

GABON



Dissected by the equator, Gabon's vast tropical rainforests are home to gorillas, forest elephants and wily chimpanzees. Join this trekking and packrafting adventure across the Ivindo National Park to navigate dense jungle, braided rivers and some of Africa's most impressive waterfalls in this multi-activity expedition.

Aim

The aim of this epic expedition to Gabon is to complete a journey in expedition packrafts on Gabon's Mouniandje and Ivindo Rivers. Along the way you'll hike into the jungle to visit a remote bai – a clearing in the jungle with fantastic opportunities for wildlife viewing, and finish your journey at Kongou falls in Ivindo National park, arguably one of Africa's most impressive falls. It is one of the least populated regions in Gabon and the land is often inaccessible and uninhabited, except for forest based communities often referred to as Pygmies. Our expedition takes us out from the regional capital of Makokou, to travel deep into the forest of Gabon, full of elephants, birds, monkeys and other wildlife.

This Gabon trek and raft adventure is open to those new to rafting, with rivers at times still and flat and at times punctuated with heart-rate-rising Grade One and Two rapids. Rucksacks will be strapped securely onto the packrafts for the paddling phases. When more serious rapids mean that the team portages around them on land, the lightweight packrafts will be deflated, strapped to rucksacks and carried through the waterside jungles as the adventure continues.

This is primarily a packrafting adventure rather than a wildlife safari, but the visit to the jungle Bai will provide excellent wildlife viewing opportunity, attracting forest elephants, gorillas, forest buffaloes, leopards, otters, bongos and other animals and birds from the surrounding jungle. Travelling by packraft increases the chances of spotting wildlife, and the 2016 expedition team spotted gorillas along the river, paddled within metres of elephants at the water's edge, and spotted and heard many other smaller mammals and birds.

Highlights

- Undertake an epic amphibious adventure.
- Navigate the Mouniandje and Ivindo rivers.
- Explore Gabon's Ivindo National Park.
- Trek Gabon's equatorial jungles.
- Stand beneath the spectacular Kongou falls.
- Visit a jungle bai and look out for forest elephants, gorillas and leopards.
- Birdwatch in Africa's epicentre of forest bird diversity.
- Travel in local dug-out canoes.

What our teams say

"Far exceeded my expectations, I had no idea it would be so wild, so far from any human contact, and really did not expect to see an elephant, gorillas, or a leopard outside of my hammock! I didn't expect the river rapids to be so much fun. I should have learnt from the Panama trip last year that you guys really know what you are doing!"
 – David Marsh, 2016 teammate.

Why Go

Try packrafting

Gabon is the perfect place to learn to packraft in a truly adventurous setting – or to hone your paddling skills further if already adept. Packrafts are changing the face of adventure travel. Versatile and robust, these expedition-strength inflatable boats allow explorers to navigate remote rivers in a dynamic way. If the rapids become too serious – deflate the raft, strap it and the paddle on your back and continue on foot through untracked jungle before river conditions are suitable again. Various types and brands of packrafts are available including Alpacka Rafts, which Secret Compass uses alongside Anfibio kit and the Alligator 2S packraft from Germany's Packrafting Store. Teammates bringing their own kit will receive a discount, get in touch for details.

Eco tourism

Gabon's national park network is world-renowned. A team from Outside Magazine visited the area in 2005 and found a 'wild pristine place, almost untouched by time'. Very little has changed over the last ten years, making this area ripe for rediscovery by a new generation of ambitious and adventurous team members. The country seeks to model itself on Costa Rica, which has turned its abundant natural resources into a successful eco-tourism product. Over 10% of Gabon enjoys protected National Park status, and around 80% of the country is made up of tropical rainforest, with limitations on logging in place to protect this resource. Due to the serious lack of infrastructure for tourism in Gabon's wilder reaches, tourism figures remain low – making it a great setting for an epic, amphibious adventure of this nature. You will likely have the rivers and jungles all to yourself for the duration of this remote expedition.

Wildlife in Ivindo N.P.

Well-documented species in Ivindo National Park include forest elephant, bull elephant and primates like gorillas, chimpanzees, colobus and mandril. Buffalo, duikers, bush pigs and giant pangolins might also be spotted. Observing incredible birdlife in the verdant tropical rainforests is highly likely, according to our man on the ground in Gabon. The region is home to notable species including the grey-necked rockfowl as well as many range-restricted species, and over 400 types of bird have been recorded. While animal and bird sightings cannot be guaranteed and should be considered a plus, a previous team spotted gorillas and elephants within a range of just a few metres.

Conservation efforts

Ivindo National Park (est. 2002) extends to 3,000km squared. It is a natural crossroads of unique ecosystems and biodiversity and is at the heart of Gabon's conservation efforts. The park contains the Institut de Recherche en Ecologie Tropical, with a research station based in the park that will be visited at the end of the expedition and

stayed at for one night. An eco-tourism organisation that is active in the region – and you will travel with its staff in dug-out canoes at the end of this expedition – is the Fondation Internationale Gabon Eco-Tourisme, or FIGET. Its goal is to protect the primary forests of the Ipassa-Migouli-Invindo region. The team will be accompanied by FIGET guides during the expedition along with other local support staff.

The plan

Secret Compass runs expeditions with framework itineraries, rather than guided tours with set daily plans. Read more about our [Approach](#) here. The following is the outline plan for this epic trek and packrafting expedition to Gabon – the ‘substance’ rather than the specifics. A fuller itinerary is provided in the Gabon Expedition Handbook which is available on request or upon application to join the team.

Teammates arrive

All teammates will arrive into Libreville at or before 2300hrs on 1 June 2019. Our in-country partners will handle airport pick ups and drop offs. You'll meet your leader at a local hotel that night, where the expedition will begin with an official briefing. It's an early start on day two for a full day's drive in 4WD vehicles to Makokou, your jumping-off point for the expedition.

