

Africa's green heart

Gabon is blessed with some of the most diverse tropical forest in the world – ancient jungles that are thought to contain over 8 000 plant species, 600 different types of bird and 20 species of primate. Flying over the forest, sometimes you see nothing but a green canopy to the horizon. At other times, there are clusters of huge trees surrounded by swamp grass and lagoons.



'Loango is an area so pristine and pulsing with life, it's almost sacred.'
Don Pinnock



Central African safari Gabon

Gabon is to Africa what the Amazon is to South America: if you haven't seen it, you haven't felt the vital throb of the continent. By Don Pinnock.

It seemed undignified for an elephant to look like Mickey Mouse. Its big round ears looming above the lagoonside grass pointed to another oddity – it was small, a fact emphasised by the curtain of huge tropical-forest trees swooping up behind it. But its tusks and aggression dispelled my suspicion that it was a youngster. This was a full-grown forest elephant and we were being revved.

We reversed the boat and the jumbo returned to ripping out tufts of grass and stuffing them into its mouth. When I looked across at the deep, dark jungle, the elephant's size made perfect sense: its big Kruger cousins wouldn't have a chance of pushing through that green tangle.

We were in Loango National Park in southern Gabon, an area so pristine and pulsing with life, it's almost sacred. Earlier that day, we'd left Loango Lodge in a fast boat, skimming across lagoons stained by tannins leached from inland swamps and looking like polished ebony. The park has around 100 kilometres of coastline without human footprints, backed by mangrove-lined lagoons and huge swathes of tropical rainforest. It's where half-crazy American biologist Michael Fay arrived in 2000 after a 3 200-kilometre trek across Central Africa and was astounded to find hippos surfing the shore break and elephants patrolling the beaches. >

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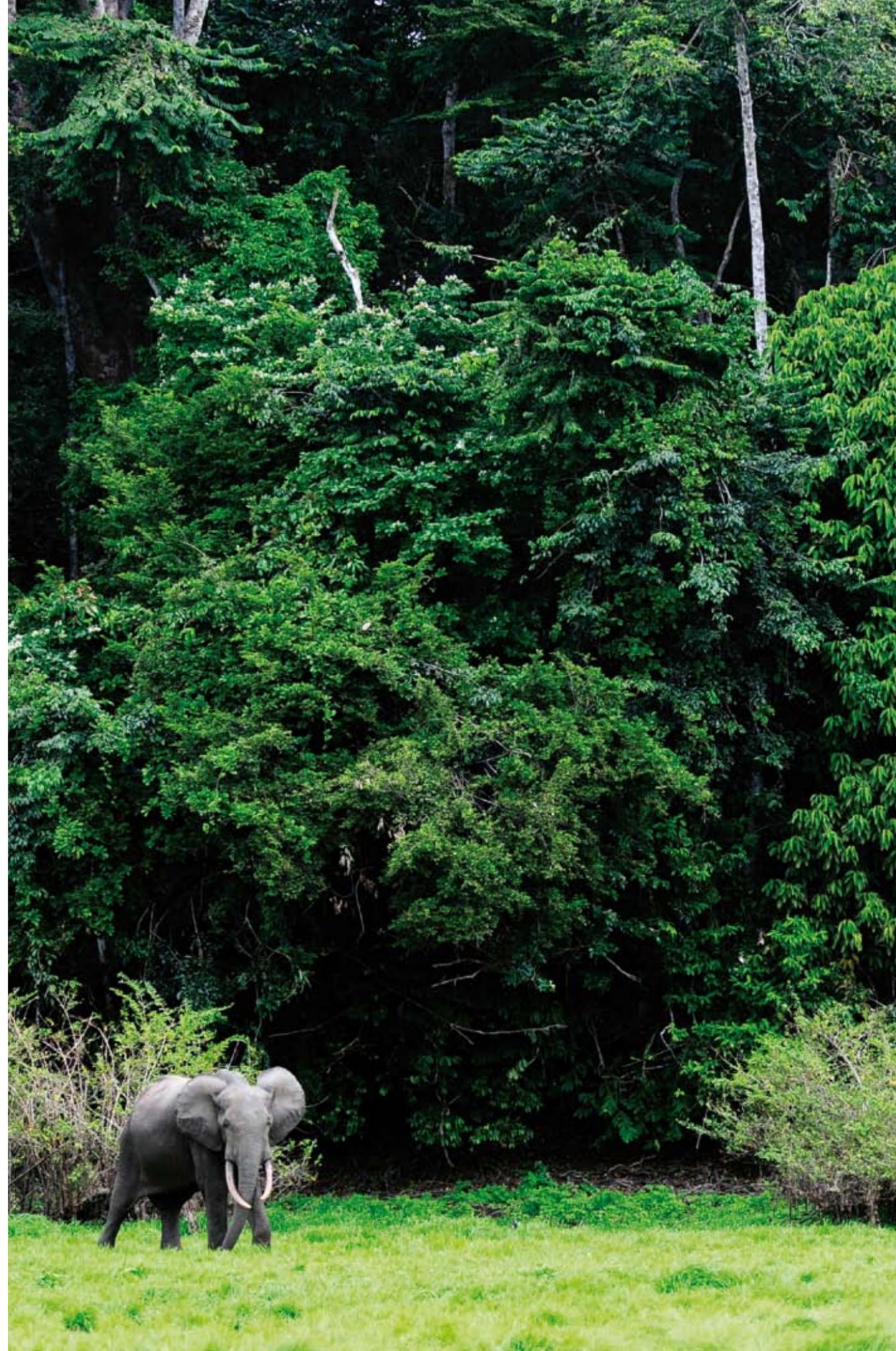
Before leaving for the West African country, several people had asked: 'Um, Gabon ... where is it exactly?' One friend who I thought was well travelled told me I was lucky, because he'd never been to South America. 'It's the heart of the African jungle,' I told them smugly, 'with chimps and gorillas.'

