

# *Travel diary* ✈️

## BENIN



Supporting Alliance for African Mobility

FROM: Spain, San Viator and Asociación Mundus  
TO: Benin, Ecole Professionnelle Salésienne Saint Jean Bosco

03/10/2021 - 9/10/2021

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# Travel diary

 **Benin**

## Let's discover our two mobility experts

*Alfredo Garmendia and Sergio Lagarde are the perfect team! Their expertise in mobility projects and their enthusiasm make them great SAAM ambassadors in **Benin**. Let's get to know them!*

### ALFREDO GARMENDIA

#### Head of the International Affairs in San Viator

I am Alfredo Garmendia, Head of the International Affairs of Centro San Viator, where I have been working for the last 20 years. I have a bachelor's degree in Anglo-Germanic studies.

For the last 18 years I have combined my job as project manager with teaching to young students with fewer opportunities, so somehow I work mixing two of my passions.

From our department, we lead different initiatives into Erasmus+ - Youth, School, VET, adult and Higher Education - and others, such as AMIF, etc. Our long experience in EU projects has been determining to establish solid networks, especially in the Automotive and Third Sector.

We are currently involved in some "extraordinary" projects as the COVE on inclusion GIVE-Governance for Inclusive Vocational Excellence, MOVET-Mobility for VET in Europe (Second pilot VET mobility scheme for the Western Balkans) and SAAM.



### SERGIO LAGARDE

#### SAAM project technician

As project technician, Sergio coordinates the SAAM day-to-day tasks, the communication with the partners and the coordination and interaction among the Work Packages leaders. He knows every single partner well and he is probably the person after Bea who knows SAAM better. Since COVID-19, he is hosting the online meetings and leading "The Voyage". Moreover, he co-leads the Quality Assurance Work package together with AKMI (SAAM partner from Greece).

Despite his age, Sergio has a wide experience abroad planning and executing International Cooperation projects. He went to Senegal and co-founded an NGO that works with youth in both Spain and Senegal. Then, he worked with another NGO in Senegal. After that, he has been leading life-changing experiences for youth in international projects.



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# Travel diary ➤

## 📍 Arriving in Benin

### *Sunday, October 3rd*

We both left our hometowns to meet in Paris on **Sunday October 3rd** to meet in Paris and take a very comfortable **6h-flight to get to Cotonou**. Once there, we had to go to a “provisional-test-tent” to do the PCR before officially entering the country. The process is quite fast and professional. Covid is hitting Benin but the **measures and restrictions are quite well organized**.



Mr Patrick Hinvi, school principal (but he is lay, he is not “Father”!, not common in Salesians Schools) was waiting for us at the airport’s entrance.



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# Travel diary ➤

## 📍 Arriving in Benin

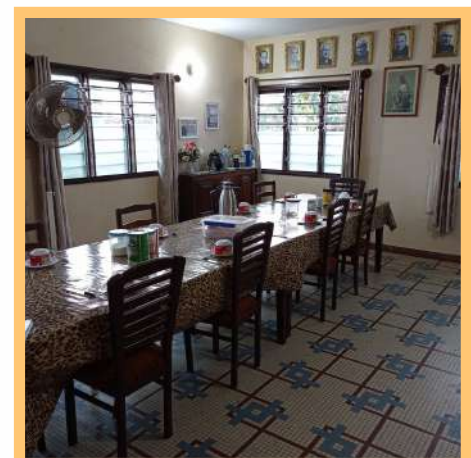
### *Sunday, October 3rd*

The Don Bosco VET centre in Cotonou is a low-income neighbourhood. It has two sites: **The VET centre and the Salesian Community**, 3 minutes walk one from the other. We are sleeping in the school itself in a comfortable room with all the basics but meals are in the Salesian community where Salesians live and the church is.



