

# **This week's dream: unspoilt Gabon**

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## This week's dream: unspoilt Gabon

Gabon is a "lovely, emerald-forested gem of a country", says Melanie McGrath in *The Guardian*. Around 11% of its territory is designated national park, and it has miles of beautiful white beach. Added to that, the oil boom of the Seventies has made it one of the richest and most stable nations in sub-Saharan Africa. Now Gabon is setting its sights on becoming "the Costa Rica of Africa": an unspoilt, sophisticated eco-tourist destination. The prototype for this tourism drive is Loango Lodge, at Loango National Park, a "plush, fly-in" resort with luxury air-conditioned bungalows and fabulous views over "whisky-coloured rivers and blue lagoons".

Loango is a truly astonishing place – perhaps the only one in the world where you can see chimpanzees, buffalo, turtles and humpback whales on the same day, and "where forest elephants come down to the beach and hippos surf the waves". There are "supertroops of rare mandrills" in the mangrove forest and



Gabon's gorillas: "terrific, shaggy wildness"

manatees lurking in the waters. But its most fascinating inhabitants are probably the Western Lowland gorillas – all 35,000 of them. They are part of the *raison d'être* for Gabon's national parks, and a "must-see".

Visitors to the gorilla-watching parks of Rwanda and Uganda have to buy expensive licences and undergo medicals. There's none of that in Gabon: you're free to "do your own thing". Coming face to face with a gorilla – "fantastically muscular in all his terrific, shaggy wildness" – is tremendously exciting. Unused to human visitors,

they will eye you suspiciously before "knuckle cantering" off into the trees. As tourism grows, the parks are likely to become more regulated. But if we want these creatures to be preserved in their own habitat, we'd better hope they do.

*Tim Best Travel* (020-7591 0300; [www.timbesttravel.net](http://www.timbesttravel.net)) has seven nights at Loango from £1,675pp.

## Hotel of the week



## Baglioni Hotel, London

For a taste of Italy without having to get on a plane, this hotel might be the answer, says Rhiannon Batten in *The Independent*. The Baglioni is perhaps "the most over-the-top creation this side of Nancy Dell'Olio", and "takes flouncing seriously": the "theatrical" decor, black-clad staff and "glam" subterranean nightclub are authentically Italian. The bedrooms are "for playing in rather than sleeping in", with "mountains of silk cushions, shimmering bedspreads" and "snazzy" Illy espresso machines. If you want a decadent weekend in the capital, Baglioni is the place to stay.

Contact: 020-7368 5700; [www.baglionihotellondon.com](http://www.baglionihotellondon.com). Doubles from £247 without breakfast.

## Getting the flavour of...

## Counting crosses in Lithuania

There is a small green hill in Lithuania that is unlike any other, says Sara Evans in the *Sunday Telegraph*. The Hill of Crosses, off the A12 at Jurgaičiai, is covered – literally – with crucifixes, stacked "jumble-sale style" in wobbling piles. It is estimated that there are at least 100,000 of them, more in one place than anywhere else on earth. "From kitsch to sublime" they stand, some beautifully crafted and strung with coloured rosary beads, others mere twigs held together with chewing gum. Under both Tsarist and Soviet rule, the hill was a place of protest; a symbol of defiance against occupation and religious intolerance. The site was destroyed three times before the country's independence in 1990, but the people kept recreating it. These days, people come from all over the world to plant a cross for those who have died fighting for freedom. It feels enchanted – an "ecumenical wonderland". Visit [www.stautilia.lt/tic/](http://www.stautilia.lt/tic/) for more information.

## Ancient Albarracín

Finding unspoilt parts of Spain is becoming more and more difficult, says Nick West in *The Independent*. But the province of Teruel, in the Aragon region, is certainly one of them. Little changed since the Middle Ages, the small town of Albarracín, for instance, is a charming "ancient settlement"

of winding cobbled streets and impressive old stone buildings with Moorish influences "perched on the cliffs of a precipitous gorge". The surrounding national park boasts soaring pine forests, ochre-red rock formations and Palaeolithic cave drawings. Deer, hares, rabbits, wild boar and golden eagles live here relatively undisturbed, and the terrain is wonderful for walking, cycling and fishing. A natural sense of calm "oozes from every rock, stream and forest". Fly to Valencia with easyJet (0905-821 0905) for around £50. Visit [www.albarracin.org](http://www.albarracin.org).

## Hot and cold in Slovakia

Slovakia has its very own geothermal resort, says Tom Chesshyre in *The Times*. AquaCity, in the town of Poprad, has heated outdoor pools, steam rooms, saunas and "all the hot tubs and massages you could possibly want". After a hot treatment, you plunge into a teeth-chatteringly cold one, such as the "Snow Paradise" room, where the temperature is set at -51C. Two minutes is plenty. Or try the Cryochamber, where the even chillier chill of -80C is said to be good for osteoporosis, rheumatism, back pain and even cellulite. The treatment was developed for Eastern European athletes; less sporty visitors can opt to "stick to the warm bits". AquaCity (01582-748840) has doubles from £87. SkyEurope ([www.skyeurope.com](http://www.skyeurope.com)) flies from Stansted for £64 return.

## Last-minute offers from top travel companies

## Spring in the Algarve

A week's rental of a lovely old renovated house (sleeps six) close to Albufeira's beaches now costs £315 (saving £135) from 22 April to 5 May. Contact Villa Select (01789-764909; [www.villaselect.com](http://www.villaselect.com)).

## Ice climbing in Chamonix

A two-day adventure climbing holiday against the stunning backdrop of Mont Blanc costs £549pp including flights, b&t and instruction. Contact: 020-7610 9008; [www.blacktomato.co.uk](http://www.blacktomato.co.uk). Valid until 31 March.

## Cottage in Wales

Rent Pilgrims cottage in the fishing village of Solva for £244 (sleeps five) with Coastal Cottages of Pembrokeshire (01437-767600; [www.coastalcottages.co.uk](http://www.coastalcottages.co.uk)). Available 25 February; 4, 11 and 18 March.

## Vibrant Istanbul

Exclusive Escapes (020-8605 3500; [www.hiddenturkey.com](http://www.hiddenturkey.com)) has three nights at the Sari Konak boutique hotel in the old town, from £513pp (sharing) including flights. Price valid until 31 March.

