

Gift of the Gabon

The Guardian

Gabon has an astonishing variety of wildlife - the only place in the world you can see gorillas, hippos surfing the waves and whales in the same day. And now it aims to become the Costa Rica of Africa. Melanie McGrath reports

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Surf 'n' turf ... forest elephants comes down to the beach to frolic at Loango National Park.

"Of all the rooms at Loango Lodge," says Serge, fussing with the shutters of an immaculate okoumé wood bungalow overlooking Iguéla lagoon in the small central African republic of Gabon, "this is Mr Rombout's favourite. He's coming here you know, very soon, they say. You may even get to meet him."

Serge leaves me to admire the view of sharp blue waters softening to treacle at the banks where trees and jungle lianas dip down to meet them. In the reeds below the bungalow, a large black and yellow ornate monitor lizard suns itself and a clutch of African grey parrots clatters in the shade of an oil palm overhead. Loango Lodge is Rombout Swanborn's dream. It is also his great gamble. From his favourite room overlooking Iguéla, it's easy to see why he took it.

Son of a Dutch Shell employee and a teacher, Swanborn spent much of his childhood in Gabon during the oil boom years of the 1970s which made this highly urbanised, sparsely populated and still largely forested country one of the richest and most stable in sub-Saharan Africa. Swanborn struck gold at an early age by inventing a device to separate oil from water out on the rigs and in 2000 he established a fishing lodge on the edge of an area of coastal forest in the south of the country in a region known as Loango.

Two years later, with his eye on the diminishing oil reserves, President Omar Bongo signed over 28,500 sq km of Gabonese rainforest, savannah and coastline to create the country's first national park system and, he hoped, a new tourist economy. Rombout Swanborn seized the moment, sinking \$7m into Operation Loango, which now constitutes the largest and most impressive of the joint ventures dreamed up by government, private enterprise and the Wildlife Conservation Society, among others, to kick-start eco-tourism in this lovely, emerald-forested gem of a country.

It's probably no coincidence that about 11% of Gabon is now national park, a percentage matched only by Costa Rica. All the talk at Loango is of Gabon as the future Costa Rica of Africa, an unspoiled, high-end eco-tourist destination. The comparison isn't as strange as it might sound. Aside from their fabulous natural heritage, both countries are the stable, relatively wealthy exceptions in unstable, impoverished regions; both have governments supportive (at least for the moment) of tourist development; and both believe in harnessing private enterprise to fund national environmental and conservation initiatives. Already, Operation Loango has funded primate research and a beach clean-up.

Swanborn's Operation Loango, the plush fly-in lodge with those immaculate bungalows, plus a series of smaller lodges and bush camps strategically placed around Loango national park and a couple of research camps, is currently a prototype for the kind of eco-tourist development Bongo and Swanborn would like to see developed in Gabon's 12 other new parks and, for the visitor at least, a good place to start. According to Dr Lee White, the British head of the Wildlife Conservation Society in Gabon, Loango is "the most beautiful park in Africa".

He may well be right. Serge and I took a boat trip around the park's whisky-coloured rivers and blue lagoons, into the still, musty gloaming of the rainforest and then out once more into the blaring sun, across an estuary towards the Atlantic and Loango's 100km of empty, soft-sanded shoreline. Every so often we moored up, surprising a herd of red river hogs, with their tufty ears and Star Wars' Yoda faces, or stopping to watch a group of forest elephants that had come down to the shoreline to graze on ibago, a hallucinogenic root. Loango is the only place in the world where you can see gorillas, chimpanzees, buffalo, turtles and humpback whales within a stone's throw of one another; the only place in the world where forest elephants come down on to the beach and hippos surf the waves. This variety was one of the reasons I'd come. The other was to try to spot one of the country's 35,000 Western Lowland gorillas.

Gorillas were part of the reason Bongo decided to create the parks, after listening to a presentation by Lee White and Mike Fay. Fay is an American naturalist who completed a 2,000-mile, 456-day trek called the "Megatransect" of the great Congo basin jungle which comprises the largest area of undisturbed rainforest in Africa and of which Gabon is a part. During his trek, Fay came across populations of so-called naive gorillas and chimpanzees, apes that had never come across human beings and so had no fear of them. It seemed like a good time to act.

The jungle of the Congo basin is the setting for Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart Of Darkness*. Its hero, Marlow, describes his experience as "like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world". This is what attracted Swanborn and his millions to this former French colony, as it attracted the fictional Kurtz before him. Gabon really is the Africa of black water rivers and misty, primeval swamp forest; the Africa of pygmies and mythical dinosaurs; the Africa which, 100 years ago, lent the Dark Continent its mystique and its name. Serge, his fellow eco-guide Basile and I wandered across Loango for days without seeing another human being. Only a few washed-up plastic bottles on the beach and, out at sea, a necklace of oil rigs served as reminders of the times.

