

Bongo & Sitatunga Hunt Tala-Tala (13-29 May 2017)

Saturday 13 May

Despite a mild shock at London Heathrow when I discovered that the UK consulate for Republic of Congo had fouled up the return date on my visa, the rest of the trip to Brazzaville was one of the easiest trips that I can remember. This was especially so as I didn't have the aggravation of checking a gun through Heathrow, which I never find a good experience. Air France was extremely efficient, and the stopover in Paris was brief but long enough not to have to rush excessively. Overall and the flight was comfortable, not too long and I arrived at a convenient time.

On arrival at Brazzaville's extremely modern airport, I was met by Christophe and Jean-Luc (the owner). After a very brief drive into the City, they dropped me off at the Radisson Blu on the Banks of the Congo River and agreed to pick me up in an hour or so to go out to dinner. The Radisson was a good choice of hotel for my initial stay in Brazzaville as it has good amenities, very comfortable rooms, excellent security and a great view of the mighty Congo River. It also has Mami Wata's restaurant located next door, which is where we dined for the next 2 evenings. After a very pleasant dinner chatting with Christophe and Jean Luc it was time to return to the hotel and get some proper sleep.



Mami Wata Restaurant Brazzaville

Sunday 14 May

Day 2 was always planned as a day of acclimatization and relaxation. Initially the plan had been that we would fly from Brazzaville to Ouesso in Sangha Province on Day 3, as the flights don't operate on a Sunday. Unfortunately, the Internal flights are a lot less predictable than that, and the Monday flight was rescheduled to Wednesday. Therefore, we decided that I would drive up to Tala-Tala with Christophe and Jean-Luc on Monday, so as not to waste 2 days hunting. Despite initial hesitation it was a decision I did not regret in any way. So, Day 2 involved a late start, a long breakfast, a wander around part of town taking photos, and a few very pleasant hours lying by the pool watching activity on the banks of the Congo River with the backdrop of Kinshasa in the distance. At dinner with Christophe and Jean Luc we discussed the trip, timings, the weather up North, and the practicalities of the forthcoming hunt.



Radisson Blu Hotel Brazzaville

Monday 15th May

By 4 a.m. it felt that it was no longer worth lying in bed. Even though the bed and room were comfortable I had been turning over so many things in my mind that I had only been able to get some light sleep. No point in just lying there, as we had arranged to meet in the lobby at 5:15. So I packed and repacked and got myself ready, drunk a few cups of coffee and checked out by 5 a.m. Fortunately the receptionist had no problem in taking my Credit Card payment (No Amex but Visa and MasterCard are fine), and the ATM cash machine in the lobby was functioning fine, enabling me to top up with a few hundred dollars' worth of Central African CFA cash which I hadn't been able to do the day before when the banks were closed. At 5:15 the 2 Toyota Land Cruisers loaded with provisions and fuel rocked up at the Hotel and collected Frederic, our mess staff who had flown in from Benin, and me.



Plateau Region Congo

As previously mentioned I had been initially a bit apprehensive about driving 12 hours through Congo, especially because of stuff I had read in the press over the previous year or on Foreign Office advisory sites. Jean-Luc and Christophe had set my mind at rest over the previous evenings. They had impressed upon me that they do this trip very regularly and that it was totally safe. I should

have no concern about the Check-points or the need for paying soldiers off or security etcetera. I'm glad that they persuaded me, as the trip, albeit long, was very interesting and much more efficient than waiting for the plane.

Generally speaking the N2 between Brazzaville and Ouessou is pretty good. There is one small stretch of Toll Road about an hour outside the capital which is a bit of a shocker, but broadly speaking the roads are in good shape all the way as long as you try and avoid the biggest potholes. There are the odd logging lorries and buses a driving like psychos of course, as you'd expect in any sub-Saharan country, but overall, I found the traffic and lorries a good deal less insane than for example Benin. There are between 20-30 military check points en Route, but barring one check point where Christophe got fined a small amount for his paper work having a minor technical infringement, we got through all the checkpoints easily with Gallic charm, and a bit of banter with the soldiers without having to cross their palms with any silver or notes.



