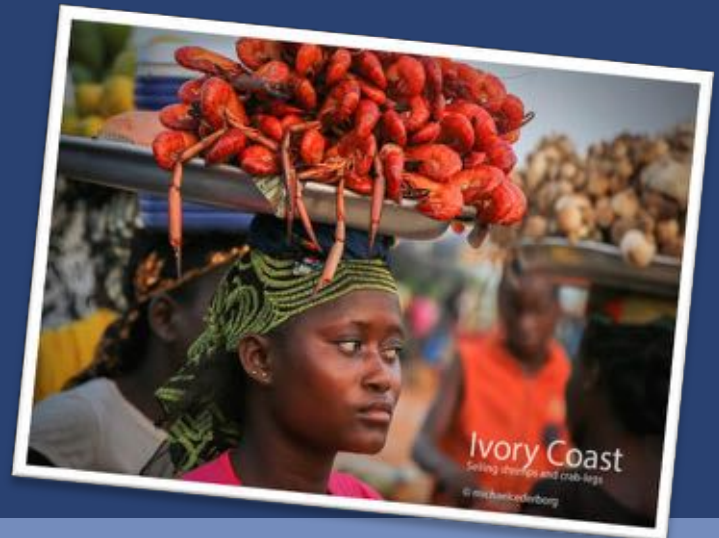




West Africa

Ivory Coast – Ghana – Togo –
Benin – Nigeria – Cameroon –
Equatorial Guinea - Gabon and
Congo

March-April 2015



First stop – Ivory Coast, Yamoussoukro & Grand Bassam

...So the adventure begins. A group of 5-8 Club-100 members travel together through West Africa. Our first stop is at Abidjan and the Ivory Coast.

...Arriving mid-day we are pick-up and transferred to our hotel / Guesthouse La Cote du Repos right on the beach. Exhausted from a long journey we decide to relax and spend the afternoon and evening at on the beach at the Guesthouse. The beach is almost empty of people – only a few odd sales persons selling the usual peanuts and clothes – but to whom? There are no tourists nor local people to sell to? We take our first swim in the strong currents of the Atlantic Coast – very nice!

...Our days in the Ivory Coast included a long drive up to the administrative capital – Yamoussoukro. Here we visit the worlds' largest church The Basilica de Dalao, a replica of St. Peters Basilica in Rome – just a little bit bigger. It is huge and can take 25,000 people it is said. But we see very little people visiting. Another crazy “One-man and Dictator” project to leave something behind as a legacy! We also travel to the ancient capital on the coast – “Grand Bassam”. This is a lovely, but very much run-down and in need of restoration city, well worth visiting. It is listed to become a UNESCO world heritage, but needs funding for restoration prior to acceptance.

... We moved on to the border of Ghana where our next guide Mr. Kofi met up with us for our three Hour transport to our hotel in Ghana. The border formalities went quite smooth....



Ghana and the Slave Coast!

Swedish presence in the slave trade in late 16 century

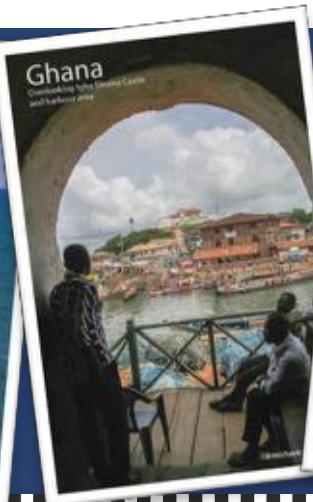
A late arrival to **Coconut Grove Hotel resort** right on the Atlantic coast. We met up with Hans Ollongren (SAS) who joined our team for a full week.

A full days trip to Elmina Castle built back in 1482, the oldest in the West African coast, and the nearby fish market. This was a very nice, extremely hot and interesting visit. Well kept bearing in mind it is over 500 years old! The nearby fish-market was also most interesting to see. People were not very receptive to having their pictures taken here.

A really beautiful market with fishing boats, traders and many spices of fish being sold – very colourful market indeed.

We drove up to **Kakum National Park** to try our luck on the **Canopy Walk** high up in the Canopy of the treetops. Having done this before a couple of times it gave no real surprises – even though it lush and green from up above. We saw very few animals, insects or birds on this walk.

A visit also included the Cape Coast Castle in Cape Coast where the Swedes took control of the castle in 1652 for a few short years. A chapter, which you don't read much about during history lessons in school. The fortification was primarily used for the gold-trade, but also for slave trade – were the slaves were collected before sold-off and transported across the Atlantic Ocean. **A stop at a local Funeral- & Coffin maker** specializing in making "custom-made" coffins to "customers". They could be found in the form of birds, cars, beer-cans etc..





