

## A Pygmy Hut in the Congo

December 2014

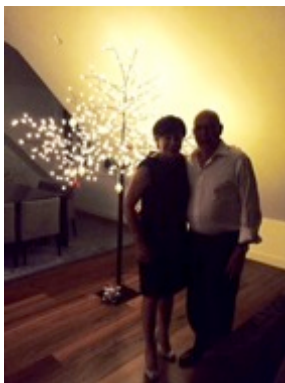
By Roger James



A slip on our driveway when returning from a pack walk on Thursday morning resulted in a broken kneecap. So it is with my left leg in a brace that I board the Saturday flight to Sydney.



Sylvia was waiting at the Sydney airport having just flown up from Albury in NSW. Staying with good friends John and Lesley in Neutral Bay. We enjoyed a chat before heading to dinner at the Shangri-La.



Leslie and John



View from Altitude Restaurant – Shangri-La, Sydney

*Sunday 21 December*

A short ferry trip found us at the Rocks for a relaxing afternoon.



*Monday 22 December*

We caught the train to Blackheath in the Blue Mountains. After train travel in Europe this was a rather slow train 2.5 hours to cover less than 120km. Beka (Sylvia's daughter) and her partner Tom live in Blackheath where they are avid rock climbers. Blackheath seems to be a part-time town as most of the shops are only open Thursday - Saturday.



*Wednesday 23 December*

We meet Tom and Beka at the airport and board QF63 for the 14 hour flight to Johannesburg. Arriving late afternoon it is only a 60m walk to the hotel.

*Thursday 24 December*

Boarding a Boeing 737-700 we fly north to Rwanda. Four hours later we land in Kigali, a town surrounded by many small horticultural lots. Security is pretty tough - as we enter the transit lounge our passports and visas are checked as-is our hand luggage. My little backpack is pulled off the conveyor belt. The guy is looking for something he doesn't recognize. It turns out to be my emergency beacon - after a considerable amount of sign language and "bings and boings" which included pointing to satellites he eventually either understood or gave up.



Another 2-hour flight and we land in Brazzaville capital of the Congo. The terminal is quite new and modern. As we walk down the passage a couple of ladies in white with masks check our temperature. A guy from wilderness travel meets us with our entry forms filled out. At the front of the queue a not so quick stop at the immigration box sees us to our bags and transport.



The car park is teeming with green and white Toyota Corollas. As we head into the city the roads are also jammed with the green and whites.



Hotel Mikhaels is quite nice although the check in process is quite slow with several people involved in the process. A sign that labour is cheap and boredom creates inefficiency.





Beka and Tom head off for an early night while Sylvia and I take a stroll around the town. Everything is pretty rough with lots of part-built and stalled multi-story building. Piles of rubbish dominate the sides of railway tracks, footpaths and empty sections. We are amazed by the number of kid's bikes and large toys being sold on the footpath and then we realize it is Xmas eve.



What does surprise us, is a huge multi-million dollar church. It is stone, very high, over 100m long with dozens of lead light windows and huge ornate copper doors. Apparently built in the 1930's this building has been surprisingly well maintained compared with the rest of the city. I am sure the money would have been better spent on housing or feeding the locals.



There is also a multi-story tower built by an oil company some thirty years ago.



The people are friendly and always answer to "bonjour". There are no touts or con men on the streets. Apparently there used to be but they all came from the Democratic Republic of Congo. A couple of years ago some 250,000 over-stayers and illegals were rounded up and sent home.

*Thursday 25 December.*

Breakfast at 6 and we are packed up and on our way to the airport just after 7. Less traffic around today. We are met by our host, who gets everything organised, bags labeled ready for our escorted journey through security. We have been joined by Peter and Marie from Switzerland, who we met at breakfast.

At the airport we are joined by John, Stephanie and sons Dan and Scott. From the U.S., Mum (US Ambassador) and Dad live here and their sons are visiting from the U.S.

A bus onto the Tarmac reveals a 16-seater German Dornier 228-200, which the pilot tells me flies like a Porsche. He did however fail to prove that.



