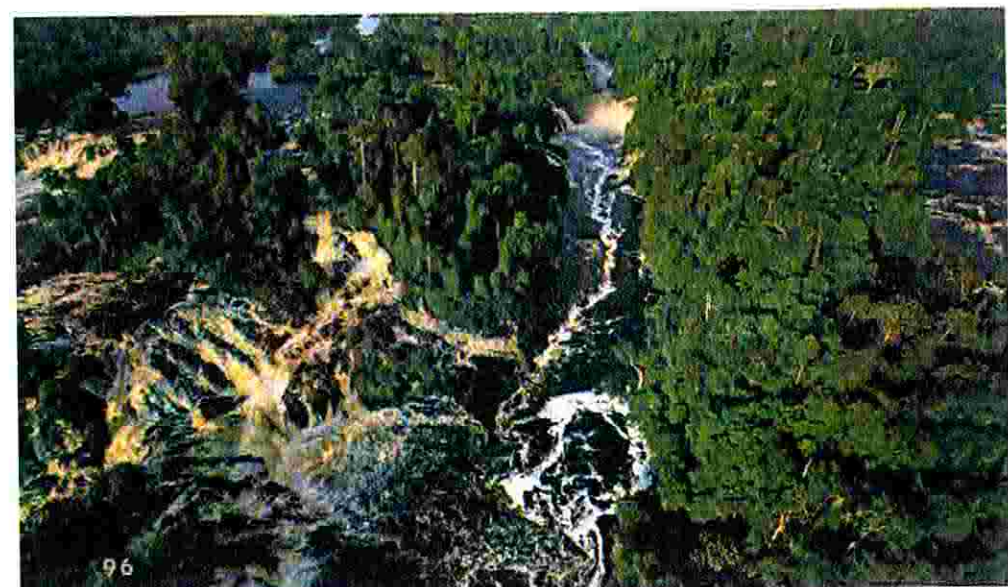
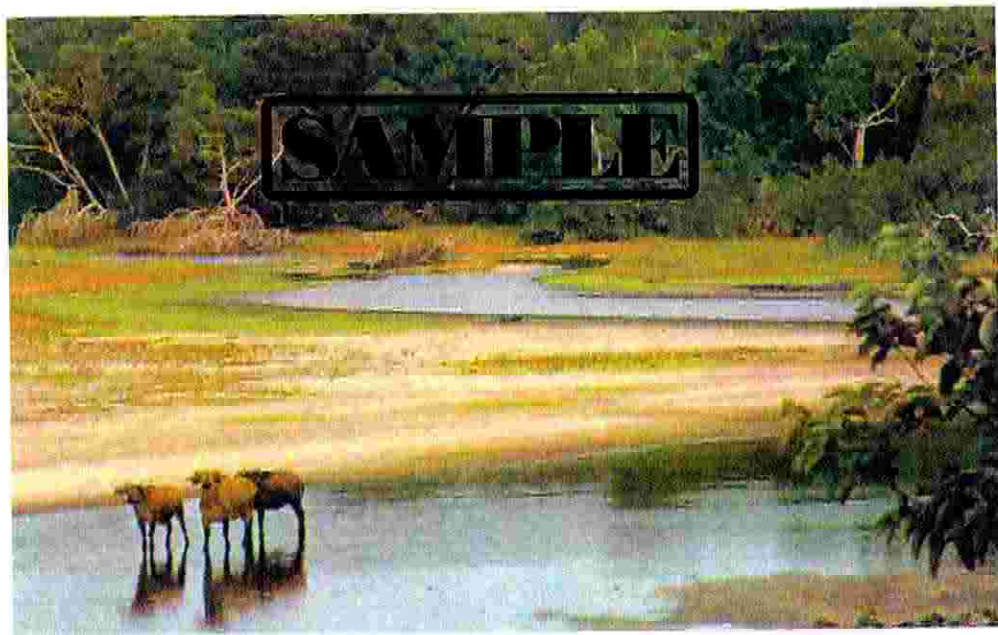


Where to go next
GABON

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WHERE TO GO NEXT GABON

Not often does a place made rich from timber and oil exports look to conservation as its future. Yet if the government of Gabon has anything to say about it, the west central African country will someday not only have a reputation for protecting its environment but also be one of the world's premier ecotourism destinations. With the vast majority of the country undeveloped, its virgin forests, savannas, salt marshes, and mangroves are home to an incredible range of wildlife: chimpanzees, elephants, buffalo, leopards, hippos, manatees, hundreds of species of fish and birds. The 550-mile coastline could easily be mistaken for the Caribbean—were it not for the lowland gorillas sunbathing on the beach. Offshore, whales migrating from Madagascar navigate the waters, as do sea turtles en route to nest on the empty sands. Gabon's president has set aside a full 10 percent of the country's landmass for 13 national parks and formed Operation Loango, a joint venture with several nonprofit groups. The organization has developed six comfortable lodges and tented camps in Loango National Park, and its trips, which benefit the local community and park projects, are one of the best ways to experience Gabon's biodiversity. What's more, you'll be witnessing firsthand the power of tourism in keeping the natural world unspoiled.

Operation Loango www.operation-loango.com; 31-26/370-5567 for bookings; seven-day trips for two from \$5,000.

Wild Kingdom Left, from top: Loango Lodge, one of six places to stay in Loango National Park; forest buffalo in the wildlife-rich Tassi area; 185-foot Kongou Falls, one of the largest in Africa, in Ivindo National Park.