BENIN FOCUSES ON THE INVESTMENT IN CULTURAL HERITAGE



Over the past decade Benin has strategically invested heavily in its cultural heritage and tourism sector. This has been done with the aim of boosting economic growth and building soft power through its increased intangible cultural heritage. Specific legal changes have been made alongside attracting high-end hospitality projects to allow Benin to become a unique leader in the region.

West African countries have been highly vulnerable to external factors such as climate change and fluctuating global commodity prices. **Benin has seen impressive growth over the years with the economy growing at over 6.5%.** However, the country still suffers from volatility in cotton prices and Nigeria's economic stability. This has resulted in frequent disruptions in the Beninese economy due to naira depreciation and trade restrictions from Nigeria.

To improve the balance of payments, the government has invested in the tourism and hotel industry. The sector development plan aims to increase tourism to contribute to 13.4% of GDP by 2030 from 6%. This has come with a total investment of €1.2 billion. The focus of Benin's investment has been placed on its unique history and cultural heritage.

Cultural Heritage and Investment

The first key aspect of Benin's investment strategy has been to monetize its cultural heritage. The country has created a key product around its vodun (voodoo) culture. The Vodun Days in Ouidah take place every January, attracting hundreds of thousands of tourists. This fills all the hotel capacity along the coast and brings in much needed foreign exchange. The Porto Novo Mask Festival takes place in August to promote the passing on of UNESCO listed intangible heritage. The WeLovEya festival in December takes place in Cotonou to celebrate the creative industries.

There are also museums to help this cause. The Museum of the Epic of the Amazons and Kings of Danhomè in Abomey showcases the regal treasures that have been returned from France. The International Vodun Museum in Porto Novo helps establish Benin as a key reference point for this heritage on the continent.

Legal changes have also been made. Recognizing Beninese nationality for those descended from the transatlantic slave trade has improved relations between Benin and those in the diaspora across America and the Caribbean. This has removed barriers to land ownership and banking for those who are not nationals of the country, therefore encouraging long-term investment in property and business.

History and Spirituality

By focusing on its history and spirituality, Benin is taking a unique approach to growth in comparison to the rest of West Africa. The country is promoting its tourism industry rather than exporting raw materials and using its transit trade. This gives them a potential sustainable competitive advantage due to their intangible heritage.

Originally developments have been concentrated along the Fisheries Road. This is the coastal route

between Cotonou and Ouidah. As the land had previously been controlled, this allowed for high-end developments to be introduced. This includes a championship golf course in Ouidah and a planned Club Med village in Avlékété.

Now developments are moving inland. The government plan (2026-2033) aims to bring in 2.5 million tourists per year by creating ecotourism sites around inland parks and the lakeside city of Ganvié. This will help boost the local economies and bring in local entrepreneurs.

However, there are some challenges to overcome when scaling up. The Sahelian borders mean that there are security issues which means only developments in the safer central and southern regions should be undertaken. Additionally, as the country is moving to a higher-end market, **there needs to be long-term investment in training professionals to ensure businesses can provide the expected service.**

Overall Benin's strategy is still ongoing, but they have created a unique approach to their country by promoting their cultural heritage and improving relations with their diaspora. They have also invested in targeted developments. Whether they will achieve their ambitious goals by 2030 will depend on how they manage their security and continue to turn their unique culture into a sustainable flow of tourists and investment.

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