

Gabon has oil, rainforest, and generous inhabitants. Anna Shepard loved it

DUSK falls on my first day exploring the rainforests of Gabon and I'm transfixed by a vision so peculiar that I forget to feel afraid. Swaggering through the lurid green vegetation is a figure obscured by black fur. Its feet squelch on the sweet-smelling mulch of rotting leaves and arms like tentacles swipe at spider webs and bat away the flies.

It turns out to be a local guide called Aime with two baby gorillas clinging to his sides. He tells me their parents were killed for bushmeat so they are now the youngest members of a nearby gorilla rehab project. Aime has landed the plum job of playing mummy, wandering the forests with the orphans every day to familiarise them with the environment and encourage them to fend for themselves.

This is my first taste of the unique safari style developing in this little-known, sparsely populated Central African country. Gabon is squeezed between Cameroon and the Congo; compared with its neighbours, it is politically stable and oil-rich. It is also home to the second-largest rainforest in the world, sprawled across three-quarters of the country.

Here conservation and tourism go hand in hand. The lodges I stay in double as bases for scientists. You're as likely to sit down to supper with a local expert on turtles, or a vet monitoring buffalo numbers, as fellow tourists. "Animals first; tourists second," everyone delights in telling me. But it is the anticipated growth in tourists that will provide financial sup-



Monkey business: a local guide, Aime, with one of the orphaned

Gorilla act

port for conservation projects, paying the salaries of local guides and encouraging people to abandon traditional hunting practices.

It is no accident that Gabon is in lists of this year's top destinations. In light of diminishing oil reserves, its government is looking for a future earner. Tourism is referred to as "*le deuxième pétrole*" (the second oil). With this in mind, in 2002, when only a trickle of wildlife enthusiasts and Africa experts came here, President Omar Bongo gave 11 per cent of the country to create national parks. Lodges now attract people who have seen the dry savannahs of East and South Africa and want something different — a jungle safari.

For my week-long trip, I'm in the hands of the largest and most developed tourism venture. Operation Loango was set up by the Government, private enterprise and the Wildlife Conservation Society. Its plush central lodge is on the banks of a lagoon, facing a national park. The lagoon ripples with crocs, hippos and the sort of fish that regularly bite chunks out of fishermen's fingers. A couple of smaller tented camps are dotted about even closer to the animals. My favourite is the remote beach camp of St Catherine, the only place in the world where you can go whale-watching in late summer and see hippos and elephants on the beach the rest of the year.

ANNA SHEPARD



ed baby gorillas he cares for at a gorilla rehab project in Gabon



Anna Shepard travelled with Audley Travel (stand AP5, 01993 838503, www.audleytravel.com).

She flew with SN Brussels (www.flysn.com) from Heathrow to Brussels, Brussels to Douala, in Cameroon, then Doula to Port Gentil in Gabon.

Prices start at £3,595 per person depending on season.

Activity in Gabon

Bryan Jackson, a Zambia-based wildlife guide who is helping to get Loango's lodges running smoothly, warns me that the *National Geographic* photographer whose images of hippos dancing in the surf brought Gabon a taste of global fame spent three months waiting for his moment. The night I spend here, it's buffalo that are sprawled on the sand. Sally Lightfoot crabs dance like ballerinas between my toes, and miles out at sea, the flames of oil refineries remind me why this paradise has remained a secret.

The flipside of being here at such an early stage is that guides are still learning to say "Watch out! There's an elephant!" in English; safety regu-

lations are few, and there's no guarantee that your luggage will arrive.

I say this because mine didn't. For a few days, I fuss over being without malaria pills, Deet spray and sunscreen. But after begging and borrowing toothbrush, T-shirt and malaria pills from Bryan and Claudia — an English teacher I met at the airport — I began to enjoy it. It makes life easy. When caught by a downpour, there was no worrying about soaked possessions. Sweat and rain poured into my eyes and I couldn't have been happier.

It's early days for tourism in Gabon. There is still concern in the nearby village that the lodge's success won't filter down to the locals. When I

chat to Jean-Pierre, the 53-year-old village chief, he says that, so far, they have not benefited. "Young men are employed as guides," he says. "But we are still waiting for a school and for electricity after 7pm." He is frustrated that although Gabon is a wealthy country, few people see the rewards of its booming economy.

On my last day, Claudia bails me out a final time. I hadn't realised that the soft drinks offered on safari walks were not included, and with my traveller's cheques still in my missing luggage I'm caught short. But nothing dents my good mood. I leave Gabon with a tiny bag and a big smile. This, along with the generosity of strangers, is all you need.