

Home
Current Issue
Archive
Forum
Site Guide
Feedback
Subscribe
Search

Browse >>

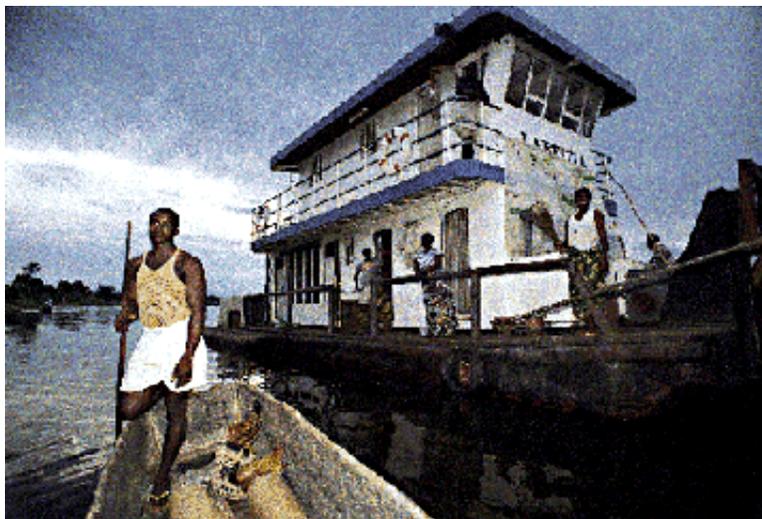
Books & Critics
Fiction
Food
Foreign Affairs
Language
Poetry Pages
Politics & Society
Science & Technology
Travel & Pursuits

Travel -- *September 1996*

Vessel of Last Resort

One of the last tourists to take a barge up the Congo River had arrived, but dead of malaria

by Jeffrey Tayler



JOSEPH Conrad traveled 1,100 miles up the Congo River to find the heart of darkness; I was sure I had seen it at mile one. I stood on the rusty, urine-stained deck of a cargo barge watching Kinshasa, the capital of Zaire, recede into a humid gray haze. The city that from Brazzaville had looked so prosperous, with its skyscrapers and dock cranes, turned out up close to be a farrago of squalor and raucous mayhem: troops of beggars limping on pretzeled legs clogged the multilane Boulevard du 30 Juin; fires smoldered in refuse heaps alive with the ulcerous, emaciated bodies of those too weak to beg; silver Mercedes rocketed through the rubble, scattering crowds, carrying their owners to hush-hush diamond deals in posh Gombe. And outside the confines of the modern district, in the old Cité and beyond, gangs of youths armed with guns and knives patrolled slums four million

strong. Someone must have gone mad here to let all this happen: if present-day Kinshasa wasn't Kurtz's "Inner Station," I didn't know what was.

With our barge cabled to its bow, the white-and-blue *pousseur*, or pusher boat, headed out toward mid-river, and we were free of Kinshasa's stench. It was evening; the day's heat was abating. Ahead, toward the Equator, the sky and water dissolved into a mist of luminous azure.

Travel on the Congo, or Zaire, River has never been easy, and with the chaos prevailing in the country since 1990, when Mobutu Sese Seko, Zaire's President-for-life

Through Western

Eyes:

A Web-only sidebar featuring writings on the Congo by the nineteenth-century explorer Henry Morton Stanley and the author Joseph Conrad

dictator, declared a transitional period to democracy, it has become more difficult than ever. The army, unpaid, has run amok several times, carrying out huge *pillages*; the economy has collapsed; and ONATRA, the national transportation company, has gone bankrupt, only rarely sending upriver its one

