

# Benin

It's surprising that Benin barely registers in people's awareness when its role in history is so significant. The birthplace of voodoo and a pivotal platform of the slave trade for nearly three centuries, Benin is steeped in a rich and complex history still very much in evidence across the country.

A visit to this small, club-shaped nation could therefore not be complete without exploring the Afro-Brazilian heritage of Ouidah and Porto Novo, shivering at the litany of massacres of the Dahomeyan Kings or learning about spirits and fetishes in Ouidah and Lac Ahémé.

But Benin will also wow visitors with its natural beauty, from the palm-fringed beach idyll of the Atlantic coast to the rugged scenery of the north. The Parc National de la Pendjari and the Parc Regional du W are two of the best wildlife parks in West Africa. Lions, cheetahs, leopards, elephants and hundreds of other species thrive here, and the infrastructure to see them is remarkably good.

In fact, Benin is wonderfully tourist-friendly compared to most of its neighbours. There are good roads, reliable intercity bus services, professional guides to tour the country with and ecotourism initiatives that offer travellers the chance to delve deeper into local Beninese life: how does learning traditional fishing techniques or sleeping in a *tata somba* (round tiered hut) house sound?

Finally, Benin's ill-loved economic capital Cotonou may not be a love-at-first-sight sort of place, but spend a Sunday afternoon chilling out in Fidjrossé, hanging around the daring Fondation Zinsou or bargaining hard at the Dantokpa market and you'll soon find the big smoke has its perks too.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 112,622 sq km
- **Capital** Porto Novo
- **Country code** ☎ 229
- **Famous for** Voodoo; slavery; the Kings of Dahomey; adopting Marxism; Angélique Kidjo
- **Languages** French, Fon, Yoruba, Dendi, Aja, Bariba, more than 50 in total
- **Money** West African CFA franc; US\$1 = CFA493; €1 = CFA656
- **Population** 6.7 million
- **Visa** CFA10,000 at border, 30-day extension CFA12,000



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **The Atakora Region** (p120) Rugged landscapes of northern Benin and rich Somba cultural heritage.
- **Lake Ahémé** (p111) Learn traditional fishing techniques and get up close and personal with voodoo traditions on the shores of Lake Ahémé.
- **Route des Pêches** (p104) From Cotonou's most happening beach to isolated fishing villages, this is Benin's deserted Atlantic coast.
- **Porto Novo** (p105) Benin's mellow capital city, with its vibrant Afro-Brazilian heritage and visionary sustainable farming centre.
- **National Parks** (p121 & p123) With three species of big cat, elephant, hippo, croc, monkey and much more, the W and Pendjari are two of West Africa's best wildlife parks.

## ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Start off in busy Cotonou (p97) where good food, cold beers, great markets and insane traffic give you a taste of things to come. Porto Novo (p105), the tranquil capital, and Ganvié (p104) the lacustrine stilt village, are both within two hours taxi journey of Cotonou. A little further along the country's main roads are two historical highlights: Abomey (p111), home to the ruined palaces of the Kings of Dahomey, and Ouidah (p107) once a capital of the slave trade and now the centre of voodoo worship.
- **Two Weeks** After a few days spent exploring the city of Cotonou, take the slow Route des Pêches to Ouidah. Put your bags down at lovely Grand Popo (p110) for a couple of idle days and head north via the stunning shores of Lake Ahémé (p111). Head to Abomey via Lokossa, and then on to Natitingou (p118), gateway to the intriguing Somba country or the Parc National de la Pendjari for a safari.
- **One Month** With this much time on your hands, you should be able to delve into every corner of this small country. In addition to the above, head northeast to the Parc Régional du W (p123) via Dassa-Zoumé (p115) and its striking rocky outcrops.

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

In southern Benin, there are two rainy seasons: April to mid-July, and mid-September to late October. The rains in the north fall from June to early October. In the north, temperatures can reach 46°C, while the coastal south is cooler, with temperatures ranging from 18°C to 35°C. Harmattan winds billow out of the Sahara between December and March, and the hottest time of the year is from February to April. The coolest, driest time to visit is between November and February. See Climate Charts, p810.

Parts of the northern Atakora region occasionally receive heavy rainfall, and smaller roads throughout Benin may be impassable during the rainy seasons; especially those in the wildlife parks.

## HISTORY

More than 350 years ago, the area now known as Benin was split into numerous principalities. One of the chiefs quarrelled with his brother for the right to succession and, around 1625, settled in Abomey. He then conquered the neighbouring kingdom of the Dan, which became known as Dan-Homey, meaning 'in Dan's belly' (see p114). The name was later shortened by the French colonisers.

Each king pledged to leave his successor more land than he inherited, a pledge kept by waging war with the neighbours, particularly the Yoruba of Nigeria. Meanwhile, the Portuguese, and later other Europeans, established trading posts along the coast, most notably at Porto Novo and Ouidah. The Portuguese, French, Dutch and English, whose forts can still be seen in Ouidah, spelled the town's name four different ways but pronounced it the same.

The Dahomeyan Kings grew rich by selling slaves to traders, who then gave them the guns that let them pillage their neighbours for slaves and land. For more than a century, around 10,000 slaves per year were shipped to the Americas (primarily Brazil and the Caribbean, in particular Haiti), taking voodoo with them. As a result Dahomey was dubbed the Slave Coast.

Early in the 19th century, the French colonised the kingdom of Dahomey, making it part of French West Africa (p105). During the 70-year colonial period, progress was made in education, and many Dahomeyans were employed as government advisers in French West Africa. The country's intellectual nature led