

THE RIVER IS A ROAD

Searching for peace in Congo
By Bryan Mealer

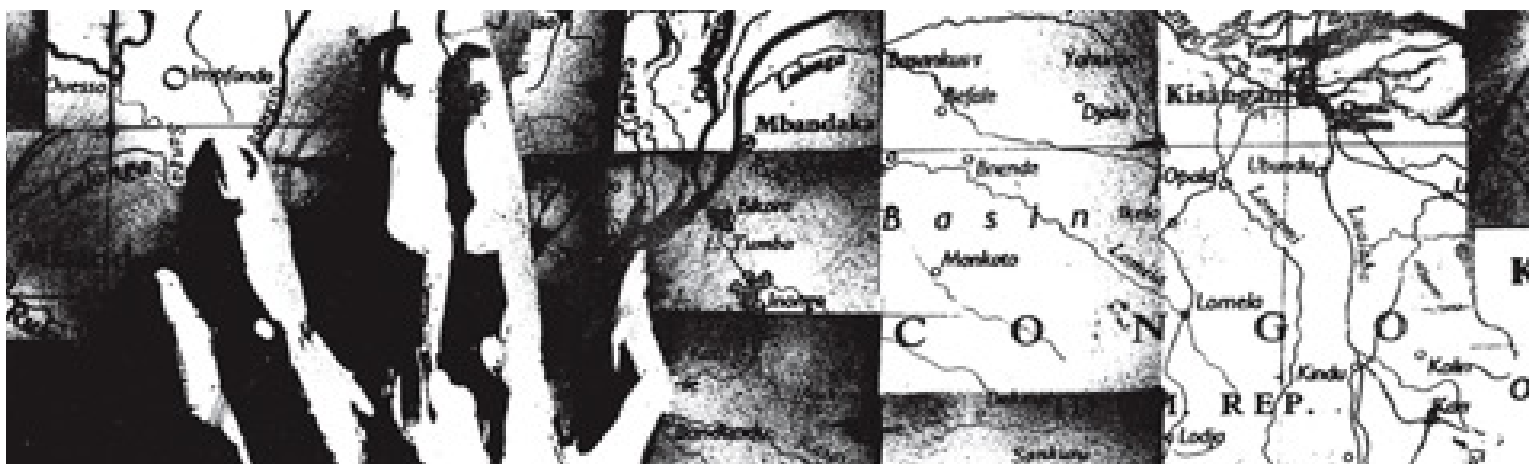
Just after dawn in early October I stood on the banks of Kinshasa's commercial port and stared into a wall of rippling heat that danced on the water. Enormous cranes loomed like giant headless chickens near the water's edge, and beyond them sat the triple-decker tugboat that would take me up the Congo River.

The captain of the *Ma'ungano* was a stout Frenchman named Albert-Henri Buisine, an old soldier who'd been raised in Congo and had spent two decades in the service of Mobutu Sese Seko, the dictator whom he once considered his closest friend, a genius he thought the world was cruel to dismiss. The captain's office was decorated with maps of the region's many rivers, all eight thousand miles of which snaked and splintered across weathered charts on the walls. Sit-

ting behind his desk, the captain explained how the war had closed the rivers and tributaries, isolating millions of Congolese. Soldiers had killed and raped in the villages, so the people had escaped to the capital, leaving behind a way of life they'd nurtured since the proud days of the African kingdoms. Many had walked hundreds of miles through the jungle, leaving their dead along the trail. "And you should see them all now," the captain said. "Starving in the slums while still dreaming of the forest."

The 1996–2003 conflicts had sucked in six African armies, and more than 4 million people had died, most of them from starvation and sickness as villagers fled through jungles to escape the gunfire and pillage. The fighting still flared in spurts along the eastern borders near Rwanda

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and Uganda, but most of Congo was now at peace. In July the country had even held presidential elections, the first since independence from Belgium in 1960.

The end of conflict was good news for the river and the forest, the captain said, because things were finally beginning to heal. Peace and elections had given people a sense of confidence, and for the first time in a century a dream of prosperity was taking hold among the Congolese. Boat captains were braving the river, people were returning home, and money was changing hands. As for the captain, he'd be pushing 2,600 tons of freight on two barges all the way to Kisangani, which is where I wanted to go.

For three years I had covered the bloody aftershocks of the conflict, as a freelancer and as the

The Congo River hooks like a scythe over the equator before emptying into the Atlantic at a rate of one million cubic feet of water per second

Kinshasa correspondent for the Associated Press. I came to Congo looking for war and I found it, spending every waking minute engrossed in its senseless death. In the end, all the blood had gotten to me, and I left Congo and the AP. But now, with peace taking hold, I was beginning to feel some hope for this damaged country. If a revival was happening along the river, I wanted to see it.

I had already spent three days combing the ports, sucking in the dust and exhaust and having no luck finding a ride, discovering I'd just missed one boat going upriver or that another wasn't leaving for weeks. Now, sitting across from Buisine, I was so relieved that I started to gush, explaining how anxious I was to finally pierce the interior and be with the people, see how they really lived. "Live instead of die!" I said, regrettably.

"Bon," the captain said, smiling, and walked

around the desk. "But tell me something. Will you prefer local or European cuisine?"

It's important I give the chef plenty of notice."

The Congo River, like the rain forest it penetrates, is the second largest in the world; only the Amazon carries a greater volume of water. It stretches 3,000 miles from the country's southern highlands and hooks like a scythe over the equator before emptying into the Atlantic at a rate of more than one million cubic feet of water per second. The sheer force of that union has created grooves in the ocean floor almost a mile deep.

The 1,077-mile trip upriver from Kinshasa to Kisangani is one of the world's great journeys. It was along this legendary stretch of water that Arab slave ships once sailed with human cargo bound for the Middle East; here that Henry Morton Stanley battled cannibal tribes and staked the first flags for colonial Belgium, which ruled the country for almost eight decades, killing and torturing tens of millions of Congolese for the ivory and rubber in their forests. And it was on this journey in 1890 that a colonial station agent named Joseph Conrad witnessed so much death that he was inspired to write *Heart of Darkness*, a description the country has yet to live down.

