

HISTORY

Birth of a Major Port

Ideally located in the heart of the gulf of Guinea, nearly at equal distance of Cameroon and Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire has a coastline stretching over 500 kilometers. Its sandy and rectilinear coast is "harassed" by the sand-bar resulting from the swell of the sea as it forms, extends on 80-100 meters, and finally breaks upon the shore, making the coasts very difficult to access.

Along the coastline, stretches a vast complex of lagoons separated from the sea by an offshore bar, in which fall the various rivers that water the country.

Open Roadsteads and Wharves

Trade between Europeans and the autochthonous of the current Côte d'Ivoire started way back in the fifteenth century. First carried out through open roadsteads, the trade would be done later on through wharves which proved to be safer.

As a result, several wharves were built on the Ivorian coasts during the first half of the 20th century.

- The first wharf was built in Grand-Bassam in 1901;
- The second wharf in Grand-Bassam in 1923;
- The third wharf at Port-Bouët;
- The fourth wharf in Sassandra in 1951 (the wharf of Sassandra remained operational for many years even after the opening of the Abidjan port)

As time passed, these facilities used soon proved to be inadequate for the ongoing growth of trade between Europe and Côte d'Ivoire, the difficulties to handle heavy cargo and the risks due to the state of the sea. The need for building a proper port strongly arose.

Toward the end of the 19th century, research was undertaken to determine the best location for the future port.

The Port's Site Selection

Since 1892, studies had been conducted along the coast under the supervision of Treich-Laplène and Binger.

Later on, further studies including that of Marchand in 1896 and the surveys of Captains Houdaille, Thomass and Crosson-Duplessis in 1898, would be conducted, especially in the following regions:

- Grand-Bassam
- The harbor of Sassandra
- Grand-Lahou

In accordance with the conclusions of the Crosson-Duplessis' research, Abidjan was finally selected to be the site for the future port as well as the bridgehead of the Abidjan-Niger railway.

Further studies again were conducted to determine the exact location of the future port, notably the most appropriate site for breaking out over the offshore bar.

In 1906 and 1907, the first attempts to break out over the offshore bar at the west of Port-Bouët (near Petit-Bassam) failed as the canals opened during the work were immediately filled with sand waves.

Between 1909 and 1929, still other projects were proposed by a number of engineers, but none of them was able to address properly the issue of the canal's digging.

Finally, between 1932 and 1933, a highway Engineer, Roger Pelnard-Considère, proposed a project which was approved by the colonial authorities. The project was the object of an experiment on a working model in the Dutch laboratory DELFT before it was definitively approved on December 1935;

Building of the Abidjan Port

Following the approval of the project, the Vridi Canal work was adjudicated to a consortium of companies in 1936. But the very work started in 1938 and was carried on under the authority of successive directors of public works such as Levy, Pelnard-Considère, Pilot, Pougnaud, Vernisse and Jean Millier. The latter completed the work and became the first manager of the Port of Abidjan.

The work included the dredging of the canal, the building of two jetties for protecting the harbor channel from sand waves, the building of shores protected by rip-raps and the execution of brushwood mattress ballasted with rip-raps for protecting the bottom.

The digging of the canal was performed both at the sea side and at the lagoon side. This helped the sea side part called "out port" be operative as from 1948 to relieve the agonizing economy due to the saturation of Grand-Bassam and Port-Bouët's wharves.

It's worth noting that the digging of the canal was somewhat hampered during the Second World War, but the work was kept on until 23 July 1950 when the last block was blasted, joining the waters of the Ebrié lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean.

As a result of the opening of the Vridi Canal to navigation, the Abidjan Port was born. The first vessel to enter the canal was the MARIE DOMINIQUE, and the first foreign-going vessel was the VOLTA.

The Abidjan Port was officially opened on 5 February 1951 by Mr François MITTERAND, the then French Minister of Overseas territories.

