

Trip Report - Taï NP in Ivory Coast

September 2025 - Markus Engelhart

Prologue

At the end of September 2025 I had the opportunity to travel to Côte d'Ivoire and support some workshops for a technology non-profit in the country's largest city Abidjan. Having fairly little knowledge of the country before, apart from being the largest cocoa producer in the world, I came across Taï National Park when scrolling around google maps. I found EcoTourisme Taï, as a local tour operator, reached out and was quickly convinced by their excellent organization and enticing itinerary to spend the 5 additional days I had in the country after the workshop days with them in the last large rain forest in Ivory Coast.

The flight from Paris to Abidjan was uneventful. Immigration and customs also worked fairly smoothly, having registered before for a visa on arrival. The only issue I ran into was the abrupt end of connectivity of the free wifi at the airport when leaving the security area - suddenly I couldn't communicate with my Yango - the local equivalent of UBER -driver anymore and took a traditional taxi instead for roughly 3 times the price. Ultimately, it worked out smoothly. From Monday through Thursday in workshops and meetings, I saw very little from Abidjan and my hope to be able to carve out some time for Banco National Park within the city limits did not materialize. Thus, the only animals I saw during that time were flocks of fruit bats at dusk and a pair of falcons on a half finished skyrise which I saw once through the window from our meeting room. All that being said, I was full of excitement when being done with work and getting ready for trekking in the rain forest.

Getting to Taï National Park

EcoTousime Taï recommended various options to get to Taï for various budgets, but given the little time I had, I chose the most comfortable / fastest one and hired a driver with a 4x4. My driver, Bakayoko, picked me up at 5AM sharp at the hotel in Abidjan to drive out west towards Taï National Park.

We left the urban madness of Abidjan in the early hours of the day behind us and our route passed by Yamoussoukro, Daloa and Guiglo. Before getting into the capital Yamoussoukro, we not only saw a saddening amount of trucks with large cut down trees on their trailers going the other direction, but also a man holding up a poached mongoose by the side of the road showing it to his companions a little further.

After a quick breakfast in Yamoussoukro, we stopped at the Crocodile Lake next to the former Presidential palace. There are Nile crocodiles in the lake, that were gifted by the president of Mali in the 1960s and are supposedly revered by local citizens. The crocs are hanging around the banks of the lake and in the water and I found the idea of an actual moat filled with crocodiles quite entertaining.

Soon, we kept going with another short stop at the Basilique de Notre Dame de la Paix - a church that the Guinness Book has awarded the title of largest church in the world - to me it looked a lot like a vanity project built in the middle of nowhere, but according to my driver there is a sense of pride of the locals for having the record.

We kept going on good, but busy, roads with the recurring police check points. They all let us pass without delay with Bakayoko telling me to pretend not to understand anything they ask me whatsoever. After roughly 8 hours of driving, including a brief lunch in Guiglo, we left the paved road and did another 3.5 hrs of dirt road.

After climbing a muddy final hill, we arrived in Daobly - the village north of Taï where I spent the night in a traditional B&B - some round houses built from clay which otherwise don't exist anymore. The owner's son took me to the village square where an event was happening with 5 or 6 local youth groups dressed up in costumes performing dances in front of 150-200 onlookers. I didn't quite get the reason and/or meaning - but it was quite an experience. After a delicious meal, I got ready for bed and came across a small toad on my way to the hut: I might be wrong because they are supposedly rare but my best guess is a Taï Toad (*Sclerophrys taiensis*) - I know no mammal - but if someone can confirm or correct, please let me know.



After a good night of sleep, I got out of my hut and was greeted by a bunch of Peters's Rock Agamas (*Agama picticauda*) on the floor and roof as well as a Woodland Kingfisher (*Halcyon senegalensis*) sitting on a powerline overhead. I went back inside to grab my camera and it was gone, just to fly back to its vantage point on the powerline with a small lizard in its beak - again, no mammal, but I felt like the animal watching had really started.



