

Mali

Mali is the jewel in West Africa's crown, a destination that seems to have all the right ingredients.

The country occupies the heart of a territory that once supported Africa's greatest empires and is rich with historical resonance. This enormously significant history bequeathed to Mali some of its most dramatic attractions – the legendary city of Timbuktu, whose name has never lost its remote allure for travellers from afar, and the gloriously improbable mosque at Djenné are simply two among many.

Mali's history has always been a story of deserts and of rivers. The lucrative trade routes of the Sahara once made the region the world's richest, and the waterways still provide the country's lifeblood. The Niger, one of the grand rivers of Africa, still sustains the country, and to journey along it (preferably on a slow boat to Timbuktu) is one great journey.

Not too far from the riverbank, the extraordinary Falaise de Bandiagara rises up from the plains and shelters one of West Africa's most intriguing peoples – the Dogon, whose villages and complex cultural rituals still cling to the edge of rocky cliffs. If you can visit one place in Mali, go to the Dogon Country: it is utterly unforgettable.

But all of Mali is alive with a fascinating cultural mix of peoples, from the nomadic Tuareg people of the Sahara to the fishing societies of the Bozo, who are respected as the masters of the Niger River (*gui-tigui* in Bambara). It seems that everywhere you go there are fascinating ceremonies. And a world-famous musical tradition, with strong roots in the local soil, mean that the cultures of Africa have never been so accessible as they are in Mali.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1,240,140 sq km
- **Capital** Bamako
- **Country code** ☎ 223
- **Famous for** Timbuktu; Dogon Country; the best in West African music
- **Languages** French, Bambara, Fula, Tamashek, Dogon, Bozo and Songhai
- **Money** West African CFA franc; US\$1 = CFA544.89; €1 = CFA655.96
- **Population** 10.6 million
- **Visa** Renewable five-day visa available at border CFA15,000 or one-month visas at any Malian embassy



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Dogon Country** (p513) Trek down the Falaise de Bandiagara and into the timeless villages.
- **Djenné** (p504) Haggle with locals on market day (Monday) beneath the shadow of the incomparable mosque – the largest mud building in the world.
- **Niger River** (p510) Take a slow boat up the river and into the culturally rich inland delta.
- **Timbuktu** (p521) Discover the legendary city, and stand amid the solitude of the Sahara watching a salt caravan arrive.
- **Bamako** (p490) Dance to the infectious rhythms of Mali's world-famous musicians.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** If you've only got one week – what were you thinking? – make sure your Monday is spent at **Djenné's weekly market** (p505), where the great mud-mosque is a stunning backdrop. Continue northeast to the lively port town of **Mopti** (p508), an excellent base for short **Niger River boat trips** (p510) and forays into **Dogon Country** (p513) – three days is a minimum. Try also to pass through **Bamako** (p490) on a Friday or Saturday, when the Malian capital rocks.
- **Two Weeks** An extra week will allow you to break up the long journey north by pausing for a couple of nights in languid **Ségou** (p501), a wonderful introduction to the towns of the Niger riverbank. From **Mopti** (p508), you could also take a three-day slow-boat journey (p510) up the Niger River to **Timbuktu** (p521), the dusty and labyrinthine city of legend that resonates with Saharan caravans and has become byword for the end of the earth.
- **One Month** In a one-month itinerary you could include extra days in **Djenné** (p505), which is lovely and quiet once the clamour of the market subsides, as well as up to 10 days of outstanding **Dogon Country trekking** (p518). Your boat journey to Timbuktu could even continue beyond, to the fascinating and remote outpost of **Gao** (p529) – a handy staging post on the road to Niger – while a longer **Saharan camel trek** (p525) from

HOW MUCH?

- **Bamako–Mopti bus ride** CFA8000
- **Mopti–Timbuktu on Comanav ferry** CFA49,110 (1st class)
- **Sunset camel ride into Sahara** CFA10,000
- **Internet connection** CFA1000 to CFA1500 per hour
- **Guide to Dogon Country** CFA9000 to CFA15,000 per day

LONELY PLANET INDEX

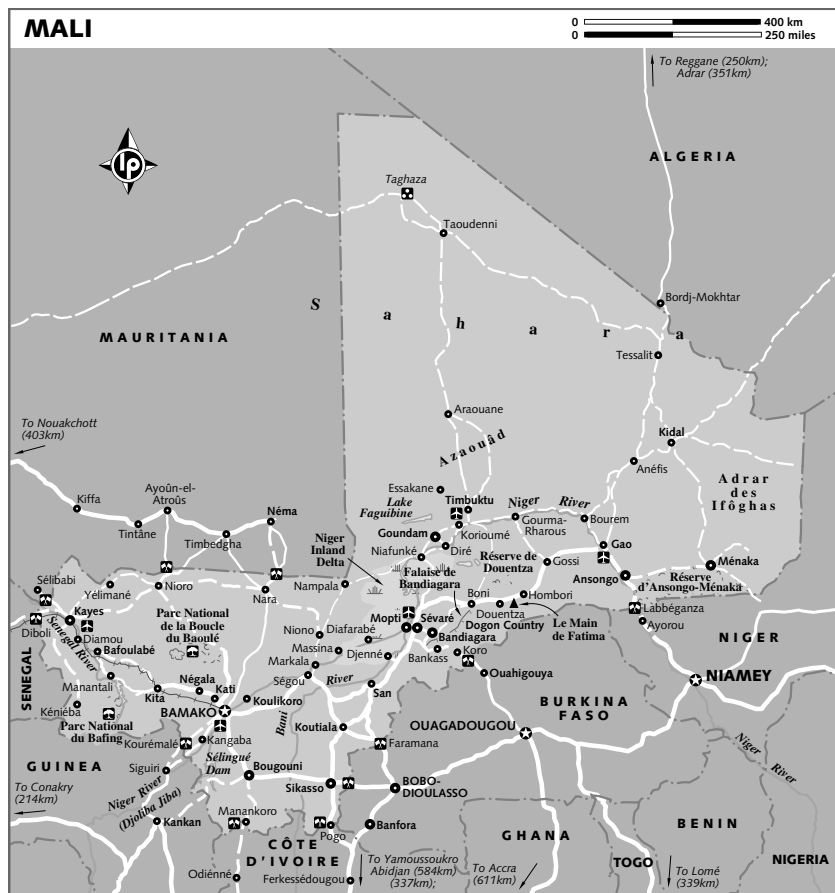
- **1L of petrol** CFA650
- **1l of bottled water** CFA750
- **Bottle of Castel beer** small/large CFA500/1000
- **Souvenir T-shirt** CFA8000
- **Portion of riz arachide (rice with peanut sauce)** CFA500

Timbuktu is another option for lovers of the desert.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Mali is wettest between July and August, although the rainy season – when torrential downpours and thunderstorms are preceded by strong winds – runs from June to September. It's hottest between April and June, when temperatures frequently exceed 40°C. September and October are also extremely hot and Timbuktu in particular can be unpleasant. From November through January, the best time to visit, the *alize* wind blows cooler air from the northeast, keeping daytime temperatures in the 30s – Malians refer to this period as the cold season! From January to June, the hot and dusty harmattan blows, irritating throats and, on some days, reducing visibility to a few hundred metres. River trips are usually only possible until December, after which a lack of rain sees water levels drop.

Mali's most famous cultural event is the **Festival in the Desert**, a musical extravaganza of Mali's best musicians amid the sand dunes near Timbuktu which takes place in early January. For the timing of other festivals, see p255.



HISTORY

Rock paintings and carvings in the Gao and Timbuktu regions suggest that northern Mali has been inhabited since 50,000 BC, when the Sahara was fertile grassland across which roamed an abundance of wildlife. By 5000 BC farming was taking place, and the use of iron began around 500 BC. By 300 BC, large organised settlements had developed, most notably at Djenné (see p506). By the 6th century AD, the lucrative trans-Saharan trade in gold, salt and slaves had begun, facilitating the rise of Mali's three great empires.

The Empire of Ghana (unrelated to present-day Ghana) covered much of what is now Mali and Senegal until the 11th century.

It was followed by the great Empire of Mali, which in the 14th century stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to present-day Nigeria. Timbuktu was developed as a great centre of commerce and Islamic culture. The Songhai Empire, with its capital at Gao, came next, but this empire was destroyed by a Moroccan mercenary army in the late 16th century.

At around the same time, European ships were arriving along the coast of West Africa, thus circumventing the trans-Saharan trade routes and breaking the monopoly and power of the Sahel kingdoms and northern cities.

Later the Bambara Empire of Ségou rose briefly to control huge swathes of Mali, before being usurped by two waves of Fula-led

Islamic jihad, the second originating from the Tukolor Empire of northern Senegal. The Tukolor were still around when the French expanded east into Mali during the mid-19th century. For more information about Mali's pre-colonial history see p30.

By the end of the 19th century, Mali was part of French West Africa. Remnants of this colonial era that are still visible today, include the huge Office du Niger irrigation scheme near Ségou, and the 1200km Dakar–Bamako train line, the longest rail span in West Africa; both were built with forced labour. Such vast infrastructure projects notwithstanding, Mali remained the poor neighbour of Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. France's chief interest was in 'developing' Mali as a source of cheap cash crops (rice and cotton) for export.

Independence

Mali became independent in 1960 (for a few months it was federated with Senegal). Its first president, Modibo Keita, embarked on an unsuccessful period of one-party state socialism. Newly formed state corporations took control of the economy, but all except the cotton enterprise soon began losing money. Ambitious planning schemes went awry, the economy wilted, and Keita was forced to ask the French to support the Malian franc – something of a humiliation for a country that had eagerly thrown off the shackles and symbols of colonialism. Eventually, in 1968, Keita was overthrown by a group of army officers led by Moussa Traoré.

Cold War rivalries were at fever pitch and Mali was firmly in the Soviet camp, with Moscow-style socialism the dominant economic model. Continual food shortages were conveniently blamed on droughts (which did devastate the north in 1968–74 and in 1980–85), but were largely due to government mismanagement. The situation was hardly helped by government instability and military intervention – from 1970 to 1990 five coup attempts were made against Traoré, and the early 1980s were characterised by strikes, often violently suppressed.

In 1979 Mali was officially returned to civilian rule, although it remained a one-party state with Moussa Traoré as its head. Thanks to market liberalisation (and adequate rainfall), by 1987 Mali had produced its first grain surplus.

However, even a leader as entrenched as Traoré could not resist the winds of change sweeping the world. The clamour for multiparty democracy elsewhere coincided with a growing restlessness among Mali's population about Traoré's autocratic rule. Democracy would come, but it was a bloodstained transition.

The Tuareg uprising (p529) began in 1990, and later that year a peaceful pro-democracy demonstration attracted about 30,000 people onto the streets of Bamako. This action was followed by strikes and further demonstrations. On 17 March 1991, security forces met students and other demonstrators with machine-gun fire. Three days of rioting followed, during which 150 people were killed. The unrest finally provoked the army, led by General Amadou Toumani Touré (General ATT as he was known), to take control. Moussa Traoré was arrested, and around 60 senior government figures were executed.

Touré established an interim transitional government and gained considerable respect from Malians and the outside world when he resigned a year later, keeping his promise to hold multiparty elections.

The 1990s

Alpha Oumar Konaré (a scientist and writer) was elected president in June 1992, and his party – Alliance for Democracy in Mali (Adema) – won a large majority of seats in the national assembly. Though a widely respected and capable leader who oversaw considerable political and economic liberalisation, Konaré had to deal with a 50% devaluation of the CFA during the 1990s (which resulted in rioting and protest) and an attempted coup.

Presidential and national assembly elections were held in 1997, but were marred by irregularities and the withdrawal of opposition parties. Konaré and his party were duly re-elected, whereafter he appointed opposition figures to his cabinet and made genuine attempts to democratise and decentralise Mali.

In sharp contrast to many African leaders, Konaré stood down in 2002, as the new constitution he'd helped draft dictated – although many Malians believe that he did so reluctantly; he is now the Chairman of the African Union. The former general, Amadou

Touré, was rewarded for his patience and elected as president in April 2002.

Mali Today

On many fronts Mali is a model West African democracy, one in which the overall health of the system has proven more enduring than the ambitions of individual leaders. It has become Africa's third-largest gold producer, which offers hope for a more prosperous future and the prospect of a long-overdue diversification of the economy – agriculture currently accounts for almost half of Mali's GDP, and cotton provides 40% of exports.

Malian-style democracy may have fostered stability and peace, and received international acclaim, but Mali is still one of the poorest countries on earth – almost one-third of Malians are malnourished, 90% of the population live on less than US\$2 a day and adult literacy is just 19%. The locust invasion and drought of 2004 served as a reminder that Mali is still as dependent on international aid money as it is on good rains. Widespread corruption also remains a problem and, for all the international momentum for debt relief in Africa, more government money in Mali

is still spent on debt servicing than on education, although it is hoped that may change after the July 2005 G8 agreement to slash the debts of indebted countries such as Mali.

THE CULTURE

The National Psyche

Malians are open and tolerant. For centuries the country's diverse peoples have shared a country that is not always bountiful, and they've learned to do it pretty well (competing kingdoms and slavery aside). Ethnic identity is still important, but where once there was enmity, in most cases a *cousinage* or 'joking cousins' relationship now exists. People from different groups commonly tease and poke fun at ethnic stereotypes and past deeds to everyone's enjoyment. The only possible exception is the Tuareg, who remain a people apart, the more so since the divisive conflict of the 1990s (p529).

In Mali, personal relationships are important, friendships are things of great value, families are the glue that holds everything together, and hospitality and generosity seem to increase in inverse proportion to a person's means. Malians worry about the dire state of the country and a perceived

loss of tradition, rail against corruption and long for a better life, but deep down they're a remarkably optimistic people who love to dance. They love it even more if you dance with them.

Daily Life

Malian societies are highly stratified, with hereditary nobles at the top and castes of hunters and blacksmiths at the bottom. In former centuries slavery was universal and subtribes of former slaves (and even slavery itself) still exist in some societies.

Mali today is – like many traditional societies in the region – struggling to hold fast to old ways of living, while embracing modern culture. This conflict is particularly acute, because Mali is officially the fourth-poorest country in the world, and for most Malians daily life is a struggle. In this context, the role played by music in Malian life cannot be overestimated. Not only has Mali's music proven to be a reassuring bastion of traditional rhythms and a bulwark against the encroachment of the modern world, it has also provided a refuge and diversion from difficult economic circumstances, showcased the strength of traditional Malian culture, and highlighted the country's ability to take the modern world by storm. It is little wonder, therefore, that music accompanies everything in Malian life, providing the soundtrack for everything from important rites of passage to the obligatory dancing on a Saturday night.

Greeting people in Mali is very important, and you'll often see highly formalised ritual greetings which last for minutes. Indeed, one of the rudest things you can do to a Malian is ignore them. People think it very impolite to ask for directions to the nearest bank before saying hello or enquiring about their health.

Although Mali has a higher number of female government ministers than France, and progress towards equality is being made in the higher echelons of society, rural women have few rights over the fruit of their labours, must accept polygamy and female genital mutilation as their lot, and are generally marginalised.

Population

Mali's population is growing by 2.9% per year, which means that the number of Malians doubles every 20 years. This figure

would be even higher, but Mali has the fourth-highest child mortality rate in the world – around a quarter of children will die before their fifth birthday. By African standards the HIV infection rate is low (about 2% of the population).

About 80% of Malians are tied to the land, directly or indirectly, so it's hardly surprising that most of the population live in Mali's fertile south. The vast northern desert and semidesert (60% of Mali) contains just 10% of the population (the same percentage of the population live in Bamako).

Concentrated in the centre and south of the country, the Bambara are Mali's largest ethnic group (33% of the population) and they hold much political power. Together with the Soninké and Malinké (who dominate western Mali) they make up 50% of Mali's population.

Fula (17%) pastoralists are found in Mali, wherever there is grazing for their livestock, particularly near Massina in the Niger Inland Delta. The farmlands of the Songhaï (6%) are concentrated along the 'Niger Bend', the stretch of river between Niafunké and Ansongo, while the Sénoufo (12%) live around Sikasso and Koutiala. The Dogon (7%) live on the Falaïse de Bandiagara in central Mali. The lighter-skinned Tuareg (6%), traditionally nomadic pastoralists and traders, inhabit the fringes of the Sahara. Other groups include the Bozo fisher people of the Niger River and the Bobo (2.5%) farmers, who live close to the border with Burkina Faso.

There is considerable intermarriage between people of different ethnic groups, the common tie being Islam. However, it's taboo for some groups to intermarry (such as between Dogon and Bozo).

RELIGION

Between 80% and 90% of Malians are Muslim, and 2% Christian. The remainder retain animist beliefs, which often blur with Islamic and Christian practices, especially in rural areas.

Mali is a secular state, but Islam here is conservative and reasonably influential. In recent years some powerful imams have called for more Islamic influence in the running of the country and less Westernisation. However, despite the odd Bin Laden T-shirt in the market, there is very little anti-Western sentiment in Mali.

MALI – LAND OF GOLD

Mali hasn't always been one of the world's poorest countries – it was once home to rich empires whose legends were the colour of gold.

The Empire of Ghana, which encompassed vast swathes of what is now Mali, was fabled as a kingdom where gold was so plentiful that it was visible on the ground, and its king was even said to tether his horse to a nugget of pure gold. Two-thirds of the world's gold came from the Empire of Ghana. After the empire yielded to that of Mali, King Kankan Musa distributed so much gold on his pilgrimage to Mecca that world gold prices did not recover for a generation (see p34 for more).

Not surprisingly, Mali's ancient rulers kept the source of their gold – primarily an area known as Bouré that surrounds present-day Siguiiri in Guinea and stretches along the Niger River into Mali – as a closely guarded secret. Gold was traded for salt and other goods in a system of 'dumb barter', in which transactions were almost devoid of direct contact, meaning that very few people knew where the gold came from.

Rumours of West Africa's gold reserves helped drive Europe's clamour for parts of the continent's interior. Although, by the 16th century, invaders from Morocco, and later Europe, found that West Africa's gold had seemingly been exhausted. Gold mining was reduced to individual prospectors searching for nuggets.

Gold mining in Mali is no longer a matter of looking for nuggets. Economic and political liberalisation in the 1990s, and a revision of the mining code, has attracted a host of multinational mining companies (particularly from South Africa and Australia). The government is a stakeholder in all mines and levies taxes on revenues. All mines are open-cast operations where gold particles are leached from crushed rock using cyanide.

But some things don't change – the areas most interesting to the multinationals are still Bambouk and Bouré, from where the great empires grew.

ARTS Music

Mali's cultural diversity affords it a wealth of great music, not only from the dominant Bambara, but also from the Tuareg, Songhai, Fula, Dogon and Bozo people. Best known are the griots (also called *jalis*), a hereditary caste of musicians who fulfil many functions in Malian society. You can tell if a musician or singer comes from a griot family by their name: Diabaté, Kouyaté and Sissoko are the most common. Many of Mali's modern singers are members of the griot caste. The female griots of Mali are famed throughout West Africa for the beauty and power of their voices; some of the most famous singers include Ami Koita, Fanta Damba, Tata Bambo Kouyaté and Mariam Kouyaté.

Mali's wealth of talented female singers also includes the hugely popular Oumou Sangaré, whose songs deal with contemporary social issues such as polygamy and arranged marriages. Her music is influenced by the musical traditions of the Wassoulou region of southwestern Mali, and features the *kamelen-ngoni*, a large six-stringed harp-lute. If you like her music, also look out for recordings by Sali Sidibé and Kagbe Sidibé. Rokia Traoré has become one of Mali's most respected female singers in Europe, but has yet to attract a broad following at home. Kandia Kouyaté has a sublime voice but she rarely performs.

After independence, Malian cultural and artistic traditions were encouraged and several state-sponsored 'orchestras' were

founded. The legendary Rail Band de Bamako (actual employees of the Mali Railway Corporation!) was one of the greatest, and one of its ex-members, the charismatic Salif Keita, has become perhaps the brightest in Mali's pantheon of stars.

The enigmatic, laid-back and much-loved Ali Farka Touré is perhaps Africa's best-known modern musician – look out for his albums *The River* and *Radio Mali*. His blues-influenced sound highlights similarities between the music of Africa and the Mississippi delta (some scholars believe that the roots of American blues lie with the Malian slaves who worked on US plantations). Other emerging blues performers include Lobi Traoré, Afel Bocoum, Boubacar Traoré and Tinariwen, a beguiling Tuareg group from Kidal that have taken the world by storm (see p62 for more on this band).

Lovers of the *kora* will adore the work of the master, Toumani Diabaté, who has collaborated with everyone from Roswell Rudd and Taj Mahal to Spain's Ketama. Ballake Sissoko and Sidiki Diabaté (Toumani's father) are two other masters of the art.

Other popular musicians include Kassy Mady Diabaté, Habib Koita, Djelimady Tounkara, and Amadou and Mariam, whose collaboration with Manu Chao was the sound of the 2005 summer across Europe.

To hear some of Mali's best musicians in action in Bamako, see p499. For a broader look at the wider West African music scene, see p58.

Arts & Craftwork

Mali's famous sculptural traditions date back to the 12th century, when figures in terracotta, bronze and gold were created by the inhabitants of Djenné and surrounding towns. These sculptures usually depict a kneeling person with stylised eyes.

Woodcarvings made by the Bambara people are noted for their angular forms. Figures called *flanitokele* are carved in a rigid posture, with an elongated torso, arms held stiffly to the side – often with palms out – and conical breasts. Bambara masks are usually bold and solid, with cowrie shells and human and animal features incorporated into the design; they're often used in secret society ceremonies. The best known (and frequently used as a symbol of West Africa) is the *chiwara*, a headpiece

carved in the form of an antelope, and used in ritualistic dances.

