

Congo

Often confused with the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), on the opposite side of the Congo River, Congo (which is officially known as the Republic of Congo and also sometimes called Congo-Brazzaville) offers a friendlier and altogether less threatening version of its sprawling neighbour.

Noted for its lowland gorillas and wild chimpanzees (the country contains over 80% of the world's population), Congo is characterised by dense rainforest and impenetrable jungle juxtaposed against a narrow 169km coastal strip that plays host to a nascent oil industry. Outside the French-flavoured capital of Brazzaville, attractions include the surf beaches of Pointe-Noire, the white-water Congo River rapids and – in 13,600-sq-km Odzala National Park – one of the Africa's largest and least known tropical ecosystems.

Wildlife aside, Congo remains a largely unknown quantity to most outsiders, with little tourist infrastructure and a recent six-year civil conflict scaring off all but the most intrepid travellers. But with a pathway to peace in progress and old feuds and disagreements temporarily – or permanently – forgotten, change flickers tantalisingly on the horizon.

Congo's greatest asset is the Congolese. Musicians, cooks, philosophers and table-football enthusiasts, the people of this ex-French colony are undoubtedly one of its most engaging national exports. Ignoring adversity and ever curious of visitors, this is a nation of people eager for a good laugh. Be open and respectful and you could be invited to share the joke.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 342,000 sq km
- **ATMs** None
- **Borders** Angola, Cameroon (closed), Central African Republic (closed), Democratic Republic of Congo and Gabon
- **Budget** US\$30 to US\$60 a day
- **Capital** Brazzaville
- **Languages** French, Lingala, Munukutuba, Lari
- **Money** Central African CFA; US\$1 = CFA498
- **Population** 3.7 million
- **Seasons** Wet (October to May), dry (June to September)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 242; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 1
- **Visa** US\$70 for a 15-day, multiple-entry visa, which can be bought at border; US\$120 for a one-month visa if bought at embassy



CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

In the south of the country near the capital, daily temperatures fluctuate between 20°C and 30°C, being slightly cooler in the drier middle of the year. Further north the seasons are reversed with the wetter months falling between April and October.

The best time to go is May to September in Brazzaville, December to February further north.

HISTORY

French Rule

Long before the French or Portuguese arrived on the banks of the Congo River, the region was part of a complex trading kingdom comprising the Kongo, Lari, Mbochi, Teke and Vili peoples of Bantu origin. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to make contact, establishing a slave system that traded commercial goods for a human cargo extracted from the continent's dark interior. In 1880 the area finally came under French sovereignty when Franco-Italian empire builder Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza used his dashing European charm to con the local Onkoo rulers into signing away their historic land rights. Predictably, the French government made quick work of gaining free use of Congo's considerable natural resources such as ivory, tropical hardwood and rubber, as well as raising hell with the local population who were used as forced labour. By 1908 Congo had been formally streamlined into French Equatorial Africa along with Chad,

WARNING

Since a 2003 ceasefire, the political situation is slowly improving in the Congo, though much of the country continues to experience uncertainty, with sporadic violence a regular occurrence. Consular advice suggests that central Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire are relatively secure, but travel outside these areas should be taken with extreme care. We were unable to do on-the-ground research, so some information in this chapter may be unreliable. Check the situation before considering travel to Congo.

Gabon and the Central African Republic. But ethnic integration wasn't exactly a colonial priority. Despite extracting copious natural resources and opening up the coast at Pointe Noire by building the Congo-Ocean railway from 1924–34, the French consistently chose to ignore festering tribal differences and with independence in 1960 the bubbling pot finally boiled over.

