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# The Ivory Coast: Country Profile

Edition 4: Summer 1998 The Ivory Coast offers a wealth of attractions and cultural heritage.

## Land of Hope

That the national anthem of The Ivory Coast describes the country as a land of hope is indicative of the positive attitude of its people. Always friendly, always welcoming, the good nature of the Ivorians will be encountered throughout the nation.

Whether travelling for business or pleasure, The Ivory Coast offers a multitude of choices. From bustling city life to sun-drenched beaches, from nature trips to cultural performances - the Ivory Coast has it all. And all of it, in one form or another, is accessible as a day-trip from Abidjan, the country's largest city.

## Abidjan: Paris of West Africa

Often called the Paris of West Africa, Abidjan is a major hub of commerce. Built on the shore of a calm lagoon, the modern skyline of The Plateau - the business district - lies across the Charles de Gaulle Bridge. With its wide tree-lined boulevards, outdoor cafes, chic boutiques and gleaming skyscrapers, The Plateau is a favourite with business travellers.

Novotel, Sofitel and the Hotel Tiama are popular places to stay. Across an arm of the lagoon in the Cocody district is the opulent Hotel Ivoire Intercontinental which features West Africa's only indoor ice-skating rink. And further away in the Riviera district is the Golf Hotel, with its highly acclaimed 18 hole golf course.

By day, The Plateau is a wonderful place to take a stroll, visiting the many shops and relaxing in one of the parks or at a sidewalk. At night, the focus of activity shifts to Treichville, where you will find lively nightclubs and the highly popular Maquis restaurants offering cheap food that encompasses everything from Lebanese specialities to authentic West African dishes.

In the daytime, the Treichville Market is a haven for bargain hunters. In 1997 it burned to the ground, but many merchants have set up sidewalk stalls during construction of the New Market.

If you have a few hours to spare, the National Museum features a large collection of masks, statues, ivory, pottery and bronze. And the bold architecture of St. Paul's Cathedral is worth a visit, the bell tower providing a good view of the Plateau.

## Yamoussoukro: A President's Legacy

The road to Yamoussoukro - the capital - is a modern four-lane motorway that begins just north of Abidjan's Adjane district. Be sure to stop at the Parc de Banco where you will see the famed Fanico laundrymen at work in the river. Over a hundred migrant workers labour there each morning. By noon, every square metre of grass flanking the road is covered with clothing and linen spread out to dry. Despite a high degree of illiteracy, there is seldom confusion with pick-ups and deliveries.

Entering Yamoussoukro, you will immediately be impressed by the Notre Dame de la Paix basilica, its enormous dome towering above the horizon. Built at a cost of over US\$400 million, it dominates the skyline and is the largest cathedral in Africa and the tallest church in the Christian world. Skilled artisans in France fashioned its 36 immense stained-glass windows.

Yamoussoukro was home to the late president and is now a monument to his excesses. From a humble town of 30,000 the population has increased ten-fold. New architecture, modern street lamps and deserted eight-lane boulevards reflect a failed vision. Yet the city is not without its charm. It boasts two of the finest universities in West Africa and superior

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convention facilities that make it attractive for international conferences. The Hotel President is one of The Ivory Coast's finest and features a top floor restaurant with quality European cuisine. A nearby golf course rivals the one in Abidjan.

The former Presidential Palace is used by relatives and is off limits to visitors. But you can approach the estate on a small bridge across an artificial lake that is teeming with dozens of crocodiles. These are fed in late afternoon, providing a guaranteed close-up view of this feared reptile.

If animals are your passion, only an hour's drive from town is the d'Abokouamekro Game Reserve. The park is home to hippos, birds, including waterfowl and other indigenous wildlife. The featured attraction, however, is the herbivore population. An ingenious programme was undertaken to breed animals that have long disappeared. Who would guess that you can see White rhinos and giraffes in West Africa? Early results suggest the project is a resounding success. A small but dedicated platoon of wildlife officers ensure poaching does not become a problem.

### The Elephant: A National Symbol

Once home to thousands of elephants, the Ivory Coast took its name from the centuries-old trade in elephant tusks. But the ban on ivory trade came too late to save the herds of West Africa. Today only a few hundred elephants survive in the north-east corner of the country in Comoe National Park, the country's largest game reserve. Here, they freely wander the forests, grasslands and savannah of the southern Sahel.

