


# **Africa unspoilt**

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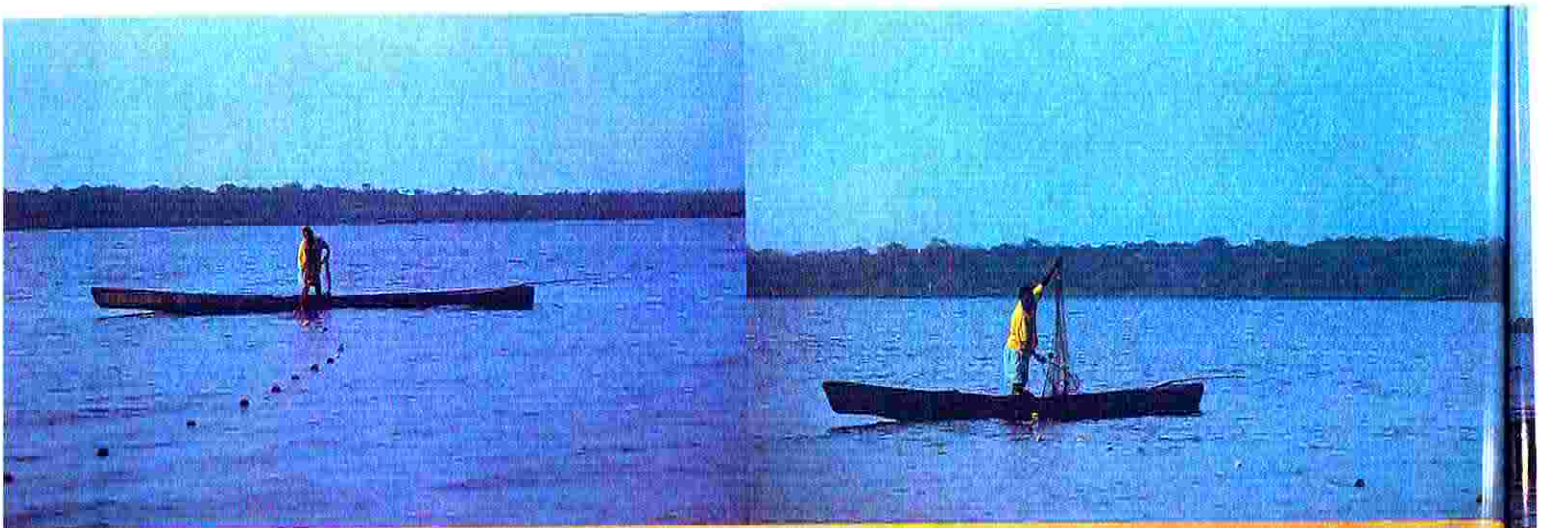
## **Topbilling**

April 2005



# AFRICA UNSPOILT

IN THE HEART OF DEEP, DARK,  
NOT-SO-SILENT AFRICA,  
IS A TRACT OF PRISTINE  
WILD LAND WHERE ANIMALS  
PLAY (LOUDLY) AND HUMANS  
SWEAT IT OUT. ANGUS BEGG  
TRACKS THE TOP BILLING  
TEAM ON A TRIP TO GABON



AS SEEN  
ON TV

Top Billing  
7 April 2005



A fisherman on Iguela lagoon checks his nets at the end of a long day



## DESPITE THE HEAT, IT'S REALLY NOT HARD TO HAVE FUN HERE, WHEN DAYS ARE MADE

**T**he black roundish thing that thumped heavily onto the forest floor, fleeing as it landed, could well have been a chimpanzee, but the senses were too occupied by the raucous sounds of the jungle to register just what it was. I'd left Ursula and the rest of the crew busy with an interview at a mahogany of mighty proportions, the sort of natural behemoth that would be called 'the big tree' in less wild destinations. It had been hot back there.

Ursula had been doing her best to keep the shine off her face with a pack of pocket tissues, while the others could do sweet nothing about the rivulets of sweat that inched down their backs. Standing still, dripping, was intolerable, so I headed back, camera in hand, along a sometimes-invisible path scattered with the dung of elephant and buffalo. The forest was fantastically alive, the whoosh of the wings of a large hornbill (black-casqued, for bird enthusiasts) competing with all manner of whooping and shrieking creatures.

After a six-hour flight from Jo'burg, another hour from Libreville, over steaming forests, 90 minutes on a jeep track and 66km on a river just south of the equator, we were on the perimeter of one of the world's most significant geographical areas, the rainforest of the Congo Basin. This was Akaka, a satellite camp in Gabon's Loango National Park.

