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.
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 Regional 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 blow 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
Independence & Le Folklore

When Dahomey became independent in 1960, Hubert Maga was elected the country’s first president. Almost immediately, other former French colonies started deporting their Dahomeyan populations. Back home without work, they became the root of a highly unstable political situation. Three years after independence, having seen how easily some disgruntled soldiers in neighbouring Togo had staged a coup, the military did the same in Dahomey.

During the next decade, Dahomey saw four more military coups, nine more changes of government and five changes of constitution: what the Dahomeyans called in jest le folklore.

Revolution

In 1972 a group of officers led by Lieutenant Colonel Mathieu Kérékou seized power in a coup that initiated almost two decades of military dictatorship. The country then took a sharp turn to the left as he embraced Marxist-Leninist ideology and aligned the country with superpowers like China, the Soviet Union and North Korea. To emphasise the break from the past, Kérékou changed the country’s flag and renamed it Benin, after the once-flourishing Nigerian Kingdom of Benin. He informed his people by radio on 13 November 1975, a date still etched into the memories of most Beninese.

The government established the schools it required to teach Marxism, along with collective farms, state enterprises, a central trade union, and a more militant spirit in the army. However, the revolution was always more rhetorical than real. The economy fell into a shambles: inflation and unemployment rose, salaries remained unpaid for months. People soon tired of living in West Africa’s answer to Eastern Europe, and there were ethnic tensions between the president, a Natitingou-born northerner, and the Yoruba population in the south. There were six attempted coups in one year alone. Then in the late 1980s, workers and students went on strike.

In December 1989, as a condition of French financial support, Kérékou ditched Marxism and held a conference to draft a new constitution. Dissidents used the occasion to blame the government for bankrupting the country, and for corruption and human rights abuses. The 488 delegates then engineered a coup, relegating Kérékou to head of the army, and formed a new cabinet under former dissident Nicéphore Soglo.

The 1990s: Multiparty Elections

The first free multiparty elections were held in March 1991 and Soglo swept to power. However, his austere economic measures – following the 1994 devaluation of the CFA – came under fire, as did his autocracy and nepotism. Top jobs went to Soglo family members such as his son Liadi. Kérékou was voted back into power in March 1996, although he stuck
to the desperately needed economic measures implemented by his rival.

Five years later, in the March 2001 presidential elections, Kérékou and Soglo faced each other again. Soglo and fellow opposition candidate Adrien Houngbédji withdrew from the race, alleging electoral fraud, leading to a landslide victory for the incumbent president.

**Benin Today**

Kérékou’s second and final five-year term in office finished with the presidential elections in March 2006, bringing an end to his 33 years at the top. The current president, Yayi Boni, former head of the West African Development Bank, beat Adrien Houngbédji in a run-off. In his campaign, based on the slogan of ‘change’, he pledged to fight corruption and revive the economy.

It hasn’t been plain sailing however; despite winning a majority of seats in the parliamentary elections of 2007 and a number of local seats in the 2008 municipal elections, reforms have come about more slowly than hoped. With the next presidential election in March 2011, the pressure will be on President Boni to demonstrate he can be entrusted with a second mandate.

**THE CULTURE**

**The National Psyche**

Nicknamed ‘the West African Latin Quarter’ by the French for its intellectualism, Benin has a strong culture of discussion and debate.

Catholicism and Islam are highly important to their many followers, but the home-grown religion of voodoo is the most influential force.

Politically, the Beninese feel they have borne a lot to achieve their stable democracy and are wary of their troubled neighbours, Togo and Nigeria.

Beninese women may be a formidable presence on the streets but this is a firmly patriarchal society and they tolerate some inequality. However, they do have vital roles in society and the workforce – even in the Muslim north of the country (see below).

**Daily Life**

Benin’s economy is primarily dependant on subsistence farming, which accounts for 38% of GDP. Yams, maize, cassava and corn are the principal food crops. The country’s main exports are cotton, palm oil, cashew and cocoa beans, with cotton accounting for more than 75% of export earnings.

Benin’s economic growth, achieved through political stability and economic management, is predicted to keep going at its slow but steady pace. Higher fuel and food costs have been partly offset by the increase in commodity prices (cotton, cocoa) and the expansion of Cotonou’s port.

Most of Benin’s ethnic groups are patrilineal and some still observe polygamy, although the practice is becoming increasingly rare among urban and educated Beninese. Marriages are still arranged by families and divorce is rare.

Most families support themselves through agriculture. Women control the local food distribution system, including the transport of produce to market and the subsequent barter and sale.

Average life expectancy is 56, with an AIDS rate of about 2.1%. Literacy is still low, with just 40% of the population aged over 15 able to read and write, but improving thanks to its young population: 45% are aged 14 or under.

**Population**

There is an array of different ethnic groups within Benin’s narrow borders, although three of them account for nearly 60% of the population: Fon, Adja and Yoruba.

The Fon and Yoruba both migrated from Nigeria and occupy the southern and mid-eastern zones of Benin.
The Bariba and Betamaribé, who make up 9% and 8% of the population respectively, live in the northern half of the country and have traditionally been very protective of their cultures and distant towards southern people.

The nomadic Fula (also called Fulani or Peul), found widely across West Africa, live primarily in the north and comprise 6% of the population.

Despite the underlying tensions between the southern and northern regions, the various groups live in relative harmony and have intermarried.

RELIGION

Some 40% of the population is Christian, 25% is Muslim but most people practice voodoo, whatever their religion. The practice mixed with Catholicism in the Americas, where the Dahomeyan slaves took it and their Afro-Brazilian descendants brought it back. Christian missionaries also won over Dahomeyans by fusing their creed with voodoo.

The northern peoples practice voodoo under the name of fetishism, as evidenced by the fetish shrines outside the tata somba houses around Natitingou.

ARTS

Art & Craftwork

Benin has a rich cultural heritage, and its traditional art has brought international attention to the legendary kingdom of Dahomey. Traditionally, art served a spiritual purpose, but under the Fon kings, artisans and sculptors were called upon to create works that evoked heroism and enhanced the image of the rulers. They became the historians of the era, creating richly coloured appliquéd banners that depicted past and present glories.

Other special examples are the clay polychrome bas-reliefs on the walls of the Musée Historique d’Abomey, now listed a Unesco World Heritage Site. They once used to decorate the palaces, temples and houses of Dahomeian chiefs.

Cinema & TV

The Quintessence film festival (www.festival-oudah.org) takes place in Ouidah at the same time as the Voodoo Festival. The annual festival, which also tours the country, aims to promote films made in sub-Saharan Africa.

Expect Ivorian soaps on the commercial TV channels such as LC2 and Golfe TV. TV Nationale is the state-run channel.

Music

Angélique Kidjo, a major international star, is Benin’s most famous recording artist (see above). Other well known Beninese artists include Gnonnes Pedro, Nel Olivier and Yelouassi Adolphe, and the bands Orchestre Poly-Rythmo and Disc Afrique.

Architecture

Benin has a substantial Afro-Brazilian architectural heritage, best preserved and most obvious in Porto Novo. Official institutions such as the Assemblée Nationale (parliament) or the Haute Court de Justice (high court) occupy the finest buildings but there are plenty of hidden gems to seek out in the capital’s streets. Ouidah also has some good examples.
The Lake Nokoué stilt villages and the *tata somba* houses around Natitingou are remarkable examples of traditional architecture.

**Sculpture**

The *cire perdue* (lost wax) method used to make the famous Benin bronzes (made of brass) comes from Benin City in present-day Nigeria. However, the method spread west and *cire perdue* figures can be bought in Benin, particularly Abomey and Cotonou.

Figures called *bochio* are carved from the trunk of a tree and placed at the entrance of a village to discourage malevolent spirits. Some voodoo wood figures are combined with a variety of materials, such as bottles, padlocks and bones, to imbue them with power. Moulded figures of unfired clay represent Legba (a Fon god) and receive daily libations for the protection of the home.

**ENVIRONMENT**

Sandwiched between Nigeria and Togo, Benin is 700km long and 120km across in the south, widening to about 300km in the north. Most of the coastal plain is a sand bar that blocks the seaward flow of several rivers. As a result, there are lagoons a few kilometres inland all along the coast, which is being eroded by the strong ocean currents. Inland is a densely forested plateau and, in the far northwest, the Atakora mountains.

Wildlife thrives in Parc National de la Pendjari (p121) and Parc Regional du W (p123), with herds of elephants and several species of cat and antelope.

Deforestation and desertification are major issues because of the presence of valuable wood such as teak. In the north, droughts continue to affect marginal agriculture.

**FOOD & DRINK**

Beninese grub is unquestionably among the best in West Africa and very similar to Togolese food (p774), the main differences being in the names: *fufu* is generally called *igname piélé* and *djenkoumé* is called *pâte rouge* for instance. But whatever the name, you’re bound to eat well in Benin.

The local beer, La Béninoise, is a passable drop. The adventurous could try the millet-based brew *tchoukoutou* or *sodabe* (moonshine).

**COTONOU**

pop 761,900

Cotonou is Benin’s capital in everything but name: a vibrant, bustling, full-on city, and very much the economic engine of Benin. As a first port of call, it can be a little overwhelming, but life can be sweet in Cotonou, with good nightlife, great restaurants and excellent shopping (ideal for end-of-trip souvenirs).

Cotonou means ‘mouth of the river of death’ in Fon – a reference to the Dahomeyan kingdom’s role in the slave trade. In 1868 the city was ceded to the French, but this was challenged in 1892 by the Dahomeyan king Béhanzin, leading to the Franco-Dahomeyan campaigns and the formation of the French protectorate of Dahomey.

**BENIN’S BURGEONING ECOTOURISM**

Eco-Bénin ([www.ecobenin.org](http://www.ecobenin.org)) is a small Beninese NGO promoting sustainable tourism. It runs activities in four sites across the country: Possotomé and Lac Ahémé (p111), Koussoukoingou (p120) in the Somba country, Alfakoara (p122) on the edge of the Parc Regional du W and Tanongou (p121) next to the Parc National de la Pendjari.

The basis of their activities is guided tours exploring the culture and heritage of the area. Circuits and prices are agreed with villagers and guides are always local. They receive comprehensive training and the fee visitors pay breaks down as follows: 45% for the guide, 25% for the community, 20% for track and equipment (pirogue, bikes etc) maintenance, 10% administration. Other services are being developed such as spending the night and eating with a local family.

Community funds are managed by a village committee and can be used to pay the school fees of disadvantaged children or to build village infrastructure such as pumps or market shelters.

As Benin suffers from a dearth of qualified and honest guides, this is a great initiative and the chance for travellers to get to know local Beninese.
Place de l’Étoile Rouge is an imposing reminder of former President Mathieu Kérékou’s dalliance with socialism.

**ORIENTATION**

The heart of town is around the intersection of Ave Clozel and Blvd Steinmetz. The area was undergoing significant works at the time of writing with the construction of a flyover. Heading north, Blvd Steinmetz runs perpendicular into Blvd St Michel, which becomes Ave du Nouveau Pont as you head east, just as Ave Clozel carries on the Ancien Pont. Both bridges head in the direction of Porto-Novo and Lagos. At the western end of town, following Ave Jean Paul II, is the popular Haie Vive area, as well as the airport.

Only major roads have names – small, unsealed alleyways are called von and directions are given with reference to another main street or a landmark.

**Maps**

The 1:15,000 IGN Cotonou map, which lists the city’s hotels, cinemas, banks and markets, is available at book shops.

**INFORMATION**

**Bookshops**

Librairie Notre-Dame (☎️ 21 31 40 94; Ave Clozel; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 4-7pm Mon)

Next to the cathedral, with an excellent selection of books on Benin (in French) and maps of Cotonou and Benin.
Sonaec (☎ 21 31 22 42; Ave Clozel; 8.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-7pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-12.30pm & 4-6.30pm Sat) Smart bookshop with the latest periodicals, maps and some photography books on West Africa.

Cultural Centres
Centre Culturel Chinois (☎ 21 31 31 74; http://bj.china-embassy.org; Ave Jean Paul II; 9am-12pm & 3.30-6.30pm Tue-Sat) Shows films (see p103).
Centre Culturel Français (☎ 21 30 08 56; www.ccfcotonou.net; Ave Jean Paul II; 9.30am-12pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sat, closed Thu morning) This busy centre has a gallery, outdoor theatre, library and cinema.

Internet Access
Ave Clozel, Blvd Steinmetz and the Jonquet strip have the most internet cafes.

Cyber Café Le Teranga (☎ 21 30 29 29; Haie Vive; per hr CFA1000; 9am-midnight)
Cyber du Jonquet (☎ 21 31 71 54; Rue des Cheminots; per hr CFA500; 8am-1am Mon-Fri, 8am-midnight Sat, from 1pm Sun)
Cyber Océane (☎ 21 30 69 41; Haie Vive; per hr CFA400; 9am-11pm)
Star Navigation (☎ 21 31 81 28; off Blvd Steinmetz; per hr CFA500; 8am-10pm)

Medical Services
Pharmacie Camp Ghezo (☎ 21 31 55 52; Rue 240)
Pharmacie Jonquet (☎ 21 31 20 80; Rue des Cheminots) Open 24/7.
Polyclinique les Cocotiers (☎ 21 30 14 20; Rue 373) A private and efficient clinic at the Carrefour de Cadjéhoun; also has a dentist.

