

History and people

Much has been said and written about Nigeria, her people and culture, economy and politics, that sheds light on the tremendous potential of this African Giant.

However, little is known to the outside world about the many exciting tourist attractions available in Nigeria: Historic sites nestled amid rivers and rain forests, breathtaking mountain vistas, remote creek villages, miles of pristine beaches and exotic national wildlife reserves. There are also museums, festivals, music and dance, a rich cultural *mélange* right down to everyday traditional markets. These are just some of the spectacular sights and sensual delights awaiting the traveler to Nigeria.

Nigeria has the largest population of any country in Africa (about 150 million), and the greatest diversity of cultures, ways of life, cities and terrain. With a total land area of 923,766 sq. km. (356,668 sq. mi.) Nigeria is the 14th largest country in Africa. Its coastline, on the Gulf of Guinea, stretches 774 km (480 mi.). Nigeria shares its international border of 4,470 km (2513 mi.) with four neighbors: Chad, Cameroon, Benin, and Niger Republics.

Nigeria lies entirely within the tropics, yet there are wide climactic variations. In general, there are two seasons, dry and wet, throughout Nigeria. Near the coast, the seasons are less sharply defined. Temperatures of over 90°F are common in the north, but near the coast, where the humidity is higher, temperatures seldom climb above that mark. Inland, around the two great rivers, the wet season lasts from April-October and the dry season from November-March. Temperatures are highest from February-April in the south and March-June in the north; they're lowest in July and August over most of the country.

HISTORY

Virtually all the native races of Africa are represented in Nigeria, hence the great diversity of her people and culture. It was in Nigeria that the Bantu and Semi-Bantu, migrating from southern and central Africa, intermingled with the Sudanese. Later, other groups such as Shuwa-Arabs, the Tuaregs, and the Fulanis, who are concentrated in the far north, entered northern Nigeria in migratory waves across the Sahara Desert. The earliest occupants of Nigeria settled in the forest belt and in the Niger Delta region. Today there are estimated to be more than 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria. While no single group enjoys an absolute numeric majority, four major groups constitute 60% of the population: Hausa-Fulani in the north, Yoruba in the west and Igbo in the east. Other groups include: Kanuris, Binis, Ibibios, Ijaws, Itsekiris, Efiks, Nupes, Tivs, and Jukuns.

EMPIRES

Kanem-Borno: While there is no direct evidence to link the people of the Jos Plateau with the Nok culture, or the Eze Nri of today with Igbo Ukwu, the history of Borno dates back to the 9th Century when Arabic writers in North Africa first noted the kingdom of Kanem east of Lake Chad. Bolstered by trade with the Nile region and Trans-Saharan routes, the empire prospered. In the next centuries, complex political and social systems were developed, particularly after the Bulala invasion in the 14th Century. The empire moved from Kanem to Borno, hence the name. The empire lasted for 1,000 years (until the 19th Century) despite challenges from the Hausa-Fulani in the west and Jukun from the south.

Hausa-Fulani

To the west of Borno around 1,000 A.D., the Hausas were building similar states around Kano, Zaria, Daura, Katsina and Gobir. However, unlike the Kanuris, no ruler among these states ever became powerful enough to impose his will over the others. Although the Hausas had common languages, culture, and Islamic religion, they had no common king. Kano, the most powerful of these states, controlled much of the Hausa land in the 16th and 17th Centuries, but conflicts with the surrounding states ended this dominance. Because of these conflicts, the Fulanis, led by Usman Dan Fodio in 1804, successfully challenged the Hausa States and set up the Hausa-Fulani Caliphate with headquarters in Sokoto, commanding a broad area from Katsina in the far north to Ilorin, across the River Niger.

Yorubas

In the west, the Yorubas developed complex, powerful city-states. The first of these important states was Ile-Ife, which according to Yoruba mythology was the center of the universe. Ife is the site of a unique art form first uncovered in the 1930s. Naturalistic terracotta, bronze heads and other artifacts dating as far back as the 10th Century show just how early the Yorubas developed an advanced civilization. Later, other Yoruba cities challenged Ife for supremacy, and Oyo became the most powerful West African kingdom in the 16th and 17th Centuries. The armies of the Oyo king (Alafin) dominated other Yoruba cities and even forced tribute from the ruler of Dahomey. Internal power struggles and the Fulani expansion to the south caused the collapse of Oyo in the early 19th Century.

