

# (REPUBLIC OF THE) CONGO

What we see depends mainly  
on what we look for.

SIR JOHN LUBBOCK

**(Republic of the) Congo captures** the imagination.

April 7, 2023, was indeed a Good Friday in this former French colony, not to be confused with its larger, Belgian-colonised neighbour, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Both straddle the world's deepest river, inspiration for Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. And both still conjure images of famine, danger and enslaved people crammed into ships bound for the Americas.

Yet here I was, cruising in comfort through one of the world's least-visited corners. We were reportedly the first cruise ship to dock at Pointe-Noire, greeted by drummers, dancers, media and the prime minister. Police-escorted minibuses took us to monuments marking slavery's legacy, painful reminders of suffering that began long before white colonisers arrived.

The next day's trip to Conkouati-Douli rainforest – the second largest in the world – was cancelled by high tides, until the charismatic wife of our ship's CEO sweet-talked the prime minister into supplying military helicopters.

Suddenly we had a real adventure. Fifteen passengers per flight crammed into ageing Russian choppers piloted by a Ukrainian in camouflage, cigarette dangling from his mouth. The safety briefing? "Not touch fuel tank or door handle." Noted. There were no seatbelts, just unsecured plastic garden chairs, as we skimmed the jungle canopy.

We landed near a chimpanzee rescue centre run by a young Frenchwoman channelling her inner Jane Goodall, fighting to protect our closest relatives – who share 99 per cent of our DNA – from poachers. Meanwhile, I fought off biting ants climbing up my leg. Swat, swat, swat. When they reached my thigh, I dropped my trousers while someone blasted me with industrial-strength repellent. Mum always said I had "ants in my pants". At least I'd followed her advice and wore decent knickers.

Back on board, my mind spun faster than the helicopter blades. As others formed a Congo line on deck, I sank into crisp white sheets, only half-worried about nearby pirates.

Caution followed us to a nearby beach. Few ventured ashore, warned of rough surf and pickpockets. I saw only a lone security guard and patted his golden retriever, as mellow as my own, who was now in the big kennel in the sky. A young man with a dubious ID offered surf lessons. "I am a surf professor," he claimed. I declined, unwilling to test myself against pounding waves and wild currents.

Nearby, teenage boys splashed in the breakers, clearly non-swimmers. Warnings would have been futile as bulletproof, macho bravado is universal at that age. Then I spotted four girls about to dive in. With clumsy French and wild hand gestures, I coaxed them back. Moments later they were giggling over nail polish and hair, taking selfies. I'd have done the same at their

age, if mobile phones had existed. As I waved goodbye, relieved they stayed in knee-deep water, I realised it was my only true connection with locals.

Ironic, really – considering the prime minister had handed me his business card over dinner. His beaming smile may mask a complex political reality, but the former teacher seemed pleasant enough.

Adventure travel is about expecting the unexpected – of big ships, small ships and friendships.

"Well, that's one for the bucket list," drawled a Texan.

"It was never on the list," I replied. "But aren't those the best experiences?"



LEFT Congo, Conkouati, 2023.