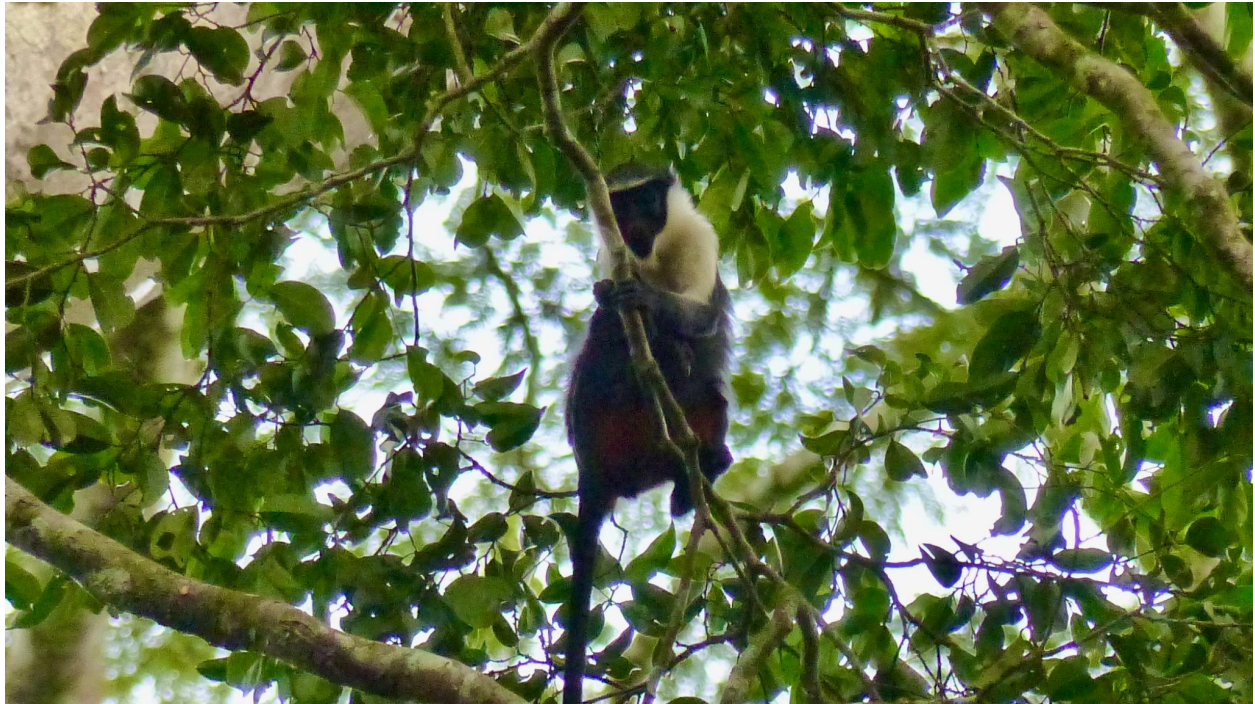
After a walk around the village and its surroundings, I got to try rubber tapping plus some folklore dancing, the cultural part was over. I had another delicious meal and I was picked up to drive to the Eco Musée of the organization. There, I left most of my luggage, met my guide Guillaume and was told a bit about the goals of the organization to develop ecotourism with local guides and staff to pay for rangers and protect the National Park. The people there are very proud of what they do and over the next couple days my good impression from the first exchange via whatsapp only got better.

Inside the National Park

From there, we drove to the edge of the National Park and started hiking. There was soon commotion in the trees around: We heard some monkeys around but the dense shrubbery made them hard to see. We kept walking and heard the unique sound of black-casqued hornbill (*Ceratogymna atrata*) above - again without a clear view. A bit further into the forest and we were lucky to have a clear view of a beautiful Olive Colobus (*Procolobus verus*), but it disappeared in between branches before I could get a good shot. We kept going and saw a black-casqued hornbill in the canopy, which stayed long enough for me to get some shots. We kept hearing various monkeys in the trees, saw some Red Colobus (*Piliocolobus badius*) rushing out of sight. The next days promised better sightings of less spooked troops - so we kept going.



