

# Detour: Democratic Republic of the Congo

The haunting yet unforgettable setting of Joseph Conrad's classic *Heart of Darkness*, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC; formerly Zaire) occupies a vast swathe of land in the centre of the African continent. The same size as Western Europe, the country is home to the mighty Congo River, some of the last remaining unexplored wildernesses on the planet, and a whole slew of primates from chimpanzees and bonobos to lowland and mountain gorillas. Of course, the DRC isn't exactly an up-and-coming ecotourism destination, especially since it's only just now emerging from a decade of civil war.

So just how safe is DRC? Optimists compare the country's present situation to Uganda in the late 1980s or Rwanda in the mid-1990s, though the unfortunate reality is that nobody really knows. DRC's greatest blessing – and its inescapable curse – has always been its abundance of natural resources. As a direct consequence, the country is still something of a volatile powder keg, and armed struggles to control these riches could ignite the fuse at a moment's notice.

While most of DRC falls outside of East Africa, the city of Goma near the Rwandese and Ugandan borders is starting to attract a small trickle of hard-core travellers. The capital of Kivu province, Goma serves as a good jumping-off point for Parc National des Virungas, home to the critically endangered eastern mountain gorilla, and the towering volcano of Nyiragongo, one of the most active on the continent.

With that said, the peace in DRC is young and fragile, security is tenuous at best, and can change very fast in this part of the world. Before you even consider stepping foot in DRC, make sure that you're well informed about the latest situation on the ground.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 2.35 million sq km
- **Birthplace of** Mobutu Sese Seko, Claude Makalele (Real Madrid, Chelsea, now Paris St, Germain)
- **Capital** Kinshasa
- **Country Code** 📞 243
- **Famous for** Congo River, *Heart of Darkness*, gorillas
- **Languages** French and Kingwana
- **Money** Congo francs (CFr); US\$1 = CFr653; €1 = CFr875
- **Population** 66 million



## A WORD OF WARNING ABOUT THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

While we were able to safely visit Goma and the surrounding area in mid-2008, the information in this chapter is best viewed as a reference material as opposed to up-to-date coverage. The security in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) at the time of research was – in a single word – uncertain. Furthermore, the outbreak of violence throughout Eastern Congo in late 2008 continues to call into question the future stability of the region. This means that the situation on the ground will inevitably change and change again during the shelf life of this edition. Quite simply, if you are contemplating a detour to DRC, there is absolutely no substitute for your own careful research. Perhaps the most reliable source of information is the UN Mission in Congo – you can visit its website at [www.monuc.org](http://www.monuc.org). It is also recommended that you inquire locally in Kampala or Kisoro (Uganda), or in Kigali or Gisenyi (Rwanda).

At the time of research, it was generally considered safe to stay in Goma, and to climb Nyriragongo Volcano. While tourists are once again heading to Parc National des Virungas, the high-profile killings of seven gorillas in the summer of 2007 sadly calls into question the security of the park. Travel to and from the Ugandan border at Bunagana is also not advisable due to ongoing instability.

While the vast remainder of DRC is outside the extents of this book, it's worth mentioning that heading overland through the bush is definitely a big no-no, but continuing to Kinshasa by plane is easy, if somewhat expensive. Ituri province and the area around Bunia was considered to be the most dangerous area in all of DRC, though the tribal conflict between the Hema and Lendu is finally ending. (The 'Ituri Conflict' is used to refer to the longstanding grievances between the agriculturalist Lendu and pastoralist Hema ethnic groups in the Ituri region of northeastern DRC. While it's difficult to trace the full historical extent of this conflict, the most recent clashes were from 1999 to 2007, and were prompted by the increasing number of armed groups in the region that fought in the Second Congo War. As with the vast majority of DRC's civil strife, the primary issue at stake was control over the area's abundant reserve of natural resources.)

To the south of Goma, Bukavu is on the rise as a functioning urban centre, though there are still scars from the thrashing it took in summer 2004 at the hands of a dissident pro-Rwandan faction. Nearby Parc National Kahuzi-Biéga is once again open for lowland gorilla viewing, though be sure you get the latest reports before visiting. During the civil war much of the park was occupied by rebel forces, who strip-mined it for coltan and lived off bush meat. As you might imagine, there are still security risks in the area, so check and check again.

