

Dicing with Death:

Navigating through the rivers
traversing Central Africa



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INTRODUCTION

Transportation is often the backbone of any State. Urban and rural transportation both play a crucial role in linking towns and places across regions. However, most professionals, especially in the built environment, have a tendency to prioritize urban areas at the expense of rural areas. Talks about public transportation mainly revolve around road transit, excluding other forms of mobility.

Most people in African countries find it hard to locomote from one destination to another. This article draws focus on the Central African countries, mainly the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), The Central African Republic (CAR) and Guinea.

Central Africa is a region within the African continent comprising of various countries. The region has the largest tropical forest zones and is endowed with several natural rivers. This article seeks to find a deep understanding of how these rivers help in transporting citizens, the challenges that arise and the opportunities to explore these transit routes within Central Africa.



CATALOGUE

- 1. Central African Republic – Oubangui River**
- 2. The Democratic Republic of Congo – The Congo River**
- 3. Guinea – The Liana Bridge**

An aerial photograph of the Oubangui River in the Central African Republic. The river is wide and calm, with a light brownish-grey hue. On the left bank, there is a dense line of green vegetation, possibly mangroves or reeds, interspersed with patches of white sand or mud. A small boat with a white cabin and a dark hull is visible in the lower center of the frame, moving away from the viewer and leaving a dark wake behind it. The background shows a hazy horizon with distant hills under a pale sky.

1. Oubangui River - Central African Republic

Overview

Oubangui is a 1,060 km river in Central Africa and the largest right-bank tributary of the Congo River. It begins at the confluence of the Mbomou and Uele Rivers and flows west, forming the border between Central African Republic (CAR) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).



The river then bends to the southwest and passes through Bangui, the capital of the CAR, after which it flows south. The Ubangi finally joins the Congo River at Liranga.

Navigation.

In the CAR, Public transportation is a nightmare. The civil war in 2013 left the roads impassable. The few buses that used to transport people are no more and have since been replaced by cattle trucks, which now carry up to **100 passengers**. The mainly used road route is from Nola, an isolated town, to Bangui, the capital, via Boda. This **420km** journey takes approximately 3 days as the roads are impassable. The sick are transported by motorcycles which have become the new ambulances.



Due to these difficult situations, the locals opt to use the Oubangui river to reach their destinations. Along the shores, travelers camp for days waiting to depart. The main navigation vessels are whalers, old boats, which have been given names of hope, such as *Savior Pendre Des Risques, La Promesse and La Terre Promise.*

The main travel route is from Bangui to Pessel, a completely isolated town with no roads. This **200km** treacherous journey takes up to **2 days**. All the boats have one thing in common, they soak water profusely. Passengers have to take shifts in draining the water all the way to stay afloat. Storms and darkness are often the travelers' worst enemy. The rains pour as much outside as inside. The "*lookout man*" must always stay alert, especially at night, to guide the captain in order to avoid collisions. The nearby villagers at the shores use their boats to harvest, not fish, but sand. With wrecked boats and no proper mechanisms, deep dives and strong currents claim several sailors every year.

2. The Congo River - DRC



Overview

The Congo River with a length of 4,700 km, is the continent's second longest river, after the Nile. With its many tributaries, the Congo forms the continent's largest network of navigable waterways. Navigability, however, is limited by insurmountable obstacles.



Navigation

In the DRC, the river is the simplest way to move tree trunks, better than the muddy impassable roads. However, passengers often use these means of transport to move to the capital, Kinshasa. Travelling on road is an ordeal. The State does little to help with the provision of public transport and as a result the passengers accept the risk because there is no option. The rafts, usually about **70m** long and **40m** wide, can carry up to **50 passengers** in open air. However, this kind of transport is usually very dangerous. Moving from Kisangani to Mbandaka, **700km** apart, can take up to **10 days**! The rafts are usually very old and hence not quite agile. As many travelers are used to this kind of journey, they have adopted survival tactics even in the worst conditions. Strong winds and currents are to be expected and sailors struggle to keep everyone alive, especially at night. Every year the country registers more than **100 fatalities**. Sailors take turns to stay alert day and night to help the captain manoeuvre through the dangerous waters. The other means to navigate through the Congo river is by using the whalers that are also dangerous as they soak water and the sailors must take turns to drain the water to keep the whale boat afloat.



In the Congo central province, there is only one link across the river banks. A 30 years old worn-out “ferry” that serves the locals. Travelers often find themselves trying to catch the ferry because if it leaves, there is no option but to sleep at the river bank.

Travelling in the raft takes approximately **30 days!** From Kisangani to Kinshasa (**1400km**) via Mbandaka. However, the locals from the neighboring villages along the river often sail with small boats to sell food to the sailors. The river Congo is highly polluted by chemicals from the nearby mines and the travelers risk getting infected.

The worn-out passengers usually have only one thing in mind, arriving alive, which is definitely never on time.



3. The Liana Bridge – Guinea

Like many countries in Central Africa, people in Guinea find it very cumbersome to cross wide rivers. Many isolated villages find themselves using tattered liana bridges to cross over. A liana bridge is a suspended bridge made of liana vines.

For the people of Guinea-Conkary, the bridge is ancestral, more than **100 years** old and ancient spirit of *Nyamu* holds it together. Without the spirit of *Nyamu*, it wouldn't exist. However, crossing over the bridge is as close as death comes as the bridge is everything but safe. The locals have no option but to pass through because the government has no plans to construct a new bridge.

Locals, especially the vulnerable people of the society risk their lives everyday passing across but deep in their mind, the spirit of *Nyamu* protects them from toppling over.



Conclusion

In Central Africa, life is anything but easy. Majority of people have gradually embraced the art of survival. Drivers, boat captains and passengers face significant challenges trying to move from one place to the other. The rural markets and urban towns are isolated far apart and the link routes are unlikely to be developed soon. Navigating through the dangerous waters is characterized by constant death threats. Strong winds and currents pose hazardous challenges to all the people on board. Sailing aboard an open-air wood raft or a patched whale boat is not an ideal way to travel.

Recommendation

The great rivers that traverse Central Africa provide a unique opportunity to sail from one destination to the other. These rivers can help open up the small towns and in the long run boost the economy of these countries. Transport planning should play a crucial part in promoting a safer, faster and a more comfortable way of travelling. With advocacy and a willing government on board, planning for transportation can help develop modern mobility options such as **water buses, cargo tanker ships, tug boats, ships and ferries.**

The people of Central Africa deserve a well-connected and sustainable water transport system for the current and future generations!

Author,

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