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A SWOT Analysis of the Tourism Industry in Benin

Laurent-Fidèle SOSSOUVI
Hispanic Studies Department, University of Abomey-Calavi. Benin, Email, laurent.sossouvi108@gmail.com

Tomás LÓPEZ-GUZMÁN
Applied Economics Department, University of Cordoba, Spain, Email, tomas.lopez@uco.es

Mei-Chih LIN
Hispanic Studies Department, University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin, Email, linmeichih@hotmail.com

Ramón RUEDA-LÓPEZ
Business Management Department, National University of Distance Education, Spain, Email, rrudeda@cee.uned.es
Corresponding Author

Abstract

Tourism in Benin is booming, with a growing focus on promoting its cultural and natural wealth. In recent years, it has resumed its role as a key driver of the economy. However, it still faces considerable challenges. This study presents a comprehensive analysis of tourism in Benin, addressing its weaknesses, threats, strengths and opportunities (SWOT), with the aim of understanding its impact and proposing strategies for its sustainable development. To achieve this objective, a SWOT analysis was conducted, drawing upon personal interviews conducted in April 2025. The findings indicate that, despite the considerable challenges confronting tourism in this nation, it also presents substantial prospects for the establishment of a dynamic, inclusive, and sustainable tourism model. The findings of this study underscore the imperative for the formulation of tourism policies that strike a balance between the pursuit of tourism revenues, the well-being of local communities, and the preservation of the environment.

Keywords Tourism; Benin; sustainable development; economic growth; local community

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Introduction

Tourism is recognised as a pivotal sector in the promotion of socio-economic development on a global scale. In the case of the Republic of Benin, tourism has become a fundamental economic activity that offers considerable opportunities for business generation, job creation and cultural exchange. Recent years have thus seen a significant growth in the tourism sector, with the concept of sustainability serving as the cornerstone of this expansion. This development has had a profound impact on the country's environmental, economic, social and cultural aspects, thereby strengthening them in a sustainable manner. In this regard, Benin is gaining international recognition as a cultural and heritage destination thanks to its rich historical heritage, cultural traditions and natural attractions (AFAR, 2024), thereby reinforcing and developing new trends in tourism (Ecofin Agency, 2025). This is because the tourism sector is recognised as being of strategic importance to Benin, both economically and culturally (Government of Republic of Benin, 2014, 2023). Thus, the country's history, defined as the 'Slave Coast', 'Cradle of Voodoo' or 'Latin Quarter of Africa', combines diverse cultural traditions with natural landscapes to offer visitors a unique blend of attractions. However, despite its cultural and environmental advantages, Benin's tourism industry faces several challenges. Like other countries in the Global South, Benin's tourism potential is limited by inadequate infrastructure, a lack of suitably trained personnel, and ineffective tourism development strategies. This situation is similar to those found in other geographical areas with similar characteristics (Garanti & Berjozkina, 2021), including West Sumatra (Anisah et al., 2023), Thailand (Kantawateera et al., 2013), and Brunei Darussalam (Sulaiman & Hashim, 2023). This research aims to conduct a SWOT analysis of the current state of tourism in Benin. This will enable the identification of the country's strengths and opportunities, as well as highlighting its weaknesses and threats. The aim is to provide public and private sector managers with the tools they need to strengthen and promote tourism, which will undoubtedly lead to significant economic growth based on a sustainable tourism strategy (Sharma et al., 2021).

Literature review

Tourism in West Africa

Tourism plays a crucial role in the economic development of West Africa. It contributes significantly to the GDP of various countries in the region by creating jobs and boosting local economies (Sogue & Senghor, 2020). Tourism can contribute directly to local economies and generate employment opportunities, thereby improving well-being (African Development Bank Group, 2018). Regions with well-developed tourism infrastructure tend to experience more significant economic benefits, suggesting a direct correlation between investment in tourism and its impact on the local economy (Chen & Devereux, 1999). Thus, different types of tourism, such as ecotourism, heritage tourism and cultural tourism, as well as adventure tourism, are particularly prominent in West Africa. This is due to the region's diverse natural landscapes, large number of historical sites and vibrant culture. Conversely, there are various community-based ecotourism initiatives in West Africa. In the Bossou Forest Reserve in Guinea, for example, the local community is directly involved in tourism planning using geographic information systems. (Samani et al., 2023). In Togo, the potential of ecotourism based on biological experiences is being explored in the Oti-Keran-Mandouri protected areas, as these regions are home to numerous endemic species and diverse ecosystems that could

