

Welcome to the hot house, an exuberant place that makes the so-called temperate lands like Northern Europe look dank, chilly, small and grey.

West Africa apparently orders its climate in bulk loads, buying in petawatts of sunshine that barbecue the land for months on end; or fat rainclouds that burst over the dry soil like end-of-season fruit.

The deep Sahara, where the sun has been known to shine every day for six years at a stretch, is about the driest part of the world. Lengths of the West African coast are some of the wettest. Between the two extremities the landscape is divided into horizontal strips that turn greener as you move south: first, stony desert; then scrubland; then areas of savannah grass and baobab trees; and finally the West African bush and patches of rainforest. The greener the strip, the longer the rains.

West Africa's Christian community is stripy, like the land. The nearer you get to the desert, the fewer the Christians are. Ghana, on the coast, is 44% Christian (counting all who in the broadest sense would claim some kind of allegiance to Christ); its northern neighbour Burkina Faso is 13% Christian; Burkina's northern neighbour Mali, a Sahara-desert state, is only 2% Christian. This reflects mission history in West Africa: work has been concentrated on the animist, bush-dwelling farmers rather than the Muslim, desert- and savannah-roaming nomads.