

# Benin

If you're heading to West Africa to unearth lost treasure, look no further than Benin. This club-shaped country, on the western edge of Nigeria, was once one of the most powerful empires in Africa – the Dahomey kingdom. The ruins of the Dahomeyans' palaces and temples can be seen in Abomey, while Ouidah is a poignant reminder of where their riches came from: the slave trade. The Route d'Esclaves in Ouidah was the last walk on African soil for slaves bound for Brazil and the Caribbean. Museums here and in Porto Novo, Benin's lagoon-side capital, examine the resultant Afro-Brazilian society and culture.

But regardless of the ill-gotten Dahomeyan gains glittering in the Musée Historique d'Abomey, there are plenty of treasures on Benin's dusty streets and palm-fringed beaches. This is the birthplace of voodoo, the country's national religion, exported by the slaves and distorted by Hollywood. Voodoo is an important part of everyday life and most towns bear signs of it, such as the fetish markets stocked with the heads and skins of every animal imaginable.

Elephants, lions and crocodiles can be seen in more animated form in the northern wildlife parks, Pendjari and W, two of the best in West Africa. Then there are the stilt villages, home to thousands in the southern lagoons, and the northern *tata somba*, mud fortresses built by the insular Somba people. Not only is Benin a richly historical and cultural country, this politically stable nation is one of the most tourist-friendly parts of West Africa.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 112,622 sq km
- **Capital** Porto Novo
- **Country code** ☎ 229
- **Famous for** Voodoo; slavery; the Kings of Dahomey; adopting Marxism; Angélique Kidjo
- **Languages** French, Fon, Yoruba, Dendi, Bariba and Ge
- **Money** West African CFA franc; US\$1 = CFA544.89; €1 = CFA655.96
- **Population** 7.4 million
- **Visa** CFA10,000 at border, 30-day extension CFA12,000



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Ghèzo's throne** (p110) Shiver in front of this throne mounted on human skulls, one of the dark relics from the slave-trading Dahomey kingdom in Abomey.
- **Route des Esclaves** (p106) Retrace the last steps of millions of slaves to the Point of No Return memorial in Ouidah.
- **Fetish market** (p93) Shop for essential voodoo items such as monkey testicles and bat wings.
- **Stilt villages** (p102) Where tens of thousands of people go about their daily business 2m above the surface of Lake Nokoué.
- **Malanville market** (p120) Watch the nomadic Fula traders drift into town, produce piled on their heads, in the arid far north of the country.

## ITINERARIES

- **One Week** A classic example of urban Africa **Cotonou** (p95) is worth a brief look, but the other southern cities have more charm. **Porto Novo** (p103), the tranquil capital, and **Ganvié** (p102) the lacustrine stilt village, are both within two hours taxi journey of Cotonou. A little further along the country's two main roads are a couple of must-sees that ooze a sense of culture and history: **Abomey** (p110), home to the ruined palaces of the Kings of Dahomey, and **Ouidah** (p106) once a capital of the slave trade and now the centre of voodoo worship.
- **Two Weeks** Relax after all that sightseeing with a few days of lounging on the empty beaches at **Grand Popo** (p108). This elegantly decaying beach resort is a handy base for excursions to the peaceful fishing villages around **Lake Ahémé** (p109). Inland, the stand-out towns are **Natitingou** (p116), gateway to the intriguing fortified compounds in Somba country, and **Malanville** (p120), where the weekly market draws Fula nomads from the neighbouring countries.
- **One Month** With this much time on your hands, you should be able to delve into every corner of this small country. In addition to the above, linger in Somba country and stay with a family in their compound, then explore the two wildlife parks, **Pendjari** (p118) and **W** (p120). **Parakou** (p113) and **Djougou** (p115) are pleasantly sleepy towns to while away a few days.

## HOW MUCH?

- **Traveller's fetish** CFA3000
- **Mashed yam** CFA200
- **Appliqué hat** CFA1500
- **Zemi-john** CFA1100
- **National park entry** CFA10000

## LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L of petrol** CFA300-600
- **1L of bottled water** CFA500
- **Bottle of La Béninoise** CFA250
- **Souvenir T-shirt** CFA2000
- **Yam chips** CFA1100

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

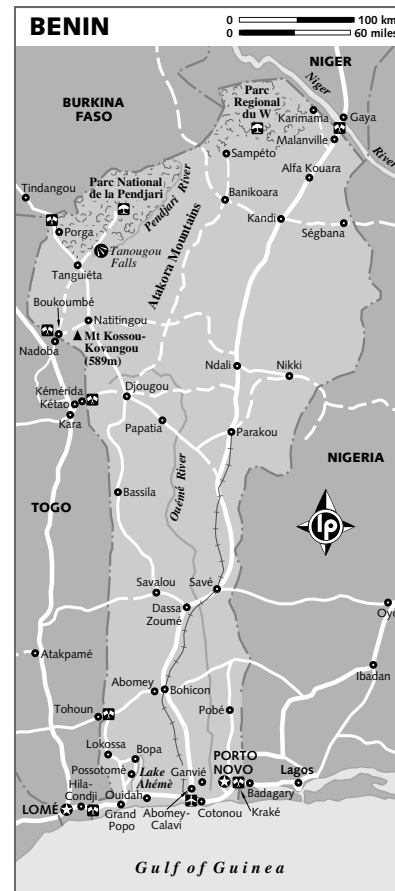
In southern Benin, there are two rainy seasons: April to mid-July, and mid-September to late October. The rains in the north fall from June to early October. In the north temperatures can reach 46°C, while the coastal south is cooler, with temperatures ranging from 18°C to 35°C. Harmattan winds billow out of the Sahara between December and March, and the hottest time of the year is from February to April. The coolest, driest time to visit is between November and February.

Parts of the northern Atakora region occasionally receive heavy rainfall, and smaller roads throughout Benin may be impassable during the rainy seasons; notably those in the wildlife parks, particularly Parc Régional du W.

## HISTORY

More than 350 years ago, the area now known as Benin was split into numerous principalities. One of the chiefs quarrelled with his brother for the right to succession and, around 1625, settled in Abomey. He then conquered the neighbouring kingdom of the Dan, which became known as Dan-Homey, meaning 'in Dan's belly' (see p112). The name was later shortened by the French colonisers.

Each king pledged to leave his successor more land than he inherited, a pledge kept by waging war with his neighbours, particularly the Yoruba of Nigeria. Meanwhile, the Portuguese, and later other Europeans,



established trading posts along the coast, most notably at Porto Novo and Ouidah. The Portuguese, French, Dutch and English, whose forts can still be seen in Ouidah, spelled the town's name four different ways but pronounced it the same.

The Dahomeyan Kings grew rich by selling slaves to traders, who then gave them the guns that let them pillage their neighbours for slaves and land. For more than a century, an average of 10,000 slaves per year were shipped to the Americas (primarily Brazil and the Caribbean, in particular Haiti), taking voodoo with them. As a result southern Dahomey was dubbed the Slave Coast.

Early in the 19th century, the French colonised the kingdom of Dahomey, making it

part of French West Africa (see p103). During the 70-year colonial period, progress was made in education, and many Dahomeyans were employed as government advisers in French West Africa. The country's intellectual nature led the French to nickname it 'the West African Latin Quarter'.

## Independence & Le Folklore

When Dahomey became independent in 1960, Hubert Maga was elected the country's first president. Almost immediately, other former French colonies started deporting their Dahomeyan populations. Back home without work, they were the root of a highly unstable political situation. Three years after independence, having seen how easily some disgruntled soldiers in neighbouring Togo had staged a coup, the military did the same in Dahomey.

During the next decade, Dahomey saw four more military coups, nine more changes of government and five changes of constitution: what the Dahomeyans called in jest *le folklore*.

## Revolution

In 1972 a group of officers led by Lieutenant Colonel Mathieu Kérékou seized power in a coup that initiated almost two decades of military dictatorship. The country then took a sharp turn to the left as he embraced Marxist-Leninist ideology and aligned the country with superpowers like China, the Soviet Union and North Korea. To emphasise the break from the past, Kérékou changed the country's flag and renamed it Benin. He informed his people by radio on 13 November 1975, a date still etched into the memories of most Beninese.

The government established the schools it required to teach Marxism, along with collective farms, state enterprises, a central trade union, and a more militant spirit in the army. However, the revolution was always more rhetorical than real. The economy fell into a shambles: inflation and unemployment rose, salaries remained unpaid for months. People soon tired of living in West Africa's answer to Eastern Europe, and there were ethnic tensions between the president, a Natitingou-born northerner, and the Yoruba population in the south. There were six attempted coups in one year alone. Then in the late 1980s, workers and students went on strike.

In December 1989, as a condition of French financial support, Kérékou ditched Marxism and held a conference to draft a new constitution. Dissidents used the occasion to blame the government for bankrupting the country, and for corruption and human rights abuses. The 488 delegates then engineered a coup, relegating Kérékou to head of the army, and formed a new cabinet under former dissident Nicéphore Soglo.

### The 1990s: Multiparty Elections

The first free multiparty elections were held in March 1991 and Soglo swept to power. However, his austere economic measures – following the 1994 devaluation of the CFA – came under fire, as did his autocracy and nepotism. Top jobs went to Soglo family members such as his son Liadi. Kérékou was voted back into power in March 1996, although he stuck to the desperately needed economic measures implemented by his rival.

Five years later, in the March 2001 presidential elections, Kérékou and Soglo faced each other again. Soglo and fellow opposition candidate Adrien Houngbédji withdrew from the race, alleging electoral fraud, leading to a landslide victory for the incumbent president.

### Benin Today

Kérékou's second and final five-year term in office finished with the presidential elections in March 2006, bringing an end to his 33 years at the top. The USA and France had replaced China et al on his speed dial, and Benin has become one of the most stable, and responsible, democracies among the Ecowas members; a trend that is set to continue under the new president, Yayi Boni. The former head of the West African Development Bank beat Adrien Houngbédji in a run-off. In his campaign, based around the slogan of 'change', he pledged to fight corruption and revive an economy suffering from depressed cotton prices. 'If you want to change the future, change yourselves,' he said when he was sworn in.

### THE CULTURE The National Psyche

Nicknamed 'the West African Latin Quarter' by the French for its intellectualism, Benin has a strong culture of discussion and de-

bate. It's not unusual to see people engrossed in a book or one of the country's papers.

Catholicism and Islam are highly important to their many followers, but the home-grown religion of voodoo is the most influential force.

Politically, the Beninese feel they have borne a lot to achieve their stable democracy and are wary of their troubled neighbours, Togo and Nigeria.

Beninese women may be a formidable presence on the streets but this is a firmly patriarchal society and they tolerate some inequality. However, they do have vital roles in society and the workforce – even in the Muslim north of the country (see below).

### Daily Life

Benin's economy is primarily dependant on subsistence farming, which accounts for 38% of GDP. Yams, maize, cassava and corn are the principal food crops. The country's main exports are cotton, palm oil, crude oil and cocoa beans, with cotton accounting for more than 75% of export earnings. Imports exceed exports by about US\$170 million.

Benin's economic growth, achieved through political stability and economic management, is offset by rapid population growth. The country also remains vulnerable to the political turmoil in Nigeria, which it depends on for fuel. While high fuel costs hamper economic growth, the expansion of Cotonou's port and increased cotton production continue to drive progress.

Most of Benin's ethnic groups (see opposite) are patrilineal and many still observe polygamy, although the practice is becoming increasingly rare among urban and educated Beninese. Marriages are still arranged by families and divorce is rare.

Most families support themselves through agriculture. Women control the local food distribution system, including the transport of produce to market and the subsequent barter and sale.

Average life expectancy is around 53, with an AIDS rate of about 2% and some 70,000 people living with the virus. Women have 5.9 children each on average and almost 50% of the population is aged 14 or under.

There is evidence of wealth, particularly in the south, but much of it comes from external sources such as tourism or young

Beninese men working in Europe. Young men in Benin can typically expect a roof over their heads, enough food to live on and, in many cases, a scooter to sit on.

### Population

There is an array of different ethnic groups within Benin's narrow borders, although five of them account for 50% of the population: Fon, Yoruba, Bariba, Betamaribé and Fula.

The Fon, who comprise 40% of the Beninese population, migrated from southwestern Nigeria in the 13th century and established a kingdom in Allada in southern Benin.

The Yoruba (called Nagot locally), who also migrated from Nigeria, occupy the southern and mideastern zones of Benin and comprise 12% of the population.

The Bariba, who make up 9% of the population, live mostly in the Borgou region. According to legend, they migrated from the Bussa and Ife areas of Nigeria. Their most famous kingdom in Benin was centred at Nikki, and because of distance and earlier slave raids they have remained aloof towards southern Benin.

The Betamaribé (often called the Somba) comprise 8% of the population and live in

the northwest, around the Atakora mountains. Having lived for hundreds of years in relative seclusion from modern influences, they have managed to keep much of their traditional culture intact.

The nomadic Fula (also called Fulani or Peul) live primarily in the north and comprise 6% of the population.

Despite the underlying tensions between the southern and northern regions, the various groups live in relative harmony and have intermarried.

### RELIGION

Some 30% of the population is Christian, 20% is Muslim, and 50% retains traditional beliefs, such as animism and voodoo.

Most people practice voodoo, whatever their religion. The practice mixed with Catholicism in the Americas, where the Dahomeyan slaves took it and their Afro-Brazilian descendants brought it back. Christian missionaries also won over Dahomeyans by fusing their creed with voodoo.

The northern peoples practice voodoo under the name of fetishism, as evidenced by the fetish shrines outside the *tata somba* houses around Natitingou.

### GRIGRI CHARMS & JUJU MEN

Voodoo, or *vodou*, got its current name in Haiti and Cuba, where the religion arrived with Fon and Ewe slaves from the Dahomey Kingdom and mixed with Catholicism. It was originally called *vodun* in Benin and Togo – a word that means 'the hidden' or 'the mystery'. Unfortunately, it has suited Hollywood to put a sinister spin on this.

In fact, voodoo is, for millions of Beninese and Togolese, a skullduggery-free part of everyday life. It does have a dark side – it's hard to miss the voodoo dolls riddled with nails – but this is only one aspect of it.

The practice conforms to the general pattern of West African religions, with a supreme god, Mawu, and a host of lesser spirits that are ethnically specific to their followers and to the part of the spiritual world inhabited by a person's ancestors. Traditional priests, or *juju* men, are consulted for their power to communicate with particular spirits and seek intercession with them. This communication is achieved through spirit possession and ritual that often involves a gift or 'sacrifice' of palm wine, gin or food such as eggs, chickens or goats. The grace of the spirits is essential for protection and prosperity, and some spirits can be harnessed for malicious and selfish ends.

A fetish is an object or potion imbued with the spirits' power. Fetish markets are like voodoo pharmacies. The buyer has a prescription of the items the priest needs to make the required concoction – such as a parrot's tail, a cobra's head and, often, perfume.

Benin's own government has been as damaging to voodoo as Hollywood. Kérékou's Marxist government outlawed it as being inimical to a rational and socialist work ethic. Since a democratic government was installed here in 1989, traditional religious practice has been permitted. Voodoo was formally recognised as a religion by the government in February 1996.

## ARTS

## Art &amp; Craftwork

Benin has a rich cultural heritage, and its traditional art has brought international attention to the legendary kingdom of Dahomey.

Traditionally, art served a spiritual purpose, but under the Fon kings, artisans and sculptors were called upon to create works that evoked heroism and enhanced the image of the rulers. They became the historians of the era, creating richly coloured appliqué banners that depicted past and present glories. Banners are still being made, particularly in Abomey, depicting animals, hunting scenes and deities using cut-out cloth figures.

## Cinema &amp; TV

The Quintessence film festival ([www.festi-valoudah.org](http://www.festi-valoudah.org)) takes place in Ouidah at the same time as the voodoo festival. The annual festival, which also tours the country, aims to promote films made in sub-Saharan Africa.

Expect badly dubbed Brazilian soaps on the commercial TV channels such as LC2 and Golfe TV. Television Nationale is the state-run channel.

## Music

Angélique Kidjo, a major international star, is Benin's most famous recording artist (see below). Other well known Beninese artists include Gnonnes Pedro, Nel Olivier and

Yelouassi Adolphe, and the bands Orchestre Poly-Rythmo and Disc Afrique.

## Architecture

Don't miss the bas-reliefs on the walls of the Musée Historique d'Abomey in Abomey. These are polychrome bas-reliefs in clay that were used to decorate the palace, temples and chiefs' houses. The palace has been restored and designated a Unesco World Heritage Site.

The Lake Nokoué stilt villages and the *tata somba* houses around Natitingou are remarkable examples of traditional architecture.

## Sculpture

The *cire perdue* (lost wax) method used to make the famous Benin bronzes comes from Benin City in present-day Nigeria. (President Kérékou adopted the once-great kingdom's name when he relaunched Dahomey as a socialist nation in 1975.) However, the method spread west and *cire perdue* figures can be bought in Benin, particularly Abomey and Cotonou.

Figures called *bochio* are carved from the trunk of a tree and placed at the entrance of a village to discourage malevolent spirits. Some voodoo wood figures are combined with a variety of materials, such as bottles, padlocks and bones, to imbue them with power. Moulded figures of unfired clay represent Legba (a Fon god) and receive daily libations for the protection of the home.

## ANGÉLIQUE KIDJO

The posters for her many performances worldwide have proclaimed her 'the African funk diva' and 'West Africa's finest singer', but the truth is that Angélique Kidjo is a world musician in the true, boundary-busting sense of the phrase.

