

Benin

Benin is a deeply cultural destination. Known under French rule as Dahomey, evidence of the colorful cultural history of this region remains on display just about everywhere. It is also the African heartland of the Voodoo faith, and although aspects of this have been showcased for the benefit of tourists and visitors, this ought not to imply any superficiality.

There is a tangible feeling as one tours the city of Cotonou, and its surrounding communities, that this is a deeply faith driven society. Although this might at times be seeded with strong flavors that might at times escape the average western understanding of faith, the extraordinary sight of the *Temple of Pythons*, a Voodoo/Animist shrine, separated by a narrow boulevard from the *Catholic Basilica of Ouidah*, between which Muslim market traders lounge and drink tea, tells a powerful story of religious tolerance within the kaleidoscopic cultural mix of West Africa.



So it was. Our day in Benin was spiced with the rich diversity and variety offered by this fascinating little country. After our customary arrival in port, and the traditional Africanesque delay and confusion, we were embarked onto a brace of tour busses, and assisted by the quaintly accented commentary of our local Beninois guides we set off through the city in a convoy. Of course there was included in this the police escort that we have become used to, with the addition this time of an armed policeman on each bus, more, I suspect, along for the ride than to offer any meaningful security in this hectic but in every respect non-threatening city.

On the surface Cotonou seems like any other noisy and colorful African city, an impression reinforced as we left the central precincts and merged into an endless labyrinth of dusty streets clogged with informal markets, trading kiosks and roadside industries. Our guide, Amadou, made the point that Benin lacks natural resources, but what it does not appear to lack is entrepreneurial energy. The informal sector oozes out of every pore of this city, and every conceivable commodity and enterprise is available somewhere not too far from anywhere else.

Soon enough we arrived at our first destination. Gamvié, described as the Venice of West Africa, is a little less than that, but nonetheless it is an extraordinary community atop the tidal Lake Nueké where historically, refuge was sought against the predation of the slave catching troops of Dahomey. Today it remains an independent water community reliant on small scale trade and fishing, existing around a small, self contained stilted village. We visited the site in a series of water taxis, embarking at a bustling but rather odorous waterside market from where we wove our way through busy fishermen and paddling market ladies, touring also a cluster of stilted homes where we paused briefly at a hotel of sorts for a short recital of local rhythms and an opportunity for a bathroom break.



From Gamvié we made our way through the congested countryside to the fascinating town of Ouidah. The sad history of Ouidah is that is served at one time as the main entrepot for slave embarkation to the New World, and a great deal of local focus and commemoration has been given over to memorializing this shameful trade. Ouidah is also the center of the local Voodoo culture, with colorful and symbolic statuary representing various aspects of the faith to be found everywhere within and around the town.

Text and photos by Peter Baxter, Lecturer

Landing at Lome, Togo

Saturday 20 April 2013



Shortly after an early breakfast we all disembarked for a day of learning and discovery in and around the city of Lome. We separated into two groups at the port and launched into a long, action-filled day punctuated with the color and vitality of the Ewe and Akan people, who founded the city in the 18th century.

The day began with a visit to the fetish market in the center of town. We had been prepared by our guides for an experience that would potentially offend or inform, an experience that would build on what we had learnt about West African voodoo the day before in Benin. The sheer number of dead birds, dogs, monkeys, geckos, snakes and unidentifiable bones was overwhelming for most of us. Some brave explorers went behind the scenes to speak with the “oracle” and have their fortunes read. Some walked away with love potions and others with lucky charms.

Next we were off to the International Museum of Guinea. This was a small converted residence that held treasures that amazed all of us. Expert in African arts and culture or not we were all privileged to see rare, authentic artifacts from across West Africa that span centuries and enthralled us all. With everyone inspired by what we had seen we went to the artisanal market nearby and a shopping frenzy commenced. We bought some of the most beautiful carvings and paintings of the expedition, while some of us simply relaxed and had a beer with the local people in a nearby bar. This amazing fun-filled and informative morning had us all hungry for a wonderful lunch onboard the MS Expedition.



As soon as we could we were on the road again. This time we travelled out of town to AkatoViepe village to meet the chief and experience village life. Upon arrival we were met with singing and dancing. The schools were closed, so all the kids were in the village to receive the school supplies we presented to the chief. We asked the chief questions and learnt about patrilineal communities, their farming practices, and the role of different people in the village. We danced, drank homemade gin, explored the village, and met the children. We were all inspired by a day in Togo and returned to the ship filled with new knowledge and a burning desire to return...