attract environmentally conscious travellers (Koumantiga et al., 2022). Integrating local perspectives into tourism planning is essential for creating equitable and sustainable tourism models in West Africa. Collaboration between local communities and various tourism stakeholders, alongside efforts to incorporate tourism into local economic activities, can facilitate the realisation of socio-economic and environmental benefits. Tulel et al. (2020) argue that community-based tourism initiatives involving local stakeholders can improve tourism sustainability and promote economic benefits for communities. However, this potential is often hindered in West Africa by political instability, health crises, inadequate infrastructure, and the effects of climate change (Baliki et al., 2024).

This region's political instability has been a major deterrent to tourism. Opare-Addo (2020) provides a historical analysis of Ghana, examining the implementation of different tourism policies during periods of political instability. Various disturbances in this geographical area, such as the Boko Haram crisis in Nigeria and varying degrees of violence, have led to a significant decline in tourist arrivals. This has not only affected tourists' perception of safety, but has also compromised the economic viability of the tourism sector (Chisadza et al., 2022). In line with this, Akinyemi (2024) analysed the key factors influencing international tourist arrivals in Nigeria, highlighting the significant impact of political factors and security concerns on tourism dynamics. Conversely, health crises such as the Ebola outbreak between 2014 and 2016, and more recently the Coronavirus pandemic, have demonstrated their ability to negatively impact tourism in West Africa. This has led to a sharp decline in international visitors and had negative short- and medium-term effects on local economies that rely on tourism (Chisadza et al., 2022). Health crises cause immediate disruption to tourism, particularly in West Africa. This highlights the need for adequate health infrastructure, as well as tourism strategies that consider the region's health situation. (Ansumana et al., 2024). The third obstacle to the development of tourism in West Africa is the high cost of travel and the relatively poor state of urban and rural infrastructure (Plane, 2021). Significant funding would be required for the construction of this type of infrastructure, from both governments and tourism-related companies, particularly multinationals, as well as for training people (Evans & Acosta, 2020). The fourth obstacle is climate change, which is having a significant impact on Africa. As the climate crisis worsens, its effect on tourism becomes more apparent, affecting seasonal patterns and even the viability of natural attractions (George & Kangalawe, 2024).

