BLACK AFRICA, BLACK AMERICA, AND CHICAGO PIZZA

Sangha River, Central African Rain Forest. No one knows how many gorillas there are in this vast untracked jungle. Researchers estimate as many as 100 to 200,000. There could be a lot more - no one knows.

To see a family of gorillas up close in the wild, which is what I brought a group of intrepid TTPers here to do, is profoundly memorable. What had the most impact on me personally was how peaceful and benign the gorillas' lives are. They eat leaves. Babies ride on the backs of their mommies. Kids wrestle and play. Dad - the giant bull silverback - watches over them protectively. They have no predators.

It's not just that no predator would mess with huge gorillas - it's that a jungle like this has very few predators at all, no lions and a few leopards which go after small antelopes. The gorillas are left alone. When you watch them, what you hear is silence. There is no deafening hum of insects like in the Amazon. There's only an occasional bird call and the gorillas munching on leaves.

Human interlopers like us are completely boring. This fellow is wondering, "Who are you weird critters and when are you going away?"

The contrast between gorilla life and human life in Africa is overpowering. For several of the folks with me, this was their first experience of Africa. They had, of course, heard of poverty here, but to confront it in your face - whether on the streets of a big city or a village in the bush - was inexpressibly shocking.

It's not easy getting to the remotest jungle in Africa (see the maps and info in Gorillas & Pygmies Expedition). On our way, we spent a couple of days in the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, Africa's Calcutta with hordes of people in filthy rags living and sleeping in the streets.

Ethiopia is twice of Texas with a 94 million population, 85% of whom are subsistence farmers in traditional villages whose only connection to the outside world is a donkey track. They have neither roads nor electricity. Unless you have witnessed it firsthand, you really can't fathom the depth of such destitution. Nor the unceasing amount of work - grindingly hard labor - it takes to sustain what meager level of survival they have.

Our jungle lodge had a deck overlooking the Sangha River, where we would watch the sunset and enjoy a cold beer or gin and tonic.

When our conversation turned to African poverty and hardship, I was asked what I thought as I'd seen so much of it. I said it made me think of Chicago pizza.

Aficionados of it claim there're special qualities of the water in Chicago, like its alkalinity, which provide that distinctive thin crunchiness. I wasn't thinking of actual pizza, however, but rather a friend of mine who owns a pizza parlor, that, being in Chicago, means most of his customers and all of his employees are black.

"If he were with us here," I said, "I don't know if he would laugh or cry comparing Black Africans to Black Americans - probably he would do both."

I then proceeded to relate to everyone how my friend has to run his business: he has to pay his employees in cash. No paychecks, no withholding, no FICA. He can't get employees any other way, it has to be cash. The reason is not for tax-avoidance. They don't get paid enough to worry about taxes. What they worry about is losing government benefits.

If you are an unemployed black in Chicago, you get:

*A free cell phone with 250 minutes a month.

*A LINK credit card for food stamps, Illinois' equivalent of the national SNAP (supplemental nutritional assistance program) food stamps.

*Free or much reduced rent for an apartment in Section 8 public housing.

*Earned Income Tax Credits - a Bush II invention where the government pays you money if you make no money.

*ADC (Aid for Dependent Children) for single mothers.

A job with a paycheck threatens all of this, as you no longer qualify for these freebies. To the extent you get a paycheck, your freebies are reduced or eliminated. So the only work you'll accept is a job that's off the books cash-only.

That's life for millions of Black Americans. Comparing that life to that of hundreds of millions of Black Africans is grotesque. And what is hideously more grotesque is for the former - most all of whom have a refrigerator and flat-screen TV, and all of whom have running water, sewers, electricity, and a floor to live on instead of dirt - to complain about it, to pretend to be a victim of America.

Someone like Allen West or Herman Cain needs to come to Black Africa, to cities like Addis Ababa or Lagos, Nigeria, to traditional villages out in the bush far from any road much less a hospital, and spend time soaking in what life is like there, what it has been from time immemorial, the life Black Americans don't have to live because their ancestors were brought to America instead of staying in Africa.

Then he could come back to the US and say something like this:

> "What I saw in Africa made me realize that every Black American should be bottomlessly grateful that their ancestors were brought here. We all know how horrible those slave ships were that crossed the Atlantic. We all know the degradation they experienced as slaves on cotton plantations in the South.
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> "But what many Black Americans may not know is that their ancestors were captured and enslaved by Black African kingdoms and chieftains, who in turn sold them to white slave traders. Slavery was practiced in Africa, as it was in most other parts of the world, from the

dawn of human time. Look at how much slavery there is among the peoples of the Bible. Look at how slavery is approved and authorized by Allah in the Koran - which means, incidentally, that either Allah is morally wrong about slavery or that the Koran is not the perfect word of Allah.

"Slavery was a normal accepted practice in Africa for thousands of years. If they had not been sold to white slave traders and taken to America, the ancestors of Black Americans would have remained slaves in Africa. And there they would have died. Slavery was the norm. What was the exception, the single great historical exception, was the Christian West - led by the British, then Americans - objecting to it, fighting and even dying to put an end to it.

"I was so deeply affected by what I saw in Africa that I am forming a foundation to sponsor Black Africans from all over the US to travel to Africa - not to be a tourist and stay in a nice hotel, but to live for a few weeks as Africans live, in a city or a village in the bush.

