

“HEART OF DARKNESS” Great Forests and Kingdoms of the Congo Basin (2007)

by
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In October 2007, members of the St. Louis Chapter of The Explorers Club were part of a small group that visited Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR) and Gabon on a journey organized for the Chapter by Explore, Inc. This territory in West Africa formerly was recognized as part of French Equatorial Africa. Members of the St. Louis Chapter who undertook the journey were: Lotsie Holton (Chapter Chairman Emerita), Cynthia S. Peters and Mabel L. Purkerson, M.D. (Chapter Chairman). Other St. Louisans who traveled there were Rick Holton and Jessie L. Ternberg, M.D.

The Congo Basin is comprised of 700,000 square miles of tropical rainforest. Dense vegetation contributing to inaccessibility, lack of infrastructure, and civil discord have heretofore prevented expeditions of very many travelers to this fascinating area.

Flying from Paris, we began the trip in Douala, Cameroon. We visited the culturally and tradition rich fondoms (chiefdoms) in the high grasslands of Cameroon, said to be the heart of Cameroonian culture. Here we visited some of the last of Africa’s great kingdoms. Kings and their queens, descended from royal families who have ruled for centuries, are still to be seen here. We visited several palaces. At Bafut Palace, seat of power of the 800-year old Tikar fondom, we were escorted over the premises by Queen Constance, who introduced us to their large private collections of royal artifacts. The royal collections include ceremonial objects and masks that date from the 13th century to the present. We learned a bit about the secret societies that still figure prominently in decision-making in the fondoms. We were told the long history of tribal wars and wars against the British, French and Germans. We saw the Nighaa Ni Bifh, a huge 300-year old “talking” drum used in earlier times to send messages around the fondom, especially in time of war. Cell phones and TV antennae were very much in evidence now, reducing the drum to historical significance only. We viewed traditional dances at Bafut Palace and at the Babungo fon’s palace. At Babungo, we met The Fon, and were introduced to a few of his 77 wives and more than 500 children. This Fon possesses many ancient treasures of his dynasty, among them priceless museum quality masks and ceremonial objects. The third chiefdom visited was Bandjoun. This is a Bamileke fondom where we studied the typical Bamileke architecture.

We departed Cameroon and traveled to Bayanga in the Central African Republic (CAR). Doli Lodge (on the Sangha River) was our base camp while visiting Dzangha-Sangha National Park in the southwest corner of the CAR. Highlights included wading the river to arrive to an area where forest elephants could be observed from viewing platforms called miradors. That day we were rewarded by the sight of 129 forest elephants together at this forest clearing! We met Andrea Turkalo, a Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) biologist, who has devoted the past 17 years to the study of African forest elephants. She has identified thousands of the elephants in this park and continues to follow them and study communication among the elephants. Also seen in abundance at the forest clearing were forest buffalo, birds and several sitatungas. Other highlights were treks through the forest to observe the lowland gorillas and a netting hunt with the Ba’aka (known as pygmies or forest people). They chased small African antelopes - duikers

- into the nets they set up in the jungle. The trapped animals were killed and used for food. They are very happy people and sang songs in preparation for the hunt.

Next, we traveled to Gabon and Loango National Park. This park, created in 2002, is part of the nation's 13 park system created by Gabon's President Bongo after he became convinced of the need for conservation of the natural resources in Gabon. Data presented to him by Dr. Lee White (WCS Senior Conservationist and Director of the Gabon Research Program) and from Dr. Michael Fay's Mega Transect aided the President in his making the case for conservation. During our Loango visit, we were privileged to have both Dr. White and Dr. Jean-Pierre Vande Weghe (of WCS) available to provide information and discussion. Loango Park is located at the confluence of the Atlantic Ocean and the Congo Basin. It offers a fabulous combination of wildlife and scenery. The white-sand beaches, lagoons and vast forests provide habitat to a wide array of animals, birds, reptiles and marine life. Forest elephants, buffalo and sitatunga can be seen feeding on shoreline vegetation. Nesting herons, pelicans and young long-snouted crocodiles abound along the waterways. Efforts of fishermen can be rewarded with catches of tarpon, snapper, barracuda, etc. An unusual sight might be to see elephants and hippos in the Atlantic surf! During our stay, we were invited to view the sacred ceremonial Bwiti dance (fire dance) in which dancers, accompanied by ancestral drum rhythms, commune with their ancestors as they flourish burning batons and jump over burning coals. The Bwiti was spectacular with only a few burned holes in our clothing from falling embers.

Our departure from Loango was via a boat ride on the Mpivi River. We stopped at the Mission of St. Anne on its banks. The metal church building here, built in 1889, was designed by Gustav Eiffel, architect of Paris' Eiffel Tower. We stopped again to see a group of gorillas in a sanctuary at Evengue, supervised by WCS and Cambridge University. Then, on to Libreville to begin our homeward journey.