

Gabon

Gabon lies on the west coast of Africa straddling the equator. About half the size of France, it has a small population of 1,3 million. Substantial oil and mineral reserves have allowed the country to conserve its pristine rain forest and rich biodiversity; almost 75% of the country is covered in tropical rainforest.

As the land is sparsely populated with limited road infrastructure, there is minimal pressure on the environment. In 2002 President Bongo decreed 13 National Parks.



Travel Tips

Visas: All visitors except South Africans require a visa.

Currency: Communauté Financière Africaine (CFA). Notes come in denominations of CFA 10 000; 5 000; 2 000; 1 000; 500. Take Euros in cash (use traveller's cheques for emergencies). Credit Cards are not widely accepted.

Health: Take anti-malaria prophylactics. A Yellow fever vaccination certificate is essential. Hepatitis A and B injections recommended. Drink only bottled water. Travel insurance is essential.

When to go: June to September is the dry season. The rainy season, September to May, is best for birding. Whale watching is possible from July to September. Gorillas in Langoué Bai can be seen all year but are most easily tracked between June and August.

What to pack: No formal clothes are needed; keep your luggage down to the basics. Long-sleeve shirts, pants and socks are useful against mosquitoes. It is essential to have proper walking shoes.

Time zone: GMT + 1 hour.

Power supply: Mostly 220v AC, 50Hz. Plugs are generally 2-pin. Do not rely on being able to recharge batteries everywhere.

Language: French is the lingua franca, and there are approximately 40 local dialects. English is not widely spoken.

Customs and luggage allowance: 500 cigarettes and 1 litre of alcohol. Twenty kilograms of luggage and 1 item of hand luggage.

Read on: *Gabon, Sao Tomé and Príncipe* by Sophie Warne (Bradt Travel Guides).

Top Attractions

Loango National Park: Protected coastal habitat, including part of the 220km² Iguéla Lagoon. It encompasses over 100km of wild coastline. Elephant, hippopotamus, Red Forest Buffalo, and at times gorillas wander on the beaches or in the adjacent marshlands.

Sette Cama Lodge: South of the Loango National Park, comprising 5 wooden bungalows with private bathrooms.

Loango Lodge: On the northern boundary of Loango, at Iguéla. It has 10 rooms, including 3 suites with air-conditioning and private bathrooms. You are likely to see Forest Elephants, Forest Buffalo, Crowned and Putty-nosed Monkeys, chimpanzee and manatee.

Lopé National Park: Is in the centre of Gabon, and became the first protected area in Gabon in 1946. Home to several important primate species, especially Western Lowland Gorilla, chimpanzee, mandrill and the endemic Sun-tailed Monkey, Forest Elephant, Sitatunga (or marsh-buck), Forest Buffalo and Red River Hog. The lodge overlooks the Ogooué River. Explore the park by foot or game drive.

Mikongo Camp: Lies deep in the forest in a small clearing. It comprises wooden bungalows, most with private bathroom facilities. For birders an important bird to look for is Grey-necked Rockfowl. The rockfowl site is a two hour walk through primary forest along a maze of narrow elephant trails. You might have a chance encounter with a Western Lowland Gorilla, mandrill or chimpanzee.

Ivindo National Park: Langoué Bai is in the Ivindo National Park in Gabon. The *bai*, a pygmy word for "forest clearing" is particularly appealing to Forest Elephants and Western Lowland Gorillas, and both are regular visitors at the *bai*. Access to the *bai* is by train, then by road and finally on foot. The camp comprises large tents on platforms with separate showers and toilets, and a separate dining area. From camp, the *bai* wildlife viewing platforms are just over an hour's brisk walk.