Submitted by Steve Boyes, Naturalist

Photos: Boy with skull; Town Square by S. Boyes. Chief of Akato by Conrad Henning

Port Tema, Ghana

Sunday, 21 April 2013

We pulled up in Port Tema today in smooth seas, where 4 buses awaited. On the way to the Shai Game Reserve, the local guides filled us in on the complex history of Ghana. Upon arriving at the Reserve, we were immediately greeted by several Olive Baboons ambling through the brush. One young baby hung onto his mother's belly while two males cavorted in the tall grass. Further down the trail we found three towering ostriches, a grayish drab female, soon joined by two males who appeared out of the forest sporting their dramatic black and white color pattern. We saw several Kob antelope, which our guide told us numbered about 300 individuals according to the annual consensus.



Driving to a different part of the park, we passed numerous termite mounds, and baobab trees, the leaves of which are used by the locals to make soup. Some of us climbed to the top of a rocky hill for a expansive view of wilderness, while others ambled part way up to the cheerful burbling song of the BulBul, and stopped to see many birds, including the Little Bee-eater, White throated bee-eater, and the Acacia Barbet. We passed a Kapok tree, known for the pods that are filled with a cotton like substance, once used to fill the first life jackets. Driving through the Reserve, it was striking to notice the lack of large predators, which have been hunted out for bushmeat, skins and fetishes.



We then moved on to Cedi's Bead Factory. There, the artisans showed us the process of making glass beads. After pounding the glass in large drums, they put it into bead molds, fire them in kilns, cool and polish the beads. Some beads are painted using powdered pigments and fired again. Many of us left with colorful bracelets and strings of patterned and beads of all colors.

After a quick stop to buy a basket of fresh mangos for the ship, We travelled the Akosombo Highway to the large arts and crafts market in downtown Accra, passing the president's house, and other city landmarks. We negotiated the narrow stalls of cloths, instruments, local painting masks, carvings, dresses, leather bags, weavings, and more.

After local shopping, we made our way back to the buses for a quick ride to the Cedi Casket shop, where locals were sanding wooden caskets they were making. Some caskets were in the forms of a fish, a bird, a cocoa pod, a bus, a wrench, a hammer, and a film projector. These caskets were made to reflect the African traditional belief of carrying one's profession into the afterlife. We returned to the Port of Tema, rejoining the ship for dinner with our five new welcome guests.



Cape Coast Castle, Ghana

Monday 22 April, 2013

Significant details of West African heritage tourism are the various sites and installations that relate to the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. This subject was touched on very lightly in Benin as we toured the town of Ouidah, the main funnel of regional slave capture to the Middle Passage and beyond. Here a handful of points of commemoration shed a clear light on the complicity of both the Portuguese and local Dahomey kings in this awful chapter of human history. However it is Ghana that offers the first clear glimpse that an east/west traveler might expect of the industrial nature of the commercial traffic in human beings that gave the West African coast its early name – the Slave Coast – and which in many respects defined, and continues to define, the ongoing relationship between this part of Africa and the New World.

We visited two significant sites: Cape Coast Castle, and Elmina Castle, both located within a few miles of one another, and both at one time important collection points for general trade, but most specifically the Slave Trade, dealing in commodities gathered or captured within a wide hinterland beyond.

Cape Coast Castle was our first stop. Although this site was established by the Swedes in 1653, it was not until the 1700s, when it fell under the control of the British, that it reached its peak of output as a commercial slaving depot. The castle itself, although forbidding from the outside, was surrounded by the pleasant aspects of local fishing activity, and the relatively clean and pleasant precincts of Cape Castle village. Inside, however, the gloom was manifest, and immediate.

Our guide, whose name was Phillip, in a disturbingly matter-of-fact style, led us through the dungeons of the castle articulating the horrors with both gravity and clarity, which seemed in many ways to enhance the ghastly echoes of that terrible moment in history when man's inhumanity to man was so manifest.

The experience was not pleasant, but it was edifying nonetheless. There were few among us not relieved to regain the clear light of day, and the fresh air of freedom.



