



Nouabale-Ndoki (Republic of Congo) and Dzanga-Ndoki (Central African Republic) National Parks: Western Lowland Gorilla and Forest Elephant Safari

Be Among the First to Arrive!



This tour focuses on the only two habituated groups of western lowland gorillas in the world, wild gorilla sightings, as well as on Africa's highest densities of forest elephants. It is a true adventure and unique wildlife experience—only a handful of visitors make it to these Central African parks. Conservationist J Michael Fay, who pioneered conservation efforts in this remote area, has said that there are few places left which are truly wild. He counts the Congo Basin parks among them.

Travel Challenges:

Getting there: Currently, flying from Brazzaville, the ROC's capital, to Ouessou in its far north on Air Congo is the only viable means of access to the parks from within the ROC. Getting in and out of Congo's airports is an experience in itself. Typical problems with air travel in Congo are flights leaving early, late, or not at all—the country suffers from frequent fuel shortages. Delays in getting back to Brazzaville from Ouessou impact travellers the most since they want to connect uneventfully with their international departures. It has happened that we have had to return to Brazzaville from Ouessou by road, which involves poling across a river, catching a bush taxi and local bus, and overnighting in the town where the current Congolese president was born. *A safari is either an adventure or it isn't.*

Getting Around By Boat: Once in Ouessou, we travel by boat on the rivers which drain the Congo Basin. These river highways are magnificent, some of the best reasons to travel in Central Africa. Our boats are motorized pirogue, the local boats carved out of huge tropical hardwoods which have always served as transport here. We sit in camp chairs or seats of rattan which fit comfortably inside these traditional canoes. We can spend up to seven hours in them. On a day without cloud cover, the sun

can beat down relentlessly. In the event of the strong downpours the region gets, we may have to wait the weather out, taking shelter, otherwise the uncovered pirogue fills.

Getting Around By Car: Although we enter the Central African Republic by pirogue, there is some overland travel involved in that country. Doli Lodge, where we stay for the duration of our visit to the CAR, is outside Dzanga-Ndoki National Park. We therefore use battered 4 X 4 vehicles to drive to park destinations such as Dzanga Bai and Bai Houkou. Expect trips of one hour and more to these destinations on roads in poor condition.

Physical Fitness: This is a very active safari. When it comes to gorilla trekking, the habituated groups in both parks may be 30 minutes' walk from the camp or three hours. You will not know until you arrive at the starting point. In Dzanga-Ndoki, you drive to its center of gorilla operations and begin walking. In Nouabale-Ndoki, it is a two to three hour walk just to arrive at the starting point for a gorilla follow. The forest treks are not arduous in terms of elevation gain or loss. The terrain is for the most part flat so all that is really required is stamina. There are also patches of swamp to wade through (in Nouabale-Ndoki) and stretches of river to cross (in Dzanga-Ndoki). This requires wearing rubber shoes. The parks' other attractions are the bais, saline clearings in the middle of the forest which attract elephants, buffalo, sitatunga and bongo antelope, and gorilla. Accessing these bais requires more walking, which is why we spend all day at the observation towers which have been built overlooking the forest clearings.

Respect for Quiet: The ability to remain quiet, as you walk through the forest and for the long hours that you spend on the observation platforms, is a requirement of this tour. The trackers and guides enforce silence. Scientists on the platforms work in silence too. (Your days here offer you the opportunity to experience a researcher's life.) Wildlife conservation in Central Africa has supplanted a long tradition of hunting. Animals have long ago learned to fear man. The trackers who now habituate gorillas or who escort us through the forest, ever vigilant about spotting elephants, once hunted them. If we talk on the observation platforms the wildlife will leave the clearing. If we are noisy in the forest we risk startling gorillas and elephants. We need to be quiet as we walk through the forest so that our trackers can do their job and avoid any distressing man-wildlife confrontations.

