

CHAPTER 13

DZANGA-SANGHA

Cameroon/Central African Republic – 2015

A topless Pygmy woman watches me while my fingers claw with all their might at the wet, slippery net to find a hold and prevent me from sliding further down. There, a meter below me, lies the head of a cow slaughtered less than two hours before. Its skin lies spread out on the back of the pickup truck and next to it are two pale plastic bags in which most of the meat is packed.

Flies have discovered this delicacy and are hitching a ride with us. The smell of death reminds me of the carcass, even if I can hardly see it anymore: the tropical night is about to squeeze the last bit of twilight out of the sky. Almost all the light that remains comes from the headlights of the car dragging us through the jungle. Every pothole in the road makes me slide towards the cow, so I try to pull myself up by the net to hang on as high as possible before the next rut pushes me down again. I don't want to end this long day sitting in the lukewarm remains of a dead animal.

After hanging on to the net for a couple of hours, we reach Bayanga. My feet have stayed dry but I'm not yet at my destination. I still have to travel another ten kilometers on the back of a *boda-boda*. Why not, after four days of continuous traveling.

The young rider of the motorbike finally drops me off at a tributary of the Sangha River, where the track ends. A floating wooden platform brings me to the other side by pulling the rope attached to a tree I can't see. Total darkness. This is the entrance to Sangha Lodge, where I planned to sleep for a few days. I sent a text message before, but did it arrive? Is there anyone here at all? Illuminated by the faint glow of my phone, I walk to the entrance. I put my bags on the ground and feel a wave of pent-up tiredness surge through the filth that sticks all over my body.

Then, I see a feeble light moving my way from afar. When it comes closer, the head of a white-bearded man appears in the flicker above it. He puts down his oil lamp, holds out his hand and says: 'Boris Kester, I presume?'

A few days earlier, I walked past the Golden Pavilion and through the meticulously maintained gardens at Kinkaku-ji in Kyoto: I was in Japan for work. After the return flight, I slept at home for a night, unpacked and repacked to fly to Yaoundé through Paris the next morning. I was on my way to the Central African Republic (CAR), one of the countries I had looked at with some awe for years. It was permanently colored red on the travel advisory pages. It had been a turbulent place for years, with fights flaring up regularly between Christians and Muslims, which had cost hundreds of lives. Instead of going to the capital Bangui, where a curfew was in place, I decided to visit the Dzanga-Sangha National Park. In this southwestern corner of the country, it was supposed to be relatively quiet. Instead of hiring a private plane or four-wheel drive in Yaoundé, I chose to travel to the border with the CAR by public transport. Big disadvantage: transport to the far corners of Cameroon was surrounded by uncertainty. I hoped to be able

to do it in three days, one way, but it remained to be seen whether that was realistic. Big advantage: those same uncertainties were a guarantee for adventure.

After a short night in a forsaken hotel in a suburb of Yaoundé, near the bus station, I find myself standing next to smoking buses on the main road. It's still dark when I buy a crusty baguette with egg and mayonnaise – the French have left behind some good things here. The bus for Bertoua departs shortly thereafter. It brings me, faster than expected, to my destination, on a smooth asphalt road – by Cameroonian standards. A cheerful lady sits next to me and we chat about anything and everything. After a while, she puts her lips next to my ear and whispers: 'I would like to meet you when we get to Bertoua.'

I have to laugh a little awkwardly at these open advances and suddenly feel incredibly white next to this Cameroonian woman. In the meantime, she scribbles something on a piece of paper and tears it out of her notebook, saying: 'Here, my phone number. Call me later!'

'Merci, Armelle.'

With the scrap of paper still in my right hand, I wonder what to do with her. I look out of the window and let my left arm hang down along the banister. After a while, I feel a tickle. The person sitting behind me puts a piece of paper in my hand. When I smooth it out, I see 'Sophie' and a phone number scribbled on it. I'm curious to know who this Sophie is, but when I look back, the backrest is too high to see her. Only when I stand up to get out of the car can I turn around and look into her smiling face. She purses her lips and sends a kiss into the air

with her hand while giving me a challenging wink. If I had taken the private plane, I would already be in Dzanga-Sangha, but I wouldn't have had two notes with pretty women's phone numbers in my hands. Now I just have to decide what to do with them.

