



10 DAYS BENIN & TOGO: AFRICAN CEREMONIES - PHOTOGRAPHIC TOUR

Witness the colorful Voodoo Festival in Benin and other fascinating ceremonies in two magical countries of West Africa - friendly people, beautiful landscapes, mysterious cults! A special journey organized and accompanied by travel photographer Catherina Unger

08TH – 17TH JANUARY 2019

08th January - Cotonou

Arrival in Cotonou and transfer to the hotel. Cocktail reception with hors d'oeuvres and welcome dinner. Introduction and presentation.

Included meals: dinner

09th January - Cotonou, Ganvie & Ouidah

We cross the lake Nokwe with a motorized boat to reach Ganvie, the largest and most beautiful African stilt village. The approximately 25,000 inhabitants build their huts on teak stilts and cover the roofs with a thick layer of leaves. The village has managed to preserve its traditions and environment despite the long-lasting human presence in a closed setting; and the lake is not over-fished. Life unfolds each day around the canoes that men, women and children guide with ease using brightly colored poles. We reach Ouidah, considered the capital town of African Voodoo. Ouidah was conquered by the Dahomey army during the XVIII century to become one of the main slave ports. Today Ouidah enjoys an Afro-Portuguese architecture and the python temple faces the Catholic Cathedral. The laid back attitude of the locals blends in harmoniously with the thunder of the distant waves and the rhythm of the drums - a timeless atmosphere very well described by Bruce Chatwin in his book "The Vice-Roy of Ouidah". On foot we visit the Python Temple and the Portuguese Fort, now a museum on the history of Ouidah and the slave trade. We end our city tour by following the "slave road" to the beach, the point of "no return" where slaves used to board ships.



10th January: Voodoo Festival, Ouidah and surroundings

Every 10th of January in Benin is a national celebration day honouring traditional religion and all cults associated with it. Ouidah in particular is where dozens of voodoo ceremonies are held, calling thousands of adepts, traditional chiefs and fetish priests. As per the program of festivities, we will choose the best sites - the festival takes place in the entire region around Ouidah.



11th January. African Kingdoms, from Ouidah to Bohicon (250 km – 5 hr)

We move to Abomey where we visit the Royal Palace. The walls of the palace are decorated with bas-reliefs representing symbols of the ancient Dahomey kings. Now a museum listed on the Unesco World Heritage List, it displays items belonging to the ancient kings: thrones, cult altars, statues, costumes and weapons. A Kingdom whose economy was for a long time based on the slave trade. The royal army also included a female troop famous for its boldness and aggressive fighting spirit. In the middle of the royal courtyard there is a temple built with a mixture of clay, gold dust and human blood. In the afternoon, we attend spectacular Gelede dancing masks. It is celebrated by the whole community to promote fertility of both the people and the soil. Each sculpted mask represents a different character. The masks are brightly painted and move like puppets as they relate myths and moral stories using mime. The delighted crowds laugh and clap their hands as they watch in appreciation.

12th January. Shrines. From Bohicon to Copargo (350 km – 6 hr)

Our first stop, Dassa, was the capital of an ancient kingdom founded by Olofin in 1385. We will visit some remains of this long-lasting dynasty. First we will stop at the wooden horse, given by Portuguese merchants in 1903 to the chief who was complaining that four of his horses had died from a mysterious disease. We will continue our visits by walking up the Royal hill, where the Kings used to be buried. As we are now in the voodoo world, we will not fail to notice how the site is "protected" by many statues and the remains of recent rituals. Then we stop at the Dankoli Fetish, an important place for the Voodoo cult: thousands of little sticks are pushed in the fetish as testimony of the countless prayers for a good harvest, a happy wedding, an easy delivery, success at school etc. Once the prayers are answered, people come back to sacrifice what they had promised - a goat, a chicken or a cow, according to the nature of the prayer. Traces of blood, palm alcohol or oil on the fetish are proof that many prayers have been answered. In the afternoon we reach Taneka mountain.



13th January: Fetish hill, from Copargo to Natitingou (100 km – 2 hr)

We discover old Taneka villages located on a mountain with the same name. The villages are made up of round houses covered with a conical roof protected at the top by a terra cotta pot. The upper part of the village is inhabited by the young initiated and by the fetish priests who only cover themselves with a goat skin and always carry a long pipe. This ethnic group has been living on an archaeological site for centuries, in fact it looks as if the first inhabitants moved to the mountain during the IXth century. Since then, other populations have joined thus forming a kind of melting-pot where despite the fact that each group kept its own cults and initiation rites, common religious and political institutions were defined. As we wander among the villages along alleys bordered by smooth stones, we may come across half naked men. The Taneka people believe that in order to “become” a man, it is necessary to combine time, patience and a lot of... blood from sacrificed animals. It actually is a lifetime process in the sense that life itself becomes a rite of passage, therefore life should not be conditioned by a “before” and an “after” but rather it is following a continuous path.