Elephants: There are large numbers of elephants in these forests and there is always the chance that we encounter them. Our forest guides are unarmed. We are briefed before entering the forest to always stay close, remain quiet, and follow our guide's instructions at all times.

Annoyances: Primary rainforest is extremely humid. It can cool down dramatically at night but during the day, it is hot. There are also insects with which to deal—most of them of them harmless but annoying nevertheless, like the little sweat bees. Not so hard to ignore are tsetse flies, ticks, and the large biting army ants. A rainforest is arguably nature at its most indomitable. If you stand stationary long enough it attempts to break you down into leaf litter!

Accommodations and Food: In Congo's case, the accommodations are decidedly no-frills. At Nouabale-Ndoki National Park headquarters, Bomassa, it is usual for groups of visitors to sleep in the dormitory. In some cases, double rooms are available but these are at a premium with so many scientists in and out. At Mbeli Camp, we share raised wooden chalets with toilet and bathing areas below, while at Mondika Camp, we share tents with separate ablution blocks. In Congo too, the majority of food is tinned and while vegetarians won't have any problems, any special diets other than vegetarian are difficult if next to impossible to accommodate. Rooms and meals are better at Doli Lodge in the Central African Republic (and cold beer and sodas available), but even then, meals are not the highlights of travel to this remote part of Africa.

Travel Rewards:

Rare Forests and Wildlife: The tropical forests of these two Congo Basin parks comprise the world's largest rainforests after those of the Amazon Basin. They are therefore among the last of their kind on the planet. Delayed flights and bumpy roads notwithstanding, this remote area is now *accessible*. And if location alone makes it a rare travel experience, by extension so must be the wildlife that is found there. The Central African Republic has some of the highest densities of forest elephants and western lowland gorillas in Africa. At Dzanga Bai in Dzanga-Ndoki, between 50 and 100 elephants often come daily to the bai. Flocks made up of scores of African Grey parrots gather there in the early morning and late afternoon, a moving sight when this parrot exists in the wild in only very small numbers. At Mbeli Bai in Nouabale-Ndoki National Park, there may be three separate families of gorillas feeding

peacefully. Sixteen gorilla families along with ten solitary silverbacks, amounting to some 150 animals, are known to come to Mbeli to feed on its nutritional plants, and the researchers know every last one of them. Then there are Kingo and Makumba, the habituated gorilla patriarchs of Nouabale-Ndoki and Dzanga-Ndoki. To meet them and their families is to understand that you are now inextricably wrapped up in their fate. Habituated in the interests of science, they have been made vulnerable by their trust of man. A sustainable tourism program is the best answer to ensuring their survival once the science is complete. Tourists also bring the revenue to better the lives of local people, without whom conservation efforts would fail. It is easier to keep wildlife alive if men who hunted in the past for their livelihood earn a salary guiding you through the forest.

Culture: These forests are the ancestral homes of Ba'Aka pygmies, traditionally hunters and gatherers, who have been integral to the establishment of conservation efforts. In the case of Dzanga-Ndoki in the Central African Republic, the Ba'Aka are the cornerstone of the tourism program. Without their knowledge of the forest and its wildlife, the gorilla habituation program wouldn't exist. Every time we enter the Dzanga forest we are escorted by a Ba'Aka guide. As part of this tour, we spend a morning with the Ba'Aka in their forest on a traditional "net hunt" for small game such as red and blue duiker. (They hunt in a forest outside the parks borders where they are allowed to hunt.) We also collect edible, functional and medicinal roots, leaves and fruit. It is a remarkable experience.

It is inevitable that challenges to travel to these Central African parks will decrease as they develop. The interest shown in the parks is growing. Both parks are habituating other families of gorillas which will allow more guests to visit the gorilla programs at any one time. Nouabale has opened a chimpanzee research and ultimate habituation program a six hour hike from Mbeli Bai, which may become another park activity in the future. Meanwhile, to spend time in these parks now is to understand that you are paying for the privilege, only a few of you at a time, to enter a remote, pristine rainforest to experience one of Africa's most recent wildlife opportunities—and not for the five-star luxuries your per diem can provide you elsewhere.

