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Burkina Faso

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Introduction

Burkina Faso, literally "Land of Incorruptible People," is a West African country whose story is as complex as it is compelling. Though landlocked and often overshadowed in the global media by its larger or wealthier neighbors, Burkina Faso's story is woven from centuries of migration, empire, colonial legacy, resilience, and creativity. From the sweeping savannas and legendary Mossi kingdoms to the vibrant music of Ouagadougou's streets, this is a nation of extraordinary depth and character.

This book was conceived to offer an accessible, comprehensive portrait of Burkina Faso: its geography, peoples, and historical tides, through to its current social, economic, and political challenges. While headlines often focus on the cycles of political instability and security crises, far less attention is given to the everyday lives, hopes, and cultural achievements of the Burkinabe people. This volume seeks to balance the narrative, revealing the threads of tradition, faith, and ingenuity that hold the country together during even the most turbulent of times.

We begin by exploring the land itself: Burkina Faso's distinctive landscape of plateaus, its three great rivers, and its diverse ecological zones form the foundation for much of the nation's history, economy, and social organization. The climate's unforgiving rhythm demands constant adaptation, shaping both settlement and agriculture, and this has left an imprint on the people's relationship with their environment.

Burkina Faso's history is marked by a tapestry of evolving kingdoms, colonial imposition, and the remarkable figures who have shaped its destiny. The legacies of the Mossi emperors still echo in national consciousness, while the revolutionary period led by Thomas Sankara remains a touchstone for many Africans seeking an uncorrupted, people-centered path forward. Burkinabe society is a mosaic of dozens of ethnic groups and languages, with a young and dynamic population whose outlook is understandably influenced by migration, tradition, and external events.

Today, the country faces daunting challenges. Recurring political transitions have unsettled hopes for stable democracy, and ongoing security threats undermine both daily life and aspirations for development. Yet the spirit of the Burkinabe endures in the face of adversity, expressed in communal solidarity, artistic innovation, and persistent efforts toward economic reform and modernization. In examining the intersections of history, culture, religion, and the economy, this book also explores the pressing issues of displacement, education, gender, and the environment.

For those looking to know Burkina Faso beyond the headlines, this book will serve as both a guide and a tribute. Whether you are a traveler, student, policy maker, or

simply a curious reader, the chapters that follow aim to illuminate the complexity and vibrancy of a country whose story deserves to be told in full. Welcome to Burkina Faso: Portrait of a Country.

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CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Climate of Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso, formerly known as Upper Volta, occupies a significant portion of the West African interior, a landlocked nation that stretches across approximately 274,200 to 274,223 square kilometers. To visualize its placement on the continent, one might imagine it as the heart of a regional mosaic, bordered by Mali to the northwest, Niger to the northeast, Benin to the southeast, Togo and Ghana to the south, and Ivory Coast to the southwest. This positioning, while lacking direct access to the sea, has historically positioned Burkina Faso as a crossroads for trade and cultural exchange within the Sahel and West African sub-regions.

The country's topography is characterized by an expansive plateau, an elevated, relatively flat landform that dominates its landscape. This plateau, while generally uniform, presents subtle variations that influence its ecological zones and human settlements. The highest point in the country is Tenakourou, rising to a modest 749 meters (2,457 feet) in the southwest. This gentle terrain contributes to the country's overall savanna environment, a vast expanse defined by its grassy plains. These plains, particularly prominent in the north, gradually give way to more sparse forests as one travels south, illustrating a gradual transition in vegetation and ecological characteristics.

Burkina Faso's climate is predominantly sunny, hot, and dry, a reality that profoundly shapes daily life and economic activities. This general characterization, however, masks a nuanced regional variation, with three principal climate zones dictating rainfall patterns and temperature extremes. The Sahelian zone, located in the north, is a semiarid steppe, a transitional area between the Sahara Desert and the more fertile regions to the south. Here, rainfall is scarce, typically occurring for only three to five months of the year, and often proving erratic in its timing and intensity. This makes agriculture a precarious endeavor and necessitates a resilient approach to water management.

