

Getting on with jumbo-size neighbours

By Sarah Monaghan



Camille Aviengne says 'hello' to a baby crocodile

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'Is that a jumbo on the runway?' I asked an expat in the passport queue next to me. We both squinted. It was! I had just arrived at Gamba Airport in Gabon and already I had spotted my first elephant.

He was a handsome bull, with the straight tusks typical of the African forest variety, he emerged from the trees and began to career about the grounds, heading, unnervingly, towards the runway. A couple of officials rushed to sidetrack him but moments later the roar of another plane did the job. As the aircraft touched down, its propellers whirling, the elephant trumpeted, made a volte-face and fled into the forest.

Gabon, in central Africa, is a former French colony and Gamba, in the southwest of the country, is home to its biggest onshore oilfields. Energy giant Shell employs a sizeable expat staff here on a site that sits plum in the middle of a rainforest. It is hard to imagine a more sensitive location for industrial activity on this scale. Surrounding the complex from where oil is pumped to thundering turbines is one of the most biodiverse places on earth, a gorgeous mosaic of rainforests, savannahs, mangrove lagoons and beaches sandwiched between two of Gabon's loveliest national parks.

I had gone there to report on a partnership between Shell and the US-based Smithsonian Institution, an international leader in scientific research. Conscious of its responsibility given the oilfields' location, in 2001 Shell established a partnership with the Smithsonian, providing a \$2.8?million grant for the first in-depth study of central African rainforest biodiversity. The head of the project, Olivier Pauwels, admits he was initially sceptical: "I had a very poor opinion of the oil industry when I learned we would be doing an ecological survey on an oilfield."

From the outset, both parties agreed to full transparency on the findings. Their publication stunned the scientific community. The scientists had recorded almost 3,000 species, including 100 fish, 150

amphibians and reptiles, 1,000 insects and 110 mammals, including rarities such as leopards, gorillas, aardvarks and manatees.

Their biggest surprise, though, was not the breadth of wildlife but where it was found. The greatest concentration was recorded inside the oilfields. The reason has turned out to be the limited access imposed on the area by Shell.

"These oilfields have been so well protected that the wildlife density is exceptional," said Olivier. "You see even more animals here than in the neighbouring national parks."

The partnership has offered a useful insight into the impact of oil companies' policies on the environment.

Smithsonian and Shell have shared their results with the International Petroleum Industry Environmental Conservation Association and are now working on an international code of practice they hope will influence other major energy players.

While I was there I had the chance to speak to some of the 400-plus expats - mainly English, French and Dutch - who share this rainforest paradise with the animals.

They are based at Shell's residential camp, Yenzi - a well-organised place, with its own bakery, health centre, sailing club, primary school (with Dutch, English and French streams), restaurant, clubhouse and swimming pool. It boasts a stunning setting on the forest edge besides a lagoon - which means there are plenty of opportunities to see wildlife close up.

"If I have to describe Gamba to someone I always say it is a Club-Med in the middle of the jungle," said Jet Hoeve, a British expat wife. "Last week, just before going to bed, I heard noises in the garden and when I went to investigate there was a family of four elephants, with a very small baby!

We were able to watch them for a full half hour before they moved on. It's hard to imagine anywhere else where you have nature literally on your doorstep like this."

A posting here though means an acceptance of isolation from the western world. Gabon, part of the Congo Basin, is around 80 per cent covered with dense forest and Yenzi camp, approximately 350km south of the capital Libreville, is only accessible by sea or by air via flights operated by Shell.

As soon as they arrive, Shell's human resources policy recommends that new employees attend a 'rainforest induction' course. Olivier was holding one when I turned up, showing examples of venomous snakes.

They looked amazingly realistic. Then I realised that was because they were real - though thankfully dead. Everyone made a special mental note of the white, yellow and brown diamond shapes of the Gabon Viper. It is the most poisonous snake on the planet but apparently it is pretty rare and fairly shy.

The fact that for this one Olivier only had a photograph and not a dead example was (slightly) reassuring. Seeing a lot of nervous faces, Olivier told everyone not to worry; if they find a snake in their homes, don't panic but simply "back off very slowly and telephone security".

Pascal Aviengne has lived here with his family (wife Yolande and two children) since 2004. He said there are 18 different types of venomous snakes at Yenzi. "We have never been threatened by one and have never had one in the house. But lots of pet cats disappear here."

Back at the briefing, Olivier is focusing on elephants. "Right now it is the mango season. We've got a lot of elephants coming into camp each evening to eat fruit that has fallen from the trees." He tells everyone they should never leave food out on their porches or wander about after dusk. "Impress this on your kids; there's no way they'll be able to outrun an elephant."

Shane Blake, a Brit who came to Shell-Gabon in 2002, accompanied by his wife Lesley, did outrun one, but only just. "I popped out with our dog the other night. We were on the driveway to our house when a lone male elephant saw us from a long way away and started to trumpet and charge us," he said "I sprinted to the house, dragging the dog by his lead. We only just made it into the door."

The elephant was furious. "He began to circle our cars, slamming his trunk into them from all sides. He then rammed into the rear of one, ripping off the spare wheel cover with his tusks and pushing the car into the back of the other one."

As I left the briefing Annabelle Honorez, a Dutch expat, showed me a photograph on the clubhouse notice board. It was the remains of an encounter between a four-wheel-drive vehicle belonging to the wife of a Shell employee and an angry elephant. The bonnet has been crumpled to half its original size. "She forgot to turn off her lights, which made it a bit cross; she wasn't harmed but her car was."

Next to Yenzi camp is an 18-hole golf course for the use of the Shell employees - but it can sometimes be difficult to keep your eye on the ball.

"I often have the company of monkeys," said Pascal Aviengne. "It feels like they make fun of my poorest shots!" Another employee, Dave Leverton, said: "It was on the golf course that I saw the only gorilla I ever spotted in Gabon. And another time, I saw a leopard. I know nobody believes that one but I know what I saw!"

So what is it like bringing up children in this wild environment? "Before Gabon, we were living in Damascus, which is a beautiful city, but noisy and polluted," said Pascal. "We love it here."

He has noticed that his children, Loic, 10, and Camille, eight, have been a lot healthier in Gamba. They live amidst nature, have no commuting to school and get to spend weekends on empty beaches, on nature trips to the jungle or canoeing in the lagoon (keeping a watchful eye out for hippos all the same!) "Where else can your kids get the chance to hold baby crocodiles in their hands?"

Shane Blake also enjoys the outdoor pursuits at Gamba. "There's plenty to do at weekends, like watching the giant leatherback turtles coming ashore during the egg-laying season, camping on the white sand beaches or taking a boat through the inland lagoons - Shell has a cabin on the shores of one for the use of its staff." He also loves sport fishing - Gabon is one of the world's best locations for this and giant barracuda and African cubera snapper abound. "The largest fish I have personally caught was a 40kg Capitaine (Nile perch), which kept us in fish suppers for a long time!"

His favourite activity sounds the most glamorous, however: "When the tide is low at Point Madras, a beach about 30 minutes from Yenzi, my wife and I go there to break rock oysters from the rocks, crack them open and enjoy them with champagne in the sun. I doubt that there are many places in the world where we could do this. What luxury!" your view

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