Africa's First Marxist State

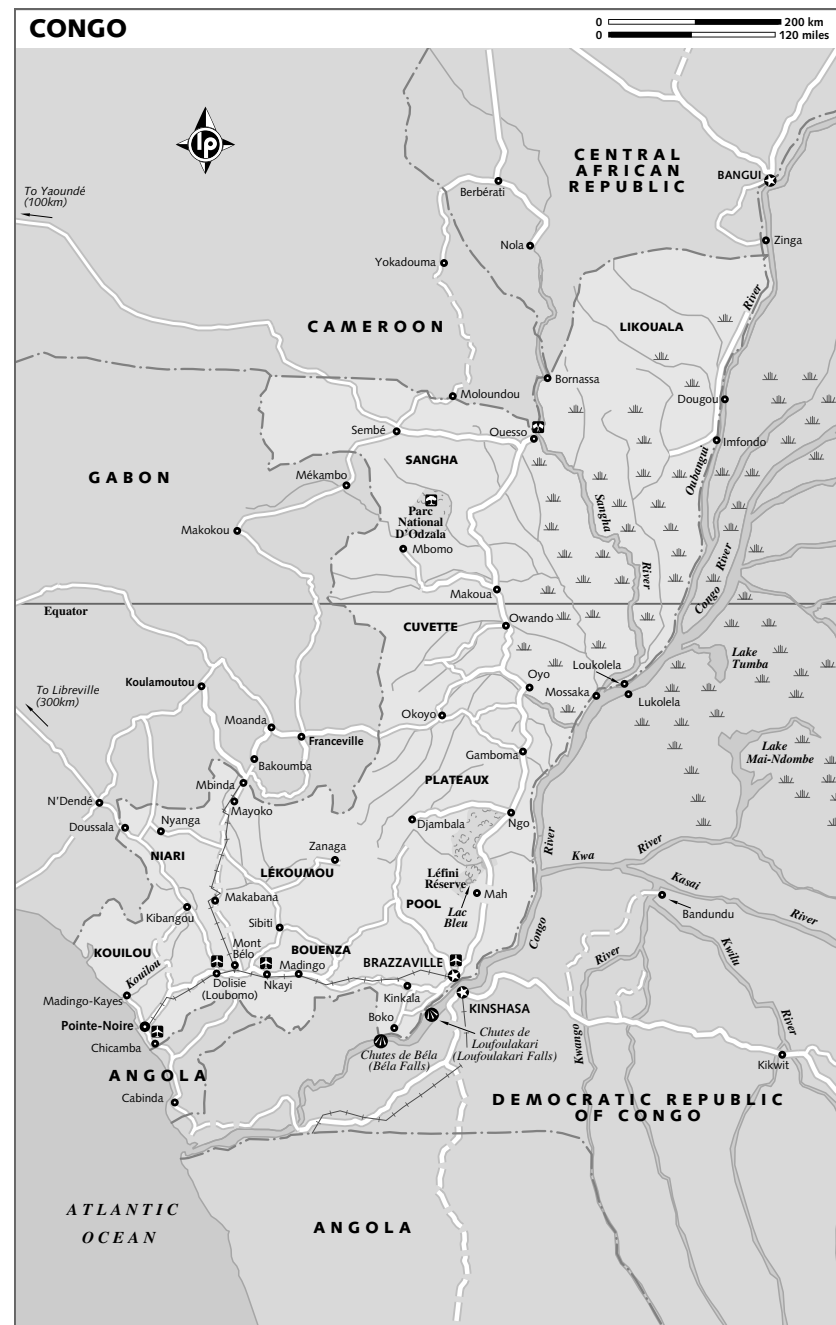
Although the initial transition was relatively peaceful, tensions quickly came to a head. Congo's first president, Fulbert Youlou, seen by many as a puppet of the French, lasted just three years before being deposed in a popular uprising in 1963 that installed Chairman of the National Council of the Revolution Alphonse Massamba-Débat in power. Introducing a one-party state with his National Council of the Revolution as the only legal political party, Massamba-Débat quickly proved to be equally unpopular and was ousted in turn by Captain Marien-Ngouabi in a military coup in 1968. Ngouabi was one of a new generation of northern Congolese political activists and in 1969 he announced the formation of the People's Republic of Congo, ushering in Africa's first Marxist-Leninist state (Angola and Ethiopia would follow). But by transferring control away from the once-powerful south, Ngouabi made many enemies and in 1977 he was assassinated, allegedly by a suicide commando. The army chief of staff, Yhombi-Opango, stepped into the breach and ruled by means of a military commission but, charged with corruption, he was ousted by the Congolese

HOW MUCH?

