

In the thick of it

Visiting the wilds of the Central African Republic isn't something many of us have done or even dreamed of, yet, as **Emma Gregg** discovers, there are plenty of rewards if you take the plunge.

We're thigh-deep in a river the colour of tea when an urgent gesture from one of our three local guides brings us to a halt. Up ahead, blocking our path, is an African forest elephant – a bull, with long tusks and a hard stare. Behind him, dense rainforest broods under a dark sky. With perfect dramatic timing, there's a bellow of thunder. Lightning cracks open the cloudscape and rain plummets down in warm, fast drops.

My pre-trip reading had suggested that equatorial Africa's forest elephants – *Loxodonta cyclotis*, smaller and more delicate-looking than their savannah-dwelling counterparts – are timid and elusive. Nonetheless, within two days in the forests of Central African Republic (CAR) we've already notched up several dozen sightings, albeit from a far safer distance than this.

There's a movement in the long grass to our left and our guides decide it's time to get assertive. One starts yelling, another thrashes his arms around in the water, and the third rushes forward, clapping his flip-flops together over his head as loudly as he can. A small, tubby female elephant makes an indignant exit from her grazing place, galumphing through the river to take refuge in the trees beyond. But the bull stands his ground. Undaunted, our flip-flop-clapping guide squelches up onto the bank and continues his charge, as fast as the sand and mud will allow. The bull, with a brisk shake of his head, turns tail. We breathe a collective sigh of relief, and get back to business – it's quite a wade back to the path to our vehicle, and the floodwaters are rising.

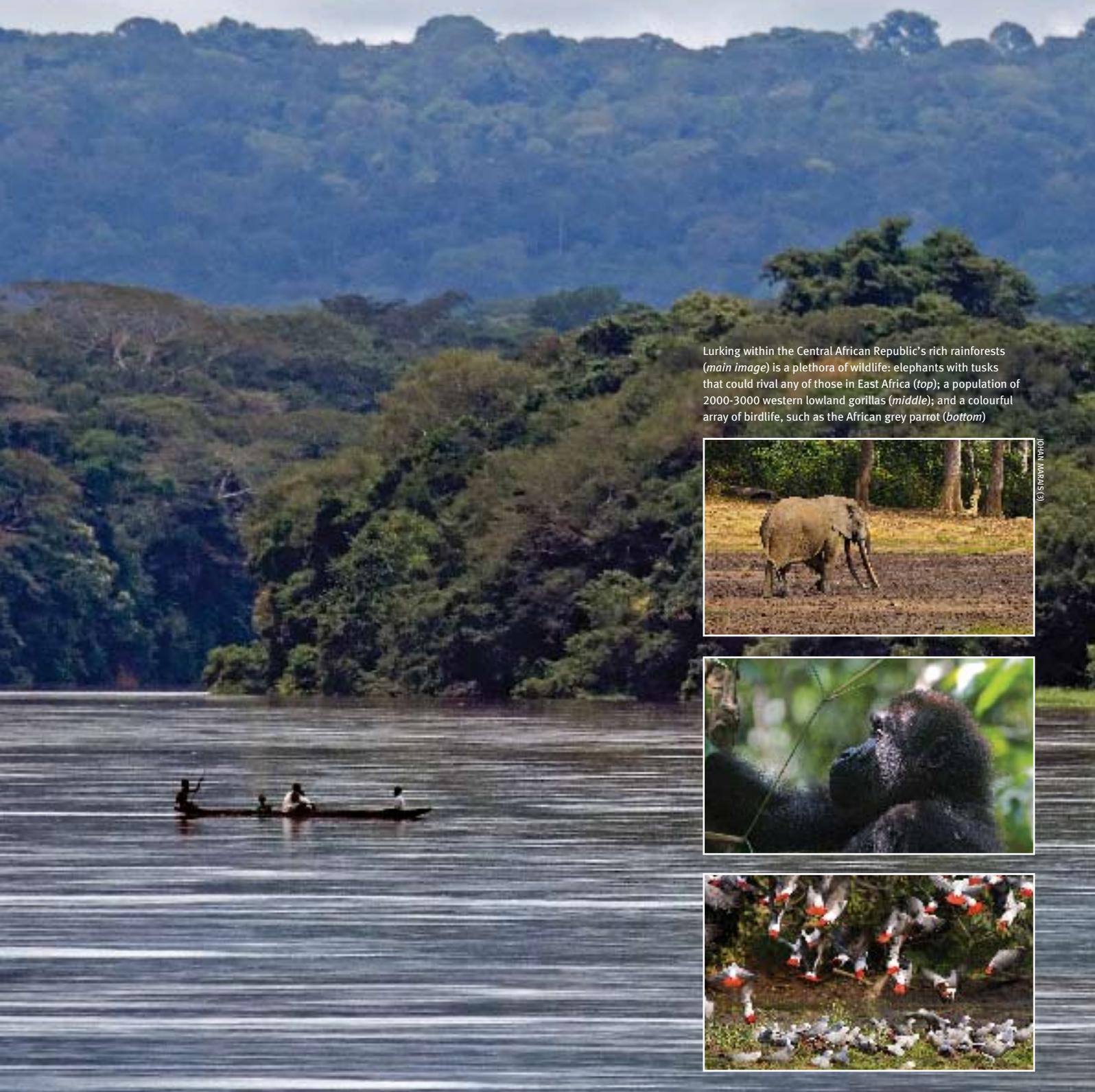
Among safari aficionados, much is made of the differences between a walking safari and a game drive. On a walking safari your connection to the landscape is more profound: you're more attuned to its sounds, smells and subtleties. But rarely is the connection as real and raw as it is here in the Dzanga-Sangha Reserve, a precious pocket of green tucked between the borders of Cameroon and Republic of Congo in southwest CAR. Those who like to keep their khaki clean should stick to the minibus trips of East and southern Africa – but if you don't mind clambering across demanding terrain,

