

THE KINGS OF THE CONGO

The Republic of the Congo remains a truly wild destination, especially when you venture north of Brazzaville into the mysterious rainforests of the Odzala-Kokoua National Park, where the western lowland gorillas live...

WORDS & PICTURES **FRANÇOIS HAASBROEK**



The aeroplane I'm on dips low and comes in to land at the Maya-Maya International Airport in Brazzaville. There's a stray dog on the runway, close to two passenger planes that have been left to rust. On the adjacent military airfield, a tree is growing through the wreck of a cargo plane.

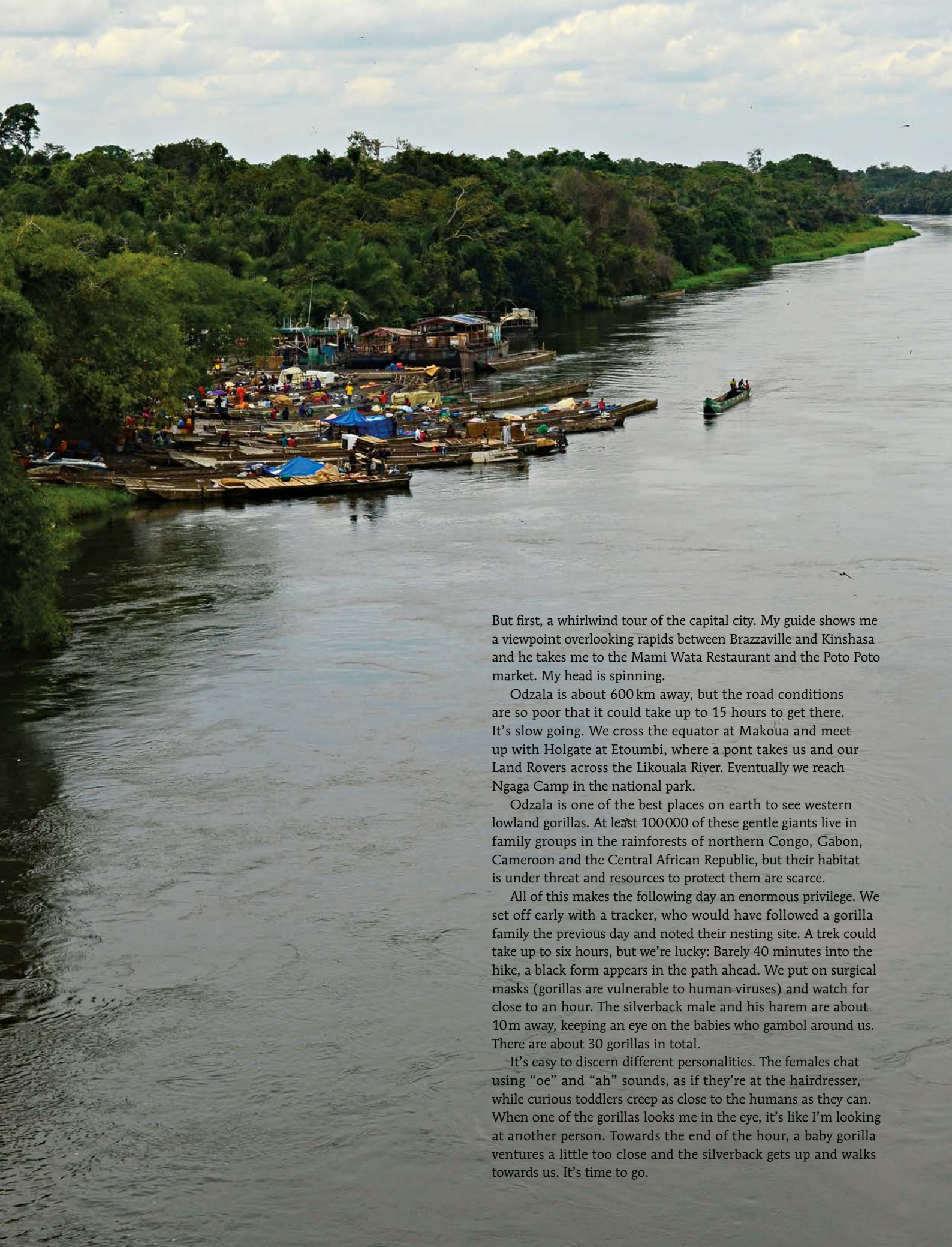
Wrecks of all description are a common sight in Brazzaville: Armoured vehicles, aeroplanes and taxis are left to the elements when they break down. I even see a Porsche Cayenne on the side of the road, slowly sinking into the ground.