Money
All banks change cash but only Ecobank and SGBB change travellers cheques. There are plenty of ATMs in Cotonou, most of which accept Visa.
There’s a thriving black market for currencies including the Nigerian Niara around the Jonquet district and Gare du Dantokpa.
Ecobank (☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Blvd St Michel (Blvd St Michel; Rue 657 (Rue 657) Close to Marché Ganhi.
Polyclinique les Cocotiers (☎ 21 30 14 20; Rue 373)
Société Générale de Banques au Benin (Ave Clozel; 8am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Has a Visa cash machine.
Banque Atlantique (Blvd St Michel; 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat) Has a MasterCard and Visa cash machine.

Post
Main post office (off Ave Clozel; 7am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-11.30pm Sat)

Telephone
Telecom (OPT) building (Ave Clozel; 7.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) You can make overseas telephone calls and send faxes.

Tourist Information
Direction du Tourisme et de l’Hôtellerie (☎ 21 32 68 24; Place de l’Étoile Rouge; 8am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Mon-Fri) Inconveniently located out of the centre, behind Pharmacie de l’Étoile Rouge and of limited use.

Visa Extensions
Direction Emigration Immigration (☎ 21 31 42 13; Ave Jean Paul II; 8am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Mon-Fri) Issues 30-day visas.
DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The biggest danger in Cotonou is the traffic, the 80,000 reckless zemi-johns (taxi-motos or zems) in particular. They’re unavoidable however, so always make sure that the driver agrees to drive slowly (aller doucement) before hopping on.

The Jonquet, the beach and the port area all have their fair share of undesirables: don’t walk alone at night. Take a taxi to get home.

Keep an eye on your belongings in crowded areas such as the Grand Marché du Dantokpa.

SIGHTS

The seemingly endless Grand Marché du Dantokpa is Cotonou’s throbbing heart, bordered by the lagoon and Blvd St Michel. Everything under the sun can be purchased in its labyrinthine lanes, from fish to soap, plastic sandals to goats, pirated DVDs to spare car parts. More traditional fare, such as batiks and Dutch wax cloth can also be found in the market building. The fetish section is at the northern end of the market. To appreciate just how huge and thriving Dantokpa is, climb the footbridge that crosses Ave de la Paix: it’s exhausting just to look at it.

For a different kind of culture shock, head to the amazing Fondation Zinsou (21 31 50 51; www.fondationzinsou.org; Rue du Gouverneur Bayol; admission free; 10am-7pm, closed bank holidays). This fantastic exhibition space seeks to promote contemporary African art among Beninese people and has featured big names such as Malian photographer Malick Sidibe and home-grown visual artist Romuald Hazoumé (famous for his jerrycan creations). Children from local schools are regularly invited in and the foundation runs kids’ art classes on Wednesday and Saturday. The chic boutique sells beautiful art books and the café serves expensive teas and fresh fruit juices.

COURSES

For Fon-language classes, call Vinawamon (97 87 37 72), also contactable via the Centre Culturel Français (p99).
SLEEPING

Budget

Maison de Passage des Allemands (☎ 21 30 45 76; Haie Vive; r with air-con CFA7000; Ⓟ) This discreet villa next to Bar Le Lambi’s is an absolute bargain if you manage to get a room: it was set up to accommodate German aid workers, and since there are only seven rooms and lots of aid workers, it’s often full. Book well in advance. Bathrooms and toilets are shared but it is clean; you also get the use of the kitchen and an atmospheric patio and balcony. The only problem is the noise from the next door bar and traffic.

Hôtel Babo (☎ 21 31 46 07; Rue Agbeto Amadoré; s with fan/air-con CFA6000/10,000; Ⓟ) There’s a good chance you’ll be sharing the night with friends of the creepy-crawly variety but it’s a big place and rooms cater for all needs, from air-con on the 1st floor to no fan or bednet on the 5th floor (the great views might be small comfort).

Le Chant d’Oiseau (☎ 21 30 57 51; www.chantdoiseau.net; Rue du Collège Père Aupiais; s/d/tr with fan CFA9000/13,500/17,500, with air-con CFA16,500/22,000/27,500; Ⓟ) A safe, excellent budget option run by a catholic community and within walking distance of the lively Haie Vive area. The building looks a little austere with its concrete facade but the rooms are quiet and spacious, and the restaurant serves great-value food. There is also an internet cafe (per hour CFA500). Find it next to the well-known Collège Père Aupiais.

Midrange

Hôtel Benin Vickinfel (☎ 21 31 38 14; www.beninvickin felhotel.com; off Blvd Steinmetz; r from CFA15,500; Ⓟ) Don’t be fooled by the grim exterior. This 33-room hotel is good value considering it’s right in the city centre. Rooms are a little pokey but comfortable and very quiet (ask for one with a shower rather than a bath).

Our pick Chez Clarisse (☎ 21 30 60 14; Camp Guézo; s/d with breakfast CFA25,000/30,000; Ⓟ) The closest thing to a guest house you’ll find in Cotonou, this is a charming place, with seven immaculate rooms in a villa at the back of the popular Chez Clarisse restaurant. The owner is delightful and guests get the use of the lounge and of the small but perfectly formed pool. It’s at the back of the US embassy.

Hôtel du Port (☎ 21 31 44 44; www.hotelduport-cotonou.com; Blvd de la Marina; s/d from CFA36,800/44,200, bungalow s/d CFA46,600/54,200; Ⓟ) This well-run hotel is the best midrange option in Cotonou. Rooms are comfortable and the bungalows very spacious. The surrounding towers of containers from the next-door port are slightly surreal and in sharp contrast with the oasis-like pretty pool (nonguest CFA2500), garden and paillote (straw awning) restaurant-bar (meals CFA3800 to CFA6500). Hôtel du Lac (☎ 21 33 19 19; www.hoteldulac-benin.com; r CFA40,000-60,000; Ⓟ) A good mid-range choice on a breezy spot at the edge of the lagoon. Rooms are sunny, spacious, exceptionally clean and most have water views. The restaurant (meals CFA2500 to CFA4800) has a great panoramic terrace and the pool is popular at the weekend (adult/child CFA2500/2000). The only downside is that it’s a little out of the way, on the other side of the river close to the Ancien Pont.

Alex’s Hotel (☎ 21 04 36 86; Rue 108; s/d from CFA41,500/53,500; Ⓟ) Cotonou’s Hotel California, with mildly erotic art decorating the corridors, sweetly scented rooms and enormous leather sofas crowding the reception area. There are city views from the roof, a gym (you’ll definitely be working up a sweat) and a popular karaoke bar and nightclub, Cristal Palace (p103).

Top End

Novotel Orisha (☎ 21 30 56 69; www.novotel.com; Blvd de la Marina; r CFA85,000; Ⓟ) This super swish Novotel comes complete with design furniture, funky bar, beautiful swimming pool and decked out terrace featuring ‘day beds’ and wooden loungers. Rooms follow the same cool design style: not very African, but definitely comfortable and excellent value.

Benin Marina Hotel (☎ 21 30 01 00; www.benin-marinahotel.com; Blvd de la Marina; r with city/ocean view CFA121,000/134,000, bungalow CFA155,000; Ⓟ) Luxury accommodation in true West African style: in a concrete bunker. The inside has more charm, with African tapestries lining the corridors and tasteful decor in the rooms. There is also a circular pool (nonguest adult use costs CFA4500, child CFA3500), with a poolside restaurant and a busy nightclub.

EATING

All restaurants listed below are open for lunch and dinner.

African

Chez Léa (off Rue des Hindous; meal CFA1500) Fill up on poulet moyo at this crazily popular lunch joint.
set up under an awning and corrugated iron roof. Plates are piled high with chicken, aloko (fried bananas), fries, rice, peas and salad. Perfect to fill up on the cheap and take in the vibe from Cotonou’s working crowd.

Maquis Le Lagon (☎ 97 44 29 94; off Blvd Steinmetz; mains CFA2000) On a quiet von (alleyway), friendly Le Lagon serves African-sized portions of fish or chicken – or if you dare, beef tongue – with staples such as attiéké (grated cassava) and aloko on the side. The tables on the street are perfect for people-watching.

Chez Maman Bénin (☎ 21 32 33 38; Rue 201A; meals CFA5000-3000) This long-standing no-frills canteen off Blvd St Michel has a large selection of West African dishes scooped from steaming pots. There’s a couple of blaring TVs showing the latest football action. Low-key but good fun.

Pili Pili (☎ 21 31 29 32; Quartier Zongo; meals CFA2500-3800) This maquis (open-air restaurant) rates highly with Beninese and expats for its amazing West African food. Prices are reasonable and the jugs of freshly squeezed pineapple juice at lunch time are a refreshing godsend. It’s on the second von to your right as you head down Ave Togbé from Carrefour Unafrica.

Asian
Hai King (☎ 21 30 60 08; Carrefour de Cadjéhoun; mains CFA4000; ☎️ 10am-2.30pm & 6-11.30pm) You’ll easily spot this popular Chinese restaurant by the dozen red lanterns decorating its facade. Close to Haie Vive, it serves great Chinese food on an atmospheric covered roof terrace overlooking the bustling Carrefour Cadjéhoun.

Royal Garden (☎ 21 30 03 20; Haie Vive; meals CFA3500-5000) This Indian-run restaurant with garden seating, on the same street as Le Livingstone, does a delicious curry and is popular with the few Brits living in Cotonou.

European
La Verduré (☎ 21 31 31 75; off Ave Clozel; meals around CFA6000) Tucked away, just west of Blvd Steinmetz, is this great little French seafood restaurant in a leafy garden, which also has a nice bar with a pool table.

Chez Clarisse (☎ 21 30 60 14; Camp Guézo; mains CFA3500) This small French restaurant, in a pretty residential area next to the US embassy, is a perennial favourite that churns out excellent European and African specialities. Service can get overwhelmed on busy nights though.

Le Costa Rica (☎ 21 30 20 09; Centre de Promotion de l’Artisanat; mains CFA4000) This French-owned Joint serves excellent home-made pasta, wood-fired pizzas and Provençal fare. It’s also one of the few places to serve draft beer in Cotonou.

Chez Mimi (☎ 21 31 49 07; Rue d’Abomey; mains from CFA5000) Run by the savvy Mireille, this ‘maquis de luxe’ is Afro-European fusion cuisine at its best: home-made fresh fruit punch, divine monkfish gratin and delicious desserts all served in a lovely alfresco setting. To find it, turn off Rue Capitaine Adjovi opposite Pharmacie Zongo.

Les Trois Mousquetaires (☎ 21 31 61 22; Ave Dodds; mains from CFA9000) Cotonou’s gastronomic highlight, this fine establishment serves delicate French cuisine such as cocote de la mer au cidre (cider seafood stew, which doesn’t sound anywhere near as elegant in English!) or roast veal rib. The wine list is extensive too and the old colonial dining room is the perfect setting for a sophisticated evening. Book ahead.

Lebanese
Fleur de Sel (☎ 97 59 19 59; off Rue 651A; mains CFA3500) Savour Lebanese specialities with a side of ocean breeze and great port views at this beach-side restaurant. As well as succulent kebabs and unctuous hummus, the house also serves fab seafood, with lobster, crayfish and whole fish big enough to feed a party of 10. Find it down the road from the Chambre de Commerce et d’Industrie du Bénin.

Cafés & Patisseries
Boulangerie-Pâtisserie (Route de l’Aéroport; ☎️ 7am-8pm) The bread, croissants, éclairs and cakes from this little bakery next to the Air France office can rival those of any French bakery.

La Gerbe d’Or (☎ 21 31 42 58; Ave Clozel; ☎️ 6am-10pm) It’s overpriced and the cakes are not always as fresh as they ought to be, but the cafe upstairs sells good ice creams.

Quick Eats
There’s an amazing number of food joints that spring up at meal times. It’s mostly omelette stalls in the morning (can’t beat an omelette sandwich and a cup of Milo for CFA400 to kick-start the day), sandwich bars at lunch time and smokin’ brochettes (kebabs) in the evenings. All are incredibly cheap and often a good place to chat with locals.

Self-Catering
In the centre, around Marché Ganhi, are a number of good supermarkets, including
La Pointe (☎ 21 31 69 45; off Ave Clozel; 9am-8pm) and La Championne (☎ 21 30 69 43; Haie Vive; 9am-10pm).

**DRINKING**

Haie Vive, near the airport, is a good, safe area by night, with many of the city’s best bars and restaurants.

Le Livingstone (☎ 21 30 27 58; livin@leland.bj; Haie Vive; meals CFA3500-4500; 11am-late) Hugely popular with expats (many of whom live just round the corner in the leafy district of Haie Vive) who come here to chill out to the tune of Western pop and sport channels. It also serves ace but expensive pizzas (CFA5000). Perfect if you’re in need of home comforts.

The nameless our pick buvette at Carrefour Cadjéhoun is a brilliantly atmospheric spot for sundowners. Tables spill out of nowhere as soon as darkness falls (if you walked past during day time you wouldn’t even know there’s a bar) and there is often live music.

The Jonquet strip is bristling with pumping music and wild and wicked bars, such as Le Soweto (☎ 97 44 17 49; Rue des Cheminots; 7am-4am).

**ENTERTAINMENT**

**Cinemas**

You can see films in French at the Centre Culturel Français, which issues monthly pamphlets with upcoming program details, and at the Centre Culturel Chinois on Saturday at 8pm.

**Nightclubs**

The decadent bars on Jonquet strip are generally open through the night, often without a cover.

