

UNBOUND

By Boyd Matson

A Walk in the Park

Gabon's jungle parks are among Earth's last Edens. But don't expect to find paradise.

I'm trying to look on the bright side of hiking through swamp-filled forests in the West African country of Gabon, searching for elephants which, if we do find them, are likely to charge and send us running for our lives. But it's increasingly hard to be optimistic while a foot worm is burrowing under my skin with the persistence of a Wall Street banker begging Congress for money. As I wonder how many billion times I'm going to have to scratch this parasitic invader, I think, "At least it's digging above the knee instead of in the foot, saving me the effort of bending to the ground every ten seconds."

The high burrowing point of this so-called foot worm is due to the startling depth of the shoe-sucking swamp muck we've been tramping through for three days. I blame this misery squarely on Wildlife Conservation Society biologist and National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence Michael Fay. He's leading this little walk in the park for a group of intrepid travelers who've paid a premium to follow him. Unfortunately for us, Fay has never learned the meaning of the word detour. He picks a direction and marches forward, come foot worms or high water.

We're exploring Loango National Park to see firsthand why parts of Gabon were considered so special that, seven years ago, President Omar Bongo Ondimba cancelled over \$20 million in logging concessions to establish 13 national parks. Fay drew early support for protecting Gabon's forests by conducting his African megatransect, an epic survey of flora and fauna that involved walking some 2,000 miles across half the Congo and all of Gabon. Determined to catalog unexplored places, he largely avoided roads and villages. His primary gear was a machete, global positioning system, T-shirt, shorts, and sandals. I usually pack more stuff just to go out to dinner.

Any hopes that Fay might have melled in the intervening years, seduced by creature comforts, were dispelled our first night at the Loango Lodge. While the rest of us retired to our cabins, Fay pitched his

one-person tent, turned on his headlamp, and, sitting on his sleeping bag, started typing on his laptop. I bet part of what he wrote went like this: "Sleeping on the ground keeps my body hard. Living out of a backpack keeps me self-sufficient. I thrive where others falter, and tomorrow I will prove it by making Boyd suffer." Suffice it to say: A walk in the park with Mike Fay is not exactly a walk in the park.

According to the calendar, the rainy season in Gabon ended two weeks ago, but nobody told the rain gods. In these conditions you learn the difference between waterproof and water resistant. My jacket is neither. Fay seems oblivious to the weather. If anything, he regards the rain as an opportunity, as a free wash for the one T-shirt and pair of shorts he's had on the entire trip. I mutter, "Michael Phelps won eight gold medals and didn't get this wet." Undaunted by rain or dripping sarcasm, Fay leads us on in search of Loango's treasures: forest elephants and buffalo, hippos, red river hogs, chimpanzees, lowland gorillas, Sitatunga antelope, and numerous species of monkeys and birds.

It's not every day you see a grown man get visibly excited about finding a pile of fecal matter in the woods. But when we stumble across fresh gorilla droppings, Fay acts like a kid who's just scored the latest

When we stumble across gorilla droppings, Fay acts like a kid who just scored a copy of *Guitar Hero*.



A shirtless Michael Fay crosses an African stream during his megatransect adventure.

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