

Getting Started



West Africa is a great destination to plan, with a wealth of resources to track down – books that capture the region's unmistakable whiff of the exotic (opposite), excellent movies that get little airtime elsewhere (p21) and a host of unique festivals that can act as your route planner to the region (p21). The region's world-renowned music (p58) is also worth tracking down to provide a soundtrack for your visit.

On the practical side, West Africa can be a challenging destination so think carefully about what sort of trip best suits you.

Most travellers use buses, bush taxis and trains. This mode of transport is a lot slower than with a private vehicle, and you probably won't reach as many places, but it's cheap and a great way to experience local life.

That said, if you've never travelled in Africa before you may want to take an organised tour (p840). Although more expensive than travelling solo, a tour takes the hassle out of organising everything from transport to hotels. Another benefit is travelling with a guide whose local knowledge can offer countless invaluable insights.

For a range of possible itineraries to whet your appetite, see p23.

WHEN TO GO

It's best to visit West Africa in the drier and generally cooler period from November to February. Any time up to April (in southern coastal countries) or May (in Sahel countries) is also dry; from then on it gets progressively hotter and more humid. From January to May, the dusty harmattan winds of the Sahel can reduce visibility and cause respiratory complaints.

Hotels along the coasts of Senegal and The Gambia are packed with European sunbathers on package tours from December to March. The Dogon Country, Timbuktu and Djenné in Mali are very crowded at this time, especially in December and January.

The rainy season is from May/June to September/October and is not ideal for travel. The wettest areas are Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia, where annual rainfall often tops 4000mm. In the Sahel countries, rain falls for a few hours per day, keeping temperatures down and the skies clear of dust. In all areas, rainy periods get shorter and levels decrease as you move further north and away from the ocean. Most people find dry heat, such as that found in the Sahel, easier to handle than the humidity of the coast.

Avoiding the rainy season is about more than not getting your feet wet. Although many major roads in the region are tar, the overwhelming majority of minor roads are dirt and can become impassable after heavy rains. Many wildlife reserves are also closed from June to November. For specific details, see the climate charts in the country chapters.

Regional festivals (see the Directory in all individual country chapters and p21) can be a highlight of travel in the region, and it's worth considering timing your trip to coincide with some of the major ones. In the Sahel countries especially, note when Ramadan and major Islamic holidays will take place (see p818).

COSTS & MONEY

Travel in West Africa doesn't come as cheap as you might expect, with prices generally around 50% and up to 75% of what you pay in developed countries. Mali and Senegal are particularly expensive. Exceptions to the generally high prices include local food, beer and transport.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- sealable plastic bags – to protect your belongings from moisture and dust
- the requisite vaccinations (p853) and proof of yellow fever vaccination (most countries won't let you in without it)
- travel insurance (p819) – accidents do happen
- waterproof jacket – essential during the rains
- one smart set of clothes – advisable for visa applications, crossing borders or if you're invited to somebody's house
- basic medical kit (see p853)
- mosquito net and repellent – free-standing nets are heavier than regular ones, but often more practical
- light sleeping bag (for cold desert nights) or a sleeping sheet (for less-than-clean hotels)
- sunglasses, hat and sunscreen (as essential in the Sahara as on the beach)
- torch (flashlight) and spare batteries
- sturdy water bottle, water purifier and filter
- universal washbasin plug and length of cord for drying clothes
- sanitary towels or tampons
- condoms
- an emergency stash of toilet paper
- photocopies of your important documents (and leave a copy somewhere safe back home)
- English-language books – they're very rarely available in West Africa
- a small (size-three) football – a great way to meet local kids and their families
- contact-lens-cleaning-and-soaking solutions and a pair of prescription glasses as a back-up
- patience – most bush taxis do leave eventually

In addition to accommodation, food and transport, you should also factor in things such as visa fees, national park admission charges and the cost of hiring local guides.

If you're staying in the most basic accommodation (from US\$5 a night), eating only local food (as little as US\$2 a day), getting around on local transport (around US\$2 per 100km), take no tours and buy few souvenirs you can count on spending US\$10 to US\$15 per day.

Those looking for a little more comfort (midrange hotels can range from US\$15 to US\$70 per night) and preferring to eat in reasonable restaurants (from US\$2 to US\$10 for a sit-down meal) could get by on US\$30, but US\$55 is a more reasonable budget.

At the upper end, the sky's the limit – top-end hotels start at around US\$80 and can be three times that, organised tours are scarcely cheaper than taking a tour in Europe and car rental averages about US\$100 per day and sometimes more, plus petrol.

For advice on local accommodation costs, see the Accommodation section in the Directory for each individual country.

READING UP

Books

The Gates of Africa: Death, Discovery & the Search for Timbuktu, by Anthony Sattin, is a beautifully written text about the time when Africa drew an eclectic range of travellers, from fortune-seekers to serious explorers.

The Lost Kingdoms of Africa, by Jeffrey Taylor, is a highly readable account of a modern journey through the Sahel; it was published in the US as *Angry Wind*.

The Shadow of the Sun, by Ryszard Kapuściński, is a masterpiece by one of Africa's most insightful observers who always places Africans at the centre of their own history.

African Silences, by Peter Matthiessen, is a classic on African wildlife and the environment in Africa; the passages on Senegal, The Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire are so beautifully written that you'll return to them again and again.

Journey Without Maps, by Graham Greene, is a wonderful narrative by one of the 20th century's best writers as he travelled through the forests of Liberia and Sierra Leone in 1935.

The State of Africa, by Martin Meredith, is so accessible that it doesn't read like a history book and its searing retelling of Africa's transition to independence contains some fascinating sections on West Africa's best-known rulers.

