

Gift of the Gabon

Published in:

The Guardian

Melanie McGrath
January 2006

Gift of the Gabon

Gabon has an astonishing variety of wildlife - the only place in the world you can see gorillas, hippos surfing the waves and whales in the same day. And now it aims to become the Costa Rica of Africa. Melanie McGrath reports

Saturday January 21, 2006

[The Guardian](#)

"Of all the rooms at Loango Lodge," says Serge, fussing with the shutters of an immaculate okoumé wood bungalow overlooking Iguéla lagoon in the small central African republic of Gabon, "this is Mr Rombout's favourite. He's coming here you know, very soon, they say. You may even get to meet him."

Serge leaves me to admire the view of sharp blue waters softening to treacle at the banks where trees and jungle lianas dip down to meet them. In the reeds below the bungalow, a large black and yellow ornate monitor lizard suns itself and a clutch of African grey parrots clatters in the shade of an oil palm overhead. Loango Lodge is Rombout Swanborn's dream. It is also his great gamble. From his favourite room overlooking Iguéla, it's easy to see why he took it.

Son of a Dutch Shell employee and a teacher, Swanborn spent much of his childhood in Gabon during the oil boom years of the 1970s which made this highly urbanised, sparsely populated and still largely forested country one of the richest and most stable in sub-Saharan Africa. Swanborn struck gold at an early age by inventing a device to separate oil from water out on the rigs and in 2000 he established a fishing lodge on the edge of an area of coastal forest in the south of the country in a region known as Loango.

Two years later, with his eye on the diminishing oil reserves, President Omar Bongo signed over 28,500 sq km of Gabonese rainforest, savannah and coastline to create the country's first national park system and, he hoped, a new tourist economy. Rombout Swanborn seized the moment, sinking \$7m into Operation Loango, which now constitutes the largest and most impressive of the joint ventures dreamed up by government, private enterprise and the Wildlife Conservation Society, among others, to kick-start eco-tourism in this lovely, emerald-forested gem of a country.

It's probably no coincidence that about 11% of Gabon is now national park, a percentage matched only by Costa Rica. All the talk at Loango is of Gabon as the future Costa Rica of Africa, an unspoiled, high-end eco-tourist destination. The comparison isn't as strange as it might sound. Aside from their fabulous natural heritage, both countries are the stable, relatively wealthy exceptions in unstable, impoverished regions; both have governments supportive (at least for the moment) of tourist development; and both believe in harnessing private enterprise to fund national environmental and conservation initiatives. Already, Operation Loango has funded primate research and a beach clean-up.

Swanborn's Operation Loango, the plush fly-in lodge with those immaculate bungalows, plus a series of smaller lodges and bush camps strategically placed around Loango national park and a couple of research camps, is currently a prototype for the kind of eco-tourist development Bongo and Swanborn would like to see developed in Gabon's 12 other new parks and, for the visitor at least, a good place to start. According to Dr Lee White, the British head of the Wildlife Conservation Society in Gabon, Loango is "the most beautiful park in Africa".

He may well be right. Serge and I took a boat trip around the park's whisky-coloured rivers and blue lagoons, into the still, musty gloaming of the rainforest and then out once more into the blaring sun, across an estuary towards the Atlantic and Loango's 100km of empty, soft-sanded shoreline. Every so often we moored up, surprising a herd of red river hogs, with their tufty ears and Star Wars' Yoda faces, or stopping to watch a group of forest elephants that had come down to the shoreline to graze on ibago, a hallucinogenic root. Loango is the only place in the world where you can see gorillas, chimpanzees, buffalo, turtles and humpback whales within a stone's throw of one another; the only place in the world where forest elephants come down on to the beach and hippos surf the waves. This variety was one of the reasons I'd come. The other was to try to spot one of the country's 35,000 Western Lowland gorillas.

Gorillas were part of the reason Bongo decided to create the parks, after listening to a presentation by Lee White and Mike Fay. Fay is an American naturalist who completed a 2,000-mile, 456-day trek called the "Megatransect" of the great Congo basin jungle which comprises the largest area of undisturbed rainforest in Africa and of which Gabon is a part. During his trek, Fay came across populations of so-called naive gorillas and chimpanzees, apes that had never come across human beings and so had no fear of them. It seemed like a good time to act.

