

# History

African history is a massive and intricate subject. What follows is only intended as a general overview. It's just to give you a taste of the world-shaking events that have shaped the continent's history, from the early men and women who left their footsteps in volcanic ash to the liberation of Nelson Mandela, and a whole lot of wars, conquests, civilisations and revolutions in between. You'll find more detailed histories in each of the individual country chapters.

## HUMAN ORIGINS & MIGRATIONS

You've probably heard the claim that Africa is 'the birthplace of humanity'. But before there were humans, or even apes, or even ape ancestors, there was... rock. Africa is the oldest and most enduring landmass in the world. When you stand on African soil, 97% of what's under your feet has been in place for more than 300 million years. During that time, Africa has seen pretty much everything – from proto-bacteria to dinosaurs and finally, around five to 10 million years ago, a special kind of ape called *Australopithecines*, that branched off (or rather let go of the branch), and walked on two legs down a separate evolutionary track.

This radical move led to the development of various hairy, dim-witted hominids (early men) – *Homo habilis* around 2.4 million years ago, *Homo erectus* some 1.8 million years ago and finally *Homo sapiens* (modern humans) around 200,000 years ago. Around 50,000 years later, somewhere in Tanzania or Ethiopia, a woman was born who has become known as 'mitochondrial Eve'. We don't know what she looked like, or how she lived her life, but we do know that every single human being alive today (yup, that's EVERYONE) is descended from her. So at a deep genetic level, we're all still Africans.

The break from Africa into the wider world occurred around 100,000 years ago, when a group numbering perhaps as few as 50 people migrated out of North Africa, along the shores of the Mediterranean and into the Middle East. From this inauspicious start came a population that would one day cover almost every landmass on the globe.

Around the time that people were first venturing outside the continent, hunting and gathering was still the lifestyle of choice; humans lived in communities that rarely exceeded a couple of hundred individuals, and social bonds were formed to enable these small bands of people to share food resources and hunt co-operatively. With the evolution of language, these bonds blossomed into the beginnings of society and culture as we know it today.

The first moves away from the nomadic hunter-gatherer way of life came between 14,000 BC and 9500 BC, a time when rainfall was high and the Sahara and North Africa became verdant. It was in these green and pleasant lands that the first farmers were born, and mankind learned to cultivate crops rather than following prey animals from place to place.

By 2500 BC the rains began to fail and the sandy barrier between North and West Africa became the Sahara we know today. People began to move southwest into the rainforests of Central Africa. By this time a group of people speaking the same kind of languages had come to dominate the landscape in Africa south of the Sahara. Known as the Bantu, their populations grew as they discovered iron-smelting technology and developed new agricultural techniques. By 100 BC, Bantu peoples had reached East Africa; by AD 300 they were living in southern Africa, and the age of the African empires had begun.

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## AFRICAN EMPIRES

Victorian missionaries liked to think they were bringing the beacon of 'civilisation' to the 'savages' of Africa, but the truth is that Africans were developing commercial empires and complex urban societies while Europeans were still running after wildlife with clubs. Many of these civilisations were small and short-lived, but others were truly great, with influence that reached far beyond Africa and into Asia and Europe.

### Pyramids of Power

Arguably the greatest of the African empires was the first: Ancient Egypt. Formed through an amalgamation of already organised states in the Nile Delta around 3100 BC, it achieved an amazing degree of cultural and social sophistication. Sophisticated food-production techniques from the Sahara combined with influences from the Middle East to form a society in which the Pharaohs, a race of kings imbued with the power of gods, sat at the top of a highly stratified social hierarchy. The annual flooding of the Nile kept the lands of the Pharaohs fertile and fed their legions of slaves and artisans, who in turn worked to produce some of the most amazing public buildings ever constructed. Many of these, like the Pyramids of Giza, are still standing today. During the good times, which lasted nearly 3000 years, Egyptians discovered the principals of mathematics and astronomy, invented a written language and mined gold. Ancient Egypt was eventually overrun by the Nubian Empire, then by the Assyrians, Persians, Alexander the Great and finally the Romans. The Nubians retained control of a great swathe of the Lower Nile Valley, despite getting a spanking from the Ethiopian empire of Aksum around AD 500.

### Hannibal's Homeland

Established in Tunisia by a mysterious race of seafaring people called the Phoenicians (little is known about their origins, but they probably hailed from Tyre in modern-day Lebanon), the city-state of Carthage filled the power gap left by the fading empire of Ancient Egypt. By the 6th century BC, Carthage controlled much of the local sea trade, their ships sailing to and from the Mediterranean ports laden with cargos of dye, cedar wood and precious metals. Back on land, scholars were busy inventing the Phoenician alphabet, from which Greek, Hebrew and Latin letters are all thought to derive. All this came to an abrupt end with the arrival of the Romans, who razed Carthage to the ground (despite the best efforts of the mighty warrior Hannibal, Carthage's most celebrated son) and enslaved its population in 146 BC. A host of foreign armies swept across North Africa in the succeeding centuries, but it was the Arabs who had a lasting impact, introducing Islam around AD 670.

### The Kingdom of Sheba

Aksum was the first truly African indigenous state – no conquerors from elsewhere arrived to start this legendary kingdom, which controlled much of Sudan and southern Arabia at the height of its powers. Aksum's heart was the hilly, fertile landscape of northern Ethiopia, a cool, green place that contrasts sharply with the hot, dry shores of the Red Sea just a few hundred kilometres away. The Aksumites traded with Egypt, the eastern Mediterranean and Arabia, developed a written language, produced gold coins and built imposing stone buildings. In the third century AD, the Aksumite king converted to Christianity, founding the Ethiopian Orthodox church. Legend has it that Ethiopia was the home of the fabled Queen of Sheba and the last resting place of the mysterious Ark of the Covenant. Aksum also captured

Mozambique loses more than \$130 million a year – the equivalent of its entire national budget for agriculture and rural development – due to restrictions on importing into Europe and the dumping of cheap sugar exports at its door.

the imagination of medieval Europeans, who told tales of a legendary Christian king named 'Prester John' who ruled over a race of white people deep in darkest Africa.

### Golden Kingdoms

The area around present-day Mali was the home of a hugely wealthy series of West African empires that flourished over the course of more than 800 years. The Ghana Empire lasted from AD 700 to 1000, and was followed by the Mali Empire (around AD 1250 to 1500), which once stretched all the way from the coast of Senegal to Niger. The Songhai Empire (AD 1000–1591) was the last of these little-known, trade-based empires, which at times covered areas larger than Western Europe, and whose wealth was founded on the mining of gold and salt from Saharan mines. Camels carried these natural resources across the desert to cities in North Africa and the Middle East, returning laden with manufactured goods and producing a huge surplus of wealth. One Malian emperor was said to possess a nugget of gold so large you could tether a horse to it! Organised systems of government and Islamic centres of scholarship – the most famous of which was Timbuktu – flourished in the kingdoms of West Africa, but conversely, it was Islam that led to their downfall when the forces of Morocco invaded in 1591.

### Swahili Sultans

While the West African kings were trading their way to fame and fortune, a similar process was occurring on Africa's east coast. As early as the 7th century AD, the coastal areas of modern-day Tanzania, Kenya and Mozambique were home to a chain of vibrant, well-organised city-states, whose inhabitants lived in stone houses, wore fine silks and decorated their gravestones with fine ceramics and glass. Merchants from as far afield as China and India arrived on the East African coast in their magnificent, wooden sailing boats, then set off again with their holds groaning with trade goods, spices, slaves and exotic beasts. The rulers of these city-states were the Swahili sultans – kings and queens who kept a hold on their domains via their control over magical objects and knowledge of secret religious ceremonies. The Swahili sultans were eventually defeated by Portuguese and Omani conquerors, but the rich cultural melting pot they presided over gave rise to the Swahili language, a fusion of African, Arabic and Portuguese words that still thrives in the present day. The Omani sultans who replaced the Swahili rulers made the fabled island of Zanzibar their headquarters, building beautiful palaces and bathhouses and cementing the hold of Islamic culture on the East African coast.

## THE EUROPEAN SLAVE TRADE

There has always been slavery in Africa (slaves were often the by-products of intertribal warfare, and the Arabs and Shirazis who dominated the East African coast took slaves by the thousands), but it was only after Portuguese ships arrived off the African coast in the fifteenth century that slaving turned into an export industry. The Portuguese in West Africa, the Dutch in South Africa and other Europeans who came after them were initially searching for lucrative trade routes, but they soon saw how African slavery worked and were impressed with how slaves helped fuel agricultural production. They figured that slaves would be just the thing for their huge American sugar plantations. At the same time, African leaders realised they could extend their kingdoms by waging war, and get rich trading with Europeans, whose thirst for slaves (and gradual insistence that slaves be exchanged for guns) created a vicious circle of conflict.

Check out Richard Hall's fantastic *Empires of the Monsoon*, an unputdownable history of the Indian Ocean and the various colourful characters who sailed across it, from Vasco da Gama to the Three-Jewel Eunuch.

If you are interested in corruption, leopard-skin hats and pink champagne (and who isn't?), get a copy of Michaela Wrong's excellent book about the infamous President Mobutu of Zaire, *In the Footsteps of Mr Kurtz*.

A mere 1% increase in world trade from Africa would be the equivalent of five times the foreign aid currently received by the entire continent.

Exact figures are impossible to establish, but from the end of the 15th century until around 1870, when the slave trade was abolished, up to 20 million Africans were enslaved. Perhaps half died en route to the Americas; millions of others perished in slaving raids.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade gave European powers a huge economic boost, while the loss of farmers and tradespeople, as well as the general chaos, made Africa an easy target for colonialism.

## THE AGE OF THE EXPLORERS

The first European visitors to Africa were content to make brief forays into well-fortified coastal settlements, but it wasn't long before the thirst to discover (and exploit) the unknown interior took hold. Victorian heroes such as Richard Burton and John Speke captured the public imagination with the hair-raising tales from the East African interior, while Mungo Park and the formidable Mary Wesley battled their way through fever-ridden swamps, and avoided charging animals while 'discovering' various parts of West Africa. Most celebrated was missionary-explorer David Livingstone, who was famously encountered by Henry Morton Stanley on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. Livingstone spent the best years of his life attempting to convert the 'natives' to Christianity and searching for the source of the Nile.

## COLONIALISM

Hot on the heels of the 19th-century explorers came the representatives of European powers, who began the infamous 'scramble for Africa', vying with each other to exploit real or imagined resources for their sovereigns, and demarcating random and unlikely national borders that still remain to this day. At the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, most of Africa was split neatly into colonies. France and Britain got the biggest swathes, with Germany, Portugal, Italy, Spain and Belgium picking up bits and pieces.

Forced labour, heavy taxation, and swift and vengeful violence for any insurrection were all characteristics of the colonial administrations. African territories were essentially organised to extract cheap cash crops and natural resources for use by the colonial powers. To facilitate easy administration, tribal differences and rivalries were exploited to the full, and Africans who refused to assimilate to the culture of their overlords were kept out of the market economy and the education system. Industrial development and social welfare were rarely high on the colonialists' agenda, and the effects of the colonial years, which in some cases only ended a few decades ago, continue to leave their mark on the continent.

## AFRICA FOR THE AFRICANS

African independence movements have existed for as long as the foreign overlords, but the formation of organised political resistance gained momentum in the 1950s and '60s, when soldiers who had fought in both World Wars on

behalf of their colonial masters joined forces with African intellectuals who had gained their education through missionary schools and universities. Young men and women went abroad to study and were inspired by the fiery speeches of communist figures and the far-reaching goals of nationalist movements from other countries. They returned home dreaming of 'Africa for the Africans'. Some realised this dream peacefully, others only after decades of bloodshed and struggle, but by the 1970s the dream had become a reality, and a new era of independent African governments was born.

In many cases, however, it didn't take long before the dream turned into a nightmare. Fledgling African nations became pawns in the Cold War machinations of self-serving foreign powers, and factors such as economic collapse and ethnic resentment led them to spiral down into a mire of corruption, violence and civil war. For a closer look at the adventures of Africa's postcolonial governments, flip to the History sections of individual country chapters.

When Ethiopian rebel forces rolled into Addis Ababa in 1991 they were navigating with photocopies of the Addis Ababa map found in Lonely Planet's *Africa on a Shoestring*.

Thanks to the Cold War conflicts of the 1970s, and the civil wars that are always raging somewhere on the continent, Africa is awash with cheap guns. An AK-47 can cost as little as US\$6 – and once upon a time in northern Kenya, an AK-47 could even be swapped for a loaf of bread.

