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GIANTS

THE LAND OF

HEADING DEEP INTO THE CONGO RAINFOREST, STANLEY STEWART SEARCHES FOR CONNECTION WITH THE MAGNIFICENT BEASTS THAT CALL THE JUNGLE HOME. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALISTAIR TAYLOR-YOUNG



IN THE HALF LIGHT of the equatorial jungles of the Congo Basin, we whispered to one another, our voices sounding thin and weedy in this colossal place. Then the tracker silenced us and motioned for us to stop. We stood in the narrow trail, as still as statues, listening, holding our breath. I could feel my heart pumping.

It was 6am and in the pre-dawn we were tracking a family of lowland gorillas, tiptoeing in single file into the green depths of one of the world's greatest rainforests, into the planet of the apes. Gabin Okele, the tracker, had already warned us against sudden movements, to keep our voices low and to avoid gorilla eye contact, as if we were strangers wandering into some redneck bar, keen to stay out of trouble.

Ahead of us now, Okele crouched and peered through the forest understorey. Turning, he mouthed a single word: "close". For a moment all was still. And then, as if in a dream though barely 30 feet away, a huge gorilla shouldered his way through the bushes, a dark figure with a flash of silver across its back. A second later he was gone, disappearing beyond thickets of foliage. That first sighting was so strange and eerie that, for a little while, I wondered if I had imagined it.

But I hadn't. We crouched for the next hour, peeking through hedges like voyeurs. The gorillas – a silverback and his family of some eight individuals – were at breakfast. I had probably hoped for more action: squabbles, chest thumping, serial mating, perhaps a blow-up when

the silverback discovered a junior male shagging one of his females behind his back. But this gorilla breakfast was as refined as a tea party. Thick-necked, broad-shouldered, with arms like tree trunks, the great apes sat on their haunches, delicately plucking tiny leaves here and there, thoughtfully chewing them in their massive jaws, before licking their lips and looking around for the next nibble. The experience was sedentary, peaceful and rather elegant. It was as if we had stumbled on sumo wrestlers bent over floral needlework.

Stranger still was the way the gorillas ignored us. They were aloof and detached. I suppose this was preferable to being charged by a 600lb silverback, but their disinterest was a trifle disappointing. Perhaps I had hoped for a flicker of mutual recognition, a connection. Were they not intrigued by the resemblance, our gestures, mannerisms and faces so like their own? When the gorillas glanced our way they looked through us as if we weren't there. But we kept watching, as Rabbi Missilou Boukaka, one of the Congolese researchers, busily documented the behaviour of these western lowland gorillas.

I would need to wait for my moment of connection, but it did come – some days later in the dense forests of Dzanga-Sangha, where the Ba'aka tribespeople live. Should I be fortunate enough to ever return to that remote jungle, one gorilla at least might just remember my face.

The green, river-laced heart of the continent, the Congo Basin sprawls across six African countries. It is

Clockwise from above:
Young gorilla; the Sangha
River; boy from the
Ba'aka tribe; Marantaceae
leaf. *Previous pages, from
left:* blackback male
gorilla; into the jungle at
Dzanga-Sangha

‘THE GREAT APES SAT ON THEIR HAUNCHES, DELICATELY PLUCKING TINY LEAVES AND THOUGHTFULLY CHEWING THEM IN MASSIVE JAWS’



A giant flat-backed millipede. *Opposite:* the Cassidy Falls at Sangha Reserve





GIANT
KINGFISHERS
DARTED AHEAD
FROM TREE
TO TREE.
BUFFALO STOOD
KNEE-DEEP ON
THE GRASSY
BANKS
WATCHING US





the world's second-largest rainforest after Amazonia: 1.2 million square miles, the size of western Europe, soaking up 1.2 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide every year. Without these forests, it is not just the gorillas who would be doomed – so would our planet. As well as acting as the earth's lungs, they are famous for their diversity, containing more than 600 types of tree and 10,000 species of animal, including forest elephants, chimpanzees, okapi, leopards, lions and the elusive lowland gorillas we had come to see.

The Congo is a place of wonders and miracles. At every turn in this lush, outlandish world are things barely believable. Insects are invariably at the front of the weirdness queue. There are head-banging termites that collectively make a noise like a rattlesnake to deter invaders. There are ants that sew leaves together to make pretty nests. There are assassin bugs who disguise themselves with their victim's bodies. There is a fungus – cordyceps – whose spores invade the bodies of insects, turning them into zombies to serve its needs. There are suicide-bomber termites who explode when ants breach their tunnels, coating invaders with a viscous substance to block the entrance. All of which might have made the gorillas seem ordinary were it not for those faces, those gestures, those hands with delicate fingernails, those expressions, those pursed lips, those thoughtful eyes. That there should be a creature so like ourselves in these remote jungles was the Congo's greatest marvel.

