

OFF GRID

# Wild BEYOND COMPARE

DESPITE DECADES OF POLITICAL TURMOIL IN THE COUNTRY, A PEACEFUL  
CORNER OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC NURTURES ONE OF THE  
WORLD'S LARGEST CONCENTRATION OF FOREST ELEPHANTS

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Clockwise from left: gorilla in Dzanga-Sangha National Park; driving through its primary forest; honey collected by the Ba'Aka people. Previous pages: forest elephants in Dzanga Bai



In a clearing in the rainforest known as Dzanga Bai, in the Dzanga-Sangha National Park, about 20 elephants mill around, plunging their trunks into the mineral-rich clay soil. Every day, up to 200 of them can congregate here in what is one of the largest gatherings of their species on earth. Sometimes they are joined by buffaloes, marshbucks, elusive bongo antelopes and red river hogs, in the midst of trees that rustle with colobus monkeys. The main draw for this multi-species convention is the soil, which the elephants eat and smear on themselves to kill toxins. Watching from an elevated wooden platform 20 feet above the ground, I note that the various soils turn their skin different colours: one elephant looks burnt orange; a nearby juvenile has coated herself in a bright yellow primer. The lemon-coloured pachyderm is almost psychedelic in its vividness. I've never seen anything like it. Not that many visitors have.

Dzanga-Sangha National Park lies on the northern fringe of the Congo Basin in the extreme southwest of the Central African Republic (CAR), a country that receives fewer tourists – about 700 in 2024 – than Antarctica, and gets little global attention beyond reports about its civil

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war and the Wagner mercenaries enlisted to protect the government. Bordered by troubled South Sudan, Chad and the DRC, as well as Cameroon and the Republic of the Congo, the CAR was the last “great blank space” on the 19th-century maps of French colonisers who named it Ubangi-Shari in 1903 – then admitted, six decades later, that it was the colony least prepared for independence, on account of its severe lack of infrastructure and tiny formal economy.

The Wabêafrika, as its citizens call themselves in the Sango language, are among the world's poorest by per capita GDP, but their natural endowments are beyond measure. Besides being home to forest elephants, Dzanga-Sangha National Park harbours western lowland

gorillas, chimpanzees, pangolins, sitatungas, duikers and mangabeys. These animals were hunted for fun in the 1970s by the CAR's former dictator and self-declared emperor, Jean-Bédél Bokassa, alongside his friend, France's then president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (until his young daughter chastised him for it). But in 1990 the national park was established, and the WWF was invited to protect its unique and endangered wildlife from poachers (who use guns made from motorcycle ➤



OFF-GRID



handlebars), artisanal miners and loggers. Now, the WWF hopes to make Dzanga-Sangha an ecotourism destination. It will be a feat. Reaching the park involves either driving for two days on an untarmacked road from the capital, Bangui, or – as we did – chartering a Cessna and cruising over broccoli-like forest, its expanse only broken by the occasional ribbon of red-earth road.

The forest elephants that gather daily in Dzanga Bai are being monitored and researched by Ivonne Kienast, the German Argentinian project manager of Dzanga Forest Elephant Project. “I once saw one that was blue,” she tells me from Dzanga Bai’s observation deck as we ogle that bright yellow juvenile. “I don’t know where it came from.” Elephant behaviour is on fascinating display here. Some mothers are more hands-on than others, and some females are violent, such as the one who bites off the babies’ tails. One time, Kienast even witnessed cannibalism, which goes to show how complex and idiosyncratic elephants can be. Our exit from the observation platform is briefly delayed by a bull that approaches too close for comfort. Once the coast is clear, we return to our vehicle after walking through forest scented with wild garlic, and wading calf-deep through glistening swamps that throng with flora and fauna. On the banks butterflies race around in huge eddying swarms; an elephant mother and calf saunter nearby over the water; and during the drive back to our lodge, a young gorilla nips across the road in front of our car and scuttles into the bush. This place is truly wild.