Development Master Plans

To cope with the unending growth in traffic and the rapid and numerous changes in sea transport for the last decades, the Abidjan Port has designed and had rigorously implemented two master plans since its establishment:

- First master plan (1951-1967)
- Second master plan (1967-1980)

First Master Plan (1951-1967)

The first master plan helped developed the following infrastructures:

- North berths (from the coast + 3.50 m): 10 m deep and 775 m long, with five berths and five bonded sheds on a total area of 28,000 m²
- West berths (from the coast +3.50 m): 10 m deep and 1,525 meters long, with 10 berths and 10 bonded sheds on a total area of 54,000 m²;
- The first section of the fishing harbor is 400 m long from the coast+2.50, including 190 m of 5 m deep, and 210 m of 7m deep.
- The fruit berth is long of 350 m from the coast + 2.50 m and 7 m deep;
- Several specialized berths:
 - Hydrocarbons lease on the East bank of the canal;
 - Rough timber yard;
 - Mooring berths for tankers;
 - Shopping berth: 27 5m long (from the coast + 2.50 m), between the berth 15 A and the port's equipment, with a shed of 3,200 m²;
 - Sheeting piles berth: 150 m (from the coast + 3.50 m) and 7.00 m deep, located between berth 15 and the port's equipment.

Second Master Plan (1967-1980)

The following facilities were built under the second master plan:

- The breakwater of Vridi: 1,700 meters long and 1,050 meters wide;
- South berths
 - Berths No 16-21 (from the coast + 3.50 m): 1,260 m long and 11.50 m deep, with five bonded sheds on a total area of 26,400 m²;
- Container terminal (from the coast +3.50 m): 12 m deep, with four berths;
- Second and third segments of the fishing harbor:
- 425 m long berths in sheeting piles, 7.00 meters deep + 2.50 m;
- 225 m long berths in sheeting piles, 7 to 11.50 m deep + 2.50 m;
- Fertilizer chemical berth out of the Vridi Canal (from the coast + 3.50 m): 10 meters deep;
- Development of an industrial area and a ship repair yard;
- Building a breakwater at the west entrance of the Vridi Canal;
- Taking up of rock groins hampering navigation in the Vridi Canal.

Capital Works and the Third Master Plan (From 1980)

Following the complete implementation of the first two master plans, a third plan was developed in 1985. It notably set out projects like:

- Rehabilitation and modernization of the existing port, which was already showing signs of saturation;
- Extension on new sites (Yopougon, Boulay Island, west offshore bar).

The implementation of the plan was however hampered by the economic crisis that hardly hit the country in the eighties. A few modernization and rehabilitation projects were undertaken though, as was the procurement of state-of-the-art equipment.

These include:

- Paving 125,000 m² of quayside storage area;
- Reshaping 3,815 m of rail tracks in the bonded area;
- Construction of a bridge to link the bonded area;
- Construction of a new 4.5-hectare cut up timber yard;
- Construction of a new fishing berth, 150 m long and 7 m deep on the former cut up timber yard (berth 15A);
- Procurement of two container cranes in 1986;
- Extension of the breakwater on 150 m (1995-1996);
- Entire rehabilitation of the first two container cranes (1998-1999);
- Construction of a new building to shelter the General Directorate of the Abidjan Port Authority
- Procurement of a third container crane in 1999;
- Rehabilitation and modernization of the fruit terminal (end of work in 2003).

In 1998, the Port Authority decided to update the master plan devised in 1985.

The beginning of the implementation of that plan was marked by the port extension project in Yopougon in the form of BOT whose agreement was signed with the consortium Anglo-Dutch LODECO in 2000.

Great Actors of the Abidjan Port Development

The dramatic progress of the Abidjan Port (which made it one of the major pillars of the famous “Ivorian miracle”) was realized thanks to a number of notable actors whose enlightening vision fostered, at various levels, the planning of a number of its development phases.

This includes first of all the visionary president Felix Houphouët BOIGNY whose ideological and political choices early made Côte d’Ivoire a leading country in the sub-region, laying the development baseline of a modern port: Abidjan Port.

Then, many generations of ministers, with technical and administrative authority, general managers and talented engineers, were able to implement the policy developed by successive governments, contributing to developing the Abidjan Port.

Some actors are mentioned below:

Ministers in charge:

Alcide KAKOU,
Minister of Public Works, Transport, Construction, Posts and Telecommunications

Désiré BONI
Minister of Public Works and Transports

Lamine FADIKA,
Minister of Marine

General Managers:

1950-1952
Jean MILLER

1952-1959
Marcel ADAM

1959-1967
Jean PAUTREL

May 1967-1979
Laurent ODAH

1979-1981
Ibo OKOUE

1981- November 1998
Jean-Michel MOULOD

November 1998 – January 2000
ALLAH Aboidjé Serge

January – November 2000
KONE Mamadou

Since 15 November 2000
Marcel GOSSIO