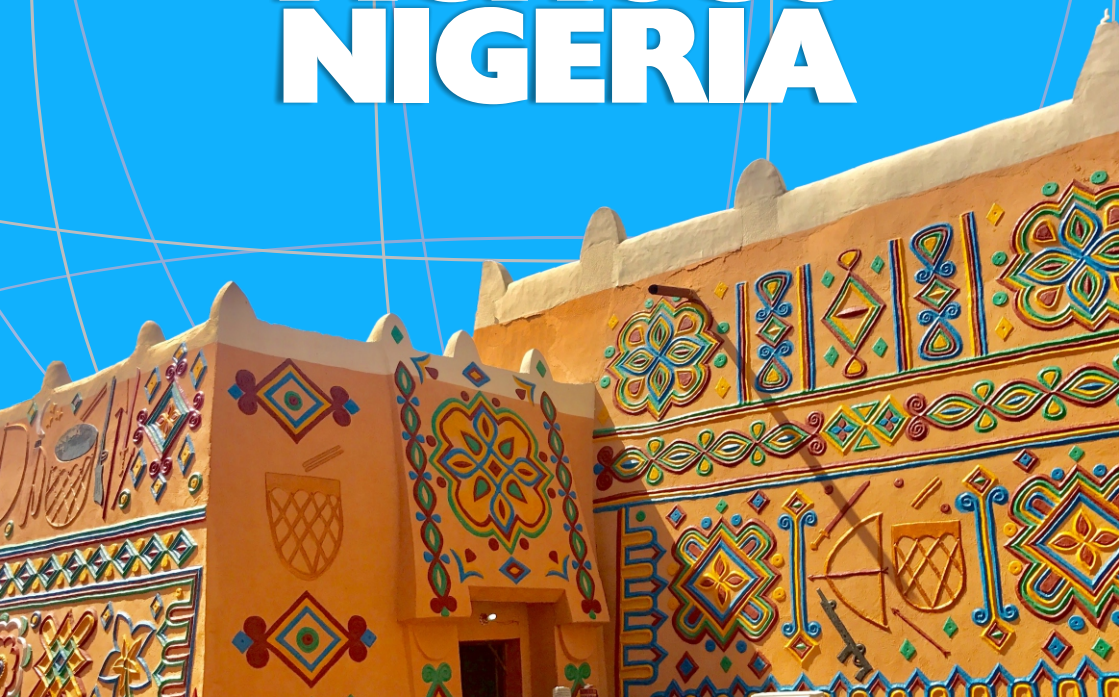


PELU AWOFESO

9° NORTH

**BACKPACKING
STORIES
ACROSS
NIGERIA**



Pelu Awofeso is a winner of the CNN/ Multichoice African Journalists Awards in tourism reporting. In late 2019, he was named the Best Travel Journalist in Nigeria at the Nigeria Travel Awards. Over the years, his writings have appeared in the *World Policy Journal* (US), *Travel Intelligence* (UK), *Daily Mirror* (UK), *Africa Today* (UK), *Africa in Words* (UK), *LOJEL* (Canada), *The Sowetan* (South Africa), *234Next*, *Nigeria indicator* and *Wings* (in-flight magazine), among many others. He has published four travel books, all focused on his travels around Nigeria, including *Nigerian Festivals*, *Tour of Duty*, *White Lagos* and a pocket guide to Jos (Plateau State). Awofeso has devoted his years in journalism to promote local and international awareness of Nigerian arts, culture and traditional architecture, especially as they relate to or impact on domestic tourism. And as a culture enthusiast, he has been involved in several campaigns aimed at achieving global recognition for Nigeria's many heritage sites. When he is not taking tourists on city tours or volunteering to clean beaches, he writes for -- and edits -- *travu.ng*

A note from the road

I wrote my first travelogue in July 1999 as a corps member in Jos leading a travel-based Community Development group, which I started while on the Orientation Camp the previous year. So last year, just as the 20th anniversary approached, I began to think that it would be a great idea to mark that early milestone in my career as a travel journalist.

Before too long, I settled on the idea of a compilation of some of the most memorable experiences I have had travelling around Nigeria: there are way too many of them, and following in the footsteps of Uthman dan Fodiyo being the highlight of these adventures.

In doing this, I resolved from the onset that I would let the stories lean more towards the northern part of the country, where I have had several thrilling moments and where I still long to travel more in. On another level, I was very keen to let readers see that part of the country in a fraction of its cultural and historical grandeur, one so very different from the way it's often portrayed in the media.