Deeper into the forest the undergrowth got denser and we came across leopard droppings - not the only poop that would get me excited over the next few days. As we went up an embankment after crossing a small stream, we heard and then saw a group of Diana Monkeys (*Cercopithecus diana*) in the canopy. We stayed there for a while watching them climbing around in the canopy and I got my first decent shots of mammals on this trip.



Ultimately, we kept going and made it to camp, where, following IUCN guidelines to protect great apes, we disinfected our rubber boots and used hand sanitizer. This protocol was maintained every time we left or entered the camp along with wearing face masks around the Mangabeys and Chimps as well as the request to avoid spitting, sneezing and peeing in the forest - something that made me really happy to have gone with them as I've seen very different behaviour from guides and operators elsewhere in the world. They had told me before I booked the trip that the usual spot to see chimpanzees was inaccessible during rainy seasons lasting from from March to June and a shorter one from September to October, hence, my focus for the 3 days inside the forest were the other 12 monkey species in the park plus as many as possible other animals - and to dream of a pygmy hippo sighting.

For two of the three nights, I was the only guest in the camp. The food was always delicious and came in massive portions. The tent I slept in had a proper bed and the private bathroom below a tarp behind my tent was surprisingly comfortable with an actual toilet bowl and a shower - firstly, kudos to the guy carrying a toilet bowl 10km into the forest and secondly, the shower came in really handy because it was as hot and humid as one would expect in a proper tropical rain forest.



Before dinner, Guillaume told me a bit about his time as an assistant in the research camp for chimps south of the camp I stayed in and the work of Christophe Bosch, the biologist who ended up founding the Wild Chimpanzee Foundation that kickstarted the eco-tourism endeavour which I took part in now. In hindsight, I should have asked him to go for a night walk after dinner - we did one the next day - but I was so happy and content in that moment that I went to bed after eating the obligatory orange for dessert and fell asleep to the sounds of the forest.

Habituated Sooted Mangabeys, Red Colobus and a Demidoff's Galago on Day 2

We got up at the break of dawn, had a quick breakfast, disinfected boots and hands and started hiking through the forest. We came across some droppings from chimpanzees and I got excited for the second time in two days about poop. Otherwise, the hiking pace was quite high and the trail after some time almost non-existent, so that sweat and condensed water from branches and leaves got me and my backpack as soaked as if I had gone for a swim in full gear.

But the effort was worth it, because at the end of it we arrived at a troop of habituated Sooty Mangabeys (*Cercocebus atys*). We had put on face masks a while before and since it's been a few years since covid restrictions have been lifted, I had almost forgotten the feeling of my glasses fogging up when wearing a mask. This didn't take anything from the experience of being in the middle of a 50 member strong troop foraging, playing, grooming and mating across the forest floor and the low branches of the trees. They've been habituated for some time and have apparently grown from under 30 to more than 50 members during that time and simply ignored our presence.



Being fully immersed watching them going about their day, I couldn't tell you how long we stayed there and just enjoyed the moments. Eventually we left them to it and made our way back to the camp. I had a second morning coffee and someone from the kitchen team brought me some popcorn. While eating I casually brushed my hand through my hair and realized a tiny gecko sitting on the back of my head - Might have been sitting there for a while and casually wandered off after I took him from my head. Another gecko species I came across must have been a Banded Leaf-toed Gecko (*Hemidactylus fasciatus*) that hunted insects, attracted by the light in my bathroom tent at night.

Speaking of insects: there were very little mosquitos or other bugs around - so few in fact, that I stopped using repellent while staying there - a habit I normally follow very meticulously after coming back with West Nile virus from Rwanda and before that suffering through an ugly Dengue fever in Sumatra. Here in Tai, there were basically none - at least that time of the year.

In the afternoon we went to see the Red Colobus (*Ptilocolobus badius*) in the canopy that hung around not too far away from the camp. There were some Diane Monkeys close by as well and we stayed for a long time watching the Red Colobus in the canopy. The light from a descending sun reflected from the underside of the increasing cloud cover above gave the whole scene a very special atmosphere - though, very difficult to capture with a camera for me.



