

Ivory Coast: Land of Masks and Dance Tour Report 2021

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by Inger Vandyke

In 2021 Wild Images organised its pioneering photo tour of Ivory Coast to gain a greater insight and depth into the cultural treasures the country. Tour leader Inger Vandyke reports on this fascinating tour to one of West Africa's most fascinating destinations.

Ivory Coast (Côte D'Ivoire) is perhaps one of West Africa's least known and least visited countries, yet surprisingly it is home to over 60 different ethnic groups that preside over a rich tapestry of traditions and dances.

ABIDJAN

Flying over the Ivory Coast it was a wonderful surprise to see vast tracts of untouched forests, wild coastlines, surf beaches and rocky headlands with waves crashing ashore from the Atlantic. As we approached Abidjan the landscaped tamed somewhat as the sprawl of the city unfolded below yet pleasantly it seemed to be woven around a series of coastal lakes and more beautiful beaches.

A warm sunny afternoon greeted us in Abidjan where we transferred to our hotel for the evening. Located in the diplomatic area of the city, our hotel looked out over a pretty tropical garden, through palm trees to one of the coastal lakes. It was a quiet and lovely greeting to this fascinating part of Africa.

KING NANA BOA KOMASI

After checking out of our hotels we had some minor issues with having a PCR test done in Abidjan before we left for the border of Ghana and the city of Abengourou to the north east of the city. Our first excursion was to the Agni-Indenie royal palace of King Nana Boa

Kouassi III, the king of the Agni people, in Comoé. Sadly he wasn't present during our visit to his palace but we enjoyed a small tour of the palace while we learned about the royal lineage of the Anyi people in relation to the history of the Ivory Coast.

Portrait of King Nana Boa Komasi

Portrait of King Nana Boa Kumasi of the Agni people (image by Inger Vandyke)

The Anyi people are a subgroup of the Akan who migrated to their current location from what is present day Ghana between the 16th and 18th centuries. Today around 11% of the Anyi population live in Abengourou, the main city of the old Indenie Kingdom in the Ivory Coast. The rest are scatted around other parts of the country and a small minority of Anyi people live in Ghana. The most important art forms among the Anyi are funerary images and monuments, although symbolism features strongly in daily life to encourage bravery, honesty, piety and truthfulness. The walls of the palace features some hand painted symbols acting as the key tenets of Agni existence.

KOMIANS

We had to curtail our visit in order to drive out to the small town of Aniassué to visit a community of Komian women. Arriving there we found out that the dance wasn't quite ready to start so we took to the streets of the town to enjoy some street photography and meet some of the friendly local people in the area. Returning to the compound of the Komians we were given a privileged glimpse of being allowed into the room where these beautiful Komian women were preparing for the dance that afternoon. It was a small blue room with an elaborate display of fetish dolls and monuments at one end so doingphotography in there was a bit of a dark tight squeeze but it was beautiful to see these stunning women prepare themselves with unique jewellery, clothes and adorning their bodies with kaolin powder.

To the sound of tam tam drums and bells the dance began and we wandered around the outside of it trying to find good angles for photography. As with all west African ceremonies, it was quite difficult to get into a spot where the background was good so we had to roll with the punches. Regardless it was still a beautiful thing to witness.

In Akan culture Komians are considered as traditional healers and not only are they consulted for their knowledge of medicinal plants, they are also known for their 'power' of warding off evil spirits and their ability to predict the future.

It really was a blessing to spend time photographing these beautiful women in their compound. As we left the light was getting wonderful so we spent a brief amount of time capturing some last minute street scenes before we returned to our hotel in Abengourou.

YAMOUSSOUKRO AND THE BASILICA OF OUR LADY OF PEACE

A morning drive took us into the central part of the country, to the capital of Ivory Coast, Yamoussoukro. We made a brief stop on the way to photograph women herding goats along the side of the road. We also watched a young boy carrying a huge load of palm fronds that were to be used in house construction. Arriving into Yamoussoukro, we were pleasantly surprised by its pretty layout and featured freshwater lakes that were home to many crocodiles. The main water plant of West Africa is usually a hyacinth but here we saw many lakes filled with traditional Asian lotus flowers which must have been introduced.

We found a lovely restaurant at the side of one of these lakes to enjoy a meal of traditional Ivorian food while we looked out at the Basilica through the trees.

After lunch we took a guided tour of the Basilica which is the largest Christian church in the world. Although photography inside was forbidden we managed to capture some iphone shots in permitted areas while we learned about the history of the Basilica. President Houphouët-Boigny of the Ivory Coast chose his birthplace of Yamoussoukro to be the site of the new capital city of his country in 1983. As part of the plan of the city, the president wanted to memorialize himself with the construction of the basilica. He is even pictured beside Jesus ascending to heaven in one stained-glass panel. Due to the location of the Basilica, it was dubbed by the media as "basilica in the bush" . It was certainly an impressive site to visit and we even enjoyed a brief trip to the upper viewing platform where we could go outside and obtain views over the city.

Inside the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace at Yamoussoukro

The ceiling inside the gigantic Basilica of our Lady of Peace in Yamoussoukro. The largest Christian church in the world, its dimensions are bigger than the Vatican (image by Inger Vandyke)

ZAOULI

Perhaps the most celebrated West African dance in the world, the Zaouli was undoubtedly a highlight of our trip. After leaving the Basilica we drove out into Guroland towards a tiny village that was home to a family of Zaouli dancers. As we arrived we were joined by quite a large group of local people who were equally as excited as we were about the impending performance. To keep us entertained one of the young family members and a Zaouli in waiting performed a Zaouli dance for us to the rhythmic beating of drums and the sounds of horns. Although he wasn't dressed as Zaouli, his dance moves were equally as impressive. You can watch his brilliant performance in our blog post about this amazing West African dance

The music intensified and we sat mesmerised as the first of three masked Zaouli dances began. Although there are many different types of masks that can be worn by Zaouli dancers, the first of ours was a grey one called 'Zohoulin'. This mask featured a chicken eating a lizard and the story behind it involved an ideological war whereby the Guro people clashed with a neighbouring group and the Guro prevailed. The Guro were represented by the chicken and the opposition by the lizard.

The second mask was red in colour and named 'Gan'. It featured four horns, two straight and two bent and it symbolised the strategy used by animals like antelope to escape hunters.

Our final mask was orange and named 'Sortanvani' and it symbolised the weavers of textiles in the Guro people.