Born in Ouidah in 1960 to a choreographer and a musician with Portuguese and English ancestry, Kidjo remains influenced by the town's Afro-Brazilian heritage. Her recent trilogy of albums explores the links between Africa and Latin America, culminating in *Oyaya!*, her latest record, which sees Kidjo singing in four languages on tracks that dabble in Caribbean rhythms such as salsa, calypso and mambo.

Most famous for the 1994 hit 'Agolo' – from the album *Ayé*, which means 'life' in the Fon language – Kidjo has also held onto the voodoo beliefs she first developed in Ouidah. She believes music can't exist without spirituality and regards voodoo as bringing energy and spirituality to everyday life.

Now a special representative for Unesco and resident in New York, Kidjo has been criticised for losing touch with her 'African-ness'. She answered this criticism with 1995's *Fifa*, for which she and her bassist husband spent several months travelling around Benin recording traditional singers and musicians. Check out [www.angeliquekidjo.com](http://www.angeliquekidjo.com).

## ENVIRONMENT

Sandwiched between Nigeria and Togo, Benin is 700km long and 120km across in the south, widening to about 300km in the north. Most of the coastal plain is a sand bar that blocks the seaward flow of several rivers. As a result, there are lagoons a few kilometres inland all along the coast, which is being eroded by the strong ocean currents. Inland are a densely forested plateau and, in the far northwest, the Atakora mountains.

Significant vestiges of wildlife are found in Parc National de la Pendjari (p118) and in Parc Regional du W (p120), including herds of elephants and several species of cat and antelope.

Deforestation and desertification are the major environmental problems. In the north, droughts continue to severely affect marginal agriculture, while poaching is threatening the small remaining wildlife populations.

## FOOD &amp; DRINK

Beninese grub is unquestionably among the best in West Africa. *Igname* (yam) is the staple food. Mashed yam, which must be eaten fresh, tastes as good in the humblest roadside stall as it does in a restaurant. Yam chips are a great snack.

The Beninese also eat a lot of couscous, rice, *pimane* (pepper) and *arachide* (groundnut) sauce with chicken and fish, such as Dourade. There is normally a vegetarian sauce on offer.

The local beer, La Béninoise, is a passable drop. The adventurous could try palm wine, the millet-based brew *tchapallo*, or *sodabe* (moonshine).

## COTONOU

## pop 761,900

Spending a day in Cotonou, which officially plays second fiddle to Porto Novo but is Benin's capital in everything but name, is like being locked in car with a chain-smoking speed freak. The *zemi-johns* swarm down the boulevards like kamikaze pilots, filling the air with fumes that only briefly clear at night, when the streets seem eerily quiet.

Benin's most populous city does have its positives of course – the country's best hotels, nightlife and shops, and the sprawling Grand Marché du Dantokpa.

Cotonou means 'mouth of the river of death' in Fon – a reference to the Dahomeyan kingdom's role in the slave trade. In 1868 the city was ceded to the French, but this was challenged in 1892 by the Dahomeyan king Béhanzin, leading to the Franco-Dahomeyan campaigns and the formation of the French protectorate of Dahomey.

Place de l'Etoile Rouge is an imposing reminder of former President Mathieu Kérékou's dalliance with socialism.

## ORIENTATION

The heart of town is the intersection of Ave Clozel and Blvd Steinmetz. Going north-east along Ave Clozel, one of the two main thoroughfares, you pass over the Pont Ancien and the road eventually turns into the highway to Porto Novo and Lagos. The new bridge, Pont Martin Luther King (Nouveau Pont) is further to the north; the wide Blvd St Michel (which becomes Ave du Nouveau Pont), the other main road, passes over it and eventually connects with Ave Clozel. Rue des Cheminots in the centre is also known as the Jonquet strip.

## Maps

The 1:15000 *Cotonou* map (Institut Géographique National de Bénin), which lists the city's hotels, cinemas, banks and markets, is available at bookshops.

## INFORMATION

## Bookshops

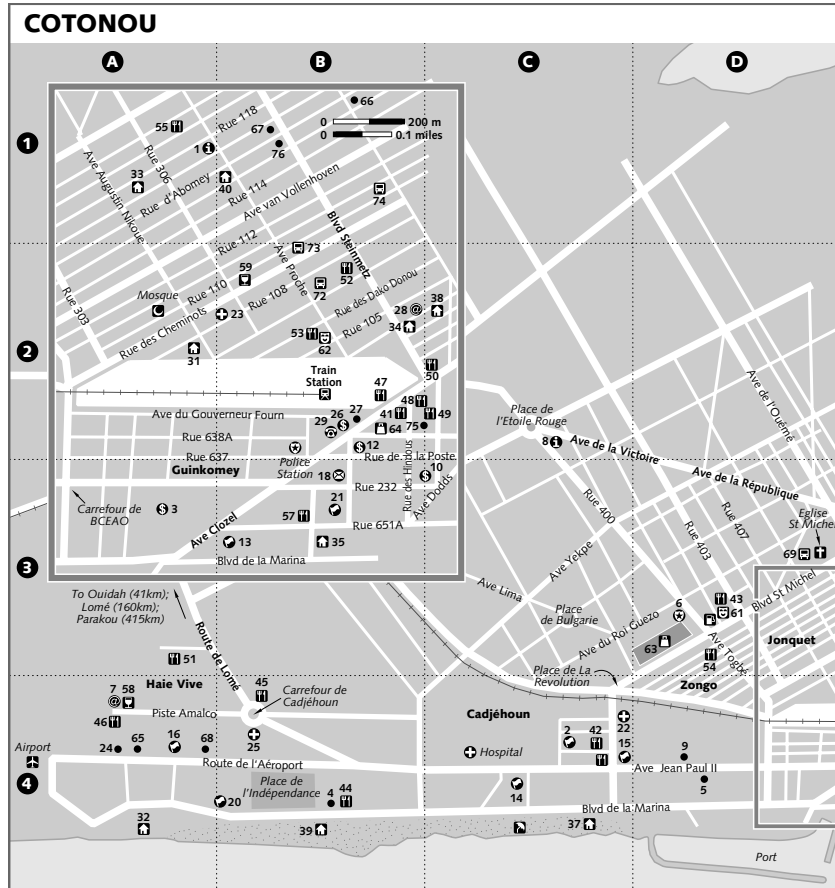
**Librairie Notre-Dame** (☎ 21 31 40 94; Ave Clozel; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 4-7pm Mon) Next to the cathedral, with an excellent selection of books on Benin (in French), including a practical guide to Parc National de la Pendjari (CFA5500) and maps of Cotonou (CFA4255) and Benin (CFA7560).

**Sonaec** (☎ 21 31 22 42; Ave Clozel; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-7pm Mon-Fri) Smart bookshop with the latest periodicals and some photography books on West Africa. Takes Visa and has maps of Cotonou (CFA7500) and Togo (CFA7500).

## Cultural Centres

**Centre Culturel Américain** (☎ 21 30 03 12; fax 21 30 03 84) Adjoining the US embassy.

**Centre Culturel Chinois** (☎ 21 31 31 74; fax 21 31 48 33; Ave Jean Paul II; ☎ 9am-12pm & 3.30-6.30pm) Shows films (see p101) and runs Tai Chi and martial arts courses (see p98).



**Centre Culture Français** (☎ 21 30 08 56; fax 21 30 11 51; Route de l'Aéroport; www.ambafrance-bj.org/ccf; ☎ 9.30am-12pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sat, closed am Thu) This exciting centre has a gallery, outdoor theatre, library, cinema and bar.

### Internet Access

Bldv Steinmetz and the Jonquet strip have the most Internet cafés.

**Cyber Café Le Teranga** (☎ 21 30 29 29; Haie Vive; per hr CFA1000; ☎ 10am-midnight) In front of the English International School.

**Cyber des Arts** (☎ 21 30 60 05; Centre de Promotion de l'Artisanal; per hr CFA500; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Sat) Breezy place with a café.

**Cyberpôle** (☎ 21 32 72 07; Bldv Steinmetz; per hr CFA300; ☎ 8am-midnight) The connection is a little

temperamental. Cheap food is also available on the quiet balcony round the back.

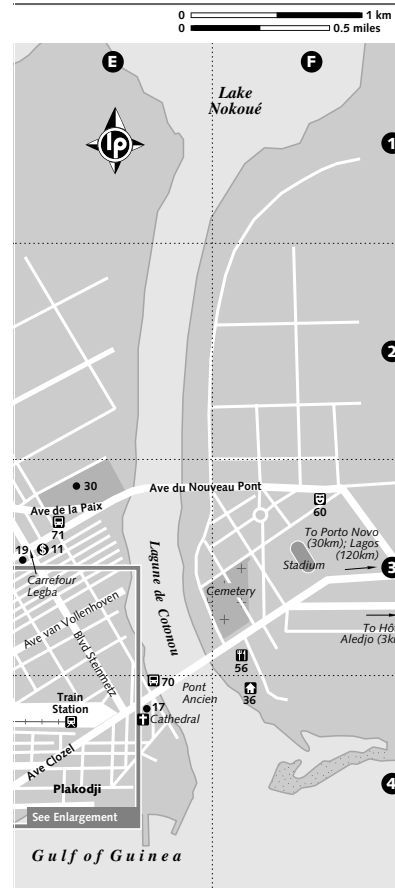
**Star Navigation** (☎ 21 31 81 28; per 1/3 hr CFA500/1000; ☎ 24hr Tue-Fri, 8am-midnight Sat-Mon) The fastest Internet connection we found in Benin.

### Medical Services

**Pharmacie Camp Ghezo** (☎ 21 31 55 52; Rue 240) The best-stocked pharmacy, just around the corner from the US embassy.

**Pharmacie Jonquet** (☎ 21 31 20 80; Rue des Cheminots) A *pharmacie de garde* (all-night pharmacy) in the Jonquet district.

**Polyclinique les Cocotiers** (☎ 21 30 14 20; Rue 373) A private and efficient clinic at the Carrefour de Cadjehoun, across from the PTT Cadjehoun.



### Money

Financial Bank, Bank of Africa and Ecobank change cash and travellers cheques. Financial Bank gives advances on Visa cards (but applies exorbitant fees). Societe Generale de Banques au Benin has an ATM.

**Bank of Africa** (☎ 21 31 32 28; Ave Jean Paul II)

**Ecobank** Bldv Steinmetz (☎ 21 31 66 36; Bldv Steinmetz); Rue 657 (☎ 21 31 40 23; Rue 657) Behind Marché Ganhi.

**Financial Bank** (☎ 21 31 31 00; Rue 637) Just south of Ave Clozel.

**Societe Generale de Banques au Benin** (☎ 21 31 83 00; Ave Clozel)

There's a thriving black market for currencies including the Nigerian Niara around the Jonquet district and Gare du Dantokpa.

### Post

**Main post office** (off Ave Clozel; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-11.30pm Sat)

### Telephone

**Telecom (OPT) building** (Ave Clozel; ☎ 7.30am-midnight Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) You can make overseas telephone calls and send faxes.

### Tourist Information

**Direction du Tourisme et de l'Hôtellerie** (☎ 21 32 68 24; tourism@elodia.intnet.bj; Place de l'Étoile Rouge) Inconveniently located out of the centre, behind Pharmacie de l'Étoile Rouge and of limited use.

### Travel Agencies

**Agence Africaine de Tourisme** (☎ 21 31 54 14; fax 21 31 54 99; Ave Proche) One of the best agencies. Offers a wide range of information and tours, including pirogue trips to Ganvié.

### Visa Extensions

**Direction Emigration Immigration** (☎ 21 31 42 13; Ave Jan Paul II; ☎ 8am-11am, 3-6.30pm Mon-Fri) Issues 30-day visas.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Cotonou is a dangerous city where muggings at knife-point are not uncommon, but tourists will be fine if they follow a few rules. Stay away from the beach, a lawless zone that even the locals avoid. Watch your wallet in the Grand Marché du Dantokpa. Avoid the Jonquet and Ganhie business districts and the port area from late afternoon onwards, and stick to thoroughfares throughout the city. Taxis are safer at night than walking or *zemi-johns* – which are hair-raising at the best of times, and plain suicidal during rush hour.

### Scams

Plausible in both appearance and manner, they have all sorts of stories to lure tourists to a secluded area where they have a gang of accomplices waiting. They may say they are in a band and they want to give you a CD, or they want you to meet a Western colleague from the aid agency they work for. If someone offers to take you to the beach, that should definitely set alarm bells ringing.

### SIGHTS

#### Grand Marché du Dantokpa

The seemingly endless **Grand Marché du Dantokpa** is Cotonou's exhilarating, exhausting

INFORMATION		SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		DRINKING ☑	
Agence Africaine de Tourisme.....1 A1	American Embassy.....2 C4	Grand Marché du Dantokpa.....30 E3	Alex's Hotel.....31 A2	Le Livingstone.....58 A4	Le Soweto.....59 B2
Bank of Africa.....3 A3	British Community Liason Officer.....(see 7)	<b>SLEEPING ☑</b>	Benin Marina Hotel.....32 A4	<b>ENTERTAINMENT ☑</b>	Ciné Concorde.....60 F3
Centre Culturel American.....4 B4	Centre Culturel Chinois.....5 D4	Hôtel Babo.....33 A1	Hôtel Benin Vickinfel.....(see 38)	Ciné le Benin.....61 D3	Cristal Palace.....(see 31)
Centre Culturel Français.....(see 14)	Commissariat Central.....6 D3	Hôtel Concorde.....34 B2	Hôtel du Lac.....36 F4	Le Repaire de Bacchus.....62 B2	Le Téké.....(see 32)
Cyber Café Le Teranga.....7 A4	Cyber des Arts.....(see 63)	Hôtel du Port.....37 C4	Hôtel du Crillon.....38 C2	New York, New York.....(see 63)	Paradise.....(see 57)
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heart, bordered by the lagoon and Blvd St Michel. Everything under the sun can be purchased in its labyrinthine lanes, particularly if 'everything' happens to be a dodgy Lucky Dube CD or a pair of plastic sandals. More traditional fare, such as batiks and Fon jewellery, can be found in the market building. There is also a **fetish market**, located near the pirogues arriving from the lagoon. Look out for the so-called 'Mama Benz', the haughty matriarchs of the market who are named after their favourite make of car.

## COURSES

For Fon-language classes, call **Vinawamon** (☎ 21 30 08 56), also contactable via the Centre Culturel Français (p95). There are **Tai Chi and martial arts courses** (☎ 21 31 31 74; Ave Jean Paul II; course CFA20000; ☞ 7pm-8.30pm Tue & Sat, 5pm-6.30pm Wed & Sat) at the Centre Culturel Chinois.

## SLEEPING Budget

**Hôtel Concorde** (☎ 21 31 55 70; Blvd Steinmetz; r with fan/air-con from CFA7000/15,000; ☞) Just south of the now-defunct Ciné Vog, this is one of the friendlier and cleaner of the central budget hotels, but it is often booked out.

**Hôtel le Crillon** (☎ 21 31 51 58; Rue 105; s with fan/air-con CFA6500/12,500; ☞) With sparse rooms and dark landings, these cheap central digs off Blvd Steinmetz have the feel of a 1950s boarding house – right down to the cock-roads unfortunately. Breakfast is CFA700.

**Pension des Familles** (☎ 21 31 42 01; Ave Proche; s/d CFA5500/6500) Both cleaner and cheaper than the nearby Pension de l'Amitié, this friendly pension has 14 spartan rooms with fan. The main drawback is it's right on the main road.

**Hôtel Babo** (☎ 21 31 46 07; Rue Agbeto Amadoré; s with fan/air-con CFA6000/10,000; ☞) This tenement-

like place of peeling paint and laundry hanging on five floors of balconies is for hardcore budget travellers only. Request a room on the top level as they are more spacious and airy, not to mention having great views. Meals are CFA500 to CFA1500.

## Midrange

**Hôtel du Port** (☎ 21 31 44 44; fax 21 31 43 26; hotel-duportcotonou@yahoo.fr; Blvd de la Marina; s/d from CFA38,500/43,500, bungalow s/d CFA46,500/53,500; ☞ ☞ ☞ ☞) The carpeted rooms and, overlooking the popular pool, spacious bungalows, restaurant (meals CFA3800 to CFA6500) and bar make this Cotonou's best midrange hotel. It's in a bad area of town though.

**Hôtel du Lac** (☎ 21 33 19 19; r CFA35,000-40,000; ☞ ☞ ☞) Excellent midrange choice in an unrivalled location at the east end of Pont Ancien. Rooms are sunny, spacious and exceptionally clean, with TVs and telephones. Ask for a sea view. The Lebanese restaurant (meals CFA2500 to CFA4800) has views across the lagoon to the port. Robberies have occurred on the bridge at night.

**Hôtel de la Plage** (☎ 21 31 34 67; Blvd de la Marina; s/d from CFA22,500/25,000, s/d apartment 35,000/40,500; ☞ ☞) The antiquated Hôtel de la Plage, opposite the Nigerian embassy, is a colonial throwback, with breezy rooms, swimming pool and laundry service. In addition to the restaurant (meals CFA800 to CFA4500), there is a bar and a fast-food joint overlooking the beach.

**Alex's Hotel** (☎ 21 31 25 08; Rue 108; r from CFA41,500; ☞) Cotonou's Hotel California, with mildly erotic art decorating the corridors, a cosy restaurant (meals CFA3500 to CFA4000) with a colonial feel, and sweetly scented rooms. There are city views from the roof and an excellent karaoke bar and nightclub, Cristal Palace.