So I began to look into my files to fetch the relevant stories; I picked out 40 of these, which I then sent off to one of my editor-friends to help shortlist to 25. Those are the stories you'll read in the following pages. Though they have all been previously published in different publications in the past (online and offline), this is the first time I will have them together in a book. The earliest was published in 2004 and the most recent in 2018.

I hope you enjoy reading the stories and I hope they inspire you to travel more around this remarkable country.

Pelu Awofeso

December 2020

Foreword

Content

- (1) Good Old Gusau
- (2) Kanta Museum
- (3) Dambe
- (4) The Caliphate
- (5) Kano: First Impressions
- (6) Northern Orchestra
- (7) Jos: Peak Season
- (8) Inside Abuja Metro
- (9) Abdullahi Gurmi
- (10) Abuja Carnival
- (11) Tafida
- (12) Christmas in Makurdi
- In Pictures: Balewa's tomb
- (13) Biafra's Bunker
- (14) Lady Cabbies
- (15) Dredging River Niger
- (16) Coronation Street
- (17) Africa's Biggest Palace
- (18) ABUAD Farms
- (19) At Home with Susanne Wenger
- (20) 99-Room Mansion
- (21) Oyesina and Sons
- (22) Ogunde's Living Museum
- (23) in god's kitchen
- (24) Monkey bridges
- (25) Lost in Nature
- Essay: Adventures in a Crown Colony
- Interview with Adebimpe Adebambo (Published in Omenka Online)
- Interview with Omena Abenabe (Published in Premium Times)
- Interview with Lande Abudu (Published in The Interview)

GOOD OLD
GUSaU

You will never experience the pangs a traveller feels if you never grab a bag and step out of familiar frontiers. For the very first time, since my frequent journeys around Nigeria, I finally felt what it must be like for a European or an American entering Nigeria — or any country with a surfeit of negative PR — for the very first time. The fear factor can be quite a weight.

When I told a neighbour that I was on my way to Sakwatto (commonly Sokoto), his immediate reaction was that of shock; you would think I had just hinted him that I was going to hang myself. “Well, just be careful,” he cautioned. “I am forever scared of those people. The place is volatile.” And would you believe this?

He is a Muslim! The Yoruba stock, though. If one of them could say this, what justification did I have not to take his advice?

“As soon as you get there, look for where you can buy their cap and garment. At least, try to look somewhat like them.”

Now, never once in the past have I had reservations about the Hausas or Fulani, or developed cold feet about visiting the North. As a matter of fact, I have travelled up to Nigeria’s northern region more times than I have to any of her other parts. Each time has been a beautiful experience, and the memories have repeatedly been so priceless.

My black silk bag already was hanging from my grip. God knows, if I had not bought the EKWOS luxury bus ticket earlier, I would have rescheduled the trip. But there is an event I can’t miss, I had to remind myself.

“Okay. I’ll do exactly as you’ve said,” I assured my

neighbour.

This (the fear) is what, I think, unbalanced and unintelligent reportage of events and situations can do to a society. Nigeria is on the receiving end, so is India. So are Europe and the United States, whether or not you agree.

I decided to go, this time around by road, boarding long buses and cars all the way in spite of my recent vow never to do night journeys. The 'explorer' in me raged to be appeased. No doubt, the less strenuous mode of movement between locations is by air; but the most rewarding is by land, especially if it is done during the day. The roadside view can be fascinating. The move from Lagos to Jos was surprisingly flawless. It ended on the stroke of 12 hours, with three stopovers to eat, urinate and top up the diesel. The second leg of the trip was meant to last eight to nine hours, and would take me out of Jos and through Zaria, Funtua, Gusau and then Sokoto (much farther northwards) in time for the Caliphate's bicentennial.

But a dearth of passengers put the journey six hours behind time. We eventually set out at 3 p.m. instead of 9 a.m. for the eight to nine hour drive. We were nine in the Peugeot wagon; I was the only Yoruba. The men wore just the kind of clothes my neighbour had suggested to me. But, I wore a giveaway— a shirt and a pair of chinos.

These guys can tell for sure that I am not one of them, I thought to myself. What if the worst happens? But, I won over the unease and internal prodding to disembark. God help me.