Benin

Benin developed into a major kingdom during the same period that Oyo was becoming dominant to the west. Although the people of Benin are primarily Edo, not Yoruba, they share with Ife and Oyo many of the same origins, and there is much evidence of cultural and artistic interchange between the kingdoms. The Oba (King), of Benin was considered semi-divine and controlled a complex bureaucracy, a large army, and a diversified economy. Benin's power reached its apex in the 16th Century.

Igbo and the Delta States

Many Nigerian cultures did not develop into centralized monarchies. Of these, the Igbo's are probably the most remarkable because of the size of their territory and the density of population. Igbo societies were organized in self-contained villages, or federations of village communities, with a society of elders and age-grade associations sharing various governmental functions. The same was true of the Ijaws of the Niger Delta and people of the Cross River area, where secret societies also played a prominent role in administration and governmental functions. But by the 18th Century, overseas trade had begun to encourage the emergence of centralized systems of government.

SOUTH WEST NIGERIA

Abeokuta means 'under the rock', derived from the Olumo Rock, the town's most famous landmark. Abeokuta, the capital

of Ogun State, lies on the Ogun River amid rugged, rocky hills, offering excellent photo opportunities. Home of adire cloth, Abeokuta has an intriguing array of markets which sell a wide range of exotic goods. Olumo Rock, sacred to the Egba people, is on the east side of the Ogun river. Visitors should engage a guide from the tourist center at the bottom of the rock where one can explore the caves used as sanctuary during the Yoruba civil war. At the rock's summit, visitors can enjoy a tremendous view of Abeokuta and the Ogun River.

Benin City is steeped in history. World-renowned Benin bronze sculptures date back to the 15th Century when the Oba of Benin ruled the large and powerful Edo kingdom, a period when bronze casting was an art used to glorify the Oba. In 1897, a British expeditionary force sacked Benin and hauled off many of the bronzes to London. Still, several good examples of the bronze artifacts remain in both the Benin and Lagos Museums. Today, bronze casting is still continued in several streets in the city, including Igun and Oloton streets. Another attraction in Benin is Chief Ogiamen's House, a prime example of Benin traditional architecture built before 1897. The house miraculously survived the "Great Fire" during that period which destroyed most of the city.

Ibadan was until recently the largest indigenous African city. Located along the edge of a thickly wooded forest belt, it was called Eba-Odan, meaning a town at the edge of the forest. Today it is the capital and main commercial center of Oyo state. Places of interest include Dugbe market, a huge traditional marketplace, the Parliament Building, the University of Ibadan, Nigeria's premiere university, its Teaching Hospital and Cocoa House. Ibadan is also close to the historic towns of Oyo, Ogbomoshu, Ijebu-Ode, Ife, Ilesha, and Oshogbo.

Ile-Ife, the ancient city of Ile-Ife, in Osun State, is truly unique. The Yoruba's consider it to be the cradle of creation and civilization. Legend says that it was at Ife that Oduduwa, sent by Olodumare, the Yoruba creator-god, established the first land upon the waters that covered the earth, thus founding Ife. His sons spread to other parts of Yoruba to create further kingdoms. Ile-Ife became a remarkable center for arts, producing both terracotta figures and bronzes dating from the 12th to 15th Centuries, second only in fame to the Benin bronzes.

Lagos, on Lagos Island, has been settled since the 15th Century, when Yoruba groups used it as a refuge from outside attacks. It was a trading post between the Benin Kingdom and the Portuguese until the arrival of British traders in the 19th Century, presaging the colonization of the interior. Lagos is divided into several parts, each with its distinctive character. The heart of the city is Lagos Island (Eko). It is linked to the mainland by three bridges and to Ikoyi Island and Victoria Island by road. The latter are mostly residential areas with palatial houses, expansive gardens and five star hotels in a gorgeous setting. Tourist attractions in the city include The National Museum, The National Theater and miles of beautiful beaches. Finally, Oba's Palace sits majestically on Lagos Island, portions of which are over 200 years old with a newly constructed extension.

Ondo area has many fascinating tourist attractions including the Ikogosi Warm Spring, Idanre Hills, Ipolo-Iloro Water Falls, Ebomi Lake and the Museum at Owo. The most popular are Ikogosi Warm Spring and the Idanre Hills. The Ikogosi Warm Spring, located in a valley in Ikogosi Town, northeast of Akure, is ideal for camping or picnics. The Idanre Hills, with curious dome-shaped peaks, are located in Idanre, southwest of Akure. The hills have socio-religious significance, having protected inhabitants from invaders during inter-ethnic wars in the distant past.

