

Gabon

In Gabon, you might just find yourself landing on an airstrip full of goats, dodging forest elephants on the stroll home from the bar, or wandering into a celebration of starkly painted dancers that harkens back hundreds of years. Outside Westernised Libreville, just about everything in Gabon is so newly accessible that just by being there you're already off the beaten path and in the middle of a whole new world.

And if you happen to be travelling with a 4WD, mechanic, cash to burn and a French dictionary, you're bound to have the adventure of a lifetime. Exploring this land ain't no walk in a national park. Lack of infrastructure and transportation will lead you on long, bumpy journeys, and it practically costs 20 bucks just to breathe the air in the glitzy capital city.

But you'll be stunned by what is shaping up to be Africa's next best ecotourism destination. Thanks to President El Hadj Omar Bongo's designation of a whopping 10% of the country's land as national parks – closing it down to loggers and miners and opening it up to travellers, conservationists and ecotourists – it's now possible to explore endless white-sand beaches, primate-filled tropical rainforests, rolling savannahs and estuaries.

Nature and wildlife fanatics will not be disappointed: long days of trekking will be rewarded with seeing wild creatures in their own pristine environment. The experience will transport you back to a time when Mother Earth – not humans – ruled the land.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 257,670 sq km
- **ATMs** Only in Libreville; Visa-card linked only
- **Borders** Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon and Congo
- **Budget** US\$100 per day in Libreville; US\$60 per day in the interior
- **Capital** Libreville
- **Languages** French, Fang
- **Money** Central African CFA; US\$1 = CFA498
- **Population** 1.42 million
- **Seasons** Wet (September to November and February to May), dry (May to September and December to January)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 241; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +1
- **Visas** Required by all; must be acquired before arrival



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Langoué Bai** (p593) Lounge on the observation platform above the forest elephants, gorillas and antelopes.
- **Réserve de la Lopé** (p592) Track vibrant mandrill troupes.
- **Mayumba** (p592) Body-surf the waves while watching humpback whales breach in the distance.
- **Loango National Park** (p591) Gape at beaches full of elephants, buffalos and surfing hippos.
- **Makoghe** (p593) Trip out on ancient ceremonies at a Bwiti initiation.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Hot, tropical Gabon has a rainy season from September to May, broken up by a short dry period from December to January, and a longer dry season from May to September. The temperature is 25°C on average, with about 80% humidity so it feels much hotter.

Whale season is from July to September and turtles come ashore to lay eggs from November to January. Mammals wander from forest to savannah depending on the temperatures – check with the national parks for seasonal wildlife migration.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Start in Libreville (p584), head to Réserve de la Lopé (p592) for some forest treks, take a night in Mikongo (p593), continue by train to Franceville (p593) and do a few day trips in the area, and then fly back to Libreville.
- **Two Weeks** Start in Libreville (p584) and head to Lambaréné (p591) for a few days, taking in a lake tour. Then head onto Mayumba (p592) where you can enjoy the beaches, the whales (if they're in season), and some forest walks. Then fly back up to Libreville and spend some time exploring the city.
- **One Month** Follow the one-week itinerary but add in a week for a stay in Ivindo National Park (p593) before heading to Franceville (p593). When you return to Libreville, take a few days in town before heading off to Lambaréné (p591) for a few nights. Take the boat from Lambaréné to Port-Gentil, and then head south via plane or boat to either Loango National Park (p591), or, if you're on a budget, Mayumba (p592).

HOW MUCH?

- **Share taxi around town** US\$0.20
- **Croissant** US\$0.60
- **Train from Libreville to Franceville** US\$55
- **Plane back to Libreville** US\$110
- **A weekend trekking in the forest** US\$400

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1
- **1L bottled water** US\$1.50
- **Bottle of Régab** US\$1
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$10
- **Grilled brochettes** US\$3

HISTORY

Avoiding the coups, wars and poverty that have plagued the rest of the continent, Gabon has been an oasis of stability and prosperity in a very troubled region for more than 40 years. Its president, El Hadj Omar Bongo, has held power since 1967 and ranks as Africa's longest-serving head of state. He has presided over an economy bolstered by income from oil, which has made Gabon one of the richest in sub-Saharan Africa – though dwindling reserves have forced planners to seek out other sources of revenue, and ecotourism has become the buzz word of the day.

Of Petroglyphs & Pygmies

Gabon has been inhabited for at least 400,000 years. Some 1200 rock paintings have been found in the area around Réserve de la Lopé. They were made by iron-working cultures that razed the forest for agriculture, creating today's savannah. The earliest modern society, the Pygmies, were displaced between the 16th and 18th centuries by migrating peoples from the north, principally the Fang, who came after settling in what is now Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea.

