

## THE VOODOO KING WANTS A PENPAL

*In the penultimate chapter of her two-month solo trip through West Africa, **Eliza Reid** gets back on course to Benin – and has a drink with the new voodoo king.*



**Party:** *Dancers at the inauguration celebration for the new Supreme Chief of the voodoo religion were painted in yellow and dancing to the rhythms of the drums visible in the background of the picture.*

The 7am bus from Ouagadougou Burkina Faso, to Lomé Togo, pulled into the central bus station promptly at 1am, having survived hairpin bends, teenage mercenaries, and an exhausted driver.

I wearily stepped off the bus and into the throng of taxi drivers, who spotted the lone western face which was like a beacon. I negotiated a reasonable price with a small, inoffensive-looking guy and followed him to what turned out to be an unmarked taxi. Then a second man, his "friend", jumped in with him – for "security" I was told. I showed them the card of a hotel where I wanted to stay. They told me it was 15 kilometres outside of town.

Proverbial alarm bells were beginning to ring. Although the two men seemed friendly, I was breaking every security rule I had set for myself. But it was the middle of the night and I was exhausted. Besides, I wasn't sure what other options were available if I got out in the middle of a deserted Lomé.

So I resorted to my Alternate Plan when in a sticky situation: talk. I asked them about their families and made up a story about how I "knew" the owner of the hotel and wanted to arrive quickly because he was waiting up for me and would already be worried because of the late arrival of the bus.

Just outside of town we were stopped at a police checkpoint. The friendly officer asked to see my passport and I took the opportunity to double-check the location of the hotel with him. I was relieved when he confirmed my driver's estimate that it was a few kilometres down the road.

We finally pulled into the Hotel Alize just before 2am, whereupon a loud discussion ensued in Fon between my taxi driver and the hotel's security guard.

"The guard tells me the owner is sleeping," explained the taxi driver in French. "But we are telling him he must wake the owner up, so you can say hello to your friend and tell him you have arrived safely."

My imaginary story had obviously worked. For the first time in my life, I paid more than the agreed price for the taxi and went to a soft bed for a well-deserved rest.

### **AN ENCOUNTER WITH ROYALTY**

I arrived before noon in Ouidah, Benin after two restful nights in Togo. Ouidah's palm-fringed sandy beaches are now marked with memorials to those who lost their lives during the slave trade, when millions of Africans were transported from the interior of the continent to colonies in the Caribbean and the Americas.

Ouidah was one of many departure points along the West African coast. Slaves from this town were generally transported to Brazil and the Caribbean, particularly Haiti.

Ouidah is also known for the religion its inhabitants brought with them to the New World – voodoo. Fifty percent of the population of Benin is said to have these traditional beliefs, although even those who are officially Christian or Muslim often mingle their dogmas with traditions from voodoo.



**The Gas Station:** When zemidjan (moto-taxis, shown on the left) need to re-fuel, they stop at makeshift stations where empty liquor bottles have been pre-filled with petrol to the desired quantity. The small rows of bottles are for the zemis. The large tub by the woman's hand stands waiting in case a full-sized car comes by whose driver could actually afford that much petrol at once. After this photo was taken, I hopped back on the zemi and we continued our journey.



**Commemoration:** The Gate of No Return in Ouidah marks the spot from where people captured from the interior left their continent forever, crammed into boats and sold into slavery in the New World. The memorial is carved with figures depicting the journeys of the slaves.

The influence of voodoo in Ouidah is still palpable. Fetishes sit on street corners and have honoured places in homes. There is a sacred forest with statues representing different divinities of the gods, in particular a horned creature with an enormous phallus, symbolising strength and fertility. **One of the most popular sites for visitors is the kitsch python temple, a shrine to these sacred creatures, where guests can be photographed with a live, but toothless, python wrapped around their necks.**

And, as I was to discover, there were still voodoo officials in the town.

After checking in as the only guest of the Hotel Oasis in the town centre, I collected a few things and left to find some lunch.

A gaggle of people in semi-formal clothing were loitering around the hotel restaurant. "*Içi, madame!*" they shouted to me. This way! They gestured me towards the dining area, obviously booked for a private function.

