

# Ghardaïa & the Grand Ergs

## غرداية العرق



This vast area of central Algeria is home to some of the country's most beguiling attractions. It is dominated by the Grand Ergs – great oceans of windswept sand rising hundreds of metres high and covering great swaths of the landscape. The Grand Erg Occidental (Great Western Erg) covers some 80,000 sq km, extending from the Atlas Mountains in the north to the Tademaït Plateau in the south. To the east, the much larger Grand Erg Oriental (Great Eastern Erg) nudges the centre of the country and then stretches well into Tunisia.

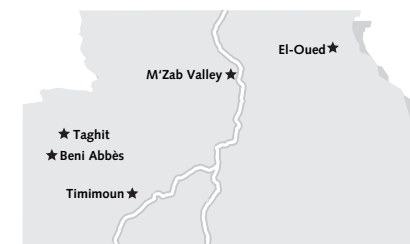
It's not just endless waves of multihued dunes though. The landscape is surprisingly diverse and in between the sand seas you'll see wide scrub-dotted plains framed by Colorado-style flat-top mountains, hectares of perfectly flat bone-white sand, fertile green valleys and black volcanic plateaus.

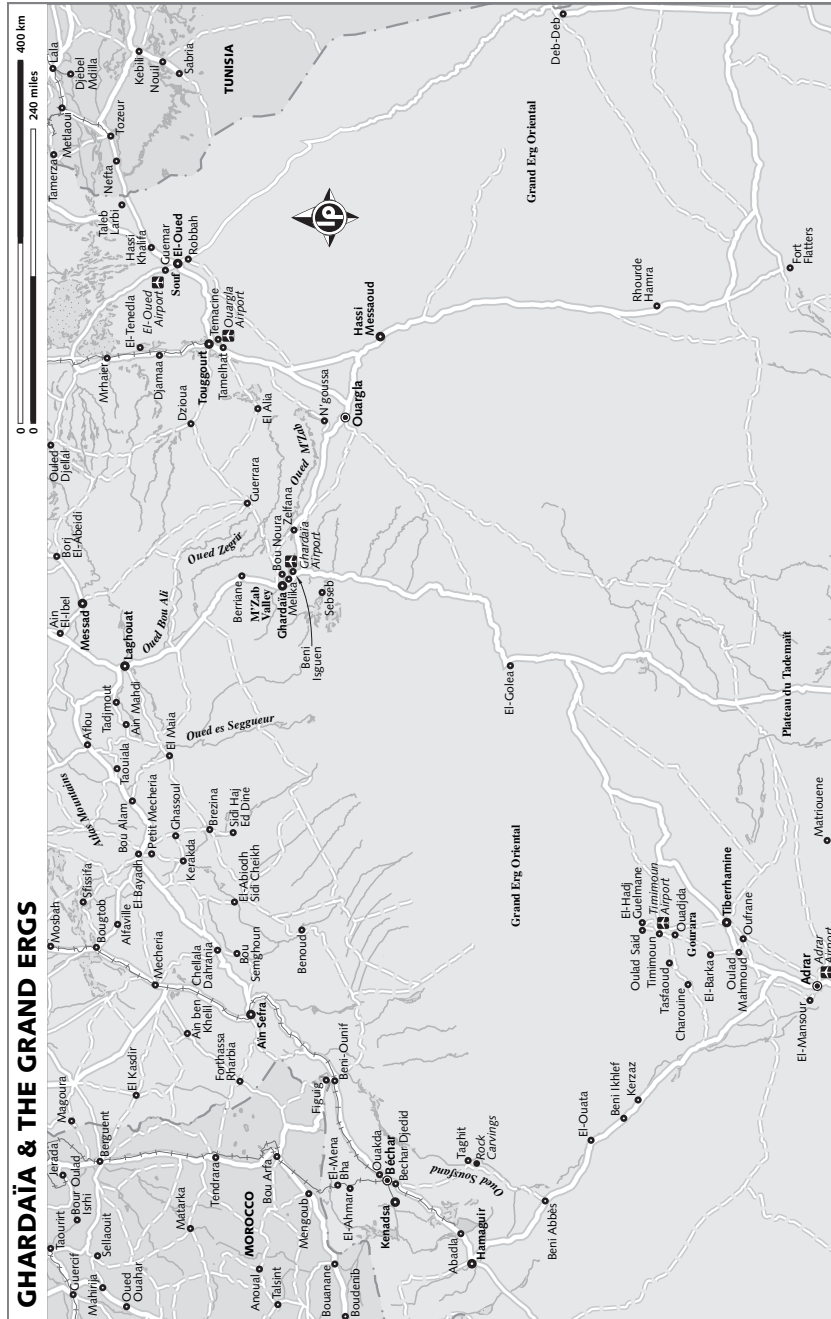
Few roads pass through the Grand Ergs – the environment is too harsh for life to survive – but they are encircled with ancient towns and emerald oases. At this region's heart, perched on the edge of the Grand Erg Occidental, is the World Heritage site of Ghardaïa, part of a pentapolis of five hilltop cities built almost a thousand years ago by a Muslim Ibadi sect called the Mozabites.

This is an area also known for its high temperatures and in the summer they can rise as high as 50°C. As the towns of the region swelter under an intense heat, some hotels close down and residents traditionally retreat to the cool of the palm groves.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore the unique architecture and fascinating history of the five ancient towns in the palm-lined **M'Zab Valley** (p155)
- Wonder at the spiked, ochre buildings and watch the sun descend over the red salt lake in **Timimoun** (p169) 'le rouge'
- Wander the crumbling oasis of **Beni Abbès** (p166); then scramble to the top of the nearest dune for unforgettable vistas over the great western sand sea
- Try your hand at sand skiing and spend the night among ghosts in the 1000-year-old fortified village of **Taghit** (p165)
- Scale the central minaret of **El-Oued** (p172) and gaze over domed rooftops to the dunes beyond





## GHARDAÏA & THE M'ZAB

### غرداية مزاب

Classified as a World Heritage site by Unesco in 1982, the M'Zab is a deep, narrow valley crowned by a pentapolis – five towns rising up sharply from different points along its length. Ghardaïa is the main town and the others, which surround it, are Melika, Beni Isguen, Bou Noura and El-Atteuf; although Ghardaïa is often used to refer to all five. Each town is built on a knoll, its pastel-coloured box like buildings climbing up towards a slim, turreted minaret. The old town centres are riddled with narrow, winding streets and covered alleyways and are excellent places to explore.

The oasis is massive, stretching for some 10km along the valley, which is lined with hectares of palm groves; and fruit trees of all kinds battle each other for room under the shadow of the palms. Traditionally, the cities' inhabitants would escape to these *palmeraie* palm groves in the summer to shelter themselves from the intense heat.

The M'Zab Valley is home to the Mozabites (see boxed text, p160), part of the Ibadid sect (see the boxed text, p48), who broke away from mainstream Islam and built a home in this harsh arid landscape during the 11th century. The Mozabites' culture and religion are fiercely protected and the towns have managed to retain much of their original character and many traditions.

### History

The history of the M'Zab is inextricably linked with the Ibadis. Yet nomads also lived here, as did Berber tribes, and archaeologists have found traces of life – in rock engravings and ancient ruined villages – going back for many centuries.

It was the arrival of the Ibadid in the 11th century, however, that really shook things up. Having broken from mainstream Islam a few hundred years before, they were chased from their North African capitals, including Tahert in the Atlas Mountains and Sedrata near El-Oued. In order to secure a safe future for themselves, they fled to a place where they would be far removed from potential enemies, choosing the harsh territory of the

M'Zab. Here they set about building a series of towns, choosing to build them on hills to enhance their security. Little by little the existing inhabitants of the valley were assimilated into Ibadid culture and religion.

El-Atteuf was the first city to be founded in 1013, followed by Bou Noura in 1065, then Ghardaïa in 1087; two centuries later Beni Isguen (1321) and Bou Noura (1355) followed.

### GHARDAÏA

#### غرداية

The first glimpse you catch of Ghardaïa is unforgettable; all main roads leading there skim the edge of the hills offering majestic views of Ghardaïa and its surrounding towns, framed by dense green palm groves and the Oued M'Zab (dry river bed). The sight is even more impressive if you've come to the valley overland, through the barren, stony wasteland that surrounds it.

Ghardaïa is the largest and most important of the five towns and is the commercial and administrative hub of the M'Zab – indeed the commercial hub of the Algerian Sahara – sprawling way beyond its original city centre. It's the only town with proper tourist facilities (apart from a couple of lodges in Beni Isguen), and the place where all long-distance transport pitches up, so it's likely that you'll end up staying here. As well as a number of hotels and restaurants, there are several shops around the town's cobbled market square, selling souvenirs and carpets, a speciality of the area.

### Orientation

Ghardaïa's old city, housing the market and the mosque, lies immediately west of the Oued M'Zab. Just south of the old town on rue Emir Abdelkader is where you'll find the main banks, the Office National Algerien du Tourisme (ONAT) and several hotels. Follow this road south as it becomes av du 1er Novembre, and you'll eventually hit Beni Isguen. If arriving by bus you'll be deposited at the main station on rue Ahmed Talbi, on the eastern bank of the Oued M'Zab, a few minutes' walk from the town centre.

### Information

#### INTERNET ACCESS

There are several internet cafés in Ghardaïa. Both **Riad Computer Service** (av du 1 Novembre; per hour DA100; ☎ 8.30am-9pm) opposite M'Zab

Tours and **Cyber Café** (DA80; ☎ 8am-10pm) just opposite the main bus station have high-speed, reliable connections.

#### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Clinique Aicha Bouker** (☎ 029 898815; ☎ 7am-6.30pm) In Beni Isguen; a good place to go for more minor ailments.

**Clinique des Oasis** (☎ 029 889999; cliniqueoasis@yahoo.fr; El-Moustadjeb-Bouhraoua) A well-managed private hospital with excellent facilities.

**SOS-SUD Ambulance** (☎ 029 880447/061, 645193/071, 751535; fax 029 880435; rue Ahmed Talbi) A 24-hour, seven-days-a-week emergency ambulance service which provides a service all over southern Algeria.

#### MONEY

**Banque de Développement Locale** (rue Ahmed Talbi; ☎ 8.45am-12:30pm & 1.30-3.30pm Sun-Thu) Changes foreign currency but not travellers cheques. Also has an ATM that didn't accept foreign cards at the time of writing.

**Banque Nationale d'Algérie** (av du 1er Novembre; ☎ 8.45am-12:30pm & 1.30-3.30pm Sun-Thu) Also changes travellers cheques.

**Credit Populaire d'Algérie** (rue Emir Abdelkader; ☎ 8.45am-12:30pm & 1.30-3.30pm Sun-Thu) Has a foreign-exchange bureau that changes travellers cheques. It is also possible to get a cash advance on a Visa or MasterCard. You'll need your passport for this and it takes about 30 minutes.

There's a branch of Western Union in the main post office next to the *gare routière* (bus station).

#### POST & TELEPHONE

The **post office** (☎ 029 643730; 8am-noon & 1-6pm Sat-Thu) is next door to the main bus station just off rue Ahmed Talbi. There are telephone shops all over town.