I was traveling with Riccardo Gangale, a photographer based in Kigali, Rwanda, one of a freewheeling fraternity of Italian photographers who usually made their way through bloody Central Africa on motorcycles. I'd also hired a fixer in Kinshasa to help with translations. Severin Mpiana was an electrical engineer with a university degree, but since unemployment was nearly absolute, he was now working with foreign journalists. Severin came from a solidly middle-class family, a rarity in Congo. His father was a banker who'd put five children through college. Severin had never traveled the interior of his own country, so the trip was as much an adventure for him as it was for me.

Our plan was to ride with Buisine as far as Mbandaka, about five days upriver, then jump to



the public barges that cruised the waters carrying hundreds of traders on their decks. We had heard that the barges were crowded and filthy, that some boats were marooned on sandbars for weeks and others sank from overcrowding or collisions in the night. Sanitary conditions were dire, with most barges having only one toilet for hundreds of people. It was a demoralizing and often deadly way to trade and travel, but the resilient Congolese sucked it up and endured. And so would we.

With the *Ma'ungano* leaving the next day, we set to work preparing for our journey. We spent a sweltering afternoon in Kinshasa's central market, purchasing the necessary gear: a durable orange tarp for slapdash shelters; nylon rope; foam mattresses; pots and pans; plastic cups and buckets; pills for pain, malaria, and worms; and dozens of cans of sardines, beans, and corned beef hash. For days, Riccardo and I had dedicated ourselves to a rigorous Get Fat Diet, gorging on steaks, doughnuts, and lots of cold beer, trying to gain weight we'd inevitably lose through sweat and diarrhea. I also brought along the *Traveler's Guide to the Belgian Congo*, an old tour book published in Brussels in 1951, back when the colony was the dazzling gem in darkest Africa. For seventy-five years, the colonial masters had ruled the Congolese with barbarism and oppression. But they'd also built sleek European cities connected by gorgeous highways, luxury trains, and river steamers. How quickly all of that had vanished in the years since independence. The forest had attacked the empire as if it were a gaping wound, leaving only ugly scars.

The *Ma'ungano* was one of the last vestiges of the colonial era, and it was only fitting to begin my journey along its decks. My experience in Congo had always been looking down, from United Nations choppers and armored personnel carriers and balcony apartments shielded by guards and razor wire, from the Land Rovers we used to escape the misery and smell of disease when it all became too much. I knew there'd come a time on this journey when turning back wasn't an op-

tion, and it was only then that I'd find what I wanted to know.

That evening we stayed aboard the *Ma'ungano* drinking cans of Castle beer on the decks, content with our good fortune. Not only did we have a personal chef; we also had a private cabin equipped with soft beds, a hot shower, and an air conditioner more efficient than most I'd owned in the States. I went to bed wired with anticipation and awoke to the rumble of engines in the pink 5:00 A.M. haze. Running outside, I saw the river bubbling under the rudders; it was the color of clean motor oil. Seconds later we were moving, but so slowly that landmarks stayed in view for hours. By late afternoon, we could still see Kinshasa. I passed the next several days in regimental fashion, waking up before light to climb atop the wheelhouse and watch the sunrise, kicking away the thousands of silver-winged moths that had perished in the searchlights the night before. A large breakfast of omelets, bread, and avocado was served on the terrace, and afterward I would jump down to the barges and hang with the crewmen.

One morning Severin and I walked to the tip of the first barge to take in the view. The two barges stretched the length of a football field and were fully loaded, the rounded humps of freight covered in brightly colored tarps. We tiptoed delicately over the ropes and tie-downs that crisscrossed our path, and squeezed around two Chinese passenger vans bound for a customs station deep in the trees. Once we reached the end of the barge, the ever-present sound of the engines faded, leaving only the bright splash of water against the slow-moving steel. In front of us the river stretched five miles across. Patches of puffy green hyacinth floated past, along with colossal islands of grassy earth ripped from the shore by the fierce current. The best seat in the house, I thought, and I wasn't the only one. One of the crewmen already occupied a chair at the edge of the barge. He was fast asleep, with one hand tucked lazily down his pants.

His name was Kalu, and for the past two years he'd worked as a loader and deckhand, traveling the river with Buisine about five times a year.



His true field of expertise was botany, which he'd studied as a forestry student in Kisangani. It was also at university that he'd sung lead vocals in a band that played the dark and sweaty nightclubs of the city.

"My friend and I played all the time. We loved to sing," Kalu said. "I wrote songs about everything: love, disappointment, the slave trade."

Singing was Kalu's passion, but the pressures of a career and a family forced him to abandon the dream. He felt the muse slipping away, so he often spent time on the bow of the boat, waiting for inspiration to strike.

"Maybe the view will make me want to write a song," he said, sighing. And after two minutes of absolute silence, he sat up with a jolt of revelation and calmly proclaimed, "The Congo River is a road. And I am only a witness on this road."

One of his old bandmates, Papi, was also working for Buisine aboard the *Ma'ungano*. Although they saw each other every day on the river, they never reminisced about old times, and Kalu told me he hadn't even sung a note in two years. But this was just a rough patch, a thirty-two-year-old man going through one of life's transitions.

"My music is still in my blood," he said, pausing to gather his thoughts off the soft river sheen. "Maybe it's not over. I figure all I need to do is record two songs, really big songs, and then my voice will become immortal."

