

LO AND BEHOLD Loango

With its growing eco-Eden reputation, started by its part in Michael Fay's famed Megatranssect expedition, Loango National Park had a lot to live up to in eyes of Emma Gregg. Would its wilds deliver on her maiden voyage?

Caption

When it comes to soundbite-friendly wildlife spectacles, Gabon really knows how to deliver. You may well have heard of its "tree-climbing" crocodiles, "inquisitive" whales, "beach-loving" buffaloes and "drug-crazed" forest elephants. And you've probably seen photos of its famous "surfing" hippos. To cutting-edge safari aficionados, Gabon is Africa's new black – so if you're the kind of traveller who longs to step into the pages of National Geographic, chances are it's already on your list of places-to-see-before-you-die.

Loango National Park on the Atlantic coast is the most visited of Gabon's many wilderness areas, but it still has plenty of off-the-beaten-track cachet. Visitors arrive with high expectations. The legend created by Mike Fay, the charismatic ecologist and National Geographic contributor, plays a large part in this: few travellers could even pinpoint Gabon on a map before the magazine hurled it into the spotlight in the early 2000s.

"There's just nowhere else, anywhere, any more, not even the Amazon (which lacks charging elephants), that can match its pageant and scope of tropical wildness," wrote David Quammen in chronicling Mike Fay's travels in this remote corner of the continent. In the late 1990s, Fay, the ultimate modern-day adventurer, hiked all the way to Loango from Bomassa in the Republic of Congo, via equatorial Africa's last pristine forest corridor. This 2000-mile trek, dubbed the Megatranssect expedition, took a total of 456 gruelling days; along the way Fay and his colleague, photographer Michael Nichols, battled with illness, exhaustion, chronic humidity, rapacious insects and threatening poachers. Their aim was to study and record the forest flora and fauna, and to draw world attention to a region in desperate need of environmental protection. Fay was overwhelmed by his discoveries. Coining the ultimate soundbite, he declared the region "Africa's last Eden".

The Megatranssect campaign was a monumental success: it prompted President Omar Bongo Ondimba of Gabon, in 2002, to create Loango and twelve other new national parks at a stroke. The hope was, and still is, that Gabon could become the Costa Rica of Africa – an ecotourism destination for the cognoscenti.

Bongo's decisiveness might suggest that he is quite a tree-hugger, as presidents go, but in fact he just has a sharp eye on his country's economic future. Oil, discovered offshore in the 1970s, has made Gabon prosperous – this is the country which, famously, used

to hold the world record for the greatest volume of champagne consumed per capita – but the reserves are dwindling. Bongo wants to be sure that other sources of revenue such as high-end, low-impact tourism are on track well ahead of the crunch point.

Loango's future looks bright, thanks in no small part to the efforts of SCD, the Société de Développement et Conservation, and its Dutch-owned tourism division, Africa's Eden. Their pilot project, Operation Loango, explored the extent to which tourism could fund conservation in a region which had no pre-existing safari infrastructure. Fay himself was instrumental, commenting "I literally want as many people on earth as possible to see this place and fall in love with it." Drawing on the combined expertise of specialists from the Wildlife Conservation Society, WWF, Conservation International and the Max Planck Institute, among others, the park now has a development plan and a variety of flora and fauna initiatives, all of which are partly funded by tourism. Fay, who has since moved on to other things, remains very much a part of the Loango set-up, occasionally flying in to give presentations.

Loango's unusual juxtaposition of varied habitats, including undeveloped beach, river, savannah, swamp and forest, make it an outstanding place to visit. The park's population of large mammals ebbs and flows in a seasonal relay: almost every month in the year, there's a good chance of seeing something remarkable, be it breaching humpback whales (July to September), breeding Nile crocodiles (October to January) or nesting leatherback turtles (November to February). Those celebrated hippos, photographed by Nichols as they frolicked in the Atlantic surf, appear between November and January, while forest elephants patrol the shore from February to April.

