



Republic of Congo & Central African Republic Lowland Gorilla & Forest Elephant Safari

Join me for a thirteen day safari to Nouabale-Ndoki National Park in the Republic of Congo and Dzangha-Sangha National Park in the Central African Republic. The tropical forests of these two Congo Basin parks comprise the world's largest rainforests after those of the Amazonian Basin.

I have room for seven guests. These parks accept only a limited number of visitors. Some camps accept only four at a time. A maximum sized group of eight therefore divides into two once it arrives in the park; each sub-group then alternates its visits to the various park destinations.

This is challenging travel pure and simple. Participants must be physically fit: We hike into camps; wade through flooded forest; and track gorillas through heavy vegetation. Guests must be prepared to accept the discomfort of long boat rides and bumpy roads in a 4 x 4; no-frills accommodations and food; a hot climate; and possible travel delays—in other words, all the unexpected events of travel in the developing world that is arguably even more acute here. Come with patience, an open mind and a love of adventure. The reward is entry to what National Geographic photographer Michael Nicholls has called Nouabale-Ndoki National Park—“The last place on earth.”

When: Departs Brazzaville October 20, 2008; returns Brazzaville November 1, 2008.

Overview of the Congo Basin parks: The tri-national parks of the Central African basin include Dzanga-Ndoki National Park in the Central Africa Republic; Nouabale-Ndoki National Park in the Republic of Congo; and Lobeke National Park in Cameroon. These parks must be considered as among the most beautiful, *accessible* rainforests in Africa, and the last of their kind on the planet. We are visiting two out of three of these parks.

Dzanga-Ndoki National Park is the ancestral home of Ba'Aka pygmies who have helped establish its current tourism program. The park shelters diverse wildlife such as forest elephants, lowland gorillas, buffaloes, sitatunga and bongo antelopes, warthogs, numerous monkey species, leopards and a long list of endemic birds, which can be viewed from platform hides built above natural mineral clearings in the forests called bais or salines. Nowhere else in Central Africa do you have such a high probability of seeing all this wildlife in one place.

Nouabale-Ndoki National Park offers similar attractions to DSNP but with one important distinction: its forests are pristine. They have never been logged. They are surrounded by swamps which make it difficult for poachers to access the forest for its trees and for the wildlife it protects.

The principal activity of NNNP is wildlife observation at Mbeli Bai. The lowland gorillas feed on a fruit here unique to this forest clearing. Mbeli Bai is also known for its sightings of forest elephants, sitatunga antelope, buffalo, red river hogs, otters, and crocodiles. Recently opened Mondika Camp is the best place to track a family of 12 habituated lowland gorillas.

Itinerary:

Day One: We depart Brazzaville, ROC on Mistral Air for Ouessou, a two hour flight. Mistral Air is a South African airline operating in ROC and the most reliable service between Brazzaville and Ouessou. Arriving mid-morning, we depart for Bomassa, park headquarters for Nouabale-Ndoki National Park, by pirogue up the Sangha River, a journey of up to five hours. Tonight we overnight at the Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) Bomassa guesthouse.

Day Two: Bomassa is also the jumping off point for visits to Dzangha-Ndoki National Park in the Central African Republic. We are visiting DNNP first. After breakfast, we travel once again by pirogue to the CAR and ROC border at Lidjombo. After official formalities we transfer to 4 x 4 vehicles which bring us the remaining distance to Bayanga, park headquarters. For the next five nights we remain at Bayanga's comfortable Doli Lodge overlooking the river. Next to the Doli Lodge is an interesting information center on the park's conservation projects.

Days Three, Four, Five and Six: Throughout the next 4 days it may be necessary to split up our group in order to undertake the different activities as follows:

Bai Hokou Research Camp – from here we track the only habituated lowland gorillas from their sleeping point the previous night. This is currently the largest number of lowland habituated gorillas (16) in Central Africa. Very few people have had the opportunity to be with them.

Dzangha Bai – this is a natural forest clearing where a variety of forest animals come to feed on the rich mineral salts found in the soil. Observing from a tree-line hide we hope to see forest elephant (there is daily average of 40-120 sighted in the Bai), bongos (the largest and heaviest forest antelope), sitatunga (swamp-dwelling antelope), red river hog and many bird species.

Ba'Aka Folk – we have the opportunity to mingle with the local pygmy tribe and to take part in their traditional net hunting in the forest. We will learn about their life in the forest, such as the medicinal plant gathering by Ba'Aka women.

Day Seven: We return to Bomassa by retracing our steps of Day Two. There should be time in the afternoon to walk to an interesting bai near park headquarters. We overnight at the Bomassa WCS Guesthouse.

Day Eight: We begin our visit proper to Nouabale-Ndoki National Park. We hike to Mondika Camp which involves a three hour trek through the forest. One area of this forest is flooded which requires immersion in knee to hip-high water. In Mondika Camp's vicinity are a family of habituated lowland gorillas. The camp has only recently opened to visitors and takes only four people at a time. (A larger group divides into two; while one visits Mondika the other visits Mbeli.) We remain here for two nights. Mondika Camp consists of tents under thatch shelters. Long drop toilet and showers are outside.

Day Nine: Mondika Camp. We trek to see habituated lowland gorillas.

Day Ten: We return to Bomassa headquarters by retracing our steps through the flooded forest of Day Nine. From Bomassa we take a short drive to another river where we set off by pirogue to Mbeli Camp, which takes about an hour. Within a forty minute walk of camp is Mbeli Bai, an extensive forest clearing several hundred meters in length, where wildlife such as elephant, gorillas, buffalo and antelope come to feed. They can be observed from a hide located in the tree-line. We overnight at Mbeli Camp, which consists of four bungalows on stilts. There is no electricity. Showers and long drop toilets are outside.

