

Benin with children

sample journey

Let's play a game! I'll tell you about a country and you'll guess which country it is.

I am in one of the smaller countries of a continent. It is not really small, it is still about three times as big as The Netherlands in Europe. But, it is still small on this continent.

In the South you'll find the ocean and in the North it borders two other countries. On the left it has one neighboring country and on the right it has another one. The country is narrow and elongated. And when you travel it from the North to the South, you'll encounter lots of different things.



Different landscapes and different people as well, since they have a lot of ethnic groups in this country. They are all dark-skinned and to me they are all equally nice.

There is lots to do also. You can swim in the ocean. And in the North you can go searching for elephants. There are large National Parks. There are even lions! And these are not the only special things. There is much more. Such as a village on a lake, where all houses are built on stilts. There are no roads in this village. Everyone has a boat and even the children go to school by boat. And there is an underground village in this country.

Do you have any idea where I am? Not yet? Okay then I'll tell you a bit on how it used to be here in the past. The different ethnic groups did fight one another. They would steal each other's belongings, and their wives and children. That's why there are still areas with houses with small doors. The attackers could not just run into houses with doors like that. Those houses are very special, because they are made of clay, a kind of brown mud. And they have two stories! They are built by hand, by the people themselves. Do you know why they used to steal people? To sell them! Those stolen people were transported by boat all the way to the Americas. They had to work hard once they arrived there, without being paid. That is called slavery. The slave traders earned a lot of money. Luckily it's now forbidden and people can live in peace. So we can go there too for holidays! By the way, they have a lot of kings here! These are kings of ancient kingdoms and voodoo kings. Voodoo is a religion, just like Christianity or Islam, but a bit different. January 10th is national voodoo day and lots of people will be celebrating in the country.

Do you know where I am? No? Then I'll tell you:

I am in Benin, in Africa!

In short

1. journey to Cotonou
2. Cotonou - Porto Novo
3. Porto Novo - Ganvié
4. Ganvié - Dassa
5. Dassa - Atakora mountains
6. Atakora mountains - Parc Pendjari
7. Parc Pendjari- Natitingou
8. Natitingou
9. Natitingou -Somba Country
10. Somba Country - Abomey
11. Abomey - Grand Popo
12. Grand Popo
13. Grand Popo - Ouidah
14. Ouidah - Cotonou - departure
15. home coming



Day to day itinerary

Day 1: journey to Cotonou

It is an exciting day! We're going to Africa, by airplane. It is kind of a long journey. Of course we need to get to the airport with our bags and suitcases, before getting on the plane.

On the airport of Cotonou in Benin, our guide and driver will be waiting for us. Together with them we'll set out on a voyage of discovery. They speak the local language and they know the way around. They will take good care of us, during our time in their country. And they will be explaining us a lot, so in a few weeks I will know a lot about Benin. And we'll have done lots of fun things too. Yahoo, I am in Benin!

night in: Cotonou

Day 2: Cotonou - Porto Novo

In the morning we can adjust a bit and visit the city. But before we'll go there we need to exchange money. The local currency is the Franc CFA. Just like in several other African countries. One Euro equals about 650 CFA. Mom and dad even got bills of 10,000. We are very rich here!



Some people are watching us. They don't see white children on a daily basis. They are curious, just like we are. They all have dark brown eyes and almost black hair. Their skin is dark and much thicker than ours. It may feel different than our skin!

Cotonou is a very large city and we can choose what we would like to see: the Cathedrale Notre Dame, the large mosque or the market for instance.

Later today we'll be traveling to Porto Novo, only a short drive from here.

night in: Porto Novo

Day 3: Porto Novo - Ganvié

Porto Novo is also called the administrative capital of Benin. Because the Assemblée Nationale, the government is based in the city.

The buildings look different. It's called Afro-Brasilian style. And there is a Royal palace, it belongs to one of the voodoo kings. We can also visit the old part of the city. Not far from here, in a place called Adjara, is a market where they sell all kinds of handicrafts. The market is held every four days. Maybe we can take a look before we continue.

To be honest I am a bit impatient, because we will be visiting a stilt village today. Can you imagine a village being built on poles and everybody living above the water? All houses are made of wood. People go grocery shopping by boat and there is a floating market. So you'll buy your things from boats.

There are shops too, like the houses they are stilt shops. This village is in the Nougoué lake, which is a salt water lake. The people living here are of the Toffinou ethnic group. We will be taking a boat to the village and we will be spending the night in a stilt hotel.

night in: Ganvié



Day 4: Ganvié - Dassa

Lying in my bed last night, I could hear the water breaking against the poles. Just like when you are in a boat or on the beach. After breakfast we'll be leaving again. The boat will come to pick us up. By car we will travel to Dassa, which is a journey of about 160 kilometers.



