

# Republic of Congo opens up to tourists

After decades of civil war and reliance on natural resources, the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville) will make its first move into luxury tourism next month when two new Wilderness Safaris camps in Odzala-Kokoua National Park open for business.

It's been tough, groundbreaking work, involving a number of well-known SA names like the Plattners, SA National Parks (SANParks) and mining companies.

In 2006 the Congolese government was one of the founders, together with SANParks, Gold Fields and the World Conservation Union, of Leadership for Conservation in Africa (LCA), which aims to integrate the principles of conservation and business.

The largest number of tourists that has ever visited Odzala in a single year is 160 in 2002, says LCA CEO Chris Marais But the extensive commercial development around the Kruger National Park demonstrates the huge potential of ecotourism over time.

LCA invited Sabine Plattner, wife of SAP software billionaire Hasso Plattner and a well-known philanthropist, to become involved in a tourism, conservation and community project in the 13650km<sup>2</sup> Odzala national park.

Odzala has the largest tropical rainforest in the Congo Basin, home to forest elephants and critically endangered western lowland gorillas. About 40000 people live in impoverished communities on its fringes.

Plattner says she accepted the project as a challenge. She feels strongly about preserving rainforests to counteract global warming and, as a former schoolteacher, about early childhood education. She was touched by the need evident in the communities around the park.

Plattner has committed several million euros to Odzala as well as considerable amounts of time. She sits on the board of the Odzala Foundation, a public-private partnership including government, communities, African Parks and the LCA.

African Parks manages the conservation of Odzala, where Wilderness Safaris' up-market Lango and Ngago camps will offer interaction with habituated gorillas, pirogue rides and game viewing.

Marais says communities around the park have high expectations but the costs of conservation are steep, at around à1,5m/year. Income from tourism is not enough to cover it.

He is negotiating with several companies that have shown an interest in starting industries around Odzala, which will help to

fund the costs of the park.

*Source: Financial Mail*

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