

TRAVEL

down in

Africa

Abidjan offers
slice of what's
young and
upcoming

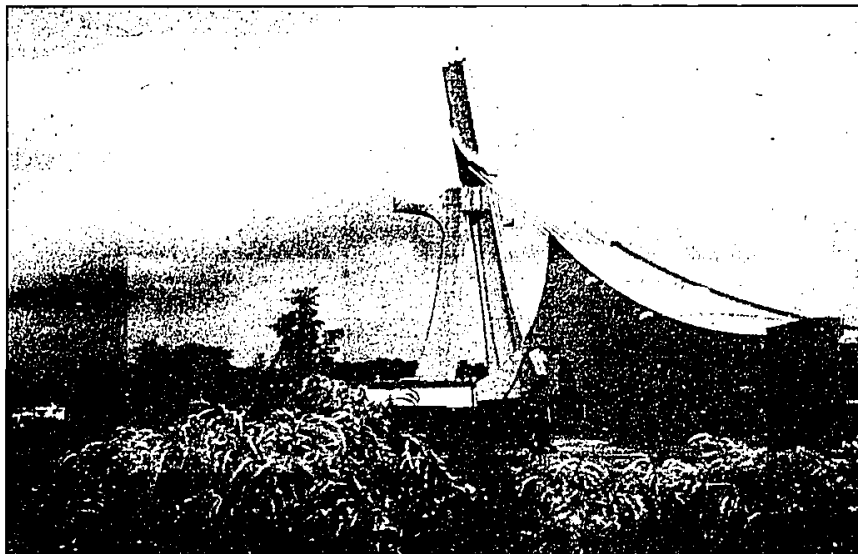


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AMBASSADE DE COTE D'IVOIRE

Church building: St. Paul's Cathedral, completed in 1985, is shaped in the image of a figure with outstretched arms and a long trailing robe.

BY KENNETH B. NOBLE
NEW YORK TIMES SYNDICATE

A few years ago a best-selling series of French travel guides cautioned would-be visitors that Abidjan is not really an African city.

Go elsewhere, it urged, if you want an "authentic" African experience. Abidjan, with its concrete-and-glass high rises, neatly landscaped streets and villas and expensive restaurants, would be likely to disappoint those looking for the exotic and the picturesque.

It is a complaint Abidjanians have heard again and again and, for the most part, find patronizing or absurd. It is certainly true that parts of the city seem to have more in common with Paris than with any other place in Africa.

There are no nearby wildlife preserves or, for that matter, little that is particularly striking about the terrain or vegetation. And while prosperity has given the city an impressive sheen of modernity, it has also brought traffic jams, pollution and high prices.

But Abidjan, set astride a lagoon and home to about 2 million people, is among the continent's most popular destinations for other reasons. It is the intellectual and cultural capital of West Africa and any visitor with the better part of a day to spend can usually find a good slice of what's young and upcoming in Africa.

For those with more time it is possible to dine out virtually every

night for six months and never enter the same restaurant twice.

The Ivory Coast is now in the most temperate part of the year, August through September, to be followed by a brief rainy season in October and November, all ideal months to visit before the blistering heat and humidity of winter set in, lasting until March. For most of the year temperatures fall within a range of 73 to 80 degrees.

While English is widely spoken at hotels that cater to international travelers, it is seldom understood elsewhere, and thus some knowledge of French is desirable, but not essential.

Except for the main thoroughfares most of Abidjan's streets are unnamed and unmarked and many buildings lack numbers.

Events

The big event this summer is Culturefest '92 from Aug. 16 to 29. It is being billed as the continent's biggest cultural celebration in at least a decade and will feature hundreds of African and African-American performers and artists, a jazz concert, fashion shows and a film festival.

A highlight will be the Gospel Music Concert featuring BeBe and CeCe Winans and other gospel professionals.

For more information contact Culturefest at (800) 348-7200 or in

New York City (212) 246-2550.

City and environs

Abidjan isn't rich in fine buildings, but anyone who wants to get some of the flavor of Africa's modern realities can spend a day around the main commercial district known as the Plateau.

Start at the National Museum along Boulevard Nangui-Abrégoua, which is open 9 a.m. to noon, and 3

p.m. to 6 p.m., every day except Monday; there is no admission charge.

The building has not been kept in good repair, but the permanent collection of 20,000 objects, mostly from various Ivory Coast tribes, is, in this writer's opinion, the best on the continent.

Not far away, along Avenue Jean Paul II, is St. Paul's Cathedral, which was completed in 1985 and is

now regarded as the commanding symbol of Abidjan. The Catholic cathedral is generally open daily from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.

For sheer vibrancy probably no neighborhood in West Africa can top Treichville. Leading south from the Marche de Treichville a two-story market with an enormous selection of bric-a-brac is the Boulevard du 6 Février, one of the city's main shopping streets. What Treichville is known best for, though, is its nightclubs; there are scores of them.

For a contrasting view of the city spend an hour or so driving about Cocody, about a 10-minute drive from the center across the Ebrie Lagoon, and the nearby neighborhood of Riviera, the focus of upper-middle-class and bourgeois life in Abidjan.

Cocody affords a panorama of the entire Plateau and is the best place to comprehend the extraordinary design of St. Paul's Cathedral. From this perspective it becomes clear that its shape represents a human figure with arms stretching out to the north, and behind it a trailing robe.

