

Planet of the apes:
Ngaga Camp in Odzala-Kokoua
National Park is engulfed by the
lowland rainforest of the Congo Basin,
Africa's most biodiverse landscape and
home to 60,000 lowland gorillas

SCOTT RAMSAY

The core of the Continent

Savannah, bushveld and desert? Yes, but Africa is also defined by its rainforest, which has some of the most diverse wildlife of anywhere else on the continent. Trekking through the remote forests of Odzala-Kokoua National Park in the Republic of Congo, **Scott Ramsay** finds another realm that remains largely unknown to outsiders →

In the middle of the Congo jungle, a family of gorillas looked down from their perches in the towering trees above us. Thunder boomed across equatorial skies and soon it started raining, a deluge of heavy water that plummeted from dense clouds. At 3.7 million sq km – 16 times bigger than the UK – the immense Congo Basin drains the second largest river on the planet, and is the second largest rainforest system on the planet, after the Amazon (5.5 million sq km). Even today when most of the planet seems mapped and Googled, the vast rainforests of Central Africa are seemingly mythical in the minds of humans.

The huge forests are the continent's least explored ecotype and span six countries: Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the Republic of Congo.

The Congo Basin holds the greatest number of mammals, primates, birds, amphibians, fish and butterflies in Africa, making it the most naturally diverse terrestrial area on the continent. There are more than 10,000 species of plant (including 600 types of tree), 1000 birds, 700 fish and 400 mammals. This list is growing all the time.

Accomplished scientists are often left scratching their heads at the litany of undescribed species, even mammals. The lesula monkey, for instance, was discovered only in 2007.

Near the heart of this vast ecosystem is Odzala-Kokoua National Park, a 13,600sq-km protected area in the north-west of the Republic of Congo, near the border with Gabon. Proclaimed in 1935 by the French administration of the time, Odzala is an integral part of the larger Congo Basin ecosystem. And it's famous for the Congo's most celebrated creature: the gorilla.

Tracking gorillas in Odzala is like stepping onto another planet, a verdant world watered by over 2000mm of annual precipitation. If it's not raining hard here, it's raining softly. And even when it's

not raining, it's almost always cloudy, so very little light penetrates the immense forest canopy.

The tall trees and marantaceae undergrowth are dense, and there's an overwhelming sense that if you get lost, you're never getting out. But that won't happen. Led by expert guides and Mbuti Pygmy trackers, you're almost guaranteed to find Earth's largest ape – and to return safely from the forest.

The gorilla treks begin from Ngaga Camp, a luxury tree-canopy eyrie run by Odzala Discovery Camps. At dawn, Karl Diakite and Gabin Okele led us off into this crepuscular realm of eternal twilight. Diakite is a professional field guide, originally from Ivory Coast, but with experience across southern and Central Africa. Okele is an Mbuti Pygmy who was born in this forest, and seems to know it like a cab driver knows the streets of London.

Unlike the mountainous terrain of the Virungas in the east of the Congo Basin, the landscape of the lowland forests is mostly flat, and rangers have cut a grid network of paths in the walking area, making it surprisingly easy to explore the forest.

Be prepared for sensory overload. As we walked, our ears and eyes were assailed by a thousand shades of green, decorated with kaleidoscopic colours of flowers, fruits and insects. Listen, and you'll hear nature's finest symphony, led by an orchestra of croaking frogs that never tires, day or night. Then there are the scents of the forest, a fertile concoction of sensuous aromas.

And then the gorillas themselves. Making eye contact with a 250kg silverback from a few metres away lives up to its reputation as one of Africa's finest wildlife experiences. Being in the close company of Earth's largest apes evokes the same feeling as being surrounded by a herd of 100 elephants, hearing a pride of lions roaring at close range, or seeing the Serengeti teeming with wildebeest. →

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Buffalo in the bai:

The forest buffalo isn't as large as its cousin, the Cape buffalo. With smaller horns and a red hide, it looks like a separate species but is, in fact, genetically identical

Opposite:

- 1 A water monitor lizard
- 2 Boating on the Lekoli River near Mboko Camp
- 3 Finding lowland gorillas is almost guaranteed at Odzala
- 4 Walking through the swamps near Lango Bai
- 5 Guide and tracker Gabin Okele
- 6 There are several hundred known species of butterfly in the forest
- 7 A forest elephant bull in Odzala, one of the last strongholds of this threatened subspecies

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The middle of nowhere:
The chalets at Lango Camp look out over the forest and *bai*, where elephant, buffalo and bongo come to drink, and hyena and leopard can be heard at night

While the mountain gorilla species of the highlands of East Africa have attracted the majority of the world's attention – and tourists – the lowland gorillas of the Congo Basin are still mostly unknown to the outside world. A different species entirely, lowland gorillas number around 100,000 in total (although estimates vary dramatically), and Odzala has the highest density of these apes in Africa.

Mountain gorilla treks in Rwanda, Uganda and even the Democratic Republic of Congo have been well established on the tourism map for at least three decades, drawing thousands of visitors who plod along well-trodden routes, with little chance of serendipitous encounters with wild animals.

Odzala is distinctly different. Just a few hundred visitors make the long journey via Brazzaville. It is anything but touristic, and group sizes are small and refreshingly personal. While it's seemingly remote, it's probably one of the most accessible forest wildlife experience in Africa. Guests can fly from Johannesburg or France to Brazzaville, and catch a two-hour connecting charter flight into the park.

When trekking in Odzala, there is a sense of discovery and surprise, as if you're one of the very first people to explore this large forest. Guides and rangers are enthusiastic, and are obviously proud of the role they play in protecting this iconic landscape and its animals.