### DIAMONDS ARE A DICTATOR'S BEST FRIEND

They symbolise love and happiness in the developed world, but the harsh reality is that the smuggling and illegal trade of diamonds has funded conflicts and propped up corrupt regimes in many parts of Africa for decades. In an effort to curb the trade in so-called 'conflict diamonds', the Kimberley System came into force in 2003. The system aims to impose a method of self-regulation for diamond buyers and retailers to ensure that only authenticated diamonds make their way into shops. Critics have suggested, however, that retailers in the US and UK are failing to implement the system effectively, and that conflict diamonds are still for sale.

# The Culture

An estimated 910,571,130 people live in Africa, speaking well over a thousand different languages. From pale northern Berbers to tall, slender Somalians and tiny, golden-skinned San, Africans comprise the most culturally and ethnically diverse group of people on the planet. Many parts of Africa are also home to significant Asian, European and Middle Eastern populations. In addition to the dazzling variety of African languages spoken on the continent, many countries have adopted the language of their former colonial powers (English, French, Portuguese, German, Arabic and Italian), either officially or unofficially.

## DAILY LIFE

For the overwhelming majority of African societies, life has changed beyond recognition in the last 100 years. Colonialism, globalisation, technological advances and foreign influences have all been factors in this social revolution. Perhaps the key change in African daily life has been the move to the cities. Population explosions caused by better access to health and medical facilities meant that rural areas became overburdened, with available land for grazing and cultivation declining and extra pressure being put on facilities such as schools and hospitals.

As governments stepped up industrial production in the wake of gaining independence during the 1950s and 1960s, there was a mass movement away from the countryside and towards the cities in search of work. Over a third of Africans now live their daily lives in an urban context. Unfortunately, urban population growth has far outpaced job creation, so that unemployment in many African cities is rife.

Although cultural life remains strong, a whole generation of kids is growing up with no connection to the countryside, its lores and traditions, and the tribal culture that goes along with village life. The average urban African teenager has more interest in basketball and hip-hop than in harvest rituals or traditional songs. In many cases, urbanisation has led to the breakdown of traditional social values such as respect for elders, and the loosening of family structures, leading to escalating levels of crime.

Rural populations in turn have suffered from the absence of males, the primary breadwinners, who are usually the first to leave their villages and seek work in the cities. Urbanisation has accelerated the spread of HIV, with migrant workers passing the disease on to their wives on visits home, and the resulting orphans being forced into the care of their elderly family members or left to fend for themselves.

All of this isn't to say that life in Africa's towns and villages is an unremitting round of doom and gloom. Family bonds are still much stronger than in many First World societies, with the concepts of community and shared responsibility deeply rooted. Western culture has in many cases been fused with traditional African forms of expression to create new and vibrant art forms, and resilience, patience and humour are still the first traits that strike visitors who make the effort to get acquainted with ordinary Africans.

## SPORT

Africans are as sport-mad as the rest of the world, and sport has played a huge part in establishing national identities in the wake of independence. Football (soccer) is the most popular of Africa's sports, and you'll never have to go far before you find someone kicking a ball (or a bundle of plastic bags tied together with string) around on a dusty patch of ground.

If you're in London, the Africa Centre (☎ 020-7836 1973; www.africa-centre.org.uk; 38 King St, Covent Garden) is a bookshop, cultural centre, gig venue and education resource for all things African.

350 million Africans live on less than US\$1 a day.

The average British household pays over £800 a year in extra grocery bills thanks to the European Union subsidy system, which also denies African farmers a fair price for their goods.

The African Nations Cup, held yearly in January and February, keeps tongues wagging across the continent all year round. Cameroon, Egypt and Ghana are the most successful teams in the competition's history, with four titles apiece.

All the national teams have devoted followings, with supporters frequently invoking magic charms and rituals to ensure the success of their teams, who enjoy a range of colourful nicknames, such as the Red Sea Boys (Eritrea),

## AIDS

It's impossible to overstate the impact that HIV/AIDS is having on Africa. The figures are mind-boggling – within the last 24 hours around 6,500 Africans were killed by HIV/AIDS. There are many possible reasons why HIV/AIDS has taken such a hold in Africa compared to other parts of the world. Collective denial of the problem, migration in search of work and to escape wars and famine, a general lack of adequate healthcare and prevention programmes, and social and cultural factors – in particular the low status of women in many African societies – are all believed to have played a role in the rapid spread of the disease.

The personal, social and economic costs associated with the disease are devastating. HIV/AIDS predominantly hits the most productive members of society – young adults. This has a huge impact on family income, food production and local economies in general, and large parts of Africa face the loss of a significant proportion of entire generations. Many families are losing their income earners and the families of those that die have to find money to pay for their funerals. Many of those dying have surviving partners who are themselves infected and in need of care. Employers, schools, factories and hospitals have to train other staff to replace those at the workplace who become too ill to work, setting economic and social development back by decades.

The Joint UN programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) estimates that there will be 42 million orphans by 2010, many of whom will end up on the street as nihilistic little crime waves. Some observers believe that HIV/AIDS is causing societal breakdown in some places; certainly, AIDS orphans have become child soldiers in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo and Uganda.

In 2003 US President George W Bush pledged US\$15 billion towards fighting AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean, but the cash may not be available to any organisation that promotes or condones abortion. Drug treatments that are available in the West to increase the life span of AIDS sufferers and reduce the risk of HIV-infected women passing the infection on to their unborn babies are still out of the reach of most Africans (Brazil has managed to halve AIDS deaths by making such drugs free). But in some countries, such as Senegal and Uganda, vigorous education programmes have slowed the spread of the disease. AIDS is by no means Africa's only killer: diseases such as malaria and TB also take their toll.

## The Facts

- Scientists think that HIV/AIDS leapt the species barrier from chimpanzees to people around 70 years ago.
- Ninety-five per cent of the world's AIDS orphans live in Africa – 12 million in all.
- Almost 26 million people are living with AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa.
- There were 3.1 million new infections in 2005, but only one in 10 Africans who needed anti-retroviral treatment were receiving it.
- Seventeen million Africans have died from AIDS since the start of the epidemic; 2.4 million died in 2005.
- Average life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa is now 47 years; without AIDS it would have been 62.
- The largest increasing group of HIV-positive people are monogamous, married women, and it's women who do most agricultural work in Africa.

Offering to kick a football about is a sure-fire way to get yourself an instant group of juvenile friends almost anywhere in Africa. Footballs for Fun ([www.footballsforsun.com](http://www.footballsforsun.com)) is a British charity that encourages visitors to Africa to buy footballs as gifts for the locals. The proceeds (£2 per ball) go to African charities.

the Zebras (Botswana), the Super Eagles (Nigeria) and the Kilimanjaro Stars (Tanzania). Not even the most frenzied of African Nations Cup activity, however, will compete with the total and utter madness that will descend when Africa hosts its first ever World Cup finals, set to be held in South Africa in 2010...

Other popular African sports include marathon running (at which Kenya and Ethiopia dominate the world) and boxing. Basketball is becoming increasingly popular with the arrival of American TV channels.

## MEDIA

Although no-one doubts the potential of mass media such as newspapers, radio stations or TV to be a tool for development in Africa, the media industry on the continent is beset by many problems. Access is one, as many people still live in rural areas, with little or no infrastructure. Many corrupt governments also ruthlessly suppress all but state-controlled media. Many Africans feel that reporting on the continent by the international media paints an unfair portrait of Africa as a hopeless case, beset by war, famine and corruption.

With 40% of Africa's population over 15 years old unable to read, the usefulness of print media is in itself questionable.

## Internet

Africa currently has 32 million internet users (or 3.6% of the population, as compared to 38.6% of Europeans and 69.7% of North Americans), with this number growing by 400% in the last five years. The real figures, however, are probably six to eight times higher, as many Africans get online via shared PCs in internet cafés or schools.

Africans are now using the internet to bypass the often unreliable reporting of the state-funded media, while groups such as rural women, who have in the past been denied access to information on healthcare and human rights, are empowered by their access to online education resources. Many such grass-roots cyber-education projects are still in their infancy, but exciting times are ahead.

## Newspapers & Magazines

For continental coverage you can't go wrong with the BBC's *Focus on Africa* magazine. Published quarterly, the writing is sharp, and the overview of politics, sport, arts and music perfect for travellers. It's available worldwide on subscription from [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk) and from shops in English-speaking countries in Africa. Other current-affairs mags include monthly *New African* and *Africa Today*. Look out too for *West Africa*, available in most English-speaking West African countries and a few in East Africa. The *East African* is good for an overview of what's happening in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. If you're in West Africa and your French is well oiled, *Jeune Afrique* is a highly regarded weekly news magazine.

## Radio

With TV out of the reach of many, radio remains by far the most popular medium of communication in Africa, with even the most remote rural villagers gathering around a crackling radio to listen to funeral or wedding announcements or catch the latest pop releases.

For continental coverage, however, locals and travellers tune into international broadcasters; most have dedicated Africa slots. As well as the trusty BBC World Service (also available in some cities on FM), Voice of America and Radio France Internationale are perennial favourites. If you'd

rather hear African news from Africans, try **Channel Africa** ([www.channelafrica.org](http://www.channelafrica.org)), the international radio service of the South African Broadcasting Corporation.

## Television

Americans own one TV set for every one person, according to UN surveys. Africans own one for every 16. Televisions remain luxury items, unavailable to most of Africa's poorer inhabitants. Walk around many African towns and villages after dark, however, and you're likely to come across the dim blue glow of a TV set, often set in a doorway so that an audience of 20 or 30 can gather around it to watch the latest episode of a local soap or a football match. The latest attempt to launch a pan-African TV station comes from a Kenyan journalist called Salim Amin, whose ATV network is slated to launch in late 2007.

## RELIGION

Most Africans are deeply religious, with religious values informing every aspect of their daily life. Roughly put, North Africa, West and Central Africa close to the Sahara, together with much of the East African coast is Islamic; while East and southern Africa and the rest of the continent are predominantly Christian. If statistics are to be believed, 40% of Africans are Muslim and 40% Christian, leaving around 20% who follow traditional African beliefs. These figures should be taken with a pinch of salt, however, as many Africans see no contradiction at all in combining their traditional beliefs with Islam or Christianity. Hindus and Sikhs are found in places where immigrants arrived from Asia during the colonial era.

Conflict and religion have always gone hand in hand in Africa, with religion playing a large part in the independence struggle in many African countries, from the diplomatic efforts of clergymen such as Archbishop Tutu of South Africa, to the war prophets of Mozambique and Angola, who promised their followers immunity from bullets if they washed in magic water. Even today, charismatic religious figures enjoy popular followings in many parts of Africa.

### RELIGION AFRICAN STYLE

Africa's traditional religions are generally animist, believing that objects such as trees, caves or ritual objects such as gourds or drums are endowed with spiritual powers. Most African religions centre on ancestor veneration, the idea that the dead remain influential after passing from the physical into the spiritual world. Ancestors must therefore be honoured in order to ensure that they intervene positively with other spiritual beings on behalf of their relatives on earth.

The practice of traditional medicine is closely intertwined with traditional religion. Practitioners (often derogatively referred to as 'witch doctors' by foreigners) use divining implements such as bones, prayers, chanting and dance to facilitate communication with the spirit world. Patients are cured with the use of herbal preparations or by exorcist-style interventions to drive out evil spirits that have inhabited the body. Not all magical practitioners are benign – some are suspected of being paid to place curses on people, causing them to experience bad luck, sickness or even death.

Although traditional religious practices can be a force for social good within a community, and herbalists are often very skilled in their craft, there's a flip side: some religious practitioners discourage their patients from seeking conventional medical help at hospitals or clinics, and someone who considers themselves cursed will very often give up the will to live entirely. In some parts of southern Africa, *muti* killings occasionally take place, in which children or adults are abducted and murdered in order to gain body parts for use in magic rituals.

Focus on Africa ([www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/focusonafrika](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/focusonafrika)) and Jeune Afrique ([www.jeuneafrique.com](http://www.jeuneafrique.com) in French) will keep you bang up-to-date on African current events. For more in-depth features, try the National Geographic's Africa Archive at [www.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/afriearchive](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/afriearchive).

## WOMEN IN AFRICA

Women form the backbone of African families, institutions that provide an excellent support network. However, these institutions are being sorely tested by the AIDS epidemic and are often upset if the men are forced to leave their homes and move to the cities as migrant industrial workers.

Women usually tackle the lion's share of agricultural work in traditional village societies, and in some nations sexual equality is enshrined in law. Sadly, on the ground, equal rights are some way off and women are often treated as second-class citizens. Families sometimes deny girls schooling, although education is valued highly by most Africans. More serious still are reports of female infanticide, forced marriages, female genital mutilation and honour killings.