- Internet per hour US\$3
- Cup of coffee US\$1.50
- Car hire per day US\$120
- Bottle of wine US\$20
- Average main course US\$7

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- 1L petrol US\$1
- 1L bottled water US\$1.50
- 500ml bottle of Ngok beer US\$2
- Souvenir T-shirt US\$10
- Street treat US\$1



Worker's Party (PCT) in 1979, with Denis Sassou Nguesso, a rising star in the army and one-time Marxist, taking the helm. Sassou's political survivalism proved to be superior to many of his rivals (he is still in power today) and his pragmatism got results. Despite initially pursuing a pro-Soviet line in common with his predecessor, Saaou adopted a more liberal bent post 1989 with the fall of the Berlin wall in Europe, and opened the way for multiparty elections.

Civil War

Eliminated in the first round of the 1992 elections, Sassou sat out a first run-off that was won resoundingly by former university professor Pascal Lissouba. A southerner, Lissouba promised to redress southern Congo's years spent exiled from development and from access to the country's top jobs. But once in office he continued to fleece the country of millions – or possibly even billions – while using his personal militia (known as the Cocoyes) to antagonise inhabitants of the capital who rallied around the ousted Sassou. In 1993 the situation erupted into full-blown civil war with Sassou's Cobra militia on one side, and the Cocoyes, together with the militia of Prime Minister Bernard Kolelas (the so-called Ninjas) on the other. Lissouba clung on to power until another – and this time decisive – civil war all but obliterated Brazzaville in 1997. In amongst the chaos Sassou took charge for the second time and Lissouba fled. But the real losers of the war were Congo's civilians, who spent months hiding in the forests. Many children died – if not from bullets then from malnutrition. In 1999 the war started again on a smaller scale, this time fought predominantly between the Cocoyes and the Ninjas.

Bowing to international pressure in 2002, Sassou decided to legitimise his presidency with multiparty elections. Winning 90% of the vote, he was aided by the fact that his two main rivals – Lissouba and Bernard Kolelas – were barred from standing and a third belatedly withdrew from the race. Not surprisingly a resurgence of fighting between the Ninjas and government forces in the Malebo Pool region dogged Sassou's first year as president, but a peace agreement between the president and the leader of the Pool insurgency, Pasteur Ntoumi, signed in March 2003 has maintained a shaky standoff.

Congo Today

A recent new constitution granted the president an array of new powers and extended his term from five to seven years. In an attempt to legitimise itself as one of sub-Saharan Africa's main oil producers the Congo has tried to increase financial transparency in the petroleum sector as well as initiate a freer press. However, for the vast majority of Congolese it remains to be seen if President Sassou – who in January 2006 was elected as Chairman of the 53-nation African Union – can deliver the goods.

CULTURE

Dress and manners are a sacred cow in the Congolese psyche and you will be judged on what you wear. A Congolese man will sleep on the floor rather than buy a mattress if it means he can save enough for a three-piece suit with hand stitching on the lapels.

If you are lucky enough to be invited into a Congolese home, take a carton of Spanish table wine (US\$3). It's champagne to the Congolese and will be seen as properly respectful in a country obsessed with manners.

PEOPLE

Of the Congo's diverse collection of ethnic groups, the Kongo people predominate, making up over 48% of the population. Other key groups include the Sangha (20%), the Teke (17%) and the M'Bochi (12%). Fifty percent of the country's population is nominally Christian.