A golden voice could do wonders to balance the weight of life along the river. The dark legends still hung like bad fruit from the trees. Beyond these riverbanks were the red-rubber graveyards where Belgium's King Leopold built his rubber kingdom and helped fuel the Industrial Revolution. For decades, thousands of tons of rubber and ivory were carted out of the jungles on the backs of Congolese slaves; it was a horrificera of murder and insanity that emptied the country of half its population. The places we now passed—Kwamouth, Bolobo, Lukolela—were the hunting grounds of the colonial Force Publique, where villages were once torched for failing to meet quotas, where children were butchered, their tiny hands severed and delivered to headquarters.

When one of the crewmen told me they still hauled raw rubber on the barges, I launched into a long speech about the atrocities that had taken place along these *very banks*—the amputations, the village raids, the heads on pikes. I guess I was hoping for some kernel of survivor wisdom in return, something we could all lean on in times of struggle. But when Severin finished translating, the crew stared at me like I'd just asked how to buy a MetroCard.

"No," the guy said, looking at his friends for reactions. "We don't know about this stuff. You might want to ask the old people."

Walking back, Severin shook his head and gasped. "So many people here, they have no idea of their own history."

Perhaps the span of two cruel wars had been enough history for the crewmen to endure. But to Buisine, history was everything, and it all came together right here. "To understand Congo," he'd say, "you must first understand the river."

During the afternoons, when the heat drove us indoors, the captain would stand at the wheel and mix the bad lessons with the good. His eyes would focus on the channel and he'd explain the things he knew, like how the water silvered at dusk and hid the sandbars, or how the bank appeared dangerously close in the cool morning air. He'd point out whirlpools roiling in the deep spots, crocodiles camouflaged in the mud, or, along a wooded island, a tree whose leaves cured hemorrhoids. After the rains, we trained our eyes upriver and watched ghost ships hover over the water. Low pressure from the storm can play tricks on your eyes, the captain explained, and through a pair of binoculars the boats returned to earth as the rust-eaten barges they really were.

At other times Buisine would point to the distant bank, where a brick building stood shrouded in vines and decay, a remnant of colonial days, and tell the story of the hospital or timber mill the locals had permitted the forest to reclaim. He told me how during the grand days of the colony, rivermen pushed more than 200



million tons of product a year up and down the Congo. Now, he says, they're lucky if they move even 2 million. And because there were more and bigger boats, the river was dredged then, and a well-trained captain was easy to find. There were signs posted along the banks indicating sandbars and snags, depth and direction of tributaries; signs telling the rivermen they weren't alone on the black water at night. The captain would wax sentimental about these years before the collapse, when he was young and the country made sense, and during these reveries his eyes never left the river.

He'd been there from the beginning and had watched the dominoes fall one by one. He'd grown up in the eastern town of Bukavu, where his family owned a quarry and cinchona plantation on Lake Kivu. He later served in the French navy and, once discharged, returned to Bukavu looking for quick money and adventure, organizing gorilla tours in nearby Kahuzi-Biega National Park and leading tourists up the smoldering Nyiragongo volcano in the Virunga Mountains.

But the government seized the family's plantation in the mid-1970s, during Mobutu's nationalist land-grab campaign known as "Zairianization." Buisine's uncle walked into his office one morning and found an African sitting in his chair, a mid-level government official from Kinshasa who'd never picked up a shovel. Cinchona (the natural source of quinine) requires meticulous pruning and cultivation, but the new owner rushed the harvest, and the entire crop died. "People whose families had worked there a century committed suicide right then," said Buisine. Years later, Buisine was working at Kinshasa's Palace of the People when he received a phone call one morning at 5:00 A.M. It was President Mobutu, screaming over the line: "Buisine! From now on you work for me." Mobutu had been impressed by the Frenchman's military background and family history in Congo. Buisine took the job. "Despite everything that had happened," he explained, "when the president calls, you can't say no."

Buisine served as Mobutu's personal superin-

tendent for sixteen years, organizing the dictator's daily schedule, security, and logistics. He was chained to Mobutu's shadow at all times, even living four straight years aboard the lavish presidential yacht, the *Kamanyola*, as it drifted aimlessly down the Congo River. Sometimes, when the Big Man's mood was right, Buisine would mention his family's land. "He'd tell me, 'We'll fix that, we'll fix that. *C'est pas grave*,'" Buisine remembers. "Other times he'd say, 'Look at everything Europe lost during the world wars, and it's doing fine now. Don't make such an issue of this Zairianization.'"

And while Mobutu siphoned off billions in public funds to build palaces, like the one deep in

Beyond these riverbanks were the red-rubber graveyards where King Leopold built his rubber kingdom and helped fuel the Industrial Revolution

the jungle equipped with a runway for Concorde jets, and to fly in massuses direct from China, the country rapidly fell apart. Civil servants went unpaid for years, soldiers mutinied and looted the cities clean, inflation soared, water and electricity disappeared, and the average Congolese suffered on \$120 a year. Mobutu's era of kleptocracy and neglect finally ended when rebels marched into Kinshasa in early 1997 and installed Laurent Kabila as president. The Big Man fled to Morocco and later died, and Buisine was taken from his home and arrested. He spent nine months in prison, then retreated, upon his release, to the relative quiet of Kinshasa. There, he waited out the war as it ravaged everything Mobutu hadn't already destroyed.

Buisine now led the simple life of a river rat, making his run six or seven times a year. Each trip was spent in the company of his commander, Abraham Bukasa, a tall, slender man with salt-and-pepper hair, whose own military career had



also been destroyed by the Big Man's many whims. In 1978, gendarmes threw the young navy sergeant into an underground prison on suspicion of aiding a failed coup. Many of his friends were executed or died from abuse.

Bound by military experience and their own place in Congo's tragic history, the two friends now spent their days on the river. "The river was created by God," said the commander.

"It won't change. Only men change."