Central Congo Region

The route was stunning as we crossed through the Pool region (following the course of the Congo River) and up to through Plateau and Cuvette regions into Sangha Province. There were great tracts of Nature Reserves and empty land interspersed with the occasion village or town, rolling savannahs, rivers and fertile plains. We passed the Presidential Village in Oyo, where the President's daughter runs a 5-star hotel that seemed not to have any guests, and Oyo's international airport that's only

open a couple of times a year for the president to use, and we drove across the Equator at Makoa where the N2 crosses the Likoula river.

As we crossed into Sangha province finally the vegetation began to change, and we moved from Savannah to greater areas of forest. Skirting around the vast Odzala-Koko National park to our west, we started seeing greater evidence of wildlife. Within an hour and a half or so we were turning off the road to Sembe and heading north towards the Ngoko River and our destination of Tala-Tala on the border with Cameroon. It was a long trip, but it time had passed very quickly, as it had all felt colourful and interesting. I felt a wave of excitement as my nose filled with the smell of the warm damp rain forest and at the sight of the fiery red laterite tracks. At last we had arrived in Tala-Tala Camp.



Sangha Region on last leg to Tala-Tala

Tuesday 16th May (First hunting day)

It was due to be the first day hunting and I was rearing to go, I was awake before 4 a.m. thinking about the day ahead, and was up, shaved, washed and ready to go by 4:30. We were scheduled to leave at 5:15 so there was time for some fried eggs, bread, and coffee etcetera before slinging the kit in the Land cruiser. The rain that we had encountered at the end of the previous night's drive had been very light and had largely skirted the hunting area, so as we went out past the logging sawmill and out to the hunting area it became apparent that the ground was drier than we would have liked. We drove around the area checking the trail cameras in each of the likely zones. The problems we had were 2-fold, but interrelated. First the tracks were quite dry and the historic spoor of the animals hadn't been washed away by the rain. This made identifying fresh tracks very difficult, indeed almost impossible. There was evidence of animals moving around on the trail cams but mostly overnight and nothing within a few hours before checking the cameras. Secondly, because the tracks were quite dry we managed to get a dry piece of stone thrown up and wedged between the brake disks and brake pads. This caused the Land cruiser to shriek and scream like chalk scraped across a blackboard as we drove along. No manner of tapping and thumping could remove the stone. So, in the end we had to take the wheels off, and partially dismantle the brakes in order to free the stone which looked like polished black obsidian when it was finally removed.



Route to Hunting Area

After a delicious lunch back at camp we rested until mid-afternoon. We then were ready to go out again. This time we went to a different part of the hunting area to where some locals had burned down a very important wooden bridge a few months before. Fallen trees are just a fact of life in the forest, and their propensity to block important tracks is immense. Consequently, a lot of time is spent with the Baka watching them chop up fallen trees with their Machetes, or with the chainsaw. Unfortunately, as a chain saw is a mechanical device there is a high probability, that it will be broken sooner or later by one of the staff and usually sooner rather than later.

We managed to clear a number of big trees over the course of the afternoon, although it was not without a little excitement, when at some stage we disturbed a Black Mamba. I'm not sure which moved faster the Snake, or the terrified Pygmies who bomb-burst from the zone shouting "Nyoka, Nyoka". In summary, it became apparent from the first few minutes on day one that the day would not be productive in terms of hunting, so it seemed sensible to focus on preparation for later hunting days by working on the routes and tracks.



