

West African Kingdoms: The Ultimate Tour
Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Gambia, Ghana

January 7- 24, 2024
with Voodoo Festival



TOGO

Jan. 7: Arrive Lomé / Mercury Sarakawa (B)

You will be met at the airport by our tour leader and transferred to the hotel.

Jan 8, Day 2: Lomé / Mercury Sarakawa (B,L)

This morning we embark on an insightful city tour of Lomé, a city where tradition and modernism overlap. Discover this metropolis with its Musee National, Place de l' Independence, fishing harbor, and the Grand Marche - the realm of the famous "Nana Benz. "

Lunch at a local restaurant. After lunch, we visit the Art Street with its craft vendors, the Artisans' Village and culminate the day at the Marche des Feticheurs (fetish market) - the heart of voodoo cult. The evening at leisure; dinner on your own.

BENIN

Jan 9, Day 3: Lomé - Ouidah / Casa del Papa Beach Hotel and Spa (B, L, D)

Depart at 9 am for an excursion to Togoville, located on the north shore of Lake Togo. We drive 30 min to Aneho, where you embark on a local paddle boat to cross lake Togo into Togoville (a boatman paddles the boat). Visit the old German built cathedral, the colonial area and the traditional quarter of the town.

Lunch at a lake view restaurant and then drive two hours to Ouidah, considered the capital of voodoo (UNESCO Cultural Site, 1996).

Upon arrival, approx. 4 pm, we visit Temple of the Python, dedicated to the sacred Python, which is believed to give vitality and protection.

Transfer to hotel. Evening are independent. Buffet dinner at hotel restaurant.

Jan. 10, Day 4: Ouidah - Annual Voodoo Festival / Casa del Papa Beach Hotel & Spa (B,L,D)

Depart the hotel at 8:00 a.m. driving 30 min to the voodoo priest's palace. The priest will come out of his palace at 8:30 am. The group will walk with Momo to meet the voodoo priest in his palace and follow him, touring the sacred points of the town performing purification ceremonies. The crowd, singers and masks dancers follow the priest as well. Thousands of voodoo believers gather to receive blessings from Quidah's voodoo chief. After the last purifying ceremony, the priest and the crowd head to the venue where speeches and dances take place. * This is a very special experience. You will gain understanding of what this voodoo festival means for the locals of Benin. Most people say that walking with the voodoo priest, with a group of locals singing, is probably the best part of the whole voodoo festival experience!

In 1996, the government of Benin decreed that Voodoo was an official religion, practiced by more than 60% of Benin's over 10 million residents. For millions of Beninese, voodoo is an integral part of everyday life. You cannot avoid the many voodoo dolls riddled with pins and nails. Quidah is the spiritual capital of voodoo and once a major slave-trading post.

*There are two hours of speeches by the Benin Government before the festivities begin. There is nothing we can do about that. While the speeches are going on, it's a great time to walk around and take photos of the arrival of dignitaries and voodoo displays.

We have reserved tourist seats which you can go to when you are ready (need a rest) or when the dances begin at approx. 12 noon. However, when the dances begin, most people stand up, so those in tourist seats need to move to the front to be able to see what is going on. Your seat is reserved and

you can come back to it as you wish. (There are three categories of seats: government and officials, local dignitaries and tourists.) This is the reason why the Benin Government is building an arena to give everyone the same view (maybe completed in 1-2 years).

The Annual Voodoo Festival takes place adjacent to the Door of No Return, a memorial concrete and bronze arch which stands on the beach, as a memorial to the enslaved Africans who were taken from the slave port of Ouidah to the Americas. Several artists and designers collaborated with the architect, Yves Ahouen-Gnimon, to realize the project.

The Voodoo Festival is one of Benin's most colorful and revered events. The celebrations begin when the supreme voodoo priest slaughters an animal, usually a goat, to honor the spirits. This is followed by singing, chanting, dancing, beating of drums and drinking of various spirits, generally gin. We will see followers of the various voodoo gods including the masked dances of the elaborately costumed Zangbetos and the trance dances of the Kokou (highly feared warrior undergods).

