Benin Photography Tour Report 2025

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Benin, a small yet captivating country in West Africa, is nestled between Togo, Nigeria, Niger, and Burkino Faso. It's a land of vibrant cultures, ancient traditions, and captivating landscapes. The country is known as the birthplace of Vodun (or Voodoo) and the cultures of Benin are steeped in spiritual practices that permeate every aspect of daily life.

Our journey coincided with the annual Voodoo festival on January 10, a day when the very essence of this ancient belief comes alive. Often shrouded in mystery and misconceptions, voodoo is, in reality, a rich and spiritual tradition. With more than 30 million followers worldwide, it is more than just a religion – it's a way of life, a profound respect for the forces of nature and the spirit of ancestors. In Benin you can feel its soul in every ritual, every rhythm, every dance, and every ceremony.

The first evening and a memorable start

Our tour kicked off with a warm and lively welcome dinner at a seaside restaurant in Cotonou. Freshly grilled fish and ice-cold beer set the tone for the evening as we relaxed and started getting to know each other.

Shango

Our first day began with an out-of-character early start in West Africa. After a brief introduction and some practical guidance/protocols for visiting West African ceremonies, we headed out for our first, a Shango ceremony in Bopa.

Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder, lightning and justice, is at the heart of this ritual. We were welcomed into a small courtyard, where the air was alive with rhythmic drumming, chanting and traditional dances. In the courtyard was a legba (a small sculpture for guest offerings), a shrine and a temple where a series of Shango priests were preparing for the ceremony. The energy was infectious, and the atmosphere felt charged with something mystical. As part of the ritual, a chicken is ceremonially offered to Shango. Later, this offering is shared and eaten by the community, symbolizing unity and respect for tradition. The Shango ceremony is steeped in history. Before it was outlawed in 1982, rituals like this served as a form of divine justice, where Shango's power was believed to reveal or decide the fate of those seeking answers.

After the main ceremony, we were invited to step behind the scenes into a small courtyard where the ritual continued with the Shango priests. At the center were three skulls that were carefully arranged and which played a crucial role in the ceremony. Suddenly, an explosion rang out when the gun powder on top of the skulls was ignited in a dramatic moment used to reach a verdict.

As the ceremony concluded, we were granted the unique opportunity to capture portraits of the priests before we left for a lovely lunch by the lake and a presentation on voodoo by Inger.

In the afternoon we visit the village of King Agassa, the spiritual leader of voodoo – a figure held in the same esteem by voodoo followers as the Pope is by Catholics. Preparations for the annual voodoo festival were in full swing. While waiting for the arrival of the king from the secret forest we were immersed in a whirlwind of music, dancing and rituals. Strikingly unfamiliar sights unfolded before us on the streets: men with faces covered in white powder, bursts of rhythmic drumming, and the sudden appearance of the Zangbeto, the traditional voodoo guardians of the night. By the end of the day, it became clear that we had only just scratched the surface of Benin's rich cultural tapestry – and we couldn't wait for what was to come.

We ended the evening with a BBQ on the beach and a bonfire. Under the starry sky, we were surprised by the rhythmic energy of a djembe band. It was the perfect way to conclude the beginning of our tour.

Egungun

The following day began early with breakfast at a small local restaurant, where we enjoyed a simple yet delicious meal of omelet and baguette. Afterwards, we set off on a journey to a remote village to witness the Egungun ceremony. Egungun, the ancestral spirits, are believed to serve as a bridge between the living and the dead, offering guidance, blessings, and protection to the community. As the ceremony began, the Egunguns emerged from the forest, their beautiful colorful costumes and elaborate masks flowing with energy and mysticism. We had the privilege of capturing this incredible moment through our lenses, documenting their majestic presence as they moved through the field. The ceremony continued with lively music and dance, and before it ended, we were given another opportunity to photograph the performers up close in a series of private portrait sessions.

The Voodoo festival

Later in the morning, we headed to the Voodoo Festival, where we were warmly greeted by King Agassa himself. His friendliness made us feel truly welcome as we immersed ourselves in the vibrant festivities.

It was a wonderful experience to walk among the crowd and capture the vibrant scenes with our cameras. The festival was attended by many high-ranking individuals including visiting Ashanti officials from Ghana, adding an air of significance to the event. Benin is home to numerous kings, a tradition that dates back centuries and remains deeply rooted in the country's cultural identity. Their presence, adorned in regal attire, highlighted the importance of the occasion.