battling with thorny lianas and maddening sweat bees, getting mud-streaked, rain-soaked and dog-tired in the hope of one or two thrillingly close wildlife encounters, Dzanga-Sangha could be your kind of place.

The reserve, which encompasses more than 400ha of rainforest, harbours surprisingly healthy numbers of large mammals – not just forest elephants, but also forest buffalos, giant forest hogs, bongos (large antelopes with distinctively striped coats), chimpanzees and western lowland gorillas. "This particular forest is remarkable for its high species diversity," says Marc Thibault of the WWF, Dzanga-Sangha's principal technical advisor, "and for the fact that it has so far been the subject of very little scientific exploration. But logging and mining pose a serious threat to the natural environment throughout the Congo Basin." Dzanga-Sangha is by no means the only protected area in CAR, but it's the most substantial protected rainforest. It's also the one region in this relatively stable but desperately poor nation in which anti-poaching efforts have been successful enough for tourism to gain a small foothold.

It's all relative, though. In darker times – the 40 years of brutal dictatorship which followed Central African Republic's independence from France – tourists stayed well away. Even now, the nation hovers on the sidelines, overshadowed by the troubles of its neighbours and bogged down by its own bureaucratic vagaries. Barely 500 visitors a year make the journey to Dzanga-Sangha, which is 500km from the capital, Bangui – a gruelling twelve hours by road. The obvious alternative, if you can afford it, is to fly into the reserve's makeshift airstrip by private charter, but even that can be fraught. Our visit was set back by the best part of a day when the aviation and immigration authorities first delayed our take-off from Douala in Cameroon, and then ordered our pilot to make a lengthy detour via Bangui airport – a place where nothing moves, apart from skinny lizards and the shimmering heat haze. Thankfully, the CAR government authorities are realising the importance of tourism in the development of the region, and are now showing more cooperation with regard to direct flights >>>

Worth every bite, scratch, bruise and smear
of mud, it's without a doubt the most dynamic
wildlife spectacle west of Ngorongoro



Lurking within the Central African Republic's rich rainforests (*main image*) is a plethora of wildlife: elephants with tusks that could rival any of those in East Africa (*top*); a population of 2000-3000 western lowland gorillas (*middle*); and a colourful array of birdlife, such as the African grey parrot (*bottom*)



© STRAWHAT MEDIA



Central African Republic

Africa's Eden, a forward-thinking, Amsterdam-based tour company, is convinced that Dzanga-Sangha is worth the trouble, and has built it into its equatorial African portfolio. On paper, the move is a stroke of brilliance – Africa, rich though it is in adventurous travel opportunities, offers few which are truly innovative. In practice, the trip is still somewhat experimental.

It was in good humour, therefore, that we settled into our accommodation, Doli Lodge, a basic forest safari camp linked to the airstrip by a bumpy mud track. And when, after a night disturbed by rainwater dripping through bedroom ceilings, we nicknamed it “Dodgy Lodge”, that was good-humoured, too.