Getting there is an adventure in itself. South African Airways flies to Gabon's capital, Libreville, and a local connection gets you to the nearest commercial airport in Port Gentil. From there you could try a water taxi, but a far better option is to ask Loango Lodge to pick you up in their plane. From the airstrip between forest trees, it's a lagoon boat ride to the lodge. When the engines stopped and I climbed onto the lodge jetty, all I could hear was the chuntering of African grey parrots, the first I'd ever seen not sitting mournfully in cages.

Vulnerable nature

Loango is the brainchild of a remarkable engineer named Rombout Swanborn, the son of a Dutch oilman who grew up in Gabon and followed his dad's footsteps into the industry. As he casually put it as we watched evening creep over the forest, 'I

RIGHT: The shy forest elephants in Central and West Africa are a distinct species. Petite and delicate, they have small, rounded ears and an ability to move through the forest silently. **BELOW:** Traditional instruments of pygmy origin, such as this mouth bow, produce an eerie sound that seems to harmonise with the mysterious jungle surrounds.



picked up a couple of patents lying around that nobody had used for separating under-sea oil from water.'

Within 18 months, he was a world leader in giving new life to ageing offshore oil-fields and, along the way, became extremely wealthy.

In 2000, he found space for a bit of downtime and returned to Gabon from Holland, where he'd been living. 'I realised how the invincible nature of my childhood was, in fact, extremely vulnerable,' he remembered. 'Gabon is one of the most beautiful places on earth, but there was logging and hunting and oil exploration. I felt the urgent need to come up with some sort of concept or project that would take the pressure off the environment. Not by building a wall around it, but by making people dependent on the presence of nature. I hit on ecotourism.'

Rombout began small – a sanctuary on the island of Evengué for gorillas saved from the bush-meat trade. Soon after creating this sanctuary, he negotiated park status for Loango and began building a lodge, training locals to do the work.

'Providing people around here with a livelihood through preserving



With a population of less than a million people and three-quarters of the country covered by pristine, primeval rainforest, Gabon is a birders' paradise. This giant kingfisher was spotted in Loango National Park.

the environment gave the project enormous force for good,' he said. 'And it was great timing. President Omar Bongo used Loango as a pilot project for the establishment of 13 national parks in Gabon. The lodge draws public attention to the wonders of the rainforest and plays a pioneer role in attracting investments into ecotourism.'

Access to the park was a problem, so Rombout started an airline, which now has a fleet of six aircraft, and a

'Gabon is one of the most beautiful places on earth, but there was logging and hunting and oil exploration'

Trees for sale

The chain-saw cut was deep into its flesh, tethering it to a ring set in concrete. Another chain bound it to its neighbour, which was, in turn, linked to the next ... and the next. So threaded, the dead trees made a huge loop – almost to the horizon – in which was being corralled the floating remains of a rainforest. Hundreds of thousands of logs destined mainly for China, but also Europe, to become doors, window frames, roof beams, furniture, plywood and veneer.

Until now, Gabon's extensive rainforest has been partly protected because of the country's oil revenues.



But the oil is running out and, when it does, the economy will rely on logging.

