

July 2011

Mama Tembo Times

I hope this long overdue newsletter finds all MTT alumni and followers well. I write from French Africa. After several extremely busy and rewarding years in Zambia, I moved in January of this year to Libreville, Gabon, where I expect to hang my Tilley hats until mid-2012.

Gabon Wildlife

Gabon lies just to the west of the Republic of Congo and has similar geography of dense tropical forests and expansive, winding rivers. Its capital, Libreville, is right on the Atlantic Ocean, built on an estuary of one of those rivers. (You learn to pronounce the local names of Gabon's rivers after a few months here.) Kingfishers and egrets are common sightings in the city, reminders that Libreville rose from the sand.

Easily the most exciting thing for me about living in Gabon is the opportunity to research its forests and the wildlife that lives within: western lowland gorillas, forest elephants, forest buffaloes, mandrills and chimpanzees. On an April exploratory mission to Gabon's Moukalaba Doudou National Park, where I camped in the forest for two nights, I encountered elephants and wild chimpanzees. There was definitely plenty of evidence of wildlife that I didn't see too, gorilla and leopard for instance. I have seen more evidence of gorilla at Mikongo Camp, in Lope National Park. Gorilla trekking in Gabon – arguably much wildlife observation here – is for purists, where signs of the animal – pugs, scat, and meal remnants - must suffice for its actual observation. But this is as real as it gets too, which should make purists happy. Scientists and local trackers spend long arduous years in the forest attempting to locate and habituate a group of gorillas for the purposes of studying them, and ultimately for tourists to enjoy close up and personal.

This is Gabon's dry season. This means somber skies (grey and leaden and not good at all for photography), but it also means that roads are free and destinations accessible. I continue to explore Gabon's national parks and wildlife areas over the next few months, as well as nearby destinations such as the tiny, island country of **Sao Tome**, in order to bring you first hand advice on where to go and what to see if Gabon is on your safari list.

Gabon Culture

Gabon is marketed as "Africa's Eden." It was introduced to the traveling world through National Geographic Society's iconic photos and films in the early 1990s of elephants and hippos "surfing" in the Atlantic Ocean off Loango, Gabon's signature national park. However, in consideration of how difficult it is to see reclusive wildlife in Gabon's forests, culture is an exciting and arguably more accessible option for travelers. There exists here a secret male society called Bwiti, the initiates of which are taught, through study and ceremonial rites,

respect for the invisible world of nature spirits and ancestors and how to communicate with this parallel reality. Bwiti ceremonies are accompanied by traditional music and some of the most dramatic dance on the continent. Bwiti concepts are not something you can expect to understand quickly as a non initiate; nor should you expect to find ceremonies easy to come by if you are traveling in Gabon. You should arrange a knowledgeable guide beforehand who can introduce you to Bwiti ways. **Please see the MTT video on Bwiti dance:**
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ExHgNj2klo>

Congo Wildlife Adventures Growing Quickly

The Congo Basin parks of Nouabale-Ndoki and Dzanga-Ndoki are attracting an ever growing number of visitors. I have always believed in the Congo Basin's tourism potential, but my experiences thus far in Gabon have re-confirmed what an amazing product Nouabale and Dzanga parks offer through their established habituated gorilla programs; their forests of wild gorilla, elephant, and bongo; and their opportunities to meet the Ba'Aka people, Central Africa's pygmies. The question I am most asked by people interested in the Congo Basin tour is, "Will I see gorillas?" I am going to go out on a limb here to say, yes, you will! **Please see the MTT video for the latest on the Congo Basin safari:**
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJBBIQal5Oc>

A Travel Opportunity September 01 - 12, 2011

Travel with me this September to the Congo Basin parks as I update myself with changes within the gorilla families, and to camps and programs. I begin in Brazzaville, in the Republic of Congo, and end in Bangui, in the Central African Republic. Pay only your costs of room and board, transport, park fees, and activities. There are two other travelers on board. We have room for one more.

Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya Updates

Zambia's top safari season began one month ago. There are some wonderful opportunities this year for a safari which matches East African prices. And it isn't too late to book. The deeper into the dry season you go, the better South and North Luangwa National Park become. Consider eight to ten days at all my favorite bush camps.

Now is the time to book **Northern Tanzania** for February 2012, my absolute favorite month of the year for the wildebeest migration. The latest conservation news out of East Africa is that the Tanzanian government has shelved its plans to build a controversial stretch of highway across the Serengeti National Park, which would have undoubtedly adversely affected the migration. However, chances are good that this issue is gone but not forgotten. Soon, rather than later, may be a good time to see the Serengeti. It remains my choice for a first or family safari. Ask me to send you what I consider to be the best migration safaris for both the dry and wet seasons.

Last September, I did an exploratory hike in Laikipia, in **Northern Kenya**, with guests from Toronto and Seattle. Northern Kenya is an amazing place for walkers, both for its scenery and for its cultural encounters with the Laikipia Maasai and the Samburu. There is more to Kenya than the Maasai Mara National Reserve. **Please see the MTT video for more on Laikipia:** <http://www.youtube.com/user/mamatembotours#p/u/7/ms96-ljQays>

A Unique Tanzanian Safari Lodge Operated by Former Street Children

If you are coming to Northern Tanzania on safari, you can support this Arusha safari lodge by staying here while you are in town. A Watoto Foundation project (*watoto* means "children" in Kiswahili), it is staffed by former street children. The Kiboko Lodge is thought to be the first ever luxury lodge of its kind, fully staffed by street kids; they even prepare the food. **Learn more about the Watoto Foundation at** www.watotofoundation.nl

MTT's Video Channel: 50,000 views

Just this week MTT's Laughing Hyena (Laughyen) You Tube channel welcomed its 50,000th viewer. A very special thanks to all those 50,000 viewers for supporting MTT's efforts to present entertaining and educational videos from actual MTT safaris. For those of you who are new to MTT videos, national parks and cultural excursions figure in them prominently, but I also take pleasure in presenting off the beaten path travel vignettes and some strictly for fun content of the Africa where I live and love so much. What other safari channel offers a video of the Zambian football team arriving at Lusaka's airport after a successful international tournament?

MTT's second video channel is: <http://www.youtube.com/user/MamaTemboTours>

2011 Safari Talks

Each year, in October/November, I return from Africa to give talks on MTT destinations and safaris. I am in the process of finalizing a 2011 schedule. Regular ports of call are Toronto, Vancouver, Seattle and southern California. If any MTT followers are members of a group or association – walking, travel, photography, conservation, for instance – and would like me to make a presentation, then please get in touch. I would be happy to hear from you.

Tidbits

“On the last day of the world, I would want to plant a tree.”

W.S. Merwin, Poet Laureate.

Safari Njema,
Leslie Nevison

Director

www.mamatembotours.com

www.CongoWildlifeAdventures.com