African women made history in 2005 when a legal protocol came into force that specifically protects women's human rights in the 17 countries that ratified it. These countries have pledged to amend their laws to uphold a raft of women's rights, including the right to property after divorce, the right to abortions after rape or abuse, and the right to equal pay in the workplace, among many others.

## ARTS

Traditional African art and craft consists of ceremonial masks, figures related to ancestral worship, fetishes (which protect against certain spirits), weapons, furnishings and everyday utensils. All kinds of materials are used (including bronze casting in some regions) and great skill can also be seen in the production of textiles, basketry and leatherwork. Contemporary African artists now use traditional as well as modern media to express themselves, with many now making an impact on the international art scene. Major events such as the **Africa Remix** ([www.africaremix.org.uk](http://www.africaremix.org.uk)) have brought African art to a worldwide audience.

Tourism has greatly affected African art and craft, with considerable effort now going into producing objects for sale rather than traditional use, and popular styles in one part of Africa are widely mimicked elsewhere. Some art forms, such as the *tingatinga* paintings of Tanzania, evolved entirely out of demand from tourists and returning expatriates for 'traditional' African artworks.

In North Africa, ancient Arabic and Islamic traditions have produced some very fine art (ceramics and carpets are particularly beautiful and refined), as well as some phenomenal architecture; in the Sahara, Tuareg silver jewellery is unique and beautiful.

But it's arguably West Africa that produces the most amazing art; Nigeria and Benin have long been associated with fine bronze sculptures and carv-

## FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

Often masquerading as the euphemism 'female circumcision', female genital mutilation (FGM) is still performed on young girls and women in many parts of Africa, despite international pressure and official opposition from many African governments. Amnesty International estimates that 135 million of the world's girls and women have undergone genital mutilation, and two million girls a year are at risk of mutilation. The practice, which is reportedly undertaken in more than 28 African countries, involves the partial or total removal of the female external genitalia, and is usually performed by a midwife or other respected female member of society. There are myriad reasons cited for the practice, which predates Islam. In many societies, an 'altered' woman is seen as chaste, honourable and clean, and ready for marriage. Infection and serious medical complications are common.

If you're interested in campaigning for women's rights in Africa, the following websites provide a good place to start:

Amnesty International ([www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org));  
Human Rights Watch (<http://hrw.org/women>);  
Womankind ([www.womankind.org.uk](http://www.womankind.org.uk)).

## CONTEMPORARY FOLK TALES

Nigerian authors dominate the English-speaking West African literature scene and some, like Amos Tutuola, adapt African folklore into their own works. Penned by Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drunkard* is a rather grisly tale of a man who enters the spirit world in order to find his palm-wine supplier! *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is a more contemporary but deeply symbolic tale about a man's rise and fall at the time colonialism arrived in Africa. Another Nigerian writer, Ben Okri, found worldwide fame with his novels *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, which draw heavily on folk traditions.

ings, and the Ashanti people of Ghana are renowned for fine textiles and gold sculptures.

Throughout East and southern Africa the Makonde people of Mozambique and the Shona of Zimbabwe produce excellent and widely copied sculptures.

In recent years, recycled art has become popular, with township artists in South Africa and elsewhere producing sculpture and textiles created entirely from discarded objects such as tin cans and bottle tops.

## Literature

Evidence of ancient written languages has been found in modern-day Ethiopia and Egypt, while in North Africa the writings of Islamic scholars and academics provide almost 1500 years of history and endless reams of prose and poetry. Swahili (East Africa), Hausa (Nigeria) and Amharic (Ethiopia) contemporary cultures have a more recent literary history, with written language in existence for a few centuries.

Sub-Saharan Africa's rich, multilayered literary history, however, was almost entirely oral. Folk tales, poems, proverbs, myths, historical tales and (most importantly) ethnic traditions were passed down through generations by word of mouth. Some societies have specific keepers of history and storytelling, such as the *griots* of West Africa, and in many cases stories are sung or tales performed in a form of theatre. As a result, little of Africa's rich literary history was known to the outside world until relatively recently. However, African writers and academics across the continent are now collecting and conserving Africa's disappearing oral heritage, and there are some excellent collections of African tales and proverbs available.

Modern-day and 20th-century African literature have been greatly influenced by colonial education and Western trends. Some African authors have made an effort to employ traditional structures and folk tales in their work, while others write of the contemporary hardships faced by Africans and their fight to shake off the shackles of colonialism using Western-influenced narrative methods (and penning their works in English, French or Portuguese).

## FOOD & DRINK

Whether it's a group of Kenyans gathering in a *nyama choma* shop to consume hunks of grilled meat washed down with cold lager, or some Ghanaians dipping balls of *foufou* (see the following section) into a steaming bowl of stew, there's one thing all Africans have in common – they love to eat. Folk tales and traditions from all over the continent feature stories about cooking and consuming food, a process that's the focus of almost all social and family activities. African food is generally bold and colourful, with its rich, earthy textures and strong, spicy undertones showing influences from Arab traders, European colonists and Asian slaves.

*Traveller's Literary Companion – Africa* edited by Oona Strathern, *Unwinding Threads: Writing by Women in Africa* by Charlotte H Bruner, *The Book of African Stories*, edited by Stephen Gray, and *Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* edited by Moore and Beier provide a very useful literary background.

*The Africa Cookbook: Tastes of a Continent* by food historian Jessica Harris is a perfect companion for those interested in creating traditional African dishes in a non-African kitchen.

## Staples & Specialities

Each region has its own key staples: in East and southern Africa, the base for many local meals is a stiff dough made from maize flour, called – among other things – *ugali*, *sadza*, *pap* and *nsima*. In West Africa millet is also common, and served in a similar way, while staples nearer the coast are root crops such as yam or cassava (*manioc* in French), served as a near-solid glob called *foufou*. In North Africa, bread forms a major part of the meal, while all over Africa rice is an alternative to the local specialities. In some countries, plantain (green banana) is also common, either fried, cooked solid or pounded into *foufou*. A sauce of meat, fish, beans or vegetables is then added to the carbo base. If you're eating local style, you grab a portion of bread or dough or pancake (with your right hand, please!), dip it in the communal pot of sauce and sit back, beaming contentedly, to eat it.

## Drinks

Tea and coffee are the standard drinks, and countries seem to follow the flavours of their former colonisers. In (formerly British) East Africa, tea and coffee tends to be weak, grey and milky. In much of (formerly French) West Africa tea is usually served black, while the coffee from roadside stalls contains enough sugar and sweetened condensed milk to keep you fully charged for hours. In North Africa and some Sahel countries (the Sahel region covers Mauritania, Cape Verde, Gambia, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea Conakry, Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad), mint tea and strong Arab-style coffee are the local delights. Other variations include *chai* (tea) or coffee spiced up with lemongrass or cardamom in East Africa, or flavoured with a woody leaf called *kinkiliba* in West Africa.

International fizzy drinks, such as Coke and Fanta are widely available, while many countries have their own brands that are cheaper and just as good (although often owned by the big multinationals too). You can also get locally made soft drinks and fruit juices, sold in plastic bags, or frozen into 'ice-sticks', but these are worth avoiding if you're worried about your stomach, as the water they're made from is usually unpurified. Alcohol allegedly kills the bugs, so no health worries about having an alcoholic drink here...

In bars, you can buy local or imported beer in bottles, and a range of spirits, with juice or soft drinks to mix them with. Excellent wines and liqueurs, from South Africa or further afield, are available in more upmarket establishments. Traditional beer is made from millet or maize, and drunk from huge communal pots with great ceremony at special events, and with less pomp in everyday situations.

West Africa's most popular brew is palm wine. The tree is tapped and the sap comes out mildly fermented. In other parts of the continent, alcohol is made using bananas, pineapples or other fruit, sometimes fermented overnight. This homemade alcohol is often outrageously strong, can lead to blindness or mental illness, and is downright illegal in some places, where police stop shared taxis to open any suspicious-looking containers in the baggage and sniff the contents. You have been warned!

## Celebrations

In much of Africa, a celebration, be it a wedding, coming-of-age ceremony or even a funeral, is an excuse to stuff yourself until your eyes pop out and you beg for mercy. In non-Islamic countries, this eating-fest could well be accompanied by a lot of drinking, followed mostly by falling down. Celebration food of course varies widely from country to country, but veggies beware – many feasts are preceded by a lot of blood and gore as surprised-looking goats, sheep, cows or chickens are slaughtered and added to the pot.

In West Africa, don't miss *sauce arachide*, a thick brown paste made from groundnuts (peanuts), either on its own or mixed with meat or vegetables. Sometimes palm oil is also added. Your fingers turn bright orange but the taste is great.

*First Catch Your Eland: a Taste of Africa* by Laurens van der Post is a fascinating, if dated, collection of memoirs and observations about food in Africa. Well worth trawling the second-hand bookshops for.

Bottled water is available in most African countries, though not in remote rural areas. Check that the cap seals are unbroken – in some places bottles are refilled with river water and sold to unsuspecting tourists.

## TASTES LIKE CHICKEN...

In many parts of Africa you'll find the locals chomping with gusto on some – ahem – unusual foods. If you're brave in heart and stomach, why not try some of these more adventurous snacks:

- Giant rat – The agouti, a ratlike rodent about the size of a rabbit, frequently turns up in West African stews. Avoid this one though – it's under threat in the wild. If you really can't do without a rodent for your dinner, try a skewer of baby grasscutters (cane rats) roasted over coals and served up in West African markets...
- Land snails – Described as having a texture like 'stubborn rubber', giant land snails are eaten in parts of Nigeria.
- Mopane worms – These are actually not worms, but caterpillars – the green and blue larvae of the emperor moth, which make their home on the mopane trees of southern Africa. These protein-rich critters are boiled and then dried in the sun before being eaten.

If you're lucky enough to be invited to a celebration while you're in Africa, it's polite to bring something (litre bottles of fizzy drink often go down well), and be prepared for a lot of hanging around – nothing happens in a hurry. The accepted wisdom is that it's considered very rude to refuse any food you're offered, but in practice it's probably perfectly acceptable to decline something politely if you really don't want to eat it, as long as you eat something else with gusto!

## Where to Eat & Drink

### FOOD STALLS & STREET FOOD

If you're looking for budget bites, most towns all over Africa have a shacklike stall or 10 serving up cheap local staples. Furniture is usually limited to a rough bench and couple of upturned boxes, and hygiene is rarely a prime concern. However, this is the place to save money and meet the locals. Good places to seek out these no-frills joints include bus stations or markets. Lighter snacks include nuts sold in twists of newspaper, hardboiled eggs (popular for long bus journeys), meat kebabs, or, in some places, more exotic fare like fried caterpillars or baobab fruits. Street food rarely involves plates or knives – it's served on a stick, wrapped in paper, or in a plastic bag.

### RESTAURANTS

For something more comfortable, most towns have cheap restaurants where you can buy traditional meals, as well as smarter restaurants with facilities such as tablecloths, waiters and menus. If you're eating in cheaper restaurants, you can expect to be served the same food as the locals, but more upmarket, tourist-orientated establishments serve up more familiar fare, from the ubiquitous chicken and chips to pizzas, pasta dishes and toasted sandwiches.

Colonial influences remain important: you can expect croissants for breakfast in Madagascar, or to pick up Portuguese custard tarts in the bakeries of Mozambique. Africa also has its share of world-class dining, with the best restaurants brilliantly fusing African culinary traditions with those of the rest of the world. Less impressively, even smaller towns are now succumbing to the fast-food craze, with greasy burger and chicken joints springing up with depressing frequency.

### Vegetarian & Vegan

Many Africans may think a meal is incomplete unless half of it once lived and breathed but across Africa many cheap restaurants serve rice and beans and other meals suitable for vegans simply because it's all the locals can afford.

Ever wondered how to make a pizza oven out of a termite mound? Or prepare bacon and eggs on a shovel? Check out *The African Kitchen* by Josie Stow and Jan Baldwin, a sumptuous cookbook that reveals the secrets of a safari chef.

In the Western world, men whose wives don't understand them head for the pub or the golf course. In East Africa, they gather in the evenings at food-stall-cum-butcher's shops lit by bright fluorescent lights and featuring signs saying 'Nyama Choma'.

Eggs are usually easy to find – expect to eat an awful lot of egg and chips – and fish is available nearer the coast. Be aware that in many places chicken is usually not regarded as meat, and may be served to strict but unsuspecting vegetarians, while even the simplest vegetable sauce may have a bit of animal fat thrown in. Expect to meet with bemusement when you announce that you don't eat meat – the idea of voluntarily giving up something that's seen as an aspirational luxury is hard to understand for many people.