**Food here is delicious and varied with a lot of different ingredients!**

Meals are with Salesians at their community following their timetable. It is a great opportunity to get to know them, understand Benin's culture and of course other cultures (there are always Salesians from different parts of the world). **Being here is a great opportunity to discover and learn surrounded by people from other countries, different backgrounds and awesome experiences!**



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# Travel diary ➤

📍 **Cotonou, Benin**

## *Monday, October 4th*

At **7:00** students arrive to listen to **“Le mot du matin”** (the word of the day), a typical Salesian way to start the day. They all gather together and listen to someone from the school (usually the principal) to talk about the next important events of the school, the news and a “lesson for the day” (personal growth is a priority in Salesian philosophy).



In the morning, we had a very **interesting working session with the School Management Team** to present SAAM, analyze the impact it will have on the centre and to think in advance on how to overcome the possible challenges we may encounter.



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# Travel diary ➤

📍 **Cotonou, Benin**

**Monday, October 4th**

We visited **Mr Claude Karam**, the honorary consul of Spain in Benin. Spain's embassy is based in Lagos, Nigeria and it has a delegation in Benin represented by Mr Claude.

As in every mobility, we had a **session with some students from the last course of VET**. These sessions are essential for us to talk about the project, to get to know them, to solve all the doubts they may have and specially to understand their fears and expectations about the mobility to Europe. **SAAM's ultimate goal is to bring the best experience possible to the participants.**



Finally, we had a working session with the **Director (Mr Patrick Hinvi)** and the **Head of studies (Mr Bienvenu)** to understand the context of the VET centre, how they work and how they are organized.

DB (Cotonou) VET centre has 4 technical educational fields: Electricity, Electronic, IT and . They have almost 800 students and 60 teachers. Moreover, they have what they call "Occupational training": They provide training for the job placement to these teenagers who are in a situation of social exclusion, coming from very low-income families or who have "failed" in their general studies. As personal growth, socio-cultural insertion and inclusion are core values in Salesian philosophy.

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# Travel diary ➤

📍 **Cotonou, Benin**

***Tuesday, October 5th***

We started the day with another **huge presentation of SAAM to students**. In 4 different sessions, **we are presenting SAAM to the 765 students in the school**. It is very fascinating how they listen to you carefully and how disciplined they are.



One of the most important tasks to do when visiting the African countries as mobility experts is to have **a working session with teachers and trainers**. With almost 30 people, we presented SAAM and we talked about their experience in Europe. Language barrier, weather and to get adapted to Europe's life are their three main worries. After that, they showed us the VET centre and the workshops of the 4 educational fields: **IT, Electricity, Electronics and Civil engineering**.

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# Travel diary ➤

📍 **Cotonou, Benin**

**Wednesday, October 6th**

Today was a very interesting day!

We visited two former Don Bosco students, now entrepreneurs, with big established companies.

One of them was even financed by the community to complete his training and now he has 25 employees. Moreover, he is training young students to give the opportunity to be trained in the real labour market, "to give back to society the opportunity he had some years ago", he said.



Both said young employability is one of the main challenges in the country. They both suffered it and want to create training programs in their companies and to partner with training centres in order to overcome this challenge.

“ **Collaboration between training centres and private companies is the key for success** ”

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# Travel diary ➤

📍 **Cotonou, Benin**

**Wednesday, October 6th**

In the afternoon we met with the **Head of VET in Benin**.

In the Ministry of Education there are two entities, the General education department and the VET one. We met with the second one.



Despite being a bit sick, **he welcomed us warmly and we exchanged ideas and experiences about VET, young employability and the government strategy.** These institutions are essential allies to multiply SAAM's impact in the countries.

SAAM is having more and more fans and everyone is willing to collaborate. **Stay tuned, SAAM is here to change the world!**



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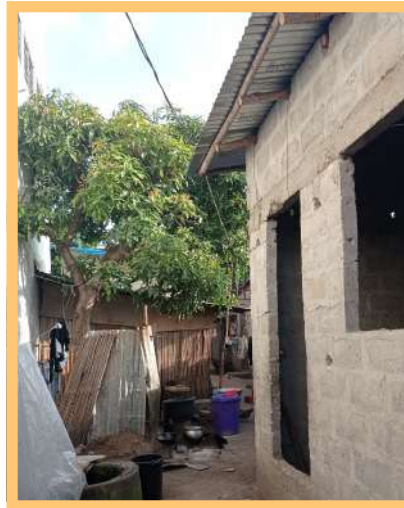


# Travel diary ➤

📍 **Cotonou, Benin**

**Thursday, October 7th**

Each day goes by and **we feel more and more at home**. The welcome and affection of the people of Benin is enormous and makes the stay easier every day.



