

Gabon

In Gabon, you might just find yourself landing on an airstrip full of goats, dodging forest elephants on the stroll home from the bar, or wandering into a celebration of starkly painted dancers that harkens back hundreds of years. Outside Westernised Libreville, just about everything in Gabon is so newly accessible that just by being there you're already off the beaten path and in the middle of a whole new world.

And if you happen to be travelling with a 4WD, mechanic, cash to burn and a French dictionary, you're bound to have the adventure of a lifetime. Exploring this land ain't no walk in a national park. Lack of infrastructure and transportation will lead you on long, bumpy journeys, and it practically costs 20 bucks just to breathe the air in the glitzy capital city.

But you'll be stunned by what is shaping up to be Africa's next best ecotourism destination. Thanks to President El Hadj Omar Bongo's designation of a whopping 10% of the country's land as national parks – closing it down to loggers and miners and opening it up to travellers, conservationists and ecotourists – it's now possible to explore endless white-sand beaches, primate-filled tropical rainforests, rolling savannahs and estuaries.

Nature and wildlife fanatics will not be disappointed: long days of trekking will be rewarded with seeing wild creatures in their own pristine environment. The experience will transport you back to a time when Mother Earth – not humans – ruled the land.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 257,670 sq km
- **ATMs** Only in Libreville; Visa-card linked only
- **Borders** Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon and Congo
- **Budget** US\$100 per day in Libreville; US\$60 per day in the interior
- **Capital** Libreville
- **Languages** French, Fang
- **Money** Central African CFA; US\$1 = CFA498
- **Population** 1.42 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
- **Visas** Required by all; must be acquired before arrival



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Langoué Bai** (p593) Lounge on the observation platform above the forest elephants, gorillas and antelopes.
- **Réserve de la Lopé** (p592) Track vibrant mandrill troupes.
- **Mayumba** (p592) Body-surf the waves while watching humpback whales breach in the distance.
- **Loango National Park** (p591) Gape at beaches full of elephants, buffalos and surfing hippos.
- **Makoghe** (p593) Trip out on ancient ceremonies at a Bwiti initiation.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Hot, tropical Gabon has a rainy season 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, 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

- **One Week** Start in Libreville (p584), head to Réserve de la Lopé (p592) for some forest treks, take a night in Mikongo (p593), continue by train to Franceville (p593) and do a few day trips in the area, and then fly back to Libreville.
- **Two Weeks** Start in Libreville (p584) and head to Lambaréné (p591) for a few days, taking in a lake tour. Then head onto Mayumba (p592) where you can enjoy the beaches, the whales (if they're in season), and some forest walks. Then fly back up to Libreville and spend some time exploring the city.
- **One Month** Follow the one-week itinerary but add in a week for a stay in Ivindo National Park (p593) before heading to Franceville (p593). When you return to Libreville, take a few days in town before heading off to Lambaréné (p591) for a few nights. Take the boat from Lambaréné to Port-Gentil, and then head south via plane or boat to either Loango National Park (p591), or, if you're on a budget, Mayumba (p592).

HOW MUCH?

- **Share taxi around town** US\$0.20
- **Croissant** US\$0.60
- **Train from Libreville to Franceville** US\$55
- **Plane back to Libreville** US\$110
- **A weekend trekking in the forest** US\$400

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1
- **1L bottled water** US\$1.50
- **Bottle of Régab** US\$1
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$10
- **Grilled brochettes** US\$3

HISTORY

Avoiding the coups, wars and poverty that have plagued the rest of the continent, Gabon has been an oasis of stability and prosperity in a very troubled region for more than 40 years. Its president, El Hadj Omar Bongo, has held power since 1967 and ranks as Africa's longest-serving head of state. He has presided over an economy bolstered by income from oil, which has made Gabon one of the richest in sub-Saharan Africa – though dwindling reserves have forced planners to seek out other sources of revenue, and ecotourism has become the buzz word of the day.

Of Petroglyphs & Pygmies

Gabon has been inhabited for at least 400,000 years. Some 1200 rock paintings have been found in the area around Réserve de la Lopé. They were made by iron-working cultures that razed the forest for agriculture, creating today's savannah. The earliest modern society, the Pygmies, were 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 foreign

powers, but the interior tribes defended their lands against European encroachment. Animosity still lingers between the coastal tribes and the rest of the country.

The capital, Libreville, was established in 1849 for freed slaves on an estuary popular with traders. In 1885, the Berlin Conference of European powers recognised French rights in Gabon, which became part of the French Congo and later French Equatorial Africa. The country became self-governing in 1958, and won independence in 1960 under President Léon M'Ba. After M'Ba died in a French hospital in 1967, his vice president, Albert Bernard Bongo, took power of the nation (changing his name when he adopted Islam in 1974).

Independence Daze

The newly independent nation got off to an extravagant start. As money rolled in from the sale of timber, manganese ore, iron ore, chrome, gold, diamonds and finally oil, Gabon's per capita income soared higher than South Africa's.

In 1976, Bongo's government announced a four-year, US\$32 billion plan to create a modern transport system, encourage local industry and develop mineral deposits. Few of these projects ever took shape. The government did, however, spend vast sums hosting a summit of the Organization of African Unity in 1977 and is still doing construction on the (conservatively estimated) US\$250 million presidential palace.

After four decades of dominance by President Bongo, his rule is evident everywhere, from the women's clothing that bears his image to the ubiquitous portraits and huge billboards glorifying the leader. A bevy of French political and military advisers serve him, as does a personal bodyguard composed of European mercenaries, Moroccan soldiers and 400 top-notch French airborne troops.

In 1990, after the country's first real political unrest, Bongo ended more than two decades of one-party rule by legalising the opposition (though subsequent elections were marred by fraud).

Gabon Today

Today, the National Assembly remains dominated by Bongo's ruling party, the Democratic Party of Gabon (PDG), though his opponents hold a few seats. Allegations of massive government corruption persist, and Bongo's power is nearly absolute.

As Bongo ages gracefully, the question looms large in the populace's mind: when his tenure finally comes to an end, will Gabon go the volatile way of Cote d'Ivoire, or will Bongo manage to control from beyond the grave?

CULTURE

Someone once said that the Gabonese like to act more French than the French themselves, and this certainly could hold true in Westernised, glitzy Libreville, despite the remaining resentment of the old colonial masters who are also still Gabon's biggest trading and investment partners. But beyond the big city (and oil-soaked Port-Gentil), most Gabonese are still living simply, sometimes in the same conditions and traditions as hundreds of years ago.

Yet even in tiny remote villages you won't find the kind of poverty seen in other parts of Africa. Everyone in Gabon has enough money for beer, and that's just what they spend it on. Women are allowed to join in, but only after the wood is gathered, the food is prepared and the rest of the work is done. On Sundays everyone dresses in their best and heads off to church where spirited dancing and singing ensues.

If you're in a hurry to go somewhere or get anything done Gabon's can be a frustratingly slow country, both because of the French-inherited bureaucracy as well as the rejection of Westernised work hours.

PEOPLE

Of the peoples living in Gabon today, the original forest-dwelling tribes (often referred to as Pygmies) survive only in the remote north of the country, barely keeping their fascinating culture intact. Most other people are descendents of the Bantu peoples, and the Fang are still the most numerous. There is also a sizable French expat community.

