



## Traveling to Gabon

For those of you interested in taking part in a traditional iboga initiation ceremony, there is a grand adventure ahead of you not to be taken lightly for you will need to be well-prepared. We advise you to inform yourself on how to travel safely, where to find a responsible setting, and what risk factors there may be and how to reduce them. In order to get the most out of this experience, it is imperative to plan properly to ensure your journey is the safest it can be.

## Culture & Customs

If you are seeking to take iboga in a traditional ceremony in Africa, you will most probably end up in Gabon, a sovereign state on the west coast of Central Africa. The capital and largest city is Libreville, where the main international airport is based.

Gabon borders Equatorial Guinea to the northwest, Cameroon to the north, and the Republic of the Congo to the east and south. Iboga is used traditionally in all these countries, but Gabon is the 'Tibet' of Africa in the spiritual sense, where the Bwiti culture is found throughout the whole country and where iboga has been used for centuries. Bwiti practitioners use the iboga plant in various rituals in order to enable spiritual growth as well as strengthening community bonds as a whole. The plant is also used as a rite of passage, among other reasons such as healing. In small doses it is used as a stimulant during hunting expeditions.

Low population density and abundant natural resources, such as a wealth of petroleum and wood, attracts much foreign private investment making Gabon one of the most prosperous countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite having an exceptionally high GDP for the area, many of the private investments are ambiguous and Gabon's inhabitants remain generally poor.

Throughout the whole country live some 1.5 million people. Almost all Gabonese are of Bantu origin, though Gabon has at least forty ethnic groups with a diversity of languages and cultures. About 80% of the inhabitants of Gabon speak French. The Babongo pygmies are the originators of the Bwiti religion and the use of iboga, said to have been discovered a thousand years ago. The Fang and Mitsogho peoples are also Bwiti practitioners. Although Christianity, one of the larger religions of the region, has been incorporated into Bwiti by some practitioners, a large part of the Bwiti do not follow this syncretic Bwiti trend. To this day there are still Catholic missionaries who are against Bwiti and its

widespread practice throughout Gabon, but the president himself is a Bwiti initiate and iboga is recognized as a cultural heritage that is illegal to export without a permit.

## The Ritual

In the Bwiti there are different types of rites depending on the ethnic group. The ceremonies are always led by a healer called N'ganga who is the spiritual leader of the community. Men's rituals are led by a male N'ganga and women's rituals by a female. There are separate temples (resembling small wooden huts) for men and women and the instruments used are also different; the main instrument being an 8-string Ngombi harp for women and Mongongo mouth-bow for men. Lots of percussion, hand clapping, and singing accompanies the ritual which has been said to help induce trance states. The temple has benches on the sides where members of the community, musicians from other villages, children, elders and healers sit whilst accompanying the rite of passage or healing process that takes 3-5 days in the case of men, and up to weeks for women. It is an incredibly delicate and complex process.

If you want to know more about the Bwiti ritual we recommend watching our film 'Experience BWITI: Renaissance of the Healed', a 40 minute film of a complete Mitsogho woman's ritual with optional voice over explaining the images.

## Decision Making

If you are seeking an exotic experience out of an interest for other cultures, going to Gabon to take iboga is not really the best thing to do. There are plenty of other ways to satisfy your needs. This is a plant like many others that must be treated with the utmost of respect; true motivation for a profound death-rebirth experience is more in line with what you can expect from an initiation into the Bwiti. You will have to ask yourself whether you are ready or not. Before embarking on this journey you will need to make sure you have the perseverance and willpower, for you will need them.

Being a westerner traveling to Gabon to be initiated into the Bwiti, there are a few important decisions that you should make and factors you should bear in mind:

### Risks

Iboga has been used for a thousand years by the Bwiti in an intrinsic way based on their world view and deep-rooted social context, entwined with their complex music, dosing methods and safety techniques. It is important to keep in mind that Westerners have a completely different lifestyle, nutritional intake, physical condition and health issues to the natives of Gabon. Even though there are traditional safety measures and guidance techniques, with the large difference in occidental physical condition and psychological frame, this can be a whole different story that really could vary from person to person. Some accidents have been reported with tourists partaking in a Bwiti ritual, and also in the Bwiti in sporadic occasions an initiate might not make it through the rite of passage. Again, ingesting iboga is not to be taken lightly. Although incidents are rare, when choosing where and with whom to entrust yourself to participate in an iboga initiation, it is important to be aware of the risk, take the right safety measures to reduce it as much as possible and follow the 'protocol' of the people that are initiating you, even though that means being in a hut for several days to weeks with mosquitos around you, not being able to take a shower during the process, having no privacy, etc.