Fetish and Voodoo – Prevails in Togo!

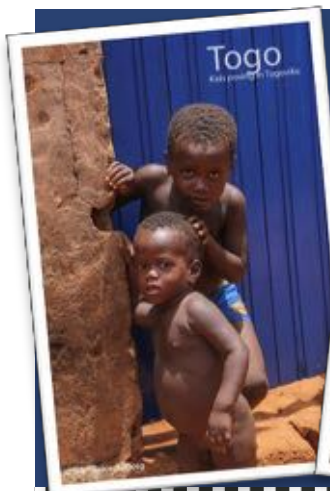


The border crossing between Ghana and Togo went OK, but as always very primitive and basic function and again with no other “tourists” in sight.

Our Togolese guide picked us up at the border and transported us to Lomé and our **Boutique Hotel Flamani**. The establishment was nice for Togolese standards. Lomé, the capitol, was not much to write home about – having visited the local commerce at the market.

The main attraction was however the **Fetish- & Voodoo market** where we spent some time to walk around the stuffed and dead animals and various fetishes. We also visited, as I part of “the show” a Shaman and Voodoo priest. Many pictures were of course taken here.

Togo Lake (only 1-2 meters deep) was our next stop. We took a felloukah across the lake to **visit the ancient city of Togoville**. Very run down today. Here we wandered around the small alleys and were **again invited to take part in a Voodoo session**. We had to undress and only be covered in a Sarong for the occasion. On the way back to Lomé we saw a sign post “Swedish Auberge” – so of course we stopped and talked to the manager. No Swedish “Kaffe och Kanelbulle” which was advertised could be offered unfortunately. All in all a very enjoyable visit to Togo.....





Cotonou – Ganvié – Porto Novo

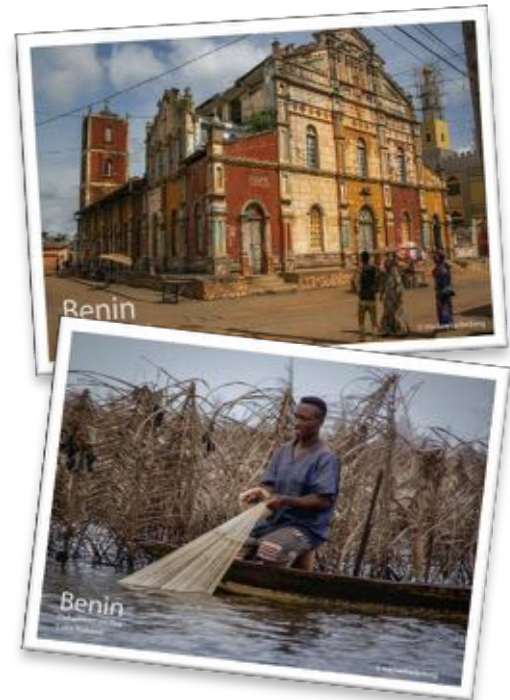
A mix of historical sites and floating villages

Continuing on the Trans West African Coastal highway into Benin, the border crossing was yet again a “walk in the park” with friendly custom police. I then later understood that our local guide who met us between countries on the border – had “greased” them to smooth our transit. Before checking in at our guesthouse, we made a visit to Ouidah (ancient capitol of Benin), and visited a snake temple. Voodoo culture is also very strong here.

The owner **of Haie Vive guesthouse in Cotonou** took us to a local restaurant (great atmosphere) where we tried a “Bicycle chicken” – named this because its muscular and thin built (not much meat)

We then went on to **visit a live music establishment with good a West African band.** Benin is the home country of Angelique Kidjo.

Ganvié was the next interesting visit on our journey. The **Tofine people lives on stilt houses in the shallow lake of Nokoué.** We got some really good photographs traveling slowly through this beautiful landscape. Fishing is of course the main source of income in this area. We ended up back in Porto Novo from the waterfront and came straight into a huge market where people had come from near and far to sell/buy products. Really quite shabby and basic, but very interesting to see naturally.





Nigeria – a country of 178 million people..