Six hours on, the driver stopped the car, stepped out and began to fiddle with the car's left full light. It was

nine o' clock. "I can't go beyond here. It's late and risky. The road from here on is bad," he offered apologetically. "We have to pass the night here (he suggested inside his car in the commercial vehicles' park) and continue tomorrow."

"Where is this?" I wanted to know.

"Ah-Ah, this is Gusau now," the oldest of the passengers, a graying huge man, answered in a tone that sounded to me like, "You ought to know, young man. Having been journeying for 20 straight hours, I was too numb to think clearly. To my embarrassment, I couldn't tell which State the name 'Gusau' belonged to. One of them helped me out."

"Zamfara."

Every hair on my body must have stood up. As much as I appreciated the driver's argument, I wished I could get out of there immediately. Zamfara of all places --my God! I might as well be facing Iraqi fighters. It soon occurred to me that there was no way out. We were staying put till morning. Eventually, I walked out of the bus station. Onyeka, a young Igbo restaurateur and resident was strutting home at about that time, so I asked him to show me to a hotel.

"A good and affordable one," I stressed.

"Alright, let's go. There's one nearby." We crossed the major road, and then I put the first question across. "Is everything we hear in the media about this place really true?" "My brother, I have lived here for eight years and not once have I seen anyone draw blood. Everything is just blown out of proportion by people who don't understand. This is the foundation of the Sharia, I agree, but there have never been problems here like you hear happen in either Kano or Kaduna."

The next morning, I checked out of Gusau Hotel feeling well rested and decided to walk to the park; it was pleasant enough weather at that hour. It didn't take long for it to immediately become clear to me that Gusau was really an Islamic city. Probably within every ten feet, there were Arabic inscriptions. The median, the structures and the roundabouts carry them boldly. I wondered what they meant though. Instead of the familiar 'Red Cross', there was the 'Red Crescent', and a little ahead I read a sign on the upper floor of a building: 'Zamfara State Moon-Sighting Committee'.

Then a church! "I thought Christians couldn't even breathe around here?"

"Nooo, it's not as tough as that," Ezekiel corrected me. He was an indigene of Delta State, who told me he'd been in Gusau for five months. "They hardly impose the Sharia on non-indigenes or non-Muslims. This place is as free as any other city."

But he pointed out that females are banned from commuting on bikes. "There's an embargo on that." And whether it is in cabs or buses, women cannot sit next to men. But when things come to a head, the odds are in favour of the fairer sex.

So, any attractions in Gusau that a tourist might hope to see? "None that I know of," Philip, Ezekiel's companion, answered. "We live outside the capital—somewhere close to the border of Niger republic. So we wouldn't really know."

KaNTa MUSEUM

Fish and fishermen aren't the only attractions in Argungu, Kebbi State, north-west Nigeria. Most visitors to the town spend time watching the wonderful water sports and other contests of the fishing festival without getting to explore the less well promoted attraction —the Kanta museum.

The bungalow housing the museum is a stunning monument at first sight. You get to it and you just halt in your tracks. All red mud on the outside, it outshines the neighbouring households, which come in very dim brown. Then the substantial free ground in front of it adds to the overall charm.

Named after the founder of Kebbi kingdom, Muhamadu Kanta, who ruled for 46 years (1515-1561), the structure was erected very early in the 19th century for succeeding Sarki (kings) by Yakubu Nabame, the first Emir (1831-1836) to live in Argungu.

Twice, I tried to get inside, and twice, someone at the entrance politely turned me back. "Try again in the evening," he suggested. I learnt President Obasanjo would be paying a courtesy visit and so the coast had to be clear. Moments after the president's convoy sped off I was back there, and calmly talked my way in (visitors pay a token to view the artefacts).

One thing to know about Argungu (50 km north-west from Birnin Kebbi, capital of Kebbi State) is that the architecture is mostly in clay – perhaps a good thing for the international tourist who may be anxious to glimpse third-world rural living. The upper reaches of the houses are packed tight with hay that has turned a beautiful gold over time. And almost every household has a space for livestock and granary (Rifewa).