Missionary influence is palpable; over 50% of the country counts itself as Christian, though traditional animist beliefs are still strong. Beliefs in superstition and witchcraft hold great power over much of the Gabonese population. Stay in the country long enough, and you will soon notice yourself referring to the 'spirits' and 'ancestors'.

ARTS & CRAFTS

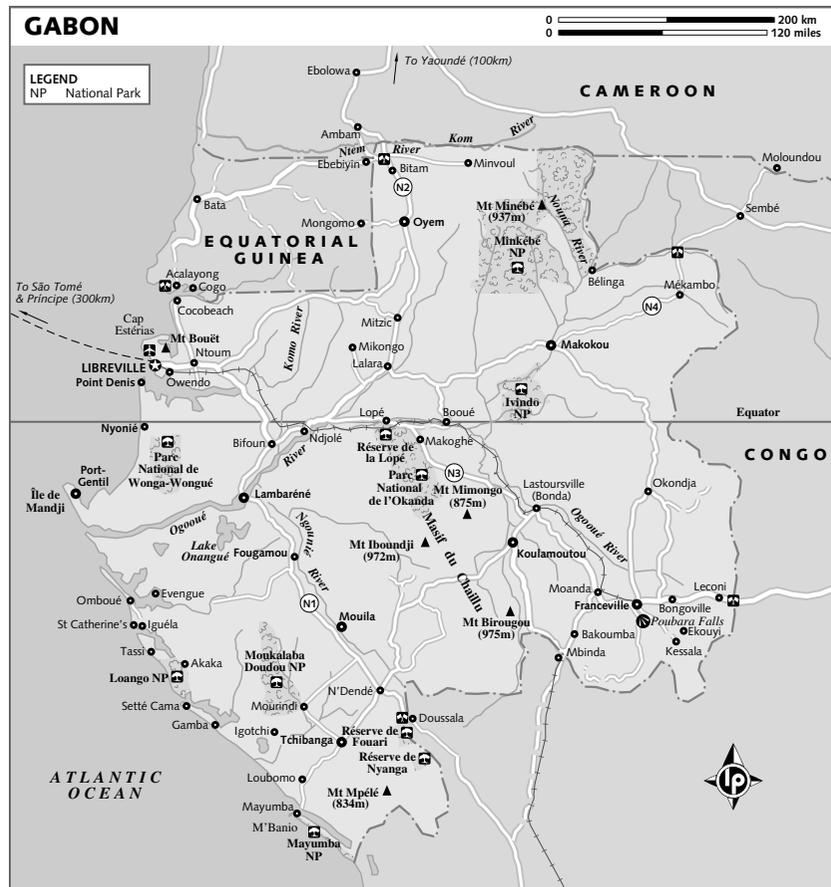
Traditional masks, carvings and *bieri* (ancestral sculpture) using natural materials such as wood, raffia and feathers are found throughout Gabon, but are rarely sold in the markets as they are still religiously utilised. (Though you will find these kinds of items from neighbouring countries in the markets.) Fang masks are prized throughout the world and sold for big bucks at art auctions.

Dancing is a national pastime, and recent dance crazes include the Ivorian Coupé Décalé and the L'Oriengo, which originated as a dance for people handicapped by polio. Traditional tribal dance is still widely practised and can be seen at cultural villages.

Hip-hop is big in Gabon, and there are plenty of home-grown groups playing on the radios. You'll also find recordings of the sacred music of the Bwiti, which uses, among other extraordinary instruments, harps played with the mouth, as well as brilliant, inspiring Pygmy recordings.

ENVIRONMENT

Gabon is a country of astonishing landscapes and almost insane biodiversity, much of which is still undiscovered and unexploited. Though almost 75% of the country is covered in dense tropical rainforest, this equatorial country is also full of endless white-sand beaches, savannahs, rushing rivers, hidden lagoons, rocky plateaus and canyons, cloud-tipped mountains and inselbergs (isolated rock domes overlooking the surrounding forest canopy), all of which are home to an amazing array of flora and fauna.



THE 'CONSERVATION COUP'

In 1999, Mike Fay of National Geographic and the Wildlife Conservation Society walked more than 3200km through the heart of Africa, documenting the stunning natural environment he passed through. President Bongo, after seeing the photos of what became known as the 'Megatransect', did the unthinkable: in 2002 he created a 13-park network of protected lands that covers 10% of the country. Overnight Gabon leapt from last to first in land conservation. Hailed as a 'conservation coup', it was a wise move for Bongo, who was looking for new sources of revenue. Wildlife organisations and ecotourist outfits subsequently rushed in to set up camps in the parks to support the fledging conservation economy.

Not that all is rosy for Gabon and its environment: each day hundreds of trucks and trains carry loads of old-growth trees and manganese into Libreville for shipment to Europe and Asia, and early efforts to set up ecotourism camps may get trampled by the quick money that comes from new oil exploration rights.

You're likely to come across (and perhaps have to flee from) gorillas, chimpanzees, mandrills, forest elephants, buffalos, crocodiles, antelopes, hippos, humpback and killer whales, monkeys of all shapes and sizes, leopards, red river hogs, sea turtles and a rainbow of rare birds – to name just a few. New conservation efforts to save endangered species are now underway (see The Conservation Coup, above).

FOOD & DRINK

Gabonese cuisine has a strong French and West African influence, especially in the cities. Traditional meals are more likely to be found in the village, and they include staples of rice and manioc, fish and bushmeat.

LIBREVILLE

pop 557,000

Glitzy in some spots, ramshackle and anarchic in others, Libreville is very likely to give you culture shock, especially if you've been slogging your way through the jungles of Central Africa. High-rise hotels line the beaches, European expats fill the shops and restaurants, and flashy cars speed down the wide boulevards. Libreville has everything you could ask for, at a price you probably can't afford.

While Libreville is a necessary stop for transit and for making arrangements, the rest of Gabon is endlessly more interesting, so git on out there!

ORIENTATION

The airport is about 4km north of town. Travelling south, all *quartiers* shoot off the large

main roadway along the ocean, referred to as Au Bord de Mer.

Street names are never used; landmarks are. Some useful ones are M'bolo, the Intercontinental, Le Meridien, the main post office (La Grand Poste), Port Môle, the casino, Mont Bouet and the major embassies.

Distant areas are referred to in kilometres from a specific point in the city centre on Blvd Bessieux (called PK), so PK8, for example, designates the exchange that is 8km from PK.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Maison De La Presse (☎ 772695) At this French-language bookshop you can get *Le Pratique Du Gabon* (US\$12; www.lepratiquedugabon.com in French), which has great city listings. English-language books are not easy to come by.

Cultural Centres

Centre Culturel Français (CCF; ☎ 761120) This beautiful, air-conditioned centre has cultural events, films and concerts.

Internet Access

Most big hotels offer wi-fi at exorbitant rates. **Centre Culturel Français** (CCF; ☎ 761120; per 45 min US\$1) A good option with air-conditioning and helpful staff. **Cybercafé Planet** (☎ 06033333; per 45 min US\$1) The fastest connection in town. Located in the strip of shops just across from M'bolo.

Medical Services

Fondation Jeanne Ebori (☎ 732771) Across from Port Môle in Quartier Louis.
Polyclinique El Rapha (☎ 447000) The best hospital in Libreville.