ENVIRONMENT

The plateau area around Brazzaville, the capital, bears a remarkable resemblance to Wales, with rolling hills, long grass and lush green trees. Further north, towards the equator, the scenery gives way to bright orange earth and dense tropical rainforest bristling with gorillas, chimps and monkeys of all kinds. Timber companies have long been busy making inroads into the rainforest around the northernmost town of Ouesso, and it has not been made public just how much of this unspoiled forest has already been sold. To the southwest is where Congo meets the sea and the Atlantic Ocean crashes onto some respectable pale yellow beaches. But be prepared; those aren't bright stars hovering low over the horizon, but the lights of offshore oil rigs.

BRAZZAVILLE

pop 1,174,000

Founded in 1880 by the Malebo Pool area of the Congo River, Brazzaville was named after Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, a Franco-Italian explorer who charmed the local natives into placing their kingdom under the protection of the French flag. Ever the lesser partner in the close geographic relationship with Kinshasa across the river, Brazzaville's moment in history came in 1944 when it hosted a conference of Free French forces that set out to redefine the way that France handled its African colonies post 1945.

Low-key, somnolent and unassuming, with its back turned to the mighty Congo River, Brazzaville retains a palpable French air with its tree-lined boulevards and streetside cafés serving fresh croissants. Frenetic Kinshasa this is not; though the city gained a certain amount of notoriety in 1997 when militia men descended on the capital en masse and drove most of the inhabitants into the surrounding forest.

With relative political stability now restored, Brazzaville's era of bloodshed seems to be behind it. Indeed, these days hassle from overzealous street salesmen is likely to be your primary preoccupation, and with a little caution and some friendly African entreaties, you can venture out into the rowdy suburbs of an evening to sample Brazzaville's pumping nightlife.

ORIENTATION

Brazzaville's MayaMaya Airport is just north of the city, a US\$5 taxi ride to the centre. The 'Beach' – the river port where the ferry arrives from Kinshasa – is on the easterly edge of the town centre. The area between Ave Marechal Foch (which leads down to the town hall and the river) and the Elf Oil tower near the Beach is considered the city centre, with banks, ministries and international airline offices located here. But the beating heart of Brazzaville (and the markets) lies in the suburbs that splay off to the east and west.

INFORMATION

Cultural Centres

Centre Culturel Français (☎ 81 1705; Rond Point de Bakongo) Hosts exhibitions and performances of Congolese dancing and theatre through the year. On Sunday it turns

into a cinema showing French films. Prices and opening times vary.

Internet Access

Brazzaville has a reasonable selection of internet cafés, though don't expect Western standards of speed and efficiency. You'll pay in the vicinity of US\$2 per hour.

Medical Services

Late-night pharmacies are located at Rond Point du City Centre.

Clinic (☎ 64 9979; Ave Patrice Lumumba) The French government operates this free drop-in clinic for foreigners, located next to the Belgian embassy.

Military Hospital (☎ 66 3363; Rue Ecole Militaire) For more serious cases.

Money

As in many African countries, you can use US dollars, but take large denominations (US\$20 and up) and make sure the notes are in good condition. US dollars can be exchanged with moneychangers on the main road leading out of the Beach, or from any of the Lebanese-owned cafés and internet places on Ave Marechal Foch (at a slightly higher rate).

Post & Telephone

The cheapest option for local calls is the street stalls with mobile phones.

Basilio.com (Ave Marechal Foch) For international calls.

CongoPhone (Rond Point du City Centre) For international calls. Neither of these places are cheap.

DHL (☎ 81 0103; Ave Marechal Foch; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) Reliable and fast.

Post office (Rond Point de la Poste; ☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Sat) Slow and also prone to theft.

Travel Agencies

Achilles Service Tour Agency (☎ 82 4553; achilles_ser_vices@voila.fr) Can organise tours in Brazzaville and around.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Brazzaville requires plenty of street savvy. Avoid the Corniche (the road running between the city and the river) after dark, as it's a favourite hang-out for soldiers (ie muggers with guns), and be extremely careful when taking photos around public buildings.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Brazzaville's markets are its main attraction and provide an assault of local colour. At **Marche Total** (Ave de Loua, Bakongo; ☎ 8am-5pm)

hawkers display popular foods such as fresh peanut butter, caterpillars, guinea pigs, bats and the ubiquitous manioc or cassava. You can trawl the stalls for everything from palm wine to Congolese fabrics and aphrodisiac charms.

