

Top deck:
Front row seat over
the bai from Lango
Camp in Odzala-
Kokoua National Park

SCOTT RAMSAY /
CONGO CONSERVATION COMPANY

jungleland

The vast forests of the Congo Basin – ‘the lungs of Africa’ – are among the most valuable habitats on Earth. Essential for regulating the climate, they also provide sanctuary to a staggering wealth of flora and fauna. Tourism is limited, but critical to the protection of this ecosystem, and nature-lovers will enjoy one of the most extraordinary safari experiences in Africa. With the parks reopening soon, we thought we would get a glimpse of what visitors might expect →

BY **HEATHER RICHARDSON**





Craning my neck, sweat streaming down my back, I spotted him in the gloom – the first pangolin I’d ever seen – scuffling along the tree branches, thick, scaled tail curled around the trunk as he foraged for ants to scoop up with his long tongue

Back in 2019 – which feels more like 10 years ago than two – I travelled with Congo Conservation Company (CCC) on a new circuit connecting the Republic of Congo and Central African Republic, designed to make the Congo Basin more accessible for tourists. Far from being a whistle-stop tour, the emphasis was on slowing down, moving on foot and by river, carving out time to appreciate this vital, threatened region.

TOUCH DOWN: BRAZZAVILLE

I don’t feel I know a thing about a country until I’ve spent some time in its cities. So I was excited to spend a few nights in Brazzaville, capital of the Republic of Congo, before we headed north.

Early in the morning, before the heat became too stifling, I went for a run along the city’s corniche, which started right outside my hotel, the Radisson Blu M’Bamou Palace. The riverside road is pedestrianised on Sundays, and it seemed the whole city had come to walk, jog or work out. Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, sprawled out on the opposite bank of the mud-brown River Congo.

My guide, Destin Net-Simbou (‘Net’), and I taxied around the markets, art galleries, craft shops and churches of the historic city. We stopped by the ‘cataracts’, where the river turns into choppy rapids, for a lunch of grilled fish and fried plantains on the sandy bank.

One hot, muggy evening, we met up with a group of *sapeurs* – *la sape* is a sub-culture that originated in Brazzaville over 100 years ago as people acquired a taste for Parisian fashion. “It’s an identity,” Net explained. Sat outside a pavement bar sipping beers, the bottles slippery with condensation, we watched male and female sapeurs parade their sharp, bright suits, fedora hats, ties and braces, all applauding each other’s modelling moves, before we pushed the chairs aside to make a dancefloor.

FOREST ELEPHANTS AND BLACK-BELLIED PANGOLINS

The following morning we had to make a hasty rerouting plan to reach Sangha Lodge, in the far south-west of Central African Republic (CAR). Guests usually catch a charter flight to the border and then travel to the lodge by river, but due to a plane fault we had to fly via the CAR capital

Bangui. The transfer went smoothly, and by late afternoon we arrived on the banks of the Sangha River, a tributary of the River Congo, and checked into the comfortable, eight-room lodge.

This extraordinarily biodiverse area is most well known for Dzanga Bai in the Dzanga-Sangha reserve. The bai, or clearing, is widely regarded as the best place to see African forest elephants.

After an hour’s drive and a 45-minute trek through the rainforest, we arrived at the edge of the bai and climbed onto a raised viewing platform. For hours, I watched elephants play-fighting and slurping up minerals from the clay, which they force to the surface by blowing bubbles into the mud with their trunks. The occasional trumpet from an irritated female echoed through the forest. I counted at least 40 elephants at any one time, but there are often over a hundred in the bai, alongside forest buffalos and even rare bongo antelopes.

The next day, we joined a team of Ba’Aka pygmy trackers that monitor rescued black-bellied pangolins around the clock, as part of the Sangha Pangolin Project. These scaly animals are the world’s most trafficked mammals, poached and smuggled for their scales and meat.

Tracker Etienne Ndobola led us into the suffocatingly humid forest to find one of the rescues, Ndima. Craning my neck, sweat streaming down my back, I spotted him in the gloom – the first pangolin I’d ever seen – scuffling along the tree branches, thick, scaled tail curled around the trunk as he foraged for ants to scoop up with his long tongue.

GORILLA ENCOUNTERS

We returned to Congo the way we should have arrived: a gentle four-hour boat journey along the river. Our passports stamped out of CAR and into Congo at two checkpoint huts on the riverbanks, we boarded CCC’s plane in the village of Kabo and flew to Odzala-Kokoua National Park in the northwest.