functioning Congo barge -- actually a floating slum of some half a dozen barges lashed to an ailing pusher boat. As a result, merchants have turned to private barges for transport and to conduct trade with the interior, where most of Zaire's 45 million people live, and where roads, if they exist at all, are truck-swallowing quagmires for most of the year. But the barges lack even the skeletal amenities (rat-infested cabins, clogged toilets, starchy food) that the ONATRA boats offered, and travel is brutally basic. For the equivalent of thirty dollars you get a space on a rusty steel deck and no more. That will have to suffice for two to six weeks of floating through some of the steamiest terrain on earth. Zairians wondered what misfortune could have driven me to take the barge, and every expatriate I met in Kinshasa said that such crafts were not for non-Zairians. "When cholera breaks out on board," an American missionary warned me, "people just die and they throw the bodies overboard." A British expat said that the last tourist to take a barge to Kisangani had arrived, but dead of malaria.

I was no old Africa hand when I arrived in Zaire, no seasoned veteran of tropical travel. In fact, I had spent the three previous years in Russia, and a desire to escape the

cold and break out of the gray-bureaucracy syndrome I suffered from there had a lot to do with my thoughts' running Equatorward at every idle moment that winter. When, in February, I came upon the British explorer [Henry Morton Stanley's account](#) of his voyage down the Congo, I was mesmerized. The desire seized me, *possessed* me, to quit the northland and travel this greatest of all sub-Saharan Africa's rivers, no matter what the risks or discomforts. I was not a missionary or a naturalist, nor was I a vacationer expecting the civilized pleasures of an all-inclusive Kenyan game-park safari; rather, I was a northerner gripped by a monomania for the primal truth of the Congo, and the only cure would be a crucible on its muddy waters.

THE deck was empty save for a few crew members and a pimply pastor from Lukolela engrossed in a Jimmy Swaggart tract. But our solitude was not to last: we were drawing toward the port at Selza, a suburb of Kinshasa, where a crowd was scrimmaging on the pier. Even before we docked, people started casting aboard foam mattresses and baskets and bales of cloth, leaping over the watery divide onto our deck. Gendarmes thrashed at the crowd with rope whips, but in vain: by the time we moored, every square inch was occupied. Tinny Zairian pop blared forth from the barge's loudspeakers. The floating river fête had begun.

The owner, Nguma, had taken pity on me and assigned me a crew member's cabin; but with a loudspeaker over the door and no windows, it turned out to be a noisy oven. I gathered up my mosquito net and sheets and billeted myself in solitude above the bridge on the *pousseur*. Feeling nauseated with shock from the crowds, the heat, and the excitement of the trip, I lay down on my foam mattress and peered through the gauze at the stars, thinking back on the history of this enormous river, the second longest in Africa. Stanley had fought his way down it from Nyangwe in 1876 and 1877, losing many of the members of his expedition to disease, to drowning, and to battles with the tribes that live on the middle and upper banks even today. My trip, tame as it was by comparison, still seemed an impossible feat: this cramped floating crate of steel had to chug up 1,100 miles of jungle river. If I got sick, if *anyone* got sick, if we broke down, there was nothing to be done about it but hope that Providence, so clearly unmoved by the tableau of mass suffering in Zaire, might decide to make a gesture of divine benevolence toward us. Many merchants, I was to learn, had had friends die on the river, from cholera or

malaria or other, nameless fevers -- a fate I hoped to avoid with half a dozen vaccines and a satchel stuffed full of Nivaquine and Paludrine pills, the malaria prophylaxes commonly prescribed in Zaire. The commencement of every voyage up the Congo was thus attended by fervent prayers for Godspeed, by whispered supplications to fetishes, by wailing farewells from relatives on shore. Our voyage was no exception. No one was certain who would arrive alive in Kisangani.

Dawn found us coursing past grassy flatland marked here and there by trees whose majestic canopies spread like giant green mushroom caps. I climbed down the ladder from the upper deck.

"Would you like to bathe?" asked Jean, the lean, neat, green-eyed chief accountant. "My room has the only bath on the barge."