14th January: Fire Dance, from Natitingou to Sokode (180 km – 4 hr)

We enter the land of the Somba & Tamberma who live in fortified dwellings. Similar in form to medieval castles, they are beautiful examples of ancient African architecture. Their style impressed Le Corbusier so much that he spoke of «sculptural architecture». A kind of sensual gesture mixing strength, care and beauty. Their strong tradition beliefs are proved by the presence of big shrines - of phallic form - at the entrance of their homes. We enter their homes to better understand their way of life. All - family, food supplies and stock - are kept inside the house, for safety and survival in case of attack by enemies. For centuries these populations have been seeking refuge in the Atakora Mountains to escape slave traders. We cross the Togo border. In the evening, fire dance. At the centre of the village a large fire lights up the faces of the participants, they dance to the hypnotic beat of the drums eventually leaping into the glowing embers, picking up burning coals, passing them over their bodies and even putting them in their mouths ... all this without hurting themselves or showing any sign of pain. It's difficult to explain such a performance. Is it matter of courage? Self suggestion? Magic?



15th January: Rainforest, from Sokode to Kloto (290 km – 5 hr)

We will head southwards, with a stop on the way in Atakpame, a typical African town built on hills where all the products coming from the nearby forests can be found. Through their skilled work on small weaving looms, men of the region make the large brightly coloured fabric called "Kente". We move further to the tropical forests surrounding Kpalime, a town with a rich colonial past which is now an important trade center. At night, walk in the forest to discover the mysterious world of the tropical forest in the darkness and so meet with the majesty of the tropical trees, the sounds of tam-tams and the echoes of wild animals.

16th January: from Kloto to Lome (150 km – 4 hr)

Lomé, the vibrant capital of Togo, is the only African city which was a colony of the Germans, the British and the French. It is also one of the few capitals in the world bordering with another nation. These elements have led to the development of a unique identity reflected in the life style of its inhabitants and in the architecture of the town: Lomé is indeed a cross point for people, trade and cultures, a cosmopolitan city in small size. We will visit: the central market with its famous "Nana Benz", women who control the market of the expensive "pagne" (=cloths) coming from Europe and sold all over West Africa; the colonial buildings in the administrative quarter where the flavor of colonial time is still very present; and the fetish market where we can find an eclectic assortment of all the necessary ingredients for love potions and magical concoctions.

Lomé with its many galleries is an important trade center for tribal art, a real interesting place with shops for antiques, craftworks, art galleries with contemporary paintings from the "Togolese school" (which start to be quite popular in French and North-American galleries).



17th January: Animism, Lome region (150 km – 4 hr)

All along the coast of Togo and Benin, voodoo is a religion that has been passed on by the ancestors and is still fervently practiced. Although for many Europeans voodoo is only a vulgar form of black magic, in truth voodoo is a true religion, far richer and more complex than people often think. In a remote hidden village we will join a Voodoo ceremony: the frenetic rhythm of the drums and chants of the adepts help calling in the voodoo spirit who then takes possession of some of the dancers. They fall into a deep trance: eyes rolling back, grimaces, convulsions, insensitivity to fire or pain. Sakpata, Heviesso, Mami Water are only a few of the voodoos divinities who can show up. In this village, surrounded by the magic atmosphere of the ceremony, we will finally understand what people mean when they say: "In your Churches you pray God; in our voodoo shrine we become God!"

In another village, we will visit a healer, another special encounter with a person who "deals with" complex issues by giving solutions based on a very "simple" vision of human life. Their anthropology systematically associates material and spiritual worlds and therefore a physical disease is always treated assessing the patient's spirit. The healer we visit cures his patients through the use of plants and the performance of sacrifices on the various shrines in his courtyard. We will have the opportunity to have a conversation with him and meet some of his patients. In the evening transfer to the airport

Price per person € 2.690,00

Single supplement € 260,00

min. of participants 6 people/maximum 12 people

INCLUDES:

Professional travel photographer during the whole tour offering assistance and several workshops. Expert local guides and drivers for all activities. Accommodation on a dbl shared basis in standard rooms in 3* hotels (local standard). Halfboard (breakfast and dinner, picnic for lunch). Tours and visits as per the program. Mineral water in the bus/car during the visits. Entrance fees to parks, concessions, protected areas and cultural sites. First Aid box. All service charges and taxes. Pass for voodoo festival

EXCLUDES:

Any flights and related airport taxes. Visa fees for Benin and Togo. Items of a personal nature. Drinks at meals, entrance fees, portorage, tours/excursions and transfers not specified above. Cancellation, baggage or medical insurance (compulsory). Any new government taxes, levies, fuel or industry increases which are beyond our control. Tips. Optional tours and activities. Every other thing not mentioned under "included services".



The present itinerary has been created especially for the needs of ambitious photographers:

- the tour will be accompanied by Catherina Unger, professional travel photographer, travel agent and experienced connoisseur of many African countries including Benin & Togo.
- the daily programs have been established basing on the needs of photographers: sufficient stops for pictures, visits of spots with particular photographic charme, use of the hours with the best light conditions
- the opportunity to exchange experiences with a professional travel photographer or the other participants and to learn new photographic techniques or tricks in postproduction (Photoshop, Lightroom)
- the itinerary offers the opportunity to beautiful landscape, street and, first of all, people photography
- review of pictures realised by the participants and solutions for the postproduction.
- voodoo ceremonies and festivities
- small group size allows us to remains flexible for spontaneous program changes depending in personal interests of the participants