Zangbeto

We ended the day with a private ceremony of the Zangbetos. Known as the 'night watchmen', Zangbetos are traditional guardians of the community, revered for their spiritual power and role in maintaining order and protection. The ceremony began with a spectacular fire-breather, who wandered around setting the stage for what was to come. Held in an open area surrounding by local mud houses, the Zangbetos appeared in their striking raffia costumes, spinning and dancing to the rhythm of the music. What made the Zangbetos so mysterious is that, even when they were flipped over, no person can be seen underneath, leaving all of us in awe.

During the ceremony, one of the Zangbetos was flipped, revealing a transformation of uncooked rice into cooked rice. Another time, a turtle and a bird appeared – both alive. It was a mesmerizing afternoon that left us captivated by the mystery and magic of this unique tradition.

Ouidah and python temple

We left early again, departing from Grand Popo to head toward Ouidah, known as a center for the transatlantic slave trade and the birthplace of voodoo. Due to the voodoo festival, many roads were closed, making some places difficult to access. However, we managed to visit the famous Python Temple, a sacred site dedicated to the worship of pythons, which are revered as symbols of fertility and protection. Most of us took the opportunity to have their photo taken with a python draped around their neck. The pythons are gentle and well cared for, making this an unforgettable moment for anyone who dared to participate.

We also took some time to shop and enjoy a delicious lunch at Alozo, a combined restaurant and gallery/shop owned by a charming Belgian-Beninese couple.

Ganvié, the ' Venice of Africa'

In the afternoon we drove to Ganvié, often referred to as the 'Venice of Africa'. This unique village is built entirely on stilts over water, a fascinating architectural response to the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. The Tofinu people established Ganvié to evade capture, as slavers were forbidden to pursue them into the water. The village was added to the Unesco World Heritage List on October 31, 1996.

While waiting for our luggage to be transferred from the bus to the boat, some of us took the chance to fly a drone, capturing incredible aerial views of the village, the market and the boats. We then boarded a small ferry and traveled across the calm waters to an auberge where we would spend the night. After placing our luggage in the modest rooms, we paired up and explored Ganvié in traditional wooden canoes. As we navigated through the waterways, we noticed that locals weren't always comfortable being photographed, which required us to be patient and respectful. However, this sometimes led to unexpected and creative images, adding a unique perspective to our experience in this extraordinary floating village. We ended the day with a cold beer, watching the sun set over the tranquil waters of Ganvié.

Porto Novo

We woke up early to catch the sunrise, and a few of us took to the skies with our drones as the day began. After breakfast the boat was loaded to take us back to the mainland. On our way we were entertained by a boat filled with young boys and music, who moved off towards an open area with us where they played music, danced, and splashed around so we could take photos.

We arrived in Porto Novo in time for some local sightseeing and lunch. Porto Novo is the capital city of Benin and is located in the southern part of the country near the coast. The city has a rich history, influenced by both African and European cultures, particularly due to its past as a Portuguese trading post. Porto Novo is known for its unique Afro-Brazilian heritage. We visited the mosque and the children near the mosque were delightful. It's often difficult to photograph people on the street, but today, it was surprisingly easy. Koon, one of our group members, helped the local women baking donuts and in return for her efforts we were given two bags to take with us. We had a great time! After saying goodbye to the kids we made our way to a restaurant for lunch.

Holi villages

We spent the afternoon visiting two remote villages of Holi people as we head eastward towards the border of Nigeria. The Holi (or Ilje or Ohori) people are part of the Yoruba people cluster and living mainly in the south of Benin. They are known for their traditional body scarring rituals. Each pattern in the Holi tribe is dedicated to their family so they can tell where someone is from just by looking at their face. Scarifications are popular on women's stomachs as a mark of beauty and in the belief that the more scars you have, the more children you will give birth to.

At the first village, we were warmly welcomed by children who eagerly walked with us into the village. We took photos, capturing the warmth of these earthy villages, while we walked around. After spending some time there, we continued on our journey to the second village, eager to explore more of the local culture and interactions.

By the time we reached the eastern city of Cové where we would stay for the next two nights, it was almost dark.

