

The Congo – Rainforest Wildlife of Africa's Hidden Heart

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Brazzaville & overnight
Day 2	Fly M'boko airstrip, transfer Ngaga Camp
Day 3/4	Ngaga Camp
Day 5/8	M'boko & Lango Camps
Day 9	Fly Brazzaville & overnight
Day 10	Brazzaville, late departure for London
Day 11	Arrive London

Departs

February

Focus

Mammals (especially gorillas), birds & other wildlife

Grading

C. Moderate to strenuous day walks

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code CNG01)

Highlights:

- Track habituated groups of Western Lowland Gorilla
- Mammals including Forest Elephant, Western Sitatunga and Forest Buffalo
- Explore the vast untouched rainforests of the Congo Basin, staying in beautiful tree top camps
- Other primates including Western Guereza, Putty-nosed and Crowned Monkeys



Images from top: Western Lowland Gorillas, Forest Elephant, Lango Bai



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Introduction

The Republic of the Congo, not to be confused with its much larger, volatile neighbour situated across the great Congo River, is a beautiful former French colony. Largely blanketed by Equatorial forest, extending from the Massif de Chaillu and Mayombe forests in the south to the enormous tracts of primary forest that lie in the very heart of the Congo Basin in the north, Congo is home to the world's second largest expanse of tropical rainforest. This country is little known and little explored, and with eco-tourism just in its infancy here, every visit is sure to be filled with discovery.

We will be based deep in the dense, unspoiled Congo rainforest for this pioneering tour where we will be exploring Odzala-Kokoua National Park. The north of the park is dominated by dense forest which covers the steep hills, whilst going west towards Gabon, the altitude drops and the habitat turns to low, swampy forest. In the south, meanwhile, the pockets of savannah and scattered forest islands cover the landscape, interspersed with "Bais"; swampy,



Tree-top rooms at Ngaga Camp (Scott Ramsey)

grassy clearings within the dense forest, regularly visited by forest wildlife coming to drink and feed on the sedges and grasses. The forests here are drained by the Sangha, Mambili and mighty Congo rivers, providing an enchanting means of exploring the dense forests and enabling us to access remote areas otherwise hard to reach on foot. Pygmy culture persists, endemic wildlife flourishes, and the remote northern forests harbour the highest known gorilla densities anywhere in the world, presenting us with the incredible opportunity of tracking down what will surely be the highlight of this tour: the Western Lowland Gorilla.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

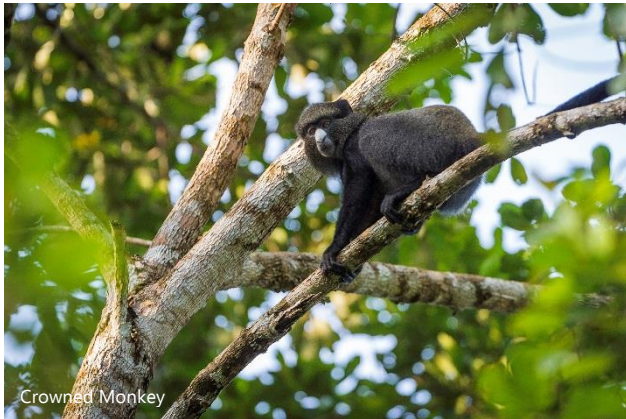
Brazzaville

We depart Heathrow (or regional airport) early morning on an Air France flight to Paris' Charles de Gaulle Airport (though please see the section below regarding UK/Paris/Brazzaville flight connections). We then connect with a mid-morning flight to Brazzaville, the capital of the Congo, arriving in the early evening. On arriving at Brazzaville's Maya Maya International Airport we will clear immigration and customs and transfer to a comfortable hotel an overnight stop.

Days 2 – 4

Fly M'boko, transfer Ngaga Camp

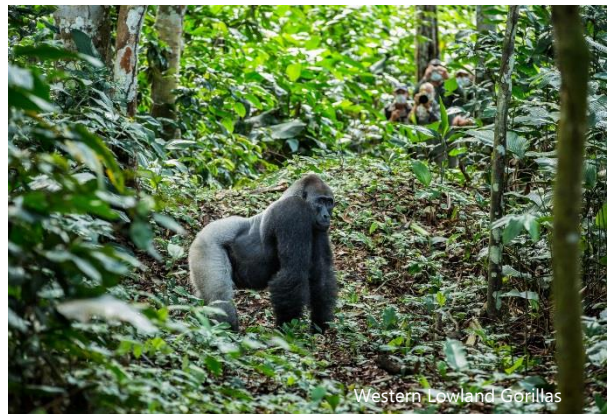
Following breakfast, we return to the airport once again, this time for a much shorter flight to the M'Boko airstrip within Odzala-Kokoua National Park. The journey should take around two hours, and will give us the first glimpses of the beautiful Congo forests that we are soon to explore. Odzala-Kokoua National Park is one of Africa's oldest national parks, founded in 1935, and is renowned for being the richest block of forest in central Africa for primates. On arrival, we will transfer to the tree-top Ngaga Camp, our base for the next three nights. Ngaga Camp is actually just outside the western boundary of the Odzala-Kokoua National Park, but based in the heart of a Marantaceae forest – pristine primary rainforest - built above the Ngaga Stream with each room facing out into



