

Democratic Republic of Congo

As much a geographical concept as a fully fledged nation, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, formerly Zaïre) has written one of the saddest chapters in modern history: from the brazen political folly of King Leopold of Belgium to the hideously corrupt kleptocracy of maverick leader Mobutu Sese Seko, and the blood-stained battlegrounds of Africa's first 'world war'. All of which make the inevitable *Heart of Darkness* references painfully apt.

But, after a decades-long decline in which much of the country descended into anarchy, Africa's third-largest nation is now squarely headed in the right direction. It still has a long way to go (militias continue to brutalise civilians in many areas), but new roads, enormous untapped mineral wealth, the world's largest UN peacekeeping force and fair elections have bred optimism among its tormented but resilient population.

Carpeted by huge swathes of rainforest and punctuated by gushing rivers and smoking volcanoes, DRC is an ecodestination just waiting to happen. Travel here remains difficult and frustrating, but the door is definitely open again.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 2,345,410 sq km
- **ATMs** Available in large cities
- **Borders** Angola, Congo, Central African Republic, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania and Zambia open. Sudan closed.
- **Budget** US\$30 to US\$40 per day minimum
- **Capital** Kinshasa
- **Languages** French (official), Lingala, Swahili, Tshiluba
- **Money** Congolese franc; US\$1 = CDF890, €1 = CDF1288
- **Population** 68.7 million
- **Seasons** The rainy season lasts April to November north of the equator, and October to May south of the equator
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 243; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 1 (west); GMT/UTC + 2 (east)
- **Visa** One-month single-entry visas cost US\$75 to US\$100 and around US\$135 for a two-month, multiple-entry tourist visa



HOW MUCH?

- **Internet per hour** US\$1.20 to US\$2.50
- **Cup of coffee** US\$2
- **4WD hire** US\$135 per day
- **Small malachite bracelet** US\$1
- **Dinner at a fancy restaurant** US\$20 to US\$50

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.05
- **1L bottled water** US\$1
- **500ml bottle of Primus beer** US\$1.10
- **Souvenir T-shirt** Don't exist
- **Bag of spaghetti** US\$0.50

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Nyiragongo** (p585) Gaze into a volcano's liquid eye.
- **Parc National des Virunga** (p585) and **Parc National de Kahuzi-Biéga** (p586) Get up close and personal with gorillas.
- **Lola Ya Bonobo Sanctuary** (p584) Meet the bonobo, a rare, peace-loving relative of chimpanzees.
- **Congo River** (p586) Take the legendary boat trip down this still-wild river.
- **Musé National** (p582) Be amazed by this enormous archive.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Apart from high-altitude areas, most of the country is hot and humid year-round, with daytime temperatures lingering around 30°C. Rainfall is scant near the coast, but increases significantly as you move inland.

The best time to go depends largely upon which area of the country you'll be visiting. The dry season (and the best time to visit) in the north is between December and March, while in the south it runs from April to October.

HISTORY**A Tragic Story**

Pygmies, probably the first inhabitants of the steaming Congo River Basin, arrived as early as 8000 BC. Bantu people settled most of the Congo by 1000AD, bringing agriculture and iron-smelting, and Portuguese explorers took

home the first stories from the region 500 years later. Trading goods such as ivory, cloth, pottery ironware and slaves, the Portuguese made contact with a highly developed kingdom known as the Kongo that was ruled over by a patriarchal monarch and stretched as far south as the Kwanza River in Angola. Kongo royalty became enthusiastic allies, adopting Portuguese names, clothes and customs and converting to Christianity.

In the mid-19th century, Arab traders crossed East Africa to eastern Congo, taking back slaves and ivory. Some, most famously Muhammad bin Hamad (AKA Tippu Tib), ran their own powerful fiefdoms. During the same era, Dr David Livingstone opened up the African interior to European exploration.

In 1874 the *New York Herald* and the British *Daily Telegraph* newspapers sent Henry Morton Stanley (the man who had found Dr Livingstone in 1871) across Africa to trace the course of the Congo River. His epic 999-day journey cemented the Welsh-American explorer's place in history and piqued the interest of King Leopold II of Belgium. Devious, greedy and wholly ignorant of African affairs, Leopold had been eyeing the unclaimed African gateau for some time, but he was unable to convince the Belgian government to go along. To solve the problem he decided to acquire a colony of his own.

In 1878 Leopold commissioned Stanley to return to the Congo under the smokescreen of the International African Society; a supposed philanthropic organisation. Over the ensuing five years Stanley signed treaties with chiefs on Leopold's behalf, tricking them to hand over their land rights in return for paltry gifts. At the Berlin Conference called by Bismarck in 1884 to carve up Africa, Leopold, aware of a German desire to offset French and British colonial interests, managed to convince the famous Iron Chancellor to declare the Congo a free-trade area and cede it to him.

Philanthropy was the last thing on Leopold's mind as he set about fleecing his Congo Free State of its ivory, copper and rubber. Hideous crimes were committed against the Congolese by Leopold's rubber traders. These included raiding villages and taking women and children captive as an incentive for the men to bring back ever-greater supplies of rubber from the forest. Those who did not return their quota had their hands chopped off. And all the while,