

# IDENTITIES ABROAD: BENIN



## IDENTITIES ABROAD

As you prepare for your education abroad program, you may be considering how your own identities may or may not interact with the host culture in similar or different ways than they do at home. Below you will find country-specific information on potential challenges for students who are from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in education abroad programs. This information, adapted from the Diversity Network's Country Diversity Notes (via [Diversity Abroad](#)), is intended to assist you in exploring how you might be received abroad based on your race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, or ability.

The information below features a country overview for Benin as well as information pertinent to the socio-cultural climate that U.S. students of diverse backgrounds can reasonably expect while living in the country. It also offers bulleted information noting facts that may directly relate to student experiences in the country. Links with additional information and resources on the various topics are also offered.

The below information provides a bird's-eye view of diversity matters in the country as they pertain to U.S. students. Purchase understands the below information is not exhaustive or inclusive of all possible student identities and experiences. We encourage you to conduct further research and chat with relevant points of contact including your program advisor, faculty leader, or peers who have traveled to Benin, to gain a greater understanding of your host country and/or city.

If you would like to speak with us about any questions pertaining to diversity and inclusivity abroad, please contact us at [study.abroad@purchase.edu](mailto:study.abroad@purchase.edu) and we will answer your inquiry to the best of our ability and/or refer you to others with the expertise that you need. Additionally, if you are interested in discussing other geographical locations, please don't hesitate to contact us.

## COUNTRY OVERVIEW

### FAST FACTS:

**Capital:** Porto-Novo

related 4.3%, Dendi and related 2.9%, other 0.9%, foreigner 1.9%

**Population:** 13,301,694

**Language(s):** French (official), Fon and Yoruba, tribal languages (at least 6 major ones in the north region)

**Religions:** Muslim 27.7%, Roman Catholic 25%, Protestant 13.5% (Celestial 6.7%, Methodist 3.4%, other Protestant 3.4%), Vodoun 11.6%, other Christian 9.5%, other traditional religions 2.6%, other 2.6%, none 5.8%

**Ethnic groups:** Fon and related 38.4%, Adja and related 15.1%, Yoruba and related 12%, Bariba and related 9.6%, Fulani and related 8.6%, Ottamari and related 6.1%, Yoa-Lokpa and



Benin is a small, west African country slightly smaller than the state of Pennsylvania. It shares borders with Togo, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria and has a very small coastline on the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean. The capital city, Porto-Novo, is located along this coastline. The official language of Benin is French. The country is mostly flat with a tropical, hot, humid climate. A majority of the population lives in the south with the highest concentration residing around the cities on the Atlantic coast. Most of the northern region is only sparsely populated but there are slightly higher populations located on the western border. Issues regarding poverty, unemployment, increased living costs, and reduced resources has driven a great deal of the Beninese to migrate to other countries. Some estimate that 4.4 million (over 40% of the population) live abroad, most moving to other West African countries such as Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire. Less than 1% emigrate to Europe, but the majority of those that do settle in France.

Cotonou is the economic center of Benin and is located in the southeast region of the country between the Atlantic Ocean and Lake Nokoué. Although it is not the capital city of Benin, this is where most of the country's government buildings and diplomatic services are located. The city was founded by King Ghezo of Dahomey in 1830 and was a center for slave trade. In 1883 it was occupied by the French and it became a part of colonial French Dahomey in 1904. In 1975, the city officially became part of the People's Republic of Benin.

Review current travel risks for Benin:

[U.S Department of State Travel Risks](#)

According to the Institute of International Education (IIE) [Open Doors Report 2019](#), 55 students from the United States studied abroad to Benin.

## ETHNIC MINORITIES IN BENIN

### SOCIAL CONTEXT:

The slave trade in Benin began in 1553 by the Portuguese at first, and the Dutch, English, French and other Europeans entered the trade shortly after. Enslaved people were the principal export from the country before the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The volume of enslaved people taken from the country increased so rapidly during the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that the area was known by the Europeans as the "Slave Coast". The numbers remained high until the 1840s and caused a substantial depopulation of certain areas of the country. It is estimated that over the course of two centuries, more than one million Africans were taken from the country from the Ouidah port alone. It is a major part of the country's history and remains a source of political tension between descendants of slave traders and descendants of the enslaved. There are memorials (including the Door of No Return in Ouidah) and museums dedicated to teaching future generations about the dark history of the slave trade in Benin.

## POTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR:

- With the rise of at-home DNA testing, there has recently been a surge of “heritage travel” where African Americans with western-African roots travel to Benin, as well as other nearby countries including Togo and Ghana, to see where their ancestors may have lived and to meet with Africans their age that grew up in these countries.
- White students in Benin may hear Beninese (especially children) refer to them as “Yovo”. This is not intended as an insult but rather, a local equivalent of the term “gringo” used in many South American countries.

## ADDITIONAL LINKS:

- [West Africa: Meet the African-Americans returning to the continent](#), Youtube
- [“Heritage travel” is surging in the era of DNA testing. It has a special significance for black Americans](#), Vox
- [An African country reckons with its history of selling slaves](#), The Washington Post
- [History of Benin](#), Britannica
- [Benin Travel Guide](#), Responsible Vacation
- [World Directory of Indigenous People- Benin](#), Minority Rights Group International
- [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2019 in Benin](#) (see Section 6: Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons; National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities), US Department of State
- [Culture of Benin - history, people, traditions, women, beliefs, food, customs, family, social](#) Everyculture.com

## SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN BENIN

### SOCIAL CONTEXT:

While homosexuality and same-sex sexual acts were recently legalized for men and women in Benin, many LGBTQ+ individuals face persecution and are very rarely open when it comes to their sexuality. Same-sex marriage is not legal, but changing gender is legal and surgery is not required to do so. There are no protections against discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals in employment or housing situations although LGBTQ+ individuals are allowed to serve openly in the military and donate blood.

## POTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER OR QUEER STUDENTS:

- Public display of affection between opposite sex partners is discouraged in Benin, but it is common and socially acceptable to see men holding hands as they walk together. This is entirely nonsexual.
- There are community-based organizations and support groups for LGBTQ+ Beninese individuals in major cities like Cotonou and Parakou for those who feel comfortable coming out and are seeking a safe place.

## ADDITIONAL LINKS:

- [LGBTQ Travel Safety](#), Asher Fergusson
- [LGBT Rights in Benin](#), Equaldex
- [LGBT Travel Information](#), U.S. Passports & International Travel
- [LGBT rights in Benin](#), Wikipedia
- [Gay life in Benin](#), Global Gayz
- [Culture of Benin](#), Everyculture.com
- [A Fight Yet to Be Won](#), GenEq Benin
- [Sexual Orientation Laws in the World \(December 2019\)](#), ILGA, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association

## DISABILITY IN BENIN

### SOCIAL CONTEXT:

Benin has signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Disabled Person, however, individuals with disabilities in Benin still struggle to access healthcare that addresses their needs. Discrimination on the basis of disability is prohibited by the constitution and laws, however disabled individuals continue to face discrimination and the government does little to address it. The labor code includes

protections and employment rights for workers with disabilities, but many individuals experience discrimination in hiring as well as difficulty or inability to access the worksite due to poorly maintained roads and walkways, and a lack of accessible public transportation. Those with physical disabilities are rarely considered in development initiatives and few resources such as wheelchair ramps are available throughout the country and there is no law requiring buildings to be accessible. Due to a lack of resources and institutional assistance, many disabled individuals support themselves through begging.

#### POTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES:

- Individuals who have physical disabilities or use wheelchairs will find it difficult to navigate the public roads and sidewalks, and may not be able to access buildings.

