

## Don't Go There

There are obviously a lot of safety concerns in West Africa. Locals would say people from other countries, mostly neighboring countries due to several recent wars, were uncivilized or else explain horrific murders that occurred in the country. But nearly everyone seemed to agree on this: don't go to Nigeria. They'll kill you, they slit baby's throats, it's too dangerous. These were all words of wisdom from numerous sources. There were similar warnings for Niger but it was more related to political unrest.

Despite these warnings, I found Niger and Nigeria fairly safe and her people welcoming. Some of the hatred towards Nigerians seemed to be similar to "America bashing". Nigeria is one of the wealthier countries in West Africa thus their wealth is resented much like some resent America's wealth. When I quizzed people further about the "Nigerians killing babies", they couldn't give details and in fact were never in the country. Similarly the dangers in Niger seemed to be exaggerated and most of the dangerous spots in both countries were confined to certain areas.

Some of the wealth comes from the fabled Nigerian e-mail scam. The scam involves receiving an e-mail from a supposedly wealthy person in Nigeria who has abundant money but has a problem: the government is corrupt and will take his money so they ask for help. The wealthy person will give the recipient \$100,000 if they just deposit the money in their bank for awhile and, of course, share your bank details. There is no \$100,000 and they have your bank information and possibly the money within it. When I was at an internet café, I met a local composing such an e-mail. He said he just needs 1 out of 100,000 to respond to make it profitable. He asked me for my e-mail but I passed.

Lagos is the only real monster city in West Africa with a population of nearly sixteen million but it feels even bigger. It is hectic with major traffic delays. After just one hour in the city, I grabbed a napkin and rubbed it across my forehead. What I saw on the napkin was a thick layer of grime. Everything was grimy including my hotel, but I did go cheap in this expensive city.

At times Lagos seems like a mass of humanity going through one big market. Navigating through these markets can be tiring but also fun. There are a series of horns and noises to attract people to whatever the vendor is selling. The little kids want to touch your skin or your hair. The variety of speed traps on the sidewalks and streets as people navigate between small shops. The intimidating police officer who then changes his facial expression into a smile and says, "You look like a movie star."

North of Lagos is Oshogbo which has a sacred forest containing stone cut statues of deities. Walking to the forest located just outside the town, one can see monkeys in the trees, adding to the mysterious setting. There are a variety of smaller stone cut gods along the road in addition to some in the actual forest. Many of the gods are covered by moss which gives a feeling they are from another cosmos.

It took a while to enter the forest because I had an altercation with security. I had to produce identification and say where I was staying. When security accused of me if being a CIA spy, I raised my voice and started yelling at him. He then backed down; I wasn't sure if he really thought I was a spy or if he was seeing if I would panic and give him money.



Even though there are many gods along the road, the most important deities are inside the forest. There are sacred meeting places, a river goddess and a place of worship. On the other side of the road but still within the forest are taller statues that are supposedly closer to the heavens. Some of the 20 feet high statues look like aliens with very larger heads, big beady eyes and thin bodies.

Niger also doesn't have a pleasant reputation, but I was pleasantly surprised. This is one of the poorest countries in the world and the country where Saddam Hussein was supposed to get his yellow cake for Iraq's weapons of destruction. Many cautioned that it was too dangerous, mostly warning about kidnapping or about the corrupt government. The "kidnapping area" is in the far north near the mountains and desert and the government wasn't good. Despite its economic woes, Niger was holding on to political gains. It had a democratically elected president who was set to step down after his mandatory second term. However, he decided to ignore the constitution to the disdain of his people and stay on which made a coup seem like a real possibility.



In Niamey, there are two main attractions for tourists: the National Museum and Niger River cruises. I passed on the river cruises but took in the museum. The item that stands out is a 50 foot long, seven foot tall, 100 million year old river crocodile that was found some years back while digging for uranium. Leaning over the croc is an equally impressive skeleton of a T Rex. There are other live animals such as hippos, hyenas and lions but they all looked like they could use a little more room. Other exhibits include traditional clothing and village life.

Close to Niamey is Koure', home of the last herd of wild giraffes in West Africa. The problem was it took five hours for the minibus to fill up to take the one hour trip to Koure'. But I met a young woman who knew English and we talked for a couple hours. Needless to say I hitchhiked home; I flagged down a soldier and he drove me to the military base

on the outskirts of the city. People who take safaris are much more likely to head to south and east Africa. The giraffes are located in the area around the small village of Koure'. Visitors are required to pay for a guide which is good because it would be difficult to find where the animals are without one and it is a source of desperately needed income for the locals. We maneuvered through the dry and barren countryside before my guide climbed a couple of trees to spot the giraffes. The first group was a family of three but the second group was larger with eleven giraffes in viewing distance. They stared at me but I couldn't get too close as they are still wild.



Both Nigeria and Niger are heavily influenced by religion. Northern Nigeria is more Muslim with some areas adapting the rigid Sharia law. Southern Nigeria is passionately Christian. One trip in a mini bus illustrates this devotion. As the trip commenced, one man started singing religious hymns and the rest of the minibus joined in. After a few hymns, the man began a prayer, "God, I pray that you have supplied us with a good driver. I know that you are the best driver and that you will give us a driver that will not drive too fast, that will not overtake when going around corners, that does not drink and drive." The prayer continued for a long time with the man stopping for several "Amen" responses. It was like traveling and going to mass at the same time.

Niger is largely a Muslim country and more reserved than Nigeria. Women cover their heads and are covered with henna. The mosque in the eastern part of Niamey was one of the main attractions with many people inside praying. There were soccer games in front of the mosque and others just pass time as it is located next to the main east-west road. Despite being an Islamic country, people drink alcohol and the courtyard of my hotel seemed to be a popular watering hole.

The people that kept telling me not to go to Nigeria and Niger should actually go to those countries first. It seems that Nigeria is considered dangerous because it's too wealthy and Niger because it is too poor. However, those who visit and meet the people and see the sites will want to go again.