“Reservations are currently taking place,” says Tienke Vermeiden of Africa's Eden. “For now, we are keeping the number of tours limited. We feel that tourism has a useful role to play in conserving Dzanga-Sangha's pristine environment, but there's a great deal of politics involved in all the decision-making processes, and simple logistical planning takes time.”

The lodge is an appealingly low-key place, in a setting which feels genuinely remote. Its timber deck hangs over a stretch of broad, brown river bordered by thick forest, veiled in mist in the mornings and alive with frog calls after dark.

Apart from forest elephants, the Dzanga-Sangha Reserve has another blockbuster animal attraction to offer walking safari enthusiasts: gorillas. The reserve is home to between 2000 and 3000 western lowland gorillas, one group of which can be tracked on foot through the Dzanga-Ndoki National Park, in the central part of the reserve. They're led by a silverback named Makumba, whose name roughly translates as Speedy.

Western lowland gorillas are trickier to habituate to humans than their more celebrated cousins, the mountain gorillas of Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC: the forest environment forces lowlanders to range more widely for food, and there have been cases of groups disintegrating under the pressure of long-term human observation. Since any reduction in their natural fear of people increases gorillas' vulnerability to the unscrupulous bushmeat and trophy hunters who

prowl the Congo Basin, habituation is not attempted lightly. Once a programme begins, the animals must be guarded throughout the hours of daylight, 365 days a year. Makumba and his clan were first identified as potential subjects in 2001 and it was only after five years of patient tracking and monitoring by WWF researchers working in partnership with local BaAka trackers that it was felt that they were ready to meet their first tourists.

On the day of our expedition, we set out early, splashing and churning our way through mud and puddles on the 90-minute drive to the Bai Hokou gorilla research station. Only three visitors at a time are permitted to track the gorillas, and all must be fit: the Makumba group typically travels a couple of kilometres a day, and can be up to three hours' strenuous walking distance from Bai Hokou (most days they are one or two hours away). Sightings are not guaranteed – the overall success rate is high, at over 90 per cent, but the forest is dense and relatively few treks result in a close, unobstructed view of the group. We were not deterred. After a very brief introduction in which we were reminded not to cough or sneeze in the presence of the animals – great apes are notoriously susceptible to human illnesses – we set off into the rainforest in the company of two BaAka guides.

To the BaAka, one of the Central African peoples the colonialists used to call pygmies, this forest is home, and our guides follow narrow, muddy elephant paths as comfortably as a Londoner might stride along the Mall. Whenever they encounter a tricky bit, they switch from flip-flops to bare feet. We do our best to keep up, stepping carefully over buttress roots, ducking under vines and trying vainly to avoid the deepest and squidgiest of the puddles.

All around us are traces of other animals – the static-like barks of monkeys, the long trunk-drag marks of forest elephants, the dazzling flashes of colour as newly-hatched butterflies flap through the lower canopy – but our guides, knowing that the gorillas were last seen over two hours away, are fully focused on the trek, and hurry us along.

We know that we're close when they leave the path altogether, stepping silently through the dappled leaf litter and making soft *cloc-cloc* noises with their tongues. “It's to let them know we are here,” whispers one of them, Mobambu, in a rare confidence. Even so, our first sight of the silverback is almost unexpected – the foliage has become so dense that we're barely 12m away when we spot him in the shadows. Immediately a small female comes bouncing up, and a rattle of leaves alerts us to others in nearby trees. Gradually we count a dozen individuals, including one round-eyed baby clinging to its mother's thick, russet-tinged fur. Trunks, leaves and branches obscure our view; we go through the motions of trying to take pictures but eventually give up, put our cameras away and settle for the simple pleasure of watching. Every so often, winningly, we're treated to a split-second glimpse of a nut-brown face.