Through the Cold War the Congo had a strong Russian and Cuban influence. It was not until the first revolution in 1979 that the republic was formed. The current president, now in his seventies, has been in power all but five years since then. In NZ prior to an election the Labour Party tries to buy votes by promising a raise to the minimum wage. Over here apparently they do it a little different. The ministers visit the villages by helicopter with

bags of money and hand out 10k local notes (about \$20 U.S.) or t-shirts with the president's photo on them.

Over the past few years they are trying to diversify before the oil runs out. This has seen a move into tourism and trying to improve the infrastructure by way of roads and technology. Cash is king here - even the best of hotels don't take credit cards.

One hour and forty minutes later we touch down at Mboko airstrip. We are met by our guides in long wheelbase Toyota Land Cruisers.



We split into two groups - the Americans going to Lango Camp an hour away. We set off with our guides Alon and Sarah on the 40km, 4 hour plus drive to Ngaga Camp. The road is pretty basic with lots of interesting plants, insects and even a bunch of monkeys to see along the way.



Alon Sarah



Eventually we reach the boundary of Odzala - Kokoua National park. We drive through Mbomo Village which consists mainly of mud huts - apparently a population of six thousand. It's Xmas day so many children are playing with their new "made in China" plastic toys. The village has solar powered streetlights and a cell phone tower but no running water. Very few houses have electricity. Apparently there were some large generators installed in the village a couple of years ago but as the president hasn't come to officially open them they have never been used.



Many children suffer from malnutrition due to a diet of mainly manioc. A root plant that contains arsenic and has to be boiled for a long time then wrung out thoroughly before eating or it kills you. At the end of that it has very little nutritional value. Efforts are being made to educate the locals into growing vegetables to enhance their diet.



The National Park headquarters outside Mbomo village



After the village the road gets even worse. We are now on one of the main roads to Gabon. We nearly get stuck in the mud. We alight on one occasion while Alon takes a run on to get through a wet patch. Being a main road the speed limit is 120kph. Funny!! We never saw one speed camera!! We averaged on the whole journey less than 10kmph.



The best they can do for drainage is dig a hole at the side of the road

An hour later (less than 10kms) we come to a barrier on the road manned by the Eco

Guards whose task it is to protect the gorillas from poachers. We turn off the main road onto the track to the camp. Alon affectionately calls the track to camp the longest 3km in the Congo.



We are greeted with drinks by the camp manager Tanya, and head guide Karl. Our pygmy style huts are quite spacious with shower and toilet. During our briefing Beka spots a forest cobra climbing the tree next to the deck - a brilliant shiny black with white, orange and yellow underbelly markings.



Next is a short stroll through the jungle revealing biting and stinging ants along with many other insects and plants.





A brief on the gorilla stalking, some nice French bubbly and Christmas dinner and the day is over.



*Friday 26 December*

We are woken at 5 with breakfast at 5:30. At six we are on the move following Zefron the gorilla tracker along quite a wide path. Originally gorilla tracks, these have been widened and maintained. The gorilla family we are tracking today is called Jupiter. (The groups are named after their silverbacks.) The group can move several kilometers each day so Zefron goes out each afternoon to keep track of them.

After an hour's stroll we are tracking the gorillas. The tracks lead us into the thick marantaceae 3m high undergrowth. Zefron cuts a track with a pair of secateurs. Along follows up even cutting twigs on the ground to ensure we don't trip. Several times the tracks lead us on and off the main paths.



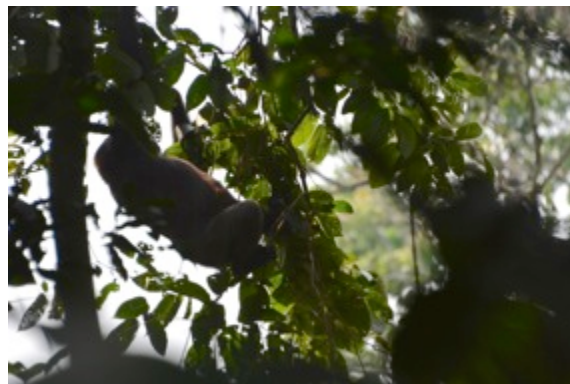
While moving through the undergrowth a green arboreal viper snake strikes out at Tom as he walks past. It must be a warning as he is out of reach. The guides are a bit concerned as we take photos as it is apparently very dangerous and the nearest hospital is a long way away. It also gives me a warning or is it a “can't reach me strike” as I move away.



