

REPUBLIC OF IVORY COAST

CAPITAL: ABIDJAN—POPULATION: 3,340,000

The richest and potentially most economically self-sufficient state in former French West Africa, Ivory Coast is a rectangular-shaped country of 127,520 square miles facing the coast on the south side of the African bulge. It is bounded on the north by Upper Volta and Mali, on the east by Ghana, and on the west by Liberia and Guinea. The southern boundary is a 340-mile coastline on the Gulf of Guinea, characterized by heavy surf and a lack of natural harbors. Early European voyagers were discouraged by this coastline and the dense tropical forest, as well as by a paucity of gold. Consequently, they established their forts farther to the east on the Gold Coast.

The country is fringed by a series of coastal lagoons on the southeast. Here is situated the capital city of Abidjan, the commercial and population center of the country. Abidjan is the natural point for the terminus of the 716-mile railway that connects Ouagadougou, capital of Upper Volta, with the Gulf of Guinea, because it is the only feasible site on the Ivory Coast for a deep-water port. Early 20th-century attempts to dig a canal through the sand bar that blocked the Ebrie lagoon from the sea were unsuccessful, but in 1950 the Vridi Canal, construction of which had begun in 1936, was completed. The canal opened the port of Abidjan to deep-draft vessels, and traffic increased by 50 percent almost immediately.

Dense forest extends to the sea in the western half of the country. Scrub savannah occupies a narrow strip stretching from Fresco in the approximate center of the coastline eastward to the Ghana frontier. Lush tropical forest extends inland to a line approximately halfway between Dimbokro and Bouaké. It is in these forest regions that the significant cash crops—coffee, cocoa, tropical woods, and bananas—are grown. North of the forest lies an inland savannah zone of lateritic or sandy soils, where the vegetation is sparse and the landscape monotonous. Only the Man mountains in the northwest, which rise to 4,800 feet, break the monotony of the inland plain.

The southern Ivory Coast falls within a tropical climatic zone. It has a narrow daily range of temperature, high humidity averaging 84 percent throughout the year, and a yearly average temperature in the high eighties. Two long rainy seasons—March to July and September to December—are separated briefly by a very short dry season in August.

THE PEOPLE

The population of Ivory Coast was estimated in 1962 at 3,340,000, of whom about 12,000 are Europeans concentrated mainly in Abidjan, which now has a population of about 250,000.

Ivory Coast contains perhaps 60 distinct tribal groups. The six principal ethnic groups are: Agnis-Ashanti-Baoule, Kroumen, Mandingo, Senoufo, Dans-Gouros, and Koua-Koua. The rate of population increase is about 2.5 percent per year.

The Catholic religion has many adherents in urban areas of Ivory Coast, particularly along the seaboard, and there are a considerable number of Moslems (one-fourth of the population), but most of the population is animist.

HISTORY

The early history of Ivory Coast is virtually unknown, although it is thought that a neolithic civilization existed there. At the time Europeans (Portuguese) first became acquainted with the country in the 14th and 15th centuries, strong kingdoms existed in the north and east, notably the kingdoms of Krinjabo, Bettie, and Boundoukou. France made her initial contact with Ivory Coast in 1937 when missionaries landed at Assinie, near the border of present-day Ghana. Early contacts were limited to a few missionaries because of the inhospitable coastline and fear of the peoples of the western coast.