Marche de Moungali (Blvd de Marechal Lyautey; ☎ 8am-5pm) is the home of Congo's West African community and is a great place for clothes and shoes, not to mention barbecued goat. The **Marche Touristique** (Plateaux; ☎ 8am-2pm) sells traditional weavings, carvings and masks from both Congos.

While not exactly heaving with historic monuments, Brazzaville has a couple of notable constructions designed by French architect Roger Erell, who was well known for fusing Western architectural ideas with local building techniques. These include the modernist **Basilique Sainte-Anne** and the **Casa de Gaulle**, residence of the French ambassador. The **Cathédrale de Sacré Coeur** is Brazzaville's oldest surviving building, dating from 1894. It was modified by Erell in the 1950s and has been visited by both De Gaulle (1944) and Pope John Paul II (1980).

The rapids that separate Kinshasa and Brazzaville can be easily accessed for a swim, or appreciated over a local Ngok beer.

Table football, or *babyfoot* as it's known here, is very popular. While the tables might not be in mint condition, local players are always enthusiastic and it's a great chance to make Congolese friends. Football tables are scattered liberally around all the neighbourhoods, but a favourite is located in the **Jane Vial market** (Ave de Trois Martyrs; ☎ 5-8pm Mon-Sat) in PotoPoto. It's best to go in the early evening, when the market turns into a rabbit warren of stalls selling barbecued chicken and salted fish by candlelight.

SLEEPING

Budget hotels, often frequented by wealthy Congolese men and their mistresses in the afternoons, have sprung up in the lively PotoPoto district. Water supply is irregular here but the hotels are well placed to enjoy Brazzaville's bustle by day and bars by night.

At the other end of the scale Brazzaville has a couple of swankier piles:

Le Meridien (☎ 81-0302; Blvd Marechal Lyautey; r US\$160; 📍 📞 📺 📺) An international class hotel set in a peaceful residential area near the city centre.

Protea Hotel (Barrage du Djoue; r US\$160; 📍 📞 📺 📺) Elegant French-inspired hotel situated on the banks of the Djoue River with two swimming pools, business centre, gym, restaurant, exotic garden, fancily furnished rooms, and prices to match.

EATING

For cheap eats it's best to head into the suburbs. Here you can buy delicious *maboke* (river fish cooked with chilli and wrapped in manioc leaves) or barbecued goat for under US\$1.50 from the street sellers. All over the city centre you can buy baguette sandwiches for under US\$1 from stalls, but you might want to ask them to go easy on the dodgy margarine.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Flights from Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Libreville (Gabon) and Paris go direct to Brazzaville, and ferries cross from Kinshasa to Brazzaville and vice versa. For more details, see p558.

GETTING AROUND

There is no public transport in Brazzaville, but privately owned buses spewing choking black smoke lurch around the capital regularly and are relatively safe and cheap (approximately US\$0.50).

Taxis are found everywhere in Brazzaville and they are a real bargain. For a flat rate of under US\$2 you can go anywhere in town (or as little as US\$1 if you can negotiate in French). You can also hire a taxi for US\$6 an hour.

Note that even most Brazzavillois don't know the street names of their city and everyone makes reference to landmarks instead. When asking for directions, always first ask for the name of the place you're going, before the street name.

AROUND CONGO

DOLISIE (LOUBOMO)

This dusty red town used to be the weekend resort favoured by Brazzaville and Gabon's moneyed classes. Then it was destroyed in the 1997 war and now only chickens inhabit the wreckage of the once-plush Intercontinental Hotel, but the town's eerie charm remains. It is possible to cross into Gabon from here via a combination of bush taxis, bureaucracy

and bribes. The journey to Libreville takes about two days. The one-hour flight from Brazzaville to Dolisie via Nkayi is well worth it, if only for the scenery.