I walked tentatively closer. The entrance was guarded by two armed policemen; clearly this was not just any private function.

"*Oui, madame, c'est içi*", said the police officer, also gesturing me inside.

And that is how I inadvertently crashed the invitation-only gala lunch commemorating the investiture of the eleventh Supreme Chief of the Voodoo Religion, the Daagbo (his Majesty) Tomadjlehoukpon II Metogbokandji.

The other invited guests welcomed me warmly and I sat at a long table enjoying a traditional three-course meal and free beer. One of them, an engineer named Rodrigue, invited to take me to visit the Supreme Chief the next day (he was not at the gala lunch as he was not allowed to leave his compound for a certain number of hours following the installation).

Rodrigue met me at an agreed hour the next evening and we walked the five minutes to the entrance of the compound of the Supreme Chief. Singing and dancing were well underway and a group of several hundred were watching men and women in grass skirts with yellow painted chests and faces dance in circles to the rhythm of drums.

Occasionally, an anonymous person in the crowd appeared to faint. People would immediately crowd around, reviving the chosen individual and pushing him into the dance. Rodrigue explained to me that these people had been penetrated with a spirit which would make them holy. **The current holy people were identified with cowbells around their necks and rows of cowrie shells crossed around their chests like bullets in an action flick.**

The Daagbo himself was sitting in a room in a regal-looking chair, surrounded on either side by well-wishers and with an empty bottle of whisky on a small table in front of him. A large grey fetish in the shape of an upside down bowl sat to his right. Rodrigue introduced me as an "adventurer" (which, as someone who is too scared to ride a bicycle, I found ironic) who was going to write about her travels in Africa.

The Daagbo invited me to his personal sitting room to have a chat with him. We were escorted to a smaller room with eggshell blue walls, plastic carpets, and an electric fan in the corner, where another regal chair, this time an imitation Lazy-Boy, awaited him.

I murmured some pleasantries Rodrigue had advised me on regarding the honour of having the opportunity to meet such a royal figure. "I am very fortunate," I concluded.

"Yes, you are," he replied, catching me a little off guard.

We talked for about ten minutes about Benin and what I thought of travelling in the country. To my surprise, he then asked for my email address so we could have a little correspondence. Apparently even voodoo kings are everyday people like you and me.

## **THE VISA DANCE**

Benin's de-facto capital, Cotonou, is the perfect example of a sub-Saharan city getting too big for its britches. It's grown significantly over the past decades, and now, with a population of

around one million (in a country of only seven), there is plenty of pollution, garbage and unemployment to show for it.



**Balance:** *This woman in Ouidah asked me to take her photo. She wanted to show off how she could balance a huge tub of bric-a-brac on her head.*

But I needed to spend at least a day in the city; I had to apply for my Ghanaian visa, the only one of my trip which could not be issued at the border.

Applying for visas is a necessary process for the overland traveller. Many borders do not issue visas on demand, and purchasing them in advance of a longer trip can be expensive and difficult, especially in the likely scenario that dates are fluid.

But the visa hunt is also often good travel story fodder and an excuse to regale others with tales of how arduous acquiring that one-page sticker in the passport was. The process takes you to a neighbourhood that is not on the tourist trail and tests your diplomatic abilities to deal with steely officials. I always wear my cleanest clothes when visiting an Embassy.

I took a *zemidjan*, the local name for the ubiquitous motos, to the Ghanaian Embassy early one morning where the stern woman told me that a visa could not be issued unless I could provide proof of accommodation. Having a list of options from my dog-eared Rough Guide was not enough.

I had to track down a local phone centre to call Ghana and make a reservation at a mid-range guesthouse that could fax the embassy to confirm my booking.

When I returned, the official was busy chastising a Chinese tourist for not properly gluing her four passport photos to the application. She glanced at me disapprovingly as I ventured forward with my form and an assurance that the booking fax would arrive soon.

"Iceland!" exclaimed the woman as she looked at my permanent address. "But it's so cold there. How can you possibly stand it?"

"I do it for love," I responded, betting on the existence of a soft side in this stern lady. Her heart melted immediately.

"'For love' - I like that," she smiled warmly at me. It was a victory; I knew my visa would be ready when I returned.