From Cape Coast we drove to Elmina, a larger, and better established fort, but with a similar history and an identical function. Elmina, however, seemed a little bit less impregnated with the smell, and perhaps even the memory of its awful history. It had much more the feel of a museum, and was easier to wander through, exploring the many rooms and halls that had as much of an administrative flavor as the chamber of horrors that it really represented.

It was interesting to note that a comment during the recap that evening that a comment was made that the difference between the lower dungeons in Elmin Castle and the spacious rooms and offices above, to which David Conrad replied that above and below, the smell would have been inescapable, and this immediately put many of us in the picture.

Surrounding the fort was the town of Elmina, a typically compacted riot of color, noise and odors peculiar to any fishing village along this densely populated African coast. After a short but pleasant lunch at the nearby Palm Beach Resort, the day was rounded off with a short but entertaining



walk through the narrow streets of the town, pausing here and there for photographs, and perhaps too soon for some, re-embarking for the long ride back to Tokoradi Port.

While half of the group toured the Slave Castles, the other half visited **Kakum National Park**. Here we braved the elevated canopy walk some 130 ft above ground, hoping to see Bongo, Forest Elephant and the three different species of primate apparently found in the forest. Unfortunately none of these were sighted, largely because of the time of day, but also no doubt because of the reduction in habitat due to ongoing habitat destruction. We made our way to the canopy and walked along seven suspension bridges, some of us testing our fears of heights. Steve Boyes sighted an **African Blue Flycatcher**, a **Green Turaco** and a **Speckled Tinker Barbet** from the canopy walk.

Text and photos by Peter Baxter, Lecturer.

At Sea, Ghana to Sierra Leone

Saturday 23 April, 2013

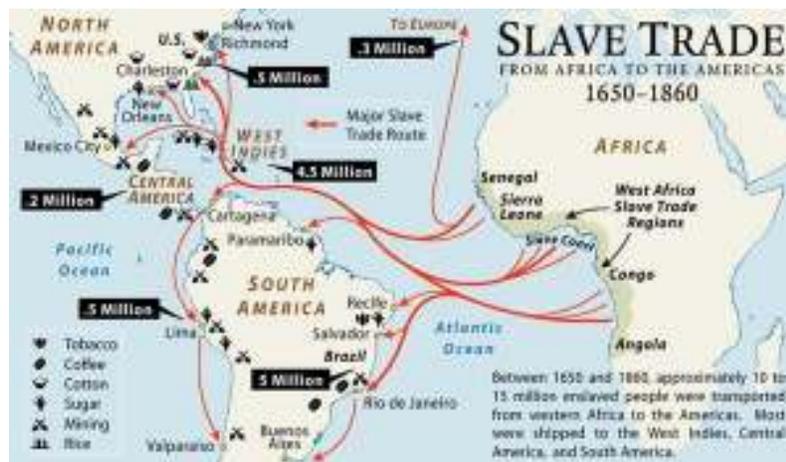
Today we are cruising off the coast of Cote d'Ivoire, which was one of the French West African Colonies, gaining its independence in 1960 under the leadership of its president, Felix Houphouet-Boigny. Sea days are a welcomed rest from the busy schedule on shore days. A chance to catch up on sleep and more knowledge offered in lectures and workshops.

Today Steve Boyes gave a powerful lecture on *Trading Away Africa's Amazing Grey Parrots*, which left everyone with a reminder of the importance of conserving the Amazing African Grey Parrots. Steve's passion for the cause started many discussions after his lecture about the serious need to stop the trade of Parrots and what people could do to help.



Bronwen then presented a lecture on *The Way of The Ancestors: The Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the Blues*. She gave an overview of the influences that slaves had on the development of the blues music.

David Conrad presented his lecture on *Ashanti Gold & Imperial Greed: A brief historical background to Modern Ghana*, which was an interesting follow up to our visit in Ghana



Between lectures, guest enjoyed a fine warm day on deck either relaxing or looking for wildlife.

The day ended up with a festive wine tasting of *Bordeaux and Red Blands from South Africa, France, USA and Australia* presented by David van Niekerk.

Submitted by Bronwen Clacherty, Musician

Photo a) African Grey parrot- Steve Boyes b) Slave trade map (www.slaverysite.com)

At Sea; Coast of Liberia

Wednesday 24 April, 2013



Today we are cruising off the coast of Liberia, which shares with Ethiopia the distinction of being the only African country that avoided European rule. With its capital named after U.S. President James Monroe, Liberia was governed between 1847 and 1980 by an elite social class made up of descendants of Afro-American settlers who began arriving from the United States in 1822.