#### TOURIST INFORMATION

There's a helpful **ONAT** (☎ 029 881751) office on rue Emir Abdelkader which offers use-

ful information about the region and can organise guides for the town as well as 4WD tours further afield.

#### TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Big Sun Destination** (☎ 029 891491; www.bigsun.populus.ch; Cite Ider Est, Beni Isguen) Organises guided tailored trips for tourists and businessmen, cultural visits, car and driver hire and stays in traditional homes.

**M'Zab Tours** (☎ 029 880002; www.mzabtours.com; av du 1er Novembre) An excellent and well-organised agency offering individually tailored tours from around €50 per person per day depending on the number of people in your party. It can also organise daily guides for Ghardaïa, car hire and border pick-ups. It has a sister agency in Tamanrasset which organises similar excursions in the south, as well as guesthouses in Beni Isguen (see p161), El-Goléa (see p171) and Tamanrasset (see p187).

#### VEHICLE REPAIR

Rue Ahmed Talbi is like one giant mechanic workshop. Come here for a wide choice of garages, vehicle-repair shops and spare parts.

#### Dangers & Annoyances

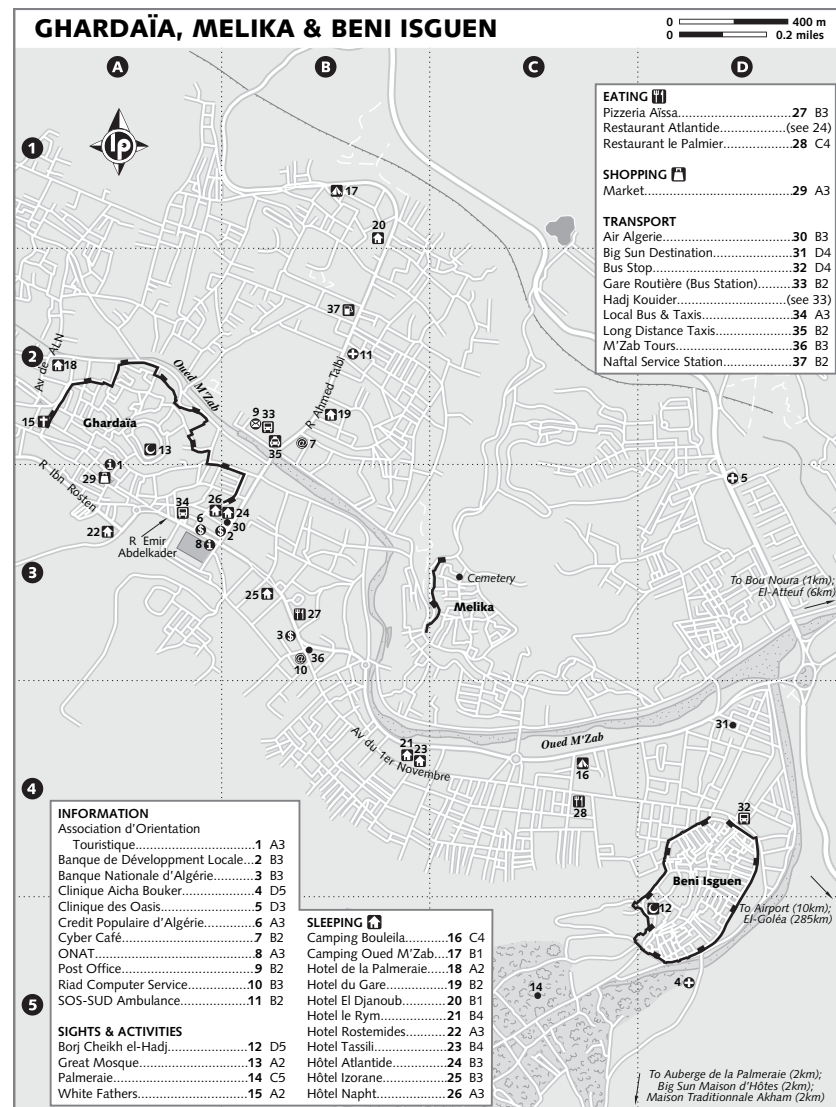
There's not much threat to personal safety for visitors to Ghardaïa. However it still pays to keep a close eye on your valuables, particularly in crowded areas such as the market, and to take care when walking around at night.

#### Sights & Activities

The entrance to the **old city** is along rue Ibn Rosten, which leads to a pretty cobbled open square in the middle of the old part of the town, where the daily **market** is. You can pick up all manner of things here from jewellery, sportswear and nuts to herbal medicines for haemorrhoids. Ghardaïa's most famous souvenirs are its traditional carpets (see p159) and luckily most of the shops that

#### THE STORY OF GHAR DAÏA

An old Berber tale tells the story of a young woman by the name of Daïa who was passing through the M'Zab with a group of wandering nomads when, straying away from her group in search of water one day, she found herself left behind. Scared and alone she made her home in a cave (a 'ghar') and each night would light a fire to ward off danger. The founders of the city, camped up in the hills above, saw lights flickering below and grew more and more curious as to their origin. One day, one of the founders sent his servant to find out the source of these strange lights and the servant returned with the young girl. So taken was he by her beauty that he asked for her hand in marriage and, legend has it, named the city he founded in her name.



line the main square are in the carpet-selling business. Unlike in some parts of the country, you can get away with bargaining here and it's all part of the fun; you might well be invited to take tea with the shop owner while you peruse the stock room.

To venture further into the old city you'll need to be accompanied by a guide. For

this you should visit the Guides Office at the **Association d'Orientation Touristique** (☎ 029 882699; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm; guides available) on rue Cheikh Ammi Saïd, signposted just off the market square. Guides cost DA250.

Walking up rue Cheikh Ammi Saïd you'll come to the **Great Mosque**. It has a fortresslike appearance; its main feature is

the unadorned, pyramidal minaret, typical of the mosques of the M'Zab.

Also of interest is the town's ancient **water distribution system** in the palm groves northwest of town, which was devised by the Mozabites as a solution to the region's arid climate. Rainwater is stored in deep wells and then dispersed through a system of underground channels, which divide the flow so that it is fairly distributed among separate palm gardens.

You could also pay a visit to the **Pères Blancs** (White Fathers; p50) at their hermitage near the old city. If it's a convenient time they will be happy to chat and to show you their library with its excellent collection of books about the Sahara. The White Fathers were founded in the 1860s by the then Archbishop of Algiers, Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, and have been in Algeria since the 1870s. Today there are orders throughout the country; they are involved in inter-religious relations and taking care of local Christians and also participate in their local communities.

## Festivals & Events

### FÊTE DU TAPIS

In March/April every year, a carpet festival takes place in Ghardaïa, in celebration of the local carpet-making industry. More than 200 people take part, representing almost 30 different *wilaya* (provinces) and it's a chance for vendors to show off their wares as well as take part in competitions.

## Sleeping

There's a good range of hotel accommodation in Ghardaïa, mostly in the midrange sector with a couple of budget places thrown in. The best place to stay in town used to be the Hotel Rostemides, a sprawling white building perched on top of a hill with fantastic views over the town. Out of action for several years, at the time of writing it was undergoing extensive renovations and was due to reopen in 2007. There are two campsites in Ghardaïa: Camping Bouleila about 1km southeast of the town centre on the El-Goléa road and Camping Oued M'Zab, on the route out of town to the north. Although the sites are still reasonably well equipped they were closed at the time of writing due to lack of custom. Check locally to see if the situation has changed.

## BUDGET

**Hôtel Atlantide** (☎ 029 882536; av Ahmed Talbi; s & d DA500) This place has bland rooms (nicer, quieter ones with air-con available for DA1000) with shared bathrooms leading off blue and white mosaic-tiled corridors. The best thing about this hotel is the restaurant downstairs which serves some of the best roast chicken in town (see opposite).

**Hôtel Napht** (☎ 029 890832; place Andalouse; s/d with fan from DA500/800) A good choice for those on a budget and is well located, right next to the old town and the taxi ranks. The 12 rooms are very basic and the owner's fondness for red light bulbs makes some of them feel a little seedy. There's a small terrace overlooking the rooftops, where you can sleep in the summer if it gets too hot, but the view isn't up to much.

**Hotel de la Palmeraie** (☎ 029 882312; av de ALN (Rte l'Oasis); s/d/tr without bathroom DA600/900/1000; Ⓟ) The rather grubby exterior on a busy road doesn't look very promising but inside it is a different story. Simple, clean rooms with spotless shared showers open onto a lovely (despite the bright-pink walls) central courtyard filled with cacti, bougainvillea and palm trees.

**Hotel le Rym** (☎ 029 893202; av du 1er Novembre; d/tr/ffrom DA1200/1800; Ⓟ) This is a very welcoming place. The rooms are nothing special but are roomy and clean, and lead off a bright airy corridor adorned with traditional carpets, paintings and photographs of Algeria. There's also a big terrace overlooking the av du 1er Novembre and nearby Melika.

**Hotel Tassili** (☎ 029 885583; fax 073 1182 80; av 1er Novembre; d/tr/apt DA1200/1800/2200; Ⓟ) Another good choice with mosaic-tiled hallways and stairs, clean simple rooms and a groovy three-bed apartment with proper bath (mosaic-tiled of course) and little private roof terrace.

**Hotel du Gare** (☎ 029 964315; rue Ahmed Talbi; s & d DA1400) A hop and a skip away from the *gare routière* this place is convenient and reasonably priced, with a selection of airy double rooms and very welcoming management. There's hot water in the winter.

## MIDRANGE

**Hôtel Izorane** (☎/fax 029 889238; carrefour Wilaya de Ghardaïa; s/d 1200/1600; Ⓟ) This small and very friendly place is a good choice with a cosier

feel than most. Rooms are clean and comfortable with televisions, fridges and air-con and there's a small terrace with a nice selection of cacti overlooking the main street.

## TOP END

**Hotel El-Djanoub** (☎ 029 885631/888987; fax 029 886 881; s/d DA3070/3886; Ⓟ) This is the only top-end hotel in Ghardaïa but it doesn't really deserve that distinction. While it has facilities such as swimming pool, air-con and satellite TV, the immense lobby and endless gloomy corridors reek of good times passed and the rooms are as bland as can be.

## Eating

**Pizzeria Aïssa** (☎ 029 882486; av du 1er Novembre; pizzas DA200; ☎ 9.30am-9.30pm) This is a very lively place – you can order takeaway pizzas at the front or sit in the back room. It costs DA100 to DA350 for a tasty thin-based pizza, and there's also a separate family-friendly room if you want to get away from the all-male atmosphere.

**Restaurant Atlantide** (☎ 029 882536; av Ahmed Talbi; meals DA300; ☎ lunch & dinner) Owned by the same people as the hotel upstairs, this place is clean and very friendly, drawing people in from the street with a lip-smacking window display of grilled chickens and platters of herb-covered chips. It also does excellent *chorba* (vegetable soup with noodles and meat), very fresh salads and zesty tagines.

**Restaurant le Palmier** (☎ 029 899038; av du 1er Novembre) This is the best and most established restaurant in town. It has a very chic dining room – bright white walls with traditional arts and crafts on display – and the welcome is warm. There's a three-course menu from DA950 as well as an à la carte mix of European and Algerian food. Dishes include *bourek* (beef-stuffed pastry rolls), and tagines. It's also one of the few places in Ghardaïa that serves alcohol.