**Hôtel Benin Vickinfel** (☎ 21 31 38 14; vkfhotel@intnet.bj; off Blvd Steinmetz; r from CFA25,000; ☞) Don't be fooled by the grim exterior. This 33-room hotel is one of the most comfortable and professional hotels in the city centre, though the rooms are a little poky. Meals are available for CFA3000.

**Hôtel Aledjo** (☎ 21 33 05 61; fax 21 33 15 74; r CFA35,500-56,500, ste CFA100,500; ☞ ☞ ☞) If you're looking for a beach hotel and won't be going into the city very often, try the ageing four-star Aledjo, 3km east of the centre.

There are 55 lavish rooms in 11 bungalows; tennis courts, a small pool and bowls. The restaurant serves good but expensive food (meals CFA4500 to CFA5000).

## Top End

**Novotel Orisha** (☎ 21 30 41 77; novotel.orisha@intnet.bj; Blvd de la Marina; s/d CFA70,500, tr CFA80,500, ste CFA110,000; ☞ ☞ ☞ ☞) While not as impressive as the grandiose driveway implies, this Accor hotel delivers comfortable rooms and good service. Serves Sunday brunch (CFA9500; open 11am to 4pm) by the pool and other meals are available (CFA3500 to CFA11,500).

**Benin Marina Hotel** (☎ 21 30 01 00; fax 21 30 11 55; Blvd de la Marina; r with city/ocean view CFA120,500/133,500, bungalow CFA154,500, ste CFA245,500-355,500; ☞ ☞ ☞ ☞) A regular pleasure garden of a place, the monstrous ex-Sheraton offers Cotonou's most luxurious accommodation, although some people prefer the Novotel Orisha. Daily happy hour in Bar Nokoué (6pm to 8pm) and poolside buffet on Friday night. Meals are available for CFA5500 to CFA10,000.

## EATING African

**Restaurant l'Amitié** (Rue 118; menu du jour CFA1000) About 100m southwest of Hôtel Babo, this Senegalese lunchtime joint is one of the best places in town for a spot of fish and rice.

**Maquis le Mandingue** (☎ 21 31 37 61; off Ave Proche; meals CFA3800-6000) Dishes such as fish of the season, in *gombo* (green vegetable), *yassa* (lemon, onion and mustard) and *arachide* sauces, are available in this popular but tranquil place with a garden and, on some nights, a harmonica player.

**Chez Maman Bénin** (☎ 21 32 33 38; Rue 201A; meals CFA500-3000) This long-standing restaurant, behind Ciné le Bénin, has a large selection of West African dishes scooped from steaming pots. Upstairs is a more expensive air-con section with a TV showing big sports matches.

**Pili Pili** (☎ 21 31 29 32; Rue du Révérend Père Kitti; meals CFA2500-3800; ☞ 12.30-5pm & 7.30-11pm) This slightly upmarket restaurant with a great ambience, behind Hôtel de l'Union, gets going from 8pm.

**Restaurant Romantica** (☎ 97 06 15 66; Rue 1885; meals CFA4000-7000) A limited menu but a mellow atmosphere and a great location next

to Hôtel du Lac, in view of the *zemi-johns* hurling themselves over Pont Ancien.

## Asian

**Hai King** (☎ 21 30 60 08; Route de Lomé; meals CFA3500-4000; ☎ 10am-2.30pm & 6-11.30pm) Not far from the airport, this popular place offers classic Chinese food, has snappy service, and a covered terrace overlooking the bustling Carrefour de Cadjéhoun.

**Indiana** (☎ 21 30 03 20; Haie Vive; meals CFA3500-5000) This Indian-run restaurant with garden seating, on the same street as Le Livingstone, does a delicious curry.

## European

**La Verdure** (☎ 21 31 31 75; off Ave Clozel; meals CFA1500-10,000) Tucked away, just west of Blvd Steinmetz, is this great little French seafood restaurant, which also has a bar with a pool table.

**Chez Clarisse** (☎ 21 30 60 14; Camp Guézo; meals CFA1500-3500) This small French restaurant, next to the US embassy, rates highly with readers. If you are feeling ambitious try the *brochette des escargots* (snails cooked on a skewer).

**Le Sorrento** (☎ 21 31 57 79; Blvd St Michel; mains CFA2500-4500) This is the only authentic Italian restaurant in Cotonou, serving decent pizza, pasta and other Mediterranean dishes. It's at the back of the Halle des Arts complex.

**Maquis Le Lagon** (☎ 21 31 55 53; Blvd Steinmetz; meals CFA1500) Tasty but stingy portions of grilled chicken and chips and the like. You eat on the boulevard and get a front-row view of one of Cotonou's quieter thoroughfares.

**Faim Gourmet** (☎ 21 30 98 62; Blvd de la Marina; meals CFA4500-5000) Right across the road from the Novotel Orisha, this place serves delicious steaks and fish in a pleasant garden.

## Lebanese

**Restaurant Mandarin** (☎ 21 30 14 57; Route de l'Aéroport; meals from CFA1500) Turkish cakes and coffee in the morning, kebabs later on. Next to the Air France office on the southwestern edge of town.

## Cafés & Patisseries

**Le Petit Four** (☎ 21 31 20 11; Blvd Steinmetz; ☎ 7am-10pm, until 11pm Fri & Sat) A classy, air-conditioned café for croissants and coffee, and beers at night.

**La Gerbe d'Or** (☎ 21 31 42 58; Ave Clozel; ☎ 6am-10pm) The best shop for fresh bread, croissants and pastries, yogurt, ice cream, cheese and wine.

## Quick Eats

Superb brochettes can be found all over Cotonou, for around CFA400 to CFA500, from late afternoon onwards – look for the smoking grills piled with meat on sticks. The stalls in front of Maquis Le Lagon Grill on Blvd Steinmetz are perennial favourites, as are the **sandwich ladies** (off Ave Clozel) on the same street as Paradise nightclub. They allow you to create your own rolls with sausages, hot pepper sauce and loads more.

There are also omelette men who set up shop around dusk and work through the night. Their tables, covered in hot chocolate, coffee and tea containers, are everywhere, offering an entire breakfast here for around CFA400. The all-day stall opposite Hôtel le Crillon is good. The side streets around Hôtel Babo and Pension des Familles are dotted with cafeterias.

## Self-Catering

In the centre, around Marché Ganhi, are a number of good supermarkets, including **La Ponte** (☎ 21 31 69 45; off Ave Clozel; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 3.30-8pm), and **American 24** (☎ 21 31 52 57; Ave Clozel; ☎ 24hr).

## DRINKING

**Le Livingstone** (☎ 21 30 27 58; livin@eland.bj; Haie Vive; meals CFA3500-4500; ☎ 11am-late) Expect reassuring guitar riffs – at least when the rock-loving English owner's wrested control of the hi-fi – and an expat crowd kicking back on the terrace. Hearty food too.

**Le Costa Rica** (☎ 30 20 09; Centre de Promotion de l'Artisanal; meals CFA2400-4500) Don't be scared off by the paintings at the entrance of those formidable Gauls, Asterix and Obelix – this French-owned joint is the coolest city-centre spot to sink a draft beer. Its pizza, steak and seafood dishes are also popular.

The Jonquet strip is bristling with wild and wicked bar-hoppers and bars, such as **Le Soweto** (☎ 97 44 17 49; Rue des Cheminots; ☎ 10am-5am).

Haie Vive, near the airport, is a good, safe area by night, with many of the city's best bars and restaurants.

## ENTERTAINMENT Cinemas

Good cinemas are **Ciné le Bénin** (☎ 21 32 12 50; Blvd St Michel; ☎ from 7pm) and **Ciné Concorde** (☎ 21 33 39 72), east of the new bridge. Both show Western and African films in French. Tickets are around CFA500. You can also see films at the Centre Culturel Français, which issues monthly pamphlets with upcoming programme details, and at the Centre Culturel Chinois on Saturdays at 8pm.

## Nightclubs

The decadent bars on Jonquet strip are generally open through the night, often without a cover – try Le 2001, Le Soweto, Playboy, Le Must and L'ancien Pattaya.

**New York, New York** (Halle des Arts; admission CFA4500) A glitzy hall of mirrors, frequented by some of the friendliest young ladies you'll encounter this side of Lomé.

**Paradise** (☎ 97 44 66 44; off Ave Clozel; admission CFA3000) CFA5000 whisky, sleazy expats, and techno.

**Cristal Palace** (☎ 21 31 25 08; admission CFA3500; ☎ 11pm-dawn Tue-Sun), at Alex's Hotel, has a karaoke bar and is a lot of fun. Benin Marina Hotel's **Le Télé** (☎ 21 30 01 00; Blvd de la Marina; free for Benin Marina Hotel guests) is also fun on holidays and special occasions, any time there's a crowd; otherwise it's usually pretty dead.

## Live Music

**Le Repaire de Bacchus** (☎ 21 31 75 81; lerepairedeb@yahoo.fr; Ave Proche; ☎ 11am-midnight, to 2am Thu, to 4am Fri & Sat) This funky jazz bar also has a food menu, although it's shorter than the list of cocktails, which start at CFA2000. With live jazz on Thursday from 10.30pm, and music such as rumba and Côte d'Ivoire sounds on Friday and Saturday, this place is the hideout of choice for Cotonou's beatniks in berets. C'est cool.

## SHOPPING

**Centre de Promotion de l'Artisanal** (Blvd St Michel; ☎ 9am-7pm) There are more beckoning hands than quality work in this large centre, but it's worth a look to get your cultural bearings. The boutiques sell woodcarvings, bronzes, batiks, leather goods, jewellery and appliqué banners.

**Marché Ganhi** is smaller and less intense than Grand Marché de Dantokpa. On the road behind the market you can pick up

bags, snakeskin wallets, *tam tam* (small hand drum) and CDs of African music.

In addition to the Centre, try the **Hôtel du Port boutique** (☎ 21 31 44 44; Blvd de la Marina; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-7pm), which is expensive but not as bad as the boutiques at the two top-end hotels.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY Air

The international airport is on the western fringe of town. The airport is rudimentarily equipped with an information centre, phone booths and a pharmacy.

If flying out of Cotonou, arrive early, as checking in is a predictably long-winded process. Departure tax is included in tickets. For fliers, there is a duty-free shop and a café-bar: a good place to fortify yourself for an encounter with the grisly officials at the entrance to the departure lounge.

For more information on airlines flying to Cotonou see p124.

## Bush Taxi, Minibus & Bus

Cotonou has a rather confusing number of stations for minibuses, buses and bush taxis. It's easiest to ask a taxi or a *zemi-john* to take you to the right one.

**Gare Jonquet** (Rue des Cheminots), a couple of blocks west of Blvd Steinmetz, services western destinations such as Lomé (CFA3000, three hours) and Ouidah (CFA600, one hour). **Gare Guinkomey** (Rue des Dako Donou) has services to the northern centres including Parakou (CFA6500, eight hours). **Gare de l'Ancien Pont** (cnr Ave Clozel & Rue des Libanais), services eastern destinations such as Lagos (CFA3000, three hours).

Bush taxis for Porto Novo (CFA500, 45 minutes) leave from **Gare du Dantokpa** (Ave de la République) at the new bridge; those to Abomey (CFA2000, two hours) leave from **Gare Misébo** (Ave van Vollenhoven). However, for Abomey, Abomey-Calavi (for Ganvié), Grand Popo and Ouidah it's far better to wait at the unofficial bush-taxi stop about 100m southwest of Église St Michel on Blvd St Michel.

Confort Lines runs daily buses between Cotonou and Natitingou. The north-bound bus leaves from the **Sonacop station** (Carrefour Legba, Cotonou) at 7am. Benin Routes' daily buses between Cotonou and Parakou leave in both directions at 7.30am. For more information on buses within Benin, see p125.

STC runs buses between Cotonou and Abidjan via Accra. West-bound buses leave from the station in Cotonou, just off Rue de Ouidah, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at midday. STN is among the coach lines that ply the route between Cotonou and Niamey. For more on international buses to/from Cotonou, see p125.

### Train

The train station is in the heart of town one block north of Ave Clozel and several blocks southwest of Blvd Steinmetz. See p126 for more details of train services.

### GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

A private taxi from the city centre to the airport costs around CFA2000, although drivers will demand double this amount *from* the airport. You can cut costs, if you don't have much to carry and you arrive during the day, by walking or catching a *zemi-john* from the airport.

### Taxi

A *zemi-john* will whiz you around town for CFA100 to CFA300 depending on the distance, though this is a dangerous way to travel on Cotonou's crowded roads.

Fares in regular taxis and minibuses are CFA150 for a shared ride (double that for fairly long trips). Taxis can be hired for CFA2000 per hour; rates increase from early evening on. Tariffs are often written on the dashboard. Gare du Dantokpa is a good place to pick up taxis.

## AROUND COTONOU

### GANVIÉ

The main attraction near Cotonou is Ganvié, where 27,000 Tofinu people live in bamboo huts on stilts several kilometres out on Lake Nokoué. All the houses, restaurants, shops, auberges and even the post office are on wooden stilts 2m above water level. The town has become a tourist magnet but a tour of its waterways is still worthwhile, especially if you have a knowledgeable guide.

The Tofinu fled to this swampy region in the 17th century from the Dahomey slave-hunters, who were banned by a religious custom from venturing into the water.

They live almost exclusively from fishing, which they do by planting branches on the muddy lagoon bottom. When the leaves on the branches begin to decompose, the fish congregate there to feed.

The best times to see Ganvié and the other, quieter stilt villages are early in the morning or late in the afternoon, when the sun is weaker.

While many people, especially the women, object to having their pictures taken, children will beg you to photograph them in exchange for a *cadeau* (present).

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hôtel Carrefour Chez M Ganvié** (☎ 21 49 00 17; r CFA5000) This quaint hotel in the middle of the village next to the craft boutique has 11 rooms with balconies, mosquito nets, communal showers and flush toilets. Guests get free transport back to Abomey-Calavi. Meals are available for CFA2500 to CFA3000.

**Chez M** (☎ 21 36 03 44; r CFA5000) Formerly called Hôtel du Lac, this grubby place doesn't have much going for it other than being close to the jetty in Abomey-Calavi. Meals available for CFA1000 to CFA3000.

### Getting There & Away

From Cotonou catch a bush taxi at Gare du Missebo or near Église St Michel (see p101) or a Confort Lines bus (see p101) to Abomey-Calavi (CFA300, 35 minutes), not to be confused with Abomey.

The embarkation point in Abomey-Calavi is 800m downhill from the pirogue moorings. At the **official counter** (☎ 95 05 27 01; ☎ 9am-6pm), return fares to Ganvié for one person in a regular/motorised pirogue are CFA6050/7050; CFA4050/5050 each for two to four people; CFA3050/4050 for five to nine; CFA2550/3050 for 10 or more. Prices, which can be cut by travelling with locals or other tourists, include a circuit of the village with stop-offs. The whole trip takes about 2½ hours.

## THE SOUTH

Leaving Cotonou's traffic and Ganvié's touts, life soon starts to look up. Not only does Benin's coastal region offer some top beach action in the resort town of Grand Popo, it is brimming with intriguing cul-

ture and history. Porto Novo could be West Africa's most laid-back capital city, packed with museums and restaurants. Ouidah and Abomey contain the remains of the riches accrued by the European slave traders and their fearsome allies, the Dahomeyan Kings. Evidence of voodoo, which originated here, can be spotted all over the region.

### PORTO NOVO

pop 234,168

Nestling on the shores of Lake Nokoué, 30km east of Cotonou and 15km from the Nigerian border, Porto Novo is Benin's administrative centre. The refined, hilly city, home of functionaries, ministerial buildings, museums and colonial architecture, is a more rewarding place to stay than Cotonou.

Porto Novo has been Benin's official capital since it was used as such by the French, whose colonisation followed the Wars of Resistance that began here in 1890. The Portuguese named the city after Porto when they established a slave-trading post here in the 16th century. Local results of the freed slaves' return from the Americas can be seen in the Musée da Silva, which examines Afro-Brazilian culture, and the statue in Place Jean Bayal celebrating co-operation between the Yoruba and Creole peoples.

### Information

There is a hospital west of the Assemblée Nationale.

**Centre Songhai** (☎ 20 22 50 92; Route de Pobè), a popular community centre, has a supermarket and web access (per hour CFA400). Basic information about the city can be found online at [www.porto-novo.org](http://www.porto-novo.org).

There are three banks and a post office in the city centre.

### Sights & Activities

**MUSÉE ÉTHNOGRAPHIQUE DE PORTO NOVO** This colonial building houses an **ethnographic museum** (☎ 20 21 25 54; Ave 6; admission CFA1000; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, from 9am Sat, Sun & holidays, closed 1 May 1 & 1 Jan). Announced by the imposing carved doors from the palace of Kétou, the museum is one of the country's best, thanks to the knowledgeable guides. The top floor is organised thematically around birth, life and death, with

everything from costumes to carved drums. Downstairs is an impressive display of the Yorubas' inventive Gelede ceremonial masks, some dating back 200 years.

### MUSÉE HONMÉ

Formerly known as the Palais Royal du Roi Toffa, this **museum** (☎ 20 21 35 66; Rue Toffa; admission CFA1000; ☎ 9am-6pm, until 5pm Sat & Sun) is housed in the walled compound of King Toffa, who signed the first treaty with the French in 1863. The kingdom of Porto Novo was one of the longest lasting in sub-Saharan Africa, running from 1688 to the 25th king in 1976, when the five dynasties had a disagreement and let the kingdom die.

