

Africa untamed

In Gabon's Loango National Park, elephants stroll casually along the beach, the red river hogs and forest buffalo have wonderfully tufty ears and whiskers, and you find the most unexpected creatures in the trees. Watch out, this place could turn your world upside down, says **Melanie McGrath.**



It's my fifth day in Gabon and I'm discovering that crocodiles grow on trees. Well, strictly speaking, they don't so much grow there, as hang out. Those I've encountered,

which belong to the slender-snouted species *Crocodylus cataphractus*, have been lounging with their legs flopped over the branches, soaking up some early afternoon sun. Until now, I had no idea that crocs could climb. But this is Gabon, and I'm learning that there's little about this small Central African republic that isn't, in some way, surprising.

I am travelling by boat, *African Queen*-style, along the black water of the M'pivie river, which runs between Loango National Park in the south and Port Gentil, a logging and oil town a few miles to the north. The four-hour journey has become something of an adventure, partly because the M'pivie is quite astonishingly wild and barely a minute goes by without the boat inadvertently flushing a Pel's fishing owl or a great kingfisher from the canopy, partly because you never quite know what is round the corner – for all you know, we might be moments away from being sunk by a large papyrus island, rotating rapidly in the current – and partly on account of those crocs and their unexpected arboreal skills.

Loango is one of 13 national parks created in 2002, in a single stroke of the pen, by the Gabonese President, Omar Bongo, after a presentation by pioneering American conservation ecologists Dr Lee White and Dr Mike Fay of the Wildlife Conservation Society. White had been Gabon's WCS Program Director since 1992, and Fay had recently spent 456 days crossing 2,000 miles of the Congo Basin jungle, Africa's largest, most intact and least explored forest, part of which is in Gabon. This is the jungle of *Heart of Darkness* and *The African Queen*, the deep, dark Africa of pygmies and tarry waters, of Stanley, Livingstone and the white man's burden. Among other natural wonders, Fay stumbled upon so-called naïve gorillas and chimpanzees, apes which had never seen a human being. It seemed like a good time to act.

The creation of 28,500 sq km of new parkland was a bold move, requiring, among other things, the cancellation of 800,000 hectares of logging concessions. In doing this, Bongo was looking to his country's future economic prospects. The oil reserves, which since the 1970s have made Gabon one of the wealthiest and most stable countries in sub-Saharan Africa, are beginning to dry up. The country remains heavily forested, sparsely populated and highly urbanised, its coastline of forest, mangrove and white sand beach probably