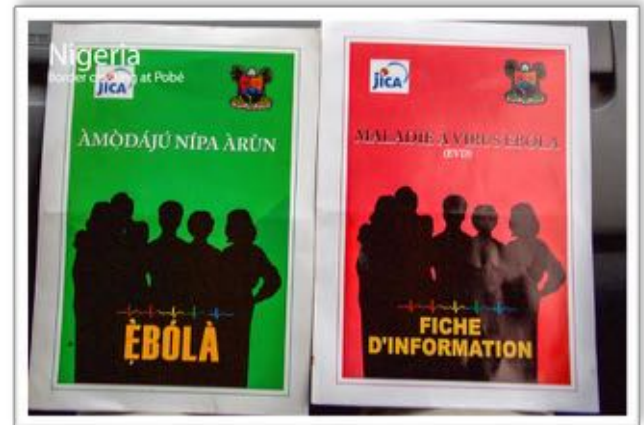
Corruption has finally been given a “Face” – it thrives here in Nigeria, where nothing happens without money changing hands (bribery)....



..The Nigerian guide who came to pick us up in Cotonou was 4 hours late due to border-crossing problems. This eventually made us decide to try a different border crossing ca: 40 km north of the regular one.

Was this a good move? Probably not. It took us close to 4 hours and 7!! Stations where we had to fill out documents, check for Ebola (fever), and being questioned in general with very unfriendly customs personnel. The borders had furthermore also been closed all together for 3 full days in connection to the Nigerian election – as there had been riots and killings in connection to earlier elections. We eventually came through into Nigeria at 5 PM in the late afternoon – this meant we had to drive down to Lagos directly instead of visiting Abeokuta and the Yoruba culture, which was originally planned for.

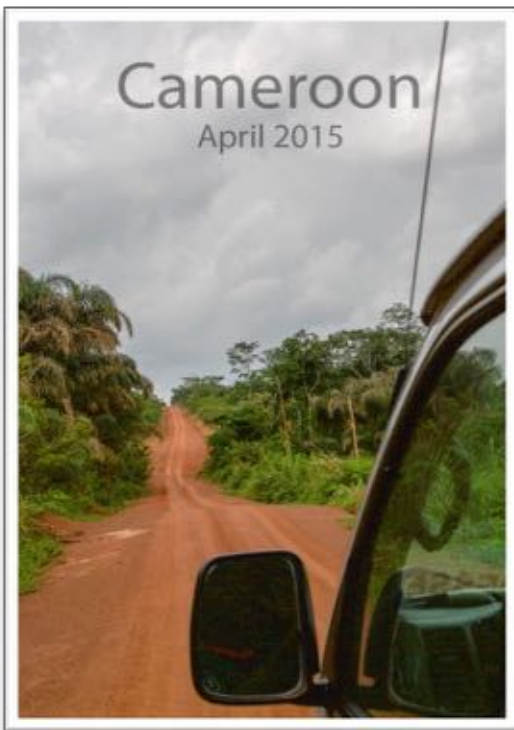
We arrived and checked in at **Ibis Ikeja in Lagos** quite late in the evening. The following day was spent on a speedboat tour around Lagos from the waterfront. We also visited a shop owned by a Swedish lady who had lived in Lagos for over 40 years! She spent most of her time on helping Swedish couples adopting children from Nigeria. Lagos a city of some 25 million people is not a city where I want to settle.





Cameroon – more than meets the eye!

Mfou Ape centre was the most interesting to visit here....



We were delayed and re-routed from Lagos into Douala and arrived only in the early morning instead of the evening before. Chemba – our excellent guide picked us up and took us all the way to Yaoundé and onwards to Mfou Apes Centre where they rehabilitate Lowland Gorillas, Mandrills as well as Chimpanzees. This was well worth a visit even though the drive was long.

Very beautiful countryside with smaller villages along the way. We made a stop at a church and were able to participate and see how people in this local village very actively participated in a “Gospel” like ceremony at church. Before crossing the border into Equatorial Guinea we had to get the local police authority’s exit stamp in our passport. They are keeping a very tight control of the few tourists, which can be seen in this country.

We continued onwards and stayed overnight in Nkolandom Lodge further south. At Ebolowa. We had to stop at quite a few checkpoints along the way where passports and yellow fever cards were checked.

...Would like to come back though and spend time in the eastern parts of Cameroon to visit indigenous groups of Pygmies and wild Lowland Gorillas.





Equatorial Guinea → A “Closed country” for tourists !

We didn't really think we would be let in – even with visa into Africa's most controlled Dictatorial country...

..It took us over 1 month to finally get the visa after having sent all of our passports to their embassy in Brussels. The border crossing at Kye Ossi / Ebebiyin between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea was an experience in itself. No tourists seem to cross this border. The very few who actually do travel to this country usually fly in. Our luggage was checked 3 times thoroughly and we had to pass 7 stations before we eventually were let into the country. We later were informed that our guide claimed to have had to bribe the customs with a substantial amount of money.

