

Viewing pleasures

With settings from *Out of Africa* to the *Heart of Darkness*, Loango National Park offers such a varied landscape that, as **Sarah Monaghan** discovers, each day's safari is a new episode

STARTLED BY THE muffled yelps, Dimitri, our guide, looked around sharply, half expecting perhaps to see a wild animal on his tail.

After all, that was why we were creeping like commandos through the trees. Instead, he saw three khaki-dressed tourists squirming and whacking at their legs like drunken slap dancers.

"Oh *merde*. Fire ants!" he yelled. "Keep hitting – they won't stop biting until you have killed them all."

Until that moment, we had been doing well at mimicking his light step across the damp rainforest floor. Dimitri had instinctively avoided the pulsating nest that I and my companions Bob, from America, and his 12-year-old daughter Alex had all blundered through.

Dimitri stood there patiently while, for the next five minutes, we spanked dementedly at the stinging termites running inside and outside our trousers. We then moved on as quietly as we could, eyeing the ground warily.

Under the leafy canopy, the air was wet-hot, like a sauna in a crammed greenhouse. Thousands of unseen insects buzzed and whirred and a yellow-throated tinkerbird was emitting an incessant techno-beep call of *hu-hu-hu-hu*.

Stepping around the deeply-furrowed trunk of a colossal *Sacoglottis* tree, whose yeasty fruits are a favourite with elephants, we paused to watch a fist-sized iron-plated red-legged millipede scramble up a branch.

In our determination to tread softly, we were all staring so hard at the forest floor that we nearly fell over Dimitri, squatting with an

excited look on his face. "Down!" he gestured. "Chimpanzees."

We crouched. Dark brown shapes were moving in the trees. Following Dimitri's lead, we crept forward. The shapes were distinctly ape-like now. Crack! The snap of a twig (and afterwards nobody would say whose foot it was) and they became a blur and the rainforest a frenzy of alarm as the chimpanzees went berserk at our intrusion into their kingdom, beating at trees, whooping and screaming like dervishes. Moments later they had gone.

Savannah sundowner

Exhilarated by what felt like a very primeval encounter, we pushed towards the daylight and onto the breezy savannah. But immediately Dimitri was waving us down again.

We had walked onto a herd of glossy-coated red river hogs. Some two dozen were snuffling in the long grass, the boars with floppy leaf-shaped ears, white flaring whiskers and razor-edged tusks. These ungulates are famed for their outstanding sense of smell but it took them several minutes to detect us, finally careering off en masse into the trees, their large rears wobbling comically.

We headed back to camp in the Land Rover for a sundowner. The vehicle, escorted by swooping long-legged pipit birds, bumped along sand tracks that shone bright white in the sunlight.

Tassi Savannah camp's restaurant and lounge area curves around a gnarled *Manilkara* tree. Here, comfortable tents are mounted on palm-thatched platforms with open-air bathrooms. But the real luxury is isolation – it is reached by boat and 4x4, →



JOHN VAN HEUVERT



Clockwise: A red river hog – these gregarious creatures live in groups of up to 100; an aerial view of Loango’s savannah and gallery forest seen from the aircraft (inset); tourists trek through the forest; African forest buffalo on the savannah near Tassi – these animals often wander onto the beach and even bathe in the ocean where they find respite from the flies and parasites that follow them; ecoguide Dimitri approaches an elephant feeding on the grasslands – during the rainy season forest elephants spend more time feeding on savannah; sunset falls on the pristine beach at Tassi



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and offers 360-degree views across coastal grasslands which run down to a wild beach where hippos roam between the brackish lagoons and the ocean.

I was looking forward to slumping on a sofa on the terrace; instead we were treated first to an unexpected sighting. An elephant was meandering through camp. Her ears flared and her tail went up at the sound of our vehicle and she made a quick exit towards the beach.

As the gin and tonic crackled on ice, the honeyed evening glow faded to reveal a moving pool of sunlight on the savannah. Through the binoculars, it turned out to be a yellow-backed duiker – a slender-legged antelope with a grey coat and astonishing dash of yellow on its rump. A herd of buffalo came into view, stared at us, then continued grazing.

“I like the way of viewing wildlife at Loango,” mused Bob. “The animals appear when you least expect them. A visit here has the slow choreographed pace of a Buster Keaton movie rather than the big showy scenes of *The Lion King*.”

My viewing pleasure and sense of discovery was increased by a circuit that allowed me to sleep in a different site each night. I had flown into the park the day before from Port Gentil, via Libreville, on a six-seater Pilatus Porter operated by Africa’s Connection, owned by the tour company Africa’s Eden.

The bird’s eye view on arrival really gave a taste of the diverse landscapes to be discovered: the 1,550 sq km park on Gabon’s Atlantic west coast encompasses rainforest, mangroves, savannah, palm-studded salt

marshes, lagoons and beaches, and some 100 km of deserted coastline. Its geography means there is the opportunity to see an exceptional mix of wildlife, depending on the season, including humpback whales, marine turtles, hippos, elephants, gorillas, monkeys, buffalo and hundreds of species of birds.