Step by step, things can and do improve, and before you know it, tourism is a viable industry once more. If the recent peace accords hold, then there is reason to believe that the security in DRC will improve over the next few years. So, keep your fingers crossed and stay up to date. More and more places are opening up to foreign tourists, and the Congolese certainly deserve all the support they can get in rebuilding their lives after the long years of war.

## History

While colonialism in any capacity is fundamentally an exploitative force, there are few examples as harsh and severe as that of the Congo Free State (1877–1908). King Leopold of Belgium, who essentially ran the country like his own private colony for nearly three decades, raped and pillaged the Congo by subjecting the population to forced labour on his massive rubber plantations. Leopold eventually transferred power to his own parliament, though the colony was run under equally undemocratic means until 1960.

Parliamentary elections in the newly dubbed 'Democratic Republic of the Congo' did ini-

tially have a measure of democracy, producing nationalist Patrice Lumumba as prime minister and pro-Western Joseph Kasavubu as president. However, it wasn't long before power struggles in DRC launched a proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union. As in other corners of the globe that played host to the Cold War, the struggle between capitalism and communism severely limited the growth and development of young countries. With the aid of the American government and the CIA, and the Belgian government, Kasavubu and his 'loyal' colonel Joseph Mobutu assassinated Lumumba, ushering in five years of political infighting and civil unrest.

In 1965, Mobutu seized control in a bloodless coup, declaring himself President Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Waza Banga, or 'the fearless warrior who will go from strength to strength leaving fire in his wake'. Despite the lofty title, President Mobutu is best remembered for using state coffers to fund Concorde charters to Paris for extravagant shopping trips. He took plunder to a new level, creating a new form of government along the way: kleptocracy, or governance by theft.

The country was officially known as the 'Republic of Zaire' from October of 1971 to May of 1997, which coincided with much of the reign of President Mobutu Sese Seko. The name change was in line with the absolute ruler's strict policy of promoting nationalism while condemning regionalism and tribalism. When Mobutu fled the country in 1997, Kabila seized Kinshasa without a fight, consolidated power and changed the country's name back to the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Mobutu was eventually deposed in 1997, though the massive black hole that followed resulted in the Great War of Africa. At its height, the war sucked in as many as nine countries, and led to the deaths of an estimated three to five million people, largely from disease and starvation. Add to the mess the Interahamwe (Those Who Kill Together), responsible for the Rwandan genocide, and the Mai Mai, who wear sink plugs around their necks, and believe that holy water protects them from bullets. The Mai Mai were community-based militia groups that banded together to defend their territory against other armed groups including Rwandan forces and Rwandan-affiliated Congolese rebel groups. After the genocide in Rwanda, they repeated the famous words from after the Jewish Holocaust: 'never again', though in Congo that turned out to mean '*à la prochaine*' or 'till the next time'.

Formal peace treaties were signed in 2002, though it will take time to overcome the trauma of the last several decades. The Transitional Government saw DRC through its first multiparty elections since independence. On 30 July 2006, Joseph Kabila took 45% of the votes, while his opponent Jean-Pierre Bemba took 20%. Fighting broke out on the streets following allegations of fraud, though it was eventually quelled by UN

peacekeepers. A new election was held on 29 October 2006, and this time Kabila took 70% of the vote. On 6 December 2006 the Transitional Government came to an end as Joseph Kabila was sworn in as President. Of course, it remains to be seen whether or not Kabila can bring stability to an enormous landmass that has been plagued by ill governance since its original demarcation.

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 up to US\$80. The local currency is Congo francs, though the US dollar is king in DRC. Note that only bills issued from 2000 onwards are accepted.