## Shopping

The greatest concentration of shops in Ghardaïa is around the market square where you'll find all manner of things from electronic goods and bootleg CDs to tourist-oriented jewellery and crafts. There are also a few souvenir shops along rue Emir Abdelkader. If you are interested in buying any of the beautifully colourful rugs here, many of which contain symbols representing the

different towns of the M'Zab, check the quality closely as they can vary enormously; the better ones have more knots per square centimetre. You can pick up a cheap synthetic carpet here for as little as €10 but for a good-quality rug expect to pay upwards of €50.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Air Algérie** (☎ 029 884663; fax 029 887280) is in the town centre on rue Ahmed Talbi. The **airport** is 10km south of town on the road to El-Goléa. There are three flights a week to Algiers (DA4600, 1½ hours), one to Tamanrasset (DA9800, two hours 20 minutes) and one to Illizi (DA7300, two hours 10 minutes).

### BUS

The main *gare routière* is on rue Ahmed Talbi, just across the Oued M'Zab and only five minutes' walk from the town centre. It is the departure point for long-distance taxis and the national TVSE buses as well as several long-distance, private bus companies. It's best to make reservations in advance.

The main destinations are Adrar (DA1000, 11 hours), Algiers (DA650, seven to eight hours), Annaba (DA920, 14 hours), Constantine (DA770, 10 hours), El-Goléa (DA400, three hours), In Salah (DA800, eight to nine hours), Ouargla (DA200, two hours) and Timimoun (DA970, 10 hours) and Tamanrasset (DA1500, 19 to 20 hours). There are also several private bus companies with offices around the main bus station, which tend to be more expensive. For example **Hadj Kouider** (☎ 072 092038/072, 290944) at the main bus station charges DA2000 to Tamanrasset.

### TAXI

Share taxis leave from a stand next to the main *gare routière* and cover the same main destinations including Algiers (DA1000, seven hours), Tamanrasset (DA1500, 18 to 20 hours) and Ouargla (DA500, two hours).

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is 10km out of town on the El-Goléa road. The only way to get into town from the airport is by taxi, which costs from DA100 per person to the centre of town.

**BUS**

The station for the local buses is on rue Emir Abdelkader just by the entrance to the old city. There are buses for Beni Isguen, Bou Noura and El-Atteuf and journeys should cost around DA20.

**TAXI**

You can also pick up local taxis at the local bus station. Short journeys around town should cost around DA50. Alternatively it is also possible to hire taxis by the hour for around DA400 to DA500.

**BENI ISGUEN** بنى إزقن

The town is built on the slope of the hill, 2.5km southeast of Ghardaïa. This is the most important religious town in the M'Zab and also has an excellent reputation for science and education. Constructed in the 14th century, it's also known for its ramparts, which are 2.5km long and 3m high. The people here hang on very firmly to their traditional ways, and the amount of outside influence is kept to an absolute minimum.

The town's narrow streets are entered from the main Ghardaïa road. It is compulsory for all tourists entering the town

to have a guide, and you can pick one up at this entry point. At the entrance to the town is a sign reminding tourists that photography and smoking are forbidden in the town, and modest dress is compulsory (no shorts or bare shoulders). However, you will normally be permitted to take photos as long as there are no women passing.

**Sights & Activities**

A guide costs DA200 and you can pick one up at the entrance to the town. The guide will show you all the interesting bits and pieces in Beni Isguen. The highlight is the Turkish tower, **Borj Cheikh el-Hadj** (also known as Borj Boleila), in the western corner of Beni Isguen, which you can climb up for stunning views over the town and beyond. Your guide will probably leave you at the **marketplace**, which has a few shops nearby selling the colourful local rugs. The best time for a visit is in the late afternoon, when the market square comes alive with the daily auction – the **Marché à la Criée**. The square is lined with stone benches where tourists and locals alike can sit to observe the action. Those taking part yell out the price of their item until someone buys it, or the price is brought down.

It is interesting to watch: as there are no cafés in the town, it becomes the social event of the day.

At the entrance to the town is the **museum**, which the guide will probably show you at the end of your tour. It is constructed in the style of a typical Mozabite home complete with examples of a kitchen, traditional refrigeration system, and marriage bedroom, as well as some interesting carpet weaving paraphernalia.

The **palmeraie** at Beni Isguen is probably the best in the M'Zab. It stretches for a couple of kilometres behind the town. The gardens here are green havens, veritable gardens of Eden. They are difficult to see properly, however, as they are mostly behind high walls. Once behind the wall, the contrast is vivid – you'll find every kind of fruit here, from grapes and figs to bananas and dates.

**Sleeping**

There are no hotels in Beni Isguen itself, as foreigners are not allowed to stay within the walls of the city. However a number of guesthouses have sprung up over the past few years in the **palmeraie**. They are based in traditional-style houses with simple rooms and shared bathrooms. Those mentioned below are all within a five-minute walk of each other. To get to the **palmeraie** just continue on the road past the entrance to Beni Isguen, where it winds around to the back of the **palmeraie**. Or you could get a bus to the **palmeraie** from outside the entrance to the old city of Beni Isguen. The guesthouses are difficult to find though, and not well signposted so if you don't have a car it's best to arrange to be picked up from the bus station or airport. In any case, they all ask that you make reservations in advance.

**Big Sun Maison d'Hôtes** (☎ 029 887616; s/d B&B from DA1500/2000) This is owned by Big Sun Destination (see p156). It is a smaller and more intimate place than the Caravansérial (but just as pretty) with a laid-back atmosphere; the owner encourages you to strip yourself of your watch and mobile phone and the emphasis here is on generating an understanding of Mozabite culture. At the time of writing Big Sun was in the process of building a traditional Bedouin camp complete with organic fruit and veg garden, a camel, goats and a tradition

well system. Reservations must be made in advance.

**Caravansérial Ghardaïa** (☎ 029 899702; www.mzabtours.com; B&B/half/full board per person from DA1500/2500/3200; 📍) Owned by the proprietor of M'Zab Tours (see p156) this is an enchanting guesthouse in the heart of the **palmeraie**. It's based around a centuries-old traditional house and is a veritable warren of curved, low-ceilinged, white-walled rooms and terraces, constructed to be cool in summer and warm in winter. Meals are taken around low tables in a large dining room scattered with traditional carpets and artefacts, or, in fine weather, outdoors under the stars. There's also a swimming pool, for use during the summer months. Full board is encouraged and in high season half-board is obligatory. It can also arrange guides for visits to Ghardaïa and the surrounding towns.

**Maison Traditionnelle Akham** (☎ 029 873127, 071 774820; takbout\_said@yahoo.fr; half/full board DA2400/3000) This place is larger than its neighbours and has an airier feel about it with multi-levelled pretty terraces, skylights and a trellis-covered shady terrace and swimming pool. In the evenings the gardens are lit up with twinkling lights – built into the stairs and strung up between the trees – and there's an outdoor fireplace around which to congregate. It also has some less charming rooms with fridges and bathrooms for those who want greater privacy.

**Getting There & Away**

Local buses leave Ghardaïa from the local bus station outside the entrance to the old city and cost DA15. They drop you outside the gates to Beni Isguen. Alternatively, it's a half-hour walk.

**MELIKA** مليكة

It is from Melika that you get the best overall views of the Oued M'Zab and Ghardaïa itself. The town is about a kilometre to the southeast of Ghardaïa, high above the **oued**. The main point of interest is the curious **cemetery** on the northern side of the town where Sidi Aïssa and his family are buried. It's a series of eerie white tombs with conical structures, almost like turrets, pointing towards the sky.

As the story goes, Sidi Aïssa was a Malakite Muslim who converted to Ibadism after

**THE MOZABITES**

Mozabites are a close-knit group that practises a form of Islam known as Ibadī Islam (see the boxed text, p48). The Ibadīs arrived in the M'Zab Valley in the 11th century after being driven from their homes in the north; they chose the harshest and least accessible region they could in order to protect their community. The Ibadīs of this region came to be known as the Mozabites.

They're a very traditional people who have managed to cling on to their unique lifestyle, clothing, traditions and beliefs over the centuries. They have a strong network of community support, tend not to marry outside their religious group, and have special councils and assemblies to preside over their affairs. Traditionally, women stayed in the towns of the M'Zab even when their men left for the north to make their fortunes in business. This was to ensure that Mozabite men retained close ties with their towns and that their children were brought up within the M'Zab. Mozabite women would contribute to the economy by weaving carpets and wool garments to send to their men to sell.

Today, Mozabites are still well known for being astute merchants; many of them have migrated to Algiers and now own businesses there, in France and further afield. Even while abroad they retain close ties with Ghardaïa and continue to contribute to the life of their community, returning regularly to the M'Zab Valley from wherever they are in the world.

Those who have remained in the M'Zab are still fairly conservative, particularly the older generation. Traditions are strong here, and many of the people (especially the women) still wear traditional dress. For men that means white tunic, baggy pants and white hat, but the effect of the women's outfits is altogether more ghostly, and one of the first things you'll notice about a visit to this region. Walk around the streets of the M'Zab, particularly in Beni Isguen, and you'll see women shrouded from head to toe in white fabric, revealing nothing but a single eye.



a dream in which he saw three cemeteries. The first was surrounded by flames and smoke and, he believed, was that of the Jews; the second was a Malakite cemetery which emitted groans of pain; and the third cemetery, which he believed was the cemetery of the Ibadis, was bathed in a serene light. After an argument with Melika's chief, Sidi Aïssa shut himself away, refusing to receive guests, until his death. After his death, the people of Melika, who were very fond of him, decided to build a magnificent tomb.

### Getting There & Away

The easiest way up to Melika is on foot from Ghardaïa. It takes about 30 minutes to make the climb, and the best route is the road which leads south opposite the main *gare routière*. It is also possible to cross the *oued* anywhere and just scramble up the side of the hill.

### EL-ATTEUF العطف

El-Atteuf is the oldest city of the M'Zab and it costs DA200 for a guide, who you can pick up at the office of the Association Tadjnint pour le Tourisme at l'Artisanat El-Atteuf Ghardaïa (☎ 029 875038; tadjnint@caramail.com). The main reason to come to El-Atteuf is to see the **mosque of Sidi Brahim**. Some 700 years old, it's a simple white building complete with curved walls, arches and inclined pillars made from palm trunks. It contains the remains of Sidi Brahim, a Muslim scholar, and is said to have inspired the French architect Le Corbusier to build a church in a similar fashion in France: the Chapel Notre-Dame-du-Haut in Ronchamp.

### Getting There & away

El-Atteuf is 9km away from Ghardaïa so is a bit of a walk. Take bus 30 from the local bus station outside the old town in Ghardaïa. It costs DA15 and takes about 10 to 15 minutes.

### BOU NOURA بونورة

Four kilometres away from Ghardaïa, Bou Noura is less interesting than and not as well maintained as the other towns. Its main point of interest is its construction. The walls of the city seem to rise out of the rocks on which they were built. To get here take a bus from the local outside the old town of Ghardaïa.

