

# 'ay Garamba!

Few words embody the same mystique as 'Congo'. In times past, it epitomised deepest, darkest Africa, and true adventurers salivated at the mere thought of exploring it. More recently, 'Congo' became synonymous with war and bloodshed, a place to be avoided by everyone except the UN and humanitarian agencies. But, as 2010 draws to a close, there is a ripple of change. In the war-ravaged north-east of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, a new era of peace and stability may be on the way. For Garamba, the embattled national park located at the epicentre of the strife, a path to recovery beckons. **Stephen Cunliffe** reports.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



**B**arely two years ago, Garamba National Park was on the brink of collapse. Tucked into the north-east of the vast Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and sharing a border with Sudan, the park had been plundered for decades by a succession of guerrilla armies, rebel groups, commercial poaching gangs and destitute refugees. Official access was all but forbidden.

During the 1970s and '80s, commercial Sudanese poachers exerted huge pressure on the elephant and northern white rhino populations, reducing elephant numbers from 22,000 to just 5,000 individuals, and pushing the rhino to the brink of extinction. SPLA rebels from Sudan perpetuated the poaching epidemic throughout the '90s and the *Maharaleen*, heavily armed Arab horsemen from Sudan, continued the rout when they arrived in 2003.

Elephant numbers went into freefall and by 2004 fewer than 20 white rhinos remained, the last hope for the survival of this critically endangered subspecies in the wild. Throughout this torrid time, ill-disciplined Congolese soldiers aggravated the situation as they supplemented their salaries with sales of ivory and bushmeat.

The most recent perpetrator of instability, however, was the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a notoriously violent rebel group from northern Uganda. After crossing into the DRC in October 2005, the LRA established a base in Azande Hunting Reserve on the periphery of Garamba. There it remained entrenched until the

Ugandan army, together with the armed forces of the DRC and south Sudan, launched Operation Lightning Thunder (see page 57). The joint offensive began in December 2008 with an attack against rebel positions along Garamba's western boundary. The LRA retaliated with systematic revenge attacks on soft targets.

At 16h30 on 2 January 2009, it hit Garamba's park headquarters at Nagero. A fierce battle ensued and 10 park employees (including three rangers) were killed, with many more wounded. The rebels then burned buildings, along with fuel stores, communications equipment, generators, two ultralight aircraft, a Unimog truck, patrol motorbikes and outboard engines. It was only the timely arrival of a large detachment of Congolese soldiers that forced the Ugandan rebels to retreat and prevented the wholesale destruction of Nagero.

**E**ighteen months later, with the LRA ousted to the Central African Republic, I was able to visit Garamba. But the aftermath of the assault was still starkly evident. Luis Arranz, head of the African Parks Network (APN) project for Garamba, met me at Nagero's airstrip and succinctly outlined the situation. 'With the demise of the LRA, the volatile security situation in the region has finally stabilised and the park has reverted to our control. Nagero and the southern sector are once again safe.'

Garamba is the country's last remaining savanna-type protected area that still, somewhat miraculously, boasts sizeable

populations of wildlife. Established by Belgian royal decree in 1938, it was one of the first national parks created in Africa and its formation was closely tied to the founding of an elephant domestication centre at Gangala-na-Bodio. Four decades later, the park's rare natural value and incredible species diversity were formally recognised when it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980.

As we drove to the recently opened Garamba Lodge, Arranz elaborated on some of the challenges he and his team now face. 'Garamba is located in one of the most remote places on the continent and when you combine this with a derelict road network, logistics become extremely complicated and hellishly expensive. It has taken us a full year just to replace the infrastructure and essential equipment lost during the attack.'

In the wake of the LRA's retreat, I asked him whether the poaching situation had improved. 'The area is far more secure and stable without the LRA, but poaching is a complex issue. I think the Congolese army are worse poachers than the LRA or even the *Maharaleen* ever were.' The growth of illegal gold and diamond mining in the surrounding hunting reserves is also a ►

ABOVE The vibrant colours of migratory northern carmine bee-eaters make a spectacular sight as flocks gather and nest in large riverside colonies.