The jungle of the Congo basin is the setting for Joseph Conrad's novel, Heart Of Darkness. Its hero, Marlow, describes his experience as "like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world". This is what attracted Swanborn and his millions to this former French colony, as it attracted the fictional Kurtz before him. Gabon really is the Africa of black water rivers and misty, primeval swamp forest; the Africa of pygmies and mythical dinosaurs; the Africa which, 100 years ago, lent the Dark Continent its mystique and its name. Serge, his fellow eco-guide Basile and I wandered across Loango for days without seeing another human being. Only a few washed-up plastic bottles on the beach and, out at sea, a necklace of oil rigs served as reminders of the times.

The only large predator species in Gabon are leopards, shy nocturnal creatures, and crocs (all three African species - the Nile, the African dwarf and the slender-snouted - live at Loango) so punch-drunk on fish they'd be unlikely to bother with human beings. A rather nasty snake, the Gabon viper, lives in the forest and there are the real but limited dangers presented by elephants, hippos and gorillas, but the attitude towards these animals is relaxed, or reckless, depending on your view. In our search for gorillas, Basile and I were caught out while kayaking on a backwater creek too narrow for comfort or, as I realised all too late, for safety, by a gnarly hippo, who tried to bring the kayak down. Basile immediately steadied the boat and we were fine, though shaken. Back at the lodge, the incident was met with a Gallic shrug, as if to say, well, yeah, you know, merde happens.

The upside of this randomness is the freedom to do your own thing, including gorilla-spotting. There are no expensive licences to be bought, no medicals to undergo, no time-limits as there generally are in the gorilla-watching parks in Uganda or Rwanda. Serge, Basile and I just hung out.

We were meandering in the savannah one day when from the edge of the forest a lone silverback suddenly appeared only 15 metres ahead of us. Coming face to face so unexpectedly with this fantastically muscular hulk in all his terrific, shaggy wildness was stupendously exciting. He sat and watched us for a while, weighing the risk of crossing a patch of open ground to reach the forest on the other side. Finally he ventured out, then lost his nerve and knuckle-cantered back to his previous spot. Two minutes later he gathered his courage, made a second foray and this time reached the other side and disappeared into the trees, stopping only for a final look back at us.

Researchers working at Operation Loango later told us our silverback was almost certainly M'bolo (Old Man), as they'd called him. He had crossed that way before. You can tell it's him, they said, because he smells of sponge cake. They are hoping to habituate M'bolo, initially to their presence, then to that of visitors like us. At which point, gorilla watching in Gabon may well become as expensive and as regulated as it is in Rwanda or Uganda. And for M'bolo's sake, let's hope it does.

One of those rooting for Gabon to go Costa Rica's way is the South African tourism manager at Loango Lodge, Edward Truter. "Gabon has the potential to become the Costa Rica of Africa, but it'll take 10 years," he says. For those who can come equipped with some French, flexibility and a willingness to endure a little roughness around the edges, the place has a great deal to offer: high canopy primary rainforest, savannah, mangrove and white sand beach around which live 60,000 forest elephants, 64,000 chimpanzees, six species of whale, including, during June and July, around 3,000 humpbacks, three species of marine turtle, supertroops of rare mandrills, manatees and, of course, those gorillas.

On my last night at Loango, Basile took me on a moonlit walk along the beach looking for nesting turtles. We saw only a few recent turtle nests, a few forest elephants, some cat and mongoose tracks, bats and a Nile croc, but it was warm and the forest was singing with night things, and way out at sea the Mordor-like flares of the rigs which first brought Rombout Swanborn to these shores glowed tangerine. I thought of M'bolo and hoped Gabon would Costa Rica-fy quickly enough to protect him but imperfectly enough to leave the country feeling as wild and old as it does now.

The next day, the Lodge's Cessna having suddenly become unavailable, reserved, I suspected, for Swanborn's imminent visit, I left Loango for Port Gentil, a four-hour boat journey along the M'pivie river with its red-black water and slowly whorling papyrus islands. We stopped briefly to admire St Ann's, an obscure mission designed by Gustav Eiffel, now elegantly colonised by hornets. I brushed the sweat from my eyes and in the doing of it flushed a colony of epauletted fruit bats from their perches. For a moment, I felt just like Kate Hepburn in *The African Queen*, waiting for my Bogie.

Way to go

Getting there

Tim Best Travel (020-75910300, timesttravel.com) can arrange trips to Gabon starting from £1,675pp for seven nights in the Loango national park, including full-board, all excursions in the park, all internal flights and transfers, but excluding international flights. Royal Air Maroc (020-7307 5810, royalairmaroc.com) flies from London Gatwick to Libreville, Gabon, via Casablanca twice weekly from £419 return including all taxes.

Further information

Country code: 00 241.