New York, New York (Halle des Arts, Centre de Promotion de l’Artisanat; admission CFA4500; 10pm-dawn) A glitzy hall of mirrors, frequented by some of the friendliest young ladies you’ll encounter this side of Lomé.

Cristal Palace (☎ 21 31 25 08; admission CFA3500; 11pm-dawn Tue-Sun), at Alex’s Hotel, has a karaoke bar. Benin Marina Hotel’s Le Téké (☎ 21 30 01 00; Blvd de la Marina; 9pm-late Tue-Sun) is also fun at weekends (salsa classes at 10pm on Friday for CFA5000) and organises regular ‘beach parties’ by the pool.

**Live Music**

Le Repaire de Bacchus (☎ 21 31 75 81; Ave Proche; 11am-midnight, to 2am Thu, to 4am Fri & Sat) With live jazz on Thursday from 10.30pm, and music such as rumba and Côte d’Ivoire sounds on Friday and Saturday, this place is positively groovy.

**SHOPPING**

Centre de Promotion de l’Artisanat (Blvd St Michel; 9am-7pm) There are more beckoning hands than quality work in this large centre, but it’s worth a look to get your cultural bearings. The boutiques sell woodcarvings, bronzes, batiks, leather goods, jewellery and appliquéd banners.

Marché Ganhi, which takes up a whole block between rue des Hindous, rue du Gouverneur and Ave Clozel, is good for fruit and veg, and bits and pieces such as CDs, baskets and roast peanuts.

For quality Dutch wax fabric, head to the elegant boutique Woodin (Rue des Hindous; 8.30am-1pm & 4-7pm Tue-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat, 3.30-7pm Mon) where demi-pièces (see the boxed text, p782, for our tips on buying fabric) start at CFA14,000.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

**Air**

The international airport is on the western fringe of town. It has a pharmacy, a small grocery shop, two bureaux de change that don’t change travellers cheques and a Visa cash machine.

For information on airlines flying to Cotonou see p126.

**Bush Taxi, Minibus & Bus**

Cotonou has a rather confusing number of stations for minibuses, buses and bush taxis. It’s easiest to ask a taxi or a zemi-john to take you to the right one.

Gare Jonquet (Rue des Cheminots), a couple of blocks west of Blvd Steinmetz, services western destinations such as Ouidah (CFA700, one hour), Grand Popo (CFA1500, two hours) and Lomé (CFA3500, three hours).

Bush taxis for Porto Novo (CFA500-700, 45 minutes) and Lagos (CFA3000; three hours) leave from Gare du Dantokpa (Ave de la République) at the new bridge; those to Abomey-Calavi (for Ganvié, CFA400, 25 minutes) and Abomey (CFA2200, two hours) leave just north of Rond-Point de l’Étoile Rouge.

For more distant destinations such as Parakou, Malanville or Natitingou, take the bus (p127) – cheaper, faster and altogether better.
For information on international buses to/from Cotonou, see p127.

GETTING AROUND
To/From the Airport
A private taxi from the city centre to the airport costs around CFA2000, although drivers will demand double this amount from the airport. There are also plenty of zemi-johns who will be quite happy to load you and your luggage for much less.

Taxi, Zemi-John & Shared Taxi
A zemi-john will whiz you around town for CFA100 to CFA300 depending on the distance.

Fares in shared taxis run from CFA150 to CFA400. Otherwise, taxis can be hired for CFA2000 per hour; rates increase from early evening on. Gare du Dantokpa is a good place to pick up taxis.

AROUND COTONOU

GANVIÉ
The main attraction near Cotonou is Ganvié, where 30,000 Tofinu people live in bamboo huts on stilts several kilometres out on Lake Nokoué. The Tofinu fled to this swampy region in the 17th century to escape from the Dahomey slave-hunters, who were banned by a religious custom from venturing into the water.

They live almost exclusively from fishing, which they do by planting branches on the muddy lagoon bottom. When the leaves on the branches begin to decompose, the fish congregate there to feed. Stilts are made of ebony and have to be replaced every 20 years or so. Because of this maintenance issue, ‘hard’ structures have started appearing for bigger and/or communal buildings such as the school and the church.

The town has become a tourist magnet but is a victim of its own success: pollution of the lagoon is a chronic problem and guides seem more interested in making a quick buck than providing an informative commentary.

Sleeping & Eating
Hôtel Carrefour Ganvié Chez M (☎ 95 42 04 68; hotelcarrefourchezm@hotmail.fr; r from CFA5000) This quaint hotel in the middle of the village has 11 rooms with balconies, mosquito nets, and some with ensuite bathrooms. It’s quite an unusual setting but the noise from the diesel water-pump across the stream is a bit of a nuisance. Guests get free transport back to Abomey-Calavi. Meals are available for CFA2500 to CFA3000.

Getting There & Away
From Place de l’Étoile Rouge, get a taxi to Abomey-Calavi (CFA400, 25 minutes), not to be confused with Abomey. The embarkation point is 800m downhill. At the official counter (☎ 95 05 27 01; ☑ 9am-6pm), return fares to Ganvié for one person in a regular/motorised pirogue are CFA6050/7050; CFA4050/5050 each for two to four people; CFA3050/4050 for five to nine; CFA2550/3050 for 10 or more. Prices include a circuit of the village with stop-offs. The whole trip takes about 2½ hours.

ROUTE DES PÊCHES
West of Cotonou, past the airport and all the way to Ouidah, is the sandy Route des Pêches, a land of seemingly endless beaches and fishing villages, a world away from the big-smoke mayhem.

Fidjrossé and its immense beach is the place to hang out and be seen on Sunday afternoon in Cotonou. Beninese families turn out en masse to exchange gossip, parade new hairdos and chill out with a beer. Stop at the tiny Festival des Nems (portion CFA300) in its blue beach hut for the best spring rolls in West Africa and wash it down with a bottle of Castel or Flag from one of the beach vendors.

As you leave Cotonou behind, the suburb gives way to thatched huts and palm groves. Many expats rent little paillotes for the weekend around here. For those just passing by, there are many popular restaurants along the route. Wado (☎ 97 77 66 66; www.wado.net; mains CFA4000) is the hang out of choice for the surfing crowd. As well as cool vibes, it serves mostly European fare.

The hidden gem on this bit of coast however, is the idyllic our pick Bab’s Dock (☎ 97 97 01 96; domhaumont@yahoo.fr; mains CFA6000; ☑ 10am-7pm Sat, Sun & bank holidays). This secluded retreat on the edge of the lagoon was built by a Belgian couple who fell head over heels for this slice of paradise. Almost everything is made of local wood – the tables, the bar, the deck – and was built with the help of local villagers. You can swim in the shallow waters of the lagoon, canoe and even sail or just relax in a hammock, rocked by the lagoon breeze. Food is European in style but local in production. A guesthouse
with four rooms was in construction at the time of writing. Bab’s Dock is 11km from Cotonou; there is no public transport there. A secure car park is signposted from the route; from there, a boat takes you to the restaurant through thick mangrove and open-sky lagoon. There is an admission fee (CFA2500) for the day, which covers the car park and boat trip.

**THE SOUTH**

Benin’s south is an enticing but intriguing mix of heavenly shores and momentous history. Ouidah and Porto Novo brim with what remains of the riches accrued by European slave traders, while time seems to stand still in palm-fringed Grand Popo and tranquil Lac Ahémé. It is also the birthplace of the much demonised voodoo religion and was once the stronghold of the mighty Dahomey Kingdom based in Abomey.

**PORTO NOVO**

pop 223,168

Nestling on the shores of Lake Nokoué, Porto Novo is Benin’s unlikely capital. Just 30km east of Cotonou and 15km from the Nigerian border, the city has somehow escaped the manic nature of its neighbours and carries on instead at a mellow, unperturbed pace. Its leafy streets, wonderful colonial architecture and interesting museums make it a fabulous two-day escape from full-on Cotonou.

Porto Novo has been Benin’s official capital since it was used as such by the French, whose colonisation followed the Wars of Resistance that began here in 1890. The Portuguese named the city after Porto when they established a slave-trading post here in the 16th century. Some of this colonial legacy can be seen in the Musée da Silva, which examines Afro-Brazilian culture, and the statue in Place Jean Bayal celebrating cooperation between the Yoruba and Creole peoples.

Basic information about the city can be found online at www.porto-novo.org. There are three banks and a post office in the city centre.

**Sights & Activities**

**CENTRE SONGHAI**

There is something amazing about the fact that Centre Songhai (20 24 68 81; www.songhai.org)
Route de Pobè is more than 20 years old. Everything it stands for – sustainable development, using local resources, blending traditional and modern techniques, recycling – was considered visionary when it was set up in 1985. The brainchild of a Dominican monk of Nigerian descent who wanted to boost the quality of life in rural areas, Songhai is now a major research, teaching and production centre in sustainable farming.

There are daily guided tours (1hr tour CF 500; 8.30am, 10.30am, noon, 3.30pm & 5pm Mon-Sat) to visit the plantations and workshops. You can also buy the centre’s products in their shop, anything from fresh quail eggs to biscuits and preserves. Songhai is about 1km north of town. Every zem knows it so you won’t have difficulties getting there.

**MUSEUMS**

Porto Novo has three rather original museums, which will fill you in on history, culture and tradition.

The privately owned Musée Da Silva ( 21 50 71; Ave Liotard; admission CF 2000; 9am-6pm) is a wonderfully eccentric and eclectic African establishment. It begins with a tour of an Afro-Brazilian house dating back to 1870, veers into rooms filled with old typewriters, Russian kepis and photocopied portraits of world leaders, before finally ending in a garage containing a Rolls Royce and a Harley Davidson hotrod.

Housed in another pretty colonial building is the Musée Ethnographique de Porto Novo ( 21 25 54; Ave 6; admission CF 1000; 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, from 9am Sat, Sun & holidays, closed 1 May & 1 Jan). The top floor is organised thematically around birth, life and death, with everything from costumes to carved drums. Downstairs is an impressive display of the Yorubas’ inventive Gelede ceremonial masks, some dating back 200 years.

Finally, Musée Homné ( 21 35 66; Rue Toffa; admission CF 1000; 9am-6pm, to 5pm Sat & Sun) is housed in the walled compound of King Toffa, who signed the first treaty with the French in 1863. The kingdom of Porto Novo was one of the longest lasting in sub-Saharan Africa, running from 1688 to the 25th king in 1976, when the five dynasties had a disagreement and let the kingdom die. The site hasn’t been well maintained and you’ll need some imagination to make something out of the bare chambers but the guide, François, puts on a good show.

**PIROGUE TRIPS & WALKING TOURS**

The 12km pirogue trip to the stilt village of Aguégué is a less touristy option than Ganvié. Among the guides offering to oblige are Hilaire and his company Iroko Tours ( 97 17 59 82, 93 80 60 59; iroko1992@yahoo.fr). Half-day trips cost CFA 15,000 for two people, and CFA 7000 per extra person. Hilaire also offers themed walking tours of Porto Novo, exploring either the voodoo culture or architectural highlights of the capital’s Afro-Brazilian heritage, such as the multicoloured mosque, once a 19th-century church and now a flamboyant example of the fusion of cultures.

**GRAND MARCHÉ D’ADJARA**

The market in the small town of Adjara, 10km north of Porto Novo on a back road to Nigeria, is one of the most colourful in Benin. Held every fourth day, it’s stocked with fetishes, grigri charms, unique blue and white tie-dyed cloth, some of the best pottery in Benin, tam tams and other musical instruments. Shared taxis to Adjara leave Porto Novo gare routière on market day – or take a zemi-john.

**Festivals & Events**

In mid-January Porto Novo celebrates the city’s Afro-Brazilian heritage with its own version of Carnival. Contact the Musée da Silva (left) for more information.

**Sleeping**

There isn’t a huge amount of choice in Porto Novo and standards are not particularly good. Below is the cream of the crop.

[Our pick] Centre Songhai ( 22 50 92; Route de Pobè; r with fan CF 4000, with air-con CF 12,500-15,500; ) Built to accommodate its numerous visitors, the 70 rooms at Centre Songhai (see p105) are basic but clean. Fan rooms have a shower cubicle but shared toilets. Air-con rooms have bathrooms and are still very good value. The centre is a lovely place to hang out and you’ll get a chance to chat with students at the maquis-bar. There is also an internet cafe (per hour CF 250).

Queen’s Hotel ( 24 79 83; quennhot2005@hotmail.com; off Route de Louho; r CF 9500-12,500; ) This low-key hotel 2km west of town has some good-value rooms (comfortable but dark) and an excellent restaurant. Find it down
the first road to your left after Carrefour Djassin Tokpa.

Hôtel Dona (☎ 20 22 30 52; www.hoteldona.com; Blvd Extérieur; s/d/tr CFA10,500/14,500/16,500; P) Rooms are quite plush at this pink establishment: those at the front benefit from balconies but are a little noisier because of the traffic on the boulevard. The rooftop panoramic restaurant is a nice spot to relax and Nicole, the friendly manager, is a good source of information.

Hôtel Beaurivage (☎ 20 21 23 99; Blvd Lagunaire; r CFA15,500-25,500; ) Tired but spacious rooms (and new beds, finally!) with the town’s best lagoon views and a wonderful terrace bar and restaurant. Even if you don’t sleep here, you should definitely come for sundowners.

