



Pirogue

Descent of the River Lulua, DRC

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The river had become too fast, and the rocks too many. We hadn't prepared for this; we hadn't had a chance to stop and scout ahead by foot. Having finally fought our way free of a narrow, overgrown channel of quick water running through dense forest, our lumbering pirogue (a traditional dugout canoe) suddenly surged into the open. Archie and I, already exhausted, looked ahead in panic.

We were speeding towards a churning field of rapids. Boulders littered the wide waterway, each threatening to undo us. We survived a couple of unplanned 360° pirouettes among obstacles and rogue currents before the breaks became too high and we inevitably struck a rock. Water gushed in and, desperately attempting to prevent the pirogue sinking, we leapt out. The fierce current hauled us over shallow rocks to the end of the rapids.

Our pirogue's nose had sunk, but the rear was held near the surface by the empty water containers we used as buoyancy aids. Bags floated off in various directions while we frantically thrashed back and forth in the still-speeding water, shepherding them back to the moving 'base' of our sinking canoe.

In the thrall of the raging water, we guided the submerged pirogue to a thickly-wooded bank. The sun was setting. I'd been wet for the last two hours and was shivering violently. We'd survived the rapids, but lost our map. From here on it would be an expedition into the unknown. We desperately needed to make a fire. Our situation looked bleak.

With all the dire warnings we'd received about how unfeasible it was to descend the river Lulua, it might have been hubris that made us try. Internet searches returned results which all contained the keyword "unnavigable". Countless villagers and rivermen warned us of crocodiles, hippos and rapids – lots of rapids; waterfalls even. But we were stubborn.

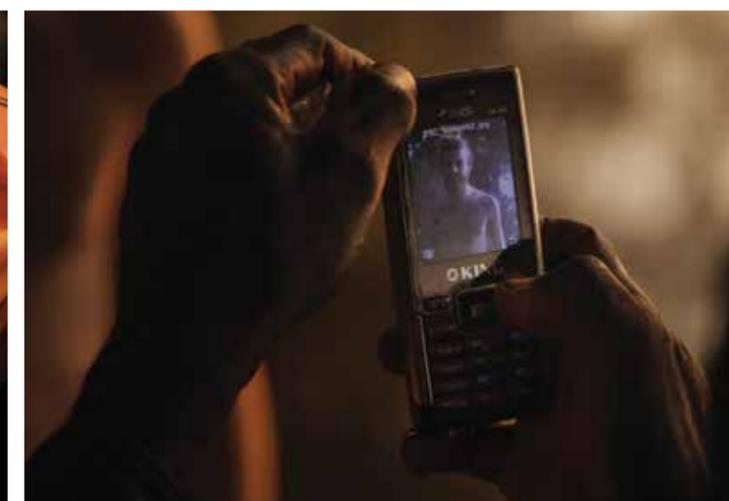
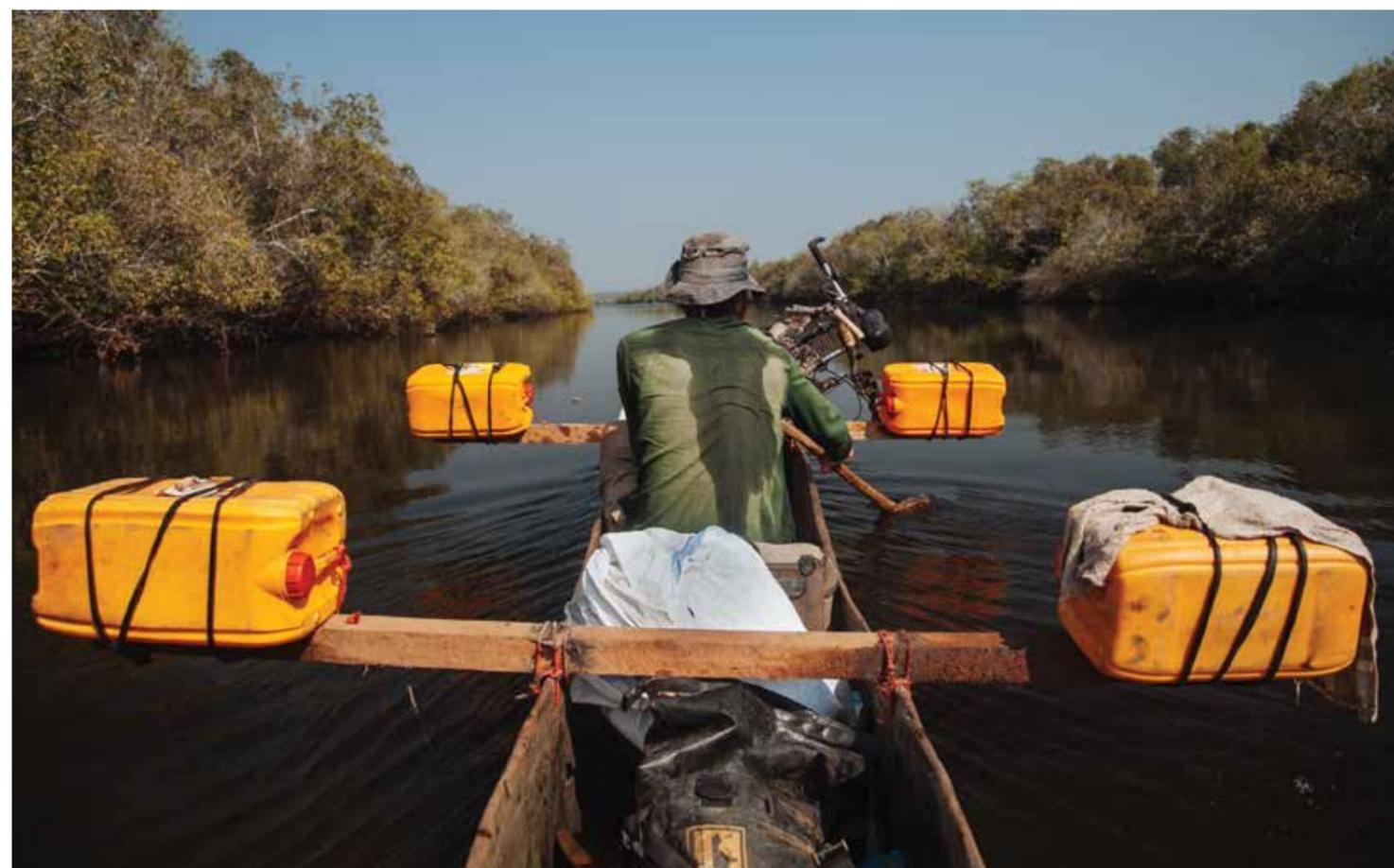
We'd hatched the plan to cross the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) by bicycle and pirogue months earlier. Meticulous document forging for visas was followed by 1,000 miles of cycling and finally our arrival in Sandoa. This crumbling colonial town sits on the Lulua which carves a snaking route