POINTE-NOIRE

Pointe-Noire is Congo's outlet to the sea and the closest the country gets to a fully fledged tourist resort. There are yellow sandy beaches here, stretches of bars, and seafood restaurants that hum with life. But behind the outer mask, Pointe-Noire is a tale of two cities. Existing alongside the settlement's potholed roads and down-at-heel townships, rich foreign oil company workers live in fancy complexes completely apart from the Congolese population.

Pointe-Noire's hotels are clean and of a much higher standard than in Brazzaville. Try **Migitel** (☎ 94 0918; Blvd du General de Gaulle; r US\$90; 📍) or **Hotel Azur International** (☎ 94 2771; Av N'teta Kouilou No 54; r US\$100; 📍).

The seafood is excellent here and the restaurants come alive in the evening. Highly recommended is Gaspers, a pavement restaurant in La Citée district.

PARC NATIONAL D'ODZALA

Week-long trips to this haven of wildlife in the north cost approximately US\$600, including flights and accommodation, and can be booked at the offices of **Ecofac** (Brazzaville ☎ 83 17 18; Av Marechal Foch; www.ecofac.org/Ecotourisme/indexEN.htm; Libreville ☎ in Gabon 73 2343; Batterie 4 Face Group Scolaire, Gros Bouquet).

Visitors have reported seeing hundreds of lowland gorillas, monkeys and even elephants. The park has five camps with eating facilities, and trips can be arranged for a maximum of four people. With long days and plenty of hiking, you will need to be in good physical shape. Due to the security situation in Congo access is often made through Gabon. Check the situation at Ecofac before booking.

CONGO DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

For the time being cheap accommodation in the Congo is limited. If you are new to the country and are not travelling with a group or official organisation, it is probably better – and safer – to start off staying in one of the handful of international hotels (where you can pre-book a room) and take it from there.

BUSINESS HOURS

Business hours are 8am to noon and 2pm to 3pm Monday to Friday, and 8am to noon Saturday.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Scamming has become an art form in Congo. The bald-faced cheek of those on the make can be matched only by the elaborate manners and genuine hospitality of the majority of citizens.

Don't give bribes at roadblocks just because you're asked; most soldiers are just trying to on. Instead say that you will buy them *un jus* (a juice) on the way back; this way they have more of a vested interest in letting you through.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Congolese Embassies & Consulates

In Central and West Africa, Congo has diplomatic representation in the following countries:

Cameroon (☎ 221 2458; Rue 1815, Bastos, Yaoundé)

DRC (☎ 34 028; Blvd du 30 Juin 179, Kinshasa)

Gabon (☎ 730062; Batterie IV, Libreville)

Embassies & Consulates in Congo

The following countries all have diplomatic representation in Brazzaville:

Angola (☎ 81 1471)

Belgium (☎ 81 3712; Ave Patrice Lumumba, west of Pl de la Poste)

Cameroon (☎ 81 1008; Rue Général Bayardelle)

Central African Republic (☎ 81 4721; Rue

Fourneau)

DRC (☎ 81 3052; Ave de l'Indépendance)

France (☎ 81 5541; Rue Alfassa)

Gabon (☎ 81 5620; Ave Monseigneur Augouard)

Germany (☎ 83 2990; Villa Marina, cnr Rue de Reims & Rue de Pavie)

Nigeria (☎ 81 1022; 11 Blvd du Maréchal Lyautey)

UK (☎ 62 08 93; Ave Fosch) Next to DHL. Honorary consul only.

USA (☎ 81 3982; Rue Leon Jacob 70)

PRACTICALITIES

- Congo's newspapers are *Les Depeches de Brazzaville* and *Congoportal News*.
- *Radio Congo* is the national station.
- Electricity is 230V 50Hz.
- Congo uses the metric system.