Most Liberians belong to indigenous ethnic groups including the Kpelle, Bassa, Grió, Kru, Krahn and Vai, while the “Americo-Liberians” made up only about 5% of the population. Nevertheless, for many generations the

Americo-Liberians dominated politics through the True Whig Party, which routinely rigged the electoral process. During the twentieth century, Liberia’s economy was transformed by vast Firestone rubber plantations, iron-ore mining, and urbanization. In 1980, a member of the Krahn tribe, Sergeant Samuel Doe took over the government in a coup d’état and became the first non-Americo-Liberian president. In 1990 Doe was tortured and killed by the rebel leader Prince Johnson, and a civil war erupted that resulted in the rise and fall of Charles Taylor who is presently being tried for war crimes at The Hague.

David Conrad kicked our morning off with his lecture *Chasing the Spirits through the Mande Landscape*, followed by our bird man, Steve “Budgie Boy” Boyes’ discussion comparing our recent stops in Benin, Togo and Ghana.

The African theme was brought to our ears with Bronwen’s workshop in the Polar Bear Bar, and after lunch the Film Festival offered *Tacugama, Forest of Hope*.

As a grand finale to the day, everyone was glued to their seats as story teller Rob Caskie told the story of the battle at Rorke’s Drift. Rob’s oratory style captures everyone’s attention with his gripping oral rendition of one of Britain’s epic war dramas.

Submitted by Page Turner, Librarian
Art work by Lucia de Leiris, Artist in Residence



Sierra Leone

Thursday 25 April, 2013

On board the MS Expedition on the inaugural West African voyage are a number of Australians and others that might be euphemistically termed 'colonials' in the sense of sharing a common British heritage. Thus, upon the occasion of ANZAC (Australia and New Zealand Army Corps) Day, there were a surprising collection of souls on board who felt it appropriate to commemorate this important day.

An intimate dawn ceremony was held on the aft deck of the MS Expedition comprising some twenty souls and conducted by Denis Saunders. Included was Guy Esperon who served in the Royal Australian Regiment for many years. This was followed by rum and coffee and ANZAC biscuits.

The remainder of the day passed as many sea days have, with a slower pace, a number of lectures, workshops and recaps, with the excitement levels rising considerably as the ship approached Freetown in Sierra Leone. Early in the afternoon we made what has become in the years since the early days of the territory an iconic entrance into port of Freetown against the backdrop of a teeming city, and of course the surrounding hills and mountains...including the famous *Sierra Leone*, or *Lion Mountain*.

Early in the evening, as the MS Expedition docked, passengers and crew were treated to a visit on board ship by the First Lady of Sierra Leone, Mdme Sia Koromah, wife of His Excellency Dr. Ernest Koromah.



The message of the First Lady, an advocate on maternal health, child mortality and protection, and of course women's rights, involved the many programs she has been responsible for developing, the most important of which being WISH, or Women Initiative for Safer Health. This program complements the President's Free Health Care Initiative implemented to assist pregnant women and lactating mothers and children under

five years old. This program provides supplies for health centers and the training of three hundred community health workers involved in reproductive health and family planning throughout Sierra Leone.

The highlight of the evening was a performance by the National Dance Troupe of Sierra Leone on the aft deck of the MS Expedition, which offered a world class performance to the spellbound passengers and crew, including a magnificent drum ensemble, various traditional dancers, and a mesmerizing fire dance performance.

This superb evening was rounded off with a visit to a local trade fair in Freetown. A fantastic introduction to what promised to be a colorful and intriguing city...

Submitted by Peter Baxter, Lecturer

Photo by W. Kaehler

Freetown, Sierra Leone

Friday 26 April 2013



On board the MS Expedition there was great expectation and interest surrounding our visit to the city of Freetown in Sierra Leone. The reputation of this city, and indeed this country, revolved with some justification around the Blood Diamond episode that occurred between 1991 and the early 2000s. This has been one of the most widely publicized and recognizable crisis in the history of the West African region. There were many amongst us interested in absorbing some of the atmospheres of this conflict, but no doubt also the reputation of Freetown for being one of the most vibrant, colorful and chaotic cities in Africa.