## GRAND ERG OCCIDENTAL العرق الغربي الكبير

One of the two great sand seas, the Grand Erg Occidental occupies an enormous area south of the Saharan Atlas Mountains in the west of Algeria. Anywhere else this would constitute a sizeable desert in its own right, but in the Sahara things are a bit different. Some of the most beautiful oases in the country are to be found here. What's more, the excellent sealed roads make them very accessible; given a week or more you could drive (or bus) around and visit a diverse selection of these desert towns.

Unlike what you might expect, not all oases are the same – highlights of this region include the mud-red fortress of Taghit, dwarfed by the looming dunes behind it; the white crumbling buildings and laid-back charm of Beni Abbès; and Timimoun – nicknamed 'the red' after its vast red salt lake and ochre buildings – with its strangely shaped, porcupine-spiked constructions.

The real stars of the show, though, are the sands themselves. You could trek through them (with camel or without), ski down them, spend the night out under the stars using the nearest dune as a pillow or simply gaze out in awe at their changing colours and seemingly never-ending expanse.

### AÏN SEFRA عين سفرة

This town at the foot of the Saharan Atlas Mountains is the gateway to the desert from the northwest and is about as far north as you will find sand dunes on this side of the country.

As you approach the town from the north, it looks like a big, dusty building site and the multicoloured apartment blocks by the side of the road must rate as some of the worst eyesores in the country. Turning into the town itself, however, you see that it is a likeable little place with wide, tree-lined streets and a convivial atmosphere.

Perhaps the most famous thing about Aïn Sefra is that it was here that the young writer and adventurer Isabelle Eberhardt was drowned 1904, when a flash flood swept away houses and their occupants. See the boxed text, opposite, for further information.

### ISABELLE EBERHARDT

It almost sounds too strange too be true: Isabelle Eberhardt was the cross-dressing, hard-drinking, illegitimate child of the widow of a Russian general and her Armenian-born lover, who travelled solo through Algeria on horseback and drowned in the middle of the desert.

She was born in Switzerland in 1877. Her mother had moved from Russia to Geneva four years previously – along with her children and the children's tutor, anarchist ex-priest Alexandre Trophimowsky – for a period of convalescence, a few months after which her husband, the Russian General Pavel de Moerder, died of a heart attack. When Isabelle arrived, she was registered as illegitimate, her mother never admitting to her family, or to Isabelle herself, that Trophimowsky was in fact her father.

Isabelle was given a diverse education, Trophimowsky teaching her Arabic and several other languages, as well as metaphysics and chemistry. Even at this early age, her rebellious streak was apparent and she would sometimes dress as a boy to see what freedoms this would allow her.

In 1897, Isabelle went to Algeria for the first time, along with her mother, to visit her brother who had been stationed there. They were both seduced by the local culture and religion and ended up converting to Islam.

Isabelle's mother died suddenly and Isabelle returned temporarily to Europe but was soon pulled back to Algeria. She had a particularly good understanding of Arab culture and politics, and could speak and write the language fluently, helped by the unconventional education given her by Trophimowsky. She adopted the persona of an Arab man, calling herself 'Si Mahmoud Essadi', and travelled alone all over the Sahara on horseback, even ending up working for a time as a journalist covering military campaigns around Béchar.

It was well known that she was a woman – she was sexually adventurous and had a whole host of lovers – yet she was accepted as a man by the local Algerians. In El-Oued in 1900 she fell in love with Slimene Ehni, a young soldier, whom she would go on to marry a year later. He put up with her affairs as well as her bouts of drunkenness and fondness for hashish.

In 1904, after seeking hospital treatment for malaria in Aïn Sefra, on the edges of the Sahara Desert, Isabelle's short life came to an end when she was drowned in a freak flash flood. Her body was found two days later, stuck under a wooden beam. She is buried in the town's Muslim cemetery.

Isabelle wrote about her travels in many books (see p15) and French newspapers, and her diaries also make interesting reading.

### Information

Roads into town from both the south and the north lead directly to the town centre, situated around the dry riverbed. There are several cafés, groceries and taxiphone bureaus as well as a Banque Nationale d'Algérie and a Banque de l'Agriculture et du Développement Rural. Buses drop you off at the *gare routière* near the northern entrance of Aïn Sefra from where it's a short walk into town. The main post office is over the river from the town centre on the road heading up to the Hotel el-Mekhter.

### Sights

The Muslim cemetery where Isabelle Eberhardt is buried is located on the outskirts of the western side of town. The cemetery has a wild, romantic feel about it, its swaying grasses framed by the rising dunes and

mountains behind. The best way to get here is by car or on foot; ask locally for directions. There's normally a caretaker there and he'll be happy to show you her grave.

### Sleeping

**Hotel el-Hidab** (☎ 049 761722/061, 260123; s/d/tr DA600/700/1000) In the centre of town, close to the river. It has clean simple rooms with sinks, and friendly service. There are toilets in the corridor but to take a shower you'll have to use the public showers on the floor below, which cost DA50 a pop.

**Hotel el-Mekhter** (☎ 049 771771; fax 762897; s & d DA2050; 🍷 🍷) The only tourist-class accommodation is around 1.5km out of town, across the river from the town centre and signposted past the military barracks. The place is rather rough around the edges and has obviously seen better days. It is nicely

situated, however, backed up against a sand dune on the edge of town, and the multi-levelled, wood-beamed rooms, though ramshackle, are quite appealing. They look out onto the dunes behind or open out onto terraces overlooking the swimming pool and courtyard. There's a restaurant, but it doesn't open if there aren't enough guests; breakfast, which is always available, is included in the price of the room.

### Getting There & Away

There are buses north to Algiers (DA650, eight to nine hours), Oran (DA500, four to five hours) and Tlemcen (DA400, three to four hours), and south to Béchar (DA400, three hours).

### BENI OUNIF بني ونيف

This totally unremarkable little border town used to give travellers coming from Morocco their first glimpse of Algeria, but since the closure of the border, it sees much less trade. The town is small – only about half a kilometre from one end to the other, centred on one long main street – so there's no difficulty in finding things.

There are two banks here, a Banque Nationale d'Algérie and a Banque de l'Agriculture et du Développement Rural, both off the main drag, but neither exchange travellers cheques. There's also a petrol station.

The road between here and Béchar still bears some of the few remaining signs of the battle for Algerian independence. Right along this border, some distance in from the actual line, the French built a continuous barrier of barbed wire some 5m wide. The whole section was patrolled by soldiers stationed at forts, each built in sight of the next, and the line was more than 1000km long on this side of the country. The idea, largely successful, was to isolate the Algerian nationalists from any support from Morocco. Most of the forts are still there today; so is much of the barbed wire.

### Sleeping

**Hôtel Afrique** (☎ 049 842090/074 821328; rue FLN Route No 06; s/d DA300/600) This is the only place to stay in town and although nondescript it is clean and welcoming. There are 11 simple and airy rooms overlooking the main street, and a decent restaurant. The next closest accommodation is at Béchar, 114km to the south.

### Getting There & Away TO/FROM MOROCCO

The road to Morocco leaves the main road south of town and the (currently closed) border post is about 1.5km away through the gap in the mountains.

From here, it's another few hundred metres to the Moroccan side – from where it's a further few kilometres to Figuig. If the border reopens the whole crossing should take about half a day.

### BUS

There is no bus station here; all the buses just stop outside the Hôtel Afrique. You have to be lucky to get a seat at times.

### TRAIN

The train station is just near the shops in the centre of the town. There are currently no passenger trains stopping at Beni Ounif, although an option will become available when the new Oran–Béchar service opens in 2007/2008.

### BÉCHAR بشار

This is a modern, sprawling administrative town and capital of the Saoura region (as this corner of the Sahara is known). It has not much to recommend it, but you will probably find yourself stopping for a night here on the way through.

From Béchar, the road heads southwest for 100km before curving around the western corner of the Grand Erg Occidental. The N50 heads west from here for the 800km journey to Tindouf in the far west of the country. This route into Mauritania has been closed due to the war in the Western Sahara. Tindouf is the main base for the Polisario fighters, who are actively supported by Algeria. It is out of bounds to foreigners.

### Information

There's a Banque Nationale d'Algérie and a Banque de l'Agriculture et du Développement Rural here, and this is the last major town in which you can stock up on things for the route south. The **Air Algérie** (☎ 049 830060) office is on the Aïn Sefra side of place de la République on av de 05 Juillet. The central market has a fair selection of fruit, vegetables and meat. It's next to the mosque with the large minaret on av Colonel Lotfi.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Béchar Hostel** (☎ 049 810844; Cite Riadi; dm DA150) Signposted off the Taghit road. Looks fine from the outside but is run down and spartan with rather cramped dorms and the showers aren't the cleanest.

**Hotel Maghreb Arabe** (☎ 049 815535; 5 Hai Es-Salem; s & d DA2000, without shower DA1500; ☎) Opposite the new bus station on the Taghit road, this is a large three-story place with a good restaurant, air-con, spotless rooms and a very friendly patron who is happy to dole out advice about worthwhile sights in the region.

**Hotel Antar** (☎ 049 817161/63; antarhotel@egtouest.com; s/d from DA2100/2500, ste DA10,000; ☎) Signposted just off the main road 1km towards Beni Abbès, this place has air-con rooms looking out onto an interior garden but it feels soulless and neglected. The one up side is the spacious and deliciously kitsch suite, complete with 70s-style patterned sofas, a plastic tree, fake miniature stalactites descending from the ceiling and a scary-looking horse mural.

**L'Oscar Restaurant Familial** (☎ 040 851009; 151 av de 05 Juillet; mains DA700-1200) One of the most popular places in town, known for its fish specialities – it serves excellent grilled king prawns and paella, as well as French meat dishes such as *steak au poivre* (black pepper steak).

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

The airport is 7km north of town and local buses make the trip out there. There are weekly flights to Algiers (DA7200, 1½ hours) and Oran (DA4700, two hours).

#### BUS

The spanking new *gare routière* is about 1.5km north of town on the Taghit road, just after the turning to the airport. Timetables are displayed, and there's a restaurant, bank, newsstand, taxiphone shop and pharmacy. Most of the buses heading north travel in the late afternoon and evening because this is one of the hottest areas in the country.

The main destinations are Adrar (DA550, six hours), Algiers (DA1000, 11 hours), Beni Abbès (DA350, three hours), Taghit (DA150, one hour), Timimoun (DA550, six hours) and Tlemcen (DA600, 6½ hours).

### TRAIN

There were no passenger trains to Béchar at the time of writing.

### TAXI

There's a large *taxi brousse* (shared taxi) station in an area called Cité Kharassa at the southern end of town. Destinations include Algiers (DA1200, 10 hours), Oran (DA1000, eight hours) and Timimoun (DA700, five to six hours).

### TAGHIT تڠيت

Pronounced 'Ta-rit', this small oasis village 90km south of Béchar has some of the most spectacular scenery in the Grand Erg Occidental. The dunes tower over the eastern edge of the town, and the view as you come over the hill from the west, of the old *ksar* (fortified stronghold), tiny against this great theatrical backdrop, is magnificent.

The old mud-brick part of the village is dominated by the *ksar*, which is currently being restored – this section of the village is a real maze of winding lanes, and the red mud architecture is typical of this part of the Sahara.