Money

Banks in Libreville will change cash and travellers checks. Hotels also change at good rates, as do local merchants. There are ATMs (accepting Visa cards only) in town at some banks, M'bolo and top-end hotels.

Post

Main post office (La Grand Poste; Au Bord de Mer) Located in the heart of the city. Western Union is directly behind it.

Telephone

Telephones are all over town in small shops. **CelTel** (☎ 740000; US\$6) Getting a SIM card for your mobile phone is cheap and easy here.

Tourist Information

Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS; ☎ 444039) Has a good grasp of everything going on in the national parks.
World Wildlife Fund (WWF; ☎ 730028) Ditto.

Travel Agents

Mistral Voyages (☎ 761222, 747779; mistral.lbv@internetgabon.com; www.ecotourisme-gabon.com) Of the many travel agencies, this is the most utilised. Owner Patrice knows everything about the country (though front office staff can be cranky) and most tour packages can be booked there.

SCD (☎ 564100, 885666; scd-aviation@inet.ga, reservation-iguella@inet.ga) Another important agency, which books Operation Loango and is rumoured to soon take over Lopé and other national parks. It also has its own aircraft, which makes things run smoother.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Libreville is not a particularly safe city and theft is on the rise. Be careful in the back of share taxis and getting out of taxis at night. Don't wander onto the beach after dark. Take all the precautions you would in any big city.

BUSHMEAT

Crocodiles, porcupines, chimps, snakes, antelopes and gorillas: they're all wanted for dinner. Bushmeat – meat that comes from wild animals – is a longstanding West and Central African tradition, especially in areas where domestic animals (and thus protein) are scarce. But in recent years, eating bushmeat has changed from a necessity to a civilized luxury, and new logging roads into previously inaccessible territory have made the commercial sales of endangered animal meat easier. And while conservationists are fighting to protect endangered wildlife, villagers defend their traditional lifestyles and the ability to feed their family. New laws now make a distinction, outlawing the commercial selling of endangered and protected animals while allowing traditional hunting practices to continue. Despite this, restaurants throughout Gabon still serve illegal meat at high prices.

Always bring either your passport or a copy of it (and your visa) with you. Police will often attempt extortion for some infraction.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The **Musée des Arts et Traditions** (☎ 761456; musee.gabon@numibia.net; Au Bord de Mer; donation of around US\$6; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm) has exhibitions on tribal crafts and culture, and a great collection of masks. Just as interesting are the folk-art sculptures on the waterfront across from the Intercontinental and, a nice walk south along the water, across from the casino.

The row of ministry buildings with wacky, Soviet-inspired architecture on Blvd Triomphal is worth a drive-by, as is the northern suburb of **Sablère**, where ministers, ambassadors, the rich and the president reside.

On weekends most of Libreville heads to the beach; young people congregate in front of the Tropicana. There are pools at the Meridien, Intercontinental and Atlantique that can be used for a fee ranging from US\$5 to US\$15, or the price of a meal. **Club Saotil** (☎ 06685020) offers squash, tennis courts, bowling and other sporting activities and lessons.

There are two cultural associations that organise traditional dance performances and ceremonies. **Ebando Association** (☎ 06250917; ibogabon@yahoo.fr; www.bwiti.com) is headed up by the wacky, wonderful shaman Tatayo, a French man who has lived in Gabon forever. On site is a Bwiti temple and many young Gabonese learning and practicing the traditional arts. Costs are variable (if you want to do an initiation, for example), but if you want to go and hang out with Tatayo and chat about Bwiti culture it's free. It's located north of Libreville in the neighbourhood of La Sablière. The other cultural association, **Mbehg-Ntame**,

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INFORMATION

- Banque Populaire du Gabon.....1 C5
- Belgian Embassy.....2 A1
- Beninese Consulate.....3 C2
- BGFI Bank.....4 C6
- BICIG Bank.....5 D6
- Cameronian Embassy.....6 D2
- Centre Culturel Français.....7 C4
- Congolese Embassy.....8 B2
- Cybercafé.....9 C4
- DRC Embassy.....10 B2
- Equatorial Guinean Embassy.....11 B2
- Foundation Jeanne Ebori.....12 C4
- French Embassy.....13 D6
- Ivorian Embassy.....14 C1
- Main Post Office.....15 D6
- Mistral Voyages.....16 D6
- Nigerian Embassy.....17 D2
- Polyclinique El Rapha.....18 B2
- São Toméan Consulate.....19 C5
- Sedoc (Visa Extensions).....20 F6
- South African Embassy.....21 D6
- US Embassy.....22 D6

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

- Musée des Arts et Traditions.....23 D6
- Presidential Palace.....24 C5

SLEEPING

- Hotel Louis.....25 C3
- Intercontinental.....26 A2
- Le Patio.....27 C4
- Maison Liebermann.....28 D4
- Somotel.....29 D5

EATING

- Chef Wang.....30 C4
- Costa Sylvia.....31 B4
- Jacly's Cochon.....32 C2
- La Dolce Vita.....33 C4
- Le Bateau Ivre.....34 B3
- Le Pelisson.....35 D6
- Le Phare Du Large.....36 B3
- L'Indochine.....37 B3
- L'Odika.....38 B4
- Maquis Stand.....39 D4
- Maquis Stand.....40 D4
- M'bolo.....(see 52)
- Papa Union.....41 B4
- Score.....42 D6

TO CLUB SAÛTI, DAKOTA, EBANDO, LE MAÏSHA, SABLIERE, TROPICANA (2km); AIRPORT (3km); LA NATIONALE (3km); SCD (3km); CAP ESTÉRIAS (20km)

TO SÃO TOMÉ & PRINCE, CAMEROON

TO LAMBARÉNÉ, COCOBEACH, OYEM, PK8 (8km)

TO TRAIN STATION (8km), OWENDO (9km)

TO LE MERIDIEN, MAISON DE LA PRESSE, MARINA, MICHÈLES

DRINKING

- Butterfly.....(see 45)
- Cotton Club.....43 B3
- Garden Café.....44 B3
- Hollywood Café.....45 B4
- No Stress.....46 B3
- NPA.....(see 48)
- VIP.....47 B4
- Warhol.....48 B4

ENTERTAINMENT

- Casino.....49 C6
- GaboExpo.....50 C4
- L'Anistocrate.....51 C4

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- M'bolo.....52 C4
- Village des Artisans.....53 D6

TRANSPORT

- Air France.....54 C5
- Air Service.....55 D6

DRINKING

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- Casino.....49 C6
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SHOPPING

- M'bolo.....52 C4
- Village des Artisans.....53 D6

TRANSPORT

- Air France.....54 C5
- Air Service.....55 D6

also run by a French man (named Cristophe) is located outside of town at PK12, and there are various dances and shows performed, as well as traditional meals served. Cristophe can be reached at ☎ 270990.

SLEEPING

Maison Liebermann (☎ 761955; r US\$14) The cheapest option in the city, with clean, fan-cooled rooms and a calm atmosphere – but beware the occasional morality lecture.

Somotel (☎ 765846/47; s/d US\$26/36) Smack in the middle of a bustling downtown neighbourhood is this popular choice with well-organised, 24-hour services. Point confused taxi drivers towards 'en face de la Maison du Combattent'.

