

Travel

In the village of Ngabe, on the shores of the Congo River, in a clearing scraped out of the green, a crowd waited with nervous anticipation for the arrival of an Ejengi, a forest spirit. Women jived and clapped to a beat set by a corps of drummers whose foreheads shone with sweat. The air was clammy and over bright, and every so often one of the men would pause to take a long swig of something from a dirty bottle. Finally, from behind a daub-walled hut it appeared, the Ejengi, an oblong form shrouded in tendrils of dry raffia palm. It was an effigy of abundance — a large meal would be taken after the performance — but also demise; its touch portended death, and when it went careening into the crowd, its botanical cloak flaring out as it spun to and fro, people whooped and fled.

I stood at the edge of the spectacle, aware of my uselessness and ignorance, watching the river stream by with the dancers stamping dust into the air, when Kevin Ngapoula leaned over to me and motioned to the twirling shape. “It’s just a small person in there,” he said. “Look, you can see his feet.”



There was a dismissal of superstition in his voice, even though Kevin was a local of sorts, having been born and raised in Brazzaville before emigrating to Australia in 2000 at the age of 20. Yet later, he was reluctant to join us for a walk into the forest, where he said his ancestors lived. “Their spirits are there,” he said. “I have to leave them in peace, and let them come to me. It’s been that way since I was a boy.”

Kevin and I were travelling through the Republic of the Congo by boat, as passengers on the Princesse Ngallessa, a snub-nosed, multi-tiered vessel operated by Expeditions Ducret. In 2024, it began running a series of pioneering “safari cruises” on the Congo and its tributaries, with wildlife extensions into neighbouring countries: tracking gorillas and elephants in Dzanga-Sangha National Park in the Central African Republic, and bonobos in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Ours was an eight-day culture-focused journey from Brazzaville up the Congo, then the Sangha River, to Ouesso, the furthest point of navigation a boat the Ngallessa’s size could manage within the country.

We were nine (though the boat holds 28), an international group of Germans, French, Australians, and Canadians, speaking a muddled, tripartite tongue as we lounged at the rooftop bar (“*Zwei gin tonic, s’il vous plait*”), watching the thickly forested verge of the river slip by.

“This is luxury,” Kevin announced the first day, and he knew what he was talking about, because he had made a similar journey almost 30 years before, huddling with his family on a crowded barge all the way from Brazzaville to the upriver city of Mossaka, to wait out a month of heavy fighting during the 1997 civil war. One can still travel that way today, aboard wooden vessels called daka-dakas, for the pattering sound of their black-smoking engines, on which people squat over camp stoves and sleep under patchy tarps for the two weeks it takes to go between Kinshasa and Kisangani (on the DRC side of the Congo River), or Brazzaville and Ouesso. I asked Kevin about that experience. “You cook,” he said. “The sun. The mosquitoes. They cook you.”

Aboard the Princesse Ngallessa we had sun and, occasionally, mosquitoes. But we also had private, air-conditioned cabins with en suite showers and thick mattresses, WiFi and a chef who prepared



A cruise up the Congo

Republic of the Congo | A new voyage takes *JR Patterson* up Africa’s second longest river, offering a glimpse of a very different way of life



three square meals a day, sometimes featuring roast beef, quiche and profiteroles. (Although, like Kevin, you could opt instead to have only Congolese fare, the other food being, as he told me, “*Pona bino mindele*” — for you white people.)

We had all been lured by the evocation of a name: Congo. The word leaves the mouth like a double drumbeat, summoning ideas of adventure and jeopardy. Or, perhaps, desperation, disease, darkness. Whatever one’s impression, there are any number of writers whose description of the river promulgates the arcane: Joseph Conrad (who called it a “devil-god”); André Gide (“a silent, brooding giant”); Redmond O’Hanlon (“sultry, oppressive”); VS Naipaul (“the

Clockwise from main: a fisherman on the Sangha River, a tributary of the Congo; bird- and hippo-spotting from the deck; an Ejengi, or forest spirit, in the village of Ngabe; the Princesse Ngallessa

JR Patterson

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JR Patterson was a guest of Expeditions Ducret (expeditions-ducret.com). An eight-night cruise costs from €4,575, full-board and including an internal flight between Ouesso and Brazzaville



great highway” on a “journey through nothingness”); Alain Mabanckou (an artery pulsing “in decay”); Tchicaya U Tam’si (“river of blood”).

It is indisputably Conrad whose work has had the greatest influence, not only impelling many of the others to the region, but, with his 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*, instilling a perceptual malaise over Central Africa that has come to define the Congo River and the wider region.

