Gouraud left Paris by train on 15th March 1904 for Bordeaux, where he would meet up with Gaden before embarking on the old tramp steamer Ville de Macéio. Gouraud had assembled what he regarded as a loyal group of officers, including Captains Gaden, Rivière and Bablon, the latter from the Bir Alali campaign which had seen the loss of Millot; Lieutenants Freydenberg, Gerhardt and Georges Mangin also joined them. This band of war-worn officers was accompanied by the Commissaire Général, Emile Gentil, who was to replace Alfred Foureau as Governor of the Congo. Gentil, who had played a role some years earlier in the colonial annexation of Chad, now brought along his wife and daughters, and they would live as a family in Brazzaville. The cramped steamer, an ageing tub that plied the route between numerous small ports along the coast of Guinea, left the port of Bordeaux on 20th March 1904. It would not be a comfortable voyage.

On board the poorly equipped vessel conditions were unspeakable, and the large party of officers, the Governor and his family, along with a number of merchants travelling to West Africa, suffered the indignities of living on top of each other. Gaden did not want to share with his parents certain details of life of board for fear of disgusting them, and the dining they enjoyed was definitely inferior to what was offered on other steamers. Gentil, however, made a fine impression on Gaden: ‘a very good man, remaining very informal and friendly, and only a touch “military”, in the best sense of the word, very frank and correct, and of very independent views. I am very happy to make this voyage with him’ (JHG-F, 23.4.04). The boat stopped over in Dakar and then continued on its way around the West African coast, visiting each and every port en route, providing a kind of ‘bateau-omnibus’ service for the local colonial communities.

The steamer plotted its slow and wearing passage around the Guinea coast, and at the end of the first week of April 1904 the party reached Kotonou and landed for a few hours. This gave Gaden the chance to meet up with Captain Bloch, the officer who had replaced him in Zinder two
years earlier, and Gaden was heartened to catch up on news of his old friends and contacts from the town. He anticipated with some sense of dread, however, the prospect of another week or more at sea before finally arriving at the mouth of the Congo River in Matadi – ‘an odiously long voyage’, he remarked (JHG-F, 10.4.04). There were two more stop-overs in Libreville and Cap Lopez before they reached their destination. Emile Gentil disembarked at Libreville (‘beautiful vegetation, but a dead town’, Gaden observed), the capital of what was to become Gabon, and the Commissaire would meet up with the party later in Brazzaville, the capital of the French Congo, before the party headed north towards Chad. By 17th April, the Ville de Macéio reached Boma near Matadi at the mouth of the Congo, where the violent, swirling, yellow-brown waters of the river forced their angry way into the sea.

Matadi, a settlement created by Henry Morton Stanley, the Anglo-American journalist and explorer of the Congo, stood at the foot of a rocky outcrop. The heat was unbearable, but the party did not stay long. A narrow-gauge railway snaked its course from the town up the side of the mountain, clinging to it precariously, and on to Leopoldville the Belgian capital on the banks of Stanley Pool some two-days’ journey away across ravines and through tunnels hewn by African labourers into living rock. King Leopold of Belgium had had the line constructed some years earlier at the cost of many thousands of lives; it connected the mouth of the Congo with the navigable river beyond the rapids just inland from the coast, and was used primarily to export rubber extracted from the interior. Having set foot on African soil again, Gaden was thrilled by the sights and experiences of the continent he loved. A boat from Leopoldville took them across Stanley Pool, a journey of around two hours to Brazzaville on the right bank of the river. The town was a rudimentary settlement set on reclaimed land carved out from the bush, and it made a sorry sight to Gaden’s eyes. It had no buildings of note nor much of a quay, and comprised mainly of a collection of unattractive flat-roofed colonial constructions lifted off the ground on piles and encircled with terraces. Trees grew intermittently between houses, which were situated in small groups of three or four built on plateaux separated one from the other by ravines and lush vegetation. The largest house was occupied by a Dutch merchant involved in rubber export; but the accommodation for the French officers was disappointing: it was rented from a local company that operated rubber factories, and the men were squeezed in two to a room. Some of the ranks were under canvas, camping in small, shared tents on parcels of land dotted here and there. Despite the lushness of their surroundings, feeding a party of men was not