



# JOURNEY TO THE POINT OF NO RETURN

EAGER FOR A TASTE OF WEST AFRICA,  
**CATHERINE COULTER** TAKES HER HUSBAND AND  
DAUGHTERS ON A TRIP TO THE VOODOO NATION OF  
BENIN, WITH A PHILANTHROPIC MISSION IN MIND...



**A**s vacation destinations go, Benin is not exactly at the top of everyone's must-see list. In fact, my husband, George, and I had initially wanted to visit Mali – the land of Timbuktu and the great mud mosque at Djenne – but with a number of security issues in place in Mali and caution advised by the Canadian government, we decided that, as much as it would

make for a fascinating school report, getting kidnapped was not the best spring break idea for our daughters Emma (15) and Hannah (11). As we explored other options in West Africa we stumbled upon Benin. A narrow West African country sandwiched between Nigeria to the east and Togo to the west (with Burkina Faso to the north), Benin has everything from historical sites to national parks and beaches. Better still, Benin is peaceful and relatively safe.

A trip is a way to see the world. But to really experience the world, to be a part of it, I'm a firm believer in being prepared to do that extra bit more. On our last trip we discovered the joy of connecting with local schools and making a difference to students the same age as Emma and Hannah, so before we left for Benin I did some digging, and ended up finding a US-based NGO called the Benin Education Fund (BEF). The BEF provides scholarships and educational support throughout the country, and they were able to make arrangements for us to visit an elementary school in the north of the country. Our girls set about fundraising for school supplies with the assistance of their classmates at Elmwood School in Ottawa, and we were soon on our way.

Broadly speaking, Benin has three geographic areas of interest – the southern coast along the Bight of Benin, the historical middle part of the country, and the north with its wildlife preserves. We started in the south, since all international flights

into the country arrive in the coastal city of Cotonou. The BEF had recommended a driver for us, as there are no commercial planes or trains in the country; the buses are too slow and the roads are not recommended for foreigners to drive. When we landed in the evening, after two days of travel, we were warmly greeted by our driver, Basile N'Tcha.

**TRAFFIC JAMS AND ATMS**

The first part of our trip took us to the north, where we were based in the regional centre of Natitingou (also known as Nati). Although we've already travelled all over the world with the girls, the long drive up to Nati was constantly entertaining. The two-lane highway north was a mishmash of traffic

perfectly balanced on their heads, stands selling tapioca and the freshest pineapples you'll ever come across, bags of cotton, firewood and homemade charcoal for sale, and people going about their daily lives in the flamboyantly coloured and patterned clothing found in much of West Africa. The scenery varied from thatched-roof, mud-walled houses, to people making mud bricks and women washing clothes in the rivers. Lush greens were absolutely everywhere, despite it not being the rainy season. Every now and again we'd pass a car or truck by the side of the road, stripped and left to rust in the dust. Evidently it's cheaper to abandon a crashed vehicle than haul it away and fix it. Motorcycles are the main mode of transport in

**"WE SAW LOTS OF CHEAP NIGERIAN GAS FOR SALE ALONG THE ROADSIDES, MUCH OF IT PACKAGED IN OLD COKE BOTTLES"**

jams, construction and cars and trucks vying for space with pedestrians, animals, motorcycles and carts. At one point the traffic was at a standstill due to an accident, with everyone settling in for several hours of going nowhere. Ever fearless, Basile pointed his jeep towards the deep roadside ditch. We closed our eyes, held our breath and suddenly found that we were driving along through underbrush, past mile after mile of stationary trucks and buses. As we drove, we watched life unfolding in a multitude of ways – women walking with enormous loads

the country and we saw lots of cheap Nigerian gas for sale along the roadsides, much of it packaged in old Coke bottles.

