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Living in Burkina Faso

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Introduction

Moving to a new country presents exciting opportunities and daunting challenges, especially when relocating to a place with a distinct cultural tapestry and unique realities like Burkina Faso. Nestled in the heart of West Africa, Burkina Faso's vibrant culture, deep-rooted traditions, and warm, welcoming people have much to offer the intrepid expat. Whether you arrive to work in international development, non-governmental organizations, the mining industry, or simply to soak in a different way of life, adapting to this new environment requires preparation, cultural sensitivity, and a spirit of adventure.

This guidebook is designed to equip you with the essential knowledge and practical guidance needed for a smooth and successful experience living in Burkina Faso. You will discover a land of contrasts: modern amenities in lively cities like Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso juxtaposed with the rustic charm of rural communities, where ancient traditions still hold sway. From managing the practicalities of visas and finding your new home to understanding local customs and cuisine, every aspect of expat life is covered in detail.

Safety and security are paramount concerns for anyone considering a move to Burkina Faso. The nation faces ongoing challenges, from political instability to health risks and security threats, especially in certain regions. This guide provides candid, up-to-date information on how to stay safe, secure reliable healthcare, and navigate the complexities of local and international regulations. Practical tips will help you prepare for the realities of daily life, recognize potential pitfalls, and embrace the rewarding experiences that await.

Cultural adaptation is an ongoing journey, particularly in a society as diverse as Burkina Faso's, where more than sixty ethnic groups coexist, each with their own languages, customs, and traditions. This book will help you approach interactions with sensitivity, learn the art of local greetings, and appreciate the importance of community, family, and religious life. Understanding the nuances of Burkinabè etiquette, business culture, and social expectations will play a crucial role in making your stay not only enjoyable but also meaningful.

For families moving abroad, special attention is given to issues like education, healthcare for children, and recreational opportunities. Whether you are single, bringing a partner, or relocating with children, you'll find guidance tailored to a range of expat experiences and needs. You will also find advice on how to build supportive networks, integrate into local communities, and make the most of Burkina Faso's festivals, foods, and natural wonders.

Ultimately, “Living in Burkina Faso: A Guide for Expats” aims to empower you to embrace this dynamic country with open eyes and an open heart. We hope this book will serve as your trusted companion, helping you navigate both the challenges and rewards of expat life in Burkina Faso, and encouraging you to contribute positively to the vibrant society that makes this country so unique. Welcome to your new adventure.

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CHAPTER ONE: Understanding Burkina Faso: History and Society

To truly appreciate life in Burkina Faso, one must first delve into its rich and intricate past, and the vibrant social fabric that defines it today. From ancient kingdoms to colonial rule and a dynamic post-independence era, the country's journey has shaped a unique national identity. This history, coupled with a diverse society comprising numerous ethnic groups, creates a fascinating environment for any expat to explore.

Long before European colonizers arrived, the region that is now Burkina Faso was a mosaic of powerful kingdoms and diverse ethnic groups. Archaeological evidence suggests human habitation dating back to 14,000 BCE, with advanced agricultural settlements emerging between 3600 and 2600 BCE. Iron production was a significant activity as far back as the 8th century BCE, demonstrating a sophisticated early culture.

Among the most influential of these pre-colonial entities were the Mossi kingdoms, which began to take shape between the 11th and 13th centuries. The Mossi people, believed to have migrated from present-day Ghana, established a hierarchical system led by powerful rulers known as *mogho naba*. These kingdoms, notably Ouagadougou, Tenkodogo, and Yatenga, were centers of trade and successfully defended their territories against various invaders, including the Mali and Songhay Empires. The capital, Ouagadougou, became a cultural hub, a role it maintains to this day. The impressive ruins of Loropéni, a UNESCO World Heritage site, serve as a tangible reminder of the region's historical importance in the trans-Saharan gold trade between the 14th and 17th centuries.

The 19th century ushered in the era of European exploration and, subsequently, colonization. French military officers began making inroads into the region in the 1890s. Despite resistance from local communities, France established a protectorate over the Yatenga empire in 1895 and defeated the *morho naba* Boukari-Koutou (Wobogo) of Mossi in 1896. By 1898, much of the territory was nominally under French control, with its modern borders largely defined by the Franco-British Convention of 1898.