Besides the wrecks, the streets of Brazzaville are surprisingly neat. It's the capital of the Republic of the Congo, not to be confused with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire) and its capital Kinshasa on the opposite bank of the wide Congo River. Locals talk about Congo-Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa to avoid confusion.

I'm here to meet up with Kingsley Holgate and his team in the Odzala-Kokoua National Park, north of Brazzaville, where we'll hopefully get to spend some time with a family of gorillas.

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT. The Congo River is 3 km wide between Brazzaville, capital of the Republic of the Congo, and Kinshasa, capital of the DRC. Although there has never been an outright war between the two countries, they don't see eye to eye. There are no bridges linking the two cities and rapids make it almost impossible to cross the river. Despite the danger of the rapids, kids often cool down in the water to escape the scorching year-round temperatures.





But first, a whirlwind tour of the capital city. My guide shows me a viewpoint overlooking rapids between Brazzaville and Kinshasa and he takes me to the Mami Wata Restaurant and the Poto Poto market. My head is spinning.

Odzala is about 600 km away, but the road conditions are so poor that it could take up to 15 hours to get there. It's slow going. We cross the equator at Makoua and meet up with Holgate at Etoumbi, where a pont takes us and our Land Rovers across the Likouala River. Eventually we reach Ngaga Camp in the national park.

Odzala is one of the best places on earth to see western lowland gorillas. At least 100,000 of these gentle giants live in family groups in the rainforests of northern Congo, Gabon, Cameroon and the Central African Republic, but their habitat is under threat and resources to protect them are scarce.

All of this makes the following day an enormous privilege. We set off early with a tracker, who would have followed a gorilla family the previous day and noted their nesting site. A trek could take up to six hours, but we're lucky: Barely 40 minutes into the hike, a black form appears in the path ahead. We put on surgical masks (gorillas are vulnerable to human viruses) and watch for close to an hour. The silverback male and his harem are about 10m away, keeping an eye on the babies who gambol around us. There are about 30 gorillas in total.

It's easy to discern different personalities. The females chat using "oe" and "ah" sounds, as if they're at the hairdresser, while curious toddlers creep as close to the humans as they can. When one of the gorillas looks me in the eye, it's like I'm looking at another person. Towards the end of the hour, a baby gorilla ventures a little too close and the silverback gets up and walks towards us. It's time to go.

Opposite page:

PRESIDENTIAL FISHING SPOT. Except for a five-year period in the 1990s, Denis Sassou Nguesso has been president of the Republic of the Congo since 1979. He grew up in Oyo, about 400 km north of Brazzaville on the Alima River, a tributary of the Congo. Oyo was once a tiny village; now it's home to at least 5 000 people, with an international airport, a luxury hotel and this riverside harbour, pictured.



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ZERO DEGREES. Even though the equator is just an imaginary line, it's thrilling to watch as the latitude co-ordinates on your GPS tick down towards zero. In the town of Makoua, two monuments declare that you are now on the equator, but neither is in exactly the right spot because the line actually runs through the mayor's house.

SNAKE FOR SUPPER? In this part of the world, any meat is good meat. This dead python was strung up for sale next to the main road north of Brazzaville.