When United Nations peacekeepers arrived in 2001 to help maintain a cease-fire, Buisine volunteered to help pilot the first U.N. boats upriver to assess the damage; in recent years, as river traffic slowly increased, he has helped the U.N. draft the first modern navigational maps of the Congo River. Many of the earth's navigable bodies of water have been mapped using satellite images, which can be downloaded into onboard computer systems or sold as discs. The images are reflected in the printed charts used by most captains, to update new construction of levees or bridges, and to account for bank erosion and

Smoke from breakfast fires crept through the huts' porous roofs, giving them the appearance of giant animals steaming in the mist

shifts in sandbars. In Congo, maps like these were just another bit of the modern world that had passed by the jungle.

Buisine picked up a thick, spineless book of weather-beaten pages and slapped it down on a nearby stool. It was a set of hand-drawn charts issued by the old Belgian-run river authority, meticulously drafted in black and white, and last updated in 1936. "This is all we have in Congo," he said.

Buisine told me that the U.N. recently pro-

vided him with military satellite images of the river that he runs through a global-positioning program. On a large monitor inside the wheelhouse, a red icon of a boat chugged up the bend. Buisine updated the digital map with each trip, recording changes in current speeds, shifts in sandbars, and average depth in the rainy and dry seasons. Village names and coordinates appeared in pop-up windows, along with tribal affiliations and logistical data in the event of U.N. intervention. The information will someday combine to form a massive database of the river, which Buisine hopes will be available to the public. Each morning I ducked into the wheelhouse to check the progress of the tiny red boat, and each morning the jungle squeezed in a little closer. Outside, the uniform brick settlements of the old colony disappeared and gave way to moldering huts set high above the river on stilts of bamboo. Smoke from breakfast fires crept through their porous roofs, giving the huts the appearance of giant animals steaming in the mist.

But the solitude of the forest was alleviated by the traders who lived there and flocked to the *Ma'ungano* day and night as she passed. They'd strike out from shore in long dugout canoes filled with fish and vegetables, four or five people in each one, stabbing the current with hand-carved paddles the shape of raindrops. We'd watch them from a kilometer out, standing upright as they pumped their arms in perfect unison to make the interception. The river traders supplied the crew with their meals, and it was also how we supplemented ours. We'd buy huge, ten-pound tilapia and give them to the cook, along with spinach, roasted peanuts, green onions, plantains, papaya, and exotic white apples. I bought wild honey so fresh that bees still clung to the arm of the old man who poured it. And we bought mangoes to store in the ship's deep freeze, taking them out on hot afternoons and peeling them with pocketknives. It was like eating ice cream.

In my old guidebook, the local "natives" were dressed in rows of beads and colorful loincloths, their bodies covered with sprawling mutilation



tattoos, their lips and ears adorned with brass hooks and trinkets. It was as if nothing had changed since the days of the old monarchies, when the mighty Kongo and Bakuba kingdoms, with their sophisticated systems of law and governance, held sway in this region, back when kings sat on thrones inlaid with ivory. Back before they were discovered. The photos in the guidebook were likely posed, snapped by one of the pith-helmeted agents who also appeared in those pages. Even under the colonial thumb, the Congolese looked proud and dignified. But finding that spirit now was like looking for warrior braves on the Great Plains of North America. The people standing along the riverbank were destitute. No ornamentation here, just rotten secondhand rags that barely hid their nakedness. Bloated children would rush out of thatched huts and wave when they saw white faces. Their mothers often stood behind them, rubbing their stomachs and begging for money. The farther we went, the worse off they appeared. And every time I saw them I felt a little more lost. The point of no return was near, and I began to wonder when the little red boat on the captain's screen would disappear altogether.

Buisine joined me on the deck one afternoon as I watched the villagers along the banks. The war really leveled these people, I offered. He shrugged. "They had nothing even before the war," he said. "They have no education, and their diet is nothing but fish and alcohol from the cradle to the grave. Nothing has changed for hundreds of years. I mean, they still make fires by rubbing sticks together."

I sometimes teased Severin about moving out to the "country" and settling down, living the simple life with the river people, but the joke would fall flat. "To think we had one of the greatest civilizations in Africa," he said once, shaking his head. "But now . . ." Severin had grown up around some of the world's nastiest poverty just outside his door in Kinshasa, and I think he was hoping, like me, to find something better in the vast, green interior. "Now these people can't even read, only count," he'd say,

echoing Buisine. "No school, no prospects for the future. What will become of their children?"

One afternoon, Buisine explained an elaborate plan he'd been pondering for years, a plan to turn the Congo River into a national park for tourists. I laughed at first, since anything related to tourism in Congo struck me as an impossible dream. But he was serious. "I used to speak with Mobutu about this for hours," he said. "Mobutu was very passionate about the land and environment." The plan was to transform the river into a massive nature preserve that stretched from Kisangani to the Atlantic. The vast chain of hundreds of river islands would be stocked with wild game, which would be imported from South Africa, where private game parks were becoming wildly overpopulated. Instead of killing the animals, Buisine said, the businessmen who owned the reserves were eager to partner with people in Congo, where many of the animals have been decimated by war. "All the islands on this river represent the ecosystems of Central Africa," said Buisine. "You have primary and secondary forests, swamps, savannah—everything."

There would be antelope and zebras, leopards and lions, elephants and hyenas. All the villagers living along the river would be appointed game wardens and rangers in order to maintain the park and guard the animals from poachers. Tourists would spend days cruising the park by riverboat, stopping at rustic lodges along the way to camp, barbecue, and sip cocktails. Villagers would visit the boats during the day for "cultural lessons," teaching tourists how to fish, weave casting nets, or carve the masks this section of Congo was famous for.

"It would be the greatest, most unique national park in all the world," Buisine mused. "And every person who lives on this river would be part of its glory." He explained how he'd been pitching the plan for the past decade, first to Mobutu, then to various environmental groups. Everyone agreed it was a good idea, but nothing was ever done. The South African business partners were



already lined up. The plan would cost billions to implement, but it was necessary if the river were to maintain its virgin ecosystem before democracy and peace brought development and ruin. "The Congo River is the great lungs of the world," he said. "We must preserve and maintain this living thing. It's the only good thing we have left."