Day Eleven: We remain at Mbeli Camp.

Day Twelve: We return to Bomassa by pirogue and vehicle and overnight at the WCS Guesthouse.

Day Thirteen: It's a 5:30 am departure for Ouessou by pirogue in order to catch Mistral Air's 10:30 am departure for Brazzaville.

What safari includes

Internal air ticket (Brazzaville – Ouessou – Brazzaville)

Ground transportation and transfers

Boat rides (Ouessou – Bomassa – Bayanga – Bomassa – Ouessou)

Shared accommodation; there is no single supplement available.

Full board

One gorilla tracking per participant per national park.

One mangabey tracking permit (DNNP)

Two Bai walk (DNNP)

Net hunting with Ba'Aka (DNNP)

Two nights comfortable but no-frills accommodation in Brazzaville (pre-departure night and safari completion night; extra nights in Brazzaville are additional.)

What safari excludes

International flights

Visas

Tips

Drinks

Laundry services

Items of a personal nature

Extra gorilla permits (payable on the spot dependent upon availability).

Cost

Cost is dependent upon number of participants. The safari will proceed with a minimum of 4 guests.

Price is quoted in Euros, the currency used by the parks. Calculated on 12-30-07, the US equivalent is subject to currency fluctuations.

I have planned for contingencies, but in Africa prices are subject to change without notice.

Four guests: E 4387 (\$6450.00 US)

Five guests: E4183 (\$6150.00 US)

Six guests: E 4027 (\$5850.00 US)

Seven guests: E 3809 (\$5600.00 US)

Visa requirements

Double entry visa for Republic of Congo and single entry visa for Central Africa Republic.

Vaccinations

All recommended vaccinations for international travel to developing countries, including Yellow Fever. Your health certificate will be checked upon arrival in Brazzaville. Malaria is present in Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic. It is strongly recommended that you take anti-malarial medication. Talk to your travel clinic about your options.

Getting to Brazzaville

Air France is the only direct flight to Brazzaville from Europe. Their flight departs Paris Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 10 am arriving 7 pm. (Their southern hemisphere winter schedule.) In my experience, the flight's departure from Paris often runs by an hour late. It is a turn-around flight: it departs Brazzaville for Paris at 9 pm Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Ethiopian is another carrier into Brazzaville from the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa. You would need to fly to Addis from Europe with either Ethiopian or KLM.

This daily Addis flight stops briefly in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, before arriving in Brazzaville mid-morning. It too is a turn-around flight.

There are flights to Brazzaville from Johannesburg, South Africa on a South African airline called InterAir. Inter Air also flies Brazzaville to other West African capitals.

It happens that flights are delayed returning to Brazzaville from Ouessou. Mistral Air, the most reliable airline between Brazzaville and the north of the country, flies Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays. In this case, we expect to return on their Sat Nov 1st flight. If you intend flying in and out of ROC on Air France then you have a cushion of two days before the next Air France flight on Monday night.

Two nights of accommodation are included in your final safari cost, arrival night and the night you return from Ouessou. I will make the best arrangements for extra nights of accommodation after discussing with each guest their individual travel plans, comfort level and needs.

More about Brazzaville

There is nothing that one must see or do in the ROC's capital of Brazzaville. It lacks fancy accommodations and cuisine and infrastructure such as water, electricity and roads is very poor. (I have gone weeks without power at my house.) However, this backwater ambiance and lack of sophistication are what make Brazzaville appealing too.

In my experience, it is safe to move about on foot and poke into all of Brazzaville's colorful street life. There is a morning's worth of cultural encounters and interactions on one short walk; a day's worth if you enter one of the city's market's such as Total and Poto Poto where you will find entire streets devoted to the sale of vivid fabrics from all over the West African world. This immersion in the markets is exhilarating but not for the faint of heart. There is noise, heat, and a press of humanity to deal with as well as plastic bag litter that is the city's scourge. On the other hand, people are friendly and for the most part enjoy having their photos taken which is not the case in East Africa. (You should still ask permission first.) Rough Guide's CDs of Congolese music don't call the Congo "Heart of Danceness" for nothing. Music is an essential part of life in the ROC. If you chase down the music you hear at all hours of the day and night you may find a church choir practicing in an empty lot under the mango or flamboyant trees.

Only five kilometers from Brazzaville are "Les Rapides", the same cataracts which put an end to nineteenth century Central African explorers' (such as Stanley) dreams of traveling the entire Congo River to the sea as the means of opening up viable trade routes for the colonialists which followed them. Les Rapides is a good place to relax on a Sunday afternoon over a cold drink while watching the tough as leather local lads dive into the swiftly moving river and be swept along in the current until they can make it to shore—a foolhardy practice for the benefit of observers who they hope will pay them a few Congolese francs for their courage.

If you speak French your experience here will be all that more rewarding.

Gorilla Tracking and Observation/Useful Attire

Although we wear face masks when we are with the gorillas, we also keep a significant distance from them and stay no more than an hour in order to minimize the possibility of transferring any of our human illnesses. If you are ill upon arrival in the parks it is necessary to forego your visits to the habituated families.

Tracking and following these animals is rough on your clothes. Long sleeves, pants, good boots, even some hardy gloves, are necessary to protect against scratches from vegetation. Long sleeves and pants also protect against the tsetse flies which are present in some areas of forest. For the hike through flooded forest, a good pair of rubber shoes is recommended. These are rainforests so light raingear is an excellent idea too.

Good Reading on the Congo

Jeffrey Taylor: *Facing the Congo: A Modern Day Journey into the Heart of Darkness*.
Redmond O'Hanlon: *No Mercy: A Journey into the Heart of the Congo*.

Leslie Nevison

www.mamatembotours.com

leslie@mamatembotours.com