Dassa is known for its 41 hills. Those are rock hills, which are called collines in Benin. We are going to climb one of them. And when we are up on the hill, we can look down on the town.

There is a building on the hill, which is called a palace. Wooden figures are stored in it. These are part of the voodoo religion and are being used in ceremonies. I am not sure

what they mean by that, but I will ask our guide to explain it to me. Maybe it is like a statue in a church, such as Jesus and his Apostles.



We are going to visit a small museum, which has a large wooden horse. It was built for a king, who had asked for a horse that would never be ill and would have eternal life. And that is why he was given a wooden horse. The King died long ago, but the horse is still there and his descendants are taking well care of it. You would never guess it is that old.

Dassa has a Royal palace too. The buildings look quite common, not like you would at first expect when someone talks about a palace. It is a luxury here when houses are built of concrete instead of mud. Not everybody can afford to

build a house like that.

night in: Dassa

Day 5: Dassa - Atakora

Today we'll be driving a long distance, almost 400 kilometers. It's not that bad, because there's lots to see along the way. The landscape is very different from what we are used to at home and it changes the further we go. We can stop along the way to visit interesting places and for lunch. And if we feel like having a little break, we can just ask the driver to stop.

We are traveling all the way to the North, because of the large forest, the National Park. There are elephants and even a lion. And a lot of other animals, including hippos. Tomorrow we'll be visiting the park. Tonight we'll sleep in a village close to the park. The village is located on the Atakora mountain range and we will be staying with a local family. Several families in this village have a hut on their courtyard, which is especially for visitors. It offers us a chance to get an idea of how the local people live. And for them it is a way of earning a bit of money.

night in: village

Day 6: village - Parc Pendjari*

Day 7: Parc Pendjari - Natitingou

We had an early start this morning to drive to the park. The best times of the day to see the animals are in the early morning and the late afternoon. During the warmest hours of the day the animals take a rest and once they are in the shade of the trees and plants it is hard to see them. So that is why we started early this morning.



We will be spending two days in the park. It is a large forest and there are lots of places where the animals like to go, the waterholes for instance. That is where they go to drink. We are going to visit all these places. I hope that we will see



lots of animals. Elephants, hippos, and much more. And maybe even a lion!

In the afternoon of the second day we will leave the park again. Before going to Natitingou we are going to the waterfall of Tanougou. We take our towels and swimwear and go for a refreshing swim.

night of day 6 in: Parc Pendjari

night of day 7 in: Natitingou

Dag 8: Natitingou

Today we have a day off in Natitingou. We can take it easy or maybe our guide knows some things we can do around here. Someone mentioned doughnut balls with banana, in French they are called beignets de banane.

And maybe there is a place in town where they brew the local type of beer. I am of course too young to taste it, but it'll be fun to see how they make it. I thought those doughnut balls have a strange name in French, but the beer's local name is even funnier: Tchouckoutou. It almost looks like the sound of a train.

night in: Natitingou

Day 9: Natitingou - Pays Somba



In the morning we will be visiting the waterfalls of Kota. We can go for a nice swim and have a picnic near the falls. It is a nice place to be. In the afternoon we'll be driving to Somba Country. Do you remember that I told you about the two story mud-houses? That is where we are going. I would love to see these houses, because it is hard to imagine that anyone can live in a house made of mud. The rooms in these houses are round.

Even the house itself is kind of round shaped. To get from one room to the other you have to bend over. The bedroom does not even have a door and you need to be flexible to climb in and out. It is almost like a little cave. Exciting! There is a small round shed on the rooftop. It is a granary, especially for the millet. A kind of cereal, small round grains, which the people eat a lot. If you would like to take something out of the granary, you need to climb a ladder and lift the reed roof.



When I first heard about these houses, I thought they would be in a museum, but they are real and people live in them. When a boy of this ethnic group wants to get married, he first needs to save up money to build his own tata. Tata is the name for this house. They are also called Tata Somba: house of the Somba. Only when a boy has finished the construction of his tata, he can get married. He has then created a safe heaven for his wife and their children.

night in: Somba Country

Day 10: Somba Country - Abomey

We spent the night in Somba Country and are now traveling on. We are going a bit Southward, to a city called Abomey. There used to be 12 palaces in the city. In 1645 King Houegbadja of the Dahomey Kingdom built the first palace. His successor the next and so on. Dahomey was a large Kingdom. Benin did not yet exist. When the French arrived in 1892, the King had to flee. He did not want the palaces to get into the hands of the French and set them on fire. One palace escaped the fires and has been turned into a museum. There is lots to see and we can learn about the history. They have a lot of old objects and the museum guide will explain everything when we visit the museum in the afternoon.

night in: Abomey

Day 11: Abomey - Grand Popo



Have you ever heard of an underground village? There is one nearby and we will be visiting it. Even the local people did not know about this village. Just until they started road constructions and an entire bulldozer disappeared into a hole in the ground. That is when they started searching and discovered the entrances to other underground houses in between the trees and bushes. They were so well hidden that they would not have discovered them if it weren't for the bulldozer falling into one of the houses.