By this point in the tour we were close to the border of Benin and Nigeria and we spent our first morning in this area visiting a remote fishing community on a freshwater lake near Nigeria. We reached the village in a large canoe, slowly gliding through the waters and meeting the local fishermen. The villagers, not accustomed to receiving outsiders, especially photographers, greeted us with warmth and hospitality. As we walked through the labyrinth of narrow streets, the charm of the village unfolded around us, and we were able to experience the genuine kindness of the local people.

Guèlèdè

We returned to our hotel in Cové for lunch and a break to escape the heat of the day. Towards the mid-afternoon we drove out to a village of warm and friendly Mahé people where we expected to see a ceremony of Guèlèdè. This ceremony is a vibrant celebration that honors the powerful spirits known as 'Yèyé' (mothers) and the ancestors, and it is also believed to celebrate the roles of women in society. Before the ceremony began, we were given the opportunity to take individual portrait photos of a Guèlèdè dancer with a young local child. We also had the privilege of photographing an elderly Mahé woman, who, for the occasion, had put on her finest attire. During the ceremony, we witnessed dancers adorned in colorful costumes and wearing all kind of masks, sometimes accompanied by rattle-like anklets that added a rhythmic element to their movements. Later, when the children returned from school, the atmosphere became much livier and busier. The village square exploded with life as the local children joined in.

After the ceremony, we visited the house of a mask maker who created the beautiful masks used in the ceremony. It was fascinating to see the craftmanship behind each mask. Two of our group members were fortunate enough to take home a piece of culture in the form of a mask as a souvenir. It was a beautiful way to end the day.

Guèlèdè – the fire spitter

The next day, we woke up early to witness the fire spitters of the Guèlèdè ceremony. Two dancers, dressed in elaborate costumes and masks, performed with fire on their heads, creating an awe-inspiring spectacle. After the performance while the masks were still alight with fire, we had the opportunity to take photos with one of them. A very exciting start to the day!

Dankoli fetish

Leaving Cové, we drove north to the Taneka area. We had lunch in Djougou and, on the way, stopped to visit the Dankoli fetish site. The site is known for its traditional religious practices, where animals are often sacrifices as offerings to deities which is not very photogenic but it is one of those places that you need to visit in Benin as it is right on the side of the road and hard to miss.

Taneka

On our way to the Taneka village at the foothills of the Atacora mountains in northern Benin we drove along a road with cashew trees so we stopped to try some cashew fruits, which were delicious. On the way into the Atacora foothills we gave a ride to three young boys heading towards the village. After a while the road became difficult so we parked our bus and then walked uphill. We were fortunate to be invited to witness the initiation ceremony of young men. We began by taking a few portraits of two young men followed by taking photo of a chief of fetish. Next, we were invited to meet the new king of the village, named Tinigasawa dorite 4. For the second time during this trip, we had the privilege of meeting a king. We were guided by the strict protocols of visiting West African kings, whne we entered his reception room. We were then allowed to ask questions and he kindly allowed us to photograph him. Afterwards we attended an initiation ceremony where young Taneka boys were initiated into men, and we were grateful to be present for such an important event that has been rarely witnessed by outsiders. Various dances took place throughout the ceremony, and in between, we had the change to meet other chiefs of fetish. As the day came to a close, we walked down the mountain, reflecting on the rare and enriching experiences of the day. Due to the fact that none of us wanted to leave the incredible Taneka ceremony we had witnessed, by the time we arrived in Natitingou, northern Benin, it was dark.

Otamari and Tatas

The following morning we left to visit the homes of the Otomari people, known as Tatas. These traditional dwellings are Unesco World Heritage listed for their unique architecture and cultural significance. Tatas are made from mud, clay, and straw, and they are known for their circular or polygonal shapes. They are designed with high walls, often featuring a thatched roof and small openings to regulate the temperature. The walls of the Tatas are often decorated with intricate designs, adding both aesthetic beauty and functional purpose. We had the chance to enter one of the Tatas, where we climbed up hand carved wooden ladders to reach the roof with its thatched granaries used to store grain.

We then attended a Dikuntri ceremony with Otomari women with dance and music. The ceremony took place in front of an old Tata, and we were graciously allowed to take photos during and after the ritual.

Afterwards, we had lunch at Valerie’s place, where we were warmly welcomed with hugs and hospitality before we dined on a wonderful meal in the shade of a large mango tree.

