

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 in West Africa ain't easy. Much of the Sahara and parts of the Sahel are off-limits due to ongoing violence and civil conflict sparked by an Islamist insurgency in Mali and elsewhere. Abundant natural resources have more often than not cursed countries with their side effects. And environmental degradation threatens to swallow entire countries. But with great resilience the region goes about its business, trying to build prosperity, democracy and, despite the odds stacked against its people, a peaceful future.

Best on Film

Half of a Yellow Sun (2013) Stirring love story and evocation of Nigeria's Biafran civil war in the 1960s.

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

Blood Diamond (2006) Heart-rending Hollywood blockbuster set in Sierra Leone's diamond-fuelled civil war in the 1990s.

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

Best in Print

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 the forests of Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Things Fall Apart (Chinua Achebe; 1958) Timeless dramatisation of the collision between traditional culture and Europeans in 19th-century Nigeria.

African Silences (Peter Matthiessen; 1992) A memorable foray into West Africa by one of the 20th century's premier nature writers.

Terrorism in the Sahel

Not that long ago, travellers explored the Sahara and Sahel with ease and the world's largest desert was an undoubted regional highlight. Now the Sahara is one of the most dangerous places on earth. With Libya's 2011 disintegration, arms and rebel groups flowed down into Niger and Mali. In 2012 fundamentalist Islamist groups, with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to the fore, swept across Mali until a French force pushed them back into their desert strongholds. Bomb attacks on Bamako in 2015 and Ouagadougou in 2016 served as reminders that Mali's peace is fragile at best. At the same time, the withering conflict between Al-Qaeda-affiliated Boko Haram and government forces in Nigeria has wrought devastation in the country's north. Mali, Niger, western Mauritania and northern Nigeria are no-go zones. One consolation appears to be that the fundamentalist Islamist roots behind much of the conflicts bear little resemblance to the tolerant and moderate form of Islam practised by most in a region where the majority of the population is Muslim.

The Resource Curse

West Africa could be one of the richest places on earth. Oil in Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea and diamonds in Sierra Leone have done little to improve the lives of ordinary West Africans. Nigeria seems perennially at war with itself and living standards are too often appalling. In Equatorial Guinea, oil riches have propped up a brutal dictatorship whose members enjoy fabulous wealth while too many Equatorians live in abject poverty. Sierra Leone became a byword for Africa's resource curse in the 1990s with a vicious war and it remains an economic basket case. It's not all bad news. Sierra Leone is again at peace. Equatorial Guinea has a per-capita income higher than its former colonial ruler, Spain. And