OPPOSITE Lush green savannas sprinkled with iconic sausage trees dominate Garamba's southern region, providing an idyllic habitat for thousands of elephants and buffaloes.



### facts & figures

Garamba National Park is located in the district of Haut-Uélé in the north-eastern corner of the Democratic Republic of Congo, abutting its border with Sudan. The park is enclosed by three *domaines de chasse* (hunting reserves) – Gangala-na-Bodio, Mondo Missa and Azande. The total area of the Garamba complex, as it is known, is 12 427 square kilometres.

concern. Nonetheless (and perhaps out of necessity), Arranz remains optimistic. 'These challenges are not insurmountable obstacles, and now is the crucial moment for us to save Garamba. As we explore the park during the days ahead, you will be amazed at how much wildlife still survives here. It is a resilient place that can bounce back, given the chance.'

Later, I sipped my beer on the veranda of Garamba Lodge, which boasts possibly the most lavish and attractive tourist facilities in Central Africa, and listened to the hippos honking in the Dungu River below. Nuria Ortega,



the tourism, marketing and PR coordinator for Garamba, pulled up a chair next to me and we fell to talking about how APN came to be in this remote corner of Africa.

'In September 2005, African Parks arrived in Garamba at the invitation of the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN),' Ortega explained. As a not-for-profit organisation, APN has entered into a partnership with the DRC government and, with funding from the European Union and Spanish government, has assumed total responsibility for the rehabilitation and long-term management of the entire 12 427-square-kilometre Garamba complex.

'We're investing heavily in the ongoing recruitment and training of rangers, which has helped to secure the reserve and improve the poaching situation,' she said. 'The park's neglected road network and decaying tourism infrastructure are also in the process of being upgraded, but getting this lodge completed has been my obsession for the past 15 months,' she added with a smile.

After a good night's rest, APN pilot Stéphane Carré and I took a dawn flight over the park in his new ultralight to search for Garamba's fabled elephant herds. We took off and immediately swung north over the Dungu River. Huge tracts of rich green savanna, interrupted by meandering rivers and groups of buffaloes, kob and hartebeest, spread out below us as we made our way towards the Garamba River. Newly graded roads were



## Operation Lightning Thunder

On 14 December 2008, the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) started bombing Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel camps in north-eastern DRC as part of a joint operation with the South Sudanese (SPLA) and Congolese (FARDC) forces. The objective was to cripple the rebel group once and for all. However, even with substantial logistical and financial support from the US African Command (AFRICOM) and the UN Mission in the Congo (MONUC), the operation had only limited success.

The attack caused the LRA to disperse. While the notorious rebel leader Joseph Kony fled north, his fragmented guerrilla army went in search of revenge. The LRA focused its fury on the surrounding civilian population and carried out a string of vicious reprisals. In what have become known as the Christmas massacres, the retreating rebels attacked local villages, killing the men, abducting the women and children and burning everything in their wake. On 25 December 2008 they struck the village of Faradje, 23 kilometres from Garamba National Park's headquarters at Nagero, and killed more than 150 people in an orgy of violence.

With the UPDF in hot pursuit, Kony took the remnants of his army north into the Central African Republic. Although the Ugandan army continues to harass and engage the LRA, Kony and his generals have thus far evaded capture.

visible too, forging routes deep into the wildlife sanctuary; an exciting development proclaiming that a truly wild and remote national park was once again accessible to adventurous tourists.

As we neared the Garamba River, Carré's voice crackled inside my headset. 'Elephants! Down below! Let's take a closer look.' Before I could say anything, the ultralight plummeted out of the sky. Seconds later, we were skimming along, barely 10 metres above the ground. As I fought to rein in my thumping heart (and relocate my stomach, which appeared to have remained at 150 metres), the herd appeared up ahead. Close to 50 of the grey giants with youngsters of every age and size strode across the savanna. As we banked sharply over the river, preparing to come around for another pass, I estimated in excess of 150 hippos in one particularly massive pod.

