Burkina Faso

Country Facts
Population: 15,746,232
Languages: French, local languages
Predominant Religions: Islam, Christian [Roman Catholic]
Time Zone: Greenwich Mean Time
Voltage Requirements: 220 volts
Telephone Codes: 226, country code

Introduction:
The resourceful Burkinabe have made the most of what little nature has given them. In fact, they have made sure their country in Western Africa doesn’t remain in obscurity, far from the beaten track. In odd-numbered years, Ouagadougou, the capital, stages one of Africa’s leading cultural events: FESPACO, the Pan-African Film and Television Festival. During the event, this pleasant, rapidly developing city is filled with filmmakers and fans who pack the city’s cinemas to see Africa’s best films. In even-numbered years, the city hosts the continent’s largest crafts market: the SIAO [Ouagadougou’s International Crafts Show], which draws hundreds of artisans and more than 100,000 visitors from around the world. In between big events, Burkina Faso returns to the quieter day-to-day culture of local markets and clubs, as well as the problems of a resource-poor, landlocked country on the edge of the Sahara.

Compassion in Burkina Faso:
Compassion International’s work in Burkina Faso began in summer 2004. As of 2010, more than 19,175 children participate in more than 95 child development centers. Compassion partners with churches to help them provide Burkinabe children with the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and become all God has created them to be.

Cultural Information:
- Burkina Faso is well-known as the land of the “upright men.” It’s a country with people who possess integrity and also a place where people are generally very friendly.
- Burkina is a friendly and welcoming country, where people are more important than programs. So relax, take time to enjoy passing the day with people, and give proper attention and respect to everyone. Nothing — even talking to a policeman — is done without first greeting with a handshake and inquiring about their health.
- Remember you are a visitor, and behave as respectfully as you would in someone else’s home. Dress appropriately. Often Westerners are viewed as scruffy or immoral in the way they dress. Although youth in the cities are increasingly imitating Western styles, you will give and gain respect by adopting a degree of African modesty.
- Do not give your left hand when greeted. After greetings, expect to be given some water before asked about your family. When the host comes with water and tastes it from your cup before handing it to you, this is normal! This gesture tells you that the water is safe to drink. When given the water, take it politely and though you may not drink it, thank
the host. It would be normal for a visitor to just hold the cup and give it back later even though they have not drunk anything.

- When you address people in French, be careful with the use of *vous* and *tu*. *Vous* is normally formal and used when addressing people you do not know well. *Tu* is informal and for people you are close to or know well.
- It is customary to give a gift to a family if you visit them. If you ever find yourself at the chief’s home, do not give the gift directly to the chief! Make sure you give it to one of his agents to hand it to him.
- If you have a cap or hat on your head, remove it when talking to an elderly person (anyone older than you should be shown respect).
- Normally after you are given food, your host may go away and leave you alone to eat. Understand that he or she is just giving you time to eat in peace instead of sitting with you and looking at you as you eat. The Burkinabe think they might embarrass you!
- In Burkina Faso, children eat with children, women with women, and men with men. If you must share a plate of food with an elderly person, let him or her be the first to start eating. On occasions when you are given a plate of food on your own, it is always good to leave something on the plate – don’t eat everything.
- Only 10 percent of the county’s population is Christian. Most of the nation’s people are Muslim — 50 percent. About 40 percent have indigenous beliefs.
- Burkina Faso is among the poorest countries in the world. About 45 percent of its population lives on less than $1 a day. Only 13 percent of the nation is literate, and 57 percent of the country’s children are involved in child labor.

**Dos and Don’ts:**

- Do go to the markets and talk to the merchants about their wares. Enjoy the experience and the haggling over price. But don’t ask the price of an item unless you want to buy it, and if you agree on a price, don’t change your mind — you are obligated to buy.
- Don’t hold hands or kiss someone in public. It is considered obscene for couples to display affection openly.
- Do learn some French before you travel to Burkina Faso. French is the official language used for all business. However, in many small villages it is difficult to find anyone who can speak French fluently enough to carry on a conversation.
- Do go to the movies — not to watch the films [which are inevitably grainy and dubbed in French] but to watch the audience. People love to talk back to the screen. In general, Burkinabe aren’t excited about seeing African films: They love Indian films at matinees and American action films at night. Outdoor theaters across the country are like drive-ins with benches instead of cars. Watching movies at indoor theaters is a dress-up event.
- Do be careful about taking pictures. A permit is no longer required to take pictures in the country, but carrying your camera around openly — especially in Ouagadougou — can create hassles and erect a cultural barrier between you and the residents. Always ask permission before photographing people, and don’t be surprised if someone objects to your taking any photographs. Women are more likely to object to being photographed
than men. Never photograph transportation centers or government or military buildings or personnel — it’s illegal.