But first, I must buy a ticket for the next stage of my journey. At the almost deserted bus station of Alliance Voyages, the ticket office is closed. A lady tells me that the ticket seller is praying in the tiny mosque in a corner of the plot. When he returns, I quickly buy the bus ticket for Yokadouma. The number plate of the bus is also mentioned on it. Departure: seven o'clock.

The next day, it's still early when I return. I know that the bus won't leave on time, but I don't dare to be late. It's a coming and going of cars, mopeds with passengers, traders, women with large bowls selling food, people coming to say goodbye, travelers. I hand my backpack to one of the baggage boys and settle myself on a crumbling wall. I look at the scenes around the white, green, blue and yellow Renault-Saviem buses from the seventies. On the sides it says: 'Yaoundé Bertoua Yokadouma', or 'Libongo Lokoma Kentzou'. On one bus, I see: 'Toutes Directions' (all directions). I would love to take it, but the number plate doesn't match the one on my ticket.

Everywhere, muscular, tawny men are lifting luggage and goods onto the buses. Their helpers stand on the roofs, sort luggage, try to stack it as efficiently as possible, tighten sails, tie ropes, tie knots. Then, when a new package arrives, they untie it all again. The mountains of baggage on the roofs grow steadily until they are almost as high as the vans on which they are piled up.

Of course, the given departure time is not realistic. The

guys on the bus are still piling more items on the mountain of luggage on the Renaults well past seven. While the last chaps finally jump off the roof, a man dressed in a white *boubou* steps onto a wooden stool by the bus with the passenger list in his hands. He reads out the names one by one. When your name is announced, you may enter to choose a seat.

I turn out to be the very first one. Inside, the bus looks like a prison van: a barred cage with wooden benches on a half-corroded floor. I sit down on the second bench, as the first row is too close to the driver's cabin. To my surprise, everyone waits patiently for their name to be called, in order of how the tickets were sold. So, it can be as simple as this. No chaos, no pushing, pulling or shouting; the van fills up quickly. At around ten o'clock, the man in white slams the door and we drive eastwards on Bertoua's main road, with some bumps and jolts. We haven't even left the last houses behind us and the tarmac is already gone. I will only see it again at this same spot, on my journey back home.

The windows are open and red dust is blowing into the cage from all sides. Slowly but surely, it covers our hair, clothes, shoes and bags. There is no music, but everyone is chattering away: a sociable crowd. We pause in Batouri; I venture outside the bus area, walk down the main street, then turn back for fear of missing the bus. When I enter the grounds, the bus is on jacks and all the wheels have disappeared. Two pairs of legs are sticking out from under it, with a range of tools and screws spread out on the ground. Time enough for a tour of the market.

Despite this extensive maintenance, the van starts to show more hiccups on our way to Yokadouma. Every time we stop, we all have to get out. Here, the unsurpassed commercial spirit

of the Africans shows itself once more. Before we know it, a child or woman (rarely a man) shows up with oranges, with pieces of roast chicken in a plastic bag, with a box of sweets, combs in a variety of bright colors, tins of ointment, curlers, soap, or what have you. Ready to do business. Or they come just to stare at that yellow van, which for a moment gives them the illusion that they are connected to a far-flung city, to another part of the country, to the rest of Africa and who knows, the rest of the large, distant world.

Later in the afternoon, it begins to rain heavily. The road soon turns into a brownish-red, slippery mud stream. The window next to the row in front of me turns out to be missing and the left side of my t-shirt and trousers are soon soaked through. I'm lucky because there are large holes in the ceiling on the right-hand side and the rain pours down straight into the bus. The tarpaulin protecting the luggage on the roof turns out to be anything but watertight. The unlucky people sitting underneath try to stay dry by holding a plastic bag over their heads. In vain. The water mixes with the red dust that we had collected hours earlier. Now it's a good thing that the bottom of the van also has large holes: they provide a way for the water to wash away.

Perhaps driven on by the sweltering heat, a very vocal lady and a distinguished-looking gentleman get into a heated argument with each other. Because of the animated conversations around me, I missed what preceded this. But now that they are shouting, they can be understood very well, especially because everyone has shut up to allow them to follow what is happening. I now remember that even before we left Bertoua, the

woman could occasionally be heard above all the voices with piquant comments about others. The man tries to calm things down, which results in an increasing escalation: the woman snarls at him in a shrill voice with severe indignities. The others in the cage love this free entertainment. Their cheering and laughing excite the two ruffians more and more, until the woman's final salvo: 'Once we get to our destination, I'll find a doctor and ask him to remove your genitals. The world would be a better place if you were no longer a man.' In her precisely formulated French, this sounds both frightening and elegant. The audience loves it, especially because the man has no response, or perhaps he decides that it's wiser not to say anything back. Then, of course, she goes on to taunt him. I admire the man's control. His strategy works: the woman gets tired of insulting him. Tempers calm down and we are mainly occupied with the rainwater still pouring into the bus from all sides.