SOUTH EAST NIGERIA

Anambra State

It offers many exciting attractions throughout the area, including the Ogbunike caves, Agulu Lake, Igbo-Ukwu archaeological excavations and the Aguleri Game Reserve. Onitsha, located on the Eastern bank of the River Niger, is famous for its robust market and commercial activity. The traditional Ofala festivals, performed by royalty in Anambra, are rare pageants of color and fanfare.

Calabar

It is an attractive city on the bank of the New Calabar River, near its confluence with the Cross River, which has a long history as the regional port of eastern Nigeria. Residents here trace their ancestors back to Babylon before the time of Christ. First visited by the Portuguese at the end of the 15th Century, Calabar is also the center from which many missionaries ventured forth in the 19th and 20th centuries, including Mary Slessor, who arrived in Calabar in 1875. Places of interest include the National Museum in the old Residency Building. The building was prefabricated, shipped from Britain and erected atop Consular Hill in 1884, later known as Government Hill. The museum itself is history, a vibrant colonial style citadel commanding superb views of Calabar and the Calabar River. The museum traces the history of Calabar and the surrounding areas in a spacious setting.

Enugu

It is the center of the Nigerian coal industry, situated in attractive, hilly country with wide roads and expressways and main arteries leading north, south, east and west. Sites in Enugu include a branch of the National Museum, the Iva Valley Coal Mine Museum (where coal was first mined in 1909), and University of Nigeria faculties. It also boasts one of the best hotels in Nigeria, the Nike Lake Hotel.

Oron is in the southeast corner of the Akwa-Ibom State, on the Cross River, and is worth visiting for its National Museum. The Museum, overlooking the river, encases the history of the local Ibibio people plus an important collection of wooden Ekpo memorial carvings that portray the male ancestors of the Ibibio people, believed to be two to three centuries old.

Owerri is predominantly inhabited by the Igbo people. The Igbo's are renowned for their music and dancing, especially the colorful masquerades in which the dancers wear elaborate masks. Places of interest include an amusement park, the Nekede Botanical and Zoological Gardens, the Palm Beach Tourist Village at Awomama and the Oguta Lake Holiday Resort, which has recently developed into an international tourist center.

Port Harcourt

It is the capital of Rivers State and is the center of the oil industry in Nigeria. It is called "The Garden City" because of its abundance of trees and parks. Now the second most important port in Nigeria, Port Harcourt did not exist before 1913. Nearby are the two historic ports of Bonny and Brass, formerly connected with the slave trade, but which now serve as oil ports and terminals. The town is a good base from which to explore the local creek villages and towns. The local people include Elk, Kalabari and Ibos, not to mention British, French, American and Dutch, who work in the oil fields. Sites include the State Museum, which features many examples of local culture including masks and carvings. The Cultural Center on Bonny Street has a stage and auditorium for plays, dancing and a shop where tourists can purchase local handicrafts. The Azumint Blue River sports beautiful clear water with sandy beaches. Tourists can rent canoes for a ride down the river to stop at a beachside picnic site, outfitted with wooden chairs, tables and grills for a pleasant riverside barbecue.

Umuahia

This is home to the National War Museum, where relics of the Nigerian civil war are on display, including weapons and fascinating local inventions. Other attractions include the Akwette Blue River Tourist Village and Uwana Beach. Visitors to Akwette will be impressed with its unique weaving industry.

CENTRAL NIGERIA

Abuja, in 1976, was selected by the Federal Government to become the new seat of government; and in 1992, the first of four stages of this move to Abuja was launched with almost all the senior government officials now in Abuja. Besides being the administrative seat of government, Abuja is a beautiful city surrounded by rolling hills, with ample mountaineering potential. The Gwagwa Hills, near Suleja, the Chukuku Hills, the Agwai Hills and the famous Zuma rocks are just some of the awe-inspiring manifestations of nature's beauty in the area.

Bida is a lively town, famous for its handicrafts and colorful market, and is the principal city of the Nupe people. Bida is famous for its glass beads, cloths, silver and brass work, its carved 8-legged stools made from a single piece of wood, and decorative pottery. Bida's market truly stands out as a traditional showcase of local commerce in Nigeria.

Gurara Falls is on the Gurara River in Niger State, on the road between Suleja and Minna. Particularly impressive during the rainy season, the falls span 200 meters across with a sheer drop of 30 meters, which creates a dazzling rainbow effect as the water cascades over the top into a cloud of spray below.

