

## TOTALLY WIRED

The lives of the people in a village in the West African country of Gabon have been transformed by an immense recycling project, in which a mining company has salvaged a disused cable transport system to create an ecotourism safari park and commercial agricultural project, giving the villagers a new livelihood.

**Sarah Monaghan** reports

**T**he former French colony of Gabon was jubilant when its national railway, the Trans-Gabonese, was completed. The 800-kilometre link, heralded as 'the backbone of the nation', meant that, for the first time, passengers and cargo could be transported from one end of the forest-bound country to the other – from the capital Libreville in the northwest to Franceville, near the border with the Republic of the Congo in the southeast.

But Bakoumba, a village at the end of the line, had no desire to join the party; the new railway spelled its death knell. For more than three decades, life for this community had been measured by the rhythm of the giant buckets that traversed the sky above it, and the Trans-Gabonese would bring them to a halt.

Since 1962, this small settlement in southeastern Gabon had served as the maintenance station for one of the

longest aerial cable systems in the world, constructed to transport manganese ore from an opencast mine run by Comilog, the world's fourth-largest producer of manganese. It employed 120 local people at Bakoumba, mainly as technicians and cable servicemen.

Before the railway, Comilog's annual production of three million tonnes of ore was transported around the clock in 2,860 one-tonne containers along Bakoumba's 76-kilometre cable line. The cable was strung between 858 pylons, all the way to a railhead at Mbinda in the Republic of the Congo, from where the manganese was transported to the port of Pointe-Noire for shipment.

**LEFT:** captive-born mandrills have joined wild mandrills at Lékédi Reserve to create a thriving colony that tourists can visit; **ABOVE:** a 365-metre hanging bridge has been suspended high across the forest canopy over a primate sanctuary using more than two kilometres of the original Comilog aerial cable

In 1991, Comilog decided to close the cableway. Thanks to the Trans-Gabonese, it could now transport its manganese more efficiently by rail directly to the deepwater port at Libreville.

### DOWN TO THE WIRE

But what to do with the now-obsolete cableway and the unemployed local people of Bakoumba? Comilog had long benefited from Gabon's mineral resources, so, rather than abandon the community to inevitable decline, it came up with a solution that was both radical and innovative.

'What we needed was a venture that would offer local employment, be economically viable, ensure the continuation of the local community and help it to become self-sufficient,' explains Michel Limousin, Comilog's finance manager.

Over the next five years, every able-bodied man was mobilised on a salvage operation to transform the



cableway, maintenance depot and surrounding land into a unique wildlife park and agricultural enterprise. The whole reserve would be created by reusing all of the existing materials and buildings.

A 14,000-hectare protected safari park, Lékédi Reserve, was mapped out across territory with a range of habitats, including savannah, gallery forest and dense primary and secondary tropical forest, as well as rivers, lakes and mangroves that provide habitat for a range of indigenous West African wildlife, including western lowland gorillas, chimpanzees, leopards, duikers, buffalo and 150 species of bird.

The park's 87 kilometres of fencing, suspended between 10,000 fence posts, was assembled from the recycled cable. Many of the original pylons – some of which reach 72 metres in height – found a new function as viewing towers. A number were even fitted with covered platforms, on which visitors would be able to spend a night in the wild.

Housing that had been used to accommodate Comilog's management personnel was converted to tourist lodgings: ten two-bed villas and nine private rooms. The staff mess hall was converted into a bar and restaurant, complete with pool and tennis court.

Its kitchens began to be supplied with salad leaves, tomatoes, peppers, mangoes, pineapples and bananas from the site's newly created market gardens, as well as with locally grown oyster mushrooms, produced using dried substrates of indigenous manioc (cassava). Thanks to a partnership with the Gabonese Institute for Agricultural Development, this project is now producing 600 kilograms of mushrooms a month for local distribution.

### FISH TO FRY

The reserve also began generating income and employment from two further agricultural projects. The first was pig farming, being carried out experimentally with wild red river hogs (a meat much appreciated locally) in a bid to discourage the hunting of the species as bushmeat. The huge manganese buckets from the cableway were employed in this enterprise, serving as birthing pens in the hog enclosures.

The other has become Gabon's largest commercial freshwater fish farm, in which 20 former cableway workers rear tilapia. Production has risen each year over the past five years; the fishery is expected to produce 140 tonnes of fish this year.