Yes, everything here, from the grassy plains and wide-open spaces to the massive herds of buffaloes and elephants that roam them, is on a grand scale. What makes Garamba truly unique, however, is that it is predominantly a savanna park surrounded by forest and woodland on all sides, an anomaly that has confused ecologists and scientists for decades.

An initial hypothesis postulated that fire and elephants were responsible for the difference in vegetation, with regular fires and elephant pressure in the park's grasslands preventing tree recruitment. This theory was abandoned after research revealed that similar levels of fire and elephant impact occurred beyond the park's borders, where trees are common.

Further studies established that it was the existence of different soil types on either side of the river boundaries that gave rise to Garamba's expansive, gently ▶

ABOVE After decades of heavy poaching, there are signs that Garamba's beleaguered wildlife is tantalisingly close to a new era.

ABOVE, LEFT The Dungu River is home to some of the largest hippo pods found anywhere in Africa.

OPPOSITE Inquisitive Guereza black-and-white colobus monkeys are a regular sight in the fruiting and flowering trees around the park's Nagero headquarters.

## Taming elephants

Belgian monarch and ruler of colonial Congo King Leopold II was obsessed with the idea of elephant domestication. In 1900 he dispatched a young Belgian army officer, Jules Laplume, to undertake the hazardous task of capturing and training wild elephants in the remote north-eastern corner of his fiefdom. After establishing a base at Api, not far from the northern bend in the Congo River, Laplume embarked on a steep learning curve as he sought an effective method to separate and capture young elephants without incurring the wrath of their mothers. He finally settled on using large gangs of assistants to rope and secure the young elephants while he concentrated on distracting the mothers, killing them if necessary. By the end of 1902 he had caught four calves and domestication began.

The Belgians and their Congolese assistants were unaware of any established techniques for training elephants, so progress was slow. However, in 1918, after World War I, a fresh team of colonialists arrived with renewed enthusiasm for the task. They engaged the services of a group of mahouts from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) who, despite the language difficulties, succeeded in sharing their expertise with the local elephant handlers, known as *cornacs*.

In 1927, when a decision was taken to shift the domestication centre from Api to Gangala-na-Bodio on Garamba's southern boundary, the facility already had more than 50 African elephants in training, with many working effectively. In a remote part of Africa with non-existent infrastructure, the herd was used extensively for transport and agricultural work. With access to an estimated 60 000 wild elephants in the Garamba area, the centre continued to flourish and at its peak in the 1950s housed close to 100 trained elephants, dispelling the long-standing myth that African elephants could not be domesticated like their Asian cousins.

The years preceding Congo's independence in 1960 saw sustained pressure from internal disturbances and rebellions take its toll on the domesticated herd, which shrunk to 15 elephants. By 1990 just four remained. A desire to resuscitate the centre and develop elephant-back safaris as a means to realise Garamba's huge tourism potential proved unsuccessful and, in March 2010, Leopold's legacy drew to a close when Kiko, the last of the Gangala elephants, died at the age of 57.