Sahara: A Natural History, by Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle, is one of the most comprehensive English-language histories of the natural and human world of the Sahara that is wonderfully easy to read.

The Strong Brown God, by Sanche de Gramont, is lively, beautifully written and still the best overview of the Niger River's human and geographical history.

Websites

For specific country overviews and hundreds of useful links, head to Lonely Planet's website (www.lonelyplanet.com), including the Thorn Tree, Lonely Planet's online bulletin board.

Background information on West Africa can also be found at the following websites:

African Studies Center (www.africa.upenn.edu/Home_Page/Country.html) Extensive links from the University of Pennsylvania's Africa programme.

Contemporary Africa Database (www.africaexpert.org) This growing online database contains general information on Africa.

WEST AFRICA'S WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Sites in West Africa considered to be of global significance by Unesco include the following:

Benin Royal palaces of Abomey (p112)

Cameroon Réserve de Biosphère du Dja (p215)

Côte d'Ivoire Parc National de Taï (p278) and Parc National de la Comoé (p263)

Gambia James Island (p318)

Ghana Coastal forts and castles (p354) and Ashanti traditional buildings in Kumasi (p377)

Guinea Nimba Mountains (p430; also extending into Côte d'Ivoire)

Mali Djenné old town (p505), Timbuktu (p521), Tomb of the Askia (Gao; p531) and Falaise de Bandiagara (Dogon Country; p513)

Mauritania Parc National du Banc d'Arguin (p561) and the *ksour* (fortified areas, or old quarters) of Ouadâne (p567), Chinguetti (p565), Tichit (p569) and Oualâta (p570)

Niger Réserve Naturelle Nationale de l'Air et du Ténééré (p583) and Parc Régional du W (p596)

Nigeria Osun Sacred Forest & Groves (p641) and Sukur Cultural Landscape

Senegal Île de Gorée (p696), Saint Louis (p712), Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj (p717) and Parc National de Niokolo-Koba (p721)

Togo Koutammakou, the Land of the Betamarihé

FAVOURITE FESTIVALS & EVENTS

- Dakar Motor Rally (p441; 22 January; Senegal) – Africa's biggest auto race that finishes with a mad dash along the beach from Saint Louis to Dakar in Senegal
- Festival in the Desert (p62; early January; Mali) – exceptional music festival amid Saharan sand dunes
- Fespaco (p133; February–March in odd years; Burkina Faso) – Africa's world-renowned film festival held in Ouagadougou
- Carnival (p458; February; Guinea-Bissau) – Latin-style street festival in Bissau with masks, parties and parades
- Mardi Gras (p251; the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, 40 days before Easter; Cape Verde) – major carnival-type celebration with street parades
- Kano Durbar (p661; during Tabaski, 69 days after Ramadan; Nigeria) – colourful cavalry processions and high ceremony to honour West Africa's most important Islamic festival
- Fetu Afahye Festival (p361; first Saturday in September; Ghana) – colourful carnival, dances and sacrifices to the gods
- La Cure Salée (p613; usually first half of September; Niger) – world-famous annual celebration by Fula herders featuring a male beauty contest and camel races, near In-Gall
- Igue Festival (Ewere Festival; p643; first half of December; Nigeria) – colourful seven-day festival with traditional dances, mock battle and a procession to the palace to reaffirm loyalty to the *oba* (king) in Benin City
- Cattle Crossing (p504; December or January; Mali) – spectacular annual festival of Fula cattle herders around Mali's Inland Delta, especially Diarabé

Ecowas (www.ecowas.info/index.htm) The official site of the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) is a useful, if limited, introduction to the countries of the region with a few useful links.

Norwegian Council for Africa (www.afrika.no) This is a comprehensive site with extensive information and links for each country, chat forums and more.

Sahara Overland (www.sahara-overland.com) The best practical guide for travellers to the Sahara, it has useful forums, route information and book reviews.

For good news sites on the region, try **AllAfrica.com** (www.allafrica.com), **BBC** (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/default.stm>), **IRINNews** (www.irinnews.org) and **West Africa News** (www.westafricanews.com). For country-specific websites, see the individual country chapters.

MUST-SEE MOVIES

West African directors are world-renowned, in part because of the prestigious Fespaco film festival (p133), held biannually in Ouagadougou.

Mooladé, by Ousmane Sembene, is a moving story about female circumcision and the most recent offering by this prolific and talented Senegalese director, who is considered to be the father of African cinema.

Yeelen, by the Malian director Souleymane Cissé, is a lavish generational tale set in 13th-century Mali, which won the Special Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1987.

Tilä, by the Burkinabé director Idrissa Ouédraogo, is an exceptional cinematic portrayal of life in a traditional African village; it won the 1990 Grand Prix at Cannes and the top prize at the 1991 Fespaco festival.

Buud Yam, by Gaston Kaboré from Burkina Faso, won Fespaco's top prize in 1997 for its tale of childhood identity, superstition and a 19th-century African world about to change forever.

Dakan, by Mohamed Camara of Guinea, daringly uses the issue of homosexuality to challenge prevailing social and religious taboos.

Clando, by the Cameroonian director Jean-Marie Teno, addresses the timely issue of Africans choosing between fighting corrupt regimes at home and seeking a better life in Europe.

The Blue Eyes of Yonta, by Flora Gomes, is one of few feature films ever made in Guinea-Bissau and captures the disillusionment of young Africans who've grown up in the postindependence era.