He led me around the *pousseur* and through his quarters to the "bathroom" -- a slimy metallic cubicle with a hole in the floor -- and handed me a bucket filled with unctuous green water, bath-warm with a frothy head, drawn as it was straight from the Congo's hot currents. As I scrubbed and rinsed with it, I had the sensation that it was an organic fluid. It felt viscous, sebaceous; I seemed to be bathing in plasma. It stung my eyes, and I wondered how river blindness was transmitted (not like this, it turns out).

Everywhere on deck straw mats lay strewn with bolts of cloth, sacks of sugar and salt, malaria pills in white boxes, batteries, needles and thread and



scissors, cookie tins, Bic pens, school notebooks with green covers. The merchants -- who were the majority of the barge's passengers -- laughed and bantered among themselves in Lingala, the language most widely spoken along the river, interrupting their discourse to shout, "*Ey, mondele* ["white man"]! *Bonjour!*" as I walked by. Mothers scrubbed down two-year-olds, skillet sizzled with onions and chunks of fish in palm oil, thump-thump-thumps resounded as women in rainbow robes pounded plantains into mash with carved mallets. A congregation led by the pastor from Lukolela chanted Lingala spirituals

at the stern.

I chatted, in French, as I walked around. Among the merchants there were high hopes for the income this voyage might bring, as well as fear. A twenty-five-year-old man originally from Bandundu said to me, "I was a tailor in Kin, but when the *pillages* began, in 1991, I lost my business, so I took to the barges. I have a fiancée -- she'll leave me if I can't buy her dresses and jewelry. So here I am, risking this voyage. People get diarrhea and dysentery on these trips, and sometimes the boats sink. Man proposes, but God disposes."

Those who have taken to the barges confront head-on the timeless, primal phenomena of sun, rain, wind, and heat, and engage in a pattern of trade millennia old. All day they sell their basically urban merchandise to villagers paddling up in dugout canoes, immediately using their profits to buy the manioc root, smoked fish, monkey, crocodile, and antelope offered by these same villagers. The merchants then hawk these foodstuffs in the huge markets of Kisangani after the ascent of the river or Kinshasa after the descent. Even crew members stockpile smoked fish or monkey for their families at home. Everyone aboard becomes a *débrouillard* -- a master at getting by -- or doesn't last.

Day three found us amid whitecapped waters and buffeting winds. We chugged ahead into rushing rafts of water hyacinth, through the part of the river known as le Chenal, a narrow strait paralleled by low mountains. The sky was lowering and iron-gray, with lightning flickering from the Equator ahead. No pirogues came out to meet us; villages were few. But the first signs of a great jungle were appearing: on ridges stood massive, broad-boughed trees, and the savanna's underbrush gathered into higher and denser clumps.

The next day began with a flurry of shouts in rainy fog. Loaded with pineapples and manioc tubers, pirogues in V-shaped formations of three and four were shooting toward us through the mizzle and docking at our sides. I stood at the railing composing shots on my Nikon.

"*Nina! Nina!*" someone shouted. "*Nina!*" An excited murmur arose on deck. A man with "*Nina*" on his lips forced his way through the crowd and hurled himself overboard, just missing a pirogue. Thirty feet from the barge floated a fish the size of an inner tube, dead and belly-up in the choppy gray waters.

"An electric catfish, a *nina*!" a boy next to me shouted. "What a prize! It will bring him ten dollars." But the man missed it, it floated past, and then the drama for those on deck became whether he could catch up with the barge again. He thrashed the water in a sloppy crawl, landing near the *pousseur* at the stern, and hoisted himself aboard. A hero for the entertainment he had provided, he raised his arms to general applause.

THE heat in the Kinshasa region had been bearable, but my travel mates warned me that after Bolobo, which we had just passed, the climate would turn equatorial. The next dawn dragonflies and fat, sluggish moths covered my mosquito net. The river had become a sheet of glass spreading to infinity around us, overhung by a suffocating mist; the air had turned heavy, gone sour with tropical rot. No banks were visible, although the occasional island -- a ragged outcropping of black tree silhouettes -- drifted by in the steam. Noon brought white heat and steely white light; the Congo became a lifeless, utterly still lake of glare, ten miles wide, all colors reduced to black and gray against the white of water and sky. The barge's surfaces became untouchably hot, and shade diminished as the incandescent ball of the sun rose directly overhead. The merchants erected tarps up and down the deck and lay prostrate under them, torpid with the heat.

