



PICTURES BY SARAH MONAGHAN

*Elephants in Loango National Park; accommodation in Loango; on the water near Point St Catherine*

# Gabon is...

BY SARAH MONAGHAN



...tipped to be the Costa Rica of Africa in recognition of the large percentage of land designated to 13 new national parks and the extraordinary variety of wildlife on offer.

Straddling the equator, this rainforest nation is situated on West Africa's Atlantic coast. Animals reign here – Gabon is the continent's least densely populated country – and is 85 per cent covered in tropical forest.

This, along with savannahs, mangroves, lagoons and beaches makes it an ideal habitat for myriad species of animals and reptiles including 20,000 lowland gorillas and 60,000 forest elephants – the largest population in Africa – and 700 types of exotic birds.

Its beaches are the only place where you can find hippos swimming in the surf, while offshore you can view turtles and whales. The coast is an important breeding ground for humpbacks migrating from the Antarctic.

In 2002, President Bongo set aside 11 per cent of the country to create the national park network. Ecotourism is in its infancy but

three parks are up and running.

The capital, Libreville, is the doorway to this colourful country. It sits on a palm-fringed ocean boulevard and, thanks to its French colonial past, offers excellent dining and the world's highest per capita consumption of champagne. Most visitors spend a day or two here before moving onto the parks.

The most developed is Loango, operated by the company Africa's Eden, which has its own inter-parks airline. The largest variety of whales and dolphins outside of South Africa are found in Loango.

Loango has 100 kilometres of unspoiled coastline where elephants and buffalo roam. There is a main lodge with luxury bungalow accommodation overlooking a gorgeous lagoon and five comfortable satellite camps on open savannah, deserted beach and fast-flowing river. Safari activities include game drives, kayaking, forest treks, gorilla and bird watching. The park is renowned as a sport fishing site for tarpon and barracuda.

Lopé and Ivindo National Parks are in the interior. Lopé offers a wonderful patchwork of open savannah and dense rainforest. It is famous for its large numbers of elephants, gorillas and multi-coloured mandrills. The main lodge's chalets sit in a stunning location above the mighty Ogooué River.

Ivindo contains the breathtaking Kongou and Mingouli waterfalls, the most spectacular of forested Africa, as well as bais (waterholes) such as Langoué Bai with the largest concentration of easily observable wildlife in

Gabon. Visitors get to spend the night on a platform overlooking the bai for superb sunset and dawn animal sightings.

## WHERE TO BOOK

Wildlife Worldwide  
0845 130 6982

The operator has several itineraries including the 17-night Highlights of Gabon that takes in Loango, Lopé and Ivindo National Parks. Accommodation is in lodges, camps and hotels and is available from May to January. Prices from £4,395 pp, including flights.  
[www.wildlifeworldwide.com](http://www.wildlifeworldwide.com)

Audley Travel  
01993 838 000

The operator offers a 10-day fly-in safari to Loango National Park. From £3,800 pp including flights.  
[www.audleytravel.com](http://www.audleytravel.com)

## MUST DOS

- Watching elephants and gorillas from a 'night platform' over Langoué Bai at Ivindo NP
- Go whale-watching (July to September) at Loango NP: thousands can be seen making spectacular breach displays
- Take a mandrill safari at Lopé NP
- Try Poulet Nyembwe, the national dish of chicken in palm-nuts, at Odika, a restaurant specialising in Gabonese cuisine, in Libreville
- Spend a couple of days relaxing at St Catherine's Beach Camp at Loango NP

## GENERAL INFO

**LANGUAGE:** Gabon is French-speaking although many national parks staff and ecoguides speak good English.

**TIME ZONE:** GMT+1

**VISA:** Visas should be bought in advance from the Gabonese Embassy, 27 Elvaston Place, London, SW7 5NL Tel: 020 7823 9986.  
[www.gabon.embassyhomepage.com](http://www.gabon.embassyhomepage.com)  
A single-entry tourist visa costs £70

**CLIMATE:** Hot and humid. Temperatures around 26C. Gabon has two main seasons: wet season between February and May and dry season from June to mid-September. There are short rains in October-November and another dry season December-January

**HEALTH:** Gabon is located in a malarial area and prophylactics are advised as well as vaccinations against typhoid, tetanus, polio and hepatitis A. A yellow-fever certificate is required