Under the Canopy

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Under the canopy

ADVANCING CONSERVATION IN GABON

Two years ago the passion and efforts of a few scientists, coupled with a president's unprecedented action, made conservation history. In the space of a few months, Gabon went from having not a single national park to being the proud possessor of no fewer than 13. It was heady stuff, but the hard work was just beginning. Robert J. Ross went to take a look for *Africa Geographic*.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT J. ROSS

When President Bongo boldly mandated the formation of an ambitious network of national parks, he knew that Gabon's economic mainstays, oil and forestry, were not sustainable and that conservation and tourism could be good for the future of his country. The parks contain a wealth of treasures, all the raw material needed for a successful tourism industry. To make the new parks into more than paper creations, though, rules and regulations must be formulated, staff appointed, roads built, infrastructure developed and the environment preserved. The prospects are exciting, but not without pitfalls. I was fortunate to be among the first to go and see what is happening.

ABOVE On the beaches of Loango National Park, ghost crabs chase receding waves into the sea, then turn and run as the next ones come ashore.

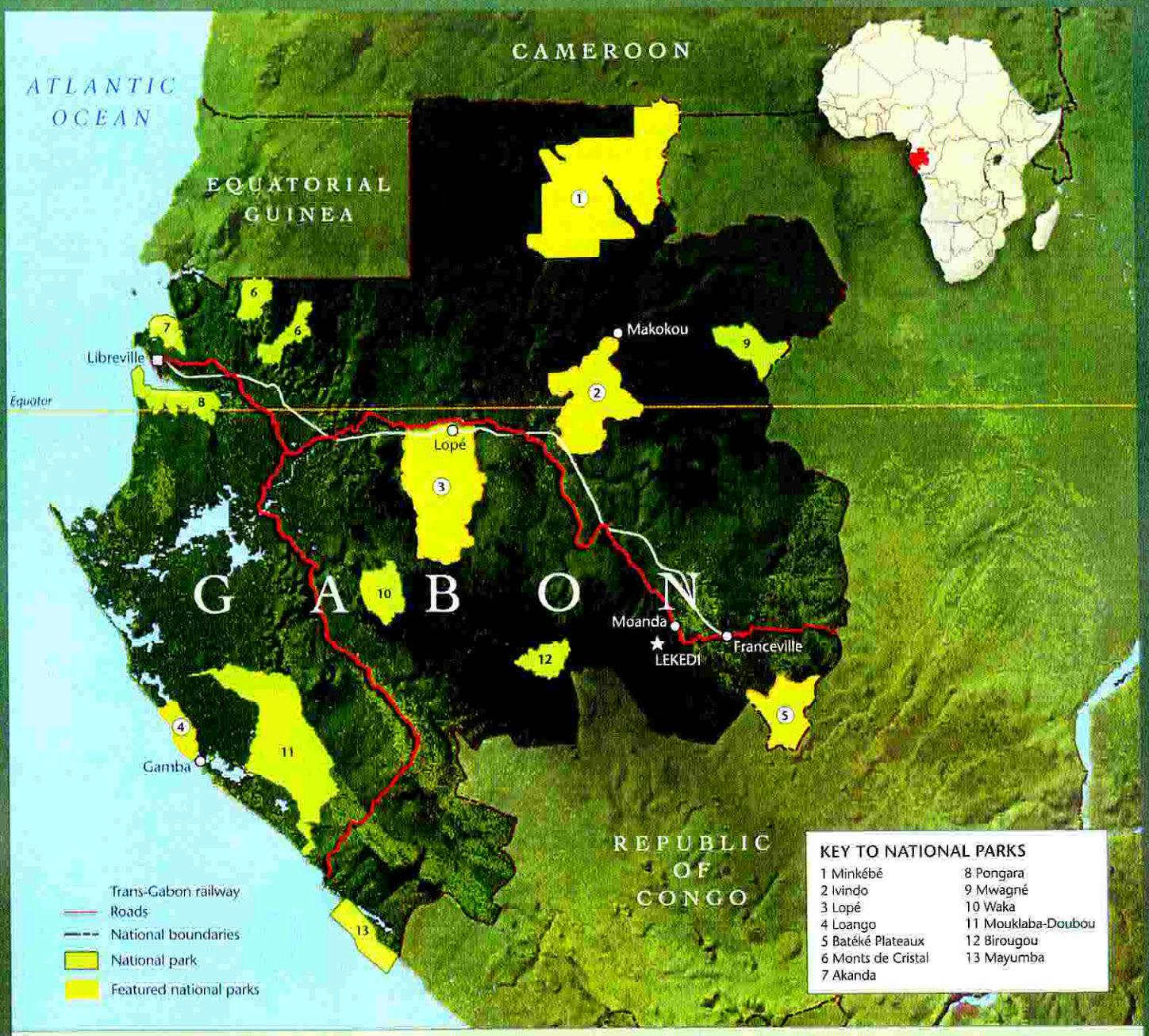
PREVIOUS SPREAD With the creation of Ivindo National Park, dawn in Langoué Bai stands a chance of being as tranquil in the future as it is today. Sitatunga are among the first diurnal animals to stir in the morning.

Flying to Libreville, the capital of the former French colony, was relatively easy. Tracking down Mike Fay, the man whose passion for the country and its natural wealth had much to do with the establishment of the national parks, proved far trickier. Fay, who finished his 3 200-kilometre 'Megatransect' walk just south of what is now Loango National Park, has made his home (a small tent pitched on the deck of a friend's houseboat) near the new Loango Lodge. Several days before my arrival, he and two companions had set out on what was for him a relatively easy two-week kayaking trip. I finally caught with up them by speedboat at Akaka, the site of a future fly camp. Fay welcomed me warmly, despite having just said to his friends that they had paddled far enough that they wouldn't see or hear anyone else for a few days. Less than a minute later the whine of our engine shattered the silence.

We talked for hours about Gabon's new parks and he suggested where I might see Loango's turtles, ghost and fiddler crabs, rosy bee-eaters, skimmers and terns, as well as hallucinating elephants and surfing hippos. Loango has kilometres of uninhabited beaches where buffalo wander only metres from the surf, hippos venture into the sea and leatherback turtles come ashore to lay their eggs. Just offshore, humpback and killer whales are seasonally in abundance, and inland the savanna is home to red river hog and sitatunga, as well as the buffalo that stray onto the beach. I was amazed at the potential and daunted by the fact that I only had five more days in what he said might just be 'the best park in Africa today'.

