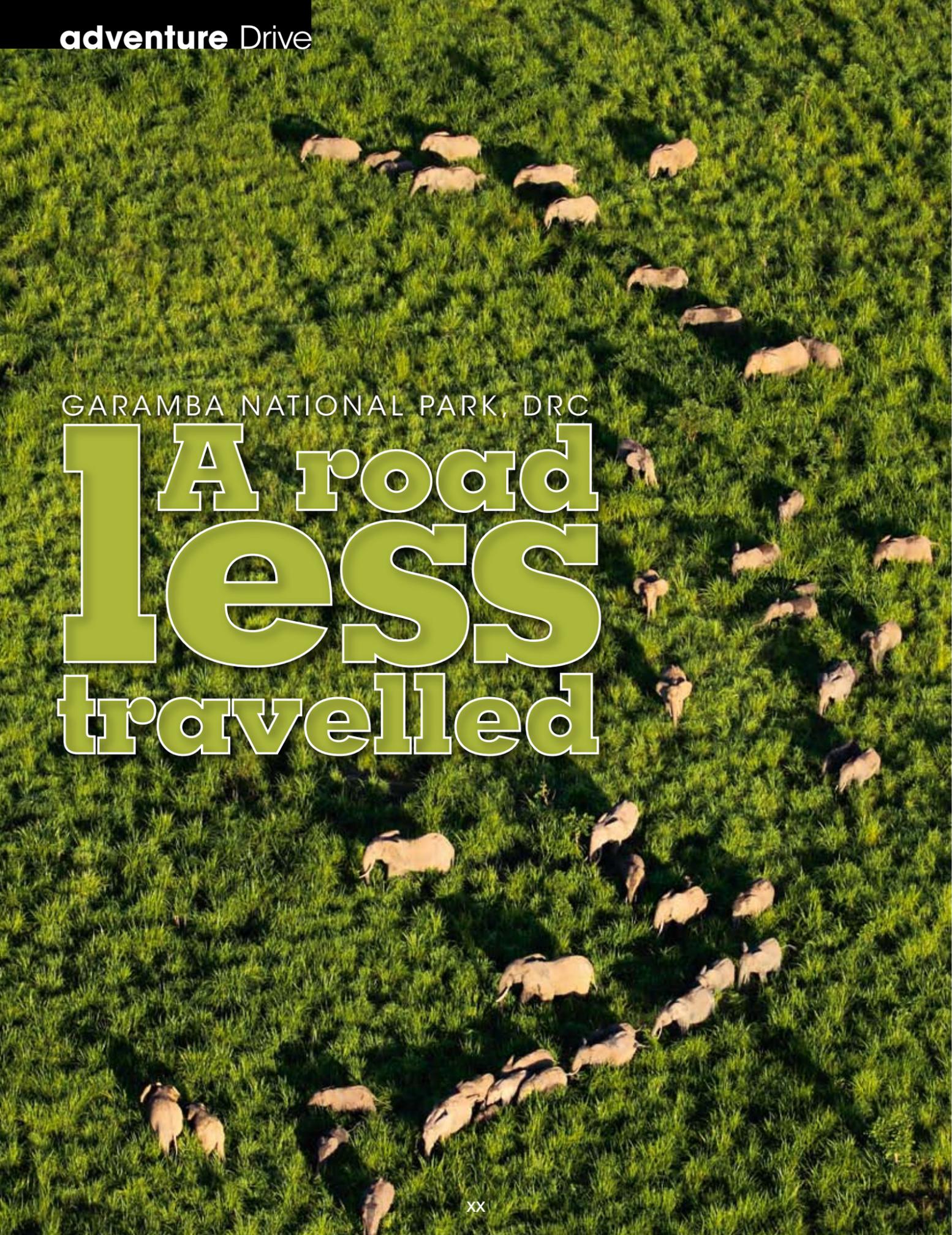


GARAMBA NATIONAL PARK, DRC

A road less travelled



Getting to Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) isn't easy. Crossing the border between Uganda and the DRC is a nightmare and the roads that lead to the park are horrendous. But those willing to tackle the challenge won't be disappointed by what they find. Garamba is a very special place

Text and photography: Stephen Cunliffe

Our vehicles swayed nauseatingly as we travelled along the muddy tracks. We had to make sure that our two Cruisers maintained their forward momentum at all times, otherwise we'd get horribly stuck.

We were in Garamba National Park, one of the oldest parks in Africa, and the roads were absolutely drenched.

As we bounced and swayed along the park's game drive tracks, I struck up a conversation with one of our mandatory park-assigned



Caption



escorts. His name was Mambo Marindo and he was the park's only English-speaking tourist guide.

"Not many tourists have come to Garamba in recent times, but in the future we hope for many more visitors," he said.

Considering all the obstacles one had to traverse in order to get there, this hardly surprised me.

For instance, crossing the border from Arua in Uganda to Aru in the DRC is an almost impossible challenge. In fact, without the local knowledge and contacts of Odra – a Congolese "fixer" hired by Garamba to fast-track border formalities for park visitors – we would never have made it across.

And once over the border, things only got worse. The "road" between the border and the park is terrible and can best be



Caption



Caption



described as a deep-rutted river of mud. Traversing it is a tiring, frustrating and frightening endeavour.

