

Understand West Africa

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West Africa is a vast, searing land where tragedy and triumph rule in equal measure. Get the lowdown.

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West Africa Today

Life is often difficult in this corner of the world. Drought, hunger and political instability continue to stalk the region, and much of the southern Sahara has become a no-go zone, the domain of bandits and Islamist rebels in no mood to compromise. At the same time, peace now reigns in countries previously wracked by seemingly intractable conflict, while democracy and prosperity are increasingly the norm elsewhere.

Best on Film

Moolaadé (Ousmane Sembene; 2005) An important film by one of West Africa's finest directors.

Kabala (Assana Kouyaté; 2002) Award-winning film about Malian village life.

Ezra (Newton Aduaka; 2007) A searing look at the abduction of child soldiers as seen from an African perspective.

Les Saignantes (Jean-Pierre Bekelo; 2005) Fascinating film from Cameroon with a female-dominated cast that sheds uncomfortable light on poor governance in Africa.

Best in Print

The Lost Kingdoms of Africa (Jeffrey Taylor; 2005) A modern journey through northern Nigeria, Niger and Mali.

The Shadow of the Sun (Ryszard Kapuściński; 2002) A masterpiece by one of Africa's most insightful observers.

Journey Without Maps (Graham Greene; 1936) One of the 20th century's best writers travels through Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Travels in the White Man's Grave (Donald MacIntosh; 2001) A little-known classic.

The Good News

Good news about Africa can be hard to find, but West Africa has much to be proud of. The one-time powerhouse of the region, Côte d'Ivoire, has emerged from a deeply troubled decade to find a peace that is fragile but somehow enduring. Liberia and Sierra Leone were for much of the 1990s among the most dangerous places on the continent, and yet both have made hugely impressive (and democratic) returns to peace. Sierra Leone, with its pristine beaches, fine ecotourism projects and abundant natural resources, is certainly one to watch.

Elsewhere, Guinea, Mauritania, Niger and Togo are all emerging from troubled periods and all face an uncertain future, but these shaky democracies were still holding on at the time of writing and may even go the distance.

But there are five undoubted stars of the West African political scene. Morocco has weathered the upheavals of the Arab Spring by inching towards greater freedoms while remaining stable and relatively prosperous; Morocco is where West Africa's inhabitants have the highest standard of living. Benin and Cape Verde rarely make the news, but continue to exhibit the stability, economic progress and good governance which are their trademark. The same could be said for Senegal – the 2012 elections proved the strength of the country's democratic institutions, although the subsequent dissolution of the parliament's upper house has caused disquiet in opposition circles.

And then there's Ghana, still the region's star performer with a series of successful elections under its belt at a time when its citizens are riding a wave of optimism thanks to the discovery of offshore oil.