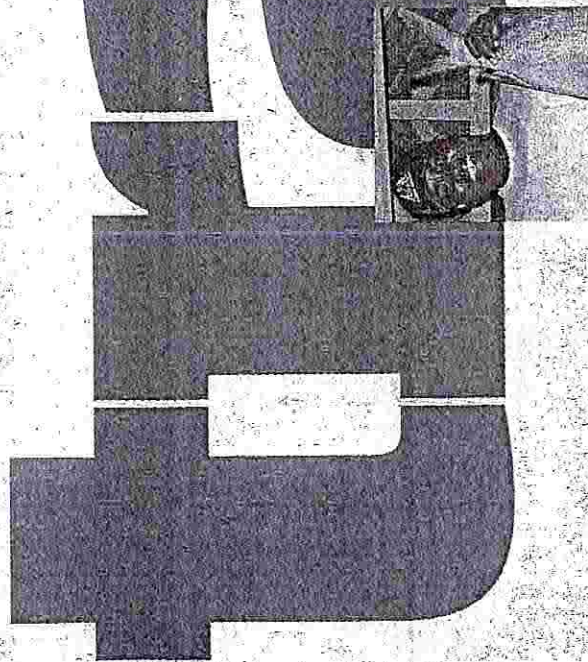
Flight time London-Libreville via Casablanca: 24 hours, including an overnight stopover.

Time difference: +1hr.

£1 = 953 CFA francs.

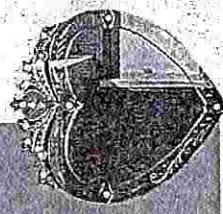


Saffron Burrows on location in Vienna » Page 10

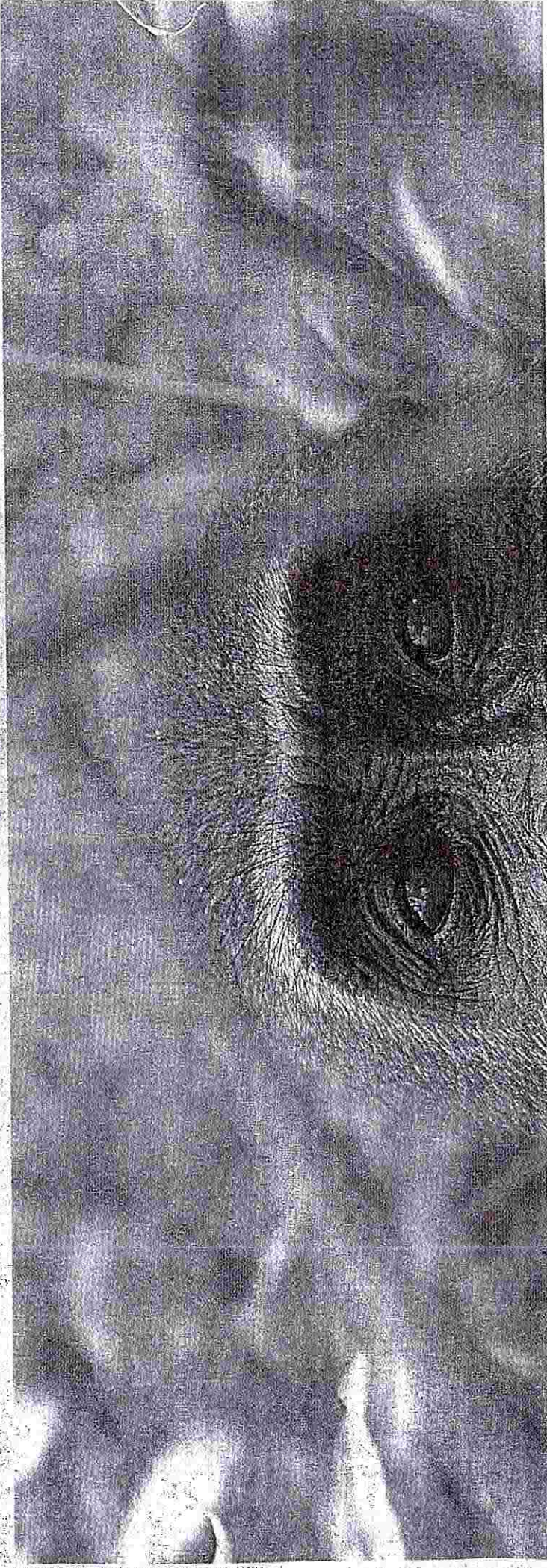


Jamaica on a plate » Page 10

TRAVELE



Five best Valentine's escapes » Page 10



PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL NICHOLS/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