That was not Conrad’s intention (at least in my reading) — the darkness he imagined emanated not from the country, but from within the hearts of unscrupulous outsiders, their belief in their inherent superiority, and in the colonial practices they endorsed and abided, which he decried as the “vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration.” His work, based on a six-month stay in 1890 during which time he travelled by steamer up the river into what was then called, in a wildly ironic misnomer, the Congo Free State, was a grim treatise on the mutilating effect that solitude and power can have upon the soul.

From Ngabé, we carried on upstream on the Congo, whose apparent stillness was only an illusion. Once off the Ngallessa, in a skiff, with the brown water curling away like freshly ploughed soil, it became clear just how quickly the current moved against us on its way to the Atlantic (the Congo becomes an unnavigable turmoil downstream of Brazzaville). It gave me a great appreciation of the skill and strength of the men and women who came alongside the ship on thin wooden pirogues, paddling mightily, then holding on to the taffrail while selling us fish and fruits.

We left the larger boat every day, to birdwatch or spot hippos, take a walk in the forest, or visit riverside villages, which were nearly all scattered collections of clay-walled, thatched-roofed huts ensconced within a warm fug of fire smoke. Under my western eyes, these villages were elemental — austere

dwellings surrounded by bush no road penetrated, where malaria, a common ailment, was treated with a tea of boiled leaves and bark. I wondered how the houses survived the vicious downpours that came almost every day, so frail did they look. We passengers found comparisons to our own cushioned lives, and the comfort we had aboard the Ngallessa, impossible to avoid.

We weren’t exactly following Conrad’s route. Where he continued along the sickle-bend of the Congo to present-day Boyoma Falls (in the neighbouring DRC), we slipped on to the Sangha River at Mossaka, turning north and going deeper into the Republic of the Congo.

Later that day, we stopped at the small fishing village of Likenzé, where we watched fishermen build and set wicker fish traps. Others crushed palm nuts using a giant screw set into a 55-gallon drum, the pungent red oil from the nuts pouring out through a spigot into a plastic jug. In his Congo-set 1896 short story “An Outpost of Progress”, Conrad



has one of the protagonists predict that, a hundred years hence, the rivers of the upcountry would be plied with “Quays, and warehouses, and barracks, and — and — billiard-rooms. Civilization, my boy, and virtue — and all.” Leaving aside the notion that virtue was always here, that infrastructure has not come to pass in any grand sense. What has appeared are solar panels that power water pumps, radios, and televisions (but few cell phones, as there is little reception). In Likenzé, I talked with a man charging a small battery. It was for his television, he said, for “le football”. And if he couldn’t find a game? “*Alors, peut-être, Rambo.*”

So tightly wound are our perceptions that one needs to guard against the idea that going up a tropical river takes one back in evolutionary time. This is true even when you encounter in the forest a

lungfish, a species at home both on land and in water, with limb-like tendrils it uses to drag itself along the ground. One night, the Ngallessa motored through the darkness, navigating by a searchlight that constantly swept the banks, the clumps of hyacinth on the water showing white. Soft thunder purled in the distance; lightning blistered the sky. Walking the top deck in my bare feet, I listened to a chorus of frogs, which sounded like a thousand separate cries of “Where am I?”

A few days later, in the village of Pikounda, we were greeted by indigenous Luma people (once, derogatorily, known as pygmies) who maintain a subsistence lifestyle, hunting duiker and red river hogs, collecting honey, and foraging for ground pineapples, sought for their aphrodisiacal properties.

Yet when I said “it’s a tough life”, Kevin shook his head and said, “you think it’s tough because you can’t do it. They’re like birds.” There was no malice or ill-intent in his words; he meant their culture of self-reliance. From the age of six (with no birth certificates, this is understood to be when one arm can touch the opposite ear over the head),



children are expected to feed themselves, going into the forest unaided to forage and hunt.

When you watch them do these things, as we did, you can begin to question your sense of what you are doing with your life. Did I not want to live free of time, to paddle a pirogue, and throw the circular “sparrowhawk” fishing net? Did I not want to hunt the red river hog with a homemade rifle? To sleep in a house made of reed and leaves? To see in the people around me all the people of the world? To see in this vast wilderness not struggle and strife, but all the comfort and security of home?

In reality, as we know, everything is always quite different. I shared my thoughts of escape with Kevin, who looked askance at me. “Think about that,” he said. I did and — alas! — there was not a book in any village. It would be difficult to have my Conrad and eat lungfish, too. “Anyway,” said Kevin, “you’re too tall to live in the forest.”

I knew I was lucky to be travelling alongside someone like Kevin, who, with his local knowledge and earnest pragmatism, was a refreshing, brusque presence among our band of visitors. “Never heard of him,” he said, when a dinner-time conversation turned to Conrad.

