Central African Republic's Dzanga–Sangha Special Reserve
Oct 02 – 11, 2026

When I lived in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo, in 2006 and 2007, I used to travel to Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park in the country's north, where we trekked to see a very famous Western lowland gorilla silverback called Kingo. We then boated up the Sangha River to Dzanga-Sangha Special Reserve in the Central African Republic, where there was another famous silverback called Makumba.

Before Rod Cassidy opened Sangha Lodge in 2009 near the reserve, we stayed at accommodations in Bayanga Village. Sangha Lodge was a game changer for intrepid travellers to the tropical rainforests of the Congo Basin. It offered rustic but secure services. In those early days, I recall arriving in Bayanga and the only available accommodation to find the cook gone and the kitchen shuttered. We broke into the kitchen and cooked eggs.

Good friends and fellow members of the MTGT family of travellers, Roger and Todd, were Rod's very first guests. All these years later—challenging years for Rod and his wife Tamar - Sangha Lodge remains a wonderful place to stay for access to the reserve. In 2009, Roger and Todd stayed in Rod's only chalet. Now there are eight spacious wooden chalets with screened, open walls facing the Sangha River. Climbing into bed each night in your chalet, listening to the river, insects, and tree hyraxes—with their remarkably dramatic territorial calls—and watching lightning flicker on the horizon is simply something to which you cannot attach a price. In the morning, you listen to the distinctive squawks and whistles of African Grey parrots. (African Grey parrots are the national bird of Gabon, by the way, and considered earthly representatives of the spirit world.) Moustached monkeys with brilliantly russet coloured tails frequent the lodge. A single male De Brazza's monkey has also taken up residence.

My October 2026 visit with two well-travelled and adventurous women was my first return to Sangha Lodge since 2018. I wonder what took me so long, although a pandemic and regional political instability had something to do with it. Yes, challenges remain. Charter flights from Bangui are the safest way to get to Bayanga if Bangui is your entry point. There are weather delays. There are car

breakdowns. By most of our standards, vehicles in the area died a long time ago. Here, they are kept alive by resourceful drivers and mechanics. On our park visits, we carried a chainsaw and a work crew to remove fallen trees blocking the tracks. We did the same thing in the early years. It rains a great deal in the rainforest. You are rarely in dry clothing. But if you are seeking meaningful travel, then the Central African Republic delivers it. Rod describes it as “upping your game.”

The silverbacks Kingo and Makumba are no longer alive, unseated by younger males and eventually succumbing to their injuries, as is the way in their animal kingdoms. But they reigned for many years. I first met Makumba in 2006. I saw him for the last time in 2018. He died in 2024.

In 2026, we met a newly habituated silverback called Limo, who protects six females and four infants. You hope for clear sightings of the gorillas in open areas of the forest, but it is a matter of chance to catch them there. More often, they are in the dense, dark rainforest where you must peer over the mask you wear to avoid spreading human diseases, fogged glasses, and dribbling perspiration. Photography is frustrating for most of us. It’s not a bad idea to put down the camera and simply be in the moment with these awesome gorillas in their rainforest habitat!

The other highlight of Dzanga-Sangha Special Reserve is Dzanga Bai, a large forest clearing that attracts large numbers of Forest Elephants and buffalo on a daily basis. Sometimes we are fortunate to see Red river forest hog, Bongo antelope, and primates here as well. Wildlife comes for the minerals in the *bai*’s saline water. It is a 45-minute drive from Sangha Lodge to the trailhead, followed by a 45-minute walk. There is a viewing platform overlooking the *bai* where we stayed for most of the day with a packed lunch observing elephant behaviour. A scientist with the Dzanga-Sangha Elephant Project works daily from this platform and was very charitable about sharing his knowledge of which elephants were at the *bai* that day. We dodged elephants both coming and going, which added a healthy dose of adrenaline to the walk!

The Congo Basin forests are the ancestral homes of the Ba'Aka, traditionally hunters and gatherers and now cornerstones of many tourism programs. Without their knowledge of the forest and its wildlife, the gorilla habituation programs in the Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic would not exist. The Central African Republic is one of the best places to experience Ba'Aka culture and their knowledge of the forest.

Every time we entered the forest, we were escorted by a Ba'Aka guide. One morning we accompanied Ba'Aka hunters on a traditional "net hunt" for small game such as duiker and porcupine. Our hunt was unsuccessful for which I am grateful. At the same time, we collected edible, functional, and medicinal roots, leaves, and fruit.

After the net hunt, we followed Ba'Aka women to the river, where they demonstrated their technique of "water drumming." Performed in shallow water, the women use their hands to strike the surface with cupped and flattened hands. The water acts like a resonant drum membrane—their slaps, splashes, and submerged strokes becoming a percussion orchestra.

It is a privilege for which I am deeply grateful to spend time once again in these rainforests, among some of the last great forests of their kind on the planet and the ancestral homes of elephants, gorillas, and forest people.