

# **Wild Coastal Africa**

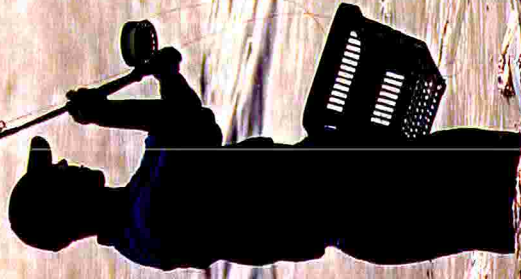
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**Wild on the Fly**

Henry Gilby  
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Using a big, modified, two-handed rod with a specially designed line, British angler James Warbrick-Smith works out a surf casting method that puts him a magnificent giant African trevally — perhaps the largest (and certainly one of the only) of such species ever caught on a fly in the surf. As a new frontier for saltwater fly fishermen, the wild, fabled coast of Africa is unparalleled in myriad exotic fish that will attack an angler's artificial offerings with savage intent.

# Wild Coastal Africa



Welcome to the most unexplored waters in the world — raw, violent, unspoiled wilderness where it's eat or be eaten, and predator becomes prey at the flip of a fin.

Story and Photographs by Henry Gilbey

# Iguéla Lagoon



*Situated at Iguéla, the northern gateway to Loango National Park, Luango Lodge offers a comfortable respite between fishing forays. The lodge is part of Operation Luango, a joint-venture tourism initiative between private organizations and the Gabon government.*

**Does** reincarnation exist? Do we really return in some fit out, freaky afterlife as something different? If so, what might an obsessed fisherman like me return as? I know it's a bizarre request, but believe me, I am asking right now, please, let me come back as a small fish anywhere near the Iguéla Lagoon system in Gabon, Africa. 'Cause if I do, my next life is going to be a short one!

Never in my angling quests have I seen such merciless and unbridled savagery towards seemingly hapless prey as I witnessed around the Iguéla. Look almost anywhere and you'll see some sort of butchery going on; baitfish being unceremoniously massacred by ravenous borders of voracious predators. The bursts and splashes of death and destruction carry far across the water, and these sounds will quicken the blood of anybody who fishes. Such an expression of life – and death – in such virgin wilderness lies waiting for the intrepid fisherman who chooses to make the trek to central Africa.

Where else in the world can you have a legitimate chance of hooking monster tarpon, huge African cubera snapper, Giant African threadfin, Guinean barracuda and potential world record jacks, from both boat and beach? And all this within a 20-minute boat ride from a comfortable base camp at Loango Lodge.

The cough of a cold boat engine accents against the background jungle sounds before mixing into a greater

we steady ourselves against the rocking of the boat. Even as we rig our rods, a school of jacks roars through a carpet of prey just a few yards from the boat.

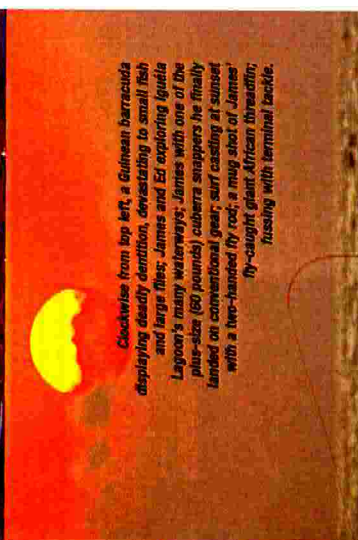
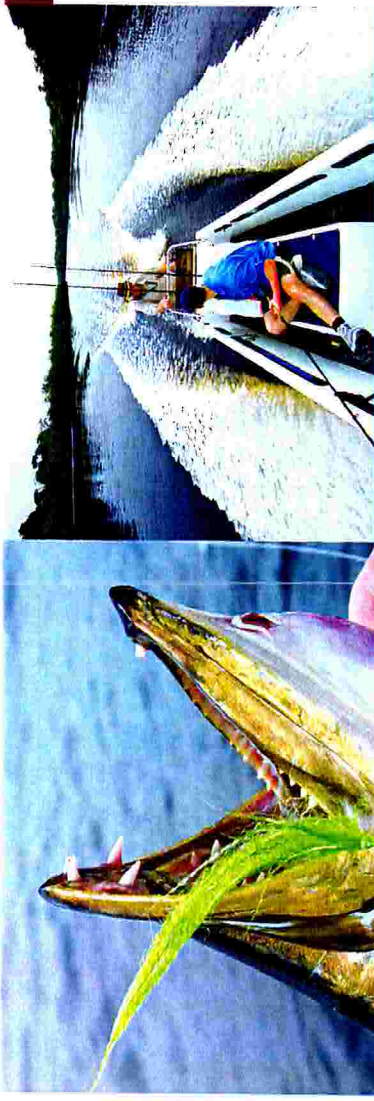
James positions himself at the back of the boat and strips line from the reel, casting out across the tide gives the fly a chance to get down deep before the retrieve. He varies the stripping, pushing the 12-weight to the max, working the line hard, but above all, he holds on tightly; big beasts swim these waters.