Upriver in Ngombe, the *Ma'ungano* was intercepted by two motorboats carrying men with guns. Several muscled men with AK-47s and aviator sunglasses jumped aboard and ran toward the captain's room. I was sitting on the terrace when they charged past. At first I thought we were being hijacked by pirates or robbed by the army, but they turned out to be soldiers loyal to Jean-Pierre Bemba, a popular rebel leader who had once controlled this region during the war. Bemba's troops had officially joined the army in order to share in the new government, and Bemba himself had become vice president. In the recent elections, Bemba had run for president and narrowly lost in the first round to Joseph Kabila, who came to power in 2001 after his father, Laurent Kabila, was assassinated. Just weeks after the vote, Bemba's men battled the presidential guard in the streets of Kinshasa and trapped me in the Grand Hotel. The two men would face off again in a runoff election on October 29, which Riccardo and I planned to cover somewhere upriver.

The soldiers told Buisine they had a prisoner they were transporting to Mbandaka. They needed a ride, a free ride. Buisine cringed and agreed, and one of the soldiers signaled for the prisoner to come aboard. He was barefoot and dressed in fatigues, his arms flexi-cuffed behind his back. His face was swollen and red from a heavy beating. The soldiers pushed him into a metal shed on the barge and sat guard out front, eating bananas and tossing the peels into the river. With guns now aboard the *Ma'ungano*, the mood quickly darkened throughout the boat, and everyone became tense and agitated. No matter how far you ran, I thought, the war would always find you.

There was a major dressed in a crisp uniform

aboard the prisoner's barge, and after instructing his men, he walked into the captain's room, where Buisine sat at the wheel. Buisine smiled and greeted him warmly. The major had once been a Mobutu bodyguard during the heyday of pink champagne and Concorde flights. When Laurent Kabila's rebels stormed the interior of the country in 1997 to oust Mobutu, the major's position was overrun, and he was forced to join the rebels or be killed. He joined the rebels, and when Kabila's men took Kinshasa, he attacked his former troops. He later deserted and joined Bemba's thriving rebel army in the jungles in their fight against Laurent Kabila. Despite being in the national army, the major still considered himself a rebel officer.

Buisine hadn't seen him for years, and for the next few hours the two dinosaurs did some catching up. Have you seen so-and-so? No, he's dead. What about so-and-so? Dead, too. And so-and-so? He's in Europe, couldn't find a place in the new government. They talked about the upcoming runoff, how a Kabila victory could spell disaster for those sympathizing with Bemba. The major's men were scared. "Do yourself a favor," Buisine told the major. "Keep a low profile. In six months, this whole place could be fucked."

Buisine instructed the cook to prepare a meal and a bed for the major, and once the captain was alone, I asked him if the army had a satellite phone in Ngombe. It was just a small fishing village and there was no cellular coverage. No, he said, I don't think they have a sat phone.

"Then how did they know you were coming?" I asked.

"The neighboring village told them," he said. "With drums."

We reached Mbandaka, exactly 700 kilometers up the river from where we began, on the seventh day. There was no electricity in the town, and already dozens of oil lamps flickered on shore in advance of the rapid darkness. As we pulled into port, we saw what appeared to be a floating refugee camp with hundreds piled aboard, living under tents made from humanitarian flour sacks.



Plumes of smoke from charcoal stoves shrouded the steel deck, and somewhere a radio blared a wobbly tune as its batteries slowly died. Men danced drunk in the shadows and toddlers rolled naked in the coal dust. She was called the *Ndobo*, and her barges pointed upriver, toward Kisangani. We immediately knew: *That's our boat.*

Riccartb, Severin, and I leaned over the rail when the *Ma'ungano* touched its barge against the *Ndobo* to tie up. And when the crowds of people camped below saw our white faces, they roared and chanted, "*Mundele! Mundele! You've arrived!*"

Severin sighed. "These people are waiting for us," he said, his face pinched and worried. I asked him what *Ndobo* meant in Lingala. "The hook," he answered, and walked back into his room.

The boat would travel to Ndobo, its namesake town located 550 kilometers upriver. It was operated by a Lebanese timber company that was logging thousands of square kilometers of forest between Ndobo and Kisangani. The *Ndobo* had come from Kinshasa with passengers loaded on its three barges and, upon reaching its destination, would return to the capital loaded with timber bound for Europe. A few hundred more passengers were expected to board that day, and they'd already started arriving. The fare was ten dollars.

We needed to stake out a prime location on the barge, so the next morning we hurried down the market road, looking for a vendor who specialized in the long wooden poles used for barge shelters. Mbandaka is a river city, and everything bought, sold, and traded in the market somehow caters to the ships that drift by. I'd heard stories about Mbandaka, none of them very good. It was grim, hopeless stuff: boat sinkings, mutinies, cholera. The city floats on the map like some lost outpost severed from the world and rendered completely insane by the silence. Mbandaka is the last exit before things turn wild for good. Once you pass Mbandaka, you have to go all the way.

Mbandaka straddles the equator at the junction of the Congo and Ruki rivers, and was founded by Stanley in 1883 as one of the colony's first

stations. Formerly called Coquilhatville, the city was a thriving port during the days of rubber and ivory, with hundreds of Europeans living in white stone villas shaded by groves of coconut palms. The old steamers bound for Kisangani (then Stanleyville) would stop at the equator station, giving passengers time to visit the botanical gardens in Eala, which featured more than 4,000 species of local flora. But, like everything else, the city slowly collapsed when the Belgians pulled up stakes after independence.

