

Where the **wild**

Imagine a place so untouched that the primates gaze at you without fear and old elephants roam, their tusks sweeping the forest floor. Described as 'Africa's Last Eden' by *National Geographic* magazine, Gabon offers a different viewing experience to elsewhere on the continent.

WORDS: Sarah Monaghan

things are

Gabon's big appeal to visitors is that it is virgin territory. The country has only begun opening itself up to tourism in the last decade since 11% of the territory was set aside to create a vast new national park network. Percentage-wise,

only Costa Rica has allocated more land for conservation. This is Equatorial Africa, so the landscapes and wildlife are unlike that of southern Africa. You won't find zebras, giraffes or lions as Gabon is 85% covered in tropical rainforest and with only five people per square kilometre, you are more likely to bump into a western lowland gorilla than a fellow human being... →



GABON



AFRICAS EDEN IMAGES

Gabon's late President Omar Bongo ruled over oil-rich Gabon from 1967 until his death in 2009. Praised for keeping his country at peace for over 40 years, history is likely to remember him more however for his leadership in conservation. The President's inspiration was the photographs and stories of National Geographic explorer Mike Fay who in 2001 completed a 3,200-km 'Megatransect' hike across the Congo Basin with a team of Pygmy guides. When he returned, Fay spoke of the naïve chimpanzees and gorillas he had seen and of forest elephants with spectacular tusks – an increasingly unusual sight in Africa where most of the 'big tuskers' fell victim to ivory hunters long ago. These elephants, however, had spent most of their lives in the secluded heart of Gabon's rainforests. "We discovered animals with 40-50 kilo-tusks," declared Fay.

WILDLIFE WEALTH

Fay also documented the world's only 'surfing hippos' – hippopotamuses that use waves to propel them from

the ocean to freshwater lagoons.

President Bongo was stunned. "Why do we not speak of such riches?" he asked his foreign minister. In 2002, in a move akin to Roosevelt's creation of the American national parks system, he decided to ringfence more than one tenth of his country as 13 national parks, lighting the touchpaper of ecotourism.

Gabon is staggeringly rich in wildlife. It has Central Africa's largest population of forest elephants (a different, straighter-tusked variety to the Eastern African species), hippos, leopards, crocodiles, buffalo, antelopes, hundreds of tropical reptile and bird species, and primates galore – including gorillas, chimpanzees, and thousands of the world's biggest and most colourful monkey, the red-and-white faced mandrill. Wildlife sightings depend on the season and also include dolphins, leatherback turtles and humpback whales migrating from Antarctic waters. The Gabonese coast is an important marine breeding ground, with the biggest concentration of visiting whales outside South Africa. →

Gabon is home to Central Africa's largest population of forest elephants.



8 TOP THINGS TODO

WATERY WILDLIFE

At Loango National Park's Akaka Bush Camp, you can spend the night in a wooden chalet on the riverbank in the heart of the tropical rainforest. Expect the wildlife, especially **forest elephants**, to pass right through camp or come swimming across the Rembo Ngowe River to feed on the swamp grass around. In the dry season, **forest buffalo** and **forest elephant** are easily seen. Smaller mammals like sitatunga, **red river hogs**, **forest duikers**, five species of **monkey** and **great apes** inhabit the area all year round.



SARAH MONAGHAN

GENTLE GIANTS

Get up close to **western lowland gorillas**. Loango National Park is the site of a sanctuary for the critically endangered western lowland gorilla and also for a pioneering rehabilitation and reintroduction programme which in July 2009 saw six orphans of the bushmeat trade transferred to a safe island in the Fernan-Vaz Lagoon where the gorillas can now live and feed in the forest, safe from predators. Visitors can accompany guides on a bushwalk to the sanctuary. * **gorillasgabon.com**



AFRICAS EDEN IMAGES

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

See all kinds of exotic birdlife. To the east of Gabon's capital, Libreville, at Lambarené, the Ogooué River splits into two channels before rejoining in a large alluvial plain with a series of lakes, papyrus marshes, reedbeds and forests. This is one of the largest deltas in Africa and is now a protected area. The fantastic birdlife includes **herons, spoonbills, skimmers, egrets, pelicans** and more. The lakes are an ideal place for a few days of relaxation either at the start or end of your visit to Gabon.