Comoe is also home to monkeys, baboons, buffalo, many antelope species and the rare leopard. Surveys have recorded over 400 species of birds.

The southern entrances to the park are a good day's drive from Yamoussoukro. Visitors can stay at the comfortable Comoe Segetel in Ganse, near the Comoe River, or the Comoe Safari Lodge in Kafolo, near the northern entrance on the border with Burkina-Faso. The park is open from December to May, dawn to dusk.

### Korhogo and the Senoufo People

Korhogo is the usual destination for visitors heading north. A worthwhile stopover on route is the village of Kong, where you will find the Lobi people who share a history with northern Ghana, Mali and Burkina Faso. Kong's major landmark is a mosque dating from the 17th century and built from mud in traditional Sudanese style. It is one of the finer examples of such buildings and one of only a few this far south.

The town of Katiola features a traditional pottery centre and the indigenous diamond mines at Tortiya. But beware - Tortiya lies at the end of a bone-jostling 50 kilometre dirt road. All mining is by hand and first-time visitors eagerly search for that special sparkle in the sun. The itinerant miners usually have a few stones for those with cash to spare.

In a world of tightly regulated bureaucracies it's refreshing to see a government that has adopted a laissez-faire attitude towards the people who toil under a hot sun hoping to find "The Big One". It's also comforting to see a landscape that, although pock-marked with dozens of holes, has not been raped by giant machinery.

On the road to Korhogo it is not unusual to encounter a band of Dozo's, the traditional hunters of the north. They belong to a secret society to which only the sons of Dozo's may join. Africans believe that the many amulets worn on a Dozo shirt possess magical properties which protect the hunters and give them the power of keen sight and amplified hearing. It is said that a Dozo cannot be killed by a bullet or knife since his charms prevent metal from entering his body. Dozo's are held in high regard and are frequently hired to guard abandoned vehicles, to direct traffic or to patrol sensitive religious sites.

Korhogo is a pleasant community and features a small museum, a craft centre and a lively market. The area is home to the Senoufo people who are traditional farmers and hunters. Their craft skills are legendary as are the special dances they willingly perform for visitors. A village market in Waranienie displays all manner of fabrics and you can watch the weavers at work on their looms. Nearby is Fakaha, another village known for its Korhogo mud cloth. The cloth has a

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rough texture and sports intricately painted designs featuring animals, birds, insects and abstract patterns.

As you visit these places, be on the lookout for masks. Senoufo masks, some of which are a metre or more in length, are renowned for their intricately carved animal heads. Masks are thought to be imbued with magical powers, with the wearers becoming the spirits they represent.

#### Westward and the Realm of the Yacouba

The west offers spectacular scenery, with mountains and rivers and an abundance of rain forest. In the city of Man and its environs you will find the rich culture of the Yacouba people - also known as the Dan.

The drive from Yamoussoukro to Man takes about six hours on a good paved road. Just south of Daloa lies the village of Gbetitapea, where hundreds of monkeys invade the village for their daily handout. The monkeys have become the totem of the village. For the most part these are the small Mona and Diana monkeys, two species which are rapidly becoming scarce throughout West Africa. The fees charged by the villagers are minimal and the experience is guaranteed to be worthwhile.

Man is a rather ordinary town nestled in a picturesque valley. Its principal landmark is la Dent de Man (the Tooth of Man). At nearly 1,200 metres it is one of The Ivory Coast's highest peaks and offers a complimentary background for a view of the city mosque. Not to be missed is the central market, where you will find a wide variety of fabrics and an endless collection of Dan masks, from those with simple motifs to ornate antiques.

Masks form an integral part of Yacouba society. They exist not only as works of art or as disguise. They are primarily for ritual purposes, each infused with divine properties and symbolic of a community's collective memory. The annual Festival of Masks occurs in November and this is the best time to see all the varieties of masks and dances from the area.

Not to be missed is the Cascade, a beautiful waterfall in the middle of a bamboo forest on the outskirts of Man. It is also an excellent place to find iridescent dragonflies and a wide variety of butterflies. However, the trail to the falls is a bit precarious.