Dusk came. We were a spearhead slicing into an azure river-and-sky melange, seemingly released from the bounds of earth, floating in a blue domain. Astern, to the west, the river was bankless, tintured lilac, bleeding red, running into cool purple with the sun's descent.

Recovered from the day's heat, I sat under the light behind the owner's cabin trying to read V. S. Naipaul, a futile endeavor given the moths and cicadas swirling around me. Then something golf-ball-sized slammed into my temple. I looked down and saw a huge armored beetle writhing at my feet. Djili, the freight manager, came over and picked it up. "We eat these beetles, you know. Come over and answer a few questions." He led me to a circle of palm-wine drinkers at the bow. Marijuana, called *bangi* in Lingala, was being smoked on the deck, and its pungently sweet aroma perfumed the air. The drinkers were chasing their wine with fat white fried palm grubs that they selected from a bowl at their feet.

"Your country is supposed to stand for human rights, but what about the rights of a man?" Djili asked, biting off

the head of a grub and chewing it lustily a few inches from my face. "Have a grub. I hear that your government would forbid me to have more than one wife. I should be able to have as many wives as I choose -- that's my right as a man. But your government would forbid it. *C'est pas juste.*"

Fearfully tasting my grub, and finding it chewy and squirting hot palm oil, I muttered something about polygamy being un-Christian, but this only provoked a tirade. *I am eating a larva*, I said to myself.

"Un-Christian? Polygamy goes back to Jesus' day! It's your government that's un-Christian, allowing pornography in the streets and forbidding me my basic rights as a man! Here, try a caterpillar." Djili held out a bowl of the brown squirming things. Still inwardly reeling from the grub, I had to refuse, but a little girl, looking at me wide-eyed, took one of the living creatures and chomped it to pieces, swallowing it with a gulp. We talked, or I should say Djili raved, until night fell and the mosquitoes drove me off the bow.

THE ninth day found us hugging the bank close to the great jungle, a tangled mass of green lucent in its nearest reaches with sunlight pouring in from above, but dark and gloomy farther in. Occasionally a monkey would scream and bound branch to branch back into the trees, or red-and-gray parrots would squawk and take flight. Huge, gangly birds that the locals call *kulokoko* screeched at the sight of us, like pterodactyls horrified to discover men trespassing in their prehistoric domain, and *wuff-wuffed* away in heavy-winged flight. Once, I caught sight of a cobra, some fifteen feet long and black, swimming along the hyacinth, its emblematic curved head and neck slicing the coffee-brown water. We were deep in the midst of an Africa many would have thought vanished centuries ago, an Africa as eternal as the dugout canoes and the blood-red sunsets.

One day a villager paddled up with a five-foot-long live crocodile, its jaws roped shut, in the bottom of his pirogue; it was bought by Maurice, a merchant from Kinshasa. "I'll smoke this and sell it," he said. "It'll pay for my return ticket." He and the villager struggled to get the thrashing black reptile out of the pirogue without receiving a blow from its tail or dropping it into the water; several bystanders helped, but the croc still whacked one boy in the face with its tail. When they had dragged it away from the edge of the deck, Maurice took to

pounding in its skull with the handle of a machete until it ceased struggling, its emerald eyes slit with black and staring fiercely, even in death.

