

Garamba, explains as we drive to the recently opened Garamba Guest Lodge. 'With the LRA firmly entrenched in the Azande Hunting Reserve, Garamba was largely a no-go zone, even for our rangers. But with the recent demise of the LRA, the volatile security situation in the region has finally stabilised, and the park has reverted to our control. Nagero and the southern sector of the park are once again safe and we're making good headway with reining in Garamba's poaching pandemic, although we still face some big challenges.

'Garamba is located in one of the most remote places on the continent,' Arranz continues. 'Combine this with a derelict road network, and logistics become extremely complicated and hellishly expensive. It has taken us a full year just to replace what we lost during the LRA attack.'

I ask Arranz whether the poaching situation has improved now that the rebel army has been evicted. 'The area is far more stable and secure without the LRA, but poaching is a complex issue,' he replies. 'I think the Congolese soldiers are worse poachers than the LRA or even the Maharaleen ever were.'

With illegal gold and diamond mining in the surrounding hunting reserves also of growing concern, there's no doubt that Arranz and his team have their work cut out in Garamba, but he remains positive. 'These challenges are not insurmountable, and now is the crucial moment for us to save this park,' he says. 'As you explore the area during the coming days, you will be amazed at just how much wildlife still survives here. Garamba is a resilient place that can bounce back, given half a chance.'

HELPING HAND

Garamba's revival is being co-ordinated by the African Parks Network (APN), a not-for-profit company that manages valuable conservation areas on behalf of African governments that lack the financial resources and technical expertise to do so themselves.

'In September 2005, APN arrived in Garamba at the invitation of the ICCN,' explains Nuria Ortega, Garamba's tourism, marketing and public relations co-ordinator as we sip beers on the veranda of the new Garamba Guest Lodge. 'After signing a long-term management agreement with the ICCN, APN assumed total responsibility for



When to go

A visit to Garamba is most rewarding during the dry season (December–May). Large areas of the park are burned during March and April, producing nutritious grasslands and ideal wildlife-viewing conditions.

Getting there

The easiest option from the UK is to fly to Entebbe in Uganda and travel to Arua in the country's far northwest, before engaging the services of the APN for the short flight to the all-weather airstrip at Nagero.

Further information

Rooms in the new Garamba Guest Lodge start at US\$80 per person per night. Reservations are essential; contact Nuria Ortega at infogaramba@gmail.com. Further information on Garamba National Park and the APN project can be found at www.african-parks.org/garamba.

the rehabilitation and management of the entire Garamba complex.'

Generous funding from the EU, as well as a Spanish cooperation grant, has enabled APN to make real headway with effectively managing and developing the park. 'The ongoing recruitment and training of rangers has been a focal point, and this has helped to secure the park and get a handle on poaching,' Ortega tells me. 'The neglected road network and decaying tourism infrastructure are also in the process of being upgraded, but getting this guest lodge completed has been my obsession for the past 15 months.'

The lodge, which boasts some of the most lavish and attractive tourist facilities in Central Africa, was inaugurated in May last year. It features ten double bungalows, a well-appointed restaurant and the aforementioned veranda, on which you can relax on comfortable sofas and listen to the hippos honking in the Dungu River below.

HARSH REALITY

Early the next morning, I join APN pilot Stéphane Carre for a dawn jaunt over the park's gently undulating savannas. After all the talk of poaching, I'm not expecting to see a great deal, but it isn't long before my expectations are being challenged, as we fly over herd after herd of buffalo and elephant. We even spot a handsome pair of male lions relaxing beside the Dungu River, which is itself littered with the distinctive pink blobs of hippo; I estimate in excess of 150 hippos in one particularly large pod.

Back at the lodge, Arranz tempers my excitement at the amount of wildlife I observed by explaining the harsh reality of what the park has experienced. 'Garamba was the final wild refuge of the critically endangered northern white rhino,' he explains. 'During the 1950s, the park was home to between 40,000 and 60,000 elephants, and in excess of 1,000 rhinos. Today, the rhinos are gone – the last one disappeared in 2007 – and the elephants have been reduced to fewer than 4,000. But Garamba's nutritious grasslands could actually support ten times the current elephant population.'

Before this year, there hadn't been any regular anti-poaching patrols north of the Garamba River in almost 15 years; the northern sector of the park was all but abandoned. However, since March last year, patrols have started to cross the river again and begun the arduous task of wresting back control of the northern sector. And the first aerial reconnaissance of the north in decades, carried out during June last year, revealed surprisingly healthy populations of a number of large mammals.

Garamba's wildlife has suffered decades of abuse, but with the demise of the LRA, the withdrawal of Congolese military forces from the park, and the timely arrival of APN, Garamba appears to have finally turned the corner and embarked on the long road to recovery. **G**