Walking through its streets, going from the center to the community for every meal and recognizing the faces of the people around us, the customs and having even a kind of a close relation with the neighbors is an indescribable feeling.

In the morning, **we visited a public VET centre** to get to know other training realities. **The VET centre, with 2300 students, was huge and full of resources.** VET is one of the government's priorities and so many new collaborations, laws and investment is being planned towards the improvement of its quality.



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# Travel diary ➤

## 📍 Cotonou, Benin

**Thursday, October 7th**

Then, we visited one of the most important companies in the country: **Sobebr**, the beer company. It is a subsidiary company of the French company Castel beer. **Don Bosco training centre has a close relationship with this company and their students come here to do their internships.** Don Bosco center has a very rich partnership around the city.



When coming to Cotonou there is something you cannot miss: **To experience the Dantokpa market, the biggest market in West Africa.** Here you can find anything you may look for and what is more, so many different cultures, nationalities and languages! Doubtlessly, an awesome experience!



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# Travel diary ➤

## 📍 Cotonou, Benin

### Thursday, October 7th

After lunch we went to do the **PCR test**. You can pay it online or before doing it. The process is quite fast and professional and in less than 15 minutes we paid and we took the test.



Then, we went to visit the **EU Delegation in Benin**. Fabio Bellopede, in charge of cooperation programs, welcomed us. In a mix of english, french and spanish we 4 (Alfredo, Patrick, Fabio and Sergio) talked about **SAAM and EU priorities** in Benin. Mr Bellopede was fascinated by the project and he told us VET is one of the priorities in the cooperation among EU and Benin.



Once we got back to the school, a group of students with a mentor were waiting for us to do a **"cultural afternoon"**. It was such a great experience shared with the students in which they showed us typical clothes, local food and how it is made, folkloric dances, music and games. We had a really good and fun time!

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# Travel diary ➤

## 📍 Cotonou, Benin

### Thursday, October 7th

Compared with other African countries, **dances** here use mostly the arms and the shoulders rather than feet as it is in Senegal for example. **We ate local snacks and most of them were made out of peanuts or manioc.**

Finally, we experienced local life going from Don Bosco centre to another neighbourhood with the Kekeno (a word in Fon, local most spoken language, that means **Mototaxi**. These mototaxis are everywhere and riders wear a yellow t-shirt) to visit a student's family. We shared some drinks and a nice conversation about Benin challenges and culture. **People in Benin are very very open and welcoming. A very full and fun day!**



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# Travel diary

 **Cotonou, Benin**

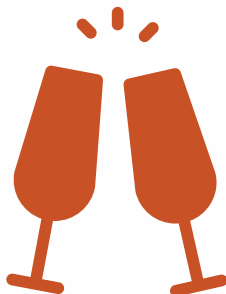
*Friday, October 8th*



Our last working day in Benin. **Time flies!** And it flies even more when you are comfortable and having fun.

Today we had the pleasure of visiting the **Minister of VET Education**. There are three ministries for education in Benin: M. of Primary Education, M. of Secondary Education and VET and M. of University.

In the afternoon we had the final meeting with **Patrick Hinvi, Principal of Don Bosco VET centre and Bienvenue, Head of studies**. We agreed that the logistics of the trip and the whole organization on behalf of the African partner was very satisfying and professional and the overall evaluation of the trip was great.



On Friday evening we had the pleasure to have dinner at Patrick's home with her wife. **We had a very fun time with them and we got to see their wedding photo album!** We were surprised to learn that the priest that married them was **Pere Jean Aureliene, the actual Head of the Salesian Community in Thies, Senegal.**

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# Travel diary

 **Cotonou, Benin**

**Friday, October 8th**

They told us all the process to get married in their culture but let me tell you a curious one:

They together decide to get married and they have to tell their families in an important event (separately). Then, someone from the groom's family (father, uncle or big brother) has to go to the bride's family to ask for permission with presents. There, once they agree, 3 women will go out and the member of the family will need to choose who he thinks is the real bride. If he is wrong...it does not really matter but if he is right, that means the universe really wants this wedding to happen!