The Bozo sculpt a mask representing a sacred ram, called *saga*, and are believed to have begun the tradition of marionette theatre, where human and animal figures are used to act out scenes from history and everyday life. The Bambara, Malinké and Soninké have adopted this tradition, and there are annual marionette festivals in Dirabougou (20km east of Koulikoro; p501) and Markala (p504).

The Bambara also produce striking *bogolan*, or mud cloth (p69), and the Dogon are also renowned for their masks (see the boxed text, p517).

Architecture

When the Dogon first moved into central Mali, they took their lead from the Tellem (p514) and built their houses on the high cliffs of the escarpment of the Falaise de Bandiagara for protection. These houses were made of mud on a wooden frame, with a flat roof supported by wooden beams, while the smaller granaries had conical roofs. In recent times, many of the cliff dwellings have been abandoned, as more Dogon moved down to the better farmland on the plains.

The design of Dogon houses is unique. Each house is collectively built of rock and mud, and set in a compound that contains one or two granaries. Single-sex dormitories are constructed for those who have been circumcised, but are not yet married, and slight architectural variations occur across Dogon Country.

The granaries, with their conical straw roofs, stand on stone legs to protect the maize or other crops from vermin. At one time their most notable feature were the elaborately carved doors and shutters in some villages, but sadly, many have been sold to unscrupulous tourists and replaced with plain wooden doors.

The focal point of any village is the *toguna*, a low-roofed shelter which is the meeting place for older men, where they discuss the affairs of the village or simply lounge, smoke, tell jokes and take naps. Nine pillars support the roof, made from eight layers of millet stalks, and the outside pillars are sometimes carved with figures of the eight Dogon ancestors. Women are allowed into some *toguna*, although by no means all.

The *tai* is a village's central square and is where most ceremonies take place; there's often an important *togu-na* close by.

Each clan in the village has a clan house, called a *guina*, which usually contains a shrine. The most impressive of these are characterised by rows of holes, like compartmentalised shelves, and geometric decoration.

Literature

Mali's story-telling was once an almost exclusively oral tradition, but one of the few tales which has been committed to paper, and is now available to a wider audience, is that of one of ancient Mali's greatest kings, Sundiata (see the boxed text, p33), whose story delightfully blurs the lines between history and literature. An accessible version is *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, by DT Niane.

Mali's greatest writer of the modern era was the Bandiagara-born Amadou Hampaté Bâ, who died in 1991 (see p48 for more information).

Cinema & Photography

Although Mali lacks the cinematic traditions of neighbouring Burkina Faso and Senegal, it does have some directors who have attracted attention beyond the region.

Souleymane Cissé is perhaps the best known, especially for the masterful *Yeelen*, which won the Special Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1987. His other films include, *Den Muso* (1975), *Finye* (1981) and *Waati* (1995).

Other well-regarded Malian directors include: Assane Kouyaté (whose *Kabala* won the Special Jury Prize at the 2003 Fespaco film festival); Abdoulaye Ascofaré; Adama Drabo; Falaba Issa Traoré and Cheick Oumar Sissoko – whose *La Genèse* and *Guimba, un Tyran, une Epoque* won prizes at Cannes (1999) and Fespaco (1995) respectively, and who is now Mali's Minister of Culture.

Mali's photographers have also been attracting international acclaim in recent years, especially the self-taught Seydou Keita, whose eccentric but revealing portraits of his fellow Malians have been exhibited around the world. Malick Sidibe also does portraits, in addition to being known for his stirring images from Bamako in the heady days surrounding Malian independence. Books worth seeking out include *Seydou Keita*; the famous *You Look Beautiful*.

MALI'S TOP TEN ALBUMS – THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

- Salif Keita, *The Best of the Early Years*
- Toumani Diabaté, *New Ancient Strings*
- Ballake Sissoko, *Tomora*
- Ali Farka Touré and Toumani Diabaté, *In the Heart of the Moon*
- Ali Farka Touré, *Niafunke*
- Tinariwen, *Amassakoul*
- Amadou et Mariam, *Dimanche a Bamako*
- Kandia Kouyaté, *Biriko*
- Oumou Sangaré, *Worotan*
- Rokia Traoré, *Bowmboi*

ful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibe; and Malick Sidibe: Photographs.

ENVIRONMENT The Land

Mali, the largest country in West Africa, is home to five different environments. The north contains the Sahara, the south is relatively flat and well-watered agricultural land, the west is a hilly and well-wooded extension of the Futa Djallon highlands of Guinea, the central band is semi-arid scrub savanna (the Sahel) and the Niger Inland Delta is a maze of channels, swamps and lakes.

The Niger River, the country's lifeline, is the major geographical marvel of Mali. It flows 1626km through the country, sweeping up from Guinea, in the southwest, to Timbuktu and the edge of the Sahara, before heading southeast through Niger and Nigeria to the Atlantic.

National Parks

Mali has four national parks and reserves, but its wildlife has been devastated by centuries of human encroachment and the parks are not easily accessible.

Northwest of Bamako, the vast Parc National de la Boucle du Baoulé reportedly has good bird-watching, while bordering the lake formed by Manantali dam, west of Kita, Parc National du Bafing protects a number of primate species, including chimpanzees.

The Réserve d'Ansongo-Ménaka lies southeast of Gao, next to the Niger River, and is extremely isolated. Much of the wildlife has gone but the Niger still has hippos. Of most interest to visitors, although difficult to reach, is the Réserve de Douentza, a vast area of semidesert north of the main road between Mopti and Gao inhabited by hardy desert elephants (p534).

Environmental Issues

Mali's most urgent environmental issues are deforestation, overgrazing and desertification. The three problems are inextricably linked and, between them, threaten much of the country. In the Sahel, trees are felled for cooking fuel and building materials. Elsewhere, overgrazing is stripping the land of ground cover and root systems ensuring that the soil has little to bind it together and is unravelling, causing erosion.

The increasing population only exacerbates these problems.

FOOD & DRINK

Food in Mali is generally similar to that found in Senegal, with *poulet yassa* (chicken in an onion and lemon sauce), *riz yollof* (rice with vegetables and/or meat) and *riz arachide* (rice with peanut sauce) featuring on many menus. All along the Niger River, restaurants also serve grilled or fried *capitaine* (Nile perch). Many tourist restaurants cater to more Western tastes. In Gao, look out for *wigila*, a local specialty of sun-dried dumplings dipped in a spice-laden meat sauce.

Street food is usually excellent and widely available. Look out for beef brochettes, fried fish, corn on the cob, fried bananas, egg sandwiches, sweet-potato chips and plates of rice and sauce.

Soft drinks are omnipresent, but local drinks such as ginger juice, or red *bissap* or *djablani* juice (which is brewed from hibiscus petals then chilled) and orange squash are sometimes available (but are not always sterile).

Although Mali is predominantly Muslim, most towns have at least one bar or hotel where you can buy Castel, a Malian lager. Flag, from Senegal, is also available in Bamako and Mopti.

BAMAKO

pop 1.3 million

Bamako grows on you. Those who rush through will find Mali's capital to be a far cry from its origins as a small Bozo fishing village. Bamako today is sprawling and gritty, and can be a charmless place if you let the streets full of people, cars, buzzing flocks of *mobylettes* (mopeds) and its fair share of pollution get to you. And yet, expats who live here often end up loving the place; they're drawn in by great restaurants and a soundtrack provided by some of Africa's best music stars. Bamako's hotels are also excellent, while the National Museum is arguably the best in the region. If you're looking for a tranquil stay, you should probably look elsewhere, but if you like your markets colourful, clamorous and spilling into the surrounding streets, appreciate energy that illuminates the night and hanker for the opportunity to

GUIDES IN MALI

Few topics occupy travellers' conversations in Mali quite as much as the question of guides. No matter where you go (Bamako, Djenné, Mopti and the Dogon Country are especially bad, although even sleepy Ségou is fast catching up), guides will sidle up and offer tours of the country, for which you pay a daily fee. They're persistent, regaling you with horror tales of thieves and the difficulty of travelling solo, which are simply not true.

If you don't want one, you certainly don't need a constant companion or intermediary to enjoy Mali. That said, in many places, such as Djenné or Timbuktu, a knowledgeable and informative local guide, hired on the spot for a few hours, can greatly enhance your visit. Guides are also highly recommended in the Dogon Country.

So, how to choose a guide? It used to be that every young Malian male could drop everything and become your guide to Mali, which meant that some were knowledgeable travel companions while others were charlatans. Thankfully, it has recently become a lot easier. Would-be guides have to take a comprehensive, one-year course organised by Mali's Ministry of Tourism, including written and oral exams. All accredited guides, who have completed the course and passed the exams, must now carry cards, which indicate whether they are accredited to guide nationally (blue) or only in their local district (yellow). To find such a guide, ask at the local tourist office, Mission Culturelle, hotel or tour operator, or ask other travellers for recommendations.

The system is not foolproof – not every guide who has passed the exam is necessarily good. Some guides can't read or write in French, meaning that they failed to sit the first-round of exams, and we have received unconfirmed reports of corruption allowing some budding guides to circumvent the exam process.

But overall, Mali's tourism authorities are to be commended on a system that has dramatically improved the situation.

befriend open and friendly locals, Bamako might just get under your skin.

ORIENTATION

Bamako's city centre is on the north bank of the Niger River, focused on the triangle formed by Ave Kassa Keita, Blvd du Peuple and the train tracks. ACI 2000 is a new district, west of the centre, which will one day rival the downtown area as a commercial centre. The Quinzangougou and Hippodrome districts, northeast of the centre, are great places to find hotels, restaurants and night-clubs. Heading south from the centre, Pont des Martyrs leads across the river to Route de Ségou (also called Ave de l'Unité Africaine, OUA), the main road out of town – the Sogoniko *gare routière* is about 6km along this road. The Pont du Roi (west of Pont des Martyrs) carries a new highway that leads to Sénou International Airport (17km).

INFORMATION Bookshops

Bamako suffers from a lack of good bookshops; check out the following.

Azalai Hôtel Salam (Map p492; Next to Pont du Roi)

The book shop here is also worth trying.

Librairie Bah Grand Hôtel (Map p494; ☎ 223 6705; Ave van Vollenhoven; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun) In the Grand Hôtel, has a decent selection of French books, magazines and newspapers; they also have occasional and hard-to-snaffle copies of *International Herald Tribune* and *Newsweek*.

Cultural Centres

Centre Culture Américain (☎ 223 6585; Badalabougou Est; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Wed, 1-4pm Thu, 8.30-11am Fri) South of town, carries US magazines and newspapers.

Centre Culture Français (Map p494; ☎ 222 4019; www.ccfbamako.org; Ave de l'Indépendance; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Wed & Fri & Sat, 1.30-5.30pm Thu) Has a good library as well as a cinema and live performances; pick up their bimonthly programme.

Emergency

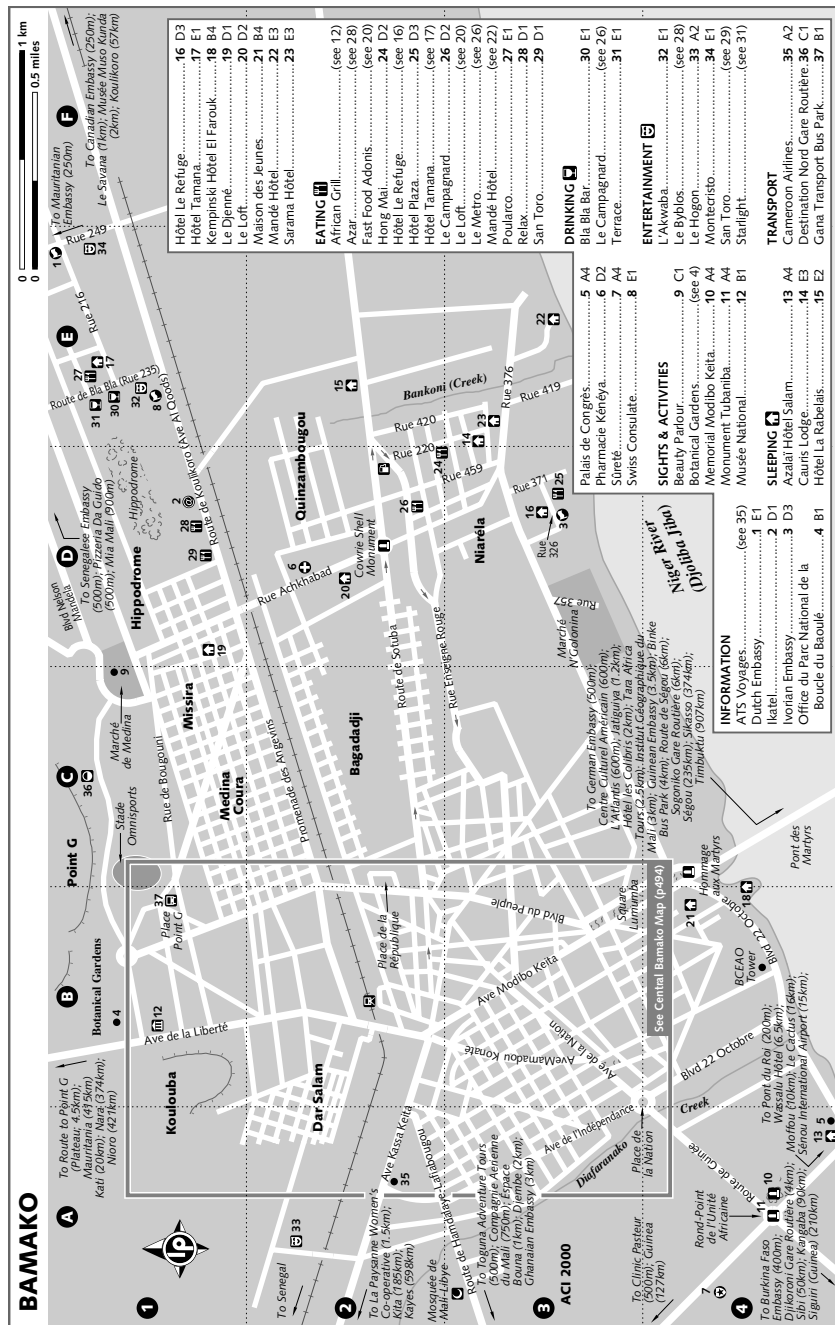
Ambulance (☎ 15)

Police (☎ 17)

Internet Access

Ikotel (Map p492; Route de Koulikoro; per hr CFA1000; ☎ 8am-11pm Mon-Fri, 9am-11pm Sat & Sun) Tech-savvy and with the fastest connections in town.

Smint Cyber Café (Map p494; PI OMVS; per hr CFA500; ☎ 7.30am-10pm) Central but slower.



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Medical Services

Clinique Pasteur (☎ 229 1010; 🕒 24 hr) West of town, this is Mali's best hospital for African diseases, emergencies and other consultations; they have their own labs and handle insurance claims with a minimum of fuss.

Hôpital Gabriel Touré (Map p494; ☎ 222 2712; Ave van Vollenhoven)

Pharmacie Kénéya (Map p494; Rue Achkhabad, Quinzambougou)

Pharmacie Officine Coura (Map p494; Ave de la Nation)

Money

Banque de Développement du Mali (BDM); Ave Modibo Keita (Map p494; Ave Modibo Keita); Rue de la Cathedral (Map p494; Rue de la Cathedral) Can exchange cash and travellers cheques, plus cash advances on Visa card.

Bicim (Map p494; Immeuble Nimagala, Blvd du Peuple) May do Visa transactions.

BIM (Map p494; Ave de l'Indépendance)

Post

Main post office (Map p494; Rue Karamoko Diaby) Poste restante is fine for letters (CFA500 to collect), but unreliable for packages.

Tourist Information

Office Malien du Tourisme et de l'Hôtellerie (Map p494; Omatho; ☎ 223 6450; www.tourisme.gov.ml; Rue Mohammed V) This is not set up for independent travellers, but has the occasional brochure and has list of guides.

Look out for Le Dourouni, a monthly listings magazine available free at some travel agencies and hotels, which has advertisements for local events, nightclubs and restaurants, plus listings for hotels and emergency services.

Travel Agencies

Several agencies deal with international and domestic flights, for tickets consult the following:

ATS Voyages (Map p494; ☎ 222 2245; ats@ats.com.ml; Ave Kassa Keita)

ESF (Map p494; ☎ 222 5144; esf@cefib.com; Place du Souvenir) Long-standing and reliable.

TAM Voyages (Map p494; ☎ 221 9210; www.tamvoyage.com; Sq Lumumba)

For tours around Mali and further afield, the following companies are recommended, and can arrange English-speaking guides: TAM Voyages (Map p494; ☎ 221 9210; www.tamvoyage.com; Sq Lumumba)

Tara Africa Tours (☎ 228 7091; www.tara-africatours.com; Baco Djicoroni ACI)

Toguna Adventure Tours (☎ /fax 2297853; toguna.adventure@afribone.net.ml; ACI2000) West of town, Toguna are highly recommended.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Bamako is largely safe, although, like any city, it has its share of pickpockets and bag-snatchers, so take the normal security precautions and never carry valuables. Bamako train station, the trains themselves and Rue Baba Diarra are a popular haunts for thieves, especially at night. The streets around Sq Lumumba (especially close to the river) should also be avoided after dark.

SIGHTS

Musée National

The Musée National (Map p492; Ave de la Liberté; admission CFA2500, guide CFA3000; 🕒 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) is exceptionally good, with a stunning collection of masks, statues, textiles, archaeological artefacts and a fine model of the Djenné mosque. Since the renovations in 2003, it's beautifully presented and well-labelled, and the tranquil grounds, excellent bookshop and good restaurant make it an excellent place to spend an afternoon. French and English-speaking guides can be arranged.

Musée Muso Kunda

This museum (Rue 161, Korofina Nord; admission free; 🕒 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) is a homage to Mali's women, with displays of traditional clothing and everyday household objects. Take a sotrama (battered green minibus; CFA150) or taxi (CFA1500) from the west end of Route de Koulikoro and ask for Fagigula (the museum is signposted from there).

Musée de Bamako

Musée de Bamako (Map p494; Place de la Liberté, admission CFA500; 🕒 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) occupies a pleasant, if somewhat kitsch, garden in the centre of Bamako. The museum itself is still a work-in-progress, with some ethnographic exhibits (including a life-sized pirogue). Of greatest interest are the enlarged postcards of colonial Bamako; some still bear the original postmarks and date from the 19th century. Look especially for the photo of Bamako train station awash in crinolines and pith helmets – a far cry from the clamour today. There is also some local contemporary art upstairs.

This charming hotel out by the Hippodrome is easily our favourite in Bamako. The rooms have character (though those with shared bathroom are overpriced), the staff are among Bamako's friendliest and most laid-back, the bathrooms are immaculate and the ambience of the leafy courtyard is wonderful to retreat into after a long Bamako day. There's also a swimming pool, a reasonably priced laundry service, a varied restaurant menu and the location – removed from the clamour of the city centre but close to good restaurants and bars – is also one that you'll soon appreciate. If you've spent any time researching Bamako hotels, you'll quickly realise what a great deal this is.

Cauris Lodge (Map p492; ☎ /fax 679 1438; hotelcauris.lodge@yahoo.fr; Rue 220, Niaréla; s/d CFA20,000/25,000; 🍷 🍷) Although not quite as good as Hôtel Tamana, Cauris Lodge is in a similar vein. The seven rooms are simple, but nicely kept, and all have mosquito nets. African art abounds in the lobby and the *paillote* bar is one of Bamako's more intimate. There's an OK swimming pool and the surrounding streets are quiet and tree-lined – and have an unmistakably African feel, without too much clamour.

Sarama Hôtel (Map p492; ☎ 221 0563; sarama@cefib.com; Rue 220, Niaréla; s/d CFA30,000/37,000; 🍷 🍷) Tucked away in the quiet streets of Niaréla, the Sarama is an interesting choice that sees fewer tourists than it deserves. Rooms are spacious, quiet and attractively furnished, and the super-friendly management is a plus. There's a small swimming pool and, although prices could be a notch lower, it represents terrific Bamako value.

Hôtel les Colibris (☎ 222 6637; hotelcolibris@yahoo.com; off Ave de l'OUA, Sogoniko; s/d from CFA20,000/25,000; 🍷 🍷) As far as Bamako prices go, Les Colibris is good value. It does have some of the stereotypical problems of an African hotel – staff who need to be roused in the afternoon and an attention to detail that could be sharper – but the rooms are well kept, spacious and worth every ceefah. The surrounding streets are quiet and leafy, and the hotel sprawls through a shady grounds (there's a pool) with bungalow-style accommodation and rooms in the main hotel building.

Le Djenné (Map p492; ☎ /fax 221 3082; djenneart@afribone.net.ml; off Route de Koulikoro; small d CFA21,000, larger s/d CFA30,000/35,000; 🍷) If you're tired of hotels that mimic European ambience,

Le Djenné offers an antidote. Local and West African artists were given free rein to decorate this place – think masks, statues, African colour schemes and architectural flourishes that are rooted strongly in local culture. Some rooms are a bit dark, but all are highly original, well maintained and come with mosquito nets.

Hôtel Le Refuge (Map p492; ☎ 221 0144; lerefuge@arc.net.ml; Rue 326, Niaréla Sud; s/d CFA27,500/38,500; 🍷 🍷) This tranquil Lebanese-run hotel comes warmly recommended by travellers and by us. Rooms are cool, well-equipped, modern and spotless, if a little lacking in character. The surrounding streets are quiet and pleasant, the bar is good, the restaurant excellent and every room has satellite TV. There's also a small swimming pool.

Le Loft (Map p492; ☎ 221 6690; leloft@arc.net.ml; Rue Archkabad, Niaréla; s/d/ste CFA32,500/36,500/50,500; 🍷 🍷) We like this place. The building may not appear to be Bamako's most promising, but inside is another, completely renovated world. Rooms are light, airy and spacious, with an attention to style that's lacking in many Bamako hotels. Wrought-iron furnishings and European-standard bathrooms set the tone, with the occasional nod to African themes. Good service, satellite TV, double-glazed windows and an excellent restaurant are among the other highlights.

