

A new dawn

PURPLE HAZE: A herd of Central African buffalo keep a watchful eye. TOP RIGHT: red-billed quelea swarm over the floodplains



Experience the remote wilderness of Zakouma

With a new mobile camp, great guides and prolific wildlife on unspoilt floodplains, this national park in Chad is the safari destination to watch

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The dry Seyal woodland was thickening and visibility was becoming impaired. Suddenly our Land Cruiser – once owned by Sudanese poachers and reclaimed and donated by the Chadian government – came to a halt. We were deep in the wilderness of Zakouma National Park, in the Salamat region of southeastern Chad, and one of our private guides had spotted a fresh leopard track. As we waited, a rare Patas monkey hurried across the path, followed by a pair of hooting Abyssinian ground hornbills. Distracted, we watched these primeval creatures in silent awe, before continuing eastward towards the nomadic market we were seeking to locate.

The park has been hidden away due to years of war and unrest, but is finally opening up to the outside world as one of the last strongholds for Central African wildlife. Indeed, exploring the ‘dark continent’ has come a long way since the days of Livingstone or Joseph Conrad. Finding somewhere we can describe as ‘Africa as it was hundreds of years ago’ is nigh on impossible, as human and economic pressures continue to squeeze the life out of whatever is left. However, this park is one exception.

Its uniqueness is not only a result of its remoteness but also of the whole experience it offers. Last year saw the opening of the park’s first ‘luxury’ accommodation, Camp Nomade. At this atmospheric, Berber-style retreat you sleep under canvas, surrounded by the noises of the night, and at dawn you may spot an African civet or a group of male lions as the sun creeps above the hazy horizon. The camp provides a refreshing contrast to the rigidity of many modern-day lodges: you can expect a truly tailor-made experience provided by a select few private guides who have personally travelled to Zakouma many times before. The itinerary is completely flexible and you’re free to explore this magical destination on foot, in a vehicle or from the sky. On game drives, the animals are skittish and unused to vehicles – for this is untouched Africa. →

The animals in this magical destination are skittish and unused to vehicles – for this is untouched Africa



And the people here are as shy as the animals.

Once we saw a trio of nomadic women with a small herd of donkeys on the side of the track. They were the first people we had seen (except at the camp) since we had left the dustbowl capital of N'Djamena. Draped in vivid red and pink cloth, their faces obscured, they timidly turned away and hurriedly moved in the opposite direction. When I asked the soldier who was with us about their mysterious behaviour, his reply was simple: "They are not used to a vehicle full of people that look like you."

There's no doubt that Zakouma's isolated location, in the underbelly of Chad, with Central African Republic and Sudan on its doorstep, has made it susceptible to poaching. A flight over the reserve to see the gargantuan herd of elephant roaming in a tightknit group of up to four-hundred strong is remarkable. However, it quickly becomes noticeable that the twenty-one or so calves are of the same age, a result of adults not breeding due to poaching pressures and stress. Shockingly, an estimated 4000 elephants were killed in the dark decade prior to 2010. Since African Parks took over its management in 2010 the situation has dramatically improved, with only three recorded poaching incidents since it began its tenure. The story here is inspirational, and the tireless work of the anti-poaching patrol teams, trained by the US Marines, sets the benchmark for successful conservation work across the continent.

Zakouma is a sanctuary for wildlife biodiversity because of the availability of water throughout the year in the east of the reserve. At dawn flocks of red-billed quelea swarm over the sparkling lagoons in their millions. The deafening beating of their countless wings offers a sensory overload and the sight of predatory raptors and herons attacking these unlucky birds is a phenomenal one to behold. At midday herds of tiang antelope filter out of the dry forest towards the reserve's lifelines and the floodplains are dotted with herds of antelope, Lelwel's hartebeest, Central African buffalo and kordofan giraffe – Zakouma's population of this rare subspecies represents half of that in the whole of Africa. And, of course, the bountiful game attracts the reserve's apex predator, the lion, and other big cats, such as the leopard we had been tracking earlier that day.

As we drove under the fruiting canopy of the riparian woodland on our return to camp, an old water-level mark on a tree reminded us of what this remarkable reserve is like during the wetter months. When the rains come, Zakouma becomes inaccessible, so the tourist season is limited to a tiny window between December and April. But time it right and you will discover that this remarkable park is an exciting, inspiring and fascinating destination for any veteran African safari traveller or guide.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Licence to kill. A pride of lions polishes off the remains of a buffalo; dining under the stars at Berber-style Camp Nomade; white-faced whistling duck stand in the shallows on the Riguek floodplain; this Land Cruiser was once owned by Sudanese poachers but the Chadian government reclaimed it and donated it to the park; a marabou stork overhead



SAFARI PLANNER

■ **Getting there** Air France flies from the UK to the capital N'Djamena, with a stopover in Paris. From there it's a two-hour scheduled charter flight to Zakouma. Only a few safari operators and private guides host trips here, including Passage to Africa. For a photography-focused experience, contact C4 Photo Safaris.

■ **Where to stay** Camp

Nomade offers week-long stays in Bedouin-style tents within Zakouma National Park. It is a mobile set-up, so it is able to continually move to the most wildlife-rich areas. The staff members are excellent, knowledgeable and serve delicious, locally sourced food. As an alternative, the recently refurbished permanent Tinga Camp has basic accommodation and meals.

■ **What to do** There's plenty to keep you busy here, including game drives, bush walks, flights over the reserve, bird-watching and market visits to catch a glimpse of nomadic Chadian life, arts and crafts.

■ **When to visit** Due to the high water levels during the rainy season, Camp Nomade is only open from December to April. Be warned, the daytime temperatures begin to increase from January onwards and can reach 35 degrees C.