Baka Huts on way to Hunting area



Francois and his Basenji Hunting Dog

Wednesday 17th May (2nd Hunting Day)

Overnight we had some rain which woke me up, but made me feel more optimistic about the day ahead. After a very nice breakfast of eggs, toast and coffee we loaded up the vehicle, gathered the Dogs and the Baka and set off for the hunting area. It was just going to be Christophe, Yannick and me this morning as Jean-Luc was driving to Ouesso airport to pick up his usual cook, who had just flown in from Benin. The ground was still wet, and the majority of legacy tracks had been washed away by the overnight rain.

The first thing we did was check the Salt licks and the trail cameras but there didn't appear to be much movement overnight. Not to be deterred we persevered until about 10:30 when Christophe jammed the brakes on and jumped out of the vehicle. Fresh tracks at last. It looked like a solitary Bongo Bull of decent size. After a quick check around the immediate area, and confirmation of the trail through the thick stuff, we set off after the Bongo with 3 dogs and 5 pygmy trackers up front. It was tough going through the thick stuff at the edge of the road, but once under the canopy it was considerably easier notwithstanding the odd thorn vine every now and then that always snagged someone. During the first 20 minutes under the canopy, the humidity started to rise and rise and it became particularly close and sweaty. Sure enough it started to rain as we came out of the forest and on to the piste we had started from. We had travelled in a broad Semi-circle and I immediately realized how easy it would be to get lost in the forest. After scouting around the piste and the surroundings, the pygmies picked up the tracks crossing the piste and we followed these back into the forest. The tracks led us past a saltlick and some swampy water, and it became evident that we had lost the Bongo, but had picked up very fresh Sitatunga tracks.

As we approached a small gully with a stream, the dogs started barking and we knew we were onto the animal, but whether it would be suitable was at this stage unknown. We rushed forward as fast as we could through thorns and thick vegetation and out into the sunlight where the dogs had managed to bay a forest Sitatunga, in a thick thorny thicket. Jackie, the lead Bansanji dog was blocking the Sitatunga's exit, barking like mad while the other dogs caught up. Christophe handed me the .375 Ruger, and we attempted to get around the animal to identify the quality and suitability of the animal whilst jumping from fallen trunk to fallen trunk to get a better vantage point. "Yes, it's a good one, shoot it." said Christophe when we had got back down on the ground and worked our way round into a good shooting position. After checking that the dogs were clear, and that there was a safe backstop, I squeezed the trigger and the Sitatunga fell. Despite the short range and the shot penetrating just behind the shoulder, the beast continued to kick in its death throes, so I gave it a second shot just to be 100% sure.

It had been a very exciting and satisfying morning. Although the action was brief, the baying of the dogs and the final rush through the thick stuff certainly got the heart pumping and the adrenaline flowing. It was therefore highly gratifying to discover that the Sitatunga was a very old one that was blind in one eye and had a growth under its chin. It was an ideal animal to cull. The icing on the cake was that it was the first Forest Sitatunga shot since Jean-Luc took over the concession. The pygmies were thrilled as they would have camp meat, and of course the local people would be very pleased as they would have their share. We took a lot of photos, loaded the beast into the back of the land cruiser, mounted everyone up and returned to camp with the Pygmies singing with gusto in the back of the truck. The Pygmies in no time had gralloched and butchered the Sitatunga and the horns were measured at 22 ½" and 21 ½" respectively.



Forest Sitatunga

The afternoon and early evening was spent in the very humid forest moving from one spot to another calling for Duiker. This involved a Mossberg 12G pump action shot gun with AAA shot and various members of the tracking team making duiker noises. I found it interesting but not something I enjoyed particularly. Shooting antelope with a shot gun just doesn't appeal to me much, but it was an interesting experience especially when a blue duiker approached to within 5 meters of me and I didn't see it because I was facing the wrong way. Proof that one should try and expect the unexpected in such circumstances.



