

# Bourdain's field notes: Congo

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It is the most relentlessly f\*\*\*\*\*-over nation in the world, yet it has long been my dream to see the Congo. And for my sins, I got my wish.

It is a country, a subject so large and so complicated as to defy explanation—or any summing up in a sentence, a volume, an hour of television, or even ten hours of television.

Occupying an ungovernable mass of land the size of all Western Europe combined, the Democratic Republic of the Congo should be the richest country in Africa. It possesses the equivalent of trillions of dollars in resources: diamonds, gold, coltan (which the whole world requires for cell phones), minerals, timber, probably oil, uranium, and hydroelectric power. In short, it has everything that the First World needs and desires. This is its curse.

But from before its beginnings the Congo has been ravaged by greed. Stripped of its population by Arab and Portuguese slavers, its tribal societies were devastated. Handed outright to Belgium's King Leopold for his personal exploitation, nearly half its population were worked to death, whipped, dismembered, executed outright, or sent running into the bush to die of starvation and disease in a pitiless quest for first ivory and then rubber. The Belgians who followed left behind a deliberately uneducated governing class and a few sergeants. The Congolese people then made the very untimely tactical mistake of democratically electing a socialist president in the midst of the nuclear arms race between East and West.

The CIA and MI6 conspired to assassinate him (whether they succeeded directly is open to debate—what is certainly very clear is that he was killed), eventually installing in his place Joseph Mobutu, a man of spectacular rapaciousness, brutality, and megalomania. At one point, having looted the country of billions—and having allowed what infrastructure remained to largely rot into the forest, Mobutu's army complained of not being paid. The President-for-Life's response was to point out that they had guns and to suggest that they take what they needed from the already desperate population. This is an attitude that prevails today.

War in Rwanda, next door, left the Congo with hundreds of thousands of refugees—many of them genocidal Hutus—living within its borders and a neighboring Tutsi government uninclined towards either sympathy or good behavior (as Mobutu had been a staunch supporter of the Hutu, who had enthusiastically slaughtered up to 800,000 of their Tutsi neighbors in a period of only a few short weeks). Ensuing civil wars have cost the country millions of lives.

At the time that my crew and I drove across the border into Goma, there were nearly 30 different rebel groups and militias—many of them aligned with the Congo’s neighboring countries—fighting it out across the country. One of them, M23 [short for March 23 Movement], were fighting amongst themselves only 10 miles away. The official armed forces of the Congo, the FARDC, were said to be on their way—an outcome generally considered to be a worst-case scenario, as they are widely regarded as professionals at the business of extortion, murder, mass rape, and robbery, rather than simply amateurs. We were, during our shoot, extremely fortunate. Relative to most, we had a luxuriously unmolested, violence-free time. We were extorted, detained, and threatened daily. But such is life in the Congo.

The Congo is a place where everything is fine—until it isn’t.

*A version of this was published on Tumblr on June 5, 2013.*