Hôtel La Rabelais (Map p492; ☎ 221 5298; touraine@afribonemali.net; Route de Sotuba, Quinzambougou; d/ste CFA38,000/57,000; 🍷 🍷) This excellent French-run hotel has much to commend it. Every room is different – some are brightly coloured, others have dark wooden beams – bathrooms are excellent and come with shampoos, soaps and fluffy towels, and there's also satellite TV, fridge and safes. The swimming pool wins our vote for Bamako's most inviting.

Mandé Hôtel (Map p492; ☎ 221 1993; mande.hotel@afribone.net; Rue Niaréla, Cité du Niger; d/ste CFA42,000/55,000; 🍷 🍷) The Mandé wins the prize for having the nicest location of any hotel in Bamako. Yes, it's a long way from the city centre (a taxi should cost CFA1000), but its perch on a quiet stretch of the Niger River's bank is outstanding. The best views are reserved for the restaurant, while the bungalow-style rooms are set back behind the swimming pool. Rooms are good, if unspectacular, and the bathrooms are in need of a loving overhaul.

Hôtel Yamey (Map p494; ☎ 223 8688; gorainta.datatech@toolnet.org; Rue 311, Quartier du Fleuve; d CFA17,500-25,500; 🍷) Hôtel Yamey is in a good location, close to the centre and adjacent to one of Bamako's restaurants and lively bars – which is just as well because the rooms, while fine, are a tad run-down. Price increases according to size – the cheapest rooms are pokey, the most expensive are large enough to leave your baggage lying around without falling over it whenever you get out of bed.

Top End

Azalai Hôtel Salam (Map p492; ☎ 222 1200; www.azalaihôtels.com; next to Pont du Roi; d/ste from CFA75,000/125,000; 🍷 🍷) One of Bamako's premier hotels, the Salam is a classy place, from the marble-lined lobby to the warmly furnished rooms, which are enormous, luxurious and equipped with everything to ensure a comfortable stay – satellite TV, Internet connection, minibar and safe. Add in the numerous gift shops, swimming pool, tennis courts, bars and restaurants, and there's everything you need here.

Kempinski Hôtel El Farouk (☎ 223 1830; www.kempinski.com; Blvd 22 Octobre; s/d/ste from CFA75,000/85,000/110,000; 🍷 🍷) Opened in 2003, this is Bamako's most intimate and atmospheric top-end hotel. The public areas boast African art and the rooms are large, supremely comfortable and have all the bells and whistles. Unlike other riverbank hotels in Bamako, every room has a river-view, although the more you pay the better it is – the river suites have balconies overhanging the river, while the ambassador suite (CFA150,000) is like a large apartment with a sweeping balcony. The service is also good.

EATING

Restaurants

San Toro (Map p492; Route de Koulikoro; starters CFA2500, mains CFA4500; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This original place is run by the same people who brought you Le Djenné (opposite) and it shows. The décor is charmingly African and there are galleries of local art in the grounds. The specialties are quality Malian dishes (*the poulet au coco* is especially good) which can take a while to appear, but are always worth the wait. There's no alcohol, but there are tasty fruit juices. Best of all, in the evenings from around 8pm, there's

live kora music with djembe thrown in on Thursdays. Highly recommended.

Soukthothai (Map p494; ☎ 222448; Rue 311, Quartier du Fleuve; starters CFA3500-4500, mains CFA4500-7500; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, dinner Sat) Craving a *pad thai*? It's only CFA6000 away. You won't find more authentic Thai cuisine in Africa, and expats swear by this place as one of Bamako's best restaurants. We're inclined to agree. If you order a bottle of wine, you'll easily pay CFA20,000 per person, so you may want to save it for a special occasion, but it's a classy place. Reservations are recommended.

African Grill (Map p494; PI OMVS; starters around CFA2000, mains CFA4000-5000; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) African Grill is a wonderful place to sample African specialties like *foutou* (sticky yam or plantain paste), *kedjenou* (slowly simmered chicken or fish with peppers and tomatoes) and *poulet yassa* (grilled chicken in onion and lemon sauce). There's a different *plat du jour* every day, a delightful oasis of a dining area, friendly service, and a steady stream of regulars. They also do sandwiches (CFA1500) and have a branch restaurant in the Musée National (p493), which opens the same hours as the museum. Warmly recommended.

Le Compagnard (Map p492; off Route de Sotuba, starters CFA3200-6000, mains CFA4200-6250; 🍷 6am-11pm) Top marks for this place. High quality French cooking, French wines and a switched-on ambience ensure plenty of regular customers among the expat community. The salad bar (CFA3900) is a nice touch and the wood-fired pizzas are as good as you'll find in Bamako.

Pizzeria Da Guido (Rue 250, off Blvd Nelson Mandela, Hippodrome; pizzas & pasta CFA4500-7500; 🍷 lunch & dinner Sat-Wed, dinner Fri) Expats swear this place in the northeast makes the best pizzas in town, but the Italian owners also do wonderful things with lasagne, ravioli, cannelloni, gnocchi and a different, but always tasty, *plat du jour* every day.

Restaurant Chinois Long Ma (Map p494; Ave de la Nation; starters from CFA1500, mains CFA3000-4000; 🍷 9am-11pm) One of the best of Bamako's many Chinese restaurants, Long Ma has tasty food, good service and a varied menu of the usual Chinese staples.

Appaloosa (Map p494; Rue 311, Quartier du Fleuve; starters CFA2000-4000, mains CFA3500-6500; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Spend any prolonged period of time in Bamako and you'll end up here at some stage; it's where Tex Mex meets Beirut

with the merest nod to Bamako. There are many highlights, including Lebanese meze, steaks and pizzas. There's also a popular bar (see right).

The best of the hotel restaurants are at **Mande Hôtel** (Map p492; ☎ 221 1993; Rue Niaréla, Cité du Niger), on a platform over the Niger River, **Le Refuge** (Map p492; ☎ 221 0144; Rue 326, Niaréla Sud), **Le Loft** (Map p492; ☎ 221 6690; Rue Archkabad, Niaréla), **Hôtel Tamana** (Map p492; ☎ /fax 221 3715; Rue 216, Hippodrome) and **Hôtel Plaza** (Map p492; Rue 326, Niaréla Sud; meals from CFA8000; ☎ lunch & dinner) which has good elevated views of Bamako.

Cafés & Patisseries

Pâtisserie le Royaume des Gourmands (Map p494; Ave Modibo Keita; pastries & cakes CFA250-700; meals CFA1000-3000; ☎ 7am-11pm) It may not look much from the outside but this place is an air-con haven amid busy Bamako, with one of the nicest dining areas in downtown. More importantly, it's the best patisserie in town, with good croissants, coffee and fresh orange juice served with a smile.

Les Délices de Bamako (Map p494; Immeuble Nimagala, Rue Famolo Coulibaly; meals CFA750-4000, pastries & cakes CFA250-600; ☎ 6am-midnight) This is a friendly and popular choice with cake eaters, although it's a bit down-at-heel.

Relax (Map p492; Route de Koulikoro; meals CFA2000-CFA3000, pastries CFA250-700 ☎ 24hrs) Relax, one of numerous patisseries in the Hippodrome area, this is popular at all hours, with rich cakes and some excellent pastries.

Quick Eats

Snacks like brochettes (grilled pieces of meat on a stick) and chips are cooked on small barbeques all around town. At the *sotrana* ranks near the Cinéma Vox, as well as west of Place de la Liberté across from Carrefour des Jeunes, there are food stalls serving cheap rice and sauce.

In Bamako Coura, cheap and cheerful sit-down restaurants include **Restaurant de la Paix** (Map p494; Rue Bagayoko) and **Restaurant Sabunyman 2** (Map p494; Rue 136, Bamako Coura), which both serve spicy Senegalese dishes for around CFA1000, and don't normally bother with printed menus. **Café Restaurant la Casa** (Map p494; Rue Ousmane Bagayoko; meals CFA750-1000) is a fine, relaxed backpacker hang-out opposite the Mission Catholique; their spaghetti, couscous and ragout dishes contain

the freshest ingredients, but if you want meat you'll need to order in advance.

On the other side of Ave Modibo Keita, but still in the centre, **Restaurant le Gourmet** (Map p494; Rue Caron; meals CFA600-1000; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Sat) is another small and simple place, offering only two or three dishes per day (often rice with a stew or sauce).

For good Lebanese specialties, try **Pou-larco** (Map p492; Route de Bla Bla; starters CFA1250-3000, mains CFA3500-7500; ☎ 8am-midnight) which does decent shwarmas as well as grilled dishes and paninis; it's a great place to watch the passing parade in the evening. **Fast Food Adonis** (Map p492; Rue Achkhabad; meals CFA2500-3000), below Le Loft, offers more fast food, but it's one of the best in town.

Hong Mai (Map p492; Rue 220, Niaréla) does cheap and quick Vietnamese food, and is a Bamako institution.

Self-Catering

For imported food and wine, try **Azar** (Map p492; Route de Koulikoro) or **Le Metro** (Map p492; off Route de Sotuba, Niaréla). There are good fruit and vegetable stalls at the *sotrana* rank near the Cinéma Vox and on Place OMVS.

DRINKING

Bla Bla Bar (Map p492; Route de Bla Bla, Hippodrome; small beers CFA1000) This is Mali's most sophisticated bar, and is so well known that the road on which it sits is now named after the bar. Regulars lament that it has lost something since being glassed in and blasted with air-con, but it's still filled with the bold and the beautiful at weekends.

Terrace (Map p492; Route de Bla Bla, Hippodrome; small beers CFA1000; ☎ 8pm-late) Upstairs and open-air, Terrace is the place to go to gaze longingly into someone's eyes, if only because the high decibel music drowns out conversation streets away, let alone at the bar. It's a pretty upmarket crowd but the atmosphere, for all the noise, is agreeable.

If Bla Bla Bar and Terrace are too high-brow for you, there are plenty of earthy bars with an exclusively African clientele and outdoor tables between the Bla Bla and Route de Koulikoro.

Le Campagnard (Map p492; ☎ 221 92 96; www.lecampagnard.com; off Route de Sotuba; small beers CFA1000; ☎ 11am-late) This is the sort of place where South African and Australian gold miners rub shoulders with Peace Corps volunteers,

which should give some idea of the breadth of its appeal, although it's mainly a foreign crowd. In 1995, *Newsweek* voted this one of the best bars in Africa – it's not *that* good but it is terrific.

Appaloosa (Map p494; Rue 311, Quartier du Fleuve; beers CFA1500-3000) As good as the restaurant is here (see p497), the food's a sideshow for evening frisson with long-legged, blond-haired hostesses (who don't expect to pay for their drinks) rubbing shoulders (and other parts of the anatomy) with rich Malian men and world-weary escapists. Classily seedy, this is, for all its faults, a Bamako institution. Make of it what you will.

ENTERTAINMENT

Live Music

Bamako has some of the best live music in the world. Where else can you see some of the finest international performers just about every weekend? The problem is that they tend to change venues almost as soon as advertising banners go up, so either ring around, ask a savvy taxi driver, or pay a visit to check who's on the bill. For more information on Mali's musicians, see p488 and p58.

Wassulu Hôtel (☎ 228 7373; Route de l'Aéroport) When she's not in Paris or touring the world, Oumou Sangare plays at the hotel she owns at 9pm on Saturday evenings. Admission is free for guests of the hotel, or CFA2500 for nonguests.

Éspace Bouna (☎ 229 5468; Rue 360, AC(200)) One of Bamako's most agreeable garden venues, Éspace Bouna sometimes plays host to the master kora player, Toumani Diabaté, as well as Djelimady Tounkara and the Super Rail Band. The big names are most likely to be on the bill on Friday or Saturday night at 10pm (admission CFA2500 if someone famous is playing), but otherwise the local salsa bands which fill in aren't half bad.

Moffou, a nightclub 10km southwest of Pont du Roi, is owned by the legendary Salif Keita. Moffou is really only worth it on the rare Saturday nights when he's playing. Otherwise you'll hear orchestras of varying quality.

Le Hogon (Map p492; off Ave Kassa Keita) Toumani Diabaté was playing here (CFA1500) when we were in Bamako, but this slightly seedy place always has traditional live music of some description from 9pm on Friday and Saturday nights.

Buffet de la Gare (Map p494; ☎ 228 7373; off Rue Baba Diarra) This is where the legendary Super Rail Band (which once included Salif Keita), made its name. Although they still play here from time to time, you're more likely to hear an up-and-coming local band on Friday and Saturday nights.

Centre Culturel Français (Map p494; ☎ 222 4019; www.ccfbamako.org) The CCF doesn't offer many concerts but, at least once a month, they do it in style – pairing anyone from Habib Koite, Kassy Mady Diabaté and Toumani Diabaté to Kandia Kouyate and Tartit. Check out their bimonthly programme for details.

Other places where live music is on the programme include **L'Akwaba** (Map p492; Route de Bla Bla); **Djembe** (Lafiabougou; admission CFA2000), west of town, where lots of Guinean musicians play; **Le Savanna** (Route de Koulikoro), east of town, which attracts Burkinabé stars; and **San Toro** (Map p492; Route de Koulikoro), a restaurant with live kora music from 8pm nightly.

Nightclubs

Bamako is a city that comes into its own after dark, and on weekends it's a party town. Clubs don't get going before midnight and close around 6am. You won't hear a whole lot of African music, and male visitors will be propositioned by women hoping to be their expensive friend, but all of that is secondary to the feel-good vibe. On Friday and Saturday places really jump, and most clubs also open Thursday and Sunday. Cover charges (CFA5000) usually include a drink, and after that drinks cost CFA1000 to CFA3000. If you leave Bamako without visiting at least one of the following for some high-octane dancing, you haven't really understood what makes the city tick: **L'Atlantis** (Badalabougou Est) South of the river.

Le Byblos (Map p492; Route de Koulikoro, Hippodrome)
Montecristo (Map p492; Rue 249, off Route de Koulikoro, Hippodrome)

Starlight (Map p492; Route de Bla Bla, Hippodrome)

SHOPPING

Mia Mali (☎ 221 2442; www.miamali.com; 1528 Blvd Nelson Mandela; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat) Far and away the most innovative and stylish boutique in Mali, Mia Mali has eminently reasonable prices and its commitment to working with over 175 artisans deserves to be supported. The array of items for sale – silver jewellery, masks, statues, textiles, artwork and home

furnishings – is endless and of the highest quality. In addition to traditional pieces, Elaine Belleza, the American owner, and her local craftspeople combine traditional themes with creative design twists. If you only visit one shop in Bamako, make it this one. To get here, head north along Route de Bla Bla, turn right (east) on Blvd Nelson Mandela, then look for the sign about 200m after you reach the mosque; Mia Mali is on the right.

Maison des Artisans (Map p494; Blvd du Peuple) Leather goods and woodcarvings are made and sold here, and there are several jewelers offering gold and silver objects, which are sold by weight (watch out for gold-plated brass). Bargaining is tough. Even if you don't plan to buy, it can be a good place to get an idea of price and selection.

La Paysanne Women's Cooperative (off Ave Kassa Keita) West of the city centre, this friendly place promises some great fabrics, designed and printed by women from the surrounding area.

Indigo (Map p494; ☎ 222 0893; www.indigo.com.ml; Place l'OMVS; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Sat) A charming, if small, boutique in the city centre, Indigo has reasonable prices for a well-chosen selection of textiles, masks, statues, musical instruments, crafts and home decorations.

Although you can find handicrafts in most of Bamako's markets (for more details see p495), the Marché N'Golonina has the best selection.

For the latest CDs of Mali's international music stars, try the music shop in the lobby of the **Grand Hôtel** (Ave Van Vollenhoven; ☎ 9.30am–1pm & 3–7pm Mon–Sat, 9.30am–12.30pm Sun). Prices are on a par with European prices (CFA20,000 per CD), but buying here means the musicians get royalties, unlike the bootleg copies you find around town, which do untold damage to Mali's music industry.

Bamako's best places for print film and processing is **Tokyo Color** (Map p494; ☎ 222 3498; Ave de la Nation), although if you're buying slide film, check the expiry dates.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Bamako's Sénou International Airport also serves a number of domestic routes which are shared between **MAE** (Map p494; ☎ 223 1465; Ave de la Nation) and **CAM** (Map p494; ☎ 229 9100; Ave Cheick Zayed, Hamdallaye). For more details on these two airlines, see p543.

Bamako to	Fare (CFA one-way)	Departures	Airline
Gao	120,900	Saturday	CAM
Kayes	57,850	4 weekly	MAE, CAM
Mopti	57,860	3 weekly	MAE, CAM
Timbuktu	90,360	3 weekly	MAE, CAM

Boat

The big boats leave from Koulikoro, some 50km downstream of Bamako. For details on the Niger River boat service see p545.

Bus

Long-distance transport for destinations south of the Niger River leaves from the Sogoniko *gare routière*, 6km south of the city centre on the left-hand side of the road heading south (CFA2000 by taxi, CFA125 by *sotrama*). This is home to **Bani** (☎ 220 6081), **Bittar** (☎ 220 1205) and **Somatra** (☎ 220 9932). About 2km back towards town is the bus park for **Binke** (☎ 220 5683). These companies have dozens of services heading north along the Bamako–Gao road.

Transport for destinations north of the Niger River leaves from **Destination Nord gare routière** (below Place Point G) or around Marché de Medina. Truck-buses to Kita leave at least three times a day, while services to Niore, Nara and Timbuktu (only in the dry season) leave a couple of times a week. Transport to Koulikoro (CFA1000) leaves when full.

Also handy for Koulikoro, Timbuktu and Kangaba is the **Gana Transport** (☎ 221 0978) bus park at Place Point G.

Bamako to	Fare (CFA)	Duration (hrs)
Bandiagara	9500	9–11
Douentza	10,500	10–12
Gao	16,000	16–20
Kita	3000	4
Mopti	8000	7–10
Niore	11,000	24–28
Ségou	3000	3
Sikasso	4500	3
Timbuktu	17,000	24–30

Train

Tickets can be bought in advance from the **station office** (Map p494; ☎ 222 8110) – come with the correct change and plenty of patience, as queues can be long and chaotic. Tickets

bought from touts may not be valid. Beware of thieves amid the crowds.

There's a service from Bamako to Kayes (2nd/1st class CFA6960/11,670, 10–14 hours) on Sunday, Monday and Friday, which returns the following day. You can also take the Wednesday morning service, which runs to Dakar via Kita (2nd/1st/couchette class CFA4600/6370/9375) and Kayes (2nd/1st/couchette class CFA11,480/16,190/22,190).

For details on international train services, see p544.

GETTING AROUND

The official rate from the airport to the city centre by private taxi is CFA7500, although it should cost CFA5000 going the other way.

The battered green *Sotramas* run from central Bamako to the *gares routières* and the outer suburbs for between CFA75 and CFA150. Important stops are marked on the Central Bamako map.

Most taxis in Bamako are yellow. Those with a 'taxi' sign on the roof are shared, while those without signs are for private hire (*déplacement*) only. The longest journey (such as Sogoniko *gare routière* to Hippodrome) in a private taxi should never cost more than CFA2000, although most journeys should cost half that.

AROUND BAMAKO

KOULIKORO

Koulikoro may have been an important place in colonial days, when the train from Dakar terminated here, but today most visitors only come here to catch the Comanav boat to Timbuktu. In November, there's an annual marionette festival at Diarabougou, roughly 20km east of town.

Motel le Saloon (☎ 226 2024; d CFA13,500; ☎) is the most pleasant place to stay, while close to the river east of town **Centre d'Accueil Régional** (☎ 262261; d CFA10,000) has passable rooms.

Plenty of transport leaves from Koulikoro market for Bamako's *Destination Nord gare routière* (CFA1000, one to two hours). Gana Transport has four buses a day from Place Point G. The **Comanav office** (☎ 226 2095; fax 226 2009) is on the western outskirts of town. See p545 for more information.

THE CENTRE

Central regions of Mali are dominated by the Niger River, Mali's lifeblood, a transporter of people, and the antidote to Mali's often bleakly arid countryside. As a traveller, the Niger River is also your guide to seeing the best that Mali has to offer – you may leave it behind at times, but generally you'll follow its path through the country, and each time you arrive on the riverbank you'll re-enter an African world that has changed little over the centuries.

SÉGOU

pop 92,500

There's something about Ségou; while Mopti is an example of clamorous river-based comings-and-goings, Ségou, strung out lazily along the riverbank 230km east of Bamako, has a languid slow-paced charm and there's an unmistakable sense that it remains a village in disguise. With its wide avenues, faded colonial buildings and nearby river excursions, it's a wonderful place to slow down, rest from life on the African road and get a sense of the Mali that exists beyond its tourist sites.