The gorge also has a swinging vine bridge called a pont de lianes. This one is reinforced for the benefit of tourists, but if time allows you can see better examples in areas near Danane on the Liberian border, a two hour drive to the west. The lianes in that region cross the Cavally River. These are constructed entirely of natural materials and are in constant use by local villagers.

For those interested in the Islamic culture of The Ivory Coast, Odienne lies another 150 kilometres north, the largest city in the north-west. On Fridays the large mosque at Odienne is heavily populated with worshippers. The town also features an enclave of pottery artisans whose bowls and vessels are superior to those found in Katiola. The lively markets in both Odienne and Touba are among the most colourful in West Africa.

#### Treasures of the Coast

If the sun is your heart's desire, then The Ivory Coast is the place to be. An array of sandy beaches lines the nation's coast. Due south from Man is the peaceful Bay of Sirens which hosts a resort hotel of the same name. Its isolation is perfect for those who wish to be far from the madding crowd.

Close by is the seaside town of Grand Bereby, home to itinerant fishermen from Ghana. Grand Bereby is a busy place where traditional dugout fishing canoes are fashioned with hand tools and the daily catch is sorted for market.

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At San Pedro, another 50 kilometres to the east, you will find many locals at the grand public beach, especially on weekends. There are a number of restaurants in the town with everything from pizza to seafood delicacies.

At Grand Lahou there are both public and private beaches. The French-owned Bandama Hotel is located on an island between the lagoon and the sea. It's principal theme is space - vast quantities of it. Every bungalow is situated in its own garden, and the main hall is a giant open-air veranda covered in thatch. By day the beach offers seclusion and serenity with fabulous views of the sunset.

There are several interesting activities in the area. For about US\$20 you can rent a boat to take you to the Isle of the Chimpanzees. Here, in an effort to protect them, a small band of apes was moved to this isolated island in a lagoon about eight kilometres from Grand Lahou.

A visit to Tiegba rewards you with a glimpse of a unique village, built on stilt pilings over the waters of the lagoon. For a small fee, boys from the village will happily transport you there by pirogue. On the road to and from Tiegba you pass through mile after mile of palm and rubber tree plantations. The carefully aligned trees create hypnotic patterns in the sunlight. This is the legacy of Houphouet-Boigny whose vision of mechanised agriculture on a grand scale has made The Ivory Coast the envy of many African countries.

Only 20 minutes from Abidjan, Grand Bassam hosts the annual Fete d'Abissa in November. This marks sacred holidays among the Agni, a subgroup of the Akan people. The week-long event is characterized more by hilarity than piety as residents don outlandish costumes and compete to create ridiculous faces splattered with paint and weird designs. Visitors are often the targets of harmless jokes and readily join in the spirit of things.

In Grand Bassam there is an artists' centre where you will find superior quality masks. Only the Treichville market and the shops in Man offer a larger variety. Behind the centre you can see artisans casting bronze using the lost wax process.

Grand Bassam was the original capital of the colonial French. The town boasts many fine examples of colonial architecture, including French, Portuguese and Dutch influences. There is now a concerted effort to restore many of these structures in the hope of revitalising Grand Bassam's former glory. Restaurants and hotels can be found in profusion. You might consider a stay at the Club Mediterranee in nearby Assini.

#### Akan: A Shared Ancestry

The subgroups of the Akan people (primarily the Baoule and the Agni) account for a third of The Ivory Coast's population are concentrated mainly in the central and eastern regions. But the Akan are found everywhere. There is no doubt that they migrated to The Ivory Coast from Ghana, many from the Ashanti region, during times of domestic upheavals. They brought with them all the traditions and trappings of their famous Ghanaian ancestors. Paramount chiefs are highly respected and carry all the authority of Ashanti royalty, including a retinue of warriors, linguists, scribes, poets and priests.

So numerous are the tribal groupings that festivals and ceremonies can happen anywhere and anytime. Like their Ghanaian cousins, the Akan wear traditional kente cloth and adorn themselves with ancestral gold during important processions and occasions of state.

Unfortunately, the town of Abengourou doesn't have a lot to offer. But many of the surrounding villages are fascinating - especially those that carry on the traditions of fetish priests. Fetishism involves a mix of sorcery and the invocation of spirits to perform favours. Often these spirits dwell in sacred places such as a tree, a river, a rock or a termite mound. They can also reside in dolls or statues.

