



11 DAYS BENIN & TOGO: AFRICAN CEREMONIES

Witness the colorful Vodoun Festival in Benin, mask ceremonies and the fire dance in Togo. Explore two magical West African countries - friendly people, beautiful landscapes, mysterious rituals!

A spectacular journey with travel photographer Catherina Unger

07TH - 17TH JANUARY 2021

07th January - Cotonou

Arrival in Cotonou and transfer to the hotel. Welcome dinner, introduction and presentation.

08th January - The stilt village Ganvie & Ouidah - first encounter with the Vodoun culture

We cross the lake Nokwe to reach **Ganvie**, the most beautiful African **stilt village**. The 25,000 inhabitants build their huts on teak stilts and have managed to preserve their ancient traditions and the environment despite the long-lasting human presence. It is amazing how men, women and even little children drive their traditional canoes with ease. In the afternoon we reach **Ouidah**, an ancient slave port and considered the capital of the **African Vodoun** religion. During a guided tour we visit the Python temple, the fort, the "slave road" and the point of "no return" where slaves had to board ships. The day ends with the visit of the sacred forest, with enormous trees and **thousands of fruit bats**. In the evening we drive to Grand Popo, a charming **fishermen's village with a long beach** where we are accommodated for the next 3 nights.

9th January. Vodoun religion, the Mono river, fishing village

Tour in small motorboat along the Mono river to discover tiny villages where ancient practices of **salt extraction** are still in use. We cross lagoons with mangrove forests and reach the **estuary**, where the waters of the river and the ocean meet. Along the coast **fishermen** live in villages built of palm branches. In the afternoon we visit the performance of the **Zangbeto secret mask** society. Zangbeto is a large mask, covered with colorful straw representing non-human spirits, the forces of nature and the night, who have inhabited the Earth long before man. In the evening we can assist to the release of **little turtles** into the sea.



10th January: Voodoo Festival, Gran Popo, Ouidah and surroundings

The 10th of January in Benin is a national celebration day honouring traditional religion. Our whole day is dedicated to attend the **colorful festival** of Vodoun. Along the entire coast of Benin and Togo, Vodoun religion gathers a lot of adepts. Passed down by the ancestors, it is still practiced with fervor today. The religious experience is much richer and complex than westerners imagine and should not be mistaken for a form of black magic. To millions both here and abroad Vodoun represents a (positive) religion that gives meaning and order to their lives. As per the program of festivities (which changes and is flexible), we will choose the best sites - the festival takes place in the entire region around Gran Popo and Ouidah. Have your cameras ready with long and wide lenses to take amazing shots!



11th January. Unesco World heritage site of Abomey. Gelede & Egungun masks dance.

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**. A Kingdom whose economy was based for a long time on slave trade.

In the afternoon, we attend two performances of **dancing masks**. The **Gelede mask** dance is celebrated by the whole community to promote fertility of both the people and the soil. The masks are brightly painted and move like puppets. The delighted crowds laugh and clap their hands as they watch in appreciation. The **Egungun** is a **very impressive and powerful mask**, being the reincarnation of deceased people. They are known and feared for their aggressiveness and their unpredictable way of moving around.

12th January. Shrines and fetish hills

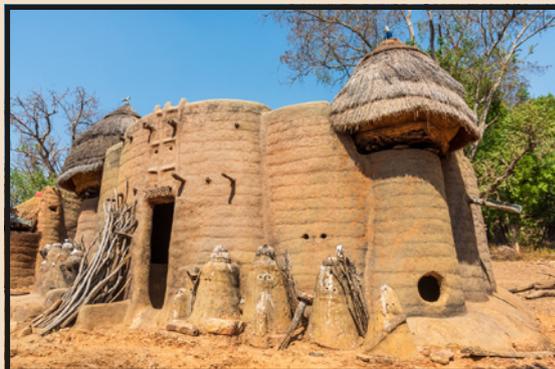
Our first stop, **Dassa**, was the capital of an ancient kingdom. We will visit some remains of this long-lasting dynasty. We will see also the legendary wooden horse, given by Portuguese merchants in 1903 to the chief who was complaining that four of his horses had died from a mysterious disease. We will climb up the Royal hill, the burial site of members of the royal family, a site "protected" by many statues and the remains of recent rituals. Later we stop at the **Dankoli Fetish**, considered to be one of the most **powerful spiritual fetishes** in West Africa. Thousands of

little sticks are pushed into the fetish to testify 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. Traces of blood, palm alcohol or oil on the fetish are proof that many prayers have been answered. Many occasions of great pictures wait for you!



13th January: Taneka & Fulani Villages, from Copargo to Boukoumbè

We get up early to explore the **Taneka villages by foot**. The hamlets are situated on a mountain-range and made up of round adobe huts covered with a conical roof protected by a terra cotta pot. The upper part of the village is inhabited by young initiated men and by the **fetish priests** who cover themselves only with a skin and 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. On the way to **Boukoumbè**, where we will stay 2 nights in a simple but authentic accommodation, we might have the chance to visit a **camp of Fulani people**, a nomadic ethnic group.