One very angry Guinean barracuda later (on a chartreuse and white clouser) and James is yelping like an excited little kid. Then I hook an 80-pound culbera on a livebait (hey, I'll fish anyway that works). This is very cool! We think we'll just stay here for the day, obviously plenty of fish around but Ed says we need to hit the beach. Time and tide waits for no man. Ed reckons other predators are about to start roaming the surf line; my hands shake with sheer excitement.

Make no mistake, fly fishing in the surf is hard work; rolling waves and strong lateral currents do their best to knock you off your feet, and this washing machine effect makes casting a real challenge. We wade out on the north side of the lagoon mouth and look for sandbanks giving way to deeper holes (in truth there are miles and miles of beach to explore, most of it never fished before). Everywhere there are crabs wandering around parading their impressive armor, and we keep one eye out for them while scanning the surf line watching for bust-

*James Warbrick-Smith reacts in total disbelief as a big Guinean barracuda finally comes to the boga grip, expertly manned by lodge manager Ed Truter. At right, James holds yet another exotic fly-caught species, an African threadfish (not to be confused with the even more unusual giant African threadfin).*





*Clockwise from top left, a Guinean barracuda displaying deadly dentition, devastating to small fish and large fish; James and Ed exploring Iguéla Lagoon's many waterways; James with one of the play-size (80 pounds) cubera snappers he finally landed on conventional gear; surf casting at sunset with a two-handed fly rod; a mag shot at James' fly-caught giant African thrushfin, trussing with terminal tackle.*

ing tarpon and spinning, twisting sharks. James is prepared for battle at a high-level. Lures are being cast around him, but James has only the fly on his mind, even when multiplier clutches scream to the sound of heavy fish. He hasn't traveled this deep into the throbbing heart of the Dark Continent to simply give in at the

up and embrace the smells and intricacies of Africa, look for inviting water (not hard, it's everywhere out here), tell yourself that every cast could hook you a true monster. You will be amongst the first people to ever seriously fly fish this staggeringly deserted and pristine stretch of coastline. (continued on page 92)

## when you go

### Iguéla Lagoon... Gabon, Central Africa

**Lodge:** Loango Lodge Outfitter, Operation Loango - SCD, Meander 251, 6825 MC Arnhem, The Netherlands • **Tele:** +31 26 370 5567 • **www:** operation-loango.com • **www:** fishinggabon.com

#### SPECIES OF FISH

The main target species in the area are African cubera snapper, Atlantic tarpon, giant African threadfin, Guinean barracuda, jack crevalle, longfin kingfish/track and Senegal outleatherhead.

#### SEASON

Fishing season generally runs from September to April, with the peak period being November to February.

#### LOCATION

Gabon is on the southwest coast of Africa, bordered by the Atlantic Ocean, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon and the Congo. Loango Lodge is located at Iguéla Lagoon, the northern gateway to Loango National Park on Gabon's southern coast.

#### GETTING THERE

Air France flies four times weekly from Paris to Libreville, the capital of Gabon. Operation Loango charter aircraft or local domestic airlines continue on from Libreville to Omboué.

#### RATES

Seven-day fishing packages start at approximately \$2,700. Prices are per person sharing a bunkroom. All meals, local transfers, salaries, guides and boat rental are included.

#### ACCOMMODATIONS

Seven bungalows and three suites, each with terrace, air conditioning, fan and hot and cold water ensures your comfort.

#### FOOD & DRINK

Meals are three-course, generally French-style and very good; breads tend to be plentiful. Soft drinks, local beers (locally brewed) and sometimes South African wines are all for sale.

#### TIME ZONE

GMT +1 hour (6 hours ahead of EST); 8:00 pm in New York is 2:00 am the next day in Libreville, Gabon.

#### IMMIGRATION/CUSTOMS

Except for South African citizens, a valid passport and visa is required to visit Gabon.

#### LANGUAGE

French and local dialects. Lodge staff speaks French, English, Dutch, German and Afrikaans. Guides speak predominantly French but are undergoing English training.

#### CURRENCY

Communauté Financière Africaine (CFA) Francs. The exchange rate on April 1, 2006: 1 US Dollar = 599 CFA Francs. Loango Lodge does not have credit card facilities and will not accept foreign checks. The best option to protect funds from robbery, fishing gear, headlamp for evening fishing, binoculars to use in this area is the Euro (1 Euro = 129 US Dollars). It is a good idea to travel with small denomination notes as change is often paid out in local currency.