I visited Loango at a quiet time of year – October – and there was still much to see. We journeyed to the park by boat from the small oil-worker town of Port Gentil, skimming south across broad coastal lagoons as herons and palm nut vultures flapped overhead. On the way, we stopped at the Fernan-Vaz Gorilla Project on Evengué island, a refuge for western lowland gorillas which have been orphaned, typically by bushmeat poachers. The project's staff, led by Canadian vet Nick Bachand, prepare the animals for re-release or lifelong sanctuary, depending on their circumstances. We were granted an audience with the live-in gorillas, Mabéké, Owendja and Izowuet, who, gratifyingly, seemed as interested in us as we were in them, hanging out close to the wire of their

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lush, leafy enclosure. Further south, we dropped in at one of the region’s few colonial remnants – a mission church, Sainte-Anne du Fernan-Vaz – to admire its splendid iron vaulting, designed by Gustav Eiffel, no less, just before he created the Eiffel Tower.

But it was when we turned into the Mpivié River that the adventure really began. Our skipper slowed the motor as we slid across water as dark and glossy as treacle. To left and right was a wall of green: towering rainforest packed out with giant ferns, epiphytes, lianas and papyrus stalks. Sunlit lower branches served as perches for kingfishers and, thrillingly, slender-snouted crocodiles – our first glimpse of a Loango legend.

The park’s main base is Loango Lodge, a former game fishing camp set on the banks of Iguéla Lagoon. Here, those used to luxury eco-lodges are required to adjust their expectations. While the main building is grand by Central and West African standards, the bedrooms are modest; disappointingly, only a few make the most of the waterfront, and eco-measures barely feature. But it’s clear that this place takes conservation seriously – research offices and study rooms are scattered around the plot, and Mike Fay’s books take pride of place in the guest lounge. Moreover, anyone preferring a more complete immersion in the wilderness can opt to stay in one of the park’s back-to-basics bush camps.

One of Operation Loango’s early successes was to train up a team of Gabonese “eco-guides”. These have a good grounding in natural history, speak a smattering of English as well as French, and accompany guests into the park, safari-style. Our guides, Patrick and Stéphane, suggested a game drive in the north of the park.

Stranded between the lagoon and the ocean, there’s a palpable remoteness to northern Loango, its open expanses dotted with mysterious islands of forest. Feeling like the only visitors for miles – which was close to the truth – we bumped along sandy tracks, eyed by red river hogs and forest buffaloes. For those familiar with warthogs and Cape buffaloes, the western equivalents are a novelty: stocky and russet-coloured, with flamboyantly tufted ears.

As we rounded a bend close to a belt of trees, a small forest elephant emerged from the shadows, then promptly retreated. We were about to move on when, to our surprise, it reappeared with a calf at its heels. So much for the shyness of the Loango forest elephant. After posing like a model, it approached our vehicle



in a most un-elephant-like way. We quickly drove on, the French speakers among us chorusing “incroyable!” as both mother and calf pursued us at a trot. Could these animals be under the influence of ibago, the hallucinogenic root that grows in these forests?

Patrick thought not, but admitted that Loango’s elephants are rather partial to the stuff, and can sometimes behave erratically. Later, he pointed out the spot where Mike Fay was wounded by an elephant in 2003. The attacker, a female, may have been defending her territory; it made over a dozen lunges with its tusks. Fay had a lucky recovery. “All I could see were those tusks bearing down on my chest,” he said later.

Loango’s legends were coming to life, one after one, so it was with a little trepidation that we set out to canoe along a coastal creek that’s something of a hippo hangout. As we steered past reedbeds reflected in mirror-smooth water, it was easy to see why some have compared Gabon’s graceful waterways to the Okavango Delta.

The hippos failed to materialise, so we proceeded

unmolested to the beach, an endless strip of windblown sand with ghost crabs skittering at the water’s edge and a lone buffalo staring out towards the far horizon. No hippos here, either. But instead of feeling disappointment, my respect for this rugged wilderness was growing all the time.

“That’s why South Africans love it here so much,” explained Jaco Ackermann, one of Loango’s team of conservation experts. “It’s completely different from the game reserves down south where the animals practically perform on cue. Here, you never quite know what to expect.” And this unpredictability is, perhaps the key to Loango’s appeal – it’s a place so truly, genuinely wild that nature will always claim the right to hold something back.

Emma visited Loango National Park with Africa’s Eden (www.africas-eden.com), as part of their ‘Central Africa’s Best Kept Secret’ tour. Brussels Airlines (www.brusselsairlines.com) generously provided flights between London Gatwick and the tour’s hub city of Douala.