Crowned Monkey

the forest canopy. Western Lowland Gorillas here favour areas of Marantaceae vegetation which is a staple food source, and so it is this majestic mammal that we will turn our attention to on arrival at Ngaga Camp. This is the home of top gorilla researchers Dr Magda Bermejo and German Illera, the first people to successfully habituate Western Lowland Gorillas, and world authorities on the species, having been researching them in northern Congo for nearly 20 years.

There are over 20 groups of gorillas in the 30km² Ndzehi Forest area surrounding Ngaga Camp, two of which have been habituated and are possible to track and observe on foot. The first is the Neptuno Group, a group of around 16 individuals with an enormous and sometimes intimidating Silverback, whose home range centres on Ngaga Camp. The second is the Jupiter Group, which has around 25 individuals and a similarly enormous Silverback, but who is curiously shy and retiring. Their home range centres just to the south of Ngaga Camp.



Western Lowland Gorillas

The movements of the groups is generally dictated by the seasonal availability of different forest fruits, and they routinely leave their overnight nests in the morning when it is still cool to move through the forest in search of a productive feeding site. They make day nests to take a siesta during the heat of the day, and then spend the afternoon foraging again and finding overnight

nests. As Western Lowland Gorillas rest in thick vegetation (as opposed to Mountain Gorillas which rest in open clearings), noise from unseen humans would likely disturb them so they have to be observed whilst feeding or on the move. This does make tracking Western Lowland Gorillas potentially more challenging, but it also means we are more likely to see unique behaviour such as playing and tree-climbing.

The permanent research team at Ngaga includes three highly skilled Mbeti trackers, who will help us to find the groups and hopefully enjoy an incredible hour in their company during our stay. Tracking expeditions usually range in length between 1 and 8km over undulating country, and excursions typically last between 2 and 8 hours, including the time spent with the gorilla group. Gorilla viewing is strictly



permitted and follows IUCN guidelines, meaning the maximum viewing duration of any gorilla group is 1 hour, in small groups, and the maximum proximity is 7 metres (we usually view from around 10 to 15m). We will track these groups on foot, though on occasion the gorilla groups do walk under the raised platforms of Ngaga Camp itself! Each family group is visited just once per day, and so, in the hands of our expert guide and tracker, we will have two opportunities each to look for the gorillas, and hopefully view them at close range. Of course, nothing is guaranteed in the world of wildlife watching, but every effort is made to view the gorillas and sightings and encounters here are very reliable.



For the rest of our time at Ngaga, we will enjoy forest walks, some of which can require wading through streams which can allow easier access through the forest! Other primates that we may encounter include Putty-nosed, Crowned and Moustached Monkeys and Grey-cheeked Mangabeys, whilst Chimpanzees are often heard and very occasionally seen. We should enjoy some fantastic forest birding during our stay, with species such as the

huge Black-casqued Wattled Hornbill, Great Blue Turaco, Black-collared Lovebird, Chestnut Wattle-eye and perhaps even rarities such as Congo Serpent-eagle and Vermiculated Fishing-Owl. There are relatively high densities of large mammals here, though the vegetation cover can make them harder to spot and some species are very shy.

During our stay we will also venture out on foot after dark in search of the many nocturnal forest residents. Africa’s largest fruit bat, the Hammer Bat, is regularly found roosting overhead, and we

have a good chance of viewing Red-chested Owlet. Nocturnal primates are well represented here, and along with the more familiar Galagos (or Bush Babies), and there is also the possibility of spotting the bizarre Potto or Angwantibo – two slow-moving prosimians. Though tricky to find, if we are lucky enough to catch sight of them then we are assured wonderful views, as they cling motionlessly in the branches overhead.

After a full day of tracking gorillas and exploring the forests, we will return to relax back at our beautiful camp, perhaps cooling off first in the natural swimming pool in the Ngaga Stream below camp, or enjoying the sounds of the forest from the star deck.

