Almost human...well, except for prehensile toes, extreme body hair and a few other differences.

**Deepest, darkest Africa is just the place to be if you are studying chimpanzees; just don't get too close.**

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY *Vanessa Woods*

# RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE

Sunset over Tchimpounga.

**THE POINT NOIRE AIRPORT** was more like a cowshed. It had four walls that didn't quite reach the corrugated iron roof and was empty but for customs officers with guns and "Tourism Brigade" chalked on one wall. So far so good.

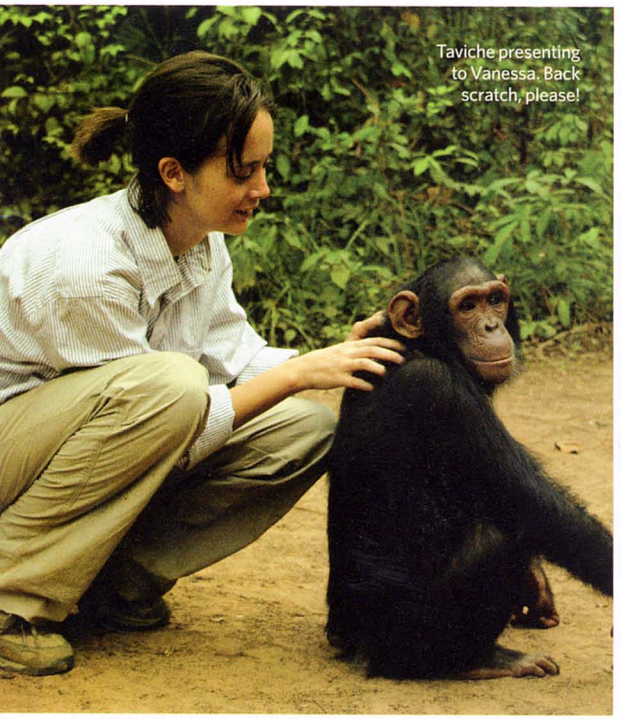
The People's Republic of Congo wasn't really my dream destination. Apart from the ebola and marburg viruses running rampant, it has only been five years since the country was torn apart by civil war. I tried looking up interesting things to do and see – but most websites had no information, except that you would definitely be robbed and might be killed.

I would have much preferred somewhere in, say, the Mediterranean. Unfortunately, Congo has something that can't be found anywhere else: the world's largest population of chimpanzees. I was part of a scientific team from Germany's Max Planck Institute, and bound for the Tchimpounga Chimpanzee Rehabilitation Centre, a chimpanzee sanctuary run by the Jane Goodall Institute. We were looking for a new place to study chimps.

Distinctly different character traits, but similar needs.

True, the United States has more than 1,800 animals in a variety of research enclosures that permit studies of chimpanzee behaviour, but in 1997, the U.S. National Institutes of Health banned breeding them in such centres on the basis that the animals were no longer useful and too expensive to maintain. The last survey completed by the U.S. National Research Council showed that only 250 chimps were taking part in any kind of research; the remainder were languishing in cages. The research centres are now petitioning U.S. authorities to resume the breeding programs.

Africa, with 17 chimpanzee sanctuaries housing more than 1,000 individual animals, is another option. We had come to this one in the Congo – the largest on the continent – to see if behavioural studies could be done on chimpanzees in Africa. The money we would normally pay to a biomedical



Taviche presenting to Vanessa. Back scratch, please!

centre in the U.S. or elsewhere to research chimps would be given to the sanctuary instead. Hopefully, over time, other scientists will follow our lead.

The sanctuary stands on a hill, surrounded by a natural savannah within the Tchimpounga Natural Reserve, about 45 minutes' drive north of Congo's second-largest city, Pointe Noire. Small pockets of forest spring out of the grassland like oases, and from their tangled interior comes the excited panting hoot of chimpanzees.

Just as we arrived at the sanctuary, five infant chimpanzees broke free from their keepers as they were being walked from their outdoor enclosure to their sleeping quarters for the night. They dodged clothes lines, parked vehicles and keepers, just like naughty children avoiding bedtime.

