

BENIN Despite the fact that Ouidah boasts one of West Africa's most beautiful beaches, the Atlantic walkway is not its main attraction. Situated 40km west of Cotonou, Benin's defacto capital, this former centre of West Africa's slave trade is the home of voodoo's eleventh supreme chief, the Daagbo (His Majesty) Tomadjehoukpon II Metogbokandji. For visitors and locals alike, Ouidah is one of the region's most important centres of this oft-misunderstood belief.

Voodoo, Benin's official religion, isn't about sticking pins in dolls fashioned in the form of your mother-in-law or ex-boyfriend. Nor is it about the evil spells or devil worship that Hollywood makes it out to be. It's actually a faith with over fifty million followers worldwide, all worshipping a Supreme Being and hundreds of lesser gods and spirits.

In Ouidah, the cityscape is detailed with evidence of its influence. Fetishes – any man-made object that has been occupied by a spirit – lurk among the faded Portuguese-style buildings and along the grassy road to the beach. You may notice them because they look out of place in their environment, or are covered in the bloody, waxy remains of a recent animal sacrifice.

About a kilometre down a dirt track from town lies the Sacred Forest of Kpassé, guarded by a dozen or so statues honouring the various divinities of the gods. Several are made from old motorcycle parts, but the most striking lies near the entrance, a roughly one-metre-high horned creature with an enormous phallus, symbolizing strength and fertility. When ceremonies to the snake god Dangbé (also known as Dan) are not underway in Ouidah's Temple of the Python, opposite the Ouidah Basilica, visitors can creep inside its cement walls to have their photos taken with sleepy and harmless pythons slung around their necks.

The town also hosts a voodoo festival each January, and various ceremonies are held throughout the year, when costumed dancers and those "fortunate" enough to be temporarily possessed by spirits sway to the beat of drums, summoning the gods. And, if you're really lucky, you might get invited in for an audience with the Supreme Chief himself, regally perched in an imitation La-Z-Boy and sipping a Fanta. Imagine the Pope being so hospitable.