I had come to Odzala-Kokoua National Park, a vast tract of more than 5,200 square miles in the northern provinces of the

Clockwise, from above: Cymothoe butterfly; pirogue canoes on the Sangha River; reflections of Senegal date palms

Republic of the Congo. Though one of Central Africa's oldest parks, protected since 1935, it remains one of its least known: tourism is still in its infancy there. It is managed by Africa Parks, a non-profit conservation organisation with 22 of Africa's most vulnerable and least commercially viable parks under its wing. Odzala's remote landscapes of savannah and tropical forest see only a trickle of lucky visitors.

The park has three upmarket lodges, courtesy of the Congo Conservation Company. It may take a bit of time to get to them, but that is part of the pleasure. In a small bush plane, you fly north from Brazzaville over vast tracts of forest threaded by serpentine rivers. You land on a grass airstrip, where there is nothing but a cluster of tin sheds. You drive in a 4x4 on mud tracks for a couple of hours, pausing briefly to be charged by an elephant, and passing only a handful of people on foot carrying firewood or sacks of flour or buckets of water on their heads. And then suddenly, in what seems to be one of the remotest places you have ever been, you arrive at Ngaga Camp, an oasis of luxuries deep in the rainforest: stylish, thatched cabanas on stilts, lighted walkways, a succession of wonderful meals, a wide platform lounge of sofas and cushions, books and binoculars, open on three sides to Africa, to vast trees and birdsong and extravagantly large butterflies.

Don't be embarrassed by the comforts and the fine service. Tourism is a tool here. These lodges and their paying guests provide the income for the protection and conservation of Odzala, for park rangers and local education; for the mobile health unit that serves more than 3,000 villagers; for employment opportunities for people who have so few. Ngaga Camp and its facilities are also a support for an ongoing research project into lowland gorillas, overseen by Dr Magda Bermejo and German Illera. It is their work, which has habituated three families of gorillas, that makes tracking of the animals and the observance of that peaceful breakfast scene possible.

WE REACHED LANGO CAMP, another of Congo Conservation Company's three lodges, on foot. It lies in a waterworld. Plodding through meandering channels, I felt I was entering some innocent, newborn place only just emerging from the waters of the Flood. Here giant kingfishers darted ahead of us from tree to tree, like guides. Buffalo stood knee-deep on the grassy banks, watching us with quizzical expressions as ox-pickers strutted across their backs looking for ticks. Round a bend, two blossom-filled trees appeared full of colobus monkeys. With their long black-and-white manes catching the light as they fled through the canopy, the monkeys looked like caped wizards, shrieking their disapproval.

Rich in wildlife, these swampy clearings are known as bais. All through the forests, labyrinthine ancient elephant pathways converge on these clearings. The bais are the saloon bars, the dance halls, the swingers clubs, the coffee shops of the forest-elephant world. The animals come here for the minerals in these waters but they stay for the social interaction. In these open spaces, away from the confinement of the forest, the elephants hang, greeting one another, interacting, mating.

The day was fading away. Awash with reflections, the shallows were patterned with clouds and the quivering images of upside-down trees. Grey African parrots rose from their cover and flew



Children of the Ba'aka
tribe line the riverbank



‘I HAD THE SENSE OF A STRANGE MOMENTUM, AS IF THE RIVER WAS DRAWING US INTO THE HEART OF THE CONTINENT’



in swirling murmurations against skies that were thickening to a palette of pinks and purples. Chimps whooped in the distance on the edge of the forest. Away to the left, a group of elephants threw mud on their backs. The youngest, standing beneath his mother's belly, gazed wide-eyed at the grown-ups of the herd.

At Lango Camp, we stepped out of the primeval waters onto a deck where sundowners were waiting. A long dining table shone with polished glass and stylish dinner settings. Appetisers arrived. At dinner – roast duck with a wonderful South African Chardonnay – we watched the elephants lumbering away through the twilight, returning to their forests, the baby trotting in its mother's wake. Later, tucked up in a sumptuous bed beneath mosquito nets, I could hear them trumpeting in the darkness, so close that it seemed like they were in the next room.

ABUSH PLANE FERRIED US to another grass airstrip several hundred miles further north. There we took a boat up the Sangha River, one of the great tributaries of the mighty Congo, five hours into the Central African Republic. Impenetrable forests crowded the banks where giant trees trailed skirts of liana and vines. Herons stalked the shallows, the Jurassic silhouettes of hornbills sailed through the canopy and swallows acrobatically swept the surface of the water for insects. Other than ourselves, the only river traffic were men silently poling pirogues between the banks of this wide, watery expanse. Stretching before us, the water was marbled with

reflections. I had the sense of a strange momentum, as if the river was drawing us into the heart of the continent.

There were moments when I felt we were being watched. The forests rang with an eerie cacophony of calls and shrieks, of croaks and hoots, of whistles and songs. Somewhere between the trees, I imagined the gorillas squatting, resting their elbows on their knees, cradling their chins in their hands, glancing out at the river, at us, some strange approximation of themselves.