Red river hog

Gabon

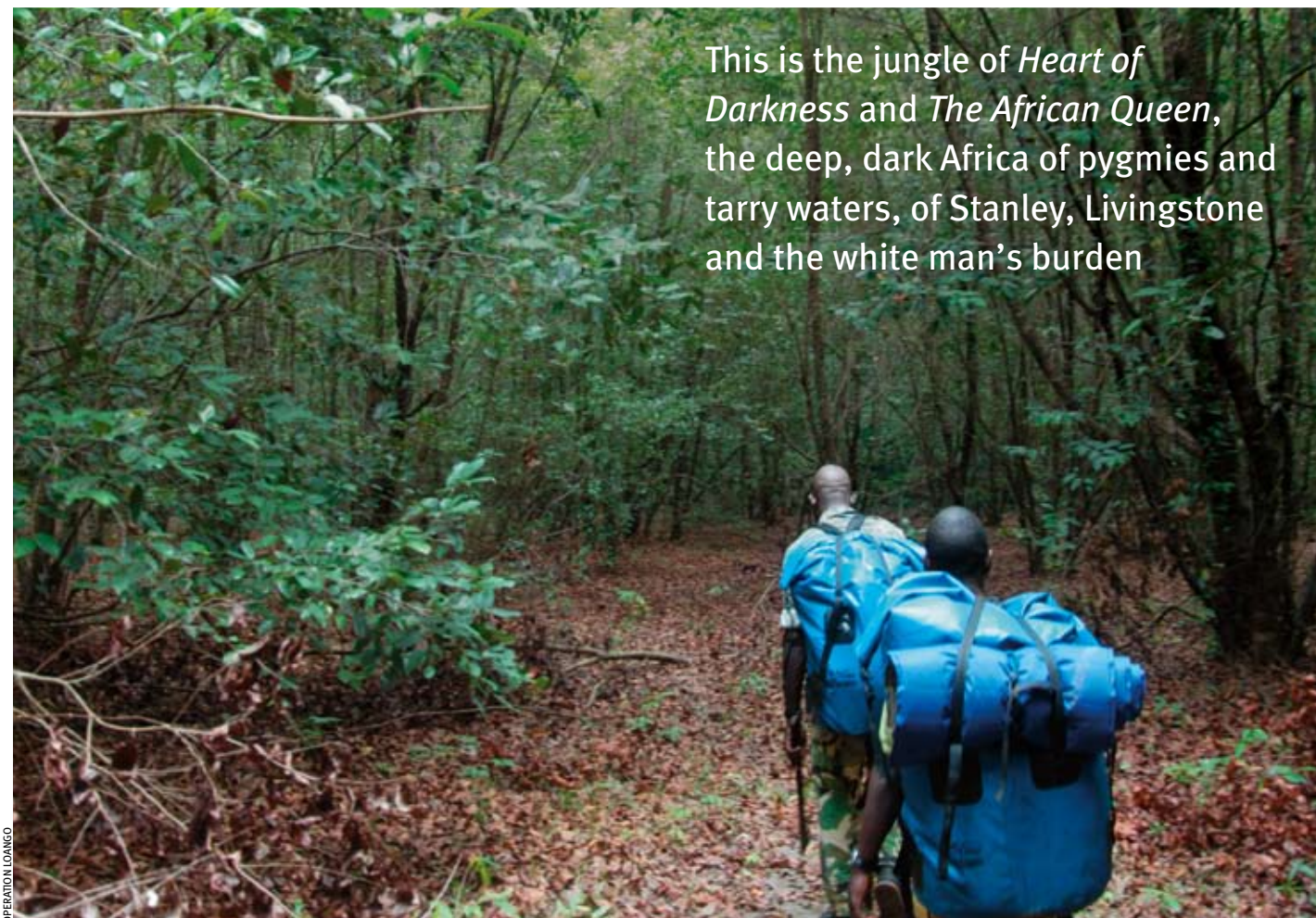
the least exploited in West or Central Africa. Ecotourism seemed to offer a way forward.

About the same time as Bongo opened the parks, Dutchman Rombout Swanborn, in collaboration with the WCS and the Gabonese government, established Operation Loango as a kind of prototype for ecotourist development across the park system. Swanborn, the son of a Shell employee and a teacher, partly grew up in Gabon, and made his fortune early inventing a widget to separate oil from water out on the oil rigs. He grew up around Loango, loved it, and was keen to invest there. Bongo was set on the idea that privately run and managed ecotourist ventures should pay for conservation and policing within the park system. And so Operation Loango was born, initially as a modest catch and release fishing enterprise and now as a \$7m fully serviced fly-in lodge with attendant bush camps, a primate research station, a gorilla orphanage and, in season, a whale observation camp.

With its marine environment, its grasslands, its primary rainforest and web of freshwater wetlands Loango has to be one of the most environmentally diverse parks in Africa. Operation Loango likes to boast that it's the only place in the world where you can see hippos mucking about in the surf and forest elephants meandering along the beach. Between November and March green and leatherback turtles lay their eggs along Loango's 100km stretch of uninhabited sand. During June and July up to 3000 humpback whales



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come to the coast to breed. Loango's swamp and rainforests serve as home to one of the world's largest populations of western lowland gorillas while, on the savannah, herds of forest buffalo graze alongside red river hogs with tufty ears and faces that remind me of Yoda from Star Wars. And then there are the rivers, awash with hippo and those spooky, tree-clambering crocs. Dr Lee White says "Loango is the most beautiful park in Africa." And he may well be right.