Loango has kilometres of uninhabited beaches where buffalo wander only metres from the surf, hippos venture into the sea and leatherback turtles lay their eggs

According to Lee White, the affable British biologist who is head of the Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) Gabon Program, Loango is indeed Gabon's 'jewel in the crown'. Tourist activities already include walks, game drives, kayaking, fishing and whale-watching. It's not unusual to see elephants on the beach, a sight that is sure to have visitors reaching for their cameras. Be warned though – keep well clear of them. Loango's elephants ▶



In 2002, with the stroke of a pen, President Omar Bongo signed into being an unprecedented 13 national parks, covering 11 per cent of Gabon's total surface area. Two years later, photographer/writer Robert Ross spent six weeks exploring these five.

① At 7 570 square kilometres, **Minkébé National Park** is one of Gabon's largest protected areas and covers an almost uninhabited tract of rainforest supporting large populations of elephants, bongos, mandrills, giant pangolins and buffaloes.

② The 3 000-square-kilometre **Ivindo National Park** contains two of the most impressive waterfalls of Central Africa and, of course, the spectacular Langoué Bai that lures forest elephants, sitatunga, western lowland gorillas and buffaloes to its mineral-rich waters.

③ The 5 000-square-kilometre **Lopé National Park** supports almost 60 per cent of Gabon's recorded bird species and contains some of the oldest rock engravings in Central Africa. There is a sizeable population of western lowland gorillas, and between July and August, large numbers of mandrills can be seen.

④ The 1 550-square-kilometre **Loango National Park** protects forests, savanna, lagoons and kilometres of coastline. Elephants, buffaloes and hippos are known to wander onto its beaches and, depending on the season, there is an abundance of whales, dolphins and turtles.

⑤ **Batéké Plateaux National Park** claims 2 050 square kilometres of open grassland, which may contain Gabon's last remaining lions. The landscape, quite different to the other national parks, supports an exceptional diversity of birds and its rolling hills are sure to find favour among hikers.

feed on *iboga*, a hallucinogenic plant that Fay says makes them particularly edgy and aggressive. He should know; one almost killed him two years ago.

Management of the northern half of Loango National Park is being driven by 'Operation Loango', a partnership between the government, WCS and the privately owned Société de Conservation et Développement (SCD), which runs the Loango Lodge. Rombout Swanborn, a shareholder of SCD, says that all revenue generated through Operation Loango's sustainable eco-tourism activities (such as the lodge) is channelled directly into protecting and managing the wildlife on which it depends. It funds a range of WCS projects that include animal and archaeological research, as well as cleaning up an 80-kilometre stretch of beach. Ocean currents have been dumping flotsam along Gabon's shoreline for years; in six months Operation Loango has removed vast quantities of it, including thousands of plastic bottles – and three one-kilogram packages of cocaine!

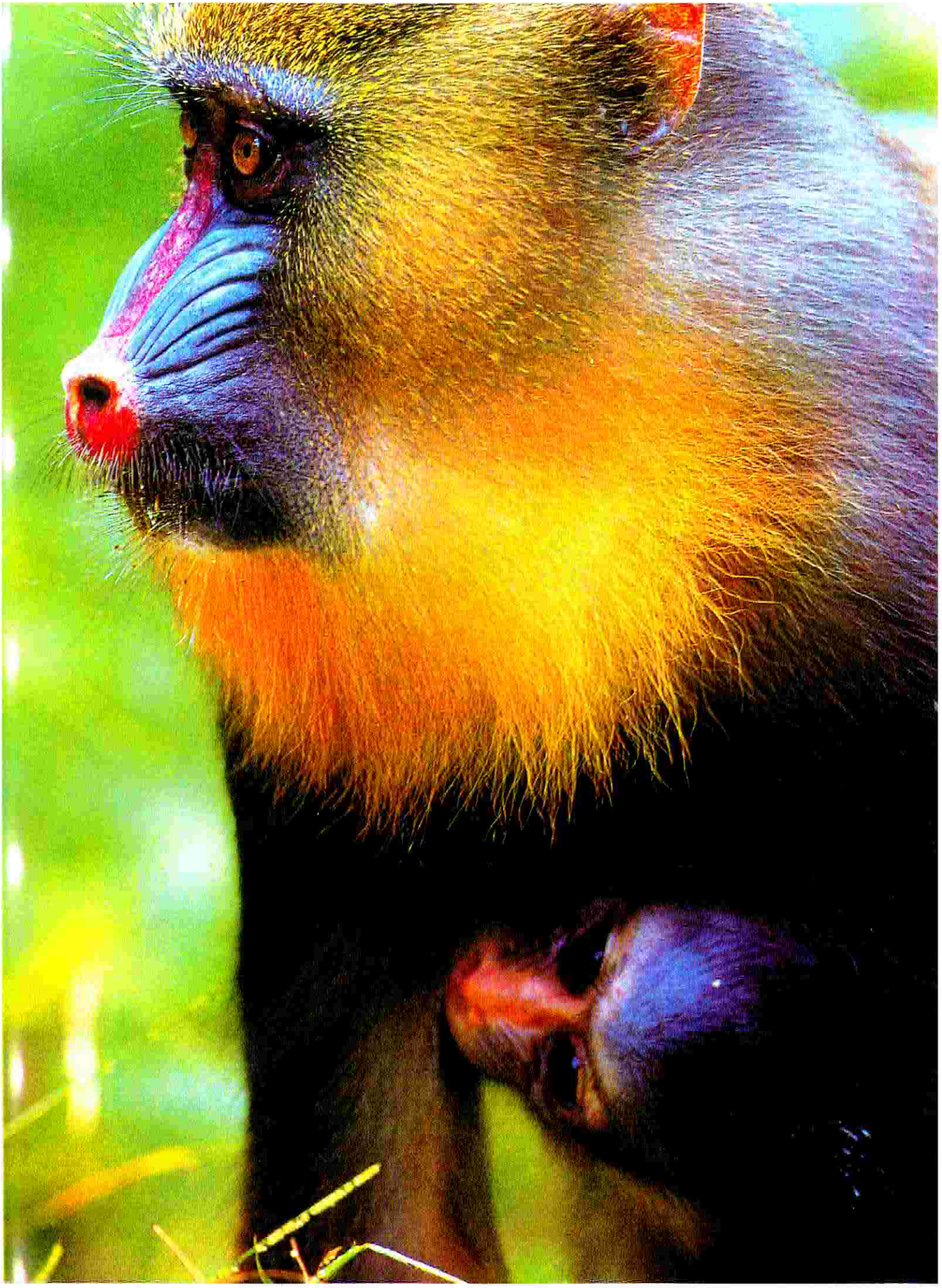
WCS also supervises a commercial fishing patrol team and anti-poaching and guiding duties. Many of the functions are being performed by 'eco-guides', 11 local residents who have been trained in the use of maps, compasses and GPS and have been taught the scientific, French and in some cases English names of flora and fauna in the park. Several of these recruits are former poachers – one of the most committed eco-guides has more than 80 per cent of his monthly salary drawn against a fine he received for shooting an elephant less than a year ago. Were it not for the eco-guide programme, he would be in jail and his family would be destitute. There are plans to train at least five more eco-guides this year, further strengthening the relationship between the community and Operation Loango.

