

The heart of wilderness

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In a single unprecedented act, Gabon's president created 13 national parks. Jon Bowermaster explores the good news in Africa

It has been a long, hot day of paddling sea kayaks in the equatorial Atlantic Ocean, paralleling the coast of the West African nation of Gabon. Eight hours on a hard plastic seat, as far as three miles out in mostly calm seas, have taken their toll. Our group is looking forward to guiding the heavily loaded boats onto shore, finally able to stretch not only legs but every other imaginable body part.

Yet at day's end, we suddenly find ourselves battling against rolling waves that are pushing us toward the white sand beach known as Petit Loango. Why the change of heart? As sizable tarpon expose their silver underbellies, a Noah's Ark of big animals appears on the shore right in front of us. Brown forest elephants munch on the sandy grass; a herd of buffalo ruminates not far from where dwarf crocodiles sun themselves in a lagoon; and then the Holy Grail emerges from the forest, a trio of surfing hippos readying for an afternoon swim. Our welcome party!

We hesitate to move toward shore for fear of spooking the enormous beasts. "I've never seen anything like this from the seat of a kayak," declares my partner in this adventure, Michael Fay, an American biologist and environmental activist. That's saying a lot, since a few years back he walked 456 straight days across the entire Congo forest—traversing two countries, Congo and Gabon, in the process—to document the region's biodiversity and draw attention to its vulnerability. That journey (known as the Megatransect) ended near this very beach, which today demarcates Gabon's first ever national park, Loango.

Ecotourism is finally making inroads here, jump-started in August 2002 when this area and 12 others—a total of 11 percent of Gabon—were declared protected with the flourish of one monumental presidential signature. Thanks to long and impressive efforts by a variety of international environmental groups, and prompted by photographs and videos of Gabon's little-seen interior, President Omar Bongo created 13 national parks where before there had been none. His decision was perhaps the biggest conservation sign-over in history, and Mike, who has lived and worked in Africa for 25 years, was a major part of the push.

"It's an unprecedented move," says Mike. "You have to go back to Teddy Roosevelt and his creation of 230 million acres of national forest in the United States to find something similarly radical."

"This is not an easy country to start up ecotourism in," he continues. "But Loango happens to be an extremely beautiful place: great climate, few bugs, hippos and elephants on the beach. We've still got lots of things to do—more beach cleanup, trawler control—but I don't focus on the frustrations."

And for once the environmentalists may have the advantage. Populated by just over a million people, this remains wild, largely pristine country—although it's constantly at risk from oil and timber companies. Seventy-seven percent of Gabon belongs to the Congo Basin, the world's second-largest rain forest. In this country, one also finds a rare interface between marine and terrestrial wilderness, between untamed ocean and sheltered lagoons. Fifty thousand to sixty thousand elephants reside here, as well as bush pigs, lowland gorillas, forest buffalo, and sitatungas (marsh-dwelling antelope). Along the 550 miles of coast are an abundance of Atlantic sea turtles, dolphins, whales, and fish. Birds nest in every tree, from kingfishers and turacos to gray parrots and 26 types of bee-eaters.

Since Mike has already walked across Gabon, we've decided to see it this time from the seat of a kayak. Our goal is to complete a 120-mile circumnavigation of Loango, crown jewel of the new national parks system, by heading south down the Ngové River and returning via the Atlantic Ocean. Photographer Pete McBride has joined us, along with two young Gabonese, Sophiano Etouck and Aimé Jessy, who are training to become park guides.

We ready our kayaks at the Loango Lodge, a surprisingly sophisticated safari camp built on the edge of a lagoon linked to the Atlantic. It's been fully operational for less than six months at the time of our visit, but business is already booming. The main building wraps around the trunk of a hundred-foot okoume tree and is surrounded by ten elegant thatch-roofed, air-conditioned bungalows. A four-minute longboat ride across the lagoon lies the park itself, where a pair of Land Cruisers are positioned for game rides. Two tented satellite camps inside the park are in the works: one upriver, Akaka, perfect for sitting among forest elephants as they come to drink, and another, Tassi, on a beach 15 miles down the coast.

With no sign of the 12-foot crocodiles that have discouraged us from taking much-needed and -desired swims, we push off under sultry gray skies. A mist rises above the tall okoume trees, their branches laden with squawking monkeys. Our route will take us around the lagoon, mostly hugging its forested shoreline, and then up the Ngové. It is the rainy season, and the dense black and red mangrove forest is flooded by high water.