Eating
Chez Mahi (Ave 6; meals CFA500-1000; h lunch Mon-Sat) Locals swear by this restaurant, just south of Place Kokoyé; it’s not an attractive place (unpainted concrete walls) but the mashed yam is excellent and the atmosphere jovial.

Java Promo (☎ 20 21 20 54; Place du Gouvernement; meals CFA1500-3000; h breakfast, lunch & dinner) Hidden behind the aquamarine shutters of a crumbling colonial building and shielded from the sun by a big paillote, this is a popular haunt for an omelette at brekkie or meat and pâte for lunch.

Le JPN (☎ 20 21 38 66; Jardin des Plantes et de la Nature, site 2; meals CFA2500; h 10am-6pm Tue-Thu, to 11pm Fri-Sun) Set in a leafy park southwest of the Assemblée Nationale, this place offers breakfast, lunch and the odd stream of ants.

Centre Songhai (☎ 20 22 50 92; Route de Pobè; menu du jour CFA5000; h breakfast, lunch & dinner) The posher of the centre’s two restaurants offers mouth-watering cuisine and CFA500 carafes of wine. More informal, and very popular with students, is the maquis-bar which serves traditional African dishes (CFA1200) and cold beer. Both restaurants use the centre’s products.

Restaurant Akango (☎ 20 21 56 12; Rue de l’Inspection; mains CFA3000; h lunch & dinner) Lavish dishes such as coq au vin or braised fish are the order of the day in this elegant restaurant on a quiet side street opposite a ministerial building.

QUICK EATS
Cafeteria Place Catchi (Carrefour Catchi) The usual cluster of Milo, condensed milk and coffee tins jostle for space with eggs and tin plates at this popular breakfast stall. Particularly handy since Cotonou-bound taxis tend to congregate on either side of the square.

There are plenty more food stalls around Carrefour Catchi and the parks around the cathedral.

Drinking
Java Promo, Le JPN and the maquis-bar at Centre Songhai are also popular watering holes.

Festival Plus (☎ 20 22 39 79; Rue Obalédé) Great Afro-Brazilian beats and cheap beer are in store at this bright-yellow, Flag-sponsored bar.

Messe Mixte (Blvd Lagunaire) This bar is popular with military personnel from the academy next door but the atmosphere is relaxed. There’s also a little maquis at the front in the evening if you get peckish.

Entertainment
The town’s most popular club is Feelings Night Club (Blvd Extérieur; admission CFA3000; h Fri & Sat), 1km north of Hôtel Beaurivage. There is also Quartz Club (Blvd Extérieur; admission CFA3500; h Fri, Sat & holidays) at Hôtel Dona. Both establishments open around 10pm but it doesn’t really get going until midnight.

The outdoor cinema (CFA500) at Musée da Silva sporadically shows French films.

Getting There & Away
Plenty of minibuses and bush taxis leave for Cotonou (minibus/bush taxi CFA500/700, 45 minutes) from the gare routière and Carrefour Catchi. To Abomey from Porto Novo is CFA2700.

For Nigeria, you can get a taxi to the border-point in Kraké (CFA700, 30 minutes) but you’ll have to change to go on to Lagos.

Getting Around
If Cotonou hasn’t scared you off zemi-johns, they are the best way to see Porto Novo. Alternatively all the major sites and facilities are within half an hour’s walk of each other.

OUIDAH
pop 87,200
Some 42km west of Cotonou is Ouidah, a relaxed, relatively prosperous town and a must-see for anyone interested in voodoo or Benin’s history of slave-trading. Until a wharf was built at Cotonou in 1908, Ouidah had the only port in the country. From the 17th
to the late 19th centuries (with trade peaking during the 19th century), captured country-
men from across West Africa left Ouidah for the Americas.

A visit to the beach, from where the slaves once left, is well worthwhile. The 4km journey
there from town takes you past a lagoon with fishermen and a small stilt village.

The annual Voodoo Festival (see opposite) is celebrated here in January. The Quintessence Film
festival ([www.festival-ouidah.org](http://www.festival-ouidah.org)), where the top honour is the Python Royal (of the award rather
than animal variety!), runs at the same time.

**Information**

There are several internet cafes on Rue Olivier de Montaguere, including FIC (per hr CFA350; ☏ 8.30am-
11pm) and Cyber PKCOM (per hr CFA300; ☏ 9am-11pm).

Continental Bank Bénin (☎ 2134 14 32; Place du Marché; ☏ 8.30am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Fri) changes cash.

**Sights & Activities**

**MUSÉE D’HISTOIRE DE OUIDAH**

This museum ([☎ 21 34 10 21; www.museeouidah.org; Rue van Vollenhoven; admission CFA1000; ☏ 8am-12.30pm &
3-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun), two blocks east of the market, is housed in the beautiful Fortaleza Sào João Batista, a Portuguese fort built in
1721. It’s one of the best museums of its kind, with exhibits focusing on the slave trade and
the resulting links between Benin, Brazil and the Caribbean. You’ll be shown voodoo arte-
facts, skulls, photos showing the influence of Dahomeyan slaves on Brazilian culture, and
traces of Brazilian architecture that the repatriated slaves brought back to Africa.

**ROUTE DES ESCLAVES**

The 4km Route des Esclaves, now the main road to the beach, starts near the Musée d’Histoire de
Ouidah at Place Chacha, the old auction square. Once sold, slaves would make their way down
to the coast to board the ships. Lining the sandy track now are fetishes and monuments such as
the Monument of Repentance and the Tree of Forgetfulness. Slaves were forced to circle the
tree that once stood here, to forget the land they were leaving.

There is a poignant memorial on the beach, the **Point of No Return**, with bas-relief
depicting slaves in chains. It’s such a beautiful spot that it’s hard to fathom that 12 million
people were deported from this very shore.

Guides from the Musée d’Histoire will offer to show you the Route des Esclaves
by zem for an extra fee. It’s probably a better bet than picking a random guide off the
street: CFA4000 should cover it.

**CASA DO BRAZIL**

Sometimes called La Maison du Brésil, this museum ([☎ 21 34 18 63; Ave de France, admission CFA1000; ☏ 9am-6pm]) gives an overview of the African
CELEBRATING VOODOO

Voodoo, or vodou, got its current name in Haiti and Cuba, where the religion arrived with Fon and Ewe slaves from the Dahomey Kingdom and mixed with Catholicism. It was originally called vodun in Benin and Togo, a word that means ‘the hidden’ or ‘the mystery’.

The practice conforms to the general pattern of West African religions, with a supreme god, Mawu, and a host of lesser spirits that are ethnically specific to their followers and to the part of the spiritual world inhabited by a person’s ancestors. Traditional priests, or juju men, are consulted for their power to communicate with particular spirits and seek intercession with them. This communication is achieved through spirit possession and ritual that often involves a gift or ‘sacrifice’ of palm wine, chickens or goats. The grace of the spirits is essential for protection and prosperity, and some spirits can be harnessed for malicious and selfish ends.

A fetish is an object or potion imbued with the spirits’ power. Fetish markets are like voodoo pharmacies. The buyer has a prescription of the items the priest needs to make the required concoction – such as a parrot’s tail or a cobra’s head. It’s all a bit grisly to the Western eye but far from the skulduggery depicted in Hollywood.

Hollywood aside, Benin’s own government hasn’t always been supportive either. Kérékou’s Marxist government outlawed voodoo as being inimical to a rational and socialist work ethic. But when a democratic government was installed here in 1989, traditional religious practice was permitted. And finally, voodoo was formally recognised as a religion by the government in February 1996.

Since then, 10 January, Voodoo Day, has been a bank holiday, with celebrations all over the country. Those in Ouidah, voodoo’s historic centre, are amongst the best and most colourful, with endless singing, dancing, beating of drums and drinking. It’s certainly eye-opening, but those expecting to see The Night of the Living Dead will be sadly disappointed.

Diaspora. The house itself is the former residence of the Brazilian governor and was later occupied by a Portuguese family until they were ousted in the early 1960s.

TEMPLE DES PYTHONS

The voodoo python temple (☎ 95 40 08 90; off Rue Colombani; admission CFA1000, photos CFA5000; ☎ 8am-7pm) is now more of a tourist trap than a sacred site. The guide explains some of the beliefs and ceremonies associated with the temple, ushers you into a room containing 40 sleepy pythons, drapes one round your neck, and asks for a cadeau.

SACRED FOREST

A generation ago, the peaceful Fôret Sacrée (☎ 97 68 89 22; admission incl guide CFA1000; ☎ 8am-6pm) was off-limits to the uninitiated. It contains the huge and rare 400-year-old iroko tree that King Ḵpассé, founder of Ouidah, is reputed to have turned himself into while fleeing enemies. The forest is now a tranquil place, dotted with sculptures that symbolise voodoo and animist deities and beliefs.

CASA DEL PAPA

Nonguests can use the facilities at this resort (see p110): swimming pool (adult/child CFA3500/2500), volleyball and tennis courts (per hour CFA3500).

Sleeping

Edelweiss Les Retrouvailles (☎ 21 10 10 86; Rue du Général Dodd; r with fan/air-con CFA6500/15,500; P) About 1km east of the Musée d’Histoire de Ouidah, past the French military cemetery, this excellent budget choice is set in leafy grounds with a paillote restaurant (meals CFA2000 to CFA3500) and a children’s playground. Bungalows are clean and airy and the management really friendly. The name of the hotel will draw a blank with most zems so try asking for ‘Les Paillotes’.

Oasis Hôtel (☎ 21 34 10 91; Rue van Vollenhoven; r CFA10,500-15,500 P) The only central hotel but not the best: rooms are noisy and overpriced, as is the restaurant (meals CFA4500). It does have a nice rooftop bar however, with superb views, and the location is very handy.

Le Jardin Brésilien Auberge de la Diaspora (☎ 21 34 11 10; r CFA10,000-25,000; P) On the beach near the Point of No Return, this tranquil place is a good midrange choice. Go for a category B room with air-con and fab views and avoid the fan rooms – overpriced and a furnace because of the lack of shade. The restaurant (meals CFA3000 to CFA9000) is
pricey but in a beautiful setting and has a good selection of fish.

Casa Del Papa (☎ 95 95 39 04; www.casadelpapa.com; Ouidah Plage; d incl breakfast CFA47,000-68,000) Squeezed between the ocean and the lagoon, Casa del Papa is the closest thing to an exclusive resort you’ll find on the coast. It’s packed with wealthy Cotonou residents at weekends but eerily quiet the rest of the week. There are numerous activities on offer as well as excursions across the lagoon and to the nearby Bouche du Roy (see right). The hotel is 7km beyond the Point of No Return on a road that is unsafe at night. There is no public transport to get there.

Eating
For a tasty meal, the hotels listed above are your best bet. For cheap bites or on-the-go food, try Evivi (Rue F Colombani; meals CFA1000, lunch & dinner), in a pleasant courtyard opposite the post office. Le Diplomate (Rue F Colombani; snacks CFA400, breakfast, lunch & dinner), with its sky-blue cladding and breakfast bar is perfect for a quick omelette.

Maquis Benin (Route de Togo; meals CFA700, breakfast, lunch & dinner) is good for brochettes before boarding a taxi on the way to Togo or Cotonou.

Drinking
The town centre is peppered with small bars, notably Liberty’s (Rue d’Orgre), or Maquia Cabana (Rue Olivier de Montaguere) with its Caribbean rhythms. Close to the basilica is La Carapace (Rue F Colombani), an attractive bar in the courtyard of a decaying colonial building.

Getting There & Away
Bush taxis to Cotonou (CFA700, one hour) sometimes leave from the taxi stop on Rue van Vollenhoven but it’s easier and quicker to get a zem (CFA200) to Carrefour Bénin where you can also catch taxis to Grand Popo (CFA600, one hour) and the Hilakondji border (CFA1000, 1½ hours).

GRAND POPO
Some 82km from Cotonou and 20km from the Togo border at Hilakondji, Grand Popo is a wonderful spot to spend a few tranquil days. The village is rather sleepy but has plenty going on at the weekend when Cotonou residents come to escape the big smoke. It’s a perfect base to explore the Mono River, go for a long walk on the beach, and learn more about voodoo culture.

Sights & Activities
VILLA KARO
On the main street through the village is this Finnish-African cultural centre (☎ 22 43 03 58; www.villa-karo.org) with a small gallery (8-11am & 4-6pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat) that runs great exhibitions. There’s also a library with books in French, Finnish and English, a free open-air cinema from 8pm on Friday evening, and a free concert on the first Saturday of the month.

PIROGUE TRIPS
Local guide Gaston (☎ 95 85 74 40) organises excursions on the Mono River or to the Bouche du Roy, where the river meets the ocean. Trips on the river last about two hours and cost CFA5000 per person but those to the Bouche du Roy cost CFA45,000 as you need a motorised boat. Boats fit up to eight people and the trip lasts about six hours. Gaston works with Cotonou-based NGO Nature Tropicale (www.naturetropicale.com) on the protection of marine turtles and sometimes gets visitors involved.

Sleeping & Eating
Lion Bar (☎ 95 42 05 17; kabla_gildas@yahoo.fr; r CFA5000) Signposted down a track from the main street, you’ll easily find this reggae land by following Bob Marley’s languorous beats. It’s the hide-out of choice for Cotonou’s expat beatniks and oozes peace and love: drinks flow at all hours of the day and night, parties are a staple, rooms are super funky and the shared facilities surprisingly clean. Meals cost CFA1500. It’s right on the beach and you’re free to pitch your tent for CFA2500.

