

PLENTY OF REASONS TOGO

IT MAY BE TINY (SMALLER THAN MPUMALANGA), BUT THE WEST AFRICAN NATION SQUARES UP TO MUCH LARGER COUNTRIES WHEN IT COMES TO CULTURE, HISTORY, SIGHTS AND ACTIVITIES
By James Bainbridge



Traditional fishing boat on shore near Aného



A typical Togolese voodoo ceremony

KNOW THIS

SAFETY

As in SA, only walk the streets by day, and stay away from quiet roads and areas. Do not carry valuables, and always drive or take a taxi after dark.

MONEY

The local currency is the West African CFA franc; R1 = CFA39.

WHEN TO GO

November to February is the driest and best time to visit.

GETTING THERE

South African Airways flies direct from Joburg to neighbouring Ghana and Benin. Alternatively, fly to Lomé via Europe with airlines such as Air France.

GETTING AROUND

Avis has two offices in Lomé. The main highways are riddled with potholes, but navigable. The most common transport is bush taxi, which can be anything from a sedan to an old minibus.

GUIDES

Lomé-based French company 1001 Pistes offers hiking, mountain biking, kayaking and 4x4 excursions. Adetop organises guided hikes and voluntourism around the city of Kpalimé.



An item at the fetish market outside Lomé



A brief history

The former French colony's name comes from *togodo*, which means 'behind the lake' in the local Ewe language – a reference to the coastal Lake Togo. It was previously known as Togoland during its 30 years as a German protectorate, which ended in 1914 with the Allies' first victory in the First World War. Britain and France subsequently split the country, with the British half eventually incorporated into present-day Ghana and the eastern side administered by France until Togo gained independence in 1960.

In sadly typical fashion, Togo has had just two presidents since 1967. Gnassingbé Eyadéma led two coups against his predecessors and held office until his death in 2005, at which point he was the longest serving African head of state – a 38-year presidency yet to be equalled by even Robert Mugabe. Eyadéma's son Faure seized power in 2005, later succumbing to international pressure and holding elections, which he won amid accusations of rigging. Although Faure Gnassingbé (Gnassingbé rather than Eyadéma) remains in office, Togo's political track record is slowly improving, and relations with the likes of the EU, IMF and World Bank have resumed.

Back before the Europeans started sniffing around, Togo was a hunting ground and conduit for slave traders from Dahomey, the fearsome voodoo-worshipping empire in present-day Benin. Togo and Benin were the birthplace of voodoo, which the slave ships carried to the Caribbean and the American South – where it joined

with Catholicism, taking the form that inspired sensationalist Hollywood B-movies.

Voodoo

In Togo today, voodoo is an animist religion, with plenty in common with indigenous beliefs found across the continent. It does have a dark side, of course – market stalls sell dolls riddled with nails, and the line between voodoo and juju (witchcraft) is blurry. However, for millions of followers, voodoo is less about skulduggery than about showing respect for their ancestors. Fetish shrines stand guard outside of family compounds, topped with animal skulls and littered with offerings such as food and palm wine. Communication and good relations with the ancestors, who live in a spirit world ruled by the supreme deity Nana Buluku and twins Mawu and Lisa (voodoo reveres twins), are seen as the key to a healthy, prosperous life.

The voodoo priest has an important place in the community for his ability to contact the dead. Consulting the priest normally involves a trip to the fetish market with a list of the



Right
Friday market at Vogán

Below right
Thatched clay houses
in Tamberma Valley

ingredients he needs to make a gris-gris (talisman or charm); rather like visiting the chemist with a prescription from the doctor. The markets are stacked to the brim with animal parts, from monkey testicles to bat wings, thunderstones and other curios.

There is an impressive fetish market on the outskirts of Togo's elegantly decaying coastal capital, Lomé. The *Marché des Féticheurs*'s tables and mats are piled with grisly items such as porcupine skins, snake heads and monkey skulls; if you go shopping, make sure you are not buying an endangered animal part.

The capital

Despite decades of decline since its days as a French colonial centre, Lomé itself is one of the more relaxing West African capitals. Sprawling inland from the Atlantic Ocean, it has a pleasing layout, with main drag Boulevard du 13 Janvier, popularly known as Boulevard Criculaire, tracing a semicircle from the coastal highway. Wander the main streets by day, stopping at cafes and bars to practise your French (or Mina, the Lomé dialect of Ewe) with the locals over a cold Flag Spéciale beer. Hit the Grand Marché to pick up a yellow Togolese football top in homage to local soccer star Emmanuel Adebayor, English Premier League striker. Apart from the *Marché des Féticheurs*, the main sight is the *Musée International du Golf de Guinée*, a stunning collection of West African masks, carvings and artefacts owned by a Swiss ethnologist and art dealer.

Other sights and delights

The loveliest part of rural Togo is conveniently close to Lomé, 120 km (two hours by bush taxi) north-west of the city near the Ghanaian border.



The area around the city of Kpalimé is cocoa and coffee country, with plantations in the thickly forested hills and hiking trails climbing peaks such as Togo's highest, Mt Agou (986m). Kpalimé itself is a low-key spot to spend a few days experiencing rural Africa, its busy Tuesday and Saturday markets attended by farmers with goats strapped to the roofs of their cars and taxis.

Another convenient spot from Lomé is Aného, 45 km east en route to Benin. The former German colonial capital and site of a Portuguese slave market powerfully evokes the poignant stories of the slaves shipped from this coastline to Brazil. Many of their descendants returned following the abolition of slavery, resulting in local Afro-Brazilian culture and relatively pale-skinned mixed-race townfolk. This is the heartland of Togolese voodoo and nearby Vogán's Friday market includes the country's largest fetish market.

Further afield in northern Togo, the scenic Tamberma Valley is a Unesco World Heritage Site for its fortified mud, wood and straw houses, which once provided defence against Dahomeyan slave-catching goons. The typical compound has a series of towers connected by a thick wall with an entrance chamber, used to trap the enemy and shower them with arrows. Looking at the thatched clay fortresses, it is easy to see how the local Tamberma people got their name, which means 'good builders'. 📌