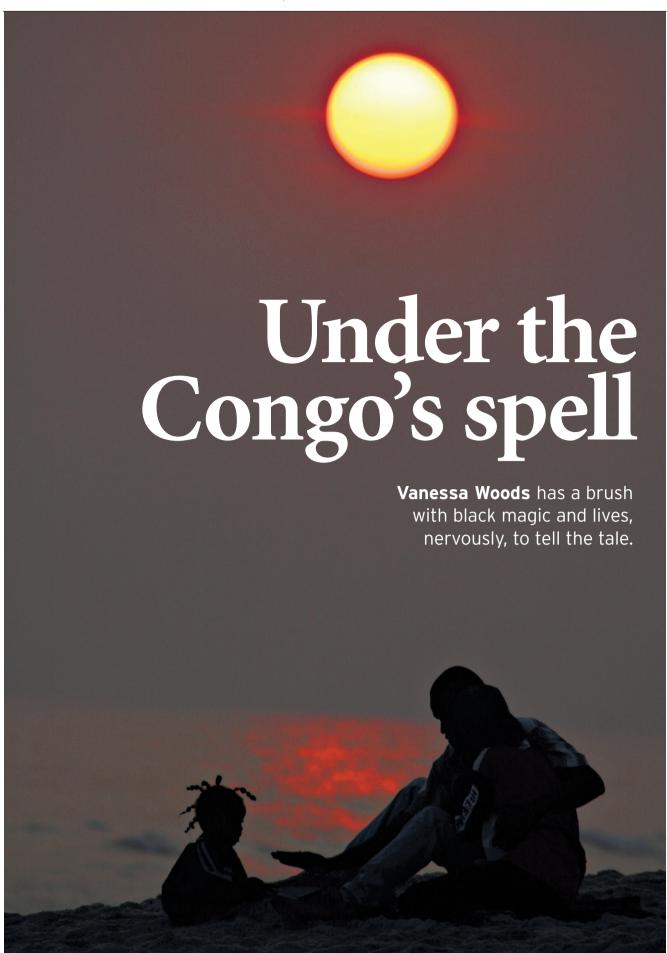
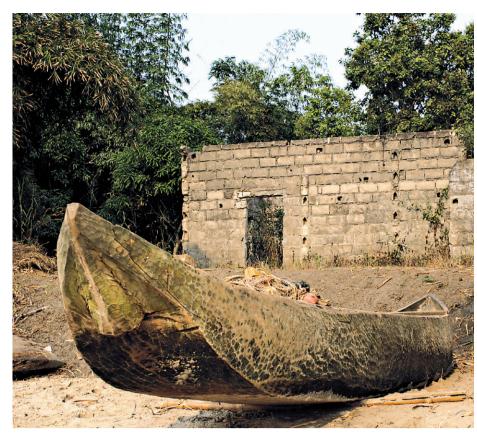
4 Travel Weekend Edition December 3-4, 2005









Jungle fever ... clockwise from far left, a family relaxes by the sea at the end of the day; the dreaded voodoo doll; a canoe at the old slave port near Pointe Noire: chimps at the Tchimpounga sanctuary put on a show. Photos: Vanessa Woods

he unfortunate little man was studded with nails from his neck to his groin. His mouth was wide open and he had a mirror hanging from his belly. I leant forward to have a closer look.

"Don't touch that!" cried a young boy who leapt out of nowhere. I could see the whites of his eyes as he threw himself between me and the wooden statue. "Bad voodoo," he said, wagging his finger. "Very bad voodoo."

You don't mess around with voodoo in the Congo. We saw signs of black magic throughout our trip: piles of ashes with scattered chicken feathers and unburnt candles, mutilated amulets around people's necks.

I started to panic. I had definitely touched one of the nails in the upper torso. I was cursed. I was going to die. "I just touched a bit," I begged of the little boy. "That's OK, isn't it?"

He shook his head and sighed. "I don't know, madam. One hopes so."

I hurried to join my companions, who were lounging on the beach. The pristine coastline stretched, calm and deserted, for hundreds of kilometres along the Atlantic. "This voodoo business," I said as I sat down, "it's not real or anything, is it?"

Victor, an education officer, looked at me as if I'd just asked if the Pope was Buddhist. "Well," he said carefully, "voodoo originates from the Fong Ewe tribe in Benin, but many tribes in the Congo have been practising for centuries, if not longer."