Roughly 400 people, mostly fishermen, live along the lagoon, and at day's end we pull into the camp of the local chief, who invites us to stay overnight and shares his pine nuts, breadfruit, and pineapple. He is the leader of approximately a thousand people in a region rich with oil. Over the years, oil companies have earned \$25 billion from the area, he estimates. The locals' take? Nothing. Bone-thin at 78, wearing only a pair of cut-off khakis, the chief tells us that the new national parks are a good thing, largely because they will employ many of his people as guides, cooks, and drivers.

Our upriver journey begins the next afternoon at the swollen mouth of the Ngové. Paddling into a light wind and rain, we again stick to the shore. Beyond blooming papyrus and palms, the flooded forest is haunting—dark, wet, humid, filled with leeches and shoe-sucking mud. Three feet of river water rise up the thick trunks of tall trees. During the dry season, Mike tells me that the shores become "a kind of Serengeti," heavy with hungry elephants feasting on previously submerged papyrus.

Late in the day, the animals start to appear. An elephant swims 30 yards ahead of us; a river tarpon rises midstream; buffalo crash through the muck, followed by a beautiful white-striped sitatunga. Pete and Mike paddle into the flooded forest, and a manatee surfaces between them. "I've never seen a river tarpon during this season," says Mike. "We thought they were only up here during the dry season." At sunset, a flock of egrets rises from an acacia, while hippos and male gorillas bark.

The river braids as we climb, forcing us to choose one channel over another. As dusk closes in, it's clear that there's very little terra firma around here. We'll have to stop and sleep somewhere, but solid ground may still be far away and big rainstorms threaten. Without debate, the decision is made to sleep in our kayaks—because, well, there's no other option.

We paddle through the dark forest, bumping into hanging vines and branches, looking for a small tuft of muck to pull the bows of the kayaks onto, maybe even something sturdy enough for us to stand on, set up a stove, and start cooking dinner before the arrival of what will assuredly be heavy rain.

Suitable muck appears at the base of a giant okoume, and we haul three of the boats into the mud and empty them of dry bags, portage carts, paddles, and waterproof cases, tying everything to nearby trees in case the river rises with the coming downpour. We set up our tents atop the kayaks in order to keep dry, though Sophiano and Aimé are in a bit of a fix, since they brought just one tent to share and will have to spend the night squeezed into a single kayak.

Sure enough, just as Mike and Pete light the stoves, the skies open. Mike finds a huge branch to sit on and a tiny folding umbrella; I hunker down on the nose of my kayak, snug under a rain jacket hood; Pete is still trying to drain his boat of river water; Sophiano and Aimé have set their kayaks up side-by-side in the middle of the flooded forest. The storm makes quick work of our fire, so dinner is scratched and we crawl into our tent-topped boats by 7 p.m. The dark, fairy tale—like forest—draped with fat vines bearing a close similarity to tree-born snakes, its calm waters dotted with gaseous bubbles—is punctuated by lightning and long peals of rolling thunder. Despite thoughts of rising water, falling limbs, and serpent-filled trees, I sleep like a baby.

We set out early the next morning, just after five o'clock, hoping to spy the same abundance of wildlife that was in evidence the previous afternoon. Our luck holds, and soon we're stopped midstream beneath a tree filled with 200 white egrets practicing touch-and-goes, a beautiful sight against the just-sunlit sky.

From there, it's less than an hour's paddle to the head of a 13-mile "colonial" trail, blazed by early explorers as a link between inland lagoons. The path's condition is unknown; quite possibly we'll find it impassable—a mud fest—or blocked by numerous elephant-downed trees, all of which would send us back the way we came.

Kayaks and gear gingerly rigged atop portage carts and harnessed to us like dogsleds, we set out overland, spotting sizable gorilla scat, three-foot-wide elephant footprints, and seven-inch red-and-black African worms within the first 100 feet. It was sweltering on the river, and now, under a jungle canopy, dragging 150- to 200-pound loads over a very rough trail, we suck down water to stave off heatstroke. But our main concern is the carts' bulbous tires: If they fail, we're in big trouble. Carrying machetes to hack at tree limbs covering the path, we cross clear streams and old overgrown bridges made from downed logs. Stopping would only give the long lines of red ants, the kind that take a piece of flesh when they bite, an opportunity to feast.

