

THE PEACEFUL CONQUEROR

Behind every city in the world that is named for a person lies a story, an adventure, which tells the fascinating tale of how the city got its name. One such city is Brazzaville, the financial and administrative capital and largest city of the Republic of the Congo. It was built in 1884, on the site of a Bateke village named Nkuna. Today, Brazzaville, with its tumultuous history, is home to more than two million people – more than a third of the country's population.

In search of adventure

The Roman poet Ovide said, "The bold adventurer succeeds the best." This observation appeared true for Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza. Pietro Paolo Savorgnan di Brazzà was born in Castel Gandolfo, near Rome, on the 25th of January

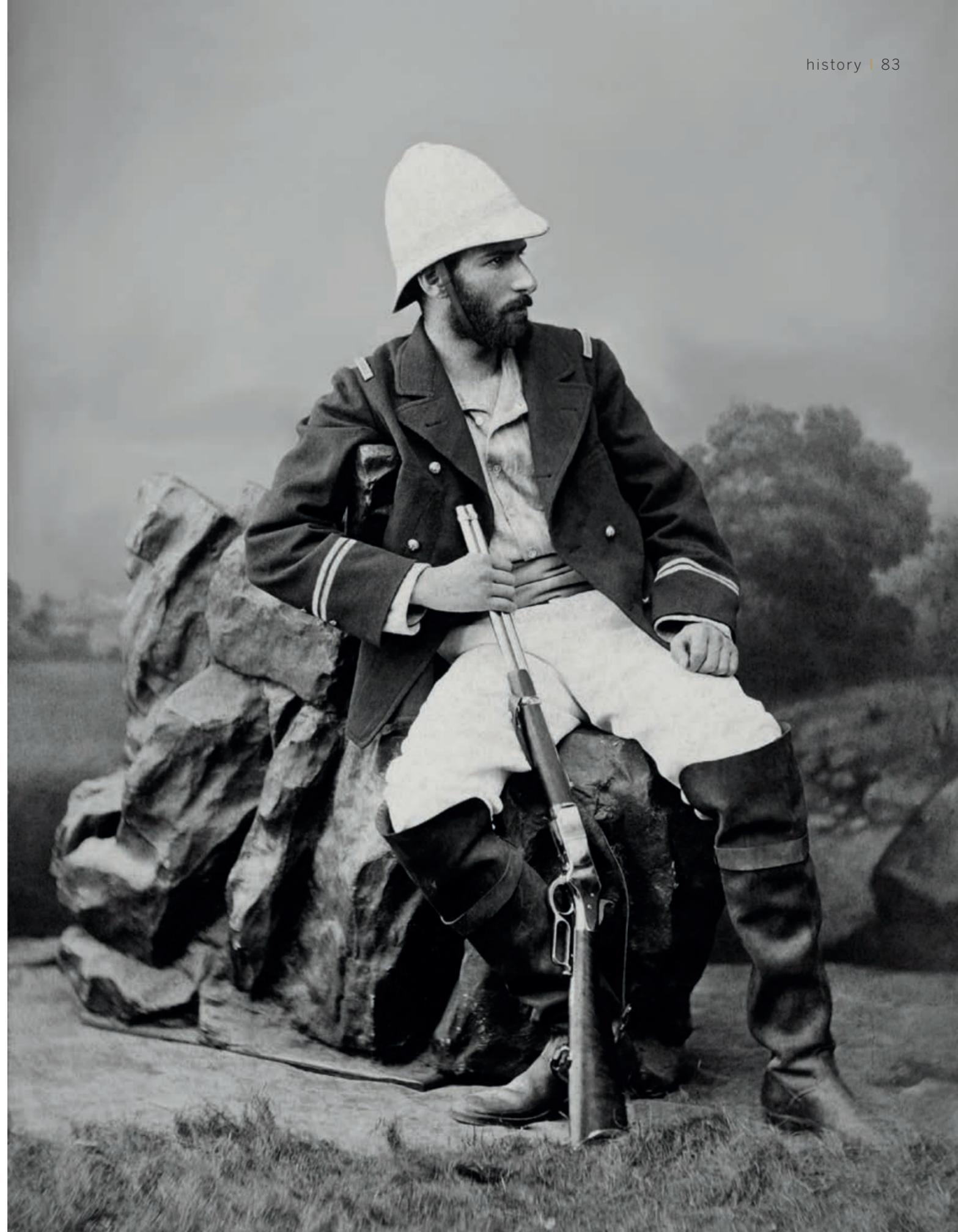


1852. His passion for exploration and adventure was fuelled early in his youth as he heard amazing stories about his relatives' travels, and lost himself in the family library which was filled with maps, drawings, and stories about travel, many of which were contributed to by his father. The seventh of thirteen children, de Brazza was a bold and daring child, whose spirit of adventure saw him at one time, boldly crossing the lake near Castel Gandolfo on a rickety old boat that he had fixed up and launched with the help of some of his friends.

His passion for exploration, it would appear, was in his blood. His paternal grandfather travelled extensively through the Ottoman Empire, Greece and Turkey. His grandmother, Orsola Priuli, claimed to be a descendant of Marco Polo's family, and his father had spent much of his own youth travelling through Europe and the Far East. He was drawn to the idea of joining the navy, however this wasn't an option in the Papal States which had very little navy of which to speak. At thirteen, the ambitious young man arranged a meeting with the admiral of Montaignac, and expressed his desire to be a seaman and spoke of his challenges. After the admiral met with de Brazza's parents, it was arranged that he would leave home and study in Paris in order to prepare for the entrance exam for the École Navale (French Naval Academy) in Brest. He was an average student at the academy but a happy one, and graduated as an ensign, thereafter sailing on the French Naval Academy ship, Jeanne d'Arc, to Algeria.

With the help of the admiral of Montaignac and the nuncio Chighi, de Brazza joined the Borda and in 1870, when Napoleon III declared war on Prussia, he asked to serve the nation who had allowed him to become a seaman and set sail on la Revanche. He became a man without a country, no longer a citizen of Roma and not yet a citizen of France. With the assistance of the admiral, who intervened on his behalf