For more information see p49, and each individual country chapter.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

In regions such as West Africa where the global inequities of wealth distribution are so pronounced, it's particularly important to ensure that your travel enjoyment is not at the expense of locals and their environment. For advice on travel in Islamic areas see p47, etiquette p54 and meeting locals p42.

At one level, the impact of tourism can be positive – it can provide an incentive for locals to preserve environments and wildlife by generating employment, while enabling them to maintain their traditional lifestyles.

However, the negative impacts of tourism can be substantial and contribute to the gradual erosion of traditional life. Please try to keep your impact as low as possible by considering the following tips:

- Please don't give cash, sweets, pens etc to children. It encourages begging and undermines existing social structures. Also, doling out medicines can encourage people not to seek proper medical advice. A donation to a recognised project, eg a health centre or school, is more constructive.
- Try to give people a balanced perspective of life in developed countries and point out the strong points of local culture (eg strong family ties, openness to outsiders).
- Make yourself aware of the human rights situation, history and current affairs in the countries you travel through.
- Try not to waste water. Switch off lights and air-conditioning when you go out.
- When visiting historical sites, consider the irreparable damage you inflict upon them by taking home an unattached artefact (eg pottery shards or arrowheads).
- Many precious cultural objects are sold to tourists (eg the traditional doors of granaries in the Dogon Country of Mali) – you should only buy newly carved pieces to preserve West Africa's history and stimulate the carving industry.
- Question any so-called eco-tourism operators for specifics about what they're really doing to protect the environment and the people who live there.
- Support local enterprise. Use locally-owned hotels and restaurants and support trade and craft workers by buying locally made souvenirs.
- Resist the local tendency of indifference to littering.

UK-based organisation **Tourism Concern** (☎ 020-7133 3330; www.tourismconcern.org.uk; Stapleton House, 277-281 Holloway Rd, London N7 8HN) is primarily concerned with tourism and its impact on local cultures and the environment. It has a range of publications and contacts for community organisations, as well as further advice on minimising the impact of your travels.

'Ensure that your travel enjoyment is not at the expense of locals...'

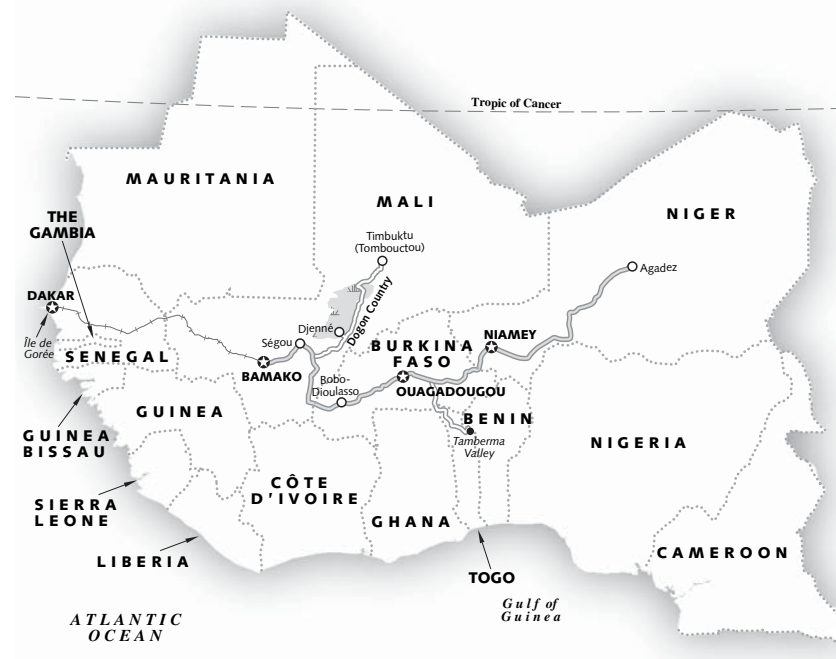
Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THROUGH THE HEART OF THE SAHEL Six to Eight Weeks / Dakar to Agadez

If you're wondering why Africa gets under the skin, begin in **Dakar** (p683); a cosmopolitan city that's a great place to start your West African odyssey. While there, head offshore to tranquil **Île de Gorée** (p696), before taking the train to vibrant **Bamako** (p490) with its world-class nightlife and unmistakably African feel. **Djenné** (p504) boasts a beautiful mud-brick mosque and a clamorous Monday market, so pause here en route to the **Dogon Country** (p513) with its outstanding trekking and intriguing cultural traditions. No trip to West Africa is complete without an excursion north to fabled **Timbuktu** (Tombouctou; p521) on the Sahara's fringe. As the great explorers discovered, Timbuktu is on the road to nowhere so retrace your steps to the lovely, riverside town of **Ségou** (p501). From there make for Burkina Faso and **Bobo-Dioulasso** (p148), an infectious languid town. Continue on to the gloriously named **Ouagadougou** (p134) and then east. After a detour to Togo's otherworldly **Tamberma Valley** (p799), head for **Niamey** (p584), Niger's capital which rests quietly on the banks of the Niger River. A long bus ride north takes you to **Agadez** (p604), an evocative former caravan town of the Sahara.

From Dakar to Agadez (around 4800km) can be reasonably done in six weeks (a week in Senegal, two to three weeks in Mali, a week in Burkina Faso and another week for Niger) using public transport. Two months would, however, be ideal.