Information

BDM (Blvd de l'Indépendance) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

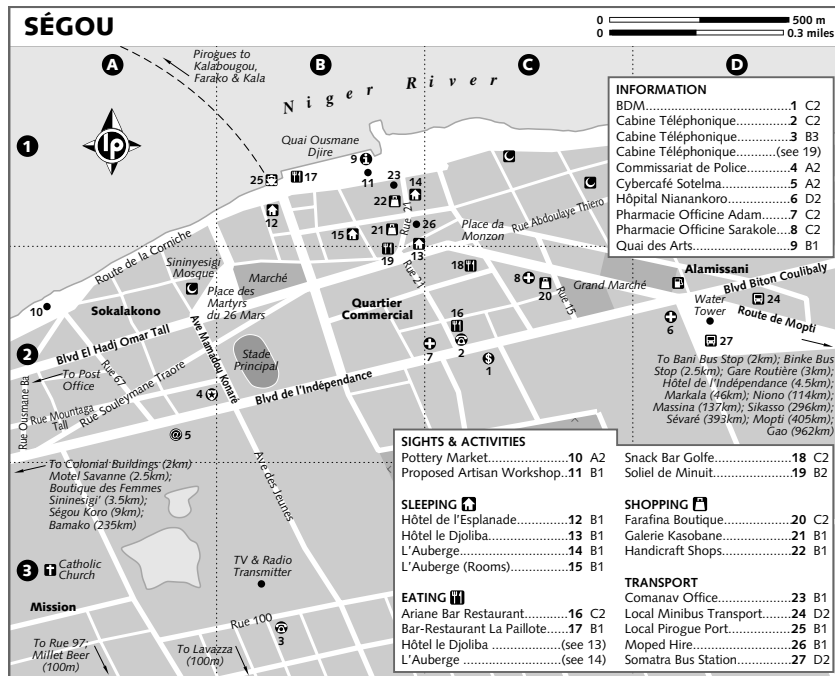
Cybercafé Sotelma (Blvd de l'Indépendance; per hr CFA1000; ☎ 8am–9pm) Old computers but quite fast connections.

Pharmacie Officine Adam (☎ 232 0643; Blvd de l'Indépendance)

Quai des Arts (Quai Ousmane Djiri; ☎ 8.30am–1.30pm & 2.30–6pm Tue–Sun) A private tourist office that's little more than a man and a map, but is more than the tourist office can muster; friendly and eager to help with information on hotels, transport, restaurants and sights.

Sights & Activities

Ségou's tree-lined streets just back from the riverbank (especially along Blvd El Hadj Omar Tall and the eastern stretches of Blvd de l'Indépendance) are enjoyable, with plenty of former colonial buildings bearing traces of decaying colonial elegance. From the small but interesting pottery market on the riverbank, it's a pleasant stroll to the Quai Ousmane Djiri area, which is slowly being developed with replica traditional



buildings (including an artisan workshop and exhibition area).

Market day in Ségou is Monday and, although it's not a patch on the Djenné spectacular, it's still an African experience with loads of atmosphere.

From the waterfront, pirogues can take you on excursions to some nearby sites, such as Kalabougou, where pottery is produced (and fired at weekends), and Farako, a centre for mud-cloth making. Trips cost from CFA15,000 per boat. In Kalabougou, you'll also have to pay a CFA3500 tourist tax (per group, not per person as some unscrupulous guides are fond of saying). Opposite Ségou, the interesting fishing village of Kala can be reached by public pinasse (CFA200).

The historic and beautiful village of Ségou Koro lies 9km upstream, just off the main Bamako road. In the 18th century it was the centre of Biton Mamary Coulibaly's Bambara empire, and the great man is buried here. Its crumbling Bambara buildings are interspersed with three ancient mosques (including one right on the riverbank) which are compact and pleasing. Intro-

duce yourself to the chief, who collects the CFA2500 tourist tax. A taxi to/from Ségou costs at least CFA10,000, and a guided tour around CFA2500.

Festivals & Events

Since 2005, Ségou has hosted the **Festival Sur le Niger** (☎ 232 1804; www.festivalsegou.org) in the first week of February. At this time, the riverbank comes alive with exhibitions, dance, theatre and puppet performances, storytelling and craft displays. As the festival gains reputation, it may even attract some of Mali's music stars for concerts.

Sleeping

Hôtel le Djoliba (☎/fax 232 1572; www.segou-hotel-djoliba.com; cnr Rue 21 & Blvd El Hadj Omar Tall; dm CFA4000, s/d with fan & shared bathroom CFA10,000/17,000, with air-con & satellite TV CFA20,000/25,000; ☎) This is our choice for the best hotel in town, combining a great location, just back from the riverbank, with large and pleasant rooms and great service. There's also something to suit all budgets, a good restaurant, and an ambience in which European quality is wedded to an African air

of tranquillity. For some, the lack of a swimming pool may be a drawback.

L'Auberge (☎ 232 1731; www.promali.org/aub-nd; Rue 21; s/d/ste CFA23,000/25,000/35,000; ☎) Long Ségou's best hotel, L'Auberge is still a favourite for many travellers. It's one of those African hotels where 4WDs park out the front and travellers fill the bar and restaurant. The garden (with swimming pool) is delightful and the restaurant excellent. The only drawback is that the decent (if unspectacular) rooms are a short block away.

Hôtel de l'Indépendance (☎ 232 1733; hotel.independance@cefib.com; Route de Mopti; s/d with fan CFA12,000/16,000, with air-con CFA18,000/22,000; ☎) If this place wasn't 4.5km southeast of town (CFA300 in a shared taxi), it would come close to topping our list for its quality rooms (tastefully decorated and with some character), pleasant courtyard and service. Lebanese-run, its restaurant is terrific, plus there's secure parking and a large swimming pool.

Motel Savane (☎ 232 0974; savane@motelsavane.com; off Blvd de l'Indépendance; d with fan/air-con CFA10,000/18,000, bungalows CFA20,000-26,000; ☎) If you don't mind being a pleasant 10-minute walk from the riverbank, Motel Savane has spacious, sparkling rooms with splashes of colour and character. It's also wonderfully quiet, has a shady garden area, and they sometimes offer drumming classes.

Hôtel de l'Esplanade (☎/fax 232 0127; esplanade@afribone.net.ml; Quai Ousmane Djiri; s/d with fan & shared bathroom CFA10,000/12,500, with private bathroom from CFA17,000/19,500; ☎) Position, position, position. Although most rooms don't take advantage of the riverside locale, walk out the door and there's the Niger in all its glory. The rooms may now be overhauled, as the hotel was recently brought under Italian management. Expect nice touches rather than major renovations.

If the dorm at Hôtel le Djoliba (the only highly recommended budget beds in town) is full, cheap beds can also be found at **Lavazza** (right; d from CFA7500) but they're big, bare and noisy.

Eating & Drinking

Soleil de Minuit (cnr Rue 21 & Blvd El Hadj Omar Tall; starters CFA1300-2000, main CFA1700-2200, 3-course meal CFA4000; ☎ 6am-midnight) Highly regarded by travellers for its fresh ingredients and laid-back atmosphere, this place is warmly rec-

ommended. The *capitaine a la Bamakoise* (fried Nile perch with bananas and tomato sauce; CFA4000) is a highlight.

Ariane Bar Restaurant (Rue 21; starters CFA1000-2000, mains CFA800-3000, breakfast from CFA1200; ☎ 7.30am-midnight) They love the TV in this place (it often holds the waiters spellbound) so escape to the garden. The cooking's nothing special but they do *poulet yassa* and prices are reasonable.

Bar-Restaurant La Pailote (Quai Ousmane Djiri) This wonderful riverside location is about to be wedded to fine Italian cooking – in November 2005 it came under the guidance of the owners of the excellent Pizzeria Da Guido in Bamako, so expect high-quality Italian cooking. They have traditional djembe and balafon artists on Friday nights and a local orchestra at 9pm on Saturday.

There are a couple of cheap restaurants at the *gare routière* and **Snack Bar Golfe** (Route de Mopti) is good for a quick sit-down meal.

Of the hotel restaurants, **Hôtel le Djoliba** (☎/fax 232 1572; cnr Rue 21 & Blvd El Hadj Omar Tall) is excellent, and they serve good pizzas on the terrace on Saturday nights. **Hôtel de l'Indépendance** (☎ 232 1733; Route de Mopti) does good local and Lebanese specialties which are well worth the trip south of the centre, and **L'Auberge** (☎ 232 1731; Rue 21) also does good pizzas. All three also have well-stocked and pleasant bars.

Away from the centre, **Lavazza** (☎ 9pm-late Thu-Sat) is an intimate garden venue where traditional and modern live music can be heard.

In the same area, locals brew thick, brown and bubbling millet beer that is worth trying; Rue 97 behind the cathedral is arguably the best.

Shopping

You can find Bambara pottery at the **pottery market** (Route de la Corniche), 1km southeast of the centre. For Ségou strip cloth and blankets, try the **Grand Marché** (Route de Mopti). A large group of curio sellers (heavy on the woodcarvings) can be found opposite L'Auberge. Bargain hard.

Farafina Boutique (Rue 15; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm Sun) sells a small range of clothes, textiles (including *bogolan* mud cloth) and jewellery. For a wider range of *bogolan* textiles, check out **Galerie Kasobane** (Rue 21; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat).

Getting There & Away

Many buses leave from the *gare routière*, 3km east of town on Route de Mopti. Somatra has a separate bus park nearby and Binke Transport and Bani are based along or just off Route de Mopti.

Numerous buses to Bamako (CFA3000, almost hourly), Mopti/Sévaré (CFA6000) and Sikasso (CFA4500) pass through Ségou daily. A few buses head up to Gao (CFA14,000).

Comanav (☎ 232 0204) also has an office in Ségou; see p545 for details of boat services from Ségou to elsewhere in Mali.

Minibuses to local destinations collect passengers on the dirt road behind the Elf petrol station. There are frequent buses to Markala (CFA1000), while the noon bus continues on to Massina (CFA3000).

Mopeds can be hired along Rue 21 for CFA6000 per day.

AROUND SÉGOU

Markala, north of Ségou, is the gateway to the Office du Niger irrigation scheme, and has an amazing bridge/dam and an interesting market. In March it hosts a fascinating marionette festival. From the pleasant Fula village of Massina, you can start a trip along the Niger by public pinasse (large pirogue). A good first stop is Diarafabé (CFA1500). There are basic places to stay in all three villages.

DJENNÉ

pop 22,382

One of the premier sites in West Africa, World Heritage-listed Djenné, which sits

on an island in the Bani River, is worth as much time as you can give it. Its incomparable mosque – the largest mud-built structure in the world – is like a fairytale apparition from a child-like imagination and provides Djenné with a backdrop to its huge, lively and colourful Monday market, one of the best of its kind in West Africa. By Monday evening, most of the tourists and traders have left – if you buck the trend and stay a few more days, you'll enjoy the labyrinthine streets and sleepy atmosphere virtually undisturbed. Away from the crowds, you'll quickly discover that Djenné is one of West Africa's oldest towns, and that little has changed since its heyday during the 14th and 15th centuries, when it profited, like Timbuktu, from trans-Saharan trade, and was a revered seat of Islamic learning. All of which adds up to what is unquestionably one of the most interesting and picturesque towns in West Africa.

Information

Visitors to Djenné must pay a CFA1500 tourist tax per person; it's collected at the checkpoint at the Djenné turn-off, soon after leaving the Bamako–Mopti road.

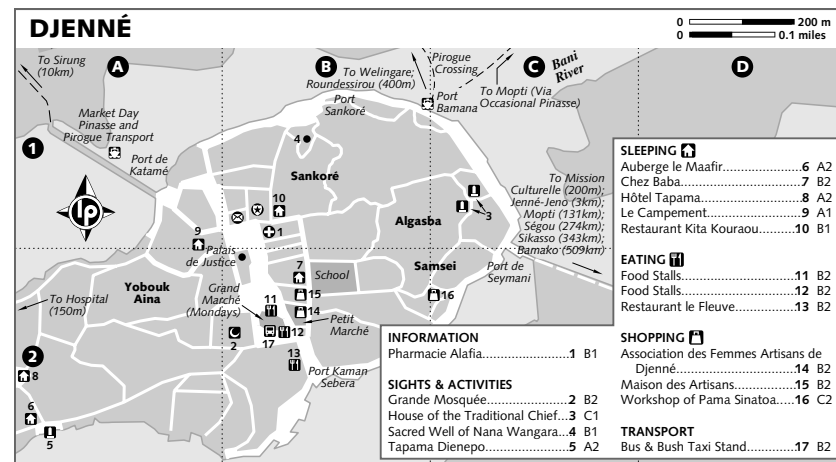
There are no banks in Djenné, but you may be able to change euros or dollars at **Le Campement** (☎ 242 0497) or **Auberge le Maafir** (☎ 242 0541). Phone calls can be made at the post office. The hospital is on the western edge of town and **Pharmacie Alafia** is central.

Guides are not essential in Djenné, although hiring a good one will open your eyes to aspects of Djenné you'd otherwise

THE GREAT CROSSING

All across central Mali from November, you're likely to see vast Fula herds closing in on the Niger River, readying themselves for one of West Africa's most picturesque annual rituals. Every late December or early January (the exact date of the crossing is not set until November because much depends on water levels), Diarafabé and other places along the Niger with large Fula populations are transformed into hives of activity, as hundreds of thousands of cows are driven southwards and across the Niger River to greener pastures. The crossing, known as *Dewgal*, dates back almost 200 years, and is a happy time for the Fula herders, who have been on the fringes of the Sahara for many months. The crossing means reunion with their families and a time to celebrate with music and dance. Fula women adorn themselves in all their ritual gold and amber finery, while the men paint and decorate their favourite animal to see who owns the finest and fattest beast.

Other smaller cattle crossings are held throughout the inland delta region in December or January, including in Sofara. This rarely visited small village, 2km west of the Bamako–Gao road just north of the Djenné turn-off, has two good-looking mosques and a large cattle market on Tuesday. Its cattle crossing is two weeks after the one at Diarafabé.



miss. Some guides speak English and fees are negotiable (aim for CFA3000 per person).

Sights

MISSION CULTURELLE

Before touring the town properly it's worth visiting the **Mission Culturelle** (admission free; ☎ 9am–4.30pm), which gives an excellent background to Djenné and the surrounding region. Apart from some photos and artefacts from Jenné-Jano (p506), there are some fine old photos of Djenné. The well-informed staff can recommend good guides. It's just before entering Djenné if you're coming from the ferry.

MONDAY MARKET

Every Monday, the wide open area in front of the mosque is transformed into a clamorous market, which has barely changed since the days when Saharan camel caravans brought salt across the sands to the gates of Djenné. Thousands of traders and customers come from miles around, and many of these itinerant traders follow the calendar of local market days in the region's villages, their week culminating in Djenné. Most arrive the night before, and by 6am on market day traders are already staking out the best sites (ie those with shade). By mid- to late-morning (the best time to visit the market), the open square in front of the mosque is filled with traders selling everything from cloth to calabashes, spices to spaghetti and pottery to pungent local

foods and prize goats. It spills over into the surrounding streets, especially those to the west. It's all the more atmospheric because it's a local's market, with little on sale for tourists, and stallholders are too busy hawking their wares to each other to worry about the intrusion of travellers. Put simply, this market experience is not to be missed.

ARCHITECTURE OF OLD DJENNÉ

You'll struggle to find a modern building anywhere in Djenné where, unusually for Africa, many of the mud-brick houses are over a storey high; traditionally, the top part was for the masters, the middle floor for the slaves and the bottom floor for storage and selling. The porches of the houses are lined with wooden columns, and the wooden window shutters and doors are painted and decorated with metal objects. Several of the most impressive houses once belonged to Moroccan traders and are decorated in a Moorish style, with elaborate windows and doors; the skill required to build such adornments is today the preserve of just one family of Djenné artisans. You'll also see Fulani-style entrances, with their covered entrances.

On a stroll through the dusty streets you'll pass a few **madrassas** (schools where young children learn the Qur'an); there are more **madrassas** in Djenné than in any other town in Mali, which serves as a reminder of its days as a renowned centre of Islamic scholarship. With the help of a guide, you can also see the old **Sacred Well of**

THE MOSQUE AT DJENNÉ

Djenné's elegant mosque was constructed in 1907, though it's based on the design of an older Grande Mosquée that once stood on the site. Famous throughout the world, the Grande Mosquée was first built in 1280, after Koi Konboro – the 26th king of Djenné – converted to Islam. It remained intact until the early 19th century when the fundamentalist Islamic warrior-king, Cheikou Amadou, let it fall to ruin. The modern form – a classic of Sahel-style (or Sudanese) mud-brick architecture – is faithful to the original design, which served as a symbol of Djenné's wealth and cultural significance, and which dazzled travellers for centuries – much as it does today.

The wooden spars that jut out from the walls not only form part of the structure, but also support the ladders and planks used during the annual repairs to the mud-render. Overseen by specialist masons, this work takes place at the end of every rainy season, when up to 4000 people volunteer to help.

Inside, a forest of wooden columns supporting the roof takes up almost half of the floor surface. A lattice of small holes in the roof allow beams of light to penetrate between the columns (in the rainy season they're covered with ceramic pots).

Excellent views of the mosque are to be had from the roofs of surrounding houses (usually for CFA500 to CFA1000) or the Petit Marché.

Officially non-Muslim visitors cannot go inside, although don't be surprised if you see camera-toting tourists high on a minaret. Bear in mind that, not only have they paid anywhere up to CFA10,000 to local opportunists keen to cash in on the tourist dollar, but they're also trampling on local sensibilities in the process.

Nana Wangara and the beautiful **house of the traditional chief**, whose role today is mainly as an adjudicator in local disputes. On the southern edge of town is **Tapama Dienepo**, the tomb of a young girl sacrificed here (she volunteered, according to locals) in the 9th century, after a local religious leader decided the town was corrupt.

JENNÉ-JENO

About 3km from Djenné are the ruins of Jenné-Jeno, an ancient settlement that dates back to about 300 BC. Implements and jewellery discovered here suggest that it may have been one of the first places in Africa where iron was used, and exposed the myth that no organised cities existed in West Africa before trade began and external influences were brought to bear upon it. In the 8th century AD, Jenné-Jeno was a fortified town with walls 3m thick, but around 1300 it was abandoned. Today, there's nothing much to see – some mounds and millions of tiny pieces of broken pottery – so a visit is of greater historical rather than aesthetic interest.

Sleeping & Eating

Djenné suffers from a severe shortage of hotel rooms, so for all but budget hotels, you should book ahead to beat the tour-group invasion.

Le Campement (☎ 242 0497; mattress on roof CFA4000, s/d with fan CFA10,000/12,500, with fan & bathroom CFA15,000/17,000, with air-con & bathroom CFA18,000/20,000; meals from CFA2000; 🍽️) This sprawling, handily located place is Djenné's tourism centre, with dozens of rooms across a wide price range, a large and pleasant open-air restaurant, and clean and tidy rooms which have the bare essentials. The spartan annexe rooms are fine, but suffer from the unfortunate problem of mosquito nets which block the air generated by the fan – making for a hot night.

Auberge le Maafir (☎ 242 0541; sinintadiawoye@yahoo.fr; d fan/air-con CFA18,000/23,000, ind breakfast; 🍽️) More intimate than the Campement, this pleasant place has attractively furnished rooms with some traditional design work (such as terracotta basins), but maintenance is not what it could be. The courtyard is pleasant and the views from the rooftop are good. Some quiet and fascinating Djenné streets lie just outside the door and you're within an easy walk to the mosque. No alcohol is served and dinner is CFA4000.

Restaurant Kita Kouraou (☎ 242 0138; mattress on roof CFA1500, r per person CFA2500) Rooms here are simple and clean, if cell-like (without windows), but it's a friendly place. The restaurant offers tasty, traditional Malian and

European staples from CFA1500. A nice, if basic, bolt-hole.

Chez Baba (☎ 242 0598; camping CFA2500, dm CFA3500) It's hard to know what to make of this place. The large, open courtyard could, at a stretch, resemble an old *caravanserai* or travellers' inn, but it also has all the comings-and-goings (guides and salesmen especially) of a bus station. Meals are available for CFA300. The rooms with mattresses on the floor are swept clean, and the mattresses on the roof have good views, but the shared toilets resemble the black hole of Calcutta.

Hôtel Tapama (☎ 242 0527; residencetapama@yahoo.fr; mattress on roof CFA2000, d with bathroom & fan from CFA10,000) Hôtel Tapama is showing its age, with bare neglected rooms, not averse to the occasional cockroach, and bathrooms that seem to be slowly falling apart. It's a pity, because the Moroccan-style internal courtyard and the surviving traces of the building's former elegance suggest that, with some renovations, it could be a terrific place with a nice feel. It's often full, more for reasons of Djenné's bed shortage than quality. Meals are around CFA2000.

There are a number of stalls serving food near the market in the early evening, while **Restaurant le Fleuve** (dishes CFA750-2000) offers simple Malian dishes which are best ordered in advance.

Shopping

Djenné is famous for *bogolan*, or mud-cloth (see p69). Although the cloth is on sale all across town, the most famous female artisan is **Pama Sinatoa** (☎ 242 0610; almaydiaka@yahoo.fr), whose workshop is near the town entrance. The quality is top-notch, the selection enormous, and in the show-rooms they do demonstrations on how the cloth is dyed. The sales pitch is more encouraging than hard-sell and they tend to be open daylight hours. You could also try the **Maison des Artisans** or the **Association des Femmes Artisans de Djenné**.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Djenné is away from the main river routes, but when the Bani River is high enough (usually from July to December), it's possible to arrive by public pinasse (CFA4000) from Mopti. There's a semi-regular Sunday service as well as departures on other days.

For the rest of the year, everything goes by road.

BUS & BUSH TAXI

Very little transport goes into Djenné except on Monday (market day). Most transport will drop you at the junction on the Mopti-Bamako road, 30km from Djenné itself, from where you may have a long wait for a lift into town.

Transport to Djenné is easiest from Mopti's *bâché gare* – *bâchés* (CFA2000) and Peugeot taxis (CFA2500) leave from here most mornings, and return in the afternoon. The journey takes about two hours.

Transport from elsewhere, such as Sikasso (CFA7000) and Ségou (CFA5000) arrives Monday morning and leaves in the afternoon.

Just before Djenné there's a short ferry crossing. Costs from CFA500 to CFA2000 depending on the vehicle size and the hour.