When Rwandan-backed rebels invaded Congo in late 1996, their goal was to exterminate the Hutu extremists who'd orchestrated Rwanda's genocide and then escaped into the Congolese mountains. Thousands of innocent Hutu also feared retribution and mixed into the mass exodus across the border. Many headed west into

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the dense jungle as rebels pursued them. For seven months they were chased through the forest, many dying from malaria, cholera, and starvation, until they reached the Congo River near Mbandaka. The river was too swift and wide to cross over to neighboring Congo-Brazzaville, where they'd hoped to find asylum. Many tried to swim and disappeared in the current. The rest simply collapsed along the banks and awaited their fate. When rebels arrived soon after, missionaries working nearby stood helpless as hundreds were shot and hacked to death with machetes and bayonets. The bodies were flung into the river. Residents downstream in Kinshasa say the bloated corpses floated past for days.

I found no memorials for the dead in Mbandaka, but their ghosts seemed to riot on the streets to agitate the living. As we walked in search of



materials for our shelter, crowds along the market road soon pressed all around. Several plump, red-cheeked women pushed their way to the front. They held smoked monkey carcasses, hog-tied with bellies cut open and fangs exposed in a horrific death mask. A small crocodile was flung at our feet, its jaws bound with vines, its eyes like dark, smoky windows. Children ran forward to beat it with sticks; others taunted the beast with stones. "Mundele! Mundele!" they shouted. The croc thrashed wildly, beating its powerful tail

A small crocodile was flung at our feet, its jaws bound with vines, its eyes like dark, smoky windows. Children ran forward to beat it with sticks

against the mud in a final stand against the enemy. It was then snatched away and tossed into the grass, where a group of the reptiles were dying slowly in the sun.

We found the long wooden poles we needed at the far end of the market and carried them back to the barge. We claimed a small empty space nearest the tug and set to work building our house. The wooden poles were lashed together with nylon rope to form a reinforced A-frame, which we secured to railway ties along the barge. Our roof was constructed from the orange tarp and woven grass mats we'd bought in the market. Inside, there was barely room for the three of us to sit, much less sleep. We celebrated that night with cold beer and steaks at the only good restaurant in town. The dim fluorescent lights of the Metropole drew swarms of insects so large they cast slow-moving shadows across the empty tables. A dance floor was situated in the middle of the outdoor patio, where a fat woman waltzed with a man too drunk to keep time. The slow *soukous* ballads played from an old cassette deck that ebbed and flowed with surges in the generator and sometimes blew sta-

tic so loud patrons shielded their heads as if they were under attack.

The waitress sat drinking at a dark corner table with a large white man who spoke fluent Lingala—a Belgian, I guessed—dressed in a starched oxford shirt with several empty bottles in front of him. His skin was the color of ash, with pasty liver spots creeping up his neck and cheeks. There was something already dead about him, the way his face moved in and out of the shadow but never really took shape; watching him was like staring at a scarecrow from a fast-moving car. Like the town, he seemed to float in some restless space, cut off long ago and unable to find his way back. He put the chill on me. I ordered a beer and shifted my chair, keeping my back to the colonial ghost in the corner.

The next morning, around 400 people crowded the barges of the *Ndobo* as we pulled out of port and said goodbye to Mbandaka and the luxury of the *Ma'ungano*. Our proud little shelter offered a wide-open view of the left bank, but as the hours slowly passed, the sunlight and precious silence disappeared, never to return. Plastic sheeting and threadbare tarps were pulled from heaping bundles, poles materialized from nowhere, pots and pans rattled on the deck, and radios thundered to life. In a very short time, a small village had risen up around us. These were the river traders, the men and women who move Congo's economy like a great army of ants. Every journey was a roll of the dice, a chance to double down or wash up in the backwater. But they took the risk because life in the city was far less forgiving. Traveling the river was the good life.

"Mundele," my neighbor yelled. "Put away your notebook and come drink some wine!" It was 11:00 A.M., an hour after leaving port, and the party aboard the *Ndobo* was in full throttle. Our neighbors to the right, Lucy and Toni, were pouring milky palm wine into plastic mugs. A new camp began every four feet, and every four feet a different radio blasted its buoyant *numba*. The sun radiated through the orange tarp like a heat lamp, sucking at our energy. Small chores, such as filtering water or washing dishes, stole our



breath and left us wilted. I finally put away my notebook and just focused on not passing out.

The three barges were so crowded that corridors soon formed through the floating village. One walkway barreled past our tent, and most people stopped to stare at the two *mundele* who had come aboard “*Bonjour*,” we’d offer, like freaks in a cage, until the people laughed and sauntered off.

The barges were like giant floating supermarkets, and one could buy almost anything in the great bazaar that spread itself along the steel deck. Walking through the narrow corridors you found essential items like lye soap in blue and pink blocks, Angola brand toothbrushes sold in packs of six, safety razors, plastic mirrors, lead spoons, needle and thread, travel-sized bags of raw sugar, beads and necklaces, women’s panties with LOVE embroidered on the crotch, rubber sandals, nylon fishing nets, Betasol lotion, and Tiger Head batteries that lasted exactly four hours.

On the barge you could find quinine and chloroquine for malaria, hydration salts for diarrhea, and pills for intestinal worms and pain. There were nurses and midwives, witch doctors and preachers, and a man for just about every trade. Our neighbor Lucy sold the secondhand clothing worn by almost everyone on the barge and along the river: the ubiquitous American T-shirts donated to charities and dumped on the African market. Everywhere you looked was a strange remnant of home; the old grandmother who advertised a strip club in Kentucky or the stoic fisherman whose shirt read I’M THE BIG SISTER.

Lucy was from Kinshasa, and she had pretty green eyes and short dreadlocks woven with decorative blue thread. She’d traded along the river for the past decade, through war and peace and all the trouble in between. During the war, when the river was closed, she was forced to walk hundreds of miles through the jungle north of Kinshasa. Soldiers and rebels prowled the narrow trails. Friends were raped by soldiers in front of their children, and everyone was taxed and robbed for the “war effort.” Lucy had already lost everything twice to storms and thieves. “When you lose

your stuff, there’s nothing for you,” she said. “They don’t sell insurance on the river.” With every trip, Lucy would sink her savings into merchandise in Kinshasa and hope to double her profits along the river. Everything else on the barge was also a hustle, including the plastic chairs she rented to us for a dollar a day and the small money she made each morning selling cups of coffee boiled with ginger root. Other traders supplemented their income by selling fried beignets smeared with homemade peanut butter or bowls of fresh catfish soup.