**The gorillas that have
never seen a human
Gabon, untamed Africa**

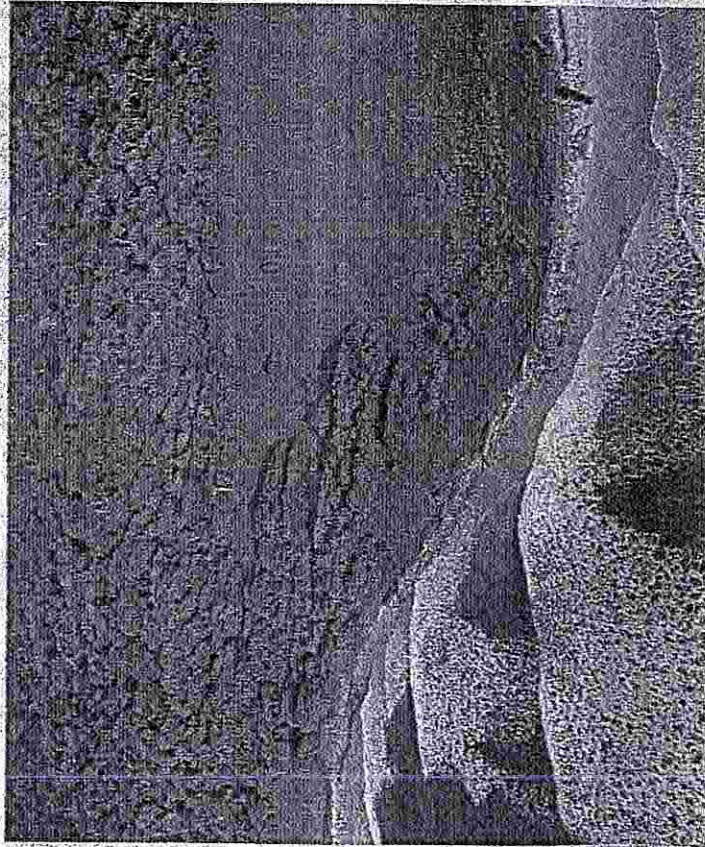
Gift of the Gabon

Gabon has an astonishing variety of wildlife – the only place in the world you can see gorillas, hippos surfing the waves and whales in the same day. And now it aims to become the Costa Rica of Africa. Melanie McGrath reports

Of all the rooms at Loango Lodge," says Serge, fussing with the shutters of an immaculate okoume wood bungalow overlooking Iguéla lagoon in the small central African republic of Gabon, this is Mr Rombout's favourite. He's coming here you know, very soon, they say. You may even get to meet him."

Serge leaves me to admire the view of sharp blue waters softening to reacle at the banks where trees and single lianas dip down to meet them. In the reeds below the bungalow, a large black and yellow orate monitor lizard suns itself and a clutch of African grey parrots clatters in the shade of an oil palm overhead. Loango Lodge is Rombout Swainborn's dream, it is also his great gamble. From his favourite room overlooking Iguéla, it's easy to see why he took it.

Son of a Dutch-Shell employee and



kick-start eco-tourism in this lovely, emerald-forested gem of a country.

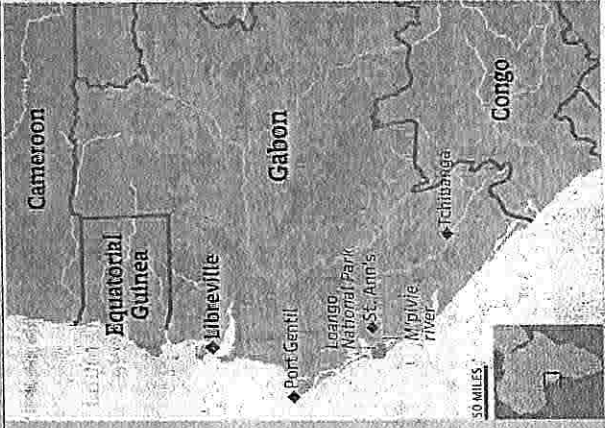
It's probably no coincidence that about 11% of Gabon is now national park, a percentage matched only by Costa Rica. All the talk at Loango is of Gabon as the future Costa Rica of Africa, an unspoiled, high-end ecotourist destination. The comparison isn't as strange as it might sound. Aside from their fabulous natural heritage, both countries are the stable, relatively wealthy exceptions in unstable, impoverished regions; both have governments supportive (at least for the moment) of tourist development; and both believe in harnessing private enterprise to fund national environmental and conservation initiatives. Already, Operation Loango has funded primate research and a beach clean-up.

