



## Benin

## Country Facts

### History

Little evidence remains of Benin's history before the arrival of the Europeans. Pygmies who would have lived in groups of hunter-gatherers across the country what is now Benin. During the first millennium AD successive waves of migration of farming and livestock-breeding ethnic groups including the Somba, Bariba, Foula and Fon arrived on present-day Benin's territory.

In 1473 the Portuguese reached the coast of Benin while searching for the sea route to India. However, it wasn't until 200 years later, at the end of the 17th century, that Europeans started to establish trading posts along the coast. At the beginning, their interest was limited to plain trade but within short time the main merchandise has become human life. It is estimated that by the end of the 17th century up to 20,000 slaves a year were shipped to the Americas passing through Ouidah, Porto Novo and Grand Popo. The Kings of Dahomey played an important part in the slave trade, without their co-operation it could not have operated on a scale that it did. The rulers were repaid by the Europeans with weapons, cannons and other goods.

This kingdom, which was very much involved in the slave trade, was founded in 1625 by King Houégbadja who had launched several wars to expand his power. There are several legends recounting the founding of the Dahomey kingdom. One of it says that it was during this period of conquest the King Houégbadja wanted to annex a neighbouring kingdom. This kingdom's ruler, named Dan, told Houégbadja that he would kill him and "build a house on his belly." However, it was Dan who was defeated and killed by Houégbadja and he named his new kingdom Dâ home meaning "in the belly of the king Dan".

By the end of the 17th century Dahomey with its capital at Abomey had become a powerful kingdom. The successive rulers could significantly extend their power. Until the middle of the 19th century the kingdom had become very rich by trading slaves for European goods. Although the British and the Danes and later also the French had abolished the slave trade, it was only by 1848 that it had completely died away. It was King Glélé who finally stopped trading humans to start exporting palm oil and tobacco, but the income was not the same and the power of Dahomey began to wane. The kingdom's decline culminated with the arrival of the French in 1892 and the sacking of Abomey. King Gbêhanzin I had torched the town to prevent its wealth and power falling into French hands, but this could not stop the invaders from capturing the kingdom. Gbêhanzin had to flee, but two years later he was caught and exiled to Martinique and then Algeria where he died in 1906. The French continued marching northward occupying the kingdoms of Nikki, Djougou and Parakou. On 22 June 1894 the French colony of Dahomey was born. It became part of French West Africa in 1904. For 60 years, the colony was controlled by the French governor based in Dakar. Under the French, a deep-water port was constructed at Cotonou, and railroads were built. School and health facilities were expanded. On 4 December 1958, it became the Republic of Dahomey, self-governing within the French Community, and on 1 August 1960, Dahomey was granted its independence.

The first elections were held in December of that same year and Hubert Maga became the country's first president, but three years later he was overthrown in a coup. Until 1972, a large number of military coups brought about many changes of government and political instability. The last of these brought to power Major Mathieu Kérékou as the head of a regime professing strict Marxist-Leninist principles. Kérékou and his Revolutionary Party of the People of Benin (PRPB) remained in power for 17 years. During his

dictatorship the country saw corruption, suppression and a high level of debt. In 1975 the Republic of Dahomey was renamed People's Republic of Benin. Its name was adopted from the great ancient empire Benin in modern-day Nigeria.

The years 1989 and 1990 were marked by riots breaking out due to the poor economic situation. As a result, in March 1990 a National Conference was held that introduced a new democratic constitution and held presidential and legislative elections. A new cabinet was created, led by former World Bank official Nicéphore Soglo. A presidential democracy was proclaimed and the country was renamed the Republic of Benin. In 1996 ex-president Kérékou, who had officially retired from active politics, was voted back into power. Due to ability to change political colours and religious beliefs he was nicknamed "the chameleon". Kérékou was elected again in 2001. The Constitution prohibited him from running for a third term, so Thomas Yayi Boni won the elections of 2006. He was elected again in 2011, although the result has been contested.

Benin's former president Mathieu Kérékou died on October 14, 2015 at the age of 82.

In March 2016 elections were held, in which businessman Patrice Talon defeated Prime Minister Lionel Zinsou.