The flight into Loango (the lodge has its own air strip) from Port Gentil, takes you across a tangle of high canopy swamp forest. The alternative is to take the boat, as I did, along misty black rivers and blue

lagoons draped in lianas, water hyacinth and fever trees. You eventually arrive alongside a series of chic omoué wood bungalows clustered on the banks of the Iguéla lagoon, separated from the sea by a stretch of buff-coloured savannah that's embroidered with clumps of forest. And it is on this spit that I watch my first Loango sunset, surrounded on one side by the song of the waves and on the other by the noises of the night things clattering about in the trees.

The following morning I set out early with French-speaking guides Basile and Serge across dewy savannah spangled with spider webs. Everywhere we go, we're utterly alone: this is a place tourists

Above: Clouds of rosy bee-eaters swoop over their sandy burrows

Left: Eco-guides lead the way on a walking safari through the Akaka forest, rich in birds and butterflies

Gabon

have yet to discover. A troupe of about thirty rusty-coloured red river hogs meanders out from the forest. Pulling up short at our scent line, they stand flipping their ears and staring. “Good to eat”, says Serge. If every so often you detect a hint of the reluctant naturalist among the Loango guides, then it is worth remembering that only a few years ago, those red river hogs would most likely have wound up Serge and Basile’s pot. So would the forest buffalo, grazing peacefully around the next reveal. The Wildlife Conservation Society recruited Serge and his colleagues from among the local hunters, targeting those known to have poached elephants, gorillas and chimps, and providing them with an alternative income.

These days none of the guides carry guns, nor, they assure me, do they need to. The only large predators in Gabon are leopards, nocturnal and shy (Serge has only ever seen two), and those crocs, so glutted here with fish they’re unlikely to bother with anything more challenging.

We meander on, rousing the buffalo to their feet, and spot three forest elephants making their way very slowly towards the trees.

“*Ibago*”, Basile tuts disapprovingly. “They walk like that when they chew *ibago*. They’re always at it.”

He disappears into the bush, thrashes around momentarily, and reappears carrying a short length of stick.

“Try”, he says. “*C’est gentil mais puissant.*” I put the thing in my mouth, chew for a few seconds to break the bitter bark. A dank-tasting juice begins to run down my throat. My tongue begins to go numb. I feel suspiciously jolly. “Too much of that and you’ll start to see bizarre things!” says Basile. “You’ll feel a dark force.” He looks into my eyes. “Ah,” he says, “but I see it’s already too late.”

Ten minutes later there are birds flying out of the ground. But no, there really are, for out on the grasslands near a patch of forest is a huge colony of river martins, once thought extinct, and, detecting us, they come rocketing from their underground chambers and up into the air. It’s an incredibly strange sight, as though the earth had suddenly spouted an avian geyser. But it’s neither quite as strange nor quite as alarming as the probing hairy trunk which appears out of the darkness at the bush camp dinner that evening and alights delicately on a bread roll, or the sound of crashing about later that night as the trunk’s owner demolishes the cookhouse and makes off with the breakfast croissants, truly the dark force of Basile’s predictions.

And though I wake the following morning reassured that the previous day’s excursions into *ibago*-land are now yesterday’s news, the next day becomes, if anything, odder than the one before. Deciding to play it safe, I say I’d like to take a short kayak trip up a black river creek followed by a walk in the forest in the hope, perhaps, of hearing a chimp or, catching a glimpse of a silverback gorilla. But the short kayak trip is shorter than either Basile, my guide, and I anticipate, for we have only paddled a mile or two when a set of giant, fetid-smelling

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Clockwise from top:
The river pavilion at Loango Lodge
Akaka Forest Camp is both a riverside base for Operation Loango's boat trips and a park surveillance point manned by eco-guards who scan the surroundings for suspicious activity as well as collecting data on the flora and fauna on the edge of Petit Loango National Park
A forest elephant, spotted on the edge of the jungle near Akaka Camp
Forest buffalo gather in the park's *bais*, or clearings
A family of western lowland gorilla



Gabon factfile

Capital and international airport Libreville (LBV)

Time zone GMT+1

Language French plus Fang, Eshira and 40 other African languages

Religion 60% Christian; 40% Muslim and animist

Visas Required by travellers from the UK, New Zealand, Australia, USA and Canada; if you book your trip through a tour operator they will usually arrange this. Gabonese embassy in the UK: 27 Elvaston Place, London SW7, tel 020 7823 9986.

