

## The land that time forgot

Imagine a place so untouched that the primates gaze at you without fear and ancient forest elephants roam, their tusks touching the forest floor. We visit Ivindo National Park deep in the centre of Gabon's rainforest



MICHAEL NICHOLS/GETTY

**L**OCATED among the vast isolated forests of eastern Gabon, Ivindo National Park is inaccessible by road. Its virtually intact ancient primary forest arises from plateaus surrounded by hills veiled by tropical mist and undulating waves of gigantic trees. This lofty, luxuriant and chaotic canopy conceals a tracery of streams and rivers that partly flow into the Ivindo, the main tributary of the Ogooué, whose waters rush down from the high plateaus of the north-east to the borders of Gabon, Congo and Cameroon.

Above Makokou, the Ivindo is relatively calm, but as it flows through the park it breaks over thousands of rapids. In some areas it is restricted to a single stretch just 500 metres across; in others its width increases to two or three kilometres as it splits into a multitude of foaming channels squeezed between rocky islands, forming a labyrinth where only the intrepid Kota fishermen of Loa-Loa, the village just below Makokou, dare to venture. Further to the southwest, the Ivindo divides around a long angled canyon studded with outcrops of rock, then tumbles over the spectacular staircases of the Kongou Falls. After Kongou, there are more rapids and waterfalls and, just before the park's southern boundary, the Mingouli Falls, which are also about 50 metres high.

The first Europeans to penetrate the Ogooué valley in the latter half of the nineteenth century discovered the river but were reluctant to follow its tumultuous course upstream. Even the lower Ivindo region was not fully explored until the first decades of the 20th century. Still today, the Ivindo valley is very much a primitive wilderness. In the calm reaches below the Kongou Falls, the river is fringed by swampy forest dominated by raffia palm, whose plume-like leaves can exceed ten metres in length. This is where thousands of grey parrots gather to spend the night; concentrations of over 5,000 birds have been observed here.

### Where the waters roar

Like all of Gabon's national parks, Ivindo was created in 2002 but conservationists had already recognised its uniqueness. In the 1980s and 1990s, efforts were made to protect the valley's rapids, spectacular waterfalls and virgin forests from the activities of the logging industry and when the park was inaugurated, some logging companies even ceded back certain sections to conservation bodies.

The Ivindo Falls are not the only waterfalls in the park. The heart of the park is drained by the Djidji. This minor river, barely more than a few dozen metres wide, is home to a large population of slender-snouted crocodiles and flows directly into the Ogooué. And it makes a spectacular departure. As it emerges from the park, it suddenly plunges over a 60-metre-high escarpment, forming one of the most →

Langoué Bai seen from the air: this forest clearing was described by scientist Mike Fay as "the most significant discovery" of his Megatransect, his 3,200-kilometre trek across Central Africa (left). Lowland gorillas are frequent visitors at the bai (above)

## NATIONAL PARKS

picturesque waterfalls in central Africa. At its southern extremity, the park is drained by the Langoué, another river that flows directly into the Ogooué. This watercourse, smaller than the Djidji, would barely rate a mention but for the 'bai' nestling in its catchment area. Bais are rare grassy clearings in forests often created and maintained by elephants attracted to their mineral-rich soils. They form a magnet for other animals and here, this long, swampy area has become a daily meeting place for all kinds of mammals. Sitatungas – antelopes with elongated hooves and long spiralling horns – are permanent residents and groups of 15 or more may be observed. Forest buffalo visit in all seasons. Gorillas come almost every other day, usually solitary silverbacks. However, the most respected guests are the forest elephants, smaller than those of the savannah, but with longer, almost straight tusks. The bai's attractions are not confined to the presence of the big beasts. In the dense vegetation of the swamp below the observation platform, the song of the Dja River Warbler rings out at regular intervals. This extremely rare marsh bird is confined to the swamps of southern Cameroon and Gabon.

The ancient forest undergrowth surrounding the bai is extremely rich and can easily be explored by following elephant trails. Like any other habitat, the tropical forest reveals its secrets only to specialists and those with the gift of patience. Besides birds, squirrels, small monkeys and the occasional appearance of a larger animal, it also boasts an extraordinary variety of butterflies and several new species have been discovered in recent years.

But Ivindo National Park is not simply renowned for its biodiversity – it is also a mecca for scientific research. In 1963, a research station for the study of the ecology was opened at Makokou. In 1972, under the management of the Institute of Tropical Ecology Research (a French organisation known as IRET), the station was transferred to the Ipassa plateau, which was designated as a 10,000-hectare nature reserve. Dozens of scientists of all nationalities have worked here, producing groundbreaking studies. In 1983, the Ipassa reserve became known as the Biosphere Reserve. Now part of the national park, it has been provided with trails so that researchers can study the forest and its fauna. Given that these forests contain one of the most diverse bird populations in Africa (over 360 species have been recorded), the network of trails is ideal for birdwatchers in quest of the more elusive and unusual species.

