



## General Information about Benin

The majority of Benin's 10.3 million people live in the south. Life expectancy is 59 years. About 42 African ethnic groups live in this country. The largest city in Benin is Cotonou, the city volunteers fly into and the capital city is Porto Novo. The country's official language is French but there are 52 other spoken African languages. Benin is tropical and it is typically very hot and humid. The dry season runs from November to April and Benin's rainy season is from the end of April through September.

## Passport / Visa Information

If chosen as a volunteer, you would need to apply for and obtain your Passport as soon as possible. After receiving your passport and yellow fever vaccine, you then will need to apply for a Benin Visa. Information can be found at <http://www.beninembassy.us/index.php/visa-forms>. Again, only take these steps for visa application after being accepted into our volunteer program.

Requirements are very strict for visa application so please read them carefully. Your actual Passport and Yellow Fever verification card must be sent to Benin's Embassy in Washington DC. The Embassy will fill out a page in your passport for your visa and the passport and yellow fever verification card will be mailed back to you in a self-addressed envelope you include.

## What vaccinations do I need?

Your family physician should have most of the vaccinations listed. You can check the CDC website for what is recommended. Go to [www.CDC.gov](http://www.CDC.gov) and click on Vaccinations and then West Africa. If you don't have a family doctor, your local health department should have the vaccinations at a reasonable rate. Every clinic does not offer the Yellow Fever vaccine, so call local health and travel clinics to see who offers this vaccine in your area. Verification of Yellow Fever vaccination is **mandatory** for entrance into Benin.

*The following list of vaccinations are recommended:*

- Hepatitis A
- Hepatitis B
- Polio (if booster is needed)
- Typhoid
- Meningococcal
- Tetanus (booster is **highly** recommended)
- Malaria protection (more on that later)
- Yellow Fever – this is the only vaccine **required** to gain access into the country. You will receive a certificate of this vaccination & it **MUST** be kept with your passport when you travel. **Do not put it in your luggage!** You must be prepared to show this certificate at the airport along with your passport and visa.

## What should I bring if I am a volunteer?

- A notarized copy of your passport to be given and kept with our in-country staff members
- Deodorant
- Sanitary products for women
- Sun block & sunburn relief lotion
- Bug repellent
- Sunglasses
- Hat
- Nalgene / Water Bottle
- All toiletries
  - Shampoo
  - Soap & Loofa
  - Toothbrush & Toothpaste
  - Hair ties/clips & bobby pins
- Hand sanitizer
- Body spray
- Travel size Kleenex packs
- Chapstick with SPF protection
- Small flashlight with extra batteries
- Alarm clock (wind up or battery operated only)
- Bible, Journal, Reading material
- Pillow
- Electrical adapters – For France; two-prong. Note: Electrical appliances must be 110/220 approved
- Clothes (see guidelines)
- In your carry-on luggage please make sure you have...
  - Passport with Visa
  - Yellow Fever vaccine verification card
  - Luggage verification tags for checked luggage (necessary to obtain checked luggage when you land in Cotonou)
  - Money in \$100 US increments
  - Prescription medications in original containers



## While in Africa

### What if I get sick or injured?

The medical facilities in Sakété and Cotonou are decent. They can patch up most injuries. There are qualified doctors that have been trained; they are competent and capable of handling situations as they arise. Jon & Jillian are nurses and are able to treat most anything at home including IV treatments and managing infections. Please keep in mind that most medications are easily accessible so there is no need to bring various medications that aren't needed on a daily basis. If a need arises we will do our best to treat it! With that being said, all volunteers are responsible for their own medical expenses associated with any medical procedures and visits to the clinic. Travel insurance is available through various agencies in the United States at fairly reasonable prices. This needs to be obtained on your own and prior to arriving in Benin.

## What should I do about prescription medicine?

If you have a medical condition that requires medication, you will need to carry all of that medication with you in the original container. Nearly all other needs that arise while you are here can be treated medically by using the local pharmacy. No need to weigh down your luggage with a bunch of possible medications. We first prescribe prayer and then suggest you bring enough personal money to make the purchase if necessary.