Ilorin, an ancient city, is the southernmost point of Fulani expansion and bears characteristics of both north and south. It has often been described as the gateway between the two because of its strategic location, and as a result offers a good base for visiting the surrounding area. Tourist sites in Ilorin include the Mimi's Mosque and residence built in 1831, the first mosque in Ilorin, and the magnificent new Central Mosque, built during the reign of Sule Gambari, the late Emir of Ilorin. Both attest to the Islamic culture of the city. Another attraction is the Dada pottery workshop in Okelele quarters, the largest pottery factory in Nigeria. Other local tourist sites in Kwara State include the Esie Museum of stone figures, over 1,000 soap stone figures of men and women, sitting on stools or kneeling, with elaborate hairstyles and facial marks. Little is known about the figures, being products of a very old civilization. Esie museum houses the largest collection of stone figures in sub-Saharan Africa.

Owu Falls, in Kwara State is the highest and most spectacular natural waterfall in West Africa, at its best during the rainy season. The waterfall cascades 330 feet down an escarpment with rocky outcrops to a pool of ice-cold water below.

Lokoja is a historic colonial town. Due to its location at the confluence of the two great rivers, the Niger and Benue, it became the headquarters of the Royal Niger Company in the 19th Century. The headquarters building, still standing, was prefabricated in London and shipped to Nigeria, where it was assembled without using a single nail. Also in Lokoja is the Iron of Liberty, located in the compound of the first primary school in northern Nigeria. Here, many slaves were freed at the end of the slave trade.

Makurdi is located on the bank of River Benue, one of the two great rivers in Nigeria. For visitors to the area, there is a zoological garden in Makurdi and Goven Hills, Ushango Hills and Bassa Hills, and fishing and boating on the Benue River. In Igbor there is the Ikure Wildlife Park.

Okene is the home of the Igbira, an industrious people renowned for their farming abilities and their beautiful woven cloth. Picturesque Okene, nestled atop several rocky hills, is a fascinating place to visit. The craft of cloth weaving still continues to thrive here and the cloth remains highly-prized throughout Nigeria. For tourists in the area, Okene has a thriving market, open every other day, where there is a section dedicated to the woven cloth.

Koton-Karifi is located west of Okene and about 20 miles north of the confluence of the rivers Niger and Benue. For anyone who enjoys fishing, Koton-Karifi is a paradise, for the multiples of the Niger tributaries are teeming with fish.

NORTH EAST NIGERIA

Bauchi, an old Hausa town surrounded by an appealing range of rolling hills, is close to both the Yankari Game Reserve, approximately 1½ hours away to the southeast, and the site of the Geji Rock Paintings, located on the Bauchi-Jos road. In Bauchi, tourists may also visit a memorial and library dedicated to Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the first Prime Minister of Nigeria, who was assassinated in 1966. The library houses many of Balewa's personal papers.

Jos

This has always been a popular destination for tourists due to its height above sea level (4062 feet). Jos has two golf courses, Rayfield and Plateau, plus a polo club and other sports/entertainment offerings. The National Museum in Jos is one of the best in Nigeria, especially for archaeology and pottery, where many fine examples of Nok heads and artifacts, circa 500 BC - 200 AD, are displayed. The Pottery Hall has an exceptional collection of finely crafted pottery from all over the country. On the same grounds, the Museum of Architecture contains life-size replicas of Nigerian architecture, from the walls of Kano to the Mosque at Zaria to a Tiv village. Other attractions in the area include the wildlife park, nestled amid 8 sq. km (3.09 sq. miles) of unspoiled savanna bush, where the rare pygmy hippopotamus is successfully being bred in 'hippo pool.' Lions roam a large enclosure that simulates their natural habitat and visitors will also find elephants, red river hogs, jackals, chimpanzees, crocodiles and numerous other animals to view. The Shere Hills can be seen to the east of Jos and offer a prime view of the city below. Assop Falls is a small waterfall (again, best seen in the rainy season) which could make a pleasant picnic spot on a drive from Jos to Abuja.

Riyom Rock is a dramatic and photogenic pile of rocks balanced precariously on top of one another, with one resembling a clown's hat, observable from the main Jos-Gimi road. Kura Falls is a refreshing area for walks and picnics, with scenery reminiscent of the Scottish highlands.

Maiduguri is a handsome, impressive town with broad streets and plentiful trees, presiding over strong traditions and a culture dating back more than 1,000 years. Maiduguri is an ideal place for seeing the Kanuri people, with their fine tribal markings, and the Shuwa women, adorned with plaited hairstyles and flowing gowns.

The Borno Region around Maiduguri is one of the most fascinating places in Nigeria. Along the northern borders of the state is Sahel-Savannah country, endowed with rolling sand dunes punctuated by oases in the dry season, yet covered with vegetation during the rainy season. Southern Borno is generally green savannah land, enlivened by hills and rock formations, while toward the Cameroon border, visitors will enjoy majestic mountain visages.

