



The Paradox of Our Lady of Peace

By Judy Koutsky | Oct 30, 1997



Travel Weekly Crossroads' associate editor, Judy Koutsky, is on a press tour of Africa's Ivory Coast. She is chronicling her adventures in regular, on-line travelogues. On the third full day of her trip, Judy attended morning Mass at the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace in Yamoussoukro. This is the second chapter in the "Judy Goes to Africa" series:

YAMO USSOUKRO, Ivory Coast -- The Basilica of Our Lady of Peace is without a doubt the most beautiful creation I've ever seen -- and I've been to Vatican City. The largest cathedral in the world, its imposing pillars and dome can be seen from miles around. Of course, it's poignant that a country with many of its people poor and malnourished spent over a million dollars to build this magnificent cathedral (although nobody will divulge the actual cost; it was simple a gift from the private funds of the former President Felix Houphouet-Boigny).

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It's even more incongruous when it's taken into account that only 15% of the population is Christian (60% is animist and the rest is Muslim). However, Ivorian officials are hoping the basilica can bring some badly needed tourist dollars by appealing to Catholics around the world. The problem, of course, is that few Catholics know of its existence. A trip to the Ivory Coast just for the basilica certainly would not be a waste.



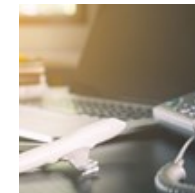
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Construction began in 1987 and it was completed in just three years. The outside is striking, yet not overpowering, but stepping inside can make one quickly forget that this is poverty-stricken Africa. Thirty-six immense stained-glass windows radiate with over 4,000 colors. The stained glass was hand-blown in France by the most revered glassmakers in the world.

Marble pillars, imported from Rome surround the pews. The pews are made of Ivorian wood called *kotiba*, and were sent to Italy for installation of individual air-conditioning



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units; they are needed because the heat and humidity would ruin the wood. A crystal chandelier from Italy hangs over the altar, and a large 22-karat-gold cross hangs down in the center of the basilica. The effect is breathtaking.

The cathedral holds 18,000 people: seven sitting and 11,000 standing. It has been full only twice: A papal visit in 1990 and the funeral of Felix Houphouet-Boigny. At the mass I attended, there were about 100 or so Ivorians dressed in Western garb. Because the mass was in French, I just sat in silence, taking in this once-in-a-lifetime sight. It's imperative to visit the basilica during service because the choir is unforgettable. It performs a combination of Catholic and Ivorian song and dance. Visitors who tour the basilica can see the upstairs, where pictures depict its construction and the history of the Ivorian Christians.



Despite the basilica's beauty, one can't help but think of the cost of its creation and how the money could have been allocated to better benefit the people. The construction of the church set off protest and political unrest among the Ivorians, and one need only see the protruding bellies of the malnourished, scantily clad children in town to understand why. Nonetheless, because it's already built and there's no undoing it, I strongly recommend that visitors,

Catholics and non-Catholics alike, go and admire it on face value. Words cannot give it justice. Some say it's the eighth wonder of the world, and I have no doubt that it is.

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