

# COUNTRY INFORMATION



## Future perspective

**OIL FUELS** Gabon's economy today, but in future more of its wealth is expected to come from its many other resources. Gabon is mineral-rich and set to become one of the world's leading producers of manganese, while its forestry sector, home to more than 400 species of large trees, already accounts for 2.5 per cent of GDP. Thirteen recently created national parks and the world's second-largest rainforest mean that Gabon is also set to hit the world tourism stage. It all adds up to prosperity. ■

## Historical perspective

**BANTU ETHNIC** groups arrived in Gabon about 4,500 years ago but little is known of tribal life before European contact. Tribal art suggests a rich cultural heritage however. The Portuguese arrived in the 15th century and named the country after the Portuguese word 'gabao', a coat with a sleeve and hood, resembling the shape of the Komo River. The British, French and Dutch followed in the 16th century, as the coastline became a centre for the slave trade. In 1839, the French took control when a local Mpongwe ruler signed sovereignty over to them. Soon the first missionaries arrived: American Protestants and French Roman Catholics. The French ran anti-slavery naval patrols from the 1820s and captured a slave ship in 1849 and released the slaves, whereupon they named their settlement Libreville (Free Town). In 1910, Gabon became one of the four territories of the Federation of French Equatorial Africa (AEF) along with Chad, Congo (Brazzaville) and the Central African Republic. The AEF fought for Charles de Gaulle's Free France during the Second World War. In 1958, Gabon voted to become an autonomous republic and in 1960 achieved independence. Léon Mba was elected President in 1961 and ruled until his death in 1967. His hand-picked successor was Albert Bernard Bongo who in 1990 declared Gabon a multi-party democracy. ■



A Superb Sunbird: sunbirds are tiny jewels of the tropics. In search of nectar, they hover at flowers but don't fly backwards as hummingbirds do. They live in the forests of Gabon. Above: An engraving shows explorer Paul Du Chaillu's retreat from Ashango country after an accident involving a gun in 1865 caused the death of two natives. Find out more about Du Chaillu on page 32

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## Essential facts

The Gabonese Republic is one of West Africa's most stable countries and boasts one of the highest incomes per capita thanks to its oil wealth. Abundant natural resources and foreign private investment have combined to make Gabon the envy of its neighbours

### FULL NAME

Gabonese Republic

### HEAD OF STATE

President Omar Bongo Ondimba

### CAPITAL

Libreville

### AREA

267,667 sq km  
(103,347 sq miles)  
Similar in size to Colorado

### POPULATION

1.38 million  
80 per cent urban

### RELIGION

Roman Catholic (75 per cent)  
Protestant (20 per cent)  
Indigenous beliefs (4 per cent)  
Muslim (1 per cent)

### GOVERNMENT

Multi-party democracy

### TIME ZONE

GMT+1

### COUNTRY DIALLING CODE

+241

### INTERNET DOMAIN

.ga

### ELECTRICITY

220V, 50Mz, twin-pin plugs

### MONETARY UNIT

Communauté Financière Africaine Franc (CFA) fixed to the Euro. CFA notes come in 10,000, 5,000, 1,000 and 500.

### CURRENCY

CFA 656 = €1  
CFA 545 = \$1

### GDP

€5.86 billion (\$7 billion)

### GDP PER CAPITA

€3,816 (\$4,581)

### MAJOR TRADING PARTNERS

US, China, France, Japan, Cameroon, the Netherlands, the Ivory Coast

### MAIN EXPORTS

Crude oil, timber, manganese

### GEOGRAPHY

The Republic of Gabon is situated on the west coast of Africa, bordered on the north by Cameroon, on the east and south by the Congo, on the west by the Atlantic Ocean and to the north west by Equatorial Guinea.

### MAIN CITIES

Libreville is the largest city with a population of about 700,000. Port Gentil, an island surrounded by swamps and ocean, is the oil capital. Franceville is the third city, at the head of the Trans-Gabonese railway, while Mouila's principal attraction is the Lac Bleu, famous for its blue water.

### CLIMATE

Equatorial. June to September plus a few weeks in December to January are dry. The rest of

the year is hot and humid. Max temps: 25°C (77°F) in July; 29°C (85°F) in February to April. Min temps: 22°C (72°F) in July; 26°C (78°F) in February.

### LANGUAGES

French is the official language but, more than half the population speak the African language of Fang.

### PEOPLE

Almost all Gabonese are of Bantu origin. Gabon has at least 40 ethnic groups, with separate languages and cultures. The largest group is Fang (30 per cent) while others include Myéné, Bandjabi, Eshira, Bapounou, Batéké/Obamba, Nzebi and Bakota. Ethnic group boundaries are less sharply drawn in Gabon than elsewhere in Africa, and Gabon has escaped the strife afflicting other West African states.

### NATURAL RESOURCES

Petroleum, natural gas, diamonds, niobium, manganese, uranium, gold,

iron ore, timber, hydro-power. About 85 per cent of this equatorial country is covered with rainforest and the region is one of the most mineral-rich in Africa.

### EMBASSIES OF GABON

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