"I believe they will return thanking their lucky stars they live in America, that their ancestors ended up here instead of staying a slave in Africa. I also believe they will return with a new appreciation of America's prosperity and economic system of capitalism.

"Just as slavery was an accepted part of life in the world until the Brits and Americans stopped it, so was poverty - only much more so. Poverty and unending backbreaking work just to survive and not starve is the natural state of humanity. Only a small privileged elite in any society throughout history lived on easy street. Widespread prosperity in a society is history's rarest exception.

"Today, many people have this bizarre notion that prosperity is the norm and poverty is the exception. Go to Africa to see how crazy this is. It's crazy to ask, Why is there so much poverty? Poverty is the norm. The real question is, What creates the historical exception of widespread prosperity? The answer is political and economic freedom, the freedoms embodied in America's Declaration of Independence.

"You agree that freedom and slavery are incompatible, right? You cannot advocate both at the same time, yes? Now, wouldn't you say that slavery is forcing people to work for you for free and against their will? If someone put a gun at your head and said, ‘You will work for someone else for free, and if you refuse I will shoot you, beat you up, or put you in prison,' wouldn't you say you were being enslaved?

"Then consider: if you say that you have a right to free food stamps, free rent, free cell phones, free welfare money, you are saying you have a right to enslave the people who are paying for it. They - taxpayers - must work for you for free to give you what you want, or else they will be shot or beat up resisting arrest, or thrown in prison. They are your slaves.

> "I think it is time for Black Americans to be truly free. To do that, they must abandon the immoral claim that others must be enslaved to support them. They must abandon the ridiculous notion they are victims, and embrace their being Americans as the most extraordinary blessing of Providence.
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> "Here in America, Black Americans have the chance to flourish that Black Africans do not. The reason is that they are *Americans, not Africans*. Trust me on this: you really, really don't want to live like Africans. Or go and see for yourself if you don't trust me. You won't believe how much you'll want to be back in the USA.
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> "And once you are back home here in America, you ought to find yourself thrilled and grateful to be American, rather than resentful. With that change in attitude towards your life, you will be on the road to independence and success."

So - as soon as I get out of this jungle, I should send this to Allen West and Herman Cain. Or feel free to beat me to it and send it yourself. Meanwhile, here's more of a glimpse of what we're experiencing.

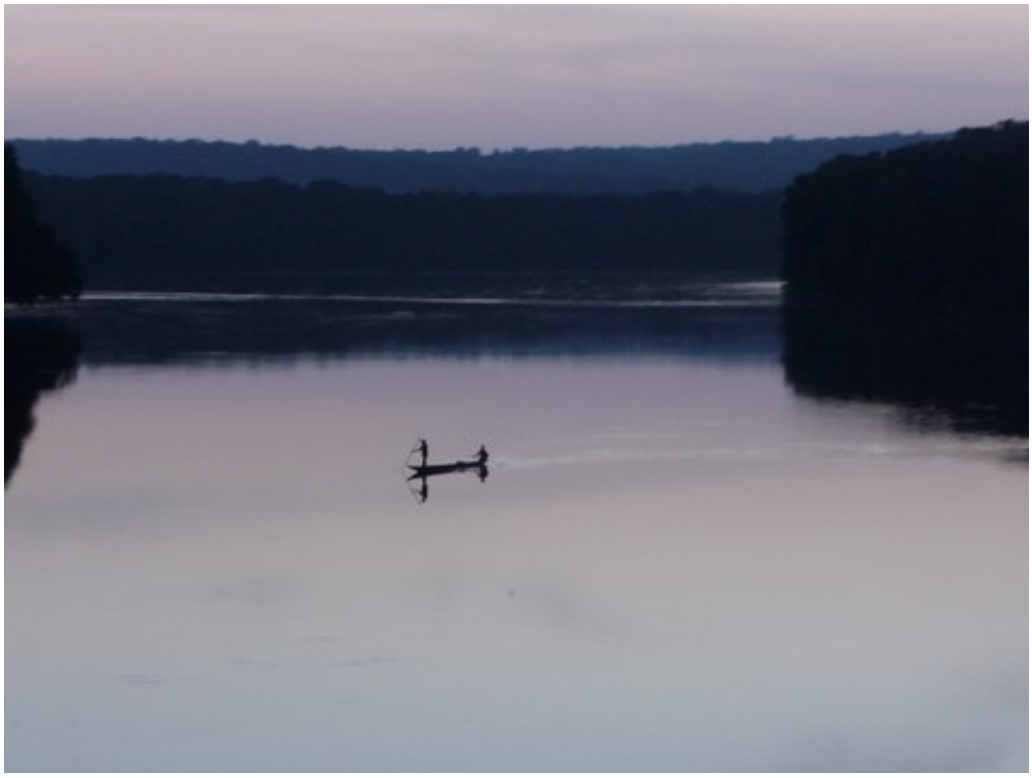
We were amazed that 600 pound silverback bull gorillas could climb high into trees. This is a zoom shot of one feasting on his favorite leaves at least 40 feet up:

This jungle is also full of forest elephants. We saw dozens at a clearing that has their favorite mineral salts:

Including this big bull with giant tusks:

We also went net hunting with the Ba'Aka Pygmies. They caught a duiker antelope and two porcupines:

Here's what it's like to trek through an African rain forest:

And here are your fellow TTPers cruising on the Sangha River:

One last shot of how remotest Africa can be. It can be so peaceful and serene - but life can be unimaginably hard here compared to America.