In 1904, the Volta basin territories were integrated into the Upper Senegal and Niger colony of French West Africa. The colony of French Upper Volta was officially established on March 1, 1919, named for its location on the upper courses of the Volta River. During this colonial period, resources were exploited, forced labor was common, and local cultures were suppressed. However, resistance movements continually

emerged, fueled by a desire for self-determination. The colony was temporarily dismantled in 1932, with its land partitioned among neighboring French colonies, only to be re-established with its 1919 borders after World War II, partly in recognition of the Burkinabè people's service during the war.

The mid-20th century saw a growing wave of anti-colonial sentiment across Africa. Upper Volta became a self-governing colony within the French Community in 1958 and achieved full independence on August 5, 1960. Maurice Yaméogo became the country's first president. However, the post-independence period was marked by political instability, economic struggles, and frequent military coups, a pattern that would unfortunately continue for decades.

One of the most significant transformations occurred in 1983 when Captain Thomas Sankara seized power. A charismatic military officer, Sankara embarked on a radical socialist agenda aimed at empowering the poor and promoting self-reliance. On August 4, 1984, he renamed the country Burkina Faso, which translates to "Land of Upright People" or "Land of Honest Men," reflecting his emphasis on integrity and national pride. Sankara's government initiated ambitious socio-economic programs, including vaccination campaigns, housing projects, tree planting initiatives to combat desertification, and the promotion of women's rights. His rule, however, was cut short in 1987 when he was overthrown and killed in a coup led by his close aide, Blaise Compaoré.

Compaoré then ruled for 27 years, a period that also saw its share of social and political unrest. In 2014, a popular uprising ousted Compaoré, leading to hopes for a democratic future. While national elections in 2015 resulted in the country's first peaceful transition of power, the years that followed have been challenging, marked by a worsening jihadist insurgency and further military coups in 2022. These events highlight the ongoing struggle for stability and effective governance in the nation.

Burkina Faso's society is as rich and diverse as its history, shaped by over 60 different ethnic groups. This mosaic of cultures, languages, music, and traditions contributes to a vibrant national identity. The Mossi people constitute the largest ethnic group, making up around half of the population, and are predominantly concentrated in the central regions. Other significant groups include the Fulani (Peul), Gurma, Bobo, Lobi, Gurunsi, and Senufo, each with their distinct customs and languages. This diversity is celebrated, with communal living and mutual respect among different cultures being deeply ingrained values.

French is the official language and serves as a unifying medium, widely spoken in government and business. However, numerous indigenous languages are also prevalent, with Mooré (spoken by the Mossi), Fulfudé (spoken by the Fulani), Dioula, and Bissa being among the most prominent. Learning some basic French is highly recommended for expats, and understanding a local language like Mooré or Dioula can

significantly enhance daily interactions and integration into local communities.

Burkinabè society places a strong emphasis on family, often extending to include extended family members, with wage earners typically expected to support their wider kin. This communal spirit, known as "Laafi" (community solidarity), is central to the Burkinabè way of life. Greetings are an essential part of daily interactions and a sign of respect; failing to acknowledge someone is considered impolite. Handshakes are customary, usually initiated with the most senior person in a group. It is also considered poor etiquette to eat or offer items with the left hand.

Religion also plays a significant role in Burkinabè society. Islam is the majority religion, practiced by approximately 63.8% of the population, followed by Christianity (23.2%, with a strong Catholic presence) and Animism (15.3%). Burkina Faso is known for its religious tolerance, with various faiths coexisting peacefully. These deeply held beliefs often influence daily life and cultural practices, contributing to the country's rich social tapestry.

Understanding this historical journey and the intricate social dynamics is key to navigating life as an expat in Burkina Faso. While the country faces ongoing challenges, particularly in security and economic development, its resilient people, diverse cultures, and warm hospitality offer a unique and enriching experience for those willing to embrace it. The blend of tradition and modernity, particularly in urban centers, provides a fascinating backdrop against which to build a new life.

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