### Choosing the right place

The next important decision is choosing the right place to undergo this experience. You do not want your spiritual quest to turn into a nightmare. Going to remote places in the Gabonese jungle to do the initiation in a community where hardly any foreigners go might be the cheapest option and the most 'authentic' environment but these tribes might be unexperienced in dealing with non-natives, which can give rise to problems. There might be communication problems, your presence alone might awaken jealousy, competitiveness, among other negative emotions. It is not abnormal that obscure spiritual practices are utilized in such cases by people involved in conflicts in the region, etc. If you don't speak French it is highly recommended to travel with someone who does and can translate for you.

There are groups that do initiations that are more used to visitors from abroad. This doesn't necessarily mean they are tourist attractions or safer. Conditions might be more adapted to the needs of foreigners, they might speak English.

Prices of a 5-day to 4-week initiation range from around 300 to 3000 euros, the more expensive options being the places where more Westerners pass by. The prices are very expensive in comparison to ayahuasca rituals in the Amazon region, but keep in mind that in the case of the Bwiti, many people come together for five days to support actively just one or two initiates and the money is divided between all those people involved.

## Preparation / Safety

Aside from the general precautions that need to be taken into account when traveling to rainforest environments, in the case of the Bwiti ceremonies and the ingestion of this ethnobotanical it is important to be aware of some extra safety considerations:

### Money issues, safe traveling

Even though there is not much iboga tourism, similar issues to the ones related to ayahuasca tourism in the Amazonian jungle have been reported. You might attract opportunism such as theft or rogue healers looking to make money by selling you into irresponsible initiations. It is therefore extremely important to get good contacts who can lead you to a community where you are treated honestly and in a responsible manner. Always try to be very clear about the financial aspect; how much you will pay for the initiation, a guide during your stay, transport, etc. Situations have occurred where an initiate was asked for more money during the initiation, which can be very difficult to deal with in such state.

Gabon is a relatively safe country, but there is a lot of corruption. At police checkpoints you might be asked for money based on whatever excuse they come up with. It is advisable not to travel alone so there is someone with you who can deal with any problems or practical issues that could arise during the trip and initiation. It is also advisable to bring an abundance of gifts for the people who will be involved in your initiation. A gesture such as this would not go amiss. Note that music is a very important part of their culture; they like to play and experiment with new instruments and record the results.

Even though you might speak French, the world view of the people you will encounter is so different to the occidental one that communication about complex matters related to the initiation can be a challenge.

### Getting prepared for the initiation

It is also advisable not to start the initiation right upon arrival in Gabon, but take at least a week or two, ideally a month, to get used to the climate, the people, local food, local bacteria, and the surroundings. It may take a little while for your stomach to get used to the change in diet – you don't want to fall ill from something you have eaten in the middle of an initiation. Gabon is a tropical country with two dry seasons and two rain seasons. It is always very hot and humid. There are many insects and malaria is ever-present. It is very advisable to bring along a well-functioning insect repellent and a mosquito net.

In the information about taking iboga, it is mentioned not to consume foods, drinks or medications that are metabolized by the CYP450 2D6 enzymes in your body as they can have adverse reactions when they interact with the iboga. It is important to note that chemical anti-malaria medications or natural ones such as products from the Cinchona tree all prolong the QT interval of the heart and therefore is dangerous in combination with iboga. Also the anti-malaria medication Lariam seems to cause frequently adverse reactions such as depression, psychosis and anxiety. It might be advisable to have anti-malaria medication with you in case you would start experiencing symptoms (fever, nightmares, etc.), and use anti-mosquito spray and mosquito net. If you are having doubts about foods, medication or food supplements you are taking, talk about it with your doctor.

Also important to take into account is that a five day initiation in a tropical environment with large doses of iboga, with night-long rituals, dancing, sleeping on a hard floor, etc. is an exhausting process for the body and mind. If you are not in good shape, it is not recommended. On your own initiative, it is advised to have a stress ECG or 24 hour holter monitor test as well as a blood test with liver screening prior to deciding whether or not to travel to Gabon for the initiation. Eat healthy, exercise and rest well in the months before the initiation, while you prepare yourself for your rite of passage and what could be a life-changing event.

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