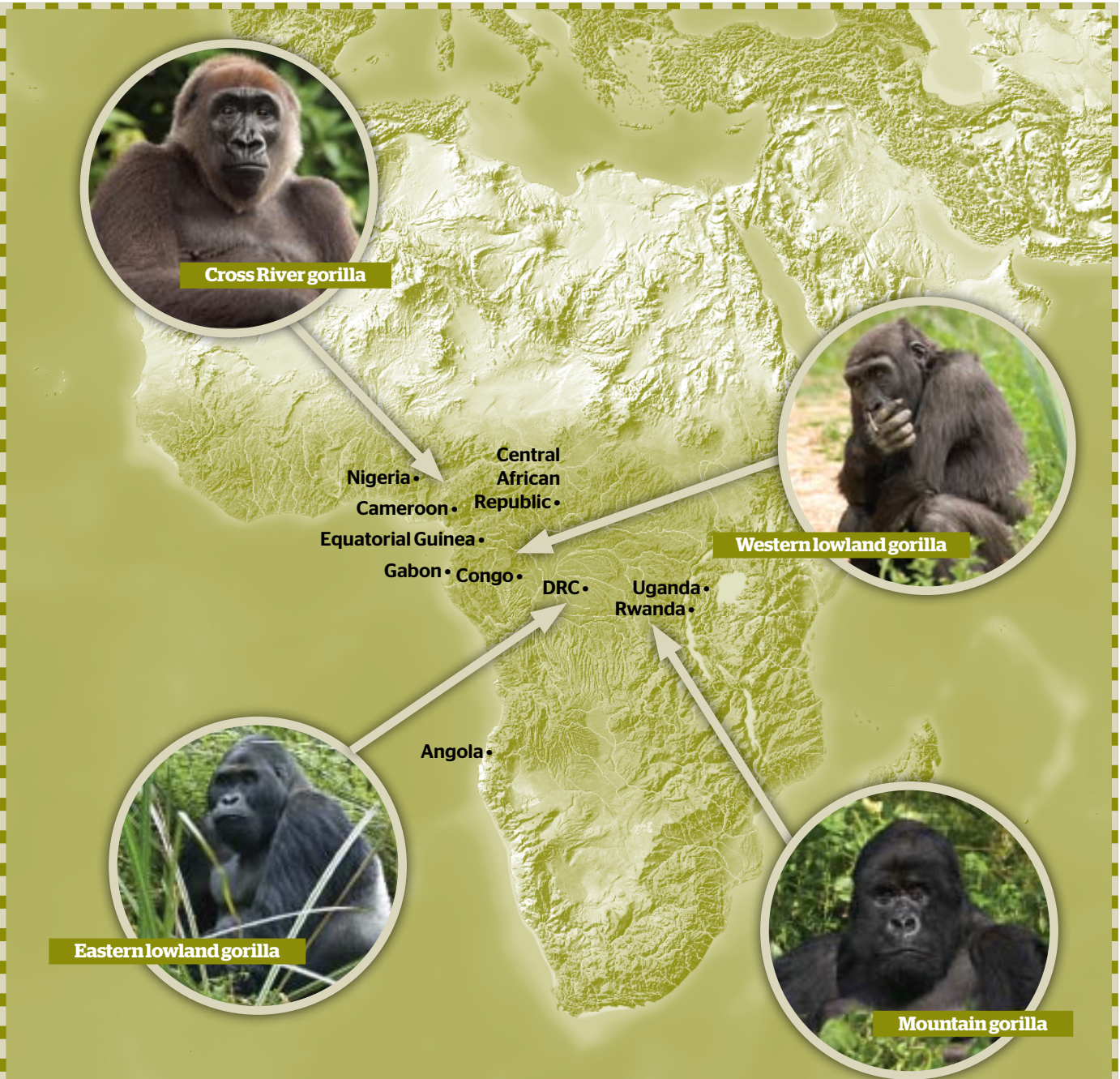
Time up. And I was left reflecting how much more dynamic and unpredictable this experience was than I remembered from previous gorilla excursions. "You see the way they look at us? They are fascinated," commented Etienne. "It can be hard work finding them but it's such a natural experience."

This was a feeling emphasised the following morning when, on a final walk around Ndzehi, Etienne and I encountered those brawling silverbacks. It is this sort of impromptu experience that makes Odzala-Kokoua so remarkable.

