

Experience Report Benin

Country - Life - People

We, Saskia and Stefan, would like to share our impressions and experiences from our three-weeks trip to Benin in February 2022 in this report.

First of all, we would like to express our deepest gratitude to the remarkable Astrid Toda, who has already built more than 50 schools and taken care of many individual destinies in Benin through her unselfish involvement over the past 28 years. We were able to spend the first week of our trip in her home and, through long conversations and numerous meetings, we were able to get a clear picture of the real difficulties and problems, but also of the potential and possibilities for development of the country.

But first of all, chronologically: a trip to West Africa during the dry season is not for the heat-sensitive, as you can see from the first step out of the plane with an air temperature of about 30°C at 9:30 pm local time. During the course of the day, one notices even among the natives, from midday until late afternoon, a certain inertia during the maximum temperatures, while the traffic flows from Calavi to Porto-Novo through Cotonou continue to drive unimpressed. Just being immersed with them - of course in a car and not on a motorcycle - is worth an excursion of several hours. It is hard to imagine how, despite the density of traffic, the mostly defective condition of the vehicles, and the fact that motorcycles, cars, and trucks are fully loaded, there are hardly any accidents. In Benin, the means of transport used are almost entirely dedicated. Motorcycles are not just a means of transportation for one or two people, no, in West Africa they can carry a family of several people from point A to point B, several dozen live chickens or a complete sofa balanced to the next house. The cars are loaded to the roof with pineapples, bananas or other agricultural products, with the trunk open, to be sold later, for example at the Dantokpa Market, the largest market in West Africa.



For this market, one can say with a clear conscience that "*there is nothing that doesn't exist here*". The liveliness of the market in this huge area offers almost everything you can imagine and appeals to the different human senses in many ways. But you have to be careful - the local merchants are a bit afraid of cameras and do not want to be photographed or filmed.



But the reason for our trip to Benin, apart from the general desire to visit West Africa, was above all the contact with the Bildungswerk Westafrika. This is a German association which has set itself the task of promoting development aid and education in the spirit of the work done by Astrid Toda. The website (www.bildungswerk-westafrika.de) allowed us to get a first idea of the activities and to contact the representatives of the association. Contact with Astrid in Benin was open and quick, and after a short e-mail correspondence, we had enough information to focus on booking flights and applying for simple visas. Astrid had a project in mind for the planned travel period: the construction of a public kindergarten in Gbéssoumè, about a two-hour drive and 30-minute boat ride north of Cotonou. Luckily, we were able to spend a few days (and nights) in the construction site, which allowed us to experience the project and the public life of the village up close. In short, it was very impressive.



The local population is almost exclusively active in agriculture and fishing and tries to reconcile food self-sufficiency with the surplus produced for sale at the market. In order to do this, each member of the family - to the extent of their age and health - must contribute and carry out the daily tasks. Without electricity or running water, the families live together in mud huts, sometimes sporadically covered with straw, in a small space, cooking on a wood fire and using the nearby Ouémé River for drinking, bathing and washing clothes. Only a few hours' flight south of Europe, one feels transported back centuries, to the time that was described to us in history classes as the life of our European ancestors. And despite the unfavorable circumstances, there is a cordiality, a joy of living and a frugality in the village community that one could never attribute to many inhabitants of industrialized countries. We were able to immerse ourselves in this community during our stay and to gather experiences and impressions that enabled us to return to Germany with a different outlook. In addition to getting to know the village life, we, both construction engineers, were of course also interested in the construction of the school. Thanks to the many construction projects completed in recent years, Astrid can now count on well-trained and reliable teams who perform the main activities of masonry, reinforcement, formwork and concreting with high quality. However, one should not imagine the work flow as in Germany, because the tools are limited to shovels, buckets and wheelbarrows of average functionality. The ladders are made of wood, the concrete is mixed by hand and the foundations (up to 8 meters deep!) are dug by hand. It is remarkable how, under these conditions, kindergarten and school buildings of such quality can be built, buildings whose standard is certainly not usual for the local conditions. The effects of the current Covid 19 pandemic are also being felt in the work of the educational work in West Africa, as donations and sponsorships are insufficient to finance other projects, including hospitals. In addition, the usual cooperation with European volunteer organizations is hardly possible due to travel restrictions, which has led to a shortage of teaching staff for volunteer services in schools for several weeks in the last two years. For the local population, the work of Astrid and the associations is a blessing that can only be continued in the future through private donations, supported by funds from the Federal Republic of Germany.



We look back on the "slightly different" vacation we had hoped for. We had an enlightening stay in a country that, in addition to its many current problems, also has enormous potential and, along with its African neighbors, can and should play an important role in solving many global problems. We were able to meet people who may never see our European standard of living, let alone live it, but who nevertheless, or precisely because of this, fascinated us with their cordiality and helpfulness.

We are grateful that with the help of Astrid Toda we were able to get to know "the country, the life and the people" in Benin so intensively. We greatly appreciate her work and that of all her supporters in Germany and Benin, and we can only recommend that everyone makes their own impression of her work and life in Benin on site.

Thank you very much and see you later, Mrs. Astrid!

Stuttgart, March 2022, Saskia & Stefan