Having spent a couple of days charting the outdoors, I wanted to know what the interiors looked like. With a native's help I walked into one household to find two women pounding what must have been the day's lunch. To my left, a much older woman bent over a small basin, washing. At that time of the day the men were either at the farm or at a river. There were children about, though, doing practically nothing. "This is the Zauze, or waiting room," my guide said as we stepped through the entrance into a front room without a door. "Visitors usually stay here while they wait to be attended to or for their host to meet them." At that point, some youngsters had joined us. Next, we were in the Kudandan, the wife's/woman's room, then the Shigifa, which is the husband's room. Still at the Kanta premises, I learnt there were usually more structures in a Kabi (earliest known name for Kebbi) compound. This is where the museum becomes even more delightful – a section of it hosts a replica of all the structures. There's a room (Daki) for the boys. And the Bukka is where to get rest. Cooked food is kept in the Ambuta (serves a function similar to the kitchen cupboard), while Yakku is used to roast meals.

Now imagine that a ferocious animal races into the compound. The family only has to climb up a short pole and tuck themselves in a booth known as 'Rudu' and they will be home safe.

About seven rooms exhibited artefacts specific to the locality: hairstyles, facial markings, musical instruments, war weapons, and age-old farming and fishing implements. In another space in the museum compound, the tombs of deceased emirs (there should be at least nine of them) are preserved in two

groups. A white platform gives details of the particular king and when he ruled the kingdom. This is the part I considered most precious; no single heritage site in Nigeria, I am sure, can boast anything close.

I later read in a magazine that, “a visit to the Kanta Museum is a visit to the history of a once-famous kingdom which is now gradually transforming itself into a modern economy.” It’s most curious that Kanta is barely promoted during the fishing festival. It should rake in its own share of revenue.

DaMBE

The blindfold swimming was exciting. The goat-skinning and wild-duck-catching contests were fun to watch. The donkey and camel racing, though delayed, raised their own ‘oohs’ and ‘ahs’. But Dambe — the traditional (and I would add raw) boxing contest at the Argungu fishing festival — stood starkly apart. If you don’t enjoy the conventional ring combat, Dambe wouldn’t interest you; and if you

can’t bear blood and bruises, you couldn’t stand it.

I didn’t know a homegrown sport such as this existed until I watched just three minutes of it on the NTA (Nigeria Television Authority). I thought it curious at the time and my initial response was to ring up the presenters and ask a couple of questions.

Then the fishing festival (and its brilliant sideshows) got resurrected by the Kebbi State government. I’d left Modiyawa Guest House that afternoon and gone to Argungu particularly to glimpse the town’s surroundings and saw a crowd gathered around a tiny entrance to the left of the road as we approached. I asked the driver to stop.

“What’s happening over there,” I asked a local.

“Dambe — traditional boxing. They are having the screening sessions,” he answered.

“Will I be allowed to see it?”

“Oh, yes. Why not? Everyone is invited.”

I pressed through the blockade of queues and in a few minutes got into the arena, a vast sandy compound fenced round and sprinkled wet. Commentaries and announcements issued from loudhailers. The various competitors, unsmiling and sturdy, prepared their fists for battle. I walked around, camera in hand, but didn’t start to snap immediately.

The people loved to pose actually — indeed Argungu natives, it seemed to me after a few days of roaming the town, love to have their faces on film. Generally, they wear such impressive smiles and are unbelievably unhurried. If it took you a half hour to compose your shots, you can rest assured they'd hang in there. This is exactly what tourists wish they'd get from their host communities. And I'd never felt more affectionate towards people like it turned out here.

As happens with every competitive sport of the festival (catapulting and archery included), contenders for the prizes get to pass through a series of screenings. On this occasion, the contest was between "Janus" and "Agurumaga".

"Ordinarily, Dambe is a sort of business. It lets the fighters themselves make some money from the spectators," one participant offered. "But opponents are never enemies. Outside the arena, they are buddies."

The fighters pull a hose or socks over their fists, webbed around with a rope knotted every few inches. "The rope is soaked in gum Arabic and sunned to dry, so that a hit inflicts the severest pain."

Oh my God! Just then, a twenty-year-old stooped close, his brow and knuckles cut and gushing thick blood.

Did he feel any pain? I asked. He shook his hairy head, grinned.

"Don't think the fight is about age. It is more to do with the skill. They all have the right to refuse or accept a challenge."

Umpires either stand or sit cross-legged when a round of fighting starts. If they think there is a need

for a pause, they whistle. A whistle also gets the battle going again. The loser is the one who goes down under a blow. And bouts usually may last a few rounds; sometimes a knockout may happen even in less than two minutes.