By five o'clock, even Mike—whom *Men's Journal* recently named one of the world's "25 Toughest Men"—is too tired to move. "I could just fall down right here," he admits in the middle of the trail, and that's exactly what we do. The next morning finds us repairing tires, all ten of them having succumbed to long *macaranga* and *fagara* plant spikes. But our patching strategy proves ineffectual, and for the next two days we pull the boats on nearly flat tires. When we finally drag them into the seven-person village of Sounga, nearly three days after leaving the river, the *patron* and his wife greet us open-jawed, then begin yammering in a Gabonese dialect. I ask Mike to translate.

"They just keep saying 'Holy shit!' over and over," he explains.

Our hosts treat us to an afternoon under the shade of a leafy porch, eating generous bowls of fish stew; we offer Tylenol and beef jerky in return. Topics of conversation include the fish trade (very slow, reports the *patron*) and the history of the rough trail we've just followed.

The journey from Sounga back to the ocean takes half a day: across another small lagoon, up another river, then over a final lagoon, which turns out to hold a pair of enormous hippos, known to be very territorial. One of the big guys surfaces just 50 feet from me, blowing a spray of mist into the sunny morning and glaring menacingly. Pete later jests that he never knew I had such a "high gear" as I found when I paddled away, convinced that the hippo was giving chase.

After awarding ourselves the rest of the day to luxuriate on the sands of the Atlantic, relishing the ocean breezes, we are settling in to cook dinner when a young male elephant wanders out of the forest behind us. He's only 20 feet away but upwind so he doesn't catch our scent. Dark-skinned and with yellowed tusks, he sniffs through the grass in search of baobab fruit.

"Holy shit!" exclaims Mike in unintended imitation of the villagers' reaction to our appearance the other day. For 20 minutes the elephant forages nearby. His trunk brushes the grassy floor, exploring the short foliage for a snack as he shuffles along on garbage can—sized feet. Most elephants don't like to walk on sand, so we're confident he won't come too close, though we are an easy lope away.

This hungry pachyderm is hardly the only sign of life at our camp on Petit Loango beach: Hippos lounge in a lagoon 200 yards away; crocodiles slide into the water; monkeys shout from the trees. But humans are in evidence too: The flares of oil rigs burn 35 miles offshore. A pair of trawlers passes by, well within the three-mile no-fishing zone. As the oil industry in Gabon fades, overfishing has become a new concern.

Under the night sky, we trade only-in-Africa tales. Sophiano is from one of the first villages where Ebola wreaked havoc; of his 11 siblings, 8 succumbed to the disease, one sister dying in his arms. And it was just a few miles from here that a year and a half earlier Mike confronted a charging elephant and was gored several times, surviving only by hanging on to the razor-sharp tusks as he was repeatedly slammed into the sand.

The biggest news in Gabon, however, is the new parks. There can be no guarantee that the 13 currently on the map will survive the next generations of government officials, but things look good for now. Still, environmental groups working in the country—the World Wildlife Fund, Conservation International, and others—are not resting on their laurels.

Nearing Pointe Sainte-Catherine and the Iguéla Inlet that will lead us back to the lodge after two weeks of nonstop paddling and portaging, on yet another 100-plus-degree afternoon, we drag the boats over a low sand dune to a 15-mile-long lagoon. After filling our dromedary bags with tannic brown water and munching on a lunch of cashews, jerky, sardines, and Clif Bars, we are off, floating quietly through water so shallow it occasionally forces us to get out of our boats and pull them over the sandy bottom.

"Let's try and stick together," says Mike, "because we'll probably run into big buffalo taking baths."

Sure enough, around the first bend we find a mom-and-pop couple cooling off in the current, attended by a pair of birds picking ticks from their fur. We watch for 20 minutes from just a few feet away, until the buffalo stand up and amble across the river.

An hour later, Mike signals toward the right bank: A big male elephant is pushing through the undergrowth near the water. We hurry our paddling to see him better in the fading dusk—or, more appropriately, to see them, since he turns out to be leading a whole family.

Two babies and two more adults follow the bull across the river directly in front of us. We watch in the dimming light, the fact that we've already been in the kayaks for more than 11 hours now a minor complaint. Besides, sometime tomorrow we'll be at the lodge, our greatest desire met by several tall glasses of cool, clear water.