Watching Zaouli was a mesmerising experience. It is one of those things in life that you never really want to end. I think we were both sad when it did. I asked if we could possibly meet the dancer. Expecting a rejection (much of the behind the scenes activity of African dancers is forbidden to the outside world), I was completely surprised to find out we were actually allowed to meet him! What a fantastic opportunity to engage with a Zaouli quite literally behind his mask!

Zaouli is a relatively recent addition to the cultural history of the Ivory Coast. It is a traditional dance of the Gouro people that was created in the 1950s and was inspired by a girl named "Djela Lou Zaouli". It takes seven years to train as a Zaouli dancer and despite the inspiration of its name, it is only danced by men, usually of one family. It was inscribed by UNESCO in 2017 as part of the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Returning to Yamoussoukro we enjoyed a fantastic dinner of grilled fish at a local street restaurant, complete with some lovely French wine and some wonderful buskers playing Ivorian music to us while we ate.

KORHOGO

After a technical issue on our arrival in Ivory Coast, we spent most of the following day travelling back to Abidjan before we could drive the long road north to Korhogo. We arrived quite late in this vibrant northern city so we checked into our hotel and went out to enjoy the first of a couple of wonderful meals at a street restaurant run by Clarice who we jokingly named "Madame Poisson" or sometimes "Madame Poulet"!

KONG

Torrential rain brought on by a huge thunderstorm overnight worried us as we got up and enjoyed breakfast. After checking the weather forecast to find out the rain was going to disappear during the day we decided to make a change to our planned activities for the day and drive out to the ancient city of Kong.

Once an important crossroad on an ancient African trade route that stretched from Mali to the coast of Guinea, Kong was a small city where traders from the Mandé ethnic group known as the Dioula-Juula could rest their caravans. It was first established as a city in the 12th century and today it is best known for its ancient mosques which were built in the traditional earthen style of Sahelian architecture.

As we drove out towards Kong, we suddenly chanced upon the wildest ceremony emerging from the forest – a funerary Kagba masked dancer of the Nafarar people. I begged our driver to stop and sadly we couldn't under any circumstances. We weren't allowed to even briefly make any photos as this was such a secretive event that if a foreigner were to witness it they risked damage to their car and maybe even injury from the dancers in attendance. Although the fact we couldn't stop made us sad, it was still a remarkable and unexpected thing to see on the side of the road.

Nearing Kong, we stopped to have some refreshments at a small roadside stall run by very friendly Fulani people where we took some photos and enjoyed a few very strong cups of coffee!

We finally drove into Kong and parked outside the Grand Mosque of Kong. We were instantly stunned by this small yet beautiful mosque that reminded us of others we had seen only in photos in Mali. While permission was being sought to visit, we enjoyed some street photography with the local children and people outside the gates to the administrative office of the mosque. These gates were also built in the same mud adobe style of the mosque and provided a beautiful backdrop for images.

When we were finally allowed in, we were given a guided tour of the mosque. Luckily as women beyond childbearing age, we were granted permission to go inside where we even got to crawl up a steep, hand sculpted clay staircase to go onto the roof of the mosque! This privileged glimpse inside one of the most renowned buildings in the country allowed us to wander through the various prayer rooms and take photos. Delightfully, we also encountered a colony of Guinean Horseshoe Bats who had taken up residence in the dark recesses of the mosque ceiling where they clung to rafters made from sapling timber and smiled down at us. Listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List due to their tiny distribution and increasingly fragmented habitat, it is hard to know if this colony of these beautiful bats is on the radar of scientists. At any rate, they were a joyous and unexpected highlight of our visit to the mosque.

View of the rooftop of Missiriba, the Grand Mosque of Kong on our Ivory Coast photo tour

View of the minaret from the rooftop of Missiriba, the Grand Mosque of Kong (image by Inger Vandyke)

Given the proximity of Kong to the border of Burkina Faso our time at the mosque was shortened due to security concerns so we captured as many images as we could before we drove back to Korhogo in time for a local lunch of Senegalese Tchep at a city restaurant.

BALAFON

After lunch we spent the afternoon attending two local dances, the first of which was the Balafon.

This ensemble of musicians gave us our first live performance of the beautiful Balafon, a musical instrument comprised of a hide-strung bamboo or timber frame supporting a linear array of tuned hardwood keys with calabash gourds suspended below it. Sounding like a heavy xylophone, it was lovely to listen to, watch and photograph a highly colourful group of local Senufo people dance and sing in circles to the beating of drums and synchronised balafon playing.

We had to tear ourselves away from it in order to meet our second group of dancers for the afternoon a short distance from us near the town.

BOLOYE (THE PANTHER DANCE)

It was only a short drive between our two performances that afternoon and as we arrived at the main court of the Boloye dance, we witnessed another taking place just before it. This funeral ceremony of Fodono women was sadly off limits to us due to privacy but for a brief moment we watched, mesmerised, as a group of women who were naked from the waist up danced to celebrate a recently deceased person. We had to tear ourselves away and prepare for a ceremony of Boloye, or the Panther dance, on of the most athletic dances we would see on our tour.

We arrived to the music of rattling Shekeres (a type of Maraca) and the melodic sounds of local Koras fashioned out of large calabashes. Children had started to dance to herald and welcome the arrival of the Boloye, a small group of costumed dancers wearing brown sacks with the spots of a leopard and faces cut into the masks so the dancers can see. Then the Boloye took it in turns to step forth and perform a highly energetic and gymnastic set of manoeuvres which was exhilarating to watch and photograph. Somersaults and high jumps were literal high points of this dance while other moves including those similar to break dances. It was a fantastic end to a beautiful day we experienced in this culturally rich part of Ivory Coast.

A CITY OF ART

The next morning we drove out to a forested village of settled Fulani people for photography, stopping nearby to see some fields of wheat, corn and cotton grown by the region's Senufo people. After a short visit to the Fulani villages we drove back towards Korhogo and we were stopped by a hilarious group of Dozo hunters who had set up a makeshift road block for security. Surprisingly, when they found out we were photographers they actually wanted us to get out and take photos of them which was quite surprising given that it was a 'policed checkpoint' and normally off limits to any type of photography! We had such a lot of laughs with these Dozo guys but we had to leave as our day of visiting some of the local artisans of Korhogo was only just beginning.