We may see a traditional Geleden mask dance of the FON Tribe. Performers wearing masks as well as marionettes will perform, dancing to traditional drums rhythms. The name 'Gelede' (or female power) derives from the name of a secret society of Yoruba origin, the largest ethnic group in West Africa, scattered between southern Nigeria and southern Benin. People attending the mask ceremony pay tribute to Yami the main deity of the village, the source of every good thing. The Gelede masks are used to ward off evil spirits which manifest themselves through calamities, or to solve ethnic conflicts, to moralize behaviors and to reassert important events among the community. The Gelede masks are also a way to send messages of compassion, solidarity, insult or joke. The man and the woman who distinguished themselves by their wisdom and loyalty to the group are the custodians of the masks. The Gelede masks are in fact female masks worn by men, implying that the ceremony and its meaning involves both the women and the men of the community.

Around the edges of the main performance area, groups from various voodoo temples perform their own rituals in smaller spaces. After attending the festival at the main venue, we may go to a few of these festival venues to see other authentic voodoo events.

We can stay at the Voodoo Festival until we are tired. Those who wish to leave the festival earlier will be driven by the driver while Momo remains with the rest of the group. Return to the hotel. Buffet dinner at the hotel restaurant.

Jan. 11, Day 5: Ouidah - Ganvie- Cotonou / Sofitel Marina Hotel (B,L,D)

Depart our hotel at 8:30 am to visit the historical Museum of Ouidah located in an old Portuguese fort built in 1721. This museum portrays Benin's role in the Atlantic Slave Trade.

Afterwards, we visit Ganvie, West Africa's largest stilt village. We drive 30 minutes to Abomey Calavi, where we cross Lake Nokoué by motorized covered boat (20 minutes) to Ganvie, commonly referred to as the Venice of West Africa.

The residents here are members of the Tofinou ethnic group. They live in huts built on teak stilts and get around in dugout canoes. We will observe the people of Ganvie going about their daily routine as vendors in dugout canoes make transactions with one another and with tourists. Try shopping amongst the local vendors in the floating market while enjoying a relaxing canoe ride on the waterways of this exotic 300-year-old village.

After the visit, we return to Abomey Calavi again by boat and drive 30 minutes to Cotonou where we have lunch.

We culminate the day with a stop at Cotonou's famous central market "Dan Togba," the fetish and traditional medicine market. Return to Cotonou hotel for overnight. Dinner on your own, pay direct.

Jan. 12, Day 6: Excursion to Novo Porto / Sofitel Marina Hotel (B,L)

This morning, we drive 20 km/ 1 hr to Porto Novo, the former capital of Benin, known for colonial buildings such as Brazilian-style Great Mosque, formerly a church. We visit several interesting museums and sites including:

Ethnographical Museum of Porto Novo This is an interesting museum that offers an intensive look at the past of Porto Novo's kings. It displays a good selection of fetishes, old Yourba king ceremonial masks, costumes, and some musical instruments.

Honmé Museum (Musée Honmé, Palais Royal du Roi Toffa). Former residence of King Toffa. This well maintained, rather simple palace is an insightful view into how Beninese royalty really lived. 1883 was the year King Toffa signed the treaty with France, agreeing to hand over land. The kingdom of Porto Novo was one of the longest lasting in Africa, lasting up until 1976.

Musée da Silva recounts Benin's history and celebrates Afro-Brazilian culture. Celebrating Afro-Brazilian influence on the city, this fairly new museum offers a lot of variety. The museum grounds consist of a traditional house, a small library, an open-air cinema showing French films.

Jardin Place Jean Bayol, a large plaza that contains a statue of the first King of Porto-Novo.

Celestial Church of Christ's Headquarters (Paroisse Mere de l'Eglise du Christianisme Celeste) is a Christian denomination, which has grown worldwide. The church was founded by S.B.J Oschoffa.

Lycee Behanzin (Behanzin high school) is the first secondary school of Benin. The school celebrated its centennial in 2015.

Great Mosque of Porto-Novo (Grande Mosquee de Porto-Novo). The mosque was established in 1925 with chapel architectural style.