## GOMA

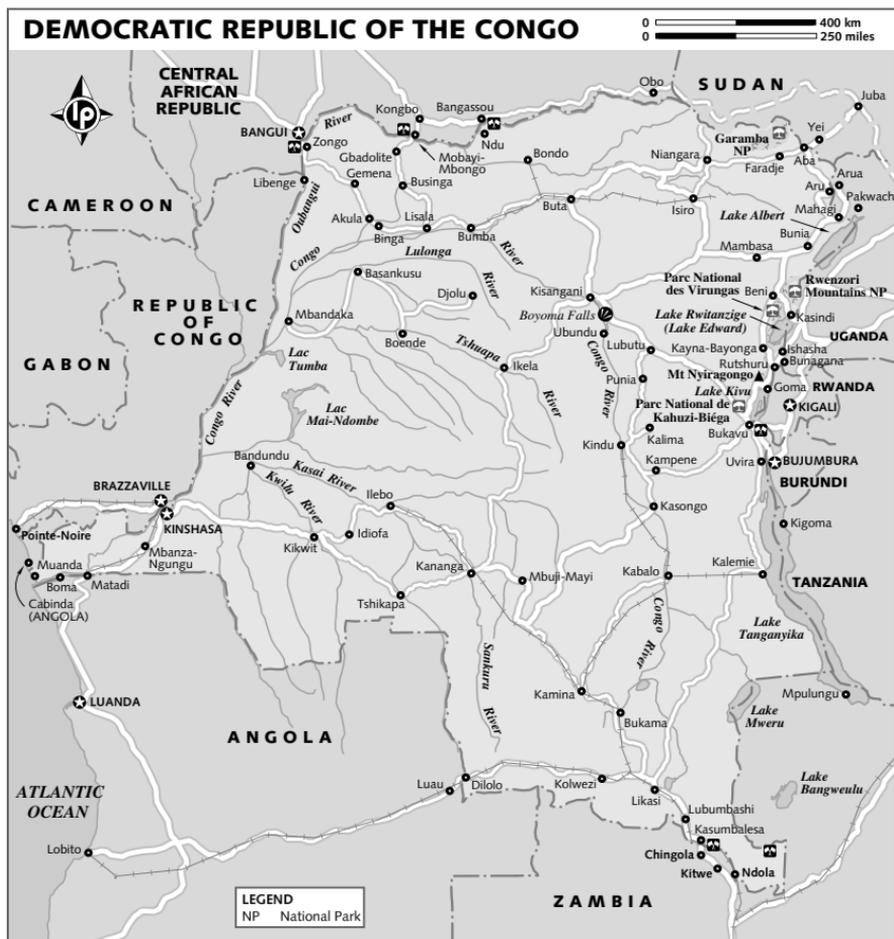
Goma is something of a modern-day Pompeii. On 17 January 2002, Nyiragongo Volcano blew its top, blanketing the city in ash and lava. While the flow moved slow enough to give residents time to evacuate, Goma was buried under 2m of molten mess. Today, parts of the city centre are moonscape, though it's largely business as usual in this bustling commercial centre on the shores of Lake Kivu.

For foreign tourists up for the challenges of DRC, Goma serves as a base for trekking up Nyiragongo Volcano, or for tracking the mountain gorillas in Parc National des Virungas (see below). However, be advised that there is still a considerable amount of instability in the Kivu region, so be absolutely sure that you're up to date on the latest security situation before travelling here. For more on safe travel in DRC, see p535.

## Sights

### NYIRAGONGO VOLCANO

Beautiful and brooding, locals in Goma fear and respect the power of Nyiragongo Volcano. Having destroyed half the city in 2002, the volcano certainly deserves its reputation, though this isn't to say that you shouldn't climb it if you're feeling fit and you've checked the safety situation. There is quite literally a lava lake at the top – please, please watch your footing, there have been deaths here up here in the recent past.



It takes about five hours to climb and about half that to descend, but it is more atmospheric to spend the night here – bring a tent, a sleeping bag and plenty of warm clothes. Please inquire about safety before camping out in the open. There is a small ranger post at the start of the climb, about 15km from Goma in Kibati on the road north to Bunagana and Uganda, though you should stock up on provisions in Goma as nothing is available here.

Before starting the climb, you must buy a permit from the rangers, which costs US\$100. While this is a hefty price, bear in mind that this money directly contributes to the preservation of Parc National des Virungas (see p538). Note that it is mandatory that you take a guide along with you,

and you will be expected to pay a negotiable price for their services. Porters are also available if you need some help carrying your gear to the top.