MONEY

CFA can be used in all countries within the Central African franc zone. These include Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Mali and Senegal. There are no ATMs in the country, and few places accept credit cards or travellers cheques, so hard cash it is. If you need some money wired in, **Western Union** (☎ 81 4293; Rue Felix Eboue; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat) is reliable but takes a whopping percentage and uses ridiculous exchange rates. When shopping, always bargain – it's Congolese theatre.

POST & TELEPHONE

The postal system is unreliable throughout the country.

Landlines are appalling in Congo and most businesses use mobile phones, which are often stolen so numbers regularly change. Phone coverage is limited to Brazzaville, Oyo, Owando and Pointe-Noire.

VISAS

All visitors to Congo need a visa. You can buy a 15-day, multiple-entry visa to Brazzaville on arrival for approximately US\$70, but you must have your yellow fever certificate with you. Visa applications from embassies abroad can be issued the same day or by the next day. You can also get a visa on arrival in Brazzaville if you come by boat from Kinshasa.

Visas for Onward Travel

If at all possible, procure your onward travel African visas from your home country before departure. This is especially true for Angolan visas which require a letter of introduction from a person in-country first. The easiest visa to get in Congo is for the Democratic Republic of Congo a short hop across the Congo River. You should also be able to pick up a visa for Gabon here.

TRANSPORT IN CONGO

GETTING THERE & AWAY

International airlines flying to and from Brazzaville include **Ethiopian Airlines** (☎ 81 2646; Ave Marechal Foch), which flies from Addis Ababa to Brazzaville twice a week; **Air France** (☎ 81 2719; Amilcar Cabral), which flies direct from Paris to Brazzaville twice a week; and **Air Gabon**, which flies from Libreville to Brazzaville a few times a week. However, flying into Brazzaville

is very pricey. A far cheaper, though hassle-loaded, option is to fly into Kinshasa and cross the Congo River by ferry to Brazzaville.

The ferry service between Kinshasa and Brazzaville is US\$25 one way, and small fast boats cross from Ngobila Beach in Kinshasa to the Beach in Brazzaville and vice versa. With overcomplicated bureaucracy involved at either end allow a total of two hours for this journey. Boats leave regularly and you can just turn up, although the last boat leaves at 4pm (noon on Sunday).

From Ouesso you can catch a ferry (large enough for 4WDs) or *pirogue* across the Ngoko river to Sokamba, Cameroon.

GETTING AROUND

From Brazzaville's MayaMaya airport, **Trans Air Congo** (☎ 81 1046) runs four flights a day to the coastal town of Pointe-Noire and two flights a day to the towns of Dolisie (Loubomo) and Nkayi, while flights to Imfondo leave once a week.

Passenger trains from Brazzaville to Pointe-Noire via Dolisie (Loubomo) aren't operating due to unrest in the Malebo Pool region. If stability returns, so might this service.

A good sealed road goes north from the capital as far as President Denis Sassou Nguesso's home town of Oyo. Beyond that the roads are increasingly bumpy until they disintegrate into sloshing mud lakes in the rain, and hard-set ridges with potholes of several feet after the rain. From Owando onwards the journey north can only be made in a convoy of 4WDs, stopping every 20 minutes for one vehicle to pull the other out of a hole. The coast also has a new road that reaches right down the coast to the Angolan enclave of Cabinda.

Shared taxis and minibuses run on an ad hoc basis between towns and villages. They are ridiculously cheap, great fun and crammed with Congolese villagers taking chickens and even goats to the capital. Car hire is available in Brazzaville with **Europcar** (☎ 81 33 38; Av du Camp) from US\$120 per day.

Alternatively, barges follow the Oubangui and Congo Rivers from the Central African Republic all the way to Brazzaville. However, they leave irregularly, and the journey can take anything from 10 days to three weeks depending on the vessel and whether the rains have come. Most barges are operated by the logging companies, so ask around at the Beach – Brazzaville's river port.

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