The Bulatura Oases are on the western side of Borno State, northeast of Nguru. This is the desert in a Hollywood film set: dunes, camels and palm trees around an oasis. The severe beauty of this place offers a special treat to visitors who have yet to experience such a daunting landscape. The oases are also excellent for bird-watchers. In the dry season there are thousands of palaerartic migrants which congregate there.

Yola, on the upper reaches of the Benue River, lies in close proximity to some of the most scenic areas of Nigeria, situated along the mountainous border with Cameroon. The Mambilla Plateau is within a day's journey from Yola, as are the Shebshi Mountains to the south.

The Gwoza Hills are breathtaking. They are located southeast of Maiduguri, and southeast of the village of Gwoza Valley, along the Cameroon border.

Mandara Mountains are also in this area, stretching from south, in the Mambilla, to Mubi in the north. The Mandara provide some of the most spectacular scenery in all of Africa. It is suggested that tourists in the area take at least a week to enjoy both the Nigerian and Cameroon sides of these mountains.

NORTH WEST NIGERIA

Kano City

The oldest major city in Sub Saharan Africa dates back more than a thousand years. For centuries it was one of the most active commercial centers in West Africa. Today, it is Nigeria's third largest city and the largest city in the north. Centrally located, Kano City acts as a terminus for northern Nigeria, linked by road and communications with all other major population centers in the region. By virtue of its historic role as trading center between the Sahara, down south to Zaria, Kano remains a living, modern day relic of a rich past. The Emir's Palace in Kano is the past incarnate with its old stone walls and entrance gate, at the heart of this ancient city, encircled by a wall that extended 17.7km in circumference, with 16 different gates. Close by, the Gidan Makama Museum offers an excellent history of Kano and of the Hausa and Fulani peoples. Kano Central Mosque is one of the largest in Nigeria and, with permission; a visitor may be allowed to ascend one of its towering minarets to gain a spectacular view of the city below.

Kaduna

It was previously the colonial capital of northern Nigeria. Located on the Kaduna River, the city serves as an important junction, with roads extending in five different directions. Kaduna is a major communications center and industrial base and also a thriving metropolis from which tourists can explore the surrounding countryside. Within Kaduna there is a National Museum on Ali-Akilu Road that features wood carvings, masks, Nok terracotta figures and Benin bronzes. Consideration may be given for an annual Durbar festival in Kaduna, similar to the 1977 Durbar that was held during the World Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC).

Katsina

The northernmost city in Nigeria sits on the edge of Sahel and borders the neighboring country of Niger, which has traded with her for centuries. Katsina, one of the old walled Hausa cities, is the capital of Katsina State. The Goborau

Minaret, a most picturesque tourist attraction, is the tallest mud-brick building in Nigeria and is 250 years old. A fine view of Katsina can be gained from the top, an area that hosts the best and most elaborate Durbar festivals.

Birnin Kebbi

A centuries old Hausa-Fulani walled city is the capital of Kebbi State. The area is famous for traditional arts and crafts, beads, swords and glassware, and is the site of the Argungu Fishing Festival, one of the most popular tourist attractions in Nigeria. Held annually, it attracts competitors from neighboring Niger and Chad Republics, plus many visitors from all over the world. Apart from the traditional fishing competition, there are also boxing and wrestling contests.

Sokoto

The center of Islamic activities in Nigeria is the home of the Sultan of Sokoto, the spiritual leader of Muslims in the country. The city stretches with avenues of lush trees and wide roads, appearing like an oasis in a semi-desert area. Sokoto is another of the great trading cities of the North, with old trade routes across the Sahara to Morocco and Algeria. It is famed for its excellent leatherwork: handbags, wallets, fans and other items featuring exquisite crafting. The Sultan's Palace is a delightful sight, with its lavish architecture and guards in their multicolored regalia. At 9:00 pm on Thursdays, visitors can watch the musicians play the Tambari for the Sultan. Usman dan Fodio, the founder of the present day Hausa-Fulani states, is buried in Sokoto. Though not a tourist site per se, it holds great historic importance.

Zaria

One of the original seven Hausa cities founded in the 16th Century, is a vibrant, attractive city which has retained its ancient look by leaving most of the modern development and industry to nearby Kaduna. Once surrounded by some 19 km of walls, in some areas still well-preserved, Zaria has three important establishments: The Ahmadu Bello University at Samaru, the first university in the north, Barewa College, the oldest high school in the north, where most of the Nigerian political and military leaders were educated, and finally the Nigeria School of Civil Aviation, the only one of its kind in West Africa.