Awalé Plage (☎ 22 43 01 17; www.hotel-benin-awale plage.com; Route de Togo; d with fan/air-con CFA14,000/22,000, f with fan/air-con CFA20,000/28,000; ☏) This lively resort, on the main coastal highway west of the Grand Popo turn-off, is good fun. The accommodation bungalows are impeccable, of a decaying colonial building.

Nature Tropicale
This protected marine reserve on the Point of No Return on a road that is unsafe at night. There is no public transport to get there.

Ouïdah Plage; d incl breakfast CFA47,000-68,000; (P N S) Right by Grand-Popo’s seemingly endless beach, where the road stops and palm trees take over, the auberge (see also p123 for booking info) is one of the most atmospheric spots in Benin. Rooms are split between three beautiful colonial buildings
and have retained their colonial charm with shutters instead of windows, fans, mosquito nets, white-washed walls and simple wooden furniture. The attractive terrace restaurant (meals CFA3800 to CFA9000) has an impressive menu and wine selection, with jazz or classical music in the background.

**Shopping**

**Aux Beaux Arts** (Main St; 11am-6pm), on your left as you drive down towards the Auberge, is a tiny shop selling highly original and beautifully crafted calabash lamps. They come in all shapes, colours and sizes. Prices start at CFA12,000 for small models and CFA25,000 for bigger ones.

**Getting There & Away**

From Cotonou, take a bush taxi from Gare de Jonquet (CFA1500, two hours) and have it drop you off at the Grand Popo junction on the main coastal highway, 20km east of the Togo border crossing at Hilakondji. The beach and village are 3.5km off the main road and are easily accessible via zemi-john (CFA250).

**POSSOTOMÉ & LAKE AHÉMÉ**

The fertile shores of Lake Ahémé are voodoo strongholds and even non-believers will admit there is something very spiritual and peaceful about this area. It’s a wonderful place to spend a few days, particularly around Possotomé, the area’s biggest village.

Possotomé itself is famous for its thermal springs, the country’s primary source of mineral water. The springs themselves are an anticlimactic trickle but you can fill up your bottle for free (although note that the water comes out warm).

Lake Ahémé features Eco-Bénin’s (see p97) flagship trips and excursions (www.lacaheme.com). Learn traditional fishing techniques with Lucien (so graceful when they do it, so comical when we try!) or go on a fascinating two-hour botanic journey with Justin to hear about local plants and their medicinal properties. There is half a dozen thematic circuits to choose from (from two hours to day trips, CFA3500 to CFA12,000), all run by delightful local guides. As with all Eco-Bénin backed initiatives, 25% of the fee you pay goes back to the community.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Camping de Possotomé** (90 11 53 35; camping CFA2500) How does watching the sun rise over Lake Ahémé sound? This campsite, on an idyllic spot on the sandy lakeshores right in the centre of the village, is run by Eco-Bénin guides. It’s basic (bucket showers and toilets) but very atmospheric. Justin, the cook, will whisk up African wonders for sustenance (omelette breakfast CFA1000, meals CFA2500) and you can hire a tent and mattress if you don’t have your own.

**Auberge Palais des Jeunes** (95 96 12 87; d/tw CFA5000/7500) Simple but spotless rooms in the centre of the village. The paillote bar-restaurant (mains CFA1500) serves French and American cuisine and turns into a nightclub on Saturday night.

**Hôtel Chez Théo** (22 43 08 06; www.chez-theo.com; r CFA15,000-20,000; ) In a stunning lakeside location, Chez Théo is divine. Rooms are impeccable, with African batiks decorating the walls. A path through a well-maintained garden leads to a great bar-restaurant (mains CFA3000) on a stilt platform with wondrous views. There is also a lounge area, with hammocks and comfy armchairs, perfect to read a book or fall asleep to the sound of splashing waves. Find Chez Théo about 600m north of the village on the lake’s shore.

**Village Club Ahémé** (22 43 00 29; village aheme@yahoo.fr; r CFA15,000-25,000; ) This 20-room hotel on the water’s edge is popular for seminars and conferences so it’s often full. Facilities are good, if a little corporate-looking, and the beach is beautiful. Staff are friendly and can help you organise excursions around southern Benin. Meals are CFA5000 to CFA6500.

**Getting There & Away**

From the main coastal highway take the turn-off north to Lokossa (20km) and Comé (700m), from where a road heads east to Possotomé (18km). Taxis that plough the Hilakondji–Cotonou route will generally drop you off at the Comé turn-off, from where the only option to Possotomé is a zem (CFA1000).

**ABOMEY**

**pop 114,600**

The name is mythical, and not without reason: Abomey, 144km northwest of Cotonou in Fon country, was the capital of the fierce Dahomey Kingdom and a force colonial powers had to reckon with for centuries. Nowadays Abomey is a rather quiet place, although the numerous
ruins and artefacts left behind by the kings of Dahomey make it clear it wasn’t always so. In fact, the French were so fearful of Abomey’s power that they deliberately designed the railway line between Cotonou and Parakou so that it would run 9km east of Abomey, in what is now Bohicon.

The legacy is that Bohicon has overshadowed Abomey commercially. Most buses and taxis stop in Bohicon, from where you have to connect for Abomey, and the area’s main market is in Bohicon.

**Information**

You can get internet access at Cyber Goho (22 50 11 46; Place de Goho; per hr CFA500; 7am-10pm Mon-Sat, from 10am Sun) and Cyber Royal (22 50 16 85; Rond-Point de la Préfecture; per hr CFA500; 8am-10pm).

The newly opened **tourist office** (Office du Tourisme d’Abomey; 22 50 15 77; Place de Goho; 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat) can provide information about Abomey’s main sights and keeps a list of accredited guides (some of whom speak English or German).

All banks are in Bohicon and none of them change travellers cheques.

**Sights**

The kings of Dahomey were certainly a bloody lot, and their litany of slave-trading, human sacrifice and war is illustrated by the bold appliqué banners hanging in the **Musée Historique d’Abomey** (21 50 03 14; 8am-4pm).
GÉNÉRATION GOGOHOUN

They’re aged 11 to 17; they live in two rural villages in southern Benin, Hlodo and Sagon, and they dream of being school teachers, doctors, custom officials, diplomats or artists. They could be your average Benin schoolchildren, but Génération Gogohoun (www.gogohoun.com) are instead embracing an all singing and dancing future, literally.

Gogohoun is a group of 30 school children who sing and dance about issues they encounter in everyday life such as emigration, AIDS, child labour or unemployment. If it doesn’t sound all that upbeat, wait till you hear them sing (we dare you not to wiggle, clap or tap!) or even speak: ‘You can do anything with culture,’ they’ll tell you. ‘It’s always difficult with work, but you must never give up.’

Their songs are all based on Adja rhythms, ancestral, rhythmic beats used in traditional ceremonies in the Zou and Mono areas. Originally called Aghbaou and characterised by its jerky buttocck moves, it was adapted as a slightly less raunchy dance and renamed Gogohoun – although women in the villages will be keen to show you how it’s really done!

Génération Gogohoun is the product of not-for-profit Franco-Beninese artists’ group Cacy-Albatros-Tingo Gars, whose aim is to promote a better and fairer society through art. The message is definitely getting through and the Gogohoun write and choreograph all their songs themselves. Professional choreographers and stage directors funded by the NGO and occasional grants from international donors help them with the professional finish during school holidays.

In 2008, Génération Gogohoun did their first tour of Benin and played their show, Fiers d’Être Villageois (Proud to Be a Villager), in Boukoumbé, Parakou, Lokossa and the CCF in Cotonou. More tours and shows are planned in 2009 and 2010, grants allowing. Check the website for updates.
THE ROUTE OF KINGS

Exploring Abomey’s Dahomey Trail could provide the best insight you’ll get into Benin’s gothic history.

Tours generally start at the remains of the moat built in 1645 by the first king, Houégbadja. The moat, 42km around and 60m deep, gave Abomey its name – abo means ‘moat’ in Fon and mey means ‘inside’.

Nearby is the Palais Akaba. Akaba goaded his enemy Dan by telling him he would build in his belly. In classic Dahomey style, Dan did indeed wind up with his belly cut open, buried beneath a tree outside the palace. The name of the kingdom thus mixes Dan’s name with the words ho (belly) and mey.

At Place de Goho, the story leaps ahead to the late 19th century with the Béhanzin statue. He agreed to sign a treaty here with Colonel Dodds and the French forces – goho means ‘meeting’ – but his soldiers instead fired on them. The French casualties of the battle are in the cemetery nearby.

The ruins of the Palais Ghézo and Temple Sémassou show that life was just as tough for earlier rulers. When the baby Sémassou was born prematurely in the street, before he (the baby) died he prophesised that terrible events would befall the kingdom. After Glélé’s henchmen disposed of the baby’s body in a bush, Dahomey suffered 21 days of war, plague, and destruction. When Glélé discovered his henchmen’s disrespectful action, the oracle advised him to build a temple to encourage Sémassou’s annunciation.

Among the many curiosities in this quarter are a twin fetish and a large white fertility fetish. Local women would straddle the latter’s oversized erect penis to ensure fertility, until it was mysteriously snapped off.

The 18th-century Palais Agonglo is the best kept of Abomey’s 12 palaces, with bas-reliefs inside listing the names and symbols of the great kings and chiefs. Agonglo also had an unusual son, the midget Hwemu. Saying he was returning to the voodoo world, Hwemu walked into the sea at Cotonou and turned into a fish. The oracle advised Agonglo to build Temple Hwemu for his son, whose name comes from the words hwe (fish) and mu (raw).

The palace of Ghézo, who had over 200 wives and established the army of female Amazon warriors, can still be seen, along with Temple Zéwa. The temple was built to appease the spirits of a traitorous group of Ghézo’s wives, who he had executed by covering in red palm oil and leaving them for the ants to eat. Zéwa was the last to die.

**our pick** Chez Monique (☎ 22 50 01 68; northwest of Rond-Point de la Préfecture; r CFA7500-12,000; [P]) This amazing pleasure garden, complete with antelopes, crocodiles, tortoises, monkeys, murals of Amazons, flower bushes and wood carvings, is a hive of activity. There is always something happening at Monique’s and staff will treat you as if you were part of the family. The breezy rooms are impeccable too, with tiled floors and mosquito nets. Our only quibble is that the onsite restaurant is not that great; opt for a contemplative drink in the garden instead.

**our pick** Auberge d’Abomey (☎ 97 89 87 25; www.hotels -benin.com; Rond-Point de la Préfecture; s/d with fan CFA11,500/12,500, with air-con CFA15,500/18,500; [D]) The latest addition to the reliable ‘Auberge de...’ chain (see also p123), with signature understated decor and a colonial feel. It’s a small place with just a handful of rooms and a lovely garden: in winter, the half dozen mango trees lining the paths groan under the weight of ripe fruit.

**Eating**

There are plenty of food stalls around the market, otherwise try some of the maquis below.

**our pick** Chez Delphano (☎ 93 64 02 40; meals CFA1600) If we had to choose a best maquis in Benin, this might be it. The owners, Pierre and Marguerite, are partial to a party and a bit of dancing, and if you’re lucky, they might even show you some moves. Marguerite is a fine cook and prepares exquisite Beninese cuisine. She also learnt how to make crêpes from a Belgian guest, which she serves in the morning with fresh ground coffee and a mountain of fruit. Yum! Find Chez Delphano north of Rond-Point de la Préfecture, on the way to Chez Monique.
La Source (☎ 22 50 19 96; Route de Bohicon; meals CFA2500) As well as being one of the smarter bars in town, La Source serves hearty helpings of chicken and chips or couscous.

Buvette du Carrefour (Route de Bohicon) This is a popular and friendly place for a drink at all hours of the day. The maquis at the back gets busy at lunch time too and dishes out the usual pâte and sauce for a handful of francs.

Drinking
There are countless drinking holes in Abomey, the majority concentrated around the market and gare routière. Try Buvette Video with its multicoloured parasols and tiny courtyard or the lively Sème Dimension (Route de l’Hôpital). North of town, on Route de la Préfecture, Au Jubilee 2000 is easy-going.

Entertainment
Lem’s Feelings (Route de l’Hôpital; admission CFA2500; ☎ 10pm-dawn Fri & Sat) An animated crowd is found at this air-conditioned club, not far east of the market. Entry includes a drink.

Getting There & Away
Plenty of bush taxis depart from Cotonou (CFA2400, three hours), sometimes with a connection at Bohicon (9km east of Abomey).

Bush taxis (CFA300) and zemi-johns (CFA500) frequently run between Abomey and Bohicon. Vehicles going to Parakou leave frequently from the gare routière in Bohicon.

Inter City Lines (☎ 21 00 85 54) and Confort Lines (☎ 21 32 58 15) buses (from Cotonou to Parakou, Malanville and Natitingou) leave Cotonou at 7am daily. They stop in Bohicon (CFA2500, three hours) on the way so you can travel northwards in the morning or catch the Cotonou-bound services from Parakou, Malanville or Natitingou in the afternoon (ring to double check the time).

DASSA ZOUMÉ
pop 21,900
Dassa Zoumé, the ‘city of 41 hills’, is a wonderfully scenic part of the country. Awesome rock formations pepper the lush green landscape and the town’s sleepy streets seem to mould themselves round these stony giants. Every August, Catholic pilgrims pay a visit to La Grotte (cave), where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared. Behind the cave, and the imposing basilica, a short walk leads to the 13 shrines hidden among the rocks.