The only large predator species in Gabon are leopards, shy nocturnal creatures, and crocs (all three African species - the Nile, the African dwarf and the slender-snouted - live at Loango) so punch-drunk on fish they'd be unlikely to bother with human

beings. A rather nasty snake, the Gabon viper, lives in the forest and there are the real but limited dangers presented by elephants, hippos and gorillas, but the attitude towards these animals is relaxed, or reckless, depending on your view. In our search for gorillas, Basile and I were caught out while kayaking on a backwater creek too narrow for comfort or, as I realised all too late, for safety, by a gnarly hippo, who tried to bring the kayak down. Basile immediately steadied the boat and we were fine, though shaken. Back at the lodge, the incident was met with a Gallic shrug, as if to say, well, yeah, you know, merde happens.

The upside of this randomness is the freedom to do your own thing, including gorilla-spotting. There are no expensive licences to be bought, no medicals to undergo, no time-limits as there generally are in the gorilla-watching parks in Uganda or Rwanda. Serge, Basile and I just hung out.

We were meandering in the savannah one day when from the edge of the forest a lone silverback suddenly appeared only 15 metres ahead of us. Coming face to face so unexpectedly with this fantastically muscular hulk in all his terrific, shaggy wildness was stupendously exciting. He sat and watched us for a while, weighing the risk of crossing a patch of open ground to reach the forest on the other side. Finally he ventured out, then lost his nerve and knuckle-cantered back to his previous spot. Two minutes later he gathered his courage, made a second foray and this time reached the other side and disappeared into the trees, stopping only for a final look back at us.

Researchers working at Operation Loango later told us our silverback was almost certainly M'bolo (Old Man), as they'd called him. He had crossed that way before. You can tell it's him, they said, because he smells of sponge cake. They are hoping to habituate M'bolo, initially to their presence, then to that of visitors like us. At which point, gorilla watching in Gabon may well become as expensive and as regulated as it is in Rwanda or Uganda. And for M'bolo's sake, let's hope it does.

One of those rooting for Gabon to go Costa Rica's way is the South African tourism manager at Loango Lodge, Edward Truter. "Gabon has the potential to become the Costa Rica of Africa, but it'll take 10 years," he says. For those who can come equipped with some French, flexibility and a willingness to endure a little roughness around the edges, the place has a great deal to offer: high canopy primary rainforest, savannah, mangrove and white sand beach around which live 60,000 forest elephants, 64,000 chimpanzees, six species of whale, including, during June and July, around 3,000 humpbacks, three species of marine turtle, supertroops of rare mandrills, manatees and, of course, those gorillas.

On my last night at Loango, Basile took me on a moonlit walk along the beach looking for nesting turtles. We saw only a few recent turtle nests, a few forest elephants, some cat and mongoose tracks, bats and a Nile croc, but it was warm and the forest was singing with night things, and way out at sea the Mordor-like flares of the rigs which first brought Rombout Swanborn to these shores glowed tangerine. I thought of M'bolo and hoped Gabon would Costa Rica-fy quickly enough to protect him but imperfectly enough to leave the country feeling as wild and old as it does now.

The next day, the Lodge's Cessna having suddenly become unavailable, reserved, I suspected, for Swanborn's imminent visit, I left Loango for Port Gentil, a four-hour

boat journey along the M'pivie river with its red-black water and slowly whorling papyrus islands. We stopped briefly to admire St Ann's, an obscure mission designed by Gustav Eiffel, now elegantly colonised by hornets. I brushed the sweat from my eyes and in the doing of it flushed a colony of epauletted fruit bats from their perches. For a moment, I felt just like Kate Hepburn in *The African Queen*, waiting for my Bogie.

Way to go

Getting there

Tim Best Travel (020-75910300, timbesttravel.com) can arrange trips to Gabon starting from £1,675pp for seven nights in the Loango national park, including full-board, all excursions in the park, all internal flights and transfers, but excluding international flights. Royal Air Maroc (020-7307 5810, royalairmaroc.com) flies from London Gatwick to Libreville, Gabon, via Casablanca twice weekly from £419 return including all taxes.

Further information

Country code: 00 241.

Flight time London-Libreville via Casablanca: 24 hours, including an overnight stopover.

Time difference: +1hr.

£1 = 953 CFA francs.

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