

• ESCAPE •

Bongo or Bust GHANA

CUTTING A TRAIL THROUGH THE JUNGLES OF AFRICA HAS NEVER BEEN SO MUCH FUN

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY MARK EVELEIGH

I begin to wonder if we are becoming just a touch obsessed by the thought of the little "lost world" we are struggling to reach.

It is there alright. Somewhere towards the centre of the Bia rainforest. We are sure of that. But nobody has actually seen the area around the mysterious "Bongo Camp" since elephants ransacked the jungle trail several months ago.

Bia National Park is one of Ghana's remotest reserves. It is nestled against the hills of Ivory Coast, where not only poachers but also rampaging forest elephants do their utmost to complicate life for the park rangers. My father and I have volunteered our services – and the use of the expedition-prepared Land Cruiser that has been our home for the last few weeks – to help the rangers re-open the track to Bongo if it is at all possible.

It is New Year's Day and we are driving down a track that has become almost invisible in the months since the vegetation has been left to run riot. Four rangers are squashed into the back seat of the Land Cruiser. I can see the barrels of their rifles and the cutlasses (as they call machetes here) sticking up in the rear-view mirror. Another man is perched on the roof, holding onto the chainsaw without which we could never undo the elephants' hard work. We have been bush-camping for some time now and, ragged and unshaven ourselves, we have christened our rough-looking bunch "The Bongo Buccaneers".

We have come here as part of the MAPA Project (Mapping Africa's Protected Areas) with the intention of shining some light on Ghana's virtually unknown wildernesses. For the last couple of years, teams in off-road vehicles have been skirmishing north from MAPA's South Africa headquarters to chart all the national parks and reserves on the African continent. Two years ago I spent a month with MAPA mapping parks in Uganda and now I have teamed up with my father as co-driver to map, document and photograph more than twenty parks, reserves and sanctuaries in Ghana.

The project is the brainchild of March Turnbull: "I had been the development director for the Peace Parks Foundation and was working as a freelance photojournalist," he explains. "I was finding it increasingly frustrating that there was no reliable, central website where I could find a good depth of information on Africa's national parks. I could never quite grasp how these parks fitted together in the big picture of African conservation. Or, more worryingly, why they didn't."

When Turnbull hooked up with other visionaries at Google Earth, the project began to expand dramatically until the result was the most accurate map ever created of Africa's remote wildernesses.

It had been thirty-five years since my family lived in Ghana and, when we heard that the MAPA project was entering its West African phase, my father and I were quick to volunteer. I was just a small kid when we moved to Nigeria but my father never forgot his Ghanaian friends who lived there. To this day, Ghanaians still enjoy a richly deserved reputation for being among the friendliest people in all Africa.

We are one of two teams tasked with mapping Ghana's parks and our planned route through the country will take us almost three thousand miles from Accra, past the



Clockwise from above: The MAPA team near Ghana's Ivory Coast border; Vincent the chainsaw operator with the Bia National Park rangers; the team comes to a precarious halt on a ramshackle log tightrope.



Left: Mike and Mark Eveleigh processing valuable data on Ghana's national parks at a bush camp in the interior. Below left: the Bongo Buccaneers celebrate their arrival at Bongo Camp.



"WE ARE CLOSER TO UNDERSTANDING THE CATCHPHRASE OF FRUSTRATED OLD COLONIALS IN BYGONE ERAS: WAWA - WEST AFRICA WINS AGAIN"

flooded Volta to the dusty north, where the wind is heavy with the sands of the Sahara. We have driven every navigable track in Gbele, near the northern Burkina Faso frontier, and have explored every trail in Mole National Park, thick with kob antelope, baboon, warthog and elephant. We forded rivers and camped wild in the bush along the boundary roads of Mole before heading west to canoe among hippos on the Black Volta. And we paid a quick visit to our old home in the Ashanti capital of Kumasi before making the long drive west to Bia National Park.

Apart from the major tourist parks, we have mapped some little-known reserves as diverse as the tiny Bobiri Butterfly Sanctuary; Bomfobiri with its buffalo herds and the sacred monkey forests at Boabeng Fiema. By the time we reach Bia we have explored a dozen protected areas that few people outside the Ghanaian conservation community have ever even heard of.

And, arriving at Bia, we find, once again, that in reality there are far less accessible tracks than actually appear on our maps of the park. We try to map every junction but time after time we find that routes that were once open are now impassable. At every turn we run up against felled trees where elephants have barred the trail. Once, in frustration, we actually drive the Land Cruiser high up the dirt-covered roots so that it tilts at enough of an angle to allow us to pass – with bare inches to spare – under a felled tree. But in general we make less headway than we had hoped and it

becomes frustrating that there appears to be so little we can achieve here.

We know that after Bia we will be heading for the coast and a series of more heavily-visited parks and reserves that lie just above the coastal plains. We are already looking forward to a day or two relaxing on the Gold Coast beaches – perhaps among the most idyllic in Africa – but Bia might turn out to be our last chance to explore a large, uncharted park in the West African interior. And if we can achieve something more tangible in Bia we know that our reward among the swaying palms and wave-washed beaches will be that much more pleasurable. In our plan to try to re-open the Bongo trail we are motivated partly by a selfish ambition to spend more "quality time" in the African rainforest and partly by a desire to use what remains of our time to do, if possible, some lasting good for Bia National Park.

A central tenet of the MAPA philosophy is that its volunteers are there to help the guardians of Africa's forgotten protected areas. So when I text the MAPA headquarters to check that we have permission to use the organisation's vehicle and time to try to re-open the road to Bongo Camp, March Turnbull's response is immediate and enthusiastic: "Go for it. You guys are legends!"

Three days later, cut, bleeding, bruised and exhausted, we could not feel less like legends. Gazing at the seemingly impenetrable wall of vegetation that still lies between us and Bongo we are closer than ever to understanding the catchphrase of generations of frustrated old colonialists in bygone eras: WAWA – West Africa Wins Again.

Elephant spoor is everywhere but the typically shy pachyderms that inhabit these forests are understandably reticent about coming anywhere near our roaring chainsaw and hacking cutlasses. Not so the poisonous snakes that send us all scampering or, even less so, the millions of biting ants and mosquitoes. Weeks later, back in Europe, I will finally be hospitalised with a potentially fatal case of falciparum malaria, a souvenir from the Ghanaian jungle.

Finally, we bypass this section of barred track only by the extreme – some would say reckless – measure of building a series of timber stepping stones leading to a sort of double tightrope of felled logs. Only someone who has ever seen a heavy Land Cruiser climb a tree will imagine how we hold our breath as my father drives and I guide the vehicle – millimetre by cautious millimetre – over this most ramshackle of bridges.

By late afternoon on the second day we are so short on chainsaw fuel that we have resorted to cutlassing through all but the largest trees. Smaller logs we simply lash to the vehicle to haul off the trail. But, finally, amid boisterous cheering and roaring, we hack through the last trees and make our triumphant entry to the long-lost Bongo Camp. It has taken us the best part of three tough days to cover just ten miles of jungle driving.

Ghana could be one of the most relaxing safari-beach destinations you could ever imagine. But if you go looking for something more extreme in the way of adventure this wonderful country seems to have a way of living up to all expectations... and then surpassing them. ☺

For more information on the MAPA Project visit mapaproject.org. The Project is keen to hear from everyone with something to contribute to conservation in Africa.