Days 5 – 8

Mboko and Lango Camp

Our next four days will be split between Mboko and Lango Camps (usually 2 nights at Lango, and 2 nights at Mboko). Mboko Camp consists of 12 cabins nestled along the Lekoli River in amongst the forest. The scenery here is stunning as the tropical rainforest borders the grassland savannah which is scattered with hundreds of towering termite mounds and frequently visited by Forest Buffalo, Forest Elephant and Spotted Hyena. Lango Camp, meanwhile, is nestled in dense gallery forest overlooking the productive Lango Bai in the central southern regions of Odzala-Kokoua National Park. Lango camp operates as a satellite of Mboko Camp, accommodating a maximum of 12 guests. The camp is raised around 3 – 4 metres above the ground, with a 360 degree walkway around each treetop room, and further interconnecting walkways between the lounge, bar, dining area and star deck. Like Ngaga Camp, it has been thoughtfully designed, taking inspiration from the local B'Aka 'pygmy' groups, and built using locally sourced, sustainably harvested hardwoods, bamboo and raffia palm.



From the camps we will explore the forest, bai and surrounding savannah on foot, by vehicle and by using motorised pirogues (traditional boats) or perhaps even kayaks. It is likely to be very wet underfoot, and so we will make the most of the permanent rivers – sometimes wading through the water on foot – allowing us to explore deep into the forest into areas otherwise hard to reach.

Forest Buffalo and Western Sitatunga visit Lango bai regularly during the day, whilst Forest Elephant and Spotted Hyena may be seen during the day but more typically arrive as night starts to fall. Night drives after dark give us the opportunity to search for Serval and Aardvark. Guereza Colobus monkeys are frequently seen in the trees above the camp, and Grey-cheeked Mangabey and Putty-nosed Monkey are commonly sighted in the forest nearby. In total, a stunning eleven diurnal primates are found in the national park, with Agile Mangabey, De Brazza’s Monkey, Allen’s Swamp Monkey also found in the forests around Lango Camp. Red River Hog, Harnessed Bushbuck and



Spotted Hyena

both Slender-snouted and African Dwarf Crocodile (both harmless species) are all commonly seen, and some rather more special sightings for which a bit of luck is required include Bongo, Giant Forest Hog and Water Chevrotain (or ‘Fanged Deer’).

This area is also perhaps the richest forest block in west-central Africa for birding, with nearly 450 bird species recorded in Odzala. We will be looking for members of families such as the broadbills, trogons, malkoha,

greenbuls and turacos, and other possibilities include Black-casqued Wattled Hornbill, Plumed Guineafowl, Hartlaub’s Duck, Cassin’s Malimbe, Bare-cheeked Trogon, Black Bee-eater, Blue-throated Roller, Spot-breasted Ibis, Congo Serpent Eagle, Forbe’s Plover, Chocolate-backed Kingfisher, Hairy-breasted Barbet, Spotted Greenbul, Fire-crested Alethe, Buff-throated Apalis, Chestnut Wattle-eye... and many more!

Day 9 / 10

Fly Brazzaville

Today we must sadly take the return flight from the Mboko airstrip to Brazzaville, and check into a city hotel this afternoon for our final overnight stop. As our flight home isn’t until the follow evening, for our final day in the Congo we will arrange a city tour for those that would like to explore the fascinating city of Brazzaville. Later this afternoon we transfer back to Maya Maya International Airport, in time to check in for our evening departure to Paris and onwards to the UK.

Day 11

Arrive UK

We are due to arrive back into London (or regional airport) at around lunchtime today.

Grading

This is a Grade B/C tour. The Republic of Congo experiences high levels of rainfall year round and trails are often very wet and muddy underfoot. As such, the high heat and humidity and rough trails demand a good level of fitness from anyone wishing to join this tour. We expect to walk an average of 5 – 8 kilometres per day, but will also make use of boats and vehicles to maximise wildlife viewing. Sometimes we walk through the water itself to reach the wildlife! That all said, the guides are excellent at adapting walks and excursions to cater for different abilities, so should you choose to do less than the main party, this can usually be arranged.



Wading near Lango Camp

Gorilla tracking

Two opportunities to track Western Lowland Gorillas from Ngaga Camp are included in the tour. Please note that whilst every effort is made, gorilla viewing is not guaranteed and depends on weather and tracking conditions, as well as the whereabouts of the two habituated groups. Sightings are, however, very reliable. Please also note that guests displaying cold, flu or other respiratory tract symptoms will NOT be allowed to track gorillas. Guests will also be asked to complete a Gorilla viewing vaccination protocol (paper exercise), and to provide evidence of Measles and Polio vaccinations, and confirm they do not have active tuberculosis (TB) infection.