Calling In Forest Duiker

Hunting Days 3 to 12

The next few days followed the same pattern with breakfast around 5 a.m. checking for Fresh tracks and checking the trail cams, and where fresh tracks were found pursuit into the forest. Ultimately the weather worked against us and although we prayed for rain it wasn't forthcoming. We hear very vocal Gorillas every day we went along the piste and caught sight of them from time to time as they rushed way whooping. On the Saturday we tracked a good Buffalo bull into the forest, but the dogs spooked him. Quite early into the hunt Buffalo made to charge in the thick stuff and we were forced to withdraw. As a consequence of this we lost the trail pretty quickly and gave up the hunt.

The pattern of the days continued, with no rain hitting the hunting area until Monday, and even then it was light rain. On Monday we had tracked a herd of Bongos for a while, and also a decent solitary bull which the dogs had not managed to bay, so by Tuesday I was feeling somewhat apprehensive. It felt that time we were running out of time and that the weather was going to continue to foil us. After a relatively inauspicious start with little in the way of tracks to go on, we suddenly hit upon an excellent set of fresh tracks. Looking at the foliage damage from the horns as the bongo had gone into the thick stuff; Christophe deduced that this was a really good bull. We moved off at speed determined to close the distance with the Bongo, with Christophe carrying my rifle so that we could move a bit faster. After 15 minutes we heard the baying of the dogs and sprinted forward as fast as we could, bursting through any obstacles in our path. We pushed past to

get ahead of the Trackers and we arrived in a smallish clearing. Christophe passed the gun over and said “shoot him” just as the bongo broke bay, bolted in front of me and back around towards the rest of the trackers who were coming into the clearing. As I started to swing through to my left, I caught sight of the trackers in my peripheral vision, and hesitated for an instant, thinking of the safety aspect. The Bongo was now gone, and the opportunity lost. I cursed myself. It would have been a very easy shot, and at that range even a bad shot would have been effective, but no trophy on earth is worth the risk if a ricochet or an injured tracker, porter or PH. Had the dogs been able to hold the Bongo at bay for 30 seconds more he would have been mine, but there was no point in dwelling on what could have been, only what we should do next. The frustration was palpable, but in hindsight it was still the right decision no matter what.



Hunting Trail Clearing

After this disappointment, my hopes had descended to a pretty low level, but I was determined to be positive and push back my feelings of frustration. We piled back into the Land Cruiser as it was

still early, and amazingly by 9:30 we were back on Fresh tracks again and into the forest vigorously pursuing another good-sized Bull Bongo. Driven by the frustration on the earlier abortive hunt, we pushed on and on, but the Bongo was not stopping. Normally a hunt in to forest will take between 15 minutes and 45 minutes before culminating in either success or failure. Long enough to get, hot, wet, sweaty and thirsty. This hunt lasted 2 ½ hours before we returned to the vehicle. It was a battle of wits, stamina and determination between Bongo dog and man in the Bongo's environment. Ultimately the Bongo prevailed but not before we had walked many kilometres, looped, back-tracked, and traversed numerous Bais. After 2 ½ hours of drizzle, sweat and wet boots it became pretty obvious that we had lost the Bongo for good. By this time the dogs were totally exhausted and unable to carry on hunting effectively. It was definitely time to stop, take stock and reflect on the morning, so that even when the next opportunity presented itself as we returned to the vehicle we decided that it would be better to return to camp, rest and regroup refreshed.



The next couple of days were pretty barren with no help from the weather as the rain skirted the hunting area. We saw and heard plenty of gorillas, but little in the way of fresh tracks and when we did see them they were usually a herd of bongos rather than solitary bulls. The lack of rain had become a frequent topic of conversation both between ourselves and with the locals. Malanyoka ("Little Snake"), who greeted us every day as we moved onto the area, promised us that he would make it rain tomorrow. We took this with a huge pinch of salt as this old man showed every sign of being "One Sandwich short of a picnic". Sure enough it didn't rain the next day. It deluged. It just didn't stop for hours and hours. There was no way that any sensible animal was going to move

around in that rain unless they were aquatic. Another dead day, and surprisingly in the aftermath of that rain the next day was equally dead with barely anything moving around the forest except the odd gorilla and a civet cat. Owing to the road between Ouessou and Brazzaville being closed on