Swainborn's Operation Loango, the plush fly-in lodge with those immaculate bungalows, plus a series of small lodges and bungalows

way to go

oom years of the 1970s which made us highly urbanised, sparsely populated and still largely forested country one of the richest and most table in sub-Saharan Africa. Swanborn truck gold at an early age by inventing device to separate oil from water, out in the rigs and in 2000 he established fishing lodge on the edge of an area of coastal forest in the south of the country in a region known as Loango. Two years later, with his eye on the diminishing oil reserves, President Omar Bongo signed over 28,500 sq km of Gabonese rainforest, savannah and coastline to create the country's first national park system and, he hoped, new tourist economy. Rombout wanborn seized the moment, sinking 7m into Operation Loango, which now constitutes the largest and most impressive of the joint ventures reamed up by government, private enterprise and the Wildlife Conservation Society, among others, to

Getting there
 Tim Best Travel (020-75910300, timbesttravel.com) can arrange trips to Gabon starting from £1,675 pp for seven nights in the Loango national park, including full-board, all excursions in the park, all internal flights and transfers, but excluding international flights.
 Royal Air Maroc (020-7307 5810; royalairmaroc.com) flies from London Gatwick to Libreville, Gabon, via Casablanca twice weekly from £419 return including all taxes.
Further information
 Country code: 00 241.
 Flight time London-Libreville via Casablanca: 24 hours, including an overnight stopover.
 Time difference: +1hr.
 £1 = 953 CFA francs.



camps, is currently a prototype for the kind of eco-tourist development Bongo and Swanborn would like to see developed in Gabon's 12 other new parks and, for the visitor at least, a good place to start. According to Dr Lee White, the British head of the Wildlife Conservation Society in Gabon, Loango is "the most beautiful park in Africa". He may well be right. Serge and I took a boat trip around the park's whisky-coloured rivers and blue lagoons, into the still, musty gloaming of the rainforest and then out once more into the blaring sun, across an estuary towards the Atlantic and Loango's 100km of empty, soft-sanded shoreline. Every so often we moored up, surprising a herd of red river hogs, with their tufty ears and Star Wars' Yoda faces, or stopping to watch a group of forest elephants that had come down to the shoreline to graze on *ibago*, a hallucinogenic root. Loango is the only place in the world where you can see gorillas,

SURF 'N' TURT... (Clockwise from above) hippos swimming in the sea and forest elephants coming down to the beach to frolic. Loango Lodge; Gabon's pristine Atlantic coastline chimpanzees, buffalo, turtles and humpback whales within a stone's throw of one another; the only place in the world where forest elephants come down on to the beach and hippos surf the waves. This variety was one of the reasons I'd come. The other was to try to spot one of the country's 35,000 Western lowland gorillas. Gorillas were part of the reason Bongo decided to create the parks, after listening to a presentation by Lee White and Mike Fay. Fay is an American naturalist who completed a 2,000-mile, 156-day trek called the "Megatransect" of the great Congo basin jungle which comprises the largest area of undisturbed rainforest in Africa and of