Exclusive ecotourism

Africa’s Eden, which operates at Loango, has recently opened lodges in São Tomé and Príncipe and plans to introduce another in the Central African Republic. In Gabon, it developed from a tourism and conservation project called Operation Loango begun by Dutch oilman Rombout Swanborn in 2002. He grew up in nearby Gamba where his father worked for the oil company Shell and his childhood was filled with rainforest wildlife, with his school holidays spent fishing in the area’s lagoons.

His aim, he says, has been to develop low-impact luxury ecotourism. “What Loango National Park can offer is authentic nature for people to experience in an exclusive manner. I want to keep Loango small-scale and high-end,” says Mr Swanborn. “We will never have 20 Jeeps around a waterhole with guides shining torches into animals’ eyes here like they do on budget safaris in southern Africa.”

Exclusivity is assisted by the park’s organisation. It has a maximum capacity for 40 tourists at any one time across its five satellite camps and main lodge. While I was there, staff were discreetly preparing for a visit by members of the Dutch royal family.

The park is host to an assortment of →



SARAH MONAGHAN



“Our candlelit dinner was punctuated by monkey calls. As darkness fell, the lagoon’s frogs struck up, their croaks so loud we had to raise our voices”

scientific projects, some part-funded by the money earned from tourism. These include research and monitoring studies of whales, manatees, crocodiles and turtles by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and the Worldwide Fund for Nature.

Screaming silverbacks

Dr Lee White, WCS director of conservation strategy for the Ogooué and Congo Basins, describes Loango National Park as “the jewel in the crown” of Gabon’s 13 national parks. “It is a really good example of conservation taking place on the back of a well-organised tourism infrastructure,” he says.

In the north of the park, primatologists from the Max Planck Institute are habituating groups of western lowland gorillas and chimpanzees, and it is hoped that tourists will eventually be able to view them.

However, habituation of the western lowland gorillas will take longer than it does with mountain gorillas because they forage further for food, says Dr Martha Robbins who leads the research.

“Habituation here will mean up to five years’ hard work,” she tells me. “We are at the stage where we are tracking the gorillas successfully and they are accepting of our presence, but the silverbacks still scream if we go too close.”

Evengué was my introduction to the park – a palm-fringed island located on the Fernan Vaz Lagoon, named after its first Portuguese explorer. This is the site of a very different

gorilla project: a sanctuary and rehabilitation scheme for bushmeat orphans.

Here primate vet Nick Bachand is doing the polar opposite of the Max Planck people: rehabilitating apes to the wild rather than habituating them to tourists in the wild. Nick took me to meet the Gabonese keepers who spend all day in the forest with young gorillas, then return them to a ‘nursery’ at night. “It used to be that gorillas had to follow keepers around; here it’s the other way round,” he says.

Later this year, six of his juveniles are to be set free on an islet in the lagoon. Meantime, in the absence of their parents, the apes’ keepers are preparing them for their great escape by training them in basic survival skills.

There are seven wooden bungalows with verandahs at Evengué, all fitted with four-poster beds fashioned from forest vines and draped with cotton mosquito nets. Our waterside candlelit three-course dinner was punctuated by the chattering of grey parrots and barking calls of putty-nosed monkeys. As darkness fell, the lagoon’s frogs struck up, their croaks so loud we had to raise our voices to hear each other.

After a spectacular tropical thunderstorm, the next day dawned bright and I left early in a motorised pirogue, gliding across the lagoon accompanied by sparkling blue dragonflies, jumping fish and soaring palm nut vultures.

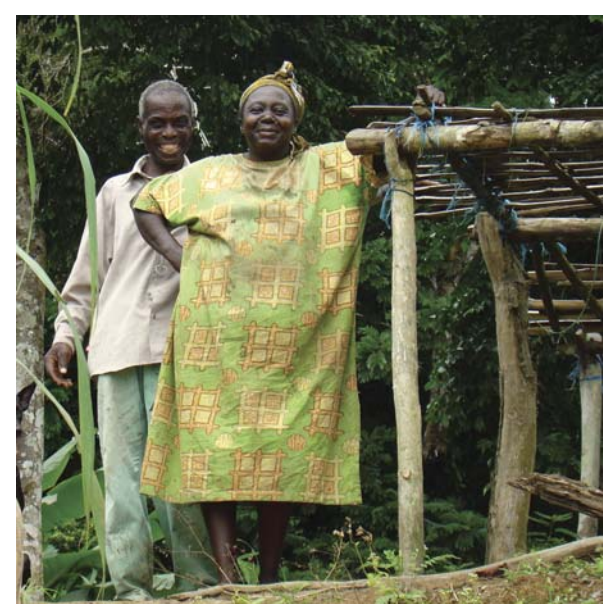
We tethered the boat to visit St Anne, a crumbling church with a vaulted iron frame designed by Gustave Eiffel in 1887, two years before completion of his Parisian landmark. →