We kept watching the Colobus in the canopy until some drizzle started and, unwillingly, we made our way back to camp. By the time we reached it, the drizzle had turned into a proper downpour and it kept on going for the next hours until it was dark.

We geared up for a night walk in what was still more than a drizzle and walked for some kilometers along trails. There were some amphibians out, possibly a Togo Toad (*Sclerophrys togoensis*) and a Amani Forest Tree Frog (*Leptopelis macrotis*), as well as an odd-looking Gaboon Caecilian (*Geotrypetes seraphini*). Climbing down an embankment to a small stream, we also saw a couple of juvenile Dwarf Crocodiles (*Osteolaemus tetraspis*) hiding under a trunk of a fallen tree.

The main goal of the night were Galagos, Demidoff's Galagos (*Galagoides demidovii*) and Thomas' Galagos (*Galagoides thomasi*), West African Potto (*Perodicticus potto*) and various duikers. Deep down I was still hoping to catch a glimpse of a Pygmy Hippo. Climbing over a fallen tree, we managed to see a Galago on a low branch scurry back and forth in between the leaf cover through the rain. Unfortunately, I couldn't get a proper shot and identification isn't 100%, but we assumed it to be a Demidoff's Galago.

We kept going and eventually the rain stopped. After that, some bats came out and flew above our heads, but I had no chance to identify any of them. There was also a mouse that went along the trail in front and then off to the side, where I caught a pretty good glimpse of it - my best guess is a Forest Soft-furred Mouse (*Praomys rostratus*). Sadly the galago had moved on and we didn't come across any other mammal. Thus, the night ended with the likely largest snail I've ever seen - definitely no expert for that, but I guess a giant tiger land snail (*Achatina achatina*) - and since they move slower than rodents I could get a decent shot.



Climbing Seba-Ridge on Day 3

Apart from some small embankments the whole area of the National Park around the camp is quite flat. So we started in the morning of the next day to hike to a small ridge from where one can catch a glimpse of the surrounding canopy from above and hopefully see some mammals.

Just like the morning before, sweat, humidity and moisture got me completely soaked. As we crossed a few streams on fallen logs without a place to hold on to, I really hoped to avoid adding an accidental watering to that mix. We saw some more Western Red Colobus up high in the canopy and despite having seen some the days before, I wouldn't get tired of watching them. We also came across some few-months-old treks of forest elephants - apparently during the dry season there are fruit bearing trees in this area that attract them.

As we climbed up the ridge, the forest became instantly lighter and more open. While there is no steep drop off or cliff of some kind that would really open up the view, one could still see the vast expanse of undisturbed forest through the branches and I truly hope it will stay that way. As we sat down for a break on the plateau on top of the ridge, we heard movement in the trees beyond the elevation. Almost at eye level we saw a troop of Ursine Colobus (*Colobus vellerosus*) climbing through the canopy and branches. It was due to bad luck and incompetence on my end that I didn't get any good shots of them: sometimes I focused on the wrong spot for them to appear, sometimes I set the focus wrong so the photos came out completely blurry and sometimes I wouldn't find them quickly enough through the finder. Nonetheless, having seen six different monkey species within the last 48 hours was a reason to celebrate and we sat down for some refreshing water and snacks.

As Guillaume told me that this ridge was the place where he had seen a leopard for the first time, he suddenly looked past me and said calmly: "Antelope". I turned around and on the trail -

maybe 5 or 6 meters away - stood an ungulate making warning sounds while staring at us. I didn't attempt to reach for the camera, but rather just enjoyed the few moments looking at it before it turned around and ran off. Based on size, build and the distinct vertical stripes on its body, my best guess is a Northern Bushbuck (*Tragelaphus scriptus*) - but please correct me if anyone has more knowledge and deems this unlikely.

Doing my bit of research into it and given that a Cape bushbuck (*Tragelaphus sylvaticus*) in Tsitsikamma National Park in South Africa in 2009 was my very first antelope, I found it interesting to read about the discussion around the taxonomy for this genus that has developed since - maybe there are more species to be added to mammal lists.