## Malaria

Malaria has flu like symptoms and can be fatal if not treated. Taking malaria precautions is **HIGHLY** recommended. Malarone & Doxycycline are the recommended prophylaxis for malaria. Both are not necessary, one prophylactic medication is fine. Please follow the directions for medication administration carefully as all malaria prophylaxis is started before leaving for Africa and continued after returning home. Malaria can remain dormant & re-occur several months later so be sure to keep that in mind and report your travels to your doctor if you show flu-like symptoms or severe headaches after returning home. Malaria is treatable so it is important to catch it early. If you think you might have malaria, it can be confirmed by a simple blood test. If you develop malaria while here, medication is always readily available. Mosquito nets are also provided for each volunteer and it is necessary that these be used each night while you are sleeping.

## Money

### What is the exchange rate?

**540 F CFA = \$1.00 US**

These numbers are approximate. The exchange rate fluxes daily. In general, there are about 540 Francs CFA for each \$1.00 US dollar. Any money left over at the end of the trip that has been exchanged into CFA can be exchanged back to US dollars before you leave the country if you wish to change it again.

### Can I use a credit card or traveler's checks?

No. It is not advised to use a credit card or debit card in Benin. *Traveler's Checks are NOT accepted!* It is best to bring cash. This is really the only option. **To exchange your cash into Francs you must have \$100 bills made after 2002 ONLY.** Euros are easily exchanged but should also come in high quantity such as 50 or 100.

### What would I need to buy?

You may want cash for buying souvenirs at the market, or sodas and snacks while here. Most volunteers take advantage of the opportunity to buy cloth and hire a tailor to make authentic African clothes. The cost for the outfits vary depending on the type of cloth and how fancy you want the outfit (about \$12-15 US for the cloth and about \$10 US for the tailor to make one outfit.)

### Should I be worried about thieves?

When paying for items in public places, such as tourist markets, it is suggested to pay for items with exact change if you have it. The market vendors may or may not provide change. **NEVER** take a wad of money out in plain view. If you are paying for something, only remove the money you need to pay for the item. If you secure your items on your person you shouldn't have any problems. Try to make a point of looking at people you pass on the street so they know you are paying attention. This usually discourages a thief from taking advantage of your carelessness. Eye contact is good, but we're not talking about prolonged eye contact. It becomes an art – just enough eye contact, but not too much.

## Should I give money to beggars?

There are many beggars in Benin so someone asking for money will most likely confront you. Many times children are made by adults to stand at intersections for hours in the hot sun to beg, instead of going to school or learning a trade. These adults know people will give money to children so they exploit them. Read Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and the goats. What do you do? It is a good idea to take some time to think about it before you get here. We allow the Holy Spirit to lead us regarding who to give to and who not to so we don't necessarily have a statement about what you should do but we suggest that you ask yourself these questions: How do you decide who to give money to and who not to give money to? Can you give money to every beggar? How do you know if the money you are giving is going to be spent on nutritious food or for drugs and alcohol? It is very difficult, to say the least. Pray & think & pray some more on these issues before arriving in Benin. And pray all the more while you're in Benin!

## Clothes, Personal Items, & Lodging

### Glasses or contact lenses?

It will probably be best to wear what you are in the habit of wearing. It is very dirty & dusty, so you might want to carry a small bottle of solution with you in order to rewet your contacts for comfort or so you can take them out and moisten them at any time. We have experienced that contacts tend to rip easily here so be sure to bring several back up pairs just incase. If you have allergies or are concerned about contacts you will be fine to wear glasses.

### Can I bring personal electronic equipment?

If you bring personal electronic equipment, bring enough batteries for the whole time. Do not count on power for recharging batteries. If you bring items such as iPods, laptops, cameras, video cameras, etc. be prepared to leave it in Africa. These items are favorites for thieves. We do anticipate it at all times, and are pleasantly surprised when it doesn't happen. You must be aware of where your personal items are at all times. You cannot leave them lying around anywhere. You should keep most things in your room with the door locked. Also, because of the climate, your items may not come back in the same condition in which you took them.

