



In the village of the elephants

Central Africa | An epic journey through the Congo Basin by boat, 4x4 and on foot brings *David Pilling* to a remote jungle clearing where forest elephants gather in greater numbers than anywhere else on earth

With only mild hyperbole, National Geographic once called the place to which we were headed “The Last Place on Earth”. Tramping for weeks in the Congo Basin rainforest through what he wrote were “hip-deep marshes of muck, leeches, tsetse flies and dwarf crocodiles”, the author described the experience as “like being passed through the guts of the forest and slowly digested”.

On the upside, he found an ecosystem dense with monkeys, forest antelope, genets, hippos, elephants and gorillas — a place seen by few outsiders but home to the Ba’Aka people for millennia. We were hoping for a similar, if somewhat less extreme, experience: a journey into the Central African rainforest.

Our ultimate goal was Bayanga, a small town beside the Sangha River in the southwestern corner of the Central African Republic. Bayanga is a legendary destination for conservationists because of a jungle clearing, Dzanga Bai (also known as “the village of the elephants”), where forest elephants emerge from the impenetrable foliage to congregate in greater numbers than anywhere else on earth.

The lodge nearby is run by Rod Cassidy, an almost equally legendary South African naturalist who many years ago sold up and moved to a bend on the river in the rainforest. Cassidy had taken on an almost mythical status. “Rod has been rewilded,” someone told me. “We lost him to the forest.”

First we had to get there. Our journey began in Brazzaville, the sleepy capital of the Republic of Congo, a former French colony not to be muddled with its bigger and badder near-namesake, the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Congo-Brazzaville, as it is sometimes called, is an altogether easier proposition, about one-tenth the size, with only 6mn people and few security concerns. On our first night, we sat on plastic stools in an open-air bar by a lazy stretch of the Congo river, mud underfoot, drinking beer and watching the twinkling lights of Kinshasa, capital of the other Congo, a mile across the black water.

My travelling companion would be Will Jones, a fellow of the UK’s Royal Geographical Society and founder of Journeys by Design, a tour operator that specialises in what he calls “off map” adventures. Jones is curious, appreciative and self-questioning — imagine a younger David Attenborough with a leonine hair-do and Buddhist tendencies.

We set off at 6am, driving at speed along a surprisingly good tarmac road. Not far out of the city, we pass a taxi, low on its axles and loaded down with passengers, some seated precariously in the open boot, legs dangling only inches from the rushing asphalt.

We’re heading 800km almost directly north, past soft hills, scattered woodlands and, many hours later, dense forest. At nightfall we arrive at the scrappy town of Ouessou. In the morning I’m



woken by a cacophony of weaver birds that have taken up residence in a tree outside my room and rise like a feathery cloud when I open the door before settling back in the branches to resume their noisy chatter.

It’s already sweltering hot as we approach a tiny jetty beside the Sangha river, a main tributary of the Congo. There are about a dozen other passengers, including some Ba’Aka, once known as pygmies, a pejorative term now banned in Congo because of the fierce discrimination the Ba’Aka have faced. The boat speeds off up the chocolate-brown river through untouched jungle, trees like apartment block-sized

broccoli stalks forming an impenetrable barrier at the water’s edge.

Apart from the odd fish eagle or heron there is little sign of the life we know is hiding in the forest. The country’s gorilla population alone is estimated at 125,000. To put that in perspective, the more visited mountain gorillas of Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo number around 1,000. It feels like a menacing Garden of Eden. Talk turns to malaria and snakes. “It’s as inhospitable and deadly a place as you can think of,” says Jones, scanning the banks with his binoculars. “Yet so beautiful.”

This is a tri-border region. On the left bank is Cameroon, on the right Congo. Upriver is the Central African Republic. Occasionally we speed past a dugout canoe or a small grass hut, most likely belonging to fishermen or hunters. Suddenly, the captain cuts the engine and we cleave to the bank. Without a word, the other passengers pull on ponchos and cover the luggage in plastic sheeting. Before the rain hits, sideways like acupuncture needles, lightning splits the sky and cracks of thunder echo across the forest canopy.

After about five hours on the river, we arrive at Bomassa. Standing on the big stone steps to greet us is Sonja Karjalainen, a tourism development manager for the Wildlife Conservation Society, which manages the Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park with the Congolese government. She is leading a project to supplement the park’s income with tourism. We are among the first guests.

Karjalainen takes us to a squat bungalow overlooking the Sangha. With hot water, a firm bed, mosquito net and electricity at set times, it’s very comfortable, considering our location. She is planning to construct additional huts, a camping site and a restaurant in Bomassa village, a short walk along the river. Over a simple dinner, we discuss conservation efforts in Nouabalé-Ndoki, a park created in 1993. Unlike surrounding areas, the 4,000 sq km reserve has never been logged. There are no roads and no records of villages, even oral. That makes it among the most intact ecosystems left in the Congo Basin, a rainforest second in size only to the Amazon.

Even here there is poaching: for ivory, elephant trunk (a delicacy), grey parrots and truckloads of bushmeat for the cities. Eighty-six rangers with nine functional weapons patrol by foot or by boat. Getting to an incident can take three days.

Clockwise from top: an elephant in Wali Bai in Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park; South African naturalist Rod Cassidy; Sangha Lodge in the Central African Republic; Dzanga Bai, where large numbers of forest elephants gather; poling a canoe through the undergrowth en route to Mbeli Bai; a western lowland silverback gorilla at Mondika research station; looking over the river from the deck at Sangha Lodge

Kyle de Nobrega



DETAILS

David Pilling was a guest of Journeys by Design (journeysbydesign.com) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (wcs.org) which manages Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park. Africa specialist Journeys by Design offers a 12-night private exploration of Nouabalé-Ndoki and Dzanga-Sangha national parks from \$17,850 per person, plus a further \$5,000 donation per group (of up to four) to the Wildlife Conservation Society



pushing tree branches at us, charging and even punching.”