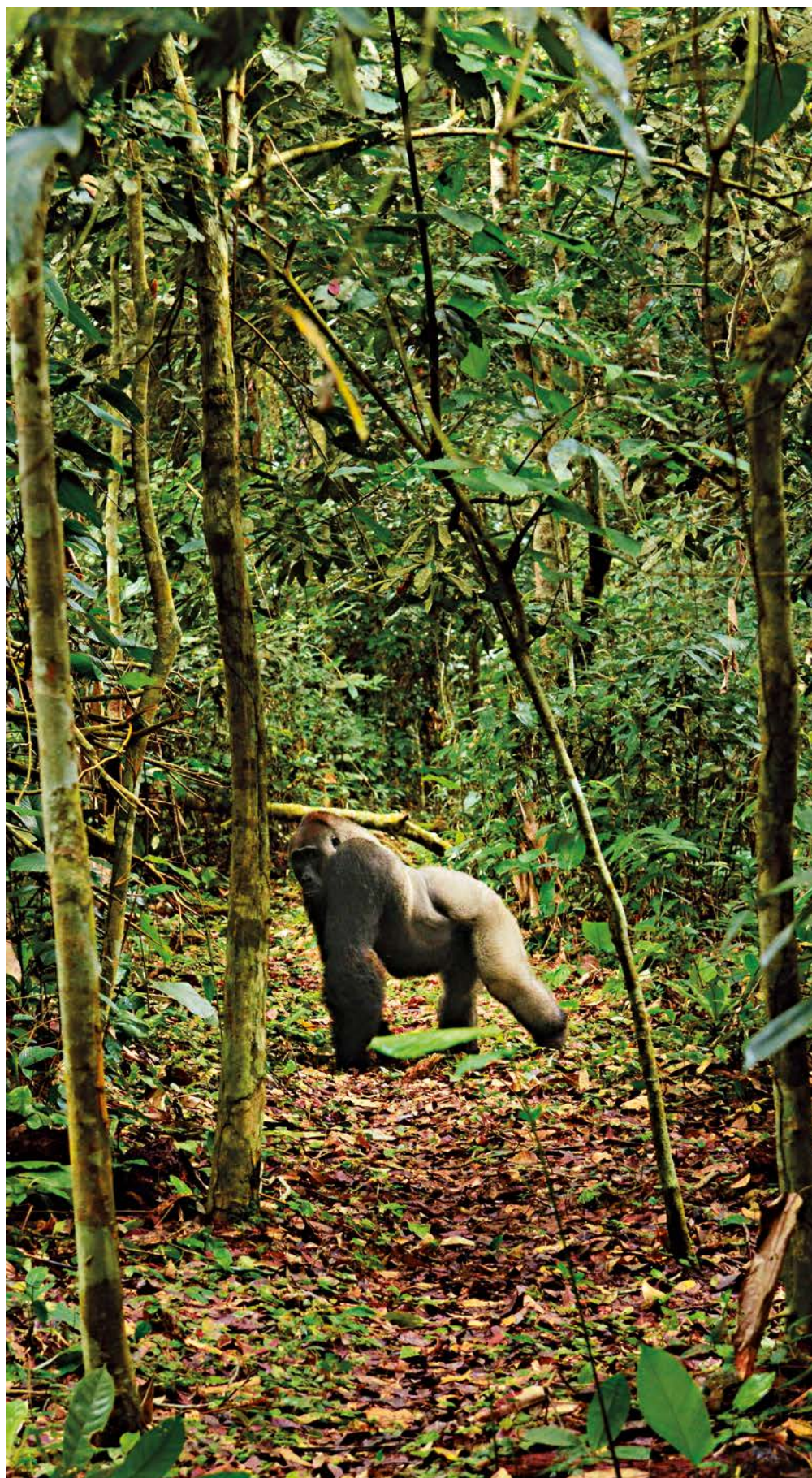
STREET PARTY. Brazzaville is one of the safest capitals in Africa. At the Poto Poto market you can buy a bag of peanuts and a Ngok' beer (Ngok' means crocodile) like fellow traveller Lesley Sutton and sit outside on the pavement without anyone bothering you.

HEART OF THE JUNGLE. The Lekoti River runs through the Odzala-Kokoua National Park and paddling in a pirogue is the best way to explore. As you drift along, you'll see wild orchids, Colobus monkeys and maybe even a rare sitatunga (a type of antelope).

GORILLA COUNTRY. The dirt road between Etoumbi and the Odzala-Kokoua National Park goes through a rainforest where gorillas live. A silverback could easily storm from the bushes at any moment. . .

THE MAN WITH THE BEARD. Kingsley Holgate stretches his legs on a pont while the tour vehicles are hauled across the Likouala River.





THE PATRIARCH (left). Neptuno is the leader of one of 16 families of western lowland gorillas in the Odzala-Kokoua National Park. Only two of these families are habituated to humans.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left:

WALK ON WATER. When it gets too shallow for a pirogue, you must continue on foot. There are natural clearings in the forest called *bais*, which are normally dry but can flood after rain. Prepare yourself for wet boots.

CLOSE THE WINDOWS! Odzala-Kokoua National Park receives an average annual rainfall of about 1 500 mm and the water drowns whatever roads exist. It's not the kind of place you can explore in your Camry.

LIKE KIDS. Adult gorillas pay little attention to tourists – they'll just carry on munching roots and leaves. The little ones are much more curious and will try to come as close as possible before being scolded by the silverback.

GIN IN THE BAI. After a day spent looking for gorillas, crossing rivers and hiking through forests, you can dry your boots next to the fire on the deck of Camp Lango in the national park.

GOOD DEED FOR THE DAY. The Kingsley Holgate Foundation raises funds for "Right to Sight", a campaign that provides reading glasses to those in need. This woman lives in Mboma close to the national park. Thanks to her new specs, she was able to read her Bible for the first time in years.

François travelled as a guest of the Kingsley Holgate Foundation and Land Rover. A return ticket from Johannesburg to Brazzaville costs about R9 000. A night in the Odzala-Kokoua National Park costs from R3 500 per person. Visit odzala-kokoua.com for more information.