Lowland gorillas tend to be overshadowed by their celebrity cousins the mountain gorillas, the gorillas in the mist of Sigourney Weaver's 1988 film, who live more than 1,000 miles to the east where the troubled borders of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Uganda converge. Mountain gorillas attract a steady stream of visitors, inspired by the stardust of Weaver's depiction of conservationist Dian Fossey and the documentaries of David Attenborough. Lowland gorillas of the Congo Basin have kept a lower profile. Few people visit.

All gorillas belong to a tiny elite family of primates known as hominids, or great apes. There are only four genera in this taxonomic grouping. In the Sumatra and Bornean jungles, there are the Pongo, the orangutans, with the air of thoughtful long-haired philosophers. In Africa, there are the Pan, the chimpanzees and bonobos, so closely related that they were once thought to be one species. The two have chosen dramatically different paths in life. Chimps are attention-seeking hysterics, an animal approximation of Donald Trump, screaming and beating their

Clockwise from above:
locals on the
Sangha River; umbrella
tree; young
male elephants at
Dzanga Bai





chests, while bonobos are the rainforest's great sensualists, solving every problem, adorning every interaction with sexual activity as imaginative as our own. Then there are the gorillas, famous for their size and colossal strength, unfairly typecast as psychos with a damsel in one hand and a crushed biplane in the other.

The fourth species of this closely knit group, and arguably the one that has cornered the market on psychosis, is us: humans. Our genetic closeness to the three other members of this primate family is startling: we share 98 per cent of our DNA with gorillas. Our common ancestor, from which humans and gorillas both evolved, slept in these forests several million years ago, when this swollen river and pristine landscape would have looked exactly as it does today.

LANDFALL, FIVE HOURS UP RIVER, was Sangha Lodge, run by Rod and Tamar Cassidy. A Gandalfian figure with a long white beard, and a legend to the forest villages, Rod has remained in this remote outpost through the good times and the bad, fending off rebel soldiers and pandemics, and happy now to see visitors coming upriver again to one of Africa's most atmospheric lodges. Sangha may not enjoy the same level of luxury as the Odzala properties but it is comfortable and charming, and its terrace offers the most meditative place on earth to watch the changing moods of a river, from the gossamer mists of dawn to the wash of evening colour. Sangha's Wi-Fi may be a little patchy but real life here has a bandwidth that leaves you dizzy. We spent a day at Dzanga Bai watching the interaction of almost 100 elephants: juveniles mock charging, old bulls mating, mothers rescuing little ones from deep puddles. And then, the next day, we went to look for the gorillas.

Ngala, a Ba'aka tracker, took charge of us. We needed to stay behind him at all times. We needed to back away slowly if the gorillas approached us. We needed to act like subordinates, which was easy because in this place we were.

We entered the forests on trails made by the great apes. Padding silently through the trees, the trackers made clicking noises, to locate one another in the dense foliage and to reassure the gorillas about our approach. After half an hour's trek, we suddenly came upon the group. In a dappled glen, the young were playing like gymnasts. They chased one another, skittering up and down tree trunks. They swung from vines. They wrestled, rolling about in a tangle of limbs, with a combination of affection and competition, invariably ending in long forgiving embraces. All the while the mothers picnicked on tasty leaves.

Deeper in the forest, we came upon the silverback Makumba sitting with his back against a tree, munching fruit. He was alone except for a toddler, a year or two old, seated at his feet. In his early forties, Makumba is old for a gorilla and he no longer manages to attract new females to his family. In the aqueous light of the forest, there was some strange complicity between the toddler and the old silverback, the bookends of gorilla life, as they shared fruit. Attentive and solicitous to his accomplice, Makumba didn't acknowledge our presence.

But then something unusual happened. The young gorilla noticed us. I could see his face creasing with curiosity. He got up and began to walk towards us on his back legs, unsteady as any



Above: Western lowland mother and baby gorilla in Odzala-Kokoua National Park. Opposite: girl in Mbomo village

toddler would be. Makumba gave a low growl. But the little gorilla ignored the warning. He was fixated on us now, staring and searching our faces for clues. He waddled right up to me, so close that I could have stooped and shaken his hand. He peered into my face, gazing into my eyes with his perplexed curious expression. It was a thrilling moment of connection. He was thinking what I was thinking: who is this creature, so familiar and yet so strange?

Then he returned to his ageing father. The old silverback had stood up and the two of them turned away, ambling off into the depths of the Congo Basin, their two figures diminishing until they disappeared at last into their forests.

Later, in the boat on the silent river, I realised that he hadn't actually been thinking what I was thinking at all. He was puzzled. He was wondering what kind of creature I was. But I already knew who he was. I was mulling a more complex puzzle. Gazing down at the curious, upturned face of the gorilla, I was really wondering: what kind of creatures are we? 📍

HOW TO GET THERE

Stanley's bespoke trip was organised by Explore Inc, the renowned African wilderness travel specialist that has worked in the Congo Basin for more than 20 years.

He was a guest of Congo Conservation Company, whose work protects the forests of the Congo Basin. exploreinc.com; congoconservation.travel