

A STAR CALLED NEPTUNO

Although founded in 1935, Odzala National Park has never truly made its mark. However, with the recent habituation of three gorilla groups and the completion of two new camps, things are set to change. We sent **Sue Watt** to investigate.

He's tall, dark and handsome with gentle brown eyes and a natural, easy-going charm. Everybody falls in love with Neptuno. And although more hirsute than I would normally go for, he cast his spell on me too.

Dr Magda Bermejo, a primatologist who has been observing him for four years deep in the rainforests of the Republic of Congo's Odzala National Park, believes he is not only a fine specimen of a western lowland gorilla, but also a very unique silverback.

"He is really gentle with the females and he likes humans – his character is more flexible than other adult males. Neptuno is special. Everyone feels the same about him."

Our trek to meet his family of 18 had been delayed for four hours earlier that morning because of thunderous rain. "We don't track them when it's raining," Etienne, a guide at Wilderness Collection's Ngaga Camp, explained during our briefing. "It's dangerous as we can't hear them and they can't hear us."

After the rain finally abated, our group of four (the maximum number allowed to accompany a guide and expert tracker) soon discovered we would have to work hard to find our gorillas. Although the terrain wasn't difficult we battled our way through claustrophobia-inducing stands of marantaceae – it was so dark and dense at times that we could hardly see our tracker

ahead of us. I also had to fight off biting ants whose nest the gorillas had recently overturned in search of a snack. And as they were no longer being nibbled on, they were now nibbling on me in retaliation. Finally, sacrificing any remnants of sartorial elegance, we donned green head-nets.

Such challenges made our eventual encounter all the more rewarding. After two hours our tracker Zepherin found Neptuno and his family high in the trees. Eating his lunch about 20m above us, he showered us with leaves each time he tugged a branch. Yet he still kept a paternal eye on his brood. Pan, a mischievous two-year-old, lay prone on a branch below, dozing nonchalantly as if recovering from an all-night party. Six-year-old Caco demanded attention, climbing to a fork in the tree and standing tall, almost pleading with us to take his photo. Others, shy perhaps, stayed atop the tree sunbathing in the warmth after the rain.

He's tall, dark and handsome with gentle brown eyes and a natural, easy-going charm. Everybody falls in love with Neptuno...

In complete silence, we watched Neptuno for our permitted 60 minutes, an hour that flew by in seconds. As if on call, he then performed his finale, elegantly twisting and turning his vast 200kg body down the liana vines like an Olympic gymnast, before disappearing into the marantaceae.

A silverback doesn't normally do that – it's difficult because they are so heavy," Magda explained. "He is so confidently strong."

On our return, we passed a massive gorilla nest piled high with marantaceae leaves (an ape's squashy mattress). Our guide Karl flung himself on it to check its comfort-

factor. Weird and wonderful gorilla snacks lay strewn on the path nearby, including aromatic half-chewed wild ginger stems, a fruit that looked like a lime-green brain the size of a football, and the apple-smelling fig-like produce of the uapaca trees.

These lush fruits together with the marantaceae are what draw great numbers of Neptuno's species to this region. It's thought as many as a fifth of the world's 100,000 western lowland gorillas reside in Odzala, one of Africa's oldest national parks.

Yet gorilla tourism here is very much





Top left: Ngaga Camp huts

Bottom left: Pan hanging out in the canopy

Bottom right: Walking in the stream near Lango Camp

Opposite: A gorilla's marantacea leaf mattress

hopes to turn around the park's fortunes as it did with Majete Wildlife Reserve in Malawi.

With rampant poaching, non-existent policing and poor management, wildlife in this 13,600-square-kilometre park has declined dramatically in recent decades, with elephants in particular suffering for their ivory. Manager Leon Lamprecht described the challenges ahead: "Our first priority is to re-establish the core of the park through law enforcement and then we can sell it to tourists. We can then use the tourism dollars to help the communities."

One potential development for tourists could be gorilla permits to visit other groups. "We've just found a little gem," Leon told me. "Lots of unhabituated gorillas at a bai (open grassy area), with nothing else there but smaller monkeys and lots of birdlife." Although it's early days, initial ideas include researching and habituating the group and providing permits, accommodation for independent travellers and a hide for observation, with local communities benefiting from the proceeds.

Community development is the key concern for Sabine Plattner and her Sabine Plattner Africa Charities (SPAC). Working closely with Magda and African Parks, along with other NGOs and the government, Sabine plans to improve education, develop employment prospects particularly for women, build a community centre and teach children the value of conservation.

As ever, achieving that delicate balance between conservation and communities is crucial. Although poaching of wildlife in general was and still is a problem, local communities have long felt a certain

connection with their gorillas. As Magda explained: "Gorillas aren't a threat to them, and as such people have actually been protecting these primates in their own ways. So it makes these communities very proud about having people from different countries interested in seeing and researching them."

By the end of our visit to Mbomo (population 5000), her point had been proven. Upon arrival we bought sticky doughnut-style cakes from the baker, admired the new vegetable garden created to supply the lodges, and wandered around the market that sold manioc, dried fish and maize alongside fake designer T-shirts. Before leaving, we enjoyed a beer as the sun set to

the sound of loud African Hip Hop, which was playing in one of the bars. Some people were wary of us, others were simply shy, but most were welcoming and warm. "Have you seen the gorillas?" an elderly man shouted as we drove past. When we answered positively he beamed with excitement and replied, "Excellent! Thank you!"

Odzala isn't all about the gorillas. From Lango Camp we took a mystical boat trip along the Lekoli River, which felt like we were discovering the undiscovered. Seven different species of monkey swung in the trees and the birdlife was prolific, the star being a surprised Pel's fishing owl that darted across the river in front of us. We waded through swamps and streams, walked across marshes and drove around open moist savannah. And although the wildlife was still skittish, we saw forest buffalo, elephant, sitatunga, bushbuck and clouds of beautiful butterflies.

Our most magical sighting happened during a casual forest walk – we caught a glimpse of two totally wild gorillas in a tree, descending and disappearing the moment they saw us. To see habituated gorillas was special enough, but to see an unhabituated pair unexpectedly was a true privilege. Surely that is a good omen for Odzala's future. 🐼

* Sue travelled with grateful thanks to Zambezi Safari & Travel Company (www.zambezi.com).

Plan your trip

Getting there Air France (www.airfrance.fr) flies from London to Brazzaville via Paris Charles de Gaulle. A two-hour private charter flight then takes you to Mboko Airstrip in Odzala.

When to visit Although it can rain throughout the year in Odzala, the main rainy seasons are from March to April and October to December.

Visas Most visitors require a visa to visit the Republic of Congo, which must be obtained before departure. A single-entry visa costing £60 is available from the consulate in London.

Health All visitors to Congo must have a yellow fever vaccination certificate. Malaria is present in Odzala so speak to a travel clinic regarding prophylactics prior to travel.

Gorilla Tracking The minimum age for gorilla viewing is 15 years. Guests with colds, flu or other respiratory tract symptoms will not be allowed to track gorillas to minimise the risk of infection.

Books Bradt's *Congo* (2nd ed, 2012) by Sean Robson is a comprehensive guide to both the Republic Congo and the DRC.



Find out more Odzala Wilderness Camps (www.odzala-kokoua.com)

Author tip Come prepared for rain and heat. Take light clothes that dry quickly, sturdy boots for gorilla tracking and waterproof protection for camera equipment. It's also well worth investing in some good river shoes for walking in water and swamps – they have good grip, they dry efficiently and you can put them in the washing machine when you get home!

