

REPUBLIC OF CONGO

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Congo is often confused with the much larger Democratic Republic of the Congo, (DRC), formerly Zaire, but is nothing like it. The Congo is on the north-western border, sandwiched between Gabon and the DRC. It is important to understand that this country has not been directly affected by the unrest in either the DRC or the Central African Republic (CAR).

The Congo Basin which is spread across this part of Central Africa, spanning six countries, comprises one quarter of the world's rain forest. This is a major carbon sink element as well as a significant biodiversity resource, much of it as yet undiscovered. The Congo itself is covered by rainforest from the Massif de Chailu and Mayombe Forests and is home for approximately 400 mammal (medium to large) species, more than 1000 birds, over 700 fish species and a whopping 10 000 plant species. The country's area is 342 000km square, and that is mostly forest! The habitat here has forced humans to be hunter-gatherers and the B'Aka pygmies are probably the best surviving examples of this lifestyle.

Modern developments have created roads into the forests, villages are now towns and cities as people migrated towards them and commercial demands have expanded activities, lifestyles and the impact of people on the forests. Deforestation is a major threat to the forests, and Africa as a whole continent. The consequent threat to wildlife, rivers, and the soils is very real as one issue leads to another in a typical domino effect, and short term gain has real power.

Brazzaville is the capital, and the international airport as well. French is the common lingua franca but the most widely spoken local languages are Lingala and Kituba. 70% of the population live in the capital, with most of the remainder living in Point Noire in the south-west. A railway system links the two cities. Population figures around 3.7 million people. The Congo river is the heart of the country and was where settlements and trade naturally started, but there are many rivers throughout the country and linear settlements are common. 'Bushmeat' is a common source of protein for most city dwellers who buy their meat at the markets, which are supplied by local hunters (normally pygmies) who net and shoot anything edible.

The natural resources include oil and gas, (petroleum products are the biggest earner), iron ore, potash, zinc, uranium and phosphates, whilst agriculture produces manioc, sugar, coffee, cocoa and timber. This for a country who cultivates less than 2% of its land. Tourism has been recognized as a way forward by the government and although in its' infancy, the small efforts already in place are starting to show signs of positive attitude change in local people.

GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

The equator runs through the middle of the country. The country is reasonably even topographically, and rivers are abundant. The Congo river itself is the largest and longest in Africa! Rainforest covers most of the country, and "fingers of savanna" have developed infrequently along old river lines and seeps, providing a different habitat for wildlife amongst the forest blanket.



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The rainy season is described in four seasons. The 'long rains' fall between October and December, the short dry spell is then January and February, followed by 'short rains' over March and April, before a longer dry spell from May to September.

The climate is therefore more humid in the north, and the south differs by being less humid and dry from June to September. The national parks tend to be in the extreme north so timing for travel is important.

WILDLIFE EXPERIENCE

The forests of the Congo are home to the largest population of Lowland gorillas on the planet, and a good population of Forest elephants, which are a distinct species, *Loxodonta africana cyclotis*. Forest buffalo, Giant Forest and Red River hogs, bongo, several species of duiker, bushbuck, chevrotin and eleven species of primate just to name a few of the hundred plus mammal species that live here. The degree of research still needed to obtain a more qualified estimate of actual species is still years away, and that is what makes this country really exciting for eco-travelers.

There are very few eco-tour operators here and so the infrastructure is basic but offers the adventurous person a fabulous opportunity to see unique wildlife.

Currently the Odzala-Kokoua National Park (1996) in the far north is the one national park able to take commercial travelers, and access is by vehicle and boat. Development of the park has been slow, until recently when an operator was allowed to enter into an agreement with the government and the local community. Forest elephant, Forest buffalo, bongo, Lowland gorillas, a wide variety of primates and small antelope may be found here, plus of course a huge variety of birds.

This park now has two camps which allow tourists to stay and enjoy the wildlife either by vehicle, on foot or by boat. The government should be encouraged by the example of its neighbour Gabon, which gazette 13 parks in a single day.



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