## Population

The population of Benin is estimated at 12.8 million (in 2020). They are divided into 40 different ethnic groups, each of them has its own history, language and culture. The biggest and best-known group is the Fon, who comprise about 40% of the overall population. The Adja in the southwest and the Goun in the area of Porto-Novo are closely related to them. The second-largest of the southern groups are the Yoruba, who originally migrated to modern-day Benin from the western part of Nigeria. They constitute about 12% of Benin's population. Most of them live in the southeast and the centre of the country. The creoles, descended from former slaves, who have returned to their homeland, are concentrated in the region of Porto-Novo and Ouidah. In the north the biggest tribes are the Betammaribé, better known as Somba, the Bariba, the Dendi and the Fulani. The Somba are famous for their fortress-like mud houses called tata, true architectural gems. They live in the Atakora Mountains. The northeast of the country is home to Bariba, their capital is Nikki. The largest ethnic group in the north are the Dendi, who are believed to have arrived at Benin from Mali. They live around the towns of Parakou and Natitingou. The Fulani also known as Peul or Fouta are another group in the north of Benin, they are nomadic or semi-nomadic cattle herders.

## Religions

Benin is considered the cradle of Voodoo, also spelt Vodoun. Although only 17% of the population are officially followers of Voodoo, an estimated 60-70% practice the beliefs. This is because many people retain traditional beliefs alongside Christian and Muslim religion. According to statistics 35% practice the Christian faith. More than half of all Christians in Benin are Catholic. Muslims are represented most heavily in the north and southeast of the country. They constitute 25% of the population.

Voodoo originated in today's Benin, from where it spread over the whole world due to slave trade. It was carried to Haiti, USA, Brazil and many other countries. Today, Voodoo has over 50 million followers worldwide. Voodoo is an animistic religion whose roots stretch back 4000 years. Its name means "god" or "spirit" in the Fon language. It is a very complex system of belief, which is divided in different variations. Each of it has its own tradition and a "loa", a spiritual leader. The Voodoo pantheon includes more than 200 gods and spirits. It is headed by Mawa-Lissa, the Supreme Being. Mawa-Lissa is a hermaphrodite, Mawa representing the female characteristics and Lissa the male qualities. Other important gods that the pantheon includes are Legba, who plays the role of a messenger between the human beings and the gods, Fa, the god of fate, Sogba who controls the sea and the storms and Dan, the god of the serpent, to whom the Python temple in Ouidah was dedicated. Animal sacrifices play a major role in Voodoo, and food, rum and tobacco are also popular offerings to appease the gods and spirits. In voodoo ceremonies, priests and priestesses fall into a trance, allowing the gods to enter their bodies and speak or heal through them. In the western world Voodoo is often misunderstood and considered as a barbaric cult as

Hollywood portrayed the religion as primitive and savage. Its adherents, however, believe in the power of nature and the natural forces and not in the Hollywood-inspired clichés.

## Languages

The official language of Benin is French. The most important local language is Fon, which is spoken by the majority of the population in the south and centre and is considered the lingua franca of trade and administration. Other widespread local languages are Yoruba, Bariba and Dendi. There are 53 languages and dialects spoken in Benin.

## Plant Life and Wildlife

### Plant life

More than 3000 species of shrubs, trees and other plants are found in Benin. The predominant type of vegetation is the savannah, which is divided into wet and dry savannah. The rainforest, which naturally covered the coastal area, has to a large extent been cleared. Only few areas of true rain forest remain. In the south the forest has been lost mostly to agriculture. Oil palms and coconut trees are cultivated as well as cotton, cassava, beans, millet and groundnuts. The Iroko tree is considered sacred in Benin. The dry savannah is characterized by the strange-looking baobab (*Adansonia digitata*), also known as monkey-bread tree. Everywhere in Africa it is considered sacred. Every part of the tree is useful. The fibres of the bark are woven into mats, the pulp of the fruit is rich in vitamins and provides a refreshing juice, the calcium-rich young leaves are used in cooking and the roots are employed to make traditional medicine. In December and January the Red Silk Cotton Tree is in full bloom and presents a striking blaze of crimson. Another typical tree of the savannah is tall evergreen mango tree.