Photo: © courtesy of Louis Vuitton





as he was not yet 21, de Brazza became a naturalised French citizen on the 12th of August 1874. This action however, had consequences for his naval career, and he lost his ranks as a foreign seaman. The admiral was once more on hand to assist his protégée enabling him to sit for a master's ticket in February 1875, which he passed, gaining the rank of auxiliary lieutenant which allowed him to be reinstated in the navy and take command of a State's ship.

Exploring Central Africa

De Brazza travelled to central Africa for the first time on an anti-slavery mission in 1872. While trading posts were already established along the coast, the interior was still an unknown factor to the Europeans. The following year, he found favour with the French government and began planning an ambitious mission with an eye towards trade, commerce and colonisation of the interior regions. Realising the value of having something to trade, he packed minimal weaponry instead taking several tons of cloth, glassware, and tools to be used for barter and as gifts for the tribal chieftains. Violence would be his very last resort. Joining him on his trip was Noel Ballay, a doctor and naturalist Alfred Marche as well as a European naturalist, a sailor, 14 Senegalese infantrymen, and four local interpreters. They covered 1448.41 kilometres on their great inland adventure between 1875 and 1878. On this first mission, with the help of the native inhabitants, they discovered many rivers, plants and animal species that were unknown in Europe. The mission was a success and impressed the French government that authorised a second mission, which took place from 1879 – 1882.

De Brazza reached the Congo River in 1880 and put forward a compelling argument to King Makoko of the Batekes, of the advantages of placing his vast lands under the protection of France. The king was looking to expand river trade and believed that he could only gain from the protection offered against the threat of attacks by rival tribes. On the 10 September 1880, the king signed a treaty of protection with the Italo-French explorer, placing Téké lands under the rule of the French Empire. The city of Brazzaville was built in 1884, on the site of a Bateke village named Nkuna, so that it might compete with Léopoldville (now Kinshasa), which was built by the Belgians on the other side of the Congo River.