Moving southward, the Sudanic zone emerges, exhibiting a tropical wet-dry climate. This region experiences greater variability in both temperature and rainfall compared to the parched north. The additional moisture supports a more diverse range of plant life and agricultural possibilities, albeit still subject to the distinct seasonal rhythms of the West African climate. Interestingly, a small sliver of hot desert climate can be found in the very northern reaches of Burkina Faso, bordering the vast expanse of the Sahara Desert, a stark reminder of its proximity to one of the world's most arid environments.

The year in Burkina Faso can generally be divided into four distinct seasons, each bringing its own set of characteristics. From mid-November to mid-February, the country experiences a dry and relatively cool season. While still warm by temperate standards, this period offers a welcome respite from the intense heat that characterizes other times of the year. This gives way to the hot season, stretching from mid-February to June. During these months, temperatures soar, and the infamous Harmattan wind makes its presence felt. This hot, dry, dust-laden wind, originating from the Sahara Desert, blankets the country, reducing visibility and adding to the already challenging conditions.

Following the oppressive heat, the rainy season arrives, typically from June to September. This period brings much-needed precipitation, replenishing water sources and allowing for agricultural cycles to begin in earnest. However, the intensity and duration of the rains can vary significantly from year to year, sometimes leading to devastating floods in some areas and insufficient rainfall in others. Finally, an intermediate season bridges the gap from September to mid-November, as the rains taper off and the country slowly transitions back into the dry and cool period.

Annual rainfall figures vividly illustrate the climatic disparities across the country. In the wetter south, precipitation can reach around 1,000 mm (40 inches), supporting more extensive agriculture and a greater variety of vegetation. Conversely, the arid north receives less than 250 mm (10 inches) of rain annually, underscoring the challenges faced by communities in this region. This dramatic north-south gradient in rainfall directly influences agricultural practices, population distribution, and the overall economic landscape of the country.

The geography of Burkina Faso is also intrinsically linked to its three major rivers, which serve as vital arteries for life and livelihood. These are the Black Volta, the Red Volta, and the White Volta. Of these, the Black Volta, also known as the Mouhoun, holds particular significance as the largest and most prominent. These rivers, while crucial, are subject to the same climatic variations as the rest of the country, their flows fluctuating dramatically between the dry and rainy seasons. This variability presents challenges for irrigation and water management, particularly in a country heavily reliant on agriculture.

While the southern areas of Burkina Faso feature scattered forests and boast endemic trees such as the karite, or shea tree, and the iconic baobab, these green havens are increasingly threatened. Recurring droughts, a persistent feature of the Sahelian climate, and the encroaching effects of desertification severely impact agricultural activities and reshape population distribution. The availability of arable land diminishes, forcing communities to adapt or migrate in search of more hospitable conditions. Overgrazing, a consequence of livestock rearing in a fragile environment, further exacerbates soil degradation, while deforestation, driven by the need for fuel

and building materials, contributes to the loss of vital tree cover. These environmental concerns are not merely ecological footnotes; they are fundamental challenges that directly impact the well-being and economic stability of the Burkinabe people.

Despite these environmental pressures, Burkina Faso remains home to a surprising array of animal life. The savanna and forested areas provide habitats for buffalo, various species of antelope, and majestic lions. Hippopotamuses can be found in the country's rivers, while elephants roam in protected areas. Crocodiles lurk in waterways, and a variety of monkey species inhabit the trees. The country also boasts a rich diversity of birdlife and an abundance of insects, contributing to a vibrant, if sometimes challenging, ecosystem. To safeguard this natural heritage, Burkina Faso has established national parks, including Po, Arly, and "W." The "W" National Park, notably, is a trans-border park, straddling the boundaries with Benin and Niger, highlighting the regional nature of wildlife conservation efforts. These parks serve as crucial sanctuaries, protecting the country's biodiversity and offering glimpses into its natural splendor amidst the ongoing environmental shifts.

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