GABON



MICHAEL VILJOEN

RAINFOREST AFRICA

Ecotourism may be in its infancy but a number of private operators, assisted by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), have opened up the parks. The most developed is Loango on the Atlantic coast, where the company Africa's Eden has sought to overcome the challenges of the country's rickety transport infrastructure by establishing an inter-parks airline that also carries tourists to the parks of Ivindo and Lopé.

Loango has 100 kilometres of unspoiled coastline where elephants and buffalo roam. There is a main lodge with luxury bungalow accommodation overlooking a lagoon and five comfortable satellite camps on a mosaic of open savannah, deserted beach, rainforest and rivers. Safari activities include game drives, kayaking, forest treks, gorilla and bird-watching and the park is also renowned as a sport-fishing site for tarpon and barracuda.

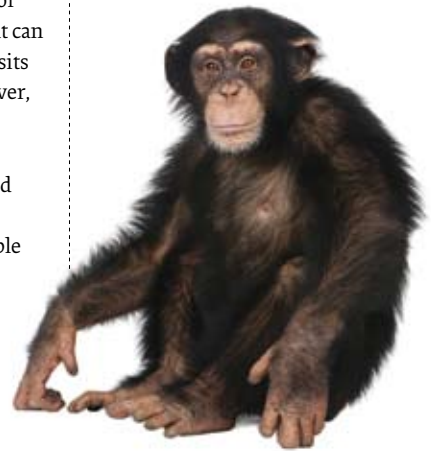
WET AND WONDERFUL

Lopé and Ivindo National Parks are in the interior. Lopé offers a wonderful patchwork of open savannah and dense rainforest. It is famous for its large numbers of elephants, gorillas and multicoloured mandrills that can be viewed in troupes of thousands. The main lodge sits in a stunning location above the mighty Ogooué River, with air-conditioned en-suite chalets.

Ivindo contains the breathtaking Kongoué and Mingouli waterfalls, the most spectacular of forested Africa, as well as bais (waterholes) such as Langoué Bai with the largest concentration of easily observable wildlife in Gabon. Visitors can spend the night on a platform overlooking the bai for superb sunset and dawn animal sightings. Many of the primates in this region too are said to be naïve: unafraid of humans due to their lack of contact.

Actress and WCS patron Glenn Close spent →

Above: Western lowland gorilla.



8 TOP THINGS TO DO

HALLUCINOGENIC HAPPENINGS

Experience a traditional **Bwiti tribal ceremony**. Visit a village inside Loango National Park and watch kaolin-daubed male and female dancers in swirling raffia costumes leap over fires and chant to a relentless drum beat under

the influence of the hypnosis-inducing Iboga root. Bwiti initiates use Iboga to make contact with spirits of the dead and communicate with their ancestors and a ceremony typically lasts much of the night.

* www.africas-eden.com

CROCODILE LEERS

Look snappy on an after-dark crocodile hunt. When your torch catches the reflective membrane on the back of their retinas, there is little more thrilling than the sight of the glowing red eyes of crocodiles.

After dusk is the best time to see these prehistoric reptiles. Three species, **dwarf, Nile and slender-snouted**, live in Gabon. At Iguela Lagoon in Loango National Park you can accompany ecoguides by pirogue to see crocs and their young up close and safely.

* www.africas-eden.com



MITCHEATON

FERTILE TURTLES

See the world's largest turtle, the **Leatherback**, arrive on Gabon's beaches after dark to lay up to 100 eggs. A Leatherback's shell can measure up to 1.6m in length and weigh more than 500kg. Gabon's 850km coast is critical to the survival of this endangered species and at Pongara National Park near Libreville the Pongara Marine Turtle Information Centre you can discreetly observe the miraculous egg-laying event from November to March.