We will be visiting one of these houses. To take a look inside we'll be climbing down a ladder. The houses look like caves and the people who built them had well thought about everything. They even had a water cave in their house.

There is a special tree also. You are only allowed to circle it barefoot. It is a holy place. Be careful, there are little stones and branches. African people do not notice them, their foot soles are much thicker than ours.

After having visited the underground village we will be driving to Grand Popo. It is right on the beach and there are lots of palm trees.

night in: Grand Popo

Day 12: Grand Popo

We will spend the day in Grand Popo. We can play on the beach and take a look at the fisherman. There is a man in Grand Popo who takes care of sea turtles. Because they are threatened by extinction. The turtles come to the beach to hatch their eggs. There are people who search those eggs to sell them as food. And there are animals who eat the eggs. That is why there are not a lot of these turtles left.



This man knows a lot about the sea turtles. Before someone else has a chance to steal the eggs, he goes searching for them. Together with other people who help him. He then takes the eggs home and takes care of them, just as long as the baby turtles are born and have become big enough to return to the sea. He then sets them free on the beach and

encourages them to return to the sea. That must be a strange experience for the turtles, since they have not yet experienced waves. And they now need to find their own food and they need to learn to watch out for the animals that want to eat them. Not all of the little turtles grow old, but thanks to the help of this man there are now more sea turtles than before. He lives near the beach, and we can go and see if he is at home and if there are little turtles.

Just a little bit further on the beach, a grandstand has been built. That is the area where a big party is being celebrated every year on the 10th of January, voodoo day. Voodoo priests and kings, accompanied by their disciples come to celebrate. They dress nicely and they sing and dance. It almost looks a bit like carnival with all these colorful outfits. And everybody is happy.

You will even see man-size straw objects dancing with the people. And you know what is really strange? When they turn them around, they are empty inside. And yet they move. They are called zangbetos. It is been said that the spirits of the ancestors move the zangbetos and that it is for that reason that we cannot see them.

night in: Grand Popo

Day 13: Grand Popo - Ouidah

Yesterday I told you about the zangbetos. Do you know that in the voodoo religion a lot of things are different than in other religions? In almost every town you'll see some kind of puppet like statues. They are placed in small houses or underneath shelters on the roadside. And these statues will be surrounded by lots of things. Pieces of cloth for instance, and often there are sticks placed in the ground. And there are empty bottles, for instance of liquor and spirits given to the statue. These statues are the symbols of idols or gods of the voodoo religion. Every idol has a specific meaning. For instance when you have a quarrel with someone, it could be that you have not been taking good care of one of the idols. And you need to make up with that idol by means of sacrifices and offerings. And by doing that the quarrel can be ended. You can also ask the idols for help. For instance when you are ill. Or when you are looking for a job. To know what you need to do, you have to visit a voodoo priest or a voodoo king. They can talk to the gods and then explain what you need to offer to which idol.

In Ouidah, the town we will be visiting next, a lot of people are disciples of the voodoo religion. So we will surely be seeing the idols there. We can see them up close, but we are not allowed to touch them. There is a snake temple too, with very large snakes, pythons. They are sacred.

Do you know what Ouidah is even more known for? In former times the slaves were boarded here, to travel all the way by boat to the Americas. The people do not want these times to return, never and that is why they keep the memory alive by talking about it.



There is lots to see and learn about it in the museum. And there is a road, called the slave route. It is almost 4 kilometers long. It is the way the slaves had to walk to get to the boat. Along the way there is a well, where they had to wash away all their African impurities, and there are other special places. We are going to walk that way too, together with our guide. Just to get an impression on what it was like for the

slaves to walk to the Gate of No Return.
night in: Ouidah

Day 14: Ouidah - Cotonou - departure

It's the last day of our journey through Benin already. Tonight we will get on the plane to go back home. That is why we will be returning to Cotonou today. First we will be packing our suitcases. Then we will take the Route des Peches, the way of the fishes, to get back to Cotonou. This road is following the coast. We will be passing through small villages and see the fishermen at work on the beach. And there are lots of palm trees.



When we get back to the capital in the afternoon, we may still have time to buy some souvenirs at a handicraft market, a marché artisanal.

Tonight we will be dropped off at the airport. Time has come to say goodbye to our guide and driver and to go back home.

night in: -

Day 15: home coming

We landed early in the morning at the airport. We are almost home. Soon we can tell our friends about our adventures and maybe I'll ask at school if I can tell about our journey through Benin.

** When the park is closed (usually July - September) the itinerary will be adjusted and visits to Taneka Country and the Kingdom of Kouandé will be replacing the park visit.*