There's no denying, this is a very expensive week, which falls firmly into the 'adventure-of-a-lifetime' category. And comfort has been sensitively carved from an at-times unforgiving environment. But to be part of a chance to value and protect the great Central African rainforests is hugely satisfying.

Conrad wasn't totally right. There's some darkness, yes. But Congo can also be a place of ecstasy and illumination. ■

**Mark Stratton** is an award-winning freelance travel writer and frequent contributor to *Wanderlust* who relishes delving into offbeat destinations.



## KNOW YOUR GORILLAS

### Cross River

The world's most critically endangered sub-species of gorilla was captured on camera in the wild for the first time in 2012, which isn't surprising as there are only about 300 left. They look similar to their western lowland cousins, but with smaller and shorter skulls. **Where found:** The largest numbers live in Nigeria but they're also found (and were filmed) in south-west Cameroon. The bad news is the population is divided across human-inhabited areas; the good is that more suitable habitat for them has been found. There's hope yet.

### Western lowland

Chances are you've seen these guys (*Gorilla gorilla*) if you've ever been to the zoo. However, the world's most widespread gorilla is actually quite tricky to see in the wild. You'll know these critically endangered creatures by their short, brownish-black coats and ginger crowns. Estimates suggest there are up to 200,000 individuals out there; threats include bushmeat hunting, habitat loss and disease. **Where found:** Angola (Cabinda only), Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo, DR Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon.

### Mountain

Shaggy coats and sideburns: no, not a 70's throwback – mountain gorillas. The most famous of all the gorillas are the ones you're mostly likely to see: gorilla tourism is a mainstay of both Uganda's and Rwanda's economies. Often called a 'perfect hour' by people who've met them, visits to habituated groups are well controlled. Apart from poachers (still a big problem), your germs are the greatest threat to the remaining 790 or so animals; steer clear if you have a cold. **Where found:** West Uganda, north-west Rwanda, east DR Congo.

### Eastern lowland

The eastern lowland gorilla is the largest sub-species, and a bit of a smooth operator: they have longer faces, they're less shaggy and more muscular than the other eastern species (mountain gorilla) thanks to climbing fruit trees. This sub-species also holds the record for the largest gorilla recorded – a silverback measuring 1.94m, which was shot in 1938. There are thought to be around 5,000 left in the wild, but the population plummeted during DRC's civil war due to bushmeat hunting. **Where found:** Eastern DR Congo.





# Congo Footnotes

## VITAL STATISTICS

**Capital:** Brazzaville

**Population:** 4.3 million

**Language:** French (official), Lingala and Monokutuba, plus many local languages

**Time:** GMT+1

**International dialling code:** +242

**Visas:** Required by UK nationals, obtainable from the Honorary Consulate of the Republic of Congo, Holborn Gate, 26 Southampton Building, London WC2A 1PN (020 3077 9958). You'll need a confirmation letter from your travel agency and yellow fever certificate. Fee is £60.

**Money:** CFA franc (XAF), currently around 807XAF to the UK£. There are few ATMs. Take cash in euros.

## When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

■ **Dry season** is best for wildlife spotting; roads into Odzala-Kokoua are passable. Lango and Ngaga camps will operate May-Dec in 2013. Note, temps humid year round (approx 30°C).

■ Sub-equatorial **rainy season**. Wildlife spotting is difficult due to access problems.

## Health & safety

From a crime perspective, Congo is **relatively safe**; healthwise, it's pin-cushion time. Essentials include obtaining a **yellow fever certificate** and a course of **anti-malaria tablets** – ask your GP. Typhoid, hepatitis A and B, polo, meningitis and tetanus should be updated. **DEET-based repellent** and head-nets will battle bugs. Carry anti-histamine cream for bites and an EpiPen adrenalin injection if susceptible to anaphylactic shock. Check [www.gov.uk/fco](http://www.gov.uk/fco) for Ebola virus outbreaks.