Our first stop was a local Senufo blacksmith who gave us a small tour of his workshop, including slag heaps, blast furnace and his hand furnace where he fashioned all sorts of metal items to sell. For a brief time we were distracted by a local church service which the clergy kindly allowed us to visit and photograph but more on this later.

The black smith and his relatively sophisticated way of extracting metal from ore was actually quite a unique experience. Elsewhere in Africa, it is possible to see blacksmiths at work in similar workshops however they usually have metal pre-prepared for them. To learn about this process from stone to completion was an unexpected surprise.

As we left the blacksmith's courtyard we heard some incredibly beautiful Balafon music. The church congregation we had visited earlier was just finishing for the day and to celebrate the local Senufo people were dancing and singing in the church. We stopped to enjoy and photograph them again which was truly wonderful.

Back in town we stopped at a local restaurant to enjoy Senegalese dishes for lunch and visited the main street market of Korhogo for photography. Another highlight of our time in the north, this colourful and bustling market was like a labyrinth of tiny alleyways with traders selling everything from beads to food.

Leaving there we drove out to the village of Kapolei to visit some sculptors of hand crafted beads. There we were given a small demonstration of this village's bead making which was like a cottage industry. We watched as the bead makers thread an individual bead onto a long wooden stick which was then twirled while it rested on the artist's foot and hand painted. The colours are all from natural products nearby and included ochres, dyes and chalk paints. Naturally there were some products ready made for sale so along with photographing this bead making at work we also brought some jewellery.

Our next stop was to a workshop of weavers making local Korhogo cloth. This textile, which is right up there in fame with the Bogolan (mud cloth) of Mali and also Kente cloth in Ghana, is woven by men who sit at elaborately made machines out of wood. Outside a group of women sit under the shade of a large mango tree and stitch the fabric into garments for sale. We wandered around taking photos and although we tried with all our might to refrain from buying any pieces we both couldn't help it in the end and bought some anyway.

A young girl and her baby sister in front of Korhogo cloth

A young girl with her baby sister in front of hanging Korhogo cloth (image by Inger Vandyke)

Finally we went to another village called Fakaha which is famous for its fabric painting. It was also reputed visited in secret by the artist Picasso who, although he claimed he never went there, was a collector of African art and made many visits to the continent. Looking at the pieces created in Fakaha it isn't hard to imagine a link between the Ivorian artists in residence there and some of Picassos work. We watched an item being painted and wandered around taking photographs until dusk when we returned to enjoy our final meal with Clarice at her local restaurant. Instead of the wonderful grilled fish and chicken of our previous visit, dinner tonight was in the form of a local stew called Kedjenou which was delicious.

Visit Fakaha the village of Pablo Picasso on our Ivory Coast photo tour (image by Inger Vandyke)

Painted fabric from the village of Fakaha, reputed to have been visited by Pablo Picasso (image by Inger Vandyke)

MONT SIENLOW SACRIFICIAL STONE

We packed up our vehicle and prepared to leave Korogho for the journey south. Before we left the city we visited a local poultry market that was selling and preparing live chickens, ducks and even guinea fowl like a butchery. Although macabre we did some street photography here and we purchased a chicken as part of the sacrificial custom of any visit to Mont Sienlow, a place of great religious

significance near the base of Mount Korhogo.

A series of bush tracks cut through groves of wild cashew trees brought us to base of Mont Sienlow, a platform of huge granite rocks that the Senufo people used as a point of sacrifices. People come here to ask for spiritual assistance from the feticheurs that are on standby at the stone. To meet the request the feticheur listens to the concern then consults with the spirits of the mountain before sacrificing a live chicken against the vertical face of the largest koppie at the site. Once sacrificed the chicken is eaten. We stopped to sacrifice a chicken of our own and take some photographs of this sacred place, noting the small collection of fetish dolls (called Touboubele) and animal skulls sitting at the base of the koppie as a symbol of benevolence. Present at the site were two women who were clairvoyants and, although we didn't seek out their services, we could have had our future told to us through their reading of cowrie shells if we had so desired.

NIOFOIN FETISH HOUSES

From Sienlow we drove further south to visit some of the most spectacular examples of African vernacular architecture in the Ivory Coast, the beautifully crafted fetish houses of Niofoin.

Wandering through a traditional village of clay round houses and stilted granaries typical of this style, the highlight of any visit to Niofoin are two special fetish houses where local animists will sacrifice animals for both good and bad reasons. The sacrifice is done by killing an animal and letting its blood fall on a special stone inside a building next to the fetish house and these sacrifices can be for anything from curing a sickness to having a good crop or wishing for financial benefits, a good marriage or even to put a spell on someone. As we arrived we learned that a dog had been sacrificed that morning which we were glad we didn't see. We only saw it being cooked by two attendants at one of the houses.

Adorning each of the fetish houses are mushroom-like roofs that, instead of being removed each year and replaced, layers of straw are simply added to the existing structure, lending them an almost weird, hobbit-like look. The walls are decorated with spirit animals and figures that indicate the purpose of the building.

We enjoyed our time photographing these whimsical structures and the surrounding villages with their lovely people and traditional council tribune structures called Kafoudal that were fashioned out of hardwood logs.

SORO ZANA – THE MASTER BALAFON MAKER

Driving southwards we stopped at the workshop of Soro Zana, the chief maker of Balafons in all of the Ivory Coast. While he wasn't there in person, we were pleased to meet his son who was at work carrying on the century old tradition of making balafons by hand. We were kindly allowed to take photos there and have a small break before driving further towards our next overnight stay in the town of Boundiali.

We arrived just in time for lunch of buns and yoghurt at a local bakery where we met two rather unusual twin girls who were wandering the streets begging. We also enjoyed a brief moment of photography with a local man driving his quirky haulage vehicle into town to sell rice.

Leaving the café we drove out to another Fulani village situated in a forest of Shea Butter trees and cashews. As we wandered around there taking photos we were lucky enough to watch and photograph two Fulani women shaving their heads in the form of the high forehead style considered as beautiful by these people of the Sahara.

N'GORO – THE FIRE DANCE OF SENUFO VIRGINS

I watched as storm clouds were brewing on the horizon and encourage us all to leave as we were due to watch a celebration of Ngoro, the initiation dance of the Virgins which is part of the growth of women in Senufo culture.

This flamboyant dance takes place at sunset to the music of musicians playing drums, balofons and wooden flutes. Overseeing the dance is a bare chested master of ceremonies who walks around cracking a large whip in between dancing in the live fire at the centre of the dance stage and chewing on live embers from that fire!