Tropicana (☎ 731531/32; tropicana@inet.ga; s/d US\$32/52) Just across from the airport, this is an old favourite and possibly the best setting to relax in Libreville. Staff might seem aloof and the services wanting, but all of Libreville is likely to pass through while you eat brochettes or French cuisine and sip sundown drinks. The manager Eric is constantly aflutter but he knows everyone and everything. On Sundays the beach gets slamming and the little bar next door is the centre of youthful activity. Be careful on the road outside after dark as there have been some thefts recently. Reservations are necessary. Note: the singles are dingy and the breakfast is a joke for US\$5.

Le Patio (☎ 734716; d US\$54) This Spanish-owned hotel in nightlife-packed Quartier Louis features a nice lobby with pool table and bar, and a good restaurant with local and Spanish specials. Rooms are all off of a cute patio; the ones on the brighter 2nd floor are nicer.

Hotel Louis (☎ 732569) This hotel is an old standard in the Quartier Louis, where you'll find plenty of decent midrange options for around the same prices as those at Le Patio.

Le Maïsha (☎ 730333) Beachfront Le Maïsha is the epitome of luxury in the presidential suburb of Sabliere, with each room decorated with its own opulent theme. It was closed for renovation at the time of research, but may be functional again soon. There's no word on opening/new pricing but before renovations began, rooms started at US\$150 and went beyond US\$500.

Intercontinental (☎ 732619; libreville@interconti.com; www.intercontinental.com; d from US\$190; 📶 🚰 🚿) On the road out to the airport, this hotel is a

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popular full-service option featuring a health club and business services (including wi-fi access).

Le Meridien (☎ 766161; reservation@lemeridien.ga; www.lemeridien-rendama.com; d from US\$190; 🍷 📺 📺) Another full-service hotel with health club and business services (including wi-fi). Further downtown than the Intercontinental, it has a beautiful pool area with an ocean view.

EATING

There are plenty of places to grab a bite in Libreville and you can't throw a banana in the Quartier Louis without hitting a restaurant. Not surprisingly, cheap grub is hard to come by, though there are dozens of places to grab a croissant for around US\$1 and plenty of street stands selling *coupé-coupé* (chopped meat wrapped in paper). At night the street *maquis* (street stalls/vendors selling brochettes and fish; US\$4) come out – the best ones are around Blvd Bessieux and Ave John Paul II. For self-caterers, M'bolo and Score are big Western-style markets.

Le Pelisson (☎ 765258; snacks & mains US\$5-10) Centrally located, this upscale balconied place is always a good spot to take a load off and munch on a pastry or an omelette.

La Dolce Vita (☎ 724238; mains US\$7-15) On Port Môle, this place is situated right above the ocean and serves great Italian food in a fantastic setting.

Costa Sylvia (☎ 06256308; mains from US\$8) This restaurant serves Gabonese and European cuisine with some Romanian specialties in a tranquil, homey environment frequented by regulars – often businessmen, ministers and families.

Jacky Cochon (☎ 731848; jackycochon@hotmail.com; mains from US\$12) The most interesting eating establishment in all of Gabon, this place in the Quartier Derrière Prison is decked out in red, green and gold, and hung with portraits of reggae legend Bob Marley. Excellent meals (grilled meat and veggies) served by long-dredded Jacky himself, a pig farmer and musician. Ask for a tour of his sawdust-floor butcher shop next door and his astral wine cellar.

L'Odika (☎ 736920; mains from US\$12) A popular choice with a gorgeous open dining area. It serves a mixture of French and African cuisine including good seafood – as well as bushmeat (see p585).

Le Bateau Ivre (☎ 443487; mains from US\$17) Gastronomes may prefer this subtler but equally superb restaurant, known for European cuisine.

Le Phare Du Large (☎ 730273; Au Bor du Mer; mains from US\$18) If you want to eat like a king – or maybe a president (Bongo has been a frequent client) – this restaurant is the epitome of fine dining. Though the plush boat-and-sea décor is a little much, the food is top-notch. The proprietor himself catches fish daily, often serving rare varieties.

For Asian cuisine, both **Chez Wang** (buffets from US\$20) and **L'Indochine** (buffets from US\$20) are decent choices, often serving buffets to crowds on weekends.

The **Papa Union** (pizzas from US\$7) chain has decently priced pizza. Another popular choice for pizzas is **Dakota** (pizzas from US\$6), near the Tropicana.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

If you wanna get out and get down, hit the Quartier Louis. Clubs get going at midnight, but you can start off a bit earlier at No Stress (fun young crowd, crappy management) or the Garden Café (expats, billiards, food until 11.30pm). Once the clock strikes 12, shake your bootie on Montée Louis (the ascent of the hill into the Quartier Louis) at new-kid-on-the-block Warhol (the most Westernised and ritzy with an occasional US\$10 cover) or NPA (often packed with French militaries and their *petites* (young prostitutes)). Then, climb into the red truck, literally, at Hollywood Café, and sashay through Butterfly, a Moroccan-owned restaurant-disco with a fantastic sculpture garden and creative ambience. Butterfly is welcoming to the small gay and lesbian scene, and its dinner buffet and hookahs are popular.

Down the road you'll find red velvet Cotton Club, which starts out the night with karaoke before the people hit the dance floor, and VIP, which plays more of an African line-up. Find a Gabonese escort to take you to Africano across town in Charbonnages, and watch those bodies move it, move it.

The impeccably decorated Lokua Bar has amazing cocktails and a live band on Thursdays with a Louis Armstrong-esque lead singer. At Port Môle, L'Aristocrate (open Fridays and Saturdays) has Samba bands.

The GaboExpo next to Port Môle hosts large-scale concerts of big Gabonese and African acts.

IN THE LAND OF BWITI

Ancestral forest spirits, sorcerers, vampires and mermaids all play a big role in the traditions of Bwiti, one of three official religions in Gabon. It is said to have two to three million African followers and more than a few in Western societies, due in part to the increasing popularity of the sacred iboga plant used in ancient coming of age ceremonies and other initiation rites. The hallucinogenic rootbark of iboga is said to induce a spiritual enlightenment; those who eat it are able to commune with the ancestors, gain protection from malignant spirits, and have complex visual insights into the world. Ibogaine, a chemical compound found in iboga, is now being tested in Western societies for the treatment of drug addicts.

There are already quite a few hallucinogenically-inspired travellers seeking out Bwiti initiation experiences in Gabon. But ingesting iboga is risky: there have been thefts and sexual assaults while people are under the influence, and deaths have been reported as a result of overdoses. If you do decide to undertake the throw-up-for-hours-stay-up-for-three-days extravaganza, make sure to find a trustworthy shaman. And be prepared for a two-week comedown.

SHOPPING

The M'bolo compound is Libreville's answer to a strip mall, with lots of small shops and one Walmart-esque hypermarket (M'bolo itself) selling food and most anything else you might need. There's also a well-organised pharmacy in the compound. Another small strip mall is across the road.

At the **Village des Artisans** (Ave Col Parant) most of the goods (and the merchants) are imports. If you're going to be travelling in other African countries you'll find much better prices for the same stuff.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Air Service (☎ 747118, 747119) and **La Nationale** (☎ 06669077, 031903) fly within Gabon to Port-Gentil, Koulamoutou, Franceville, Mouila, Oyem, Gamba and Makokou. **SCD Aviation** (☎ 564100, 885666; scd-aviation@inet.ga) also does some of these routes and includes a few more like Ombouye. Flights to cities in nearby countries include: Douala (Cameroon), Pointe-Noire (Congo), Brazzaville (Congo) and São Tomé (São Tomé & Príncipe).