Go to [www.recipesource.com/ethnic/africa](http://www.recipesource.com/ethnic/africa) for a great collection of recipes from across the continent, or check out [www.africa.upenn.edu/Cookbook/about\\_cb.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Cookbook/about_cb.html) or [www.africhef.com](http://www.africhef.com) for more ideas.

### **Habits & Customs**

In Islamic countries, food is always eaten, passed and touched with the right hand only (the left hand is reserved for washing your bottom, and the two are understandably kept separate). Water in a basin is usually brought to wash your hands before you start eating – hold your hands out and allow the person who brings it to pour it over, then shake your hands dry. It's also customary in some parts of Africa for women and men to eat separately, with the women eating second after they've served the food. In some countries, lunch, rather than dinner is the main meal of the day, and everything stops for a couple of hours while a hot meal is cooked and prepared.



# African Music

Jane Cornwell

They don't call Africa the Motherland for nothing. The continent has a musical history that stretches back further than any other, a history as vast and varied as its range of rhythms, melodies and overlapping sources and influences. Here, music – traditional and contemporary – is as vital to communication and storytelling as the written word. It is the lifeblood of communities, the solace of the nomad, the entertainment of choice. It can be a political tool – perceived as a threat (France and South Africa are full of exiled African artists) or a campaign winner (African leaders are forever trying to hitch their wagon to popular musicians, many of whom have their own record labels and charitable foundations). Its biggest acts are treated as celebrities, followed wherever they go. Oh, and despite the world music boom, some are relatively unknown in the West. If in doubt, ask a local.

Without African music there would be no blues, reggae or – some say – rock, let alone Brazilian samba, Puerto Rican salsa, Trinidadian soca or any of a wide array of genres with roots in Africa's timeless sounds. It works

Africa Hit Music TV ([www.africahit.com/](http://www.africahit.com/)) is the first internet TV station playing African music videos 24/7. Features thousands of music videos from a host of artists and genres each month.

## KONONO NO.1

You can hear it, at night, in the suburbs of Kinshasa. Trancelike rhythms – tribal, timeless, primal – bolstered by the ringing sounds of the *likembe*, the region's spiky metal thumb piano. Voices shouting and chanting, calling and responding. Whistles trilling, samba-style. The insistent beat of hand-tooled drums, the rat-a-tat of scrap metal. All of it fizzing through microphones fashioned from old car parts, warping and bulging through home-made amps and colonial-era speakers on stands. The Congo's electro-traditional grooves are always very, very loud.

The combination of traditional trance music – much of it brought into sprawling Kinshasa by displaced, war-scarred bush men – with heavily distorted DIY amplification has transformed the contemporary scene. It's been doing so for some time: 12-member collective Konono No.1 have been together for over 25 years – their 2006 BBC World Music Award Newcomer's gong was a little, well, ironic. Composed of Bazombo people from the Baongo province on the Congo side of the artificial Congolese/Angolan border, Konono No.1 adapted the ancient Massikulu rhythms their ancestors once played on ivory horns.

Their trademarks – electrified *likembe*, megaphone, rattling snare drum, no guitars – were emulated by other Kinshasa bands, who threw hypnotic *balafons* (xylophones) and sometimes, swirling guitars into the mix. 'But we were the first,' insists Konono No.1 founder Mawangu 'Papa' Mingiedi, 70, sitting dressed in flat cap, pink shirt and braces. 'Many have borrowed from us.'

Thanks to visionary Belgian record label Crammed, Konono No.1 are a cult hit in the West. Their self-titled album, the first release in Crammed's Congotronics series (they are also one of six acts on the second volume), has met with blanket acclaim. Critics have compared them to sonic experimentalists such as Can, Lee Perry, even Jimi Hendrix; put them in bed with Krautrock and punk. Their repetitive, polyrhythmic sound appeals to DJs and clubbers. A folkloric outfit back home, they've become the epitome of left-field cool everywhere else.

'We just do our thing,' says Mingiedi. 'I always loved Cuban music and African jazz. The government encouraged our *likembe* music' – as part of Mobutu's 'Authenticity' drive – 'and they helped us financially for a while.' Some have worried that Konono No.1 feeds stereotypes of 'primitive' African music: 'But it is primitive African music,' Mingiedi shrugs, amused. 'It is the music of my ancestors, sped up. What is the problem?'

The songs of Konono No.1 dispense moral advice about love, family, life – if you can make them out. Everybody likes it loud. 'We're grateful for this new overseas popularity,' says the ever-sanguine Mingiedi. 'But surprised? No. Why should we be?'

both ways: colonialism saw European instruments such as saxophone, trumpet and guitars integrated into traditional patterns. Independence ushered in a golden era; a swathe of dance bands in 1970s Mali and Guinea spawned West African superstars such as Salif Keita and Mory Kante. Electric guitars fuelled Congolese rumba and soukous and innumerable other African genres (including Swahili rumba). Ghana's guitar-based highlife (urban dance music) blended with American hip-hop to become hip-life; current faves include Da Multy Crew and female star Abrewa Nana. Jazz, soul and even classical music helped form the Afrobeat of late Nigerian legend Fela Kuti (which carries on through his sons, Femi and Seun, and a host of others today).

The mighty Youssou N'Dour kickstarted Senegal's pervasive *mbalax* rhythms when he mixed traditional percussion with plugged-in salsa, reggae and funk – though today it's Wolof-language rap groups that really appeal to the kids (there's a natural rap vibe to the country's ancient rhythmic poetry, *tasso*). Hip-hop hybrids are creating musical revivals in countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, Angola and Guinea; down in South Africa, where the ever-popular kwaito rules supreme (think slowed down, rapped-over House music), a new generation is mixing and matching with new-skool, funk, jazz and, often, politics. Elsewhere, militant artists such as Ivory Coast reggae star Tiken Jah Fakoly; former Sudanese child-soldier-turned-rapper Emmanuel Jal; and Somalia's 'Dusty Foot Philosopher', rapper and poet K'Naan (his country's first MTV star) are telling it like it is.

*Music Is the Weapon of the Future: Fifty Years of African Popular Music*, by Frank Tenaille, covers Salif Keita, Fela Kuti, Cesaria Evora, the upbeat swing of South African township jazz... Includes thirty portraits of Africa's biggest pop stars, in political and cultural context, with anecdotes.

### CESARIA EVORA

Cesaria Evora takes a thoughtful drag of her full-strength cigarette and smiles. 'You don't need to have suffered to sing *morna*,' says the 66-year-old, waving away fumes with a fleshy hand. 'But okay, it helps.' Evora sings *morna*, the bluesy music of her beloved Cape Verde, a group of volcanic islands off the coast of West Africa, with a voice – silken, languid, perfectly phrased – that has won her a Grammy (and five nominations) and captured the imagination of millions.

Her 2006 album, *Rogamar* (produced by her long-time pianist, Fernando 'Nando' Andrade), sees Evora backed by strings, percussion and broken, tinkling piano, her Creole lyrics telling of loss and longing, separation and immigration, poverty and hardship. Linking it all is *saudade*, an emotion common to all Cape Verdeans and one that combines a yearning for a better life elsewhere with the hope of returning to loved ones.

Evora rarely thinks of herself when she sings. 'I close my eyes and picture my people, my islands. I remember everything we have been through. Our droughts. Our history of slavery. Our 500 years as a Portuguese colony. Sometimes, when I do this,' she adds, 'I can even hear the waves lapping on the shore.'

Whether singing in New York, Moscow or a ramshackle bar in her home town, Mindelo, on the island of Sao Vicente, Evora always performs barefoot. 'Where I come from, it's hot, so you don't need to wear shoes.' Her on-stage cigarette breaks are equally legendary. 'I like to have a rest in the middle of a set,' says this boss-eyed grandmother. 'And if I don't smoke, I get twitchy.'

Her family was musical: 'But it wasn't until I turned 15 that I realised I had a beautiful voice.' Evora quit her strict religious school and began singing in bars, building a passionate local following and captivating the sailors who cruised into Sao Vicente's deep blue port. 'Discovered' by French/Cape Verdean producer Jose da Silva, her international career began with an album, *La Diva Aux Pied Nus* (The Barefoot Diva), in 1988.

Each Cesaria Evora album – 10 at last count, including 1992's legendary *Miss Perfumado* – makes Cape Verde, out there in a corner of the Atlantic Ocean, seem closer, less mythical. Her government has put her likeness on the national stamp by way of thanks. 'It's another way for me to travel,' she quips, exhaling.

Artists who are popular in the West – Mali's Oumou Sangare, say, or Senegal's Baaba Maal – work in a double market, making different mixes of the same songs for home and abroad, or recording cassette-only albums for local consumption. (Their home-town performances at home are wildly different, too: most start late and run all night.) Cassettes rather than CDs proliferate across Africa, and government pledges to address the gargantuan problem of cassette piracy have so far remained precisely that. Still, if you're looking for a gig or club sans tourists, ask a cassette stall holder. They might send you to a hotel or a dingy club in the suburbs, but it will be an experience.

There is no pan-African music. The Motherland is simply way too big for that. But there are distinct musical trends too important to ignore. Looking north: in Algeria it's the trad-rock genre, rai (think Khaled, Houari Benchenet, recently deceased grand dame Cheikha Rimitti), and the street-style pop known as *chaabi* (Arabic for 'popular'). Many of Algeria's Paris-based musicians are starting to perform at home again: check out rocker Rachid Taha; Berber experimentalist Akli D; folk chanteuse Souad Massi; and DJ 'scientist' Cheb i Sabbah. In Egypt the stern presence of late diva Oum Kalthoum, the Arab world's greatest 20th-century singer, is everywhere; scratch the surface for a thrumming industry that includes gypsy band The Musicians of the Nile, master percussionist Hossam Ramzy, and Bedouin singer Awad e'Medic.

There is *chaabi* in Egypt and Morocco, along with the Arabic techno pop called *al-jil* and a wealth of other influences. The Berber shepherdess blues of Cherifa, the Maghreb's very own Aretha, have made her a singer-sheika (or popular artist) to be reckoned with. The pentatonic healing music of the Gnawa – chants, side drums, metal castanets, the throbbing *gumbri*-lute (long-necked lute) – hijacks Essaouira each June during the huge Gnawa and World Music festival. The Toureg desert blues of guitar bands such as Tinariwen and, with members drawn from Niger's Toureg and Wodaabe tribes, new African music darlings Etran Finatawa. On the Ivory Coast, Abidjan remains a hugely influential centre for music production (if you make it here, you'll probably make it in Paris), while the percussive, melodious and totally vacuous *coupé-décalé* sound fills stadiums. Better, perhaps, to seek out the likes of fusionist and newcomer Dobet Gnahoré – in charisma and vocal power not unlike Beninese diva Angelique Kidjo.

Across West Africa the haunting vocals of the *griots* and *jalis*, the region's oral-historians-come-minstrels, are ubiquitous. Mauritania's best-known *griot* is the rotund diva Dimi Mint Abba, who sings the praises of the Prophet and her country while accompanying herself on the *ardin*, a long-necked string instrument. In Senegal the likes of Daby Balde, a singer-songwriter who draws on the traditions of the Fula people (while welcoming flutes, fiddles and accordions into his sound) is challenging the preeminence of the N'Dour/Maal old guard. Mali's Arabic-flavoured *wassoulou* rhythms has its most famous champion in songbird Oumou Sangaré, just as one of the *griot/jali*'s traditional instruments, the 21-string kora, is closely linked to Toumani Diabaté. Others are making their mark: Guinea's electric kora master Ba Cissoko is pushing the envelope. Madina N'Diaye is shaping up as Mali's first female kora iconoclast.

With the passing of Ali Farke Touré in 2006, his disciple and nephew Afel Bocoum is – along with Djelimady Tounkara et al – continuing the Malian guitar blues legacy. Guitar heroes abound throughout Africa: the Congo's Diblo Dibala, Malagasy band Jaobjoby and South African axeman Louis Mhlanga among them. In the islands of Cape Verde they're singing

[www.afropop.org/](http://www.afropop.org/) has a database of articles on African music and musicians searchable by artist, style and country. Includes radio shows, reviews and interviews. <http://africanmusic.org/> is an online encyclopaedia of African music with links and glossary.

[www.africmusic.com/](http://www.africmusic.com/) has three webstreaming African channels, featuring the latest hot hits.

*Africa Live: The Roll Back Malaria Concert*, directed by Mick Csáky (2006), has footage of Africa's biggest ever concert, at the Iba Mar Diop Stadium in Dakar, Senegal.