Slow internet is available at La Maison des Tics (per hr CFA600; ☎ 8am-11pm) on the main roundabout. There is a Bank of Africa (☎ 8-11.30am & 3-5.30pm Mon-Fri) in town, and plenty of cheap food stalls lining the main road.

Auberge de Dassa Zoumé (☎ 22 53 00 98; www.hotels-benin.com; s/d with fan CFA11,500/12,500, with air-con CFA15,500/18,000; ☎ ) is the best hotel in town, and part of the Auberge chain (see also p123). It is opposite the rond-point (roundabout) on the main highway. The excellent restaurant (mains CFA3500) overlooks an ostrich farm and is a prime spot for spectacular sunsets.

THE NORTH
Northern Benin’s arid, mountainous landscape is a world away from the south’s beaches and lagoons but all the more attractive for it. It’s all about the natural heritage around here – what with two fantastic wildlife parks and a mountain range – something that is obvious in the northerners’ affection and pride for their land. It is ethnically more diverse than the south, and Islam is the main religion, but voodoo is still present.

PARAKOU
pop 198,000
Once a major slave-market town, Parakou now has a prosperous, busy atmosphere, with the most facilities you’ll find in northern Benin.
There isn’t much to keep you here, but with buvettes (small bars) and excellent maquis lining the town’s dusty streets, Parakou makes a relaxing stop-over en route to the regional wildlife park of the W (see p123).

The town is quite spread out, with no obvious centre for restaurants or bars. Bus stops congregate north of town and there is a small cluster of hotels and maquis close to the now-disused train station, west of town. The gare routière and banks are in the southeast corner.

The Bank of Africa (Route de Transa) has a 24-hour ATM and there is internet at Parak Cyber Café (per hr CFA400; 9am-midnight).

Travellers continuing their journey north to Niger can get their visa at the consulate (see p124) if they don’t already have one: the border at Malanville no longer issues them.

**Sleeping**

Hôtel les Canaris (23 61 11 69; off Route de l’Hôtel Canaris; r with fan/air-con CFA6500/9500; ) Rooms at this long-standing budget establishment are nothing to write home about, but the management is friendly, it’s clean and there are some great restaurants nearby.

Our pick **Auberge de Parakou** (23 61 03 05; www.hotels-benin.com; Route de l’Hôtel Canaris; s/d with fan CFA10,000/12,000, with air-con CFA14,000/16,000; P ) This delightful auberge (see also p123) is great value for money with large, spotless rooms with tiled floors and mosquito nets. The lounge area with its pool table,
library and patio is perfect to chill out in the evening and the excellent French restaurant serves a bargain three-course meal plus draught beer for just CFA4500.

**Le Majestic Hôtel** *(☎ 23 61 34 85; www.limestonehotel.com; Route de l’Hôtel Canaris; s/d with fan CFA12,500/14,500; with air-con from CFA22,500/24,500; ⚖️ ) The closest thing you’ll find to a boutique hotel in Benin, Le Majestic is a delightful three-storey villa with balconies and a pretty garden. The interior is similarly stylish with wrought-iron furniture and pretty fabrics. Top pick is room 208. Mains at the excellent restaurant cost CFA3500.

**Le Grillardin** *(☎ 23 61 27 81; Carrefour de l’Aviation; r CFA21,500-29,500; ⚖️ ) You’ll find this pretty establishment, with its L-shaped pool and carefully tended garden, north of town. Rooms are a little pricey but well appointed and quiet despite being on the main road.

**Hôtel Les Routiers** *(☎ 23 61 04 01; Route de Transa; s/d from CFA26,000/28,000; P ⚖️) This establishment, 500m north of the heart of town, has long been the most popular top-end hotel in Parakou. You can’t help but relax by the lily pool or in the exotic garden buzzing with parakeets. There’s also a good, but expensive, French restaurant *(menu du jour CFA8000, meals from CFA5000).*

### Eating

**Aledjo** *(off Route de l’Hôtel Canaris; meals CFA500; ☄️ 7am-11pm) A typical ‘point-and-choose’ African canteen with a busy kitchen doling out huge servings of rice or pâte and sauces.***

**our pick Le Secret de la Vieille Marmite** *(☎ 90 94 24 37; off Carrefour de l’Aviation; meals CFA1000) You can’t miss ‘the secret of the old cauldron’ with its lively ambiance and bright-blue cladding. It does some of the best Beninese grub around; definitely one of our favourites.***

**Les Marmites du Roi** *(☎ 23 61 25 07; off Route de l’Hôtel Canaris; meals CFA3500-4000) This relatively upmarket maquis serves excellent African cuisine. You dine outdoors under a big patio; it’s a shame it’s all concrete and neon lights but focus on the food and you’ll have a fine evening.***

**La New Cigale** *(☎ 97 89 11 98; off Carrefour de l’Aviation; meals CFA2500-4500) Pleasant restaurant serving pizza and French food.***

**Les Âmis** *(☎ 23 10 05 37; off Route de Transa; meals CFA1500-3500; ☄️ closed Mon) This hip-hop-playing pizzeria attracts a young crowd to its covered garden and pool table. Great atmosphere and lovely staff.***

### QUICK EATS

**Le Miel** *(☎ 23 61 00 67; Route de Transa; meals CFA1000-2500) This small grocery-shop-cum-bakery has a fab selection of cakes and vegetarian savouries such as cheese pasties, as well as yoghurts, biscuits and other basic essentials.***

**Chez Mamou** *(Route de Transa; meals CFA250; ☄️ from 7pm) Friendly buvette serving good, cheap food such as wagassi (cow’s milk cheese) and macaroni.***

There are plenty of street vendors around the *gare routière.*

### Drinking

**KPM Night Club** *(off Route de Transa) zooks the night away under tall teak trees. There is a BBQ stand loaded with fish and guinea fowl at the front if you’re in need of sustenance.***

**Le Bataclan** *(off Route de Transa; admission Thu/Fri/Sat CFA1500/2500/4000; ⚖️ Thu-Sat) is a Parakou favourite. The place fills up after midnight, especially on Saturday.***

**Le Secret de la Vieille Marmite** is another good spot for a drink. Otherwise try the countless buvettes that line the roads.

### Getting There & Away

**BUSH TAXI, MINIBUS & BUS**

From the *gare routière,* north of the Grand Marché, bush taxis and minibuses go regularly to Cotonou (CFA7100, eight hours), Kandi (CFA3300, 3½ hours), Malanville (CFA4500, five hours) and Djougou (CFA2500, two hours).

**Inter City Lines** *(☎ 93 96 00 63) and Maïssadjé *(☎ 90 03 38 04) run buses between Niamey and Parakou (see p127). The depots are about 1.5km north of town on the road to Niger. Ask a zem.

### DJOUGOU

Djougou is a lively crossroads town 134km northwest of Parakou, bustling with people passing through on the way to Natitingou and Togo. It’s well-known for its skilled craftsmen (weavers, blacksmiths, etc) but there’s not much to keep you there.
The Tanéka villages around Badjoudè, near the Togo border, are very picturesque and home to thriving voodoo communities. Bénin Aventure (opposite) can organise tours of the area.

There is a Bank of Africa and an Ecobank, but surprisingly, no internet connection.

Auberge de l’Espace Tissage (☎ 97 58 91 93; Quartier Yaloua; r CFA5000) is a basic but spotless little auberge run by the local women’s weaving cooperative. The six rooms share two impeccable bathrooms and toilets, and there is a nice communal area where you can chat to some of the women. You can also watch them at work: it takes one to two weeks to produce the beautiful fabrics which are then turned into outfits, bed or table linen (for sale in the adjoining shop). It’s about 1.5km east of the centre. Ask a zém.

Motel du Lac (☎ 23 80 15 48; molacdjo@yahoo.fr; Route de Savalou; s/d with fan CFA12,000/15,000, with air-con CFA15,000/18,000; $) is on a peaceful spot near a lake, 3km out of town on the road to Cotonou, and is an unexpected retreat. Rooms are a tad over-priced but the views, breeze, lovely garden and atmospheric bar-restaurant (serving tasty French cuisine, with mains around CFA3500) make it worthwhile.

For eating, try Le Quasar (☎ 23 80 13 30; meals from CFA2500), an upmarket maquis with a slightly grandiose dining room but slow service, or Buvette Le Passage (meal CFA700), an open-air outfit under a huge mango tree, 50m down from Le Quasar.

Good nightspots include the rooftop bar Le Baron (nite from 16pm), west of town, which also has a nightclub on Saturday night.

If travelling to Kara, there are connections to the border (CFA1200, one hour). Bush taxis travelling between Parakou (CFA2500, two hours), and Natitingou (CFA1500, one hour) generally stop in Djougou. Inter City Lines or Confort Lines buses between Cotonou and Natitingou (see p120) also stop in Djougou, opposite Ciné Sabari.

**NATITINGOU**

**pop 75,600**

Affectionately known as Nati, Natitingou is the most vibrant town in northern Benin. About 200km northwest of Parakou and pleasantly located at an altitude of 440m in the Atakora mountains, it thrived under the influence of President Kérékou, who was born here.

Nowadays, it is a favourite among travellers with its easygoing attitude and perfect location for exploring the Pendjari and the Atakora.

**Orientation**

Natitingou is split in half by the goudron, the main sealed road that heads north to Burkina Faso and south to Cotonou, also referred to as Route Inter-État. A maze of unpaved vons radi-
ate from it; most have no name which makes getting around difficult. Zems are generally the way forward.

Information
You’ll find basic information about the town on www.natitingou.org. For information about tours and excursions in the wider area, including the Atakora and the Parc National de la Pendjari (see p121), contact the Natitingou-based ourpick Bénin Aventure (☎ 23 02 00 17; www.beninaventure.com), a highly-recommended company run by three excellent local guides and a young French entrepreneur. The Pendjari authorities were also planning to open an information kiosk at Hôtel Bourgogne (right) at the time of writing.

Internet connection is available at Cyber Condinat (☎ 97 39 75 04; Route Inter-État; per hr CFA400; ☎ 8am-11pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun) north of town and Cyber Centre (☎ 98 77 29 37; Rue du Marché; per hr CFA400; ☎ 8.30am-11pm Mon-Sat, from 10am Sun) in the centre.

There are a couple of banks in Nati: Ecobank (Rue du Marché; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) at the main junction, and Financial Bank (Route Inter-État; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri), a block north of the junction. Both change cash and travellers cheques but neither accepts credit cards.

The Pharmacie Tissanta (Rue du Marché; ☎ 23 82 10 13), at the southern end of town, is open 24/7. For more serious medical emergencies, Hôpital St Jean de Dieu in Tanguéita is Italian-run and has a good reputation.

Sights & Activities
The Musée d’Arts et de Traditions Populaires (☎ 23 02 00 53; Route Inter-État; admission CFA1000; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 4-6.30pm Sat & Sun), housed in a colonial building built by slaves at the beginning of the 20th century, gives an overview of life in Somba communities. The exhibition includes various musical instruments, jewellery, crowns and artefacts. Most interesting is the habitat room, which has models of the different types of tata somba (Somba houses; see p120).

You could also visit the Kota Falls (admission CFA400), 15km southeast of Natitingou, off the main highway. The walk down takes you through scenic woods and across a maze of streams. You can swim in the pool at the bottom of the falls or just sit down and read in the cool shade of the undergrowth. A great spot for a picnic.

Sleeping
Auberge Le Vieux Cavalier (☎ 23 82 13 24; fan/air-con r CFA6500/9000; ✴️) Water sometimes struggles to make it all the way to your bathroom at the top of the hill, but this is the only quibble about this otherwise great budget option in Nati. Rooms are small but clean with mozzie nets on the beds, and there is a funky courtyard decorated with murals and sculptures where the young and friendly staff often hang out.

Hôtel Bellevue (☎ 23 82 13 36; www.hotel-bellevue-benin.com; s/d with fan CFA8000/9000, with air-con CFA12,000/14,000; ✴️ P ✵️) Perched at the top of a hill in a rambling garden, the Bellevue is a charming collection of sweet bungalows and paillotes. Myriam, the formidable owner, runs a tight ship and rooms are spotless, as is the food in the restaurant (much of which comes from her veggie garden). Myriam also makes jewellery, for sale at the reception, and there is a reliable, if expensive, internet connection (per hr CFA1000).

Hôtel de Bourgogne (☎/fax 23 82 22 40; www.natitingou.org/bourgogne; Route Inter-État; s/d with fan CFA10,000/13,000, with air-con from CFA15,000/18,000; P ✴️) This delightful hotel will feel like a home away from home. Thérèse Oudot, the owner, is French honorary vice-consul and has been in Benin since the early ’90s. She is a mine of information and wonderfully welcoming. Rooms were being repainted in warm colours at the time of writing and the restaurant is hands-down the best in town. For a refreshing afternoon treat in the atmospheric lounge, try the home-made fruit juices.

Hôtel Tata Somba (☎ 23 82 11 24; www.hoteltata somba.com; off Route Inter-État; r CFA30,000; P ✴️) A regional institution, the hotel is a large, pink version of a tata somba house. The pretty swimming pool (nonguests CFA3000) takes centre-stage in the courtyard, with restaurant tables laid out in the shade (menu du jour is CFA6500). Rooms are everything you would expect from a high-end hotel, except for the bathrooms, painted in a scary shade of blue and rather dark as a result. The hotel can set up trips to the Pendjari.

