

OUTLOOK AND OPINION

PHILIP LAWRY

Group outing in the 4x4's



Philip Lawry is the newly arrived Head Of Production Geology at Shell Gabon. Phil started work mid-November and his wife Angela arrives soon. Philip and Angela have three older teenage children in the UK. Previous to this posting they were based in Doha, Qatar where Phil was Lead Geologist on the Qatargas 3&4 project and Angie taught at Park House English School. They have also enjoyed postings in the UK, NL and Thai Shell. Philip enjoys time with his family, current affairs, boys toys, holidays, books and photography. He speaks survival Thai, schoolboy French and Indonesian phrases.

1 What ideas/impressions did you have about Gabon before arriving?

Having never set foot on the African continent before arriving in Gabon, my preconceived ideas were mainly based on exotic movies and Wilbur Smith novels. Warm tropical rain, happy, colourfully dressed people; women balancing pots on their heads and long white beaches

created a wonderful montage of images. Everyone told me wildlife stories, particularly regarding gorillas, snakes, and huge insects, and of wild elephants and unspoilt monster game fishing.

2 What of your prior expectations have changed since arrival?

The warm, tropical, equatorial climate has been a pleasant surprise. Quite seriously, I thought the reports of wild elephants in our gardens must be completely exaggerated. Well, it is true - there are loads of wild elephants! This year there are more of them than ever and, unusually, they have stayed even longer than just the mango season.

3 What has been the most surprising or challenging thing since arriving?

How 'French' Gabon is has been a huge surprise to me. French is the common language; people eat baguettes, and French culture seems

to permeate every aspect of life here. Our children are French speakers and particularly enjoy being able to converse with the Gabonese who are tolerant and patient with their poor French.

Travel to and from here is a challenge. There are no direct flights to Libreville from the UK, plus Gamba is approximately 400km from Libreville. Fortunately, we are well served with Shell charter and commercial flights.

A major adjustment for me, but a splendid pleasure for some, was getting used to having no access to conventional western shops. There are no coffee chains, major supermarket brands or ethnically themed restaurants! Where we are based there are no cash machines or electronic banking so people use cheques and cash.

4 Any immediate loves/hates about your new location?

As an avid consumer I'm somewhat restricted by the lack of shops and reliable post. I work around it by burdening my family with loads of Amazon® and eBay® packages to bring from UK when they come to visit.

Internet speed is a challenge, I'd like to see the occasional YouTube® video or stream a football match. Downloading software updates and podcasts is not really practical. Right now I am looking at getting my own satellite Internet connection, independent of Shell. The technology seems mainstream, cost is high but if it were successful, I'd be thrilled. The lack of Australian football coverage was a serious issue for me, but just last week ESPN started broadcasting one match per weekend. Result!

The beaches here are simply amazing! And they are deserted. There are several nearby and on sunny afternoons I enjoy nothing more than a relaxing beach trip at the end of the day.

Commuting to work is also a delight; I choose either a 3km cycle along a jungle path or 4km along paved road. Sometimes I see monkeys in the trees. If it is raining I drive our car. There is no traffic to speak of and the door-to-door journey is about ten minutes. Bliss!

5 What are you looking forward to the most in your new country?

Making a difference and contributing. Learning and understanding the petroleum system then helping unravel the subsurface puzzles we deal with. On a personal front I'm hoping to learn survival French skills, improve my tennis, catch some big fish and keep a mild suntan.

6 What is your accommodation like?

We have an attached, three-bedroom bungalow set in well-maintained, green, leafy gardens with no fences between the houses. Houses are generally quite old, but regularly renovated every four years or so. Buildings quickly deteriorate in the harsh tropical environment and need to be regularly maintained. Large fruits and nuts drop onto our metal roof with a loud bang, which used to give me a fright during the night.

7 What is your favourite way to spend a day in Gabon?

Taking visitors for a guided jungle trek and sharing their enjoyment in seeing large wild animals up close and personal in their own habitat.

Point Pedras beach



8 Is there anything you didn't bring that you wish you had?

Yes; where do I start? There are many things I now wish I had included in our shipment. To name a few: a power wash to clean our car after 4WD trips; Heat Beads barbecue fuel; roof tent for camping, generator, chain saw, rechargeable drill/screw driver; sand boards and lifting straps for freeing bogged 4WDs; a satellite phone for emergencies; more terracotta pots; boogie boards; ice-cream maker; dry food; canned foods; washing machine and dishwasher detergent/rinse aid; portaflood lights for our trees; power boards, and electrical extension leads. I'm always on the lookout for people travelling here to bring me things we need.

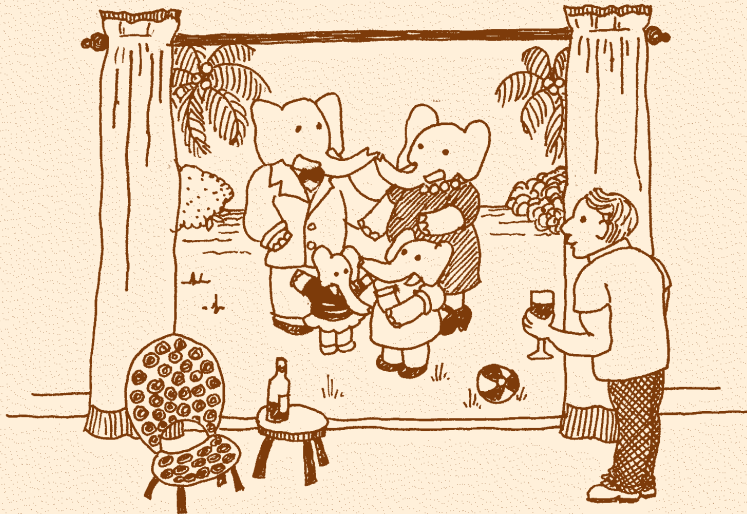
9 Any tips/advice for new arrivals?

Shell Gabon is a unique small busy operating unit and is quite satisfying to be part of. Before you leave, plan carefully and realistically scope out what you are going to need here during your posting. Take full advantage of your new colleagues' experiences and advice.

10 How did your family adjust to the location/schools/language etc?

Our children are older teenagers; at secondary school and University. As a general comment, they particularly like coming to visit us in Gabon and enjoy every minute here. Whenever it is time to travel home, they bring out their calendars and plan their next Gabon trip.

CEDRIC THOUGHT REPORTS OF WILD ELEPHANTS IN THE GARDEN
MUST BE COMPLETELY EXAGGERATED...



AND INDEED THEY WEREN'T WILD AT ALL—
JUST STRANGELY FAMILIAR...