Meanwhile, the day is drawing to a close and I wonder how much further we have to go. The various repair stops haven't helped our progress; nor have the checkpoints along the way. Sometimes, we're allowed to remain seated and the officers put their arms through the bars to accept all identity cards. Sometimes, they ask us to get out, which always results in vendors (how do they always manage to be in the right place at the right time?) swarming around us and offering us *Made-in-China* junk.

It's long past sunset when we finally enter Yokadouma. It soon transpires that there is 'most likely' no bus the next morning to Libongo, the border town with the Central African Republic. I talk to a couple of motorcyclists hanging around the bus station. A heated discussion ensues between those who

believe that going by motorbike is too dangerous because of elephants and other wild animals, and those who say that it is indeed possible. None of the young men have ever driven the route. Nevertheless, there is a lively debate in which proponents and opponents eloquently try to convince each other they are right. My conclusion is that it's not impossible, so I have my plan B for the next day ready. I walk through the streets of Yokadouma, lit only by little lights at the abundant stalls, waiting for customers. I had read beforehand that bushmeat is still eaten in these parts. Fortunately, I don't see it for sale anywhere and I manage to find a restaurant that is still open and serves food that I recognise.

After a night in a dingy room with a saggy bed, no sheets, no lights and a worn-out bucket of water in the corner (the five-star luxury of Japan three days earlier now seems very distant), I go back to the bus station the next morning. It turns out that there is indeed no van. I also understand that one alternative, hitching a ride with the World Wildlife Fund's four-wheel drive, isn't possible. The car won't be traveling to Libongo today. I head back to the motorcyclists. Now that they see me again, they smell an opportunity, especially because by now they know for sure that there is no bus and no WWF car. They have become my last straw, making my negotiating position even weaker. Last night's discussion about the dangers of the trip immediately flares up again.

In the end, I grant Benjamin the ride: he comes across as the calmest and most reliable guy. He says he needs some time to refuel and pack his things. I urge him to take all the papers he may need on the road with him. Within half an hour, he is back. But then, after a few hundred meters, he turns out not to be satisfied with the bike and asks me to wait. Half an hour

later, he is back: he has found another *boda-boda*. He tells me that the problem with his own bike couldn't be solved. He proudly says that he now has a new one on loan from a friend. Well, new: the speedometer and the headlamp are missing, the brake cables are frayed, the carrier straps are inner tubes knotted together – and these are just the defects visible to my inexperienced eye.

We tie my bag with the inner tubes to the carrier, with a pump on top. I get on the saddle behind him and we're on our way. Even before we leave the village, Benjamin is already speeding. He has to go back today – a one-way trip is 260 kilometers – and we have lost another hour altogether. The bumps in the road launch me off the bike a few times, while my feet rest loosely on the metal pipe beneath me. I hold the bars of the carrier firmly on both sides and I can barely see in front of me, not least the potholes in the road ahead.

Within ten minutes, my hands are cramping, but more importantly, I can see a potential accident around every corner and in every pothole. I realize that if Benjamin loses control of his bike, or if I get thrown off, I won't be able to count on help. I'm not wearing a helmet: he hasn't been able to get one for me. But am I going to be afraid all day? I take heart and convince myself to relax, hold the bars loosely and let my worries go. If I want to reach the border today, there is no other option than to go with Benjamin. I can only hope that my guardian angels will hold on to my shoulders, which are constantly shaking with the sudden movements of the bike.

Within a few kilometers, the first police shack emerges. According to a handwritten note on a board, this is the *Securité*

de Route or Road Safety. We haven't even come to a full stop when Benjamin hands over some money to one of the policemen, although I hiss in his ear not to do so. 'But this is Africa, you don't understand.' Yes, I know that people here often blithely give money to policemen, hoping in this way to avoid discussions and get through controls more quickly. And admittedly, I don't understand that. This automatism is precisely the reason why the system remains intact. Every vehicle here has defects and so it's easier to buy off a check in advance. Yet, by doing so, that money doesn't benefit society but disappears directly into the pockets of the officer. How many times have I had this discussion with people in this region?