This lagoon eventually dumps us back into the ocean. Its outlet is fast-flowing, like Class III rapids, and makes for a quick ride between flat plains of sand. Returning to the Atlantic, we finally meet the conditions I'd anticipated all along—big rolling seas with 12- to 15-foot rogue waves that require our full attention. Two miles off the beach, a flip would mean a long swim back.

After a couple hours of cautious paddling, just as we are setting up to hit the beach one last time, Mike spies a trawler fishing close to shore. With an eye on the vessel, we ride the surf in and pull our kayaks through shallow waters toward where the river from the lodge's lagoon pours into the ocean, creating standing waves and a current too strong for us to breach.

Ahead of me, Mike is focused only on the trawler, and before I can catch up, he's into the fast-moving water. At risk of getting sucked out to sea, he paddles hard through the current. Then, armed with satellite phone and video camera, he's off on foot to document

the trawler that's fishing illegally and call in a report to a government official in the capital city of Libreville, 150 miles north.

As we finally head upriver toward the lodge, curious elephants wander down to the water's edge. But for all the beauty we've seen during our circumnavigation, that view of the trawler boldly breaking the law lingers, a powerful reminder that the struggle to conserve is never over. Only continued vigilance can ensure that Gabon's first parks are not its last success story.

Places & Prices: A Walk In The Parks

If you've seen the great plains of East Africa and the parks of southern Africa and still want more, Gabon is for you. The country is relatively untroubled by many of the problems plaguing other African nations—crime, corruption, overpopulation—and its 13 new parks are a perfect introduction to the western part of the continent. There are two seasons, neither off-limits: The dry months, June through September, allow an abundance of big animals to roam a wider area; from October through May, it's wetter but not as hot.

A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required; hepatitis A and typhoid vaccines and tetanus, diphtheria, and polio boosters are recommended. This is malaria territory: Anti-malarial medication and mosquito bite prevention are essential.

Prices quoted are for the current month; tour prices are per person. The U.S. embassy is in Libreville, on boulevard du Bord de Mer (76-20-03; usembassy.state.gov/libreville <<http://usembassy.state.gov/libreville>>). A visa is required.

Touring

Of all the parks, **Loango National Park** has the sturdiest infrastructure. But other, inland parks have some of Africa's best game viewing. In **Ivindo National Park**, Mike Fay made what he calls "the most important discovery" of his 1,200-mile walk across the Congo forest: Langoué Bai, an isolated clearing with Gabon's largest concentration of easily observable elephants and gorillas. Ivindo is also home to the Kongou and Mingouli waterfalls, among the continent's most spectacular. For its gorillas and mandrill monkeys—and 400 species of birds—**Lopé National Park** was originally named Gabon's first nature reserve. For an overview of all the parks, surf www.gabonnationalparks.com <<http://www.gabonnationalparks.com>>.

Operation Loango—a joint venture of a government agency, a private company, and the Wildlife Conservation Society—offers savanna and beach game walks, whale watching, and even sportfishing from its Loango Lodge and satellite camps (in the Netherlands, 31-26-370-5567; www.operation-loango.com <<http://www.operation-loango.com>>; 7-day tours, \$2,725—\$3,180). Multipark tours can be arranged through **iExplore** (in the United States, 312-492-9443; www.iexplore.com <<http://www.iexplore.com>>; 11 days, \$3,899) and **African Outposts** (in South Africa, 27-11-463-4580; www.africanoutposts.co.za <<http://www.africanoutposts.co.za>>; 7- to 12-day tours, \$1,750—\$3,872).

If logistics require an overnight in Libreville, the **Hotel Tropicana**, across from the airport, has rooms on the beach and a lively local scene (some might say too lively) right out your door (241-73-15-31, fax -65-74; doubles, \$51). A quieter beachfront option is the upscale **InterContinental Okoumé Palace** (241-73-21-85; www.ichotelsgroup.com <<http://www.ichotelsgroup.com>>; doubles, \$134—\$187).

Reading

The best guide is **Bradt's** *Gabon, São Tomé and Príncipe* (\$20). Originally published in French in 1861, *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa* is a very readable account by hunter-collector-explorer Paul B. Du Chaillu. It's out-of-print but worth tracking down. *The Last Place on Earth*, to be published in September, is Michael Fay and photographer Michael Nichols's account of their Megatransect journey (National Geographic, \$150).

