



# Democratic Republic of Congo

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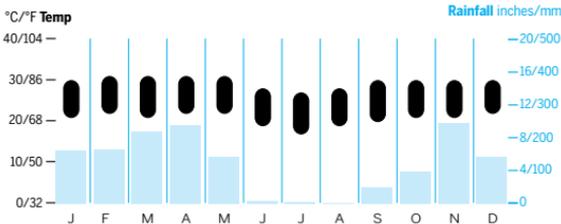
## Why Go?

Carpeted by huge swathes of rainforest and punctuated by gushing rivers and smoking volcanoes, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire) is the ultimate African adventure. As much a geographical concept as a fully fledged nation, DRC has experienced one of the saddest chapters in modern history, suffering a brutal 20th century of colonial exploitation, authoritarian madness and what has been dubbed Africa's first 'world war', which finally ended in 2003 with the rise of the Kabila political dynasty.

While real stability remains many years away, the cautious development of DRC's enormous untapped mineral wealth and the presence of the world's largest UN peacekeeping force have bred optimism among its tormented but resilient population. At the same time, a small but fast-growing tourism industry, centred on the incredible Parc National des Virunga, has seen travellers return to what is easily one of Africa's most thrilling – and challenging – destinations.

## When to Go

### Kinshasa



**Dec–Mar** Dry season for the north means slightly easier travel conditions.

**Jan** A good month to have the mountain gorillas totally to yourself.

**Apr–Oct** Dry season for the south and the best time to attempt over-land routes across the country.

## KINSHASA

POP 10.1 MILLION

Sub-Saharan Africa's second-largest city, Kin (as locals universally call it) sprawls seemingly forever from the banks of the Congo River to its distant shanty towns. Shot through with chaos, music and a lust for life that is as infectious as it is overwhelming, Kinshasa is a city you experience rather than visit. While it has the same maniacal drivers, dismaying poverty, mounds of trash, terrible air pollution and persistent street hawkers that you've seen in many other African cities, here it's all bigger, faster and louder than you've probably experienced before, and there's no better place for a whirlwind introduction to Congolese life.

### Sights

**★ Serpents du Congo** ZOO  
(☎ 0899460477, 0823620634; US\$10; ☺ by appointment) This excellent snake farm is located 28km from downtown Kinshasa and makes for a great day out. Owner Franck will gladly show you the poisonous and non-poisonous snakes here, and you even have the opportunity to hold some of the less aggressive ones. It's important to call ahead to reserve an appointment, and also to ensure that Franck gives your driver instructions on how to reach the farm.

**★ Musée National de Kinshasa** MUSEUM  
(Ave de la Montagne, Mont Ngaliema; US\$10; ☺ 7.30am-3pm Mon-Fri) This amazing ethnographic archive comprising some 45,000 objects has been waiting patiently for its new home, a US\$10 million prestige investment from South Korea currently under construction in the Lingwala area of the city. In the meantime it's possible to visit the small exhibit here, but also to be shown the warehouses where the rest of collection is currently stored. Ask one of the museum employees about doing this – a tip is expected.

**Marché Central** MARKET  
(Rue du Marché; ☺ 7am-6pm) This one of the largest markets in Central Africa, and is worth visiting for the intrepid. Watch your belongings (better still, bring nothing with you at all) and be sure to go with a local who knows the place.

### Sleeping

**★ Hotel Sunnyday** GUESTHOUSE \$\$  
(☎ 0999906425; www.sunnyday-kinshasa.com; Ave du Col Vangu; studio/r/apt US\$150/150/180; 📶📺🍷) This friendly and spotless oasis in

Gombe is a great little in-the-know bolthole. Accommodation is divided into rooms, studios (with kitchens) and larger two-room apartments, all arranged around a beautifully kept courtyard and a swimming pool, which make it perfect for kids. There's no restaurant, however.

**★ Procure Ste Anne** HOTEL \$\$  
(☎ 0992330739, 0815183819; propaskin@yahoo.com; Ave Dumri; s/d/tw US\$60/70/70; 📶📺🍷) This quiet colonial-era mansion within a large Catholic compound offers Kinshasa's best value accommodation. Rooms are historic and immaculate with high ceilings and clean bathrooms, and it's safe, central and quiet.

**Elais Hotel** HOTEL \$\$\$  
(☎ 0977384333; www.hotelelais.com/en/kinshasa; 2 Ave Ngongo-Lutete; r/ste US\$200/220; 📶📺🍷) This superb place feels like a social club in the heart of downtown Kinshasa. It's an excellent choice for business travellers, who will love their two-room suites that include a minikitchen. A gym, tennis courts, a pool and a popular restaurant complete the scene, and it's unsurprising that it's often a long-term accommodation choice for visitors.

### Eating

**Pâtisserie Nouvelle** FRENCH \$  
(www.patisserienouvelle.com; Ave de l'Équateur; sandwiches from US\$8; ☺ 6.30am-6pm; 📶) A great breakfast choice, this trendy bakery does a range of set breakfasts as well as gorgeous pastries and good coffee. This is the best-located outlet, but the **second one** (Ave Mondjiba) is far more charming and has an outside courtyard.

**Restaurant Al-Dar** LEBANESE \$  
(Bldv du 30 Juin; mains US\$5-10; ☺ 7.30am-10pm; 📶) There's a reason why this large, canteen-like Lebanese place is always full to bursting, and that reason is price. The food is classic Lebanese fast food and everyone from smart-suited businessmen to hip hopped-up young locals and exhausted UN workers come to eat here.

**Chez Flore** CONGOLESE \$\$  
(Ave Tombalbaye; mains US\$12-20; ☺ midday-11pm) If you're looking for a Congolese restaurant with a local crowd and laid-back vibe, this is it. The friendly staff will explain the large menu, which is in Lingala for the most part, and you can enjoy the enormous portions served at the plastic tables in the garden.