

Voodoo heritage

With its Afro-Brazilian architecture and beaches bordered by coconut palms as far as the eye can see, a town that played a major part in transatlantic slavery has become a development project launched in 2016 by President Patrice Talon. In a bid to promote tourism Benin is presenting an image of itself as a place of “cultural exception”, said Minister of Tourism Jean-Michel Abimbola, who stressed that the government has allocated a budget of one billion euros (\$1.17 billion) toward that goal.

Authorities are renovating the Pendjari National Park in the far north to attract safari hunters, and building several museums of voodoo, an ancestral religion that originated in the Kingdom of Dahomey. Benin has asked France to return objects looted in colonial conflicts.



A man drives a motorcycle past a voodoo temple in Ouidah.

But the spread of jihadist activity in West Africa has slowed tourism from Europe in the past few years. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the prospects, compelling Beninese authorities to promote strictly regional tourism. “In Ouidah, we are aiming at the Nigerian market as a priority,” said Wenceslas Adjognon-Monnon, development manager with the national heritage and tourism agency. Nigeria’s economic capital Lagos is only about 100 kilometres (60 miles) from Ouidah and the vast nation of some 200 million people shares little of Benin’s history of slavery and colonisation.

‘We need tough action’

“We need tough action, way beyond the movements to reclaim black causes,” argued Eric Accrombessi, a tourist guide born in Ouidah. “The renovation of these places will better illustrate the course of history to pass on to future generations.” The authorities are also building an International Museum of Memory and Slavery, with a tourist complex of 130 rooms and places of reflection, and a reconstruction of a slave ship. Historian Sarah Pruitt stressed that while exact numbers will never be known, some 12.5 million Africans were forced on to the ships between the 17th and 19th centuries. Of these, some 10.6 million survived the crossing. — AFP



People visit the art exhibition “Unity is strength: An art exhibition on the fight against COVID-19”, which includes “Eternity and Brevity” (right) by artist Pang Maokun, on the fight against the coronavirus at the National Museum of China in Beijing. — AFP photos



People visit the art exhibition “Unity is strength: An art exhibition on the fight against COVID-19”.

China promotes its ‘heroic’ battle against virus in new exhibition

Chinese workers raise their fists beside a red communist flag in a painting displayed at a Beijing museum, one of nearly 200 works put together for a propaganda exhibition that hails, not the Maoist past, but the “heroic deeds” of frontline medics fighting the coronavirus. Since the discovery of the deadly contagion in Wuhan at the end of last year, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has sought to model itself as the vanguard in the fight against COVID-19. Outside China, Beijing has been the target of Western criticism over accusations that it covered up the initial outbreak, silencing early whistleblowers including doctor Li Wenliang, who alerted colleagues to the virus in late December but was reprimanded by local authorities.

But inside the country, the CCP propaganda machine has relentlessly pushed a positive narrative. China officially recorded around 85,000 cases and just over 4,600 deaths—a fraction of the world’s total—and has now largely brought its domestic virus spread under control. The National Museum of China’s “Unity of Strength” showcases paintings, sculptures and calligraphy, all faithful to the socialist realism style, that depict what the regime says is its success in responding to the crisis. Tens of millions of people were forced into a crippling lockdown when Wuhan and its surrounding province were shut down in late January. As the virus gripped the nation, the power of the usually omnipotent and omnipresent President Xi Jinping seemed to waver, with the leader even disappearing from the state-run media for a couple of weeks.



People visit the art exhibition “Unity is strength: An art exhibition on the fight against COVID-19”, including one a portrait of Chinese pulmonologist Zhong Nanshan entitled “Chinese Communist-Zhang Nanshan” (far right) by artist Feng Zhaoxie, on the fight against coronavirus at the National Museum of China.

‘Great contribution’

But the exhibition at the museum overlooking Tiananmen Square doesn’t show the overwhelmed hospitals in Wuhan, or the homages given to Doctor Li—whose death from the virus in February triggered an usual outpouring of rage against the government on social networks. Among the large canvases on display, a painting shows an ecstatic nurse reading a letter from President Xi to her colleagues. In the middle of the room, life-size sculptures of soldiers disembark from a plane to come to the aid of stricken inhabitants, with their uniforms evoking a scene from the Long March—a military episode by the Red Army in the 1930s during China’s civil war.

One emotive piece depicts a nurse with a face mask adjusting the full protective suit of a colleague, while another features a close-up portrait of the country’s most famous medical expert, Zhong Nanshan, with a tear streaming over his mask. The state-run China Daily said, “despite not working on the frontline to battle coronavirus, artists spare no effort to document the heroic deeds of those that did, hailing their great contribution to the cause”. The exhibition, which opened on August 1 for two months, only allows visitors with Chinese identity cards, and so is not accessible to foreigners. — AFP