Used to being gaped at, the gorillas get on with doing gorilla things – climbing trees, pulling at munchable leaves and, in the case of one youngster, spinning around on a twisted vine, apparently just for fun. One pair of juveniles pound their chests – with their palms, I notice, not their fists – and mock-wrestle. Muscle-bound Makumba fails to live up to his name,

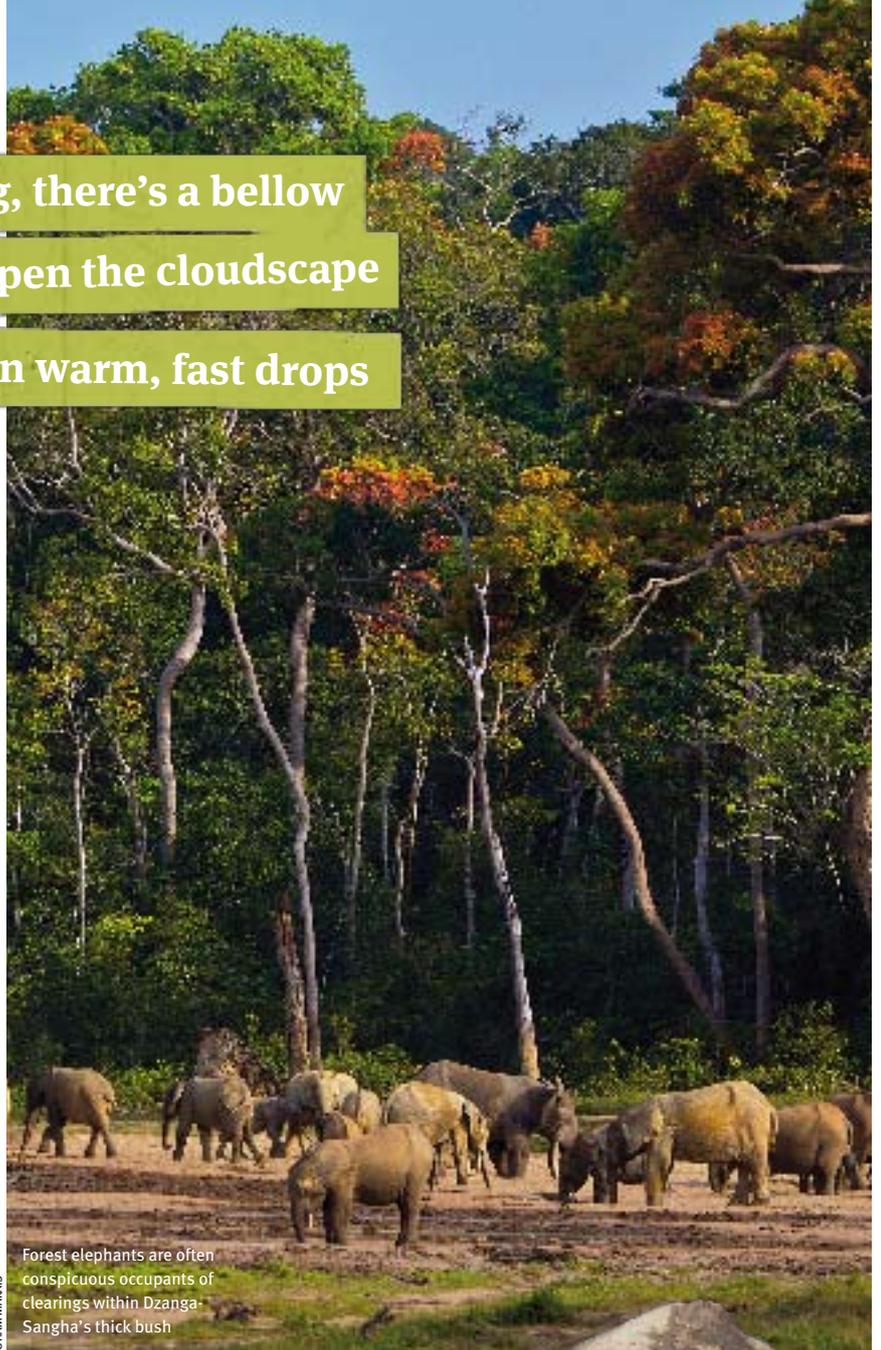


With perfect dramatic timing, there's a bellow of thunder. Lightning cracks open the cloudscape and rain plummets down in warm, fast drops

seemingly preferring leisure to speed; he lolls regally on the forest floor, examining his fingernails in an uncannily human manner. One of our group, a British primatologist who's currently running a western lowland gorilla habituation project by the Max Planck Institute in Gabon's Loango National Park, is delighted by the relaxed demeanour of Makumba and his entourage. "They're a real treasure," she says, "it's amazing that so few people know this place even exists."