Although last remodelled in 1890, the complex has the feel of a Roman bath house, with bare chambers used for regal purposes such as initiation and suicide. The guide, François, speaks some English and will likely ask for a *cadeau*.

### MUSÉE DA SILVA

This privately owned **museum** (☎ 20 21 50 71; [silvamus@eland.bj](mailto:silvamus@eland.bj); Ave Liotard; admission CFA1000; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) is a wonderfully eccentric African establishment. It begins with a tour of an Afro-Brazilian house dating back to 1870, veers into a room filled with photocopied portraits of world leaders and jazz icons, and ends in a garage containing a Rolls Royce and a Harley Davidson hotrod.

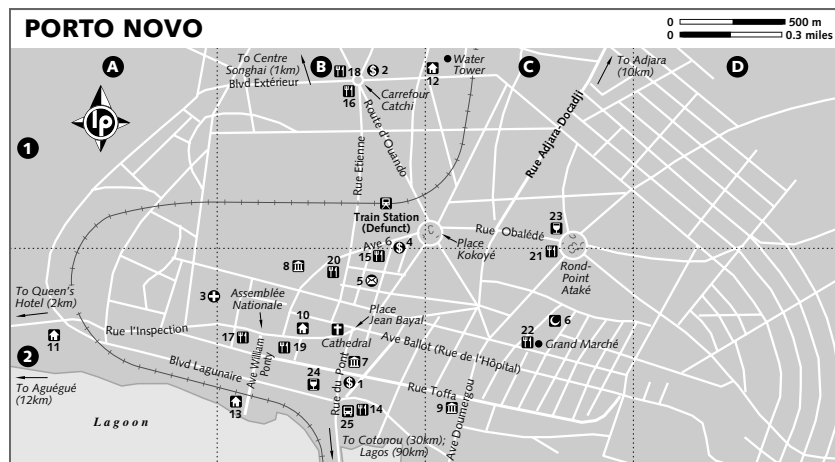
### MOSQUE

The multicoloured building near the market is a **mosque**. Originally a Brazilian-style church, built in the late 19th century, its crumbling façade painted in pastels makes it a flamboyant example of southern Benin's many buildings of that period.

### GRAND MARCHÉ D'ADJARA

The **market** in the small town of Adjara, 10km north of Porto Novo on a back road to Nigeria, is one of the most colourful in Benin. Held every fourth day, it's stocked with fetishes, grigri charms, unique blue and white tie-dyed cloth, some of the best pottery in Benin, and *tam tams* and other musical instruments. Shared taxis to Adjara leave Porto Novo *gare routière* on market day – or take a *zemi-john*.





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### PIROGUE RIDES

The 12km pirogue trip to the stilt village of Agougué is a less touristy option than Ganvié. Among the guides and hotels offering to oblige are Hilaire and his company **Iroko Tours** (☎ 97 44 53 87), also contactable through **Hôtel La Détente** (☎ 20 21 44 69; off Blvd Lagunaire), with reasonable prices starting at CFA6000 per person.

### Festivals & Events

In mid-January Porto Novo celebrates the city's Afro-Brazilian heritage with its own version of Carnival. Contact the Musée da Silva (p103) for more information.

### Sleeping BUDGET

**Hôtel La Détente** (☎ 20 21 44 69; off Blvd Lagunaire; r CFA6500; P) A popular budget option, this

centrally located hotel's rooms are run-down but it has a great lagoon-side *paillote* (thatch-roofed) restaurant.

**Casa Danza** (☎ 20 21 48 12; Place du Gouvernement; r CFA5500-12,500; ☎) The ground-floor rooms at the back of this restaurant one block south of the Musée Ethnographique de Porto Novo are a better, if kitschier, option than those in the tower block.

**Musée da Silva** (☎ 20 21 50 71; fax 20 21 26 99; silvamus@eland.bj; Ave Liotard; r CFA8500; ☎) The museum has four large, airy rooms with baths in some of the bathrooms. Ask for a room on the inside of the complex, as the outside ones overlook a busy street and can be noisy.

**Centre Songhai** (☎ 20 22 50 92; Route de Pobè; r CFA4000-12000; P ☎) This lively community centre, reached by heading straight on at the two roundabouts north of Carrefour Catchi, has 70 basic but clean rooms.

### MIDRANGE

**Hôtel Beurivage** (☎ 20 21 23 99; Blvd Lagunaire; r CFA15,500-25,500; ☎) Tired but spacious rooms with the town's best lagoon views and a wonderful terrace bar and restaurant.

**Hôtel Dona** (☎ 20 22 30 52; www.hoteldona.com; Blvd Extérieur; s/d/tr CFA16,500/18,500/21,500; P ☎) Rooms have hot water and are like those at Beurivage in this shockingly pink building with two restaurants and a nightclub.

**Queen's Hotel** (☎ 01 16 01, 90 27 60; queenhot2005@hotmail.com; off Route de Louho; r CFA9000-12000; P ☎) This low-key hotel 2km west of town has some of Porto Novo's smartest rooms and an excellent restaurant.

### Eating

#### RESTAURANTS

**Java Promo** (☎ 20 21 20 54; Place du Gouvernement; meals CFA1500-3000) Get down to this popular haunt for a yummy steak or *dourade* (fish) and chips with a carafe of wine.

**Restaurant Akango** (☎ 20 69 42 59, 93 15 58; meals CFA2000-3000) Lavish dishes such as *coq au vin* are the order of the day in this restaurant on a quiet side street opposite a ministerial building.

**Le JPN** (☎ 20 21 38 66; Jardin des Plantes et de la Nature, site 2; ☎ 10am-9pm Tue-Thu, to 11pm Fri-Sun; meals CFA1800) Set in a leafy park southwest of the Assemblée Nationale, this place offers breakfast, lunch and the odd stream of ants.

**Centre Songhai** (☎ 20 22 50 92; Route de Pobè; menu du jour CFA3500) The posher of the centre's two restaurants offers mouth-watering cuisine and CFA500 carafes of wine.

Alternatively try the restaurants at Casa Danza (CFA1000 to CFA3500) and the three midrange hotels (meals CFA2500 to CFA4500).

#### CAFÉS

**Chez Mahi** (Ave 6; meals CFA300-600; ☎ lunch only, closed Sun) Locals swear by this restaurant, just south of Place Kokoyé; hearty meals include mutton, *igname* and sauce.

**Buvette Escale du Pont** (Gare Routière) Has cheap drinks and Beninese tucker.

**Maquis Katchi Ambiance** (Carrefour Catchi; meals CFA350-500) Features many local specialities.

#### QUICK EATS

**Cafeteria Place Catchi** (Carrefour Catchi) A popular and well-organised spot that churns out coffee and omelettes in the morning.

**Cafeteria La Pirogue** (Gare Routière) This unmarked omelette joint next to Buvette Escale du Pont is a little fly-blown but handy for early-morning taxis.

Just northeast of the Musée Ethnographique de Porto Novo and opposite the school, a street stall serves fish sauce with yam chips or mashed yam. More stalls are found around the market and Rond-Point Ataké.

#### SELF-CATERING

**La Peniche Patisserie** (☎ 20 22 46 59; Carrefour Catchi) Sells passable croissant and yogurt. There is another patisserie, **Esperance** (west end of Gare Routière), and a supermarket at Centre Songhai.

#### Drinking

The restaurants Casa Danza, Java Promo and Le JPN are also popular watering holes.

**Festival Plus** (☎ 20 22 39 79; Rue Obalédé) Set in a pleasantly ramshackle courtyard and *paillote*, this lively bar also has a small restaurant.

**Mess-Mixte** (Blvd Lagunaire) A mellow place to watch the world roll down the boulevard. Serves brochettes during the week.

#### Entertainment

**Casa Danza** (☎ 20 21 48 12; Place du Gouvernement) is the place to be on Sunday nights, with live music and dancing from 7pm. The town's most popular club is **Feelings Night Club** (Blvd Extérieur; admission CFA3000; ☎ Wed & Fri-Sun), 500m north of Hotel Beurivage. There is also **Quartz Club** (Blvd Extérieur; admission CFA3000; ☎ Fri, Sat & holidays) at Hôtel Dona.

The **outdoor cinema** (CFA500) at Musée da Silva sporadically shows French films.

#### Getting There & Away

Plenty of minibuses and bush taxis leave for Cotonou (minibus/bush taxi CFA300/500, 45 minutes) from the *gare routière*. To Abomey from Porto Novo is CFA1900.

There are also frequent taxis to Lagos (CFA2700).

#### Getting Around

If Cotonou hasn't scared you off *zemi-johns*, they are the best way to see Porto Novo. A full town tour with the driver waiting should cost no more than CFA5000 for

the day. Alternatively all the major sites and facilities are within half an hour's walk of each other.

## OUIDAH

pop 87,200

Some 42km west of Cotonou is Ouidah, a relaxed, relatively prosperous town and a must-see for anyone interested in voodoo or Benin's history of slave-trading. Until a wharf was built at Cotonou in 1908, Ouidah had the only port in the country. Its heyday was from 1800 to 1900, when slaves from across West Africa left Ouidah for the Americas.

Good preliminary reading is Bruce Chatwin's evocative *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, which tells the story of the ill-fated slave-trader Francisco da Silva's arrival from Brazil and subsequent relationship with the war-mongering Kings of Dahomey.

A visit to the beach, where the slaves once left from, is well worthwhile. The 4km journey there from town takes you past a lagoon with fishermen and a small stilt village.

There are voodoo ceremonies every weekend during the dry season and the annual Voodoo Festival is celebrated here in January (see opposite). There is a **film festival** ([www.festival-ouidah.org](http://www.festival-ouidah.org)) here at the same time, and a festival honouring twins in October.

### Information

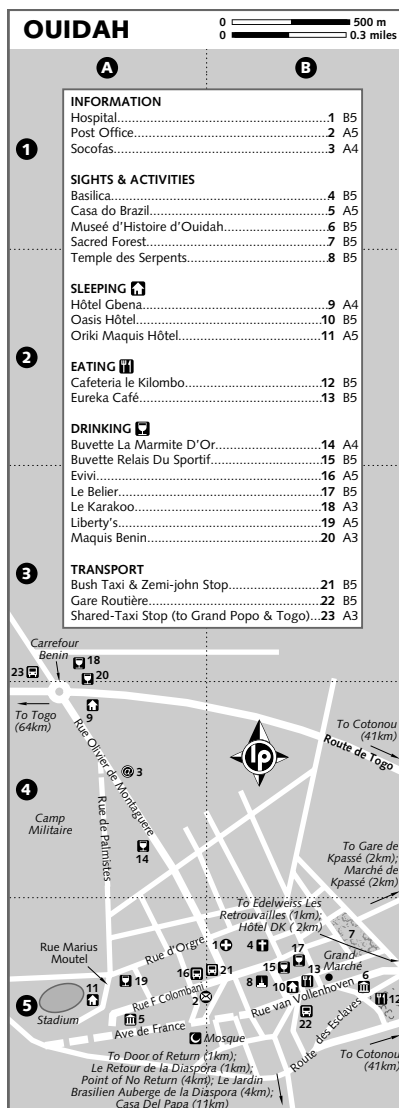
Slow Internet access can be found at **Socofas** (☎ 21 34 14 76; Rue Olivier de Montaguere; per hr CFA400; ☎ 7am-midnight).

There are no banks in Ouidah. Post cards are available in the post office on the south side of Rue F Colombani in the centre of town.

### Sights & Activities

#### MUSÉE D'HISTOIRE D'OUIDAH

This **museum** (☎ 21 34 10 21; Rue van Vollenhoven; admission CFA1000; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-6pm), two blocks east of the market, is housed in Fortaleza São João Batista, a Portuguese fort built in 1721. Perhaps the best museum in the country, with exhibits focusing on the slave trade and the resulting links between Benin, Brazil and the Caribbean. You'll be shown voodoo artefacts, skulls, photos showing the influence of Dahomeyan slaves on Brazilian culture, and traces of Brazilian architecture that the repatriated slaves brought back to Africa.



### ROUTE DES ESCLAVES

The 4km **Route des Esclaves**, now the main road to the beach, starts near the Musée d'Histoire d'Ouidah. This is the route the slaves took to the coast to board the ships. Lining the sandy track are fetishes and monuments such as the Monument of Repentance and the Tree of Forgetfulness.

### THE VOODOO FESTIVAL

Benin's most vibrant and colourful celebration is the annual Voodoo Festival held on 10 January. While celebrations take place all over the country, those in Ouidah, the historic centre of voodoo, are the best.

Since 1997, one year after the government officially decreed voodoo a religion, thousands of believers have flocked to Ouidah to reclaim and rejoice in their faith. The main festivities take place on the beach near the Point of No Return monument at the end of Route des Esclaves.

The celebrations begin when the supreme voodoo priest slaughters a goat to honour the spirits, and are marked by much singing, dancing, beating of drums and drinking of gin. However, while this is certainly eye-opening, those expecting to see *The Night of the Living Dead* will be sadly disappointed.

Slaves were forced to circle the tree that once stood here, to forget the land they were leaving.

There is a poignant memorial on the beach, the **Point of No Return**, in honour of those departed slaves. Walk through this grand arch, with its bas-relief depicting slaves in chains, to the water. Imagine the slaves climbing into lighters to go out to the 'slavers', where they would descend into dark holds for the journey to the Americas.

A short walk east are a monument marking the millennium and the Door of Return, which houses a **museum** (☎ 21 33 74 14; admission CFA1000; ☎ 9am-6pm).

If you don't want to walk, you can always find a **zemi-john** for under CFA1000.

### CASA DO BRAZIL

Sometimes called La Maison de Bresil, this **museum** (☎ 21 34 18 63; admission CFA1000; ☎ 9am-6pm) gives an overview of the African Diaspora. The sculptures and photographic displays, with explanations in English and French, have a particular focus on women in African society. The house itself is the former residence of the Brazilian governor and was later occupied by a Portuguese family until they were ousted in the early 1960s.

### TEMPLE DES SERPENTS

The voodoo **python temple** (☎ 95 40 08 90; admission CFA1000, photos CFA5000; ☎ 8am-7pm) is now more of a tourist trap than a sacred site. The guide explains some of the beliefs and ceremonies associated with the temple, ushers you into a room containing 40 sleepy pythons, drapes one round your neck, and asks for a **cadeau**.

### SACRED FOREST

This **park** (☎ 97 68 89 22; admission CFA1000 incl guide; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sun) contains the huge and rare iroko tree that King Kpassé, founder of Ouidah, is reputed to have turned himself into while fleeing enemies. To make a wish, touch the tree and leave an offering among its roots. The forest is dotted with sculptures that symbolise all sorts of voodoo and animist deities and beliefs.

### CASA DEL PAPA

Nonguests can use the facilities at this resort (see below): swimming pool (per hour CFA3500), volleyball and tennis courts (per hour CFA3500), canoes, pirogues, and kayak tours of the lagoon (half-/full-day CFA6500/17,000).

### Sleeping

**Le Jardin Brasilien Auberge de la Diaspora** (☎ 21 34 10 11; r CFA7500-20000; ☎ 9am-6pm) On the beach near the Point of No Return, this tranquil place is an excellent choice. There are three categories of rooms in the 34 bungalows among the windswept palms. The restaurant (meals CFA3000 to CFA9000) is pricey but has a beautiful view and a good selection of fish.

**Casa Del Papa** (☎ 21 49 21 01; [matbenin@serv.etj.be](mailto:matbenin@serv.etj.be); Ouidah Plage; r CFA30,500-51,000; ☎ 9am-6pm) This beach resort has 57 bungalows between the beach and the lagoon. The plushest accommodation in the area, though it is 7km beyond the Door of No Return on a road that is unsafe at night. Meals are available for CFA4000 to CFA6000.

**Oasis Hotel** (☎ /fax 21 34 10 91; Rue van Vollenhoven; r CFA9000-18000) The best and most central of the hotels in town. The 25 rooms are nothing special for the price but the

restaurant (meals CFA2000) is one of Ouidah's best and the rooftop bar has a superb view. The friendly management are open to negotiation on prices.

**Oriki Maquis Hôtel** (☎ 21 34 10 04; Rue Marius Moutel; r CFA4000-8000) Ouidah's best budget option is the quiet, friendly Oriki, about 1km south of the crossroads on Route de Togo. The comfortable rooms have fans and there is a good restaurant/bar (meals CFA2500) attached.

**Edelweiss Les Retrouvailles** (☎ 21 34 12 86; Rue du Général Dodd; r with fan/air-con CFA500/15,500; 📍) About 1km east of the Musée d'Histoire d'Ouidah, near the French military cemetery and the memorial to the arrival of Christian missionaries, this excellent budget choice is set in leafy grounds with a *paillote* restaurant (meals CFA2000 to CFA3500) and a children's playground.

**Le Retour de la Diaspora** (☎ 21 34 10 47; Route des Esclaves; r CFA5000) The best of an uninspiring bunch of hotels and *buvettes* (bars) gathered around the Village Artisanal de Ouidah on the way to the beach. The rooftop restaurant (meals CFA1800 to CFA2500) serves a small selection of dishes such as pizza and quiche.

**Hôtel Gbena** (☎ 21 34 12 15; Route de Togo; r CFA14,000-16,000; 📍) This midrange hotel on the bypass 2km north of the town centre is past its prime. The gloomy bedrooms are well maintained, but the rates are expensive and some rooms overlook the noisy road. Meals for CFA2500 to CFA3000.