### Orientation & Information

There is only one entrance to the town and as you arrive you'll see the town spread out before you on the hill against the dunes. On entering the town, continue straight ahead to reach the main square, the place des Martyrs. If arriving by bus you'll be deposited here. Around the square you'll find the post office and the Hôtel Taghit. The road to the left leads to the camp site and youth hostel as well as a few general stores and cheap cafés. There's a Naftal service station at the entrance to the town but Taghit has no bank.

### Sights & Activities

The 30-minute climb up the **dunes** to experience the jaw-dropping view is a must. The sand sea stretches out to the east, while the oasis, its river and palm groves are spread out before you to the west. Take a lead from the local kids and have a slide down a dune on a piece of tin or cardboard.

A walk among the winding streets, covered alleyways and cool houses of the **old ksar** is another highlight. Built around a central mosque, this ancient town was

constructed in around the 9th century from mud, stone and palm trunks.

If you've got a car, there are some **rock engravings** nearby, a 15-minute drive out of town. Take the road south out past the camp site and youth hostel and keep following the road past the *palmeraie*. The paved road ends abruptly in front of a rock face where you'll find some good examples of rock carvings – mostly antelope and cattle – in front of you. On the drive there, look to your right and you'll see the crumbling remains of 15th-century towns built into the hillside.

For visits to the local rock carvings, nights bivouacking on the dunes, camel treks and even skiing (yes, with proper skis!) on the dunes contact **Abdelkader Sahli** (☎ 040 853711/090 504352), self-titled 'director general' of the desert. Guides can also be arranged at the Hôtel Taghit.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Camping Taghit** (DA150) Close to the centre of town, on the road heading south, right up against the sand dunes. There are basic toilets and showers, a kitchen, and plans to construct some *zeribas* (palm huts).

**Youth hostel** (☎ 049 863131; dm DA100) Next to the camp site, the town's *auberge de jeunesse* is a simple place with four-bed dorms and a nice central courtyard, and all rooms have balconies with view of the dunes.

**Hôtel Taghit** (☎ 049 863183; taghit@egtouest.com; s/d DA1500/2000) You can't miss the Hôtel Taghit, as it's the only big building in the village. The outside looks like a palatial villa and the communal spaces, including a garden and a bright mosaic-tiled lobby, are lovely, but the rooms are a different story – with malfunctioning TVs, lumpy mattresses and run-down bathrooms. Unfortunately, it's the only hotel in town.

**Association du Vieux Ksar** (☎ 040 853683; brahimo20@hotmail.com; r from DA1900) For a different and very atmospheric experience you could rent a room in a house, or indeed a whole house in the old *ksar* – these are beautiful and simple traditional houses dating back as far as the 9th century. Facilities are basic, but sitting out on an ancient roof terrace watching the sunset over the dunes and communing with the ghosts of the past is an experience you won't forget in a hurry.

### Getting There & Away

There are two buses daily to Beni Abbès (DA250, two hours), two to Béchar (DA150, one hour) and one to Timimoun (DA450, four to five hours). There's not much traffic in either direction, although both roads are sealed. Buses leave from the place des Martyrs in the town centre.

### BENI ABBÈS بني عباس

Another beautiful oasis town, Beni Abbès is built on the edge of an escarpment, so it looks down on the *palmeraie* and the *oued*, and like Taghit it's framed with a chain of impossibly high dunes. It has a romantic air about it with faded crumbling white turret-topped buildings, streets lined with peeling white arches, and a vibrant green ribbon of palm groves below. There's not much in the way of formal attractions here, but there's a nice old *ksar* to wander around and an interesting museum. Beni Abbès was also the site where Charles de Foucauld (p189) chose to build his first hermitage, which still exists today.

### Orientation & Information

On entering the town across the *oued*, the track to the right just before the shops leads to the *palmeraie*, which has an ancient *ksar* and an excellent swimming pool.

To the left, the road leads to the little museum, the Musée Saharien, owned by the Centre National de Recherches Sahariennes.

The road straight ahead leads up the escarpment past a small row of shops, and then forks. Up to the right lies the market, several cheap, nondescript cafés, bus station, post office and defunct Hôtel Grand Erg, while to the left is the Hôtel Rym, a Banque d'Agriculture et du Développement Rural and the dunes.

### Sights

The track into the *palmeraie* leads past the old mud-brick *ksar* off to the right. This dates from the last century and is now gradually returning to the earth.

Beyond the *ksar* and beneath the stone water tower on the edge of the escarpment is a small swimming pool, known as **La Source**. It is a cool, green retreat from the blinding desert all around. A few trees and bougainvillea give shade to the pool, which

is filled by beautifully clear spring water and is in a paved enclosure.

The other obvious sight is the **dunes**. Take a scramble up them in the late afternoon when the light is at its best.

The **museum** is about 100m along the track to the left from the main road along the *oued*, and then up the first street on the right. It has an interesting selection of desert fauna and flora, and a display of traditional life in the region.

### Sleeping

There's a small palm-shaded camp site next to La Source, which was undergoing renovations at the time of writing.

**Hôtel Rym** (☎ 049 824203; rymhotel@egtouest.com; s/d from DA1700/2200; P ☎ 📞) This hotel sits at the foot of the dunes. It's a multilevelled behemoth, beautifully situated with many rooms looking out onto the dunes. At its peak it must have been splendid but sadly it's been very neglected and much of it is in a state of disrepair.

### Getting There & Away

The bus station is up by the market. There are twice-daily departures to Béchar (DA350, three hours), and buses leave once a day for Adrar (DA350, three hours) and Timimoun (DA400, three to four hours). All these buses pass through Beni Abbès en route from somewhere else, so seats are not guaranteed.

There is also a bus to Taghit every morning (DA250, two hours).

### ADRAR ادرار

Adrar is a major regional capital 120km south of the road which rings the Grand Erg Occidental. There isn't much of interest here, and the only reason you'd pass through would be on your way to the Malian border or In Salah. Its uniform brick-red colour is interesting though and its central square is notable too, if only for its gargantuan size. Because the square is so big, the midday sun here is blinding, and you need to follow the local example and retreat somewhere cooler. The town is virtually deserted in the afternoon.

On the way into the town from the north, keep an eye out for signs of the *fouggara* (underground water channels), identifiable above ground by the lines of small wells

on the surface. This system of channels, now superseded by more modern methods, once stretched for more than 2000km in this area.

### Orientation & Information

The centre of town is an absolutely enormous main square, the place des Martyrs – you could just about land a plane on it! Around it are the main buildings: the banks, post office, **Air Algérie** (☎ 049 969365) and the main hotel, the Hôtel Touat. Inside the hotel you'll find **AHNET Voyages** (☎ 049 964026; ahnetvoyages@hotmail.com) which organises tours in the region and beyond. The local tourist office seems to serve primarily as a craft shop and can't provide any useful information about Adrar or travel in the region. There's an internet café in the Maison de la Culture on the main square, and a hospital to the east of the square.

### Sights

Adrar doesn't hold a great deal for tourists, however it's worth wandering through the **place des Martyrs**, if only to appreciate its size and interesting architecture. The buildings that encircle it include an impressive mosque, and four large red mud archways, studded with wooden spikes, marking the main entrance points to the square.

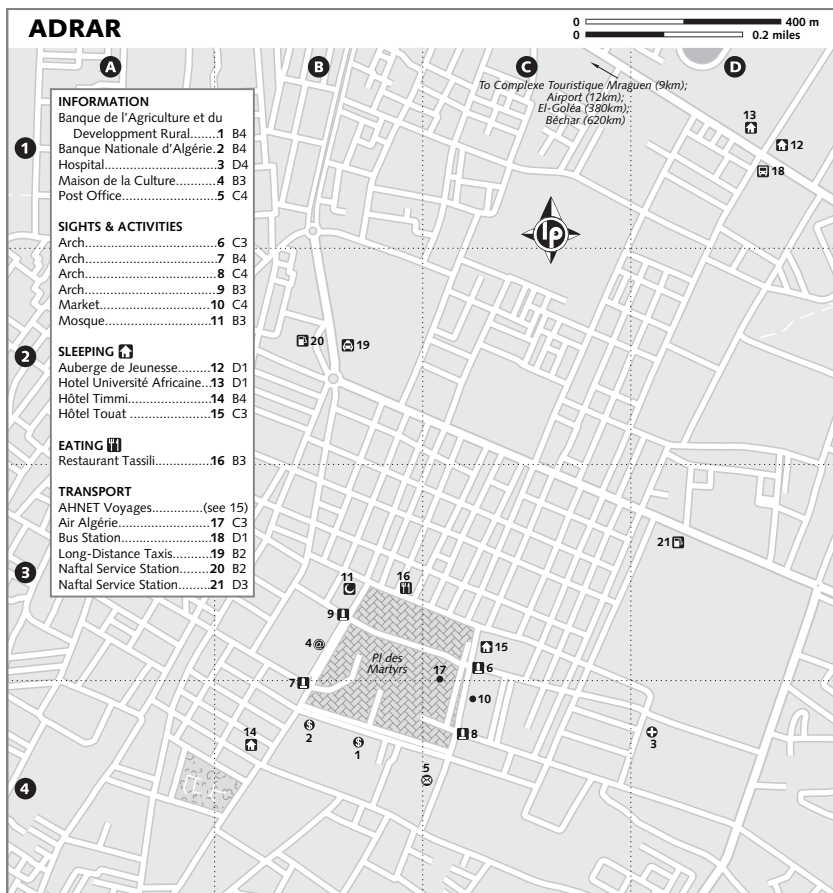
### Sleeping & Eating

**Auberge de Jeunesse** (☎ 049 964250; fax 969212; dm DA100) Well located just opposite the bus station, this hostel has a large garden, a friendly atmosphere and four-bed dorms opening out onto a central courtyard.

**Hôtel Timmi** (☎ 049 960617; s/d from DA410/700) One block from the main square these rooms are simple, clean and friendly but nothing to write home about. The reception is full of photos and maps of Adrar and its surrounds, and the staff can advise you on further travel. You can pay extra for TV and air-conditioning.

**Complexe Touristique Mraguen** (☎ 049 967 625/29; www.ctm-adrar.com; s/d from DA1500/2000; P ☎ 📞) Ten kilometres out of town on the road north of Adrar, this is a sprawling complex with bamboo-covered walkways, mini waterfall, a traditional area for music displays, a small 'zoo' with several gazelles and some sorry-looking chickens and turkeys, and rooms decorated with





bright traditional fabrics. Unfortunately the place is desolate – you can practically see the tumbleweed rolling down the empty corridors.

**Hôtel Université Africaine** (☎ 049 968825/31; fax 049 968894; s/d DA1800/2300; 📍) The newest hotel in Adrar has mosaic-tastic corridors and reception, and the large rooms come complete with fridge, TV and natty tiger-motif velour bedspreads. There's also enough parking for a monster truck convention.

**Hôtel Touat** (☎ 049 960425/969933; hoteltouat2002@yahoo.fr; place des Martyrs; s/d from DA2621/3234; 📍) Located on the place des Martyrs, this place has large, spotless rooms with an unfortunate choice of clashing décor and a good restaurant. The best (or worst, de-

pending on how you look at it) thing about this hotel is the large courtyard, which fills with hundreds of twittering, swooping birds at dawn and dusk.