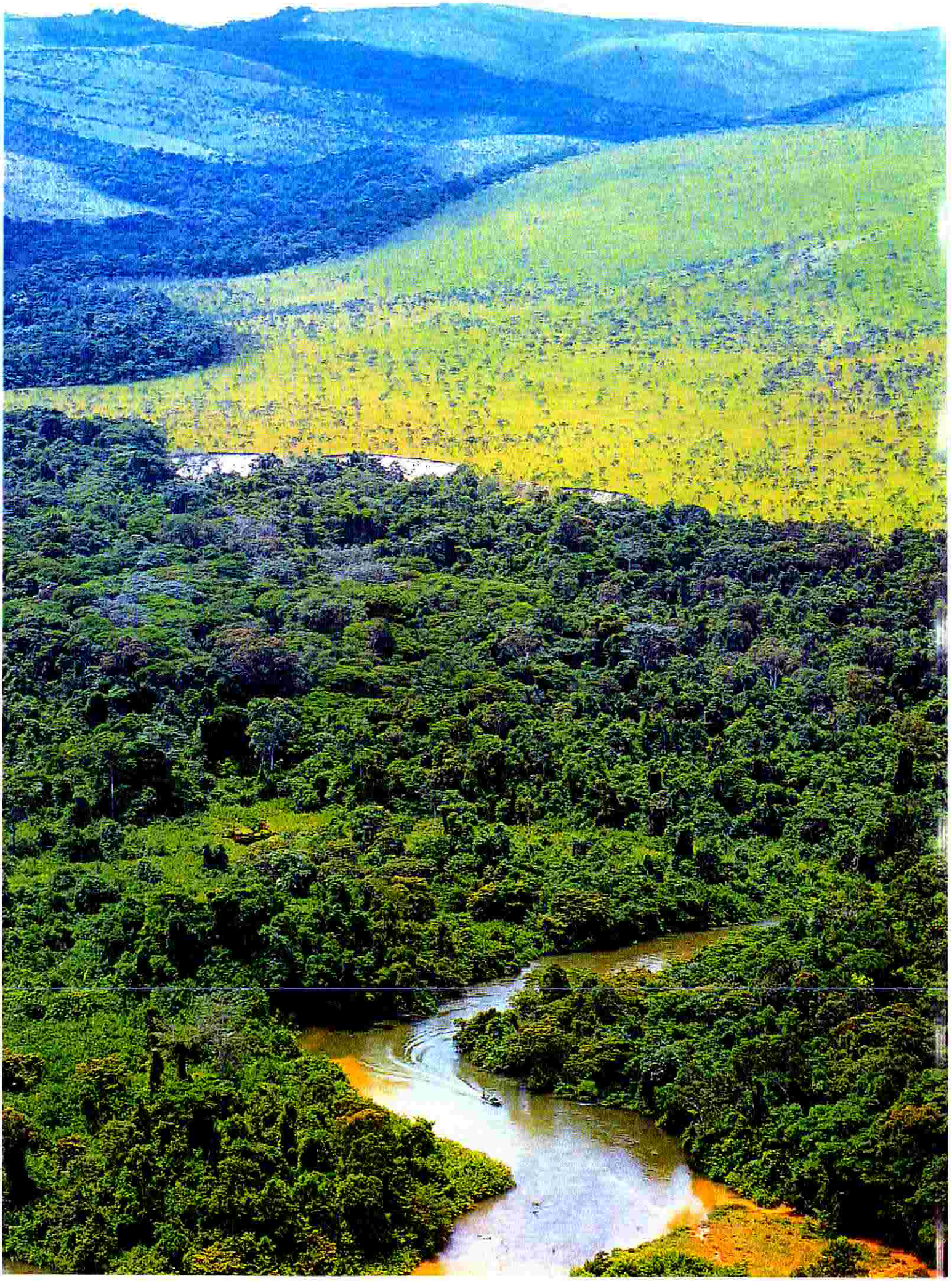
My week at Loango Lodge was superb. Sea kayaking in the lagoons one morning was followed by an amble along the shore spent dodging ghost crabs and elephants; a walk in the forest looking for turacos, mangabeys and chimpanzees preceded an afternoon boat trip to a small island where we searched for the Loango weaver, fruit bats and a large cobra known to live there. We also kept our eyes peeled for the three crocodile species that inhabit these waters, reportedly the only place in the world where the dwarf, slender-nosed and Nile crocodiles occur in overlapping habitats. A game drive further south started with the relatively uncommon sighting of two young lowland gorillas loping across the savanna and progressed to seeing several large groups of red river hogs, countless buffalo, elephants and a leopard. Sadly, I didn't have time to visit the nearby gorilla orphanage or the iron church designed by Gustav Eiffel, nor to try my luck at the world-class sport fishing that is on offer.

> To see mandrills, the best time is between June and August, when super-troops of 1 000-plus individuals congregate

My next stop was Lopé National Park, an area that has been protected in one way or another for nearly 50 years and was the park on which Fay and White had pinned their hopes when they presented their ambitious conservation programme (see box, page 41). Lopé is fantastically rich; more than 1 500 plant species and nearly 60 per cent of the 680 bird species recorded in Gabon have been seen here. There has been a ▷

A female mandrill – smaller than the male and with a less brightly coloured face – holds her baby tightly.





research station in the area for more than 20 years and it was here, in 1989, that Lee White and WCS began a study on the impact of logging in the reserve. Their work sparked a debate that continued until the creation of the national park and the cancellation of the logging concessions within its borders.