As we each watched and dozed, Basile's car radio rocked out with a combination of West African music, reggae and lots and lots of our compatriot Celine Dion, whose songs are apparently adored in this mostly French-speaking country. Best of all, from time to time we'd spot something that would make us all fumble for our cameras – boys standing by the roadside and dangling the biggest rats we'd ever seen by their tails. If you can get



**WRITER PROFILE.**

**NAME** CATHERINE COULTER

**AGE** 46

**INFO** Catherine is a lawyer who lives in Ottawa, Canada, with her husband and daughters. She has previously written about Ethiopia for *Real Travel*.



» your head around it, rat stew is supposed to be quite tasty... Another point of interest was realising, upon arrival in Nati, that our biggest problem wasn't going to be finding something appealing to eat, but rather getting our hands on some cash (the Communauté Financière Africaine franc). I guess sometimes it's important to read your guidebook thoroughly before travelling, because it turns out that there are virtually no ATMs in Benin, almost no hotels take credit cards or travellers cheques and most banks will only change euros. It took some luck and about an hour of waiting at a bank to change a huge wad of US travellers cheques, for an utterly exorbitant fee.

Most travellers to Nati are headed to Pendjari National Park, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and one of the best animal parks in northwest Africa. But the benefit of going to a place like Pendjari is that there are still hardly any tourists. The downside is that because there are so few tourists, there is very little infrastructure and it's harder to see the wildlife. Just getting to Pendjari is difficult, as it requires the long journey up to Nati and then a private car to take you north a couple of hours and through the park. Accommodation and food within the park is scant, and most visits are simply a daytrip from Nati with a packed lunch. In addition, eastern and southern parts of Africa

are simply loaded with wildlife compared to northwest Africa. That said, in our own haphazard way we managed to spot several different species of African deer, antelopes, hippos, elephants, wild boar, baboons and countless varieties of birds, all without the crowds of jeeps and tourists which we would have encountered elsewhere.

#### VOODOO PEOPLE

One of Benin's other key sites for travellers is the central city of Abomey – home to the once famous Kingdom of Dahomey. The Kingdom, which was established in the 1600s, had a long line of bloodthirsty kings who ruled southern Benin with an iron grip. All that's left to see these days is a voodoo temple, a throne perched on the skulls of royal enemies and two palaces made of mud and wattle. These have been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site due to the animist bas-relief painted sculptures which cover their outer walls.

Interestingly, some of the kings of Dahomey were among the worst slave traders in Africa. It was a way for them to get rid of their enemies, while at the same time receiving compensation in the form of guns

and other weapons, which could in turn be used to capture more slaves and conquer more territory. Those who got in their way faced a brutal death, and the wall which rings the outside of the palaces has a deep red colour which reputedly comes from the blood of royal enemies. Another of the kings created an army of Amazon warriors, women who were the kingdom's fiercest and most bloodthirsty fighters.

Along the coast of the Bight of Benin is Ouidah, one of the oldest communities in the country and particularly well known for being both a voodoo centre and the end of the slave trade route. Although voodoo is the religion of choice in Benin, as a foreigner it's not easy to catch a ceremony. Not that our girls wanted to anyway – particularly after reading that it's possible to get cursed if you look at a voodoo witch in the wrong way. But Ouidah is home to a voodoo snake temple, which we paid a visit and where we had our photos duly snapped with pythons around our necks.

From Ouidah it's a short drive down to the beach and the Point of No Return. Another UNESCO World Heritage Site, this ominously named spot is where slaves were shipped in large numbers to Europe and





» beyond. Palm trees line the fringes of the beach and broken shells and pieces of pottery from old slave ships litter the sand. It's rare these days to find a beach that is actually spotless and uninhabited, but the Point of No Return is just that. The absolute stillness of the place was the perfect setting for pondering the fate of the multitudes who left Africa against their will, never to return.

'hotels' to gas stations and a school. The market is a collection of boats in the middle of the river, all piled high with fresh fruit, vegetables and bundles of firewood. As we toured around the village in a boat with a dodgy motor, the townspeople were out and about, travelling to and from the mainland, fishing and going about their daily business in a wide variety of motorboats, sail boats and paddle boats.