"Holy smoke, get inside," said Brian Hare, a research fellow at Max Planck Institute, as he began to hustle his PhD student Ester Hermann and myself inside one of the houses. A runaway chimp is cause for panic. An adult chimpanzee is at least three times stronger than a human and chimps can be aggressive and unpredictable. Earlier this year in a private sanctuary in California, two chimpanzees escaped and attacked an elderly man. He suffered injuries to his face, buttocks, and hands. His left foot and testicles were torn off. The man had come to the private sanctuary with his wife to visit their pet chimp, which had been confiscated for biting people's fingers off.

But the keepers at Tchimpounga didn't seem very worried. They were giggling and chasing their young charges around with cups of water. The initial excitement lasted for 10 minutes before everyone was safely put to bed. The three of us looked at each other, speechless.

But the real craziness was to come. Every day, the keepers escorted 15 young chimps to a nearby forest so they could spend time in the trees. Ken Cameron, the sanctuary manager, said we were welcome to go out with them, but we weren't so sure. These chimps were between five and seven

**"I've had a five-year-old chimp grab my hair and slam my head against the iron bars of his cage. Another I had hand-raised grabbed my video camera and smashed it in my face."**

years old; this might sound like a cute age, but I've had a five-year-old chimp grab my hair and slam my head against the iron bars of his cage. Another five year old – one I had hand-raised – grabbed my video camera and smashed it in my face, nearly breaking my nose.

So walking down to a forest with 15 of the little critters sounded like pure stupidity. But we underestimated the relationship the keepers had with the chimps. As the keepers wandered down to the forest, carrying only flimsy walking sticks and the chimps' food for the day, the animals simply grouped together and followed them like sheep. I'd never seen anything like it.

When we reached the forest, the keepers fed the chimps from an open wheelbarrow full of pawpaw and other fruit. Normally, anything that comes between chimps and food is rapidly dismembered. But while there were some shrieks and pant-hoots, the chimps grouped around quietly and waited patiently for their turn.

They were definitely curious about us but if any of them started grabbing at our hands or pulling our hair, the keepers just called them by name, and they backed off.

In the unlikely event we were tricked into believing chimpanzees really could make great pets, something happened later to clear our heads. Hare and Hermann were walking in a fenced-in corridor between two groups of adult chimps. Six adult chimpanzees approached them silently. While Hare and his student were looking the other way, the chimpanzees ran at them, screaming as they hurled their logs with perfect synchronisation. One log fell at Hermann's feet. Had the electrified fence not been between them and the chimps, the duo would not have returned from their jaunt.

"It was just awesome," said Hare. "People say chimps can't coordinate and don't plan, but they just launched a completely sophisticated attack. You don't see that in a lab."

Part of what we were hoping to study at Tchimpounga was chimpanzee personality. Some personalities were pretty clear already. Taviche throws dirt at people. All that Petit Prince wants is a hug. But which is the more intelligent? What makes one chimpanzee smarter than another? Curiosity? Aggression? Chimpanzees are humans' closest evolutionary relatives. If we can figure out why some chimpanzees are clever, maybe this will gives us clues about human intelligence.

All of the chimpanzees in Tchimpounga are orphans, caught by poachers to be sold as pets. Roads made by logging companies have allowed poachers to penetrate deeper into the massive forests that cover 60 per cent of the Congo. The previous instability of the government meant logging companies were reluctant to take out long-term contracts, but this is changing. We saw trucks stacked with giant trees that must have been more than 100 years old. Whole forests of sapelli, okoume, grey ebony and mahogany are shipped out every month, intruding on chimpanzee habitats and opening the way for bush-meat hunting and infant-chimp exploitation.

Over the past five years, 48 chimpanzees have arrived at Tchimpounga. With 117 chimpanzees in total, Tchimpounga is bursting at the seams. But with the continued bush-meat trade, there will undoubtedly be more arrivals. In the next few years, Tchimpounga plans to release chimpanzees back into the wilds of Congo. Though the primary motivation is individual welfare, it will also develop release techniques that may prove vital to the survival of the species.