Like most visitors to Lopé, I arrived by train in the middle of the night. The Trans-Gabon Railway runs between Libreville on the coast and Franceville in the south-east, along a line built in the 1980s to transport timber and manganese. Passengers were – and are – secondary. About five weekly passenger trains run in each direction, but only one of these operates during the day. For whatever reason, and I heard many theories, the daylight hours are reserved for freight, while passengers travel at night, passing through hundreds of kilometres of spectacular, yet unseen, forest and river scenery.

The Lopé Hotel, perched on a hill overlooking the Ogooué River, is a cheerful and tranquil place. There are 30 rooms, mostly small chalets spread amidst the manicured lawns and gardens. All the food is imported from France and pricey. The staff could be friendlier and the guides more motivated, but that will come with time and training. Over breakfast one morning, the owner of the hotel, Emile Doumba (also Gabon's Minister of Water and Forests) and I discussed his ambitions for Lopé and, in my schoolboy French, I suggested that comfortable safari vehicles and well-trained guides were more important than a golf course and French butter pats. To be fair, the Gabonese have had little to do with tourists and, apart from a few outstanding exceptions, East or southern African standards of service have yet to find currency here. The WCS, however, is already providing both formal and informal advice.

The small part of Lopé National Park that is open to visitors is a striking blend of rolling savanna and thick forest canopy. It also boasts one of the most important archaeological sites in Central Africa, with engravings thought to date from 2500 BC and rock outcrops that harbour evidence of human habitation here 400 000 years ago. I saw grey-cheeked mangabeys and spot-nosed monkeys as well as black-casqued wattled hornbills, but dipped out on elephants; our guide explained that during the early part of the year, when I was there, the elephants move deeper into the forest. And to see mandrills, Gabon's iconic species, the best time is between June and August, when super-troops of 1 000-plus individuals congregate – the largest non-human primate gatherings on earth. From mid-2005 visitors will be able to observe a group of these red-and-blue-faced primates that has been semi-habituated through years of study by WCS's Kate Abernethy and her team.

Deep in the Lopé forest and accessible only by 4x4, Mikongo is a research station where Giulia Graziani and her small crew have been working to ➤

Thick forest hugs the Mpassa River in Batéké Plateaux National Park. Plans to develop the park for tourism include the provision of facilities for boating and rafting on the river.

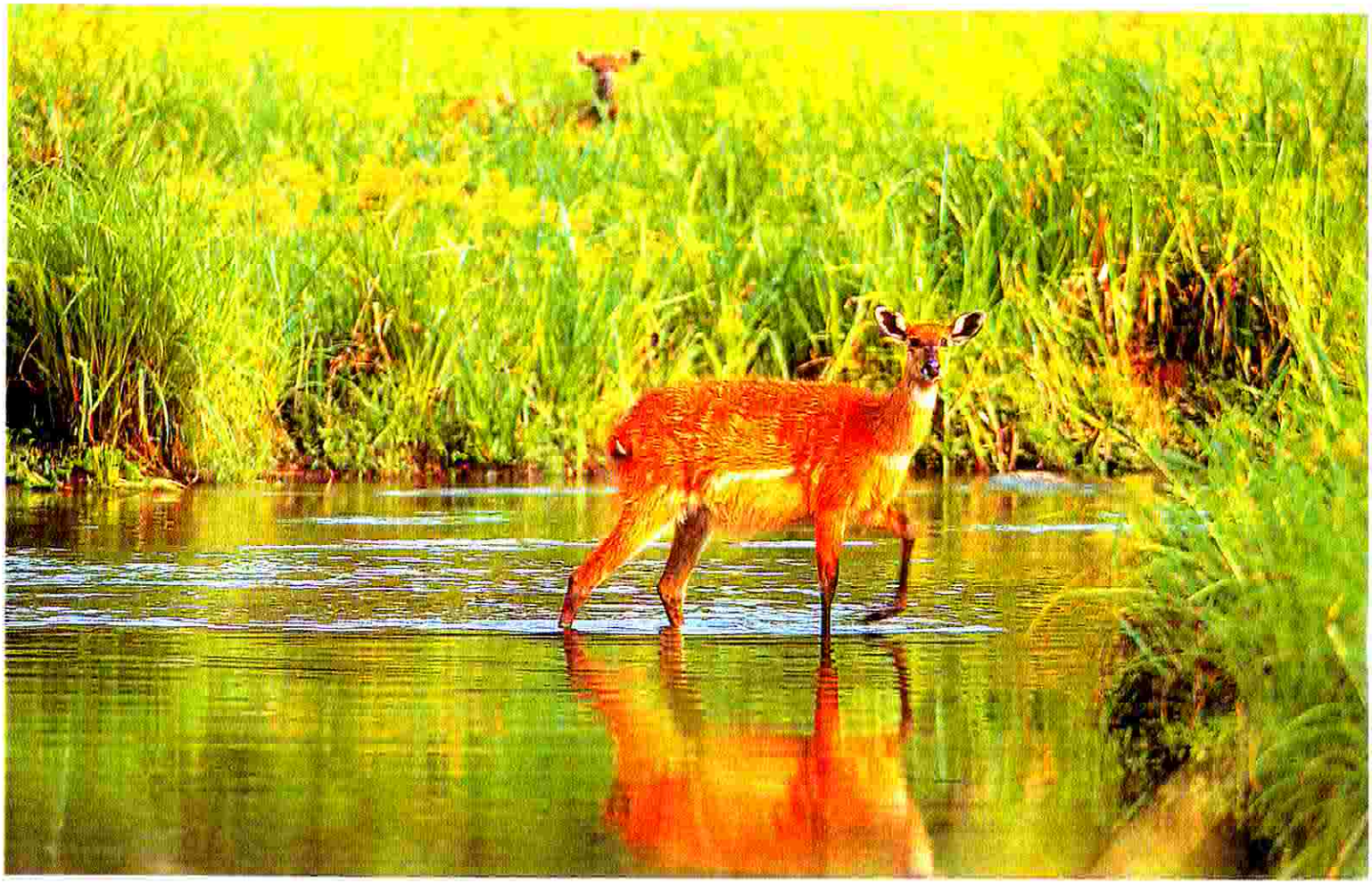
Spiders, such as this one in Minkebé National Park, are found in an extraordinary diversity of sizes and colours.

