

Detour: Democratic Republic of the Congo

A country so vast it spans the African continent from Angola to Uganda and Sudan to Zambia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) is the size of western Europe. Home to some of the last unexplored wildernesses on earth and one of the mightiest rivers, DR Congo is perhaps our planet's last great adventure. The long civil war is drawing to a close and for travellers in East Africa it is once again possible to cross into DR Congo to view mountain gorillas in the Parc National des Virungas and climb the towering volcano of Nyiragongo.

However, the peace is young and fragile and security in DR Congo is tenuous at best. Check the latest in Kampala or Kisoro (Uganda), Kigali or Gisenyi (Rwanda), before crossing into DR Congo and do not attempt an overland journey to Kinshasa. Things can change very fast in Africa, and it pays to be well informed.

Most of DR Congo falls outside East Africa, but the areas near the borders of Uganda and Rwanda covered here are beginning to draw a trickle of travellers thirsting for adventure. The lure of mountain gorillas and active volcanoes seems too much to resist – at least it was for us!

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 2,345,410 sq km
- **Birthplace of** Mobutu Sese Seko, Claude Makalele (France, Real Madrid, now Chelsea)
- **Capital** Kinshasa
- **Country code** 243
- **Famous for** gorillas, Congo River, *Heart of Darkness*
- **Languages** French and Kingwana
- **Money** Congo francs (CFr); US\$1 = CFr440; €1 = CFr515
- **Population** 60 million



HISTORY

DR Congo is the original heart of darkness, raped and pillaged first by King Leopold of Belgium, who ran it as a personal colony, and later President Mobutu (his official title was President Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Waza Banga, which meant 'the fearless warrior who will go from strength to strength leaving fire in his wake'), who used state coffers to fund essential Concorde charters to Disney World and the like. He took plunder to a new level, creating a new form of government along the way: kleptocracy, governance by theft. But the black hole that followed became Africa's first great war, sucking in as many as nine countries at its height and leading to the deaths of more than 3 million Congolese. After Rwanda, they said 'never again'. In Africa, that means 'à la prochaine' or 'till the next time'.

Even Mugabe found an angle, sending his airforce north to bomb Ugandan and Rwandan positions around Kinshasa as the capital was about to fall for a second time back in 1998. The sweetener? He was given control of state mining company Gecamines, running the richest vein of minerals in central Africa. Mobutu was famed for his extravagant shopping trips to Paris and before departure he would call up the beleaguered boss of Gecamines and demand US\$150 million pocket money. Just imagine what Robert Mugabe made in three years. Look at the map, it is not far from Lubumbashi down to Harare.

Add to the mess the Interahamwe (Those Who Kill Together), responsible for the Rwandan genocide; the Mai Mai, who believe holy water protects them from bullets and wear sink plugs around their necks; and Mobutu's old henchmen still living off the land, and DR Congo has been through the mixer. Peace is slowly breaking out, but it will take time to overcome the trauma of the last 10 years. It's not that democratic, it's barely a republic, but it is Congo.

INFORMATION

Eight-day Congolese visas are available at the Goma border for US\$35. Visas for longer stays of 30 days are also available in advance through a Congolese embassy for US\$80. The US dollar is king in DR Congo and only notes issued from 2000 onwards are accepted. The local currency is Congo francs

and during the time of our visit, the rate was similar to that of the Rwandan franc. There are moneychangers at the border post. Everyone in Goma seems to have two mobile phones, one for the Congolese network and one for the Rwandan network.

GOMA

Goma is a modern-day Pompeii, swallowed by the lava of Nyiragongo when the volcano erupted on 17 January 2002. Whole streets were smothered and the centre of the city buried under 2m of molten mess. The death toll remained low, as the lava moved slowly enough to allow residents to be evacuated. Today Goma is getting back to normal, although the centre looks more like a moon-cape than a modern city. It is the capital of North Kivu province, a bustling commercial centre and a base to climb Nyiragongo volcano or visit the mountain gorillas at Bukima in Parc National des Virungas.