A word of caution: Virtually every house in both neighborhoods has guards, some armed, and for good reason. A burgeoning growth rate and the rush to the cities that typifies much of the continent has spawned criminals who do not shy from robbery, often at knifepoint.

The cautionary note extends to the Plateau too.

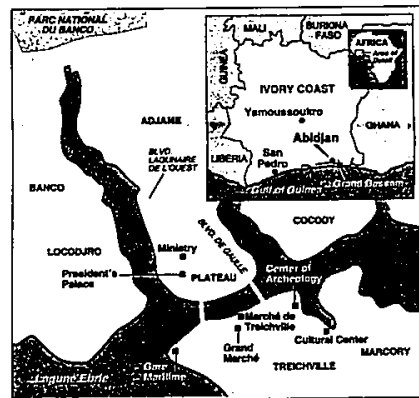
Take cabs or ride with friends at night. Do not cross large distances on foot at night, and it is best to leave jewelry and watches in the hotel. During the day the same security precautions apply to Treichville, but elsewhere in the city security is mostly a nighttime concern.

Well within the limits of a day's drive, about three hours to the north, is Yamoussoukro. In 1983 the National Assembly voted to have the political capital changed from Abidjan to Yamoussoukro, though so far hardly anyone seems to have noticed.

It is well worth the visit to see the mammoth granite and marble basilica, Notre Dame de la Paix, which is said to be the world's largest cathedral (although some claim that St. Peter's in Rome still holds that distinction). Unfortunately, opening hours change frequently; it would be wise to check with a travel agent or hotel concierge before embarking.

Grand Bassam, an old colonial town about 27 miles east of the city, toward Ghana, is another easy day trip. Along the main road as you enter the town is a small strip of artisans' stalls.

On weekdays Grand Bassam and other nearby beaches are gloriously empty. The drawback is that most restaurants are also likely to be closed, so take your own lunch.



The New York Times

Short notice vacations long on travel savings

BY EVERETT POTTER
SPECIAL WRITER



A last-minute decision to take a short-notice vacation is often a great way to go.

"When cruise lines can't fill their ships, when airlines have empty seats close to departure, when tour operators have empty hotel rooms because they can't sell their vacation packages, then they turn to us," says Joel Benard.

He is president of Last Minute Travel Club in Boston. The seven-year-old company offers both domestic and international trips at a big discount.

"We can handle it that close to departure," says Benard. "We'll arrange for tickets to be picked up at the airport if necessary."

"Flexibility is the key to saving a bundle of money," he adds. "We find that people looking for warm-weather destinations are not as choosy. Get them a great hotel and air-package deal, and they're happy whatever Caribbean island they land on. With Europe, people are usually more specific."

"You should avoid holiday weekends because there's rarely any-

thing last-minute available."

Last Minute Travel has offered seven-night packages to Aruba and Cancun, both of which include airfare and hotel accommodations, for \$399 per person.

The club has been offering round-trip airfare from Boston to London in the range of \$349 to \$399 per person. A week in Orlando, including airfare, hotel and car rental, ranges from \$199 to \$249 per person.

Benard also offers trips through his Vacation Outlet retail counters in Filene's Basement stores throughout New England and the Chicago area.

For further information contact the Last Minute Travel Club, 1249 Boylston St., Boston, Mass. 02215 or call (800) LAST-MIN or (617) 267-9800.

Moment's Notice Inc. has been offering last-minute vacations for 25 years, says general manager Sharon Mayfield.

"This kind of vacation appeals to people in every walk of life," she says.

The company charges a membership fee of \$19.95. It has about 25,000 members nationwide and maintains a hot line with a recent hotel-stay package to St. Martin for \$499 per person and to Cancun for \$399 per person.

As good as these prices are, they are comparable to those offered by major airline consolidators who offer flights to the same destinations.

"With the price wars that are going on we can't always promise to be the cheapest," says Mayfield.

For further information contact Moment's Notice Inc., 425 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017 or call (212) 486-0503. The hot-line number is (212) 750-9111.

"America's clearinghouse for last-minute unsold cruises," is how Spur of the Moment Cruises Inc. is described by its owner Duke Butler.

"On the average, 'last-minute' means anywhere from two weeks to one month out, with an average discount of 50 percent. But we've gotten discounts of up to 80 percent two weeks from a sailing date."

Butler has compiled a mailing list of 50,000 people with a list of the features they want in a vacation.

"Say I get a cruise line with empty berths for a Mediterranean sailing in August," he says. "The computer can have postcards out to the 10,000 people who request that kind of vacation within 24 hours."

Alternatively, travelers can mail Butler a self-addressed, stamped envelope to request his monthly 14-page "availability list," call his hot line at (310) 821-1060 for an eight-minute recording "of as many discounted cruises as I can mention."

For further information contact Spur of the Moment Cruises Inc., 411 N. Harbor Blvd., San Pedro, Calif. 90731 or call (800) 343-1091.

Another source for bargain last-minute cruises is Cruises of Distinction, a cruise-only travel agency.

"We charge \$30 a year for our Instant Notice Service," says company president Mike Grossman.

"It's applied to any cruise you purchase from us and entitles you to every mailing we do, at least 12 a year."

For further information contact Cruises of Distinction, 460 Bloomfield Ave., Montclair, N.J. 07042 or call (800) 634-3445.

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