The stuff of legend

It's May 2002 and the president of Gabon, Mr El Hadj Omar Bongo, is attending a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. A quirky American who has just walked across much of Central Africa, including all of Bongo's country, has asked for a few minutes of the president's time. Michael Fay, a Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) biologist, tells Bongo about his gruelling 18-month 'Megatransect' and shows Bongo some photographs. The president, who has spent the bulk of his 35-year rule flying over his country's forests, rivers, mountains and animals, is amazed by what he sees.

Several months later, back in Gabon, Fay and Lee White, head of the WCS Gabon Program, are summoned to make a presentation to Bongo's unsuspecting Cabinet. Seizing the opportunity, they outline the development of a network of 13 national parks. It is ambitious to say the least – in total the parks would cover over 11 per cent of Gabon's area and encompass land already allocated to international logging concessions. In reality, they are hoping to get approval for the elevation of Lopé Reserve from a *réserve de faune* to a national park and perhaps to plant a seed that there are alternatives to unsustainable logging and mining.

After they finish, the Minister of Water and Forests, Emile Doumba, an old friend of White's, hands the president a folder containing a proclamation that would create Lopé National Park. Bongo is having none of it. There is confusion, followed by discussion. Finally it becomes clear. Bongo wants the full network, all 13 parks. Now. Within a few days Gabon has gone from a country without a single national park to having a 13-park network that covers 28 500 square kilometres. Breathtaking.



ABOVE Shy, semi-aquatic and usually difficult to see, sitatunga are abundant in Langoué Bai.

OPPOSITE, LEFT A new frond of *Dicranopteris (Gleichenia) linearis* bears the aftermath of a thunder shower. Many plants in Gabon are yet to be catalogued, and it is hoped that some may hold clues to medical breakthroughs.

OPPOSITE, RIGHT Western lowland gorillas comfortably share Langoué Bai with forest buffalo. They had almost certainly never encountered humans before Mike Fay arrived there in August 2000.

habituate a group of gorillas. It is a task that could take up to seven years, as differing habitats and social structures make lowland gorillas more difficult to habituate than their mountain gorilla cousins. Odzala National Park in neighbouring Republic of Congo lost its habituated group to ebola a few years ago and the only other group of habituated lowland gorillas lives in the embattled Central African Republic.

Since Mikongo's inception it has been intended that tourism help fund the programme, and the few guests who do visit accompany the research team into the forest. As gorilla habituation is still at an early stage, the Pygmy trackers concentrate on other aspects of the forest – we saw crowned and putty-nosed monkeys and black colobus, and listened to chimpanzees warning one another of our presence. We learned about plants that make good eye drops and which sap helps new mothers lactate, and we chewed on a local delicacy, a seed pod called *ozigo*. A highlight was chancing upon the nest of the grey-necked picathartes (see *Africa – Birds & Birding*, June/July 2004). Of course, we were also looking for signs of gorillas, but with so much more to see, it was easy to forget that that was our primary goal.

A few days later, I flew to Franceville with Liz Pearson, head of the Projet Protection des Gorilles (PPG), a John Aspinall Foundation programme based in Batéké Plateaux National Park. The landscape here in the south-east is quite different to that elsewhere in the country, comprising rolling savanna-covered hills that spread down to fingers of forest along the riverbanks. There is an exceptional diversity of birds and it is believed that the high plateau could hide Gabon's last remaining lions.

Deep in the park, PPG is attempting to re-introduce orphaned baby and zoo-raised gorillas to the wild. The project's original group of 14 gorillas is now largely self sufficient, but it has proved difficult to break their bond with humans and it remains to be seen whether they can adapt successfully to life in the wild. In August 2003, another group – seven gorillas born and raised in the United Kingdom – was flown into Batéké by presidential helicopter. Re-introducing these animals to the forest is a challenge – they were initially scared of birds and the wind, and were on anti-malaria medication as they have no natural immunity to the disease.

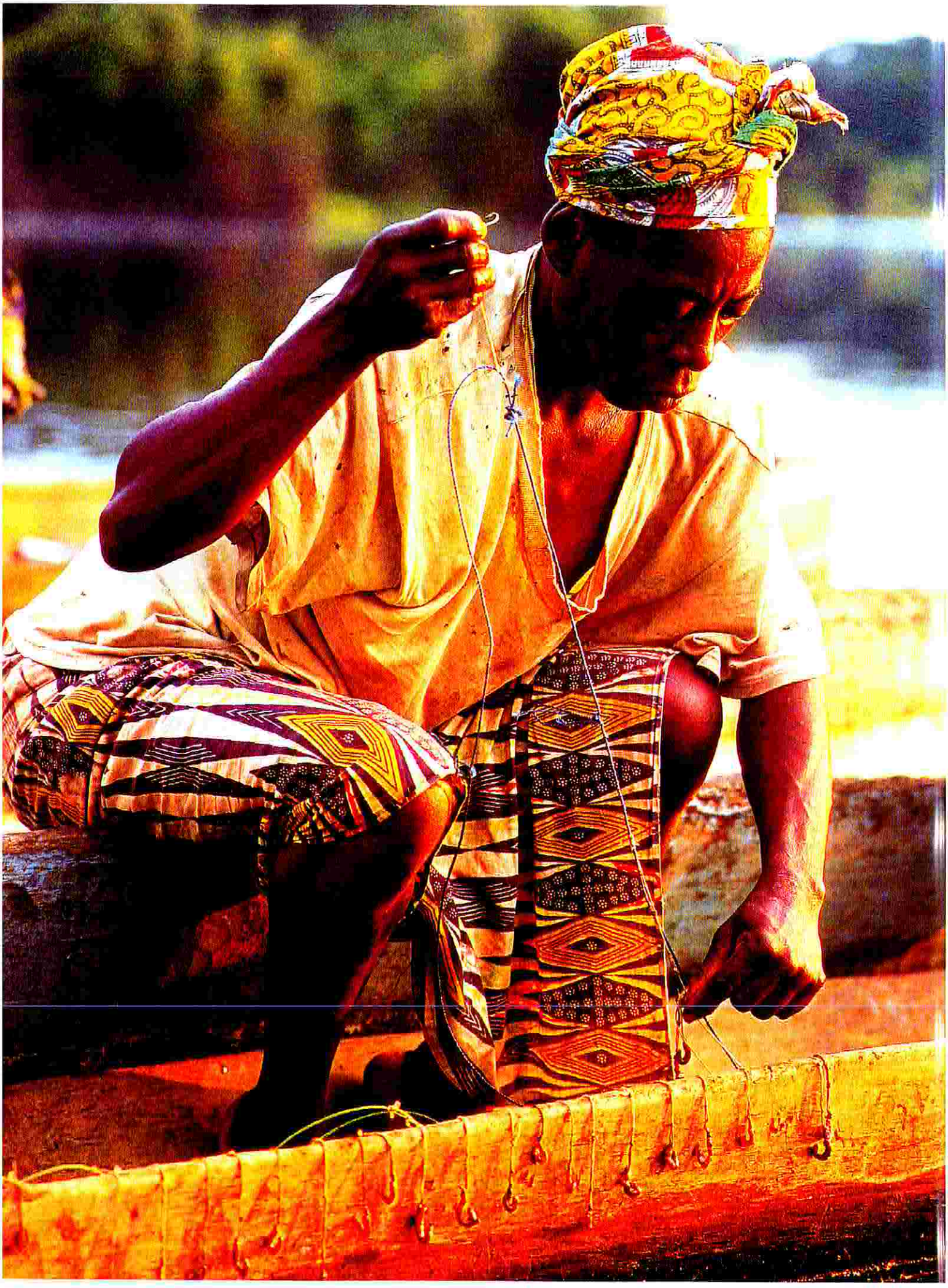
Valuable resources are being used to habituate gorillas in Lopé, with limited success. Valuable resources are being used by PPG to dehabituate gorillas, also with limited success