The gorillas themselves are less used to people than their mountain cousins, which are habituated to the presence of humans. As a result,

Lango Camp is located on the edge of a clearing where a stream spreads out forming a shallow marsh. The whole camp is built on stilts, and at night, elephant

lowland gorillas tend to keep their distance, but they're also paradoxically more curious about humans, and you may catch yourself being spied on by a quizzical gorilla through the undergrowth.

Lowland gorillas may outnumber their mountain cousins in the east, but they are also critically endangered. Unlike mountain gorillas, whose small population of around 1000 is actually increasing, the

lowland gorilla population is declining every year. In 2002 alone, the gorilla population of Odzala dropped from about 42,000 to 20,000 due to an outbreak of Ebola. At the moment, the disease has disappeared.

Poaching is also a serious issue. Bushmeat hunting, deforestation, logging and diseases are taking a serious toll not only on gorillas but also on all the other species. WWF estimates that up to 1.5 million hectares of the Congo forest is being felled annually in the basin. In this context, Odzala becomes extremely important as a reservoir of forest species.

Odzala itself is managed by non-profit organisation African Parks in conjunction with the Republic of Congo government. Although tourist numbers are still too low to contribute significantly to the park's budget, management is well aware that Odzala has great potential to draw many more visitors to its three luxury camps.

And gorillas are just a small part of the wildlife that can be seen here. Odzala is home to 20 per cent of Africa's forest elephant, a distinct, smaller species from the more numerous savannah elephant of East and southern Africa. Then there are forest buffalo, weighing about 300kg, much smaller than its savannah cousin the Cape buffalo (which can reach 850kg).

Lango Camp is the best place to spot forest elephant. Located on the edge of a clearing where a stream spreads out forming →

SCOTT RAMSAY

a shallow marsh, the whole camp is built on stilts, and at night, elephants come to drink below.

Sitting around the fire at camp, and watching these magnificent animals moving through the moonlight is profoundly peaceful and moving — and poignant: more than 60 per cent of Africa's forest elephants have been killed by poachers in the past 15 years, and Odzala is one of their last strongholds. Without them, the forest will lose its biological richness. The grey behemoths keep the undergrowth open for other species to move easily, and their feeding and defecating disperse seeds far and wide, maintaining the high diversity of the forest.

During the day, buffalo graze on the grasslands that grow on the edge of the forest. Flocks of hundreds of African grey parrots crisscross the skies, and you can hear the beating wings of huge black-and-white casqued hornbills flying low above the treetops. At night, spotted hyena howl into the humid air. This could be the climax of terrestrial evolution on Earth, the oldest forest on the oldest continent, on the only known planet with life in the cosmos. And Odzala is at its heart.

● Find more photos of Odzala in a gallery at travelfricomag.com



Endemic wildlife of African forests

In addition to forest elephant and lowland gorillas, the jungles of Central Africa are home to many other endemic species:

Bonobos and chimpanzees These two subspecies are the most closely related animals to humans. While the chimpanzee is found from Senegal in the west to Tanzania in the east, the bonobo is restricted to the low-lying basin of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Okapi Commonly known as the forest giraffe, and found in north-eastern DRC and formerly in Uganda, the okapi looks like a mixture of a zebra, a giraffe and an eland. Once widespread through the forest, its numbers have dropped dramatically because of commercial bushmeat poaching.

Bongo (1) The largest species of forest antelope (weighing up to 400kg), the vibrant auburn-and-white-striped bongo is also one of the continent's most beautiful. Found commonly in Cameroon, DRC and Central African Republic, it is nevertheless considered near-threatened.

Potto Looking like a cross between a monkey, a sloth and a bushbaby, the common potto lives in lowland and montane forest trees from Senegal through the Congo Basin to Mount Kenya. This ostensibly cute, furry creature has exceptionally strong wrists, hands and feet, making it almost impossible for them to be dislodged from the tree branches.

Giant forest hog (2) If you encounter one of these, be sure to step aside and let it pass. At 275kg, this bruiser of the underbush has a fearsome reputation, protecting their females and young against lion, leopard and hyena. They're not the prettiest of pigs, as males have hugely swollen preorbital glands that exude secretions over their broad faces. Found in forests across equatorial Africa.

ODZALA DISCOVERY CAMPS (4)



Parrot invasion: You are likely to witness huge flocks of African grey parrots gathering in the *bai* at Odzala. **Above:** Putty-nosed monkeys are one of 12 primate species found in these biodiverse forests.

OTHER FORESTS TO WATCH WILDLIFE

Dzanga Sangha Reserve, Central African Republic

Located in the country's south-west, and covering 4000sq km, this reserve is most famous for Dzanga Bai. This saline clearing in the forest attracts lowland gorillas, forest elephant, buffalo, bongo and chimpanzees, as well as thousands of African grey parrots.

Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park, Republic of Congo

Initially a sector of Dzanga Sangha, this is a 3000sq-km national park in the country's north. Considered pristine, and with no human habitation, it is one of the least known reserves and has escaped the mass logging which has plagued other forest parks. Managed by World Conservation Society in conjunction with the government, it's most famous for Mbeli Bai, a clearing that draws hundreds of animals.

Chinko, Central African Republic

This 18,000sq-km reserve is where the Congo rainforests of the west meet the savannah woodland of the east. It contains a huge diversity of species, with animals from both ecosystems. This is the place to come to see both savannah and forest elephant, chimpanzees and baboons, bongo and buffalo. After several years of sporadic attacks by Sudanese poachers, visitor numbers have plummeted, but slowly it is stabilising under the management of African Parks and the government.