**TEN AFRICAN ALBUMS**

- Ali Farke Touré: *Savane* (World Circuit) – desert blues from the late, great Malian guitar maestro.
- Cesaria Evora: *Miss Perfumado* (Lusafrica) – classic *morna* from a Cape Verdean treasure.
- Youssou N'Dour: *Immigrés* (Sterns/Earthworks) – frenetic *mbalax* and soaring vocals from Dakar's finest.
- Khaled: *Khaled* (Barclay/Universal) – in which Khaled shows why he's the king of rai.
- Alpha Blondy: *Black Samurai* (EMI) – reggae stylings from a Côte d'Ivoire legend.
- Miriam Makeba: *Best of Miriam Makeba and the Skylarks* (BMG) – vintage stuff from the South African diva and her backing group.
- Fela Kuti: *The Black President* (Universal) – Nigeria's afrobeat hero gives his all.
- Salif Keita: *Soro* (Sterns) – mande music and world beats from a West African superstar.
- Oumou Sangaré: *Oumou* (World Circuit) – Mali's songbird of *wassoulou* soars.
- Baaba Maal: *Djam Leeli* (Yoff/Earthworks) – acoustic album from the Senegalese star and his family *griot* and mentor, Mansour Seck.

the wistful, Creole language blues known as *morna*, and a slew of new talent including Lura and Tcheka is bringing up Cesaria Evora's rear. Over in Cameroon they're whooping it up to the guitar-based *bikutsi* or the brass-heavy sound of *makossa* while the polyphonic voices of that country's pygmies have struck a chord with the Western world.

In the often musically overlooked East Africa, bongo flava (Swahili rap and hip-hop) is thriving; as ever, so is *taarab*, the Arab/Indian-influenced music of Zanzibar and the Tanzanian/Kenyan coastal strip. Mozambique sways to the sound of *marrabenta* – Ghorwane and Eyuphuro are two such roots-based urban dance bands – and the marimba style known as *timbila*. Down in Zimbabwe they're listening to the *tuku* (swinging, rootsy, self-styled) music of Oliver Mutukudzi or, in secret, the *chimurenga* (struggle) music of their self-exiled Lion, Thomas Mapfumo. South Africa's giant recording industry continues to rival that of Europe and America, embracing everything from the Zulu *iscathimiya* call-and-response singing as popularised by Ladysmith Black Mambazo to jazz, funk, gospel, reggae, soul, pop, rap and all points in between.

In Africa music is more than a way of life. It is a force. Get ready to feel it.

In a few short years Sauti za Busara (Sounds of Wisdom) Swahili Music Festival in Stonetown, Zanzibar, has become one of East Africa's finest annual events. A five-day extravaganza of music, theatre and dance before a horizon dotted with dhow boats.

# Environment

If you were to strap on your boots and take a walk across Africa from east to west or north to south, you'd soon find yourself tramping through some pretty mind-blowing surroundings. You'd cross mile upon mile of low-lying grassy plains, shiver on glaciated mountains and boil in desiccated salt pans. You'd have to get across some of the biggest lakes and mightiest rivers on earth, never mind fighting your way through dense woodlands and tropical forests. Africa is a continent liberally sprinkled with enough marvels to keep geologists, geographers and latter-day explorers happy for several lifetimes.

Every conceivable ecological niche is packed with life; you could visit mountain gorillas in the rainforests of Uganda or Rwanda; track desert elephants through semidesert in Burkina Faso and Mali; look for chimpanzees in the hills of Senegal, Guinea and Tanzania; snorkel with sharks off the coast of Djibouti; or just sit back and enjoy the blooming deserts of Botswana and Namibia after the year's first rains.

Many of Africa's more spectacular natural features are concentrated in the vast inland plateau, sometimes called High Africa, that covers most of the lower half of the continent. This plateau is highest in Ethiopia, running south and east and dropping down on either side to tropical beaches and coral reefs just begging to be explored by snorkellers.

## THE LAND

### MOUNTAINS & VALLEYS

Mountains aren't always the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Africa, but in fact all regions of the continent have their fair share of spectacular peaks. The greatest mountain ranges of Africa are the Atlas in the northeast, the Cape Ranges of Southern Africa and the Ruwenzori that straddle the borders of Uganda and Congo.

#### **TRAVEL WIDELY, TREAD LIGHTLY, GIVE SUSTAINABLY – THE LONELY PLANET FOUNDATION**

The Lonely Planet Foundation proudly supports nimble nonprofit institutions working for change in the world. Each year the foundation donates 5% of Lonely Planet company profits to projects selected by staff and authors. Our partners range from Kabissa, which provides small nonprofits across Africa with access to technology, to the Foundation for Developing Cambodian Orphans, which supports girls at risk of falling victim to sex traffickers.

Our nonprofit partners are linked by a grass-roots approach to the areas of health, education or sustainable tourism. Many – such as Louis Sarno (p534) who works with BaAka (Pygmy) children in the forested areas of Central African Republic – choose to focus on women and children as one of the most effective ways to support the whole community. Louis is determined to give options to children who are discriminated against by the majority Bantu population.

Sometimes foundation assistance is as simple as restoring a local ruin like the Minaret of Jam in Afghanistan; this incredible monument now draws intrepid tourists to the area and its restoration has greatly improved options for local people.

Just as travel is often about learning to see with new eyes, so many of the groups we work with aim to change the way people see themselves and the future for their children and communities.

Experiencing the wildlife, landscapes and people of all these ranges can make your spirit sing, but if you're a real mountain junkie, then head over to East Africa, which is home to the classic, stand-alone, dormant volcanoes such as Mt Kenya and Mt Kilimanjaro. Alternatively buy a ticket to Ethiopia, Africa's highest country, which lies on a plateau between 2000m and 3000m above sea level. For added drama, you can climb volcanoes such as those in Rwanda's Parc National des Volcans or Tanzania's Crater Highlands, which are far from dormant and spit sulphurous fumes and ash on a regular basis.

The African earth deep beneath your feet is being slowly pulled apart by the action of hot currents, resulting in a gap, or rift. This action over thousands of years has formed what's known as the Great Rift Valley, which begins in Syria and winds over 5000km before it peters out in southern Mozambique. The valley is flanked in many places by sheer escarpments and towering cliffs, the most dramatic of which can be seen in Ethiopia, Kenya, and along the Democratic Republic of Congo–Uganda–Rwanda border. The valley's floor contains the legendary wildlife-watching habitats of the Serengeti and Masai Mara in Tanzania and Kenya, and alkaline lakes such as Bogoria and Turkana.

## RIVERS & LAKES

The Nile and Congo Rivers dominate Africa's hydrology, but the Niger (West Africa), Zambezi and Orange (Southern Africa) Rivers are no slouches either – all offer potential for waterborne adventures, with white-water rafters and kayak fiends heading for the Nile in Uganda and the Zambezi below Victoria Falls on the Zimbabwe–Zambia border. Whether you're being poled in a dugout canoe past the elephants of the Okavango swamps, or getting to know the fisherfolk and rice growers of the Niger Inland Delta, Africa's inland wetlands offer huge potential for interesting travel.

Many of Africa's lakes are ecological treasure chests, providing habitats for a dazzling variety of plant and animal species. Among the most spectacular of all are the so-called 'soda lakes' of East Africa, such as Lake Nakuru, the site of one of the greatest bird spectacles on earth as more than a million fuchsia-pink flamingos descend periodically to feed on the algae that are the only other life form that can thrive in the boiling, caustic waters. For more information on wild animals and birds in Africa, see the Wildlife chapter (p56).

## DESERTS & JUNGLES

If you're after dusty, thirsty adventure, try the Sahara, the world's largest contiguous desert, which occupies a quarter of Africa's surface area, encompassing parts of 11 countries and cutting a swathe through the northern half of the continent before merging imperceptibly into the semidesert Sahel area. Other major deserts include the Namib and Kalahari, which straddle South Africa, Botswana and Namibia. Don't imagine, however, that deserts contain only the white, level sand of your imagination – there

### AFRICA'S DIMENSIONS

Africa is the world's second-largest continent, after Asia, covering 30 million sq km and accounting for 23% of the total land area on Earth. From the most northerly point, Cape Blanc (Ra's al Abyad) in Tunisia, to the most southerly point, Cape Agulhas in South Africa, is a distance of approximately 8000km. The distance between Cape Verde, the westernmost point in Africa, and Ras Hafun in Somalia, the continent's most easterly point, is 7440km.

The continent's highest point is the perpetually (for now) snow-capped Kilimanjaro (5895m) in Tanzania, and the lowest is Lake Assal (153m below sea level) in Djibouti.

Mainland Africa's largest country is the Sudan; its smallest is cute little Gambia.

### SAVE THE TREES!

- Almost 6.8 million sq km of Africa was originally forest.
- Over 90% of West Africa's original forest has been lost.
- Between 1980 and 1995, an area of forest about the size of Jamaica was cleared in the Congo Basin each year.
- For every 28 trees cut down in Africa, only one tree is replanted.

are also towering sand dunes, long stretches of loose, grey gravel, and areas of bare rock.

Millennia of deforestation and overgrazing have caused the Sahara to expand, a process that is continuing today with results that are all too apparent for humans as well as wildlife. In contrast, the deserts of Namibia are caused by cold-air convection that sucks the moisture from the landscape and creates an arid landscape of rolling sand dunes with their own unique ecosystem.

African forests include dry tropical forests in Eastern and Southern Africa, humid tropical rainforests in Western and Central Africa, montane forests and sub-tropical forests in Northern Africa, as well as mangroves in the coastal zones. Despite the myth of the African 'jungle', Africa actually has one of the lowest percentages of rainforest cover in the world, with over 90% of what's left found in the Congo Basin. Enjoy it while you can – opportunities to explore Africa's forests include gorilla trekking in Uganda and watching chimpanzees in Tanzania.

## THE SEA

Africa is bounded to the east and west by two contrasting seas – the chilly, choppy Atlantic and the warmer Indian Ocean, which meet in a whirl of white water at Cape Point in South Africa. Further north, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean separate Africa from Europe and the Middle East. Of Africa's 48 nations, 33 have coastal frontage.

The sea has always determined both the physical shape of Africa's coast and the culture of the people who live near the shore. Southern Africa's rocky shores have been eroded by waves and weather to create dramatic cliffs and headlands, while waves and currents create vast sandy lagoons and spits on the West African coast.

## CORAL REEFS & MANGROVE SWAMPS

Along the coasts of East Africa and the Red Sea, warm currents provide perfect conditions for coral growth, resulting in the spectacular underwater formations beloved by divers and snorkellers.

Coral reefs are the most biologically diverse marine eco-systems on earth, rivalled only by tropical rainforests on land. Corals grow over geologic time – ie over millennia rather than the decades that mammals etc live – and have been in existence about 200 million years. The delicately balanced marine environment of the coral reef relies on the interaction of hard and soft corals, sponges, fish, turtles, dolphins and other marine life forms.

Coral reefs also rely on mangroves, the salt-tolerant trees with submerged roots that form a nursery and breeding ground for birds and most of the marine life that migrates to the reef. Mangroves trap and produce nutrients for food and habitat, stabilise the shoreline, and filter pollutants from the land base.

Perfect armchair-travel fodder, the BBC's *Wild Africa* series, now available on video and DVD, consists of six stunningly filmed documentaries entitled *Jungle, Coasts, Mountains, Deserts, Savannahs and Rivers & Lakes*.

*Africa*, by acclaimed photographer Frans Lanting is a coffee-table book so gorgeous it will have you booking a plane ticket before you get to page three...

Both coral reefs and the mangrove colonies that support them are under threat from factors such as coastal degradation and global warming. To make sure your diving holiday doesn't make things worse, consult our Responsible Diving guidelines, p1100.

## CONSERVATION ISSUES

Conservationists the world over tend to look grave when the subject of Africa comes up. The continent's rapidly growing population has led to soil erosion, declining soil fertility, deforestation, desertification, water pollution and loss of biodiversity. Things are going to get worse, too, as Africa's population is expected to nearly double (to about two billion) in the next 50 years. War, poor governance and corruption are all adding to the environmental destruction. Logging, mineral and oil extraction don't exactly improve biodiversity, regardless of whether it's locals or multinationals sucking up resources.

Rainforests are one of the richest habitats on earth – a single hectare of tropical rainforest may contain more than 600 species of trees – but also one of the most threatened. Over half of the rainforests of the Congo basin are under commercial-logging leases. It's not just rainforest that's under threat: pockets of temperate forest are getting the chop all over Africa, not only for timber, but also for firewood and to be cleared for agricultural land.