The creation of Batéké Plateaux National Park has given PPG a degree of protection, but it has also brought new pressures. The parks have to generate revenue and to do so they must attract tourists. Batéké Plateaux already has a lot going for it – birders will come to see endemics such as Finsch's francolin and Congo moorchat, and hikers to enjoy its rolling hills. But the undeniable draw-card would be habituated gorillas.

It is a challenging argument. Valuable resources are being used to habituate gorillas at Mikongo in Lopé, so far with limited success. Valuable resources are being used by PPG to dehabituate gorillas, also with limited success. Should one of the PPG groups be made available for tourists to view? Could this be reconciled with the goals of the John Aspinall Foundation? There are no easy answers to the debate, but its resolution could be linked to the long-term viability of the new national parks.

Ivindo Station is a tiny logging outpost in the centre of the Gabonese forest and the primary access point to the southern section of Ivindo National Park and Langoué Bai, the forest clearing that Mike Fay called 'the most significant discovery of the Megatransect'. My 80-minute train journey had turned into a five-hour epic, the up side of which was an early morning misty ride along Ivindo River. I also had the good fortune to travel with Isabel Orbell, wife of Ivindo National Park director Nigel Orbell, who invited me for breakfast when we eventually arrived. Fortified by coffee, fresh French bread and jam, I was given a lift in a Land Cruiser to the park.

Along the way we passed several young men with large backpacks dripping the blood of what I presumed were duikers or other antelope destined for the markets in Libreville. The Gabonese, like many Central ▷



Africans, have a taste for bushmeat, and addressing the trade is just one of the tasks facing those who have taken up the challenge of implementing what Lee White calls 'President Bongo's visionary decision'.

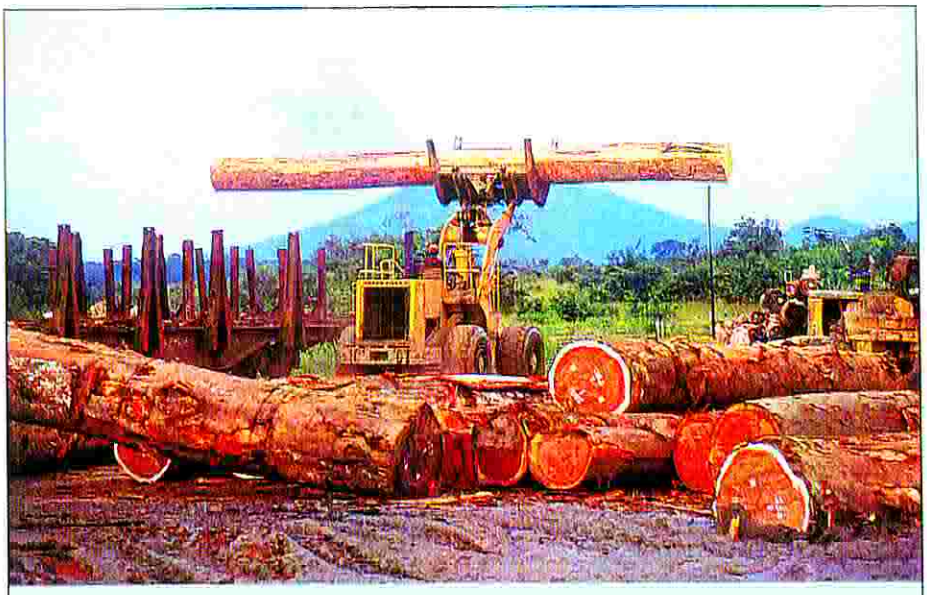
We stopped to look at one of the most beautiful snakes I have ever seen – a sunbathing rhinoceros viper – then continued to the end of the road. A few months ago, Langoué Bai was a three-day hike from the road. Since the road has been extended, the hike takes just three hours but is still tough, involving a steep scramble up the slippery mountainside and then a more gentle walk through a forest of okoumé, moabi, padouk and other beautiful and ancient hardwoods.

When Mike Fay first gazed on this 20-hectare clearing of grassland and swamp in the middle of the forest, he was amazed. Elephants with massive tusks basked in the sun and drank from the mineral-rich spring. Buffalo, sitatunga and many smaller creatures came and went. Gorillas emerged from the dense vegetation and did not seem afraid of him. Fay was familiar with large *bais* in other parts of Central Africa, but he knew there was no record of anything like this in Gabon.

Today, three 10-metre-high viewing platforms occupy discreet positions along the *bai*'s edge and exhaustive studies of gorillas, forest elephants and buffalo are under way. The researchers are based at Langoué Camp, about three kilometres away, and this was to be my sleeping quarters for the week.

On my first visit to the *bai*, we climbed a wooden ladder to one of the viewing platforms. 'Look,' whispered Alain Moundounga, a WCS researcher, 'That's Arnold walking towards the forest.' Arnold is a young silverback and one of the 35 western lowland gorillas that regularly visit Langoué.

Later in the morning other gorillas – Norma, Carmen and Aida with her baby, Addagio – sauntered into the *bai* and stayed for an hour or so. Moundounga identifies each gorilla and meticulously records their activities. Every evening, this information is forwarded to WCS by satellite phone data transmission. It was amazing to think that the following day, the Bronx Zoo in New York would know how long Norma had spent feeding by the river. A similar programme, manned by Modeste Doukaga, has identified more than 700 individual forest elephants.