Introducing the virgins is a series of male dancers wearing white tasselled trousers who dance their way into the arena in circles. Following them are the virgins whose dress consists of large pompoms made of native grasses and poms made of white feathers. Naked also from the waist up these beautiful girls perform a circular dance also in between breaks whipped up by the master of ceremonies.

Distinguished guests at our particular dance included a small group of Dozo elders who sat in specific audience chairs to watch the performance. We were lucky enough to meet the headman of the Dozo people for portrait photography while we waited for the dance to start. Post dance we were also blessed to be able to isolate some of the performances for portrait photos also.

The Dozo are hunter gatherers in Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali and Burkina Faso

Portrait of a Dozo head man in remote Ivory Coast. The Dozo are a fraternity of hunter gatherers living in Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali and Burkina Faso (image by Inger Vandyke)

By the time we left it was almost dark so that night we enjoyed a dinner at our hotel.

THE STILT DANCE OF GODUFU

As we packed up our car to leave Boundiali the following morning we realised that the hotel had two rather strange small pets. In the carpark and, sadly, attached to chains were two baby monkeys, a Vervet and a Patas. It was a little tragic to see these two wild animals being kept as pets but they had probably been kept that way for too long for them to ever be released back in the wild. We went and stopped briefly to look at them and take photos before jumping in our car to leave.

What should have been a straightforward drive towards Man from Boundiali turned into a horrible day of getting lost on back country roads in the forest with lots of bumping around unnecessarily.

Just your typical roadside scene in Ivory Coast

Just your typical street scene on the road in Ivory Coast (image by Inger Vandyke)

Our goal of the day was to reach the village of Godufu, a traditional village of Dan people situated along a dirt road near to Touba, to see its famed stilt dance. While the dance is traditionally held at the end of the day, we experienced some unexpected mishaps that made us apologetically late for the dance and we arrived near sunset at Godufu. Situated adjacent to a sacred forest, this pretty village of round houses was the perfect backdrop for this mystical forest creature who emerged not long after we arrived.

The dance begins with a ritual procession of recently married women dressed in white which takes place while the stilt dancer attends a sacrifice to the gods in the forest. Following the married women, a group of newly initiated men also start to dance and continue the ceremony.

Eventually the masked stilt dancer emerges from the forest. Acting as a medium between the supernatural and natural world, this strange creature speaks a shrill language of tongues and is dressed in a patchwork set of trousers with a woven grass skirt and a balaclava like mask. Guarded by two men who will keep him upright if he stumbles he makes his way to the dance arena where he shows off his athletic prowess by a series of dance moves where he somersaults into the air with his stilts!!! The drumming intensifies and with it go the moves of the stilt dancer, who occasionally takes a break in a specially designed seat. During this time he welcomes any special donations of small money for his efforts.

It was a little sad that we reached this dance so late as it made for quite challenging photography. Towards the end of the dance the best thing we could do is sit and just enjoy the spectacle. As we left in the darkness the kind Dan people of the village walked us back along the dirt road to our vehicle where we continued on to stay overnight in Touba.

THE DANCE OF JUGGLERS (DANSE DES JONGLEURS)

After breakfast the next day we jumped on the road to drive from Touba to Man. We checked into our lovely hotel in Man and prepared for our drive into the nearby countryside, through numerous cocoa plantations to reach a remote village where we were to witness two wonderful dance spectacles – that of the We people called Danse des Jongleurs (dance of the jugglers) and another masked dance of the Yacuba people called Gla.

Performed in the same village we arrived to find a small group of local people assembled to watch the dances with us. Like so many African ceremonies, watching one is a subject of intense curiosity in local people as well as tourists! In the crowd we instantly spotted three young girls whose faces were painted and who wore the helmets of shells and fur that is unique to the juggler dance of the We people. This wild dance involves a father of daughters throwing each daughter into the air while he dances with them. We watched and photographed him doing this with each of the girls several times. Traditionally the girls are placed in a trance prior to performing this dance. They willingly do so in the belief that the spirits will make them a better performer during the dance.

GLE

Once this dance had concluded the performers joined the crowd to watch the masked dancers of the Yacuba people performing a Gle. This dance involved three large masks, the Zehego (Chameleon), Zeblion (Monkey) and Gambié (Comedian). The first two spirit masked dancers, Zehego and Zeblion almost needed to be 'controlled' by a guard before they ran off into the crowd. Overseeing the dance was a naked guard named Joe. His muscular physique was crowned by a headdress of animal fur and his only clothing was that of a small black cloth covering his loin. He would occasionally whip the masked dancers up into a frenzy, only to have them controlled again by guards.

The third masked dancer was Gambié. He was literally coaxed out of his home by Joe and seemed very reluctant to get out and dance. This was all part of the ruse of the act of course but was quite amusing to watch.

At the end of both dances we enjoyed some portrait sessions on the dance arena, under the shaded balcony of a nearby building and also at the edge of a local forest before we returned to Man for lunch.

There was so much to actually see and do in Man. This beautiful city with its forest clad mountains, waterfalls and national reserves is easily a place you could spend more time in. We opted to visit a local market for some street photography which was also wonderful. We wandered the market alleyways taking photos, trying local street food, meeting people and generally enjoying Man life as it plays out on a daily basis.

Returning to our hotel we enjoyed taking photos of some of the murals at the hotel that featured local dances and traditions.

GOLY

The following day was going to be our longest driving day of the trip so we left Man early for the long drive back to Yamoussoukro. This was a makeup day after missing time on our way north so we needed to visit a small village outside of the capital to enjoy a Goly dance of the Baoule people.

Initially our drive took us south through the granite peaks of western Ivory Coast near the border of Liberia. We then skirted around the northern edge of the Parc National De Taï before turning east to drive to Yamoussoukro via the gigantic Lake Kossou on the Bandama River. We finally reached Yamoussoukro in time to enjoy a brief lunch before driving out to a village of Baoule people to watch the dance.