Gabon, which has seen occasional spells of instability and is notorious for its bush-meat trade, has only recently announced its arrival as a top tourist destination for nature enthusiasts, in contrast to the surrounding area of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Its emergence as an environmental haven was initiated in August 1992 when American biologist-cum-explorer Dr Mike Fay of the Wildlife Conservation Society in New York requested an audience with Gabon President Omar Bongo.

Fay had two years earlier walked over 3 000km across central Africa, south from the DRC across the length of Gabon to the coast, passing through some of the richest and most

diverse forests on earth (about 75 per cent of Gabon is covered in rainforest, the rest comprising lagoons, pockets of savannah grassland, remote mountains, white sandy beaches and mangrove swamps). The result, following the audience with the president and his senior ministers, was the establishment of Gabon's first national parks – 13 of them.

Which in a way explains **Top Billing's** arrival some 18 months later at this lodge on the Iguela Lagoon in Loango National Park, some 300km south of the capital, Libreville. We were here for a ten-day glimpse into a private-sector venture, based in the park, known as Operation Loango. A couple of years old and still a work in progress, it is ecotourism with deep integrity; with two lodges and a few camps at various sites around the park, it also finances and is host to five research programmes, the forest elephant, leatherback turtle, and gorilla and chimpanzee projects among them.

Edward Truter, the Port Alfred-born tourism development coordinator at Loango Lodge



## UP OF SNAPPING SHOTS OF ELEPHANTS

— where the centre is based — says the emphasis of the operation is on the conservation work. Rather than impressing guests with luxurious fittings and accessories, it aims to attract people who want to see the West-African coast as it would have looked thousands of years ago.

The lodge is an establishment of great comfort, airy and West African in style, lacking in pretension. But while it's not quite the chi-chi, plunge-pool, gold-plated and bended-knee service destination now so common in South Africa, it has everything going for it.

Its position on the vast Iguela lagoon is close to perfect. There is thick jungle on both sides of the lodge, and the forest across the water is splashed with pockets of savannah grassland and the Atlantic Ocean three kilometres west. The park is made up of 1 550km<sup>2</sup> of largely pristine (in the true sense of the word) land — equatorial forest, lagoons, river systems, pockets of savannah and undisturbed beaches.

A variety of wildlife exists in these ecosystems, many of which we've never seen



before: the western lowland gorilla, chimpanzee, forest elephant, red river-hog, forest buffalo, dwarf and slender-snouted crocodile among them. Not to mention the birds (during our stay, the chairman of the Nobel Prize Committee arrived from Norway with a South African guide to tick eight species off his list).

As for the **Top Billing** team, we head off to



**ABOVE** Gabon boasts a wide variety of birdlife. **RIGHT** A forest butterfly. **MAIN PICTURE** The lodge on Petit Evengue. **TOP INSERTS** Edward Truter (left), tourism development manager for Operation Loango; and Ursula Stapelfeldt (right).

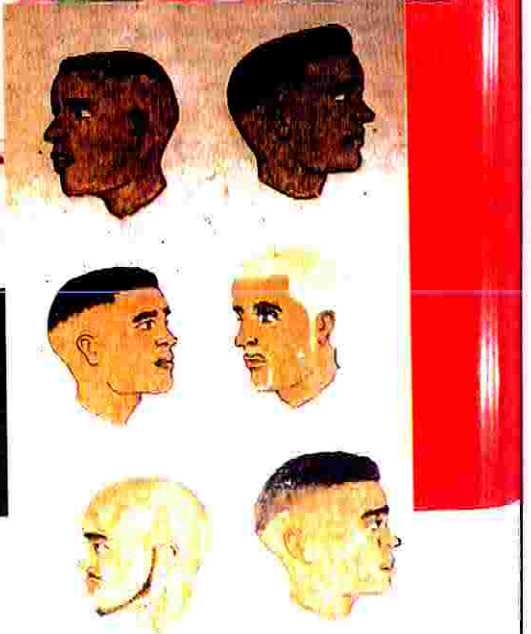


dinner. Like lunch, dinners are three-course affairs, and even after three days will seriously challenge the waistline. Any attempt to pass on any of it is pointless, with Pamela, the Nigerian waitress of impeccable English and beautiful smile, saying, 'It's good, try it!' before resolutely setting it down before us.