De Brazza was named governor-general of the French Congo in 1886. During his tenure, he established schools, clinics, and job-training programmes and required that all European

traders pay the local employees a fair wage. The integrity of his administration earned him the rank of commander in the French Legion of Honour. At the same time, across the river in the Belgian Congo, things were not so rosy. Africans worked in slavery under horrific conditions and the vast contrast between the colonies was reported by European journalists. King Leopold didn't appreciate the bad press or being compared so unfavourably to de Brazza. He ran a smear campaign against him in the French press fuelling the flames of xenophobia raised by the Dreyfus affair. Despite having added an area three times larger than France to the French empire in Africa, he was dismissed due to poor profitability of the colony and reports by journalists that the conditions for the locals would by some accounts be "too good". While things might have been "too good" for the locals under De Brazza's governorship, reports were that it was quite horrific under the new governor, Emile Gentil. As stories of injustice, forced labour and physical brutality reached Paris, de Brazza was engaged by the French government to investigate the situation. In 1905, accompanied by his wife Thérèse, he returned to Brazzaville to a cold reception. He was appalled at the corruption he found there. While





he hadn't been in the best of health prior to his return, his health deteriorated rapidly as the mission progressed. On his early return to France to hand in his revealing and damning report, he was forced to disembark at Dakar to seek urgent medical treatment. De Brazza died in Dakar and was given a full state funeral in Paris. Rather than sharing his findings with the world, the French Assembly voted to suppress the Brazza Report as potentially embarrassing and the atrocities continued for years to come.

A Diplomatic Mystery

When de Brazza embarked on his first mission into central Africa in 1875, he acquired zinc and copper watertight trunks from Louis Vuitton. He had studied the design and signed the purchase order himself at the workshops in Asnières. By 1890, the House of Louis Vuitton had improved on what was simply known internationally as the 'Belgian Bed' and was offering several types of tin trunks with camp beds in them which could be taken apart. It gained in popularity as it was

used by explorers such as de Brazza, the Marquis de Morès, GA Bloom and Jacques Faure among others. Indeed de Brazza's trunk went down in history, as he was seated on its thin mattress, when he convinced King Makoko to sign the treaty which saw the Congo become a French colony. (The trunk, which was stamped with his monogram, P.S de Brazza, plainly visible on its flat lid, is now on display in the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris.)

Before leaving on his expedition of March 1905, de Brazza ordered several trunks from Vuitton: two large-sized trunk-beds, sheathed in monogrammed canvas with folding horsehair mattresses which were covered in two-toned striped fabric, one for him and one for his wife, who accompanied him out of concern for his well-being. He also ordered a trunk desk sheathed in copper. "The documents which Savorgnan de Brazza had been sent to collect were to be kept secret," recalled Gaston-Louis Vuitton in 1962. "For this purpose the great explorer ordered a portable desk with a secret drawer. We made it, completely covered in copper, painted green. De Brazza never returned from that trip; he died in Dakar on the way back. The trunk was returned to France. They knew at the Ministry that there was a secret drawer, but no one could find it. My father (George Vuitton) had to go to the Ministry to reveal the papers collected by Savorgnan de Brazza." It was an open secret that Georges Vuitton was summoned to the Ministry to open the concealed drawer so the documents could be



retrieved. The complex mechanism was hidden in the lower part of the case, its whereabouts and workings known only de Brazza, his secretary, and Georges Vuitton. The drawers' contents – all of de Brazza's notes, the accounts gathered on the spot from administrators, concession agents, and local inhabitants - had made the journey unscathed.

The secret compartment wasn't really secret. It was such common knowledge that the newspaper, L'illustration, published a detailed article about the trunk desk dated 14 October 1905 (a month after de Brazza's death), stating that it was "especially designed to keep the items placed in it safe from all intrusion, all indiscretion." This introduction was followed by a precise, meticulous description of the inside of the trunk and its mechanism.

The article concluded, "And it is in this trunk that all the files which were opened and which are to be studied in detail by the investigating commission appointed by the Ministry for the Colonies, to shed light on all the incidents in the Congo of which everyone has been speaking for days, were brought back." Thérèse de Brazza believed until the end of her life that her husband had been poisoned. Today, Brazzaville is one of the few African cities to have kept its colonial name out of respect for "the peaceful conqueror", a fitting tribute to a man who strived to conquer not with weapons but rather through building relationships, through trade and upliftment of those around him. ■ Lindsay Grubb