'Why did you pay that policeman?'

'Well, that's how we do it here.'

'What would be a reason for not paying?'

'Not paying? You can't. If you don't pay, you don't know what will happen.'

'But if all your papers are in order, the officer has no reason to be difficult, right?'

'No, but he doesn't have a high salary.'

'What about you? Is your salary higher than the officer's?'

'No, it's not.'

'You told me you were a teacher?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'You have an important profession: you are educating the future of your country. You deserve to be paid for that. Why would you give up part of your salary to a cop?'

At this point, I often see a thoughtful face. They never looked at it like that. But Africans have an admirable respect for authority and the policemen take advantage of that. I'm a cheeky foreigner who isn't intimidated by a uniform, even less so if it's worn right down to the wire.

I join the Africans in everything. I eat their food, even though sometimes it's unpalatable. I juggle plastic bowls in a tub of water to wash myself, in the beam of a torch because there is no running water or electricity. I squeeze myself into their bulging vehicles that should have been discarded twenty years ago and where I sometimes must hold the door to prevent it from falling in the street. They have to stop every half hour or less for the umpteenth repair, so you always arrive much later than you thought. I wait with them for boats that don't arrive, trains that don't leave, border offices that are closed. I laugh with them at their casual sense of humor and admire their purity, their endless inventiveness and resilience. I shake hands and embrace them and have long since taken them to my heart, simply because they are who they are. How often do they call me the White African? But in situations with authorities, I'm not a White African, but a straightforward, principled Dutchman. The easiest thing would be to pay. But that is precisely the point: I'm not here to take the easy way out.

Benjamin has already paid, so the policemen are in a good mood and are now looking at me eagerly. That foreigner will have to give much more. But I don't give anything, so I wait. 'Passport.'

I hand over the document and see that the officer goes through it slowly, examining each stamp as if looking for spelling mistakes. Almost all sixty-four pages are already full. Stamps in green, blue, red, black, some still fresh, some already faded, so there's a lot to see and a lot to decipher. After a while, I notice that he is holding the passport upside down. I point it out to him, he pretends nothing is wrong and composedly continues to leaf through it. He asks for my vaccination booklet. Fortunately, I just had a new yellow fever vaccination. A

year before, also in Cameroon, an agent kept emphasizing that my yellow fever would expire two months later, that it was no longer valid and that giving him money would solve everything. Creative corruption. Two documents are now in order. He has to look for something new. 'Where is the *Ordre de Mission*?'

Benjamin didn't mention anything about this, so I pretend not to understand. The officer explains: he wants to see a letter from the mayor of Yokadouma, permitting me to leave town. I argue, making it clear that I have a valid visa, that I'm on my way to the Central African Republic and that nobody in the village has told me that I would need special permission from the mayor to travel to my destination. He realizes that this is a dead-end, looks in despair at his mate. What now? 'Open your luggage.'

It's time to put an end to this. I don't feel like taking down the luggage that Benjamin has painstakingly tied to his carrier with the old, torn inner tubes threatening to burst at the touch, just for a useless inspection. I ask him as politely as I can what would be his reason for inspecting my luggage. After all, we're still a few hundred kilometers from the border. He doesn't know either. With my documents in hand, I tell Benjamin, 'Come on, let's go.'

We walk back to the bike, one of the officers reluctantly pulls down the rope and with a friendly greeting, Benjamin accelerates. In their haste to collect some money, the officers have forgotten that they are actually at a road safety station: they never checked the whole bike. They could have found a whole list of shortcomings there. Or wait, Benjamin had indeed already paid for that check and this is actually not about safety at all.

The road, which runs through the dense jungle like a brown-red ribbon, turns out to be used mainly by large trucks carrying sea containers and gigantic tree trunks heading west. The arrival of the huge oncoming vehicles is announced far in advance. The approaching behemoths blow red clouds into the air – you can only see the front of the cabs as they emerge from the clouds later. The juggernauts take up the entire width of the road, so we make sure to get to the shoulder in time, waiting for the worst of the dust to settle and trying to cover our faces as best we can with our hands. Nevertheless, our ears, eyes, mouths and nostrils are soon filled with fine brown-red sand.