The next morning, the three of us got up early enough to see the keepers chase the morning's escapees around the sanctuary with cups of water, shouting and laughing as they gradually succeeded in herding their mischievous and energetic wards into their enclosures. Half an hour later, one last chimp was still entertaining himself by running around the base of the centre's radio antenna.

Godelin, one of the female keepers, held out her hand. "Viens," she said. Come.

And he did.

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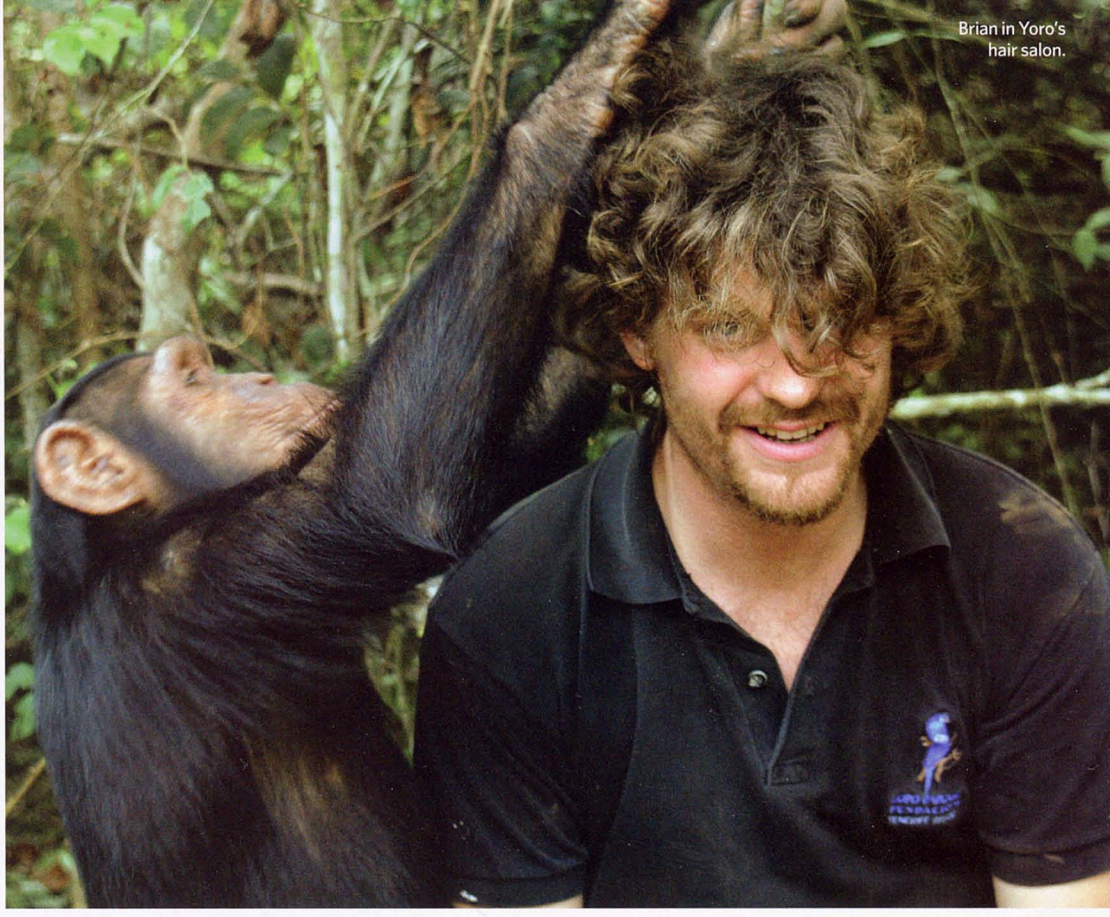
At the end of the day: Serge leads the kids home.



Brian in Yoro's hair salon.

Emmi and Taviche share a special de-fleaing moment.