* www.seaturtle.org/groups/gabon



BASTIEN LOLOUM



SARAH MONAGHAN

GABON

AFRICAS EDEN IMAGES



Loango from the air.

the night recently on a platform here overlooking the waterhole and spied on 56 elephants (she counted them). “You felt like you were in a holy place,” she told a WCS meeting in Capitol Hill. “We can’t lose these places.”

PRIMORDIAL DOMES

In the north of the country is Minkébé National Park. Minkébé is part of the second largest forest block remaining in the world, stretching west to Lopé National Park and east into the Republic of Congo. Its dramatically domed granite mountains or ‘inselbergs’ emerged millions of years ago.

Today, the land remains little touched by man. Great forest trees, many hundreds of years old, soar upwards, some crowned with wild gardens of orchids and ferns or supporting huge twining lianas, also centuries old. The region is criss-crossed by elephant paths and here the bongo, the world’s largest forest antelope, with its white and dun striped coat, can be spotted.

ICE-AGE ORCHIDS

To the west is the Monts de Cristal National Park, one of the last bastions of ancient rainforest where hills and valleys cloaked in cloud host some of the richest plant biodiversity on the planet – this area has remained isolated since the Ice

Age and harbours scores of endemic orchids.

For birdlife, one of the best places is the Batéké Plateaux National Park. Some of the park’s birds are found nowhere else on earth and their exceptional diversity draws birdwatchers to the area, especially to see the Stanley bustard, Congo moorchat, Angola batis, black-collared bulbul, black-chinned weaver, Finsch’s francolin and Téké cisticola (the latter two found only here). Flocks of Abdim’s storks migrate through the area.

Batéké contains expansive grasslands across windblown high-elevation dunes that are the northern tip of the Kalahari Sands and some of the deepest sand in the world. They sit atop high water tables and in places this water percolates up through the substrate to create small clear lakes and streams. The depth of the ancient sand betrays itself in dramatic fashion in stunning canyon lands where sandslides, followed by wind and water erosion, have created huge ‘bites’ out of the hillsides, revealing rich red, pink and gold sand strata.

These plateaux are the headwaters of the three major rivers in the area: the Ogoué, the Mpassa, the Djoumou, and the Létéli. Parts of the sands are mineral-rich, a fact much appreciated by some of the park’s most charismatic occupants – the forest elephants – who have created a vast bai (waterhole) known as Jobo Bai. 🐘

GO WHEN?

Gabon straddles the equator and is hot and humid all-year round. Temperatures are typically around 26°C, with 85% humidity. It can rain at any time of year but broadly speaking Gabon has two main seasons: ‘the long rains’ between February and May followed by a dry season from June to mid September. The rest of the year is made up of two shorter seasons: the ‘short rains’ from October to November and a dry season from December to January. The whale season begins around mid July and continues to mid-September, the tarpon fishing season October to mid November and the turtle season October to mid January.

 **CONNECTIONS**
KQ FLIES TWICE
WEEKLY TO LIBREVILLE

8 TOP THINGS TO DO

MONKEY BUSINESS

Go radio-tracking **mandrills**, the world’s biggest and most colourful monkey. Mandrills live in the rainforests of Gabon and their borders with Cameroon, Congo and Equatorial Guinea. With their exuberant red and blue faces and rumps and their handsome yellow beards, it is the males (about four times the size of the drab females) that are the star attraction. Mandrills live in enormous troupes of around 700 individuals – the largest groupings of the primate world – but remain one of the least studied monkeys. Lopé National Park has developed mandrill safaris to allow park visitors to see these spectacular primates moving through the rainforest. “Nothing can prepare you for the eerie ghost-like calls as they approach,” says Nerissa Chao, the project manager.

* email: mandrillsafaris@yahoo.fr



LEKEDI

MAKING WAVES

Wonder at the sight of huge **humpback whales** breaching. From July to October, whales which measure up to 15 metres in length arrive to breed along the Gabonese coast fresh from their 7,000-km annual migration from the food-rich waters of Antarctica and the Southern Ocean. Females give birth to calves, nurturing them close to the coast before heading back south. Boat trips are organised from several points in Gabon including Pongara and Loango National Parks and from Pointe Denis near Libreville.



WCS TIM COLLINS