The Akan village of Tangoulan is located about 50 kilometres east of Abengourou. Tangoulan priestesses are frequently called upon to assist with personal problems. One such ceremony involves summoning spirits to help a barren woman conceive. Another might ask for protection against some force - such as a guarantee a home is not struck by lightning. Occasionally a fetish ceremony involves sinister requests - cursing an enemy or stealing a husband - but for the most part spirits are invoked for positive reasons.

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## A New Tourism Awareness

The people of The Ivory Coast are known for their hospitality and even if there are no special ceremonies coinciding with your visit they will be more than willing to accommodate you. Village elders acknowledge the benefit of tourist dollars and in the last decade or so they have also come to realise that people are willing to pay to see cultural performances.

These earnings remain in the villages and are often applied towards community needs - a new solar power source or supplies for the local school, for example. Whether it's an Akan ceremony or a dance performed by Yacouba or Senoufo, the enterprising Ivoirians can usually arrange something at short notice.

While French is the official language, many Ivoirians do speak English. And trained guides are available to ensure that non-francophones also enjoy their stay. Wherever you go in The Ivory Coast, you will always be made to feel welcome.

## The Ritual of the Dance

The highlight of any visit to Senoufo country is the opportunity to see the famed Bolohi panther dance (pictured above), where athletic young men mimic the movements of the leopard to the accompaniment of an orchestra of stringed balafons and drums. The dance is usually performed in one of the surrounding rural villages.

Likewise, there are many forms of traditional dances featuring the famed masks and outlandish costumes of the Yacouba people. Several villages create performances just for visitors.

What is really pleasing is the aura of dignity in which these dances are performed. The people go all out to provide an entertaining spectacle, whether the audience is a large group or only a few individuals. The beautiful architecture of Yacouba villages adds another dimension to the show. Villagers are also quite willing to invite guests into their homes and to allow them to observe various village activities.

The village of Blolle near Man is known for its performance of the Masque du Ba. The main event is preceded by a retinue of young girls, known as the Maidens of the Corn, who enthusiastically enact a carefully rehearsed routine to the beat of village drums. The end of their performance marks the entrance of the masked dancer who is carried on poles above the heads of athletic young men. He dismounts and moves about the audience making threatening gestures and vigorously shaking his rattan skirt. Children squeal in delight and feigned terror.

Closer to Biankouma are the villages of Zala and Silakoro, both of which are famous for their stilt dancers. The women lead a procession, beating small drums and shaking rattles prior to a display of phenomenal acrobatics by several young men. But the highlight is the incredible agility of the stilt dancers. Despite the encumbrance of a heavy mask and an awkward costume, they whirl about with the grace of Olympic figure skaters. Such is their dexterity that they are able to bend their three metre posture to the ground to retrieve tips offered by visitors.

The villagers may also perform the dance of the Gore Mask, a fearsome apparition who utters guttural sounds in a secret language understood only by his attendants.

No trip to Man is complete without experiencing the Dance of the Jugglers, where magic and acrobatic displays are the primary theme. Pre-pubescent girls are taught contortion techniques at an early age. It is forbidden for outsiders to speak to them. They wear white paint on their faces in elaborate geometric lines with cowry shell head-dresses. Bending and twisting into impossible shapes, they rival any professional circus performer.

The men conduct themselves in the tradition of stage magicians, feigning a variety of self-mutilation tricks. The finale consists of the men tossing the young girls high in the air. As the girls fall the men draw daggers from their waistbands and catch them in mid-air on the edge or point of the blades. It's a daring display of courage and careful timing that holds the audience spellbound.

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## COTE D'IVOIRE FACTFILE

**Language:** The official language is French, although many ethnic languages are spoken.

**Health:** An international certificate for yellow fever vaccinations is required for entry, except for children under one year old. There is a malaria risk all year round throughout the country.

**Currency:** The CFA Franc is linked to the French Franc at a rate of 1 FF = 100 CFA.

**Climate:** There are two rainy seasons: the main one from May to July and a shorter one in October and November. Average temperature ranges between 21oC and 30oC.

**Roads:** There are about 70,000 kilometres of roads throughout the country, of which about 6,000 are tarred.

### Safety First

There is no need to worry about safety in West Africa - just follow the same common sense principles you apply at home. By Bob Burch.