Even though the creation of the new national parks has effectively cancelled 800 000 hectares of concessions, logging remains a major industry in Gabon.

Carbon-based economy

Since 1967, Omar Bongo has presided over a stable and relatively wealthy African nation. The exploitation of oil reserves and Gabon's seemingly endless forests has resulted in a per capita income that is at least six times higher than the sub-Saharan average. But these economic mainstays are becoming increasingly unsustainable. In 1957 less than 10 per cent of Gabon's 20 million hectares of forests was allocated to logging concessions; by 1999 this had climbed to 75 per cent. The opening up of the forests has also been a key factor in the rapidly increasing bushmeat trade.

Although oil currently accounts for 80 per cent of the country's export income, production from Gabon's largest oil field is down 75 per cent on 1997 levels and, if no new fields are discovered, the current rate of production will exhaust Gabon's reserves in 10 years. Therefore, in addition to emphasising further oil exploration and developing new forest regulations that lay the groundwork for sustainable logging practices in the future, the government is trying to diversify its economy. Tourism, and the creation of the national parks, is a key element of that strategy.

During the week I spent at Langoué, I was able to act on a rare opportunity to do something extraordinary. I noticed that the light over the *bai* was always at its most beautiful in the evening, and I also wondered what the clearing looked like at dawn. I knew that 6 February was going to be a full moon and I wanted to spend the night at the platform. 'Alone? *Tout seul? Si tu veux*,' said Alain and it was arranged. I took with me some food, a bed roll and whatever confidence I could muster. At the usual hour the research team climbed down from the platform and left for camp.

It was quiet. As the light faded, I took photographs and listened. The sitatunga left the *bai* and three elephants emerged from the forest, trumpeting in my direction. Several more followed and the moon rose, bathing the elephants in ▶

A resident of a BaKa Pygmy village on the Ivindo River prepares for a day's fishing. Smoked fish and manioc forms the staple diet for most of the people living on the rivers near Minkébé National Park.

ABOVE Early morning on the Nouna River in a pirogue with WWF's Patrick Koumbi. Regular anti-poaching patrols have significantly reduced the flow of bushmeat and ivory on the rivers of Minkébé National Park.

OPPOSITE, LEFT ABOVE No more eager to see us than we were to see it, this large black cobra glided quickly across the water and disappeared into the vegetation on the far bank.

its clear light. The sounds of the night were unfamiliar, but magical. With the moon almost overhead, I crawled under my mosquito net and watched an aerial dog fight as dozens of bats swooped in to catch the moths attracted to the beam of my torch. When I awoke at first light, the mist hung in the trees surrounding the *bai*, the sitatunga were shaking off the night chill by frolicking in the Langoué River, and a troop of moustached guenons were making a racket in a nearby tree. The scene was breathtaking. When Alain and his assistant showed up later, their flask of hot tea was welcome, but their arrival felt like the Normandy invasion.

Langoué Bai is an important asset to Gabon. By enabling us to see animals that are otherwise hidden in the forest, it not only makes a contribution to science, but at the same time has tourist-attracting potential, with attendant job creation and foreign exchange spin-offs. WCS is already working with Patrice Pasquier, who runs Mistral Voyages in Libreville, to bring a few visitors into the *bai*. In early February 2004, I was the sixth. There is also an ambitious plan to develop a totally 'green' eco-camp, with discreetly place elevated walkways and viewing platforms, that will ensure that Langoué Bai remains pristine. These new facilities could be in place within two years and will turn this into a 'must visit' destination for the world's eco jet set. For the more adventurous, rather rough it now.

As it turned out, I had saved the wildest experience for last. Five weeks into my exploration of Gabon, I flew to Makokou en route to Minkébé National Park. There I met Sosthene Ndong Obiang, the regional director of WWF, which has taken responsibility for Minkébé, the largest of Gabon's new parks.

Apart from nomadic BaKa Pygmies and a few hundred or so gold prospectors seeking their fortunes on its fringes, this vast forested zone has seen no permanent human population since the Fang people left early in the 20th century. As there are virtually no roads, I would be joining a pirogue team conducting a WWF anti-poaching patrol.

Some 18 months ago, the rivers kept navigable by gold prospectors were facilitating a burgeoning trade in bushmeat and ivory, but since the introduction of WWF patrols there has been a significant decrease in poaching.

We started our journey at Mayébout, a small village north of Makokou on the upper Ivindo River. After checking in at Nouna Camp, WWF's base station and the location of the park's sole radio transmitter, we turned off the Ivindo into the much narrower and quieter Nouna. We would not see another pirogue for four days. Water monitors sunned themselves on branches overhanging the river, grey-cheeked mangabeys and other monkeys danced through the canopy and birds, including the spot-breasted ibis, were all around. The birding here is probably the best in Gabon, but even Patrice Christy, Central Africa's leading birder, has only surveyed small parts of the area. Minkébé also has sizeable populations of bongo – the largest and rarest of the forest antelopes – giant forest hog, elephant, buffalo and sitatunga, as well as monkeys and large troops of mandrills. Tragically, in addition to exacting a human toll, three recent outbreaks of the ebola virus wiped out the local gorilla population.

More than 100 twisting kilometres and two full days by pirogue from Mayébout, dodging submerged logs and overhanging trees all the way, we reached the Bindoum River and the landing point for the trail leading to the Minkébé gold camps. Here we found two old pirogues tied to a tree and a mountain of beer bottles, signs of busier times. At one stage there were more than 1 000 *chantiers*, or gold prospectors, in the forest. Now there are fewer than 100.

Minkébé gold camp was a revelation. There were rows of neatly kept homes fashioned from the bark of the okala tree, manioc plants growing in every clearing and shops stocked with Coca-Cola, tinned foods, batteries, cooking oil, soap... How did it all get here? The same way we did. It's expensive, but the people living here and sifting gold dust from the earth earn the equivalent of US$50 per day and they can afford it. One member of our team ran off ▷

ABOVE Many watching eyes and listening ears, and an ability to climb and jump with ease through the canopy make it difficult to get near mandrills. We were just lucky that a troop decided to leap from branch to branch a few metres ahead of us.