**"AS WE APPROACHED THE SCHOOL WE SAW THERE WERE SEVERAL HUNDRED PEOPLE ON EITHER SIDE OF THE DUSTY ROAD, ALL CHANTING 'WELCOME'"**

**MAKING A DIFFERENCE**  
The sites of Benin were all interesting and the people were remarkably friendly, but the real highlight of the trip was our visit to an elementary school in Tampegre, arranged before our arrival by the Benin Education Fund. Tampegre is a small farming community situated in the north of the country, about 30 minutes from Nati. On the day of our arrival in Nati we tried to rearrange the scheduled date for our school visit but were told that

it would not be possible, as the children had prepared a dance for us. What exactly this meant did not become clear to us until we drove through Tampegre. As we

We spent the entire morning being feted and, as the girls remarked, we now know what it feels like to be a celebrity. Songs were intermingled with speeches, which in turn were interspersed with more dancing. Some of the top students spoke to us in English, which was translated to French by the principal and in turn translated to the local language by a teacher so that the parents and other villagers could understand. We told the students a bit about ourselves and took great pleasure in handing out the school supplies we had brought with us.

approached the school we saw that there were several hundred people on either side of the dusty road, all chanting "Welcome, welcome" and waving homemade Canadian and Benin flags. Most of them were school children, but the welcoming committee was rounded off with teachers and parents. As we got out of the car and made our way by foot to the school, groups of male and female dancers passed us, putting on their show. It was enough to bring tears to our eyes.

In a country like Benin, the basics are revered, and the BEF had given us a list of needed items, from pencils, pens, markers and crayons to soccer balls, educational books and dictionaries. For anyone who hopes to take in the sights of Benin or another African country



one day, we strongly recommend making a difference in your life and the lives of young students by establishing a connection with a local school in this way. It's impossible to do justice to our visit in words, but the memories from that morning will remain with us forever.

The highest compliment that I can give to a country is that my daughters want to return there at some point in their lives. Benin is not a country of knock-your-socks-off sights, it can be difficult to get around and although the food is edible, it's never going to win any culinary contests. But it is a place that gets under your skin and into your soul, a place filled with the beat of West African music and vibrant colours. Benin is number one on Emma's 'return to' list, and that should tell you everything you need to know. ■



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### TRAVEL

A number of carriers fly to Cotonou, the largest being Air France. Flight prices change almost daily due to fuel costs, taxes and availability. Once in Benin, the easiest way to get around is by hiring a car and driver. Some of the major hotels can arrange this for you. Catherine recommends Basile N'Tcha, who can be contacted at [kamapo@yahoo.fr](mailto:kamapo@yahoo.fr) or on one of the following three phone numbers: +229 97 889 269 / 98 525 252 / 95 851 764. In March 2009, Basile charged US\$125/day for his services as a driver and the use of a large air-conditioned jeep.

### ACCOMMODATION

Reasonably priced, recommended hotels include the Hotel Tata Somba in Natitingou ([www.hoteltatasomba.com](http://www.hoteltatasomba.com)) and the Hotel du Lac in Cotonou ([www.hoteldulac-benin.com](http://www.hoteldulac-benin.com)).

### WHEN TO GO

Anytime other than the rainy season, which is from April to July and September to October. The coolest and driest months to travel are from November to February.

### MONEY

Make sure you bring lots of euros! Most hotels, restaurants, shops and even banks in Benin are not set up for credit cards, travellers cheques or US dollars.

### VISAS

British passport holders require a visa to enter Benin. Visas can be obtained from the Honorary Consulate: Millennium House, Humber Road, Near Staples Corner, London NW2 6DW; tel: 020 8830 8612; fax: 020 7435 0665; [l.landau@btinternet.com](mailto:l.landau@btinternet.com)

### HEALTH

Vaccinations against cholera, diphtheria, hepatitis A+B, meningococcal meningitis, polio, rabies, tetanus, TB and typhoid should be considered. There is also a risk of yellow fever, dengue fever and malaria in Benin.