The coast's not clear, either – up to 38% of the African coastline is considered to be under a high degree of threat from developments that include cities, ports, road networks and pipelines. Further out to sea, coral reefs are damaged by unsafe fishing practices such as dynamiting, overfishing and the anchoring of boats in living coral.

### DESERTIFICATION

According to a 2006 academic study, the northern and southern hemispheres' jet streams – fast wind currents high in the atmosphere – are moving nearer the poles. The researchers say more study is needed to assess whether the patterns are linked to natural climatic variation or are a response to human-induced phenomena such as deforestation, overfarming, climate change or the depletion of the ozone layer. The Sahel, the area bordering the Sahara, is shrinking at an alarming rate as animals graze on its fragile land, and trees and bushes are cut for fuel. Without the vegetation to hold it in place, the thin topsoil of the Sahel blows away, leaving stony land where neither grass nor crops can grow.

### GENETICALLY MODIFIED CROPS

Are genetically modified (GM) crops a magic solution to Africa's agricultural problems or a time bomb that will hit the world's poorest nations first? Some African governments, such as that of South Africa, which is among the top 14 growers of genetically engineered crop varieties worldwide,

#### MOZAMBIQUE'S MEGA-DAMS

Early in 2006, Mozambique's government proudly announced funding to build a second enormous dam on the Zambezi River. The dam, to be called Mepanda Uncua, would have the capacity to generate about 2000 megawatts of power, equivalent to the output of about four large power stations. Opponents of the dam claim that it will affect the flow of the Zambezi, damaging the ecology and leading to loss of livelihood for the farmers who live along its banks. Like the majority of Mozambique's population, these farmers have no access to electricity anyway.

Need to keep up to date with conservation initiatives in Africa? [www.afrol.com](http://www.afrol.com) is a handy site for all the latest stories, or try [www.earthwire.org/africa](http://www.earthwire.org/africa), an environmental news portal.

Scientists have discovered that elephants can be deterred from raiding the crops of African villagers by smearing rags with chilli and hanging them on wire fences around the fields. For more details, go to [www.elephantpepper.com](http://www.elephantpepper.com).

#### KILIMANJARO'S MELTING ICE CAP

Glittering white like a mirage behind its veil of cloud, Mt Kilimanjaro's perfect white cap of ice is one of Africa's most iconic images. But scientists who've been studying the mountain over the past few decades have discovered that the ice covering Kilimanjaro's famous silver peak is melting at an alarming rate. A recent study shows that the peak has lost over a third of its ice in the last 20 years alone, with a real possibility that the ice will disappear completely by 2020. Deforestation and global warming are among the factors to blame.

have enthusiastically embraced GM crops, hailing them as the solution to increased production and hunger alleviation. Other countries, such as Zambia, refuse even to accept GM crops in the form of food aid, calling them 'poison'. Sound arguments exist on both sides of the debate, but for now the jury is still out...

### CONSERVATION PROJECTS

Large-scale conservation measures are not common in Africa. However, across the continent, governments and aid agencies are instituting projects, many of them community based, aimed at tackling problems on a local level.

In the past, Africans have been kicked off their land to make way for wildlife reserves and national parks. Understandably, this didn't usually lead to their enthusiastic commitment to conservation initiatives, but thankfully community-based conservation is now all the rage: experts have woken up to the fact that conservation is not going to work in the long term unless local people can see real benefits. With over 500,000 sq km of land protected (an amazing feat, even though enforcement is at times lacklustre), some really impressive national parks are found across Africa. By and large the parks in East and Southern Africa are the most organised and exciting, but in the North and West some classic landscapes have also been protected.

### AND NOW FOR THE GOOD NEWS...

The news from Africa isn't all doom and gloom. Recent years have seen political successes for environmentalists in many African countries, while many fantastic projects across the continent are making great strides in environmental education and community-based conservation. Read and be inspired – change *can* happen!

- Central Africa: a 2004 census of mountain gorillas in Central Africa's Virunga Mountains recorded an impressive 17% increase in the local population.
- Gabon: in 2002, Gabon's government promised to set aside 26,000 sq km – over 10% of the country – to form a new system of 13 national parks.
- Madagascar: in 2003, the president of Madagascar pledged to triple his nation's total protected areas to 6 million hectares by 2008. He has since increased this figure by more than a million hectares.

For 15 months Wildlife Conservation Society biologist J Michael Fay hiked 3200km across central Africa, surveying the land and wildlife of the Congo River Basin. Read his findings at [www.nationalgeographic.com/congotrek](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/congotrek).

# Africa's Wildlife

Think 'Africa' and one of the first – if not the first – images that springs to mind will be of large, exotic animals, such as elephants, giraffes and gorillas. Wildlife, including these iconic species and hundreds more, is central to the African experience. Nowhere else on earth can a traveller observe, photograph or otherwise interact with large wild animals in such great numbers and variety. Visitors have been using the well-established safari circuits in East and Southern Africa for decades and, more recently, tracking gorillas in the highlands of Uganda and Rwanda has captured travellers' imaginations. But as more African countries realise the value of preserving wildlife in its natural habitat as a source of income and employment for local people, further wildlife-watching opportunities are opening up for visitors.

## ANIMALS

Africa is home to more than 1100 mammal species, some 2400 bird species and hundreds of species of reptile, amphibian and freshwater fish. Mammals top the list of 'must-sees' for the vast majority of visitors, but a trip to Kenya, Botswana or Cameroon, for example, has turned many a casual bird-watcher into an insatiable 'world birder'. And, unlike in many parts of the world, Africa's most charismatic mammals are often large, and easy to see and photograph.

The term 'Big Five' was coined by white hunters for those five species deemed most dangerous to hunt: elephant, lion, leopard, rhino and buffalo. Hunting is now either banned or strictly controlled (in theory at least) in most African countries where these animals survive, but the label has stuck and many tourists come to Africa determined to see these species. But there's a whole lot more out there, some of it right at your feet, that's no less interesting.

For example, Africa has the biggest diversity of hoofed animals on earth. Antelopes range from the tiny, knee-high dik-dik and duiker, through the graceful gazelle, impala and springbok, to giants such as the eland and kudu. Many of these will be seen on a typical East or Southern African safari, as well as other iconic hoofed animals, such as the three zebra species and giraffes. And don't worry, there's a good chance of seeing buffalo, despite their fearsome reputation (earned, incidentally, by rogue bulls, which really are dangerous).

Meat provides a ready source of first-class protein, and in Africa it walks around in huge herds, so not surprisingly many predators have also evolved here. Among them are lions, unique among cats because they form cohesive prides that hunt cooperatively and share the spoils; the secretive but adaptable leopard, found from rainforests to the edge of human settlements; and the cheetah, fastest of all land mammals, which hunts by running down its prey. The dog family is also well represented, with three species of jackal and the African hunting dog, the most social of dogs, which hunt in fast-moving packs. Maligned and misunderstood, the spotted hyena is superbly adapted to run down fleet-footed antelopes with its seemingly tireless, lolling gait, and even challenges lions and leopards for their kills.

The African elephant is the largest living land animal and can still be seen in good numbers in many parts of the continent, despite the ravages of poaching. Such huge animals have a voracious appetite, which inevitably brings them into conflict with humans as they trash crops and farms. But the killing of the two rhino species – white and black – is inexcusable. These

Chimpanzees and humans are the only animals known to deliberately murder their own kind. Not surprisingly, we share 99% of our genetic makeup with chimps.

[www.africanconservation.org](http://www.africanconservation.org) is the website of the nonprofit African Conservation Foundation, with links to countries, projects and info on how to get involved.

## CONSERVATION SUCCESSES

In terms of species lost, Africa has been remarkably lucky, despite increasing pressures from human overpopulation and land degradation. However, local-wildlife populations are frequent targets for poaching and hunting, and are often the victims of all-too-frequent wars. Luckily, a high degree of interest around the world often ensures that human and financial resources can be mobilised at short notice when crises arise; and an army of dedicated researchers, volunteers and communities constantly battles to save habitats, species and even individual animals.

And it's not all bad news. Outstanding successes have included the rescue of the southern white rhino, which was brought back from the brink of extinction in South Africa through captive breeding, and is now off the endangered list. Similarly, the mountain zebra was saved by one farsighted farmer, who protected the last 11 surviving zebras on his farm; the species has since recovered to several hundred individuals.

The involvement of local communities is essential to preserve and maintain national parks, and to study the wildlife itself. Tourist encounters with gorillas and chimpanzees provide valuable foreign earnings for countries such as Rwanda, Uganda and Gabon, and teach local communities the value of preserving the forests and their wildlife. Increasingly sophisticated ecotourism developments are being initiated and run by local groups, helping to empower them financially and to remove much of the mystery and superstition with which they have traditionally viewed wildlife. Talented local wildlife guides can command comparatively high earnings for their services in ecotourism 'hotspots'.

inoffensive vegetarians are armed with impressive horns that have made them the target of both white hunters and poachers; rhino numbers plummeted to the brink of extinction during the 20th century.

We owe a lot to the rainforests of Central and West Africa, for it is from here that *Homo sapiens* ultimately evolved. Indeed, all the primates as we know them – humans, the great apes, monkeys and a host of ancient 'primitive' forms such as bushbabies – evolved in Africa. Our obvious kinship with these often-engaging animals has spawned various forms of 'primate tourism', whereby troops of monkeys or apes are habituated to human presence so visitors can observe them in their natural habitat. High on everyone's list should be gorilla- or chimp-tracking at one of several sites now geared up for primate tourism. The West African rainforests are rich in primates – not just gorillas and chimps, but a host of beautiful and strikingly-marked guenons and forest baboons.

Birds are a highlight of any safari, and in most sub-Saharan countries you could see hundreds of species in the course of an average visit. Birds reach their highest profusion in the Congo rainforests, but are easier to see in countries with a mosaic of habitats such as rainforest, savannah and wetland. Several bird families, such as the ostrich, secretarybird, touracos, shoebill, hamerkop and mousebirds are unique to Africa. Apart from endemic species, hundreds more species flood into the continent on migration during the northern winter. For the dedicated birder there are a host of challenges, such as sorting out the bewildering variety of weavers, sunbirds and warblers.

Africa's reptiles are also diverse and include hundreds of species of snake and lizard. Those who have a phobia of such things needn't worry – all lizards are harmless and the danger from snakes is greatly exaggerated. The only really dangerous reptile is the famous Nile crocodile, which generally eats fish, though large specimens wait in ambush for wildebeest and other animals at river crossings, and do occasionally kill people. Some fine specimens can be seen in Kenya's Lake Turkana and in Madagascar. The largest African lizard is the Nile monitor, which sometimes reaches a metre or more in length. The fabulous chameleons, subject of much superstition among Africans,

Freshwater lungfish are biological relics found only in Africa, Australasia and South America, showing that these three continents were all once part of the supercontinent Gondwana.

are difficult to spot among foliage but come in many shapes and colours. Spectacular snakes include the African rock python, which is nonvenomous and kills its prey by constriction, and various species of cobra and viper that you may be lucky enough to see from your safari vehicle. Small, handsome tortoises are often encountered on the plains.

Madagascar rates a separate mention for its unique treasure-trove of endemic wildlife that has remained virtually unchanged since this great island split off the African mainland 165 million years ago. Most famous of its inhabitants are the lemurs, monkey-like animals that are found nowhere else on earth. Lemurs have adapted to nearly every feeding niche, and range in size from tiny mouse-lemurs to the indri, which look like a cross between a koala and a giant panda, and has a voice like a police siren. Madagascar's birds and reptiles have also taken some interesting evolutionary turns: the island is famous for the world's largest and smallest chameleons; and the largest bird species ever known, the extinct *Aepyornis* or elephant bird, which stood about 3m tall and laid eggs as big as a football. It roamed Madagascar's remote forests until only a few hundred years ago, and whole (but dried out) eggs are still occasionally found today.

## HABITATS

A greatly simplified picture of the African environment would divide it into three major habitats: the vast equatorial rainforests that stretch from the Atlantic to the borders of East Africa; deserts, such as the Sahara stretching across the top of the continent and the Namib in the southwest corner; and, filling the spaces in-between, the savannah plains, dotted with acacias or miombo and populated by the big cats, elephants, giraffes and vast herds of grazing animals. Biologists sometimes use an island metaphor to explain Africa's extraordinary wildlife diversity: 'islands' of habitat have been stranded all over the continent by the expansion and contraction of these three major habitats during alternating wet and dry climatic phases over many millennia.