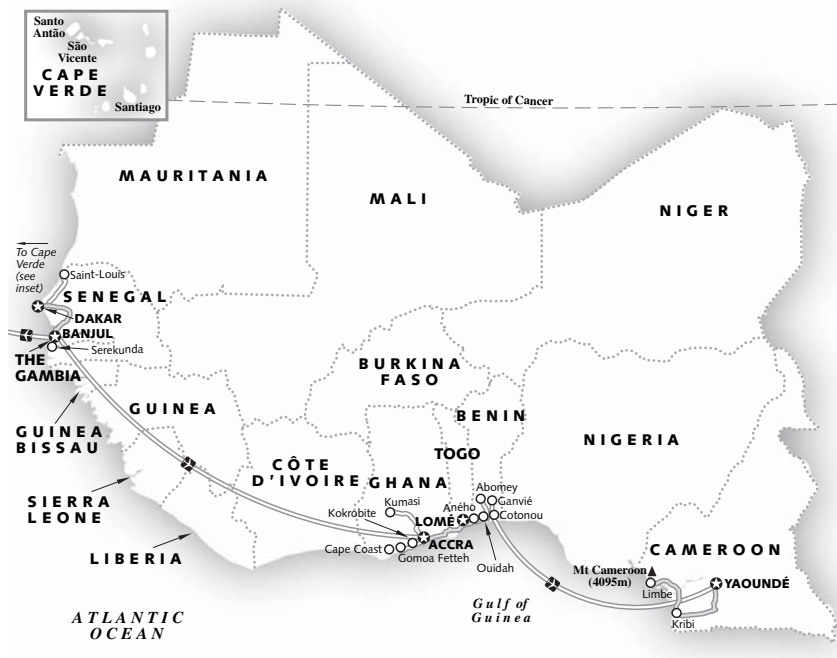


ATLANTIC ODYSSEY

Six Weeks / Dakar to Limbe

West Africa's dusty, thorn-strewn interior is not for everyone, so just as well there's the palm-fringed Atlantic Coast. All flights lead to **Dakar** (p683), Senegal's capital, which combines tropical ambience with African sophistication. To the north, **Saint-Louis** (p712) is like stepping back into precolonial Africa. The Gambia may be small, but its beaches, especially those around **Serekunda** (p303) make it a good (English-speaking) rest stop for taking time out from the African road. Cape Verde is one of West Africa's greatest surprises, with its soulful musical soundtrack, unspoiled beaches, mountainous interior and laid-back locals. The islands of **Santiago** (p235), **São Vicente** (p240), and **Santo Antão** (p243) are particularly beautiful; if you can be here for Mardi Gras (p251), you'll love it. Consider flying to agreeable **Accra** (p339) in Ghana, from where excursions to the old **coastal forts** (p354), **Cape Coast Castle** (p360) and stunning beaches at **Kokrobite** (p354) and **Gomoa Fetteh** (p356) never disappoint. Don't fail to detour north to **Kumasi** (p377) with its wonderful market in the heartland of the fascinating Ashanti culture. There's plenty of onward transport to the fascinating markets of **Lomé** (p778) and on to the decadent colonial charm of **Aného** (p787). Not far away is Benin, with **Ouidah** (p106), the evocative former slaving port and home of voodoo, the history-rich town of **Abomey** (p110) and the stilt-villages of **Ganvié** (p102). **Cotonou** (p95) has all the steamy appeal of the tropics; from here fly to **Yaoundé** (p179) in Cameroon, which has a distinctive Central African feel. **Kribi** (p217) and **Limbe** (p188), from where you can climb **Mt Cameroon** (p192) for stunning Atlantic views, are places to laze on the sand and consider just how far you've travelled.

Dakar to Limbe (around 2500km by land, plus flights) should take about six weeks (one week in Senegal, two in Cape Verde, two travelling from Ghana to Benin and a further week in Cameroon).