The Zangbeto Temple: Zangbeto are the traditional voodoo guardians of the night in the Yoruba religion Zanbeto. They act as an unofficial police force and are highly regarded.

Adjarra Market, located 10 km north of Porto. Held every fourth day, this market is certainly one of the best in Benin. One can find unique types of tie-dyed fabric, amazing pottery, unusual musical instruments, various voodoo ornaments, and of course mainstream market items.

We will have lunch in a local restaurant before driving back to Cotonou. The rest of the day at leisure. Dinner on your own, pay direct,

BURKINA FASO

Jan. 13, Day 7: Cotonou-Ouagadougou / Hotel Lancaster (B)

Enjoy a leisure morning on your own. Suggest take snacks from the breakfast buffet or buy at the airport as timing doesn't allow for a lunch stop today.

At about 12 noon, we transfer to the airport for flight Air Burkina 558, departing at 3:55 p.m. and arriving in Ouagadougou at 4:25 p.m.

Upon arrival, transfer to our hotel. Dinner on your own at hotel restaurant, pay direct.

Jan. 14, Day 8: Ouagadougou / Hotel Lancaster (B,L)

This morning we'll visit the Grand Market and the crafts markets at the Artisans' Center, where you will find basketry, batik fabrics, wooden statues and masks, jewelry, leatherwork and bronze castings; and a short walk around the city.

Afterwards, visit the National Museum. We'll have lunch at a local restaurant.

This afternoon visit the Sankariare Cattle Market, Cathedral of Ouagadougou, the giant bronze statue of Ousmane Sembene-founder of Ouagadougou film festival, Monument of National Heros and the Monument of Cineaste built in 1987 in honor of African Film makers who come to FESPACO, the pan-African festival of cinema and television of Ouagadougou.

Return to the hotel; evening at leisure. Dinner on your own, pay direct.

SENEGAL

Jan. 15, Day 9: Fly to Dakar / Lamantine Resort & Spa (B,L,D)

Hotel will serve us breakfast at 5:15 am. We depart at 6 am, transfer to the airport for the flight Air Burkina 2J 527, dep 9 am, arriving Dakar 12:40 pm.

Upon arrival at the new Dakar airport transfer to hotel in Saly Portugul (45 min drive). Lunch at local restaurant.

Note: the drive from the airport into Dakar city would take 1.5 hrs and pass thru 3 toll booths. Lamantin Beach Hotel is a beautiful location. Enjoy the rest of the day at leisure.

Buffet dinner at the hotel restaurant, open til 10:30 pm. This dinner always gets rave reviews from our clients.

Jan. 16, Day 10: Dakar Full Day Tour / Pullman Accor Dakar (B, L)

We depart our hotel and drive into Dakar city, approx. one hour, to start our tour with visits of the various markets: Kermel, Sandaga, and the handicraft market of Soumbédioune and the Tilen market famous for its medicinal herbs and its traditional healers.

Lunch at a local restaurant.

Next, visit the National Museum, the President's Palace and the Parliament House; the Central Market, French Cathedral, Monument of African Renaissance and the Great Mosque.

Transfer to the hotel. Evening at leisure. Dinner on your own, pay direct.

Jan. 17, Day 11: Goree Island / Pullman Accor Dakar (B, L)

We depart the hotel at 9 am to embark on a cruise to the historic island of Goree.

Just thirty minutes from Dakar Port, the ferryboat that arrives at Goree Island carries the heavy burden of 300 years slave trading in West Africa. The island ranks today among the classified monuments of the World Patrimony. We will visit the House of Slaves (Maison des Esclaves) and its "Door of No Return," a former prison for slave trade and said to be the final exit point of the slaves from Africa, now a museum and memorial.

We will also see the canons built by Portuguese navigators. Lunch at a restaurant on the island.

Return to Dakar and enjoy a drive through the picturesque district of Medina and the residential district of Fann.

Transfer to hotel. Evening at leisure; dinner on your own, pay direct.