14th January Boukoumbè, the fortified villages, Tamberma & Somba

Full day to explore the surroundings of Boukoumbè. We are in the land of the **Somba** who live in fortified dwellings. Similar in form to medieval castles, those houses are beautiful examples of the ancient African architecture. Their style impressed **Le Courboisier**, who defined it « sculptural architecture ». Their strong traditional beliefs are represented by big shrines in phallic shape at the entrance of the houses. With permission granted us by the inhabitants we will enter their homes to better understand their way of life. Their houses are a **reflecting their cosmology**. The whole family and livestock are kept in the house in case of enemy attacks. The **Tamberma** share these mountains with other tribes. We will see ethnic groups having slightly the same style of life, although each group is proud of its origins and traditions.

15th January Togo: Unesco Site Koutammakou & Fire Dance

Today we enter Togo. After crossing the border, we will remain in the land of the Tamberma. In the village **Koutammakou** we can admire other fortified mud dwellings, it is a cultural landscape designated in 2004 as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**. The traditional mud houses are known as a national symbol of Togo. Many of them have two floors and some of them have a flat roof. Later on we proceed our journey to **Sokodè** where in the evening the very impressive fire dance awaits us. In the centre of the village a large fire lights up the faces of the participants, who dance to the hypnotic beat of the drums eventually leaping into the glowing embers. They pick up burning coals and pass them over their bodies and even put them in their mouths without injuring themselves or showing any sign of pain...



16th January: from Sokodè to Lomè (340 km – 5 hrs)

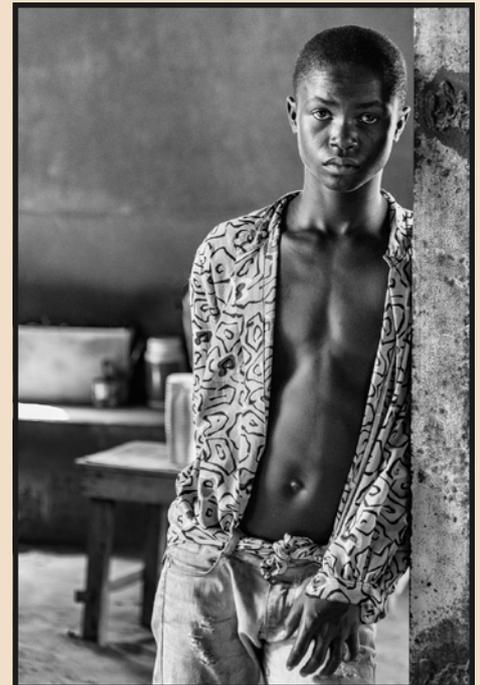
Today is a transfer day, at its end we will reach Lomè, the **vibrant capital of Togo**. It is the only African city having been colonized by Germans, British and French. It is also one of the few capitals in the world to be on the border with another nation. These elements have led to the development of a special identity reflected in the life style of its inhabitants and in the architecture. Lomè is a crossing point for people, trade and cultures, a cosmopolitan city in small size. We will pay special attention to the famous **fetish market**, where an eclectic assortment of all the necessary ingredients for love potions and magical concoctions can be found.



17th January: Animism, Vodoun, traditional healer, Togoville (half day program)

Day dedicated to the visit of the surroundings of Lomé, specifically the region of **Togoville**. Togo was named after Togoville. This area is very interesting because it is located in the heart of **Vodoun land** while at the same time there is an important **Christian sanctuary** that proofs the interconnection between both religions.

On the agenda there is a boat tour on the lake Togo and - if there will be the chance - a voodoo ceremony in a remote hidden village. The **frenetic rhythm** of the drums and chants of the adepts help to call the **voodoo spirit** who takes possession of some of the dancers who fall into a **deep trance**: eyes rolling back, grimaces, convulsions, insensitivity to fire or pain. **Sakpata, Hevieso, Mami Water** and other deities are showing their presence by taking possession of their adepts. Then we will meet a **traditional healer** who treats his patients with voodoo rites and herbs. The treatments are effective for almost all diseases, especially for insanity. Retour to Lomé and end of our journey.



Price per person € 2.590,00

Single supplement € 350,00

min. of participants 6 people/maximum 12 people

supplement small group (4-5 participants) € 540,00

INCLUDES:

Professional travel photographer, expert local guides and drivers for all activities. Accommodation on a dbl shared basis in standard rooms in 3* hotels (local standard, some places with A/C, some with fan). Halfboard (continental breakfast and dinner). Tours and visits as per the program. Mineral water in the bus/car. 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 airport taxes. Visa fees. Items of a personal nature. Lunches. Drinks, portorage. Entrance fees, tours/excursions and transfers not specified above. Cancellation, baggage and medical insurance (compulsory!). Personal photographic permissions. Any new government taxes, levies, fuel or industry increases which are beyond our control. Tips. 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 the African continent including Benin & Togo.
- the daily programs have been established basing on the needs of photographers: stops for pictures, visits of spots with particular photographic charme, use of the hours with the best light conditions, program points of special photographic appeal
- the opportunity to exchange experiences with a professional travel photographer and the other participants with the same interests
- voodoo ceremonies, masks, dances and festivities
- small group size allows us to remain flexible for spontaneous program changes depending in personal interests of the participants



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