### Can I take photos and/or video?

It is permissible to take photos and video throughout Benin. You should be considerate if someone reacts like they do not want their photo taken. It is always a good idea to ask first. Be careful to NOT take video or photos of government or police officials. The camera could be confiscated and you might get an "insider's" look at a Benin prison. Remember to enjoy the experience and not be locked behind your viewfinder the entire time you are here.

### What should I wear?

The dress in Benin is quite conservative; keep this in mind when packing. Suggested footwear is comfortable sandals, flip-flops, crocs and/or tennis shoes that have already been broken in. Cotton or linen clothing and clothes made for extremely hot temperatures are suggested. Sleeping attire is anything that is appropriate to wear in front of roommates. You will want to make it as little as appropriately possible; too much clothing will make sleeping more uncomfortable. Pack one bathing suit just in case.

*Women:* wear pants, capri pants, or skirts. It is imperative that you remember your knees must be covered at all times. Skirts should be long enough to cover knees when sitting. No shorts or short skirts will be permitted. Shirts should be short sleeve or wide tank top. No spaghetti straps or tube tops. One-piece bathing suits only please.

*Men:* pants and shorts are appropriate. For church, khakis and a collared shirt is good. Being without a shirt is not normal unless you are doing manual labor. T-shirts are appropriate.

While life in the village is different than life in town, appearance is important to the Beninese people. Expats (foreign white people) tend to dress sloppy and not totally presentable. We don't think you need to be dressed up, but you also shouldn't wear your rags. So, keep that in mind when packing.

## **Where will I be staying?**

Lodging for your arrival and departure will depend on flight times. If you arrive or depart late in the night or early in the morning, we will be obliged to rent a hotel room in Cotonou. Volunteers are responsible for paying this expense as well as the expense for the staff member(s) who will have to be there at this time also. If you arrive during the day, we can drive directly to Sakété to begin your adventure. The hotel in Cotonou (if needed) will have all amenities including towels. Toiletries not included.

You will be staying in a hotel that is in the town of Sakété. This can serve two people per room. There are sheets and pillows, a toilet and shower, along with a fan, in each room. It is totally concrete (except the mattress). All of your needs will be met here...but not much more. They have electricity but we encourage everyone to bring their flashlight just in case electricity is cut. The hotel is 5,000 CFA/person/ night.

## **What about plumbing & electricity?**

At the hotel modern plumbing and electricity are available. The toilet at the hotel may or may not have a seat. The lighting in the room may be only a light bulb. A fan will be available for sleeping. We cannot guarantee modern conveniences at all locations we will be at for your time here. It is easiest to roll with what is offered. Electricity and water are often cut for various reasons, so be prepared to be in the middle of a shower and have the water run out or for your fan to turn off in the night.

## **Food & Water**

### **Can I drink the water?**

Tap water should not be used for drinking. You will be drinking bottled water or filtered water during your trip, depending on your preference. This will be provided for you with the cost of the trip. There is a well at the orphanage and while we don't recommend you drink that water, Jon and many other visitors have and it presents no problems that we are aware of.

### **Will I drink enough water?**

It is important to drink extra water during the trip since people who are not adapted to the climate will perspire more than usual. It wouldn't be surprising if you drink 3 liters a day or more. If you would like to bring powdered drink mixes, it will help replace electrolytes and may improve the fatigue many people experience while in Benin. However, you must use caution with these drinks since half of your daily intake of liquid should be plain water. You must have water with you at all times! You can bring a small, refillable bottle with you if it is more convenient to carry around. Water is always easily available and purchasable anywhere in the country.

## What will I eat?

You may eat anything that is cooked or baked well. Raw fruits and vegetables must be prepared by soaking 20 minutes in water/bleach solution. Then the fruit or vegetables must be rinsed well before being prepared. Anything prepared for you by the orphanage is fine to eat.

Be wary of chicken or other meats cooked at roadside stands. It is probably not fatal, but it is not a good idea to eat it without checking with Jon or Ashley first. There are health risks with eating meat prepared on the side of the road. If you are not next to Jon or Ashley then do not purchase it or eat it from the side of the road. You can kindly decline if it is offered. Also, check with Jon or Ashley before eating something offered to you away from the orphanage with the exception of established westernized restaurants.