From the border town to Bata, was only 230 km, but with 10! Checkpoints along the way it did take quite a long time. These guys are really suspicious. It did not help when our so-called “Guide” seemed to do anything in his power to worsen our passage through these passport checkpoints. He even said we were here as journalists and not Tourists.

Our hotel Manager in Bata was really quite nice and helpful sorting out some difficulties we encountered – Hotel Ibis Bata – he also said he had only had one group of tourists in the 3 years he had worked as manager of the hotel. We also went to Mongomo and spend a full day/night there – the hometown of the president. The local chief of police was informed that we were “let loose” on town. The President was also visiting the town at the same time with lots and lots of military and police setting up roadblocks. Along the roads we found many interesting animals for sale as bush meat (see pictures below)





Gabon – Green and lush countryside!

Serpentine roads with nerv-wrecking and dangerous drivers



Again, we encountered a corrupt border-guard who insisted on ca: 150 SEK per person to let us into Gabon. We flatly refused and were eventually let in after some time and deliberation.

Our first stop was to visit a Christian Church in Oyem during Sunday (Easter Mass). This was a great experience to see/hear how everyone got totally absorbed and involved in the ceremony. After a very long drive we stopped the Equator to take photographs. Due to delays we arrived at Lambarene only very late. This is/was the place where the Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer set-up a clinic and hospital in the 1920-ies.

Situated beautifully near a lake we went on a tour around the premises. The hospital has been kept and is today a Guesthouse and museum for visitors. Enjoyable.

... We drove up to the capital – Libreville and checked in to a bit shabby Hotel Tropicana right on the beach. This hotel had seen better days. In the evening we went to eat at quite nice restaurant La Dolce Vita. We had seafood and wine. The electricity came and went – as one has by now become accustomed to. We saw the city and also made some longer walks along the lovely beach – even swam. The beach was quite crowded, but primarily with locals. A few odd expatriates also came to the Tropicana to meet with others





Congo, on the recovery?

Poor and effected by the recent civil wars in the country

We flow into Brazzaville from Libreville via Pointe Noire. As usual we had trouble with the customs. This time they would not let us in for the reason that we needed to have contacts and someone locally to vouch for us and our arrival. Does it ever stop? In the commotion and when we were waiting (one passport also confiscated and held by the customs for security) one of the customs guards accidentally bumped my bag-pack and my bottle of wine fell out onto the floor and broke. The guard got even more unfriendly towards us after this and claimed that I should compensate him for this... To make another and long customs story short – we eventually got through and without paying any further bribes... Welcome to Congo!

We stayed at the recommended guesthouse The Hippocampe owned by a French/Vietnamese couple. The rooms were small and simple, but the food was really quite good... Vietnamese!

We drove up to the National Park Lesio Loua to get a chance to see some Lowland Gorillas. Quite a long drive on initially good roads, which turned into no roads at all. The Game Reserve turned out to be only a small rehabilitation centre for two orphaned Gorilla youngsters and a 35-year-old Polio affected male. Not much for seeing Gorillas in the wild. The park was however really beautiful, but contained vertically no animals at all. We saw a Jackal, antelopes and some birds. We made a lovely and long boat trip along a bi-river to the mighty Congo River and watched some hippos, crocs and monkeys. The lodge was not even near what one is used to and could expect for tourists. This was really basic – as was the food!

Back in Brazzaville we spent the evening after yet another meal at the by now local favourite – The Vietnamese kitchen of Hippocampe - we continued to a recommended live music club – La Bodega de Brazza. This turned out to be a really nice place with fantastic local music and a mixture of locals and a few expatriate – most likely relief workers.



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Where to stay in West Africa?

- **Cote du Repos**, Abidjan, Ivory Coast www.cote-du-repos.com
- **Coconut Grove Hotel**, Cape Coast, Ghana www.coconutgrovehotelsghana.com
- **Residence Flamani**, Aného, Togo www.residenceflamani.com
- **Guesthouse Haie Vive**, Cotonou, Benin www.guesthousebenin.com
- **Ibis Hotel Ikeja**, Lagos, Nigeria www.ibis.com
- **Foyer du Marin**, Douala, Cameroon www.ctnkolandom.com
- **Centre Touristique de Nkolandom**, Cameroon www.ibis.com
- **Ibis Hotel Bata**, Bata, Equatorial Guinea
- **Hotel Akoakam**, Mongomo, Equatorial Guinea
- **Albert Schweitzer Guesthouse**, Lambaréne, Gabon
- **Hotel Tropicana**, Libreville, Gabon
- **Hotel Hippocampe**, Brazzaville, Congo www.hippocampe.asia
- **Lefini Lodge**, Lesio Louna N.P., Congo