Ngaga Camp, one of three properties in Odzala, consists of six stylish rooms connected by raised walkways and enveloped by thick rainforest. From here, the main activity is seeing the western lowland gorillas that live around the camp.

Early in the morning, we followed tracker Gabin Okele into the forest. As we walked, he smartly pruned the route with his shears, switching to a machete as we veered off the



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SANGHA LODGE (2)



Opposite, top: Walking through the forest at Lango. This is typical of the walking experience throughout these forests, allowing you to observe flora up close and immerse deeply into the habitat of the birds and mammals you come to see

Opposite, bottom row: A Ba’Aka tracker in Sangha. The Ba’Aka’s expertise is invaluable in helping the Sangha Pangolin Project to monitor rehabilitated pangolins. Herds of as many as 100 forest elephants, as well as forest buffalo and other animals are frequently seen in Dzangha bai



Tropical: The view from Sangha Lodge; waterfall walks in the forests in Dzanga-Sangha



The author travelled with Natural World Safaris, which offers separate or combined trips to the Republic of Congo and Central African Republic

path. Just before we reached the gorillas, we slipped on surgical face masks (now oh so familiar) to protect the critically endangered primates from potentially lethal human pathogens.

Neptuno is an impressive silverback, a swathe of grey fur running along his back and down his hind legs. Western lowlands spend much of their time in trees – I watched them swinging from branches, a youngster dangling one-handed from a vine. A baby on his mother’s back gazed down at us – five humans squatting in the undergrowth – with wide-eyed curiosity. After an hour, Neptuno climbed down, crashing through the tall canopy of marantaceae plants, signalling to his group – and to us – that it was time to move on.

SLOW TRAVEL

After a night at Mboko Camp – the largest CCC property, with 12 rooms on the edge of a grassy savannah where elephants browsed – we made tracks to our final lodging.

Our bags sent ahead, we clambered into kayaks and pushed off down the languid, jungle fringed Lekoli River, letting the current carry us. We glided silently past a bull elephant on the lush bank. A rare Pel’s fishing owl swooped across the water.

When our kayaks started dragging along the sandy bed, we continued on foot, wading carefully through thigh-high water, trying to avoid hidden sinkholes.



SANGHA LODGE

Opposite:

- (1) Bongo in the bai;
- (2) Rod Cassidy leads a night walk;
- (3) Agile mangabey; Neptuno, the silverback Western lowland gorilla;
- (4) A black-bellied pangolin;
- (5) picathartes;
- (6) Valley of the Giants

Eventually, we emerged into a flooded bai, where Alice Paghera, our guide, signalled for us to pause. There were forest buffalos ahead – notoriously cranky creatures. We waited until they’d moved into the trees, gave them a wide berth, and continued through the water.

On the other side of the clearing, we reached Lango Camp. We emptied our boots, leaving them to dry on the sweeping deck overlooking the bai, and kicked back with cold beers.

Later that afternoon we took a walk through the forest, hoping to spot chimpanzees. Under the canopy, it was quiet and cool. We found an Ethiopian pepper tree, the corns of which Alice crushed, releasing a pungent, perfumed

aroma. A black-casqued hornbill flapped past, and parrots whistled overhead. Insects and frogs chirped and buzzed. Strangler figs looped around tree trunks and long, curly vines dangled from the branches. We didn’t see the chimps, but we did find nuts that Alice thought they’d cracked open.

We padded along in silent single file, taking in the sounds, movements and scents of the forest. This unhurried, intimate experience of nature had been a common thread throughout the trip – “my style of guiding,” Alice said with a smile. As I thought of nothing but the dimming light of the forest, the soft crunch of leaves underfoot and the cicadas whirring in the dusk, it was easy to understand why. 🌿

secret garden

“If I had to describe a week here, it would blow you away,” says Rod Cassidy, owner of Sangha Lodge. The avid birder and conservationist, together with his wife Tamar, built the lodge in 2009 and have worked tirelessly ever since to provide what he calls an “immersive rainforest experience”. Cassidy cites Dzanga Bai as the camp’s unique selling point, but while he calls this incredible elephant gathering, along with gorilla tracking and on-foot game encounters as “stock in-the-park experiences”, there is so much more to the area than this. “The rainforest is the richest biodiversity in the world,” he says, “and just to sell it on elephants and gorillas is daft.” Here are a few of his park highlights...

1 Dzanga Bai

The ‘Ngorongoro of the rainforest’ provides the most exceptional elephant experience you can ever have. Up to 150 elephants gather in this forest clearing on any given day. Other animals also frequent the bai, such as bongo (a difficult animal to see anywhere), buffalo, and giant forest and red river hogs.