Proper Rain

Sunday so that the President and his entourage could open a dam nearby, Saturday would be our last hunting day. With only one day left I was determined that I would avoid putting Jean Luc and Christophe under any pressure. They had pulled out all the stops for me and done whatever they could to ensure that I had every opportunity possible to secure a good trophy. They'd made sure I was well looked after, and had a good time, and I really didn't want them to feel responsible in any way for my bad luck. I told Christophe that I was happy to hunt in the morning, but if we weren't successful in the morning then I would like to end on a positive note of my own choice and not keep trudging on until the last minute.



Final Mornings Hunt: Setting off.

The water levels had fallen overnight, and the piste was still nice and moist with old tracks entirely erased. About halfway along our route we came to a rapid halt. There before us lay the best fresh Bongo tracks of the last 2 weeks. It appeared to be huge lone bull of even better size than the one I had failed to shoot. Off we marched into the forest, cutting our way in quietly following the trail meticulously with 3 of the trackers up front, and 4 dogs in front of them. Sadly the best dog had been sick or injured for the last 4 days and had been unable to hunt with us. After an hour or so we came to a clearing where Christophe suggested that I go behind Moustique, the head tracker, and carry the gun so that if anything popped up I would be ready to shoot. We found the fray marks on the trees, the wallow patches where the bongo had rolled, and found its warm couch mark and fresh droppings. All of these made me feel pretty positive and upbeat that we would be successful today. Suddenly, one of the dogs barked excitedly, and we ran forward trying to locate where the sound came from. However, the barking stopped as quickly as it began, and although we carried on tracking for a while but it became apparent that lead dog wasn't with us and must have scared off the Bongo. The sad truth now dawned on us after a 2-hour track that the quarry had fled and would now be long gone. Hunt over, Game over.



The Team (less Yannick and Jean-Luc)

I had mixed feelings, but the more I reflected the clearer everything became to me. I had a good time. I had lots of hunting. I had some success and I had the experience of hunting in the rain forest that many hunters have never been fortunate enough to have had. A trophy is just a souvenir, and a souvenir is just a memory. I have plenty of memories of the hunt, so there was absolutely no need to feel disappointed that I didn't actually shoot a Bongo. The 2 weeks were enormous fun. I got to see some amazing country. I got to hunt with Pygmies and dogs in the rain forest. I got to hunt with 2 outstanding hunters. I genuinely couldn't fault the experience, and would do it again without hesitation if the money and time were available



An unusual sight

Return

The Trip back was easy and uneventful. Mikael's hotel was just as nice as the Radisson, what it lacked in location it made up for in being less expensive but very comfortable. Jean-Luc and Christophe escorted me to the airport, and bid me farewell. Jean-Luc very kindly arranged for me to be escorted through the airport by a senior airport official who made the whole process particularly smooth and enjoyable.

Summary

In summary, I had a wonderful experience hunting magnificent species in a country that I would never have visited otherwise. Jean-Luc and Christophe were exceptional hosts, who looked after me and worked tirelessly against many obstacles to ensure I had a great experience. I fulfilled a lifetime dream of hunting with Pygmies and dogs in proper African rain forest which is an environment that appears to be disappearing fast. May should have been a good month to hunt in, and indeed I would wager that the hunter after me was likely pretty successful. Unfortunately, the regular pattern of a couple of hour's rain most days didn't pan out, and this made hunting a good deal more difficult. The loss of our best hunting dog during the second week was also likely a factor that complicated matters additionally. In conclusion, it was a genuinely interesting and gratifying experience which I would recommend it to any hunter who is interested in forest hunting unequivocally.



View from Mikhael's Hotel Room



View of Kinshasa City 8 Miles away from Radisson Blu Garden





Baka huts in Forest



Moutique head tracker and Dog Jackie