- Don’t offer to shake hands with locals in the Islamic (northern) part of the country if you’re a woman.
- Don’t wear shorts. Showing anything above the knee is considered improper by the Burkinabe.
- Do be prepared for the large number of flies and mosquitoes found indoors as well as outside.
- Do avoid using your left hand for handling food or for passing money or other goods to people. As in most of West Africa, it is considered the “dirty” hand and is thus offensive.

**Travel Tips**

**Personal Safety:**
Burkina Faso is fairly safe for travel, though in larger cities such as Bobo-Dioulasso and Ouagadougou, visitors should beware of pickpockets, and when shopping always be discreet with your money. (Be especially careful around the United Nations traffic circle and the central market in Ouaga.) Occasionally, bandits are active in isolated areas on the main roads, so avoid traveling at night.

Leave at home all unnecessary credit cards, social security card, library cards and similar items you may routinely carry in your wallet. Do not take more cash than you reasonably require for that day. Use the room safe or hotel safe to secure valuables as well as additional cash. Secure cash in multiple locations – wallet, various pockets, money belts. Carry items in front pockets, not back pockets. Do not display large sums of money in public; only make visible the amount of money that approximates your purchase. Maintain a close awareness of your purse, wallet, backpack, etc. as well as the people around you. It’s a good idea to keep one hand or arm in constant contact with these items especially in areas of high people traffic. Never leave items with cash in them (purse, wallet, backpack, etc.) on a bus, car, or any other location, even if the vehicle is being watched by Compassion staff or Compassion-hired contractors. Stay alert and be cautious at all times. Don’t take safety & security for granted.

**Health:**

Sanitary conditions in most restaurants in Burkina may pose problems for travelers. Most hot, freshly cooked food should be safe (especially if it’s included on a package tour), but peel fresh fruit and raw vegetables, choose meat that is cooked thoroughly, avoid local dairy products (except for sterilized milk and yogurt), and assume the tap water is unsafe (stick with prepackaged or boiled drinks).

Be aware that dusty conditions November through March may aggravate respiratory problems. During the dry season, moisturizing skin lotions are essential. Do not swim in lakes or streams, which may be infested with bilharzia [a potentially fatal parasite that attacks the liver]. Skin infections are common — even the smallest wound should be disinfected and covered with a
bandage. Carry your own toilet paper. The sun can be very strong, so use sunscreen and wear a hat. Bring a pair of comfortable walking shoes. Bird flu has been identified over the border in Niger. Eat well-cooked meat, and avoid close contact with the killing and preparation of poultry.

Medical services are limited and generally below Western standards. Bring all prescription medicine needed for the trip as well as insect repellent. See your doctor about obtaining malaria suppressants [chloroquine-resistant strains of malaria have been reported in all parts of the country, and even with repellant and mosquito nets, you are likely to be bitten]. A vaccination certificate for yellow fever is required for entry to the country.

We strongly advise you to contact the CDC [www.cdc.gov] or check with your personal physician for more information about your specific health needs while traveling, including any recommendations for immunizations.

Money:
The local currency is the West African CFA (XOF), used throughout French West Africa. It is linked directly to the euro. This society still operates predominantly with cash. Money and traveler’s checks [with passport and receipts] can be changed easily at major banks in the big cities and at your hotel, but you may have problems changing anything other than euros in smaller towns. Credit cards [Visa more than MasterCard] are accepted only in high-end establishments. ATMs are now at the major banks, but may not always accept foreign cards.

Weather:
November through March is the “cool,” dry, windy season, and June through October is the warm, rainy season. Anyone with allergies will want to avoid the harmattan winds of December through February that turn the country into a dust bowl. Many locals wear face masks to keep from inhaling the thick, red dust. The rainy season can be inconvenient if you get caught in a severe downpour. Roads are washed away, and power lines go out regularly, but it’s also cooler then, and the rains can be quite beautiful and dramatic. Happily, even the strongest downpours tend to blow over in a few hours. Avoid Burkina Faso late March through May, the hot, dry season when even locals complain of the weather — 104 F / 40 C in the shade.

Dress:
Loose, lightweight cotton clothes are generally best, not only for comfort, but also for a degree of culturally sensitive modesty. Covering the legs above the knee will also avoid giving unnecessary offense. Long sleeves and trousers (especially in the evenings) provide some protection from mosquitoes.

All information taken from Weissmann Reports, the World Factbook and Compassion International.