Clockwise: Mirror-like reflections on the River Mpvié; ecoguide Yves motors the pirogue across Fernan Vaz Lagoon; a Bwiti ceremony is observed by Rombout Swanborn, owner of Loango Lodge and founder of Africa’s Eden; Evengué Lodge is located on an island which serves as a gorilla sanctuary where apes are kept in a semi-natural captive setting; a group of bushmeat orphans is being rehabilitated to the wild here and will soon be released onto an islet in the lagoon. Inset: Arrival at Evengué Lodge by motorised pirogue



SARAH MONGHANI, JOHN VAN HEUVERT



Clockwise: Loango Lodge; villager Mère Hélène has a small plantation and supplies the lodge with bananas, spinach and chilli peppers – the lodge has built up good relations with the small communities living inside the park; the open-fronted long bar at the lodge overlooks the savannah hills and Iguela Lagoon; a local fisherman on Iguela Lagoon. Inset: Breakfast and sunset from the deserted beach at St Catherine's Point



The remote lakeside mission was originally founded by a wealthy French priest and today 60 pupils are still educated by a Catholic foundation. It was an eerie place. Termites munched noisily on the original wooden pews and the voices of children singing hymns echoed from the school behind.

A graveyard bore witness to the lives of the nuns and priests who had died here over the century; many had succumbed young to the hardships of tropical existence, including Hyacinth Antini, the adopted daughter of the great colonial explorer Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza.

Leaving the lagoon, we entered the shrunken horizons of the narrow River Mpié. Impenetrable trees, giant ferns and mangrove stumps crowded in over ink-black water, pungent with the smell of vegetal decomposition. I expected to see Kurtz from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* come crawling from the undergrowth. So glassy still was the water that it projected a lustrous reflection of the swamp forest above it, creating verdant kaleidoscopic symmetries.

Every now and then, a blue Senegal kingfisher flashed past and we would drift by a sleepy dwarf crocodile slumbering on a low sunny branch. A *sitatunga* – a semi-aquatic antelope – swimming through the water rapidly changed direction at our approach.

Arriving at Loango Lodge, an impressive parasol-shaped structure built on stilts over Iguela Lagoon, we were brought back to the 21st century. At its long open-fronted padouk bar, guests were sipping cool drinks and sharing wildlife sightings. The lodge is run by Philippe Duplessis, an energetic Frenchman who oversees the safari activities and a well-trained team of 20 ecoguides, and his elegant wife Sylvie, responsible for the excellent French-style menu its kitchens offer.

Heady atmosphere

That evening, a tribal Bwiti ceremony at a nearby village transported me back to darkest Africa. Kaolin-daubed male and female dancers, under the influence of the hypnosis-inducing Iboga root, stomped to a relentless drum beat in a heady atmosphere of burning resin, and men in swirling raffia costumes leapt through fire.

My final day and night, spent at St Catherine's Beach Camp, blew away the last traces of smoke clinging to my clothes. This small tented camp faces onto a stretch of wild pristine beach where the Iguela Lagoon meets the Atlantic Ocean. Here the tannin-red freshwater collides with the briny deep and the water boils with huge snapper and barracuda.

These nutrient-rich waters are so thick with fish that they have won a special reputation

with adventure fishermen. I spent a morning at sea trying to learn to cast with the appropriately named Jonas, an energetic ecoguide specialised in sport fishing who could shoot his line towards the horizon with an enviably effortless flick of the wrist.

That evening, I met wildlife consultant Jaco Ackermann on St Catherine's Beach. A former game ranger for Serengeti and Kruger National Parks, he was excited by the rawness of Loango. "There's nothing quite like this place in Africa," he told me. "Nowhere else offers this kind of variety in terms of scenery or wildlife safari possibilities."

We walked for miles along the deserted beach collecting shells, clambering over skeletal driftwood logs bleached white by the sun and watching ghost crabs dart across the sand. Scores of fresh elephant tracks crisscrossed the beach. Later we gathered for an aperitif of fresh sashimi with soy sauce and lemon, followed by barbecued brochettes prepared from king fish caught that day and served à table on the beach against a blood-red sunset.

No electricity here meant that paraffin lamps at night cast shadows across the sand as the flames moved in time with the sea breezes. I fell asleep to the rhythmic sound of the waves. ■

Sarah Monaghan



WAY TO GO

Most foreign passport holders (South Africans excepted) require a visa to visit Gabon. Gabon is French-speaking, however Loango Lodge staff speak English, French, Dutch, German and Afrikaans. The ecoguides speak mainly French but are undergoing English training.

The rainy season runs from October to May when temperatures are in the upper 20s to lower 30s (C°), with high humidity. There are heavy and often stormy downpours every one to two days, followed by clear skies. A coastal breeze means the rainy season is still a comfortable time to visit. The dry season runs from June to September. There is a mini-dry season during December, with warm and humid temperatures and clear skies.

Visitors to Gabon can fly to Libreville with Air France or Gabon Airlines via Paris, or with Royal Air Maroc via Casablanca. Prices per person for an eight-day visit to Loango National Park (including all safari activities and full board) start from \$3,693 (€2,353) with Africa's Eden, based on two people sharing. International flights are extra. Packages of 13 and 17 days combining a trip to Loango National Park with those of Ivindo and Lopé National Parks may also be booked.

For more information, visit www.africas-eden.com