**Hôtel DK** (☎ 21 34 11 97; Route de Togo; r CFA15,500-20,500, ste CFA35,500) With its decaying façade and its dysfunctional swimming pool, this hotel near the bypass east of town has a ghostly air. Its 50 air-conditioned rooms make it a possible choice for large groups. Meals for CFA4000 to CFA8000.

## Eating

For cheap eats try the open-air **Cafeteria de Kilombo** (meals from CFA400), across from the Musée d'Histoire d'Ouidah, or **Eureka Café** (Rue van Vollenhoven; meals from CFA400). Head to the market for fish stands, omelette joints and the Fan Milk depot, and to Carrefour Benin for brochettes and other meat treats.

## Drinking

The town centre is peppered with small bars, notably **Evivi** (Rue F Colombani), opposite the post office; **Liberty's** (Rue d'Orgre), one block northeast

of Oriki Maquis Hôtel; **Buvette Relais du Sportif** (Rue F Colombani), overlooking the Basilica; and **Le Belier** (off Rue F Colombani), at the market.

**Buvette La Marmite D'Or** (Rue Olivier de Montaguere) Located south of Socofas Internet café, this is a sociable spot to watch the *zemi-johns* racing into town.

**Maquis Benin** (Route de Togo) Is an atmospheric place in earshot of the lorries approaching Carrefour Benin.

**Le Karako** (admission CFA3000, free for women; 📞 Fri & Sat) PAMFF Hotel's nightclub.

## Getting There & Away

Bush taxis and occasional buses to Cotonou (CFA600, one hour) leave from the two stations in the centre of town and from Gare de Kpassé, at the market on Route de Togo, near the Sacred Forest. For Grand Popo, Abomey and Togo, wait at Carrefour Benin.

## GRAND POPO

Some 82km from Cotonou and 20km from the Togo border at Hila-Condji, Grand Popo is Benin's best getaway spot for travellers to spend a few idle days on the sand – although swimming is limited due to strong currents. It's Benin's most tourist-focused location, but this hasn't lessened its sleepy charm. If you do tire of lounging by the pool, nearby are some fascinating landscapes and voodoo culture. In the small villages lining the coastal highway, the white flags flying from poles identify voodoo practitioners.

## Sights & Activities

### VILLA KARO

On the main road through the village is this Finnish-African **cultural centre** (☎ 22 43 03 58; www.villa-karo.org) with a small **gallery** (📞 8am-11am & 4-6pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat). There's also a library with books in French, Finnish and English, a free open-air cinema from 8pm on Friday evenings, and a free concert on the first Saturday of the month.

### PIROGUE TRIPS

Local fishermen can be persuaded to take you to the **Bouche du Roy**, where the Mono River meets the ocean. These trips can also be organised through Awale Plage (see opposite), which runs excursions to villages, markets, voodoo sites, and a turtle beach.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Auberge de Grand Popo** (☎ 22 43 00 47, central reservations ☎ /fax 21 31 38 62; www.hotels-benin.com; camping

per person CFA1500, tent hire CFA5000, r CFA13,000-23,000; 📍 📞) The mothership of the dependable 'Auberge de...' chain, this long-standing and highly recommended hotel is right on the beach. Rooms are split between a beautiful colonial building and quaint garden bungalows. The attractive terrace restaurant (meals CFA3800 to CFA9000) has an impressive menu and wine selection. The pool is CFA1000 for non-guests.

**Awale Plage** (☎ /fax 22 43 01 17; awaleplage@yahoo.fr; Route de Togo; camping per person CFA1500, tent hire CFA3000, bungalows CFA14,500-28,500; 📍 📞) This lively resort, on the main highway west of the Grand Popo turn-off, has been given the thumbs up by LP readers. There is an excellent beach bar, the restaurant (meals CFA2900 to CFA5000) is good, and you can hire boogie boards. Staff are dressed as pirates and they throw fortnightly full- and new-moon parties, with poolside live music.

**Etoile de Mer** (☎ 22 43 04 83; Route de Togo; r CFA10,500-25,000; 📍) This cheap alternative to Awale Plage, with a garden restaurant (meals CFA3500 to CFA5000) and beach bar, located on the highway at the Grand Popo turn-off, was seeking new management at the time of writing.

**Doze Plage** (camping per person CFA1500, r CFA6000-7000) One of three basic auberges in the centre of the village, this three-roomed hotel was building six more rooms at the time of writing – along with a toilet and shower. A quiet spot for a beer and a bite to eat (meals CFA2500 to CFA4000).

**Saveurs d'Afrique** (meals CFA2500-3000) This beachfront restaurant, which serves brochettes, fish and other typical fare, has the best location of the cluster of touristy eateries in the middle of the village.

## Getting There & Away

From Cotonou, take a bush taxi from Gare de Jonquet (CFA1300, two hours) and have it drop you off at the Grand Popo junction on the main coastal highway, 20km east of the Togo border crossing at Hila-Condji. The beach and village are 3.5km off the main road and are easily accessible via *zemi-john* (CFA200).

## LAKE AHÉMÈ & AROUND

Possotomè, Bopa and the other fishing villages on the western shores of Lake Ahémè, 40km southeast of Lokossa, are voodoo

strongholds and you'll spot fetishes in their shops and houses. There are also regular voodoo ceremonies, which tourists are generally welcome to attend. In Possotomè, ask around on the beach near the *gare routière* to meet a fetish priest, who can prepare you a talisman.

Possotomè is famous for its thermal springs, the country's primary source of mineral water. The springs themselves are an anticlimactic trickle but you can visit the bottling factory that has been set up nearby, and the tiny **Centre de Tissage** (📞 7am-6pm Mon-Wed). Pirogue trips to the fishing villages can be organised at Village Club Ahémè or, for a cheaper trip, by asking around the village.

Lokossa, midway between Grand Popo and Abomey, is a convenient spot to find taxis east to Possotomè and Bopa, as well as north and south along the Abomey-Comé highway. If you stop here, check out the market, which takes place every five days.

## Sleeping & Eating

Possotomè has the best facilities in the area.

**Auberge Palais des Jeunes** (☎ 95 96 12 87; r CFA5000-10,000; 📍 📞) Good value and central. The *paillote* bar-restaurant (meals CFA1300 to CFA1500) serves French and American cuisine and turns into a nightclub on Saturday nights.

**Village Club Ahémè** (☎ 43 00 29; village.aheme@yahoo.fr; r CFA12,000-25,000; 📍 📞) This 20-room hotel on the water's edge has seen better days. The more-expensive upstairs rooms are considerably sunnier. As well as picking up from Cotonou airport, the hotel organises excursions around southern Benin. Breakfast is CFA1500, and other meals CFA5000 to CFA6500.

**Hôtel Chéz Theo** (☎ 22 43 08 06; r CFA10000-18000; 📍 📞) Newer and better value than Village Club Ahémè, though its beach is not as good and it has a monkey chained to a tree. Meals are CFA2500.

**Café Bar La Source** (meals CFA350) Scruffy but charming *buvette* on the beach in the centre of the village.

## Getting There & Away

From the coastal highway take the turn-off north to Lokossa (20km) and Comé (700m), from where a dirt road heads east to Possotomè (18km) and Bopa (26km). Taxis and

*zemi-johns* to Possotomè and Bopa can be found at Comé and Lokossa *gare routières*. Shared taxis between Lokossa and Comé do occasionally take the lake road, but they generally stick to the main road.

## ABOMEY

pop 114,600

Abomey, 144km northwest of Cotonou in Fon country, is a remarkable town. Its winding lanes are dotted with *banco* (mud brick) houses and the palaces and temples built by the kings of Dahomey. The main attractions are the 'Dahomey Trail' tour of these ruins and the restored royal palace, where a museum contains artefacts such as a throne mounted on human skulls.

## Orientation & Information

There are few main roads in Abomey – dirt streets radiate from the central market. Use the water tower as a point of reference.

There is a web café, **Cyber Goho** (☎ 22 50 08 10; Place de Goho; per hr CFA1000; ☎ 7pm-midnight).

## Sights

The kings of Dahomey were a bloody lot, and their litany of slave-trading, human sacrifice and war is illustrated by the bold appliqué banners hanging in the **Musée Historique d'Abomey** (☎ 21 50 03 14; www.epa-prema.net/abomey; admission CFA2500; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun). One of the tapestries shows Glélé using a dismembered leg to pound his enemy's head, another shows a head being crushed in a vice.

The same is true of the many exhibits on display in the museum, such as Ghézo's throne, which is mounted on the skulls of four enemies. The museum is housed in two palaces – all that remains of what was once one of the most impressive structures in West Africa, with a 4km perimeter and a 10m-high wall enclosing 44 hectares and a court of 10,000 people. There were originally 12 palaces, as every king built a new one.

The final king of Dahomey, Béhanzin, torched the place while fleeing the French in the late 19th century. His forces had been fighting the invaders using their own guns – bought from the Germans in Togo – but the French got the last laugh when they turned the palace into their administrative centre.

The bas-reliefs on the exterior, which illustrate the gory history of Dahomey, were

a major factor in Unesco's decision to classify the structure as a World Heritage Site.

The admission fee includes a guide, who will take about an hour to show you round the courtyards, ceremonial rooms and burial chambers. The tour finishes at the Centre des Artisans, where you can buy appliqué banners and bronze figurines made using the *cire perdue* method: items once made especially for the kings of Dahomey.

## Sleeping

Accommodation in Abomey is skewed towards the bottom of the market.

**Chez Monique** (☎ 22 50 01 68; camping per person CFA3000, r CFA7500-12,000; P) A regular pleasure garden, where antelopes, crocodiles, tortoises, monkeys and murals of Amazons can be found between the trees and the wood carvings. The breezy rooms have tiled floors, blue walls and insect screens. Meals are available for CFA2500.

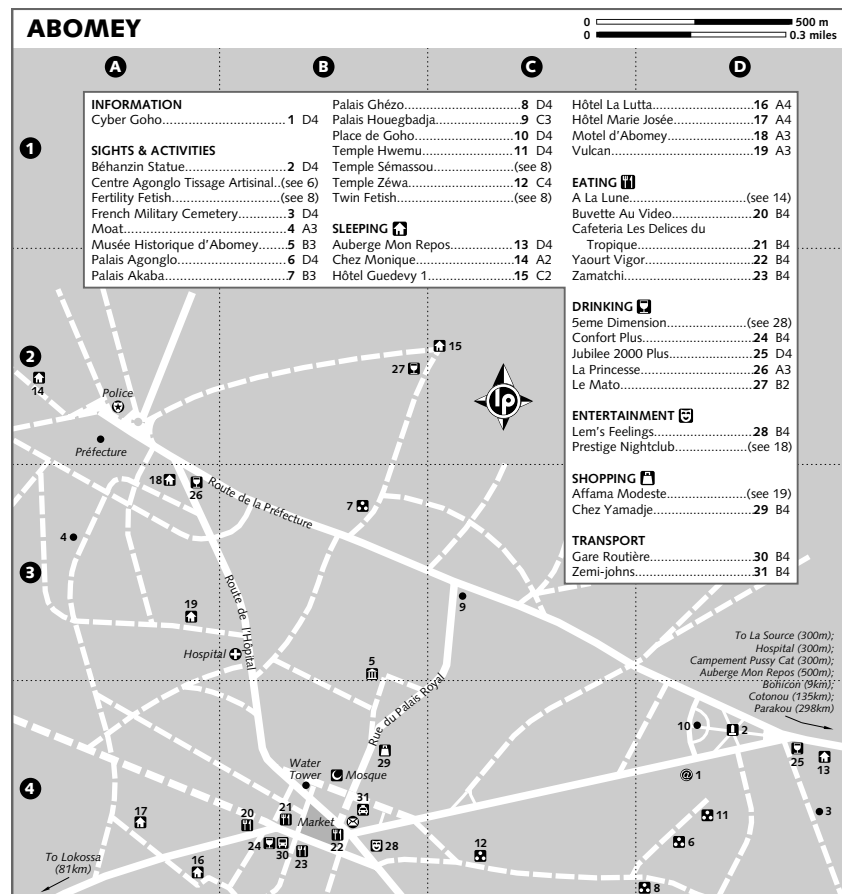
**Motel d'Abomey** (☎/fax 22 50 00 75; Route de l'Hôpital; r CFA12,500-60,500; P) The largest and best hotel in Abomey, with 33 rooms and 19 bungalows. The thatched bungalows, painted on the outside with murals in the local style, are decked out with TVs and comfortable furniture. European and Beninese food is available in the restaurant (meals CFA2200 to CFA4000), one of Abomey's best.

**Hôtel Guedevey 1** (☎ 22 50 03 04; s with fan CFA6500, s/d CFA10,500-15,500, bungalow CFA20,500; P) Despite the decrepit façade and eastern bloc ambience, the 50 rooms in this hotel 2km north of town are some of the best in Abomey, with TV installed. The decent restaurant (meals CFA1200 to CFA3800) serves European dishes and snacks.

**Hôtel Marie Josée** (☎ 22 50 02 89; off Route de Lokossa; r CFA6500-25,500; P) This professional hotel's nine rooms range from basic rooms with fan and insect screen to the plush suite with TV and stereo. There is an attractive terrace restaurant (meals CFA2500), and a hire car firm on the premises.

**Vulcan** (☎ 97 07 30 64; Quartier Adjahito; r CFA6000) This cool budget choice is set in gardens dotted with funky sculptures and canvases. Best found by *zemi-john*, it's located in the back streets between the hospital and Motel d'Abomey. Meals are CFA2500.

**Hôtel la Lutta** (☎ 42 16 83; s/d CFA4000/4500) This rundown hotel is lost among a maze of sandy streets 300m southwest of the



market – take a *zemi-john*. Run by local legend Monsieur 'La Lutta' (Adjolohoun Jean-Constant) and his French-novel-reading teenage daughter, it's an endearingly eccentric establishment, with voodoo dolls grinning in the gloomy parlour and extraordinary plumbing in the rooms. Meals are available for CFA1200 to CFA2500.

**Auberge Mon Repos** (☎ 22 50 17 66; Route de Bohicon; r CFA5500) Staff bend over backwards to welcome visitors to this respectable budget hotel, signposted on the right as you head towards Bohicon. There is a decent restaurant (meals CFA1000 to CFA1800), and plans to install air-con in the rooms.

**Campement Pussy Cat** (☎ 22 50 02 02; off Route de Bohicon; r CFA4500) Turn off the road head-

ing to Bohicon between La Source and the garage for this characterless but comfortable budget choice, where the rooms themselves are adequate despite the large, dingy TV room.

## Eating

**La Source** (☎ 22 50 19 96; Route de Bohicon; meals CFA2000) As well as being one of the smarter bars in town, La Source serves hearty helpings of chicken and chips or couscous.

**A La Lune** (meals CFA2500) Fans of Chez Monique's restaurant reckon it serves the best West African cuisine around, but we weren't that impressed with our chicken and *pâté rouge* (corn flour with peppers and seasonings) in tomato sauce.

## THE ROUTE OF KINGS

Exploring Abomey's **Dahomey Trail** could provide the best insight you'll get into Benin's gothic history. This half-day tour of the remnants of the Dahomey civilisation, which was as important as Benin City in Nigeria and Dogon country in Mali, is best attempted by *zemi-john* (CFA2500). Ask at Hôtel La Lutta for a driver – if you're lucky you'll get the knowledgeable proprietor himself.

There are some 14 sites to be seen, all of which have an air of faded majesty about their crumbling walls.

Begin the tour at the remains of the **moat** built in 1645 by the first king, Houégbadja. The moat, 42km around and 60m deep, gave Abomey its name – *abo* means 'moat' in Fon and *mey* means 'inside'.

Nearby is the **Palais Akaba**, who goaded his enemy Dan by telling him he would build in his belly. In classic Dahomey style, Dan did indeed wind up with his belly cut open, buried beneath a tree outside the palace. The name of the kingdom thus mixes Dan's name with the words *ho* (belly) and *mey*.

At **Place de Goho**, the story leaps ahead to the late 19th century with the **statue of Béhan-zin**. He agreed to sign a treaty here with Colonel Dods and the French forces – *goho* means 'meeting' – but his soldiers instead fired on them. The French casualties of the battle, which is known as 'the last six hours', are in the **cemetery** nearby.

The ruins of the **Palais Ghézo** and **Temple Sémassou** show that life was just as tough for earlier rulers. When Sémassou was born prematurely in the street, before he died he prophesied that terrible events would befall the kingdom. After Glélé's henchmen disposed of the baby's body in a bush, Dahomey suffered 21 days of war, plague, and destruction. When Glélé discovered his henchmen's disrespectful action, the oracle advised him to build a temple to encourage Sémassou's annunciation.

Among the many curiosities in this quarter are a **twin fetish** and a large white **fertility fetish**. Local women would straddle the latter's oversized erect penis to ensure fertility, until a female tourist snapped it off to keep as a souvenir.

The 18th century **Palais Agonglo** is the best kept of Abomey's 12 palaces, with bas-reliefs inside listing the names and symbols of the great kings and chiefs. At **Centre Agonglo Tissage Artisanal** (☎ 8am-7pm), you can buy bags and costumes made in styles originally taught to Agonglo's weavers by his Portuguese slave-trading allies. Agonglo also had an unusual son, the midgen Hwemu. Saying he was returning to the voodoo world, Hwemu walked into the sea at Cotonou and turned into a fish. The oracle advised Agonglo to build **Temple Hwemu** for his son, whose name comes from the words *hwe* (fish) and *mu* (raw).