The fry are fed with a fish flour imported from Senegal and are reared in concrete basins in which manganese was once stored. They are then transferred to larger ponds laid out across a 30-hectare area. Last year, 700,000 fish were sold for local consumption, raising €300,000.

## GABON

### CO-ORDINATES



### When to go

The best time to visit is during the dry season, which runs from June to September.

The rainy season is characterised by temperatures of around 30°C and high humidity – but a coastal breeze means that it can still be a comfortable time to visit.

### Getting there

Several airlines fly to the capital, Libreville, such as Air France and Gabon Airlines via Paris, Lufthansa from Frankfurt and Royal Air Maroc via Casablanca. Local airlines fly from there to Franceville (journey time is one hour); from there, it's an hour's drive to the Lékédi Reserve. Alternatively, take an eight-hour trip on the Trans-Gabonese railway: trains depart three times a week.

### Further information

The day rate for accommodation in an air-conditioned chalet at the Lékédi Reserve (including excursions and food) is CFA50,000 (£69). For more details, visit [www.sodepal.com](http://www.sodepal.com) (site in French)

As for the reserve, today it receives both domestic and international tourists and runs residential visits for pupils from schools across Gabon. Resident wildlife includes leopards, dwarf forest buffalo, forest sitatunga, five varieties of duiker, harnessed bushbuck and a wide variety of monkeys, including the black colobus.

Botanical trails have been laid down – some of the trees are more than 1,000 years old – as well as routes across the reserve for wildlife-viewing visits in four-wheel-drive vehicles. There are also embarkation points for boat trips by river to observe bird life and reptiles such as Nile and dwarf crocodiles. One footpath leads to a magnificent waterfall that feeds into Lake Lékédi, the 30-minute route punctuated by two-metre-high termite mounds, with a kilometre-long length of the original cable fixed as a handrail along the more precipitous section.

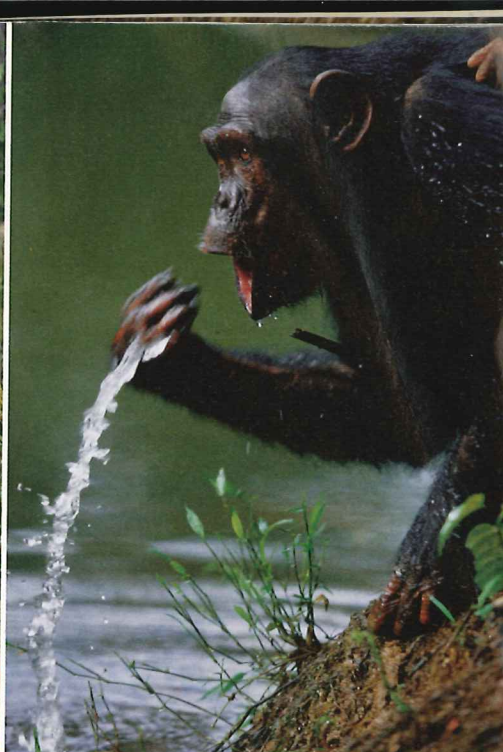
### BRIDGING THE GAP

Perhaps the most innovative reuse of the old cableway is a 365-metre hanging bridge that has been constructed high across the forest canopy using more than two kilometres of cable. The bridge traverses a valley that hosts a ten-hectare enclosed sanctuary for chimpanzees and other primates. Crossing it, visitors find themselves floating over the treetops, as monkeys leap through the branches around them and the eerie cries of chimps echo from below.

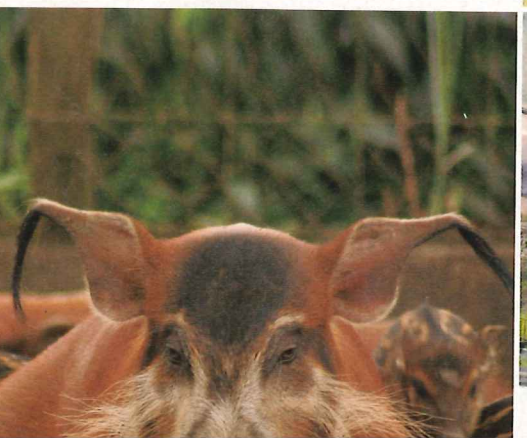
Among the other primate species that can be seen in the park are western lowland gorillas and mandrills. Both face a multitude of threats, from loss of habitat to disease and the bushmeat trade, but were already living wild in the Lékédi territory. 'We know there are wild gorillas here as we see their nests and tracks, as well as signs they have been eating afrimomo, a wild ginger grass they love,' says park manager Eric Willaume. 'It seems a number come from outside the park to sleep, probably because they are safe from elephants here.'

