

Voodoo Country

Togo and Benin are both known as voodoo countries. A prime example is the Fetish Market in Lome', Togo which has skulls and bones from antelopes, crocs, cheetahs, puffer fish, lizards, mice, birds, etc. According to voodoo practice, when one needs good fortune or is ill, one must buy the bones and have them ground up for medicine or as a sacrifice. The voodoo culture makes for an enchanting stay but there is much more to see such as lakes, forts and stilt villages.

Lome' had bad traveler reviews as being unsafe, but that's the city center at night and I stayed between the border and Chinatown which can be walked safely at night. Lome' has an inviting beach which is a top attraction with many people eating and drinking at the various restaurants located on the beach. The city is green with trees lining the boulevards which harkens back to their French colonial days. At the end of the main boulevard, is the large Hotel 2 Fevrier built by the leader and dedicated to himself after he survived a near fatal plane crash.

Togoville, via Lake Togo, is where the Virgin Mary was to have appeared prompting construction of a cathedral. Many of the paintings in the church are of black saints which is different than western churches. This is also where a local chief handed over protection of the area to the Germans in 1884, who controlled Togo until WWI. A small museum where the agreement occurred shows some Togolese and German documents and artifacts. In the house next to the museum is the ancestor of the chief who ceded control to the Germans.

Ouidah, Benin oozes voodoo from its forests, its streets, and its music. Many of the voodoo deities, or fetishes, can be found in the sacred forest on the outskirts of town. Some of the statues include: tigers, a horned person looking like Satan, a fertility god, thunder god, sun god, chicken pox statue, a two faced spy, voodoo priests, a rainbow snake curled up biting his own tail and representing continuity, mathematician, farmer god and a fortune teller. A



guide is included and due to the number of deity statues and my lack of knowledge of voodoo, he was much appreciated. Within the forest is an iroko tree in which an early leader of Ouidah, King Kpasse, was to have transformed into as he was fleeing from his enemies. According to legend, he then began the city of Ouidah. One is supposed to be reenergized when touching the tree, but I didn't feeling anything. But, I don't believe in voodoo either. At night the voodoo aura reaches full affect with drumming and a lack of electricity creates a mysterious, dark atmosphere.

The city center has several other smaller attractions. The Casa do Brazil focuses on the plight of women in Africa. One memorable exhibit is a sphere that has the 24 hours of the day on it. From 4 am to midnight there are small statues of women doing a variety of different types of work including cooking, cleaning and raising children. So, apparently women in Benin only sleep from midnight to four. There is also a python temple as well as some smaller Catholic churches and mosques.

Another attraction in Ouidah is the Route de Esclaves, a four kilometer pathway that slaves marched on from the fort to the awaiting slave ships. The Portuguese fort dates from 1721 and now holds a museum which contains historical pictures and local artwork. Leaving the fort, the slave route is a poignant walk. I closed my eyes and attempted to imagine what they felt. The sandy road is flanked by coconut plantations, numerous voodoo fetishes and small stilt villages on one side and satellite towers on the other, which ruined the mood. A local teacher and about twenty of his teenage students were taking the walk and singing as they walked along the road. On the route is the Tree of Forgetfulness in which the Africans had to walk around three times before continuing on the passage. The idea was for them to forget their life in Africa as they were forced to start a new life in a new world. The tree has been chopped down but a memorial has been constructed in its place. At the end of the route is the Point of No Return, which was the last time the Africans would be on African soil before heading onto the slave ships. This event is commemorated by a large pinkish gate that illustrates some of the slave conditions on its side walls.

Porto Novo also has two main attractions, one in the city and one upriver. The Ethnography Museum had an excellent, in-depth look at the culture of Benin specifically and West Africa in general. The mandatory tour is a comprehensive look at customs that are performed at all major life passages. The most detailed are the customs based on birth and death as well as marriage and also how gender affects the various ceremonies. Other smaller attractions include the Silvia Museum and Honme' Museum that recreates a mud village. There is also a large market as well as mosques with colorful blue and red designs surrounding the doors and windows which appear to be unique to the area.



Aguegue is a stilt village some twelve kilometers from Porto Novo. There are nearly 6,600 residents in this village with no market; hence the residents must go back and forth to Porto Novo. The residents were escaping the Dahomey people from Abomey, who would have enslaved them. The trip to the village pays for the boat petrol and tour guide but also some of the money is given to the villagers because it's tough to have a good job living on stilts.

Abomey, to the north of the stilt village, was the center for the Dahomey kingdom. One can visit most of the old palaces from the various kingdoms. Some of the palaces are falling apart but others are in good shape. The most well-preserved is the Agonglo Palace whose reign was from 1789 – 1797 and is represented by an orange fruit that looks like a pineapple. All other kingdoms' insignias are on the palace walls including a bull for the Ghezo kingdom and a lion for the Glele kingdom.

Most kings slept at the palace they created for their kingdom but actually ruled in the palace that is now the Historical Museum of Abomey. UNESCO has declared the complex a World Heritage Site and for good reason. Visitors can see the courtyard, government rooms and burial chambers.



The story of the Dahomey kingdoms is detailed through maps and other items illustrating the brutal rule of their rulers. One notable item is a throne for the Ghezo kings, with each leg of the chair supported by an enemies' skull.

Moving from Abomey to northern Benin, there are no more beaches, voodoo, English speaking countries or moderate temps. It's hotter, Muslim, French and sand. The northern border town of Malanville is known for her market but it was just average as it was off season. It wasn't a bad place to wonder around for a day though.

For two skinny, relatively small countries, there is a lot to see in Togo and Benin. Voodoo is a big part of the culture; even some of the hotels I stayed at had voodoo dolls in the rooms or dining areas. However, if you aren't into voodoo, you'll still enjoy the countries. Walking the Route of the Slaves or visiting the cathedral where the Virgin Mary was to have been or examining the palaces of the Dahomey are all unforgettable experiences.