



TAKE THE BEST SEAT ON THE SAVANNAH
WITH A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF GARAMBA
NATIONAL PARK'S BOUNTIFUL WILDLIFE

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

GARAMBA DAWN OF A



“LIONS DOWN below!” Luis’s voice crackled inside my headset. “Why don’t we take a closer look?” he suggested. Before I could answer, the microlight aircraft was thrown into a steep dive. Only seconds later, we were skimming along, barely 10 metres above the ground, while my stomach felt as if it was still at 500 feet. As I fought to rein in my thumping heart and pull myself together, the regal heads of two handsome male lions rose out of the grass and fixed our little aircraft with a bold stare. Their burning olive eyes and hypnotic gaze demanded we return to appreciate them once more. As we banked sharply over the Dungu River, preparing



**RIGHT: THE GREEN SAVANNAHS
PROVIDE A PERFECT HOME TO
MAGNIFICENT ELEPHANT HERDS**

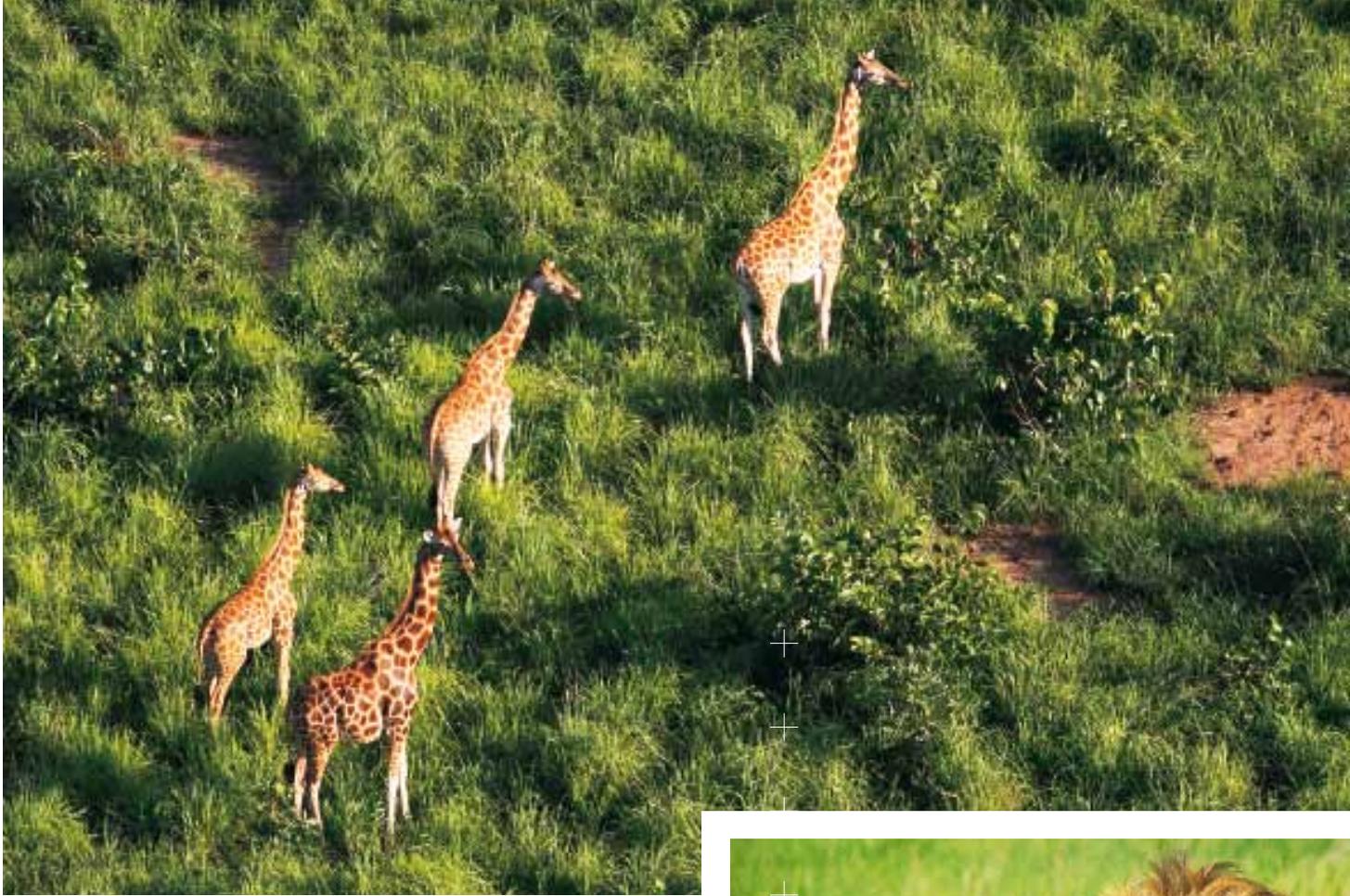




Aerial view of a herd of sheep grazing in a lush green field. The sheep are scattered across the field, some standing and some grazing. The field is a vibrant green, and the sheep are a mix of brown and white. The overall scene is peaceful and idyllic.

new era

[INTO THE WILD]



➤ to come around for another pass, I estimated in excess of 150 hippos in a massive pod.

The huge raft of hippos provided a great analogy for the national park itself: in Garamba, everything is big. From the huge grassy plains and wide-open spaces to the massive herds of buffalo and elephant that roam its savannah landscapes, nothing comes in small sizes.

Garamba, located in the north-east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, is the country's only savannah-type park that still contains sizeable wildlife populations. It is the last refuge of the endangered Congolese giraffe, as well as being a stronghold for elephant, buffalo, Lelwel hartebeest, Ugandan kob and defassa waterbuck... and if the lions down below and whooping hyenas of the previous night were anything to go by, then carnivores weren't in short supply here either.