But for those willing to take on the challenge, the rewards are sweet. You are given the rare privilege of having one Africa's oldest, remotest and wildest national parks almost entirely to yourself.

Garamba is located in the north-eastern part of the DRC and is the country's last remaining savannah-type park that boasts sizeable populations of wildlife. It was established by Belgian royal decree in 1938 and was one of the first national parks on the African continent.

Garamba was also designated a Unesco Heritage Site in 1980, and it is easy to see why. Expansive landscapes of gently undulating grasslands set the scene for spectacular encounters with large herds of elephant, buffalo, hippo, Lelwel hartebeest, Ugandan kob and defassa waterbuck in one of the last great chunks of genuine African wilderness.

But while its natural beauty is undeniable, the park has been plagued by many problems. Predictably, many of these issues have been related to central Africa's turbulent political landscape. For instance, Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) rebels operated within the confines of

the park during the 1990s and decimated the animal population. In 2005 the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) – a notoriously violent guerrilla group from northern Uganda – also established a base in the park. They remained in Garamba until a Ugandan-led military offensive finally drove them out in 2009.

Poaching has also been a huge problem. Not only have soldiers, guerrilla fighters and refugees killed thousands of animals for food, but commercial poachers have also been active in the park since the 1970s. It is estimated that elephant numbers were reduced from around 22 000 to less than 5000 during the 1970s and 1980s.

However, things have been steadily improving over the last few years. In 2005 control of the park was handed over to African Parks Network (APN), a non-profit organisation that enters into partnerships with African countries to manage valuable protected areas on a government's behalf when it lacks the resources to do so itself.

With generous donor funding from the European Union and the Spanish government, APN has been able to make impressive progress. Restoring the park's neglected tourism infrastructure is a particular priority and the derelict road network is being upgraded. Work is being

done on the main park access road between Faradje and Nagero, as well as 700km of internal roads.

A new lodge has also been opened recently, and it boasts possibly the most lavish and attractive tourist facilities in all of central Africa. It has impressive views of the Dungu River, a wonderful restaurant and comfortable bedrooms.

As we continued our trek along Garamba's muddy trails, Mambo suddenly spotted something in the distance.

"Elephants," he whispered. "Why don't we go and have a closer look?"

We stopped the vehicles and followed our two escorts on foot. We walked carefully around the elephants' position and approached them from downwind. We managed to sneak to within 30m of where they were feeding.

Sitting quietly in their presence was a magical experience that I will not soon forget!

But as I watched them feeding, blissfully unaware of our presence, I unfortunately also understood why poachers with automatic weapons had been so successful in hammering Garamba's huge herds. It is all too easy to harm these majestic animals.

Back at the lodge, I spoke to Luis Arranz, head of the APN project in Garamba. I asked him about the elephants we had

encountered earlier in the day.

"The elephants found here are interesting," Luis said. "Intergradation of the savannah and forest sub-species has occurred here. The elephants aren't really a part of either because they don't live exclusively in the forest or the savannah. But Garamba is an ideal environment for them because there's plenty of food and water throughout the year."

Sadly, the elephant population has been reduced to such an extent that the rich grassland could actually support ten times the current number.

"In the 1950s, Garamba was home to about 60 000 elephants and 1000 rhinos," said Luis. "Today the rhinos are gone and the elephants have been reduced to less than 4000."

But with the park now being protected by APN, things are looking up.

"We have arrived at a critical juncture in the fight to save Garamba. Animal populations can rebound rapidly if we manage to secure the park," said Luis.

While Garamba's future looks bright, it is at the moment still the exclusive domain of daring adventurers in search of a truly wild African experience.

Garamba is certainly not for the faint-hearted!

TRAVEL PLANNER

GETTING THERE: Getting to Garamba by vehicle is challenging, especially during the wet season (May to December), when roads are completely drenched. The easiest approach to the park is through Uganda, though you will still be forced to traverse 200km of truly awful roads. Be warned: only those in search of a real off-road adventure should attempt it.

THE TRIP – via Faradje and onto Nagero on the park's southern boundary – can take anything from a day to a week, depending on road and weather conditions. Don't underestimate the challenges posed by travelling by road to Garamba. You are strongly advised to seek out the latest information on the route before departing.

WHERE TO STAY: The recently opened Garamba Lodge overlooking the Dungu River is currently the only real option. The lodge, under Spanish management and boasting a Rwandan chef, is probably the most beautiful and luxurious property in all of the DRC! The luxury camp comprises ten immaculate chalets and an impressive central lodge building with a restaurant.

THE COST is US\$150 (R1090) per person per night on a full board basis and reservations are essential. To make a booking, contact Nuria Ortega, Garamba's marketing coordinator, at nurigaramba@gmail.com.

BEST TIME TO VISIT: The park is reached most easily during the dry season, which is from late December to early May. Large tracts of the park are also burned during March and April. The short, green grass during this time provides ideal wildlife viewing conditions.

PARK FEES: These are currently under revision, so a small donation to APN and its Garamba project is suggested in the interim.

FUEL AND RESUPPLYING: APN has a vehicle workshop with mechanics, spare parts and fuel supplies. However, these facilities are available to visitors only in an emergency.

Drinking water is available at Nagero and you can eat and drink at the Garamba Lodge.

Although there is a small local market 4km from Nagero, overlanders should definitely be self-sufficient and travel with adequate fuel and provisions. 🌍