The palace of Ghézo, who had over 200 wives and established the army of female Amazon warriors, can still be seen, along with **Temple Zéwa**. The temple was built to appease the spirits of a traitorous group of Ghézo's wives, who he had executed by covering in red palm oil and leaving them for the ants to eat. Zéwa was the last to die.

end of Place de Goho; **Confort Plus**, near the *gare routière*; and **Le Mato**, opposite Hôtel Guedeuy 1.

## Entertainment

**Prestige Nightclub** (admission CFA2500, free for guests of Motel d'Abomey; ☎ Fri-Sun & holidays) This club at Motel d'Abomey is one of the fanciest places in town.

**Lem's Feelings** (admission CFA2500; ☎ Fri) A more animated crowd is found at this air-conditioned club, not far east of the market. Entry includes a drink, and from then on drinks are CFA1000.

## Shopping

Abomey is one of the best places in Benin to buy craft work. As well as the stalls at Musée Historique d'Abomey and Palais Agonglo, try **Chez Yemadje** (☎ 95 40 66 97; Rue du Palais Royal ☎ 7am-7pm), run by the family that used to embroider for the Dahomeyan kings. Next to the Vulcan auberge is the studio of the talented pop-art sculptor **Affama Modeste** (☎ 95 05 31 86).

## Getting There & Away

Plenty of bush taxis depart from Cotonou (CFA2000, three hours), sometimes with a connection at Bohicon (9km east of Abomey).

Bush taxis and *zemi-johns* run between Abomey and Bohicon (around CFA300) during the day and in the early evening. Vehicles continuing to Parakou leave frequently from the *gare routière* in Abomey and stop off in Bohicon. In Bohicon, to hail a taxi headed north towards Parakou, just stand along the main road and wave.

**Confort Lines** (☎ 21 32 58 15) buses leave for Bohicon from Cotonou (CFA1500, three hours) and Natitingou (CFA6500, five hours) at 7am daily.

Alternatively, you could take the train to Bohicon (see p126). It takes four hours from Cotonou and costs CFA1400/1100 for 1st/2nd class.

## DASSA ZOUMÉ

pop 21,900

What makes Dassa Zoumé, the 'city of 41 hills', so interesting are the awesome rock formations overshadowing the town's sleepy streets. Every August, Catholic pilgrims pay a visit to **La Grotte** (cave), which is where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared. Behind the cave, a short walk leads to the thirteen shrines hidden among the rocks.

There is an evenings-only Internet café and a Bank of Africa in town, and plenty of cheap food stalls lining the main road.

**Auberge de Dassa Zoumé** (☎ /fax 22 53 00 98; www.hotels-benin.com; camping per person CFA2500, s/d with fan CFA10,000/11,000, with air-con CFA14,000/16,000) The best hotel in town, opposite the *rond-point* (roundabout) on the major highway. The camping pitches and excellent restaurant (meals CFA3800 to CFA4000) overlooking an ostrich farm.

**Auberge Le Cachet** (☎ 22 53 02 11; r shared bathroom CFA4500, r with bathroom CFA5000) Situated near the hospital, this small, rustic hotel has bog-standard rooms and a great restaurant (meals CFA1500).

## Getting There & Away

Bush taxis from Cotonou to Dassa Zoumé (CFA3000, four hours) depart from under the new bridge next to the Grand Marché du Dantokpa.

Daily Confort Lines buses cost the same and take the same time (see p125).

You can also get to Dassa Zoumé by train, which costs CFA2900/2500 for 1st/2nd class. See p126 for timetable.

## THE NORTH

Northern Benin's arid, dusty landscape is a far cry from the south's beaches and lagoons. Easier going than their Fon cousins on the coast, the northerners – mainly composed of the Betamaribé, Djende, Fula and Bariba groups – can often be found escaping the sun in the shade of a mango tree. Islam replaces Christianity as the dominant religion, apart from among the animist Betamaribé people in Somba country. The area's main sights are the two wildlife parks, particularly Pendjari, and the castellated *tata somba* houses.

## PARAKOU

pop 198,000

Once a major slave-market town, Parakou still has a prosperous, busy atmosphere, with the most facilities you'll find in northern Benin and a prime position on both the highway and railway line. There isn't much to keep you here, but with the many *buvettes* lining the town's dusty streets, Parakou makes a relaxing stop-over en route to the northern wildlife parks.

The centre of town is the area around the cinema at the intersection of Route de l'Aéroport, Rue des Cheminots and Route de Transa, three blocks northwest of the Grand Marché.

The Bank of Africa has a 24-hour ATM.

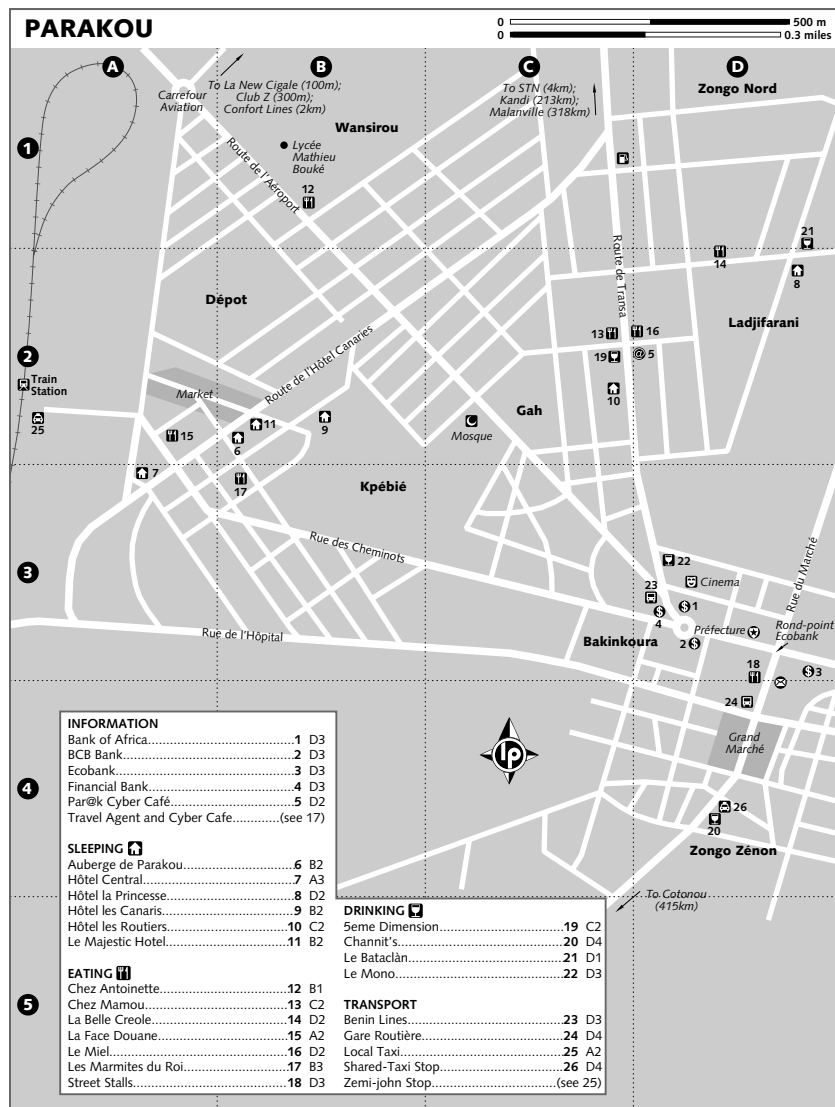
## Sleeping

**Le Majestic Hotel** (☎ 23 61 34 85; nablia25@yahoo.fr; Route de l'Hôtel Canaries; r CFA12,500-30,000; ☎) Clean, stylish and the best value in town.

Good budget choices near the *gare routière* include **Zamatchi** and **Cafeteria Les Delices du Tropique**. **Buvette Au Video**, to the northwest, is more traditional than the name suggests, serving *pâté*- and rice-based dishes at rock-bottom prices. The market is the place to head for street stalls, along with the **Yaourt Vigor** (Route de l'Hôpital) yogurt depot.

## Drinking

Good bars include **Sème Dimension** (Route de l'Hôpital), attached to Lem's Feelings; **La Princesse** (Route de l'Hôpital), opposite Motel d'Abomey; **Jubilee 2000 Plus**, at the southeast



Ask for a room with a balcony overlooking the market. Meals are available for CFA3000 to CFA4000.

**Hôtel les Routiers** (☎ 23 61 04 01; Route de Transa; s/d from CFA25000/28000, ste CFA41,000; P ☎) This establishment, 500m north of the heart of town, has long been the most popular top-end hotel in Parakou. You can't help but

relax in the garden setting with its clean pool (CFA1500 for nonguests). There's also a good, but expensive, French restaurant (*menu du jour* CFA7000, meals from CFA5000).

**Auberge de Parakou** (☎ 23 61 03 05; www.hotels-benin.com; Route de l'Hôtel Canaries; s/d with fan CFA10,000/12,000, with air-con CFA14,000/16,000) This

delightful auberge has large, spotless rooms with tiled floors and mosquito nets. Its excellent French restaurant serves delicious meals (CFA2600 to CFA3500).

**Hôtel la Princesse** (☎ 23 61 01 32; fax 23 61 32 86; s CFA6000-15,500, d CFA8000-18,500, bungalow s/d CFA25,000/27,000) The prices in this Parakou institution reflect past glories but it's a dependable choice nonetheless, with spacious, carpeted bungalows complete with phones and TV. The hotel has an attractive thatched restaurant (meals CFA2000 to CFA2500) across the street, and Le Bataclan nightclub.

**Hôtel Central** (☎ 23 61 01 24; fax 23 61 38 51; r CFA19,500-25,500; P ☎) If you can get over the screamingly kitsch décor, this hotel is all ship-shape, with a pleasant pool open to non-guests (CFA1000). Rooms upstairs are bigger and more expensive. Meals are CFA2500 to CFA5000.

**Hôtel les Canaris** (☎ 23 61 11 69; Route de l'Hôtel Canaries; r with fan/air-con CFA6000/11,000) The friendly management of this long-standing hotel, about 400m east of the train station, were dusting down a new block at the time of writing, with a restaurant on the roof.

## Eating

Street stalls north of the market serve hunks of meat and corn on the cob.

**Le Miel** (☎ 23 61 00 67; Route de Transa; meals CFA1000-2500) Upstairs from the excellent bakery – which sells vegetarian savouries as well as cakes, croissant and yogurt – this restaurant serves good pizzas and sandwiches.

**Chez Mamou** (Route de Transa; meals CFA250) Friendly *buvette* serving good, cheap food such as *wagassi* (cow's milk cheese) and macaroni.

**La New Cigale** (☎ 97 89 11 98; off Carrefour Aviation; meals CFA2500-4500) Pleasant restaurant serving pizza and French food.

**La Face Douane** (meals CFA500) No-frills African restaurant with a busy kitchen doling out huge servings of rice and sauces.

**Chez Antoinette** (☎ 23 61 05 73; Route de l'Aéroport; meals CFA500) A reasonable place for omelettes in the morning and spaghetti at night, just south of the school.

**Les Marmites du Roi** (☎ 23 61 25 07; off Route de l'Hôtel Canaries; meals CFA3500-4000) A relatively upmarket spot to sample African cuisine. You dine outdoors under *paillotes*.

**La Belle Creole** (☎ 23 61 40 32; off Route de Transa; meals CFA1500-3500) This hip-hop-playing piz-

zeria attracts a young crowd to its covered garden and pool table.

## Drinking

**Le Bataclan** (admission Thu/Fri/Sat CFA1500/2500/4000; ☎ Thu-Sat) Opposite Hôtel la Princesse, this club is a Parakou favourite. The place fills up after midnight, especially on Saturdays.

**Channit's** (Rue du Marché) The newest and hippest club in Parakou, a block south of the market.

*Buvettes* abound – try **Le Mono** (Route de Transa) and **5ème Dimension** (Route de Transa); and **Club Z** (Route de Malanville), 200m northeast of La New Cigale.

## Getting There & Away

### BUSH TAXI, MINIBUS & BUS

From the *gare routière*, north of the Grand Marché, bush taxis and minibuses go regularly to Cotonou (CFA6500, eight hours), Kandi (CFA3000, 3½ hours), Malanville (CFA4500, five hours) and Djougou (CFA3000, two hours). It's extra for luggage.

Bush taxis east to the Togo border take at least three hours because the road is not sealed.

Benin Lines runs daily buses between Cotonou and Parakou (see p125). The southbound bus leaves from outside Parakou Financial Bank at 7.30am.

EHGM, STN and SNTV run buses between Cotonou and Niamey via Parakou (see p125). The northbound STN bus stops 4km north of Parakou at 10am daily.

### TRAIN

Save money by taking the train (see p126), which leaves for Cotonou (1st/2nd class CFA5600/4000) at 8.42am on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday and arrives at 7.30pm.

## DJOUGOU

Djougou is a lively crossroads town 134km northwest of Parakou, bustling with people passing through on the way to Natitingou and Togo. You are now entering Djende country, where *Bertooley* replaces *Yovo* as the nickname of choice for white folk.

For hiking opportunities, the Tanéka villages around Badjoudè, near the Togo border, are very picturesque.

There is a Bank of Africa, and Internet access south of the town centre at **Cyber** (☎ 97 68 72 63; per hr CFA500).

**Motel du Lac** (☎ 23 80 15 48; Route de Savalou; r CFA10,500-14,500; P ☎) The beds have seen better days in this French-owned hotel 3km from town, but the rooms have balconies and there's a great *pillote* restaurant (meals CFA2500 to CFA4000).

**Motel de Djougou** (☎ 23 80 01 40; r CFA5000-12,500; ☎) Situated in grounds with the odd burnt-out car and the vague feel of a *Mad Max* film set, the hotel's round bungalows are shabby but tick the basic boxes. Meals are available for CFA2000 to CFA3500.

**Le Quasar** (☎ 23 80 00 49; meals from CFA1700) Beninese food served with a touch of class.

For cheap food, try Royal Verdue, next to Cinema Sabini, or the streets coming off the roundabout. For a cheap omelette in the morning, head to Chez Basile, in front of Motel de Djougou.

Good nightspots include Royal Verdue, nearby Buvette La Flamboyant and New Jacks nightclub, west of town.

If travelling to Kara, there are connections to the border. Bush taxis travelling between Parakou and Natitingou generally stop in Djougou. You may have to change a few times if you plan to travel down the quiet Savalou road by bush taxi – Confort Lines buses are a better option on this route (see p125).

## NATITINGOU

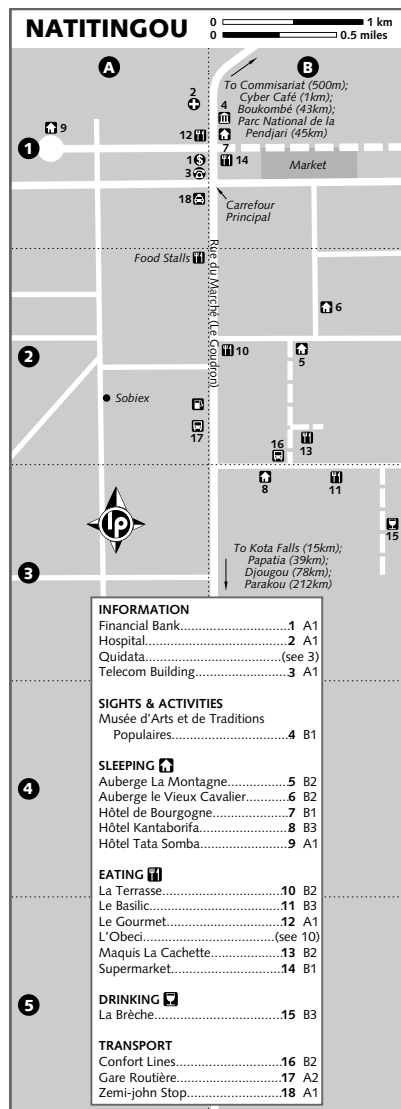
pop 105,000

About 200km northwest of Parakou and pleasantly located at an altitude of 440m in the Atakora mountains, Natitingou is the most vibrant town in northern Benin thanks to funding from President Kérékou, who was born here. It's the starting point for excursions into Somba country and the Parc National de la Pendjari.

The **Musée d'Arts et de Traditions Populaires** (☎ 95 95 93 63; admission CFA1000; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 4-6.30pm Sat & Sun), behind Hôtel de Bourgogne, gives an overview of life in Somba communities. The exhibition includes various musical instruments, jewellery, crowns and artefacts from dances, circumcision ceremonies and other Somba rituals. Most interesting is the habitat room, which has models of the different types of *tata somba* (Somba houses; see opposite).

You could also visit **Kota Falls**, 15km southeast of Natitingou, off the main

highway to a well-maintained dirt road. It's a great spot for a picnic, and for at least half the year during the rainy season, you can swim in the pool at the bottom of the falls. It's also worth checking out the Fula **botanic gardens** (☎ 8am-noon & 3-6.30pm) in Papatia, half way between Djougou and Natitingou.



## Sleeping

**Hôtel Tata Somba** (☎ 23 82 11 24; fax 82 15 84; r CFA28,000-30,500; P ☎) Natitingou's top hotel, a large pink version of a *tata somba* house, helps guests set up trips to the national park. It has a pool and tennis court, both of which are open to non-guests (CFA3000 and CFA1000). The *menu du jour* is CFA6500.