### Elephant footprints

Research is also being carried out in other areas of the park. IRET has installed a satellite camp on the Djidji River so that the boldest researchers can work in the very heart of the park. The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) has opened a station in a clearing near Langoué Bai, enabling a team to follow seasonal changes in the life cycle of the trees. Another team studies the daily activity in the bai. Finally, four elephants have been fitted with GPS transmitters so that their movements can be tracked throughout the year. This experiment has already shown that the animals range over much of the park and will even penetrate the neighbouring logging concessions.

But all this natural wealth should, and will be, accessible to more than just a handful of initiates. Although Ivindo National Park was not created until 2002 and is still in the early stages of development, it is destined to become one of Gabon's principal natural attractions. A rocky clearing near Langoué Bai has been prepared for a tourist camp and a trail and canopy walkway is planned to provide access to the bai. There are also plans for a well-equipped camp at Kongou Falls. While waiting for the construction of these larger and more comfortable facilities, WCS has set up a temporary camp in the Langoué area for tourists. In addition, the International Foundation for Gabonese Eco-tourism Giuseppe Vassalo (FIGET) has installed a small reception camp at Kongou Falls and that can be reached thanks to the skills of the Kota boatmen of Loa-Loa.

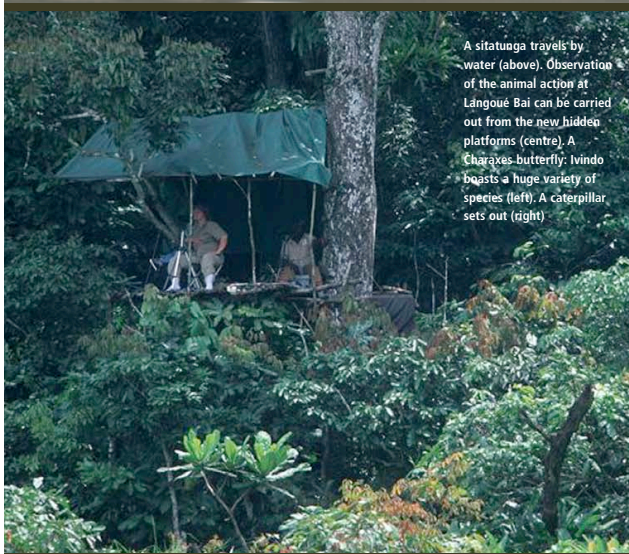
Jean Pierre Vande weghe



“THE MOST RESPECTED GUESTS ARE THE GREAT FOREST ELEPHANTS WITH THEIR LONG ALMOST STRAIGHT TUSKS”

A singular sight: the rare Red-headed Picathartes is found at Ivindo (left). Two long-tusked animals test their strength at Langoué Bai (right). Ivindo boasts some of the most spectacular waterfalls in Africa: these are the Kongou Falls (below)





A sitatunga travels by water (above). Observation of the animal action at Langoué Bai can be carried out from the new hidden platforms (centre). A Charaxes butterfly: Ivindo boasts a huge variety of species (left). A caterpillar sets out (right)

## SECRET GARDEN

IMAGINE having the opportunity to see what the planet must have looked like thousands of centuries ago. That was what American scientist Michael Fay experienced when he happened upon Langoué Bai on his famous Megatranssect expedition, a 15-month-long trek he made across the rainforests of Central Africa in 2001.

Bai is the pygmy name for a glade where animals congregate to drink and socialise. When Mr Fay first set eyes on this 20-hectare clearing of grassland and swamp in the heavy jungle canopy, he was mesmerised. Forest elephants with massive tusks basked in the sun and drank from the mineral-rich water. Among them were older males armed with spectacular tusks – an increasingly unusual sight in Africa where most of the ‘big tuskers’ fell victim to ivory hunters long ago. These more fortunate creatures, on the other hand, had spent most of their lives in the secluded heart of the forest. “The amazing thing about this clearing is that there are more big-tusked elephants than any place else,” said Mr Fay, adding, “We’ve discovered animals with 40-50 kilo-tusks.”

Buffalo, sitatunga and many smaller creatures came and went. Naive gorillas emerged from the dense vegetation. “Gorillas and chimpanzees, when they’re completely naive recognise you as a fellow primate. They see your head, they see your arms, they see your fingers, and they think they’re just like us, but they’re not. There’s something different,” he said.