Tourism in Benin

Along with agriculture and trade, tourism is one of the main drivers of the Beninese economy. (Ecofin Agency, 2024; World Bank Group, 2016). Tourism is a multidisciplinary field influenced by cultural heritage, the economic impact of the sector, and contemporary socio-political dynamics. It is also closely linked to the cultural and historical narratives that shape a country's identity. Benin's historical and natural heritage is attracting an increasing number of visitors (Principaud, 2004), with 325,000 people visiting in 2020 according to the most recent data available (World Bank Group, 2019). One of the main types of tourism in Benin is nostalgia tourism, which is primarily associated with slavery. Significant growth in this form of tourism has been observed since the 1990s, driven by the increasing interest among people of African descent living in non-African countries to learn about the cultural and historical narratives surrounding slavery. These narratives are closely linked to tangible historical sites, such as those found along the 'Benin Slave Route'. Thus, Holsey (2024) emphasises the importance of preserving these places, highlighting that this serves not only historical purposes, but also as a means of connecting with the diaspora, promoting cultural exchange, and generating economic benefits for the local community (Forte, 2009). In addition to nostalgia tourism, cultural festivals make a significant contribution to the growth of the nation's tourism industry. Benin's festivals blend tradition, spirituality and community cohesion, drawing in local participants and tourists — both domestic and international — seeking unique experiences (Nadine et al., 2020). In this regard, LeMay-Boucher et al. (2012) argue that conducting research that analyses these festive practices in relation to different tourism development strategies would provide a more complete understanding of the dynamics of cultural tourism related to festivals in Benin. A third type of tourism in Benin is religious tourism, particularly that related to voodoo, given that Benin is the birthplace of this religion. Several previous studies have highlighted the importance of this type of tourism (Séraphin & Gowreesunkar, 2018).. As part of religious tourism in Benin, Voodoo tourism attracts tourists interested in experiencing this spiritual practice first-hand (Dognon et al., 2023). Rahayu et al. (2024) emphasise that tourists often select destinations associated with religion based on factors such as personal growth, seeking new experiences, or a desire for lifestyle change (Kombiéni, 2025). A fourth type of tourism in Benin focuses on ecological and natural resources. Ecotourism initiatives, particularly those focused on biodiversity, have demonstrated their potential as a significant means of achieving sustainable development. In this regard, Djegbate et al. (2020) study of W National Park — listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996 and spanning Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger — highlights the relationship between tourism development and nature conservation. This uniqueness lies not only in its ecological diversity, but also in the educational opportunities it provides visitors with regarding biodiversity conservation and local fauna, fostering a deeper connection between tourists and the local environment (Girard & Schéou, 2012). Another notable place is Ganvié Village, located on Lake Nokoué, where community tourism activities take place (Hountondji et al., 2025).

Consequently, Benin's contemporary tourism strategies must take historical legacy issues into account, such as the need to repatriate cultural artefacts found in other countries. These include the throne of King Béhanzin, sceptres (symbols of authority), religious artefacts and objects of worship from Dahomey. The restitution of these artefacts to Benin has become a central discussion point. In fact, the return of this legacy would significantly impact tourism by strengthening the country's cultural heritage (Palmer, 2024). These items are a fundamental part of Benin's history and displaying them outside their local context affects how visitors perceive their authenticity. As tourists' expectations evolve towards more sustainable experiences, it is vital that Benin responds by integrating responsible tourism practices. Emphasising environmentally sustainable tourism

is not just a passing trend; it is a necessity in order to meet the growing demand for quality and diversity among tourists worldwide. Felicien et al. (2023) emphasise the increasing significance of aligning tourism development with sustainable principles that promote socio-economic and environmental benefits for the country. In terms of tourism statistics, the number of foreign travellers arriving in Benin has increased substantially in recent years. The number of foreign visitors arriving in the country increased from 199,000 in 2010 to 325,000 in 2020, according to the latest available data (UNWTO, 2025). Table 1 shows the number of foreign tourists who arrived in Benin between 2015 and 2020 (the latest available data) and the impact this had on the country's gross domestic product (GDP).

Table 1. Number of foreign tourists arriving in Benin and their impact on GDP. Period 2015-2020

Year	Number of international travellers	Income (in millions of euros)	GDP (%)
2015	255.000	148	1,3%
2016	267.000	129	1,1%
2017	307.000	160	1,3%
2018	322.000	175	1,2%
2019	337.000	241	1,7%
2020	325.000	202,6	1,3%

Source: Own elaboration based on UNWTO (2025)

Methodology

This study uses a SWOT analysis framework to examine the state of tourism in the Republic of Benin. Since its inception, the SWOT analysis method has been widely used to identify the external (threats and opportunities) and internal (weaknesses and strengths) factors that influence a given social system, either positively or negatively. Applying this methodology to the social sciences has many advantages, improving strategic planning, public policy formulation and organisational development. SWOT analysis provides a structured framework for identifying and evaluating an organisation's internal capabilities and external environment, enabling researchers to contextualise social phenomena effectively (Helms & Nixon, 2010). This analysis helps to design viable strategies by aligning strengths with opportunities, while jointly addressing weaknesses and threats. This leads to more informed decision-making (Haryani, 2018). The methodological strengths of the SWOT framework lie in its comprehensiveness and flexibility. Several studies, such as those conducted on tourism in Thailand (Kantawateera et al., 2013) and the design of holistic tourism strategies (Nono et al., 2021), have highlighted the effectiveness of SWOT analysis in contextualising the challenges and opportunities facing a tourist destination and providing a framework for developing its tourism. This research employs the traditional SWOT analysis framework to systematically evaluate the internal attributes and external influences shaping the tourism industry in Benin. The analysis is structured as follows:

a) Strengths: This research identifies Benin's internal resources and capabilities that give it a competitive advantage, such as its historical monuments, cultural heritage, and biodiversity.
b) Weaknesses: This research examines the internal shortcomings that hinder the country's tourism development. These include infrastructure-related challenges, limited tourism management capacity, the absence of integrated tourism strategies and a dearth of statistical data.
c) Opportunities: This research assesses potential external factors that Benin could leverage to improve its tourism sector. These opportunities include the growing global demand for sustainable and culturally immersive tourism experiences, the potential for technological integration in destination management and the possibility of repositioning Benin as a tourist destination.
d) Threats: This study identifies the external challenges that could hinder the development of tourism in Benin. These include competition from more well-established tourist destinations, environmental risks, and geopolitical conflicts.

A SWOT analysis of the tourism situation in Benin was conducted through 25 personal interviews carried out in April 2025. The interviewees were public managers (national, regional and local) involved in tourism; people working in tourism-related private companies (hotels, tour guides and restaurants); university professors specialising in tourism from Benin and other African countries; museum managers; and representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). All participants in the SWOT analysis have extensive knowledge of the tourism situation in Benin.

Research findings

Strengths of tourism in Benin

Benin's tourism sector boasts several intrinsic assets that give it a significant competitive advantage. Firstly, the country's rich cultural heritage and historical legacy are a major strength of tourism in Benin. Its iconic historical sites, including ancient kingdoms, art, and contemporary cultural expressions, play a key role in providing authentic experiences for tourists interested in learning about the culture. A second strength of tourism in Benin lies in the country's biodiversity. It has a variety of natural landscapes, ranging from coastal areas to forested regions, which support ecotourism and adventure tourism. This has been extensively studied in the scientific literature (Cossengue et al., 2025; Sulaiman & Hashim, 2023), which identifies these areas as popular tourist destinations, particularly in African countries. A third strength of tourism in Benin lies in its cultural wealth. This includes the various annual festivals (such as the Vodou Days festival in January), as well as the country's dance, music and indigenous crafts. In fact, cultural events attract tourists to destinations and have a significant socio-economic impact on the local community (Fordjour & Cruz, 2023). This cultural wealth is an attractive feature for visitors interested in learning about the country's culture. As is the case in other African countries, its cuisine also plays a role in enhancing tourists' experience and satisfaction at their destination. (Gyebi et al., 2025). A fourth strength of tourism in Benin is its strategic geographical

location. Located in West Africa, it is close to the region's various economic centres. Benin is also a politically stable country, having been a democracy since 1990, with public safety standards like those in Europe. The fifth strength of tourism in Benin is the hospitality of the Beninese people, who strive to make visitors' experiences in their country memorable. In particular, the active participation of women in the tourism sector in Benin significantly enhances the quality of tourism services provided (Matsoso & Harris, 2025).

Weaknesses of tourism in Benin

The first weakness of tourism in Benin is the inadequacy of its physical and technological infrastructure. The lack of modern transport networks and international air connections, limited accommodation facilities and inadequate digital connectivity infrastructure cause problems regarding the financial services offered to tourists and hinder the development of tourism (Beck & Cull, 2014). A second weakness lies in the lack of coordination between public tourism administrations and private actors. The existence of multiple public administrations involved in tourism means there is no single tourism policy, leading to administrative coordination problems. This also results in a lack of up-to-date statistical data, which would provide better tools for decision-making (Pan & Dossou, 2020). Similarly, the lack of scientific studies related to tourism in Benin is one of its main weaknesses (Kakpovi, 2023). In fact, studies analysing the motivations and perceptions of tourists in Benin are very limited, focusing almost exclusively on sun and beach tourism (Houngbeme et al., 2021). A third weakness of Benin's tourism sector is the lack of training for human resources professionals working in tourism. This results in a lack of skills among those working in the sector, meaning better training in tourism management and strategy design is needed. The fourth weakness lies in the inadequate promotional and marketing strategies currently in place. In fact, Benin currently has a weak international tourism brand. The fifth weakness lies in the lax environmental conservation legislation, which could lead to the degradation of natural assets in the medium to long term.