AROUND DJENNÉ

Welingare and Roundessirou are two of the most interesting Fula villages a few hundred metres north of Djenné and well worth the walk. Most travellers cross by

FULA EARRINGS

In Djenné, Mopti and other towns along the Niger, you will occasionally see well-to-do Fula women dressed very elaborately – although there are very few who do so on a daily basis, with most reserving such attire for festive occasions. Adornments include large bracelets of silver and necklaces of glass beads. Most spectacular, however, are the huge gold earrings called *kwotenai kanye*, worn by the wealthiest women. They are so heavy that the top of each earring is bound with red wool or silk to protect the ear, and is sometimes supported with a strap over the top of the woman's head. Earrings are given as wedding gifts from the woman's husband, who will have had to sell off several cows to afford them, but Fula women remain financially independent of their husbands, so gold and jewellery is often passed down from mothers to daughters. If you don't get to see a woman dressed in this way, some of Mali's postage stamps bear photos.

the bridge on foot (to the west) or hire a moped, but it costs CFA150 to cross by pirogue. Sirung, a beautiful Bozo village with a stunning mud mosque, is approximately a 20-minute moped ride southwest from Djenné. Bicycles (CFA3500 per day) and mopeds (CFA6000 per day including fuel) are available for hire and this can be arranged at most hotels in Djenné.

MOPTI

pop 109,456

In Mopti, tourism is a contact sport, with more guides, pinasse owners and touts per square metre than anywhere else in Mali. That said, clamour is central to Mopti's charm – its port is Mali's most lively and interesting – and you'll have to pass through here if you want to take a pinasse trip to Timbuktu. It's also a major staging post for journeys into the Dogon Country, and has reasonable transport connections to Djenné. If it all gets too much, stay in Sévaré, 12km away – which has great hotels and better transport options – and just come into Mopti when you have to.

Like many other Malian settlements, Mopti – at the junction of the Niger and Bani Rivers – is an agglomeration of quarters made up of several ethnic groups (especially Bozo and Fulani) who have been coming here for centuries to trade. Surrounded by rice fields and the river that is the city's reason for existence, Mopti can be hard work, but it's a necessary stop-off, and can even be fun.

Information GUIDES

For a recommended guide, ask at your hotel, the tourist office, other travellers, or contact the local guides association **AGTM** (☎ 679 3916), who speak English.

INTERNET ACCESS

Action Mopti Internet (off Ave de l'Indépendance, Old Town; per hr CFA1500; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-8pm Mon-Sat) Super-fast satellite connections.

Librairie & Cybercafé de la Venise (Ave de l'Indépendance; per hr CFA1000; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-8pm Mon-Sat) Central but slow.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital (☎ 243 0441; Blvd de l'Indépendance) Offers basic health care.

Pharmacie Officine du Carrefour (☎ 243 0422; Ave de l'Indépendance)

Pharmacie Officine de La Venise (☎ 243 0377; off Ave de l'Indépendance)

MONEY

Some hotels and shopkeepers will change cash and travellers cheques; CFA650 to the euro is possible but CFA640 is more common. Remember that banks in Mopti close at 11am on Friday and don't open again until Monday.

BCEAO (Route de Sévaré) Changes euros.

BDM (off Ave de l'Indépendance) Might do cash advances on credit cards, but don't count on it.

BIM (Blvd de l'Indépendance) Changes euro (cash only) and is a Western Union agent.

POST & TELEPHONE

Post office (Rue 68; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 1-4pm) Poste restante.

Sotelma (Rue 68; ☎ 8am-10pm) Has cardphones.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Bureau Régional du Tourisme (☎ 243 0506; mopti tourisme@hotmail.com; Blvd de l'Indépendance) About 200m north of Hôtel Kanaga; services are improving all the time.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

The following two companies can assist with travel reservations, hire 4WDs and run a range of river trips and Dogon treks:

Bambara Africa Tours (☎ /fax 243 0080; bambara@bambara.com; Hôtel Kanaga)

Satimbé Travel (☎ 243 0791; www.satimbetravel.com; Ave de l'Indépendance) An excellent company run by Issa Ballo.

VISA EXTENSIONS

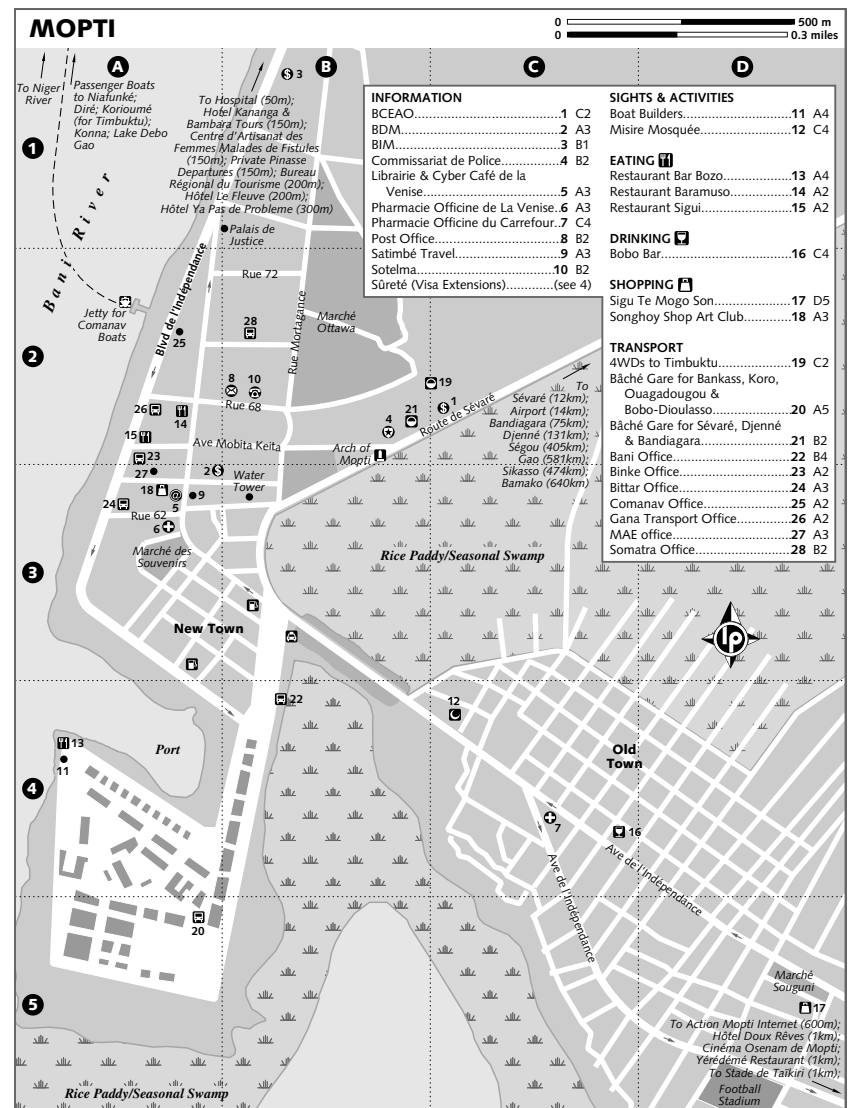
Commissariat de Police & Sûreté (Route de Sévaré; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-12.30pm Fri) One-month visa extensions cost CFA5000 and take about 15 minutes to process.

Dangers & Annoyances

Mopti is the centre of Mali's tourist industry and your visit can be tarnished by local and hard-to-shake youths continually offering their services as guides, or simply trying to sell you postcards and souvenirs.

Sights & Activities

Mopti's port is Mali's busiest and most evocative, it's a lively place where boats from up and down the river unload their



cargoes. You'll see slabs of salt from Timbuktu, plus dried fish, firewood, pottery, goats, chickens and much more. You'll also see a wonderful cast of characters, from stylishly dressed local women taking a pirogue back home and small boys diving into the water, to grizzled fishermen who regard it all with the disdain of the ancients.

Boat building happens next to Restaurant Bar Bozo.

The classic Sahel-style **Misire Mosquée** (Grande Mosquée; Ave de l'Indépendance), built in 1933, towers over the old part of town. Just before the rains in May or June the lower, mud-covered part of the mosque is re-rendered. The mosque is off-limits

BOAT TRIPS ON THE NIGER

Boat trips from Mopti on the Niger and/or Bani Rivers are one of the highlights of any trip to Mali, but they're also among the most daunting to organise. **Satimbé Travel** (☎ 243 0791) has been recommended as a pleasant and reliable local operator to deal with and most guides can make the arrangements on your behalf. Remember that longer boat trips are only possible from July or August to December when water levels are high.

Day or sunset trips

Dusk is a good time to take a short boat trip. There are numerous Fula and Bozo villages along the river, although your standard sunset excursion (CFA25,000 per boat for less than three hours) won't get you far beyond Mopti – probably just to the island separating the two rivers. Tour companies charge around CFA15,000 per person for a smaller pirogue (without a motor) for half a day.

If you can spare a day, Kotaka is a Fula village well known for its pottery and a fine mud-brick mosque, and the Bozo village of Kakalodaga really comes alive at dusk, with women cooking, kids playing and men repairing their nets and building boats. Tongorongu is another pretty Bozo village known for its mosque and pottery. A little further afield is Konna, which has a beautiful mosque (but sits on the Bamako–Gao road).

Mopti to Korioumé (for Timbuktu)

If you can spare the time (two nights, three days), travelling by pinasse is a terrific way to get between Mopti and Timbuktu. Indeed a slow boat up the Niger is one of the great African travel experiences. You'll go through the low-lying wetlands of the inland delta and pass fascinating Bozo, Fulani, Songhai and even Tuareg villages. The elaborate riverside mosques of the Delta, the birds in the wetlands and the changing cultural landscape en route make for a memorable few days.

The first day includes sailing to Lake Debo and, most likely, camping on the low sand dunes by the shore. This enormous lake is an important over-wintering place for migratory birds and has several Fula and Bozo villages on its shores. By the second night, you'll sleep on the riverbank a couple of hours before Niafunké. By late afternoon on the third day, you'll pull into Korioumé, the port of Timbuktu, 18km from town.

Before signing up to any river trip, check exactly where you're going, how much time you'll have sightseeing, what's included, and what the boat looks like (some pinasses have little more than planks covered in thin foam mats to sit on). To charter a boat to Timbuktu that comfortably seats 10 people, you won't get much change out of CFA450,000/400,000 in high/low season; petrol is included but food is not (count on CFA15,000 per person for the three days). Buy your food in advance. Arranging a trip directly through a boat owner may get you cheaper rates, but negotiations can be difficult.

Getting a ride on a large *pinasse transporteur* (cargo pinasse) is an option between Mopti and Korioumé (CFA12,000, about two days). **Bakaye Minedou Traore** (☎ 243 0104) operates a big pinasse to Timbuktu, while the 80m-long *Baba Tigamba* (known as *Petit Baba*) makes the journey on Friday afternoon. It has proper seats and even a small upper deck called, somewhat ambitiously, the *cabine luxe!* Smaller public pinasses should take about three days from Mopti to Korioumé (CFA9000), but with breakdowns and cargo stops they can take up to six.

For shorter journeys by public pinasse, aim for the following prices: north to Niafunké (CFA4000) or south to Diarafabé (CFA3000) and Massina (CFA4000), or to Djenné along River Bani (CFA4000).

to non-Muslims, but money (CFA500 to CFA1000) can buy you a good view from a nearby rooftop.

East of the mosque is the old town, where tourists rarely venture. It's an interesting place to wander around, although the architecture is pretty modern by the standards

elsewhere in Mali. There are separate Fula, Bella, Bobo and Mossi quarters.

At the **Marché Souguni**, to the southeast of town, traders sell fruit, vegetables, salt, fish and meat downstairs and art and crafts upstairs. A smaller market sells herbs, spices, traditional medicines and food stuff, and nearby

is a small Bobo bar which features bellaphone music and millet beer (see right).

Sleeping

Mopti has two top hotels, but many travellers prefer to stay in Sévaré (p512).

Hôtel Ya Pas de Probleme (☎ /fax 243 0246; www.yapasdeprobleme.com; off Blvd de l'Indépendance; mattress on roof with mosquito net CFA3500, dm CFA4500, s/d with fan & shared bathroom CFA10,000/13,500, with fan & shower CFA15,000/18,000, with air-con & private bathroom CFA22,000/25,000; 🚻) Mopti has been crying out for a place like this. A delightful French- and Dogon-run place, Ya Pas de Probleme has beautifully decorated rooms, an intimate and homely atmosphere and represents top value across a range of budgets. In addition to the spacious rooms, there's likely to be a terrace restaurant, larger dorm and more rooms to choose from by the time you arrive. The owners Olivier, Jean Marie and Ousman, are wonderful hosts.

Hôtel Kanaga (☎ 243 0500; kanaga@bambara.com; Blvd de l'Indépendance; d CFA53,000; 📞 🚻 🚿) They may have hiked their prices, and it may lack a personal touch, but this former Sofitel is the classiest place in town. Rooms are stylish and come with satellite TV and superb bathrooms with real shower receptacles. The swimming pool and restaurant are both excellent. It's 1km north of the centre on the banks of the Niger.

Hôtel Doux Rêves (☎ 243 0490; Rue 540; mattress on roof CFA3500, s/d with shared bathroom from CFA9000/12,000, with private bathroom from CFA12,000/15,000) Although it looks better from the outside than it actually is, the rooms here are simple (if a touch depressing) and the ambience in the surrounding streets is unmistakably African. Some rooms are bigger than others and all have mosquito nets, although not all have toilet seats.

Hôtel le Fleuve (☎ /fax 243 1167; Rue 86; d with fan/air-con CFA10,000/20,000; 🚻) These bog-standard Mali hotel rooms are bare, but clean, and the whole place suffers from not receiving many tourists (the service goes missing at times). Then again, when the tourists arrive, so too will the guides. The rooms in the newer annexe are slightly better.

Eating & Drinking

Restaurant Baramuso (Rue 68; meals from CFA500) This is the place for a wonderful cheap lunch in the centre of town.

Yérédémé Restaurant (off Ave de l'Indépendance; meals CFA1500-3000) In the southeast of the Old Town, opposite Stade de Taf'kiri, Yérédémé offers reasonable food served in a nice shady courtyard. It also sells mango and bissap jam for CFA1000 and makes clothes to order.

Restaurant Bar Bozo (meals CFA1800-3000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) While the food is average tourist fare and the service is incompetent (a two-hour wait for your meal to arrive is not unusual), Restaurant Bar Bozo is superbly located at the mouth of Mopti harbour. The passing panorama of Mopti river life could easily occupy an afternoon, so even if you don't eat here, stop by for a drink, preferably at sunset. It's a shame it starts running out of *everything* by 8pm.

Restaurant Sigui (Blvd de l'Indépendance; meals CFA2500-3000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This popular place gets the thumbs-up from travellers for its hybrid of European, Asian and Malian dishes, with a few vegetarian options thrown in. It's the best place to eat in town. They cook up a mean *capitaine a la Bamakoise* (fried Nile perch with bananas and tomato sauce) among other dishes.

Hôtel Ya Pas de Problem (off Blvd de l'Indépendance; mains from CFA2000) and **Hôtel Kanaga** (Ave de l'Indépendance; meals CFA7500) are two good hotel restaurants; the latter does excellent smoked *capitaine* sandwiches.

Numerous food stalls cluster around the *gare routière*, port and entrance to town. In the Old Town is a small **Bobo bar** (nr Rue 271 & Rue 282) where bellaphone music is sometimes played, continuing as long as people keep drinking millet beer.

Shopping

There's a fantastic range of art and craft for sale in Mopti, but you'll need to negotiate with some of Mali's toughest traders. Although you'll find crafts from all over Mali, Mopti is famous for blankets, and with hard bargaining, you can get the all-wool variety (made by combining six or seven long thin bands) from around CFA5000, a wool-cotton mix for CFA7500, all-cotton ones with simple coloured squares for CFA10,000 or CFA12,500 for a more complex design. Ornate Fula wedding blankets can cost CFA50,000 or more.

There are numerous artisan stalls upstairs at **Marché Souguni**. **Sigu Te Mogo Son** and

a group of disabled people who make handicrafts, are also based here. Opposite Hôtel Kanaga, just off Blvd de l'Indépendance, is **Centre d'Artisanat des Femmes Malades de Fistules** (☎ 8am-1pm & 4-8pm Mon-Sat), a local association helping handicapped women and selling textiles and weaving.

One of the best boutique-style shops in Mopti is the central **Songhay Shop Art Club** (☎ 8am-1pm & 4-8pm Mon-Sat) which is more expensive and largely fixed price, but its jewellery and textiles are good quality.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport is about 2km southeast of Sévaré and 14km from Mopti. **CAM** (☎ 243 1261) and **MAE** (☎ 679 4979; off Ave de l'Indépendance) each have at least two flights a week to Timbuktu (CFA43,360) and Bamako (CFA57,860). CAM also has one flight per week to Gao (CFA85,200, via Timbuktu). A private taxi from Mopti to the airport costs at least CFA6000.

BOAT

From Mopti many travellers head for Korimoué (Timbuktu's port) by boat. **Comanav** (☎ 243 0006) has an office on the waterfront, though tickets can be hard to come by as this is the busiest sector on the boat's itinerary. For details on the Niger River boat service see p545.

For details on travelling by pirogue and public or private pinasse, see the boxed text p510.

BUS & BUSH TAXI

Although some buses continue as far as (and originate in) Mopti, Sévaré is now the main transport hub for the region. Bus company offices in Mopti are marked on the map. For details on destinations and prices, see opposite.

Bâchés (CFA200) and Peugeot taxis (CFA250) cover the 12km between Mopti and Sévaré between 7am and 8pm daily (a private taxi costs CFA2500). They leave from the *bâché gare* at the town entrance. Transport also leaves here every morning for Djenné (CFA2000) and Bandiagara (CFA1750). *Bâchés* and Peugeot taxis leave from near the port some mornings for Bankass (CFA3000, two hours) and Koro (CFA5000, three hours).

To Timbuktu (CFA15,000, 12 hours on a good day), 4WDs leave most days from behind the *bâché gare*. It's a hard journey.

SÉVARÉ

This bustling little town has not a single sight worth seeing, but it's much more relaxed than neighbouring Mopti, has terrific places to stay, and ample transport connections. Bandiagara and the Dogon Country are just 63km away.

Information

BNDA (Route de Mopti) Charges 2% commission on travellers cheques and cash.

Post office (Route de Mopti) Does Western Union office transfers.

Sleeping & Eating

All of the following places are either on or signposted off the main road through town.

Mac's Refuge (☎ 242 0621; malimacs@yahoo.com; Rue 124; camping without/with own equipment CFA6000/4500, s/d with fan & shared bathroom CFA12,000/18,000, with fan & private bathroom CFA18,000/21,000, with air-con CFA21,000/25,000; ☎ ☎ ☎) One of the best places to stay in Mali, Mac's is indeed a refuge. Rooms are individually styled to reflect the culture of Mali's many ethnic groups – with Bobo masks, Bozo fishing nets and Tuareg leather cushions and so on. The food here is legendary (there's a banquet meal – CFA5000 – of a different cuisine at 7pm every night) and his buffet breakfasts (included in room and camping prices) are enough to make you want to stay longer. Add a small pool, bicycle hire (CFA1000 per day), a small reference library on Malian culture and Mac's talents as a qualified masseur (CFA15,000 per hour) and you'll soon see why it's so popular.

Mankan Te Bed & Breakfast (☎ 242 0193; www.mankan-te.de; off Route de Bamako; s CFA15,000-19,000, d CFA16,500-20,500; ☎ ☎) Another outstanding choice, the intimate Mankan Te has lovingly maintained rooms with splashes of colour, super-clean bathrooms and mosquito wire (no holes) on the windows. In addition to the redoubtable Jutta, the owner and a fount of practical knowledge on the region (her website is excellent), there are also five tortoises in residence. It's warmly recommended, and a couple of blocks away from the B&B, Jutta also runs a restaurant,

Mankan Te Restaurant (www.mankan-te.de; Route de Bamako; mains CFA2000-5000, 3-course meals CFA4000-8500; ☎ lunch & dinner), that is quickly earning a reputation as one of the region's best. A garden setting and a wide variety of dishes (vegetarian, pasta, African specialties) make this an excellent place. It turns into a late-night bar after the kitchen closes.

Hôtel Amedjele (☎ 242 1031; www.amedjelehotel.com; off Route de Mopti; s/d CFA34,000/40,000; mains CFA200-4500; ☎ ☎ ☎) Styled like a Dogon village, just off the road between Mopti and Sévaré, this charming Spanish-run place has expansive gardens, a rock pool for swimming and bungalows shaped like a Dogon granary. They're not huge, but are beautifully decorated with terracotta basins, exposed stone walls and stylistic flourishes throughout. There are mosquito nets in the rooms and the grounds are sprayed twice daily. The restaurant (Spanish flair wedded to African flavours) is one of the best in Mali.

Hôtel Flandre (☎ 242 0829; www.hoteelflandre.com; off Route de Bamako; s/d CFA20,000/22,500; ☎ ☎) While there are more stylish places in town, the well-run Flandre boasts super-clean and spacious rooms that are well-appointed and come with satellite TV (one of only two hotels in the Mopti region to have the latter, and the only one in this price range). There are also plans for a swimming pool, and some English is spoken.

Hôtel Via-Via (☎ 679 4841; www.viaviacafé.com; Route de Bandiagara; camping CFA3000, s/d with air-con & breakfast CFA12,500/15,000; ☎ ☎) Right next to the *gare routière*, but quiet and peaceful, the Via-Via is handy in a town with little to see and where all the hotels are a long way from anywhere. It's a newish place, and it needs a while for the trees to mature, but the rooms are tiled and spotlessly clean.

Shopping

Farafina Tigne (☎ 242 0449; www.farafina-tigne.com; Route de Bamako; ☎ 8am-8pm) One of the best shops in the country, Farafina Tigne has an extensive selection of quality Malian handicrafts, including bogolan cloth and Tuareg jewellery. There's also zero sales pitch.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Although the regional airport is in Sévaré, travel agents talk about planes to Mopti. For details about flights between Sévaré/

Mopti and other Malian towns see opposite. For international flights to/from Mopti with Point Afrique, see p543.