On expedition

The next day another early start to transfer to your get-in point on the river Mouniandje for your first day in the pack rafts. Your leader will instruct you on how to use the rafts and off you go, heading towards your first wild-camp on the banks of the river! The next couple of days will see you trek further into the jungle to view wildlife at a jungle bai, before continuing your journey down the river Mouniandje and towards the river Invindo. Your days on the river form the heart of this epic amphibious adventure. You'll cover 20 – 25 km per day, carrying all of your food and belongings in your rucksack strapped to your raft, from time to time deflating your packrafts and carrying your kit around the bigger rapids.

You'll be fuelled by a mixture of high-calorie expedition food, supplemented by fresh local foods that are caught or bought en-route. Taking decisions as a team, you'll portage around any major obstacles, run the smaller rapids and carve out wild camping spots near the river's edge every night. Wildlife sightings are not guaranteed on the river section but previous teams have spotted gorillas and elephant at very close quarters...

Goal achieved

Having explored the Ivindo river, falls and caverns – the expedition draws to its conclusion. Speed back up the river in pirogues (local motorised dug-outs) to Makokou and travel back to Libreville. After a final night at a hotel in Libreville for hot showers and a celebratory team meal, all teammates are free to organise return flights or onward travel at any time from 17 June onwards. The expedition officially ends after breakfast on 17 June 2019 and our local partners will organise your transfer back to the airport for those leaving after breakfast.

Fitness

Secret Compass expeditions are achievable by anyone with a healthy lifestyle and a good level of general fitness. The biggest challenges on this expedition will be the long days of paddling and trekking through dense, humid jungles carrying weight.

Applicants will receive a Handbook with further expedition information. View Secret Compass's suggested Expedition Training Advice and get in touch with any fitness, health, training or kit questions that remain.

Teammates who arrive without meeting the agreed minimum fitness requirements can jeopardise themselves and the expedition's goal so do take training seriously, prepare as appropriate and arrive fit and ready to go.

Teammates must be comfortable with the following.

Minimum fitness requirements

- Trek: up to 10km per day (it's slow going in the jungle with no paths!).
- Raft: paddling in a one-person packraft down fast-flowing rivers for up to 25km per day, negotiating rapids and portaging around obstacles.
- Carrying: up to 30kg when portaging early in the expedition including a deflated packraft and a share of team food and kit. When hiking to the bai pack weights will be less.
- Terrain: deal with dense jungle foliage and uneven ground, possibly cutting own paths, wading through swamps or crossing rivers.
- Climate: a hot and humid environment at around 30 degrees C with the humidity trapped beneath the jungle canopy when trekking.
- Swim: be able to comfortably swim 200m unassisted and be comfortable in white water.

Included

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- Professional Secret Compass expedition leader with full communications kit and medical kit.
- In-country support and vehicles.
- All transport as outlined in the itinerary.
- Accommodation in hammocks throughout.
- All food (snacks and meals) and soft drinks.
- Packraft and Personal Floatation Device (PFD).
- Local and National Park permits.

Not included

- International [flights](#)/ travel to and from Libreville.
- [Travel insurance](#) (obligatory).
- Visas where relevant.
- Tips to local guides (discretionary).
- Personal equipment (full kit list in the Handbook).
- Beverages and any costs of a personal nature.

Exped FAQ

On application, potential teammates will receive a detailed Expedition Handbook. Here are some expedition-specific questions and our general [FAQ](#) will answer many other questions. Get in touch if your question remains unanswered.

When does this team close?

This team needs to be confirmed by 4 April as we must confirm some things in-country at this point. (Later bookings can be accepted as there isn't a protracted visa process for Gabon but, if serious about joining this team, do send in your application as soon as possible and before 4 April so that we can consider you in our initial planning.)

I'm a vegetarian. Can I join?

Teammates with dietary requirements are welcome to apply for this expedition and should state their specific requirements when applying.

Do I need a visa for Gabon?

Check with your local embassy for correct and up-to-date visa information for your nationality. Procuring relevant tourist visas is the responsibility of each team member.

Can I arrive a day late?

As The Plan outlines, there is a chain of transport to get teammates out to and back from the Ivindo river, with contingency days built in that were used last year. Therefore, start and end dates are not flexible.

Can I charge all my electricals?

This will be very challenging with limited access to power once the trekking and packrafting begins. Please ensure that you are self-sufficient in terms of charging your appliances by bringing things like spare batteries, lightweight solar panels or power packs to avoid frustration.

Will there be telephone signal?

There is likely to be 3G in Libreville and wifi at its hotel. There might be a local network at Makokou. While on the active section of this expedition there is likely to be none.

Do we have to run all rapids?

Rapids will be risk assessed on a dynamic case-by-case basis once on the ground. The skill and confidence levels of the teammates will be taken into account. It is generally possible to walk around obstacles though teammates should be keen to raft as much as possible as continual portages can slow team speeds.

Can I join as a paddling beginner?

Yes.

Any raft training you'd recommend?

If they offer packrafting, a day at a whitewater training centre in Cardiff, Lee valley or Nottingham (all UK) or international equivalents could be fun and beneficial. This is not a prerequisite.

Are there animals in the water?

There may be some non-poisonous snakes and dwarf and slender snout crocodiles (can bite but like being bitten by a dog) in the water itself, with a diverse ecosystem in the jungle.

Can I bring my own packraft?

Yes, contact Secret Compass to arrange your discount.

How can I find out more?

Apply for this expedition team using the button below to receive your Expedition Handbook with fuller details. Secret Compass is then on hand to answer any questions or to firm up your place on the team.