Opportunities of tourism in Benin

The first opportunity lies in the growing demand among tourists for authentic, culturally immersive experiences. This means that Benin, a country with a rich culture, could capitalise on this type of tourism (Felicien et al., 2023; Garanti & Berjozkina, 2021). The second opportunity lies in strengthening university education in tourism, an area in which Beninese universities are increasingly specialising. In the medium term, this would mean that the country would have a pool of highly trained tourism professionals who could design products tailored to different types of tourists and implement comprehensive tourism strategies. This would also strengthen communication in different languages, which is a key element in tourism (Ayaba & Neba, 2023). The third opportunity lies in strengthening the two existing UNESCO World Heritage listings. Currently, the Royal Palaces of Abomey are listed as a World Heritage Site and the Gelede oral tradition of the Yoruba-Nago community is listed as Intangible Cultural Heritage. In addition, four sites have been proposed for UNESCO listing: the Lake Site of Ganvié; the city of Ouidah, including the old quarters and the Slave Route; the city of Porto-Novo, including the old quarters and the Royal Palace; and the underground village of Agongointo-Zoungoudo. Both current and potential future UNESCO listings could attract cultural tourists interested in historical heritage, with the potential to boost tourism and economic growth in the region (Adie, 2017; Hosseini et al., 2021). On the other hand, it is also essential to highlight the intangible heritage related above all to voodoo, which is a practice that is steeped in tradition and spirituality. The fourth opportunity lies in Benin's strategic geographical location in West Africa. This could lead to increased intra-regional travel and cross-border tourism initiatives. This potential is reinforced by the fact that other regions have exploited geographical proximity to develop integrated tourist circuits and trans-regional packages (Towner & Taumoepeau, 2019). Furthermore, enhanced political and economic cooperation across West Africa could encourage the development of collaborative tourism initiatives that would benefit all participating countries. The fifth opportunity lies in the growing interest among multinational companies to invest in developing emerging tourism markets (Atalayar, 2023), partly due to tourism promotion programmes implemented by various public administrations. There is also potential to link tourism with other economic sectors, such as agriculture, crafts, and cultural industries, creating a model of multisectoral economic development. These links can boost the tourism sector while contributing to broader socio-economic development objectives within the country. The sixth opportunity lies in promoting nostalgia tourism, which would allow the large community of African origin settled in other continents to learn about the history and traditions of their ancestors (Earl & Hall, 2023).

Threats of tourism in Benin

The first threat is climate change, which could cause a significant decrease in tourism in certain countries, particularly those in the Global South. In fact, climate change is one of the greatest threats currently facing tourism development in certain countries in the Global South (Chihwai & Dube, 2023). The second threat lies in environmental degradation and the unsustainable management of natural resources. Several studies on tourism (Wisudawati et al., 2020) have identified the lack of adequate environmental management practices, which poses the risk of the overexploitation of natural attractions. If not proactively managed, this could result in the deterioration of environmental assets that are an essential part of Benin's tourism offering and ultimately undermine the sustainability of tourism growth. The third threat lies in changing health conditions, such as the global outbreak of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) or potential epidemics in certain African countries caused by different types of viruses. Health crises in African countries would have a direct impact on tourism. The fourth threat lies in the region's political instability. Although Benin is a politically stable country with a well-established democracy, it is in a region with geostrategic issues that could affect its security and, consequently, tourism. The risk of terrorist attacks by extremist groups