A taxi to or from the airport costs US\$4/8 during the day/night, even if your hotel is just across the road.

Local Transport

All *taxis-brousses* (bush taxis) leave from PK8 (pronounced peek-a-weet), 8km out of Libreville. Overpacked minibuses, 4WDs, pickups and *clandos* (cars that act as long-distance taxis) can be found daily for most destinations; early morning is the best time to show up. You can pay double to secure yourself a seat in the

front alone (otherwise two share it). A gazillion stops to pick up fruit or say hi to a cousin will be made along the way. From Libreville, you can catch local transport to Lambaréne (US\$10, four hours), Cocobeach (US\$10, two to three hours), Tchibanga (US\$30, eight hours) and Oyem (US\$20, 11 hours).

Train

Many eastern destinations are best reached by the Transgabonaise train that leaves 8km south of the city in Owendo. It's a comfortable ride; 1st class costs not much more than 2nd. Reservations are made through travel agents or at the station. Expect delays and breakdowns; overpriced food is available. Trains run to Lopé (the town at the entrance to the reserve; 1st class US\$40) and Franceville (1st class US\$88).

GETTING AROUND

Share taxis on pre-determined routes cost CFA100 (US\$0.20). *An un course* (hire-taxi) is US\$1 to US\$4 (US\$6 per hour), though rates and service differ depending on the mood of the driver. Prices go up at night.

AROUND LIBREVILLE

POINT DENIS

Point Denis is a nice, easy weekend getaway where most of the French expats go each weekend to lounge on the beach and enjoy their water toys. The 30-minute boat shuttles leave each Saturday and Sunday in the morning, from Port Môle (US\$16 return) and Michèle Marina (US\$20 return).

Favourites for eating and sleeping are **Assala Lodge** (r US\$90) and **La Maringa** (r US\$70).

If you walk to the Atlantic side of the point and keep going, you'll hit endless miles of uninhabited beach. During sea-turtle season (November to January) you can help local NGOs protect the eggs and reroute confused turtles.

Further down the coast is the isolated and beautiful **Phare de Ngombé** (☎ 06629999), a lodge situated at the old lighthouse on the coast in front of Pongara forest. A Saturday to Sunday visit, including forest excursions, turtle-watching and fishing, costs US\$200 per person (all-inclusive).

NYONIÉ

Relaxing beachside bungalows (with electricity but no hot water), forest excursions in search of buffalo and elephants, and all the food and drink you want await you in Nyonié (a camp situated south of Point Denis), just an hour boat ride from Michèle Marina in Libreville. The first night is US\$200 (all-inclusive with drinks) and each successive night is US\$80. For arrangements contact **Beti** (☎ 06033636).

COCOBEACH

Two to three hours north of Libreville down a dusty road is the small coastal town of Cocobeach. There's not much to do in this tiny town, but you can cross over on a pirogue to Cogo in Equatorial Guinea (US\$10; baggage extra) after getting an exit stamp from the local Sedoc branch, just past the Motel Esperance. Note that you cannot get a visa for Equatorial Guinea while in Cocobeach and those arriving in Cogo without a visa will be heavily fined and terribly hassled.

For sleeping options in Cocobeach try either the **Motel Esperance** (r US\$22) or, just up the road, the cheaper **Motel Iboga** (r US\$11). You can get some grub across the street from the Iboga for about US\$3.

Taxis leave from PK8 in Libreville and cost US\$10 for a packed vehicle or US\$50 to take a car on your own. Taxis leave early in the day for most destinations.

NORTHERN GABON

In the past there's been no reason to go to northern Gabon unless you're in transit to or from Cameroon or Equatorial Guinea. But once you get out of Oyem, the main

centre, the area is unchartered territory and ripe for exploring off-off-off the beaten path. Some remaining Pygmy tribes are rumoured to live in the northern forests, and Minkébé National Park is in the northeast corner, studded with rock-dome inselbergs and filled with rare mammals. Ecocamps are being developed in the area around Minvoul; check with the **World Wildlife Fund** (WWF; ☎ 730028) in Libreville to organise trips to the national park.

OYEM

pop 30,000

Oyem, the largest city in the north, is the centre of Gabon's Fang community. People go to Oyem to cross over to Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon. There may soon be some national parks in the area, but nothing yet. It's a relatively untravellered area, and there are still forest-dwelling pygmy tribes that can be visited. It's an area of strong traditional cultures, mostly Fang. There is also a big market right over the border in Cameroon on Saturdays called Mondial, and many locals go to get fresh produce. It's two to three hours by car and anyone can tell you where to find the packed taxis.

Hotel Mvet Palace (☎ 986172; r from US\$30) is an upmarket accommodation option, or you can stay cheaply at one of the missions in town.

There are special buses from Libreville (in addition to the *taxis-brousses*) that leave from PK8 (US\$24, around 11 hours) with a stop at Ndjolé. By plane from Libreville to Oyem costs US\$90 one way and takes about 45 minutes.

Taxis-brousses leave from Oyem to Mongomo in Equatorial Guinea daily; you must already have a visa in hand. It takes about 30 minutes to the border and it costs around US\$8. Then you switch taxis on the EG side to your various destinations.

BITAM

pop 10,000

Bitam has an excellent market with fresh fruits and vegetables at low prices where you can find shared taxi rides to the Cameroon border (US\$5 to river border, US\$5 for the pirogue across; visas US\$60). Don't forget to stop at immigration and get an exit stamp (no charge if your papers are in order) or you'll be turned back at the border checkpoint.

From Bitam you can take a short taxi ride to Ebebiyin in Equatorial Guinea, and catch a four hour ride to Bata.

SOUTHERN GABON

LAMBARÉNÉ

pop 20,000

Lambaréné is somehow kinder and gentler than the rest of Gabon, as if the humanitarian efforts of Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer changed the character of the land. And Albert Schweitzer's legacy is indeed felt everywhere, from the still-operational free hospital (founded in 1924 to treat lepers) to the volunteer-staffed lab that researches malaria and other tropical diseases. The **hospital museum** (admission US\$6) is well worth a visit to see photos of the original hospital and the impeccably arranged house and artefacts from Schweitzer and his wife.

The town is divided into three areas spanning the river quite close to each other. The near bank has the Schweitzer hospital grounds; across the bridge is the island with the main markets and town; across another bridge is the far bank of **Isaac** where you'll find nightlife and action. Short taxi rides around town vary from CFA300 (US\$0.60) to CFA600 (US\$1.20) depending on how many bridge crossings you make. Prices go up at night.

Explore the many lakes by pirogue, arranged at the port in town, through the Ogooué Palace, or by contacting **Cedric** (☎ 07646364). A long boat trip will cost around US\$100, but can be split with many people. There are different sites in the various lakes (as well as birdlife and hippos) including the old **Mission Ngomo** with its aging wooden cathedral, the **Lake Evaro** luxury tourist camp and gorilla sanctuary (stays can be arranged through travel agents in Libreville), and many traditional villages.