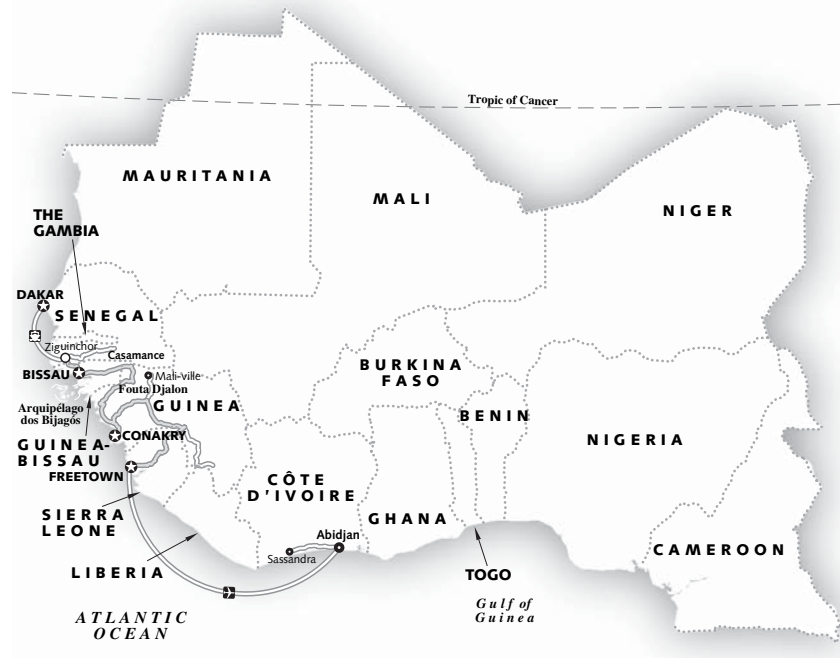


ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

FORBIDDEN WEST AFRICA One Month to Forever / Dakar to Sassandra

The westernmost extremity of Africa's bulge has recently been off-limits to travellers but tentative peace processes have opened up some destinations that you could well have all to yourself. Begin in **Dakar** (p683) and catch the ferry to **Ziguinchor** (p727), the capital of **Casamance** (p725), which is culturally distinct from the rest of Senegal and home to fine beaches, labyrinthine river systems and lush forests. Just across the border, Guinea-Bissau is battle-scarred but its return to peace has allowed travellers to enjoy the architectural remnants of Portugal's colonial occupation, not to mention the village-like capital, **Bissau** (p445). The **Arquipélago dos Bijagós** (p450) is isolated, rich in wildlife and like nowhere else on the coast. Continuing south, Guinea is a great destination, with **Conakry** (p409), a good place to start for its nightlife and the vaguest whiff of emerging sophistication. Guinea's interior is lush and beautiful, nowhere more so than in the **Fouta Djallon highlands** (p418), which offer trekking and **Mali-ville** (p423), a beautiful base. To really get off the beaten track, head into the forests of Guinea's **Forest Region** (p428) where Graham Greene's *Journey Without Maps* will resonate. Just across the border, Sierra Leone is another country on the up, with stunning beaches and **Freetown** (p753), the oddly beautiful capital and a city that seems to contain all the country's optimism and drive. Liberia is probably off-limits, but if the situation stabilises in Côte d'Ivoire, **Sassandra** (p275), a fishing village with great beaches, will be the first to welcome back visitors.

Getting as far as Freetown involves around 3300km of dodgy roads and infrequent transport – count on anywhere between a month and forever. If you fly to Abidjan, count on an extra week kicking back in Sassandra.

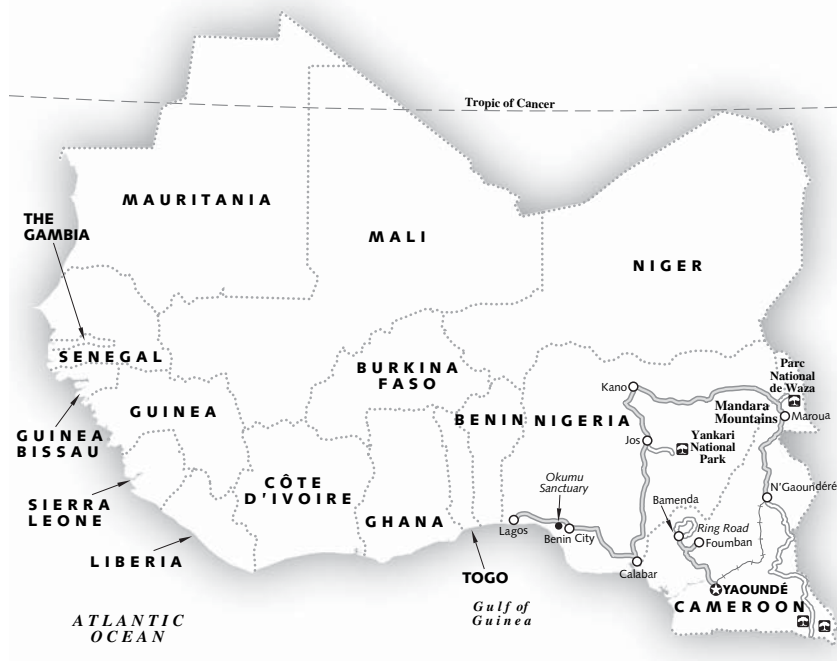


NIGERIA & CAMEROON

Two Months / Lagos to Foumban

Nigeria is one of those destinations that suffers from bad press, although it must be said that most of the horror stories are told by those who've never set foot in the country. **Lagos** (p629) may be in-your-face, high volume and logistically confronting, but it's also Africa's most energetic city, awash with pulsating nightlife, clamorous markets and a terrific museum. **Osun Sacred Forest** (p641) in Okumu Sanctuary, and the Oba's Palace in **Benin City** (p644) are worthwhile stopovers as you head across the south en route to **Calabar** (p647), which is likeable for its old colonial buildings, fish market and lovely setting. From the steamy climate of the south head for the cooler mountain setting of **Jos** (p652), set amid stone-strewn rolling hills and a good base for visiting the excellent **Yankari National Park** (p655). **Kano** (p659), West Africa's oldest city and one of the Sahel's most significant cultural centres, is a fascinating place with a strongly Islamic character. The long journey east takes you across the border to **Maroua** (p208), a pleasant base for exploring the weird-and-wonderful landscapes of the **Mandara Mountains** (p211) and **Parc National de Waza** (p213). From **N'Gaoundéré** (p205), you can either head deep into the utterly untouristed rainforests (p213) of the southeast, which offer a verdant taste of Central Africa, or take the train through the country's heart, through forests and skirting isolated rivers all the way to Yaoundé. **Bamenda** (p196) is your gateway to the villages of the **Ring Road** (p198), a deeply traditional area of Cameroon that feels untouched by time. **Foumban** (p203), with its markets and royal palace, is another important cultural centre and a great place to end your journey.

This route will see you covering at least 5100km (much more if you detour down into Cameroon's remote southeast) and will take a minimum of two months by public transport.

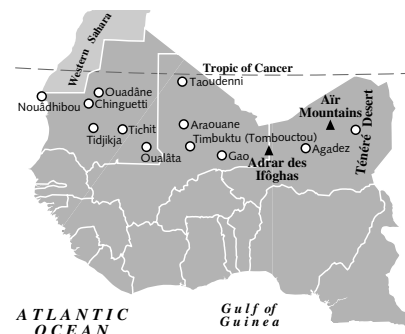


TAILORED TRIPS

INTO THE SAHARA

If the sculpted perfection of sand dunes, the isolated serenity of former caravan towns and the immensity of solitude to be found in the Sahara's vast open spaces appeal, this itinerary is for you, although you'll either need your own or a rented 4WD or, in some places, a camel.

