

# Gabon

What do you want to do most on this earth? Lock eyes with a gorilla in the jungle? Drink margaritas on sands so white they flash silver in the sun? Watch ribbons of surf wash hippos to shore, while at the same time softening the beach footprints of elephants? Dance until your feet fall off, fuelled by cold beer and the promise of tomorrow by the sea?

You could make an appointment with a 'have it all' travel agency – those VIP one-stop shops promising experiences you thought you could only dream of – or you could go to Gabon, where – if your wallet can take it – you can do all of those things and more. From the showy bars of Libreville to the unbeatable feeling of hitting a stretch of good road after hours on a bad one, from unfathomably loud cities to picnics in the jungle, Gabon will take you from one extreme to the next.

From the air, this land is a mass of velvety jungle, a *perroquet's* view of nothing but trees, leaves and humid bushland. The domain of gorillas, it looks impenetrable: as if you could never make your way through all that foliage. But once your feet touch that ubiquitous soft red soil, you'll realise that Gabon is ripe for exploring. The late president Omar Bongo turned 10% of the country into national parks, and you can fly right in.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 267,670 sq km
- **ATMs** In Libreville
- **Borders** Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon and Congo
- **Budget** US\$100 per day in Libreville; US\$50 to US\$200 per day in the interior
- **Capital** Libreville
- **Languages** French, Fang
- **Money** Central African CFA; US\$1 = CFA463, €1 = CFA656
- **Population** 1.45 million
- **Seasons** Wet (September to November and February to May), dry (May to September and December to January)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 241; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +1; no daylight saving
- **Visa** Required by all; must be acquired before arrival



**HOW MUCH?**

- **Fancy grilled fish supper** US\$13
- **Concert ticket** US\$4
- **Cocktail in a Libreville bar** US\$6.50
- **Forest walk among mandrills** US\$75
- **Weekend for two with the gorillas** US\$800

**LONELY PLANET INDEX**

- **1L petrol** US\$1.10
- **1L bottled water** US\$1.30
- **Bottle of Régab beer** US\$1.10
- **Souvenir football shirt** US\$17.50
- **Plate of manioc leaves with fish** US\$4.30

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- **Loango National Park** (p615) Gape at beaches full of elephants, buffalo and surfing hippos.
- **Réserve de la Lopé** (p617) Track vibrant mandrill troupes.
- **Lambaréné** (p614) Explore the town made famous by the Nobel-winning doctor Albert Schweitzer.
- **Mayumba National Park** (p616) Body-surf the waves while watching humpback whales breach in the distance.
- **Kongou** (p617) Head to the falls before the developers do.

**CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO**

There's no escaping it: Gabon is one hot slice of Africa. The rainy season runs from September to May, broken up by a short dry period from December to January, and a longer dry season from May to September. The temperature is 25°C on average, but with about 80% humidity – so it feels much hotter.

Whale season is from July to September, and turtles come ashore to lay eggs from November to January. Mammals wander from forest to savannah depending on the temperatures – check with the national parks for seasonal wildlife migration.

**ITINERARIES**

- **Ten Days** Kick off the adventure in Libreville (p608), but don't stick around too

long or you'll have fewer pennies for the charms of Lambaréné (p614), Loango National Park (p615) and the surrounding towns. You can then fly back to Libreville and spend a couple of days exploring the city.

- **Three Weeks** Fly into Libreville (p608) and take the train down to Réserve de la Lopé (p617). After a couple of nights there, explore Mikongo (p617) and Ivindo National Park (p617), before moseying down to Franceville (p617) for a night. Fly west to Gamba (p616) via Libreville, then head onto magical Mayumba (p616) where you can enjoy the beaches, the whales (in season) and some forest walks. Then fly back up to Libreville and spend some time exploring the city.

**HISTORY**

When the late President Omar Bongo died in 2009, he was Africa's longest-serving ruler, presiding over an economy so rich in oil income that it had ducked and dived its way out of the crises that brought nearby nations to their knees. Strong relations with Paris have helped keep Gabon on the straight and narrow, and though the country's corruption record is appalling and the oil is running dry, the late president's son, and successor, Ali Ben Bongo is growing in popularity.

**Of Petroglyphs & Pygmies**

Gabon has been inhabited for at least 400,000 years. Some 1200 rock paintings made by iron-working cultures that razed the forest for agriculture, creating today's savannah, have been found in the area around Réserve de la Lopé. The earliest modern society, the Pygmies, was displaced between the 16th and 18th centuries by migrating peoples from the north, principally the Fang, who came after settling in what is now Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea.

Contact with Europeans, starting with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1472, had a profound effect on tribal structures. British, Dutch and French ships traded for slaves, ivory and tropical woods. The coastal tribes established strong ties with these colonial powers, but the interior tribes defended their lands against European encroachment. To this day, animosity still lingers between the coastal tribes and the rest of the country.