**Restaurant Tassili** (place des Martyrs; ☎ 11am-8pm) One of several identikit restaurants in the town centre selling grills, stews and couscous. At least this place has the advantage of opening out onto the main square, making it a good place for coffee and people-watching.

### Getting There & Away

**AIR**  
The airport is 13km north of the town centre and a taxi is the only way to get out there.

Being a fairly important regional town, Adrar is well served by plane. There are four departures a week to Algiers (DA9700, three hours), two to Oran (DA8000, two hours 20 minutes) and one a week to Borj Mokhtar (DA9000, two hours) and Ouargla (DA6600, two hours).

### BUS

The bus station is about 1km north of the main square. The large depot is also the graveyard for quite a few broken-down Mercedes trucks and buses.

As all the departures originate here, it is possible (and advisable) to book tickets the day before you plan to leave. Main destinations include Béchar (DA550, six hours), Reggane (DA300, two hours), Ghardaïa (DA1000, 11 hours) and In Salah (DA600, six to seven hours).

If the bus to In Salah is not running, it is possible to get there by taking the daily bus to Reggane and changing there.

There is no direct bus to Borj Mokhtar, on the Malian border, and crossing the border here was inadvisable at the time of writing.

### TAXI

Shared taxis run regularly to Timimoun (DA400, two hours) from beneath the tree close to the Naftal service station near the truck park, 10 minutes' walk from the centre of town.

### TIMIMOUN تميمون

If you can stop at only one of the oases around the Grand Erg Occidental, make it Timimoun. It's an enchanting place, full of distinctive red mud buildings studded with wooden spikes, and surrounded by ancient villages. The residents are very friendly and it's one of the nicest places in the Sahara.

Perhaps the best thing about Timimoun is its location – the town is built on the edge of an escarpment, and there are fantastic views out over an ancient salt lake to the sand dunes in the distance; on a bright, moonlit night the effect is magical.

The population of the town and the surrounding area is a real mix: the Haratine (non-Negroid Blacks), the Zénète Berbers, the Chaamba Arabs (originally from the east) and the Black Africans (descendants of Malian slaves). The predominant language

of the region is Zénète, a Berber dialect similar to those of the Kabylie and the M'Zab.

### Orientation

The town is small and easily negotiated. There is one long main street, the av du 1er Novembre, around which banks, the tourist office and shops are located. If you arrive by bus or taxi you will be dropped off here. West of the av du 1er Novembre is the old *ksar*, the *palmerie* and the dunes.

### Information

#### MONEY

There is a branch of the Banque Nationale d'Algérie opposite the post office and a Banque de Développement Local about halfway along the main street.

#### POST

The post office is close to the roundabout, on the road that connects the main street with the main road from Adrar to El-Goléa.

#### TRAVEL AGENCIES

The tourist office is in the municipality building, near the roundabout on the main street. It can organise guides from DA1000 per day. It also has a small exhibition room and may be able to provide a map of the Sebka Circuit.

**Agence Mer de Sable** (☎ 049 902595; www.agence-merdesable.com) is owned by the same people that run the camp site (see p170) and arranges tours in Timimoun and beyond.

### Sights & Activities

The town lends itself well to photography; just walking up and down the main street you'll see plenty of possibilities, with the red buildings and the *koubba* (domed tomb) in the middle of the road, and wandering round the main avenue you catch glimpses of the salt lake and dunes though the gaps in between the buildings.

The **Hôtel de l'Oasis Rouge** (av du 1er Novembre; admission free; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-7pm, closed Friday), originally constructed by colonial missionaries in the early 1900s, is a fine old building and it is worth a wander around inside to see the arched hallways, the courtyard and the walls, which are decorated with traditional designs. It also contains a one-room museum with a small collection of local fabrics,

paintings, pottery and basket weaving, most of which is for sale. Another fine example of Timimoun's architecture is the ornate **Porte du Soudan**, also constructed during colonial times and oriented towards the south.

A stroll round the daily **market** is also a good way to pass the time if only for the intoxicating smell of wonderfully fresh herbs and spices.

Down towards the **palmeraie**, along the road to the camp site, the old section of town is a maze of dusty alleys and ochre houses. The *palmeraie* itself is cool and shady, and the individual plots are divided by mud-brick walls. Enter by the road which leads from the main roundabout down past the high school to the camp site and Hôtel Gourara.

### SEBKHA CIRCUIT

If you have access to a vehicle, the Circuit de Sebkhah, also known as the Gourara Circuit, is an absolute must. This is a 75km loop to the north of Timimoun, skimming the flat red salt lake and taking in some mighty fine scenery; you'll see clusters of little oasis villages and ruined *ksar* clinging to rock faces. Highlights of this circuit include the deep red caves where the locals still come for siestas during the blinding heat of summer, the old ruined town of **Tindjilet** balanced on the edge of an escarpment, and **Tasfaoud**, a small oasis with a 13th-century castle.

### Festivals & Events

#### S'BOU DE TIMIMOUN

For seven days and seven nights the residents of the Gourara region hold celebrations marking the birth of the prophet Mohammed. The S'bou Festival marks the seventh day of the celebrations. During this time the inhabitants of the Gourara region as well as thousands of worshippers from around the country descend on Timimoun. During the day the streets are deserted but at night they're full to the brim as people come to spend the night in prayer.

Its origins lie five centuries ago when Sidi el-Hadj Belkacem, a local marabout (holy man), had a dream in which the Prophet asked him to celebrate his date of birth in a fitting manner. The pinnacle of this festival occurs when the flags of the different brotherhoods of the Gourara are unfurled near Sidi el-Hadj Belhadj's tomb.

### Sleeping

#### BUDGET

**Camping la Palmeraie** (☎ 049 900956, 074 239617; DA250 per person; (P)) Centrally located next to the Hôtel Gourara with clean ablutions, hot water, a dining hut and a kitchen. The owner can organise camel rides, hiking, traditional folk evenings and the like.

**Youth hostel** (☎ /fax 049 902581; dm DA100) Ten minutes' walk north of town along av du 1er Novembre this hostel has spartan four- to six-bed dorms, a café, a lounge with table football, and terrace with fine views over the dunes on which one can sleep in fine weather. The bathrooms could be cleaner though.

**Hotel Moulay el-Houcine** (☎ 049 902083; fax 900897; s/d from DA600/1000) Just off the main road, opposite the Hôtel de l'Oasis Rouge, this place has pretty dull rooms but makes up for it with the warm welcome and the great big roof terrace with views over the town centre and the market.

#### MIDRANGE

**Hôtel Gourara** (☎ 049 902627; gourarahotel@etouest.com; s/d from DA1000/1500) Built by Fernand Pouillon in the 1950s the Gourara is slightly dilapidated these days, but what it lacks in up-to-date comforts in makes up for in romantic atmosphere. Slap bang on the edge of the escarpment, many of the rooms have dramatic views over the salt lake and dunes (be sure to ask) and the wide semicircular terrace is a great place to nurse a cold drink and watch the sun go down.

**Camping Roses de Sable** (☎ 049 902595; www.agence-merdesable.com; huts per person DA2500, r with/without bathroom per person DA3000/2800; ☎ closed May-Oct) This is a lovely place set in a large garden where you can sleep in a *zeriba* under the shade of a palm tree or in a room (each one named after an oasis in the region) in the pretty bungalow at the back. Delicious meals are served up daily by the wife and daughters of the owner (prices quoted here include full board), and there's a fantastic multi-levelled terrace with awesome 360-degree views of the surrounding landscape. Even better is the location; walk out of the front gate and it's all there on your doorstep – a long stretch of red sand meets a veritable ocean of dunes as far as the eye can see. To get here follow the road signposted by the entrance to Hôtel Gourara; it's about 2.5km

(not 1.5km as the sign claims!). Alternatively it's a 30-minute walk along a footpath which leads from av du 1er Novembre (near the mosque) to the back of the camp site. Be sure to reserve in advance.

### Eating

There are a few cafés and restaurants along the main road. You could try Restaurant E Rahma, opposite the Hôtel de l'Oasis Rouge, for rotisserie chicken and chips, as well as local specialities. Restaurant Djudjura, also on the main road, has plenty of outside tables from which to soak up the atmosphere of the streets.

### Shopping

As well as the market, there are a few tourist shops along the main street and both the tourist office and the Hôtel de l'Oasis Rouge have items for sale. Be sure to look out for *roses de sable*, which you'll see here. They're natural rock sculptures in the shape of roses, exactly as found in the sand.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

The **Air Algérie** (☎ 049 904555) office is on the main square. The airport is 8km to the southeast of town and a taxi costs DA50 per person. There are flights to Algiers and Oran.

#### BUS

Buses leave from the main street, almost opposite the mosque. It is possible to book in advance on only some of the services, as most are just passing through and don't originate in Timimoun.

There are daily services from Timimoun to Adrar (DA250, two hours), Béchar (DA550, six hours) and Ghardaïa (DA970, 10 hours).

#### TAXI

*Taxis brousse* leave from just next to the bus station. The main destination is Adrar (DA400, two hours).

### EL-GOLÉA القليعة

The most easterly oasis of the Grand Erg Occidental, El-Goléa is also one of the biggest and a major stop on the route south.

The oasis itself is very lush and, apart from palms, supports a large variety of fruit trees,

including plum, peach, apricot, cherry, orange and fig. The market here has the last decent produce on the southward route, so stock up.

### Orientation & Information

The road in from Timimoun will lead you to the main square – known as place Centre Ville – which contains a bank, post office, local taxi and bus stops and several cafés. South of the square is the town's main market behind which you'll find Place Mohammed V where long-distance buses and taxis pull up. There's an **internet café** (per hr DA80; ☎ 10am-noon & 4-8pm, closed Friday) on av 1er Novembre off place Centre Ville.

### Sights & Activities

The town is dominated by the old **ksar**, El-Menia, built on a rocky knoll in the east of town. It was built by Zénète Berbers in the 10th century and is now being restored. It's well worth the scramble up the hill to soak up its atmosphere and get grand views of the town and surrounding oasis.

The other sight worth seeing is the remote **Eglise Saint-Joseph**, some 3km north of El-Goléa; a dreamy looking cream and white church, set among sand and waving palms, next to which you'll find the tomb of Charles de Foucauld where his body was buried in 1929 (see the boxed text, p189, for further details).

Back towards the town centre, the well-maintained **Musée Communale** (☎ 029 913122/076 383125; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-6pm) opposite the Hotel el-Boustane is dedicated to the palaeontology and geology of the region, and has an interesting collection of fossils and ancient pottery and stone tools, as well as written information on prehistory and mineralogy.

### Sleeping

**Hôtel Vieux Ksar** (☎ 029 814310; s/d without bathroom from DA500/800; (P)) On the road south of El-Goléa, 30 minutes' walk from the centre of town, this place has quiet well-kept rooms off a network of bright corridors and a nice garden at the back – all green trellises and fruit trees. Good food can be prepared with advance notice. This is an excellent-value place – only the location is against it.

**Auberge Caravanserail** (B&B per person from DA1200, camping DA500; (P)) This hotel was in the last

stages of renovation at the time of writing but was shaping up to be a great little place. Rooms are housed in a cool white building located just off the **place Centre Ville** and there's space for camping, a big shady garden bursting with palms and fruit trees, and an outdoor fireplace around which to congregate on chilly nights. Reserve in advance through M'Zab Tours (p156) in Ghardaïa.