## Further reading & info

**Congo** (Bradt Guides, 2012)

**Heart of Darkness** (1899) by Joseph Conrad  
[www.wilderness-collection.com](http://www.wilderness-collection.com) / [www.odzala-kokoua.com](http://www.odzala-kokoua.com) Info on camps and species  
[www.african-parks.org](http://www.african-parks.org) African Parks

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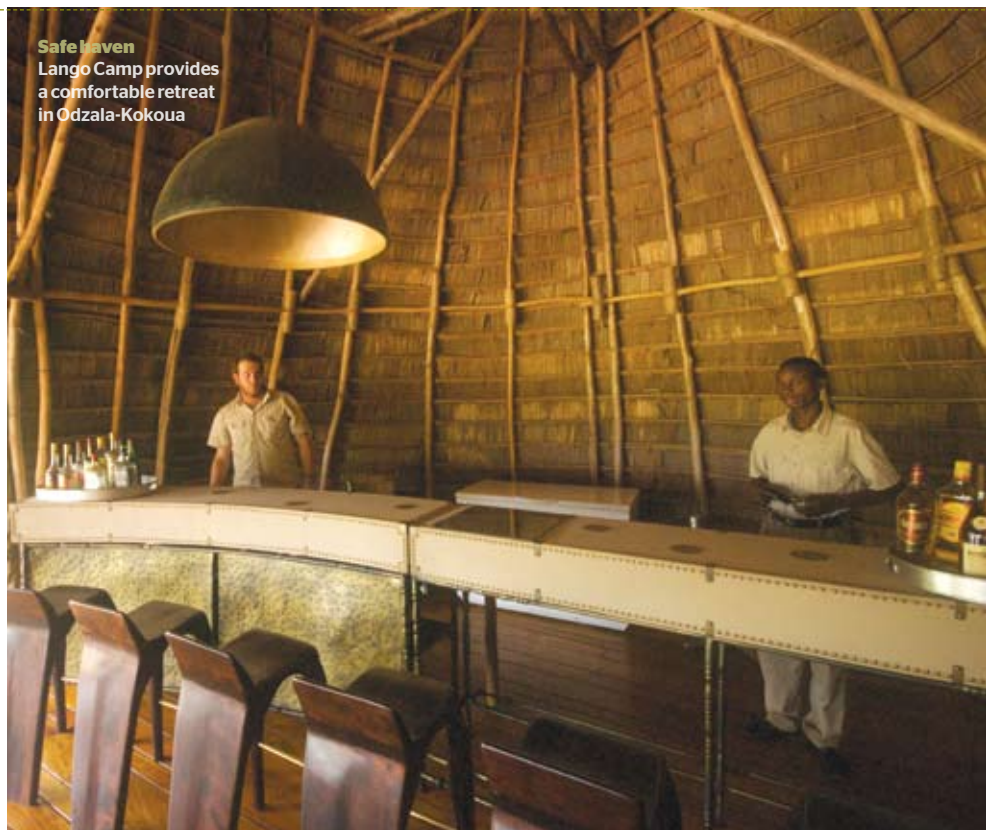
Best places to see gorillas – online  
 Blogs from the Congo – online

### Planning guides

Gorilla watching travel guide  
 Republic of Congo travel guide

## Safe haven

Lango Camp provides a comfortable retreat in Odzala-Kokoua



## The trip

The author travelled with **Mirus Extraordinary Journeys** (020 7589 8800, [www.mirusjourneys.com](http://www.mirusjourneys.com)). It offers a nine-night package that includes three-nights all-inclusive accommodation in stilted guest rooms at both Lango and Ngaga camps (operated as part of the Wilderness Collection), one night's hotel in Brazzaville, international flights, internal flights and road transfers, and all activities including two gorilla treks at Ngaga (conducted under IUCN protocol). This costs £5,235 pp based on two sharing.

## Getting there

**Air France** (0871 6633 777, [www.airfrance.co.uk](http://www.airfrance.co.uk)) flies from London to Brazzaville via Paris for around £790 return. Journey time is from 11 hours.

## Getting around

Lango and Ngaga camps have a capacity of 12 guests per week and cannot be booked independently.

However, opportunities do exist for truly determined adventurers on smaller

**budgets** to wildlife-watch in Odzala-Kokoua. From Brazzaville, buses run north up the N2 to Makoua, from where trucks or *taxi-brousse* may be arranged via Etoumbi to eventually reach the park headquarters in Mbomo; elephants can be seen in this vicinity. I saw a new and less-expensive lodge under construction for independent overland travellers at Mbomo.

For rainforest trips you'd need to **employ a local guide** – ask at park HQ. This would not get you to habituated gorilla families because access to them is strictly regulated, but it doesn't rule out chance encounters and you'd certainly see other primates.