Logging is the only thing this region has to offer. They are plentiful: giant trees so tall that their tops touch, far above our heads. I suspect that the Chinese are cutting down trees to their heart's content. I imagine that after a long journey by road, all these dusty trunks will be transferred to a ship for the much longer boat trip to China once they reach the coast. There, they will be turned into tables, chairs, beds and cupboards, which will be polished off in a shiny finish and end up in one of the gray uniform housing blocks in Shanghai or Beijing or one of the many other Chinese multi-million-inhabitant metropolises that we don't even know exist. Ah, if only the residents of those flats could look around here to see where their furniture comes from!

Of course, there are more checkpoints and more police officers ahead. I ask Benjamin several times how many more we are going to see, but every time he says we have seen the last one, another comes along. I keep forgetting that he, too, is navigating this road for the first time. At some stations, the officers are friendly and surprised to see a white man on the back of a motorbike. But most of them make my life difficult. Benjamin is

resigned to everything, working hard today to earn money with an assignment he only partially knows about. For this reason alone, I can hardly bear the aggressive, greedy looks and the sometimes arrogant attitude of the officers, especially since they ultimately radiate total uselessness. Often, by the way, they aren't even wearing uniforms, but dusty t-shirts and faded trousers. Sitting in the middle of a jungle, where no one lives, with only the occasional large lorry transporting their raw materials at high speed to a distant country. And then holding up the rope and stopping a *boda-boda* passing by because there might be a few thousand francs to scrape out of it.

Benjamin no longer pays the men, so he is also checked. To my chagrin, at the sixth checkpoint, he turns out not to have his driving license with him. Now the policemen have a justifiable argument to be troublesome. This was exactly the reason I had urged him to bring all his papers. But perhaps he has no driving license at all? It just goes to show that these checkpoints aren't actually about checking anything, but only about cashing.

We drive for hours through dense rainforest, with an occasional clearing where huts stand alongside the red ribbon of the road. Women sit stirring huge pans on the fire. Men chat under a big tree. Children run after us, shouting. The question that arises is: why did these people start living here at the edge of the road? Far from everything, with the guarantee of heavy trucks that take away their only capital every day, for which they will never see anything in return, except an ever-thickening layer of red dust on the fragile roofs of their simple huts.

Benjamin sometimes makes steering errors, misjudges the depth of potholes, or simply overlooks them. When we're launched off the road, my heart stops and I hold onto the bike as tight as I can to avoid falling off after landing. I hope my little

angels are still clinging to my shoulders because if things go wrong, the nearest hospital is very far away. Moreover, who would take me there in the first place?

Many dust showers later, we finally reach the turnoff to Libongo, a crossroads at a forest clearing. We turn left and soon come across a barrier. A man comes out of his booth, pulls a serious face and asks for money. I make a joke of it, whereupon a broad smile breaks through his face. He is employed by one of the companies that chop wood here. He says he never asks for money, but he thought he could get some from a foreigner. We shake hands and he wishes us a good ride.

This road turns out to be very different from the main road we have been traveling so far. It's a narrow red lane that runs straight through the green heart of Africa. No more controls, no villages, no people, no openings in the forest, no trucks, no dust showers. Hardly any potholes. I can relax now. Below us: red, beside us: green, above us: blue. The world reduced to its primary colors.

Then, suddenly, Benjamin makes an emergency stop. I'm violently pushed into his back. Excitedly, he shouts: 'Look!' When I raise my head from his back and look in front of us, I see them. A group of huge gorillas in the middle of the road, with the silverback as the proud center. Benjamin is scared, that much is clear. Who knows, maybe he has never seen them before? While we stand there and look at the gray-black hominids who make no move to leave, I realize that in Uganda or Rwanda you have to dig deep into your pockets to see them. Here, they come as a bonus during a drive through the jungle. When the group has finally moved a bit towards the verge,

Benjamin takes his chances. He speeds up, steers as much to the right as possible and drives partially through the verge on the other side of the road. The silverback raises his head and makes himself impressively big, but we have already passed him and I look back in awe, just as the silverback looks at me in amazement.

The African colors of red, orange, pink, blue and gray in the sky announce that the day is coming to an end. Along the road, for the first time since the turn-off, we see a human being. A Pygmy. He is holding a dead blue duiker in his hand. Benjamin stops to chat while the big black eyes of the little deer stare at me innocently. The man lives in Libongo: fifteen minutes later, we drive into the border village. It took us almost eight hours to get here and I'm afraid I'm much too late to cross the border.