When we arrived in the village we immediately saw some lovely woven Kati cloth which is the signature textile that is hand woven by the Baoule. The dance wasn't quite ready to begin so we went and did some street photography while trying to work out how best to photograph the dance, which way the dancers were going to enter the arena etc. Then we started to hear drums. The dance was beginning. Oddly the first of two different masked dancers emerged from what looked like the weedy growth in an abandoned building which lent them a sort of mysterious air. Stopping to pose for us to take photos we accompanied them down to the arena with their guards. The first were red faced Goly masks named Kpan. Representing both male and female spirits these dancers are almost identical as they are supposed to be representative of the traits shared by both sexes. When the Kpan dancers had retired, they were replaced with a pair of Antelope/Crocodile inspired Goli Glan who performed a similar dance.

After finalising a small purchase of Kita cloth we left the dances and drove through torrential rain back to Abidjan arriving quite late in the evening.

PEOPLE OF THE CLOTH

After breakfast and our mandatory PCR testing the following morning we made a brief stop at a local bookstore to see if we could purchase any obscure titles that describe Ivory Coast's cultures but we had no luck. Our program for the day was to first visit the famous Banco washers of Abidjan so we drove through city traffic to reach them and as we were stuck in a jam we noted there was a small region where tie dyed fabrics were being made. We asked if we were going to return along the same route and the answer was yes so we decided we would stop to visit them on the way back to the city.

Banco washers working outside Abidjan on Ivory Coast

Banco washers toil away at their trade every day near Abidjan. Collecting laundry from nearby communities it is their job to wash clothes by hand using soap and old tyres as washstands (image by Inger Vandyke)

Arriving at a forest pool of the Banco River on the side of the road we met a lively group of Fanico, or Banco washers. Consisting of workers from mainly neighbouring countries these Fanico start work at 6am visiting houses of the nearby neighbourhoods collecting clothes and other items to wash in the small lake where they work. We spent a little time here watching these men work in the lake and then labour their washing loads out onto local grassy hills to dry.

Portrait of a Banco washer at Abidjan on our photo tour of Ivory Coast

Consisting mostly of immigrants to Ivory Coast, Banco washers are now a part of city life in Abidjan (image by Inger Vandyke)

When we finally left them we drove back to the fabric making area where we enjoyed photographing the fabric workers, drying laundry, drying fabric and meeting some of the local children who were basically children of the cloth. It was here that I got to fly my drone at low level over some of the drying cloth which acted like a mosaic on the land when viewed from the air.

Tie-dyed t-shirts dry near to a textile plant at Abidjan

Aerial view of indigo dyed t-shirts at a fabric factory area in Abidjan (image by Inger Vandyke)

We stopped briefly to change money and continued on to lunch we met some lovely Ivorian friends of our guide to enjoy a wonderful dish of Sumbala with chicken at a rustic lakeside restaurant.

GRAND BASSAM

That afternoon we drove down to Grand Bassam, the Ivory Coast's premier beach resort and the last stop of our trip.

We checked into our wonderful hotel right on the beach and breathed in the ocean air. What a lovely place with a restaurant almost on the sand. As we arrived it was wonderful to listen to a local busker playing "Folon" by Salif Keita before we even settled. After putting our bags in our room we decided to walk the long esplanade adjacent to the beach up towards the fishing village of the French Quarter. This lovely stroll allowed us to do some street photography of the beautiful and crumbling French colonial buildings, meet local people, watch children leaving school and lightly peruse some of the local art and other things to buy. We ended up in the fishing village enjoying photography around the pirogues and community until the sunset.

A selection of wares for sale to beach tourists in Grand Bassam

Hats and swimsuits for sale to beach goers in Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)

Arriving back at our hotel we enjoyed some celebratory cocktails at our beach restaurant before a dinner of beautiful Ivorian fish and prawns.

The next day we had planned to get up for sunrise to go and watch the fishermen head to sea for the day but pouring rain set in overnight so we cancelled it and went back for a small sleep in. After breakfast we drove further east to visit a more far flung fishing community but there wasn't a lot going on there because the local chief had passed away and most of the community were in mourning. We decided to drive back to the fishing village we'd visited the previous day at the French Quarter. Wandering around here we were joined by a group of local kids who alternated between playing in the sea, skipping on the beach with long strands of kelp and also pushing each other around in a handmade wooden wheelbarrow. The overnight rain had created localised flooding since the previous

day so we were amused to see some kids had fashioned out paddleboards from discarded plastic which they were paddling through a flooded pool. While we watched them a couple of them came forth with a young Little Egret that they had found that couldn't fly. This prompted an impromptu discussion about wild birds and why they shouldn't be 'rescued', followed by a careful release of the bird close to where it was found.

We met some lovely people at that village including a local Akan lady named Rose who had recently given birth to a little boy named Nathaniel. Our guide pointed her out to us as she was still smearing shea butter on her skin in the days following her birth which is a part of the Akan tradition.

Finally we went into a part of the village where fish was being smoked traditionally in steel containers before we walked out to meet our car. We did stop briefly to try and photograph people in the reflections of the pools before being offered a small try of some of the locally brewed alcohol, a rum made from sugar called Koutoukou, by one of the locals.

Eventually we decided to leave and go off to visit one of the area's better known restaurants for a lunch of fish on the beach. It was a wonderful place to eat the freshest fish you could imagine – even with the endless stream of hawkers and buskers that ply the beaches of Grand Bassam each day to earn a few Franc.

Meet colourful souvenir sellers on the beach at Grand Bassam during our photo tour of Ivory Coast (C

A pretty young girl selling beach toys for children at Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)

That afternoon we just decided to take a stroll along the beach photographing some of the local people riding horses, enjoying the sun and playing in the surf. I also bought some artwork from local acrylic artist Alfred Sansan Dah to take home with me.

The beautiful art work of Grand Bassam painter Alfred Sansan Dah

The beautiful acrylic paintings of Grand Bassam artist Alfred Sansan Dah (image by Inger Vandyke under permission from the artist)

It was a little sad to sit at our restaurant enjoying yet another outstanding meal of Ivorian food, our final dinner of our tour.

Sunset at Grand Bassam

Sunset through the coconut palms on the beach at Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)

The next morning we spent our time before our afternoon flights getting the results of our PCR tests. It was a slightly overcast and drizzly day but I managed to fly my drone up to photograph some Ivorian fishermen motoring their pirogues along the coastal seas.