Africa's rainforests are an evolutionary hothouse, rich in birds and small mammals, that remain largely unexplored biologically. As recently as the early 20th century, new species of large mammal were still being discovered, including the okapi, a horse-sized member of the giraffe family; and the giant forest hog, the world's largest wild pig. Other denizens of the deep forest include pygmy hippos in West African rivers; distinctive forest-dwelling subspecies of elephant, buffalo and bush pig; and the bongo, a large and beautifully marked forest antelope. In remote, uninhabited parts of the Congo basin these generally retiring animals emerge from the forest into clearings called *bais*, naturally-occurring grassy depressions that provide sweet grazing.

Animals that can climb or fly are able to exploit food and other resources high in tree canopies. Thus, rainforests are rich in birds, small climbing predators such as genets and, of course, primates. Birdlife includes a range of large and spectacular species, such as hornbills and touracos, as well as hundreds of smaller species, and hawks and owls rarely seen by humans. From the deep green cathedrals of towering trees, monkeys eventually ventured into the surrounding savannahs and developed complex social systems that enabled them to survive among a new suite of predators.

Deserts typically occur in areas of low rainfall and feature their own unique fauna and flora. Most famous of Africa's deserts is the mighty Sahara, which stretches virtually across the continent's northern side. An expanding human population caused the extinction of nearly all large animals north of the Sahara, and the giraffes, large antelopes and lions that once roamed

www.africanbirdclub.org, the African Bird Club's website, is a great starting point for any birding trip to Africa, with info on each country and links to trip reports.

*Cats of Africa*, by L Hunter, is an authoritative but readable book covering the behaviour, conservation and ecology of all Africa's wild cats, with superb photos by G Hinde.

the Mediterranean coast were all killed off by Roman times. Many large animals, including elephants, rhinos and the majestic gemsbok, eke out a precarious existence in the extraordinarily harsh conditions of the Namib Desert; and a suite of smaller animals has evolved for survival in habitats that have probably never known rain.

But the vast, unpeopled savannah plains probably still epitomise the African wildlife experience for most visitors. It's a beautiful and complex ecosystem that spans a continent, shaped by fire, rainfall and even the wildlife itself. The pounding of millions of hooves over millennia has allowed the survival of only the hardiest grasses; the same grazers deposit vast amounts of manure that fertilise the soil. Fires set by lightning and the destruction of trees by elephants encourages grasslands, but eventually the herds move on, the shrubs and trees regrow, and over centuries and millennia the cycle is repeated across the continent.

The same cold waters that create the southwestern deserts support rich fish stocks, which in turn support a host of seabirds, and sea lions and their predator – the great white shark of the southern oceans. But the wildlife highlights of tropical and subtropical seas are the coral-reef systems that proliferate in warm, sunlit shallow waters. Coral reefs are among the most complex, but least understood, ecosystems on earth. They are home to hundreds of species of fishes, crustaceans and other invertebrates. Superb underwater viewing of these habitats can be had around the shores of the Indian Ocean, particularly in the Red Sea, and East and Southern Africa.

Even freshwater ecosystems occur on a grand scale in Africa, with some of the world's largest lakes and rivers, as well as a host of tributaries. The largest of the aquatic animals is the hippopotamus, which leaves its wallows by night to feed on grasses, sometimes many kilometres from the water's edge. The sitatunga, the world's only aquatic antelope, has splayed hooves for walking on floating vegetation and submerges itself in swamps to avoid predators. The Rift Valley lakes as well as Lake Victoria itself once supported hundreds of unique fish species, the cichlids, but unfortunately many of these have been wiped out by Nile perch, a large predatory fish that was introduced to the lakes.

## AFRICA'S WILDLIFE HIGHLIGHTS

Picking Africa's wildlife highlights is a daunting task, but the following reserves stand out for their ease of access, intrinsic interest or sheer spectacle. East and Southern Africa have well-established safari circuits where sightings of iconic large mammals are virtually guaranteed, but many countries in West and Central Africa also offer outstanding opportunities for bird- and mammal-watching.

### North Africa

Most of the large animals are long gone, but there's good bird-watching in Morocco at Boumalne du Dadès (p188), and world-class snorkelling and diving in Egypt's Red Sea (p103).

### West Africa

The best parks for large animals are Ghana's Mole National Park (p349), Senegal's Parc National du Niokolo-Koba (p488) and Cameroon's Parc National du Waza (p298). Bird-watchers fare better, with good pickings in tiny Gambia at Abuko Nature Reserve (p325) and Kiang West National Park (p326), the shorebird spectacle at Mauritania's Parc National du Banc d'Arguin (p427) or Senegal's Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj (p487), and great rainforest birding on Mt Cameroon (p288).

*J Kingdon's Field Guide to African Mammals* is an excellent and authoritative guide to all the continent's land mammals. *Island Africa*, also by Kingdon, is a beautifully illustrated explanation of Africa's extraordinary biodiversity.



Among the bewildering array of field guides to African birds, *Birds of Africa South of the Sahara*, by I Sinclair and P Ryan, covers the largest geographical area and is superbly illustrated.

## Central Africa

Gabon is fast becoming a hot ecotourism destination and Réserve de la Lopé (p592) offers outstanding gorilla- and chimpanzee-viewing. Lesser-known destinations include Central African Republic's Dzanga-sangha (p534), with large populations of rainforest mammals; and Zakouma National Park in Chad (p546) – famous for large herds of elephant and other large animals, including lions.

## East Africa

The spectacular wildebeest migration is best experienced in either Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve (p700) or Tanzania's Serengeti National Park (p770). Some of Kenya's top birding spots include Kakamega Forest Reserve (p699) and Lake Baringo (p694), and don't miss the millions of flamingos at Lake Nakuru National Park (p693). No East African safari would be complete without a visit to Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater Conservation Area (p771), and snorkellers and divers won't be disappointed by the coral reefs at Kenya's Malindi–Watamu National Marine Park (p703), or those at Zanzibar (p757) or Pemba (p765) in Tanzania.

Cosy up to gorillas and their impish offspring at Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Forest (p804) or Mgahinga National Park (p811), or at Rwanda's Parc National des Volcans (p726). But don't pass up the chance to track bands of wild chimpanzees too; Kibale Forest National Park (p807) in Uganda is a great choice, or, for exclusive chimp-watching in Tanzania's remotest corner, there's Mahale Mountains (p781) and Gombe Stream (p781) National Parks.

And Ethiopia is coming onto the ecotraveller's radar with exceptional bird- and mammal-watching at Simien Mountains National Park (p666).

## Southern Africa

Two legendary reserves for large mammal sightings are Botswana's Chobe National Park (p856) and Namibia's Etosha National Park (p972), both with good populations of iconic species plus excellent bird-watching. Botswana also boasts the world-famous Okavango Delta (p848), while South Luangwa National Park (p1060) is Zambia's finest reserve. The massive Kruger National Park (p1026) in South Africa is a must-see (and the best place in the country for lions) and highlights among a host of smaller reserves include Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park (p1012) and Greater St Lucia Wetland Park (p1012). If you're a diver, don't miss Mozambique's Bazaruto Archipelago (p945).

Madagascar has many wildlife highlights: look for indris in Parc National d'Andasibe–Mantadia (p898), and other lemurs and rainforest birds in Parc National de Ranomafana (p893).

## WILDLIFE-WATCHING

Although observing wildlife is often straightforward, here are a few pointers to enhance your wildlife-viewing experience, whether you're in a safari vehicle, a hide or on foot.

### When to Go

Some countries, such as Kenya, offer exceptional wildlife-viewing at any time of year. That said, wildlife is generally easier to spot during dry seasons, when waterholes become a focus for activity. Quietly staking out a waterhole is a great way to watch mammals and birds coming to drink. Unfortunately, dry seasons also usually coincide with peak visitor numbers. Wildlife usually disperses during wet seasons, and denser vegetation can make observation

more difficult, but you may be rewarded with 'private' viewings of behaviours such as breeding activity.

### How to Look

Most animals are naturally wary of people so to minimise their distress (or aggression) keep as quiet as possible (talk softly), avoid sudden movements (such as pointing) and wear subdued colours (such as khaki) when in the field. Try to avoid direct eye contact, particularly with primates, as this is seen as a challenge and may provoke aggressive behaviour. Good binoculars are an invaluable aid to observing wildlife at a distance and are essential for bird-watching. When on foot, stay downwind of animals wherever possible – they'll smell you long before they see or hear you – and in this way close approaches may sometimes be made.

### Living with Wildlife

Encounters with animals are a daily fact of life for millions of African people and on safari you will have your share of wonderful experiences. Remember that over much of Africa you are no longer at the top of the food chain – never get out of your vehicle unless it is safe to do so. Always obey park regulations, including traffic speed limits; thousands of animals are needlessly killed on African roads every year. Follow your guide's instructions at all times – it may mean the difference between life and death on a walking safari. And *never* feed wild animals – it encourages scavenging, may adversely affect their health and can cause animals to become aggressive towards each other and humans.

[www.betterviewdesired.com](http://www.betterviewdesired.com) is the site to visit before you buy a pair of binoculars. It features up-to-date, authoritative and critical reviews of binoculars for wildlife-watchers.

# Africa & Development: What Gives?

Michela Wrong

In an article entitled 'How to Write about Africa', award-winning Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina once offered a potted summary of Western clichés that was as funny as it was scathing.

'Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book,' recommended Binyavanga, tongue firmly in cheek. 'An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these.' Treat Africa as one country, he urged – don't get bogged down in detail. Taboo subjects included 'ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans, references to African writers or intellectuals, mention of school-going children who are not suffering from yaws or Ebola'. Last, but not least: 'Readers will be put off if you don't mention the light in Africa... There is always a big sky.'

It's true that few regions have been more sloppily written about than Africa, which is still viewed as a destination for the adventurous, altruistic or non-conformist, those out to test themselves, save others or escape the humdrum. 'People go to Africa and confirm what they already have in their heads,' wrote Nigeria's Chinua Achebe, 'they fail to see what is there in front of them.' In the Western mind, Africa still represents 'otherness' at its most intense.

As with all clichés, such attitudes exist because they are part-rooted in reality. How many other regions can claim the dubious distinction of having US State Department travel warnings – at time of writing – for 12 of its 53 nations? How many areas have introduced the modern world to such medieval horrors as Ebola or Marburg disease? Where else does the whisper of cannibalism regularly surface in connection with some rebel movement or militia chief? And whatever Binyavanga says, anyone who fails to notice the light and skies must have something wrong with either their eyes or their soul.

The point is not that fly-blown refugees or psychopathic warlords don't exist, it is that they don't represent the full picture. After only a few days in Africa, first-time visitors will realise that ordinary life goes on and those they meet fret about taxes, gossip about Manchester United, tell bad jokes and surf the Web just like them. They will leave wanting to know more about the facets of life that never make the headlines, yet encapsulate our common humanity.

If, curious to understand trends and causes, they bother to dig deeper, they're likely to emerge confused. Because just as no other continent has been the target of such misleading hyperbole, no other has been subjected to such indulgent wishful thinking. Whether prompted by liberal guilt, political correctness or unacknowledged racism, predictive analysis comes in extremes, ranging from the All-We-Need-Is-One-Last-Heave school of thought to the Armageddon-Is-Approaching variety.

The upbeat view runs something like this. It took its time, but the 1989 collapse of the Berlin Wall sounded the death knell for a generation of corrupt 'dinosaur' presidents propped up by Washington or Moscow. The days when Colonel Chanceyourluck seized the radio station and executed the entire cabinet on the beach are also fading: more than two-thirds of African nations have now held multiparty elections. From Angola to Sudan, Somalia to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the players in Africa's most devastating conflicts have been forced and cajoled to the negotiating table. With a new generation of progressive leaders taking the reins, the world's richest nations have something to work with: hence the promise to double

aid at the 2005 G8 meeting in Gleneagles. Africa's crippling debt burden, now widely viewed as indefensible, is being whittled away and the West has also registered a moral imperative to correct trade terms tilted against the developing world. Domestically, the liberalisation of the media and advent of modern technology is ending the continent's isolation, with even remote villages boasting mobile phones and cybercafés. 'In the 19th century, the issue was what we could do to Africa,' says Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, 'in the 20th, what we could do for Africa; in this century, what Africa, empowered, can do for herself.'

The pessimistic view runs as follows. Yes, multiparty elections have become the norm, but that's only because an entrenched political elite has learnt to play the democracy game, rigging polls, co-opting opposition leaders and bribing voters. Cold War manipulation has simply given way to a new distortion, the 'either you're with us or against us' litmus test of the Bush era. While some conflicts are running out of steam, new ones have an uncanny habit of erupting. Darfur showed that despite all the 'never again' statements voiced after Rwanda's genocide, the outside world will still stand by as a regime commits massive human rights abuses against its citizens, and Mugabe's pauperisation of Zimbabwe has shown all the talk of African leaders policing themselves under the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) aegis to be just that – talk. Despite an estimated US\$580 billion in Western aid since independence, Africa is the only region in the world that is stagnating; its share of world trade had fallen to under 2% by 2002. Average life expectancy – just 46.1 years in sub-Saharan Africa, compared to 79 years in the rich nations of the OECD – has sunk to 1950s levels and the number of poor is set to rise to 404 million in 2015.