PIX 4



99-room Mansion

When people talk of must-see places in Ibadan (Oyo state, south-west Nigeria), they miss out on one of the most remarkable landmarks in the city – the era-defining Adebisi Mansion in the Idikan area. Built over two years with the best materials money could buy, it was completed in 1929, the same year the famed Mapo Hall was commissioned by the British colonial government.

Remarkably, the mansion of 99 rooms and 34 pillars dwarfs Mapo Hall and it was the property of Sanusi Adebisi Giwa (1882-1938), a very successful farmer and businessman, who was also known for his philanthropy. If he were to be alive in our time, he would be in the same league as the likes of Aliko Dangote and Mike Adenuga.

On the day I visited, there was a party in the compound, packed full with revellers feasting and enjoying rounds of Fuji music. Upstairs in one of the living rooms, Chief (Dr) Busari Adebisi, one of the patriarch's grandchildren, was hosting some guests.

I imagined that his granddad must have sat there on many occasions to welcome VIPs on courtesy visits and, perhaps, climb down through the wooden stairs to attend to hundreds of peasants who thronged the compound seeking his charity (he also used the dedicated hall downstairs for bigger meetings with chiefs and his extended family).

“We had to lock up most of the rooms because it requires a lot to maintain them,” the retired lecturer of the University of Ibadan told me. “But I must say that there is not a single wood in this building, from ceiling to floor-board, that has been repaired or replaced since it was built.”

Then, as now, the wealthy competed with the houses they built, its features and furnishings all considered. But being the first of its kind to be built by anyone in Ibadan, the privately funded Adebisi Mansion became a benchmark and spawned a lore all of its own.

“There is a saying in Ibadan that has endured till date,” says a long-term resident Ayo Adedeji, CEO of Travel Far (@travelfarng) and my guide on the trip. “It goes like this: ‘Anyone who plans to build a house like that of Adebisi will never build one in his lifetime.’”

Mogaji Adebisi explains the import of that statement. “They are not only talking about the edifice completely but the components of the edifice itself – the plank, the nature and character of the plank, the cement and so on,” he said. The older Adebisi, he added, sourced the wood from his expansive cocoa farm – that’s where he made his fortune, doing business with the Miller Brothers, later to become UAC – in Mamu, which he seasoned for five years before using them on the property.

Though the mansion stands solidly behind an equally solid fencing, it has lost its shine somewhat, a greater part of it covered in dust, in and out; but it retains much of its architectural grandeur, even from a distance, including some of its 20th century fittings – fans, stools and all. In the late owner’s room, which I was allowed to enter, a polished wardrobe sits on the west wall, a throwback to a time long past.

Adebisi was a devout Muslim and, like most, he never joked with the month of Ramadan, Eid al Fitr and Eid el Kabir. As expected for a man of his means and stature, his mansion was a mecca during the

festivities.

“...his friends, business associates and well-wishers from outside Ibadan city would be making preparations on how to be in Ibadan on Eid day so as to have an opportunity to celebrate with Adebisi,” wrote one of his biographers Jubril Aminu, in the book ‘Beyond the Inimitable Edifice’. “As a man of fashion, he would put on a befitting, roundish turban, a brand of dressing he introduced into the chieftaincy arena during his time.”

At the end of prayers at the Eid grounds, most would return with him to the mansion at Idikan, the flamboyant character riding a horse and waving the horse-tail to the crowd.







INTERVIEW WITH
aDeBIMPE aDeBaMBO
(PUBLISHED IN OMENKA ONLINE)

Why did you choose to focus on travel journalism?

I would say that travel journalism chose me. I tie it to the good fortune of being at the right place at the right time—the physically stunning city of Jos, which many Nigerians have sadly not visited. I was in Plateau State for my national service and I stayed back afterwards to explore the capital and surrounding LGAs; so the only way I could share my unforgettable and immersive experiences of covering festivals and touring historical buildings, waterfalls and more was to write about them. I was fortunate to have had a mentor, Mr Godwin Goyang, who arranged for me to write a weekly column for the state-owned newspaper, The Standard . That was my break into travel reporting, so to speak. Nearly decade and half on, I still remember those days of little beginnings in the “Home of Peace and Tourism” and I honestly long to return to the city where I honed my skills as a travel writer to do more exploring and writing.

You recently returned from the Coronation of the new Oba of Benin. Can you tell us a little about your experience?

