

FLY ABIDJAIN

ONCE A POPULAR BEACH DESTINATION, THE
"MANHATTAN OF THE TROPICS" IS NOW
DEVELOPING A NAME AS AN ENTREPRENEURIAL HUB

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Dry your tears, Afrika!
We have drunk from all the
springs of ill-fortune and of glory
And our senses are now opened
To the splendour of your beauty
To the smell of your forests
To the charm of your waters
To the clearness of your skies
To the cares of your sun.

From Dry Your Tears, Afrika by Bernard Binlin Dadié, 1967

It was 1995 when SA played host to its first-ever Rugby World Cup. I was very young, in Grade 2 and the country was high on rugby fever. In my class, each of us had to draw a slip of paper from a large hat. On it was written the name of the rugby team who'd become "our side" for the duration of the tournament. We had to research the country we were given and then report back to the class, detailing some of the cultural and interesting facts we learnt as the games unfolded.

The country I drew was the Ivory Coast. Little did I know that some 15 years later, I'd end up visiting Abidjan, the Ivory Coast's commercial and banking heart.

Looking back, I don't recall exactly what I might have said in a classroom speech about a country that, to my younger self, must have seemed very far away, up the west coast of Africa.



Nothing beats simply hitting the street corner any time of the day or night to treat yourself in local restaurants run by *maquis*.

hasn't touched the Ivory Coast to date).

It may not seem like the ideal place to venture into. It might not have the soulful night life of Senegal or the thick air of business and chaos you find in Nigeria, but it warrants its nickname, "Manhattan of the Tropics", because of the many skyscrapers clustered around the Ébrié Lagoon, which stretches over 200km on either side of the city centre.

In a country that's the world's largest producer of cocoa beans and is home to over 60 ethnic groups, the most important resource for getting around the city is a good knowledge of French and a deep passion for soccer – neither of which I have.

Thanks to national team Les Éléphants, whose players are often involved in different initiatives around the country to promote peace through sport, soccer is a way of life in the Ivory Coast, where a local team can be found in pretty much every town and village. Uttering the name of famous former Captain Didier Drogba seems to work wonders for my street cred.

CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE:

- St Paul's Cathedral, Ivory Coast's soccer forward Gervais Yoo Kouassi (Gervinho).
- A farmer sells cocoa beans at the International Agriculture & Animal Resources Fair. The beaches have a lot to offer.

The best way to get a clear

perspective of the lie of the land is to head to St Paul's Cathedral, high up on Le Plateau, with a rather formidable facade that falls somewhere between a ship's sail and a futuristic cross dominating the skyline over the Bay of Cécody. Designed by Italian architect Aldo Spirito and completed in 1985, it's more than just a unique design on the horizon landscape. During 2010, this church offered a safe refuge for many of the local people caught up in the traumatic second civil war, when nearly 1,800 individuals were caught in the gunfire that echoed across the streets of Abidjan.

The Ivory Coast's mixed past has left basic amenities such as electricity and running water in scarce supply in certain areas. With many people unable to earn even the minimum wage of \$20 a month and hundreds having lost everything in the violence of 2010, entrepreneurs are becoming the drivers of future growth and innovation in the post-conflict country. A walk around the Cécile Fakhoury Gallery, taking in the sublime photography of the likes of Nestor Da and Paul Sika, ▶



Now, driving over the Pont Général de Galle on the way to Le Plateau, Abidjan's business district, facing a wall of tropical humidity, I realise that any imaginings I had as a child were probably vastly different from this African city, which is anything but average.

Once a popular beach destination among French sun-seekers, it saw two civil wars (in 2002 and 2011) that crippled the country's tourism. Sharing borders with Liberia and Guinea (now infamous worldwide because of the recent outbreak of the deadly ebola virus, which thankfully