BUS

Sévaré is on a busy transport route with plenty of transport coming and going from the **gare routière** (Route de Bandiagara). Any transport going along the main Bamako–Gao highway stops at the main crossroads in the centre of town. Buses headed to Bamako (CFA8500, seven to 10 hours), Ségou (CFA5000, four to six hours), Gao (CFA7000, nine to 13 hours), Douentza (CFA3500, three hours), Hombori (CFA4500, four hours) are among the options.

Occasional minibuses go to Bandiagara (CFA1750) and Bankass (CFA3000). *Bâchés* head to/from Mopti (CFA200) between 7am and 8pm from close to the post office.

AROUND SÉVARÉ

The ruins of Hamdallaye, the capital of Cheikou Amadou's 19th-century Fula empire, are 17km from Sévaré on the Route de Bamako. The site is about 3km across, but the mud walls that once encircled Hamdallaye have eroded down to small banks of earth, and this is all that now remains of the once grand buildings. The high stone wall that surrounded the mosque now encircles the simple tombs of Cheikou Amadou and his son Alaye Cheikou. A few nomadic Fula set up camp here from time to time, and there are plans to build a large new mosque at this important Fula pilgrimage site.

DOGON COUNTRY

In this era of top-10-places-to-see-before-you-die lists, Dogon Country (Pays Dogon) features prominently, and deservedly so. Mali's stand-out highlight encompasses the homeland of the fascinating Dogon people, arrayed above and below the huge Falaise de Bandiagara, which extends some 150km through the Sahel to the east of Mopti. The landscape is stunning, and the Dogon people are noted for their complex and elaborate culture, art forms and unique houses and granaries – some clinging to the bare rock face of the escarpment.

The best way to see Dogon Country is on foot. Treks along the escarpment are

possible for anything from between one day and three weeks. Ancient tracks link village with village and the plateau with the plains. In places, carefully laid stones create staircases up a fissure in the cliff face, while elsewhere ladders provide a route over a chasm or up to a higher ledge.

On standard treks, daily distances are often short, allowing plenty of time to appreciate the people and landscape while avoiding the heat in the middle of the day.

History

Before the Dogon reached the escarpment, it was inhabited by the Tellem people. The origins of the Tellem are unclear – Dogon tradition describes them as small and red

skinned – and none are believed to remain today, although some Dogon say that the Tellem now live on the plains to the east. The vertical cliff is several hundred metres high, yet the Tellem managed to build dwellings and stores in the most inaccessible places. Most cannot be reached today, and the Dogon believe the Tellem could fly, or used magic powers to reach them. Another theory suggests that the wetter climate of the previous millennium allowed vines and creepers to cover the cliff, providing natural ladders for the early inhabitants. The Tellem also used the caves to bury their dead, and many are still full of ancient human bones.

The Dogon were first brought to the attention of the outside world through the

work of French anthropologist Marcel Griaule, whose influential book *Dieu d'Eau: Entretiens avec Ogotemméli* (published in 1948) was the result of many years of living and studying near the village of Sanga. Griaule died in France in 1956, and a plaque near a dam he helped build marks the spot where the Dogon believe his spirit resides. Griaule's book was published in English under the title *Conversations with Ogotemméli* in 1965, and is still available.

Guides

Guides are not strictly necessary in a practical sense, but in a cultural sense they are vital. Ideally a guide will be your translator, fixer (for accommodation and food) and verbal guidebook, not to mention a window into the Dogon world. Without one you'll undoubtedly miss many points of interest, and could genuinely offend the Dogon villagers by unwittingly stumbling across a sacred site. All guides speak French and some also speak English or other European languages.

As a general rule, it's much better to hire your guide at one of the gateway towns than in Mopti or Bamako, although more importantly, your guide to the Dogon Country should be a Dogon. Non-Dogon guides may not speak Dogon or know anything about the culture or local paths, which can lead to problems – some non-Dogon guides have asked travellers to also pay for local guides to show them the way!

Choosing a guide can have a huge impact on your experience of the Dogon Country, so take your time and write down all the expenses, as this aids memory on both sides, and ask lots of questions about market days, history, festivals etc, to see if they know their stuff.

It's also worth spending an extra day or two asking around for recommendations from other travellers, rather than rushing off with the first guide you meet. Other places to ask around include good hotels (such as Mac's Refuge in Sévaré, p512), the Mission Culturelle in Bandiagara (see under p519), and the Bureau Regional du Tourisme in Mopti (p508), who can put you in touch with the only female guide to Dogon Country. Or, the guide associations in Bandiagara (p519) and Mopti (p508) have lists of accredited guides (see the boxed text p491); if a guide fails to pro-

duce their yellow or blue card, this should be a warning sign to look elsewhere.

Tour operators who can organise treks are listed on p546.

Costs

Visitors to Dogon Country must pay for the privilege. Not only do various fees provide the local people with a much-needed source of income, they also go a small way towards compensating the Dogon people for the alienating impact of mass tourism. Standard costs include the following:

Breakfast (CFA500)

Lunch or dinner (without/with meat CFA1500/2500)

Guide (per day guiding only, from CFA9000; all-inclusive CFA15,000 to CFA20,000)

Porter (per porter, per day CFA2500)

Village tourist tax (per person CFA500 to CFA1000)

Nothing if you're just passing through.

Sleeping in village campment (per person, per night CFA1000 to CFA1500)

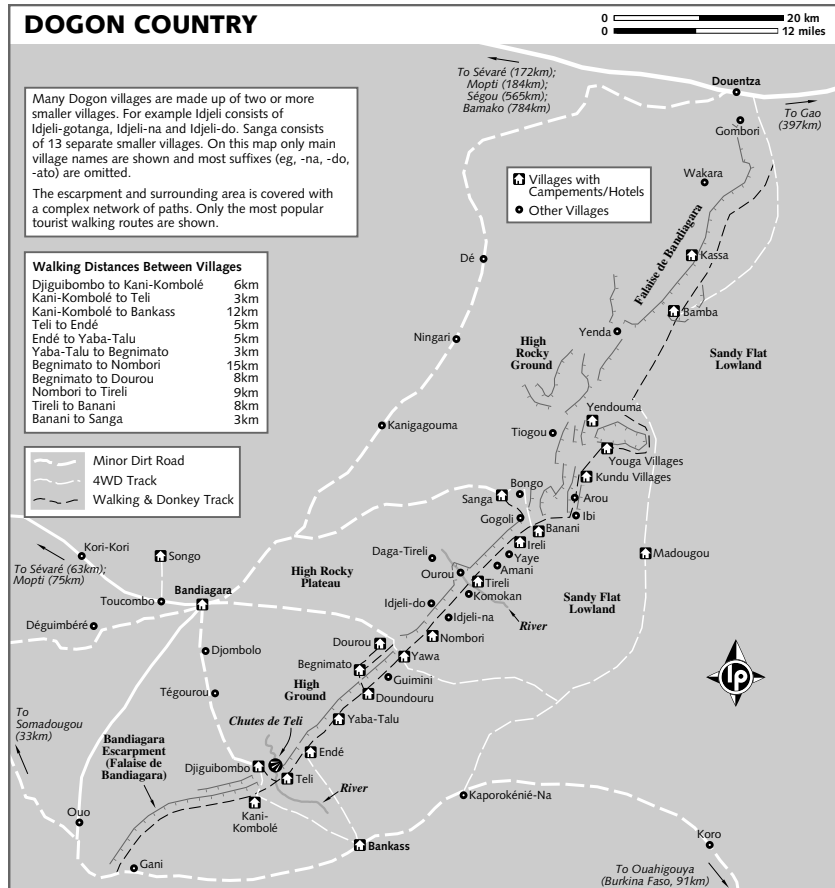
The village tourist tax should allow you to take photos of houses and other buildings (but *not* people – unless you get their permission), and to visit nearby cliff dwellings. If possible, pay this fee directly to the village headman, not to your guide.

You should always agree in advance with your guide about what's included in his or her fee (some guides offer all-inclusive packages). Make sure you discuss everything, from the above fees to who'll be paying for the guide's food and lodging (the latter should be covered by the daily fee). Per-person fees for guides fall if you're a larger group.

Your only other cost is reaching the escarpment. From Bandiagara, a local taxi to any of the local trailheads will cost CFA10,000 to CFA20,000. If you're alone it might be cheaper for you and the guide to hire mopeds.

From Bankass to the escarpment at Endé or Kani-Kombolé (12km) by horse and cart is around CFA5000 (the track is too sandy for mopeds). Of course, you can save money by walking this section.

Optional costs include payments to take photos of people (with permission of course) or to visit a village's *hogon* (spiritual leader); it's usual to give him a small gift of around CFA500. Another good gift are kola nuts, which can be bought in Mopti or Bandiagara.



DOGON CULTURE

Dogon Religion & Cosmology

The Dogon believe that the earth, moon and sun were created by a divine male being called Amma. The earth was formed in the shape of a woman, and by her Amma fathered twin snake-like creatures called the Nommo, which Dogon believe are present in streams and pools. Later, Amma made two humans – a man and a woman – who were circumcised by the Nommo and then gave birth to eight children, who are regarded as the ancestors of all Dogon.

Amma is credited with creating the stars, and a feature of Dogon cosmology is the star known in Western countries as Sirius, or the Dog Star, which was also held to be auspicious by the ancient Egyptians. The Dogon are able to predict Sirius' periodic appearance at a certain point above the skyline, and have long regarded it as three separate stars – two close together and a third invisible. The movements of these stars dictate the timing of the Sigui festival, which takes place about every 60 years. Modern astronomers knew Sirius to be two stars, but it was only in 1995 that powerful radio telescopes detected a third body of super-dense matter in the same area.

Aspects of Dogon religion readily seen by visitors are the *omolo* or fetishes, sacred objects which are dotted around most villages. Most are a simple dome of hard-packed mud, and their function is to protect the village against certain eventualities. To strengthen their power, sacrifices are made to these *omolo* on a regular basis. This usually means pouring millet porridge over them, although sometimes the blood of a chicken is used.

Hogon Etiquette

Meeting a *hogon* (Dogon spiritual leader) can be a fascinating experience, but travellers should be aware of certain rules and regulations to avoid any cultural faux pas:

- Always make initial approaches to the *hogon* through the *kadana* (guardian of the hogon).
- Always show respect and reverence to the *hogon* and never touch him.
- Take gifts, such as kola nuts or a little cash for millet beer, but don't thrust these into his hands.
- If you really want to wow the *hogon* of Arou, bring him an ostrich egg (they are always blowing off the top of his temple).
- Wait for instructions as to where to walk and where to sit – it's easy to wander into a sacred part of the sanctuary or upset a fetish (this will require you to pay for a sacrifice).
- Don't probe too deeply – many *hogon* are reluctant to explain the inner workings of Dogon religion.

Dogon Villages – A Snapshot

Each Dogon village has its own charm, whether it be a stand-out geographical feature or an ambience you won't find elsewhere. The following snapshots (from southwest to northeast) may be helpful for choosing your route.

Kani-Kombolé Home to an interesting mosque.

Teli Very picturesque with waterfalls nearby.

Endé Pretty villages, nearby waterfalls and a good place to visit the village *hogon*.

Begnimato Spectacular views of the plains.

Dourou More good views from atop the escarpment.

Nombori Stunning views on the route here from Dourou. This is an untouristy village, and good place to visit the *hogon*.

Komokan Largely animist village with a fine *togu-na* (traditional Dogon meeting place or shelter where men sit and socialise).

Orou Nestled in an alcove of the escarpment.

Tireli Known for its pottery, a touristy but good place to see Dogon mask ceremony.

Amani Home to a sacred crocodile pool.

Yaye Still clinging to the cliff.

Ireli A classic Dogon village with cylindrical granary towers at the foot of the cliffs, and a mass of ancient Tellem houses.

Banani Sits under an amazing overhanging cliff and full of wonderful Tellem buildings.

Bongo Spectacular views of the plains and an enormous natural tunnel.

Arou Home village of the most powerful *hogon* in Dogon Country; the temple is marvellous and there's a nice rock arch.

Kundu villages Stretch from top to the bottom of the escarpment making for an excellent walk.

Youga villages On a separate hill out on the plains, they're quite traditional, animist and beautiful.

Kassa Numerous springs and very attractive.

Wakara One of the highest villages in the area.

Dogon Masks & Ceremonies

Masks are very important in Dogon culture, and play a significant role in religious ceremonies. The most famous ceremony is the Sigui, performed every 60 years (most recently during the 1960s), which features a large mask and headdress called the *iminana*, which is in the form of a prostrate serpent, sometimes almost 10m high. During the Sigui, the Dogon perform dances recounting the story of their origin. After the ceremony, the *iminana* is stored in a cave high on the cliffs.

The *iminana* is used during a major 'funeral' ceremony that takes place every five or so years. According to tradition, when a person dies their spirit wanders about looking for a new residence. Fearful that the spirit might rest in another mortal, the Dogon bring out the *iminana* and take it to the deceased's house to entice the spirit to live in the mask. The accompanying ceremony can last a week and celebrates the life of the dead person and the part they played in village life.

When important village members die, they are interred in a cave high on the cliffs (sometimes appropriating a Tellem cave), usually on the same day or the day after they die. The body is wrapped in colourful cloth and paraded head-high through the village, then lifted with ropes up to the cave. A smaller funeral ceremony takes place about five days later.

Other masks used by the Dogon include the birdlike *kanaga*, which protects against vengeance (of a killed animal), and the house-like *sirige*, which represents the house of the *hogon*, who is responsible for passing on traditions. Most ceremonies, where you may see masks, take place from April to May. These include Agguet, around May, in honour of the ancestors, and Ondonfile and Boulo (the rain welcoming festival), which takes place in the time leading up to the first rains.

If it's not possible to be here at this time, at least two villages – Tireli and Sanga – organise (with a day's advance notice) early-morning or late-afternoon re-enactments (CFA70,000) of the traditional mask ceremonies. It's not the real thing but it's taken seriously by the dancers and a rare insight into one aspect of Dogon culture. It's also enjoyed as much by local women and children (who are forbidden from seeing the real thing) as by tourists. Female tourists are sometimes allowed to watch the real thing but it varies very much from village to village.

Weekdays & Markets

The traditional Dogon villages keep a five-day week, while those on the plateau tend to observe a seven-day week. Dogon markets are always lively affairs, although they don't get going until about noon. The following table of market days should help you attend one.

Five-day week	Dourou cluster	Sanga cluster	Others
1	Dourou	Tireli	Ibi
2	Gimini, Nombori	Banani, Tiogou	
3	Idjeli, Pelou, Amani	Yendouma	
4	Konsongo, Komokan	Sanga	
5	Doundjourou (near Begnimato)	Ireli, Kama	

Seven-day week

Seven-day week	Village
Monday (big) & Friday (small)	Bandiagara
Tuesday	Bankass
Thursday	Kani Kombolé
Saturday	Bamba
Sunday	Douentza, Endé, Songo

Equipment

The general rule is to travel as lightly as possible, because paths are steep or sandy in places. Footwear should be sturdy, but boots are not essential. It's vital to have a sunhat and a water bottle, as otherwise heatstroke and serious dehydration are real possibilities. You should always carry at least a litre of water. Re-useable bottles can be bought in villages along the way and you can get water from village pumps (always preferable to a well) en route – although it needs to be purified. Avoid carrying 'Western' products that have layers of packaging. Tents are not required, although a mosquito net is a good idea, especially after the rains. Nights are warm, although a lightweight sleeping bag will keep off the predawn chill from November to February. Dogon villages are dark at night, so a torch (flashlight) is useful, and you'll need toilet paper. Wearing shorts for trekking is OK, as they do not offend Dogon culture, although women will feel more comfortable wearing a skirt or long trousers when staying in a village.

Dangers & Annoyances

We have received isolated reports of travellers having things stolen from their backpacks when left on the roofs of *campements*; the culprits are far more likely to be other travellers rather than locals. Stow your valuables away and securely lock your bag when you go off to explore the village.

Starting Points

Three towns, Bandiagara (opposite), Bankass (p521) and Douentza (p534), provide gateways to Dogon Country. From these towns transport to the actual trailheads must be arranged (although Douentza is only about 5km from Dogon Country). Of the numerous possible trailheads, Kani-Kombolé, Djiguibombo, Endé, Dourou and Sanga are the most popular.

Trekking Routes

Time and money usually decide the length and starting point for a trek, but also consider how much energy you want to exert. Simple routes will take you along the bottom (or top) of the escarpment, while more interesting routes head up and down the cliff itself, often scrambling on all fours, leaping from boulder to boulder or using ladders

carved from logs to cover the steepest sections. People with no head for heights may feel shaky in places. You should factor local market days (p517) when planning.

DAY TREKS

If you are very short of time there are three circular walks from Sanga, aimed at tour groups on tight schedules. The **Petit Tour** (7km) goes to Gogoli, the **Moyen Tour** (10km) goes to Gogoli and Banani, and the **Grand Tour** (15km) goes to Gogoli, Banani and Ireli.

TWO DAYS

Spending a night in a Dogon village gives you a much better impression of life on the escarpment than you'll ever get on a one-day trip.

From Bandiagara, with a lift to Djiguibombo (pronounced, wonderfully, Jiggy-boom-bo) you can walk down to the plains, spend the night in either Kani-Kombolé, Teli or Endé and return by the same route. You could also do a circular route from Dourou to Nombori.

From Bankass, a short, but rewarding circuit takes you to Kani-Kombolé, through Teli to Endé (spending the night at either) and then back.

THREE TO FIVE DAYS

A good three-day trek from Bandiagara starts with a lift to Djiguibombo. You descend to Teli for the first night and trek northeast to Begnimato (second night). On the third day continue to Yawa, then up the escarpment to Dourou, where you can arrange a lift back to Bandiagara. You can add an extra day by diverting northeast to Nombori. An easier trip from Bandiagara would be Djiguibombo, Teli and Endé, returning by the same route.

An excellent four-day alternative, and one of our favourites, is to start from Bandiagara, trek down the escarpment to Nombori (first night), head northeast to Ireli (second night), on to Tireli (third night), then up the escarpment to Sanga.

From Bankass, you can get to Teli or Endé and then walk northeast to Begnimato, Yawa or Nombori, and on to Dourou and Bandiagara.

From Sanga, a good four-day route descends first to Banani then heads north to Kundu (first night), Youga (second night)

and Yendouma (third night). On the fourth day go up the cliffs to Tiogou and return over the plateau to Sanga. The escarpment is less well-defined north of Banani, but unlike areas further south, it's rarely visited.

SIX DAYS OR MORE

If you have plenty of time, any of the routes described above can be extended or combined, and routes in from Douentza exploring the north are possible. For example, from Douentza to Sanga takes at least seven days and takes in Gombori, Wakara, Kassa and Bamba. From Sanga and Banani you can head southwest via Tireli and Yawa to reach Dourou (after three days) or Djiguibombo (after another two or three days), and then end your trek at Bandiagara or Bankass. This trek can also be done in reverse.

Sleeping & Eating

These days almost every Dogon village has at least one *campement*, which invariably consists of one-storey buildings encircling a courtyard. Although some have rooms, sleeping on the flat roof under the stars can be a wonderful experience – the sights and sounds of the village stirring in the early morning light are unforgettable.

Evening meals are usually rice with a sauce of vegetables or meat (usually chicken). In the morning, you'll be given tea and bread with jam or processed cheese. Small shops and restaurants catering for tourists have been set up in the most-visited Dogon villages, while beers, bottled water and soft drinks are available almost everywhere. Millet beer is also widely available, and it's not bad.

BANDIAGARA

pop 6853

This small, dusty town lies 63km east of Sévaré, and about 20km from the edge of Falaise de Bandiagara. Once a major administrative centre, tourism is now the main show in town, as it basks in the reflected glow of the smaller and more beautiful Dogon towns and villages closer to the escarpment. The attention of numerous would-be guides as soon as you arrive can be quite intimidating.

Information

In the heart of town is the market (market day is Monday, although there's a smaller version on Friday) and supplies can be pur-

chased from here and a number of outlets nearby – try Alimentation Niang Ibrahim. **Centre de Médecine Traditionnelle** (☎ 244 2006; crmt@africone.net.ml) As well known for its *maisons sans bois* (houses without wood) architecture as it is for its work with medicinal plants. Visits are free, although donations are appreciated.

Cybercafé Clic (Route de Djiguibombo; per hr CFA1500; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Super-fast satellite connections.

Guide association (☎ 244 2128) Guides in Bandiagara have a reputation for aggressive salesmanship, but you can contact the guide association, which has no office.

Mission Culturelle (☎ /fax 244 2263) Staff can provide cultural information and recommend guides.

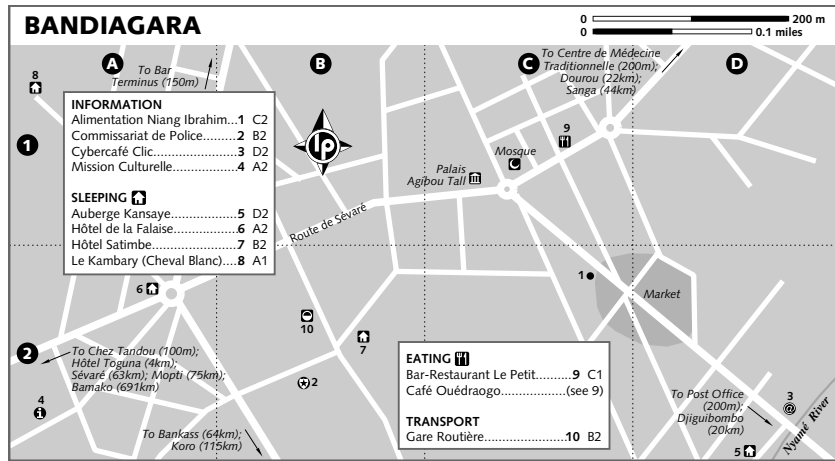
Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel Satimbe (☎ 244 2378; amadoutinouologuem@yahoo.fr; opposite gare routière; beds CFA2500) The garden here is nice, but privacy isn't a priority as the partitions separating the rooms are more window than wall. A stay here is all about price. It's also central, and simple meals are available if you order in advance.