"I just touched a voodoo doll," I blurted. "Does that mean I'm cursed?"

Ken, the manager of a chimpanzee sanctuary, whistled through his teeth. "You sure picked your place. You know there's a slave port just over there. A lot of people died before they even made the boat. The locals say spirits linger, working magic."

Ken's eyes were twinkling, but I wasn't sure he was joking. The coastal area of Congo was a big source of slaves for the transatlantic trade. Thousands captured in the interior were brought here and saw Africa for the last time as they began their perilous journey to the Americas.

The sun set gloriously on an otherwise perfect day. We'd had breakfast in Pointe Noire, a small town made rich by oil. A public holiday had been declared 12 hours before, for no other reason than President Denis Sassou-Nguesso was dropping by. We munched on croissants at a French bakery that would have done Paris proud.

Driving north we stopped at an impromptu-style restaurant plopped in the middle of nowhere. We saw a fisherman haggling with the cook over a fish as big as our table. It was capitaine, a kind of perch the Congolese still fish traditional-

ly from the wild rapids of the River Congo.

Thirty minutes later the fish had been fried in palm oil and hot pilli pilli peppers. I don't like fish and had ordered some chips instead, but one bite of the capitaine melted in my mouth and I shovelled in one forkful after another until I was as potbellied as a penguin.

We drove until sunset, stopping to admire the blazing clouds over the water and an odd assortment of voodoo dolls leaning against a fence.

From this stretch of the Atlantic, the River Congo winds like a snake into impenetrable jungle. It separates the Democratic Republic of Congo from the Congo we were in, the People's Republic. As Africa's most powerful river and the most voluminous river in the world, the Congo has a discharge of 450,000 litres of water a second. Treacherous currents and rapids make it as impassable now as when Joseph Conrad set his *Heart of Darkness* here in 1902.

The river and surrounding rainforest are legendary. More than half the country (an area as big as Western Australia) is covered in a huge forest that is home to wildlife that reads like Livingstone's fantastic journal. Kopi, a kind of forest giraffe, are as rare as unicorns. Black hippos stay cool in the deep waters that protect them from the sun, while manatees swim from the brackish water near the sea to the swirling waters above the cataracts. Thirteen species of primates swing through the trees, as well as countless birds and small mammals.

Looking into the jungle, its magnificent canopy stretching as far as the eye could see, it was clear the Congo is one of the last places in the world that true adventure still exists. I had grandiose visions of treading ground that had felt no human footprint for centuries. Of coming face-to-face with pygmies, or grasping the curling trunk of a woodland elephant.

I was brought back to reality by the call of another famous Congo critter. "Get in the car." said Ken.

"Oh!" I craned my neck excitedly over the Land Rover. "Do you think we can see them?"

"We want to see wild chimps about as much as hungry lions. Come on," he said, seeing my disappointment, "there's a much safer way to see them."

Jane Goodall's Tchimpounga Chimpanzee Sanctuary sits on top of a hill in the middle of a savanna. Small pockets of forest provide the chimps with a playground. The 117 chimps are orphans, rescued from the illegal bush meat or pet trade. Congo has the world's largest population of chimpanzees and Tchimpounga has more refugees than any other African sanctuary.

Being in the forest with them was like a scene from *The Jungle Book*. Laughing, they chased each other up and down trees. They tumbled on the ground at our feet and pulled our hands, wanting us to join in.

Suddenly, the chimps bolted up the trees and started pant-hooting and screaming. The whole forest erupted in panic. The keepers looked worried.

"Could be wild chimps."

I couldn't help thinking of the voodoo doll. Was this the end? Torn to pieces by chimpanzees? One of the keepers, Sedgewick, went to investigate the potential invaders. He came back, smiling broadly.

"I found the wild chimp," he said and held up a black plastic bag. He waved it around for all the young chimps to see and, looking surprisingly sheepish, they crept down from the trees.

A little tired of looking over my shoulder for the voodoo curse, I brought it up gingerly with Sedgewick on the way back from the forest. "Voodoo is very useful," he said. "If you have a broken leg, the witchdoctor can break the leg of a chicken and yours will be fixed."

"What if you had bad luck, or were cursed somehow?"

Sedgewick's advice was to see a witchdoctor, who would sew some ashes and blood in a linen sack, insert the sack under my skin and sew it up again. The

cost, a mere 5000 francs (\$133).