This group of some 150 monkeys is part of a long-term study in the region.

4 Pangolins

The forest is home to three of the four species of pangolin found in Africa (the White-bellied, Black-bellied and Giant). The Sangha Pangolin Project plays an urgent and vital role in protecting the world’s most trafficked animal – researching, providing veterinary care and rehabilitating rescued pangolins back into the wild.

2 Night walks

With a guide carrying a thermal imaging camera, you can find anomalures, the African equivalent of flying squirrels; the ‘scaly tail’ is the only mammal besides the pangolin that has scales. You are also likely to encounter nocturnal primates, including the potto and the galago (bush baby).

5 Birds

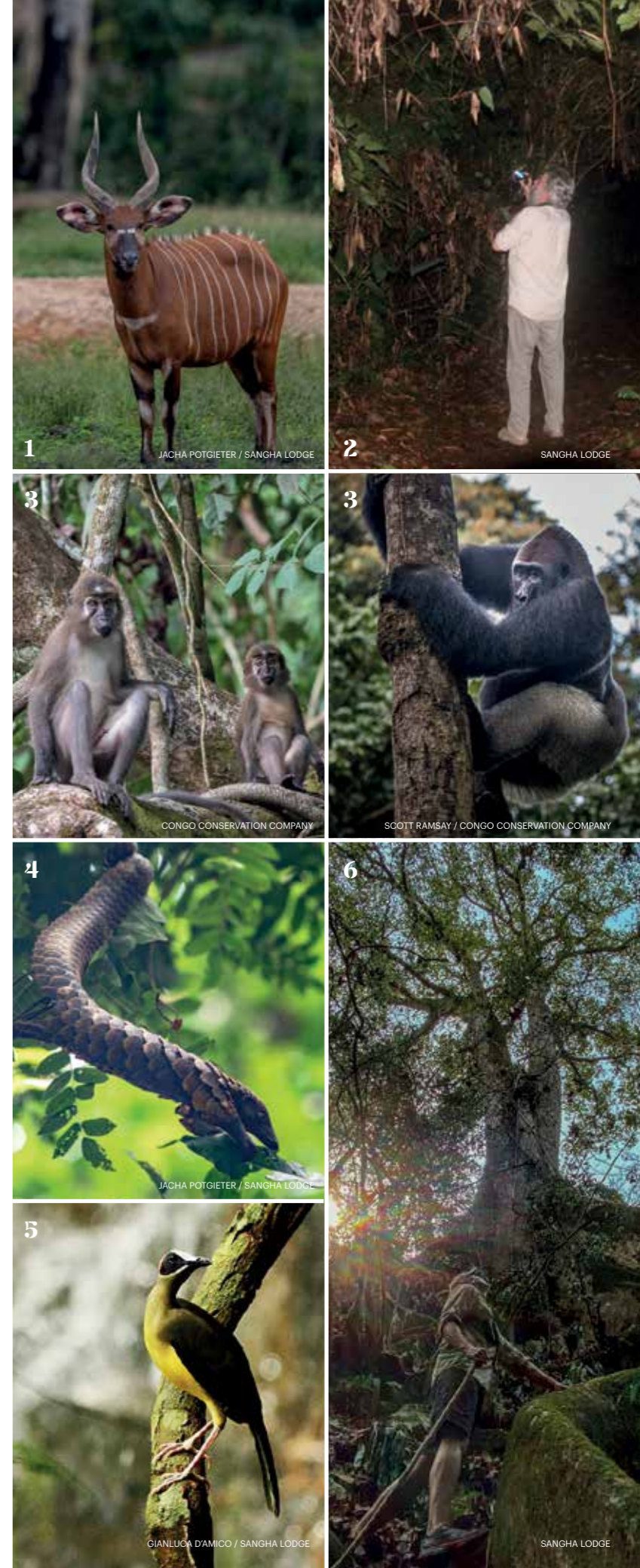
There are over 400 species here – and I’ve had over 300 in my garden. Perhaps the most-prized sighting is the picathartes – I was the first to find these birds here, in 2010.

3 Primates

Track Western lowland gorillas at Bai Hokou. Along with neighbouring Nouabalé-Ndoku National Park and Odzala, this is the only place in the world where you can find habituated groups. There’s also the antics of a large contingent of Agile mangabey to observe.

6 Valley of the Giants

A 10-minute boat ride from the camp lies the ‘mountains’. From the lodge they look like rolling hills with forest on top, but walk into that forest and you’ll find 40-50ft cliffs, waterfalls and the most enormous trees you have ever seen.



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