Gorilla numbers have been boosted by some recent introductions: three male gorillas, all bushmeat orphans, are being reared by an expert keeper who accompanies them into the forest each day to teach them to become self-sufficient. These young apes will





**ABOVE LEFT:** netting tilapia at the new fish farm at the Lékédi Reserve. Production has risen over the past five years, and in 2009, the fishery is expected to produce its biggest yield yet; **ABOVE:** a cattle egret stands atop a forest buffalo; **ABOVE RIGHT:** the chimpanzee is one of several primate species that can be seen in the park; **RIGHT:** Ulrich Massima, the Gabonese in charge of the mandrill project at Lékédi, crosses the hanging bridge suspended over the primate reserve; **BELOW RIGHT:** conveyor belts at the manganese mine are now used to transport the freshly mined ore to a railway depot. Gabon produces three million tonnes of manganese a year, and the export of the mineral – coupled with its oil reserves – has helped it to become one of the wealthiest countries on the continent, with a per capita income four times that of other sub-Saharan African countries; **BELOW:** an experimental project to rear wild red river hogs is taking place to discourage people from hunting the species for bushmeat; **BELOW LEFT:** a fully grown tilapia; **LEFT:** one of the cable reels and one-tonne buckets of the disused Comilog line, which, in the absence of roads through the dense forests, transported the manganese ore round the clock via an aerial cable system from Bakoumba in Gabon to Mbinda in the Republic of the Congo. Built in 1962, the 76-kilometre-long cable was the longest of its kind in the world







soon be released into the wild on an island on a lake in the reserve.

#### **RADIO STARS**

The park's mandrill population has also been boosted through reintroduction. In 2003, an experimental group of 36 captive-born mandrills previously kept at the nearby Centre of Medical Research of Franceville, an institution specialising in Ebola, malaria and HIV research, was released into the reserve.

Although the first breeding season saw several deaths of the young animals ('We believe this was due to the stress of the relocation,' says Ulrich Massima, the Gabonese in charge of the mandrill project), the second season was successful, with the newcomers integrating with a group of wild mandrills.

At last count, the combined group numbered 62. Several have been radio-collared, and visitors can accompany guides on tracking missions, an activity offered at only one other location in Gabon (in Lopé National Park) and nowhere else in the world.

### *'Poachers have the habit of shooting at whatever eyes their lights make shine, be it an endangered gorilla or antelope'*

As with elsewhere in Gabon, bushmeat poaching is a problem at Lékédi. The biodiversity of the park and its periphery is threatened by Congolese and Gabonese poachers who target its population of duikers, red river hogs, apes and buffalo. 'We have problems with hunters in all areas,' Willaume tells me, 'but we have established two patrols of four men, which has helped.'

Because the reserve is private property, he adds, the guards have the right to apprehend hunters. 'That said, a lot goes on at night, and unfortunately poachers have the habit of

shooting at whatever eyes their lights make shine, be it an endangered gorilla or an antelope. We made two arrests recently, however. One was a local villager and the other a poacher who had come in from Congo.'

Today, some of the original 120 staff from Bakoumba have reached retirement age, but the reserve still employs almost 70 in a mix of capacities, including as guides, cooks, gardeners, mechanics and hospitality staff, in the fish and pig farms, and as part of anti-poaching brigades.

'Bakoumba, born out of a heavy and noisy industry, has, in a decade, become known as "the nature village",' says Willaume. 'It is now an ecotourism and agricultural enterprise that has created jobs, encouraged food self-sufficiency and allowed real and lasting wildlife conservation. We are all very proud.'

**ABOVE:** François Mitterrand (left), president of France, inaugurates the first section of the Trans-Gabonese Railway with his Gabonese counterpart, the late El Haj Omar Bongo Ondimba, on 18 January 1983. Built between 1973 and 1986, the route covers about 800 kilometres, linking the capital, Libreville, on the northeast coast to Franceville in the southeast