We hear of tourists attacked in Egypt, car-jackings in South Africa, pickpockets in Nairobi, fraud in Lagos. It's enough to deter many travellers from venturing forth to Africa.

Sadly, our perceptions are often clouded by the media's enthusiasm in reporting such events. Millions of visitors to Africa never experience any of these problems, but the isolated incidents - rare as they are - make the headlines.

In the real world, Africans are every bit as honest as your next door neighbour. However, certain precautions should be taken. Abidjan has been classified as a dangerous city, but in fact it is no more dangerous than London or New York or Rome.

Common sense can go a long way towards making your visit hassle free. Everybody loves to take their wallet along when they go somewhere, but face it: do you really need all those credit cards with you? Leave the wallet at home - you won't need your phone card, petrol cards and all those others. Take one credit card such as Visa or American Express. The only place you can use a credit card is in major hotels or at a bank for a money advance.

Automatic Teller Machines are a relatively new item in West Africa. There are very few and the queues are a nuisance. You won't need your driver's licence, hospital card, library card, and all the memberships you own either. Granted, a thief wouldn't be able to use these things, but think of the inconvenience you will go through trying to replace them. Take cash, traveller's cheques and one credit card. The only identification you will need is your passport. Be sure to copy the numbers of traveller's cheques and your credit card number into a notebook. Photocopy the first few pages of your passport. If you do lose these documents, these precautions will make it easier to replace them and to cancel cards and cheques.

Some people like to wear a money belt. This is fine for being sure you have everything with you and in a secure place, but it is impractical when you actually try to get at your money, not to mention the fact that in doing so, you will advertise to everyone that you are wearing one. Each day you venture forth, try to estimate how much cash you will need and limit what you carry to that amount. If you run short, you can probably borrow some from another traveller in your group and repay him back at the hotel.

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Purses, handbags and camera straps are temptations. It is easy to cut them and a thief is soon gone with bag and all. Although this type of crime is rare, it does happen now and then. Bags that are worn about the waist are a far better option. They come in all sizes and hold a lot of stuff. Cameras should always be worn with the strap around your neck - never casually hung over a shoulder. Today's small "Point & Shoot" cameras attract far less attention and produce great pictures. They are also lighter and easier to carry than bulky 35mm models. Never wear expensive jewellery (or even jewellery that looks expensive). Africans often perceive Westerners as ultra-rich.

People often wonder about hotel security, but all in all West African hotel staff are very honest. A job in a major tourist hotel is a plum. No employee would jeopardise that security by stealing. This even holds true for the smaller hotels. But if you do have valuables you are worried about, leave them with the desk for safekeeping.

Health is also a concern. Be sure to consult with your physician about what preventions are necessary for malaria and other relevant diseases. Always bring sufficient medicines if you are taking prescribed drugs. You are unlikely to find them in an African pharmacy. Bottled water is an absolute rule for West Africa. Use it even when you brush your teeth - and never wash your contact lenses in local water.

Sometimes we fear the worst when we hear of an isolated Ebola case somewhere in deepest Africa. An Ebola incident in the Congo is certainly no reason to cancel a trip to West Africa. It would make about as much sense as cancelling your trip to Spain because there is a meningitis outbreak in Warsaw. Wash your hands frequently. Handshakes are customary in West Africa and hand contact is how most common infections (such as colds) are passed. The same applies for money which carries all manner of germs.

If you are going out on the town in the evening, taxi drivers are more than willing to rendezvous with you at an appointed time. If you decide to stay past the hour, they will wait for you. And if all this sounds intimidating, rest easy. It's just common sense. Remember, West Africans are well aware that tourist dollars are necessary to their economy. Chances are the fellow standing next to you is watching out for you too. Africans are swift to deal with thieves in their midst.

Just as there are certain areas in your own city where you would not venture forth at certain times, the same holds true for any city in the world. Enjoy your trip and rest assured that you are really in friendly territory. It would be a shame to give up the rewards of a rich African cultural experience based solely upon grossly exaggerated news reports.

Canadian Bob Burch is an award-winning photographer and journalist who has made over 30 trips to Africa. He has contributed to Audubon, Conservation International, Fortune, Life and the National Geographic Society.

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