Contact with Europeans, starting with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1472, had a profound effect on tribal structures. British, Dutch and French ships traded for slaves, ivory and tropical woods. The coastal tribes established strong ties with these foreign

powers, but the interior tribes defended their lands against European encroachment. Animosity still lingers between the coastal tribes and the rest of the country.

The capital, Libreville, was established in 1849 for freed slaves on an estuary popular with traders. In 1885, the Berlin Conference of European powers recognised French rights in Gabon, which became part of the French Congo and later French Equatorial Africa. The country became self-governing in 1958, and won independence in 1960 under President Léon M'Ba. After M'Ba died in a French hospital in 1967, his vice president, Albert Bernard Bongo, took power of the nation (changing his name when he adopted Islam in 1974).

Independence Daze

The newly independent nation got off to an extravagant start. As money rolled in from the sale of timber, manganese ore, iron ore, chrome, gold, diamonds and finally oil, Gabon's per capita income soared higher than South Africa's.

In 1976, Bongo's government announced a four-year, US\$32 billion plan to create a modern transport system, encourage local industry and develop mineral deposits. Few of these projects ever took shape. The government did, however, spend vast sums hosting a summit of the Organization of African Unity in 1977 and is still doing construction on the (conservatively estimated) US\$250 million presidential palace.

After four decades of dominance by President Bongo, his rule is evident everywhere, from the women's clothing that bears his image to the ubiquitous portraits and huge billboards glorifying the leader. A bevy of French political and military advisers serve him, as does a personal bodyguard composed of European mercenaries, Moroccan soldiers and 400 top-notch French airborne troops.

In 1990, after the country's first real political unrest, Bongo ended more than two decades of one-party rule by legalising the opposition (though subsequent elections were marred by fraud).

Gabon Today

Today, the National Assembly remains dominated by Bongo's ruling party, the Democratic Party of Gabon (PDG), though his opponents hold a few seats. Allegations of massive government corruption persist, and Bongo's power is nearly absolute.

As Bongo ages gracefully, the question looms large in the populace's mind: when his tenure finally comes to an end, will Gabon go the volatile way of Cote d'Ivoire, or will Bongo manage to control from beyond the grave?

CULTURE

Someone once said that the Gabonese like to act more French than the French themselves, and this certainly could hold true in Westernised, glitzy Libreville, despite the remaining resentment of the old colonial masters who are also still Gabon's biggest trading and investment partners. But beyond the big city (and oil-soaked Port-Gentil), most Gabonese are still living simply, sometimes in the same conditions and traditions as hundreds of years ago.

Yet even in tiny remote villages you won't find the kind of poverty seen in other parts of Africa. Everyone in Gabon has enough money for beer, and that's just what they spend it on. Women are allowed to join in, but only after the wood is gathered, the food is prepared and the rest of the work is done. On Sundays everyone dresses in their best and heads off to church where spirited dancing and singing ensues.

If you're in a hurry to go somewhere or get anything done Gabon's can be a frustratingly slow country, both because of the French-inherited bureaucracy as well as the rejection of Westernised work hours.

PEOPLE

Of the peoples living in Gabon today, the original forest-dwelling tribes (often referred to as Pygmies) survive only in the remote north of the country, barely keeping their fascinating culture intact. Most other people are descendents of the Bantu peoples, and the Fang are still the most numerous. There is also a sizable French expat community.

Missionary influence is palpable; over 50% of the country counts itself as Christian, though traditional animist beliefs are still strong. Beliefs in superstition and witchcraft hold great power over much of the Gabonese population. Stay in the country long enough, and you will soon notice yourself referring to the 'spirits' and 'ancestors'.

ARTS & CRAFTS

Traditional masks, carvings and *bieri* (ancestral sculpture) using natural materials such as wood, raffia and feathers are found throughout Gabon, but are rarely sold in the markets as they are still religiously utilised. (Though you will find these kinds of items from neighbouring countries in the markets.) Fang masks are prized throughout the world and sold for big bucks at art auctions.

Dancing is a national pastime, and recent dance crazes include the Ivorian Coupé Décalé and the L'Oriengo, which originated as a dance for people handicapped by polio. Traditional tribal dance is still widely practised and can be seen at cultural villages.

Hip-hop is big in Gabon, and there are plenty of home-grown groups playing on the radios. You'll also find recordings of the sacred music of the Bwiti, which uses, among other extraordinary instruments, harps played with the mouth, as well as brilliant, inspiring Pygmy recordings.

ENVIRONMENT

Gabon is a country of astonishing landscapes and almost insane biodiversity, much of which is still undiscovered and unexploited. Though almost 75% of the country is covered in dense tropical rainforest, this equatorial country is also full of endless white-sand beaches, savannahs, rushing rivers, hidden lagoons, rocky plateaus and canyons, cloud-tipped mountains and inselbergs (isolated rock domes overlooking the surrounding forest canopy), all of which are home to an amazing array of flora and fauna.