After lunch, we headed to an Otomari village to meet an elderly woman who wore a labaret made of stone, one of the last women to do so. When we arrived we discovered that she had gone to the market in Togo, so while we waited for her to return we were granted permission to cross the border into Togo and visit a typical Togolese Tata. The Tatas of Togo are a little smaller than those in Benin and they feature a larger selection of spiritual legbas. We met a lovely Togolese woman who kindly allowed us to photograph her and she even changed into special clothes fashioned out of woven Togoleses clotgh for the occasion.

Finally the elderly Otomari woman returned from the market so we went to her village and had the opportunity to photograph her in front of her Tata, showcasing her traditional labaret. It was an unique experience, where we captured a piece of a living tradition that is becoming increasingly rare to witness.

Dikpantri

Later that afternoon, we visited a Dikpantri ceremony, which was specifically held for the initiation of young men passing to elder status in Otamari . This traditional ceremony is an important rite of passage of men within the Otomari culture.

Borgou Fulani people

The next morning we packed up our bags and drove from Natitingou to Parakou, a journey of approximately three hours. Upon arrival at our hotel, we had some time to relax and recharge.

In the afternoon, we visited a remote village inhabited by the Borgou Fulani people. The Fulani are a nomadic and semi-nomadic group known for their cattle herding. Their communities are often characterized by vibrant clothing, intricate jewelry, and distinct hairstyles. The visit turned into an unforgettable afternoon where we met numerous highly decorated Fulanis who extended a warm welcome to our group. As our visit came to an end, the entire village gathered around our bus to bid us farewell. They treated us with dance and music. The women looked stunning, adorned with beautiful decorations and jewelry, while the children's joyful presence added to the moment. It was a heartfelt and memorable way to conclude the day.

Batonu horsemen

The following morning we went to visit the Batonu horsemen of Parakou. The Batonu people (or Bariba) are an ethnic group primarily found in northern Benin and parts of Nigeria. They are closely connected to the Nikki kingdom, which is one of the more significant traditional kingdoms in the region. We watched as one of the horses was carefully washed and adorned with decorative ornaments. We followed the horse with horsemen in our bus through the streets of Parakou to the location where the other horses had gathered. There, we witnessed a series of impressive performances, with the horsemen showcasing their skills. The event culminated in breathtaking full gallops of riders and horses through the streets. Photographing the event was challenging, as we had to stay mindful of our own safety amidst the action. Nevertheless, it was an incredibly impressive spectacle.

After the ceremony we left Parakou and headed toward Dassa where we had an afternoon off to relax and unwind. It was a perfect opportunity to review our photos and reflect on the incredible experiences we'd all had so far.

Sakpata

The next day we began by witnessing an incredible ceremony of Sakpata. Sakpata is a healing ceremony and the god of Sakpata actually lives in the earth. After we arrived, the drummers and dancers followed in colorful clothes. A series of athletic dances were then performed where a group of young men and women twirled and somersaulted before us. They were inexhaustible with their energy as the singing and dancing went on. After the ceremony, the group gathered at the temple, where we took some portraits. Even as we were leaving the celebration continued with more singing and dancing that we could hear from inside our bus!

Abomey

In the afternoon we arrived in Abomey, the former capital of the Kingdom of Dahomey. Abomey is renowned for its many royal palaces, which were constructed for the 12 original kings of Dahomey. After a break for lunch we visited the palace of of one of the lesser kings, Agonglo. A somewhat controversial King, Agonglo was responsible for trying to restore a failed economy and in his attempts to do so, he tried to loosen the growing tight restrictions on slavery, an act which became very controversial and ultimately led him to be assassinated! Currently, this palace serves as the home of several weavers who continue the tradition of creating beautiful, handwoven Abomey cloth, a trademark product of the city. After buying some textiles in the shop we went to visit the hidden and otherworldly Chameleon Temple, a truly bizarre and intriguing place. The temple is dedicated to the chameleon, an animal deeply revered in Fon spirituality and Voodoo practices. In Fon beliefs, the chameleon symbolizes adaptability, transformation, and the ability to navigate life's challenges. The rest of the afternoon some of us went shopping for wax fabrics which we then gave to a local tailor to make some colourful shirts and skirts for us.