**Hôtel de Bourgogne** (☎ /fax 23 82 22 40; www.natitingou.org/bourgogne; s CFA20,500; ☎) This two-storey hotel, on the main road at the northern end of town, is a good, cheap alternative to Hôtel Tata Somba. The *menu du jour* is CFA5500

**Auberge le Vieux Cavalier** (☎ 23 82 13 24; fan/air-con CFA5500/8000; ☎) With amicable staff and a courtyard decorated with murals and sculptures, this is the most fun of Natitingou's hotels. Its restaurant (meals CFA1500 to CFA1800) and small, clean rooms with mozzie nets are an excellent budget choice.

**Hôtel Kantaborifa** (☎ 23 82 17 66; s/d with fan CFA6500/8500, with air-con CFA12,500/14,500; ☎) This dependable midrange option is handy for Confort Lines buses, which leave from here. Meals are CFA1500.

**Auberge la Montagne** (☎ 23 82 11 16; r CFA5500-6500) Up the hill from La Terrasse, the rooms in this basic auberge are good value and it has a restaurant (meals CFA1500 to CFA3500).

## Eating & Drinking

**La Brèche** (☎ 90 92 43 20; menu du jour CFA4000) A strong contender to be the most culturally enlightening bar in the world, this *buvette*

is in no less than a *tata somba* house with views of the Atakora mountains.

Natitingou has a fine array of places to grab a beer and a bite. Try **Le Gourmet** (Rue du Marché; meals CFA1700-2000), a good place to meet Somba guides; the 24-hour **Le Basilic** (meals CFA2800-3500), up the hill from Hôtel Kantaborifa; **La Terrasse** (Rue du Marché) and **L'Obeci** (Rue du Marché), both next to Ciné Atacora; and **Maquis La Cachette**, 500m south of Auberge la Montagne.

Food stalls line Rue du Marché and there is a supermarket, Quidata, opposite the Financial Bank.

## Getting There & Away

From the *gare routière* on the main road, bush taxis and minibuses go to Parakou (CFA4000, five hours), although it is often quicker to get a connection in Djougou. There are also daily minibuses to Cotonou (CFA8500, 10 hours) and bush taxis to the Togo and Burkina Faso borders.

More comfortable is the daily Confort Lines bus from Natitingou to Cotonou (CFA7500, 10 hours), leaving at 7am from outside Hôtel Kantaborifa, its representative in Natitingou.

## BOUKOUMBÉ

On the Togo border, 43km southwest of Natitingou, Boukoubé is the capital of Somba country. The drive there is stunning, bumping along red *piste* (rough track) roads past corn fields and baobab trees as wide as the nearby *tata somba* houses. About 15km

## THE SOMBA

Commonly referred to as the Somba, the Betamaribé people are concentrated to the southwest of Natitingou in the plains of Boukoubé on the Togo border, and to the southeast around Perma. They live in the middle of their cultivated fields, rather than together in villages, so their compounds are scattered over the countryside. This custom is a reflection of their fierce individuality, which has seen them resist both Dahomey slave hunters and the advance of Christianity and Islam.

The Dutamari-speaking Betamaribé's principle religion is animism – as seen in the rags and bottles they hang from the trees. Once famous for their nudity, they began wearing clothes in the 1970s, but they still hunt with bows and arrows.

What's most fascinating about the Betamaribé is their *tata somba* houses – round, tiered huts that look like miniature forts with clay turrets and thatched spires. There are some 10 types of them, including the *otchaou*, which is the same as the houses built by the Betamaribé's Tambarma relations nearby in Togo (see p800). The ground floor of the house is mostly reserved for livestock and defence mechanisms. A stepladder leads from the kitchen to the roof terrace, where there are sleeping quarters and grain stores.

before town you'll pass the sheer cliffs of Mt Koussou-Kovangou (589m), one of Benin's highest mountains. About 3km further on is the **Belvédère de Koussou-Kovangou** observation point.

Boukoubé feels like a village at the end of the world but it has a lively market, where the Somba people gather for a few calabashes of *tchoukoutou* (sorghum beer). Every four years or so in late October or early November, there is a whipping ceremony, in which the young men belt each other black and blue to demonstrate their manliness. Boukoubé is one of the few areas in Benin where you can buy the rare traditional smoking pipes.

The incredible **Auberge Villegoise de Tourisme de Koussou-Kovangou** (☎ 23 82 13 27; r CFA3500-4500) has 11 rooms in a *tata somba* house and in some less basic, *tata somba*-style bungalows. Signposted on the left 16km before Boukoubé. Bring a torch. Meals are CFA2000.

**Chez Pascaline** (☎ 23 83 02 02; meals CFA1000-1500), near the rond-point in the middle of the village, is the best place to eat. Ask here to find a guide or to stay the night with a Somba family (CFA3000).

Accommodation can also be arranged at the Maison de Jeune – contact the **town hall** (☎ 23 83 01 02).

It's easiest to find a taxi from Natitingou to Boukoubé (CFA2000, two hours) on market day, which happens every four days. Taxis do go on other days, or you can grab a *zemi-john* (CFA5000 return).

## PARC NATIONAL DE LA PENDJARI

This 275,000-hectare **national park** (admission per person CFA10,000, per vehicle CFA3000; ☎ 15 Dec-15 May), 45km north of Natitingou, is the wildlife park *par excellence* in this part of West Africa. Visitors may spot lions, leopards, elephants, baboons and hippos. The best viewing time is near the end of the dry season when the animals start to hover around the water holes.

With waterfalls, a woody landscape and good tracks, it is a pleasure to drive around.

The park adjoins the Parc National d'Arlé in Burkina Faso and is bordered to the west, north and east by the Pendjari River. It's much more developed for tourism than the Benin section of Parc Régional du W, so receives more visitors.

The entrance fee is valid for 30 days. In reality, you may have to pay a lot more by the time you've factored in additional charges such as the photography fee (per day CFA3000) and the compulsory guide (per day CFA5000), who will expect to be provided with food and water.

There is an **office** (☎ 23 83 00 85; www.pendjari.net) in Tanguéta. A guidebook, *Guide Pratique de la Pendjari* (CFA5500), is available from bookshops in Cotonou (see p95) and boutiques at the better hotels.

## Sleeping & Eating

Many visitors stay in Natitingou and make excursions from there, but you'll have a better chance of seeing animals if you stay at the park itself. Due to the presence of lions, there are only certain areas, including Mare Yangouali and Pont d'Arlé, where camping is permitted. Park wardens show you where.

There are some rustic campements in Tanguéta, at the southern tip of the park near the river and a waterfall. The town's best option is the well-run Hôtel Baobab, which has a good restaurant.

**Campement Relais de Tanougou** (bungalows Dec-May CFA9000) At the Tanougou Falls, well located for an early-morning walk and swim. The circular bungalows have a bathroom behind a dividing wall. Prices are 25% cheaper during low season. Meals are CFA3500. Some 15km southwest of the Batia park entrance. Book with **Hôtel Tata Somba** (☎ 23 82 11 24) in Natitingou.

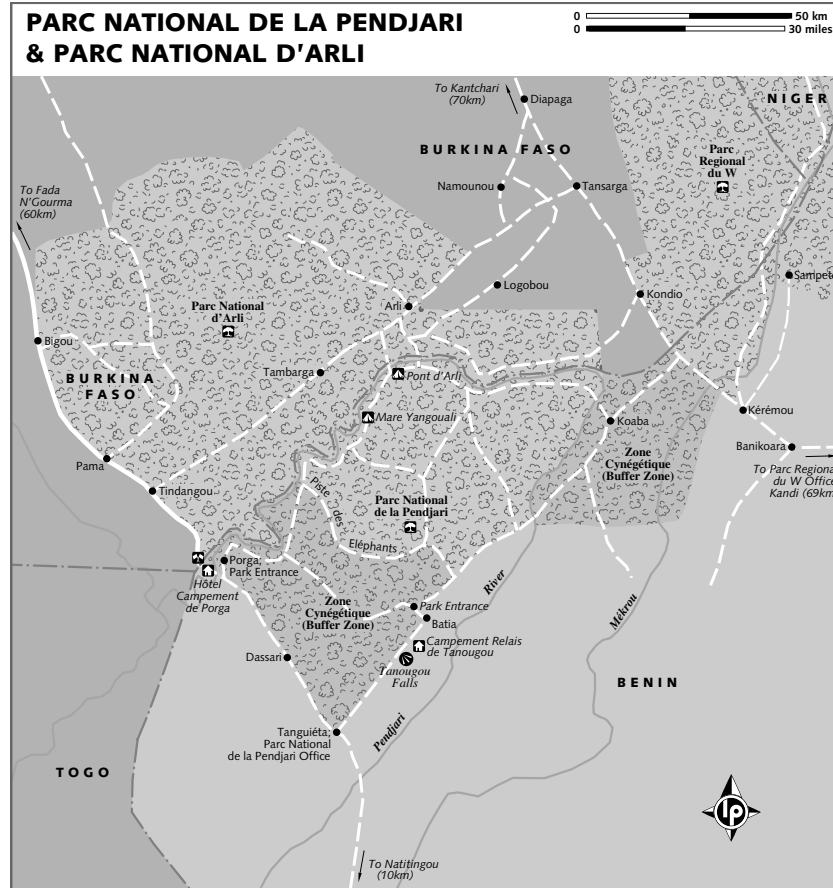
**Hôtel Campement de Porga** (r with air-con CFA28000; ☎ ) Right at the main entrance to the park, it's a larger place with a restaurant, bungalows and basic rooms available. Again, book with **Hôtel Tata Somba** (☎ 23 82 11 24).

## Getting There & Away

The main entrances to Pendjari are roughly 100km north of Natitingou. To get to the park from Natitingou, take the *goudron* (bitumen road) 97km northwest to Porga near the Burkina Faso border. This village is the main entrance to the park.

Alternatively, turn off the sealed road at Tanguéta, 45km from Natitingou, and take the *piste* (rough track) 41km northeast to Batia, the other entrance. Many people prefer this because the route is shorter.

As hiking is not permitted in the park, backpackers without vehicles can try to hitch



a lift at the hotels in Natitingou, Porga and Batia. It is possible to hire a vehicle – inquire at the park office or at hotels including **Hôtel Tata Somba** (☎ 23 82 11 24). Travel agencies in Cotonou organise trips, but they are expensive.

## KANDI & AROUND

Kandi, 213km north of Parakou on the way to Niger, is worth a stop for its market. The Bariba and Fula people – originally from Nigeria and Niger respectively – and the voluptuous mango trees give this town its distinctive northern character.

Some 40km north of Kandi on the road to Malanville, just north of the village of Alfa Koura, is an accessible wing of the Parc Re-

gional du W, where you can view elephants and many species of antelope. Readers have reported seeing up to 50 elephants in one day bathing and drinking in the water hole. The beautiful area is also worth a look during the wet season – you might see a crocodile.

It's CFA2500 for a day's entry to the park, including camping, and CFA500 for a guide. There are some basic rooms (CFA5000) and a restaurant (meals CFA3500), open during the wet season.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Auberge la Recontre** (☎ /fax 23 63 01 76; r with fan/air-con incl breakfast CFA7500/14,500; ☎ ) The rooms are stuffy, and the cheaper ones share a bathroom, but the rooftop restaurant



(*menu du jour* CFA4500) makes this the best budget choice in Kandi.

**Auberge de Kandi** (☎ 23 63 02 43; [www.hotels-benin.com](http://www.hotels-benin.com); camping per person CFA2500, r with fan/air-con CFA10,500/15,000; 🍴) This auberge 2km north of Kandi has sizeable rooms, attractive gardens and its French restaurant (meals CFA3800 to CFA4000) is the best in town.

A barbecue at the turning for Auberge le Recontre dishes out bags of meat with onion and spices. Ask near the Sonpra cotton plant at lunchtime for a woman who prepares sublime mashed yam.

Popular places to drink include **Oasis Bar** (Route de Ndali), south of the market, and **Maquis C'est Ca Meme** (Route de Ndali), south of town. There is a nightclub, **Tropicana** (admission CFA2000), behind the maquis.

### Getting There & Away

From Parakou, bush taxis head north to Kandi (CFA3000, 3½ hours). To get to the elephant viewing platform at Alfa Koura from Kandi, catch a ride with a bush taxi heading north (CFA1000, 1½ hours).

### MALANVILLE

This town is in the far north on the Niger border, considerably closer to Niamey than it is to Cotonou, 733km away. Market day, held on Friday and Saturday, is a who's who of West African peoples, attracting traders from Togo, Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Niger. Stand on the bridge over the River Niger and you'll see Fula women trudging across the border with produce teetering on their heads.

**La Sota** (☎ 97 64 97 48; r with fan/air-con & TV CFA12,500/15,500, ste CFA17,500; 🍴 🍷 📺) Malanville's smartest hotel, formerly called Hôtel de Luxe, is 2km south of town on the banks of the River Sota. Meals are CFA2500 to CFA4800.

**Rose des Sables** (☎ 23 67 01 25; r with fan/air-con/air-con & TV CFA5500/10,500/18,500; 🍴) One kilometre south of town, is slightly battered but has reasonable facilities. Group discounts available. Meals are CFA2500.

Near the market, **Sous les Neems** (meals CFA300) serves *wagassi* (cow's milk cheese), *pâté* and cold beers. *Buvettes* and food stalls, selling everything from mashed yam to sugared pancakes, line the main road through town.

Malanville is well connected with Parakou by bush taxi (CFA4500, five hours), bus and minibus (CFA3000, seven hours). EHGM, STN and SNTV buses travel between Cotonou and Niamey via Malanville, but they are often full up (see p125). A *zemi-john* to Gaya in Niger, where you can get taxis to Niamey, is about CFA1000.

### PARC REGIONAL DU W

**Parc Regional du W** (admission CFA10,000; 📅 1 Dec-15 Jun) covers 10,242 sq km in Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, where the largest section of the park is. It was one of the first Unesco-recognised biospheres worldwide. You may see several species of cat and antelope, buffalo, hippos, crocodiles and elephants.

Although W is twice as large as Pendjari, it has traditionally been the less popular park, partly because the latter had better access and infrastructure. However, W now has a bridge over the River Mékrou, plans to tarmac the road between Kandi and Banikoara, and lodges with restaurants in locations including Koudou, right next to the falls.

Visitors need their own 4WD transport and guide, both of which the park's Kandi-based **Bureau de Liaison** (☎ 23 63 00 80; [www.parc-w.org](http://www.parc-w.org); 📅 8am-12.30pm & 2pm-late Mon-Fri) can help with. There are plans to make the park accessible to other transport – horse, foot, bike, car, even pirogues for hippo-watching.

The park has four entrances in Benin: at Kérérou near Banikoara, which is 69km northwest of Kandi; Sampéto, Alfa Kouara and Kofonou, near Karimama on the Niger border.

## BENIN DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

Basic rooms with a fan cost about CFA6000, while comfortable air-conditioned mid-range rooms are around CFA10,000. Bathrooms are generally en suite. Tariffs should include the tourist tax of CFA500, and be listed prominently at the hotel entrance. Top End prices range from CFA70,000 to over CFA100,000.

The 'Auberge de' chain has consistently good hotels in Grand Popo, Dassa Zoumé, Savalou, Parakou and Kandi. Central reservations can be made on ☎ 21 31 38 62 or [www.hotels-benin.com](http://www.hotels-benin.com).

### PRACTICALITIES

- Cotonou's daily papers include *Le Nation*, *Le Soleil*, *L'Option* and *Le Matinal*.
- Foreign newspapers and magazines can occasionally be found at newspaper stands.
- The state-owned ORTB broadcasts on the radio in English, French and local languages.
- Cotonou has some 15 commercial stations, including Radio Afrique (101.7MHz).
- LC2 and Golfé Télévision are the most popular commercial channels, while ORTB runs one channel.
- The electricity supply is temperamental outside the main towns.
- Benin uses the metric system.

### ACTIVITIES

The beaches around Cotonou are fairly ordinary, and prone to muggings. For better sunbathing and swimming, head to Grand Popo (p108), although the currents are strong right along the coast. Many of the large hotels have swimming pools and tennis courts open to nonguests.

If you get the chance, hire a bicycle (but don't expect 18-speed mountain bikes) and cycle around Porto Novo (p103) or Abomey (p110).

There are few organised hikes but there is nothing to prevent you walking from village to village on the shores of Lake Nokoué (p102) or Lake Ahémé (p109), taking pirogue rides for some stretches; or along quiet back roads in the north of the country.

A good area for rock climbing is Dassa Zoumé (p113) and Savé.

You can kayak on the lagoon at Casa Del Papa (p107) in Ouidah. Other hotels that organise activities for guests include Awale Plage (p109) in Grand Popo and Village Club Ahémé in Possotomé (p109).

### BOOKS

*The Viceroy of Ouidah*, by Bruce Chatwin, is a biographical sketch of the notorious Brazilian slave trader Fancisco da Silva and how he and the kings of Dahomey built the

trade. The vivid novella begins with a 20th-century reunion of the da Silva clan and moves back to the original Afro-Brazilian himself via his descendants, their dreams and disappointments.

*Instruments of Darkness*, by Robert Wilson, is the debut of this award-winning thriller writer, following an English 'fixer' through the Cotonou underworld as he searches for a fellow expat who has mysteriously disappeared.

*Show Me the Magic*, by Annie Caulfield, is a slightly glib but entertaining account by this English comic writer, who has collaborated with the comedian Lenny Henry, of travelling around Benin in a taxi. She and her driver repeated the journey with Spice Girl Mel B for the documentary *Mel B Vodou Princess*.