#### ECONOMIC STABILITY

Gabon is a stable country with a small population but is concentrated in a few urban centers. A high standard of living maintained by an active petroleum industry (and low population growth) has meant less



of each. Double-handed rod for the surf, 8-weight for the mangroves. Take the best reels you can afford with large arbor spools loaded with 30-pound gel-spun backing. Bring floating, intermediate and last sinking lines for all set ups (and spares of all). Leaders should be as simple and well-tied as possible; fish will destroy them! 30-lb fluorocarbon shock tippet and 30-lb wire for barracuda.

#### FLIES

3/0 to 5/0 sizes on very strong hooks for the bigger fish. Bring Deceivers, Chouser Minnows, Sea Hables, Half 'n' Halls, lassy profile flies, various poppers/skitters, and some very large castable flies that present a huge profile and as much water disturbance as possible for fishing the surf like Silicones and Conomo Spots. Also bring a similar selection of various small flies for fishing the mangroves. Most of our fish were caught on a color combination of chartreuse and white.

#### OTHER ACTIVITIES

The luxury of the Iguéla area allows for excellent nature activities including wading



come wearing hippos & elephants on the beach, gorilla watching, waterfalls, kayaking, bird watching and beach combing. Opportunities to interact with numerous wild and tame village visits, seeing Baka (tribe) (clay), archaeological ruins, and day trips to the historic town of Lambere and the Albert Schweitzer hospital.

Creamy surf washes over a waist-high sandbank and falls into a deeper hole to the right. James starts casting in perfect arcs against a hazy African sky, punching the sinking line to pull it across the edge of the sandbank and into the drop-off. Feet slightly apart to brace himself against the surge of the ocean, he casts again, and again, and then suddenly strips right into 100 percent resistance.

The long rod slams over, James' left hand works furiously to set the steel hard, line peels from the reel, waves continue to slam at his legs, but all seems strangely calm and under control. If it were me, I'd be a nervous wreck, but today I'm working the camera; a perfect excuse to hide my slight ineptitude with a double-bander! Ed comes running from playing another fish some fifty yards away, but James is already turning his quarry hard against the tide, working the fish away from reaching the relative sanctuary of deeper water. The odd shark fin swims around menacingly, lending urgency to the need to land this fish... now, as fast as possible. More side strain and suddenly, James is kneeling down and grasping some unseen writhing predator by the wrist of the tail, the biggest grin you ever saw implants itself on the man's face, and he cradles the fish to gently unhook the prize. Only then does he start shaking with excitement, a sense of achievement, and I presume absolute wonder as well.

When did you last see a giant African threadfin caught on the fly from a foaming mass of wild Gabon surf?

There is every chance that Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* might well have scored the hell out of anybody contemplating a trip into central Africa. Many are the stories of trouble in places such as the Congo, Sierra Leone and Liberia, but let me assure you that Gabon is quite unique. A relatively wealthy country with strong oil reserves and resulting foreign investment, Gabon is hugely advanced in conserving a large proportion of its natural assets (such as vast tracts of rain-forest, savannas and pristine lagoons, many contained within recently set-aside national parks).

Do not, however, for once second go there thinking that all is set up just right for the fly fisherman. Masses of huge fish inhabit seemingly every piece of water, and standard lure, bait and surfcasting methods are hugely effective. But fly fishing is just beginning to be applied seriously along the lines that if you can catch big fish on lures from boat and beach, then you can take them on the fly. Talking to Ed about this gives James and me so much reason to return someday soon. While we concentrated our efforts in the lagoon, on the adjacent beach, just outside the river mouth, and of course in the turbulent waters just inside, the fishing out-

side this area has basically been left alone. Rumors abound of cobia, record busting jacks, sailfish, dorado, huge tarpon, and quite seriously, who really knows what else?

I have fished from beaches all over the world, but never have I seen a place where you can catch such large fish so close to the shore. Ed hooked and landed two giant African threadfin, each nearly 80 pounds, the week before we got there. Yes, he was fishing jigs on strong conventional tackle, but these fish were hooked not 15 yards from his feet in waist high surf. Over time he's caught many huge cubera snappers in the shallow waters of the lagoon on poppers, and tarpon to 150 pounds right from the beach, all at casting distances easily attainable with a fly rod.

Many are the restless nights I have suffered after this trip, dreaming of the frightening potential coastal Gabon offers the adventurous saltwater fly fisherman. And so, as always, I recite my little prayer about reincarnation. "If I die before too soon, no coming back as a small fish in Iguéla Lagoon." But come back I will, in this lifetime, with big flies, big rods and even bigger dreams. 