Benjamin is beaming. For him, this was as much of an adventure as it was for me and he enjoyed it. I pay him more than we had agreed for all his trouble and ask him if he is actually going to drive the 260 kilometers back to Yokadouma. He would be on his own, less than an hour and a half before sunset, with gorillas and probably other animals along the road. Without a headlight. Not to mention the checkpoints. He nods. He doesn't heed my advice to stay the night. I will never know if he arrived home safely.

The immigration office is closed, but after some walking and asking around, I quickly find the officer. He decorates my passport with a fresh exit stamp. He is cooperative and even finds someone who can help me find transportation across the border so that I can actually leave the country. The Central African Republic is on the other side of the Sangha River and I would

preferably like to cross that river today. I also ask around about buses back to Yokadouma, but nobody can tell me anything decisive. Sometimes there is a bus, sometimes not. Yes, I suspected as much.

A load of goods has arrived which also needs to be transported to the other side and has already been loaded onto a large *piroque*, so I'm in luck. With all the tree giants of the rain-forest around me, it comes as no surprise that this wooden canoe is also huge. Some passengers are already seated. There is a boy at the stern and behind him, a man in a military uniform with a cap and a woman in a bright yellow-blue-green-orange robe. I take my place behind them. Behind me lie boxes and crates and a recently slaughtered cow. The head is loose, the legs are still attached to the rest of the moist skin and the meat is in bags standing next to it. The bulge of Bayanga, to the south of the country, is so isolated and inaccessible from the rest of the Central African Republic that supplies come from Cameroon. And well, borders. For me, the CAR means a new stamp, another new country, another step closer to my goal – I still have fourteen to go. But borders here have been artificially drawn by European gentlemen in top hats who, with cigars in their mouths, stood bent over the map of Africa in the nineteenth century. Africans take a much more pragmatic view.

On the other side is Bamanjoko, where a man in a hut writes my name in a school notebook. I don't even get a visa – he says I will get one the next day, in Bayanga. For years, I have wondered how to enter this country and where to get a visa. The official doesn't even ask for money. That is the beauty of Africa: even if you have traveled here a lot, it never ceases to amaze you.

When I walk out of the hut, I see that a couple of boys are

busy loading the cargo of the *piroque* onto a white Toyota pickup. Around them, a large group of people are inspecting the goods. Once everything is lifted and pulled onto the car, the rear bumper almost touches the ground. Everything is held in place by a large black net. The seats in the car were already taken before we came ashore, and the only place left for us is to sit on the net. That is quite a challenge because they have built the goods like a pyramid, with steep walls you have the tendency to slide down, especially when the car drags itself through the deep pits of the endless road to Bayanga.

Rod and Tam, the South African owners of Sangha Lodge, turn out to be sensitive, warm-hearted people who do everything they can to make me feel at home here. Immediately after my arrival that night, they even make a pizza for me. Lit by two candles and the oil lamp, we gradually get to know each other. I eat and listen. They have had a difficult time: while everyone advised them to flee the country's ferocious civil war, they have stayed in this remote corner of the country.

The few visitors who come here do so, almost without exception, by chartered airplane. Rod is curious about my experiences and hears me out about the trip that brought me here from Yaoundé. Then, we discuss possible activities for the coming days. After the long journey here, I can finally focus on my goal: discovering the Central African forest. Because of the myriad obstacles on the way here, I already know I will have that jungle all to myself.

As always, it's exciting to arrive in the dark and not see the surroundings until the next day. I wake up in total darkness. The loud sound of the awakening jungle around me isn't interrupted by anything. Outside, the cover of night is slowly being lifted. I sit down on the spacious wooden veranda. The water in the wide, brown river is flowing fast, towards the south, where it will flow into one of the biggest rivers in Africa: the Congo. Eventually, it will end up in the Atlantic Ocean. A low fog hangs over the Sangha and its emerald fringe. Every once in a while, the cry of an animal emerges from the jungle, which is all around me. From all sides, I hear the twittering of birds in an overwhelming cacophony. I have arrived in the dark, beating heart of Africa.

After a while, Tam comes walking onto the veranda with a pangolin hanging from her shoulder. The scaled animal looks around with small beady eyes, its pointed snout sticking up in the air. While we're talking, she puts the animal in my hand. It immediately rolls up and it's suddenly a lot smaller. Pangolins are endangered here. They are easy to catch and are therefore regularly on the menu. Tam and Rod have taken it upon themselves to buy the animals at markets and give them a second life at their lodge.