## **OF ORPHANS AND KINGS**

Abomey, 120 kilometres north of Cotonou, is the site of the ancient royal kingdom of Dahomey, the former name of Benin. This was the place from which the brutal regime of the Kings of Dahomey, descended from a panther and the son of a princess, reigned before the French invaded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Abomey was where the skulls of enemies were collected like golf balls and impaled on the castle walls, which were themselves made from human blood, as a warning to others.

The former royal palaces of the kings of Abomey is now a UNESCO-listed heritage site. Each king had built their own palace and of the original twelve, two now remain.



**The Commute:** Women from Ganvié, population 30,000, crowd around boats to take them to their homes on stilts on Lake Nakoué. They travel daily to the mainland to sell their wares and collect any supplies they need.



**Venice:** Ganvié, near Cotonou, bills itself as the Venice of West Africa, since all of the village's buildings sit on stilts in Lake Nakoué. It is possible to take a tour of the village in a pirogue, passing through clusters of water lilies on the way.

Pierette, my compulsory guide to the complex, showed me the tomb of King Guézo, with walls lined with the blood of human sacrifices. There were also weapons used by the Amazons, a legion of ferocious women soldiers who would sacrifice themselves for the king if they returned to Abomey without enough victims. Pierette also pointed out juicily the throne of King Ghézo, which sits on the skulls of his former enemies. To add to the gore, we visited the temple of the Ahoissis, the site of the graves of 41 of King Glélé's wives who volunteered to be buried alive after his death.

Filled with the gruesome history for the day, I took a *zemi* along dirt tracks to the Chez Monique *auberge* on the outskirts of town. There I met the other guests, a group of Swiss and American tourists in town to volunteer with an orphanage they had begun supporting in early 2005. Would I be willing to help them paint walls for a day, they asked?

The three-storey building of the Peuple du Monde orphanage houses 120 orphans and, despite constant improvements, still did not have electricity, running water, or enough mosquito nets for the children. The owners estimated that up to a third of the children were HIV-positive; the Americans had arranged for them to be tested during my stay, but regardless of the outcome, the money does not exist to treat the condition.

I spent one day painting the walls of the outdoor kitchen and two pit-toilets, swarming with flies. It was stiflingly hot and the sweat was stinging my eyes and pouring off my nose. The children remained unaffected by the heat, and sang for us while we worked or pulled at my arm to request that their photo be taken. One of the Swiss women delivered a lecture to all the teenage girls about hygiene issues; none of them knew what could cause them to become pregnant, nor how to prevent it.

Meeting the smiling, energetic faces of the children at Peuple du Monde gave me strength to face the next orphanage I had arranged to visit on my trip: SPES, a charity in Togo founded and primarily funded by Icelanders.

I was on my way back to Lomé.

## **END.**

*Eliza Reid travelled alone through seven West African countries last October and November. This is the fourth part of her travelogue. The fifth and last entry will appear in Morgunblaðið next Sunday.*



**Playing:** Football is a popular game everywhere in West Africa. These kids paused during play to partake in another favourite pastime – posing for photos. The main building of the Peuple du Monde orphanage is in the background.



**The Wave:** Even when I'm on the top floor of the Peuple du Monde orphanage, children can sense a lens pointed in their direction and clamber for attention.

## WEST AFRICA

### Benin

Population: 7.8 million

Capital: Porto Novo

Official Language: French, although Fon and Yoruba are common in the south.

Religion: Indigenous beliefs (50%); Christian (30%), Muslim (20%)

Life Expectancy at birth: 53 years

A young woman tourist I saw in Senegal was sporting a T-shirt which read "Benin: It's Next to Nigeria". Certainly, the continent's most popular nation gets a lot more international attention than the thin strip of a country to its west. But according to the BBC, Benin, formerly known as Dahomey, is one of Africa's most stable nations. Despite some problems of being next door to the seething mass that is Nigeria, including major difficulties with child trafficking, the country is a little slice of the best the continent has to offer, including tranquil beaches, the slave trade history, and voodoo culture. Since Benin made a successful transition from Marxist-Leninist rule to democracy in the 1990s, the country has been a stable and friendly place to visit.