### Wildlife

Benin offers good opportunities of game viewing, maybe the best in West Africa. But, like in other West African countries, there are only few conservation areas and the country lacks the large herds of animals often seen in East Africa or in the southern part of the continent. In the north and northwest Benin boasts two national parks, the Pendjari National Park and the W National Park. Both parks offer the opportunity to see lion, leopard and cheetah, as well as the smaller cats including serval, caracal and African wild cat. In Pendjari and W there are big elephant populations with an estimated number of more than 3000. While the African wild dog is probably extinct in Benin, there are good chances of viewing the spotted hyena. Among the primates, the most often spotted are baboons and vervet monkeys in addition to patas. Several species of antelope live in both parks including roan antelope, Defassa waterbuck, hartebeest, bushbuck, oribi and different members of the duiker family. Warthog and rock hyrax are also common in Pendjari and W.

Benin is an excellent place for birders. 572 species have been recorded. The coastal lagoons offer the opportunity to see a large number of water birds. Parts of the area surrounding Lake Nakoué and Lake Ahémé are still covered with forest, so there are good chances of spotting forest birds, too. Among the bird species encountered in Benin there are more than 50 species of raptors such as the African fish eagle and different vulture species. Around the waters of the both national parks storks including marabou and jabiru stork can be seen, as well as several ibis, heron and egret species, lapwings and plovers, African jacana and many more. Enthusiasts should use a field guide to birds of West Africa. Reptiles: Nile crocodiles occur in both parks and can easily be seen on river banks. They are considered sacred by many locals. A wide variety of snakes is found in Benin, but most of them are very shy and unlikely to be seen. One of the most commonly encountered snakes is the rock python, which is the largest snake in West Africa. Another widespread species of python is the royal python, which is the one that many tourists will see at the Python Temple in Ouidah, where they are usually draped over the visitors. Among the venomous species, puff adders, Gabon vipers, various spitting cobras and the black mamba are found in Benin. The various chameleon species are most likely to be found on voodoo markets as ingredients for charms and fetishes. Benin is also home to tortoises including leopard

tortoises, as well as rock monitors, colourful agamas and the widespread common house gecko, who is an excellent hunter of insects.

## Geography

Benin covers an area of 112,620 square kilometres. The country stretches from the Bight of Benin in the south to the Republic of Niger in the north and Burkina Faso in the northwest. It borders Togo to the west and Nigeria to the east. In the northeast the River Niger makes up part of the border between Benin and the Republic of Niger. Its coastline measuring only 120 km is marked by lagoons, swamps and lakes including Lac Nakoué and Lac Ahémé. The country can be divided into four areas from the south to the north, starting with the low-lying coastal plain. Behind the coast lie several plateaus of southern Benin, which are split by valleys running north to south. An area of flat lands dotted with inselbergs extends to the north of the plateaus. The area is covered with savannah, dry forests and farmland where oil palms, coconut trees, banana and pineapple are cultivated. The Atakora Mountains in the northwest with the highest point, Mont Sokbaro, at 658 m are the only significant hills. The Atakora Range stretches through to the southeast of Ghana. It is mainly comprised of quartzite, so the quality of soil in the mountainous areas is poor.

Extending about 510 kilometres in length the Ouémé is Benin's largest river. Its most important tributaries are the rivers Okpara and the Zou. In the west of Benin the river Mono forms the border with Togo for about 100 km. It meets the ocean in Grand Popo.

## Economy

Benin is highly dependent on agriculture, with substantial employment and income arising from subsistence farming. About 65% of the workforce is employed in this sector. Cotton is the mainstay of the economy followed by groundnuts and palm oil. Like Mali and other cotton-producing countries in West Africa, Benin suffers from the fall in world cotton prices and the subsidy support the US and Europe give to their own farmers.

Industry is considerably less important than agriculture to Benin's economy. The main industries are cement manufacturing, cotton ginning, food processing and, to a smaller extent, textiles.

Another important sector is the transit trade passing through the deep-water port of Cotonou. A lot of used cars arrive here and are shipped to landlocked countries such as Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad or Mali. However, due to the high level of corruption a big percentage of the activities is attributed to the informal sector. This also applies to fuel smuggling from Nigeria to Benin.