**Hôtel El-Boustan** (☎ 029 816050; fax 816402; d from DA1800; P ♻) East of the centre of town on the road to the *ksar*, the state-run El-Boustan is El-Goléa's main hotel but certainly not the nicest. Like so many other state-run hotels, it has bog-standard rooms that are rather overpriced and a complete lack of atmosphere.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

**Air Algérie** (☎ 029 816100) has an office in the centre of town between place Mohammed V and place Centre Ville. The airport is 3km to the west of town and there are weekly flights to Algiers.

#### BUS

The bus station is nothing more than an office right in the centre of town on place Mohammed V. There are daily departures for Adrar (DA550, five hours), Ghardaïa (DA400, three hours), In Salah (DA750, eight hours) and Timimoun (DA500, four hours).

#### TAXI

The long-distance taxis leave from an area just a few minutes' walk to the southwest of the centre. The main destination is Ghardaïa, but they also run to Timimoun.

## GRAND ERG ORIENTAL

### العرق الشرقي الكبير

The Grand Erg Oriental is much larger than its western counterpart, and shares its mass of rolling dunes with neighbouring Tunisia. The main draw of this region is the town of El-Oued, an oasis close to its northern edge. Its domed-roofed splendour is at the heart of the Souf region – a series of oases dotted throughout a small triangular area and one of the hottest regions of the Sa-

hara. The people of the Souf region have an ingenious way of growing dates and other fruits in the desert, digging pits deep in the sand and planting date palms and other fruit trees at the bottom from where their roots can reach the subterranean water. It is not uncommon to see just the tip of a palm tree sticking out of the top of one of these pits. Many of the women of this region sport garments similar to those you see in Ghardaïa – a single robe that covers everything except for one eye.

Touggourt is another oasis town, right on the western edge of the erg, south of El-Oued. The road that connects the two towns passes through some magnificent sand-dune country where it's a constant struggle to prevent the dunes from swallowing the road.

Further south again is the centre of Algeria's oil industry, the source of most of Algeria's export income. The beating heart of this area is Hassi Messaoud, although Ouar-gla on the edge of the erg is as close as most people need to go, unless they are heading for the Route du Tassili and Djanet.

### EL-OUED الواد

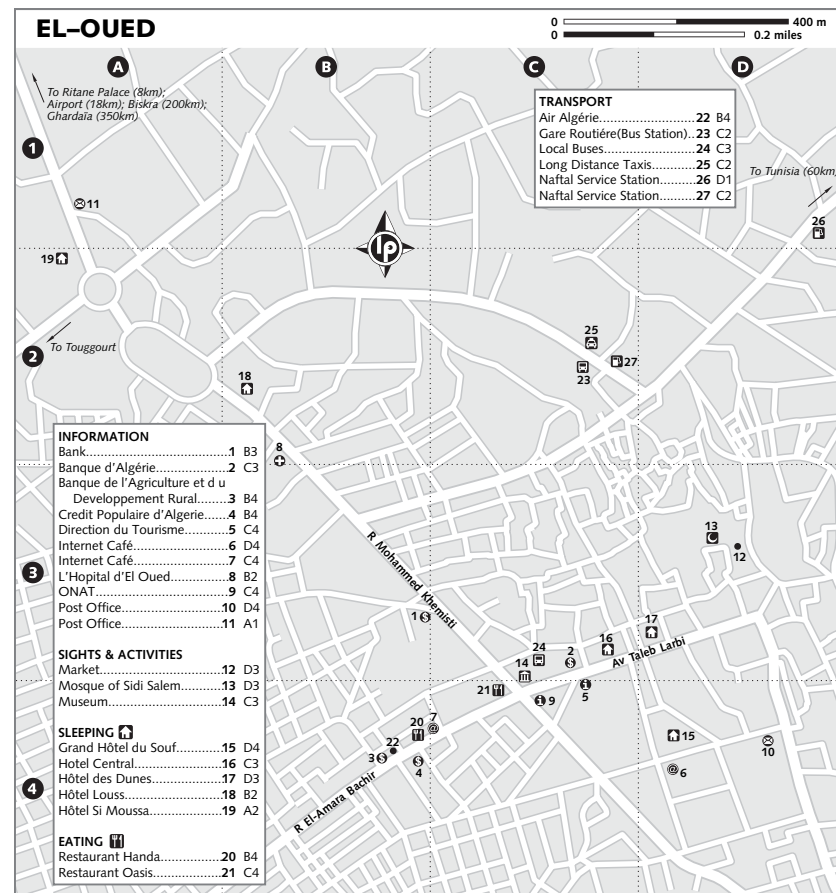
El-Oued has been dubbed 'the town of a thousand domes' and it doesn't take long to work out why: the great majority of buildings come crowned with vaults and domes, initially conceived as a way of dealing with the intense summer heat. Temperatures have been known to rise as high as 50°C here and can reach 45°C for days on end. From the correct vantage point, the view out over the shimmering curved roofs to the encroaching sands beyond can be dazzling. El-Oued is also one of the busiest towns of the region and its streets are dirty, chaotic and full of life, especially around the large market where donkey carts vie for space on the streets with cars and pedestrians.

The town is also famous for its carpets, many of which bear the brown Cross of the Souf motif on a white background and you can find these on sale all over the country.

#### Information

##### INTERNET ACCESS

There's an **internet café** (per hr DA100; ☎ 8am-1am;) opposite the Hotel du Souf. There's more



**internet access** (per hr DA70; ☎ 7am-5pm) next to the Restaurant Oasis but the connection is not as fast.

#### MEDICAL SERVICES

**L'Hôpital d'El Oued** (☎ 032 218891/8041) On rue Mohammed Khemisti near the town's main roundabout.

#### MONEY

On av Taleb Larbi there's a **Banque d'Algérie** (☎ 9am-2pm, closed Fri & Sat) which changes travellers cheques, gives cash advances on Visa cards and can change Tunisian money. There's also a Crédit Populaire Algérie and a Banque d'Agriculture et du Développement Rural on rue El-Amara Bachir. It is also possible to change money at the Hôtel

du Souf, and there is a bank at the Tunisian border, although it is not always open.

#### POST & TELEPHONE

The post office is just down the road from the Hotel de Souf and it has an ATM and phone booths.

#### TOURIST INFORMATION

The tourist office is in the Direction du Tourisme on av Taleb Larbi near the corner of rue Mohammed Khemisti, and has information on local sights as well as a map of El-Oued. There's an ONAT office on the same road but it serves mostly as a booking agent for flights to other North African countries and can't offer useful advice on El-Oued.

## Sights

The daily **market** in the old part of the town is a colourful and animated affair. It is at its busiest on Friday. Most stalls sell food and everyday items, but a few cater to the tourist trade.

In the centre of the market is the **Mosque of Sidi Salem**. You can climb to the top of the minaret here for a view over the town's domed rooftops and the desert beyond, although the effect is marred somewhat by the number of satellite dishes and construction sites. Just ask for the caretaker and he'll let you in to walk up to the top. Similar views are also to be had from the roof of the Hôtel du Souf.

The **museum** (☎ 8.30am-noon & 3-6pm, closed Thu & Fri) opposite the tourist offices consists of just one room. However, it has some good displays, including old aerial photos of the area, a collection of the various insects and animals of the region, and some good *roses de sable* and other geological curiosities. There are also a couple of traditional rugs, and a pair of special wool-and-camel-hair soles which are used to walk on the burning hot sand. The whole thing is a bit dusty and moth-eaten but is worth a quick look.

## Sleeping

The range of accommodation is not great in El-Oued, and while there's a fair amount in the midrange section, there is little for the budget traveller. What little budget accommodation there is tends to be below par.

## BUDGET

**Hôtel des Dunes** (☎ 032 246795; av Taleb Larbi; s/d DA250/500) The most central lodgings in El-Oued are housed in a traditional domed building on av Taleb Larbi. It has basic rooms with bars on the windows and the facilities only include toilets, so you'll have to go to the public showers behind.

**Hotel Central** (av Taleb Larbi; s & d DA600) Next door to the Hôtel des Dunes this is also a seriously budget place. It has very basic doubles with balcony, sink and fan and like the Hôtel des Dunes, there are toilets but no bathrooms so you'll have to use one of the many public showers in the vicinity.

**Hôtel Si Moussa** (☎ 032 272838; rue Mohammed Khemisti; d DA800; P ☎) It's on rue Mohammed Khemisti near the fancy roundabout, complete with pavilion, at the intersection with

the Touggourt road. It is a 15-minute walk from the town centre but is a little closer than some other hotels to the bus station for early-morning departures, and there are also shuttles from town. Hôtel Si Moussa has clean and basic rooms with shower, and it's also possible to sleep on the roof here.

## MIDRANGE

**Hôtel Louss** (☎ 032 210079/99; fax 218755; s/d DA1500/2000; P ☎) 'Nothing special' is the best way to describe this hotel. The rooms, service and international restaurant are acceptable.

**Grand Hôtel du Souf** (☎ 032 247320; s/d/ste from DA1500/2000/4700; P ☎) This is the nicest place to stay in El-Oued. The entrance is impressive – full of arched hallways and domed ceilings covered in green-and-white mosaic. The rooms are pretty nondescript but there are some swish suites that come with padded faux leather doors, huge bathrooms and domed ceilings done out in the prerequisite mosaic. The hotel comes complete with its own tower; and the views from the top match those from the town's minaret. At time of writing a traditional tented area for taking tea and traditional meals was being constructed.

**Ritane Palace** (☎ 032 201539/201885; Daira d'El-Oued; s/d DA2553/2957) Ten kilometres from the city centre, it's only worth staying here if you want to be near the airport. It's a large hotel that wants to be the ritziest in the area (and certainly charges as if it were) and it does try hard – it has very attentive staff and plusher-than-average rooms, and the communal areas are embellished with bold displays of art – yet, because of its isolation, it lacks customers.

## Eating

Food is expensive in El-Oued and there isn't a great deal to choose from. For something other than the usual couscous or chicken and chips you'll have to try one of the hotel restaurants, all of which have more varied menus with European as well as Algerian specialities and rather more upmarket surrounding.

**Restaurant Oasis** (rue El-Amara Bachir; ☎ 11am-9pm) This is a good choice although it has pretty bland surroundings it has a good selection of grills and stews.

**Restaurant Handa** (rue El-Amara Bachir; ☎ 10am-9pm) Some 100m further west on the same

road as Restaurant Oasis, Handa is very similar.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The **Air Algérie** (☎ 032 248686; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-2.30pm Fri-Wed, 8am-noon Thu) office is on rue El-Amara Bachir in the centre of town. The airport is at Guemar, 19km to the north, and can be reached by local bus. There are three flights a week to Algiers (DA4800, one hour 20 minutes).

### BUS

The main bus station is about 1.5km north of the town centre – a 20-minute walk; or there are local minibuses which take you to or from the centre of town.

There are departures to Algiers (DA950, 10 hours), Annaba (DA520, six hours), Constantine (DA470, five hours), Ghardaïa (DA520, six hours) and Ouargla (DA300, three hours).

### TAXI

Yellow long-distance taxis leave when full from opposite the main bus station to Touggourt (DA400, 1½ hours), Ouargla (DA600, three hours) and towns in the Souf area.