Around nine, from the main trail we spot a gorilla up in a tree some 60m away. We put on our masks and our bug nets. When you stop around here the sweat flies arrive by the thousands.



There are a number of gorillas playing around and feeding in the trees. They are pretty noisy with lots of crashing banging and breaking of branches. After 50 minutes of watching from the track Zefron cuts a path in through the undergrowth. We sneak in and after 40m or so we stop to witness a female climb a tree and hang around watching us. Time is up so we withdraw to the main track and move off.



It takes around 5 years for a gorilla group to become habituated. In the initial stages they will be quite aggressive and throw stuff at people before moving off. They are quite smart and eventually will trust regular contact with humans as long as it for short periods. In

2003 several thousand of them just south of here were wiped out by Ebola, as were some of the local tribes people. Although they say 30% of the local pygmy population have immunity to this.

There are three habituated groups around here: Jupiter, Neptune and Pluto (named after the silverbacks – the boss male gorilla). The first two are for tourists to view the third is a research group. They are managed by the African Parks Association.

Returning to the camp we meet up with Peter and Marie who have been out to visit the Neptune group and have had a truly amazing experience including a close up encounter with the Silverback.

Around three the rest of the group went for a jungle stroll with Alon. I stayed in camp to rest my leg. Alon pointed out the various fauna. They even found a tadpole in a water-filled hollow in a tree. The tree frogs lay their eggs above these pools.



I meet the groups down by the river for a sundowner (drinks as the sun sets) around 5pm.



During pre dinner drinks Alon gives a presentation on gorilla life style. This is interrupted when he spots a scorpion coming across a cushion behind Sylvia and Marie. Alon grabs a glass and captures it before releasing it outside. I would have killed the bloody thing.





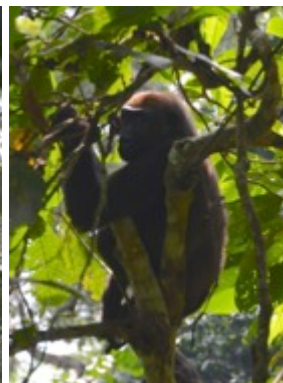
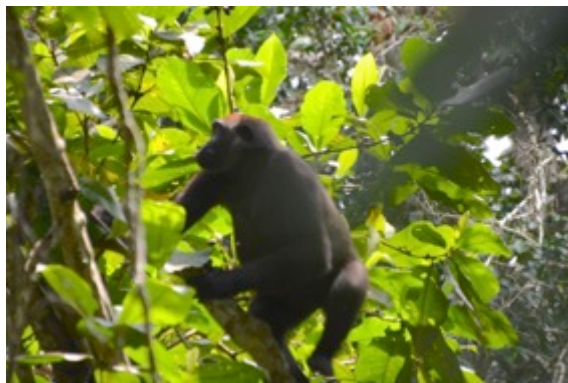
Gorillas live around 35 years. The females breed every 3 to 4 years if the young ones survive, or at shorter intervals if they don't. At around 14 the kids leave and look for, or form, another group to prevent inbreeding. The silverback keeps his eldest son around as 2IC. When the silverback gets too old or dies the group will disband.

#### *Saturday 27 December*

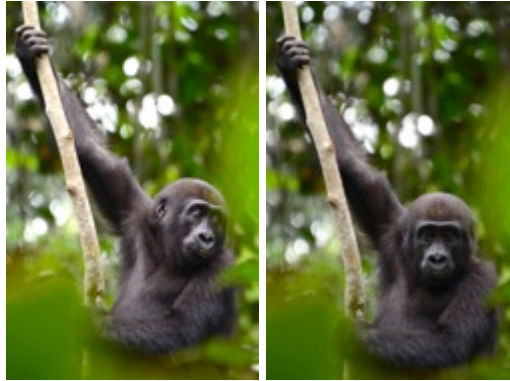
By six we are on the track with tracker Calvin leading us to see the Neptune group. Quite a distance out on the main tracks we head into the undergrowth. We pass through areas where the gorillas have been digging up a yam type root, which is part of their diet. Eventually Calvin tells Alon that both Neptune and Pluto have been in this area and we may be tracking the wrong group. We need to go and confirm, which we do. Thirty or so minutes later we hear the growl of the silverback some distance away. Calvin explains through the guide that it is definitely the wrong group as the leader back in the Neptune group doesn't react like that.

