Benin

Location
This country, Benin (9 30 N, 2 15 E), is located in western Africa and is sandwiched between Togo and Nigeria. The size of the country is rather small because it has been said that it is only a little bit smaller than Pennsylvania. Porto Novo is the capital of the country.

Geography
The country has a coastline and most of the land is flat and plain – like. They do have some hills and even though some mountains exist, they are rather flat. The highest point of the country is Mont Sokbaro at 658m. The country has natural deposits of limestone, timber and marble. Because it has a coastline, they do have a little bit of oil deposits. About 23% of their land can be used for agricultural purposes. Irrigation is also applied in this country as there are some dry parts in the northern part of the country. Even though irrigation techniques are being used, there are some parts of the country that do not receive enough water. With people moving in, forests are being destroyed and there is also the problem of desertification. Even though the country has a coastline, it is a bit difficult to access because of sandbanks.

Climate
The north is rather dry but compared to the south, which is almost like the tropics, it is very hot and humid. From December to March, the northern part of the country suffers from much dryness and also creates dangerous winds during that time period.

History
Benin used to be under French rule but has now gained its independence, which happened August 1, 1960. Centuries ago, the country used to be a West African kingdom known as Dahomey. They also have a past of a government rule by militias but have since ended and now the government is run under Russian ideals of Marxism and Leninism. The idea and ability to vote in elections slowly worked its way into the country and by 1991; the country was considered a democracy under President Nicephore Soglo. Mathieu Kereku was the president before Soglo who brought in the Russian ideals to rule the government by. The current president, Thomas Yayi Boni has worked hard to end corruption in government.

Important Dates
On August 1, 1960 is when they finally gained their independence from France. Hence it is their national day as well. December 2, 1990 was when they adopted their constitution.

Population
As of July 2008, it is estimated that the population for this African country is 8,294,941. One must remember that this is a country that plagued with the horrible disease of AIDS. Because of this disease, more people are dying and do not have the energy to reproduce. It is said that around 68,000 people live with the disease. And out of those people, around 5,800 die of it. There are also a lot of infant mortalities which makes the rate pretty high. Females and males are evenly distributed in this country. Even with an AIDS epidemic, the country still grows at a rate of 2.619%. The life expectancy of the country is rather low, with females living to around 55
years of age and males a little lower, around 52 years of age. If you compare their fertility rate to that of women in the US, the women in that country produce around 5 children.

As a whole, the people of the country are called Beninese, but there are some other ethnic groups that live there as well. Some include Fon, Adja, and Yoruba, just to name a few.

**Currency**

The CFA Franc (XOF) is the currency that is used in the country. CFAF is the currency symbol. As for the exchange rate, 1 US dollar is worth 421 CFAF.

**Education**

For a country that is still developing, one could give the excuse why the literacy rate is so low. With only about less than a third of the population knowing how to read and write does not help the country in evolving. There is even a bigger difference between males and females. Less than half of the males are literate while literate females make up around 20% of the group. French colonization along with missionary help has greatly improved the country’s education system. The government requires at least 6 years in school and after that transfer to something like a vocational school.

**Language**

Because of its past history of being a colony of France, it is no surprise that the official language is French. Besides French, there are tribal languages as well (6 major ones that are spoken in the north). And in the south, Fon and Yoruba, are commonly spoken as well.

**Religion**

About half the country is Christian (split into different sects such as Protestants, Methodist, etc) and about 25% are Muslim. A religion called Vodoun and others make up the rest of the preferred religions. One of the reasons the country is Christian is because many Christian missionaries come into the country to help with the AIDS epidemic.

**Agriculture**

The country produces a lot of cereals, roots and tubers, meats and pulses. Cotton (grown in the northern part of the country) is a popular crop because it one of the main items that they trade off. There have been increases in their production due to the incorporation of new technology. Palm oil (mostly produced in the south) has been in high demand based on its usage for making margarine and soaps. Not too many things have gone smoothly for the country’s farmer. Techniques such as how to store their produce and how to transport them has been a reason why there are low periods in production. Land usage can also be a problem since there have been reports of illegal dealings and lands with no evidence of proper ownership have been seized by those with power. The country also raises cattle, sheep and pigs. This greatly helps in the nation’s food supply.

**Trade**

The country is still struggling with development and therefore has yet to establish any international trade. They do trade with other regions to get materials, but they are still lacking in that aspect. When they do export, some of their products include cotton, raw oil, palm products and cocoa. Items that they need imported include petroleum products, food items and
intermediate products. Their partners in trade include France, China, United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Netherlands and Germany. For countries that they receive supplies from include the US, Portugal, Morocco, Brazil, Indonesia, and Libya.

**Food**

Having a coastline, seafood is quite popular in the region. They like to make their food somewhat spicy. Meat is also consumed but is it quite expensive and therefore are reserved more for holidays. A popular lamb that is made with peanuts is also very popular. Using spices is an important part of Beninese cooking.

**Landmarks**

Some places to visit when you are in Benin include the capital, Cotonou, which allows you to see the local life there. In Abomey, if you are into museums, there is a Royal Palace Museum and also a crafts center where you could see how they work with wood, cloth and brass. In the Royal Palace Museum you could see old ancient artifacts. In Ganvie, there is a village where you could explore irrigation techniques.