## Getting Around

Local bus and taxi services for the town and surrounding villages leave from next to the museum. Short journeys cost DA15.

## TOUGGOURT توفرت

A totally unremarkable oasis town, Touggourt is perhaps most famous as the starting point of the first motorised crossing of the Sahara. The Citroën half-track vehicles of the Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil expedition set off from here in 1922 for Timbuktu via Tamanrasset. The event is marked by a simple pillar in the town square. The town was also once a key stop on the trans-Saharan trading route, and the seat of a dynasty of kings called the Ouled Djellab.

Today the town is a regional administrative centre. There are a couple of banks, a post office and an Air Algérie office. If you have a day to spare you could do worse than spend it here, but don't lose any sleep if you miss it.

Shared taxis also travel to the Tunisian border (DA400, 1½ hours) when full. There's a

4km walk between the two border posts but some people find a car to take them.

## Orientation

From the main square, the road to the right curves past the cinema to the marketplace, taxi and bus station. The road straight ahead leads past the old hotel on the left to the Hôtel Oasis and Temacine.

## Information

There's a Banque Nationale d'Algérie and a Banque d'Agriculture et du Développement Rural in the town centre. There's an internet café in the town centre opposite the Banque d'Agriculture et du Développement Rural building.

## Sights

There's a large **palmerie** outside town and a couple of old, vaguely interesting **mud-brick villages** to the south.

Market day is Friday; in winter especially, the town is full of itinerant merchants who have come for the market. The marketplace is just off the road to El-Oued, near the taxi station.

## Sleeping

Touggourt is seriously lacking in good accommodation options. At the time of writing a new tourist-class hotel was under construction next to the bus station. It will be called the Hôtel el-Nakhil.

## BUDGET

**Hôtel Essaada** (☎ 029 674545; s/d/tr/q DA300/500/600/800) This place overlooks the market and has very basic rooms and shared facilities. There's a *hammam* (bathhouse) underneath that's open from 7am to 9pm.

**Hôtel de la Paix** (s/d/t/q DA700/900/1400/1800) Between the market and the main street this is a simple little place with average rooms and shared bathrooms. It's rather dark and noisy though and we got a frosty reception. The only advantage is its central location.

## MIDRANGE

**Hôtel Oasis** (☎ 029 681050/5050; fax 029 682645; s/d DA1500/1950) Located about 500m south of the town centre this is without a doubt the best place to stay in town. It has good rooms, the usual mosaic hallways and a

palm-surrounded pool. In the lobby is a useful (although rather old) sketch map of Touggourt as well as some information on stuff to do in the vicinity.

### Eating

There are a few very basic restaurants between the taxi station and the market as well as around the main square, but we didn't find anything great here.

### Getting There & Away

#### BUS

There's a bus station right on the western edge of town, on the route to Biskra, and one in the centre of town next to the large main market place. Both have buses to long-distance destinations.

Daily bus services include Algiers (DA950, 10 hours), Biskra (DA350, three hours), Constantine (DA480, five hours), El-Oued (DA200, two hours) and Hassi Messaoud (DA300, three hours).

#### SHARED TAXI

The shared-taxi station is next to the marketplace just off the main El-Oued road, five minutes' walk from the town centre.

There are departures for Biskra (DA500, three hours), El-Oued (DA300, 1½ hours) and Ouargla (DA650, four hours), but very little happens after about 1pm.

#### TRAIN

The train station is close to the centre of town but is currently only served by goods trains.

### Getting Around

Local buses for Tamelhat and Temacine leave from a stop just outside the main bus station, next to the market.

### AROUND TOUGGOURT

#### Temacine تَمَاسِين

On the edge of the *palmeraie* about 10km from Touggourt is Temacine. At its centre are the remains of a traditional mud-brick village built around a ksar at the top of a small hill. Rains destroyed the village in the early 1990s, and its inhabitants had to move to the new housing which now surrounds the village. Even though the houses are no longer intact, it's still nice to wander round and the ruins exude a romantic air.

The mosque and minaret partly survived and have now been rebuilt.

If you can find the caretaker, it's possible to climb up to the top of the minaret for a view over the ruined village, the nearby salt lake and the *palmeraie*. Next to Temacine is the 'sea', a small salt lake, which holds little interest itself, but has some good ruins – those of **Boha Mar**, a thousand-year-old village, and the **mausoleum** which stands next to it. Coming from Touggourt, take the Ouargla road past the Hôtel Oasis. After about 10km you'll find Temacine on your right.

#### Tamelhat تاملحات

A couple of kilometres further on is Tamelhat, which was also destroyed by the rains in the early 1990s. There are large open spaces where buildings have collapsed completely and now the town is made up mostly of new buildings.

In the centre of the town is the mosque and mausoleum of **Sidi el-Hadj Ali**; the cupola above the mausoleum is decorated with colourful tiles and stucco.

### Getting There & Away

There are local buses from the main bus station in the centre of Touggourt and these will drop you directly in the centre of Temacine or Tamelhat.

### OUARGLA ورقلة

The town of Ouargla has slightly more to offer than Touggourt. It has a better range of accommodation, an interesting museum and a nice old town. It's not worth making a special trip here, but if you're passing through it's not a bad place to spend a day. The town's origins lie in the 10th century at Sedrata, about 15km south of Ouargla's present-day location. Sedrata was once a capital for the Ibadis before the city was razed in 1072 and they were forced to flee further south to the M'Zab Valley (see p160).

#### Orientation

The town's main street is rue 1 Novembre where you'll find the main banks, restaurants and hotels. Another good reference point is *quatre chemins*, the crossroads at rue 1 Novembre and the rte de Rouissat, which many locals will use when giving directions.

### Information

There are several banks and an **Air Algérie** (☎ 029 761195) office along rue de 1 Novembre and there's a post office opposite the casbah. To use the internet try the youth hostel on rue 1 Novembre.

### Sights & Activities

A few hundred metres south of *quatre chemins* you'll find the old **casbah**. There's nothing of particular significance here but it's nice to wander the narrow, sandy streets with their pretty beige- and rose-coloured buildings. There's also a mosque and circular central market place selling fruit and vegetables as well as deliciously fragrant baskets of fresh herbs.

In between the *quatre chemins* and the casbah is the **Musée du Sahara** (🕒 9am-noon & 2-4pm Sun-Wed), which has interesting information on the geology and plant and animal life of the Sahara and has some prehistoric artefacts and stuffed animals on display.

### Sleeping

#### BUDGET

**Youth hostel** (☎ 029 713301; rue 1 Novembre; dm DA100; 📺) Located on the Ghardaïa road about 300m from *quatre chemins*, this is a good clean hostel, one of the nicest in the south, and has a cafeteria, internet café and clean bathrooms.

#### MIDRANGE

**Hotel El-Boustane** (☎ /fax 029 713591; rte de Rouissat; s/d/apt from DA900/1200/2600; 📺) About 700m past the Hotel El-Anssar also on the right, this place is a multicoloured explosion; the lobby, with its swirly patterned sofas, clashing carpets and giant fish tank, leads to an orange-floored hallway off which there are smallish rooms with thick maroon carpeting and faux-wood-panelled walls.

**Hotel le Tassili** (☎ 029 763004; fax 761361; Quartier Résidentiel d'Ifri; s/d DA2450/3300; 📺) Look for the blue neon signs opposite the Mosque de Ifri just east of the town centre. This is an old hotel dating from the colonial era. It has good rooms with fridges and big mirrors and there's a large, fully equipped suite in a grass hut at the bottom of the garden. There are some nice areas to hang out too – there's a lively terrace where the locals come for a cold drink in the evening; a romantic fabric-

swathed, tented area for drinking mint tea, and a cosy lobby with cave-painting reproductions on the walls and a nook with comfy sofas and a big fireplace for chilly winter nights. The car park has a hole-in-the-wall bottle shop and alcohol is served in the bar.

**Grand Hotel Touristique el-Anssar** (☎ 029 763 745; s/d DA1500/2600; rte de Rouissat; 📺) Rooms here are large with balconies but feel rather dark; thankfully they are enlivened by such delights as giant glossy waterfall posters and plastic flowers. There's a restaurant, *salon de thé* (tea room) and parking. It's about 200m north of *quatre chemins* on the right-hand side.

#### TOP END

**Hotel Lynatel** (☎ 029 714242; lynatel@hotmail.com; rue 1 Novembre; s/d from 3400/3800; 📺) On rue 1 Novembre between *quatre chemins* and the SNTV bus station. This is a sparklingly clean place and the swishest digs in Ouargla. The large rooms have high ceilings, plenty of light and seriously comfortable beds. Suites are equipped with computers which will soon be connected to high-speed internet. There's a massive roof terrace with views over town where parties are held in good weather, and there's even a resident pastry chef to knock up goodies for breakfast.

### Eating

You'll find plenty of basic restaurants serving chicken and chips along the rue 1 Novembre. Other than those your best bet is the hotels. The excellent **Hotel Lynatel restaurant** (🕒 noon-2.30pm & 7-11pm) serves top-quality North African and European food and scrummy desserts. There's a **salon de thé** at the Hotel El-Anssar, where you can get a nice variety of herbal teas, good coffee and fresh pastries; and the Hotel le Tassili restaurant specialises in French cuisine.

### Getting There & Away

#### BUS

The bus station is at the eastern end of town on the Ghardaïa road, about 1.5km from the town centre, and is where the private bus companies are based. There are buses to Algiers (DA920, 12 hours), Constantine (DA620), Illizi (DA950), the Libyan border (DA1450, 14 hours) and Oran (DA1000, 14 hours).

The SNTV (state-run) buses operate out of an office across the street from the main bus station. Destinations include Ghardaïa (DA200, two hours), Algiers (DA800, 12 hours), Oran (DA915, 14 hours) and In Amenas (DA1300, 12 hours).

#### TAXI

Long-distance taxis wait 400m east of the bus station on the Ghardaïa road. They go to Ghardaïa (DA500, two hours), El-Oued (DA600, three hours) and other places.

There are five taxi services a week to Algiers (DA5500, one hour 20 minutes), two to Oran (DA6600, two to five hours), and weekly services to In Amenas (DA5500, 1½ hours), Adrar (DA6500, two hours), Djanet (DA8600, 1½ hours), Illizi (DA6000, one hour) and Tamanrasset (DA9200, four hours).

The airport is on the Touggourt road about 8km out of town on the right.

#### HASSI MESSAOUD حسي مسعود

Situated 85km southeast of Ouargla, this is solely a service town for surrounding oil

operations – there are about 800 oil wells within a 25km radius of the town. There is absolutely nothing of interest, but you will find yourself coming through on the way south on the Route du Tassili N'Ajjer. Driving in the region at night, you're sure to notice a strange orange glow in the night sky – these are the burn-off flames from the oil refineries which can be seen from many kilometres away.

#### Sleeping

The only decent accommodation in town is 3km from the centre at the northern end of town, and it's expensive at DA2000 for a single.

#### Getting There & Away

There are regular buses between here and Ouargla, and a daily service to In Amenas, although you'll need luck to get a seat on it as it comes from Ouargla and is likely to be full.

There are 10 flights a week to Algiers (DA6000, one hour) as well as direct international flights to Paris and London.