Picky eaters should carry something with them or they might go hungry. We suggest you at least try what is in front of you. "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Luke 10:8 shows us that Jesus taught his disciples that "when you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you". We expect the same from visitors. If you have a health issue or allergy, we would like to know about it ahead of time to help prepare things that would be appropriate for you. If you are diabetic, please know there will be large spans of time between meals on any given day. Please bring small snacks with you for these unforeseen circumstances. And remember, unfortunately, chocolate melts in the heat!

## What kinds of snack food should I bring?

You can bring single serving packets of granola bars, mixed nuts, raisins, dried fruit, dry cereal, peanut butter crackers, snack chips, etc. Also, you can bring a small jar of peanut butter, artificial sweetener, & single serve drink mix. Teeny ants are plentiful and happy to share your snacks so you'll need to be sure they are sealed at **ALL** times. Not to mention the cockroaches. Grocery stores with very limited selections are available in the main cities if you wish to take a day trip to these places. Other snacks can be found in the market of Sakété, but the variety is extremely limited.

## What kinds of food will be provided?

When staying in Sakete, lunch and dinner will be provided for you as part of your trip fee. These foods are typically rice with a sauce, beans, or pate (the local food made of mais flour). If you wish to vary from these meals you may purchase the ingredients of your desired meal in the market and bring them with you to prepare at the orphanage. One of our cooks or children can help with the task if you provide everything. The food fee will still be taken as it is planned for in advance. If the volunteer purchases food, gas and charcoal at minimum will be necessary.

Breakfast is on your own agenda and also your own personal money. You can easily walk to the bread stand from our guesthouse or the hotel. Spreadable cheese can be purchased locally and other toppings are available at the grocery store. Instant coffee, tea, milk powder and sugar are all sold locally as well. A water heater is available for use at the guesthouse.

Western foods are imported and as mentioned can be found at the super markets in the city. Store-bought foods consist of items like canned tuna, jam, Nutella, noodles, rice, and flour. Fresh meat, bread, and eggs can be bought in the store. Fresh fruit, baguettes, and vegetables come from the local market. Sodas can also be purchased in Sakété for around \$1.00US.

# Practical Advice

The sun is intense in this tropical environment, even on cloudy days. Sunscreen is suggested. Jackets are seldom needed but a good thing to have on rainy, cooler days. Rain resistant items are needed for rainy season. We suggest bringing an umbrella or light plastic poncho. Sometimes an umbrella works; sometimes it is a torrential downpour.

Bugs are an issue all the time, so your goal should be to avoid getting bit. Wear bug repellent especially if you are out after dark (which you will be). And BRING RAID. BRING RAID... you will need it.

Whether or not you have ever been to Africa, it is appreciated that visitors keep an open mind and do not act as if they “know Africa”. An important thing to remember is that Africa is HUGE! Did you know the continental United States can fit nearly three times inside the boundaries of the African continent? Think about the regional differences in the United States: East coast and West coast, New England to the Deep South. What is experienced in Kenya is very different than what is experienced in Benin, Senegal, Egypt, Rwanda, Sudan, Ethiopia, or Mozambique. Going to Africa once, or even 10 times, doesn’t make you an expert. Jon and Ashley who live here still recognize how little they know. It is important to get to spend time with the people of each area you visit in order to “know” them. Benin is about the same size as the state of Virginia. There are major cultural differences in Benin, especially as one moves north from the coast. In His own image, God created us. Learn to enjoy those differences and gaps in understanding and allow God to build a bridge to span those divides. When you leave Benin it will be like leaving family only if you take the time to get to know its people.

## Do I need to learn French?

There are 52 languages spoken in Benin but the official language is French. If you have had some French, brush up on your verbs & conjugation before arriving. It will be a neat experience for you to be able to pick out some words said in conversation and possibly begin communicating with the locals. Volunteers who will be staying for more than 2 months are required to know French. We are limited in our use of volunteers when there is a language barrier.

Knowing a few handy greetings and phrases will go a long way in showing Beninese people you want to share part of their lives. If you’ve never had French before, hop on the Internet and learn some greetings and handy phrases. Please make every effort to learn some before coming. However, the language of Christ’s love is truly universal.