Although he was familiar with other large bays elsewhere in Central Africa, Mr Fay has described Langoué Bai as “the most significant discovery of the Megatranssect” due to its unique isolation and biodiversity. Since 2001, a continuous research programme has been working to monitor the wildlife populations that frequent the clearing. Today, three ten-metre-high viewing platforms occupy discreet positions along the bai’s edge from which large mammals can be observed with ease and exhaustive studies of gorillas, forest elephants and buffalo are underway.

Sarah Monaghan



## WAY TO GO

### Getting there

The northern section of Ivindo National Park can be reached via Makokou, roughly an hour’s journey from Libreville. From Makokou, it is 12km to the IRET station and 7km to the village of Loa-Loa, from where pirogues take travellers to the FIGET camp at Kongou Falls. To arrange, send an email to figet.gabon@inet.ga. The southern section, which includes the Langoué region, can be reached by train from Libreville, the journey to Ivindo station taking six hours. From Ivindo, it is a two-hour drive to the edge of the forest, followed by a two-hour walk to the WCS camp at Langoué. For more details, visit [www.wcs.org](http://www.wcs.org).



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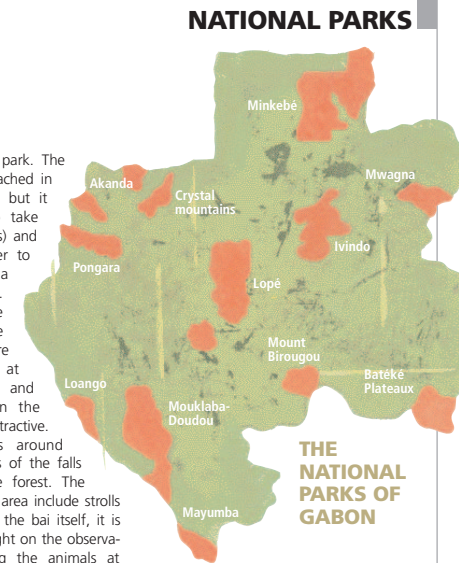
### Staying there

At present there is a basic camp with accommodation for eight visitors just above Kongou Falls, managed by FIGET. Reservations can be booked either directly through FIGET (email: [figet.gabon@inet.ga](mailto:figet.gabon@inet.ga)) or through travel agencies in Libreville, including the long-established Mistral Voyages ([www.ecotourisme-gabon.com](http://www.ecotourisme-gabon.com)). Makokou has a basic but comfortable hotel, the Hôtel Bélinga, tel: + 241 90 37 10. The WCS tent camp in Langoué Bai accommodates eight people. Reservations should be made directly through a choice of agencies in Libreville.

### Doing there

Pirogue trips on the Ivindo can be arranged from Makokou and Loa-Loa, in the northern

section of the national park. The Kongou Falls can be reached in three and a half hours but it would be advisable to take longer (four to six hours) and picnic en route in order to admire the flora, fauna and stunning landscapes. Pirogue excursions on the placid waters of the Ivindo above the falls are particularly enjoyable at dusk when the birdlife and luxuriant vegetation on the banks are at their most attractive. The network of trails around Kongou offer fine views of the falls and give access to the forest. The delights of the Langoué area include strolls through virgin forest. In the bai itself, it is possible to spend the night on the observation platform, watching the animals at twilight and experiencing the nocturnal forest ambience.



THE NATIONAL PARKS OF GABON

### Websites

Gabon National Parks:  
[www.gabonnationalparks.com](http://www.gabonnationalparks.com)

Gabontour:  
[www.gabontour.ga](http://www.gabontour.ga)

Mistral Voyages:  
[www.ecotourisme-gabon.com](http://www.ecotourisme-gabon.com)

Eurafrique Voyages:  
[www.gabondestinationinsolite.com](http://www.gabondestinationinsolite.com)

Wildlife Conservation Society:  
[www.wcs.org](http://www.wcs.org)

National Geographic:  
[www.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.nationalgeographic.com)



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### Birdwatching there

Besides its rich and diverse avifauna (364 recorded species), the Ipassa forest has an important advantage: the terrain is flat and criss-crossed by well-beaten tracks. Reaching Makokou, or travelling on from there to Ipassa, does not require the organisation of an expedition. This is easy bird-watching country, accessible and highly rewarding. The Langoué camp offers similar opportunities and the dedicated birdwatcher will also encounter species that are not present at Ipassa. The ornithological gem for most birdwatchers here has to be the Cameroon Picathartes (a species of rock fowl), while the swamps in the bai contain an easily observable population of Dja River Warblers. The site is also ideal for watching local species such as Bates’s Swift and the Forest Swallow.



### Books

*Ivindo et Mwagna, Eaux noires, forêts vierges et bays* by Jean Pierre Vande weghe (WCS Gabon). French language. The book’s 272 pages are packed with essential information concerning the region’s physical environment, flora, fauna and human activity.