

Observations on Cultures and People, and Recommendations for Travel, in Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Following are a few general observations on cultures and people, and recommendations for travel, within Democratic Republic of the Congo, as suggested by our recent travel experience. This short, internal white paper is adjunct to our formal travel report “Exploratory Trip to Democratic Republic of the Congo, August 20 – September 15, 2004” which provides details on our meetings in Kinshasa and Mbandaka and our expedition to villages and forests south of Mbandaka around the general region of Lac Tumba.

Observations on Cultures and People

Currency

The local currency – the Congolese franc (CF) – is highly inflated with an exchange rate of approximately CF390 = \$1US.

Languages and Dialects

One of the challenges was communicating clearly with villagers who spoke only Lingala. One member of our traveling team spoke English and French; and at least one other spoke French and Lingala. Thus, we engaged in detailed discussions with villagers, such as asking about their use of specific resources, methods for timber cutting, etc., often through two translators.

Lingala – a *lingua franca* -- is spoken in a number of local dialects, including the following ones we encountered or learned of:

Lingala dialect	Location (village)
Ekonda	Bikoro
Ntomba	Iyembe Monene, Bikoro, Botuali
Ngombe	Ngombe (just south of Landscape #7)
Mongo (or Kimongo)	Bogonde Drapeau, Kalamba-Beambo
Bobangi	Bobangi
(all dialects)	Mbandaka

Additionally, Batwa is spoken only by Pygmies throughout the region.

Recommendations on Traveling Within Democratic Republic of Congo

DR Congo is 5 hours ahead of Eastern Time in the U.S. (and thus 8 hours ahead of Pacific Time).

City Travel

The following suggestions pertain to traveling to and within the capital city of Kinshasa:

1. Arrange with the U.S. Embassy (e.g., through the USAID office in Kinshasa) for an "expeditor" to assist with arrival to the Kinshasa International Airport. Procedures for immigration, customs, baggage retrieval, and especially ground transportation from the airport to any hotel destination are at best unclear and at worst unsafe (particularly the ground transportation). An "expeditor" will assist in all of these matters.
2. Apparently, the Grand Hotel in Kinshasa is the one of the only places in the country that will take a credit card. No place takes traveler's checks. Otherwise carry clean, untoned \$20 and \$50 bills in the newer U.S. currency that have BIG HEADS ONLY. Bills with small heads will not be accepted in the DRC! Also, the Grand Hotel would not exchange U.S. currency for Congolese francs, but when you make purchases in stores they usually take U.S. currency and give francs as change.
3. We were warned that venturing onto the streets, especially after dark, is unsafe, although other foreigners more used to the city situation downplayed the safety concerns, at least during daylight hours. As always, it is best to use common sense and avoid situations that feel uncomfortable or unsafe.
4. Avoid using street taxis. We were warned about scams, unscrupulous drivers, and unsafe situations. Arrange for all ground transportation with the people or office with whom you will be visiting.

Field Travel

The following suggestions pertain to our field excursion experiences in the western portion of DR Congo.

1. Stock up heavily on bottled water. Safe bottled water is available in stores in towns. Be sure the cap seal is unbroken. Several brands of bottled water are available, including water bottled under United Nations sanction.
2. If traveling to lowland swamp forests, bring calf-high rubber boots or open-toed rubber-soled shoes that can get wet and muddy.
3. Expect that field villages will have neither electricity nor running water. Our field expedition carried a portable generator for part of the field outings, from which we could recharge digital cameras, but that may not always be present.
4. Day length is nearly always 12 hours along the equator, so bring one or two light sources.
5. Malarial preventative is a must.
6. Bug spray (especially for mosquitoes) is a must. Mosquito-borne malaria is prevalent in many locations.