It also somewhat goes without saying that the superb ethnic dance and music performance of the evening before had whet the appetites of many for exploration, so as the day dawned, and a surprisingly well oiled and orchestrated series of arrangements rolled into place, we embarked on busses with a heightened sense of anticipation.

None of these expectations were disappointed. Our first approach into Freetown confirmed its reputation for chaos, but with enormous skill and fortitude, our bus drivers plunged into the bowls of the city and negotiated it all with both good humor and a steady grip.

There were so many interesting aspects to the city tour that it is difficult to know where to begin, but what immediately struck me was the combination of bustle, clutter, seething traffic and population, and of course the ever present informal sector industry. Many of the streets retained their old colonial era names, such as Gloucester Road, Wilberforce Street, George Street and Regent Street, all very oddly juxtaposed against this swarming West African city.

Our first stop was the Sierra Leone National Museum, close to the famous Cotton Tree, where in many ways it was the opportunity to absorb some of the airs of the city that was more interesting than the Museum itself. A nearby war memorial was also of considerable interest. This was not an altogether accurate representation of events, but it did at least render a sense of the extent to which this tragedy has been imprinted on the psyche of this city.



There are of course other symptoms too. As we visited the central market the sight of occasional amputees reminded us of one particular horror of that war, but also, it must not be forgotten, the seeds that have grown since that offer a far better hope for a peaceful future.

Another unexpected aspect to our day was the St Georges Anglican Cathedral located close to the central market. This attracted the interest of a few more pious amongst us, and again it was the oddity of such a juxtaposition against the crazy backdrop of Freetown that prompted more discussion on the many contradictions of this unusual city.

A few of the passengers and crew of the MS Expedition visited the *Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary* just outside Freetown. Upon arrival we were met with the excited calls of one of our closest relatives, the endangered West African Chimpanzee. After a brief introduction to the issues facing



these amazing great apes in West Africa we began our tour of the five enclosures use in the rehabilitation process. The concept behind the sanctuary is to increasingly nurture wild behavior in the chimps while at the same time weaning them off their dependence on us. The sanctuary hopes to one day release rehabilitated chimpanzees back into the wild, but realizes that this dream may never be realized in a rapidly developing and degraded West Africa. Tacugama remains depend on the charity of visitors and we hope to return on future voyages.

Submitted by Peter Baxter, Lecturer

Photos: a) Fire dancer by Wolfgang Kaehler b) woman on street by Doug Gould

At Sea, African West Coast

Saturday 27 April, 2013

The busy sea day started off with David Conrad's lecture, "Women of the Gold Fields." He showed women with babies on their backs working long hard hours for a pinch of gold dust. Later, Conrad Hennig gave his lecture, The "Diving Physiology of Marine Mammals", in which he compared the extreme diving adaptations of elephant seals and sperm whales.



Lucia continued the ongoing art workshop with many painting the ubiquitous Baobab tree which we have seen so often during this cruise. They were gathered as usual in the Polar Bear Pub around the round tables, working with watercolor.



Wolfgang gave another photography workshop in which he discussed many photographs that were brought in by the participants. Projecting slides, he talked about composition, light, and suggested ways of improving each photograph. He discussed various ways to shoot the photos as well as ways to tweak them on the computer. Each participant brought ten photos and there was a lively discussion.

In the afternoon, we saw another BBC film narrated by the legendary David Attenborough. The on board African film Festival brought us "Eye to Eye with the unknown - The Sahara," showcasing many adaptations of the wildlife of the desert.

In the meantime, actual wildlife was giving a show for all those out on deck this afternoon. A huge pod of dolphins were feeding and leaping high out of the water.

A recap about Sierra Leone stimulated a discussion about the economics, politics of the region. Many folks gave first hand accounts of conversations and observations they picked up during our bus trek through the traffic of the bustling town.

Dinner was served out on the back deck, with a decorative buffet and barbecue. Tables were all set up under the clear sky where we dined during sunset. One table stood in the "pool," or water-filled life boat, with our intrepid captain and other diners sitting in half submerged chairs. Tony, the head chef, and his crew were highly praised for this outstanding feast.

Tonight our ongoing African Film Festival brought us "Agadez- The Music and the Rebellion!" For the Tuareg, the desert is freedom, and music is power. Bombino, the Tuareg guitarist brings us closer to the Tuareg culture in this beautifully filmed piece.