A taxi to the ranger station from Goma shouldn't cost more than US\$5, though it can be difficult to get a ride back to town. However, you can always arrange a pick-up time if you plan ahead, or try to flag down any of the buses heading south to Goma.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel des Grands Lacs** (☎ 9889 9943; Blvd Kanyamuhanga; s/d from US\$20/30) Once Goma's grandest hotel, this colonial relic would struggle to earn just one star these days, though it's atmospheric enough for a cheapie.

**Ihusi Hotel** (☎ 081-3532300; Blvd Kanyamuhanga; r from US\$75; 🍷) Frequented by visiting dignitaries and politicians, this large hotel offers smart rooms as well as an open-air bar-restaurant with sweeping views of Lake Kivu.

**Stella Matutina Lodge** (☎ 085-876116; Himbi; r from US\$85; 🍷) The most comfortable rooms in town are at this luxurious lodge, set in the spacious grounds of a grand villa to the west of the centre in Himbi district.

**Chez Doga** (Blvd Kanyamuhanga; 🍷 11am-late) One of the most popular places in town, this bar-restaurant really picks up at night, attracting an eclectic mix of UN workers, smart locals and a few unsavoury characters to keep things interesting.

### Getting There & Away

For information on getting to Goma, see right.

### PARC NATIONAL DES VIRUNGAS

Established in 1925 by the Belgian colonial government as Albert National Park, Parc National des Virungas is the continent's oldest protected area, and arguably one of its most vital. Befitting such a vast country as DRC, Virungas is, quite simply, enormous. To put things into perspective, Virungas is contiguous with five different national parks in Uganda, and protects an incredible range of endangered animals, from forest elephants and okapis to chimpanzees and mountain gorillas.

Befitting such a tortured country as DRC, the park lies at the centre of a war-torn region, and has been threatened by poaching, land invasions, charcoal producers and rebel factions. Indeed, the gang-style execution of seven mountain gorillas in July 2007 made the international headlines, as did the personal stories of the devoted park rangers, who have been virtually fighting a war to protect our primate relatives. Sadly, it was difficult to say at the time of writing which side was winning the fight, which certainly calls into question the future of tourism in Virungas.

Tracking the rare and wonderful mountain gorilla is one of the most magical experiences to be had in Africa, though it is advisable that you do this in either Uganda (p417) or Rwanda (opposite). While the information presented in this section does provide a general overview of the national park, it is contingent on whether or not the security situation improves during the shelf life of this guidebook. Once again,

there is no substitute for your own research, so be sure you're aware of the latest events on the ground before stepping foot in Virungas.

In the past, gorilla-tracking permits were issued for two sectors of the park, namely Bukima and Djomba. The four gorilla families at Bukima include Kabirizi, Humba, Munaga and the Rugendo group, while the habituated family at Djomba is called Mapuwa.

In 2007, gunmen shot seven gorillas in the Rugendo group in the back of the head. While poachers have historically removed the heads and hands of gorillas, these killings were believed to be the work of factions looking to discredit the efforts of the rangers. An excellent article in the July 2008 issue of *National Geographic* entitled 'Who Murdered the Virunga Gorillas?' gives perspective on this horrific tragedy.

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

Beds are, in theory, available at the small resthouse in Djomba, which has a stunning setting on a ridge below Sabyino volcano. There is also an upmarket lodge under construction on the hilltop above Djomba, though it remains to be seen whether or not this will ever be completed.

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, though the road is in poor condition and best undertaken by 4WD.

## TRANSPORT

For the full lowdown on crossing into DRC from Uganda, Rwanda or Burundi, see the Transport sections of these individual chapters. The most commonly used crossings to enter or exit DRC are the Bunagana border with Uganda near Kisoro (p496) and the Goma border with Rwanda at Gisenyi (p572). Visitors wanting to carry on to Kinshasa are advised to fly. Flights are expensive, but it saves more than a month of dangerous overland travel by road and river, and, quite possibly, your life.

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