I was in seventh heaven and revelling in the privilege of exploring one of Africa's oldest and most mystical parks from the air. Declared a national park way back in the 1930s during the Belgian colonial era, Garamba was for decades synonymous with the elephant-training centre located at Gangala-na-Bodio on the reserve's southern boundary. Many years later, after the Congo gained independence and the centre had



ceased its domestication activities, the park's unique natural value was finally recognised when it was assigned world heritage site status in 1980. Luis Arranz, my pilot, and park manager for Garamba, explained, "To have forest and savannah landscapes within the same park is extremely rare. The combination



TOP: ENDANGERED CONGOLESE GIRAFFE
MIDDLE: PRIDE OF THE LION
RIGHT: CARMINE BEE-EATERS



THERE ARE NOW AN ESTIMATED 3,500 ELEPHANTS LIVING IN THE GARAMBA NATIONAL PARK

buffalo and elephant whizzed by below as we approached the Garamba River and the heart of the 4,900km² national park. Huge tracts of rich green savannah, sprinkled with iconic sausage trees and carved by meandering rivers, dominated the vast Garamba landscape. This chunk of African wilderness was, however, cut by more than just watercourses. Newly graded roads were clearly visible, 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.

Until this year, access to the park was all but forbidden. A succession of rebel groups, guerrilla armies, commercial poaching gangs and destitute refugees had plundered the park for decades. The most recent perpetrators of instability were the Lord’s Resistance Army, a notoriously violent guerrilla group from northern Uganda. They retreated into Garamba in October 2005 and set up their headquarters in the Azande West Hunting Reserve on the periphery of the national park. From their Garamba base, they waged a typically brutal campaign against the surrounding villages and

local Congolese people until a joint military offensive of Ugandan, south Sudanese and Congolese forces finally ousted them from the area in 2009. With the demise of the LRA, the volatile security situation in northeastern DRC has finally stabilised, Garamba’s

poaching pandemic has been reined in and the park is once again under the control of the highly respected African Parks Network.