The country has 13 national parks in which the forest is protected. Outside of these areas, slow-growing hardwoods such as ozigo, padauk, moabi, kevazingo, sapile, douka and beli will come crashing down. China is presently taking more than a million cubic metres a year with methods described by the NGO, Forest Monitor, as 'aggressive and openly short-term logging with greater variety of species taken'. A customer for okoumé (*Aucoumea klaineana*) from Gabon is evidently the new World Cup stadium in Durban.



They simply ignored us, a greeting being beneath their dignity, and continued pondering deeply whatever gorillas ponder

marketing and reservations company, Africa's Eden. When that was done, he knew the recipe worked and began looking further afield.

Blackwater lagoons

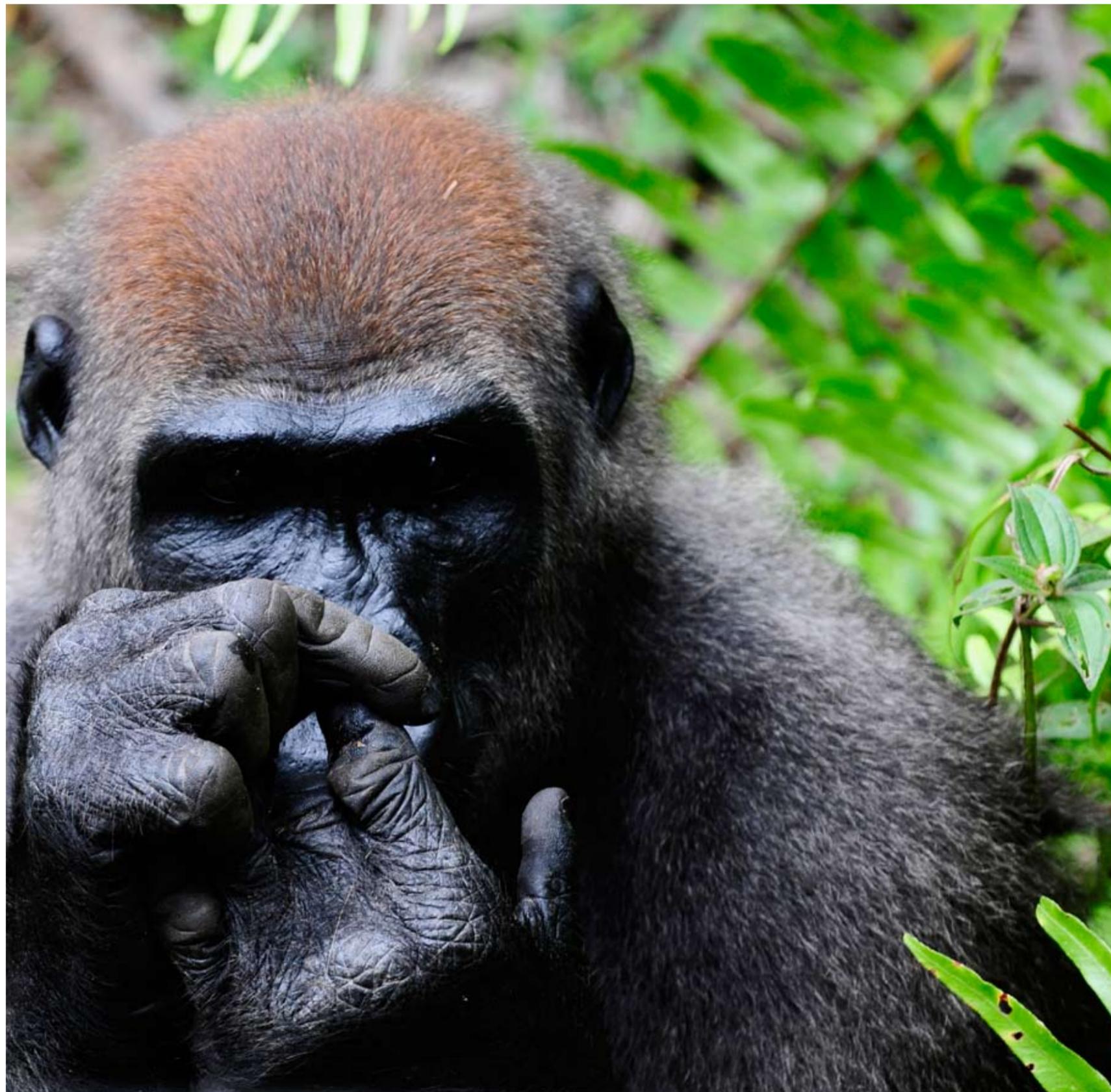
It's no good trying to understand the scale of a rainforest from the base of its massive trees. You have to get above it. The bright blue Pilatus Porter – a sort of Land Rover of the air – bounced over the rough strip and seemed to leap into the air after only a few metres' run. As we climbed, the forest unspooled to the horizon. We flew low along the coast, watching wave sets flop onto beaches devoid of human form. As we turned over the blackwater lagoons, I checked my seatbelt and slid open the plane's door, clutching my camera as a blast of air pinned me to my seat.