The magic of Sri Lanka just got closer

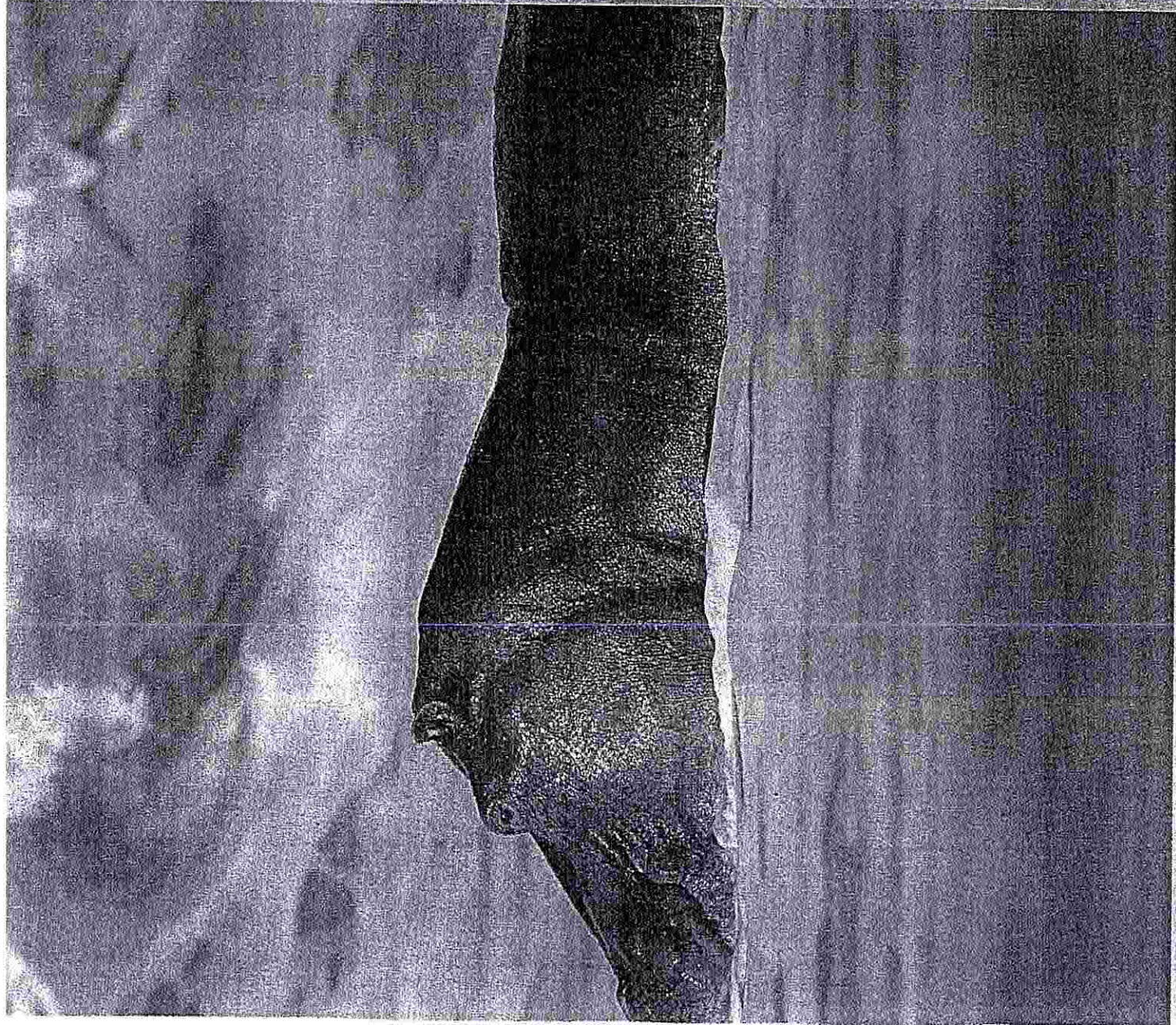
30% off holidays to Sri Lanka. Visit srilankan.aero/holiday

Warm smiles, stunning wildlife, breathtaking beaches and 30% off on your holiday. How's that for great Sri Lankan hospitality? Visit our website to find out about our special holiday packages. Book through your travel agent before 31st January.