Jan. 18, Day 12: Drive to Saint-Louis / Hotel de la Residence (B, L)

Depart at 8:00 am, heading north through the Sahel to the old colonial city of St. Louis, which was formerly the capital of French West Africa.

After a one-hour drive we stop at Lake Retba, also known as the “Pink Lake” located 30 km northeast of Dakar, north of Cap Vert Peninsula. This lake is considered an anomaly as it boasts one of the most rare natural phenomena in the world. The lake's pinkish hue is a result of the excessive amount of *Dunaliella salina* algae in the water that produces a red pigment used to absorb light, which in turn provides the algae with life-energy. The pink color is particularly visible during the dry season. The lake is also known for its abundantly high salt content.

You will see the “salt harvesters” with their colorful tackle, and interact with the Fulani ethnic groups living in the surrounding villages.

Next we stop at the Norflaye Turtle Conservation Farm. After the visit, we drive two hours to the town of Thies for lunch at a local restaurant.

After lunch, we will drive to St Louis (3 hrs/155 miles north of Dakar).

Saint-Louis was founded in 1659 and named after the French King Louis XIV in the 1700s. It is the oldest city to be created by Europeans on the western coast of Africa and served as the capital of Senegal from 1872 to 1957. It played an important cultural and economic role in the whole of West Africa. A stroll around the Ville (as the cab drivers know it) quickly reveals the French colonial influence. Many of the buildings hold their old character with brightly colored buildings and beautiful balconies. The Island was named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2000.

On arrival check in to the hotel. Remainder of the day and evening at leisure. You may wish to This evening, explore the colonial quarters of St. Louis. Dinner on your own, pay direct.

Jan. 19, Day 13: Excursion to Djoudj National Park / Hotel de la Residence (B, L)

We depart at 7:00 a.m. for the 1.5-hour drive to Djoudj National Park (UNESCO World Heritage Site), the third largest pelican sanctuary in the world. It is known for its' large pelican migration and many other species of birds. We shall cruise in a spacious motorized open-air boat, for a 1.5-hour trip through the mangroves of the river to see where the pelicans hatch their eggs each year.

After the visit, we return to St. Louis for lunch at a local restaurant.

This afternoon, we visit the Langue de Barbarie Peninsula. We take a horse and buggy ride to Guet Ndar, the fishing village that is located on the Langue de Barberie and watch the fisherman bring in their catch. Local people carry the fish in baskets on their neck and on their heads. Women can be found smoking and drying fish next to the beach in vast cauldrons. Nearby very colorful pirogues are always under construction. It is possible to see nearly every stage from the first carvings to the final painting.

Jan. 20 Day 14: Saint Louis- Toubacouta / Hotel Keur Saloum (B,L)

We depart at 7 am and drive to Toubacouta. After 3 hours drive we stop in the town of Touba to visit the holy mosque of Mouride Islamic brotherhood. After the visit, it is a 1.5 hr drive to Kaolack for lunch in a local restaurant. From Kaolack it is 1.5 hr drive to Toubacouta.

Upon arrival, approx. 4 pm, check into the hotel and have a bit of leisure time to rest. Just before sunset, we embark on a motorized boat ride to explore Sine Saloum Delta (UNESCO World Heritage Site).

Evening is at leisure. Dinner on your own, pay direct.

THE GAMBIA

Jan. 21 Day 15: Drive Juffureh-James Island- Banjul / Kairaba Beach Resort (B,L)

We depart at 7 am and drive 30 minutes to the Gambia border. Border formalities may take about an hour on each side. You will step out of the vehicle and walk about five minutes across. There is now a digital passport and visa processing system at both borders.

After crossing the border, we drive one hour to the historic village of Juffureh and tour it.

Juffureh became famous in the 1970s following the film release of the bestselling book, "Roots" written by the African-American author Alex Haley, a descendant of Kunta Kinte. The film told the story of Kunta Kinte's capture in Juffureh by slave traders and his subsequent enslavement in America approximately 200 years ago.