Travel Essentials:

When to Go: You can visit the habituated gorillas all year round, and elephants collect at Dzanga Bai in the CAR daily, but there are better times than others to visit. July through November, the rainy season just above the equator, which is where these parks are located, is when river levels are high and it is easier to get around by pirogue. Gorillas enjoy certain fruits and aquatic plants that are available during the rains which might bring them to Mbeli Bai in the ROC park more frequently. They also emerge from the forest to the open forest clearings to warm up after rainfall. July and August is the busiest time for European visitors. I suggest late September through October when the "crowds" have thinned. June, a kind of shoulder season month, is another good option.

Small Group Travel: The complex logistics of this tour lend themselves to small group travel. Some of the ROC camps sleep only four at a time. Furthermore, only two people are allowed on a gorilla trek. Therefore, even with four people, two must go in the morning and two in the afternoon. Other operators do take up to eight people and more, but I prefer to keep our numbers low. That way it is easier to be quiet and truly observe the wildlife, and it improves the overall intimacy of the experience. However, the tour is more expensive if there are four and less people. This is because there are less participants to share the fixed transportation costs. If there are eight on a tour we divide into sub-groups of four and alternate destinations, meeting again at the end of the tour for the journey back to Brazzaville.

What to Bring: A backpack is better to bring than a duffel bag. Porters, who carry our bags between camps in Nouabale-Ndoki, have an easier time with them. If you must bring a duffel, then ensure it isn't too heavy and that a porter can slip the straps over his arms and carry it backpack fashion. A pack which is water-resistant is a good idea too although not absolutely essential. We cover bags with tarps when it rains. A small umbrella is useful if you have room. Other essentials are rain poncho, rubber shoes such as Texas, hiking boots, insect repellent, sun hat, book, flashlight, clothes line, and a warm jacket or fleece. After heavy rain and at night, the forest can cool down considerably. Heavy mists develop over the rivers. A sleeping bag isn't essential, but it is a nice thing to have for those cool nights, even if you have to use it only once or twice. Or a lightweight travel blanket is a good option to supplement the thin blankets provided in the tents and huts.

Photography: Getting a good shot of dark, moving subjects (gorillas) hiding behind foliage in low light conditions of a rainforest is not easy. A video camera is probably your best bet under these conditions. I also bring a monopod for the video cam to help eliminate camera shake. Bring plenty of batteries as you cannot charge for the three nights that you are in the ROC's walk-in camps. Re-charging isn't a problem in the CAR. Bring plenty of memory cards if you intend shooting RAW. At the observation towers overlooking the saline clearings, a 400 mm is the minimum lens length for decent shots of foraging wildlife. A 600 mm lens is ideal, but this is a mighty big lens to carry.

Helpful Reading: National Geographic Magazine has followed the ROC's Nouabale-Ndoki National Park's programs and scientists for many years. Their latest article was on Kingo, the habituated silverback who is the star attraction of Mondika Camp, in January 2008

Visa requirements:

Double entry visa for Republic of Congo (approximately \$US150.00) and single entry visa for Central Africa Republic (approximately \$US130.00). These must be obtained in your home country. Both embassies will require a LOI (Letter of Invitation) which you will receive prior to visa applications.

Vaccinations:

All recommended vaccinations for international travel to developing countries, including Yellow Fever. Your health certificate will be checked upon arrival in Brazzaville.

In addition, all visitors must furnish proof of a negative TB test administered within six months of arrival at Nouabale-Ndoki, as well as proof that they are vaccinated against polio and measles. There will be no exceptions. Gorillas are highly susceptible to human diseases.

If guests arrive ill, or show any symptoms of cold or flu, they will not be allowed to visit the habituated gorillas groups and may be barred as well from the observation platforms.