We turn around and go after the other group.

At around 11am Calvin spots a face looking at us through the undergrowth. We stay still for some time until there is a growl and the beating of a chest as the group moves off. We follow hitting a main track where we spot a couple hanging around in the trees. After watching for a while a track is cut into the undergrowth. We move almost silently in until I stand on a rotten piece of log, which gives way. We all sit and watch the undergrowth moving only a few meters away and listen to the odd growl or may be a snore.



We withdraw to the track and sit for an hour or so while the group has a sleep. Bugs move in swarming all over us, taking advantage of any gap in the clothing to have a go. Moving off down the track we spot a couple of young ones in a big tree. Then two even younger ones practicing their skills on a small tree that bends over and touches the ground as they reach the top. One of the reasons the mortality rate is so high for these animals is accidents while practicing their climbing.



Then a large female, seeking attention from the silverback, comes onto the track about 20m away, challenging us with a growl. The silverback, who unbeknown to us, was only a few meters away in undergrowth let's out a mighty roar. Sylvia gets such a fright she pulls a muscle in her neck. A bit more growling goes on before the female retreats, her baby hopping on her back as she moves into cover.

It is after 3pm when we return to camp. Peter and Marie have had another great experience finding the Jupiter group 3 minutes from camp.

After a late lunch we took a drive to the local village Ombo. There, people live in mud huts made by making a frame from branches interweaved with marantacae twigs. Mud is packed in from the inside then the outside. There are lots of kids in the small village.



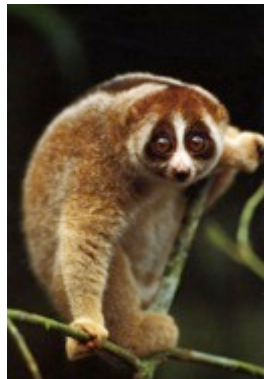


Apparently they sustain themselves almost totally from the forest and land. Alon arranges to buy some bananas and papaya to take back to camp. I am quite taken with a demonstration of a crossbow and Alon negotiates to get it thrown in with the deal to add to my collection.



On our return it is dark when we come off the main road onto the 3.5 k track to the camp. By spotlight we see a galago (bush-baby), potto (funny looking possum-like animal), some sleeping flycatcher birds hanging over the road like a baby's mobile and the rear-end of a civet as it disappears into the bushes.

Not our photos...





Galago

Potto

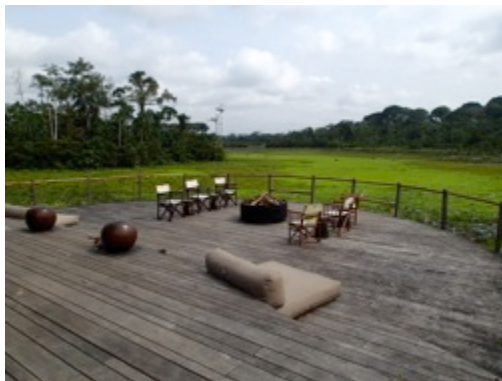
Civet

*Sunday 28 December*

We sleep in until 7am. After breakfast we start the 5 plus hour drive to Lango Camp around 50k to the south. Along the way we often stop to look at an array of colourful birds and other wild life. On the last part of the journey we come across the odd Forest Buffalo lying on the track.



Lango Camp is built around 4m off the ground to prevent game wandering into the huts.



We take a stroll down the river casually passing a herd of 60 forest buffalo who have gathered on the far river bank. We wandered down the river spotting a colobus monkey and quite a number of birds. We came to a large clearing created by elephants. They have cleared the area in search of minerals such as salt.

By the time we walked back up the river in the water against the current all the way it was dark.



View back towards Lango Camp from the river

### *Monday 29 December*

I woke with a rather bad case of diarrhoea and was laid up for the day. The others went on a drive then a boat trip and spotted a few elephants, various birds, buffalo and monkeys. In the afternoon they went for a walk in the swamp forest and found a huge beetle and some giant millipedes.