Afterwards, it is a 30 minute motorized boat ride from Juffureh to James Island (aka Kunte Kinteh Island), the colonial period ruins of a slavery station and the 'Portuguese chapel' of San Domingo, which later came to be known as Sandi Munko Joyo. The boat is an open top (no awning or cabin), with an outboard engine. Nearby there are also the old ruins of Maurel Freres and the CFAO trading post. Visit the island.

Return to Juffureh by the same motorized boat and have lunch. Afterwards, we drive another hour to board the Barra /Banjul ferry which takes an hour to reach Banjul. Upon arrival in Banjul, we will drive 30 minutes to the hotel, at Senegambia Beach.

Evening at leisure. Dinner on your own, pay direct.

Jan. 22, Day 16: Makasutu Forest & Banjul / Kairaba Resort (B,L)

Departing at 8 am, we drive one hour south to Brikama where we turn to the east coast and continue 7 km into the Makasutu Forest.

Makasutu Forest, on an island facing the south bank of the Gambia River, is a tropical 1000-acre reserve encompassing five different eco systems, including gallery forest, savannah, mangroves, palm forest and wetland. Wildlife is plentiful with many bird species, baboons, vervet and red colobus monkeys and even the occasional odd mongoose.

On arrival, we begin with a nice stroll to the Baobab Restaurant, where we are greeted by the special guide from the Makasutu Forest reserve and given a brief history of the area. On the way, we will see some tree stumps carved into by sculptors. These are the remnants from the time when locals were chopping down trees.

After the talk, we hop aboard a pirogue, a traditional wooden boat, to experience nature as we cruise on the Gambia River through the mangroves lined with oyster shells. The boat ride will last a little over 1 hour. When we return, we'll then enjoy lunch at the Baobab Restaurant followed by some traditional entertainment.

Afterwards, we drive 30 minutes to Banjul for a city tour with a local Gambian guide.

Banjul is one of the best examples of urban Africa. The sand-blown streets play host to colorful markets and fading colonial buildings, and a sense of history permeates every district. The Gambian capital may be one of Africa's smallest cities, but it has a big personality too soon forgotten by travelers.

Built in celebration of the 1992 military coup, a commemorative arch, Arch 22, is the country's tallest building. The Senegalese-designed gateway contains a small museum about the coup d'état and a cozy café. The real draw of the Arch is the view from the top-floor balconies.

Just outside the city lies the Tanbi Wetland Complex, established in 2001 as a protected wildlife area that spans more than 4,500 hectares. Nearly 80 percent of the reserve is made of numerous species of mangroves, but the natural vegetation also includes salt marshes, grass woodlands and bare flats.

Tidal creeks and lagoons cut through the reserve in a patchwork fashion, and locals make good use of the water by fishing for shrimp, diving for oysters and growing rice. Wildlife abounds throughout the site, including crocodiles, lizards, small monkeys, manatees and over 360 species of birds. We shall explore the wetlands a local guide who will also show us how to way to spot these creatures.

Visitors can also get up close and personal with Banjul's crocodiles at the Kachikally Museum and Crocodile Pool, used by locals for fertility rituals. About 80 Nile crocodiles call the pool home and some are allowed to freely roam around the grounds. Visitors can even touch some of the creatures and dip their feet in the sacred waters for a small fee.

The Royal Albert Market is the bustling heart of Banjul. Named after the husband of Queen Victoria, the market is an extensive emporium that comes alive with pungent aromas, lively scenes and the hum of shoppers and sellers haggling over prices on everything from vivid, shimmering fabrics and shining silver jewelry to fresh produce and the latest electronics. Packed to the brim, the market's labyrinth of alleys are a great place to immerse yourself in Gambian culture. Visitors should not hesitate to bargain; most goods can be purchased for just half the asking price!

Drive 30 minutes to Kairaba Beach Resort. Evening at leisure. Dinner on your own, pay direct.

SENEGAL

Jan. 23, Day 17: Banjul-Saly / Lamantin Beach Hotel (B, L, D)

Depart at 8 am driving 30 minutes to the Banjul Ferry terminal where we board a ferry for a one hour ride to Barra. We disembark at Barr and drive 30 minutes to the border town of Hamdallaye. There is an approx. 30 min wait on each side of the border, crossing from The Gambia back into Senegal. Then we drive two hours to Kaolack, stopping for lunch at about 1 pm.