Eating & Drinking
Natitingou has a fine array of places to grab a beer and a bite. Among the great maquis is Le Karité (mains from CFA500; ✿ lunch only), world champion of igname pilé (pounded yam) and lost in a maze of alleyways on the eastern side of town (ask a zem to take you there). Also
**The Somba**

Commonly referred to as the Somba, the Betamaribé people are concentrated to the southwest of Natitingou in the plains of Boukoumbé on the Togo border. They live in the middle of their cultivated fields, rather than together in villages, so their compounds are scattered over the countryside. This custom is a reflection of their fierce individuality, which has seen them resist both Dahomey slave hunters and the advance of Christianity and Islam.

The Dutamari-speaking Betamaribé’s principle religion is animism – as seen in the rags and bottles they hang from the trees. Once famous for their nudity, they began wearing clothes in the 1970s.

What’s most fascinating about the Betamaribé is their *tata somba* houses – round, tiered huts that look like miniature forts with clay turrets and thatched spires. There are some 10 types of them, including the *otchao*, which are the same as the houses built by the Betamaribé’s Tamberma relations nearby in Togo (see the boxed text, p797). The ground floor of a house is mostly reserved for livestock and defence mechanisms. A stepladder leads from the kitchen to the roof terrace, where there are sleeping quarters and grain stores.

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**Getting There & Away**

From the *gare routière* on the main road, bush taxis and minibuses go to Parakou (CFA3500, five hours) via Djougou (CFA1500; 1½ hours), Boukoumbé (CFA2000, two hours) via Koussoukoingou (CFA1500, 1½ hours), and Porga on the Burkina border (CFA3000, 2½ hours) via Tanguïéta (CFA1500, one hour).

Bus services linking Nati and Cotonou (CFA8500, eight hours) include Inter City Lines (☎ 23 03 01 06; www.intercity-lines.com; Rue du Marché), opposite Pharmacie Tissanta, and Confort Lines (☎ 95 86 67 02; off Rue du Marché). Note that all buses arriving from Cotonou drop passengers off outside the post office. Cotonou-bound services however, pick passengers up at their respective offices. Services leave at 7am; book ahead or arrive early on the day.

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**The Atakora Region**

On the Togo border, 43km southwest of Natitingou, Boukoumbé is the capital of Somba country, at the heart of the Atakora mountains. The drive there is stunning, bumping along a red *piste* (rough track) past corn fields and huge baobab trees. Boukoumbé itself is rather sleepy and uneventful, save for its lively market every four days, when *tchoukoutou* (sorghum beer, an acquired taste) gingerly flows. If you’re crossing the border here, make sure you get your passport stamped at the commissariat (police station) as there is no border check point.

About 15km before Boukoumbé, you’ll pass the mountain village of Koussoukoingou (also known as Koussou-Kovangou), famous for its stunning location and breathtaking views of the Atakora range.

Eco-tourism association *Perle de l’Atakora* (Pearl of the Atakora; ☏ 97 44 28 61; www.ecobenin.org /koussoukoingou), set up by Eco-Bénin (see the boxed text, p797) offers guided walks in the area (2½ to 3½ hours cost from CFA2000 to CFA4000) taking in local sights such as the famous *tata* houses (see above). You can also arrange to spend the night at a *tata* (CFA4500 per person including an evening meal). As with all Eco-Bénin projects, about 20% of what you pay goes back to the community.

Getting to the Atakora is best with your own transport, but bush taxis do ply the dusty *piste* between Nati and Boukoumbé (CFA2000, two hours). They’re most frequent on Boukoumbé...
market day. Otherwise, zemi-johns (CFA5000, three hours) will take you: it’s an exhilarating ride amid such a stunning landscape, although very dusty and tiring.

PARC NATIONAL DE LA PENDJARI

Amid the majestic landscape of the Atakora’s rugged cliffs and wooded savannah live lions, cheetahs, leopards, elephants, baboons, hippos, a myriad of birds and countless antelopes. The 275,000-hectare Pendjari National Park (www.pendjari.net; admission per person CFA10,000, per vehicle CFA3000), 100km north of Natitingou, is the wildlife park par excellence in this part of West Africa.

The best viewing time is near the end of the dry season when animals start to hover around water holes, but the park is open year-round.

It adjoins the Parc National d’Arli in Burkina Faso and the Parc Regional du W, which, together, form the WAP (W, Arli, Pendjari) wildlife complex.

The park authorities have done tremendous work to promote responsible and quality tourism at Pendjari. Guides are now assessed every two years and given an A or B grade reflecting their level of expertise. The list of accredited guides can be found on the park’s website, at park entrances and in Nati’s better hotels. You stand a much better chance of seeing animals and learning about wildlife by sticking with these professional guides.

For more information, you can also drop in at the park’s friendly office (☎ 23 83 00 85; www.pendjari.net) in Tanguiéta or buy the excellent
Guide Pratique de la Pendjari (CFA2000), from bookshops in Cotonou (see p98) or at park entrances.

Sleeping & Eating
Many visitors stay in Natitingou and make excursions from there, but you’ll have a better chance of seeing animals if you stay at the park itself. For the rough and ready, camping is allowed at Mare Yangouali and Pont d’Arli. Guides will show you where.

More comfortable is Hôtel de la Pendjari (23 82 11 24; www.hoteltatasomba.com; r with fan/air-con CFA21,000/29,000; 15 Dec-31 Jul; ) at the heart of the park. Rooms are simple but adequate; there is an atmospheric bar-restaurant under a huge central paillote (meals CFA6000) and amazingly, a swimming pool.

On the park’s periphery, Relais de Tanongou (23 82 11 24; www.hoteltatasomba.com; r CFA7000-10,000; 1 Dec-31 May), next to the Tanongou Falls, is well located for an early-morning walk and swim. The spacious bungalows have a bathroom behind a dividing wall. Meals are CFA4000.

Spend a night with local villagers in Tanongou through Eco-Bénin (p97; s incl evening meal CFA4000-4500) who also offer a programme of walks (2–4hr CFA1000-4000) in the area.

In Tanguïéta, Hôtel Baobab (23 83 02 25; camping per person CFA1500, r with fan/air-con CFA6500/13,500; ) is popular with travellers but theft is an issue because of its out-of-town location. Meals are CFA5000.

Both the Pendjari and the Relais must be booked in advance because of their remoteness. You may be able to negotiate special rates at the very beginning and end of the season.

Getting There & Away
The main entrances to Pendjari are roughly 100km north of Natitingou. To get to the park from Natitingou, take the goudron (bitumen road) 50km north to Tanguïéta. From there, you can either head further north to Porga, 47km north on a good sealed road, or turn east and take the good piste to Batia, via Tanongou, 41km from Tanguïéta.

As hiking is not permitted in the park, travellers without vehicles could try to team up with other parties at hotels in Natitingou. Otherwise, many of the park’s guides have their own vehicle, which you can rent. Bénin Aventure (23 02 00 17; www.beninaventure.com) rents 4WD vehicles for CFA75,000 a day (for up to four people) including a chauffeur-guide (A-rated by the park) and fuel.

Travel agencies such as Point Afrique, the ‘Auberge de’ chain (see opposite) and a handful of Western travel operators also offer tours of the park.

KANDI & AROUND
Kandi, 213km north of Parakou on the way to Niger, is the nearest town to Parc Régional du W (see opposite). The town itself doesn’t have much in the way of sights, but it’s a good base to visit the area.

The village of Alfakoara, 40km north of Kandi and on the edge of the park, is a good alternative for those who don’t have the time or resources (financial and logistical) for an extensive tour of the W. Elephants have used the pond at Alfakoara since time immemorial and the village has an unusual track record of peaceful cohabitation with the tusked giants. You can easily access the viewing platform (admission CFA2500) from the main road and there is a good chance you’ll see elephants in the dry season. Eco-Bénin has also set up walking tours (www.tour-communautaire-parcw.net; 1½-2½hr CFA2800-3300) from Alfakoara to learn more about Mokollé and Peul (Fula) traditions.

Sleeping & Eating
Auberge La Rencontre (23 63 01 76; r incl breakfast with fan/air-con CFA7500/14,500; ) The rooms are stuffy and the welcome lacklustre, but the rooftop restaurant (menu du jour CFA4500) is a nice spot to chill out.

Auberge de Kandi (23 63 02 43; camping per person CFA2500, d with fan/air-con CFA11,000/17,000; ) This auberge (see opposite for booking info) 2km north of Kandi has spacious but relatively bare rooms, and a delightful garden with frogs hopping about and birds singing their heart out. The French restaurant (meals CFA3800 to CFA4000) is the best in town.

For cheap maquis grub, try Maquis C’est Ça Même (Route de Ndali; meals CFA1000), a little turquoise number south of town, with a good vibe. Maquis AEFI (meals CFA8000) on the southern roundabout, is a favourite nightlife spot among the locals with dancing under the stars and a kitchen that serves decent pâte noire and wagassi cheese as well as cold beers.

Getting There & Away
From Parakou, bush taxis head north to Kandi (CFA3300, 3½ hours). Inter City Lines
The park has three entrances in Benin: at Sampéto, near Banikoara, Alfakoara, and Kofonou, near Karimama on the Niger border.

MALANVILLE
This dusty town is in the far north on the Niger border, considerably closer to Niamey than it is to Cotonou, 733km away. Market day, held on Friday and Saturday, is a who's who of West African peoples, attracting traders from Togo, Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Niger. The town is busy every day of the week though, and you'll regularly see Fulra people leading herds of hundreds of sheep across town.

Rose des Sables (☎ 23 67 01 25; r with fan & shared facilities CFA7000, with air-con & ensuite from CFA10,000; 📍), one kilometre south of town, is a cheap but not cheerful hotel. Bedbugs colonise the beds and the staff are a bit clueless but it’s the only option if you’re on a budget. Meals are CFA2500.

La Sota (☎ 97 64 97 48; s/d with fan CFA18,000/19,500, with air-con CFA22,000/25,000; 🏨), is run by the same management as Le Majestic in Parakou, and is an unexpected and great-value place. Rooms are a little underwhelming for the price but the facilities are tops, with a TV lounge, a good restaurant (meals CFA5000), a garden maquis outside and a great pool. The hotel is located 2km south of town on the banks of the River Sota.

Near the market, Sous les Neems (meals CFA500) serves wagassi (cow’s milk cheese), pâté and cold beers. Buvettes and food stalls, selling everything from mashed yam to omelettes, line the main road through town.

Malanville is well connected with Parakou by bush taxi (CFA4500, five hours). Inter City Lines runs a daily service between Malanville and Cotonou (CFA11,000, 12 hours). Niger buses Rimbo and SNTV travel between Cotonou and Niamey via Malanville, but they are often full up (see p127). A zemi-john to Gaya in Niger, where you can get taxis to Niamey, is about CFA1200.

**ACCOMMODATION**

Accommodation in Benin is good value. Basic rooms with fan cost as little as CFA5000, while comfortable air-conditioned midrange rooms
hover around CFA20,000. Top-end prices range from CFA35,000 outside Cotonou to over CFA100,000 in the economic capital.

The ‘Auberge de’ chain has consistently good hotels in Abomey, Dassa Zoumé, Grand Popo, Kandi, Koudou, Parakou and Savalou. Central reservations can be made on  21 31 38 62 or www.hotels-benin.com.

ACTIVITIES

The beaches along the coast are not safe for swimming because of strong currents. Stick to hotel swimming pools or the lagoon where you can also canoe (see p104 and p109).

Eco-Bénin (p97) runs guided themed walks in four locations across the country as well as pirogue and cycling excursions around Lake Ahémé (p111).

BOOKS

The Viceroy of Ouidah, by Bruce Chatwin, is a biographical sketch of the notorious Brazilian slave trader Francisco da Silva and how he and the kings of Dahomey built the trade. The vivid novella begins with a 20th-century reunion of the da Silva clan and moves back to the original Afro-Brazilian himself via his descendents, their dreams and disappointments.

Instruments of Darkness, by Robert Wilson, is the debut of this award-winning thriller writer, following an English ‘fixer’ through the Cotonou underworld as he searches for a fellow expat who has mysteriously disappeared.

Show Me the Magic, by Annie Caulfield, is a slightly glib but entertaining account by this English comic writer (who collaborated with the comedian Lenny Henry) about travelling around Benin in a taxi. She and her driver repeated the journey with Spice Girl Mel B for the documentary Mel B Vodou Princess.

BUSINESS HOURS

Businesses are open from 8am to 12.30pm and 3pm to 6.30pm Monday to Friday. Some banks are now open through lunch time and most open from 9am to 3pm on Saturday. Shops are open from 8am to noon and 3pm to 7pm Monday to Saturday and sometimes also on Sunday morning.

Midrange and upmarket restaurants are generally open for lunch and dinner (unless otherwise noted). Cafes and maquis tend to be more informal and generally serve food throughout the day.

COURSES

Learn Fon in Cotonou (p100).

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Cotonou has its fair share of traffic accidents and muggings (see p100) so be careful, particularly at night (take a taxi). In Ouidah, avoid the roads to and along the coast.

There is little street lighting so bring a torch if you don’t want to trip on the country’s numerous dirt tracks.