Begin by entering West Africa from the Western Sahara (p839) to **Nouâdhibou** (p559) in Mauritania, before making for the wonderful oasis towns of **Chinguetti** (p565), surrounded by sand dunes, and **Ouadâne** (p567) with its stone-ruin sense of abandonment. Rather than returning to civilisation, continue to **Tidjikja** (p569), **Tichit** (p569) and **Oualâta** (p570), each of which has beautifully painted houses. In Mali, **Timbuktu** (Toumbouctou; p521), perhaps the greatest of all desert cities, is a gateway to lonely **Araouane** (p528) and the remote salt mines of **Taoudenni** (p528), an epic of deep desert immersion. En route east, look out for Mali's desert elephants (p534) and pause in **Gao** (p529), another once-great desert city and gateway to the **Adrar des Ifôghas mountains** (p533). Evocative **Agadez** (p604) in Niger enables you to explore the **Air Mountains** (p608), a massif once described by Heinrich Barth as 'the Switzerland of the Sahara' and a desert home of the Tuareg, and the exquisitely remote **Ténééré Desert** (p609), which is known as the 'desert beyond the desert'.



THE STRONG BROWN GOD

The Niger River is one of Africa's grand old rivers and its strange course through West Africa, which fascinated European geographers for centuries, can guide your footsteps to some of the best the region has to offer.

It's a challenge to reach the **source of the Niger** (p425) in the highlands of Guinea, but there's something special about standing at the sacred spot where the river's 4000km course begins. **Kankan** (p426), the spiritual home of the Malinké people, is one of the most interesting towns of Upper Guinea, while Mali's sights are all close to the Niger's path, including **Bamako** (p490) with its wonderful live music; sleepy **Ségou** (p501), which stretches along the riverbank; and **Djenné** (p504), a beautiful old island town on the Bani River. **Mopti** (p508) has a raucous river port where you can arrange the ultimate river experience – a slow boat (p510) up the Niger River to **Timbuktu** (Toumbouctou; p521). En route, if you're here in December, head to **Diarafabé** (p504) for the amazing annual Fulani cattle crossing. Anywhere along the Niger Bend, where the river turns its face away from the Sahara, sand dunes line the riverbank, most accessibly around **Gao** (p529). Where Niger meets Benin, **Parc Régional du W** (p596 and p120) is one of the best spots in West Africa to see wildlife.



WEST AFRICA'S BEST MARKETS

West Africa's markets are where the peoples of the region meet and trade, where music blaring from speakers competes for attention with aromas fair and foul and where all the colours of Africa will brighten your day.

In Ghana, Kumasi's **Kejetia Market** (p378) is enormous and awash with the colours of Ashanti culture. In neighbouring Togo, the **Marché des Féticheurs** (p779) in Lomé may just appeal if you're in need of a monkey's skull. Moving on to Benin, the huge **Grand Marché du Dantokpa** (p97), Cotonou, is also for those who get turned on by talismans. Lagos' **Balogun Market** (p633) is the best of many in the Nigerian capital and carries the vaguest hints of a medieval bazaar amid the Lagos clamour. To the north, in Nigeria, Kano's **Kurmi Market** (p661) is, at 16 hectares, one of the largest markets in Africa. In Niger, the **Tuareg camel market** (p606) in Agazdez is full of Tuareg men in turbans and anything but a desert stillness. Gorom-Gorom's **Thursday spectacular** (p163) in Burkina Faso is a who's who of the Sahel's ethnic groups, while in Mali, Djenné's **Monday market** (p505) has the town's spectacular mud-built mosque as a backdrop. The **Makola Market** (p344) in Accra, Ghana, **Bamako market** (p495) of Mali, the **Grand Marché** (p150) of Bobo-Dioulasso in Burkina Faso and the **Marché Sandaga** (p694) in Dakar, Senegal threaten to take over the cities, while **Kaolack** (p711), also in Senegal, has the second-largest covered market in Africa.



IN SLAVERY'S FOOTSTEPS

Slavery ravaged practically all of West Africa and a visit to the sites where slaves left African shores for the last time is at once poignant and essential to understanding the shadow slavery cast over the region.

Ghana has perhaps the greatest concentration of slavery sites. Accra's **National Museum** (p344) has an evocative exhibition that provides historical context before you set out for the many forts and castles where slaves were held in dire conditions and then loaded onto equally dire ships. They're all worth visiting, but **Cape Coast Castle** (p360), Elmina's **St George's Castle** (p363) and **Fort Amsterdam** (p358) in Abanize are must-sees. East along the coast, **Ouidah** (p106) in Benin is another essential and emotion-filled reminder of slavery's horrors with a well-marked **Route des Esclaves** (p106) with its moving 'Point of No Return' memorial. The ports of Senegal were also used by slaving ships, with slaves from the interior brought to the coast. Île de Gorée's **La Maison des Esclaves** (p697) is famous as a grim holding centre for slaves, although historians dispute whether many slaves were shipped from here. In Guinea is the lesser-known **Îles de Los** (p417) where countless Africans saw their last view of their continent. In Sierra Leone, **Bunce Island** (p760) was a major shipping port for slaves, while **Freetown** (p753) was originally founded as a refuge for ex-slaves.



