



CONGO

Sheltering an incredible diversity of flora and fauna, including western lowland gorillas and forest elephants, is a vast, little-visited tropical rainforest known as the 'lungs of Africa'. Odzala-Kokoua National Park lies deep in the Republic of Congo and is protected by locals on a mission to guard and conserve the natural wonders on their doorstep

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: MATT DUTILE

One of Africa’s oldest national parks, Odzala-Kokoua has diverse ecosystems that include tropical rainforests, savannahs, swamps and mineral-rich woodland clearings known as *bai*. Kamba African Rainforest Experiences is the only private operator here, managing a collection of three lodges in those varied ecosystems. From these, it launches game drives, walking safaris and kayak and boat trips down the Lekoli River. Head field guide Dylan Smith takes visitors on foot from Lango Lodge along a series of water-logged paths created over generations by forest elephants. It’s a pulse-quickening experience to come across one while quietly wading through the channels. The *bai* also shelter hippos, striped antelopes like bongo and sitatunga, and over 400 bird species, including the brown-feathered hamerkop.





Abutting Odzala is the Ndzezi concession, home to the critically endangered western lowland gorilla. Their smaller stature makes them nimble tree climbers, unlike their mountain cousins in Rwanda and Uganda. Three families have been habituated, primarily for the purpose of scientific study, but small groups of visitors can also observe their natural behaviour. Kamba trains Congolese guides, like Stive Massala Boukongo. Trainees graduate after four weeks of teaching and a three-month internship. During that time, their home base is Mboko Lodge, a former research station, but they travel from camp to camp with guests, too. They learn everything from wildlife safety protocols to species identification, down to the tiniest frog eggs.



Life comes in all shapes and sizes in Odzala, from 3cm-long looper moth caterpillars to 50-stone African forest buffaloes. Small herds of buffalo enjoy a good wallow in the *baï*, where cattle egrets and yellow-billed oxpeckers pick nuisance parasites from their hides. Fruit, like the sweet and tart giant yellow mulberry, is also abundant in Odzala and accounts for one of the highest diversities of primates in the continent, including chimpanzees and mandrills. Protecting those primates and other fauna is the job of the ‘guardians of the forest’. Led by Martin Alex Mpoko, its 11 members sweep the region for poachers and snares. They also increase awareness among villagers of the benefits of preserving the rare ecosystems in this unique part of the world. ▣

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