The following morning, we first made a brief visit to the Gallery of Modern Art in Abomey, before driving to Lokossa where we stopped to visit the family of our local guide. As a lovely gesture, we were treated to plate of sun-ripened, sweet, fresh fruit. Some of us also took the opportunity to visit a nearby local fetish market which was fascinating yet quite confronting.

Vodounsi

That afternoon we drove to a remote village near the Togo border to attend a Vodunsi ceremony. When we arrived we found the entire village had gathered for it and we soon realised that we were perhaps some of the first outsiders to ever witness this incredible event. Fascinated by our presence, we joined the throngs of excited onlookers waiting for the ceremony to start. The Vodunsi ceremony specifically centers around priestesses and their initiation or training in Voodoo spiritual practices. It's common to see shamans and other spiritual leaders guiding the participants. The presence of shamans dressed in red is often a sign of their role in directing the spiritual energy during the ceremony. After the ceremony, we were privileged to be invited to take individual portraits of the shamans and vodounsi, something that is very rarely afforded to visitors. At the end of the ceremony we all found it hard to leave. The singing

and dancing seemed to be in full swing and perhaps went on into the night. It was the first time we had seen a spectacle like this on a Wild Images tour and all of us were completely mesmerised by the experience!

Kokou

Our last full day in Benin started with one of the most spectacular Kokou ceremonies ever seen on a Wild Images tour. Kokou is a warrior spirit associated with strength, power, and protection. The ceremony generally involves participants entering a state of trance to communicate with the spirit world. We saw devotees in trance, preparing themselves by anointing their bodies with palm oil, which is believed to be a sacred substance that helps to connect with the divine. They then covered themselves in white and yellow powders, which symbolize purity and divine energy. Each dancer wore a woven grass skirt, representing the simplicity and earthiness of the ceremony. After going into trance, each of the participants danced wildly to the rhythm of drums and music that are believed to be possessed by the spirit of Kokou. We watched in awe as some individuals engaged in self-cutting as part of their ritualistic expression of devotion and sacrifice, a powerful symbol of purification and their willingness to endure pain for spiritual strength. It was a very intense ceremony, not only for those involved but also for us. Normally, it is not possible to take photos after a Kokou ceremony as the devotees disappear to worship the Kokou gods, however, this time, we were incredibly lucky to capture some powerful photos of the dancers after the ceremony.

Gambada

In the afternoon, we attended a private Gambada ceremony, a voodoo celebration that focuses on love, unity and relationships. Participants engaged in wild dancing accompanied by loud drumming and music. The atmosphere was filled with energy, as people moved in a trance-like state, expressing their connection to the spirit of Gambada. A key feature of this ritual was the use of white powder, which was scattered over the dancers and participants, symbolizing purity, blessing and spiritual transformation. As with the Kokou ceremony, we were fortunate enough to be given the rare opportunity to capture portrait photos afterward.

Twins

On our last day of the trip, we attended a small but fascinating and somewhat quieter ceremony to celebrate the culture of twin children in Beninese society. This tiny shrine devoted to twins is looked after by a high priestess who every day, looks after a series of dolls that have been carved to look like a child that has been lost in a family. She feeds, bathes and dresses them daily in cultural quirk that is very unique to Benin.

The countries of Benin and Nigeria have some of the highest rates of multiple births in the world. If a pair of twins dies at childbirth, the parents will carry dolls of their deceased children around with them until they die. These tiny dolls are looked after like their own children. If only one twin dies then the sibling will carry one doll around as its brother or sister until that twin dies. The last week during our tour we had seen quite a number of women carrying these dolls with them. It was wonderful to finish our tour with a ceremony that truly celebrates this unique tradition.

After a brief stop in the coastal town of Ouidah to buy some souvenirs, visit the gate of no return and the tree of forgetfulness, we then drove to Cotonou where we enjoyed our last sunset dinner on the beach at the same restaurant where our tour started two weeks ago.

I can honestly say it was an incredible experience in the warm and welcoming country of Benin. We had the privilege of meeting remarkable people and delving deep into local cultures, discovering rich traditions that are both ancient and vibrant. Throughout the trip, we were embraced by the hospitality of Beninese people, who made us feel like we were part of their communities everywhere. Our time in Benin was truly special, and the memories of the fascinating ceremonies, meaningful encounters, and unique experiences will stay with us forever.