Meanwhile, the river comes to life. Several *pirogues* sail by, carrying fishermen looking for prey. After getting a visa in my passport a few hours later, I start hunting for something completely different. A comfortable one-and-a-half-hour ride takes a ranger and me to Bai Hakou, the center of gorilla tracking of Dzanga-Sangha National Park.

Two Ba-Aka Pygmies join us. One of them walks ahead of us, right through the jungle. He picks up the pace. Without stopping even once, he determinedly leads us through the dense jungle via a tangle of paths. Every few steps, he snaps a blade of grass: markers to find the way back. My guide and I

walk behind him, followed by the second native. The longer we walk, the more I realize how vast this area is and how impenetrable the jungle. Because of the large trees and dense vegetation lower down, our view is never more than a few dozen meters. How are we ever going to find gorillas here? The age-old thrill of safaris: there are no guarantees, you have to be lucky and, apart from looking around, you have little influence on what you will see. Good guides often make the difference.

When the Ba-Aka finally stops, he points down. Gorilla droppings. We're on their trail, I think, and I can feel my heart pounding with excitement. My sense of direction tells me that we're constantly walking in circles, but without even being able to see where the sun is, it's very difficult to find your bearings. The guides are in radio contact for a while and then we see them.

Three people.

Is this it, after two hours of walking? The men say nothing. When they see us, one of them puts his index finger over his mouth, his fingertip against his nose. Then they step apart as if they were following a script.

Right behind them, I see four large black spots among the abundant greenery. When we carefully walk forward until we're a few meters away, we can see, hear, smell and almost feel them. This is the Makumba family, the guide whispers in my right ear. The silverback is in the middle, he seems to be completely absorbed. He is sitting on the ground, chewing on bright red fruit. He regularly frowns. He seems to be in a philosophical mood. Yet Makumba means speed: this colossus can shoot through the forest like a flash when circumstances call for it. His two children, a girl and a boy, live up in the trees, climbing, jumping, running, romping. Nothing is foreign to the

young gorillas. The young lady especially seems to know no fear and sometimes runs right past us. The parents have long since outgrown this phase of play.

The men turn out to be researchers and whisper explanations in my ear. They do their utmost to put me in the best possible position to observe the primates and take pictures of them. They do their own observations themselves. All the behavior is coded and timestamped in a notebook. The disadvantage of this is that after exactly one hour they know it's time to say goodbye. One hour is the maximum time visitors are allowed to spend around gorillas.

Finding the way back is no problem for the Ba-Aka. Using the snapped blades as signposts, the Pygmy walks back to the world without any problems. That evening, there is even a dash of wifi in the lodge and from this dark heart of Africa, I call my father to congratulate him on his birthday. For a moment, the feeling of total isolation and distance completely disappears.

The next day, the guide and I drive to another place in the park for a different kind of safari. A Ba-Aka accompanies us and after a short drive, we walk for half an hour, partly through a small river, to a large wooden platform that lies on the edge of a *bai*. Water flows through this large clearing in the forest, making it the perfect place to admire the animals of Dzanga-Sangha. Once I get used to doing nothing but sitting and watching, I'm glad that Rod advised me to take the whole day for this. Not in a swinging and bouncing jeep, not in a kayak, not on a horse and not walking, but just sitting on a wooden bench. My camera and lenses are around me and a bottle of water is within reach. Sheer joy. As if I were sitting in the loge of a theater with an endless show where the curtains are always open and there is never a break.

In the jungle, it's very difficult to spot animals, but here you can't miss them. The large opening is full of water sources, which makes it irresistible to all the wildlife. We see dozens of elephants on the plain. They stick their trunks into the gray soil, slurp up the equally gray water and move on. The little ones blow bubbles in the small pools. Or they shower themselves. Aside from elephants, there are bongos, reddish-brown antelopes with white stripes on their sides, herds of water buffaloes and a wide variety of birds. My guide says that a few years ago, before the civil war, there were many more animals here. Poachers seized their chance in the lawlessness of the war. A wonderfully relaxing day in the middle of the jungle doesn't end until late in the afternoon. While we're wading through the river on our way back, I'm holding my camera bag over my head, when we see a lone elephant approaching us. The guide gets a bit nervous and finally manages to chase the mastodon away by having us all make some noise.