After seeing the Bushbuck we took the path down from the ridge and came across another Ursine Colobus sitting in a branch fork - and again I did not manage solely because I was too slow with my finder. We kept going and my nose picked up a scent that reminded me of the smell in the stables of hippos and tapirs of my hometown zoo where I went often as a child. As I thought of that memory, Guillaume, having waded through a small stream ahead of me, told me quietly to come. He looked down at the muddy ground and there was a very distinct foot print of a Pygmy Hippo. Half a meter up the bank there was another very clear one and suddenly, he was very excited himself. We moved on cautiously looking around. A few meters onwards, we found bushes with propelled feces all over them - still fresh.

A day time sighting would have also been a first for him. We looked for more traces but sadly lost its trail and checking cautiously around the banks there was no more sight. No Pygmy Hippo this time, but I've never been so excited about poop in my life.



We made it back to camp, dried our clothes in the afternoon sun, watched a beautiful Blue-headed Wood-Dove (*Turtur brehmeri*) and went out for a final hike to learn about some

trees, their features and medical uses. We saw again some Diane Monkeys and a bit further very high up in the canopy - through a small opening in the undergrowth a Lesser Spot-nosed Monkey (*Cercopithecus petaurista*) relaxing up there, bringing the final tally up to 7 monkey species over three days.

We concluded the walk at the base of the probably widest tree I've ever seen - beautiful! On the way back there is a "Network Point", the only spot in the area where there is cellphone signal. Personally, I enjoyed being offline for the time, but I wanted to send my wife and daughter back home a short "All good!" message. Unfortunately, my phone only received messages and did not send any.



Back in camp, three other visitors arrived and we shared another delicious dinner. One of the men is project manager of a newly built waste water system and treatment plant in Abidjan and we talked about problems with waste water, plastic waste in Abidjan and across the country, the upcoming elections and more - a very interesting albeit at times somewhat depressing conversation. Sitting at home writing this, I think I should have rather asked to go for another night walk and search for some more mammals.

The way back

The next morning Guillaume and I left camp at 6 AM and were followed by the sound of flying black-casqued hornbills (*Ceratogymna atrata*) above the canopy without really getting the view of one. We hiked quite quickly because I needed to make it back all the way to Abidjan that day and had agreed to stop only for pygmy hippos, chimps, elephants, leopards or buffalos - not quite a serious agreement that fell apart as soon as we saw something moving in the bushes: A pair of western crested guinea fowls (*Guttera verreauxi*), but for third time this trip, I messed up

with the camera and did not get a good shot before them flying off - I promised myself to work on that before going to a forest area for wildlife spotting.

Shortly afterwards, Guillaume suddenly stopped and pointed ahead where a duiker was walking along the trail, stopped, looked at us for a second and then ran off into the forest. Just like the bushbuck the day before, I didn't attempt to get my camera out but rather enjoyed the moment. Based on the distinct difference from the lighter colored head to a very dark body, my best guess is a Black Duiker (*Cephalophus niger*).

Afterwards we made it out of the park, drove back to the Eco Musée where I took a shower to be less stinky for the drive and flight, wished goodbye to Guillaume and drove back with Bakayoko to Abidjan.

Recap

Those days in the rainforest of Taï National Park were definitely a highlight of 2025. Seven monkey species, two ungulates and one rodent, plus traces of several more, plus a bunch of more non-mammalian species. While there are always more species to see, I felt for three days in the park, I got to see a lot and I consider it a great privilege to observe them in such a beautiful forest environment.

I was also very happy with EcoTourismeTaï as a local tour operator - the communication before, their staff as well as the camp itself were great and I truly hope they will succeed in their mission to enable the protection of this place.

If I get the chance to come again to Côte d'Ivoire, hopefully with my wife and daughters, I'd spend more days in the park, to enjoy the serene beauty of this place, see chimps and maybe forest elephants and pygmy hippos. I'd also like to spend more time traveling around the country and maybe go visit Comoé National Park further north.