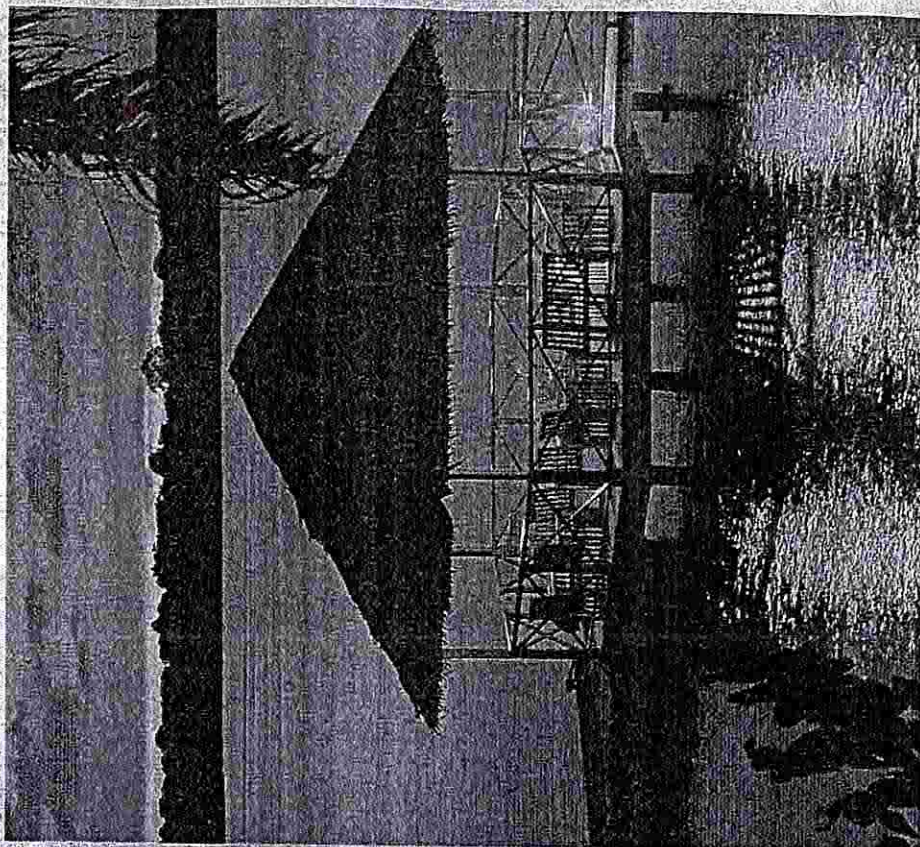
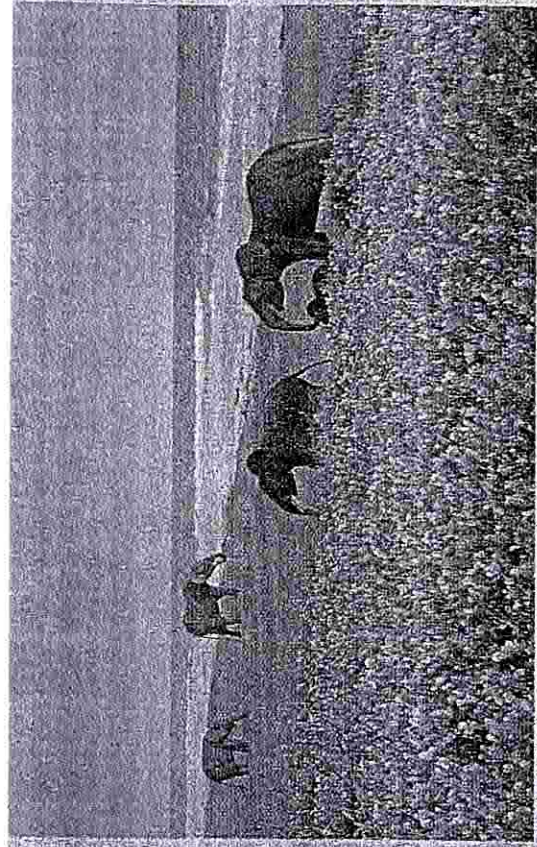
You're our world



Srilankan Airlines



which Gabon is a part. During his trek, and the slender snouted — live at



forest alone silverbacks suddenly.

way before. You can tell it's him, they beach looking for nesting turtles. We

apes and birds never come a nuisance human beings and so had no fear of them. It seemed like a good time to act.

The jungle of the Congo basin is the setting for Joseph Conrad's novel, Heart of Darkness. Its hero, Marlow, describes his experience as "like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world". This is what attracted Swanborn and his millions to this former French colony, as it attracted the fictional Kurtz before him. Gabon really is the Africa of black water rivers and misty, primeval swamp forest; the Africa of pygmies and mythical dinosaurs; the Africa which, 100 years ago, lent the Dark Continent its mystique and its name. Serge, his yellow eco-guide Basile and I wandered across Loango for days without seeing another human being. Only a few washed-up plastic bottles on the beach and, out at sea, a necklace of oil rigs served as reminders of the times.

The only large predator species in Gabon are leopards, shy nocturnal reatures, and crocs (all three African species – the Nile, the African dwarf

being, a rather hideously slinky, like a cobra) viper, lives in the forest and there are the real but limited dangers presented by elephants, hippos and gorillas, but the attitude towards these animals is relaxed, or reckless, depending on your view. In our search for gorillas, Basile and I were caught out while kayaking on a backwater creek too narrow for comfort or, as I realised all too late, for safety, by a gnarly hippo, who immediately steadied the boat and we were fine, though shaken. Back at the lodge, the incident was met with a Gallic shrug, as if to say, well, yeah, you know, merde happens.

The upside of this randomness is the freedom to do your own thing, including gorilla-spotting. There are no expensive licences to be bought, no medicals to undergo, no time-limits as there generally are in the gorilla-watching parks in Uganda or Rwanda. Serge, Basile and I just hung out. We were meandering in the savannah one day when from the edge of the

with this and several other unusual mammals all his terrific, shaggy wildness was stupendously exciting. He sat and watched us for a while, weighing the risk of crossing a patch of open ground to reach the forest on the other side.

