


 MYSTERY IN A BOTTLE

JAMES BAINBRIDGE'S DREAM JOB TOOK AN INTERESTING TURN WHEN HE CAME FACE TO FACE WITH WEST AFRICAN VOODOO, BUT HE LEFT WITH SOME GOOD STORIES AND A LUCKY TRAVELLER'S CHARM

It was my first *Lonely Planet* assignment, the beginning of a dream job updating their travel guides. Getting paid to travel and write stuff about it? I had finally cracked it, and life was rewarding my hard work ... or so I thought. I opened the atlas and peered at the countries on my *Lonely Planet* contract, two slivers of land up the side of Nigeria – Togo and Benin. All I knew about them was precisely nothing, but in the previous edition of the guidebook, my pale and haunted-looking predecessor said the region was the birthplace of voodoo. The religion had travelled from here on the slave ships to the Americas, along with countless men and women sold by the fearsome Kings of Dahomey, whose temples and sacrificial altars can still be seen.

I also read that Togo had just got a new president, when the president of 38 years had left office in the manner of many African dictators – in a box – and his son had seized power. When I arrived at the Ghana-Togo border, it was a little like

driving against rush-hour traffic, with hundreds of refugees streaming into Ghana while I checked into Togo. Still, hearing my first snatch of West African French in a while, from a black-market money changer with a wad of CFA franc notes (R1 = CFA41), brought back fond memories of my previous West African travels. What could possibly go wrong?

Over the following weeks, I came face to face with all manner of voodoo practices. The religion's heartland lies around Abomey, Benin, where faded fetish statues of twins, revered in the voodoo belief system, stand on street corners. A kindly hotelier showed me around the Dahomeyan kings' crumbling palaces, temples and shrines – the scooter tour was memorable for running in reverse-chronological order and concluding with a bottle of gin. Next up was Ouidah, home to a python temple and the Route of the Slaves, where one can retrace the steps of shackled slaves who once trudged to ships bound for the Americas. Outside the Sacred Forest, I

met an *Egungun* – they channel the spirits of the dead, with spooky voices emanating from behind their cowrie-shell masks. Excitedly shrieking children followed him at a safe distance – touching these possessed characters brings bad luck. 'Eh le blanc' ('hey, whitey') said the spirit – a jibe from beyond the grave.

'When in Rome', I figured, and bought a lucky traveller's fetish from a fisherman-priest on nearby Lake Ahémé. Voodoo priests send their customers to the fetish market with a prescription: A list of items to find among the grinning animal skulls and mysterious clutter. I had to buy a parrot's plume and a bottle of gin; the priest had offered two strengths of spell, which seemingly corresponded to the volume of gin included, most of which he drank during the ceremony. I chose the shoestring spell, and my parrot's feather clearly didn't work, because I got mugged a few days later. Then again, the thieves didn't get away with any of my precious notebooks, and today, I'm still travelling with that lucky charm in my bag. ✨