northwards, parallel to the nearby Angolan border, and spills into the Kasai which, in turn, feeds the mighty Congo.

An educational, but frustrating, week was spent cycling along sand footpaths through sedate forest villages, trying to persuade suspicious fishermen to sell us a pirogue. Each day the laid-back village men seemed only inclined to make a deal 'keisho' (tomorrow). They all asked for just a few days to go fishing and thus earn enough money to cover the period necessary to have a new pirogue made. Yet, they never seemed to go fishing – things don't happen fast in the bedlam that is The Congo today.

We finally succeeded in obtaining a canoe for a wildly inflated price and set about patching holes in the 5.5m long, 40-year-old craft. By the time we had finished, we were equipped with a low-sitting, hollowed-out tree trunk and a week of supplies. A crowd watched us shakily push off into the current one afternoon and carve the tentative first strokes of our voyage. We had no experience of rivers, let alone pirogues. This was reflected by the doubtful faces of the unusually quiet onlookers. Our river life – a steep, waterborne learning curve – had begun.

The days were largely routine unless rapids intervened, which they did increasingly often. The river slowly shed its dramatic shroud of mist each chilly morning, and we took turns as helmsman in the more comfortable rear seat. Lunches were bolted down whilst perched on the grand and twisting old tree roots that lined the bank, or taken on the water: one man eating, one steering. The 80m wide river twisted and turned back on itself in tight bends reminiscent of those ubiquitous aerial shots of the snaking, jungle-pressed Amazon.





Towards the end of the second day we approached some islands. The current subtly quickened and, before we had time to do anything about it, we were committed to running a small set of rapids. The breakers were only about 30cm high, but proved enough to lap generously over the sides near the stern and slowly start to sink us. Archie at 'midship' had begun to jubilantly cheer that we'd come safely through, just as I shouted that we were going down. He looked shocked by this, and down we went.

After a few chaotic minutes, I managed to reach the bank with the rope and haul in the canoe, our sodden kit, and my bag-clutching partner. We bailed out the pirogue and busied ourselves with wood collecting, firelighting and putting up drying lines. This rapid had been little more than a strong ripple. We'd have to be more prepared next time, because there would be more.

The men we met on the river (there were rarely any women, and those there were fled from us) enthusiastically gave us advice on the obstacles ahead and how best to approach them. However, estimates of distance could vary by hundreds of kilometres. Each knew their short stretch of river, but little

beyond that. We rarely knew where we were or how far we'd travelled.

