Banana Base, Zaire. 

Malongo in the enclave of Cabinda was Chevron's operational base for their offshore oil and gas production in Angola. Cabinda, while geographically within the Congo had been historically part of Angola.

Apart from the camp there is nothing in Malongo except jungle.

Cabinda is a ten minute helicopter trip away, and Luanda is an hour and a half south down the coast, by Fokker fifty.

The mouth of the Congo River is only three hours steaming south.

The unique diving conditions that we worked in everyday, was entirely down to the mighty River pouring into the Atlantic just south of us.

The almost constant surface current and the brown water, through which we had to dive to get to our job, was caused by the freshwater Congo river, skimming over the salt water Atlantic Ocean, for many miles out to sea.

In the 90s when I worked in Malongo, the kleptocratic dictator of what was in the past, and would be again in the future, the Congo; Joseph-Désiré Mobutu decided to change the name of the country and the name of the river, to Zaire.

He told the world that he was changing the names to "de-Belgianize" his country.

In effect the only two things that he did, was thoroughly confuse his own people and rob them blind.

Notwithstanding all that, the name of the country and the name of the river was Zaire while I was there.

There was an SBM almost full in the middle of the mouth of the Zaire River, and it fell within Chevron's remit in terms of maintenance, for some reason not known to us.

This meant that every six weeks, we were required to go and ensure that all was well, and every two years, change the four huge shackles that held the chains which secured the Single-Buoy Mooring to the PLEM (Pipe Line End Manifold) on the seabed.

Normally those shackles would last many years, but because of the battering that the SPM took, Chevron's engineers figured that they would need to be changed so regularly.

The routine inspection took 2 days; we would leave Malongo at 7 AM, arrive at Banana Base at 10 AM, steam up the river to the Customs headquarters, spend all that day trading with the poverty stricken local Congolese, and if we were clear to go to work for the following morning, we could be back in Malongo by 4:30 PM that afternoon.

The customs post at Banana Base was a crumbling, Belgian colonial era series of continental style red tiled buildings, set on a spit of land on the north bank of the Congo/ Zaire River.

There was a concrete quay, as poorly maintained as the surrounding buildings, with a rusting and dilapidated crane topping off the general look of decrepitude.

As we turned in to the river pushing against the surge of it, the breeze died and an oppressive heat descended upon us.

Great islands of vegetation skimmed swiftly past, rended from jungle somewhere upstream, now to be delivered into the Atlantic Ocean to wither and die.

There have been stories of large animals inhabiting these islands, being swept out to sea, and seeing their size firsthand, I could believe it.

The colour of the water was so dark brown as to be almost black, filled as it was with the soil of the Congo.

Out there on the seabed there must be a vast plain of rich alluvial dirt, built up over eons of deposits, where the river slows and releases its cargo.

On my first time down to Zaire, my colleagues who had all been down before, had gathered together a few empty 45 gallon drums, empty paint cans , mayonnaise tubs old boots and old coveralls to trade with the people, the trading started almost before we were tied up alongside.

I left them to it, not feeling terribly comfortable haggling with the impoverished population. I sat instead on the starboard aft Bullard, sketching and scribbling.

While I sat there, a dugout canoe with three young boys paddling, appeared suddenly out of the pervading browness of the river, they expertly brought the canoe alongside with their carved leaf shaped paddles.

All three were dressed in old and faded shorts, and they offered ripe ears of corn, bananas and other fruit and vegetables eagerly to me.

The scene would not have been strange to the protagonists of Heart of Darkness in the early nineteenth century.

I trawled through my leaving cert and Linguaphone French to find the word for wait, which suddenly sprung into my mind, so I told them to "attendre" while I slipped quietly into the galley and filled an empty sandbag sack with cartons of fruit juice, Coca-Cola, yoghurts and cheese, commodities which I felt sure that those children might like. I didn't want anyone to see what I was doing so I quietly sneaked back out on deck and gave the bag of swag to the first young boy. I also fished out three five dollar bills from my wallet and gave one each to the three boys.

Their leader again offered his produce to me, but I told him it wasn't necessary and with a ‘merci beaucoup’ they paddled away, blending quickly with the brown of the river.

The trading on the port side of the vessel went very well. Four empty 45 gallon drums, a number of empty paint and mayonnaise tubs, and a selection of hardhats coveralls and boots had netted us three twenty-four bottle crates of hot Primus beer.

The beer went in the deep freeze for an hour to cool it down and we went back to people watching.

A young boy with a machete in his teeth climbed a Palm tree like an acrobat.

He climbed right to the top, at least 60 feet off the ground to hack off some of the broad fronds, for what was anyone's guess, a new roof for his house maybe?

Then a surreal scene unfolded before us.

Al Dave and Joe had conducted their business with this guy in a shiny shell suit. He seemed to be the man in charge and he was certainly the man with the beer.

