



# WHERE SIDEWALKS END

## CONNECTING YOU TO A DISCONNECTED PLANET

### An Audience With A Traditional Priest In Togo

#### Exploring West Africa's Ancient Religion



#### Experience

It's the sort of ordinary city street you might find in any modern capital, busy with early morning traffic and suited pedestrians heading for work, aside perhaps for the marché des féticheurs that lie in the middle of it all looking rather out of place.

Located on the outskirts of the Togolese capital in the Akodessewa district, the fetish market's dozen rickety stalls bear all manner of animal totems. There an elephant's tail, the hair coarse; crocodile skins still pinned to the ground for drying; whole monkey heads; gutted rats, and snake vertebrae necklaces. A living version shifts within some sacking. The word fetish refers both to these charms and the deity that oversees their use. Visceral it may be, ghoulish it is not.

Having noted down a recipe for skin moisturizer – active ingredient: dried and ground chameleon – I'm told I can meet Fetish himself. The physical incarnation of Legba, a major god of the Yoruba tribe, I'm led to a mound of clay rising out of the earth floor of a dark rickety hut and adorned with a simple face and erect penis.

The son of Fetish, a priestly figure connecting the divine and the human, rings a handbell as I'm told to repeat my name three times for good luck. Speaking out loud I can't help but feel a little foolish. Then the priest displays a series of charms: a large flat ebony seed that aides the memory if put under your pillow at night, another charm for a good love life, the figures of a king and queen designed to keep family members safe, and a small bound wooden figure designed to keep travellers safe.

I'm told it's Fetish, rather than the priest, who decides how much I should pay for the last of these. To do this the priest casts cowry shells to the ground repeatedly, reading the god's wishes from the pattern of how the shells fall. 'The Fetish says you have very good luck. I asked if you should pay 25,000 CFA' (the cost of a good hotel room) 'but Fetish says no. You are lucky. I asked Fetish if you should pay 20,000. Fetish says no. I asked if you should pay 18,000. Fetish says yes... But, if this is too much you can suggest a price to Fetish.'

I meekly suggest 5,000 francs, the equivalent of a meal on the street outside. The priest throws the cowries down one final time. He smiles. 'You are very lucky.'

On an Atlantic beach a little way south I try and remember the instructions given to me by the priest to ensure the charm's protection. 'You must whisper your travel plans into its mouth' he had said. 'Then you must plug the mouth to stop the wish escaping. At the end of your journey you must remember to release the plug, so your wish can return to Fetish completed.'



#### Stay – Accommodation

Budget travellers will like the prices at My Diana Guesthouse, a simple yet clean option surrounded by greenery which is centrally located. To escape central Lomé head to the mid-range L'Arbre du Voyageur in the Atikoumé area. There are also a good number of international chains, including Ibis, for better facilities should you prefer a higher-end choice.

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#### Eat – Restaurants

Togolese food is sublime wherever you buy it. Keep an eye out for pintade (guinea fowl) dishes, usually served with the dough-like fufu. Brochettes de la Capitale is a good reliable restaurant serving a range of dishes not far from the city center. Readily-available street snacks include aloko (deep fried plantain), and gaou (bean flour) fritters.



## Time – Seasonality & Schedules

Togo's Atlantic coast, where you'll find the capital, enjoys a dry season from November to February, with unpleasantly heavy rain from around May to mid-July. Temperatures are hot throughout the year, so move slowly and drink plenty of water to stay hydrated. The market is open daily from around 9am – 6pm, but best avoided during the middle hours of the day because of the heat.

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## Safety – Possible risks

Like any major city there is a risk of mugging and petty theft, with the risk increasing after dark. It's generally advised to stay away from the beaches as night falls. Togo's coastal waters have strong undercurrents, and swimming is not recommended at any time of day. Standards of driving can leave a lot to be desired, so take care when on the roads as a passenger or pedestrian.



## Pay – How much does it cost?

Compared to travel in western capitals a visit to Lomé can be relatively inexpensive. The market has an entrance fee of approximately \$10, with additional costs should you wish to photograph or video your visit. As described, prices with Fetish and his human priest are negotiable to say the least, and will depend a lot on what you're wearing – in other words, how rich you look.

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## Responsible Travel – Best Practices

While clearly not ascribing to western views of conservation, it's important to realize that the majority of Togolese retain traditional animist beliefs in conjunction to Christian or Islamic faith, to which fetishes are an integral aspect dating back centuries. Togo is a conservative society, and women in particular should wear loose fitting clothing (which also helps with the heat) to avoid offending local sensibilities.



## Reality Check – Be Aware

Travel in West Africa can be a trying experience at times. The weather can sap the strength, while the attention you may receive as a foreign visitor can become tiresome. Though it may be irritating too, it is generally just a harmless attempt by locals to learn more about a world they have very little knowledge of. Be polite and patient, and you'll get as much out of your conversations as the locals.