When someone in a village offered me a drink of lotoko, a potent corn-liquor, he pointed to the dusky bottle and said, “You drink that, you won’t get back to the boat”. Instead, he directed me to a toothsome hunk of smoked *Congo ya sika* (a type of bonytongue fish), and later we sat together sharing Primus beer, dousing our food in a sauce made with *mwasi saba*, a local pepper so spicy I could feel it altering the beat of my heart.

By the end, I was perhaps no less useless, no less ignorant, but I was at least not lonely. There, I had outdone Conrad, who, sitting up late at night on his “wretched little stern-wheel steamboat” felt himself beset by melancholy and loneliness, as his surroundings brought about “an end to the idealised realities of a boy’s daydreams”. His ultimate impression of the Congo was like a Goya painting, a bleary landscape of soot and shadow set in a heavy Victorian frame. By the time we arrived in Ouesso, I had my own canvas to fill with people of great and admirable skill, and a new friend, none of it in darkness, but under a grace of light.

A SET-JETTER’S GUIDE TO

The Night Manager



The synopsis: The first season of *The Night Manager* was slick appointment television in pre-Brexit, pre-Trump 2016. A lavish BBC adaptation of a John le Carré novel by the writer and theatre director David Farr (*Spooks*, *McMafia*), it presaged a new era of intelligent spy dramas while relaunching Hugh Laurie as the cut-glass, linen-clad arms dealer Dickie Roper and building talk of Tom Hiddleston as a future James Bond. Le Carré wrote only one novel with these characters, and it took years (and a vivid dream) for Farr to come up with a fresh idea worthy of the original. Season two finds Hiddleston’s Jonathan Pine back, albeit under a new name,

chasing another arms dealer in Colombian businessman Teddy Dos Santos (Diego Calva), who has connections to Roper. Many of the first season’s cast and crew return, from director Georgi Banks-Davies to Olivia Colman as agent Angela Burr, but this one’s generally grittier and steamier than the first season.

On location: Season one made stars of its locations — most notably Marrakech’s Es Saadi hotel, as Cairo’s fictional Nefertiti Hotel, the mountaintop Riffelalp Resort above Zermatt, and Mallorca, where Roper’s family dine at the waterside Ca’s Patró March restaurant in rocky Cala Deià and live at the vast hilltop Sa Fortaleza, said to be the biggest private house on the island (and hireable for weddings from €600,000).

Like the first, the second season was shot entirely on location. There are scenes in England (including a brief cameo for Wellington College), Wales (Three Cliffs Bay on the Gower Peninsula) and across Spain, where

Tenerife stands in for Syria and Hostal de La Gavina (lagavina.com; rooms from around €455), in elegant seafront S’Agaró on the Costa Brava, represents the Medellín Gun Club where Pine and Dos Santos first meet.

But Colombia is the key locale, especially hilly, revived Medellín and coastal Cartagena, with its Afro-Caribbean vibes and colonial walled city. In Medellín, Dos Santos’s house is a private home in the hills 20 minutes’ drive above the city, and there are shots of the city’s cable cars, the brightly painted hillside homes of the Comuna 13 district and the landmark 1940s Hotel Nutibara (hotelnutibara.com; rooms from around £36). In Cartagena, the 18th-century Relais & Châteaux boutique hotel Casa Pestagua (casapestagua.com; rooms from around £415) plays a key role, with the central characters sharing a three-way kiss in its colonial-style courtyard.

Behind the scenes: Farr’s original script set much of the action in Bogotá. But, according to producer Matthew



Patrick, who also worked on the first season, multiple reces led the team to move much of the action from the capital to Colombia’s second city. “Medellín is just so visual, with so much colour, texture and depth,” he says. “Even filming establishing shots, like a drone shot of the cable car, was so exhilarating.” The crew stayed amid the elegant arches and beams of Casa Pestagua during filming in Cartagena. “Normally people kick up a fuss about

From left: Jonathan Pine (Tom Hiddleston) in Medellín in ‘The Night Manager’; Cartagena’s Casa Pestagua hotel — BBC/Ink Factory, Tico 3Palacios

sleeping where they film, but not for this place,” says Patnick.

But, as usual, not everything on screen is as it seems. The Gran Meliá Medellín (“the only hotel in Colombia you’d ever be seen dead at”, according to Pine’s fellow MI6 officer and fixer Sally Price-Jones) is actually the 391-room Torre Melina Gran Meliá in Barcelona (melia.com; rooms from about £253) while a Medellín charity gala in the show was filmed at Barcelona’s neoclassical School of Nautical Studies. “It’s a challenge to shoot a show like this without using a studio,” says Patnick. “But it’s part of the show’s magic. The first season set a standard, and we’ve all known the level we have to deliver this time around.”

Toby Skinner

‘The Night Manager’ continues until February 1 on BBC and Amazon Prime