Auberge Kansaye (☎ 625 0762; kansayebouba@yahoo.fr; beds from CFA3000) Bare, blue concrete rooms are where you'll sleep (mosquito net and fan are available on request) but there's a mellow ambience here – the music wafting through the corridors ranges from Bob Marley to cool Ibiza chill-out. Their riverfront restaurant (meals CFA1000 to CFA3000), was nearing completion when we were there and will be *the* place to eat in Bandiagara. A great choice if you don't spend too much time in the room.

Hôtel Toguna (☎ 244 2159; Route de Sévaré; camping CFA3500, d CFA5000) After a recent overhaul, the Toguna is outrageously good value, boasting tidy rooms with private (but outdoor) shower and toilet. The garden's pleasant, the *toguna*-style restaurant (meals CFA500-2500) likewise, and it's super-quiet. The downside is that it's 4km west of town with not a lot of passing public transport.

Le Kambary (Cheval Blanc; ☎ /fax 244 2388; chevalblancmali@yahoo.fr; s/d with fan CFA18,000/20,000, with air-con from CFA25,000/27,000; ☎ ☎) Accommodation in this delightful Swiss-run place is in attractive stone igloos, with white-washed and spacious interiors and portholes for natural light. The bathrooms also have character and are terrific. If you've just arrived from Dogon, you may wonder if you've been transported to heaven. The restaurant



(mains from CFA2200) is outstanding (the food's great and the garden is beautifully designed) and there are sometimes musical evenings with buffet meals (CFA7700). There's also a swimming pool and mini-golf. They have a list of recommended guides.

Hôtel de la Falaise (☎/fax 244 2128; napopapa2003@yahoo.fr; mattress on roof CFA1500, dm CFA4000, s/d with fan CFA14,000/16,000, with air-con CFA22,500/25,000; starters CFA600-1500, mains CFA1500-2800; 🍴) This new hotel in the centre of town is a welcome addition and, although the rooms are a touch overpriced, they're comfortable, well kept and awash with blue walls and tiled floors. If you're staying in the dorm, the toilet and shower is a fair walk across the compound. The restaurant does unremarkable African and European dishes.

Street food is available around the market and *gare routière* in the evening. For a sit-down meal, try **Bar-Restaurant Le Petit** (Route de Sévare; starters CFA500-900, mains CFA1500-3250, breakfast CFA1500, small/large beer CFA500/900) which is as chilled as the steady stream of guides allows it to be. Take refuge from them with an espresso coffee (CFA500). **Café Ouedraogo** next door is similar, though more of a bar.

Getting There & Away

Most transport leaves Bandiagara around 7am or 5pm. There's a lot of transport to Sévare/Mopti (around CFA1500), but getting to Bankass (CFA1000) or Koro (minibus/bush taxi CFA2000/2500) means a longer wait. You might also find the odd

minibus heading to Sanga (CFA1500) and the occasional Somatra bus to Bamako, but for most onward transport it's almost always easier to go via Sévare or Mopti.

SANGA

Sanga (also spelt Sangha), 44km east of Bandiagara and close to the top of the escarpment, is one of the largest Dogon villages in the region. It's a fascinating place to explore with a guide, in particular the Ogol Da section, which is full of temples, fetishes and shrines. It's a favourite of tour groups and has become quite touristy in recent years, and for independent travellers it's expensive to get to, but it's worth it.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel Femme Dogon (mattress on roof CFA3000, d CFA7500) Oddly, this place looks and feels slightly like a French refuge, though a little shabbier. However, it's a nice setup, with a popular bar and restaurant and running water. Treks and 4WD hire can be arranged here, but you'll need to bargain hard.

Campement-Hôtel Guinna (s/d with bathroom & fan CFA15,000/17,500; meals CFA1000-5000) This is a tour-group favourite and it's certainly the best-equipped place to stay in any of the Dogon villages. Rooms are spick-and-span and have good bathrooms. After a week's trekking the garden's lovely, the food is good and the hot showers and cold beer fantastic.

The Protestant Mission also has plans to open up some guest rooms for travellers.

Getting There & Away

Apart from the occasional minibus to Bandiagara (CFA1500), there's no regular public transport to Sanga; chances are higher on Sanga's or Bandiagara's market day (see p517). Otherwise hitching might be your best bet. Chartering a taxi costs at least CFA15,000, or getting a moped to drop you off costs CFA7500 (including petrol).

BANKASS

Bankass is 64km south of Bandiagara, along the dirt road to Burkina Faso. The Falaise de Bandiagara is about 12km away, which makes it a good gateway to southern Dogon Country, particularly if you're coming from Burkina Faso.

Information

Association Bandia represents Bankass' guides, many of whom hang out beside the *cabine téléphonique*. There's also a small hospital in town.

Sleeping & Eating

Campement & Hôtel Hogon (camping/mattress on roof CFA2000, r CFA5500; mains CFA2500-3500) On the western edge of town, this is the best of the cheapies, although it's pretty run-down and basic. It's set up with tourists' quirks in mind, but the best assets are the guys who run it – friendly and helpful with everything from finding guides to transport to Burkina Faso.

Getting There & Away

There are daily Peugeot taxis and minibuses to Bandiagara (CFA1000), Mopti (CFA3000, two hours) and Koro (CFA1250, one to two hours).

KORO

Koro has a nice mosque but little else to offer apart from an impressive baobab tree, the Saturday market and a bus to Ouahigouya (CFA2500, two to four hours) which leaves Koro around 2pm daily. Passport and customs formalities must be completed in Koro and Tiou (in Burkina Faso). Peugeot taxis and minibuses ply the route between Koro and Mopti (CFA3500) daily. There are weekly buses to Bamako. If you find yourself stuck here overnight, it will give you time to discover **Aventure Dogon** (☎ 244 2191; www.aventure-dogon.com; camping CFA4000,

d from CFA8000; meals CFA4500), an excellent place to stay and plot your exploration of the Dogon Country.

THE NORTH & EAST

Northern Mali is dominated by the vast empty plains and dunes of the Sahara Desert. It's also home to Timbuktu, one of the world's most important destinations down through history. Away to the east, it doesn't get much more remote than Gao – a great place to venture beyond well-worn tourist paths.

TIMBUKTU (TOMBOUCTOU)

pop 32,460

Timbuktu, that most rhythmical of African names, has for centuries been synonymous with Africa's mysterious inaccessibility, with an end-of-the-earth allure that some travellers just have to reach. It's the name we all knew as kids, but never really knew where it was. More than just a name, Timbuktu's fame was derived from its strategic location, at once on the edge of the Sahara and at the top of the 'Niger bend', from its role as the fabulously wealthy terminus of a camel caravan route that has linked West Africa and the Mediterranean since medieval times, and from the vast universities of Islamic scholarship which flourished under the aegis of some of Africa's richest empires.

After it was 'discovered' by Western travellers, Timbuktu also became a byword for the West's disappointment with Africa. Even today, Timbuktu is a shadow of its former self, existing as a sprawl of low, often shabby, flat-roofed buildings which only hint at former grandeur, while all the time the streets fill up with sand blown in from the desert. And yet, still the travellers come and you'll get the most from your visit here if you give yourself time to understand the significance of this town – its isolation, its history and its continuing importance as a trading post on the salt-trade route.

History

Timbuktu is said to have been founded around AD 1000 as a seasonal encampment for Tuareg nomads. An old woman was put in charge of the settlement while the men tended the animals. Her name was Bouctou,

meaning 'large navel', possibly indicating a physical disorder. Tim simply means 'well' and the town became known as Tombouctou. Other accounts say that in Tamashék *tim* means 'that belonging to'. The well which Bouctou tended and which started the Timbuktu legend can still be visited (p524).

Timbuktu was only developed as a trading centre in the 11th century, but it went on to rival Gao to the east and Walata (in Mauritania) to the west. Gold, slaves and ivory were sent north and salt (from the mines of Taghaza and Taoudenni) came south.

Kankan Musa, the greatest king of the Empire of Mali (see p34), passed through the town in 1336, on his way back from Mecca, and commanded the construction of the Dyingerey Ber mosque. Islamic scholars were sent to study in Fez, thus beginning a great tradition of Islamic education, which increased when Sonni Ali Ber and the Empire of Songhai took the town in 1468. Timbuktu also began to get seriously rich. In 1494 Leo Africanus, a well-travelled Spanish Moor, recorded in his *History and Description of Africa* that Timbuktu had 'a great store of doctors, judges, priests and other learned men, that are bountifully maintained at the king's expense'.

In 1591 Moroccan armies sacked Timbuktu, killing many scholars and sending others to Fez (along with much of the city's riches). Fifty years later the remnants of the invading army had been assimilated into the local population, but their invasion signalled the start of the city's decline, which continued as European ships began to circumvent the trans-Saharan trade routes. Over the next 300 years Timbuktu fell to the Songhai (1780–1826), Fula (1826–63) and the Tuareg (1863–95). The French marched in during 1894, and found the place pretty much how it looks today.

After Mali gained independence, its governments were dominated by (and therefore Timbuktu ruled by) the Bambara of southern Mali, which led to simmering tensions. These came to a head during the 1990s when Timbuktu was badly hit by fighting between Tuareg rebels, the Bambara-dominated army and Songhai militias. There was no actual fighting, but Tuareg civilians and suspected sympathisers from other groups were arrested and imprisoned. Many were reportedly executed in the sand dunes.

Information

Officially every visitor to Timbuktu must pay a CFA5000 tourist tax, but in reality this only applies to those who want to visit Dyingerey Ber Mosque and the Ethnological Museum (the tax operates as a de facto admission fee). The fee is collected at the Bureau Régional du Tourisme (where they can put a 'Tombouctou' stamp in your passport) or at the entrance to the mosque or museum.

There are a number of places where local and international telephone calls can be made around town.

BDM (Route de Korioumé) Also south of town, does cash advances on Visa card and Western Union transfers.

BDR (Route de Korioumé) South of town, changes euro cash.

Bureau Régional du Tourisme (☎ 292 2086; Blvd Askia Mohamed; ☎ 7.30am–4pm) Has a list of recommended guides and can advise on trips further afield.

Commissariat de Police (☎ 292 1007; Place de l'Indépendance)

Hospital (☎ 292 1169; off Route de Korioumé)

Pharmacie Officine Jour et Nuit (☎ 292 1333) Near the Ethnological Museum.

Post office (Route de Korioumé) Sells postcards and stamps – for that all-important postmark.

TCP (Route de Korioumé; per hr CFA1000; ☎ 7.30am–1pm & 4–7pm Mon–Fri, 7.30am–1pm Sat) Slow Internet connections.

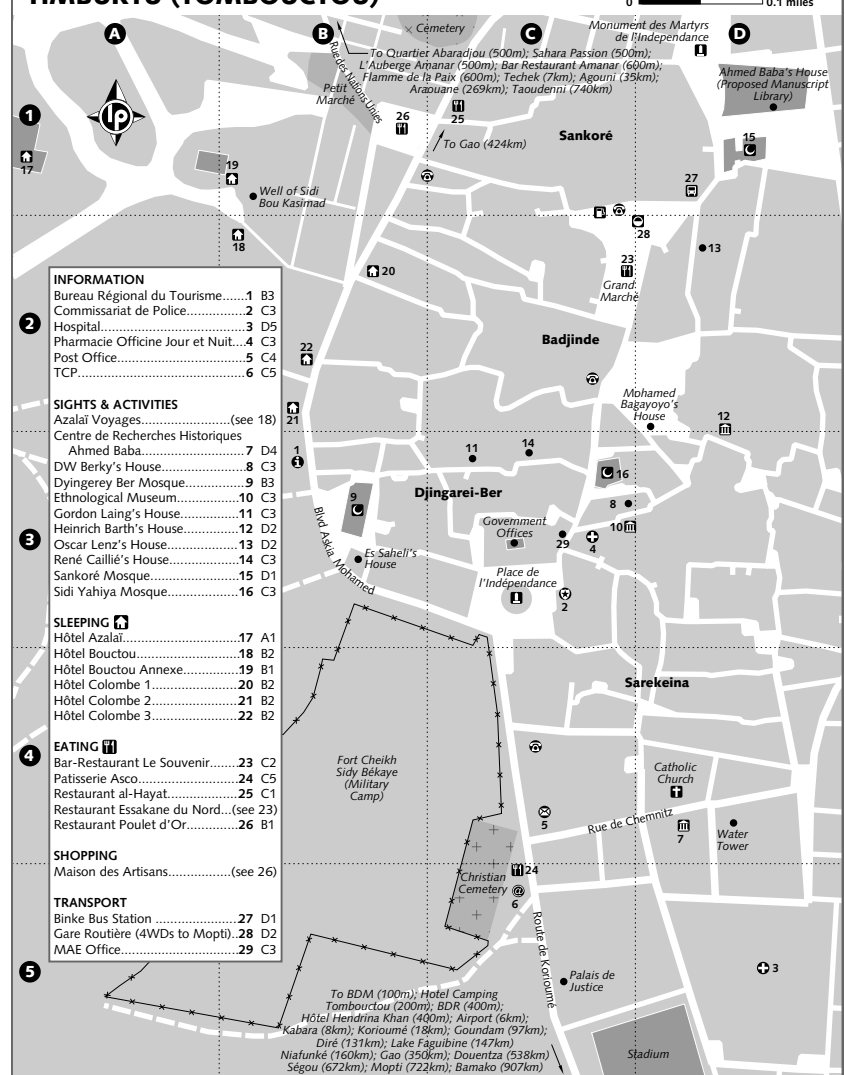
Sights

MOSQUES

Timbuktu has three of the oldest mosques in West Africa. While not as visually stunning as some in Mali, they're still extremely impressive and represent classic and well-preserved examples of the Sudanese style of architecture which prevails throughout much of the Sahel.

The oldest, dating from the early 14th century, is **Dyingerey Ber Mosque** (admission CFA5000 as part of town tourism tax). You can go into this mosque, west of Place de l'Indépendance, but sometimes only with a guide. The interior is a forest of 100 sturdy pillars, and there are a series of interconnecting rooms with holes in the wall at ground level – in the days before microphones, worshippers who could not hear the imam could look through into the main prayer hall to see when to pray. There's a separate women's section, from close to which stairs lead up onto the roof (ask permission before climbing up) for good views over the town and out towards the desert; don't point your camera south as

TIMBUKTU (TOMBOUCTOU)



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Sidi Yahya Mosque.....	16 C3

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Restaurant al-Hayat.....	25 C1
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Restaurant Poulet d'Or.....	26 B1

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TRANSPORT	
Binke Bus Station.....	27 D1
Care Routière (4WDs to Mopti).....	28 D2
MAE Office.....	29 C3

there is a police building in the vicinity. The muezzin still climbs to the summit of the pyramidal minaret, with its wooden struts, to call the faithful to prayer on those days when the electricity isn't working; otherwise it's done by microphone.

Sidi Yahya Mosque, north of Place de l'Indépendance, is named after one of the

city's saints (it's said that 333 saints have lived in Timbuktu) and was constructed in 1400. Non-Muslims are not allowed to enter, and from the outside it's the least interesting of Timbuktu's main mosques.

Built (reportedly by a woman) a century later than Sidi Yahya was the **Sankoré Mosque**, northeast of the Grand Marché. It

THE DOOR THAT CANNOT BE OPENED

Appropriately for a city of legend, Dyingerey Ber Mosque has a particularly fine and suitably mysterious one. At the back of the main prayer hall is a straw mat, which covers an old door made of palm wood. The story goes that, in the 12th century, a local man became famous as a practitioner of black magic. At the time, Timbuktu was a city which only Muslims were allowed to enter, so the local religious authorities, concerned over the man's popularity, expelled him from the town. After a day he returned, claiming to have had a dream in which he became a good Muslim. The imam told the man that he should come to Friday prayers, after which he would be allowed to stay in town. As the prayers began, the man suddenly turned into a lion and jumped into the small room behind the door in question. It was quickly closed behind him and has never been opened again, lest the man's spirit (and evil) be released into the world.

also functioned as a university, and by the 16th century was one of the largest schools of Arabic learning in the Muslim world, with some 25,000 students. It, too, is closed to non-Muslims, but its pleasing minarets, interesting location and aesthetic harmony make it well worth a visit.

MUSEUMS

The **Ethnological Museum** (admission CFA5000 as part of town tourism tax; ☎ 8am-5pm) occupies a hugely significant site near Sidi Yahiya Mosque, containing the well of Bouctou (see p521), where Timbuktu was founded. There's also a variety of exhibits including clothing, musical instruments, jewellery and games, as well as interesting colonial photographs and pictures of the ancient rock carvings at Tin-Techoun, which have since been stolen or destroyed.

An amazing collection of ancient manuscripts and books are kept at the **Centre de Recherches Historiques Ahmed Baba** (Cedrhah; ☎ 292 1081; cedrhah@tombouctou.org.ml; Rue de Chemnitz; admission CFA1000). Home to (at last count) 23,000 Islamic religious, historical and scientific texts from all over the world, the centre is the focus of a South African-funded project to protect, translate and catalogue

the manuscripts. The oldest manuscripts date from the 12th century, but there are countless other priceless works, including some of the few written histories of Africa's great empires, and works of scholarship carried to Timbuktu from Granada after Muslims were expelled from al-Andalus in 1492. Documented family histories (often over 400 years old) of Timbuktu's most famous clans are also held here. South African experts with whom we spoke estimate that up to five million manuscripts could survive in the Timbuktu area, preserved by the dry desert air and in the possession of families. Indeed, Timbuktu has a few other private libraries containing ancient manuscripts and books.

EXPLORERS' HOUSES

Between 1588 and 1853 at least 43 Europeans tried to reach this fabled city; only four made it and only three made it home. The houses where they stayed while in Timbuktu have been preserved (and marked with small plaques) although most remain in private hands; entering requires prior negotiations with the owners and can be expensive.

West of Sidi Yahiya Mosque, the house where Gordon Laing stayed is very small. He was the first European to reach Timbuktu, but was then murdered on his journey home.

René Caillié spent a year learning Arabic and studying Islam before setting off for Timbuktu disguised as a Muslim. Caillié's research paid off and he was the first European to reach Timbuktu and live to tell the tale, even if his honest description of a careworn Timbuktu well past its prime earned him less glory than anger, and there were accusations that he'd fabricated the story. West of Sidi Yahiya Mosque, the house where he did indeed stay in 1828 was under renovation when we visited, but it's unlikely to be opened to the public.

Heinrich Barth's incredible five-year journey began in Tripoli and took him first to Agadez, then through Nigeria and finally, in September 1853, he reached Timbuktu disguised as a Tuareg. He stayed for the best part of a year before narrowly escaping with his life and eventually returning to Europe. East of Sidi Yahiya Mosque, **Heinrich Barth's house** (admission CFA1000; ☎ 8am-6pm), where he stayed, is now a tiny museum containing reproductions of Barth's drawings and extracts of his writings.

There are other houses where a host of lesser-known explorers stayed while in Timbuktu, among them Oscar Lenz's old residence and the house of DW Berky, leader of the first American Trans-Saharan Expedition of 1912.

MARKETS

The Grand Marché is the large covered building in the centre of town. It's not particularly grand, but it's busy and not a bad place to buy slabs of salt. The Petit Marché is further west by the old port, while the Maison des Artisans (where local artisans produce and sell their wares) is close by, at the end of Blvd Askia Mohamed.

FLAMME DE LA PAIX

On the northwestern outskirts of town, the striking **Flamme de la Paix** (Flame of Peace) monument is worth visiting. It was built on the spot where 3000 weapons were ceremonially burnt at the end of the Tuareg rebellion (p529). The monument is where Timbuktu meets the desert, so continue on to enter the dunes.

Activities TREKKING

Like a vestige from another age, salt caravans still travel between Timbuktu and Taoudenni. The return trip takes between 36 and 40 days. Trucks also make the journey – a fact which is lengthening the expedition for those who travel by camel, as the trucks sometimes exhaust salt supplies at the mines for a few days. But with fuel costs high and camels costing very little, it is extremely unlikely that the camels will be replaced by four-wheeled transport any time soon.

These are commercial operations and trips are extremely gruelling; they're not to be taken lightly – there's no escape if you find you can't hack it or get sick. Expect to spend between 15 and 18 hours a day on the move, with no rest days, and often with just four hours' sleep a night. The food can be pretty grim (dates, peanuts, dried goat meat and rice if you're lucky) and not always sufficient to keep hunger at bay. Most meals are taken on the move.

The trip costs between CFA650,000 and CFA700,000 per person. This gets you a guide, food and three camels. Guides are essential even if you travel with a caravan –

many guides will try to get you to leave the caravan behind to speed things up, so insist before leaving if you want the caravan experience all the way to Taoudenni. Many guides and camel drivers speak only Hasaniya, a Moorish dialect of Arabic, and interpreters can cost an extra CFA400,000.

November and December are the ideal months to travel – the desert is not too hot and the harmattan has not begun. Sand storms are a problem in January and February.

For an evocative account of the journey and of the salt mines themselves, read *Men of Salt: Across the Sahara with the Caravan of White Gold*, by Michael Benanav (p539).

Festivals & Events

Every year in early January, Essakane, 50km from Timbuktu, hosts the outstanding **Festival in the Desert**, which attracts a host of Mali's best musicians (especially Tuareg groups) and the occasional international group. For more information on the festival, see p62. Tour operators listed in the following section or at p546 can also help you make arrangements.