# FLEXIBILITY IS NOT AN OPTION!

## **Time Differences**

Time conscious people sometimes have a difficult time in West Africa. Getting things done in a “timely manner” has a TOTALLY different meaning here than in the US.

Some advice:

- Take your watch off
- Don't ask what we're doing next, just enjoy the moment
- Bring travel games, music, magazines, or a book for times when waiting is what we are doing
- Learn to adapt to this culture instead of expecting others to adapt to you

The schedule that is set for the day will inevitably change or need to be rearranged because every single day is different here.

## **Turn Obstacles into Opportunities**

Any scheduled activities are tentative until they actually happen. There are so many potential issues that advanced planning is almost impossible in West Africa. Westerners who have not yet experienced West Africa are almost always shocked when things do not go as planned. Tires go flat, vehicles break down, appointments are late, reservations cancelled, someone gets sick or injured, everyone shows up at the wrong time, no one shows up at the right time, and a long list of situations can change at any moment. This sounds as pessimistic as a toddler whining when something does not go his way, but it also has a positive twist. We need to surrender our rights, our control, and our expectation and place them in God's hands. The commitment to you is that the leaders will do their best to make the planned activities happen. Be prepared, however, to accept the obstacles and problems faced together as opportunities to do something unexpectedly great for God.

## **Volunteer Expectations**

Attached is a list of volunteer tasks, however, our objective with volunteers is for them to help relieve the many tasks of the organization and orphanage. We expect for our volunteers to work diligently daily on anything and everything that needs done, to have initiative, adaptability, and to be self-sufficient. Being self-sufficient is of utmost importance. Jon and Ashley are already too busy with the children and organization, they cannot take on more people that they need to care for. Please be conscious of this and be willing to work and live on your own. This absolutely does not mean they will “throw you out to the wolves”, but we need you to know that they will not be able to be by your side during your entire stay. We have the opportunity to gain much from each volunteer and hope they will gain much from us as well!

## **Volunteer Conditions**

- We expect from all those working with us flexibility, adaptability and tolerance.
- We expect from all those working with us to accept our Biblical values and principles.
- Each volunteer agrees to respect the working hours and the schedule agreed upon beforehand with our Volunteer Coordinator.
- Each volunteer makes him/herself available to the organization during his/her whole mission. Normally, a volunteer works around 40 hours a week during 5 or 6 days.
- For private traveling or other activities outside of our organization, Tree of Life declines all responsibility.

# Tasks for Tree of Life USA Volunteers

## **We desire for our volunteers to:**

- become familiar with all the aspects of the organization and understand realities of life in Sakété and Benin
- based on their discoveries, develop strategies for future funding, project proposals, communications, etc.
- together with the Directors, develop ideas of income-generating activities or projects for Arbre de Vie
- participate in everyday life of Arbre de Vie
- work diligently and independently to help the organization and the children advance

## **According to their gifts and competences our volunteers can take on any of the following tasks:**

### **Communications**

- produce PR material such as pictures, videos, articles for the website and other sources
- send material to the Communications Coordinator in the United States (Jillian Gibson)
- write a daily journal which includes main orphanage activities
- write a short article about any extraordinary activity (raising awareness, social cases, etc.)

### **School Work**

- based on a schedule, help the children with their English lessons
- teach math
- give computer lessons
- supervise homework
- help the smaller kids learn how to read and write
- read stories and texts for French comprehension with the kids

### **Educational Activities (outside of school work)**

- organize games with the children
- read stories with the kids
- help the kids create educational skits
- teach gardening and general knowledge of natural surroundings
- teach recycling methods
- teach the utilization of all available resources

### **Arts and Music**

- teach music lessons
- teach modern and western songs, including French worship songs
- do arts and crafts with the children
- help the children develop drawing skills
- teach the children how to make bracelets, jewelry, and other creative activities

### **Biblical Teaching**

- give Bible lessons/stories
- organize worship services with the kids
- teach Biblical principal

### **Other Activities**

- work with the children in the garden
- participate in all daily chores and activities
- teach the children how to think critically and problem solve
- teach self sufficiency
- teach the “way of life” or “how to succeed”
- help the orphanage directors and staff in any given task