The following day, we're back in the forest again, but with a different agenda. No elephant paths to follow this time - we're weaving our way between tree trunks and lianas, sticking very closely to our BaAka companion, Mbali, as she's the one with the machete. Despite being very pregnant she can fit through far smaller gaps than we can and it's an effort to match her pace. Up ahead is a gang of her fellow villagers, all barefoot; slung over their shoulders are long nets of hand-twisted twine, roughly the height of a tennis net. All are in a high state of excitement. They've been chanting, clapping and singing together all the way here - "to summon up the forest spirits," says Chamba, our guide - and now they're about to show us how they hunt blue duiker, small forest antelopes.

Quickly, they unravel their nets, hook them onto trees and close up all the gaps to form a long, low, semi-circular barrier. They then start whooping, calling and shaking branches in order to frighten any animals in the vicinity into their trap. Nothing emerges, so with minimal fuss they collect up the nets and move on, looking for a suitable spot for a second



Forest elephants are often conspicuous occupants of clearings within Dzanga-Sangha's thick bush

JOHAM MARAIS

WHICH ELEPHANT?

African forest elephant

Latin name: *Loxodonta cyclotis*

Habitat: forests of Central and West Africa

Max height and weight: 2.5m / 4500kg

Ears: large, more rounded

Tusks: harder, straighter, downward-pointing

Mandible: long and narrow

Toenails: five on front foot, four on hind foot



African savannah elephant

Latin name: *Loxodonta africana*

Habitat: sub-Saharan bush, grasslands and marshes

Max height and weight: 4m / 12,000kg

Ears: large, more pointed

Tusks: thicker, curved, outward-pointing

Mandible: short and wide

Toenails: four on front foot, three on hind foot



JOHAM MARAIS

Undaunted, our guide squelches up onto the bank and continues his charge, as fast as the sand and mud will allow

attempt. Everything is decided jointly – BaAka live in egalitarian, leaderless groups, in which men and women share tasks and spoils, hunting included. “If after a few tries they catch nothing,” says Chamba, “they will gather together and discuss whether one of them has a personal problem they should lay aside. Once they’ve done that, generally, they will succeed.”

A yell rings out and the message is relayed that two duikers – *mboloko* – have been spotted but have escaped. Mbali, who has been passing the time by giving us a crash course in medicinal plants, looks disconsolate, but I can’t help a silent cheer on the duikers’ behalf. I’ve been told that the end would be quick, though – a sharp whack on the head. The BaAka don’t hunt intensively, and antelope meat is a luxury.

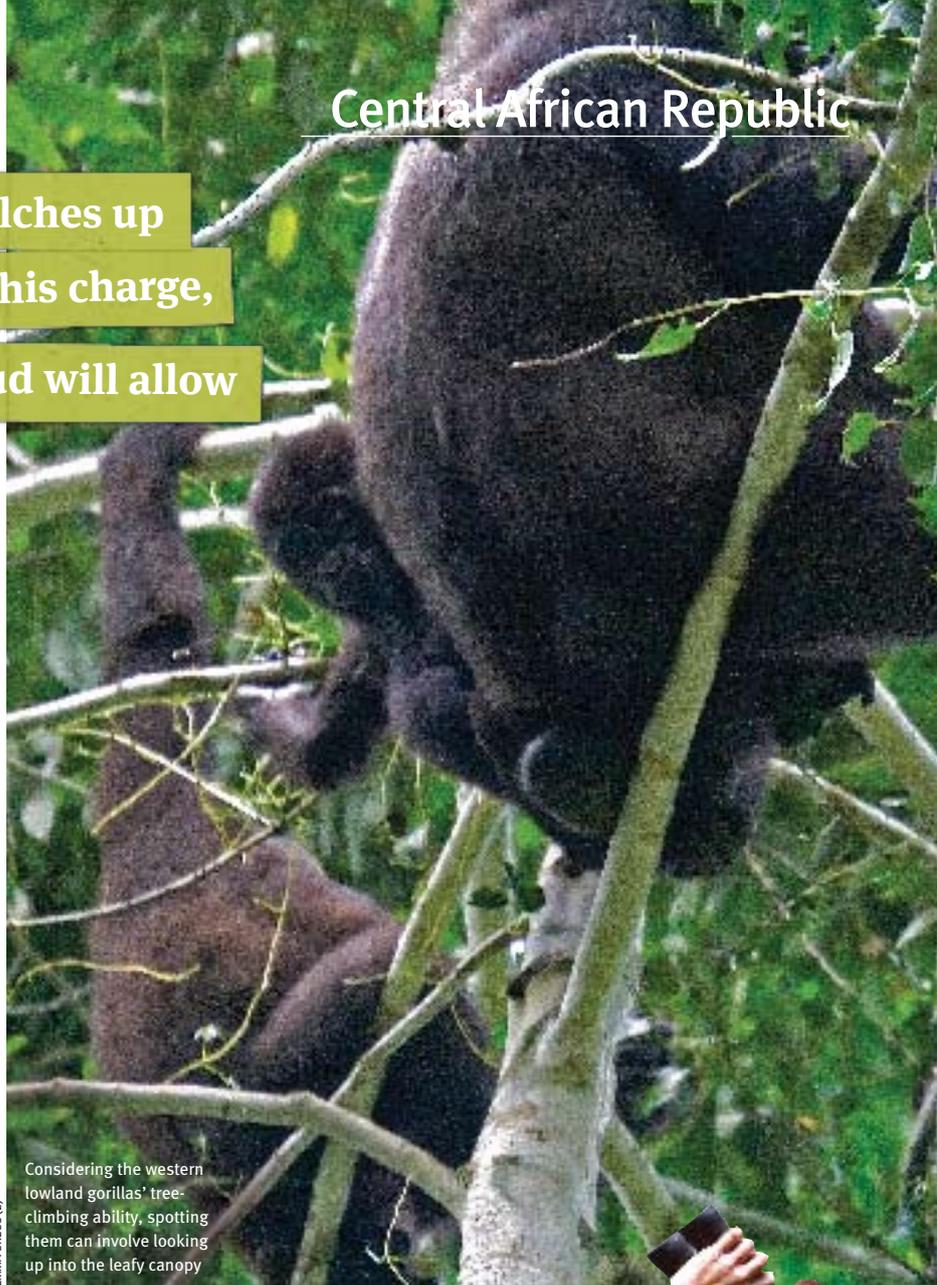
In the end, we run out of time, and leave the forest empty-handed but for the bundles of canes and edible leaves that some have collected along the way. Presumably there’ll be wild cassava leaf sauce on the menu today.