At night the specters of great trees loomed black against the Milky Way's lustrous wash of stardust. With our spotlight probing the waters in front of us, searching for shoals, illuminating swirling beetles and crow-sized bats, with mosquitoes showing like a fine mist in their millions, we threaded our way through a dark labyrinth of isles. Drumbeats announcing our arrival resounded from villages ahead; 700 miles into the jungle we were still beset by pirogues, many carrying stacks of monkey carcasses, blackened, their eyes and mouths wide open as if they had been smoked alive in stark terror. Some paddlers were bare-breasted women, others men in loincloths. Once we ran over a pirogue, occasioning loss of property but not of life: its occupants jumped free in time. All night there were shouts, drumbeats, armadas of canoes laden with bush meat streaming toward us.

Late the next evening I was watching a dispute between the barge's security chief, Augustin, and a couple of drunken fishermen when the barge lurched. I grabbed the rail; others fell flailing into their merchandise. The engine sputtered, and crew members raced toward the *pousseur*, jumping over cooking pots and sacks of salt. The engine roared, coughed. Behind the propellers the spotlight showed fulminating clouds of sand in the water. We had run aground so violently that one of our two rudders had been severed and an engine incapacitated.

I WAS exhausted. Almost three weeks of heat and crowd and hassle on the barge seemed to have drained the life out of me. Nze, the chief mechanic, said that this was a serious accident that could delay us by three days at least. We were already a week late. I wanted to scream. To the south, over the forest, lightning flared silently at first, and then with rumbles of thunder. We sat still, with the Congo's warm fluids rushing past our motionless bow in a rippling V.

In despair I retired to my spot above the bridge. A full moon hung over the silhouettes of trees on the distant bank and dappled the waters below with its orange glow. Nevertheless rain came that night, soft and slight in the beginning, and then hot, copious, and pummeling. I gathered up my net and retreated to the awning under the bridge. Until dawn I watched the lightning flare up and show the vast river around us. I shuddered at the crash of

thunderbolts that seemed aimed at our craft on the open water.

After a long repair session on a sandbar the next morning, during which the mechanics detached the broken rudder and then placed the good rudder next to the engine that worked, we started up again and moved on toward the black-clouded horizon, past five-story-tall broad-canopied trees guarding the entrance to the jungle like jealous sentinels.

At noon we began drawing near a stretch of sandy shore. Villagers, mainly young men in rags, came whooping and hollering out of their huts. They leaped into their pirogues and paddled furiously toward us. Augustin whistled in alarm. The owner emerged onto the bridge platform bearing an automatic rifle. The villagers let loose what sounded like a war cry, and Augustin yelled to them not to dock, but some tried anyway. At this the owner brandished his rifle and began firing shots into the air, and the villagers abandoned the barge, with one pirogue capsizing in our violent, single-engine wake.

"It is dangerous here," the owner said. "These people are cannibals. They will see you and say, 'Ah, the flesh of the *mondele* is like sugar!' " He laughed uproariously. "This is a dangerous area for robbers and murderers. The deep jungle is wild in people as well as beasts."

A boy on the bank made a motion with his arms as if machine-gunning me, and soon all his little pals imitated him. Desi, a merchant from Lokutu, turned to me. "You see, they fear you, the *mondele*," he said. "White people to them are murderers, villains. The children hear how the Belgians used to eat little boys and girls, and they think you, any white, is a Belgian. For them to kill you would be an act of self-defense."

Eleven hundred miles and twenty-one days after leaving Kinshasa we pulled into Kisangani, in the very heart of equatorial Africa. The merchants, though they complained that business had been bad on this run and that they would barely break even, laughed and shouted jokes to one another as they struggled to haul their smoked fish and bush meat to the huge market. Here Conrad's Marlow alighted to find a spiritually diseased and languishing Kurtz, but here I was to disembark into mainstream modern African life, with no ceremony, no commentary ready to deliver on the malaise of twentieth-century humanity's soul. Dazed with fatigue, disoriented, I

followed the merchants off the barge and began making my way up toward the dusty main street, with its placarded hotels and diamond traders, with the bells of the city's broad white cathedral chiming over the din of the crowds.

Illustration by Jeffrey Tayler

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