Below us was a technicolour wonderland of greens, blues and purples. Huge trees, some maybe 100 metres high and looking like broccoli heads on steroids, dominated the canopy. Along the edge of lagoons, mangroves dipped their long legs into the dark liquid like shy ballerinas.

I noticed a flight of parrots in formation over an iridescent-green grass swath crisscrossed with hippo paths, then watched as the plane's shadow leapt from tree to tree and lost itself in the ebony water of a meandering lagoon. It all seemed ancient, inscrutable and infinitely precious.

ABOVE: The African dwarf crocodile is a diminutive species seldom exceeding one-and-a-half metres. Along the lagoons of Loango, they sun themselves on logs and seldom moved even when our boat nosed in close.

RIGHT: Africa's Eden, which runs all tourist facilities in Loango National Park, began as a gorilla protection outfit on Evengué Island, which it still maintains. This is Owendja, doing a finger check.



Rombout Swanborn had a dream to protect Gabon's rainforest – and made it come true

We landed at Evengué Island and met Mabeke, a huge silverback western lowland gorilla, and his adoring furry attendants, Owendja and Izo-wuet. They simply ignored us, a greeting being beneath their dignity, and continued pondering deeply whatever gorillas ponder.

The next day, we climbed into a boat and nosed up to a treeful of white pelicans, then some dwarf crocodiles, ruddy forest buffaloes and Micky Mouse elephants. If chimps were around, they weren't saying anything, but we did pick up two young researchers from Cambridge University who had been following a troop for months.

Deep in a maze of lagoons, we beached the boat and jumped ashore. The air was damp as exhaled breath, steamy with rooting and rotting, fragrant with petal. The green of the rainforest felt like the colour of

win Q: Name the lagoon on which Loango Lodge is situated.

Getaway, in conjunction with Africa's Eden, is giving a nine-day Africa's Last Eden Tour for two people, valued at €5236 (about R63300). The prize includes transfer to and from Libreville Airport Hotel to overnight at Le Méridien Hotel, accommodation in Loango National Park plus all meals, park fees and most excursions and internal flights. Not included are flights to and from Gabon, drinks and visa costs. **SMS** Gabon, followed by your answer, name, e-mail address and postal address to 34419; or enter **on-line** at www.getaway.co.za/competitions. The closing date is 23 June 2009. See competition rules on page 179.



SMSs cost R2.



wildness. Green was pushing up from the leaf mould and pouring down through the leaves.

Rainforests have been badly misrepresented in Western imagination, portrayed as thickets dense with unmeaning, a glum numbness, mute as doom. In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad described them as 'wilderness without sound'. In truth, they are life-growling, flowering, leaping, hooting,

We opened the door of the plane and, as the wind tried to pluck off my eyebrows, I clicked and prayed that the amazing lagoon and forest scenes spooling below would be in focus.

wriggling and budding. The clickety-clapping sound of leaves in the breeze, birdsong in the canopy, the slather of rain and the sudden chatter of a red-capped mangabey – it's a whole universe laughing with life.

They're also places that seem full of spirit, a visible world with the invisible folded into it. For the Fang people who live in the area, there are spirits in streams, lakes, trees and salt licks at the *bais* – soggy clearings where wildlife comes to drink. We hiked up a vague path and I found myself gaping at the huge leaves, all with drip points to shed tropical stormwater. Immense trees all around were the sort I remembered from

childhood books, connecting the earth to lands far overhead.

Other rainforests

Back at the lodge, I asked Rombout about the other projects he'd hinted at. One is in the Central African Republic, where he's trying to create a sustainable park through tourism. 'At sunset, you can see gorillas and more than a hundred elephants in the *bais*. I always thought Gabon was the most wonderful destination. But when I went there, I thought: "Wow, here's competition!"

I've also got projects on the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe. We're assisting the government to evolve

as many other large sport ocean fish. Sightings include forest elephant, forest buffalo, western lowland gorilla, chimpanzee, red-capped and grey-cheeked mangabey, greater white-nosed and putty-nosed monkey, moustached guenon, crowned monkey, red river hog, dwarf crocodile, sitatunga, bongo, hippo and, if you're lucky, leopard.