It was a ceremony I knew I had to witness; I’m almost certain I would have fallen into depression if I had missed it for any reason. As many people described it: it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to observe the coronation of Oba Ewuare 11. The last known coronation in the city took place in 1979. Though the actual coronation activities of the new king took place over a period of time, some of them away from public view, what I saw with several thousands of Nigerians was the presentation of the king’s staff of

office. Even that was preceded by lots of activities celebrating time-honoured traditions of the Binis. Standing in the midst of the crowd outside the centuries-old palace, I was happy to see a people proud of their heritage and glad to share the same with the rest of the world.

You also attended the coronation of the Ooni of Ife last year. Did you find any similarities and major differences?

I missed that, sadly. It was the more reason I planned not to miss the Benin coronation.

You started Travel Next Door to encourage people to undertake affordable journeys with Nigeria. What have your successes and challenges been?

You're right. I started @TravelNextDoor in January 2014 during the centenary celebrations. My aim was that Nigerians, young people especially, should use that year as an excuse to explore Nigeria, starting with villages and towns near where they live or work. Having travelled widely in the country myself over the years, I knew for a fact that many communities in Nigeria have all sorts of tourist attractions which most don't know about. So I was inspired to target the initiative at youths because I started to travel around the country myself in my early 20s with a backpack. I sensed that the average Nigerian youth was not adventurous, and that's sad; they would rather ping and party. But I am seeing changes in that regard—young people are floating tour initiatives and encouraging their peers to travel to fascinating attractions here and there.

You attempted in 2012 to partner with the Local Government Area in Badagry to clean

beaches but you didn't make any headway.

What were the challenges?

The local government was receptive to the idea of cleaning the Gberefu Beach, which we always found dirty when we took tourists there, when we sent in the proposal sometime in 2012; but everything stalled because some of the staff who deliberated on the document didn't see any avenues to make money for themselves. Here we were wanting to mobilise our friends, families and colleagues to come clean up the dirty beach, which ought to be their responsibility in the first place, and some people thought it was a way to make easy money. We abandoned the idea altogether.

Why did you set up Beach Samaritan initiative NGO and any benefits derived so far?

It happened after the Badagry incident. In 2014, my partner on the project Ms Adesola Alamutu, an environment advocate of 16 years, decided to pick up from where we left off. We resolved to try out another beach location and so we visited some communities in search of which beach to clean; we ended up at Okun Alfa (Alpha Beach) community, where the Baale gave his blessings to the initiative. And so it was that we mobilized 100-plus volunteers in October 2014 to clean a section of the beach. I would say that the benefits we have derived is the fact that we have succeeded in drawing the attention of the government to the sad state of our beaches and educating the communities on how to better maximize the commercial opportunities that beaches represent. We are also pleased that many volunteers learn about environmental preservation

from our efforts. We have cleaned about nine beaches to date. We look forward to getting more corporate buy-in so we can do more for our dirty beaches.

In 2015 at the I-REP documentary film festival a documentary you produced (Badagry: Journey Back in Time) reened. What inspired it and have many people had access to it?

I have been a tour guide and operator for a couple of years, a spin off from my life as a travel journalist. Badagry happens to me as our most frequent destination, and I have always thought I should do a documentary about the historic town. So I did just that, paying for a crew to follow one of our tours and conduct the necessary interviews. It's yet to be seen by so many but we are working on having it on the right online platforms, so many more interested persons can watch it.

You mentioned in one of your sessions that many of our national treasures , monuments and museums are in a state of disrepair. What solutions do you proffer?

We need to have more expertise in preservation and restoration of artifacts; we need to channel more resources to these facilities and encourage the private sector to be involved in the funding. We need to encourage more Nigerians to visit them and contribute financially (via token donations) to their upkeep—so many awesome treasures are in those museums nationwide, objects the West would plunder over and over— a la 1897 invasion of Benin Kingdom—if they had the slightest opportunities. It also doesn't help that we still hold on to long

abandoned models of museums and monuments management, banning photographs and so on.

The trite statement that Nigerians have no sense of history sadly rings through many times. What do you think can be done to salvage the situation so we don't lose everything?

It's quite simple and it is what many commentators have suggested: Ensure that history is a compulsory feature of the curriculum, from primary to tertiary. Make it more fun to learn it. It's a shame that many Nigerians have grown up not knowing the most basic things about their motherland.

Are people just playing lip service to the Nigerian Tourism industry without lifting a finger? How great are the potentials in the local tourism and hospitality industry?