At the **Mission Souers de l'immaculée Conception** (☎ 581073; r US\$12) the adorable nuns make you feel as if you've been spirited into the *Sound of Music*. The grounds are gorgeous, there's a kitchen available for use, and the fan-cooled rooms are clean. It's best to call ahead to ensure a room – there's no real set system to the room prices, you'll pay US\$12 if you have a room to yourself or if you come with friends (per person) – though they also have a 20-bed dorm.

For comfort, the lovely, up-market **Hotel Ogooué Palace** (☎ 581864, 07162802; reservation@

ogouepalace.com; www.ogouepalace.com in French; d from US\$56) is a great choice with a waterfront location, excellent meals, and some (caged) animals on the grounds.

The reconstructed **Hotel Schweitzer** (☎ 581033, 07949053; r US\$30) has nice views and beautiful local art, but the expat owners display some eccentric behaviour.

The best food in town is across the far bridge in Isaac. At night fish and brochette stands line the streets (La Terrasse is the local favourite), or try the simple restaurants La Pleide or La Refraction. If you're looking for something more substantial try the French cuisine of Petit Detour.

Late at night everyone hits Padouk to dance. Sunday night out is a favourite of the many young researchers stationed at the Schweitzer lab.

LOANGO NATIONAL PARK

Loango National Park very well may be the most varied and visually stunning of all of Gabon's national parks. It's known for its mythically surfing hippos, but you'll also find the largest concentration and variety of whales and dolphins, elephants wandering white-sand beaches and an assortment of rare land mammals cavorting in the savannah.

Operation Loango (☎ 564100, 07399618; reservation-iguéla@inet.ga; www.operation-loango.com), the only show in town to visit the northern end of the park, is Gabon's premiere high-end ecotourist destination using tourist dollars to support conservation efforts. Whale, crocodile, and turtle studies and a gorilla habituation project are in progress, while the luxury ecolodge and satellite camps hosts tourists.

At Iguéla, the base camp, everything is regally appointed and finely delivered, with a grand price tag to match (prices start at US\$375 per person without drinks). There are several equally stunning satellite camps in the varied environments: St Catherine's on the beach; Akaka, where animals roam about; Evengue ('gorilla island'), where gorilla rehabilitation is underway; and Tassi in the savannah and coastal grasslands. Activities include whale-watching trips, savannah and lagoon tours, some of the best sport-fishing in the world and visits to Mission Sainte Anne where Gustave Eiffel's pre-fab iron church is still in use.

All logistics and travel arrangements are made through **SCD** (☎ 564100, 885666; scd-aviation@inet.ga, reservation-iguéla@inet.ga) in Libreville.

SETTÉ CAMA

This lagoonside village set at the southern entrance to Loango National Park is a beloved, though often empty, traveller respite. The varied ecosystems of the national park – coastal equatorial forest, savannah and the deserted beaches of the Atlantic coast – offer a grand setting to explore nature, immerse in local culture and chill out. Villagers organise dance ceremonies, traditional pirogue fishing trips and forays to search the Ndougou Lagoon for hippos and crocodiles. During turtle season it's possible to spend a night in the sea-turtle research camp.

The EU-funded **Case Abietu** (☎ 07141718; gambareservations@yahoo.fr; www.gamba-tourism.com) is a successful pilot project in community-based ecotourism. The village cooperative runs this simple guesthouse with six fan-cooled bedrooms, a lounge, a small library, and a delightful terrace overlooking the lagoon. Villagers prepare traditional meals and act as ecoguides. The elders of the 'Mama Mafubu' weave traditional mats, which are sold at the tourist information centre at Gamba airport. The profits of the all-inclusive tariff minus drinks (around US\$120 per person per night) goes to set up community projects. The Case Abietu model is in the process of being replicated in two villages, **Mourindi** and **Igotchi**, in the **Moukalaba Douadou National Park**. Check with Gamba Reservations for details on opening dates.

Also in Setté Cama are the more pricey and luxurious bungalows of **Setté Cama Safaris** (☎ 262309; www.settecama.net, in French). You can either contact them direct or through **Mistral Voyages** (☎ 761222, 747779; mistral.lbv@internetgabon.com; www.ecotourisme-gabon.com) in Libreville.

From Libreville to Gamba by road is a long, bumpy haul in a pick-up, often broken into two days by a stay in lovely Tchibanga at the wonderful **Hotel Modibotie** (☎ 06042049; r US\$50, s from US\$70). In total, the trip by *taxi-brousse* will cost you about US\$60/80 in the back/cab.

Air Service flies to Gamba six times a week, and clients of Case Abietu get a 15% reduction, making the cost around US\$260 return.

MAYUMBA

When you mention Mayumba to someone who has travelled there, you're often met with a dreamy, faraway look. It's no wonder – with the nicest beaches in all of Gabon (endless and uninhabited), whales spouting in the distance, trees full of magical spirits and nesting sea

turtles on the beach, it's not too far from a slice of ecotraveller heaven.

You can stay simply and cheaply at **Bissa Na Bissa** (US\$10). More comfort can be found at the central **Motel Mayeye Foutou** (☎ 07283538; r US\$25), which is owned by the mayor.

There are many routes to Mayumba by land and air, though all take some time. The simplest way is to fly with Air National direct.

People travelling by *taxi-brousse* from Libreville often break up the long travel with a stopover in Tchibanga.

There are also flights to Tchibanga and Gamba where you can then hop on a *taxi-brousse* to Mayumba. The park has an excellent website with many details to navigate the long journey there at www.mayumba-nationalpark.com.

EASTERN GABON

RÉSERVE DE LA LOPÉ

Gabon's most popular national park is known for its patchwork of rolling hills, savannah and dense rainforest where you'll likely see elephants, monkeys, buffalo, a host of bird species and, if you're lucky, some of the biggest mandrill troupes in the world.

Lopé Hotel (☎ 778561; bungalows from US\$6; 🏠), a full service and well-appointed lodge situated on the bank of the Ogooué, is the main operation in town. Bungalows of varying sizes offer astounding views of the surrounding hills and savannah. You'll often have the grounds, including the bar, restaurant and pool, to yourself. Restaurant meals are expensive (US\$30), but the staff is exceedingly friendly.

Budget travellers can do excursions into the park through the Lopé Hotel (from US\$30) but skip out on high costs by staying at **Chez Jules** (☎ 07871827; r with fan US\$20) in the village. Rooms are basic, but waking up in the centre of rural daily life is well worth it. Brochettes and beer are found across the road at the evening hangout of El Dorado. Other meals can be had at the cafeteria just across the from the train station, where late-night dancing ensues. Don't walk around at night though; you're likely to get charged by a herd of buffalo.

You can also arrange an ecoguide for some tours of the national park through Jules, who is also the village pastor, or visit the new eco-

guide centre down the road where local guides will be easily found and drinks had for all.

The train from Libreville takes about four hours. Lopé Hotel vehicles meet the train. Otherwise, walk to Chez Jules down the road.

AROUND RÉSERVE DE LA LOPÉ

At **Mikongo**, a forest camp set up by the Zoological Society of London, you can track animals with local Pygmy trackers and bathe in the 'pool' under cascades. Gorilla habituation is in process and at nightly family-style dinners you can sit with researchers and learn about various conservation projects.

Package prices per person (US\$350 for one night and two days; US\$550 for two nights and three days) include all trekking excursions (cultural visits to local villages can be arranged), comfortable sleeping huts, meals and transport to and from the camp. Arrange through the Lopé Hotel (opposite) or travel agents in Libreville (p585).