Birding in this area supports a range of species unlikely to be found elsewhere in Africa. These include white-backed night heron, black and plumed guineafowl, black-headed bee-eater,

Gabon helmet-shrike, rufous-tailed palm-thrush, long-tailed hawk, Nkulengu rail, red-billed dwarf hornbill, pied hornbill, white-throated blue swallow, white-browed forest flycatcher, blue cuckoo-shrike, African grey parrot, Hartlaub's duck, white-crested tiger heron, vermiculated and Pel's fishing owls, Forbes's plover, African river martin and Loango weaver.

At water level, there's leatherback and olive Ridley turtles, tarpon, hump-back dolphin, bull shark, West African manatee and humpback whale.



What to see

More than 80 per cent of Gabon is covered with forest, which contains some 8000 known plant species (as many as 20 per cent of which are found nowhere else on the planet), as well as almost 200 mammal and 600 bird species.

Loango Park is the jewel of the west coast. Highlights include breathtaking panoramas, with elephants, buffaloes and hippos venturing onto the long white beaches.

Loango is internationally renowned as a site for tarpon of record size, as well

park structures, managing them and making sure the logistics are in place. Príncipe is a little pearl with extremely dense rainforest. The landscape is magnificent. The government has agreed to make the whole island an eco-destination. We want to turn it into an environmentally responsibly managed destination. We're fixing the airport and running Bom Bom Resort. On São Tomé the emphasis will be cultural. It used to be a slave island. Now it has a very special Brazilian feel.'

Logs in the sea

I left Loango by launch, which zoomed us across Iguela Lagoon to the airstrip. Before the plane landed, it had to shoo off a family of red forest hogs, which had masked faces and fly-whisk ears. Forest buffalo looked on disapprovingly as the Dornier touched down and reversed thrust, vibrating the languid air.

As we flew north to Port Gentil, I looked down at the lagoon beside the busy port and a chill ran down

At sunset, you can see gorillas and more than a hundred elephants in the bais



my spine. It was filled with hundreds of thousands of huge floating hardwood logs.

'Where are they going?' I asked a local engineer sitting next to me.

'China, mostly,' he said. 'Hardwood makes good veneer.'

The full impact of Rombout's urgency to protect the rainforest suddenly hit home. ■

footnotes

How to get there

There is a daily SAA flight from Johannesburg to Libreville which costs R9286 return, including airport tax. Cheapest flights are with Tri-MG Intra Asia Airline, which costs R5702, including airport tax.

The recommended flight schedule is to arrive in Libreville on a Wednesday, then take the Friday flight with Africa's Connection to Port Gentil and Omboué. Return to Libreville on the following Friday and take the Saturday morning flight (00h20) back to Joburg. From Omboué, you can choose to be transferred directly to Loango Lodge or stay the first night at Evengué (Gorilla Island) on the way. From there it's a boat ride up the Mpiévié River and then transfer to Loango Lodge by vehicle.

Where to stay

Most visitors stay at Loango Lodge in the north of the park on the banks of the Iguela Lagoon. This is a luxury lodge with comfortable, air-conditioned chalets overlooking the lagoon. From the lodge, visitors can take boat trips on the lagoon and up the Rembo Ngowe River, go for game drives in the savanna and down to the beach, walking in the forests, kayaking and whale watching (the season is from July to September). The lodge is owned by Africa's Eden which also operates three eco-camps: Akaka Bush Camp, Pte Ste Catherine Beach Camp and Tassi Savannah Camp.



Costs and contacts

The nine-day itinerary costs from €2618 (about R31600) a person sharing, excluding flights to Libreville. Contact Africa's Eden at tel +31-26-370-5567, e-mail reservations@africas-eden.com, web www.africas-eden.com.

Currency

Communaute Financiere Africaine (CFA). Take euros in cash.

Visas

All visitors except South African passport holders require visas.

When to go

May to September and January are dry with overcast skies. The rainy season (October to April) is best for viewing wildlife on the beach and birding.

Health

Malaria precautions and a yellow-fever vaccination certificate are essential. Drink only bottled/filtered/boiled water. Travel insurance is a must.

What to pack

Keep your luggage down to the basics. Long-sleeve shirts and trousers are

Africa's Connection has efficient, noisy Dornier aircraft that whisk you from civilisation to the heart of the rainforest.

advisable to prevent mosquito bites. Avoid blue clothing. For ease of carrying, soft bags or a medium-sized suitcase are preferable.

Language

The lingua franca is French. There are about 40 local dialects. English is not widely spoken.

Recommended reading *Guide to Gabon* by Sophie Warne (Bradt). ■

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