I could tell that the river traders made an impression on Severin, who had warmed up to our neighbors considerably. Their brassy resilience and resourcefulness impressed him, and he now counted many friends on the barge, joking and debating politics and religion. He later discovered that Lucy even lived on his street in Kinshasa and was friends with his mother.

“They are loud and uneducated, but the river people are teaching me many things,” he said one night. “How to make money from nothing and survive. In many ways, their life is better than in Kinshasa. Notice they eat five meals a day! Only the rich can eat like this in the city.”

I began spending time with an army lieutenant named Pierre Kitebo, who was traveling back to Kisangani. He had been lost in the great labyrinth of war and faraway deployment and had not seen his family in eight years. The army had finally granted him a leave, so he set out to find his family, carrying only an old photo of his wife to keep him warm and a vague idea of where they lived. He’d spent three weeks on another barge from Kisangani to Basankusu, where he finally found his family in a small hut deep in the jungle. When Pierre had left eight years before, his youngest daughter, Benedite, was still in her mother’s womb. She didn’t recognize the tall, beaming man in army fatigues when he walked out of the trees.

“They all ran out and hugged me,” he said. “They were happy to see their daddy.”

He now sat in a cramped, ragged lean-to, surrounded by his wife, two sons, and daughter, who



were finally going home to Kisangani, where he trained soldiers in an army camp. He pulled the little girl close to his chest and kissed her head. "They were naked when I found them," he said. "But there will be no more suffering now."

Here, I thought, I was beginning to see signs of recovery. I'd also found it in people like Lucy and Solange, another neighbor, who'd already doubled her \$400 investment. I saw the recovery in men like Jean Kalokula, whose last river journey had been with a convoy of pirogues during the war. They'd traveled at night to avoid checkpoints and slept in the jungles during the day, until malaria finally killed most of his party. He'd buried their bodies on the lonely middle islands and limped back to Kinshasa to wait out the war. He was now traveling the river again for the first time since then, a man who was proud to be going back to work. In all of these people, a sense of dignity had been restored.

But after a few days on the barge, having found the story I thought I'd come for, something started to change. All the romance I'd imposed on the river and its people began to fade. Their all-night drinking now grated on my nerves, and the endless heat only fueled the slow crawl of madness. It would be days, maybe even weeks, before we reached Kisangani. The river owned me now.

Sometimes I'd sit in my tent for hours, stoned on the humidity, watching the molecules behind my eyes ignite like tiny starbursts, when an evil stench would smack me awake. One afternoon I swore someone's head was on fire. The heat made the smell stick in the back of my throat. I followed a pale cloud of smoke to where a woman sat flipping a giant dead monkey over a charcoal stove, scorching the fur and scraping the char with a broad machete. Its innards were still intact and boiling out of its mouth. The next morning, while rolling up my mattress, I discovered tiny pea-shaped objects writhing beneath my bed. *Maggots*, I thought, the word like a blinking banner across my mind. *Maggots on my pillow. Maggots on my pillow.* I kicked the maggots away with my boots and went in search of breakfast. That same afternoon, while eating a stick of beef jerky, I looked down

to find a matted wad of pubic hair resting on my arm. I shrugged, blew it back into the wind, and finished my jerky.

The dirt and stench, the pigs and chickens that ran wild and defecated where people ate, the mountains of ripe bushmeat in every camp—these annoyances we learned to handle. But as the days stretched on, the imposing isolation of the river fed tiny fears and anxieties until they festered into their own little nightmares. It finally peaked a few nights later as I sat on the tie post by the water's edge. I'd sat there watching the sun crash behind the jungle, illuminating the soft mist that crept along the water. And now in the darkness I was enjoying the first cool breezes of the day, and for some reason the radios didn't seem so loud. For the first time in days, I was even feeling a bit hopeful again. As I sat there, I actually wrote in my notebook, "Watching the river moving past—this is what keeps the spirit strong when you get low. This is when I love this place the most."

Suddenly the engines faded and I felt the barge veer to the bank, where it eventually stopped. Not only did we stop; I watched the tugboat *Ndobo* disengage from the barges, turn around, and disappear downriver, stranding us on the riverbank in jet-black darkness. The taillights vanishing in the night seemed to be sucking my breath after them. And when they were gone, I panicked.

Riccardi was standing nearby, aiming his flashlight into the black vacuum of the jungle's edge. He smiled. "What do you call it?" he said. "The white man's grave? Well, man, they've left us in the white man's grave." I walked back to our tent, where Severin had just returned from his nightly rounds. "It's the captain's son," he said. "He was burned very badly. They had to find a hospital."

"The nearest hospital is two days away," I said. I looked for panic in his eyes but found none, not even the slightest hint of irritation. He was maddeningly calm. "No one seems to care." He shrugged. "This is their life."

It was true. Instead of panicking, the Congolese only amped up the party. The saucy *rumba* now roared behind an arsenal of fresh batteries, and jugs of palm wine sloshed from camp to



camp. Stranded on a remote stretch of river in the middle of the jungle, they reacted by dancing as if it were their last night on earth.

I shined my light down the barge and saw several men pissing in the river. This was normal; there was only one toilet for all 400 people, so the guys usually did their minor business over the side. But now, near the bank, the current was stagnant, and just a few feet downstream, half a dozen women were scooping up the same water and drinking it. "We've gotta get off this boat," I gasped. "We've gotta get off this boat or we'll all die of cholera."