### BUSINESS HOURS

Businesses are open from 8am to 12.30pm and 3pm to 6.30pm Monday to Friday. The banks are generally open 8am to 12.30pm and 3pm to 5pm Monday to Friday. Shops are open from 9am to noon and 3pm to 7pm Monday to Friday and until noon on Saturday.

### COURSES

There are Fon, Tai Chi and martial arts courses available in Cotonou (p98).

### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Tourists should be on their guard in southern Benin, which suffers from the crimes normally associated with tourism.

Muggings are a real danger on Cotonou's shoreline, even during the day (see p97). Never walk on the beach alone, and even when walking with someone, don't carry or wear valuables. At night, take a taxi if you want to travel in Cotonou, and in Ouidah avoid the roads to and along the coast.

Benin's beaches are plagued by dangerous currents – seek local advice before swimming.

### EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

#### Beninese Embassies & Consulates

In West Africa, Benin has embassies and consulates in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. For details, see the relevant country chapter.

In Africa, Benin also has representation in Algeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon and Libya.

Elsewhere, Beninese embassies and consulates include the following:

**Belgium** (☎ 02-35 9471; 5 Ave de l'Observatoire, 1180 Brussels)

**Canada** (☎ 613-233 4429; www.benin.ca; 58 Glebe Ave, Ottawa K1S 2C3)

**France** (☎ 01-45 00 98 82; www.ambassade-benin.org; 87 Ave Victor Hugo, 75016 Paris)

**Germany** (☎ 0228-34 40 31; Rüdigerstrasse 10 Post-Sech, 228-5300 Bonn)

**UK** (☎ 020-8954 8800; fax 44 20 8954 8844; Dolphin House, 16 The Broadway, Stanmore, Middlesex HA7 4DW)

**USA** (☎ 202-232 6656; fax 202-239 6500; 2737 Cathedral Ave, Washington, DC)

### Embassies & Consulates in Benin

Embassies in Cotonou include the following, open Monday to Friday:

**France** Consulate (☎ 21 31 26 38; Rue 651A); Embassy (☎ 21 30 02 25; Route de l'Aéroport)

**Germany** (☎ 21 31 29 68; Ave Jean Paul II; ☎ 9am-12pm)

**Ghana** (☎ 21 30 07 46; Route de l'Aéroport; ☎ 8am-2pm)

**Niger** (☎ 21 31 56 65; Rue 651A; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-6pm)

**Nigeria** (☎ 21 30 11 42; Blvd de la Marina; ☎ 10-11.30am)

**UK** (☎ 21 30 12 74; Haie Vive) Officially, British Nationals must deal with the British Deputy High Commission in Lagos (p666). However, the Community Liaison Officer for the British community in Benin, Pauline Collins, based at the English International School, can be of some help.

**USA** (☎ 21 30 06 50; cotonou.usembassy.gov; Rue Caporal Bernard Anani)

### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Apart from the colourful annual Muslim celebrations in the northern towns – Djougou and Natitingou are especially good places to see them – the main event is the annual Voodoo Festival, held in Ouidah on 10 January (see p107).

Every four years or so, in late October or early November, there is the coming-of-age 'whipping ceremony' in Boukombé, which seems to go on until the young men are satisfied that they have literally beaten each other black and blue.

There are frequent minor voodoo celebrations in Ouidah, Abomey and on the shores of Lake Ahémé.

### HOLIDAYS

Public holidays include the following:

**New Year's Day** 1 January

**Vodoun** 10 January

**Martyr's Day** 16 January

**Liberation Day** 28 February

**Labour Day** 1 May

**Independence** 1 August

**Armed Forces Day** 26 October

**Republic Day** 4 December

**Harvest Day** 31 December

Benin also celebrates the usual Christian and Muslim holidays. See p818 for a table of dates of Islamic holidays.

### MAPS

The best map by far is the 1:600,000 *Republique du Benin Carte Générale*, produced by the Institut Géographique National. With good country detail and insert city maps of Porto Novo and Cotonou, it costs about CFA7500 in Cotonou bookshops.

### MONEY

The unit of currency in Benin is the West Africa CFA (Communauté Financière Africaine) franc. Cash advances against credit cards (Visa only) are possible at the major banks in Cotonou. The best banks for changing money are Financial Bank, Bank of Africa, Ecobank and BTICI, which also often have ATMs.

Benin's neighbours all use CFAs apart from Nigeria, where the currency is the Naira. There is no official way to get hold of Naira in Benin but Cotonou has a healthy black market around the Jonquet district and Gare du Dantokpa.

Banks accept travellers cheques in most major currencies, although these can only be reliably changed in Cotonou.

### PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

A photo permit is not required, but be careful when taking shots of cultural and religious buildings and ceremonies. Rules are not clear-cut, so it's best to ask first. A *cadeau* may be requested. For general information see p823.

### SOLO TRAVELLERS

Lone travellers should be on their guard in Cotonou as they may be more susceptible to muggings than groups.

### TELEPHONE

International telephone calls and faxes can be made at telecom offices and private telephone agencies throughout Benin. The cost per minute is about CFA1350 to France, CFA1850 elsewhere in Europe, CFA1400 to North America, and CFA2640 to Australasia.

### Phone Codes

The phone codes had recently been updated at the time of writing. Numbers in the Ouémé and Plateau areas (including Porto Novo) are now prefixed with 20; the Littoral and Atlantique areas (including Cotonou and Ouidah) with 21; the Mono, Couffo, Zou and Collines areas (including Grand Popo, Lake Ahémé, Abomey and Dassa Zoumé) with 22; and the Atakora, Donga, Alibori and Borgou areas (Parakou and the north) with 23. Libercom mobile phone numbers are now prefixed with 90, BCom (Bell Benin) with 93, Telecel with 95, and Areeba with 97.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

There is a lacklustre tourist office in Cotonou, and, in northern Benin, offices of the two wildlife parks. Hôtel Tata Somba (p117) in Natitingou is also a good place to inquire about Parc National de la Pendjari.

### VISAS

Visas are required for all travellers except nationals of the Ecowas. If flying into Cotonou you will require a visa before arrival. A 30-day, single-entry visa costs UK£55 from the Beninese consulate in the UK; the embassy in the USA charges less.

If crossing overland, it's far easier to get a visa at the border, where the 24-hour posts issue 48-hour, single-entry transit visas (CFA10,000).

You can then obtain a 30-day, single- or multiple-entry visa (CFA12,000) in Cotonou. The **Direction Emigration Immigration** (☎ 21 31 42 13; Ave Jan Paul II, Cotonou; ☎ 8am-11am, 3-6.30pm) accepts applications between 8am and 11am Monday to Friday. These can be collected at 6pm the following working day, though it may be possible to speed the process up if you ask. You will need one passport photo. The office also offers the five-country Visa Touristique Entente for CFA25,000 (see p828).

### Visa Extensions

Only available in Cotonou at the **Direction Emigration Immigration** (☎ 21 31 42 13; Ave Jan Paul II, Cotonou; ☎ 8am-11am, 3-6.30pm).

### Visas For Onward Travel

For onward travel to Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo, the French consulate issues three-month visas (CFA20,000) and transit visas (CFA6000) in 24 to 48 hours, with two photos required. However, it may be preferable, if more expensive, to get the five-country Visa Touristique Entente (CFA25,000) at the Beninese Direction Emigration Immigration (see p828).

### GHANA

Ghanaian visas take two days to issue and cost CFA12,000/30,000 for single/multiple entry. Four photos are required.

### NIGER

For Niger, it is, again, worth considering the Visa Touristique Entente (see p828). It costs about the same as the three-month visas issued by the Niger embassy, which takes 24 hours to process applications and requires two photos.

### NIGERIA

The Nigerian embassy issues only two-day transit visas to travellers with a Nigerian embassy in their home country. You need two photos, along with photocopies of your passport and, if you have one, your ticket for onward travel from Nigeria. The expensive visas vary according to nationality (CFA30,000 for UK, CFA68,000 for US, CFA20,000 for Australia) and are issued on the same day.

### TOGO

Seven-day visas for Togo (CFA10,000) are also issued at the border (see p804).

### WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Travelling in Benin presents few problems for women. Beyond the usual 'Where is your husband?' curiosity, the greatest annoyance is unwanted attention, especially from officials. The best tack in these situations is to say you are waiting for your husband.

As with anywhere in the world use common sense – don't wander around solo at night, especially in Cotonou, where the beach is a definite no-go area during the day.

While it is not necessary to cover yourself from head to toe, it is advisable to dress in a modest fashion. If in doubt, look at what the local women are wearing and follow suit. For more advice, see p828.

## TRANSPORT IN BENIN

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

#### Entering Benin

Benin's immigration regulations and officials are awkward. If flying into the country, you cannot obtain a visa on arrival. However, you can if entering by land, but the visa is only valid for 48 hours, and can only be extended in Cotonou. Officially you need a yellow fever certificate, but you rarely have to show it.

#### Air

The main airport is on the western fringe of Cotonou, in Cocotiers.

Air France has the most reliable and frequent services between Benin and Europe.

For flight information, ticket sales and reconfirmations, the following airlines have offices in Cotonou:

**Air France** (AF; ☎ 21 30 18 15; www.airfrance.com/bj; Route de l'Aéroport) Hub: Paris.

**Air Gabon International** (GN; ☎ 21 31 21 87; Blvd Steinmetz) Hub: Libreville.

**Air Ivoire** (VU; ☎ 21 31 86 14; Blvd Steinmetz) Hub: Abidjan.

**Air Togo** (YT) Hub: Lomé.

**Ghana International Airlines** (GH; ☎ 21 31 42 83; Blvd Steinmetz) Hub: Accra.

**Point-Afrique** (6V/DR; ☎ 95 84 85; www.point-afrique.com; Quartier Cocotiers) Hub: Paris.

**Virgin Nigeria Airways** (VK; ☎ 21 31 58 24; Blvd du Gouverneur Ballot) Hub: Lagos.

#### Land

##### BURKINA FASO

There's at least one bush taxi a day along the 97km of tarred road from Natitingou to Porga (CFA1500, two hours), where you can cross to Tindangou in Burkina Faso. Monday, Porga market day, is a good day to find a ride.

##### NIGER

From Malanville, 733km from Cotonou on tarred road, a *zemi-john* or shared taxi can take you across the River Niger

to Gaya in Niger (*zemi-john*/shared taxi CFA1000/500). The border is open 24/7 and it is quite straightforward to pick up visas there for both countries.

From Gaya, it's easier to find a Peugeot bush taxi to Niamey (CFA4500, five hours) or a minibus (CFA4100, 5½ hours) than it is to squeeze onto one of the Cotonou-Niamey coaches, which are usually full.

Heading south, there are no longer Peugeots or minibuses from Niamey to Malanville, Parakou or Cotonou. Instead, get to Gaya and walk or *moto-taxi* it to the border and Malanville, from where bush taxis head south.

##### NIGERIA

In Cotonou, bush taxis and minibuses leave for Lagos throughout the day from the Gare de l'Ancien Pont (CFA3000, three hours), as well as from the Gare de Dantokpa. You could save money by taking a taxi to the border crossing at Kraké and changing there, as Nigerian taxis are cheaper than those in Benin. If you do this, you will need to get some Naira at the border or on the black market in Cotonou (see p97). There are also taxis to Lagos from Porto Novo (CFA2700, 2½ hours), which is both closer to Nigeria and less hectic than Cotonou.

Avoid arriving or leaving Lagos at rush hour (the 'go slow' between 6am and 10am, and 3pm and 7pm) – it's a mess. If you're heading to Ibadan, Lagos can be bypassed by crossing at Kétou, though there is less public transport.

You may have to grease a few palms at Kraké (see p670), although asking for a receipt is a good way to discourage corrupt officials. If hiring a taxi across the border, check whether the price includes bribes.

##### TOGO

Cotonou and Lomé are connected by frequent bush taxis (CFA3000, three hours), which regularly leave the Gare de Jonquet in Cotonou for Lomé through the day and the early evening. Alternatively, pick up a taxi to the border point at Hilla-Condji and grab another taxi on the Togolese side of the frontier. There is also a daily STIF bus service from Cotonou to Lomé (CFA3000, three hours).

Other crossings are at Kéméri, north-east of Kara in Togo, and between Nadoba in Togo and Boukombé in Benin. The lat-

ter crossing takes you through spectacular countryside but you would need to be well organised, with your own 4WD vehicle.

##### BUS

**STC** (☎ 21 32 66 69) runs buses between Cotonou and Abidjan (CFA34000, 28 hours) via Accra (CFA15,000, seven hours).

**EHGM** (☎ 227 74 37 16), **STN** (☎ 227 74 03 69) and **SNTV** (☎ 227 73 30 20) are among the Niger-based coach lines that ply the route between Cotonou and Niamey. SNTV's buses leave Niamey daily at 4am (CFA20,000, 13 to 15 hours) and EHGM's leave on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday at 4am (CFA18700, 13 to 15 hours).

Buses stop in major towns such as Parakou and Malanville, but they are hard to get on as they fill up when they set off.

Burkina Faso-based TVC (see p170) has a Sunday bus from Ougadougou to Cotonou (CFA20,000) which continues to Lagos (CFA30,500).

### GETTING AROUND

#### Bush Taxi, Minibus & Bus

Minibuses and bush taxis are the principal means of transport between towns, and are faster than in many West African countries. A bush taxi from Cotonou costs CFA600 to Ouidah, CFA2000 to Abomey, CFA3000 to Lagos or Lomé and CFA6500 to Parakou, while minibuses cost about 25% less and take much longer. There is sometimes a negotiable surcharge for luggage.

There are few domestic bus companies.

**Confort Lines** (☎ 21 32 58 15) runs daily buses between Cotonou and Natitingou via Savalou (CFA7500, 10 hours), stopping in all major towns en route. There are free sandwiches and the conductors are faithful to the company's boast that there are no hidden charges. Benin Routes has daily buses between Cotonou and Parakou (CFA5500, five hours).

It is best to book ahead, particularly on buses between Cotonou and Niamey. The buses are, as usual in Africa, overloaded with passengers and luggage, but they are still more comfortable, and often cheaper, than bush taxis.

#### Car & Motorcycle

Petrol costs between CFA300 and CFA600 per litre, with prices generally rising as you travel north. The price fluctuates because

of instability in Nigeria, on which Benin depends for petrol. In Nigeria petrol is cheaper, so much of it is carried illegally across the border into Benin and sold on the black market at prices slightly below the official rate. Just look for the guys along the roads with 1L to 5L bottles.

For private transport, organise a taxi through one of the major hotels in Cotonou, though this can prove costly. The taxis outside the Hôtel du Port are better value than those outside the Novotel Orisha and Benin Marina Hotel.

If you're driving, you need an International Driving Permit. Roads are in good condition throughout Benin.

### Local Transport

#### TAXI

Fares for regular journeys in taxis and minibuses in Cotonou are CFA150 for a shared ride. Taxis can be hired for CFA2000 per hour; rates increase from early evening on. Tariffs are often written on the dashboard. Gare du Dantokpa is a good place to find taxis.

#### ZEMI-JOHNS

In nearly all towns, you'll find *zemi-johns* (scooter taxis). While they are by far the fastest and most convenient way of getting around the cities, they are not as safe as regular taxis. Cotonou sees *zemi-john* crashes everyday – often fatal ones. Tell your driver to drive slowly.

You'll recognise them by the driver's yellow and green shirt (green and purple in some regional centres). Hail them just as you would a taxi, and be sure to agree on a price before the journey. The typical fare is CFA150 to CFA250. They are also an easy way to get to remote destinations.

#### Tours

Two- and seven-day tours are available in restored colonial railroad cars on **La Train d'Ebene** (☎ 21 31 38 62). The shorter tour (CFA50,000 or CFA40,000 per person for groups of 12 or more) departs Cotonou on Thursday morning for Dassa Zoumé, where you can walk in the hills and visit an ostrich farm. Meals are served onboard. The longer tour (CFA250,000/200,000) also takes in towns not on the railway – Ganvié, Ouidah, Grand Popo, Abomey and Natitingou.

For ecotourism, **CPN Les Papillons** (☎ 22 54 07 13; cpnlespapillons@yahoo.com), an NGO based in the village of Camaté-Shakaloké, 10km from Dassa Zoumé, hosts groups of tourists and offers trips to other parts of Benin.

A recommended guide is Cotonou-based **Franck Tok** (☎ 95 05 61 04; tokfrank@yahoo.fr). A language facilitator for the Peace Corps, he is fluent in both English and French.

### Train

Run by **L'Organisation Commune Benin-Niger des Chemins de fer et Transports** (☎ 21 32 22 06), Benin's one railway line links Cotonou with Parakou via towns including Bohicon (for Abomey) and Dassa Zoumé. Cheap and spacious but frustratingly slow, the train

leaves Cotonou at 8.30am on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, arriving in Parakou at 7pm and returning south at 8.42am the following day. Get to the station before 8am to buy tickets.

Second-class seats on the train are significantly cheaper than taking a bush taxi but the carriages tend to be crowded with humanity and produce. First class is about as comfortable as you'll find on any train in West Africa. It has a rudimentary bar, and food is available at stations along the way.

Tickets in 1st/2nd class from Cotonou to Bohicon (about four hours) cost CFA1400/1100, to Dassa Zoumé (about five hours) cost CFA2900/2500, and to Parakou (about 11 hours) cost CFA5600/4000.