Back at the lodge the story of a hippo trying to capsize our kayak was met with a Gallic shrug, as if to say, you know, merde happens

Finally he ventured out; they lost his nerve and knuckle-cantered back to his previous spot. Two minutes later he gathered his courage, made a second foray and this time reached the other side and disappeared into the trees, stopping only for a final look-back at us.

Researchers working at Operation Loango later told us our silverback was almost certainly M'bolo (Old Man), as they'd called him. He had crossed that

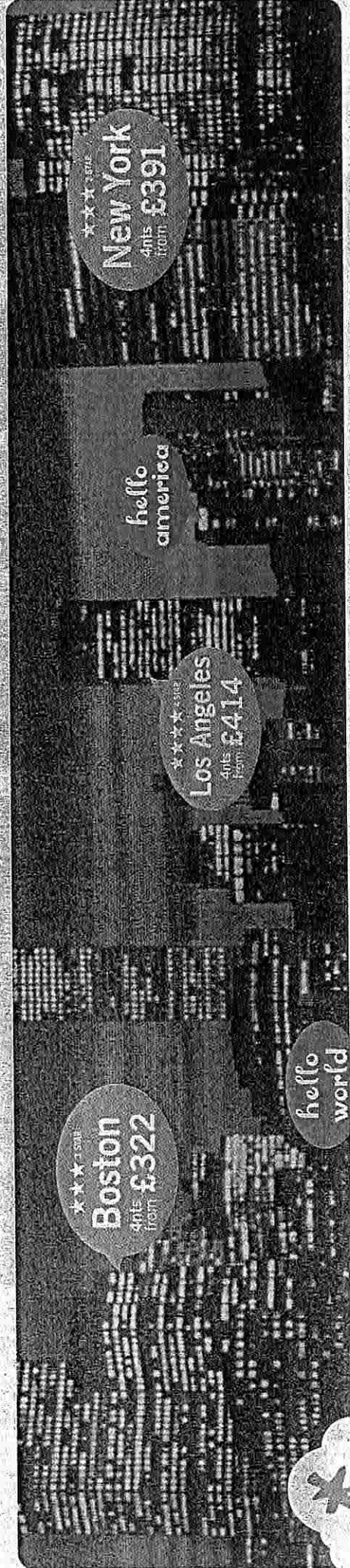
of visitors like us. At which point, gorilla watching in Gabon may well be as expensive and as regulated as it is in Rwanda or Uganda. And for M'bolo's sake, let's hope it does.

One of those rooting for Gabon to go Costa Rica's way is the South African tourism manager at Loango Lodge, Edward Truter. "Gabon has the potential to become the Costa Rica of Africa, but it'll take 10 years," he says. For those who can come equipped with some French, flexibility and a willingness to endure a little roughness around the edges, the place has a great deal to offer: high canopy primary rain forest, savannah, mangrove and white sand beach around which live 60,000 forest elephants, 64,000 chimpanzees, six species of whale, including, during June and July, around 3,000 humpbacks; three species of marine turtle, super troops of rare mandrills, manatees and, of course, those gorillas.

On my last night at Loango, Basile took me on a moonlit walk along the

but it was warm and the forest was singing with night-things, and way out at sea the Mordor-like flares of the rigs which first brought Rombo out Swanborn to these shores glowed tangerine. I thought of M'bolo and hoped Gabon would Costa Rica-ify quickly enough to protect him but imperfectly enough to leave the country feeling as wild and old as it does now.

The next day, the Lodge's Gessa having suddenly become unavailable, reserved. I suspected, for Swanborn's imminent visit, I left Loango for Port Gentil, a four-hour boat journey along the M'pivie river with its red-black water and slowly whooping papyrus islands. We stopped briefly to admire St-Ann's, an obscure mission designed by Gustav Eiffel, now elegantly colonised by hornets. I brushed the sweat from my eyes and in the doing of it flushed a colony of epauletted fruit bats from their perches. For a moment, I felt just like Kate Hepburn in The African Queen, waiting for my Bogie.



★★★★★
Boston
4nights from
£322

★★★★★
Los Angeles
4nights from
£414

★★★★★
New York
4nights from
£391

hello world

★★★ travelocity.co.uk

✈️ 700 airlines ✈️ 100,000 hotels ✈️ cars in 4,000 locations

☎️ 0870 111 7066

Prices correct at time of going to print and are subject to availability and conditions. All prices are inclusive of flights and are per person, based on two people sharing accommodation, departing 04/02/06. Booking fees may apply. Travelocity.co.uk acts as an agent for ATOL protected operators.