On the way to Mikongo is the bwiti village of **Makoghe**.

IVINDO NATIONAL PARK

Langoué Bai in the dense, tropical Ivindo National Park is perhaps the *pièce de résistance* of all the Gabonese ecodestinations, presenting the rare opportunity to view forest animals undisturbed in their own environment. The Bai, a Pygmy word for a marshy clearing in the forest, serves as a source of minerals for the animals and acts as a magnet for large numbers of forest elephants, western lowland gorillas, sitatunga, buffalo, monkeys and rare bird species. A WCS-built research station and ecocamp near the clearing allow visitors to easily view the wildlife.

All-inclusive stays at the stunning, ecologically friendly base camp, designed to reduce human impact on the environment (composting toilets, solar energy, no chemicals), are pricey at US\$315 per night, but worth it.

Arrangements to get to the Bai must be made well in advance through travel agents in Libreville (p585). An intensive two- to three-hour hike with pack into the campsite is required. Prepare to sweat. And then prepare to be amazed.

MAKOKOU

pop 13,100

Makokou, the small capital of the Ogooué-Ivindo region, is visited mostly for its dramatic

falls, but in the next few years it may become a central access point for many new ecotourism sites. Things are changing rapidly so check with organisations for new camps in the region.

To arrange a stay at the Kongou's falls, contact Joseph Okouy at the Gabonese NGO, **Fondation Internationale Gabon Eco-tourisme** (figet; ☎ 07905513; figet.gabon@inet.ga). It's also possible to visit the Institut de Recherche en Ecologie Tropicale (IRET) station in the mall town of Mékambo 170km east, which has Pygmy communities.

Hotel Belinga Palace (r US\$34) offers tourist discounts, or you can try **Auberge Mendongha** (r US\$16).

From Libreville, take the train to Booué and then a *taxi-brousse* to Makokou. Flights to the small airport go a few times a week.

It's possible to go on to Congo from Mékambo, but the road is terrible. Ask around about a *taxi-brousse*.

FRANCEVILLE

pop 41,350

Franceville may be the third most populated centre in Gabon, but spread over rolling green hills cut with laterite roads it feels more like a lovely little town than anything else. It's well worth a few days stay, especially as the jumping-off point for the amazing sights around the stunning Batéké Plateau.

The main drag, Carrefour Poto-Poto, named after the bustling central market, is happening, and the **Cristal Motel** (☎ 670488; d US\$36) is a good option for sleeping, as it manages to be both right in the middle of everything and quiet enough to get some rest (it's also attached to the hottest nightclub in town). Other good options are the cosy **Auberge Apilly** (☎ 677284, 06056297; r with fan/air-con US\$20/30; 🏠) and, if you want luxury, the top-notch **Poubara Hotel** (☎ 671374, 07849172; hotel_poubara@hotmail.com; r US\$50-200 🏠), which has a beautiful pool and a popular Sunday brunch.

Also along the main drag are some great places to eat, namely 5ieme Dimension and Bord de Mer, as well as a few good bakeries: Patisserie Poto-Poto (more bustling) and Salon De Thé (cuter).

Off the main drag is Afrikando, with occasional live music, and down by the river is Buké-Buké, a favourite with young researchers from the primate research station of Centre International de Recherches Médicales de Franceville (CIRMF).

Shake it at the Cristal or the upscale disco at the Poubara. Great all-night-long action can also be found in back of Poto-Poto. The New Garage is a nice place to have a cold drink and chat with Adjo, who is a fountain of information on the region.

Stop in at the newly-minted **Maison du Tourisme et de la Nature** (☎ 07398429, 06279683; mtn@tiscali.fr; www.masuku.org in French), near the Cristal, for advice on sights and guides, or get a hold of the charming but inconsistent **Franklin** (☎ 06234818), a one-man-band of regional tourism who can arrange various trips. His prices vary, but all-inclusive trips start at US\$130 per person.

AROUND FRANCEVILLE

The region around Franceville is full of mostly unexplored treasures, though travel infrastructure is almost nonexistent. Once you get off the paved roads, a 4WD and a guide are necessary. Rental vehicles at Mvengue Airport, just out of town, start at US\$180. Otherwise they might be scrounged up in the various towns.

On the road to Kessala you can stop at the tiny town of **Ossele** to trek for animals with Hilaire, who is often referred to as a forest magician – an ex-hunter with astounding knowledge of plants and animals. To arrange a meeting with him, find his sister Romaine in Franceville at the Musuku Hotel.

Poubara Falls & Pont de Liane

About a half-hour south of the city, the Poubara Falls and Pont de Liane (vine bridge) are popular tourist spots in a rainforest setting on the Ogooué River. Shared taxis to these spots leave from the *gare routière* (bus or transport station) in Franceville.

Bateke Plateau & Cirque de Léconi

East of Franceville the savannah rises up into the Batéké Plateau, a dry, cool and flat stretch of land that extends south and east into Congo. About 70km past Bongoville, birthplace of the president, you reach **Léconi**, a small, quiet town with a couple of bars, a **hotel** (r US\$32) and a cheap *case de passage* (a cheap and simple guest house with few amenities).

A few kilometres out of town is the spectacular Cirque de Léconi, a deep, circular, red-rock canyon of loose sand. Locals say spirits await within. Also in the area (but harder to find) are the spectacular green and white canyons.

After trips into the canyons, you can bathe in the endlessly clear L'Eau Claire at Abouyi village, just five minutes from Léconi towards Franceville.

Infrequent *taxis-brousses* go to Léconi from Franceville, but a 4WD is necessary to get to the cirque. It's possible to camp overnight if you can find equipment.

Ekouyi

Two bumpy hours from Léconi, the small village of Ekouyi has set up some lovely but basic huts where you can spend a few days enjoying village culture and canoeing in the clear river. Arrangements can be made in Franceville through Franklin or you can wing it via Léconi.

GABON DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Catholic missions are often the cheapest option. Small towns sometimes have a *case de passage* (a cheap and simple guest house with few amenities) to be found. In remote villages, if you greet the chief and bring a small gift you'll likely be welcome to stay in a hut.

ACTIVITIES

Almost all organised ventures into the wilderness are best arranged in Libreville through travel agents or conservation societies. Waiting can be involved, so start early in making plans.

BUSINESS HOURS

Nearly everything will close down starting around noon (when everyone goes home for lunch and a siesta) and will open up somewhere between 2pm and 3pm, with the exception of Sunday, when most shops are closed.

PRACTICALITIES

- Weights, measures and road distances use the metric system.
- Electricity is 220v AC, 50Hz (uses European-style two-round-pin plugs).
- For English-language news see www.africa.com/gabon.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Treat Libreville like any big city with its fair share of crime. Police will hassle you, so always carry your passport or a copy (and a copy of your visa).

The dreaded *fourous* (tiny insects) will leave red splotches, but won't hurt until a few days into the forest when infernal itchiness ensues.