Snapshot

There was a time when Côte d'Ivoire was the exception to the grim realities of a rough neighbourhood. Now, West Africa's one-time success story has become a poster boy for race-driven conflict, and for every step it takes forward, it takes two steps in the wrong direction. Elsewhere, the tide has turned for the better and Côte d'Ivoire has been left behind by its neighbours. Sierra Leone, Liberia (which in 2005 elected Africa's first female head of state) and, to a lesser extent, Guinea-Bissau, are showing genuine signs of a lasting return to civilian rule. Look elsewhere and there are more reasons to be optimistic, with Senegal, Ghana, Cape Verde, Niger and Mali the real stars of West Africa's democratic revival. Former military rulers continue to hold power in Benin, Burkina Faso and Nigeria, but now do so under the guise of democratic legitimacy, while the coup in Mauritania in 2005 shows early signs of heralding a more open era. The death of the world's longest-serving leader, Gnassingbe Eyadéma in Togo in 2005, brought his son to power, but for once the African Union and Ecowas (the Economic Community of West African States) bared their teeth, refused to recognise the dynastic succession, and forced the long-entrenched leadership of the country to finally subject itself to the will of the people. In a sign of how times have changed, Guinea's Lansana Conté and Cameroon's Paul Biya, in power since 1984 and 1982 respectively, now stand out as dinosaurs.

West Africa's movement towards political liberalisation has not, however, put food on the table, and West Africa remains the world's poorest region. In the UN Human Development Index for 2005, which ranks countries on a range of socio-economic indicators, Niger, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso and Mali occupied the four lowest positions, with Guinea-Bissau not far behind in the table of the world's worst places to live. Of the 17 countries covered in this book, only Cape Verde (which ranked an acceptable 105th out of 177), Ghana (138th) and Togo (143rd) were deemed to be among the countries which could be said to enjoy 'Medium Human Development'. Programmes of debt relief for many West African countries, given momentum and popularised by Bono and Bob Geldof and the Live8 concerts in 2005, suggest that there is both popular goodwill in developed countries for helping the region lift itself out of poverty, and the possibility that such change could become a reality. The **New Partnership for Africa's Development** (Nepad; www.nepad.org) suggests that African governments are starting to take their own responsibility for finding a way out of the morass seriously. It's not that Africa doesn't have riches – Nigeria and, increasingly, Mauritania have oil, Sierra Leone has diamonds in abundance (the illegal mining of so-called 'blood diamonds' by rebel groups and unscrupulous diamond traders fuelled the country's devastating civil war), and Ghana and Mali have ample gold. But West Africa's natural environment is in crisis and until Western agricultural policies cease to undercut impoverished African farmers, and the corruption, sadly still prevalent, among many West African elites comes to an end, life for ordinary people in West Africa will continue to be the harshest of struggles.

Burkina Faso has the lowest adult literacy rate in the world (12.8%), followed by Niger (14.4%) and Mali (19%). Cape Verde is the star with 75.7% of adults able to read and write, followed by Cameroon (67.9%), Nigeria (66.8%), Ghana (54.1%), Togo (53%) and Mauritania (51.2%).

In Niger, there are just 3.3 doctors for every 100,000 people, while Burkina Faso (4) and Mali (4.4) fare little better. Mauritania has the highest proportion with 47, followed by Nigeria (26.9). Comparable Western countries include Australia (249.1), the UK (164) and the US (548.9).

The highest infant mortality rates are in Sierra Leone (166 per 1000 live births), Niger (154) and Guinea-Bissau (126). The lowest are in Cape Verde (26), Ghana (59), Senegal (78) and Togo (78). The figures for Western countries include Australia (6), the UK (5) and the US (7).

The Authors



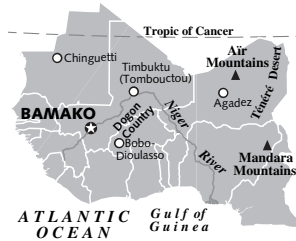
ANTHONY HAM

Coordinating Author

Anthony's first trip for Lonely Planet was to West Africa where he ate rat, was held up at knifepoint and fell irretrievably in love with the region. In the six years since, he has often returned to the region (collecting a formidable array of parasites en route) to indulge his passions for West African music, days of Saharan solitude and long, slow trips up the Niger, not to mention visiting old friends. He is also writing a book about his Tuareg friends and the Sahara. When he's not in West Africa, Anthony lives in Madrid from where he writes and photographs for numerous newspapers around the world.

My Favourite Trip...

For me it just has to be the Sahara where the silence, solitude and night-time companionship of the campfire has no equal. In particular, I'd return to **Chinguetti** (p565), **Timbuktu** (p521) and **Agadez** (p604). From the latter, I'd explore the **Air Mountains** (p608) and **Ténéré Desert** (p609) with my Tuareg friends. I could also happily sail up and down the **Niger River** (p510) to the end of my days, leaving it only to trek the **Dogon Country** (p513) and catch the world's best live-music scene in **Bamako** (p499). I also find myself returning again and again to **Bobo-Dioulasso** (p148) and would love to revisit the **Mandara Mountains** (p211) of Cameroon, despite what the crab sorcerer of Rhumsiki told me.



JAMES BAINBRIDGE

Benin & Togo

James has grooved to the amazing music and grimaced on the appalling transport in a string of African countries from Morocco to Ghana, starting with a visit to Guinea at age 13. On one memorable overland journey from London to Timbuktu – and back – he stayed with a musical griot family in Senegal and wrote up the experience for the *Guardian*, before emptying Bamako's markets of cassette tapes and lugging them home across the Sahara. When he's not trying to hail a *zemi-john* (motorcycle taxi) in Togo or Benin – the countries he researched for this guide – James can be found working as a freelance journalist in the UK.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are independent, dedicated travellers. They don't research using just the Internet or phone, and they don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage. They travel widely, to all the popular spots and off the beaten track. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, galleries, palaces, museums and more – and they take pride in getting all the details right, and telling it how it is. For more, see the authors section on www.lonelyplanet.com.