We decided to walk the streets of Grand Bassam to photograph some of the old French buildings of the town. World Heritage listed Grand Bassam's buildings date mostly from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of them now sit like phoenix on the sides of sandy streets and are either crumbling, being swallowed up by strangler fig trees or both. A bit of internet sleuthing took us to one of the more prominent buildings called Ganamet. The house of a Syrian/Lebanese trader who lived in Grand Bassam to trade coffee and cocoa with the Akan people, Ganamet House has an eclectic mix of French and Middle Eastern architectural features including a mansard roof which is unusual of the Bassam houses. Not only did we get to photograph this stunning place from the outside, a local guide actually showed us through the interior, which you needed a bit of stealth and agility to negotiate as the stairs almost crumbled beneath your feet. Thankfully someone was with us to warn us about bits we shouldn't stand on!

Strangler figs take over Ganamet House in Grand Bassam

Entrance portal to Ganamet house in Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)

We also visited a tiny antique store in another old Bassam building and wandered around to see the lovely old bank building of BCA. Returning to the hotel for lunch we spent a few hours doing some final photography and wrapping the tour up before we said our farewells at the airport in Abidjan.



Zaouli dancers take seven years to learn their moves and the tradition runs in Ivoirean families. Here the youngest generation of a Zaouli family shows us how its done (image by Inger Vandyke)



A rare, behind the scenes meeting with a Zaouli dancer. It takes seven years for these young men to learn a Zaouli dance and they are revered almost as gods by the Guro people who have Zaouli as part of their tradition (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Zaouli Gan mask that symbolises the horns of prey animals like antelope and how they protect themselves from hunters (image by Inger Vandyke)



Watching Zaouli is an absolute highlight of our tour. A UNESCO listed dance for its cultural significance, it is one of the most mesmerising performances in West Africa (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Zaouli Sortanvani mask. It features a wooden loom to symbolise weavers in Guro culture (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Zaouli dancer takes flight during an athletic jump as part of his performance (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a gorgeous young Fulani girl in remote Ivory Coast (image by Inger Vandyke)



A small group of Touboubele fetish dolls greet the faithful at the sacrificial rock of Mont Sienlow (image by Inger Vandyke)



Aerial view of indigo dyed t-shirts at a fabric factory area in Abidjan (image by Inger Vandyke)



A group of Senufo virgins wait for the next act of the N'Goro, or Fire Dance (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a beautiful young Senufo virgin with her dancing poms made from raffia and paper (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Senufo blacksmith shakes his ore free of detritus before sending it to a traditional blast furnace (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Senufo blacksmith showing his newly made axe in his workshop (image by Inger Vandyke)



A small flock of Sanderlings fly over the surf beach of Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)



A beautiful Ivoirean girl selling pineapples in the ruined ground floor of Grand Bassam's Ganamet House, one of the most iconic buildings of this former French trading outpost on the Gulf of Guinea (image by Inger Vandyke)



Niofoin villages feature a collection of stilted granaries, round houses made from mud bricks and fetish houses as a centre point of worship (image by Inger Vandyke)



Prior to the arrival of Senufo virgins at the dance of N'Goro, a group of young men in white tasseled trousers dance to announce their arrival (image by Inger Vandyke)



A young man acting as a guardian of one Niofoin fetish house (image by Inger Vandyke)



One of Niofoin's two fetish houses and a Kafoudal, or wooden council house. The ancient fetish houses of Ivory Coast never have their roofs replaced like other African structures, they are simply added to each year after the rains (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of an N'Goro Fire Dancer (image by Inger Vandyke)



A line up of young Senufo men at the dance of N'Goro, or the Fire Dance (image by Inger Vandyke)



The wildest master of ceremonies oversees the N'Goro Dance. Not only does he dance barefoot in an open fire he chews on live embers in between cracking a long whip to keep the audience entertained! (image by Inger Vandyke)



The master of ceremonies at an N'Goro Fire Dance. He's sitting in a live fire holding a live ember as part of his act (image by Inger Vandyke)



The sacred sacrificial stone at Mont Sienlow is adorned with the bones of animals, bowls for offerings and a small group of Touboubele fetish dolls to welcome the faithful (image by Inger Vandyke)



Streetlife in Kong, northern Ivory Coast (image by Inger Vandyke)



Beautiful young girls at Kong (image by Inger Vandyke)



Street photography in N'Zima fishing village at Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)



Aerial view of laundry drying on the lawn near a township in Abidjan (image by Inger Vandyke)



A local lady passes by the Grand Mosque of Kong after shopping for yams in the local market (image by Inger Vandyke)



Rafters made of saplings line the ceiling of Missiriba, the Grand Mosque of Kong (image by Inger Vandyke)



Entrance door to the 12th century Grand Mosque in Kong (image by Inger Vandyke)



The stunning beauty of Kong's Grand Mosque (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a beautiful Ivoirean girl on the street in Kong (image by Inger Vandyke)



Behind the scenes with a group of Komian women as they prepare to dance (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Komian dancer in mid-dance (image by Inger Vandyke)



A pretty Komian woman jokes with the guests on our tour from the door of her home (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Komian pauses for a moment during her dance. She is standing in front of a wall mural that tells of Komian tradition in the Ivory Coast (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a beautiful Komian in Annasiué (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Komian with her makeup of kaolin powder, an essential decoration for dance (image by Inger Vandyke)



A pretty young girl selling peanuts at a street market in Man (image by Inger Vandyke)



She sells steel wool on the street side. A young girl carries her curious stock of trade on her head at the street market in Korhogo (image by Inger Vandyke)



A typical hairdresser in the street market at Man (image by Inger Vandyke)



An Ivoirean man drives his rice manufacturing equipment into town at Boundiali (image by Inger Vandyke)



Detail of the Sahelian adobe minarets at the Grand Mosque of Kong (image by Inger Vandyke)



Built in Sahelian style and dating back to the 12th century, the Grand Mosque of Kong is a beautifully preserved mosque that is reminiscent of those over the border in Burkina Faso and Mali (image by Inger Vandyke)



Ivoirean fishing boats ply the waters off Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a young We, or Guéré, girl dressed up for the Dance of the Jugglers (Danse des Jongleurs) (image by Inger Vandyke)



Street photography in Ivory Coast is not only simple but beautiful. Just be prepared to have as many photos taken of you as you will take with friendly locals! (image by Inger Vandyke)



The Grand Mosque in Kong is home to a colony of Guinean Horseshoe Bats that are classified as endangered due to their small distribution (image by Inger Vandyke)



A selection of hand made and hand painted beads in Korhogo (image by Inger Vandyke)



A pretty young girl selling sandals and clothes at the street market in Korhogo (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a lady selling traditional medicinal plants at the street market in Man (image by Inger Vandyke)



