

Location: Nkala/Mpelu Community Forest, DRC Congo

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Target Species: Bonobos (*Pan Paniscus*)

In summer 2022 I spent 10 weeks in Central Africa together with a friend, visiting Congo-Kinshasa (DRC), Congo-Brazzaville (RoC) and Gabon. As part of this trip, I was keen to see Bonobos in the wild. Both Salonga National Park and the more popular Lomako-Yokokala Faunal Reserve were options, but their remote location results in complex logistic and thus high cost. The much lesser known Nkala-Mpelu Forest area in Mai-Ndombe province is only around 200 km upriver from Kinshasa, located close to the Congo River. It can be reached by a combination of boat and motorcycle. Nkala/Mpelu is at the very southwest end of the range of Bonobos and unique for its forest-savanna mosaic environment. The other sites mentioned above are rich tropical rainforests.

WWF has played an important role in assisting the Bonobo project in Nkala/Mpelu since it was established in 2001 by some forward-looking Congolese. However, it is run by a local NGO called Mbou-Mon-Tour (MMT). While the name creates the illusion of regular tours, the number of visitors is very limited. When we visited in July, there had been two groups of visitors during the prior 8 months, one of which were Kinshasa-based expats working at embassies. MMT is focusing on conservation, community development and eco-tourism, and the funds earned from visitors will directly benefit the communities. We could see this first-hand when visiting the communities. There was a clinic, and the villages were much less trashed up than most other rural community I have visited in DRC. Of course, the area is still very poor, and the doctor at the clinic told me that malnourishment and malaria remain major issues.

The point person at Mbou-MonTours is Innocent Leti. He has played an important part in establishing the Nkala/Mpelu project. Innocent is based in Kinshasa and speaks perfect English. I made all arrangements with him, and he joined me for the trip. He is very reliable, trustworthy and enjoyable to be with. You can reach him by email (innocentleti2015@gmail.com) or WhatsApp (+243813776345), and he is very responsive.

We visited several other regions in DRC, and I would encourage any visitor to at least spent 2-3 days to explore Zongo Falls and the colonial town of Mbanza-Ngungu which can be easily reached from Kinshasa by road and will provide an impression of what this part of DRC looks like outside the capital. We arranged this part of the trip and the visa for DRC through Ernest Obe who can be reached by WhatsApp (+243816174555). Ernest was reliable as well and delivered what we asked for.

Port of entry was Kinshasa Airport. Arrival red tape worked fairly well, but you will need to arrange for a pick-up as this is not an “easy” airport. And more importantly, you need an airport fixer locally called *protocol* when you depart from this and any other airport in DRC as there are various obscure fees you have to pay that you do not want to be overcharged for. In addition, you will certainly be asked for a variety of “donations” such as food, beer and, of course, cash. Ernest knows his way around and will arrange for the *protocol* – he did for us in Kinshasa, Lubumbashi and Kisangani.

In Kinshasa I stayed at Platinum Hotel which is centrally located. It is no problem to walk around town although there is not much to see unless you have a penchant for rubbish lining the streets and what I would describe as some of the worst traffic in the world. Delhi and Houston are well-managed, low traffic cities in comparison. The most worthwhile thing I recommend is to visit the Bonobo project in Kinshasa. It is doing a great job trying to save these amazing primates in a country where every day Bonobos end up as bush meat (much of it in Salonga).

We paid Innocent in USD-cash a few days before our trip. Costs were \$1,500 for the return trip by boat up the Congo river (around double if we had taken the speed boat, the \$1,500 is for up to 6 people I believe), \$250/person/day for the Bonobo watching, and around \$60/day/person for lodging and food. You will need another \$300 or so for road transport to and from the harbor, and from and to the river near the forest. Expect all of this to have gone up by now as a result of fuel cost increases. Food is good and accommodation is in basic rooms in concrete buildings. On departure day we met at 6am and drove for around 3h to Maluku port where our small wooden boat waited. We sat on comfortable recliner chairs, and a roof shielded us from the sun.



Bonobo II, our boat, on the right

Expect some delays in the port as things are being arrange. This is a port in DRC, and to Western visitors it will be fascinating – be discreet and you will be able to take some photos.



Maluku Harbor

Usually, the boat ride will take 2 days (unless you take the speed boat), but we opted to do the 18h trip without any break, going non-stop through the night. The boat ride is both sad and fascinating at the same time. For a long-time the lack of roads in DRC seemed to prevent the rainforest from being logged over, but humankind has found a new solution: huge floats of primary rainforest logs are being brought down the Congo river. You will see dozens of them. And you will observe many wooden boats and barges that are completely packed with people and cargo, traveling for a couple of weeks to some of the upstream destinations. The boat trip down the river can be done in one day as you are going with the current.



Congo River Barges & Log Float

We arrived at around 4am at our destination beach. After catching a few hours of sleep on the boat (on mattresses and under mosquito nets), we took motorbikes for around 1h to reach the camp. Transportation is only possible on foot or by motorcycle, but not by car, and thus you need to travel lightly. For me that meant my camera equipment plus minimum clothing. At the camp there is electricity for most of the day to charge batteries.



Beach Arrival & Motorcycle Ride to Camp

We spent 4 days at Nkala/Mpelu and saw Bonobos every day. There are tracking teams attached to each group of habituated Bonobos. At the time of our visit there were three groups that we could observe. The trackers sometimes lose their group (as this did not seem to always be close-range tracking) but will have a general idea where the Bonobos are. The typical day starts at 2-3am, depending on how far you have to trek to the overnight nesting site. Innocent will communicate with the rangers the night before to identify the Bonobo group most suitable for observation based on distance to hike and accessibility. We typically had to hike 2-3 hours, reaching the nesting site just before sunrise. You will wait in respectful distance and in silence till the Bonobos climb down from the nest, and then follow them. Depending on whether they are comfortable with your presence, they will allow you to come closer or maintain more distance. While you will mostly walk on established tracks to get to the nesting site, this changes when following the Bonobos. The forest is dense, and thus be prepared to get stuck in knee-high mud when crossing small streams, and to have your clothes being torn apart by thorny undergrowth. We were completely covered in scratches and had some memorable ant encounters. The Bonobos also tend to move quiet fast, and thus it requires a good amount of fitness to follow them, in particular if you are hauling some camera equipment around.

The most rewarding moments will occur when the group of Bonobos stops moving in order to feed. Usually, they will keep a barrier of vegetation between themselves and human observers, but they are certainly curious and will often look at you while you look at them. On one occasion we had the youngsters of the group coming very close, and on another the group just started to relax on the trees above us when temperatures were increasing. On that occasion we could even observe some mating behavior. Overall, these were fantastic encounter. I hope the following photos give you some idea.

The only other mammal we observed were two Red-tailed Monkeys (*Cercopithecus Ascanius*). The likely reason is hunting pressure. The Bonobos are exempted from hunting as they are regarded as sacred by the local communities. Most of this seems to be snare hunting, as I did not find a single cartridge in the forest, as opposed to what I have seen in other Congo Basin forests.

The return trip will follow the same route, and Innocent will make sure you are going to be dropped off at your hotel in Kinshasa. We reached the hotel at around 9pm at night.





