

E-mail from Louise Ducroix

Before I even realized I was about to pursue my dream, I was flying over the second biggest forest on the planet. “How beautiful it is!” would I have said if only I could have contemplated this scene, but I couldn’t because my view was hindered by clouds so thick that I couldn’t see a single tree. At least, I didn’t have the chance to notice how isolated I was about to be from the world I formally knew.



After a rough landing on Ipope Airstrip which tore me away from my day dreaming, I looked outside the window to see that we were surrounded by hundreds of people, mostly children shouting and staring at us. It appeared so unreal; I knew instantly that I was about to lose my bearings. The heat stroke me, as I was standing there taking it all in with my two bags filled with the year supply of what I’d hoped I needed to survive in this jungle. As I slowed my mind down and took a deep breath I remember the feeling of the thick humidity filling my lungs which was an entirely new experience for me as well as the smell of the air which was a new fragrance to me; the scent of drying savannah after the rain. A tall, quite skinny and hairy man came up to me, who I presumed was the current camp manager I was about to replace: Alexis, announced to me that I was going to start working immediately. I knew instantly that I was about to embark on a tough year.

Indeed, it was a tough year, I would lie if I said that it was easy, it was not, but it was the most amazing experience I have ever had and I would do it again in a heartbeat if the opportunity presented itself. Despite some difficulties, I enjoyed it because I was doing what drives me and nothing can kill my will to study and protect primates.

I thought my adjustment to the local diet, water, and parasites would include my biggest challenges, and although they were a part of that, my new job responsibilities, which included being in charge of managing anti-poaching patrols may have been the hardest for me. Because I have always despised weapons, working with them was something to get used to. I remember feeling shivers all over my body when I saw, a group of ten strong Congolese men with intense looks on their faces show up in camp with military rifles. From an academic background, I had never had to experience managing a team working with guns. That precise moment was the most intense pressure I felt during my whole year in the Congolese jungle.

The anti-poaching patrol I worked with did a really good recovery job. After 2 weeks of forest search for traces of poachers, the team came back with poachers, snares, a shotgun and quite a lot of bush meat. I was really terrified to see things I didn’t want to see, essentially dead bonobos but still the capture included antelopes, porcupines, and river hogs. We inspected and confiscated everything. My lack of training then came to show when the ecoguards were looking to me to tell them where to take the arrested poachers, to which I was absolutely

clueless. I was expecting the ecoguards to know that information but they were waiting for my “orders” to fulfill their mission. We eventually figured out that poachers are usually taken to the nearest ICCN station. To know that poachers were around made me feel a bit anxious, especially for the people working for the project and the wildlife. Fortunately, no one encountered poachers during our time following bonobos.

Managing the camp comes with all sorts of daily surprises and issues which tend to keep you quite busy. You have to be able to handle a wide range of situations such as those on porters’ days which is our bi-weekly food supply days we receive from the village. We wouldn’t always receive what we ordered which can be very frustrating at times but have to make due. I also received a lot of requests from people of the village. Lompole village which is situated 25 kilometers from our camp, has no modern way of communicating, no internet nor phone, therefore everything is done by hand written mail, which further complicates things when there is a language barrier and issues to be resolved.

After the welfare of the bonobos, I do believe food is the most important concern in the camp. Although the food we ate was monotonous, we were fortunate to receive spices from all over the world with the new incoming people who would join our camp. Even if everything from smoked fish to huge wiggly worms was ending up in my stomach, because in the forest no calories are left behind, one of the hardest challenges for me this year was the low food diversity. However, I was not allowed to complain because I understand that I come from a life where we have far too many food choices and options; I just needed to adapt to this new way of life.

Fully immersing myself into the local way of life by learning from the villagers and attempting to understand the culture helped me to get the most out of this experience. It led me to experience diverse activities such as fishing, learning how to make chikwanga (manioc bread), and lotoko (manioc alcohol), dancing, learning the daily uses of a machete, and also how to use a bow and arrow (I trained on a broken hand made basket not an animal of course) and many more. My favourite and most intriguing new experience was “calling” the caterpillars.

One day, while going from one village to another across the forest, we heard children shouting “youhouuuu youuuuu youuuhouuu. “What are they doing?” I asked Elvis, the local manager, to which he responded that, “they are calling caterpillars to collect them!”. I was dubious about it, then we took a closer look, he yelled “youhouuuu youuuu”. We were surrounded by “dancing” caterpillars replying to the “you” sound. The next day, Elvis took us to go collecting these tiny dancers, we met several children, there for the same reason. For each child we crossed, Elvis was taking a tax by grabbing some of their caterpillars. In the end we had a lot of caterpillars but not from the ones we collected, mostly those from the taxed children. I found this experience fascinating and was more focused and interested in observing and understanding this unusual behaviour (to me) rather than collecting these critters. At that time, I was not considering that they would end up in our plates for dinner. Back in the village, these caterpillars were wrapped in huge *Haumania* leaves and cooked in the fire, and there you go, Liboke de chenilles! Bon appétit! I didn’t know how to put them in my mouth, entire, head first with their big eyes looking at me or back first. Finally, I decided to mix them into my food. An unexpected morning, after I woke up and went to greet the local workers, we exchanged about our dreams and tried to interpret them (which was a part of our morning routine), I saw

a bunch of 666 numbers written in the sand all over the floor in the camp. What on Earth I thought? Was I encountering some sort of black magic? I asked the workers about it, curious to know what it was all about and indeed, it was a spell to keep the ants away from the camp. I truly learned new things every day on this adventure.

Going to observe bonobos was the reward I allotted to myself when everything in the camp was done. It was very frustrating for me to stay in the camp sometime knowing that the bonobos were around in the forest but I couldn't see them. My first encounters with the bonobos was very intense. We were under their nest at dawn, we couldn't see them yet but as soon as I heard them, my glasses became foggy and not because the air was saturated with humidity. This day will be stuck in my memory forever, not only because my dreams were finally coming true, but also because to my shock, these apes commonly known to be the "peaceful sexy apes" had caught, killed and ate 3 red colobus monkeys.

Each shift with bonobos was different and came with novelties. There is a lot to learn from the forest, especially from the local workers. During hard times, the local workers would tell me that "When you don't have what you like, you like what you have". Bonobos and this sentence are all you need to enjoy your stay.