

ROD AND TAMAR CASSIDY, FOUNDERS OF SANGHA LODGE



Dzanga Bai, Dzanga Sangha NP, CAR



The lodge chalets..

What was your original vision for Sangha Lodge?

The usual answer: to establish a reasonable lodge that uplifted the standards in Central Africa to compare with East and Southern Africa, that could contribute to conservation and community... But, more than this, we wanted to show the world a different side to Africa than just the charismatic animals. The Congo Basin has the richest biodiversity on the continent – there's so much more to see and do than look at our elephants and gorillas. Eventually we hope to increase tourists' awareness of this environment with a variety of activities similar to what the lodges in the Amazon offer – such as canopy walkways, tree climbing, kayaking and so on. All of these will bring sustainable jobs to a population that currently exists on consumptive utilisation of the forests.

What challenges have you faced along the way and how have you overcome them?

Our biggest challenge has been the war that broke out following the coup de tête in 2013. All tourism died and the expats running the NGO responsible for running the park left. The local population felt abandoned and turned to the forest for their livelihood. The impact of this was huge. Elephant poaching began and at one point 26 elephants were killed in a single incident by the rebel army. At this time, we were broke and stuck outside the country; but, thanks to a lot of help and donations from friends, we returned and became the eyes and ears for conservation in the area.

What can travellers expect to see and learn at Sangha Lodge?

Sangha Lodge is in the heart of the rainforest, with access to habituated lowland gorillas and the best forest elephant experience in the world: the famous Dzanga Bai. Apart from having the richest biodiversity in Africa, there is always something new to learn – even for those of us who have lived here for eight years. Hopefully travellers will learn not only about wildlife, conservation and the rich diversity, but also about some of the people who manage to live in perfect harmony with this environment, The Ba'aka people.



What makes Sangha Lodge a unique experience for travellers?

The Congo Basin speaks for itself. Between Sangha Lodge and Odzala in the Republic of the Congo, we are the only two lodges functioning in this environment. Dzang Bai is, without a doubt, the most amazing elephant experience in the world. We cater for special interests on top of this and offer expert advice on birding, butterflies, mammal-watching, night walks and more.

What's the most surprising reaction you've had from a traveller at Sangha Lodge?

Most clients visiting us have low expectations and are blown away by the lodge and the wildlife. I think our biggest surprise has been the huge generosity shown by a number of our past clients when the crisis in this country happened and we had to survive with little or no income. Their genuine concern for us and the wildlife around us kept us alive for two years. Our clients arrive as guests, but leave as friends – that's for sure.

How does the Lodge benefit local people and wildlife?

Employment: We have 16 permanent staff at Sangha Lodge and a further 14 staff working on a pangolin research and conservation. Community: We support two local schools and clothe over 20 indigent children attending those schools. We support local farmers with seeds for vegetables and also buy as much of our produce locally as possible. Conservation: We run a pangolin research and conservation programme, which began life as a small rescue-and-release programme for pangolin from the bush meat markets (there was a big increase in this trade during the war); so far we've released a total of over 70 pangolins from the trade, but this has raised more questions about pangolins than it answered and, as such, we're pleased to say that we should welcome our first research students in the coming year. In the meantime, we have a team of Ba'aka tracking an already habituated pangolin and monitoring her every day.

How is Sangha Lodge helping to show a different side of Africa?

This is easy to answer: as most tourism in Africa is about savannah habitats and coastal beach tourism, we are one of but a few who show the lowland tropical rainforest in all its glory.



Rod holding a black bellied Pangolin Pangui– courtesy of Sangha Lodge



The Ba'aka people –courtesy of Sangha Lodge

By KATIE PALMER

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