The following day, I go hunting with the Ba-Aka – with nets. To my surprise, our party consists mainly of women. After they have loaded their nets and other supplies, we drive on in our pickup through the jungle. The women are singing in the boot while the guide throws a dilemma at me. Do I want them to kill an animal after they catch it? If so, they will do this on the spot.

So, the question is: do I want to sign the death warrant of their prey and witness its execution? My decadent Western urban sentiment resists – I still remember that matted look in the lifeless eyes of the dead blue duiker I saw a few days earlier. The guide offers me an alternative: if I pay them the equivalent of an animal, they will set it free. But with this remorse money, they will still buy another animal on the market that will disappear into the *marmite* tonight. On balance, it doesn't matter

what I decide: the dwarf people are going to hunt anyway, and an animal is going to die. The women's songs remind me of this. Or are they singing love songs? Whatever the case, the energy is palpable: everyone is in the mood. During the ride to the jungle, I'm torn between the women's lively singing and my guilt about the imminent death of an animal. When we disembark, I inform the guide that the kill will be for the hunters. It elicits a cry of delight from the leader of the group.

We walk into the forest, the hunters spread out with their nets and communicate with each other via shouts, which echo under the dense canopy above us. Net hunting is hoping for a lucky catch. The hunters spread out through the forest, unable to see each other, but knowing exactly what to do. They hang their nets low on the branches so that they touch the ground and eventually form a large circle. Then, within the circle, they systematically search for animals trapped in this cage of nets. It doesn't seem efficient because if there aren't any animals in the huge cage, the deployment of the nets has been for nothing. With the dense vegetation, the Pygmies don't have much choice because the animals that live here are smaller than the vegetation and therefore difficult to spot and catch.

The hunters' energy is infectious, and I watch with them as they hang up their nets and search the jungle for possible prey for the evening's dinner. We push deeper and deeper into the jungle. However, even after they have made five circles, the yield is nil. Meanwhile, one of the women I'm with shows me how they make the nets from plants they find here and how they drink water from tree bark. The Ba-Aka have lived in this jungle for centuries, it's their home and they know exactly what they can use and for what purpose. They go home without any loot: time for a vegetarian dinner. Or, at least, get an animal at the market, but I won't live to see that. Secretly, I feel relieved.

At the beginning of my long journey home, I visit an American writer who moved here years ago. He tells me about the recent crisis, how his documents were stolen by rebels, how he went into hiding from the violence, how he came back to this house and how he will stay in this remote corner in the heart of Africa that he has come to love. I leave my luggage with him and walk back to the village to find a motorcyclist who can take me to the border. The sun casts ever-warmer hues over the houses and the landscape as we ride towards the light.

I don't bat an eyelid when the rider is tearing along narrow paths. After a while, he tells me that I'm the first white guy who hasn't told him to slow down. Whether that is a compliment, I don't know. Apparently, I have become a bit more reckless. At the border, my details are written down once more in the notebook and the man behind the rickety table asks for a contribution to buy medicine for his sick wife.

At the river's edge, the men of the big *pirogues* know they have me in their clutches. I have to get to the other side and the sun is already almost touching the horizon above Cameroon. They demand a price ten times higher than what Rod had advised me. I refuse, walk away, talk to others and ask around if I can sleep somewhere in one of the huts. Then, I see a young guy with a small boat and offer him a few thousand francs. When he hears my proposal, his eyes light up. Much to the chagrin of the others who approach us menacingly, we sail away a little later, due south, past an island in the river, to Cameroon. Upon arrival, I immediately walk to the village square where the bus leaves. Next to the little office, with the sign *Alliance Voyages – la maîtrise de la route*, is the old prison bus that I know well, with the same familiar number plate. Luck is on my side.

The next morning, as the sun begins its climb into the sky above the dense jungle of the Central African Republic, where Pygmies will once again be casting their nets, strong men load all the luggage onto the roof, the bus fills up quickly and I'm even allowed to sit next to the driver. Better still: on my right-hand side is a soldier, who manages to talk me past every checkpoint without further ado. Gradually, the cow corpse, the dead duiker, the gorillas, the forest elephants and their bubble-blowing youngsters, the hunting Ba-Aka and all those other intensely lived and often raw experiences of the last few days become vivid memories. A new reality presents itself. I'm on my way back to electricity and running water, to asphalt, to cops who aren't after my money, to cities, to predictability, and finally: back home. Far, far away from adventure.