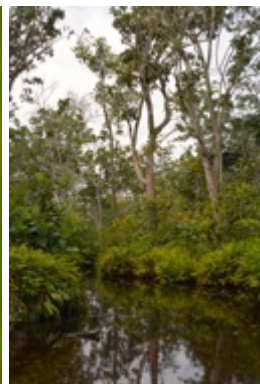


*Tuesday 30 December*

I went for a morning drive with Karl to a dry forest where we took a stroll. Putty-nose and mangabe monkeys danced around in the trees above. We also followed forest elephant and bongo tracks.



The others did a long adventure walk through the swamp forest across from the camp including walking through waist-deep water at one point. They had a few close encounters with buffalo. They reckoned with my broken-knee leg brace and recovery from diarrhoea, I wasn't up to it.



After lunch we all took a drive across the savannah to a wet forest. We strolled about 700m through the forest on a boardwalk. It was interesting to see how the elephants used the same route without stepping on the boards and breaking them.

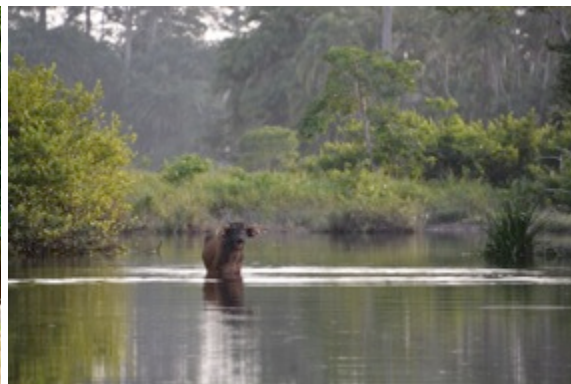




Arriving at Mboko Camp which is designed to cater for Congolese from the cities.



A short drive and we arrived at the Lekoli River. Boarding an aluminum boat with an outboard motor we set off down the river. The boat is splashed with dettol to dissuade the tsetse flies. These flies have their wings folded flat over their backs and give a nasty bite which can result in sleeping sickness. Mostly we drifted, spotting a flock of swallows dipping into the river. Lots of various birds graced us with their colorful company. Buffalo grazed at us from the river bank. Colobus monkeys hung out in the trees.



Then in the tall grass of a clearing we spot a couple of elephants. Their trunks go up in the air to sniff us out before they continue feeding. The boatman holds the boat still in a

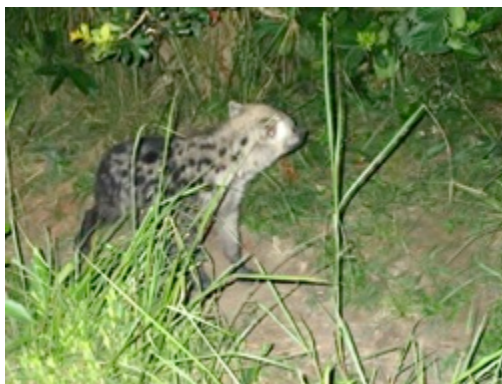
snag while we take lots of pics.



As we continue drifting down the river drinks are served along with some light snacks and more dettol is splashed around the boat to keep off the ever-increasing number of tsetse flies. The sun sets and the sky lights up in many colours.



More elephants are spotted on our return both from the boat and the vehicle. It is getting dark as we emerge from the wet forest so we drive back using a spotlight. We have an amazing interaction with a hyena. A young pup sitting outside his burrow is mesmerized by the light and comes right up to the truck. He is about to climb in when the boatman gives him a tap on the nose with a stick.



We arrive back in camp and dine with John and his family (US family we flew in with) who have arrived from Ngaga camp ready for our morning flight out. They too have had a great gorilla experience. They had driven down that afternoon to ensure they were ready for the plane in the morning. They had quite a long journey as their vehicle got stuck and one of the guides had to walk several kms back to the camp to get them pulled out. They were lovely people and it was great chatting with them over dinner.



After a late dinner most people went to bed. Peter, Marie and I stayed up and enjoyed a great presentation from Alon on his father's lodge (Sanga) and concession in the Central African Republic.

#### *Wednesday 31 December*

Breakfast and an hour's drive to the airstrip. A briefing and we are airborne. The hour-forty flight to Brazzaville gives us all a chance to reflect on what has been a fantastic few days.

The jungle and Savannah of the Congo is certainly one of those many special places in the world.