Health Yellow fever certificate required. Anti-malarials essential.

Currency CFA franc.

Climate Tropical: hot and humid all year round, with rainy seasons from February to May and October to November. November is the rainiest month.

Notable fauna Western lowland gorilla, chimpanzee, mandrill and numerous other monkey species, forest elephant, hippo, forest buffalo, Congo clawless otter, African golden cat, Congo sitatunga, red river hog, manatee, humpback whale, over 670 bird species.

Getting there Royal Air Maroc (www.royalairmaroc.com) flies from

London Gatwick to Libreville via Casablanca twice weekly. Air France (www.airfrance.com) flies to Libreville from Paris CDG and SN Brussels Airlines flies to Douala in neighbouring Cameroon.

Accommodation Operation Loango (www.operation-loango.com) has five small rustic lodges and camps within Loango National Park, some with tents and some with more comfortable sleeping quarters and French-style cuisine.

Tour operators Tim Best Travel (www.timbesttravel.com) can arrange trips to Gabon starting from £1,675pp for seven nights in the Loango National Park with Operation Loango, including full board, all excursions in the park, all internal flights and transfers, but excluding international flights. Other operators include: Birdquest (www.birdquest.co.uk), Discovery Initiatives (www.discoveryinitiatives.co.uk), Explore (www.explore.co.uk), Pulse Africa (www.pulseafrica.com) and Rainbow Tours (www.rainbowtours.com).

Find out more Gabontour (www.gabontour.ga) provides tourist information in French. *Gabon, São Tomé & Príncipe: the Bradt Travel Guide* (1st edition, 2003) is the only English language guidebook.

A slender-snouted crocodile hangs out on the branch of a tree



BOTH PICTURES: OPERATION LOANGO

jaws surges up from the creek bed, grabs the kayak and proceeds to turn the thing, and us, over. The thought rushes through my head that I am about to die not from the hippo attack itself but from the sheer force of bad breath. Rising to the occasion, Basile steadies the kayak, the hippo crashes back into the water and is gone. We return to the lodge, where the incident is met with a kind of shrug of mild amusement as if to say, this is Gabon, what do you expect?

That afternoon, we are driving in a 4x4 towards the forest to look for gorillas when a large silverback suddenly appears, sits himself down not fifteen metres from us and measures up his chances of making it across the clearing. He's a thrilling sight, a great, tense bulge of muscle and maleness. We discover, later, that this is M'bolo, Old Man, one of the family of gorillas the primate researchers are trying to habituate, first to their presence, and, later, to tourists like us. In a few years' time gorilla-watching here will be regulated and expensive (or let's hope so, for M'bolo's sake) but for now it is simply a matter of mooching around and being up for some surprises.

We finish the day with a long moonlit walk along the beach, spotting turtle nests (we come across many recent ones but no accompanying turtles) and enjoying a swim in the sea.

"Any encounters with bull sharks?" asks the lodge manager that evening and, seeing the look on my face, adds, "Ooh, don't worry, there are plenty around but we haven't had any fatalities so far."

Even by African standards, this is a wild spot, wilder than any I've encountered so far on my travels on the continent, and Operation Loango is, shall we

say, relaxed about its safety precautions. I was not reassured to see that the guides don't even carry radios. For now, though, if you're prepared to forego not only lions and rhino (Gabon has only three of the Big Five) but also some of the slick organisation you'd normally expect for these kinds of prices, if you're happy to put up with a little roughness around the edges and you speak a little French, you can visit a magnificent country so genuinely untamed that, walking about, you have the strong sense of following in the footsteps of the ancients and feeling the world as they might have felt it: wild, dangerous even, brim with daily astonishments, and quite thrillingly, uniquely raw. ●

■ *Melanie McGrath travelled with Tim Best Travel and Royal Air Maroc.*

Since 2004, a team of primatologists from the Max Planck Institute have been working with local Pygmy trackers to habituate several families of western lowland gorilla to humans. In the future, Operation Loango hopes to launch a gorilla-watching programme for tourists

Below: Elephant-spotting from one of Operation Loango's safari vehicles