The terrible roads, crazy drunk drivers and huge trucks carrying unsecured loads of old-growth forest are possibly the biggest danger in country.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Gabonese Embassies & Consulates

Gabonese embassies and consulates include the following:

Cameroon (☎ 220 2966; Rue 1816, Bastos, Yaoundé)

Canada (☎ 613-232 5301; 4 Range Rd, Ottawa, KIN 8J5)

Congo (☎ 81 56 20; Ave Monseigneur Augouard, Brazzaville)

Equatorial Guinea (☎ 240-93 180; Calle de Bata, Bata)

France (☎ 01 42 24 79 60; 26 Bis Ave Raphaël, 75116, Paris)

Germany (☎ 30-8973 3440; www.botschaft-gabun.de; Hohensteiner Str 16, D-14197 Berlin)

Netherlands (☎ 070-26 42 41; 107 Jan Van Nassastraat, The Hague)

Nigeria (☎ 684673; 8 Norman William St, Lagos)

São Tomé & Príncipe (☎ 224434/6; Rua Damão, São Tomé)

UK (☎ 020-7823 9986; 27 Elvaston Pl, London, SW7 5NL)

USA (☎ 202-797-1000; 2034 20th St NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC, 20009)

Embassies & Consulates in Gabon

Most embassies are open from 8am to noon and 2.30pm to 5pm, but call before showing up as some are often unstaffed. Countries with diplomatic representation in Libreville include the following:

Cameroon (☎ 732800; Face Université)

Congo (☎ 730062; Batterie IV)

Equatorial Guinea (☎ 732523; Hauts de Gué-Gué)

France (☎ 761056; Au Bord de Mer)

Germany (☎ 760188; Immeuble 'Les Frangipanières')

Nigeria (☎ 732203; Blvd Léon M'ba)

São Tomé & Príncipe (☎ 721527; Au Bord de Mer)

South Africa (☎ 774530; Immeuble des Arcades)

USA (☎ 762003; Au Bord de Mer)

HOLIDAYS

As well as religious holidays listed in the Africa Directory (p1106), these are the principal public holidays in Gabon:

New Year's Day 1 January

Renovation Day 12 March

Labour Day 1 May

Independence Day 17 August

All Saints' Day 1 November

MAPS

There is an old but detailed road map of Gabon available at **Maison de la Presse** (☎ 772695), in Libreville, for an astonishing US\$22.

MONEY

Gabon is expensive and finding cash is hard. ATMs in Libreville will only work with Visa cards, and credit cards are only accepted at top-end hotels. Bringing all the cash you need into the country in euros is the best option. Euros trade higher than dollars.

Travellers cheques work in only a few places in Libreville, but Western Unions are plentiful. Don't leave Central Africa with CFA, as they're nearly impossible to change.

SHOPPING

For the most part the price you're told is very near to the real price. Bargaining is expected in the artisanal markets, but discounts in other places are negligible.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Major travel agents and conservation organisations will have information on the various sights in country. See p585 for contact details of some organisations in Libreville.

VISAS

Visas are required by all travellers and must be obtained before arrival; they are not available at the airport or at border crossings. Getting a visa to Gabon is notoriously difficult and expensive. From countries outside Africa it can cost more than US\$100. Unless you're flying straight to Libreville from Europe, it is best to apply for one at the Gabonese embassy in a nearby African country, where it only takes a couple days and costs around US\$50.

Gabon is one of the few countries that may insist on seeing an outgoing plane ticket or other proof of onward travel before issuing a visa, as well as an invitation from a hotel or company in Gabon.

At Sedoc in Libreville you can obtain visa extensions.

Visas for Onward Travel

Visas for the following countries are available from embassies in Libreville (see p595):

Cameroon Visas are required by all travellers to Cameroon; they're available (usually quickly) for around US\$60. Visas for Cameroon are also available at the various borders.

Congo All visitors to Congo need a visa. A one-month visa (US\$120) can be issued by the embassy the same day or the next day. You can also buy a 15-day, multiple-entry visa on arrival at the border for approximately US\$70, but you must have your yellow fever certificate with you.

Equatorial Guinea Visas are required for all except Americans, though many embassies outside the country are not always aware of this exemption, and officers on the ground will be suspect. Visas can be purchased at the embassy for up to US\$70. Obtaining a visa can be a long process and may require having an invitation from an organisation in the country. Expect many trips and long waits.

São Tomé & Príncipe Visas are required by everyone and cost in the range of US\$30 to US\$60. One-day express visas can be purchased for US\$60.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Women can expect unwanted attention from men, marriage proposals and, in share-taxis, the occasional groping. Women can feel free to stand their ground or involve other, local women in the ordeal.

TRANSPORT IN GABON

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Royal Air Maroc (www.royalairmaroc.com) flies from Paris (France) to Libreville with a stop in Casablanca (Morocco). **Air France** (www.airfrance.com) flies straight from Paris to Libreville. Libreville is also linked to most major cities in West and Central Africa by a rotating cast of regional airlines. Libreville's Léon M'Ba Airport has flights to and from Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), Brazzaville (Congo), Douala (Cameroon), Lagos (Nigeria), São Tomé town (São Tomé & Príncipe), Johannesburg (South Africa) and sometimes Malabo (Equatorial Guinea), among others.

Land

CAMEROON

Travellers to and from Cameroon cross at the Ntem River between Bitam (Gabon)

and Ambam (Cameroon). From the town of Ebolowa in Cameroon there's a regular bus service to Yaoundé and Douala. Visas can be purchased at the border.

CONGO

Before heading out to any Congo crossing ask locally about the conditions and reliability of cross points and transport beyond the Gabonese border.

The main crossing to Congo is between N'Dendé (Gabon) and Doussala (Congo), from where you head to Loubomo to connect with the Pointe-Noire to Brazzaville railway.

The border with Congo in eastern Gabon is easily crossable; you can sometimes cross without having papers checked. But don't get caught on the other side sans visa! Crossings in the east include Léconi (near Franceville) and Mékambo (past Makokou; visas might be purchased there). Keep in mind that the areas in western Congo can often be a no-man's-land.

EQUATORIAL GUINEA

Crossings can be done at Cocobeach (Gabon) by pirogue to Cogo and Acalyong (Equatorial Guinea), and via Oyem and Bitam (Gabon) to either Mongomo or Ebebiyin (Equatorial Guinea). Taxis leave daily from all towns and the ride to Bata is around four hours with the new roads.

Be prepared for corrupt and suspicious officials. Secure a visa before attempting to cross or beware!

Sea

There are occasional boats to and from Cotonou (Benin), São Tomé & Príncipe and Cameroon. Expect long, uncomfortable journeys. Ask for details at the Maritime Express office on Port Môle in Libreville.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Regional flight operators include:

Air Service (☎ 747092)

La Nationale (☎ 06669077, 031903)

SCD Aviation (☎ 564100, 885666; scd-aviation@inet.ga)

Boat

There are passenger boats between Lambaréné and Port-Gentil (US\$20, about five hours) and between Port-Gentil and Libreville (US\$40,

about three hours). Inquire at the Maritime Express office on Port Môle.

Car & Motorcycle

Cars are available for hire within the city, but not for trips on the dirt roads that lead to destinations outside of the city. Renting a 4WD is difficult without also renting a driver.

Europcar (☎ 745845), **Hertz** (☎ 732011) and **Avis** (☎ 724251) have offices in Libreville.

Local Transport

Comically over-packed *taxis-brousses*, mini-buses and pick-up trucks are options for travelling outside Libreville.

Train

Taking the Transgabonaise train line that crosses the country is a cheaper, faster and far more comfortable option than taking a *taxi-brousse*.

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