Nigeria has several hundreds of tourist attractions—festivals, landscapes, monuments, handcrafts, wildlife and so on. It is unbelievable that local, state and federal governments have ignored them for decades. While I lived in Jos, I was amazed by how many tourist attractions the state had documented in brochures, pamphlets and other materials; sadly, all that publicity was circulating mostly in the state and not outside, where it would have generated more interest. I reckoned that with all its tourist assets, Plateau State could earn a large chunk of revenue from tourist receipts; the same goes for every state in Nigeria. These attractions are there, the world would pay good money to experience them.

There are security concerns these days and people say it's even safer and cheaper to

travel out of Nigeria as tourists than to visit our own sites. Are you and others working in this area pressuring the Federal government to fix things or just carrying on with private ventures?

Nigeria is not as insecure as it is made to appear, and because of the current recession Nigerians are now seeking opportunities to travel and vacation to places in Nigeria, which is a good development. I have always argued that every country in the world has security issues, and you only need to look at the current situations in the US, Turkey, France and perhaps Germany to appreciate that. But you know what? It has affected tourist visits to those countries, but many would still do anything to visit, because there are a whole lot of attractions to see. The issue with Nigeria is that we have not been able to manage our national image as well as those western countries. Our embassies abroad should be one of our most active promotional outlets but that is not happening; we do not have Nigeria cultural centres anywhere in the world to promote our heritage and more—like there is Goethe Institut, the French Cultural Centre and the British Council. Many of us have sold ideas to the government but they are never acknowledged or acted on.

These hard times, how do you suggest we boost our internal tourism?

By showcasing the local attractions more to Nigerians as perfect alternatives to attractions abroad, and we need more tour operators and travel agencies to plug into that campaign. We also need hotels having more affordable room tariffs and owners of leisure facilities or tourist sites ensuring

that their places are in excellent shape. Nigerians have high tastes because they are widely travelled.

How many states of the federation have you visited and what were your most memorable moments?

I have been to 32 at the last count—I can't wait to cover what's left. I recall visiting Sokoto State during the bicentenary celebrations of the Caliphate and tracing the footsteps of Uthman Dan Fodio. My other memorable moments include: covering the Ofala Festival, spending time in a village in Uyo, hunting in a forest in Osogbo and visiting the war museum in Umuahia.

You have written books on your travel and tourism experience: Tour of Duty and Nigerian festivals. How helpful have these books been in raising/creating about the beautiful Nigeria?

I have written three books to date— A Place Called Peace (A guidebook to Jos), Nigerian Festivals and Tour of Duty . They have been well received and also become reference materials for tourists and researchers in and outside Nigeria. I feel good when people contact me after buying or reading one of my books.

As an intrepid traveller, have you only embarked on trips within Nigeria?

I have travelled more in Nigeria but I have also travelled to Cairo, Nairobi, Accra, Lusaka, Kampala and the United Kingdom.

What memorable trip to another African country have you had?

Visiting the River Nile while in Kampala and being 'chauffeured' on it in a canoe. The Nile has an

interesting history and the fact that it is surrounded by three countries makes its story also a complex one.

What is the next project you are working on?

A whole lot, really—I am always working on multiple projects at the same time. At the moment, we are designing a travel magazine and putting finishing touches to my new travel book. We are also trying to see how we can get funding for a train adventure around Nigeria; we would love to document the sights and sounds enroute and showcase it in an exhibition.

In 9 Degrees North, Pelu Awofeso writes with the wonder of a tourist and the fairness of a journalist. We travel with him from city to hamlet to relic in Northern Nigeria as he opens up the diary of his road trip to us. There are many different stories and many different characters in each story, as is the case with this often misunderstood region of the country. He punctuates his clean and simple style of writing with vivid images that bring a new dimension to his words.

The book does not pretend to be a historical journal but if you pry a bit deeper between the lines, you will make a few discoveries. As he weaves through the stories, you can taste the sounds, hear the smells and feel the pulse of Northern Nigeria and the normalcy of every day living in the North. In Awofeso's stories, every person is at the center of their own lives, living fully, robustly and unapologetically. Towards the end of the book, Awofeso comes back to the South, perhaps to draw parallels between humanity in the North and the South, or perhaps just because the stories were too good not to be told. Either way, the stories are so succinct, they could easily be the descriptive text on the walls of a museum of Nigeria.

Funmi Oyatogun
Travel Consultant