Elsewhere in Congo, a regular **rail service** with modern-looking trains runs from Brazzaville to the main coastal city of Pointe-Noire; first-class fares cost from £25 one-way. Taxi-journeys within downtown Brazzaville cost around 1,000 CFA (£1.20).

## Cost of travel

The trip described here was all-inclusive; however, those travelling independently will find **Congo relatively expensive** – on a par with Europe for hotels, >

◀ services and food. I ate out at a restaurant in Brazzaville and paid around £12 for a main meal and beer. Modern hotels are aimed at business travellers and therefore pricey; simpler accommodation can be found from around £30 per night.

### Accommodation

**Mikhael's Hotel** ([www.mikhaelshotel.com](http://www.mikhaelshotel.com)), located in downtown Poto-Poto, is elegantly modern, with a restaurant, bakery, WiFi and pool. Doubles from around £146.

**Hotel Hippocampe** ([www.hippocampe.asia](http://www.hippocampe.asia)) is a perfectly decent hotel compound, with its own restaurant-bar. It's popular with overland travellers. Doubles from 28,000XAF (£35).

### Food & drink

National staples include starchy **cassava** (manioc), eaten with Congolese dishes such as spicy piri piri chicken or as *saka saka* (cassava ground with peanut paste).

In restaurants, dishes such as **pizzas**, **river fish or chicken and chips** frequent menus. These are inevitably accompanied by 750ml **Ngok** beers. At breakfast time, expect a Francophone ambience: coffee and baguettes.

In Brazzaville I ate on the banks of the River Congo, looking out towards Kinshasa, at the excellent **Mami Wata Restaurant** ([restaurantmamiwata.com](http://restaurantmamiwata.com)) – speciality chicken diable (£9). ■

### > Congo highlights

## Odzala-Kokoua's Big 5

#### 1. Western lowland gorilla

Critically endangered ape, ranging across Gabon, Congo, Central African Republic and Cameroon. Lives in families of around 15 to 25 individuals controlled by an alpha-male silverback, which can stand 1.8m tall and weigh up to 180kg.

#### 2. Western chimpanzee

These endangered apes are our closest relatives, sharing 98% of our DNA. They may live in social groupings of up to 150 individuals. Very difficult to see: no families are habituated in Odzala-Kokoua but there are plans to do so at Ngaga.

#### 3. Bongo

Large forest-dwelling, chestnut-coloured antelope with white stripes and wavy horns (*pictured below*). Infrequently seen in Odzala-Kokoua.

#### 4. Forest elephant

*Loxodonta cyclotis* is an African elephant subspecies with straighter tusks and rounded ears – ideal for moving through the equatorial forests.

#### 5. Forest buffalo

This subspecies is much smaller than the southern African buffalo; it has smaller horns that fuse in the middle and a reddish-brown hide. Seen in small herds within Odzala-Kokoua.



Mark Stratton, Dreamstime

## WHICH CONGO?

**T**ravel in the immense Congo Basin is the Shangri-La of exploration, a chance to delve into the darkest secrets of the African continent. Yet the word Congo has become synonymous with turmoil: war, political instability, disease and, above all, danger.

However, two very different 'Congos' share the basin. The Republic of Congo – formerly called Congo-Brazzaville and French Congo – is the smaller of the two, stretching along the western banks of the great Congo River down to the Atlantic coast. Largely forested, it was first explored by Frenchman Pierre de Brazza and came under French control in 1880.

It has undergone political strife in recent times, but is nowhere near as troubled as the Democratic Republic of Congo, its bigger neighbour. Still, it remains an enigma and, outside of Brazzaville and Odzala-Kokoua,

tourism is negligible as the country pins its medium-term economic future on oil.

By contrast, the Democratic Republic of Congo lies east of the Congo River, sprawling all the way to Lake Tanganyika. It is much larger than the Republic of Congo – some seven-times the size, with a population of nearly 70 million. It is also potentially more dangerous.

The Foreign Office travel advice is sobering, full of warnings of guerrilla warfare, insurgency, corruption, Ebola outbreaks, street crime... And yet, this mineral-rich state – a former Belgian colony, once known as Zaire – pulls in a trickle of hardy travellers. River travel along the Congo, mountain gorilla and bonobo watching, encounters with pygmy tribes and great waterfalls combine to make this one of the most exciting – if hazardous – destinations in Africa.

