

One of my all-time favorite regions to visit is Africa. From the hectic markets, to the fascinating tribal villages, there's never a dull moment in this part of the world. Which is why last month, my husband and I embarked on an amazing journey to Nigeria that neither of us will soon forget.

After a long flight, our friendly guide met us at the airport and took us to our hotel. We freshened up a bit, then joined the rest of the tour group for a meet-and-greet over dinner – the first of many delicious meals on this trip.

We kicked off our journey the next morning with a visit to a Gwari village. We spent some time getting to know the locals over some native dishes, learning about their unique blend of Abrahamic and traditional religions as we watched the brightly-dressed women cart their pots and baskets around on their shoulders.



Later, we toured Ushafa, a village known for its pottery (and for a visit from Bill Clinton in 2000). We strolled through the pottery center, admired the beautiful handicrafts, and watched the women work their magic molding clay into works of art.

The next day, we made our way to Kontagora, stopping at a few more delightful Gwari villages on the way. We arrived in the city in time for dinner, then ventured out for some drinks at a nearby bar with a patio, where we took in the local atmosphere as the hot desert wind whipped around us.

From Kontagora, we ventured into the welcoming villages of the Kamberi people. We met with some members of this secluded tribe, exploring their thatched roof huts, and learning about their culture. We were lucky to witness the excitement of the weekly market on our visit, watching the villagers barter and trade goods, and seeing some traditional dances.

Our guide translated as we mingled among these wonderful people, some partially dressed and others wearing flamboyant colors. The women in particular were just stunning, their unique facial piercings and tattoos outshone only by the warmth of their smiles.

We headed to Ilorin the next morning, visiting a Fulani settlement along the way. The conservative mono-chromatic Muslim dress in this northern region was a stark contrast with the brightly colored costumes of the south. Nevertheless, we had an incredible time here, touring the spectacular palace of the Emir, and learning about the region's weaving traditions.

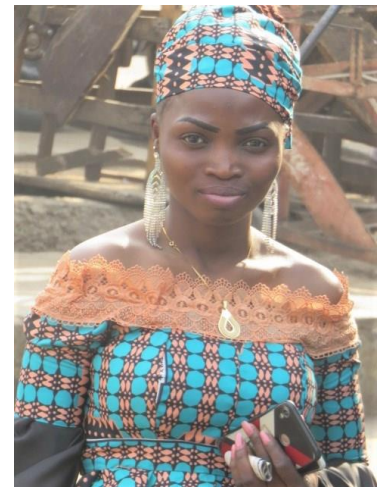
Later, we visited the Esie Museum, where we saw an impressive collection of soapstone statues. There are hundreds of these intricately carved statues, which depict both men and women, and at least one king. Legend has it that these figures were once humans who were turned to stone for disobedience. The Esie people still believe the statues have magical powers and hold a celebration to honor them once a year.

We made our way to Osogbo the next morning to explore the Grove of Osun. This magical forest was like nothing I've ever experienced. Stepping into this spiritual oasis, we were immediately surrounded by interesting sculptures, serene foliage, and monkeys scampering about, clamoring for us to give them a bite of the bananas we brought for them.



From the grove, we traveled to an Orisha temple, and learned about the local religion from one of its priestesses. Next, we visited the Nike Gallery. We were greeted by the owner, the lovely and charismatic Mama Nike, who gifted me and the other women in our group some bangle bracelets. I was overwhelmed by the amazing variety of art, which ranged from antiques, to paintings, to bronze sculptures, and everything in between.

The next day we headed to Ife Ife, where the legendary Oduduwa founded the Yoruba dynasty. Our guide took us to many famous sites in the city, including a sacred Oodua shrine, the Obatala Palace, and the Ooni of Ife Palace, as he regaled us with stories of the origins and lore of the ancient Yoruba people.



We made our way to Abeokuta, the site of the Olumo Rock. The rock is sacred among the Egba people, who used it as a fortress for several years during 19th century tribal warfare. We spent about an hour climbing the rock, navigating the many twists and turns, and peering into its caves. Once at the top, we were taken aback at the breathtaking view of the city and vegetation below, offset by the bright blue sky.

We stopped for a tasty lunch of Jollof Rice at a nearby local restaurant, then roamed Abeokuta. We visited Kuto market and saw where the beautiful adires worn by the women of the region are made, then discovered the mysterious tools of voodoo on display at a local fetish market. Afterward, we stopped by the Palace of the Alake of Egba and saw many statues, historical figurines, and even a squash court.

Our next day began with a drive to Lagos, where we visited the National Museum. We wandered around the museum, admiring the artifacts which ranged from an ancient terra cotta head, to the car where an army general was assassinated in. My favorite exhibits here were the ornate tribal masks.

Later, we spent some time at the Lekki International Arts and Crafts Market. We strolled through the labyrinthine streets, spellbound by the rich cacophony of the vendors hawking their wares and the locals laughing, singing, and dancing. We were warmly welcomed by the sellers, who bartered with us over everything from figurines to jewelry.



The next morning, we headed to the town of Badagry. Here, we visited the Point of No Return, the somber site where future slaves were held before being shipped off to a life of pain and suffering.

Afterward, we toured the Heritage Museum, where we learned about the atrocities of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade as well as the rich history of the various cultures in this part of Africa. We wandered through the museum, taking in the haunting artifacts like shackles, manacles, and replicas of slave ships.

Our last stop of the day was a visit to the Wawu of Badagry at his palace. The Wawu was imposing, dressed in an African print inspired robe, a hat, beaded necklaces, and holding a scepter. He sat on his throne as we all watched one of his wives perform a blessing ritual, making offerings to the gods and tossing kola nuts on the floor, then interpreting their meaning.

We drove back to Lagos, then headed out for our final group dinner. We dined on the delicious local cuisine (I had Suya), reminisced about our incredible trip, then went back to our rooms for the night.

The next morning, we spent a few hours exploring Lagos before we left, stopping to eat some local street food, and taking in the energy of this bustling city. Later, we boarded our flight back home, forever in love with this land of elusive tribal people, sacred groves, and friendly faces.

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