Sleeping & Eating

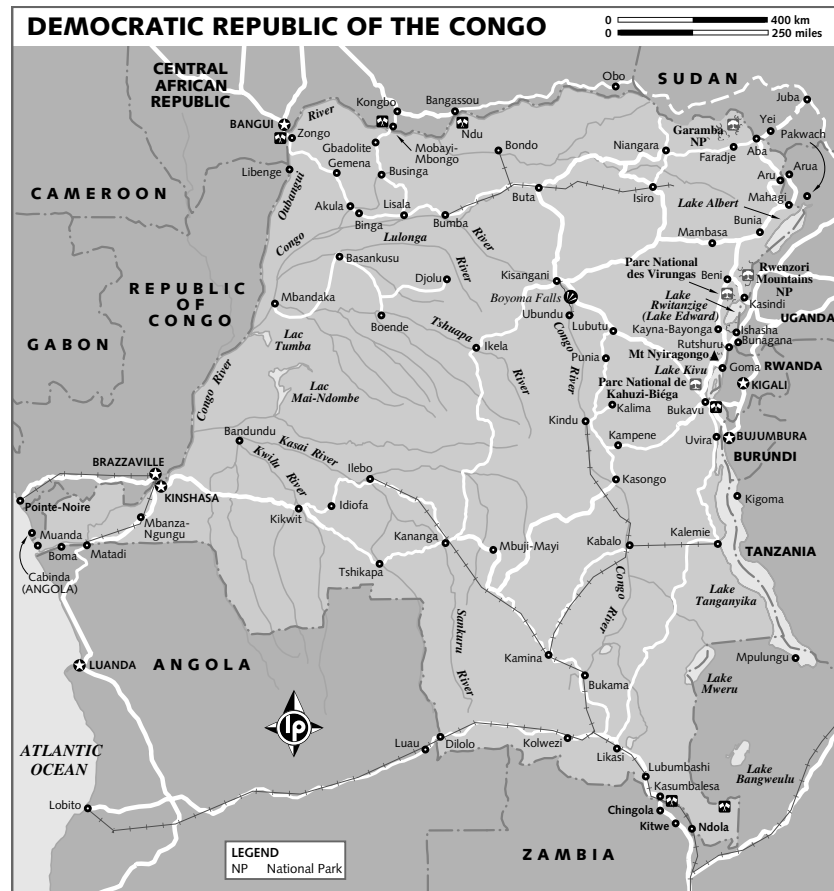
Surprisingly, there are lots of good hotels and restaurants in Goma. Most of the popular places are located on or just off the main road to Rwanda. There are plenty of good local restaurants in the city centre turning out brochettes (kebabs), fresh fish and lashings of Primus beer. International restaurants are incredibly expensive.

Stella Matutina Lodge (☎ 085 87616; Himbi; r US\$80-100) This lodge has the most comfortable rooms in town, set in the spacious grounds of a grand villa to the west of the centre in Himbi district. Plush bathrooms, fine furnishings and an expensive restaurant make this the choice for high-flyers in town.

Husi Hotel (☎ 081 3532300; Blvd Kanyamuhanga; r incl breakfast US\$55-75) Popular with UN staff and aid workers, this large hotel has 44 smart rooms. There is a nice garden and a popular lakeside bar and restaurant. This is a good place to catch up on events in DR Congo.

Bird Hotel (☎ 088 86367; Ave Bougainvillier; r US\$35) For something a little bit cheaper, Bird Hotel has small rooms with bathroom and satellite TV.

Shu Shu Guesthouse (☎ 97286221; Ave Grevilleas; r US\$10) Home to the cheapest rooms in town, it costs US\$10 for a big bed in a room with a shared bathroom. It feels slightly out the way up a back street for those worried about security.



Hotel des Grands Lacs (☎ 98899943; Blvd Kanyamuhanga; s/d US\$20/30) Once Goma's grandest hotel, this colonial relic still proudly displays its four stars in the lobby, but it would struggle to earn just one star these days. The cavernous rooms include a bathroom, but it really needs a face-lift.

Restaurant Le Chalet (☎ 088 18725; Himbi; mains US\$13-25) Lavishly decorated with Congolese crafts and with a beautiful lakeside setting, this is Goma's leading restaurant. The food is French and includes juicy grills and imported duck.

Entertainment

Congolese nightlife is legendary and Goma is no exception. There are lots of good local

nightclubs on Blvd Kanyamuhanga, including Cap Sud and Coco Jambo, where the locals are dancing before they have hit the entrance. Super Club Dallas conjures up images of JR and Sue Ellen, but it is a backstreet club with good local tunes.

Chez Doga (Blvd Kanyamuhanga) One of the most popular places in town, this bar-restaurant really picks up at night. UN workers, smart locals and plenty of prostitutes make for a messy mix and the party goes on into the night.

PARC NATIONAL DES VIRUNGAS

Befitting such a vast country as DR Congo, Parc National des Virungas is quite simply enormous. To put it in perspective, it is

SECURITY

Just how safe is the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo)? That is the question going through everyone's mind before they decide to visit. The truth is nobody knows and the situation can change for the better or worse, but we were able to visit in summer 2005 and this is the situation as it stood then. It was considered safe to track the gorillas at Djomba and Bukima in Parc National des Virungas, safe to climb Nyiragongo volcano and safe to stay in Goma. However, travel from the Uganda border at Bunagana to Bukima was not considered safe at the time of writing due to the incidence of armed robberies on this stretch. There is no substitute for checking the security situation again and again before entering the country. The most reliable source of information for security in DR Congo is the UN and their website for the mission is www.monuc.org, which includes PDF maps of Goma and Bukavu.

Other parts of Parc National des Virungas were not considered safe, including the Rwindi section opposite Queen Elizabeth National Park in Uganda and the Congolese side of the Rwenzoris. Ituri province and the area around Bunia was considered the most dangerous area in all of DR Congo due to the ongoing tribal conflict between the Hema and Lendu. To the south of Goma, Bukavu was safe enough, but still suffering from the thrashing it took in summer 2004 at the hands of a dissident pro-Rwandan faction. Nearby Parc National Kahuzi-Biéga was apparently open for lowland gorilla viewing, but much of the park had been occupied by rebel forces for long periods during the civil war, who strip-mined it for coltan (a black tarlike ore used in the production of capacitors in electronic devices) and lived off bush meat. Steer clear unless you are 110% sure it is safe. Heading overland through DR Congo is definitely a no-no, but continuing to Kinshasa by plane is easy if expensive.