Which version to embrace? The answer, of course, is that both are true. For as Binyavanga highlights, one of Africa's biggest handicaps has always been the basic fact of its geographical shape. So neat, so apparently self-contained, it lures outsiders into dangerously simplifying a continent of 1800 languages, one that contains both snow-capped mountains and green meadowlands, freezing coastlines and crusty deserts; nomads who love their camels and farmers who lust after soil; along with mosques, holy trees, animist shrines, Masonic lodges and vast cathedrals. The French-speaking Maghreb states, to take one example, have far more in common with one another than Angola or Kenya. South Africa's chronicle of apartheid is emphatically not the story of the rest of the continent. Few Africans consider Egypt, which they regard as an extension of the Middle East, as belonging to the continent at all, while Ethiopia, with its 3,000-year-old Queen of Sheba myth, inhabits a cultural universe all its own. The average Nigerian has as much in common with an Eritrean as a Swiss villager has with a Native American. Anyone piecing together the factors that moulded the continent must therefore do what I do here – warn against the dangers of generalisation, while generalising like crazy.

## SLAVERY

If Africa sometimes seems like a continent suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, one of the least thoroughly digested of its many traumas was the slave trade. Part of African reality long before the white man set foot there, slavery was the fate of criminals, the indebted and prisoners of war. However, its domestic form was more benign than what came later, when Arab slave traders sent raiding parties into the interior, kidnapping the fittest and strongest. Entire regions became depopulated as villagers fled, and the impact of the Arab tactics of divide and rule, in which one chieftain turned against another, have been insidious. By the 16th century, European powers were hard on the Arabs' heels. With African rulers acting as middlemen – the

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Websites provide Africa's diaspora with a way to keep in touch and let off steam, but often seem off-puttingly incestuous or strident to outsiders. For a general overview of the continent, try [www.aallafrica.com](http://www.aallafrica.com).

West African empires of Dahomey and Ashanti in today's Benin and Ghana grew fat on slavery's proceeds – British, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch traders shipped between 12 and 20 million souls across the Atlantic to work the New World's tobacco, sugar and cotton plantations. The brutal trade finally ended in 1833 when Britain, its conscience pricked by the abolition movement, outlawed slavery in its colonies.

What is striking is how deep in the continent's subconscious this terrible episode has been buried. Some academics estimate that had it not been for the slave trade, Africa's mid-19th-century population would have been double its 25 million figure. Yet with the exception of the markets along the Swahili coast (a 2,900km stretch of Kenyan and Tanzanian coastline), Ghana's castles and Senegal's Goree Island, one rarely stumbles upon its traces. The complicity of rulers of the day may explain a reluctance to engage with the issue. As Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade, whose ancestors were slave owners, told African delegates campaigning for reparations: 'If one can claim reparations for slavery, the slaves of my ancestors or their descendants can also claim money from me.' The other complicating factor may be awareness of the time it took many African states to outlaw slavery – Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie, for example, only set about it in the 1920s – and embarrassment at the knowledge that it still quietly persists in countries such as Sudan, Mauritania and Niger. This awkward fact was highlighted in May 2005 when a pressure group arranged a release ceremony for 7,000 slaves in Niger. Humiliated by the media coverage, the government warned those involved they faced prosecution if they admitted to being slave masters, and the ceremony was scrapped.

## LEGACY OF COLONIALISM

Africa's second whammy was a network of national borders, imposed from outside, which ignored salient geographical features and divisions of tribe, language and religion. The Scramble for Africa was made possible by explorers such as David Livingstone, Richard Burton and Henry Morton Stanley, who traced the continent's contours, and by the discovery of medicines that allowed the white man to survive in the tropics. Until the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, in which Europe's great powers agreed on a continent-wide carve-up, Africa's distinctive contribution to history had been the art of living fairly peacefully while *not* in states. When the Scramble began, South Africa and Algeria were the only areas of Africa settled by Europeans. By the time it concluded in 1914, only Ethiopia and Liberia remained unspoiled. As Germany, Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal and Italy gobbled up land, driven as much by the need not to be seen lagging behind their competitors as any strategic interest, the missionary societies volunteered to spearhead what they saw as Europe's great civilising mission. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Nobel Prize winner, jokes: 'When whites arrived in South Africa, they had the Bible and the blacks had the land. The whites told the blacks to close their eyes and pray. When they opened their eyes, they had the Bible and the whites had the land.'

By introducing the monetary economy, taxation and paid labour, colonialism effectively propelled rural communities into the industrialised era. Alarmed by the implications of Kwame Nkrumah's Pan-African credo, Africa's postindependence leaders attempted to set those artificial frontiers in stone in 1963 with the doctrine of *uti possidetis* (boundaries shall stay as they are). But much of Africa's postcolonial turmoil can be seen as a straining against them. In Somalia (which now contains unrecognised Somaliland and Puntland), Sudan, DRC and Côte d'Ivoire, the nation state is under pressure as never before.

The Scramble's other poisonous gift was to fix the continent's gaze towards the West. Under colonialism, Africa's economic role was to provide Western markets with raw primary commodities – coffee, cocoa, tea, rubber, gold,

copper and diamonds – that would be processed elsewhere. Railways and roads were designed to link the interior with coastal ports, not one African nation with its neighbour. Today, it is still easier to fly from Zambia to Britain or from Togo to France, than it is to travel east to west across the continent. For Frantz Fanon, that orientation formed the basis of a morale-sapping inferiority complex. 'What is often called the black soul is a white man's artefact,' he wrote. If true, it may explain why 70,000 of Africa's brightest head abroad each year to join the diaspora and why 40% of African savings are held outside the continent. Even today, despite determined attempts by writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiongo to reestablish a proud African identity, Africans often seem more interested in the antics of their former colonial masters than in events across the border.

## COLD WAR INTERFERENCE

Africa had barely extricated itself from colonialism when it was bound in an even tighter straitjacket. Exsanguinated by WWII, Europe's powers withdrew from their colonies, only to see their place taken by the superpowers, whose behaviour would be dictated by the principle of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. There was nothing subtle about US and Soviet Union interference: fighting a proxy third world war, both sides plotted the assassination of elected African leaders, funded the extravagancies of kleptomaniac dictators, supported atrocity-prone rebel movements and poured lethal weaponry into nations that had until then known the flintlock and spear. The massive arming of Africa that resulted – Ethiopia's Mengistu Haile Mariam, for example, received at least US\$9 billion in Soviet hardware – transformed the nature of conflict on the continent. It also taught a generation of black leaders that as long as they sang the appropriate ideological tune, they would always be eligible for World Bank and IMF loans, in the case of the pro-US contingent, and Warsaw Pact funding, in the case of the pro-Communists. 'The Cold War,' writes Ryszard Kapuscinski, 'was one of the most disgraceful pages in contemporary history, and everyone ought to be ashamed.'

Angola, DRC and the Horn of Africa probably bear the deepest scars of this cynicism, which all too often encouraged a numb passivity among citizens who realised the future would be decided not by them, but in Washington and Moscow. While *perestroika* eventually concentrated the minds of South Africa's white rulers, helping to pave the way for Nelson Mandela's release, many of the continent's worst despots succeeded in clinging to power despite the shrivelling of superpower support. The danger today is that after a period in which good governance topped the agenda of foreign donors, the War on Terror has become a new Cold War, with policy towards Africa dictated exclusively by whether a leader has signed up for Washington's campaign against Islamic extremism.

## IN SICKNESS & IN WEALTH

Africa boasts so many of the worst diseases known to man for good reason: for millions of years the cradle of humanity provided bacteria and viruses with a venue in which to adapt to the human organism. They are still taking their toll. It's easy to forget that old-fashioned malaria still kills more Africans each year than AIDS, or that three to five million children under the age of five die annually of preventable diseases. As for the new virus, a disastrous combination of factors, from ingrained poverty to women's low status, African machismo and practices such as widow inheritance, have allowed it to wreak havoc. Poor leadership, Africa's great curse, also played its part, with too many rulers either ignoring the problem, presenting it as a Western plot, or presiding over condom-burning ceremonies. Today, sub-Saharan Africa is home to 60% of all people living with HIV. The fact that most victims are in their productive years bodes

*The Scramble for Africa*, by Thomas Pakenham, is a whopping doorstop of a book. But it's also a great, scintillating read, full of ruthless and eccentric characters, tracing the European greed for territory that shaped today's continent.

Martin Meredith's *The State of Africa* is a clear and concise run-through of Africa's postindependence history, taking the reader from colonial withdrawal up to the present day.

'Dry sex', practised in parts of southern Africa, has helped spread HIV. Women use herbs, soil, salt or torn newspaper to soak up the vagina's natural lubrication, which is regarded as distasteful. The result is increased friction, greater sensation and greater infection rates.

ill for economic trends. While the cost of antiretrovirals is plummeting, it's hard to see long-term treatment for over 25 million infected Africans as viable on a continent where so many already go without basic medical services.

Africa's other ancestral inheritance – its extraordinary natural riches – have proved more curse than blessing. Mimicking a colonial pattern of asset-stripping, Africa's governing elites funnelled profits from the oil, diamond, mineral and timber industries into Swiss bank accounts and European real estate. Today, oil-rich states usually boast the worst governance records and with both China and the US – expected to source a quarter of its oil here by 2015 – on the prowl for petroleum, it's easy to see pragmatism again replacing principle in superpower dealings with Africa. The new competition for resources between East and West is likely to be no more uplifting than the last.

## HOPES & FEARS

The 21st century is going to be a testing time.

Climate change – likely to have a particularly dramatic impact on Africa's farmers whose livelihoods are rarely secure – is only one of the many looming challenges. Somalia looks set to become the new venue for Washington's crusade against Islamic fundamentalism, with the standoff between its Islamic Courts movement and a weak transitional government threatening to draw Eritrea, Ethiopia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Libya into a devastating proxy war in one of the world's poorest regions. Uganda, which came tantalisingly close to resolving its conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army in 2006, could yet see peace slip through its fingers, while the aftermath of the first democratic elections in DRC in 40 years may prove more disruptive than the polls themselves. Even while policymakers worry about the possible implosion of Zimbabwe and Ethiopia, Nigeria's fragmentation and a permanent split between south and north Sudan, they know from experience that the worst crises are rarely foreseen, for Africa has a great capacity to wrong-foot and surprise.

While some analysts believe African economies are up and running – in the last decade, 16 nations saw average annual growth of over 4% – others warn that their Asian rivals are already at full gallop and the distance between the two is now so wide it may never be bridged. China's current intense interest in Africa may prove a mixed blessing, boosting prices of raw materials while undermining its manufacturing sector with cheap credit.

As for the hopes voiced by the likes of Bob Geldof and Bono that a doubling in Western aid could trigger an African renaissance, sceptics murmur that aid has often damaged accountable government, and twice as much aid may merely mean twice as much damage. 'The best way to keep Africans poor is to continue handing money to political elites who suppress development,' warns Moeletsi Mbeki, South African analyst.

For newcomers, perhaps the best advice they can heed is to resist the insidious notion that they are somehow duty-bound to rescue Africa from itself. It's ironic that a continent that has had so much harm done to it by outsiders is so often perceived as demanding some form of moral reaction from its visitors.

The truth is that Africa's future will be decided not by outsiders but by its own citizens. Extending feelers across the continent, South Africa's businessmen are bringing new dynamism to industries shackled by state intervention and graft. The continent's vast, supremely well qualified diaspora sits watching from abroad, awaiting the moment when its talents can be put to use back home. Terrifyingly, exhilaratingly, more than half of Africa's population is under the age of 17. Less burdened by the ethnic loyalties of yesteryear, harbouring little respect for the geriatric leaders who sabotaged Africa's independence, familiar with the spreadsheet, podcast and MP3 player, they currently have no say over the continent's direction. When that changes, Africa will find its way.

Pick up any guidebook from the '60s, '70s or '80s and one fact strikes you: Africa has become less, not more, accessible. Roads once used by ordinary cars now need 4WDs, popular air routes have been scrapped, hotels no longer exist and ferries are a distant memory.

Apart from being expensive, African visa requirements are one of the most irritating hurdles for the traveller. Accept that they are a form of retaliation for the obstacles the West puts in the way of African migrants, go armed with photos and cultivate a sense of humour.

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