However, about an hour after the deal was done another guy, in an ill fitting khaki uniform showed up, and a very loud argument ensued between the two of them.

I caught scraps of the rapidfire French and translated as best I could for the diving team, while the beer cooled.

Monsieur Uniform complained loudly to Monsieur Shellsuit that it was he who should have done the trading with us.

Monsieur Shellsuit rebuffed this claim saying that Monsieur Uniform was not there to make the deal.

Monsieur Uniform retorted that Monsieur Shellsuit should have waited.

Monsieur shellsuit told Monsieur uniform to fuck off, at which time M uniform began removing his, uniform, handing it to a boy next to him.

Seeing this, M. Shellsuit did likewise, and surrounded by a cheering mob, the two Monsieur ‘Underpants' began to fight like schoolboys, with much attempted head locking and kicking, raising a great cloud of dust around them and the spectators.

I suppose it was easy for us to smile wryly at this childish behavior, but that spectacle could have been a fight for supremacy, a fight for survival.

There was no real damage done to either fighter and when the winner began to dress after the contest, it turned out that it was Monsieur Uniform who had re-established the pecking order.

Fully dressed, he came over to the quayside and with admirable dignity dusty and slightly bloodied as he was, in French he addressed me, and once I had asked him to speak simply and slowly, he asked could we please drink all the beer as soon as possible and give the empty bottles and crates back to him.

Sixty bottles of beer, how long would it take us to drink all that?

Between the five of us that was twelve bottles to be consumed between that afternoon and the following morning at 6 AM.

I told M. Uniform that we would try, and we certainly did.

By the time our clearance came the following morning, we were able to give all sixty bottles, empty back to M. Uniform. We hadn't actually drunk it all; Jake our cook had given us a very large pot into which we emptied twenty-four bottles.

We had had a nice evening, Jake made a special dinner and the crew and the dive team, and all had one or two bottles each.

Customs clearance was a bit of a spectacle in itself.

An army of customs clearance officers came on board to eat.

Jake knew the drill, plenty of French fries and chicken nuggets.

Large bowls of grub was served to the customs men who filled the galley.

They all had leather satchels containing official -looking forms for filling out and stamping.

They also had small carvings in their bags which they sold to us.

Having eaten all the food and sold all of their goods, they gave us clearance to go to work.

The SBM was about a mile offshore, slightly towards the north bank of the river according to the chart, because in midstream, the river being so wide that neither bank was visible.

When we got there, there was a lot of vegetation wrapped around the railings of the SBM, but the current was so strong that any islands sweeping down upon the SBM would simply be deflected around to continue its journey.

SBM is an acronym for Single Buoy Mooring and as the name suggests it consists of a single buoy, a very large one, on the surface.

The ones that I have worked on have one or two floating hoses, usually 36 inches in diameter, floating on the surface ready to be picked up by a tanker that comes to load.

The buoy itself is tethered to piles on the seabed by a series of heavy chains, and is connected to an oil or gas pipeline on the seabed via two large diameter hoses.

Tankers tie up to the buoy and then pick up one or both of the floating hoses for connection to their loading hoses, oil or gas can then be transferred from the pipeline on the seabed to the tanker.

On this occasion our skipper brought us in on the lee side and backed up to the SBM, so that a diver could step across and secure our mooring line to the mooring bollards.

Joe, my diving colleague was the first diver and he would establish a downline to one of the chains, I was to be a diver number two.

Because of the fierce surface currents offshore from Cabinda and in the mouth of the Congo (Zaire) River, our dive team had developed a unique method of entering the water. Usually commercial divers would be lowered to near the job in a basket or would go in feet first off the dive boat.

Neither of those methods would work with very strong surface currents so we went in headfirst like a swimmer diving.

The momentum downward was usually enough to carry one through the surface current into the slack water below.

When I saw it first I was horrified, but it worked.

Joe went off head first with our downline and then did an inspection of two of the chains, leaving two for me.

It was only 45 feet to the bottom, so there was no decompression time. Joe came back up the downline to the ladder and out without incident.

I launched myself like an arrow towards the underside of the SPM and after the initial push of the Congo against me; I came out in clear calm water below.

I could still feel my umbilical being snatched at, but I was clear and in the beam of my hat light, I could clearly see all four chains and our downline.

It was one of the easiest dives that I ever did in Angola. I could look up at the muddy water and the raging current, racing across the top of the Atlantic, it was amazing.

The bottom, known as a skirt, of the SPM was in this clear calm water and incredibly the large Bat Fish, who inhabit the underside of all the SPMs in Angola, on this one, swam upside down, as if the skirt was the seabed. It was a bizarre sight; I wondered was it something to do with the darkness down there, they didn’t have the advantage of artificial illumination.

I did my inspection in about 20 minutes, so I released the downline from the chain and got pulled back to the ladder and out.

We were done by lunchtime and back in Malongo by 4 PM, just in time for coffee in the workshop.

The end.