That said, the situation in which DR Congo finds itself now is little different to say Uganda in the late 1980s or Rwanda in the mid-1990s. It takes time for a country to overcome its past and only a trickle of tourists will make it at first. Step by step, things improve and before you know it, tourism is a viable industry once more. Security should improve, more places should open and the Congolese deserve all the support they can get in rebuilding their lives after the long years of war.

contiguous with five different national parks in Uganda: Mgahinga Gorilla, Bwindi Impenetrable, Queen Elizabeth, Rwenzori Mountains and Semuliki. However, due to the long civil war in DR Congo, the only sections of the park currently open are Bukima and Djomba, where it is possible to track the wonderful and rare mountain gorillas, one of the most magical experiences in Africa.

Information

There are currently 36 permits per day available to track the mountain gorillas in Parc National des Virungas: 28 permits at Bukima and eight permits at Djomba. There is currently almost no wait time to visit the gorillas in DR Congo, as there is no long-term booking system and tour companies are still steering clear for the time being. Security is provided by the Congolese army and rangers are equipped with walkie talkies and GPS units. The rangers speak both English and French and deserve a healthy tip, as they struggled to protect

the park while madness ruled in the country beyond.

Permits cost US\$250 per day at the time of writing and most people are arranging trips through Uganda or Rwanda. **Backpackers Hostel** (☎ 256-41-274767; backpackers@infocom.co.ug; www.backpackers.co.ug) in Kampala is the official Uganda representative for gorilla visits in DR Congo and **Alex Mujambere** (☎ 256-71-626194; mujalex@yahoo.co.uk) makes the journeys up and down to DR Congo every week. **Jambo Safaris** (fax 250-543030) are the Congolese agents selling permits on behalf of the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de Nature (ICCN), the Congolese national parks authority. They have a representative office on the Congolese side of the Bunagana border with Uganda. Arranging trips from Uganda is the easiest option as it includes transport, which is pretty scarce on the Congo side.

Dangers & Annoyances

In August 1998 four tourists were kidnapped at Djomba while attempting to visit the

gorillas; one was released, but three were never found, presumed dead.

Gorilla Tracking

The four gorilla families at Bukima include Kabirizi with 30 members, Humba with 12, Rugendo with nine and Munaga with seven. Kabirizi is popular due to the large number of gorillas, but the small Munaga group includes three silverbacks. Gorilla families of less than 10 are only allowed six visitors per day. All these families are usually located between 30 minutes and three hours from the Bukima ranger post.

The habituated family at Djomba is called Mapuwa and has 11 members. The Rugendo family from Bukima sometimes strays towards Djomba meaning another eight permits available here, but it all depends on their movements. Djomba is currently the most popular place to track in DR Congo, as some visitors don't want to spend too long in the country and it is less than one hour from the Ugandan border.

Sleeping

There is a small hut at Bukima ranger post, which was derelict at the time of our visit, but the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are looking to redevelop it for overnight stays.

Beds are available at the small resthouse in Djomba, which has a stunning setting on a ridge below Sabyino volcano. It costs US\$30 for a bed with full board, and camping is possible for US\$5 per person. There is also an upmarket lodge under construction on hilltop above Djomba.

Getting There & Away

Bukima is about 40km from Goma. The main road is in reasonable condition, but the 15km access road is appalling and only passable by 4WD. It takes about two hours to get here from Goma, three hours from the Ugandan border at Bunagana, but the

latter option was considered unsafe at the time of writing.

Djomba is only about 7km from Bunagana as the crow flies, but a little further by road. The road is in poor condition and best undertaken by 4WD. It is possible to walk to Djomba from the Ugandan border if you take a local as a guide.

NYIRAGONGO VOLCANO

Beautiful and brooding, locals in Goma know only too well the power of Nyiragongo. This active volcano last erupted in 2002, swallowing half of Goma in the process. It is possible to climb the volcano and camp overnight at the summit, rising early to stare down into the bubbling crater. It costs US\$100 to climb, but you need your own tent, as there are no facilities at the summit. It takes about five hours to climb, about half that to descend, but it is more atmospheric to spend the night here. Bring warm clothing as it is chilly at the top. Porters are available for US\$12 to carry water, food and bags to the summit. Buy all the provisions you need in Goma, as nothing is available here. The small ranger post here is about 15km from Goma on the road north to Bunagana and Uganda.

TRANSPORT

For the full lowdown on crossing into DR Congo from Uganda, Rwanda or Burundi, see the Transport sections of those individual chapters. The most commonly used crossings to enter or exit DR Congo are the Bunagana border with Uganda near Kisoro and the Goma border with Rwanda at Gisenyi. Visitors wanting to carry on to Kinshasa to link up with West Africa should only fly at the time of writing. Flights are expensive at around US\$350 one way, but it saves more than a month of overland travel by road and river, and, quite possibly, your life.

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