

BURKINA FASO

Burkina Faso, the smiling country where the people are always nice and laid back, is a simple and forgotten world. It is also the “country of an integrated people”, so named for the past 70 years. This is a territory of savannahs, wooded regions in the south which, little by little, become the Sahel, which is punctuated by yellow acacias and shrubs, pastures of horses and sheep. To the northeast the first dunes appear among the shining pools, precious watering holes for the herds of zebu with horns in the shape of lyres and tended by the Peul shepherds.

To the west rises the Banfora Cliff, with small waterfalls, lakes, green trailing sugar cane, and lunar landscapes of rock sculpted over time into the shape of pickaxes and arrows.

Three rivers provide water to the arid lands of Burkina Faso: The White, Black and Red Volta, which flow into Ghana and the ocean. Along the banks women wash their colored linens while the children happily play in the water, and lone fishermen cast their lines.

Occasionally, in the most humid and wooded regions one might see elephants; but for the most part Burkina is a country of small villages with traditional white buildings composed of straw and clay mixed with water, and with colorful peasants and marketplaces. Here and there one sees clay mosques and churches decorated with local religious symbols: Burkina is also a country of tolerance and of religious syncretism.

The Mossi, a war-like people who built a great empire between the 15th and 19th centuries and didn't lose their autonomy until the arrival of the French, inhabits the central plain surrounding the capital city of Ouagadougou. Their descendants, fierce but peaceful people, live in round clay houses and grow sorghum, millet, and peanuts which they store in granaries made from braided straw. Each ethnic group has different architectural styles which, in both line and color, adapt well to the countryside.

To the west are the Bobo and their village, Bobo Dioulasso, the second largest village of the country, showing a touch of France in Africa. There are large festivals throughout the region in certain seasons where the young and old, women and children, all unite to dance, drink millet beer, and talk about the masked ones who come dancing and jumping accompanied by the sound of tom-toms and flutes. The polychrome masks represent animals, buffalos, antelopes, monkeys, and birds. There is also a large flat mask of a butterfly that is at least two meters in length. All of the masks embody spirits of which fertility and health are asked, and to which thanks are given after the harvest.

In the south live the Gourounsi: their white houses are round with walls decorated by the women. Their geometric decorations in red, black, and white are splendid, and are reminiscent of ancient traditional symbols. In the evening the men sit around the fire telling stories and riddles as old as the world.

Also in the south are the Lobi, a people who have been able to preserve and maintain their animist beliefs. In front of their fortified homes one can see protective fetishes to

which the Lobi offer drinks and sacrifices of chickens and goats. Their famous “bouthida”, small amulet-statues, are placed in the interior rooms to protect the soul of each Lobi, both living and deceased. The beliefs of their ancestors give form to the basis of their current culture and everyday life.

In the north in the region inhabited by the Kouroumba, rock drawings recall the ancients – the brave horsemen and hunters of ostriches, giraffes and lions. A little further north are found traces of old necropoli and dwellings confirm the existence of these populations whose history is misunderstood (or unknown).

To the northeast live the Songhai peasants, the Peul, and Touareg nomads. The latter raise zebra, goats and camels, continuously crisscrossing the territory with their herds in search of water and pasture land. Are they solitary people in a world unchanged and unchangeable, or genius’ of the savannah? The different ethnic groups meet in the local marketplaces which retain an old-time charm: the Peul women covered in jewels, the Touareg with their blue dresses fluttering in the breeze, the barefooted Bella moving alongside their camels and goats with sticks, and the Sonhai selling tobacco, millet and vegetables. Nearby, artisans work on leather bags, saddles, silver jewelry, baskets of braided grass, painted calabash, while blacksmiths throw iron into the fire which they will forge into a knife or a gee.

This symphony of odors and colors, which excite the senses and imbed in the memory, make it impossible to forget the real Africa.