TIM BEWER

Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea & Sierra Leone

While growing up, Tim didn't travel much except for the obligatory pilgrimage to Disney World and an annual summer week at the lake. He's spent most of his adult life making up for this, and has since visited nearly 50 countries. After university he worked briefly as a legislative assistant before quitting capitol life in 1994 to backpack around West Africa. It was during this trip that the idea of being a freelance travel writer and photographer was hatched, and he's been at it ever since, returning to Africa several times. He lives in Minneapolis.



JEAN-BERNARD CARILLET

Mauritania

Jean-Bernard got his first taste of Mauritania while on a romantic tour of the Adrar with his significant other in 2000. It would have been wiser to choose an idyllic island in the South Pacific because the romance ceased soon afterwards...but at least his love affair with the desert is still ardent. A Gallic author based in Paris, he was all too happy to cover a country where he could discuss in French with nomads under a traditional tent the virtues of strong tea. Jean-Bernard is an Africa aficionado – he's visited 13 African nations and has also co-authored Lonely Planet's *Ethiopia & Eritrea* and *Africa on a Shoestring* – the first Lonely Planet guidebook he bought.



PAUL CLAMMER

Cameroon & Nigeria

Once a molecular biologist, Paul has long since traded his test tubes for a rucksack, and the vicarious life of a travel writer. Overlanding in Africa was his first significant travel experience, and he has returned to the continent many times since. He is fascinated by the interface between Muslim and black Africa (he's also written a book about Sudan), and so particularly relished the chance to explore Nigeria, that most maligned of West African countries.



MARY FITZPATRICK

Liberia

Originally from Washington, DC, Mary set off after graduate studies for several years in Europe. Her fascination with languages and cultures soon led her further south to sub-Saharan Africa, where she has spent much of the past decade living and working, including several years as a freelance writer in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. Mary has authored and co-authored numerous guidebooks on Africa, and currently works as a full-time travel writer from her home base in Cairo.



MICHAEL GROSBERG

Ghana

After a childhood spent stateside in the Washington, DC area and a valuable philosophy degree in hand, Michael took a job doing something with developing a resort on an island in the Pacific after which he left for a long overland trip through Asia. He later found his way to South Africa where he did journalism and NGO work and found time to travel all over southern Africa. He returned to New York for graduate school in comparative literature and he has taught literature and writing in several NYC colleges in addition to Lonely Planet assignments that have taken him around the world.



KATHARINA KANE

The Gambia & Senegal

When Katharina Kane heard the haunting sound of a Fula flute during a London concert, her fate was sealed. She headed straight to Guinea in West Africa, where she ended up studying the instrument for a year before writing a PhD on its origins. She then decamped to Senegal, a country that she'd fallen in love with during one of her many travels to West Africa in her role as a music journalist. Katharina has worked on other Lonely Planet titles, writes for various world music magazines, including *Roots* and *Songlines*, and produces radio features on world music for stations including the BBC and WDR. She currently lives in Dakar, or on a plane to yet another new place.



ROBERT LANDON

Cape Verde & Guinea-Bissau

Robert has degrees in literature from two different California universities, but his best education continues to be travel, especially yearlong stints in Italy, Paris and Rio de Janeiro. For more than a decade, Robert has been able to finance his trips with his writing, and his work has appeared in the *San Jose Mercury-News*, *Bloomberg.com* and countless other websites (most now defunct). His time in Brazil introduced him to the far-flung Portuguese-speaking world and was his gateway to West Africa's Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau – two of the most extraordinary places he's visited.



MATT PHILLIPS

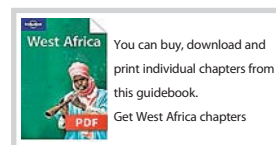
Niger

Matt got his first taste of Niger (literally a mouthful of sand – ughh!) while liberating Mr Harry, a loveable 1982 Landrover, from the Sahara's grip. Although that sand wasn't too tasty, Matt acquired a taste for Niger and stayed for his fill. He's travelled the country three times, by three different means: Mr Harry, bus and bush taxi. Highlights include finding seashells in the Saharan sands and standing atop Agadez's mosque. Lowlights include 'sleeping' overnight in a Peugeot at Gouré's *autogare* (bush-taxi station) and projectile vomiting from a moving bush taxi. Matt's crossed 21 African nations and has also co-authored Lonely Planet's *Kenya* and *Ethiopia & Eritrea* guides.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Jane Cornwell is an Australian-born, UK-based journalist, author and broadcaster, who wrote the Music in West Africa chapter. After graduating with a Masters degree in anthropology, she left for London where she worked, variously, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and for Peter Gabriel's Real World company. She currently writes about arts, books and music – most notably world music – for a range of UK and antipodean publications, including the *Times*, *Evening Standard* and *Telegraph* newspapers, *Songlines* magazine and the *Australian* newspaper. She travels about the planet regularly, interviewing world musicians.

Dr Caroline Evans wrote the Health chapter. Caroline studied medicine at the University of London, and completed General Practice training in Cambridge. She is the medical adviser to Nomad Travel Clinic, a private travel health clinic in London, and is also a GP specialising in travel medicine. She has been an expedition doctor for Raleigh International and Coral Cay expeditions.



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