The punishment for a morning run is humidity of 90 per cent. February is apparently as hot as it gets. But as they say somewhere in Northumbria, 'It's all ▶



ABOVE LEFT Presentation of food at Loango Lodge was beautiful, creative and resourceful.  
 ABOVE Ursula's catch: 7kgs of brown snapper.  
 ABOVE RIGHT Pamela, the all-smiles Nigerian waitress.  
 RIGHT A sweaty affair: dancers with the fire and raffia palm that make up the Bwiti initiation ceremony.  
 BELOW Hanging out in Ombue.  
 BELOW RIGHT Fish at the market in Ombue, the nearest commercial centre to Loango National Park.  
 BOTTOM LEFT Forest buffalo on the beach.  
 BOTTOM RIGHT These traditional hairstyles are on offer at the hair salon in Ombue.  
 OPPOSITE TOP Seeing an elephant drinking from the ocean was a first for all of us.





## THE FISH TAKES THE BAIT. URSULA STEPS OVER, ALL ENTHUSIASM AND EXCITED GRIN

good fun'. Thank heavens for the air-con. Coca-Cola also assumes wildly popular proportions, especially with Ursula 'I don't drink the stuff at home'. The local beer, Regab, is equally popular with the rest of us, arriving in litre form. It's a cheaper alternative to the Amstel and Heineken found throughout Gabon (along with the French, the Dutch – especially through Shell – are well-entrenched in this oil-rich little country).

Despite the heat, it's really not hard to have fun here when days are made up of snapping shots of elephants drinking from the ocean, catching glimpses of gorillas running across the savannah in the distance and reeling in fish for the evening braai shoot on the beach.

It's Ursula who has to be filmed catching it. Then it must be taken to a barbecue at Catherine Point – on the beach up at the estuary – where the braai has been started and 'the set' prepared for filming. Fortunately Ed, a fanatic fisherman, does the musclework. He tells us we are chasing the capubera snapper. On cue, the fish takes the bait and starts fighting, and Ursula steps over, all enthusiasm and excited grin. She hauls it in, bending and reeling almost professionally while questioning aloud – when she sees it surface briefly – whether or not this is the right thing to do. The *coup de grâce* is delivered with a club by Ed, but Ursula can't bear to watch. 'It's actually a brown snapper,' whispers Ed a short while later, grinning because of the trouble Ursula is having pronouncing 'capubera' while being filmed.

The resultant meal is excellent, accompanied by (you would imagine no less with a **Top Billing** crew) a good few glasses of Moët Chandon while seated on the beach at sunset. The view out into the Atlantic is gentle and warm. Twenty-five kilometres out to sea, the flares of two oil rigs flicker.

But our journey is not over. Our next lodge is on the island of Petit Evengue, which is on the Verman-Vaz lagoon and a mere 2km<sup>2</sup> in size. Here a young researcher from Holland is busy with some research and monitoring

work. His subjects are western lowland gorillas, comprising a silverback – Mabeke – his family group and a few orphans. Some are former inmates from zoos, others are from laboratories or orphans of parents poached in the forest (bush-meat trade in west central Africa remains a huge concern to the conservation groups in the region). The plan is for future generations to be released into the bush.

Later, we visit a Catholic mission at St Anne, an iron church built by Gustav Eiffel (the same who built the tower, plus buildings in Maputo and Peru), known for its black Madonna-and-child sculpture. Our intention is to attend mass, but thanks to some dodgy local information we miss it by four hours.

This means more visuals need to be shot. With cameraman Stefan and director Francois disagreeing briefly about natural light inside the church, and the rain intermittent, the TV crew takes its time. The shoot is dragging. It's good to get back to the lodge.

Petit Evengue is a very private camp, with two family-style wooden bungalows and three tents on individual platforms. The view is maybe 100 metres across to Grand Evengue, and on both nights from the verandah just above the canoes and the little jetty, we watch a sky littered with large fruit bats flying overhead en masse at 7pm. Like clockwork, says the young Hollander.

Flocks of African-grey parrots take up their own patch of evening sky, flying and squawking overhead. We reflect on the days past, and remember the early glimpse of lowland gorillas dashing across the savannah when we drove in to Loango Lodge. Unfortunately we didn't get lucky again. Although guests will soon be able to accompany researchers attached to the various projects, and with habituation this will improve chances of sightings, that's just the way of the bush.

It's hot. I hear a splash, and discover Francois and Stefan have jumped into the lagoon. 'It's a wrap', as they say in the film world. Time for that gin and tonic. ☞

## NEED-TO-KNOWS THAT YOU DIDN'T GET ON TV

**THE FLIGHT IS...** direct from Jo'burg to Libreville with Inter Air.

**THEN...** you get whisked off directly – Dutch style, no delays – by the company's own air service to the park.

**THE FLIGHT IS...** surprisingly good, bar the 50 minute stop-over in Brazzaville.

**PORT GENTIL IS...** the closest large commercial centre to the park. It's not necessarily recommended for tourists, although the nightlife is, according to reports, excellent.