from the nearby Sahel region could negatively impact tourism in the north of the country. The fifth threat is the possible loss of cultural authenticity due to excessive commercialisation. As destinations seek to increase their tourist numbers, there is a risk that efforts to attract large crowds will endanger the cultural and natural features that make Benin unique. Some projects, such as the urbanisation of the banks of Porto-Novo and the development of Fidjrossè beach in Cotonou (Houngbeme et al., 2021),, have led to the displacement of local communities whose livelihoods depended on traditional fishing in order to create tourist attractions. Studies in regions that have experienced rapid tourism expansion, such as the Caribbean (Walker et al., 2021) and certain areas of Turkey (Eriş et al., 2019), conclude that balancing tourism development with preserving authenticity is necessary. The sixth threat lies in the strong competition posed by Benin's neighbouring countries in the tourism sector. These countries offer a diverse range of cultural and historical attractions, beautiful landscapes and high-quality tourism infrastructure, as is the case with Nigeria. These countries also have effective promotional strategies that boost their international appeal, and some offer similar experiences, such as religious and spiritual tourism in Nigeria and Togo, and ecotourism and cultural festivals in Burkina Faso and Niger. Finally, countries such as Togo and Nigeria share cultural traditions and ethnic practices similar to those of Benin. Table 2 summarises the SWOT analysis for Benin.

Table 2. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of tourism in Benin

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
S.1. Heritage and historical wealth. S.2. Natural diversity and biodiversity. S.3. Culture. S.4. Geographical location. S.5. Hospitality of residents.	W.1. Transport and technological infrastructure. W.2. Coordination between public and private initiatives. W.3. Qualification of professionals related to tourism. W.4. Tourism promotion and marketing strategies. W.5. Environmental legislation.
Opportunities	**Threats**
O.1. Global demand for new tourist experiences and destinations. O.2. University training for tourism professionals. O.3. New declarations, both tangible and intangible, as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. O.4. Integrated interregional tourism circuits. O.5. Presence of international investors in the tourism sector. O.6. Nostalgia tourism.	T.1. Consequences of climate change. T.2. Environmental degradation. T.3. Health crises. T.4. Political security and instability in countries in the region. T.5. Weakening of the country's cultural identity. T.6. Significant competition from neighbouring countries.

Conclusions

Tourism in West Africa is at a crossroads, balancing economic opportunities with ecological sustainability. An effective approach requires a balance of both. The future of tourism in West Africa is intrinsically linked to the ability to address several challenges through innovative and sustainable practices. Tourism is not only an economic activity, but also a microcosm of broader global trends affecting other sectors, such as culture and heritage. The interaction between cultural heritage, environmental considerations, and socio-economic conditions shows that, although there is significant growth potential, solutions to the challenges must be adapted to the regional context to ensure that tourism becomes an important driver of economic development. To realise its full potential, therefore, targeted investments in infrastructure and promotion, as well as the development of community participation, are essential. Improvements to roads, airports and basic services, together with promotional campaigns, will attract tourists from Africa and beyond. Furthermore, local communities must be involved in the planning and implementation of tourism projects to ensure the economic benefits are inclusive and equitable. Within West Africa, Benin's tourism development has many interconnected dimensions. Tourism is therefore key not only to the country's economic development, but also to preserving its rich cultural heritage and conserving its biodiversity. As Benin seeks to establish its identity within the competitive global tourism landscape, it must strengthen sustainable tourism growth and preserve cultural authenticity while integrating innovative tourism experiences. Benin currently has several attractions that appeal to travellers, including Voodoo, the Slave Route, Lake Ganvié, local cuisine, natural landscapes and various festivals. Responsible, sustainable, participatory, inclusive and transparent management of tourism development in this country could be a catalyst for reducing poverty and promoting local development. To this end, it is essential to involve local communities in planning and implementing various tourism projects. This research's main practical application is presenting a SWOT analysis to help public and private tourism administrators understand the current tourism situation in the country. This will enable them to develop strategic plans for specific geographical areas and create tourism products tailored to different types of tourists. A key limitation of this research is the lack of up-to-date statistical data related to tourism. Another limitation is the scarcity of tourism-related research in Benin. A future line of research could be to conduct a study to understand the motivations and perceptions of international tourists who visit the country.

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