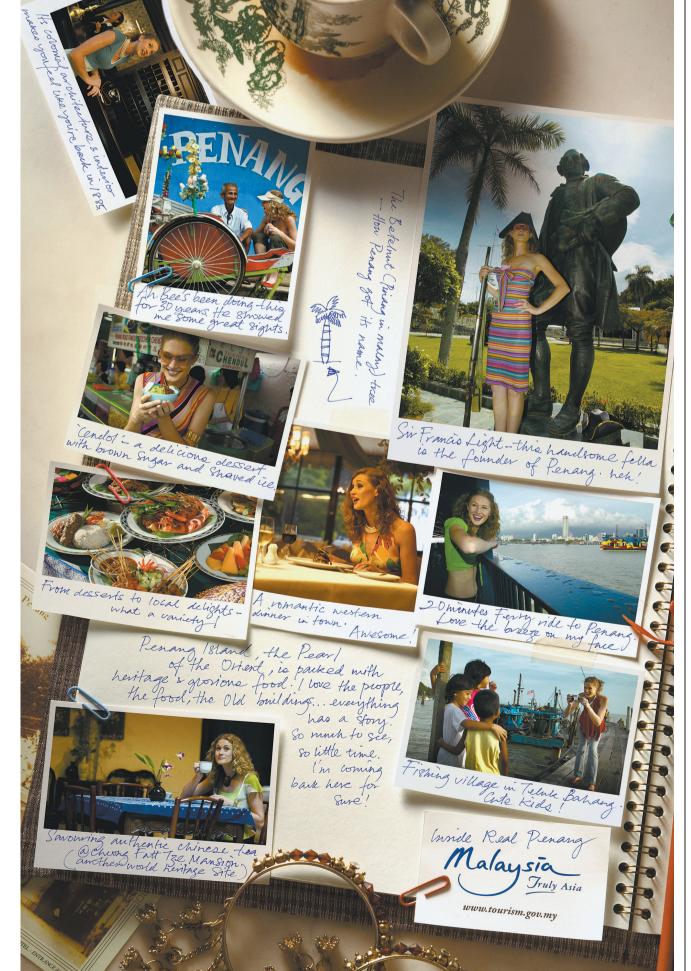
I was OK until he got to the part where the witchdoctor slit my skin open. Desperate, I told him about the voodoo doll. He laughed. "The power is not in the statue. The power is in hatred."

It was like talking to Yoda from *Star Wars*. "Someone must go to the witch-doctor who curses the statue. Have you done anyone harm? Have you injured a body or wounded a spirit?"

I thought hard. Apart from a couple of ex-boyfriends, I couldn't think of anyone who would want to curse me. And they were more likely to have another beer than go to a witchdoctor.

Sedgewick smiled. "Then you have nothing to fear. Tread a good path, lead an honourable life, and do no harm."

Relieved, I walked with him back through the savannah, the sun suspended like a red moon over the Congo. You can be sure I'll be treading very carefully from now on.



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Destination Republic Of Congo

■ GETTING THERE

There are no direct flights from Australia to Pointe Noire, but Air France (www.airfrance.com/au) flies to Paris and then on to Pointe Noire for \$6438 return in high season. Make sure you book the Paris to Pointe Noire leg first, as Air France does this route only three or four times a week.

■ VISAS

A visa is required to enter the Republic of Congo. It can be obtained from the Congolese embassy in London. Yellow fever and other vaccinations should also be up to date.

■ STAYING THERE

Migitel, Boulevard du General de Gaulle, Pointe Noire. Phone (0011 242) 940 918. A basic hotel located near the city and beaches with rooms from \$90 a night. Air-conditioning and satellite TV.

Hotel Azur International, 54 Avenue N'teta Kouilou, Pointe Noire. Phone 942 771. Three-star hotel near the ocean from \$100 a night. Air-conditioning and satellite TV.

Most hotels have a connection with a tourist agent if you would like to be shown around. The Achilles Service tour agency operates from Brazzaville, but can show you the sights of Pointe Noire. Ask for Odende Goma, who speaks English. Phone 824 553 or email achilles_services@voila.fr.

■ SECURITY

The Republic of Congo has been peaceful for five years, although sporadic fighting does occur. The main danger in Pointe Noire is theft. Photographing military personnel, public buildings and bridges is illegal. See www.smarttraveller.gov.au.