#### ADDITIONAL LINKS:

- [Mobility International USA](#), Resources for Americans Traveling Abroad with Disabilities
- [Information for Students with Disabilities Traveling Abroad](#), U.S. Department of State (see section under Local Laws & Special Circumstances)
- [Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016](#), (see Persons with Disabilities).
- [Traveling with Disabilities and Medications](#), Transportation Security Administration
- [Accessible Travel in Benin](#), Lonely Planet
- [Benin](#), Humanity and Inclusion

## RELIGION IN BENIN

#### SOCIAL CONTEXT:

Christianity is the most prominent religion in Benin, nearly 50% of the population follows one of the various denominations. There are also large Muslim populations as well as adherents of African Traditional Religion throughout the country. It is not uncommon for members of one family to practice Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religion, or a combination of each. Other religious groups in the country include Eckankar and followers of Baha'i Faith.

One of the most practiced African Traditional Religion in Benin is Vodun (Voodoo) system of belief, which originated in this region of Africa. Ouidah, located on the central coast, is the spiritual center of Beninese Vodun. Voodoo day is a public holiday in Benin and there is a national Voodoo museum. It does not hold the same negative connotations it may have in the West and many who practice Christianity or Islam incorporate Voodoo elements, ceremonies, and rituals, into their practice. It is more than a religion or belief and encompasses language, culture, dance, art, music, and medicine.

#### POTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS STUDENTS:

- The use of specific animals and animal sacrifice are traditional parts of some Voodoo ceremonies. Pythons are a symbol of strength in the religion and Python Temples have pits filled with live snakes where devotees can go to repent for sins. Chickens and goats are sacrificed as offerings and eaten. Many other animals and animal parts used in ceremonies are sold in fetish markets.

#### ADDITIONAL LINKS:

- [Countries and Their Cultures: Benin](#) (see section on Religion and Expressive Culture), Every Culture
- [Faith-Based Travel Information](#), U.S. Passports & International Travel
- [Religion in Benin](#)
- [The Reality of Voodoo in Benin](#), BBC
- [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2019 in Benin](#) (see Section 6: Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons; National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities), US Department of State
- [Mosques & Prayer Time in Benin](#), IslamicFinder.org

## WOMEN IN BENIN

### SOCIAL CONTEXT:

Beninese women experience a great deal of discrimination because of societal attitudes. There is a significant gender income gap, a 2017 report showed that women earned 45% less per hour on average than men. Despite constitutional laws and labor codes prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex, women did face employment discrimination in private and public sectors.

While there is no law limiting the participation of women politics, cultural factors have limited their participation. In Beninese custom and tradition, women assume the responsibility of managing the household. Many do not have equal access to formal education, currently 65% of girls in the country are not in school. And women are discouraged from getting involved in politics. However, in an effort to change this, parliament recently adopted a constitutional amendment which will mandate that women will fill at least 24 seats in the National Assembly starting in 2023.

Violence against women is an issue in Benin. Enforcement of laws prohibiting sexual assault was not strong and victims are often unwilling to report their cases out of fear of retaliation and negative social stigma associated with being a victim of sexual assault. Domestic violence against women is a major issue and judges and police are reluctant to intervene in these disputes.

### POTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR FEMALE STUDENTS:

- Female tourists may be charged more than males for goods or transportation.
- Zems, taxis, bush taxis, and buses are all fairly safe for female travelers, but very crowded. Be prepared to re-examine your definition of personal space!
- Female tourists may be approached by men and lured into conversations, questioned about boyfriends, proposed to, etc.
- As always, be aware of your surroundings. Try to always travel with a group and avoid going out late at night alone, especially if walking.

### ADDITIONAL LINKS:

- [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2019 in Benin](#) (see Section 6: Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons; National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities), US Department of State
- [Sexual Harassment and Prevention In College Students Studying Abroad](#), The Center for Global Education
- [Information for Women Travelers](#), U.S. Department of State
- [Culture of Benin - history, people, traditions, women, beliefs, food, customs, family, social](#), Everyculture.com
- [Solo female travel in Benin](#), Beyond Babeesh

## REFERENCES

Maps, flag, and country facts are from the [CIA World Factbook](#). Accessed online in June 2021

[IIE Open Doors Report](#) | [Lonely Planet Benin](#)

**Please note: The content within the resources provided were last reviewed in June 2021 and as such could have changed. Views expressed in links provided or in sub-links within the document do not necessarily reflect the views of the Office for Global Education.**