

AFRICA · CULTURE · HISTORY · SACRED SITES · WILDLIFE · OFF THE BEATEN PATH

 Benin

The birthplace of vodun crams a remarkable amount into a narrow strip of West Africa: Ganvié's stilt houses on Lake Nokoué, the slave-trade memorials and Python Temple of Ouidah, the earthen palaces of the Dahomey kings at Abomey and, far to the north, elephants and lions in Pendjari. Visit around 10 January to see the Vodun Days celebrations on the beach at Ouidah.

 **The UK Foreign Office (FCDO) advises against all travel to parts of Benin.**
Read the latest FCDO travel advice before planning a trip. Your travel insurance may be invalid if you travel against FCDO advice.
FCDO advice last updated 15 December 2025.

 CAPITAL Porto-Novo	 CURRENCY West African CFA franc (XOF) £1 ≈ FCFA 781	 LANGUAGE French, Fon Yoruba, Bariba	 BEST TIME Nov–Feb
 DAILY BUDGET £30–£160 ££ Moderate	 PLUGS Type C, E 220V · adapter needed	 FLIGHT FROM LONDON 10h via Paris, Brussels or Istanbul ~£650–£1,050 return	 TIME ZONE UTC+1 standard time

Benin has only about 120 km of coastline but reaches almost 700 km north to the Niger River. Most first trips use Cotonou as a base for the lagoon coast: the stilt village of Ganvié, the Afro-Brazilian mansions and museums of Porto-Novo, and Ouidah, once a major slave-trading port and still the spiritual centre of vodun. Heading inland, the main road north passes Abomey, capital of the Dahomey kingdom, then forks towards Parakou and towards Natitingou, gateway to the fortress-like Tata Somba houses of the Atakora hills and to Pendjari National Park.

Benin sees few foreign tourists, so you rarely queue at sights, but tourist infrastructure is thin beyond Cotonou, Ouidah and Grand-Popo. French is essential away from hotels, and most travellers either hire a driver-guide or rely on zémidjans, the motorbike taxis found in every town. Costs surprise people: street food and transport are cheap, yet decent hotels in Cotonou are priced not far off European levels. Vodun is an officially recognised, openly practised religion, so shrines, ceremonies and the fetish stalls of Dantokpa market are part of daily life rather than performances. Expect humid heat year-round and harmattan dust haze from December to February.

Top 5 highlights

1

CULTURE

Ganvié stilt village

Some 20,000 people live in stilt houses on Lake Nokoué, in a settlement founded by Tofinu people escaping Dahomey's slave raiders. Pirogues leave from the jetty at Abomey-Calavi, and the floating market is busiest in the morning.

2

HISTORY

Ouidah and the Route des Esclaves

Walk the 4 km Route des Esclaves from the old auction square to the Door of No Return on the beach, then visit the Python Temple opposite the basilica and the sculptures of the Sacred Forest of Kpassè.

3

HISTORY

Royal Palaces of Abomey

Twelve kings of Dahomey ruled from Abomey between 1625 and 1900, and their earthen palace compounds form a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Look for the painted bas-reliefs recording battles and royal emblems, and ask which buildings are open during restoration.

4

WILDLIFE

Pendjari National Park

Co-managed with African Parks since 2017, this savannah park along the Pendjari River is one of West Africa's last strongholds for elephants and lions, with buffalo, hippos and antelope. Check the FCDO travel advice before planning a trip north.

5

BEACH

Grand-Popo

A laid-back town of palm-lined Atlantic beaches near the Togo border. Take a pirogue trip through the mangroves to the Bouche du Roy, where the Mono River meets the sea, but beware the strong currents if swimming.

Biggest cities

LARGEST CITY

Cotonou

≈ 2 million people

Benin's economic capital and transport hub is rarely loved at first sight, but Dantokpa, one of West Africa's largest markets, and the Fondation Zinsou's contemporary art space reward a day or two.

2ND LARGEST CITY

Porto-Novo

≈ 265,000 people

The official capital is calmer than Cotonou, with a Brazilian-style Great Mosque, the Honmè royal palace museum, crumbling Afro-Brazilian mansions and an ethnographic museum known for its Yoruba masks.

3RD LARGEST CITY

Parakou

≈ 255,000 people

The north's commercial hub sits on the main road and old railway line towards Niger; most travellers treat it as an overnight stop, with a busy central market, on the way further north.

Ranked by urban-area population where available. Figures are rounded estimates, and sources define city limits differently, so rankings of similar-sized cities can vary.

When to go to Benin

Best time: **Nov–Feb.**

Jan

Feb

Mar

Apr

May

Jun

Jul

Aug

Sep

Oct

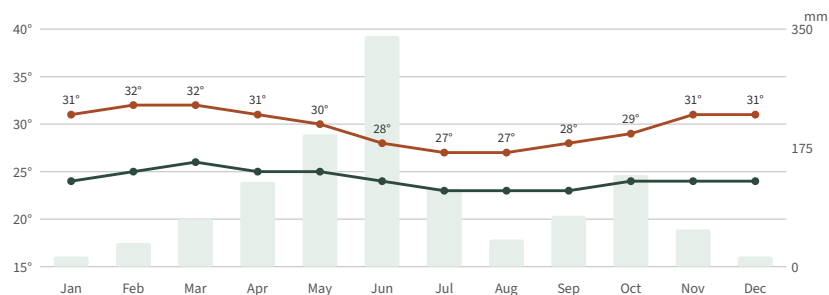
Nov

Dec

■ Best ■ Good ■ Mixed ■ Poor

Average climate in Cotonou

— High °C — Low °C ■ Rain (mm)



Festivals & events

Jan	Fête du Vodoun (Vodun Days) 10 January is a national holiday for vodun. The largest celebrations, now staged as the Vodun Days festival, bring drumming, Egungun masquerades, Zangbeto guardians and ceremonies to Ouidah for several days.
May–Jun	Nonvitcha Held in Grand-Popo every Pentecost Sunday, this gathering of the Xwla and Xwéda peoples celebrates their unity with processions, music and dance, organised by an association founded in 1921.