Continue driving 2.5 hrs to Joal-Fadiouth, which is actually two small rural villages in the Thiès Region at the end of the Petite Côte of Senegal, south-east of Dakar. Joal lies on the mainland, while Fadiouth, linked by a bridge, lies on an island of clam shells, which are used in local architecture and crafts. We walk across the 900 mt long wooden bridge into the village of Fadiouth and enjoy a short walk in the village.

Continue to 1.5 hr drive to Saly Portugal. Transfer to hotel, arrival approx. 5 pm. Evening at leisure. Dinner at hotel restaurant.

Jan. 24, Day 18: Depart Dakar/ (B)

Private transfer to the airport (one hour drive) to board your flight home

Price: \$7885 per person based on min group size 8. Single room supplement: \$1900
Extra night hotel Lomé, privilege sea view room : \$175 per person twin share, \$297 single room
Transfer if not on day 1: \$50 per car.

Tour Includes:

Accommodations based on availability; with daily breakfast:

Lomé: Mercury Sarakawa, privilege sea-view room <http://www.sarakawa-hotel.com/fr/hotel-togo>

Ouidah: Casa Del Papa Resort & Spa lagoon-facing rooms <http://casadelpapa.com/>

Cotonou: Sofitel Marina Hotel (if open) <https://sundukovy.com/en/sofitel-cotonou-benin/>

OR if Sofitel not open: Golden Tulip Le Diplomat <https://diplomate-cotonou.goldentulip.com/en-us>

Ougadougou: Hotel Lancaster Ouaga 2000, standard <https://lancasterouaga2000.com-hotel.website/>

Saly (near Dakar airport): Lamantin Beach Resort & Spa <http://www.leramantin.com/en/>

Dakar city center: Pullman Accor Dakar <https://all.accor.com/hotel/0563/index.en.shtml>

St. Louis: Hotel de la Residence, colonial style renovated by French owners

<http://www.hoteldelaresidence.com/>

The Gambia, Banjul: Kairaba Hotel standard room garden view <http://kairabahotel.com/>

Toubakouta: Hotel Keur Saloum superior river front bungalow room <http://keursaloum.com/>

Saly: Lamantin Beach Resort & Spa <http://www.leramantin.com/en/>

Meals: 15 Lunches, 5 Dinners. Bottled water 3 litres per day per person during drives & sightseeing.

Our Tour Leader: Mr Mohammed Traore (Momo) is from Bamako. He has been a guide and tour logistics organizer since 1998. He has been leading Original World tours since 2017. Besides being experienced and knowledgeable, he is a wonderful warm personality that our clients will enjoy getting to know.

Local guides: in certain cities as required by regulations. Momo will be giving enhanced talks before the group reaches a site and handles all arrangements to ensure a smooth trip.

Vehicle: Toyota Hiace 14 seats for 6-7 people; Toyota or Nissan Coaster, 25 seats for 8-12 people

Two Toyota Land Cruisers Prado for excursion to Taccugama village/outside Freetown

Entrance fees: All entrance fees for sites listed; and all activities listed

Airfares: Cotonou-Ougadougou, Dakar-Lomé-Accra

Does Not Include: Visas fees, tips to driver, guide, hotel porters, meals not listed, personal expenses such as laundry, phone calls, drinks even when meals are included.

NOTES

Hotel star ratings listed here cannot be compared to the same rating of hotels in the US or Europe. A 5* here is not equal to a 5* in the US. There is no authority in West Africa that oversees the ratings. Hotel websites and various booking sites give differing ratings. We have removed any mention of star ratings. View the hotel websites to see the quality. In our opinion these are excellent quality and best available in some of the areas we visit.

Sequence of activities and time schedule subject to change.

Drive times stated do not include time spent touring en-route, bathroom stops or time at border crossings which are unpredictable. Security check points can take an extra 1-1.5 hours.

Flight schedules within the tour are subject to change.

Festival dates subject to cancellation or date reschedule by the local government