



# An Eye on West Africa

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I have lived on the west coast for over 15 years now. Sure, I haven't been everywhere yet, but having been to resorts in several countries, from Senegal all the way round to Cameroon and beyond, I thought I pretty much got the gist – some lovely sandy beaches, such as those in Sierra Leone and The Gambia, and tons of culture and history such as that in Ghana (including a traditional drumming school!) and Nigeria, that kind of thing. But nothing prepared me for the beauty of the Atlantic coastline in eastern Côte d'Ivoire – or at least one piece of it.

I was heading for Assinie-Mafia, which is about 90 minutes' drive from Abidjan airport. The arrivals hall there is rather civilised, with a book store, easy currency exchange, a bar and even a Burger King. Anyway, I head out of the airport, and instead of travelling north into the city, I head east, along the Abidjan beach front. That looked nice enough, if a little windswept, but my first stop was to be Grand-Bassam. Sadly, the town has a tragic history, after a terrorist attack in 2016 left 16 tourists and soldiers dead. That was over two years ago, and whilst the dead and injured are not forgotten, life goes on, and the tourists have returned, although fewer than before.

The old quarter of Grand-Bassam is a UNESCO World Heritage site, because of its history as a major city and port, but today it's really rather faded. Wikivoyage says the town is "Filled to the brim with French colonial charm", but I prefer Lonely Planet's "Arty and bathed in faded glory". Lots of interesting-looking, but pretty decrepit buildings. Even the acclaimed ceramics factory was, well, decrepit.

The leading hotel in Grand-Bassam is the Hotel L'Etoile du Sud, on the beach, a small beach with angry-looking surf. The rooms are nice enough, but the balconies which form the entrance to the rooms are in poor condition, and I was less than impressed. The Afrikland Hotel is one of the most sterile I have ever come across (and empty), whilst the Nsa Hotel is just awful. So I came away from Grand-Bassam very disappointed, wondering what it might have been like when it was a real hotspot on the West African coast.

Next stop was my real destination, Assinie-Mafia, about another 30 minutes' drive east of Grand-Bassam. The road from Grand-Bassam goes a bit inland to the north, and then plunges south to Assouindé, where there are numerous little surf clubs including Kame Surf – I swear the list of cocktails in their bar is the longest in Africa. Head east along the coast and there's Assinie-Mafia, spread out along the coast, with several resorts and private villas. Turn into one of them, and there in front of you is (finally!) the reason for my use of superlatives – the Assinie Lagoon. The resort is

spread along the north shore of the lagoon, which is maybe 300 to 400 metres wide, looking across to the peninsula, itself about 125 metres wide, and then to the Atlantic Ocean.

I'm not one for the traditional beach-sea-horizon-sky view, but this lagoon view is, to me, absolutely fantastic.

You can hear the ocean from here, you can swim in the lagoon (it's not recommended to swim in the ocean, too dangerous) and all sorts of water sports: speedboats, canoes, water-skiing and more. The palm trees across the water, a glimpse of the ocean if you're high enough up (the peninsula is pretty flat), the sound of the surf, and the tinkle of the ice in your gin and tonic – just perfect!

The main hotels on the lagoon are the African Queen Lodge, the Coucoué Lodge and Les Marines de Babihana. The Coucoué has a massive store of speedboats, jet skis and quad bikes, and both Coucoué and Marines have restaurants over the water. These hotels are okay, but nothing special, although I was impressed with a suite I saw at the Marines, with a glazed bathroom looking out into a tiny private garden.

What is special in Assinie-Mafia is the new kid on the block, the Maison d'Akoula, a truly beautiful palace, created by Mme Akoula Amon Chauvin-Buthaud, the *propriétaire*, who designed everything herself. It is a labour of love, and has just eight rooms, four on the 'mainland' and four on the peninsula, the latter accessed only by boat (a two-minute ride). What rooms! They're enormous, with beautiful furnishings and décor, either on the water or in the beautiful gardens, privacy and exclusivity assured.

Most of the guests for the resorts in Assinie-Mafia are residents of Abidjan, leisure at the weekend and, for those with meetings facilities, conference groups during the week. They don't get much demand from other countries in the region, but then you didn't know such a place existed, did you? Neither did I before a couple of weeks ago. Perhaps I shouldn't have told you about Assinie-Mafia, but then the accommodation stock is not huge, and it's not going to be overrun any time soon. Before the troubles hit the country, there was both a Club Med and a Valtur village at Assinie-Mafia, on the peninsula, but they've been closed for a long time now, and their type of mass tourism would (in my opinion) be inappropriate in the resort today.

It's a real treat, is Assinie-Mafia, I loved the peace and quiet – not to mention the prawns and the G&T! ■

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