After dinner, **the 4 of us went out for a drink (or some!) near the stadium where all the fun happens in Cotonou.** This area is a very crowded place full of people, music and bars and the night life is so fun! We enjoyed it even though Covid did not allow us to dance because country restrictions are quite high.



**What a wonderful sunset!**



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# Travel diary ➤

📍 **Cotonou, Benin**

**Saturday, October 9th**

Saturday was our day off and the opportunity to visit cultural places. We woke up a bit late because Friday's night went a bit late and we went to visit a very special place:



**"Foyer pour tous" (home for everyone)** is the name of the NGO that Patrick, together with some colleagues, founded in 2006 to help children and women from a village near Cotonou. Children there need 1h walking to go to the closest school so most of them are not schooled. Women are coming from very low-income families so they do not get any kind of education and when they are 13 or 14 they are already pregnant.

This NGO has built a VET school and there they provide: **a place to be** for children and teenagers, basic training, sensibilization workshops about women rights and family organization, sports and activities for kids...because their mission is **"to ensure a better socio-professional integration of young girls and boys, especially those in vulnerable situations, by offering them the means and conditions necessary for its realization, and to work for the development of the family unit"**.



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# Travel diary ➤

📍 **Cotonou, Benin**

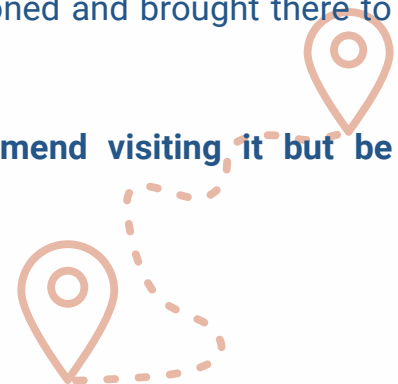
**Saturday, October 9th**

After that we went to visit **Ouidah**, one of the most important historical points in the country. Ouidah, 40 minutes from Cotonou is famous because it was **one of the 7 points in Africa where slaves were brought to be sold and bought** and from where they were departing to America by boat.



Here you can visit the **slavery route** where you can see different monuments explaining the process slaves followed from being prisoned and brought there to the moment they go into the boat to go to America.

A very interesting but hard visit. We really recommend visiting it but be prepared to feel strong emotions.



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# Travel diary ➤

## 📍 Cotonou, Benin

***Saturday, October 9th***

The route is divided into 6 important stages:

- The **market**, where the slaves were brought by the African tribal kings from all over the continent to be sold. Europeans (Portuguese, French, Dutch...) were coming there to buy the slaves.
- The **"tree of oblivion"**. Slaves there were turning around the tree 7 times (women) or 9 times (men) to forget who they are, forget their names and families to be soulless people without intention to rebel.
- After that, they were brought to a **big house without windows** to spend two months inside. There, they will experience how the trip by boat would look like, eating every 48 hours and being chained and sitted.
- Some of them would die, so there is a **mass grave** where all of them were buried.
- Then, there is a **sacred tree** nearby where it is supposed the souls of the dead will be in peace reamingin close to their families and roots.
- Finally, **"the door of no return"**, a point in the harbour where slaves were brought into the boats. Once there, they will leave their continent forever. Most of them did not see the sea before and the impression and fear of the endless horizon would make them want to suicide. As they were chained, they would eat their tongue or eat sand to try to die, at least, at home.



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# Travel diary ✈️

📍 Cotonou, Benin

**Saturday, October 9th**

We spent a very hard moment but we kept with us the answer that the guide told us when we asked them why they have monuments in this horrible places:

***“Because a nation without history is not a nation. We need to know what brought us here and even though we have learnt how to forgive, we will never forget what happened”***



**SEE YOU SOON!**

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