Entry requirements

UK passport holders will need a visa for the Republic of Congo, which can be obtained in advance. A letter of invitation will be provided in order for you to obtain your visa. Yellow Fever vaccinations are mandatory for travel to Congo and you will need to show a valid vaccination certificate at immigration on entry into the country.

Seasons & weather

Congo lies on the Equator, so temperatures vary very little year round. It has a bimodal rainfall pattern, of two green seasons when more rainfall occurs (typically March to May and September to November), and two drier seasons, when rainfall is reduced but still possible (typically December to February and June to September). The rainfall and the start and end dates of the seasons can be quite variable year to year!

Green Season Highlights:

- Rainfall during this period means that the air is clearer for photography; when it is not raining the humidity higher

- A scarcity of ripe fruits during this period results in smaller ranges and daily movements by gorillas and elephants
- Elephant visits to baobabs to obtain minerals are more frequent during this season
- Spectacular electrical storms contrast with sustained periods of clear blue skies and beautiful limpid light for photography
- Stunning sunrises and sunsets

Dry Season Highlights:

- With limited rain during this period the air can be relatively hazy and humidity is lower than the green season
- Ripe fruits during this period (especially February and August) result in gorillas feeding primarily in trees thus allowing easier sightings and more kinds of behaviour on display
- When trees are fruiting the gorillas can move significant distances across their home range to access specific tree species but also stay close to fruiting trees, and thus can be more accessible

Extra Expenses

All accommodation and meals are included in the cost of this holiday, except for lunches and dinners in Brazzaville where rooms are booked on a bed and breakfast basis. We suggest budgeting around EUR120 per person for meals in Brazzaville. All meals and drinks are included during your stay at the Odzala camps. Drinks away from the Odzala camps, other personal expenses, tips and visa fees are not included in the tour cost. A 15 day tourist visa is currently £75 (subject to change without notice).

Food and Accommodation

In Brazzaville we stay in a standard city tourist hotel, where all rooms are en-suite and booked on a bed & breakfast basis. For your stay in Odzala-Kokoua National Park you will be staying at Mboko, Lango and Ngaga Camps. Mboko has



Lango Camp main guest areas (Scott Ramsey)



Mboko Camp lounge area and double room

12 cabins nestled along the Lekoli River in amongst the lush forest which provides a feeling of privacy. Lango and Ngaga Camps both consist of just 6 treetop rooms, interconnected by wooden walkways, plus a lounge, bar, dining area and star deck.

Departures from Regional Airports

We are happy to arrange connecting flights to and from Paris from any UK airport serviced by Air France. These currently include Heathrow, Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle, Aberdeen and Edinburgh. Departures from regional airports may incur a small additional charge, so please call the Naturetrek office for more information and prices.

UK/Paris/Brazzaville Connections

The airline connection time in Paris for this holiday is reasonably tight with just over two hours available to change aircraft. This is a valid Air France connection, but as the flight to Brazzaville does not operate daily, any delay out of the UK resulting in missing the onward connection in Paris could seriously disrupt the tour. We therefore recommend that group members consider flying out to Paris the afternoon or evening before the start of the tour and stopping overnight at an airport hotel a short distance from Charles de Gaulle Airport. This would allow for a more leisurely start to the holiday and also negates the need for a very early start from the UK. Although you are very welcome to book your own hotel room over the internet, we are also very happy to arrange this additional night for you. A night (room only) at the Ibis Hotel at Charles de Gaulle Airport costs around £90 per room.

NB: If you decide to fly out to Paris the night before - whether or not you opt to reserve your own room - please could we ask you to contact the Naturetrek office on 01962 733051 so we can amend your outbound flight.

Alternatively, there is an overnight flight with Ethiopian Airlines via Addis Ababa that may be possible, however it would also require departure from the UK a day earlier.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to the Republic of Congo. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/congo> regularly prior travel.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read our main Naturetrek terms and conditions in the back pages of our brochure or on our website, and then book either online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, by calling us on 01962 733051, or by completing and returning the booking

form in the brochure together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us on 01962 733051.



Top left: Black and White Colobus Monkey, Top right: Bongos Centre left: Room at Ngaga. Centre right: Lango Camp (Scott Ramsey)
Bottom: Lango Camp & Lango Bai (Scott Ramsey)