These kindly, self-sufficient people are so remote and unconnected from their fellow countrymen that war could easily come and go, sweeping through the region, without them ever knowing. There is no road access and the river's challenging nature leaves them extremely isolated. They spend their days smoking fish, or checking and setting fishing lines on trees overhanging the banks. Smaller fish are thrown into giant baskets woven from branches and suspended in the water. They are later scooped out when they've grown larger. The people eat almost exclusively fish and are consequently all under five-foot-tall.

When food ran short, Archie and I would land at one of the occasional places where large pirogues act as ferry crossings on the small tracks connecting villages. Whichever one of us forfeited a much-needed rest (by losing at rock, paper, scissors) would then cycle away from the water and inevitably end up being questioned by suspicious village elders who demanded papers, while a tight crowd of incredulous gawkers pressed ever closer. There was rarely anything other than cassava, fish and tropical fruit

on sale. Our diet was therefore simple, but the daily exertion made each meal gratifying enough.

The journey became a balance of pleasant paddling on placid stretches of water, and fraught periods of activity when presented with rapids. We landed as soon as we thought white water might soon present itself, or we heard it, and scouted ahead on the banks. Most rapids consisted of multiple channels through rocks and islands. Choosing the right one was as essential as it was impossible.

Our two-man system of relaying the pirogue gradually through the rapids quickly developed and we became a smooth, cohesive team. We also improved at picking our way through less severe white water without disembarking. A vocabulary of curt, barked commands formed, and an effective system of simultaneous bailing out and steering was created.

Occasionally we enlisted the help of local men for a few dollars or some cigarettes. At one waterfall, a whole village helped us circumvent this major obstacle by dragging the pirogue a couple hundred metres over sun-blanching rock. My teeth were set on edge by the worrisome grating sound coming from the already battered underside of the hull.

Frequently, we darted down narrow side channels of water before daunting rapids in the hope of avoiding the worst of the danger. This strategy rarely bore fruit and we were usually dragged into fallen trees or hanging vines by the unrelenting current. Tight steering was difficult in our clumsy vessel and was not made easier by the jutting extremities of our bicycles stacked on its bow.

If we got caught up in branches, we had to jump in, grab hold of a branch or vine and start hacking away at it with a machete, taking care not to get swept away with the freshly-liberated foliage. Drifting down one such channel, an unseen fishhook in a tree snagged on my matted hair and nearly plucked me off my perch in the stern.

In these instances, hopelessly lost down some unmapped jungle waterway, we were torn between exuberance at our intrepid adventure, fear of crocodiles, and dismay at the hazardous situation we'd rushed into. Nobody knew where we were. But that was, in part, why we were there.

The daily tonic to the exertion and anxiety of facing the unknown around each bend in the river was making camp. Each evening we'd nose into

slack water among the trees, pitch tents and slump down by a campfire to cook and unwind. Often our camping spots were soothing, picturesque shelves of sandy ground perched just above the seasonally low water. They were enclosed by gnarled webs of trees and a labyrinthine spread of roots. Occasional visits from curious men were a refreshing opportunity to chat and meet Congolese under more relaxed circumstances than on the water.

After a particularly challenging gauntlet of rocks and raging water one evening, we approached a ring of huts with a smoke stack perched high on a clear bank. We landed and began chatting to the bewildered small man we found there. M'baz welcomed us and we brewed three cups of sweet tea on his fire while he contentedly puffed on the cigarettes we'd produced.

M'baz showed us to one of the five huts and indicated that we should sleep there. The circular domed huts were two metres across and shoulder-high (for us) inside. They were made from dry grass hung over a wicker-woven frame. The doorway was a metre-high opening. In the morning, our host's companions – two smiling men with twists of muscle like tight metal cable – returned from their lines each bearing a fish almost a metre long with gills still gulping.

In time, we acclimatised to our otherwise alien environment. However, as our capabilities increased, our strength waned. Regular stumbling around on unseen jagged rocks in fast flowing water soon meant our feet and shins were covered with cuts which were impossible to keep clean. Our hands spent too much time wet and with rough ropes running through them. We each owned a mess of torn knuckle caps and open, weeping wounds. Insect bites compounded things.

Besides the rapids, risks seemed to be accumulating. We began to hear hippos honking in the night and we passed a crowd of men celebrating their victory over a four-metre-long crocodile. In addition, a couple of cracks in the pirogue's prow were growing longer and wider day by day. We knew it was only a matter of time before the river either beat us or forced our surrender.

Until then we enjoyed the ride and wondered which outcome we'd prefer.

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