Indigo dyed cloth in the textile area of Abidjan (image by Inger Vandyke)



A young Guéré girl waits her turn to dance (image by Inger Vandyke)



During the Dance of the Jugglers young Guéré girls are tossed into the air before being expertly caught and landed into safety (image by Inger Vandyke)



"Is it my turn yet?" young Guéré girls waiting for the prompt to perform in the Dance of the Jugglers (image by Inger Vandyke)



The wild and fascinating Dance of the Jugglers in remote Ivory Coast (image by Inger Vandyke)



Wood detail of an ageing door on one of the French colonial buildings in Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)



The simple fun of using strands of kelp as skipping ropes. Children of Grand Bassam's fishing community, N'Zima, play on the beach and in the surf (image by Inger Vandyke)



There is no monument to slavery in Grand Bassam. Locating the headquarters of where it happened requires some local knowledge as the building now sits crumbling in the forest (image by Inger Vandyke)



A pretty young girl selling beach toys for children at Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)



Sunset through the coconut palms on the beach at Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)



A bunch of children play with makeshift toys in the surf on the beach at Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)



Detail of an old French colonial building in Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)



Children of Grand Bassam's fishing community, N'Zima, grow up in a world of fresh fish, colourful pirogues, surf beaches and summer rains (image by Inger Vandyke)



Young men contemplate a night of sea fishing from their pirogues at Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)



A pair of Goly Masked Dancers called Goli Glan with their guardian. Their masks are mixed symbols of crocodile and antelope (image by Inger Vandyke)



Building detail in Grand Bassam. A UNESCO World Heritage site, the original French colonial buildings of Grand Bassam are listed for their important history of French trading posts in the Gulf of Guinea (image by Inger Vandyke)



Sunsets on the beach at Grand Bassam are stunning (image by Inger Vandyke)



A proud grandmother watches over her grandkids playing in the N'Zima fishing village of Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)



A young member of the local fishing community of N'Zima in Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)



Goli glan masked dancers of the Baoulé people (image by Inger Vandyke)



A pair of Goly Kpan dancers of the Baoulé people (image by Inger Vandyke)



Musicians serenade a solo Goli Kpan masked dancer into the arena (image by Inger Vandyke)



Goli Kpan masked dancer (image by Inger Vandyke)



A stilt dancer emerges from the sacred forest adjacent to Godufu (image by Inger Vandyke)



A parade of Gla masked dancers of the Yacuba people in remote Ivory Coast (image by Inger Vandyke)



Elders sit to oversee a stilt dance in the village of Godufu (image by Inger Vandyke)



Taking a break, a stilt dancer rests on a specially constructed seat during individual acts of his dance (image by Inger Vandyke)



Performing an acrobatic series of moves, a stilt dancer hand stands during his performance (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Gambié dancer of the We, or Guéré people (image by Inger Vandyke)



Masks play an important role of helping the culture of the Yacuba people to survive (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Zehego Gla (mask) dancer. Zehego is the mask of the chameleon in the Yacuba people of Ivory Coast (image by Inger Vandyke)



Guardians of Yacuba Gla performers often shout commands as part of their performance (image by Inger Vandyke)



Gla guardian of the Yacuba people in a forest adjacent to his village (image by Inger Vandyke)



A beautiful smiling Fulani girl in the door of her home (image by Inger Vandyke)



Living deep in the forest, the Fulani people of Ivory Coast have mostly settled in the country after arriving there as nomads (image by Inger Vandyke)



Entrance portal to Ganamet house in Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)



The facade of charismatic Ganamet House is slowly being consumed by strangler figs. Once the home of a Lebanese coffee and cocoa trader of the same name, Ganamet house is a fine example of the crumbling French colonial buildings of Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)



A guardian commands the Zeblion Gla (mask) of the Yacuba people (image by Inger Vandyke)



Fulani children are so very pretty (image by Inger Vandyke)



Drying and smoking fish in the village of N'Zima, Grand Bassam (image by Inger Vandyke)



A ball of indigo-dyed natural cotton sit waiting to be woven into fabric at Korhogo (image by Inger Vandyke)



Workers at a tie dying facility have a laugh at the unexpected arrival of photographers wishing to document their lives in Abidjan (image by Inger Vandyke)



Cloth workers labouring to make tie dyed fabrics in Abidjan (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Boloye dancer launches into a somersault (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Boloye kora player in Korhogo (image by Inger Vandyke)



One of the liveliest dances we see on our tour, Boloye dancers have a series of highly athletic moves! (image by Inger Vandyke)



Boloye musicians play a mixture of Kora and Maracas, both made from calabashes, at a performance of Boloye, the Panther dance (image by Inger Vandyke)



The youngest Panther dancer struts his stuff at a performance of Boloye (image by Inger Vandyke)



Child of the cloth - a young boy sits in the drying area of tie dyed cloth near Abidjan (image by Inger Vandyke)



The youngest Boloye performer watches his fellow dancers while he waits for his turn in the performance (image by Inger Vandyke)



A local weaver takes a break from making textiles in Korhogo (image by Inger Vandyke)



Boloye, or Panther, dancers line up to start their dance (image by Inger Vandyke)



Fashioned from local timbers, these sophisticated looms are used to create beautiful textiles in Korhogo (image by Inger Vandyke)



The oddly shaped stilted granaries of the Niofoin (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Niofoin fetish assistant poses proudly in front of the door of a Niofoin fetish house (image by Inger Vandyke)



A fetish assistant cooks a sacrificed animal from earlier that day. Across West Africa, animals that are sacrificed are generally eaten (image by Inger Vandyke)



Beautiful tie dyed fabrics from the air (image by Inger Vandyke)



Hand tie dyed fabrics are laid out to dry in the West African heat at a local textile manufacturing area of Abidjan (image by Inger Vandyke)



Zaouli master dancers are a much venerated part of Guro culture. Their performances attract many local people and guests alike. Here a dancer peeps from behind his mask looking for a cue to begin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Each Zaouli dance is overseen by a Master of Ceremonies (image by Inger Vandyke)



The mask of Zaouli Zohoulin. This important Zaouli mask features a chicken eating a lizard, a symbol dating back to the time the Guro engaged in an idealogical war and succeeded (image by Inger Vandyke)



Of all the dances we see on our tour, Zaouli is one of the most riveting (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Zaouli dancer of the Guro people in Ivory Coast (image by Inger Vandyke)