If you are white, children – but also adults – will shout ‘Yovo! Yovo!’ (meaning white person) ad nauseam. It’s normally harmless but tiresome, although travellers have reported being intimidated by the sheer scale of the phenomenon. Abomey is particularly bad.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies & Consulates in Benin

France
Embassy ( 21 30 02 25; Route de l’Aéroport, Cotonou); Consulate ( 21 31 26 38; Rue 651A, Cotonou)

Germany
( 21 31 56 93; Ave Jean Paul II, Cotonou; h 9am-noon)

Ghana
( 21 30 07 46; off Route de l’Aéroport, Cotonou; h 8am-2pm)

Niger
Embassy ( 21 31 56 65; Rue 651A, Cotonou; 8am-4pm Mon-Thu, to 1pm Fri); Consulate ( 23 61 28 27; Route de l’Hôpital, Parakou; 8am-1pm & 3.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri)
FESTIVALS & EVENTS
Apart from the colourful annual Muslim celebrations in the northern towns – Djougou and Natitingou are especially good places to see them – the main event is the Voodoo Festival, held in Ouidah on 10 January (see p109).

Every four years or so, in late October or early November, there is the coming-of-age ‘whipping ceremony’ in Boukoumbé, which seems to go on until the young men are satisfied that they have literally beaten each other black and blue.

There are frequent voodoo celebrations in Ouidah, Abomey and on the shores of Lake Ahémé.

HOLIDAYS
Public holidays include the following:
New Year’s Day 1 January
Vodoun 10 January
Easter Monday March/April
Labour Day 1 May
Ascension Thursday May
Pentecost Monday May
Independence Day 1 August
Assumption 15 August
Armed Forces Day 26 October
All Saints 1 November
Christmas 25 December

Benin also celebrates Muslim holidays. See p815 for more details.

INTERNET ACCESS
Internet is widely available across Benin, and at reasonable prices (per hour CFA200-500). The only town of any size that doesn’t have any internet access is Djougou. Speed and reliability are another matter: network and electricity cuts are frequent and connections are slow.

INTERNET RESOURCES
Benin Tourisme (http://benintourisme.com) The best website, with highlights and lots of practical information (in English, French, Spanish and German).

République du Bénin (www.gouv.bj) The country’s official portal (in French only).
Ville de Cotonou (www.cotonou-benin.com) Cotonou’s main online resource, with news and travel info.

MAPS
The best map by far is IGN’s 1:600,000 République du Bénin Carte Touristique. With good country detail and insert city maps of Porto Novo and Cotonou, it costs about CFA7500 in Cotonou bookshops.

MONEY
The unit of currency in Benin is the West Africa CFA (Communauté Financière Africaine) franc. All banks in the country change cash although outside of Cotonou, banks will only change euros. Cash advances against credit cards are possible at major banks in the capital. Banque Atlantique now accepts MasterCard.

Benin’s neighbours all use CFAs apart from Nigeria, where the currency is the Naira. There is no official way to get hold of Naira in Benin but Cotonou has a healthy black market around the Jonquet district and Gare du Dantokpa.

Travellers cheques can be changed in Cotonou and Natitingou.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO
A photo permit is not required, but be careful when taking shots of cultural and religious buildings and ceremonies. Rules are not clear-cut, so it’s best to ask first. A cadeau (gift) may be requested. For general information see p821.

TELEPHONE
International calls can be made at telecom offices and private telephone agencies throughout Benin. The cost per minute varies hugely but allow CFA400 per minute to Europe and North America, CFA600 to Asia.

Mobile phones are now a staple and the network coverage is surprisingly good. MTN is the main operator. A SIM card costs CFA2000, local SMS CFA50, international SMS CFA75 and international calls CFA125 per minute. Top-up vouchers worth anything from CFA500 to CFA25,000 are readily available.

TOURIST INFORMATION
There is a lacklustre tourist office in Cotonou (p98). The offices of both wildlife parks
(p121 and p123) can also help, as can Eco-Bénin (p97) and Bénin Aventure (p119).

**Visas**

Visas are required for all travellers except nationals of the Ecowas (Economic Commission of West African States). If flying into Cotonou you will require a visa before arrival. A 30-day, single-entry visa costs UK£55 from the Beninese consulate in the UK; the embassy in the USA charges $100.

If crossing overland, it’s far easier to get a visa at the border, where the 24-hour posts issue 48-hour, single-entry transit visas (CFA10,000). You can then obtain a 30-day, single- or multiple-entry visa (CFA12,000) in Cotonou. The Direction Emigration Immigration (21 31 42 13; Ave Jan Paul II, Cotonou; 8am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm) accepts applications between 8am and 11am and 3pm to 5pm Monday to Friday. These can be collected between 11am and 12.30pm or between 5pm and 6.30pm two days later. You will need one passport photo.

**Visas For Onward Travel**

For onward travel to Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire, the French consulate issues three-month visas (CFA20,000) and transit visas (CFA6000) in 24 to 48 hours, with two photos required.

**Ghana**

The embassy no longer issues visas (although the Ghana embassy in Togo does – see p798) and requests travellers obtain visas in their home country before travelling.

**Niger**

You must obtain a visa before travelling to Niger as border officials at the Malanville/Gaya crossing no longer issue visas. The embassy in Cotonou or the consulate in Parakou (p124) issue 30-day visas. They cost CFA22,500 and you’ll need two photos. Officials say you should allow three to four working days but travellers have reported speedier processing.

**Nigeria**

The Nigerian embassy issues only two-day transit visas to travellers with a Nigerian embassy in their home country. You need two photos, along with photocopies of your passport and, if you have one, your ticket for onward travel from Nigeria. Fees vary according to nationality (CFA30,000 for UK, CFA68,000 for US, CFA20,000 for Australia) and are issued on the same day. You cannot get visas at the border.

**Togo**

Seven-day visas for Togo (CFA10,000) are issued at the border (see p801).

**Women Travellers**

Beninese men can be sleazy and women travellers will get a lot of unwanted attention. Particularly unnerving is militaries and other officials using their power to get more of your company than is strictly necessary, such as not letting go of a handshake, keeping hold of your passport or demanding your phone number. Always stay polite but firm and make sure you have a good ‘husband story’. For more advice, see p826.

**Transport in Benin**

**Getting There & Away**

**Entering Benin**

Benin’s immigration regulations and officials are awkward. If flying into the country, you cannot obtain a visa on arrival. However, you can if entering by land, but the visa is only valid for 48 hours, and can only be extended in Cotonou. You’ll also need a yellow fever certificate.

**Air**

The main airport is on the western fringe of Cotonou, in Cocotiers. Air France has the most reliable and frequent services between Benin and Europe. For flight information, ticket sales and reconfirmations, the following airlines have offices in Cotonou:

- Afriqiyah Airways (8U; 21 31 76 51; Blvd Steinmetz) Hub: Tripoli.
- Air Ivoire (VU; 21 31 86 14; www.airivoire.com; Blvd Steinmetz) Hub: Abidjan.
- Point-Afrique (6V/DR; 21 30 98 62; www.point-africa.com; Route de l’Aéroport) Hub: Paris. Flights only in summer, organised tours the rest of the year.
- Royal Air Maroc (AT; 21 30 86 04; www.royalairmaroc.com; Route de l’Aéroport) Hub: Casablanca.
**Land**

**BURKINA FASO**

There’s at least one bush taxi a day along the 97km of tarred road from Natitingou to Porga (CFA1900, two hours), where you can cross to Tindangou in Burkina Faso. Monday, Porga market day, is a good day to find a ride.

SKV (☎ 98 59 88 00) runs buses between Cotonou and Bamako (CFA35,000, 48 hours) via Ouagadougou (CFA17,000, 18 hours) on Wednesday and Friday (departure is at 8pm).

**GHANA & CÔTE D’IVOIRE**

**Inter City Lines** (☎ 21 32 66 69; www.intercity-lines.com) plies the interstate coastal route between Cotonou and Abidjan (CFA34,000, 28 hours) four times a week (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday). Cotonou–Accra costs CFA15,000.

STIF (☎ 97 98 11 80) has a service to Lomé (CFA4000, four hours), Accra (CFA8000, seven hours) and Abidjan (CFA27,000, 20 hours) every two days (departure at 1pm).

**NIGER**

From Malanville, 733km from Cotonou on tarred road, a *zem-join* or shared taxi can take you across the River Niger to Gaya in Niger (*zem-join/shared taxi CFA1200/700*). You cannot get a visa for Niger at the border – get one in Cotonou or Parakou (see opposite).

From Gaya, it’s easier to find a Peugeot bush taxi to Niamey (CFA4250, five hours) or a minibus (CFA4600, 5½ hours) than it is to squeeze onto one of the Cotonou–Niamey coaches, which are usually full. From Cotonou, try Rimbo (☎ 95 23 24 82) with daily services to Niamey (CFA19,700, 19 hours), or SNTV (☎ 93 91 40 42; www.sntv.biz) also with daily trips (CFA17,500, 15 hours).

Crossing from Niger to Benin, you’re unlikely to find bush taxis from Niamey to Benin so get to Gaya and cross the border on foot or with a *zem*.

**NIGERIA**

In Cotonou, bush taxis and minibuses leave for Lagos throughout the day from Gare de Dantokpa (CFA4000, three hours, excluding border crossing mayhem). There are no direct taxis to Lagos from Porto Novo so you’ll have to change at the Kraké/Seme border (CFA700, 30 minutes). Make sure you have some Naira to continue your journey on the other side. Another option is the Lagos–Accra bus service run by ABC Transport (☎ 21 33 33 77; www.abctransport.com), which stops in Cotonou (CFA4000, four hours).

There are countless checkpoints between Seme and Lagos, so travellers with their own vehicle will be better off crossing further north at Kétou, which then goes on to Ibadan.

You may have to grease a few palms at Kraké, although asking for a receipt is a good way to discourage corrupt officials. If hiring a taxi across the border, check whether the price includes bribes.

**TOGO**

Cotonou and Lomé are connected by frequent bush taxis (CFA3500, three hours), which regularly leave the Gare de Jonquet in Cotonou for Lomé. Alternatively, pick up a taxi to the border point at Hilakondji and grab another taxi on the Togolese side of the frontier. STIF buses also ply the route every other day (CFA4000, four hours).

Other crossings are at Kétou/Ouaké, on the Kara–Djougou road, and between Nadoba in Togo and Boukoumbé in Benin along a good *piste*. The latter crossing takes you through spectacular countryside but has little public transport except on Wednesdays, Nadoba market day.

**GETTING AROUND**

**Bus Taxi & Bus**

Minibuses and bush taxis are the principal means of transport between towns, and are faster than in many West African countries. There is sometimes a surcharge for luggage.

Benin now also has a range of excellent bus services. The best is **Inter City Lines** (☎ 21 00 85 54; www.intercity-lines.com) with comfortable seats, air-con and dreadful Ivorian soap videos which get the entire bus roaring with laughter. It runs daily services between Cotonou and Parakou (CFA7500, 7½ hours), Malanville (CFA11,000, 12 hours) and Natitingou (CFA8500, eight hours) stopping in all major towns en route. **Confort Lines** (☎ 21 32 58 15) also runs daily services between Cotonou and Natitingou (CFA8500, eight hours) and Parakou (CFA7000, 7½ hours).

These services have proved very popular with travellers and Beninese alike for their reliability, affordability and what feels like luxurious comfort compared to bush taxis, so book ahead.
Car & Motorcycle
Petrol costs between CFA300 and CFA600 per litre. Petrol is cheaper in Nigeria, so much of it is carried illegally across the border and sold on the black market at prices slightly below the official rate. Just look for the guys along the roads with 1L to 5L bottles.

If you’re driving, you need an International Driving Permit. Roads are in relatively good condition throughout Benin with a couple of exceptions: the Cotonou–Bohicon road is appalling, as is a stretch of the Parakou to Kandi road. Both are scheduled to be resurfaced though, so smooth travels await.

Local Transport
TAXI
The omnipresence of zems has translated into the near disappearance of taxis for short journeys. Shared taxis still ply the main thoroughfares in big cities however, such as the Bohicon–Abomey stretch or the main axes between Cotonou’s suburbs and the centre. Expect to pay CFA200 to CFA500 depending on the distance.

ZEMI-JOHNS
In nearly all towns, you’ll find zemi-johns (scooter taxis). While they are by far the fastest and most convenient way of getting around, they are dangerous: most drivers behave like lunatics and helmets are not available.

Zem drivers wear numbered yellow and green shirts in Cotonou (various colours in other towns). Hail them just as you would a taxi, and be sure to agree on a price before the journey. The typical fare is CFA150 to CFA250. They are also an easy way to get to remote destinations.

Tours
The excellent Bénin Aventure (see p119) organises guided, tailor-made trips around Benin in a chauffeur-driven 4WD. Allow CFA75,000 a day (for up to four people) for car rental, fuel and guiding fees, CFA15,000-40,000 per night for a double room, and about CFA50,000 in excursion fees (park entrance etc). A great option for those not scrimping and saving and wanting more out of their trip.

More adventurous, and very much in the spirit of the Paris Dakar, is the Brussels to Grand Popo by 2CV rally organised by Touareg Trail (www.touareg-trail.be). Mechanic novices fear not however: if you don’t have the resources or inclinations to take part in the full two-month adventure, Touareg Trail organises Meet & Greet (per person, full board, incl flights €2250), a 10-day trip that allows you to join the last leg of the race with a fully-prepared 2CV. The itinerary changes every year and may take in a neighbouring country. Fun on an epic scale.

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