The year before, a barge had been hit with cholera on the same remote stretch east of Mbandaka. By the time the passengers reached the next town, dozens were dead on the deck. Yes, I thought, it would happen just like that, here and now. I watched the cholera move like a phantom across the barge, sliding its finger across the throats of little children, before sliding into me. The black wall of jungle pulsed all around, and I could feel it swallowing me like a dying star.

A little later, Riccardo returned with a handful of whiskey packets that were sold all over the barge. And after a few of those, I began to feel better. I still desperately wanted to get off, and I could tell that Riccardo agreed, if only for the sake of forward progress. We decided our only prayer was flagging down a passing boat, but we hadn't seen one in nearly two days. "What about Buisine?" I said. "He can't be more than twelve hours behind." That was it, we decided, Buisine would save us! We began to fantasize about the *Ma'ungano* rumbling past and sending its dugout to the rescue. "So long, suckers!" we'd yell, using our boots to beat away the doomed crowds who would try to tag along, to weasel in on our air-conditioning and hot showers. All night I lay awake listening for the sound of diesel engines passing by.

The *Ndobo* finally returned the next afternoon. It had traveled three kilometers downriver to Mankanza, where there was a small clinic. The three-year-old son of the *Ndobo's* captain had tipped a pot of boiling oil over his body, but the

doctor in Mankanza could do little for his burns. There was no medicine, so Riccardo and I treated the boy with ointment from our medical kits until we reached *Ndobo* three days later.

I was glad to leave the barge, and watched impassively as the traders picked apart our shelter down to the very last rope. They could have it. We hitched a ride with the timber company car to Bumba, where we were planning to cover the runoff election. And since the *Ndobo* was

Instead of panicking, the Congolese only amped up the party. Stranded on a remote stretch of river, they danced as if it were their last night on earth

turning back around for Kinshasa, Bumba was where we hoped to find a motorized pirogue to Kisangani. We'd now traveled 1,337 kilometers in fifteen days.

Like Mbandaka, Bumba is an old Belgian trading port that crumbled long ago. Here the Congo stretches twelve miles across at its widest point, though this imperial view was blocked by chains of wooded islands that seemed to throttle the great river and suck the living air from the town. There were two bars for killing the time, and the beer was cool and plentiful, but no restaurants or cafés. We took our meals in the Hotel Mozulua, where the heat and mosquitoes kept us awake at night and pushed us to press forward.

The runoff election was the most significant step toward peace and stability in the country's history. But we'd become so impatient to keep moving that it became little more than a distraction. The vote was no mystery either. For much of the war, Bumba and the surrounding region had been occupied by Bemba's rebel force, who'd raped and murdered and lived by the gun. Yet despite these crimes, almost everyone sup-



ported Bemba for president. Bemba's tribe hailed from the forest, and it was said that President Joseph Kabila wasn't even Congolese, that his roots were in Tanzania. To them, it explained why the president had auctioned off much of the country's mineral wealth to foreigners. And with no reliable source of news in the jungle, rumor trumped all.

The morning polls went smoothly enough, and Riccardo and I toured the various stations and interviewed voters. I found myself having the same conversations I'd had during every other African election I'd covered.

"What kinds of changes will you demand from the winner?"

Silence. "Hmmm."

"So you're demanding peace, electricity, and better schools for your kids?"

"Oh, yes, yes . . . peace. Peace and schools."

We'd just hired bike taxis back to the hotel when everything went strange. The once crowded streets suddenly were empty, void of dogs and children and women ferrying to the market. Looking around, I saw people staring out windows and sheepishly standing in doorways—both bad signs. A government lorry rumbled past loaded with soldiers brandishing their readied guns. And when we turned a corner toward the hotel, my heart sank to my shoes.

A mob of about a hundred young men was rumbling down the dusty roadway carrying machetes, sticks, and rocks. Earlier that morning, a Kabila supporter had been caught stuffing a ballot box in one of the stations. The mob had burned the ballots and set fire to several buildings. They now rioted through the narrow streets, spewing venom against Kabila and thieving foreigners. When they saw us, it was like we'd stepped right into their trap. "Ay, *étranger!*" they shouted, and quickened their pace. Riccardo raced toward them with cameras held high. And whereas I would usually follow, this time I froze.

As a reporter in Congo, I'd endured my share of drunken soldiers and guns, but it was mobs that terrified me the most. All it took was one

rock in the face to draw first blood and the rioters would pounce like wolves. I'd been through some bad times in Togo and Somalia and in Kinshasa, but that morning in Bumba, I suddenly felt my luck had run its course. A voice, diamond-sharp in my mind, told me to turn back immediately. There were no lives left. If I stayed, only bad things would happen.

"*Allez! Allez!*" I screamed at my driver, a small boy whose body had gone rigid. "Severin, tell this kid to go!"

We turned onto a deserted backstreet and moved parallel with the angry crowd, struggling for speed on the sandy roads. Some of the mob caught up and held rocks to our heads, leering and shouting threats. But we finally found our intersection and soon were safe within the high walls of the Hotel Mozulua.

Later that afternoon, soldiers charged the mob with bullets and tear gas. Three people were killed and dozens were beaten and arrested. One of those killed was a fifteen-year-old boy, gunned down in the street. His uncle found us at the hotel that night. "He was only throwing rocks," the man said. "And they shot him in the head. His brains aren't even there anymore." Of the hundreds of towns and villages in Congo where people voted that day, Bumba was the only one to erupt in violence. Overall, the election was hailed as a landmark success, a victory for peace after a decade of blood. But standing in the dark courtyard of the Mozulua, listening to another man plan another funeral, it sounded the same to me.

In the end, there were no boats to take us to Kisangani, so we hired a convoy of bicycles and continued east into the boiling sun. Our journey led us off the river and far into the jungle, beyond any guidebook or map. The war had ended, but peaceful revival had done little for the crowds of children who lined the forest track, their stomachs bloated from hunger, their mothers begging us to save them, begging us to do something. There was nothing I could do, nothing except pedal faster, leaving behind the naive ideas I'd clung to along the road. ■