A young lady of Aniassué assists a Komian dancer in preparing for her dance (image by Inger Vandyke)



The tools of the Komian dance (image by Inger Vandyke)



A young Guéré girl decorated for the Dance of the Jugglers (image by Inger Vandyke)



The Gla dancer of Gambié, or the 'comedian' and his guardian (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of an Akan woman who recently had a baby. In Akan tradition new mothers must smear their bodies with shea butter for the week after birth (image by Inger Vandyke)



A young Senufo girl watches a performance of Balafon dancers near Korhogo (image by Inger Vandyke)



Local Senufo people dance in circles to celebrate the Balafon (image by Inger Vandyke)



The son of Soro Zana, the most prominent maker of Ivory Coast's Balafons, shows us how these fantastic musical instruments are made in his workshop (image by Inger Vandyke)



Head stands are also part of the Boloye dance (image by Inger Vandyke)



A pair of Balafon dancers with their beautiful hats fashioned out of sisal and ostrich feathers (image by Inger Vandyke)



Local children enter the Boloye dance arena showing off their moves before the performers arrive for the main act (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Balafon performer pauses in contemplation during his dance (image by Inger Vandyke)



Smeltering ore in the workshop of a local Senufo blacksmith (image by Inger Vandyke)



Traditional Balafon musical instruments are fashioned from natural materials such as strings made from goat skin and sisal (image by Inger Vandyke)



Brightly coloured materials used to make clay beads. The paints are all natural and area created from local ochres, leaves and fruits (image by Inger Vandyke)



An elderly man oversees the making of Balafons in the workshop of Ivory Coast's most famous Balafon maker, Soro Zana (image by Inger Vandyke)



Banco washers toil away at their trade every day near Abidjan. Collecting laundry from nearby communities it is their job to wash clothes by hand using soap and old tyres as washstands (image by Inger Vandyke)



A young girl with her baby sister in front of hanging Korhogo cloth (image by Inger Vandyke)



View of the minaret from the rooftop of Missiriba, the Grand Mosque of Kong (image by Inger Vandyke)



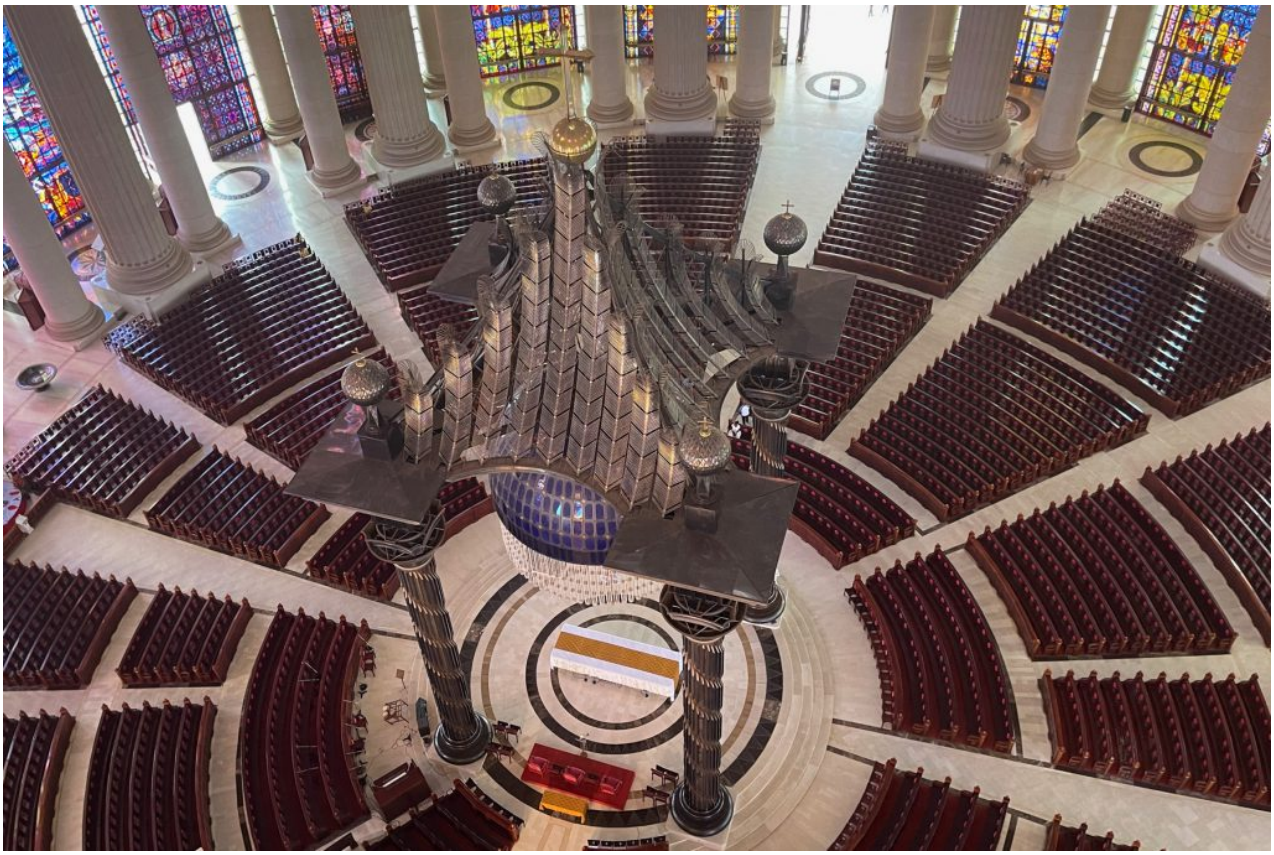
Portrait of King Nana Boa Kumasi of the Agni people (image by Inger Vandyke)



Ivorian wood detail on a palace door of the home of King Nana Boa Kumasi (image by Inger Vandyke)



The beautiful acrylic paintings of Grand Bassam artist Alfred Sansan Dah (image by Inger Vandyke under permission from the artist)



The seating inside the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace at Yamoussoukro (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Dozo head man in remote Ivory Coast. The Dozo are a fraternity of hunter gatherers living in Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali and Burkina Faso (image by Inger Vandyke)



The regal status of a Dozo head man in remote Ivory Coast (image by Inger Vandyke)



Painted fabric from the village of Fakaha, reputed to have been visited by Pablo Picasso (image by Inger Vandyke)