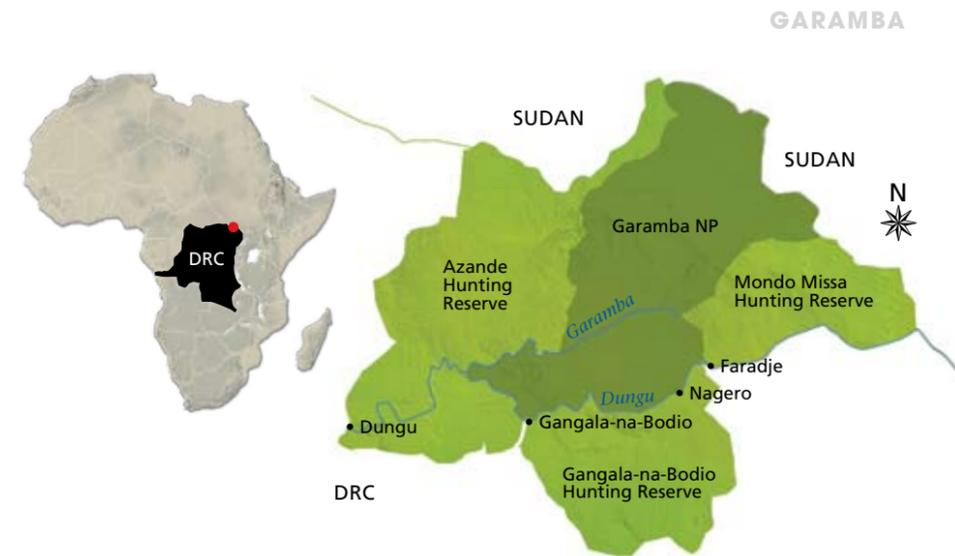
undulating grasslands. These spectacular savanna landscapes sprinkled with iconic sausage trees set the scene for many other memorable aerial encounters as Carré deftly manoeuvred the ultralight over more elephants and hippos, as well as buffaloes, Lelwel's hartebeest, Ugandan kob and defassa waterbuck.

When we returned to the lodge at lunch-time I sought out Arranz to share with him our sightings, which included some 300 elephants over the course of the morning. I learned that the elephants here are an unusual mix between the savanna and forest subspecies, and I had seen that the park was an idyllic ecosystem for them. With an estimated 3 500 elephants still residing in Garamba, I asked Arranz what he thought the future holds for them.

'Garamba was the final wild refuge of the critically endangered northern white rhino, but, sadly, the last of these disappeared in 2007. However, there are still viable populations of all the other large herbivores, including elephants, and Garamba's nutritious grasslands could actually support 10 times the current elephant population.' The park manager concluded with some sobering statistics. 'In the 1950s Garamba was home to between 40 000 and 60 000 elephants and in excess of 1 000 rhinos. Today the rhinos are gone and the elephants have been reduced to less than 4 000.'

But it is not all doom and gloom. Before 2010, there had been no anti-poaching patrols north of the Garamba River for almost 15 years. The northern sector of the park was all but abandoned. However, since March, patrols have once again started to cross the river and have begun the arduous task of wresting back control of the north. The first aerial census there was conducted in June 2010 and revealed a surprising amount of animal activity in the area, considering what it has endured in recent decades.

Garamba truly is a resilient place and with the demise of the LRA, the withdrawal of Congolese military forces and the arrival of the African Parks Network, I want to believe that this wonderful and surprising savanna enclave has finally arrived at the dawn of a new era. **AG**



## Travel notes

**How to get there** The easiest option is to travel to Arua in Uganda and then engage the services of the APN to fly to the all-weather airstrip at Nagero on Garamba's southern boundary.

**When to go** The park is most easily accessed during the dry season from late December to early May.

**Where to stay** Garamba Lodge, under Spanish management and boasting a Rwandan chef, is luxurious. The camp comprises 10 en-suite double chalets and an impressive central lodge building with a 20-seater restaurant that opens onto a veranda overlooking the perennial Dungu River. You'll pay US\$150 per person per night (full board). Contact Nuria Ortega at [nurigaramba@gmail.com](mailto:nurigaramba@gmail.com) for more information.

To discover more about the African Parks Network and its Garamba project, go to [www.african-parks.org/garamba](http://www.african-parks.org/garamba)

RIGHT As the rainy season approaches, massive thunderheads enhance the quintessential African sunset.

OPPOSITE Elephants satiate their appetites on Garamba's abundant grasslands.