How much does Benin cost?

SHOESTRING £30 per person / day ≈ FCFA 23,424 hostels, street food, buses	MID-RANGE £75 per person / day ≈ FCFA 58,561 3-star hotels, restaurants, some taxis	COMFORTABLE £160 per person / day ≈ FCFA 124,929 4-star+, guided trips, private transfers
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Estimates per person per day, excluding flights. Prices vary by season and city.

Food to try

Amiwo Maize flour cooked in a tomato, onion and chicken stock until it becomes a reddish paste, served with fried chicken or fish and a fiery pepper sauce.	Ago glain Crab cooked in a spicy sauce of tomato, onion and chilli, a coastal speciality usually eaten with akassa, a slightly sour fermented maize dumpling.	Wagasi Soft cow's-milk cheese made by Fulani herders in the north, often sold with a red-dyed rind and eaten fried in slices or added to sauces.
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Getting around

There is no passenger railway, so travel is by road. Zémidjans, motorbike taxis whose Cotonou drivers wear numbered yellow shirts, cover short hops, and the Gozem app books bikes and cars in the main cities. Air-conditioned coaches run from Cotonou north to Parakou and Natitingou, with shared taxis and minibuses filling the gaps. Many visitors hire a car with a driver, which also helps with French and directions.

Practical information

PLUGS & VOLTAGE  C E 220V — bring a UK-to-C/E adapter	EMERGENCY NUMBERS Fire and ambulance: 118 Police: 117 Source: FCDO “Getting help”
DIALLING CODE +229	TIME ZONE UTC+1 (standard time)
TAP WATER Not safe — drink bottled or treated water	DRIVING On the right
TIPPING Not expected at street stalls or simple maquis. Leave around 10% in smarter restaurants, and tip guides, drivers and boatmen a little for good service.	

ETIQUETTE

Greet people before any request and shake hands with your right hand. Ask before photographing people, shrines or ceremonies, as some vodun sites forbid photos or charge for them, and dress modestly away from beaches.

MAIN AIRPORTS

Cardinal Bernardin Gantin International Airport (Cadjehoun) (COO), Cotonou

Visas & entry for Benin

Shown for a British passport.

Visa required — apply before you go

You must have a visa to enter or travel through Benin.

For further information on entry requirements, contact the Beninese Embassy in France (in French).

From the UK government's FCDO entry requirements for British passport holders — read the full page for passport validity, permits and exceptions.

Health & vaccinations

 See a travel health nurse, GP or travel clinic **6–8 weeks before you go**. Make sure routine UK vaccinations (such as MMR and diphtheria-tetanus-polio) are up to date.

RECOMMENDED FOR MOST TRAVELLERS

- Hepatitis A
- Tetanus
- Typhoid
- Yellow fever

SOMETIMES ADVISED — DEPENDS ON YOUR TRIP, ACTIVITIES AND HEALTH

- Chikungunya
- Dengue
- Hepatitis B
- Measles
- Meningococcal disease
- Polio
- Rabies
- Tuberculosis

YELLOW FEVER CERTIFICATE

A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required for all travellers (usually over 9 months or 1 year old). There is a risk of yellow fever in parts of the country — vaccination may be advised.

MALARIA

High risk of malaria

- There is a high risk of malaria in Benin: antimalarial tablets recommended.

Source: TravelHealthPro (National Travel Health Network and Centre), checked 21 October 2026. This is a summary, not medical advice.

Public holidays in Benin

The next 12 months. Banks, offices and some sights may close, and transport and hotels get busy around these dates.

Sun 1 Nov 2026	All Saints' Day
Fri 25 Dec 2026	Christmas Day
Fri 1 Jan 2027	New Year's Day
Thu 7 Jan 2027	Vodoun Festival
Fri 8 Jan 2027	Vodoun Festival

Tue 9 Mar 2027	Eid al-Fitr (date may shift)
Mon 29 Mar 2027	Easter Monday
Sat 1 May 2027	Labour Day
Thu 6 May 2027	Ascension Day
Sun 16 May 2027	Eid al-Adha (date may shift)
Mon 17 May 2027	Pentecost Monday
Sun 1 Aug 2027	National Day
Sat 14 Aug 2027	Prophet's Birthday (date may shift)
Sun 15 Aug 2027	Assumption Day

National holidays only. Dates based on lunar calendars can move by a day or two depending on official announcements.

Useful phrases in French

ENGLISH	FRENCH	SAY IT
Hello	Bonjour	<i>bon-ZHOOR</i>
Thank you	Merci	<i>mair-SEE</i>
Please	S'il vous plaît	<i>seel voo PLAY</i>
Excuse me	Excusez-moi	<i>ex-KOO-zay MWAH</i>
How much is this?	C'est combien ?	<i>say kom-BYAN</i>

Know before you go

A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required on arrival and malaria is present year-round, so see a travel clinic several weeks before you go.

Bring euros or a Visa card: the CFA franc is pegged to the euro, and Visa cards generally work more reliably than Mastercard in local ATMs. Carry cash beyond Cotonou.

Agree fares with zémidjan drivers before climbing on and ask for a helmet. Check the FCDO travel advice before heading north towards Pendjari or the border regions.

Visa, health and safety rules change. Before you book or travel, check the FCDO travel advice (gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice) and TravelHealthPro (travelhealthpro.org.uk). Costs are estimates. © 2026 Pick My Trip.