

# Welcome to West Africa

*West Africa has cachet and soul. Home to African landscapes of our imaginations and inhabited by an astonishing diversity of traditional peoples, this is Africa as it once was.*

## African Landscapes

From the Sahara to tropical rain forests, from volcanic outcrops to stony depressions in the desert's heart, West Africa is an extraordinary sweep of iconic African terrain. Sand dunes of the Sahara yield to the Sahel where human settlements sit on the edge of eternity. A few latitude lines to the south, savannah and woodland take over, building to a crescendo of primeval forest crowding the coast and its pristine beaches. Through it all runs one of Africa's longest rivers, the Niger.

## A Musical Soundtrack

West Africa's musical tradition is one of incredible depth and richness. Youssou N'Dour, Tinariwen and other musicians may have been 'discovered' in recent decades, but the region's music is so much more than mere performance. The *griots* of ancient African empires – Mali's master *kora* player Toumani Diabaté is a 71st generation *griot* – bestowed upon West Africa's musicians the gift of storytelling as much as the power to entertain. They do both exceptionally well and their ability to make you dance or learn something new about the region may just rank among your most memorable travel experiences.

## African Peoples

The mosaic of peoples who inhabit West Africa is one of the region's most beguiling characteristics. The sheer number of peoples who call the region home will take your breath away. Drawing in a little nearer, you'll discover that traditions survive in West Africa like nowhere else on the continent, revealing themselves in fabulous festivals, irresistible music and the mysterious world of masks and secret societies. These are peoples whose histories are epic and whose daily struggles are similarly so. West Africa is in-your-face, full-volume Lagos or the quiet solitude of an indigo-clad nomad – not to mention everything in between.

## Secret Wildlife

You wouldn't come to West Africa in search of an East African-style safari. If you did, you'd be disappointed. And yet there's more to West Africa's wildlife than initially meets the eye. If you look in the right places, there are elephants and primate species in abundance, and big cats stalk the undergrowth. Throw in pygmy hippos and some of the world's best birdwatching and it becomes clear that West Africa is greatly underrated as a wildlife-watching destination. And unlike in East or Southern Africa, you're likely to have whatever you find all to yourself.



## Why I Love West Africa

By Anthony Ham

On my first journey into West Africa, I felt like I was visiting another planet, and I loved it. It was the cooling sand beneath my feet as I shared a campfire with Tuareg nomads in the Sahara, or a dawn glimpse of paradise at a bend in the river deep in the Cameroonian rainforest. It was dancing the night away in the bars of Bamako or Dakar, or the silence of the Sahelian night. And no matter how many times I return, I never lose that sense of having wandered into some kind of otherworldly African fairytale.

**For more about our authors, see page 520**