Our close encounters with gorillas and with the BaAka are both fascinating and moving, but there’s another treat in store, on the far side of that long wade through tea-coloured water. Climbing the timber steps up to the lofty viewing platform at Dzanga Bai, we feel like Romans taking our places in the emperor’s box of a gigantic amphitheatre. Spread below us is a majestic assembly of forest elephants with muddy tidemarks around their legs and bellies – around a dozen families, drinking and socialising with evident enjoyment. Dotted among them are sitatungas, giant forest hogs, forest buffaloes, herons and egrets.

It was the charismatic American ecologist Mike Fay who, together with *National Geographic* photographer Michael Nichols, threw the spotlight onto the rich diversity of wildlife that gathers in the *bais* of equatorial Africa. *Bai* is the BaAka name for a natural clearing in the rainforest, formed in a marshy area rich in natural salt deposits. Kept open by the mining activities of elephants, they’re a magnet for animals and birds. Dzanga Bai is a magnificent arena, over 500m wide, and Wildlife Conservation Society researchers have been keeping watch over it since 1990, identifying over 5000 individual elephant visitors.

We’re filthy and drenched but our tiredness simply evaporates as we take up our binoculars and settle down to enjoy the scene. Worth every bite, scratch, bruise and smear of mud, it’s without a doubt the most dynamic wildlife spectacle west of Ngorongoro – and we have it all to ourselves. 🐼

■ Emma Gregg travelled to Dzanga-Sangha Reserve with *Africa’s Eden* (www.africas-eden.com) as part of their ‘Central Africa’s Best Kept Secret’ tour.



EMMA GREGG (2)

Considering the western lowland gorillas’ tree-climbing ability, spotting them can involve looking up into the leafy canopy

GORILLA TRACKING HOTSPOTS

For western lowland gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*):

CAR Dzanga-Ndoki NP

Remote, but it’s the only place on earth to track this elusive species. Only one group is sufficiently habituated to be visited; others are under observation. Maximum of six visitors per day (three per trek). Visitor permits around US\$220.

GABON Loango NP

Max Planck Institute researchers are currently habituating groups of western lowland gorillas and hope that tourists will be able to visit them in due course.

For mountain gorillas (*Gorilla beringei beringei*):

RWANDA Volcanoes NP

Seven habituated groups; a maximum of 56 visitors per day (eight per trek). Visitor permits US\$500.

UGANDA Bwindi Impenetrable Forest and Mgahinga NP

Five habituated groups; a maximum of 32 visitors per day (eight per trek). Visitor permits US\$500.