“The elephants come right up here sometimes,” says Nuria Ortega, the ecotourism manager of Dzanga-Sangha National Park. We are at Doli Lodge, our partly WWF-run, solar-powered home for two nights. Its semi-open lounge terrace and wooden stilted villas overlook the beautiful Sangha River, flanked by forest and cleaved by a ➤

*Clockwise from left: a well-thumbed book in Doli Lodge; Ba’Aka woman drinking water from a cut branch; agile mangabey feeding in the forest of Dzanga-Sangha*



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From left: locals in pirogue dugout canoes on the Sangha; Doli Lodge on that river's banks

sandbank as it winds languidly miles downstream past hippos, eventually joining the juggernaut Congo River. One evening, beneath apricot skies, we cruise in a dugout canoe, looking out for jacanas, turacos, hornbills and kingfishers. Lilac non-native water hyacinths decorate the grassy banks, and local young men climb the raffia palm trees to tap them and make palm wine. Twenty minutes by motorboat takes us to an area of primary rainforest filled with steep cliffs and waterfalls.

Next morning we're back in the forest to see some of the park's estimated 2,000 gorillas, a few of whom are being habituated to humans for the first time. En route we spot elephant tracks in the soil. The possibility of encountering those beasts adds a thrilling dimension to our trek. We soon find Limo, a silver-back with a red tuft of hair on his head, staring down at us from a treetop. Minutes later, he and a baby-clutching female descend to the ground in a shower of leaves. All of them disappear from view – except Limo, who lies prostrate in our direction, playing sentry guard. Although still wary, he is getting used to new faces and charges at people less frequently. "This is part of the next phase of the habituation," says the programme adviser, Andrea Sotto-Mayor, "letting the gorillas know that there are new visitors and that this will be a regular thing."

New visitors are entering the area all the time. Poachers, miners, Chinese loggers and the war-displaced now outnumber the 5,000 Indigenous Ba'Aka people (formerly known as "pygmies") who, traditionally being illiterate, have historically been disdained and exploited by other Wabêafrikans. Now semi-nomadic, they keep one foot in the forest and another around Bayanga village. They can still hunt legally in the Dzanga-Sangha Special Reserve, but their livelihood, based on selling medicinal plants, fruits, wild nuts and honey to settled Wabêafrikans, is shrinking as the forest dwindles.

We join the Ba'Aka on a hunt among equatorial trees where more than a quarter of all known medicines are found. They show us the guga tree bark used for problematic pregnancies and removing parasites, before they catch a squirrel with a net made from vines. Then the men collect honey by hacking footholds into the tree trunk and climbing up incredibly fast, using a rope and hoist technique. After 20 minutes of smoking out the bees, two boys place the honeycomb in baskets – weaved



*A woman's voice embodying  
the spirits calls out and  
everyone responds in unison*

in situ from leaves and vines – and let me taste its organic sweetness.

Nature here is powerful and all-consuming, making it impossible to establish agriculture as we know it – everyone must

submit to the forest's savage domain. We camp with the Ba'Aka for one night in a clearing, where their carbon footprint is as light as the butterflies fluttering about. Sitting around the domed huts erected from twigs and waterproof leaves, men, women and children joke and chatter endlessly; the hunter-gatherer lifestyle seems to create a refreshing lack of social or gender hierarchies. Francois Mokute, the exhibitionist musician and jester, wears a leaf crown and plucks his ngombi – like a harp – while the others sing and shake hollowed gourds for percussion, creating a rich melody. After sundown a woman's voice embodying the spirits calls out and everyone responds in unison as sheet lightning flashes in the sky. Lying sleepily on a mat, among the fireflies, watching the ladies' silhouettes dancing by the flames, I feel joyfully disconnected from the world and yet so connected – to my ancestors and to nature here in this green heart of Africa. 📍

**BOOK IT** Cookson Adventures can organise a five-night adventure to the Central African Republic from £17,500 per person based on a private group of eight guests. This includes exclusive use of Doli Lodge, two gorilla treks, camping with the Ba'Aka and Dzanga Bai elephant experiences, as well as internal charter flights, itinerary planning and a Cookson Adventures host. [cooksonadventures.com](http://cooksonadventures.com)