In September 2005, APN arrived in Garamba at the invitation of L’Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature and assumed total responsibility for the rehabilitation and long-term management of the entire 12,427km² Garamba complex. As a not-for-profit company, African Parks enters into public-private partnerships with African governments to manage valuable protected areas on their behalf when they lack the resources to do so themselves. With generous donor funding from the

“ REBEL GROUPS, GUERRILLA ARMIES, POACHERS AND REFUGEES PLUNDERED THE PARK ”

of well-watered grasslands and forests mean that, in addition to being a wildlife-rich savannah reserve supporting magnificent herds of buffalo and elephant, the park is also home to chimps and bongo antelope in the wooded areas. Ultimately, Garamba offers a stunning diversity of wildlife species within a highly unusual savannah-forest ecosystem.”

After the exhilarating low-level flying display, which had enabled us to get up close and personal with the lions, we once again climbed to a more respectable cruising altitude and swung the microlight north, heading deeper into the reserve. Herds of

THE COMBINATION OF GRASSLANDS AND FOREST SUPPORTS A DIVERSE WILDLIFE COMMUNITY

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OPERATION LIGHTNING THUNDER

On 14 December 2008, the Ugandan People's Defence Force started bombing Lord's Resistance Army rebel camps in north-eastern Congo as part of a joint operation with the south Sudanese and Congolese 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 and the UN mission in the Congo, the operation had only limited success. The notorious rebel leader Joseph Kony escaped, and with the remnants of his guerrilla army carried out vicious reprisal attacks on Congolese civilians before retreating into the Central African Republic.

European Union and the Spanish government, APN has been able to make impressive headway with the monumental challenges of effectively managing and developing Garamba. The ongoing recruitment and training of rangers has placed emphasis on securing the reserve and improving the poaching situation. The park's derelict road network and neglected tourism infrastructure are also in the process of being upgraded. The most exciting development for prospective visitors, however, was the recent unveiling of a new luxury camp, Garamba Lodge, which boasts quite possibly the most lavish and attractive tourist facilities in all of central Africa.

Back onboard the microlight, we were low on fuel and Luis signalled it was time to head for the park headquarters at Nagero. As we flew over the

picturesque wilderness bathed in soft evening light, the park manager opened up and shared some thoughts on his regrets and plans for the park. "Garamba was the last wild refuge of the critically endangered northern white rhino, but, sadly, the last of these prehistoric-looking herbivores disappeared from our savannahs as recently as 2007." I could tell that the loss of the rhinos had been a huge blow to the African Parks project, but the Garamba situation was certainly not all doom and gloom. "There are still viable populations of all the other large herbivores, including an estimated 3,500 elephants in the park. In fact, Garamba's nutritious grasslands combined with an abundance of water throughout the reserve, means the place could actually support 10 times the