ABOVE LEFT Alone, I might easily have missed this colourful caterpillar, but walking with the Pygmy trackers at Mikongo in Lopé National Park was a revelation and gave me an insight into their deep understanding of the forest.

and returned with a dozen fresh, warm baguettes – there was even a bakery.

The gold camps, where young men shovel orange soil into wheelbarrows to be sifted, are in a narrow sliver of land that juts into the park. The *chantiers* fell stately trees to make way for manioc. It's a compromise – if they could not grow manioc, they would hunt more. Hunting, indeed their very presence here, is a delicate issue. Pauwel deWachter, the director of the WWF Minkébé project, told me, 'The *chantiers* are not allowed to prospect for gold in the park. They can hunt for subsistence, only using snares and traps, and they are not allowed to transport bushmeat out of the camps. They can only hunt approved species and they cannot harbour elephant poachers.' That evening we shared a meal with a father and his son, who had trapped a porcupine and water monitor for dinner. In the name of journalism I had a bite of each and can report that they were good and bad respectively.

Early the next morning, I headed back upstream with our *pirogier* in search of a bird's nest I had seen the previous evening. The morning mist hung over the river, the sun broke through in patches, it was quiet. Suddenly, in the trees just ahead, the branches started shaking and about 200 mandrills burst across the river and were gone in less than a minute. We had seen some wildlife on the river – monitor lizards, bee-eaters, kingfishers, darters, sitatunga, buffalo, monkeys and a few snakes – but mandrills, until now, had eluded us.

It may be a few years before tourists are travelling here regularly – if I was the sixth tourist at Langoué, I was definitely the first in Minkébé – but the rivers and forests of Minkébé National Park hold many riches. There are signs that the gorilla population is slowly rebounding, and Nouna Camp in particular would make a great spot for tourist facilities. Certainly, the future looks bright for what is without doubt one of the world's great wilderness areas.

As in all Gabon's parks, however, there are significant challenges. On our penultimate afternoon on the river, we stopped a heavily laden pirogue to inspect it. The owner, a merchant returning to Minkébé gold camp with supplies, was also transporting two *chantiers* and two old rifles. Pauwel deWachter had explained that licensed weapons are still permitted

Forest elephants can disappear in an instant in the forests of Gabon and are all but impossible to observe except in the *bais*, near the rivers or as they emerge, like this one, into the savanna of Loango National Park.

in the park, although they may not be carried loaded on the river and are subject to inspection by the anti-poaching team. The first rifle was inspected and returned to the merchant, but an old *chantier* refused to part with his weapon, holding it at arm's length over the river. There was a long, heated discussion. He had been on the river long before WWF came along and would not accept that the rules had changed. Suddenly, frustrated and angry, he threw the gun into the river. After trying fruitlessly to retrieve it and lacking the space to take the old man back with us for prosecution, we let common sense prevail – we went our way, they went theirs and the rifle was gone.

President Bongo's support of the national park network may have been swift and decisive, but it was not consultative. The management, patrolling and maintenance of the parks is being driven largely by non-Gabonese agencies – foreign NGOs such as WCS, WWF, Conservation International and the well-funded Congo Basin Forest Partnership. As elsewhere in Africa, if the conservation efforts in Gabon are to succeed, they must have the support of local people. This is something that Lee White is acutely aware of. 'President Bongo decided to act at a strategic moment in history with the full support of his government. There was not time to consult everybody, but we do see this as a major priority.'

In over six weeks in Gabon I saw just five of the 13 new national parks. There are undoubtedly more gems to be discovered and, although Gabon's ability to handle tourists is limited at the moment and the national parks will inevitably experience growing pains, I have no doubt that the next few years will bring more exciting news from this extraordinary country. Its hidden forests and unexplored rivers have been protected in the nick of time and we are only just beginning to uncover opportunities to see and do things that occur nowhere else on earth.

INFOTRAVEL

Game drives in Lopé National Park include visits to forest and savanna zones. Tourism in Gabon is still in its infancy; if you go, arrive with reasonable expectations and you will leave with wonderful memories.

Getting there and around

Air Gabon operates twice weekly flights between Libreville and Johannesburg, and connects Libreville with London, Paris and a number of African cities. Inter Air has a weekly service between Johannesburg and Libreville, Air France flies regularly between Libreville and Paris, and Air São Tomé, Cameroon Airlines and Royal Air Maroc link Libreville with other destinations in Africa.

Travelling in Gabon can be time-consuming and expensive. The Trans-Gabon Railway runs between Libreville and Franceville with numerous stops along the way. Several private airlines operate domestic flights, but their schedules and routes often change so consult Mistral Voyages (see Useful contacts) for the latest information. Road travel can be difficult or impossible, depending on the season and the destination, although there is an extensive *taxis-brousse* (bush taxi) network. French is the official language and English is not widely spoken.

Entry requirements

A valid passport and visa, obtained in advance from a Gabon embassy, are required. You should also carry proof of a yellow fever vaccination.

Health and safety

Although Gabon is generally a very safe country, normal precautions should be taken, especially at night in Libreville and other large towns. Always carry your passport with you – random police checks, although infrequent, require identity documents. Malaria prophylaxis is strongly recommended.

Currency and costs

Gabon is significantly more expensive than other sub-Saharan African countries. The CFA franc is used and only currency issued by the Banque des États de l'Afrique Centrale (Bank of Central African States) is valid. The economy is cash-based, although a few hotels are accepting credit cards. Travellers' cheques (euros are best) can be cashed at local banks.

When to visit

With its equatorial climate, Gabon can be visited at any time of year. The dry season, when the mandrills congregate in super-troops, is from June to August. The main rains fall between October and May. Whale-watching is best from July through September, and leatherback turtles come ashore to lay their eggs between November and February.

Useful contacts

Patrice Pasquier and his wife Astrid run Mistral Voyages in Libreville. Patrice's English is excellent and his knowledge of the country is unsurpassed. Tel. (+241-74) 77 79, e-mail *mistral.lbv@internetgabon.com* or go to *www.ecotourisme-gabon.com*

For flight information, South Africans should contact Air Gabon on tel. (+27-11) 807 4011, while the Gabon embassy tel. (+27-12) 342 4376 will provide visa information.

To find out more

Gabon, São Tomé and Principe: The Bradt Travel Guide by Sophie Warne is an excellent source of practical information about travelling in Gabon.

The following websites may also be useful:
www.internetafrica.com/tourisme (Gabon's national tourism office)
www.gabonnationalparks.com
www.wcs.org/centralafrica
www.ecofac.org