**LIBREVILLE IS...** the capital city. It is wealthier and has better roads.

**THE MAIN LANGUAGE IS...** French.

**THE CURRENCY IS...** CFA franc (Communauté Financière Africaine).

**THE EXCHANGE RATE IS...** around CFA85 to a rand.

**TAXI CHARGE...** a standard fee of CFA2 000 (about R25) whether you travel 500m or 10km – that's in Libreville.

**IT IS SIMILAR TO...** Paris, but in Africa. People are not overly friendly, but if you make the effort, there is at least the chance of a positive response. Don't get flustered with your French.

**SOCIETY IS...** reasonably well-off. Homeless people and beggars are scarce.

**COSTS ARE...** quite high. It's said by some that Libreville is among the five most expensive cities in the world.

**RESTAURANT PRICES WERE...** more in line with Johannesburg than Tokyo.

**SHOPPING IS...** good. The main craft market in Libreville has a wide selection of artwork, from masks to batiks, but haggling is definitely required.

**RECOMMENDED RESTAURANTS**

**ARE...** Paradiso in Mont Louis, and Le Dolce Vita in Libreville harbour.

**FOR ACCOMMODATION...** try the InterContinental and Hotel Tropicana, but avoid the Novotel hotel – it's a shocker.



**ABOVE LEFT** Mabeke, the silverback western lowland gorilla in the sanctuary on Petit Evengue. **ABOVE CENTRE** Getting ready for a Bwiti ceremony. **ABOVE RIGHT** Authentic cuisine. **MAIN PICTURE** A fisherman heads home after a long day.



## TOP BILLING READER OFFER:

Take a trip to Gabon and see gorillas up close and natural

InterAir and Operation Loango are offering **Top Billing** readers an eight-day getaway to Gabon and Loango National Park

**EXCLUSIVE**

### YOUR EIGHT-DAY ITINERARY

- **DAY 1** Fly from Johannesburg to Libreville. Stay over in Hotel Tropicana, a small hotel directly on the beach that offers the real atmosphere of Gabon.
- **DAY 2** Fly with Air Gabon or Air Service to Port Gentil and spend a day in the small harbour town with its famous Café du Wharf. Guests will stay in hotel L'Hrondelle.
- **DAY 3** Fly to Omboue, then travel by boat to Evengue; the island where you can observe gorillas up close.
- **DAY 4** From Evengue, visit St Anne, a gorgeous missionary post in the middle of the Yernan Vaz Lagoon, where you can see the famous Eiffel Church, built in the same year as the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Take a trip over the Mpiovie River, with its black water and rich bird life. Arrive at Loango Lodge for lunch, and take a houseboat tour of the lagoon.
- **DAYS 5 - 7** Stay in Loango National Park beach- and bushcamps and view wildlife, including elephants, gorillas and chimpanzees, under the guidance of the operation's local and international guides. This can be done both on foot or by 4x4. Activities include fishing, hiking and canoeing. From June till September, you can also go humpback-whale watching, and observe researchers at work.
- **DAY 8** After a morning safari, our private plane will take you back to Libreville, where your InterAir plane will be waiting to take you back to Johannesburg.

### PRICE

InterAir flights from Johannesburg International Airport to Libreville return: R12 600 (business-class); R5 230 (economy class). Prices exclude tax. Flights depart on Mondays and Wednesdays, and return on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

**Domestic flights** from Gabon to Port Gentil: R470. From Port Gentil to Omboue: R413. From Loango Lodge to Libreville: R1 980

**Operation Loango** cost at Loango Lodge: R2 172 per person per night. Children under the age of 13 pay half.

**Please note** This is a special price for **Top Billing** readers. **Hotels Tropicana and L'Hrondelle** cost per night: R587

### WIN TWO FLIGHTS TO GABON

InterAir South Africa is giving away two flights to Gabon worth R5 230 each, from Johannesburg International Airport to Libreville. Airport tax is excluded.

**To win, answer the following question:**

On which island can you visit a gorilla rehabilitation programme? E-mail your answer, together with your full name and contact details, to [info@topbilling.com](mailto:info@topbilling.com) before 30 April 2005.

**Competition rules** 1 The judges' decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. 2 Readers may enter as many times as they wish. 3 Staff members of Tswelopele Productions, the sponsors of the prize, their directors, partners, agents, consultants or advertising agencies and immediate family may not enter. 4 Prizes are not transferable and may not be exchanged for cash. 5 This competition is open to all residents of SA. 6 Prize-winners agree that Tswelopele Productions may publish their names and photographs, and that the prize-winners will receive no payment in any form whatsoever in respect of this. 7 Where necessary, and at Tswelopele Productions's sole discretion, prize items described may be substituted with alternative goods of equal value.

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