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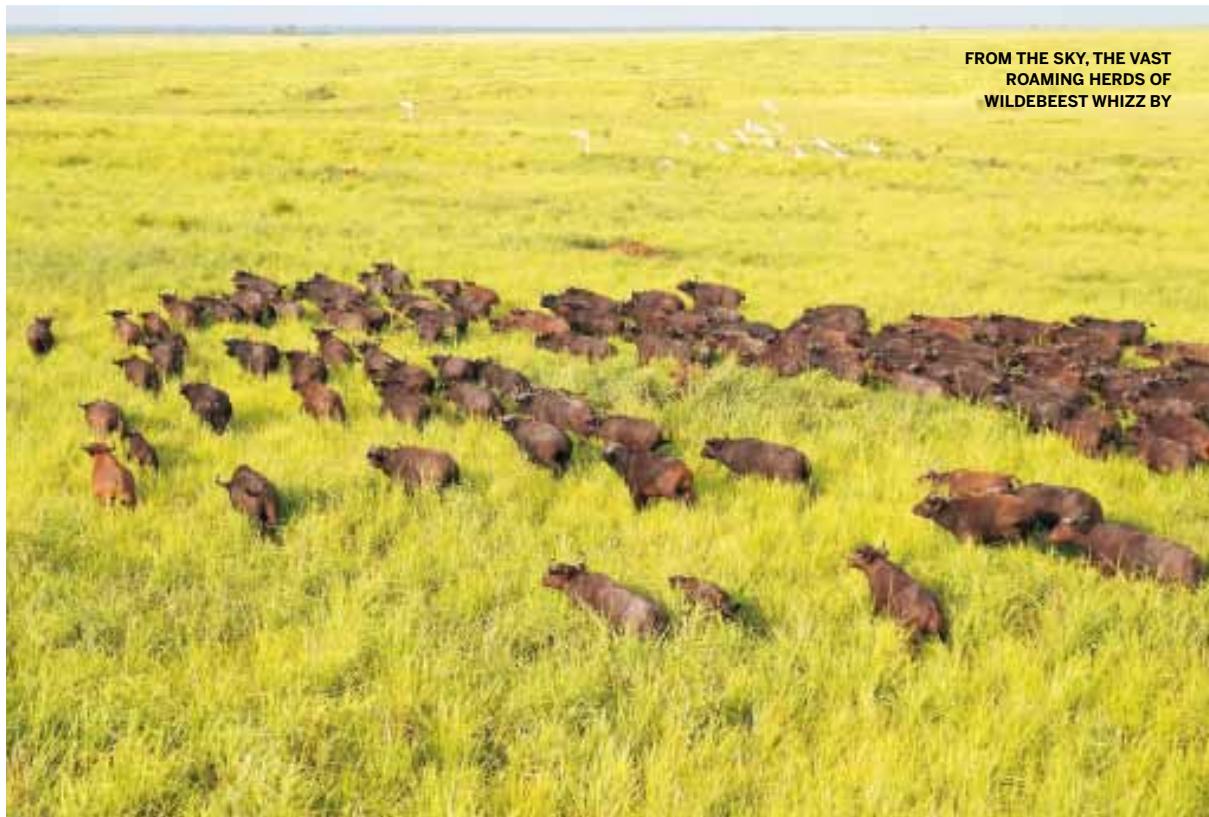
“ GARAMBA WAS THE LAST WILD REFUGE FOR THE WHITE RHINO – SADLY THE LAST DISAPPEARED IN 2007 ”

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POACHING HAS DEVASTATED THE WHITE RHINO AND ELEPHANT POPULATIONS



FROM THE SKY, THE VAST ROAMING HERDS OF WILDEBEEST WHIZZ BY

FAST FACTS

Where to stay
The luxurious Garamba Lodge overlooking the Dungu River is currently the only option. It costs US\$150 per person per night on a full-board basis. To make a booking, contact Nuria Ortega at nurigaramba@gmail.com.

Best time to visit
December to early May.

Activities
Game drives, walking safaris and camping.

Further information
www.african-parks.org

“ I CHECKED THE FUEL GAUGES AND SAW BOTH WERE EMPTY. A FEELING OF IMPENDING DOOM WASHED OVER ME ”

current elephant population.” His comments backed up what I heard from an ecologist when researching the park. In the 1950s, Garamba was home to 40,000 to 60,000 elephants and in excess of 1,000 rhinos. Luis’s final comments were spoken with a determination that the APN project should succeed. “Now is the crucial moment to save this park. If we put systems in place and offer effective protection, the wildlife populations will rebound to numbers not witnessed in 50 years. We cannot afford to fail.”

The stutter of the engine snapped me from my reverie. I checked the fuel gauges and saw both were empty. The whine of the engine was suddenly replaced by a deafening silence. As a feeling of impending doom washed over me,

I glanced at Luis and was surprised to see that he was calmly enjoying the serene beauty of the African sunset and unconcerned by our imminent appointment with death. He turned to me with a smile and said, “It’s so much more peaceful without an engine! You ready to have some fun?” Once again my stomach was left behind, as we spiralled rapidly down towards the airstrip and the talented pilot made a perfect landing using just the flaps.

Garamba, a true African wilderness, is not for the faint-hearted! ✕

_INFORMATION

SA Express flies from Johannesburg to Lubumbashi six days a week and between Lubumbashi and Kinshasa seven days a week. See pp134-136 for the flight schedules.