Kingo is still going strong, but the next morning we find a different group just 800 metres from camp. A Congolese researcher, squatting a short distance from the muscle-bound silverback, records every detail on an iPad, part of a rolling programme of world-class research.

We leave Mondika by dugout canoe through a narrow creek, brushing against the forest and occasionally ducking to avoid branches. There’s a soporific sound of the paddle hitting the water and the gentle whine of tsetse flies.

We spend the night on a rickety platform at Mbeli Bai, a clearing favoured by gorilla groups — though not during our stay. Next day we backtrack to Bomassa and the following morning we’re on the Sangha river again for the final push to the Central African Republic.

No visa is required for visitors to the national parks straddling the tri-border area, but some formalities are called for. The boat pulls up to a hut where an official meticulously fills out several milled forms. Perfectly friendly, he intimates that he might go quicker if offered a little consideration. A bat hangs upside down beside his desk.

After a few hours on the muddy-brown river, we round a bend — and there is



The next morning, Jones, Karjalainen and I head off along an elephant-made path for the hour-long walk to Wali Bai, one of three forest clearings we will visit. As we enter the forest, our voices lower as if in church. A putty-nosed monkey plays overhead. The ground is crunchy with leaves and dotted with black boomerang-sized seed pods. Birds and insects trill.

We reach the bai (a Ba’Aka word for clearing) and climb on to the platform. Wali Bai, about two football fields in size, is filled with shallow water. Three buffalo are loitering in the pool. Kingfishers whistle and dart.

As dusk falls, our own sounds magnify. It feels wrong to rustle through a rucksack for a head torch or fumble with a packet of Pringles. A fish plops. Crickets thrum. Then two elephants steal silently out of the forest, announcing their arrival with a sloosh as they surge into the water. We sleep on the wooden platform, my rest disturbed only by an elephant trumpeting in the blackness.

The following day is a longer hike. We splash knee-deep for several miles along a river whose water glistens an improbable red. The colour apparently comes from tannins in the leaves, but the disco-red fluorescence belies such scientific explanation. It is like entering a magical kingdom.

We splish on, barefoot, avoiding gnarly roots that curl like octopus tentacles. Only later does Karjalainen mention that the river harbours electric fish that can administer quite a sting.

We arrive at Mondika camp shortly before dusk. Through an interpreter I talk to one of the Ba’Aka trackers, a man in his late forties called Privat Mongambe. We practically have to shout over the din of cicadas.

Mongambe was born in the Central African Republic, the first in generations to live a semi-settled existence. He drifted to Congo to find work in the 1990s. In order to observe the great apes, scientists wanted to habituate a family by getting them accustomed to humans, and several Ba’Aka, including Mongambe, were recruited. The job description was simple: stick with a family of gorillas for as long as it takes. It took three years.

“We were scared. But you couldn’t run away or the gorilla would catch you by the leg,” Mongambe recalls of those early days. “We named the silverback Kingo, ‘Loud Voice’ in Lingala. Kingo was famous for acting aggressively,

Sangha Lodge, Rod Cassidy’s jungle sanctuary, where we find a safari camp-style building with dining table, bar and 180-degree view of the Sangha river. Cassidy is there to greet us. He is in his sixties, with a long white beard, and the comparison with Gandalf is irresistible. “Your room is the best,” he says, handing me the key to my cabin. “Though it wasn’t yesterday afternoon when a tree went straight through the roof.”

Though Sangha Lodge is situated in what Cassidy considers one of the most significant ecosystems in the world, the business has struggled. Not long after he built it, civil war broke out. Though the war has subsided and he is hundreds of miles from any trouble, the UK and US governments still advise against all travel to the country. The logistics are not straightforward. You can come the way we did, from Congo. Alternatively, Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic, is a short flight away, though recent fuel shortages have disrupted schedules. The journey from Bangui by road takes 18 hours.

For those who make it, Cassidy recommends a seven-day stay. He offers mangabey as well as gorilla tracking and a hike through the “valley of the giants”, where horseshoe bats cling discreetly in the hollows of trees 160ft tall. He can

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also show you grey-necked picathartes — non-migratory birds that dwell in the forests. “Picathartes,” he says, as if incanting a spell.

The Ba’Aka will also take visitors net hunting. We went one day with five women and five men, nets slung over their shoulders. On the drive in, they sang joyful songs. They sang again to bless their nets. To my secret relief, they didn’t catch anything that day, but the experience of stalking through the undergrowth and watching them erect nets in a circle at lightning speed was unforgettable.

Then there is Dzanga Bai. We get there one morning after a brisk walk along a narrow path, again accompanied by Ba’Aka trackers. When we reach the clearing, at least 60 elephants have already gathered, a number that will nearly triple as the day wears on.

We climb on to the viewing platform. The elephants are in constant motion as if they are part of some giant clock mechanism. They stick their trunks into holes in the earth to extract the minerals that have drawn them to this clearing for thousands of years.

There’s competition for the best spots, which are monopolised by bull elephants with enormous tusks. Smaller elephants, including babies, loiter around, waiting for the chance to sneak in. They take a few quick tokes before being shoved aside.

It is “the mother of all bais”, says Cassidy, who appreciates the trees and the bats and the insects as much as the elephants. “For someone who loves biodiversity, I live in paradise.”

David Pilling is the FT’s Africa Editor