Tours

Local guides offer tours of the town and can set up camel trips, trucks to Gao or boats to Mopti. Their services are not essential, but can make your walk around town more interesting. For guides, the best bet is to choose one of the companies/guides listed below, or ask your hotel or the Bureau Régional du Tourisme for a recommendation.

The following can also arrange cars and long-distance camel trips:

Aberhamane Alpha Maïge (☎ 292 1681, 602 3406; alpha@timbuktu-touristguide.com; Hotel Hendria Khan) Experienced English-speaking guide.

Azalai Voyages (☎ 292 1199; azalaivoyages@nomade.fr; Hôtel Bouctou)

Azima Ag Mohamed Ali (☎ 602 3547) An experienced English-speaking Tuareg guide, and a wonderful desert companion.

CAMEL RIDES & 4WD TOURS Sunset or overnight trips

You'll receive numerous offers of camel trips into the surrounding desert during your stay in Timbuktu. The most popular excursions include short sunset trips to nearby dunes and/or Tuareg encampments (CFA10,000

per person per camel), and overnight trips that take you to the dunes at sunset, followed by a night under the stars, often at a Tuareg encampment (from CFA20,000 per person, including a traditional meal).

Longer expeditions

For extended trips there are a number of interesting options. Techek (7km away) and Agouni (35km away) are popular destinations (salt caravans muster at Agouni before entering Timbuktu), while more far-flung destinations include Lake Faguibine (p528), Araouane (p528), and even the salt mines at Taoudenni, deep in the Sahara's heart.

Prices start at CFA20,000 per day by camel, or at least CFA50,000 per day in a 4WD (plus petrol) – up to CFA90,000 including guide, driver and food. No prices are cast in stone and opening prices can be 10 times higher than these! Always agree on what's included in the fee – food, sleeping bags etc – with your guide (and write it down) before setting out, and never pay the full amount until you return to Timbuktu.

Sleeping

For a place that's so popular with tourists, Timbuktu lacks outstanding accommodation choices.

Hotel Camping Tombouctou (☎ 292 1433; Route de Korioumé; camping CFA2500, dm CFA3500, s/d CFA7500/10,000) This place is simplicity itself but the rooms have cool, thick walls, mosquito nets and fans, and there's a nice communal area. The long walk into town can be punishing in the afternoon.

Sahara Passion (☎ 604 1907; camping or mattress on roof CFA3500, dm CFA5000, s/d with fan & shared bathroom CFA10,000/12,500, with private bathroom CFA15,000/17,000; Ⓟ) Although not as good as its Gao equivalent, Sahara Passion, close to the Flamme de la Paix monument on Timbuktu's northern outskirts, has rooms with high ceilings – those with private bathroom are enormous. Some are a bit stark (including the 15-mattress dorm) but it's in a quiet part of town and food is available on demand.

Hôtel Bouctou (☎/fax 292 1012; dm, camping or mattress on roof CFA6000, s/d with fan & shared bathroom CFA12,500/15,000, s/d with fan & private bathroom CFA15,000/18,000, with air-con CFA19,000/22,500; Ⓟ) Arrive here at noon when things are quiet and you might find the place deserted, save for the staff sleeping in the restaurant. By

sunset, it swarms with tourists, guides and other hangers-on, but the rooms are large and spacious with tiled floors. The location, on the desert fringe but a short stroll from the centre, is ideal. The rooms in the annexe, north across the sandy track, are newer but even more bare.

Hôtel Hendrina Khan (☎ 292 1681; www.tombouctou.com; off Route de Korioumé; s/d from CFA19,500/23,500; Ⓟ) The Hendrina Khan probably has the best rooms in town (the excellent bathrooms clinch it) and it's a very well-run place. The rooms have satellite TV and fridge, and are spacious and tiled, while other services include a laundry, excellent restaurant, a bar and a small reading library. The best rooms are in the annexe. The only drawbacks are the long walk into the centre of town and the fact that the surrounding desert fringe is not Timbuktu's most appealing.

Hôtel Colombe 1 (☎ 292 1435; Blvd Askia Mohamed; s/d from CFA19,000/23,000; Ⓟ) If you like to be in the centre this place is excellent, with enormous rooms and a terrace overlooking the street where meals and drinks are served. Service can be woeful, however, and the bathrooms need an overhaul. The same owners also run the nearby **Hôtel Colombe 2** (☎ 292 2132; Ⓟ) and **Hôtel Colombe 3** (☎ 292 2554; Ⓟ) which are newer (it shows in the much nicer bathrooms), but otherwise identical, and go for the same price.

Hôtel Azalaï (☎ 292 1163; s/d CFA25,000/32,000; Ⓟ) If we tell you that this used to be a Sofitel, you'll see how far standards have fallen. The rooms, while comfortable, are faded and overpriced – although the desert-fringe location and traces of traditional architecture will appeal to many.

Eating

Here's an important hint for eating out in Timbuktu: never just turn up in a restaurant hoping to be fed. Ordering in advance is almost always necessary.

Bar Restaurant Amanar (meals CFA1500-3600; ☎ lunch & dinner) Our favourite restaurant in Timbuktu, Amanar has a mellow atmosphere with a soundtrack of Malian blues (think Ali Farke Touré and Tinariwen), chilled and friendly waiters and a small and intimate garden. They do all the travellers' staples, but the soups are outstanding. Right outside the door stands the Flamme de la Paix monument and the Sahara. From

Thursday to Saturday, they stay open late as a lively bar with a DJ from 10.30pm.

Restaurant Poulet d'Or (Maison des Artisans; meals CFA1000-2500; ☎ lunch & dinner) This is a popular (and recommended) chavellers' restaurant, which does the usual chicken and chips, brochettes, rice, meat and sauce, but does them particularly well – also look out for some more adventurous dishes (like roast goat), which might need ordering in advance.

Pâtisserie Asco (Route de Korioumé; meals CFA3000; ☎ 6am-midnight) The friendly Pâtisserie Asco does a range of pastries, the croissants are dense and stodgy, but their local specialties are excellent. The *riz alabadjja* (rice, cow butter, meat and lemon) is a highlight. The only drawback are the hangers-on who seem to appear whenever tourists do.

For cheap meals there are rotisseries all over town, while **Restaurant al Hayat** (Blvd Askia Mohamed; ☎ 6am-midnight) does breakfast (CFA600) and a range of couscous and spaghetti dishes (CFA750). On the roof of the Grand Marché, you'll find the pleasant **Bar-Restaurant Le Souvenir** (☎ 7am-midnight) and **Restaurant Essakane du Nord** (☎ 6am-midnight), both of which do couscous for CFA1500/2000 without/with meat.

Getting There & Away

Getting out of Timbuktu is often harder than getting in. Start planning and negotiating your departure early.

AIR

Both **CAM** (☎ 292 1345) and **MAE** (☎ 602 3929; Place de l'Indépendance) have at least two weekly flights between Timbuktu's flash new **airport** (☎ 292 1320), 6km south of town off Route de Korioumé, and Bamako (CFA90,360) via Mopti (CFA43,360). There's also one weekly flight to Gao (CFA42,140).

BOAT

Between late July and late November, the large Comanav passenger boats stop at Korioumé, Timbuktu's port – for details on prices, see p545. The **Comanav ticket office** (☎ 292 1206) is in Kabara (the old port) although there's a smaller office at Korioumé. **Azalaï Voyages** (☎ 292 1199; azalaivoyages@nomade.fr) can reserve a ticket for a small fee. If you're waiting for the boat, Korioumé has some food stalls and basic eateries. Rooms can be found for the desperate.

The Comanav passenger boat stops from four to 12 hours at Korioumé, so if you're travelling between Gao and Mopti, it's possible to make a mad dash to Timbuktu, 18km north. The going rate for a round-trip tour in a chartered taxi is around CFA20,000 – there's no time to take a shared one.

Alternatively, you can travel between Mopti and Korioumé (the official port for Timbuktu) by public or private pinasse; for details see the boxed text p510. Public pinasses also go a few times a week to Niafunké (CFA3500).

Apart from the Comanav ferry, there's very little transport to and from Gao, although an occasional pinasse goes to Gourma-Rharous, where you might find another pinasse going to Gao or (more likely) a place in a truck. The same rules of chartering a private pinasse to Mopti also apply to Gao, although beware of guides charging you for a chartered pinasse and then putting you on a public one carrying cargo and dozens of other passengers.

LAND

In the dry season, battered 4WDs run from Mopti to Timbuktu (CFA12,500 for a seat or CFA60,000 for the car to yourself) almost every day. The main route (via Douentza) is bad – waterlogged and muddy after the rains, sandy and dusty in the dry. It's a very uncomfortable journey, often with a night under the stars. The journey should take around eight hours, but can take double that after breakdowns, river crossings and other incomprehensible stops in the middle of nowhere.

A few days a week there's a Binke truck-bus (dry season only) to Douentza (CFA10,000, eight hours), from where a Binke bus waits to carry passengers on to Mopti and Bamako. The buses can take twice as long as the 4WDs. Gana Transport also runs a weekly dry season service from the *gare routière* between Timbuktu and Bamako (CFA19,500, 24 hours); the journey goes via Niafunké (CFA7500) and Ségou.

If you're heading east, trucks also run a couple of times each week between Timbuktu and Gao (CFA12,500 to CFA15,000) along the north side of the river. Occasionally, 4WDs also make the trip. Ask around the Grand Marché, be prepared to wait and steel yourself for a tough two-day trip.

Getting Around

Timbuktu has only one official taxi and he doesn't work after 6pm. You may, however, find some unofficial taxis (ie local guys with underutilised vehicles). A private taxi/*bâché* to Kabara costs CFA6000/300 and to Korioumé, CFA6000/500, but you may be asked five times as much.

AROUND TIMBUKTU

Niafunké

Niafunké, a large, typically sleepy town on the west bank of the Niger River, is a pleasant riverside settlement with shaded streets and friendly, relaxed locals. The town is best-known as the home of Ali Farke Touré (who named one of his albums after the town), Mali's master bluesman and one of the country's best-loved stars; the locals love him so much that he is now the town's mayor. He also owns the **Campement** (r from CFA8000), which has pretty respectable rooms and is close to the market (market day is Thursday).

Trucks leave each week to Timbuktu (CFA7500) and elsewhere, and you'll find plenty of river transport heading to Timbuktu (CFA3500) and Mopti (CFA4000), especially around market day.

THE TIMBUKTU SALT TRADE

Throughout the cool season, from October to March, a camel caravan from the salt mines at Taoudenni (about 740km north of Timbuktu) arrives in Timbuktu every few days.

Each caravan consists of anywhere from 20 to 300 camels, with smaller caravans often joining up with larger ones en route. Every camel carries four to six slabs of salt, weighing about 60kg. The journey takes about 16 days, and because of the intense heat the caravans often travel at night, with camels unloaded and rested during the day. On arrival in Timbuktu the salt is sold to merchants who transport it upriver to Mopti, where it is sold again and dispersed all over West Africa. Salt is a valuable commodity which used to be traded weight for weight with gold. Nowadays, a good-quality slab will fetch up to CFA8000 in Timbuktu, with its value increasing as it heads south.

The salt comes from the beds of ancient lakes, which dried out many millennia ago. The salt starts about 2m below the surface and is reached by a system of trenches and tunnels up to 6m deep and 200m long. The salt is dug out in large blocks and split into slabs on the surface.

Work in the mines is appallingly paid and dangerous; each man earns up to CFA80,000 for six months' work, and is allowed to keep one in every four bars mined. Indeed, these salt bars, which are sold to supplement salaries, are how the salt workers really make their money. But they don't bring many back to Timbuktu where they can be sold; the nearest well to the mines is around 15km (a one-day camel journey) away, and camel drivers provide water to the miners in exchange for salt. Four *guerbas* of water (about 120L) costs two slabs.

The salt caravans unload on the northern side of Timbuktu, where the Bella live in temporary camps, but the Tuareg and Arab traders do not welcome visitors. If you really want to see more, go with a reputable guide who knows the traders.

With thanks to Michael Benanav

Lake Faguibine

When the Empire of Ghana was at its height this lake, about 50km north of Goundam, was one of the most impressive in West Africa. However, it's now been dry since the end of the 1980s. The landscape and cliffs on the northern shore are very impressive, and cave paintings are found at Farach. For organising an expedition here and elsewhere in the Sahara, see p525.

ARAOUANE

pop 4026

The sand-drowned oasis village of Araouane is a remote outpost over 250km north of Timbuktu. It was once a place of great learning; clan histories and Islamic texts dating back centuries are still kept by local families. It's still a major staging post on the camel caravan route from the salt mines of Taoudenni.

Araouane is about nine days from Timbuktu by camel, or 12 hours by 4WD. There are two routes to Araouane; the eastern route takes in an ancient mosque now almost completely buried (only the minaret now protrudes from the sand). Further along the route, rock paintings can be seen on a desolate outcrop.

SAVING ARAOUANE

Araouane, amongst the Sahara's most isolated settlements, was once the scene of one of the more ambitious and unusual desert stories. In 1988, a New York loft renovator by the name of Ernst Aebi arrived in Araouane on a mission to prevent the town disappearing under the Saharan sands. Using his own money, and in association with eager locals, he planted trees to keep the desert at bay, and gardens of fruits and vegetables, which he taught the villagers to tend. He even built a hotel. By the early 1990s, however, and with the Tuareg rebellion putting much of northern Mali off-limits, Aebi left Araouane, whereafter his hotel fell apart and the gardens quickly died. Although locals continue to struggle against the inevitable through a project called **Arbres pour Araouane** (Trees for Araouane; ☎ /fax 292 1253), just a few tamarisk trees are all that remain of this worthy dream. Aebi's book, *Seasons of Sand* tells the story in detail and is a great read.

GAO

pop 38,190

Gao, one of the most important towns of Mali's more illustrious past, doesn't carry the resonance of the more evocatively named Timbuktu, but it has a grand history (Gao was the former capital of the Songhai Empire – see p33) and, like its more famous cousin, similarly appears stranded amid frontier territory. Gao can feel like a cluster of nomadic settlements (semipermanent Songhai and Tuareg encampments are found across town) pushed onto the Niger River's shores by the Sahara Desert that dominates to the north. Expeditions into the desert are a highlight of a visit here, as is the lively port. There's a remote desert ambience here, created by the sandy streets, fascinating cultural mix and – the somewhat incongruous Point Afrique flights to and from Paris (p830) notwithstanding – the sense of finding yourself somewhere this close to the end of the earth. Apart from anything else, to say that you've been 350km past Timbuktu earns pretty big traveller-cachet points.

Gao's tourist season runs from mid-December until mid-March.

History

EARLY HISTORY

Gao was probably founded in AD 650, and by 1000 – before Timbuktu had even been created – it was a well-established city-state and a gateway to the eastern trans-Saharan trade routes. Gao became the capital of the Empire of Songhai around 1020, shortly after Dia Kossi, the then ruler, converted to Islam. Over the next 300 years Gao became rich and powerful and, although it eventually fell to the mighty Mali empire in 1324, its people were subjugated for less than 20 years.

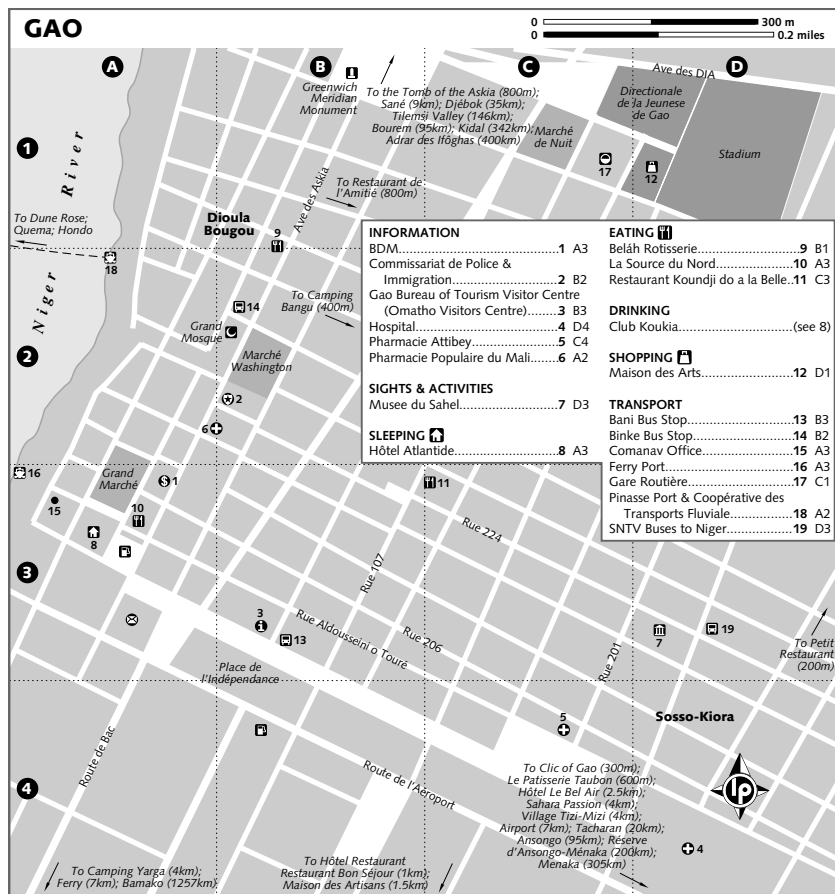
One of the greatest leaders of the Songhai was Sunni Ali Ber, a ruthless military tactician more content with waging war than administering his empire, which soon included Djenné and Timbuktu. Alas, his son wasn't a patch on his father and was overthrown by Askia Muhammad Touré. Askia was a devout Muslim and immediately set about restoring the prestige of Gao's Islamic institutions (he now lies in the Tomb of Askia in the north of the city). Then in 1591, 53 years after his death, Gao was smashed and looted by invading Moroccan armies. Gao subsequently fell into decline and never recovered.

THE TUAREG UPRISING

The Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s, which was devastating as much for towns like Gao (which were cut off from the rest of the world by fighting and banditry) as it was for the Tuareg themselves, was a conflict with deep roots.

After Mali and Niger became independent in the 1960s, the governments of the fledgling states inherited a deep Tuareg mistrust towards those who wanted to confine their nomadic lifestyle, and a reciprocal enmity from the peoples of the south – who dominated government – who remembered the Tuareg as slave-owners who had preyed on villages south of the Sahara. Persecution of the Tuareg was widespread after independence and little government money was spent in Tuareg areas.

The great droughts of 1968–74 and 1980–85 drove many Tuareg to cross borders in search of food. When their return was negotiated by the governments of Mali, Algeria and Niger, many found themselves restricted to poorly resourced transition camps. By the late 1980s, the camps had become permanent.



In May 1990, just across Mali's border with Niger in Tchintabardane, young Tuareg men attacked the *gendarmerie*, killed two soldiers and made off with a cache of weapons. When they were captured in the Malian town of Menaka, local Tuareg stormed the prison and released them. Fighting quickly spread and a Tuareg group attacked government offices in the Gao region. Heavy-handed retaliation by Malian soldiers led to a widespread Tuareg uprising and a proliferation of groups advocating everything from an independent Tuareg state to a more equitable distribution of government money.

President Alpha Konaré agreed to allow more Tuareg representation in the army, civil service and government, but in 1994

there was a large Tuareg assault on Gao, which in turn led to bloody reprisals by the Malian army and the creation of the Ghanda Koi, a Songhai militia. By the middle of the year, Mali was in a state of virtual civil war. Hundreds of people were killed and bandits exploited this unrest to cause further chaos in the north.

Things calmed in 1995, after moderate representatives from the Songhai and Tuareg communities came together to push towards a lasting peace. This culminated in the ceremonial burning of 3000 weapons in Timbuktu on 27 March 1996 (where the Flamme de la Paix now stands).

Aid money has since been pumped into the region and Tuareg refugees have re-

turned from Mauritania, Algeria and Libya (who had armed and trained many of the insurgents). However, for many the traditional nomadic lifestyle, pivotal to the Tuareg's cultural identity, is now a thing of the past.

Information

INTERNET

Clic of Gao (Route de l'Aéroport; per hr CFA1000; ☎ 8-11am & 4-9pm Mon-Thu & Sat, 6-9pm Fri, 8-11am Sun) At L'Institut de Formation des Maîtres.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital (☎ 282 0254; Route de l'Aéroport) A new hospital.

Pharmacie Attibey (☎ 282 0441; Rue Aldousséini O Touré)

Pharmacie Populaire du Mali (Ave des Askia)

MONEY

BDM (Ave des Askia) Changes euro cash, organises Western Union transfers and, sometimes, provides cash advances on Visa cards.

TOURIST OFFICES & GUIDES

Association Askia Guide (☎ 282 0130) Guides for exploring local sites and the Sahara.

Gao Bureau of Tourism Visitor Centre (Omatoth Visitors Centre; ☎ 282 1182, 605 1559; Place de l'Indépendance; ☎ 7.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, by appointment Sat & Sun) The best tourist office in Mali, with savvy and helpful staff who have a full list of hotels, restaurants, accredited guides and a host of other services – well done, guys!

Sights & Activities

Gao's premier tourist attraction is a sunset trip to **La Dune Rose** ('The Pink Dune', known locally as Koïma), a wonderful sand dune on the eastern bank of the Niger, visible from town. As it turns pink with the setting sun, there is magic in the air, not least because it was once believed by locals to be the home of magicians. If you're coming here (only possible from September to February when water levels allow), consider also hiring a pirogue (from CFA15,000 for three hours) to drift further along the river as the dunes come alive. Upstream at Quema and Hondo (a three-hour trip) there are more stunning dunes, while you're almost guaranteed hippo sightings at Tacharan.

Prices for longer river excursions are somewhat inflated, but hippo and manatee spotting is possible (CFA75,000 per day).

Musée du Sahel (Rue 224, Sozzo-Kiora; admission CFA1000; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-6pm Tue-Sun) is a wonderful museum that tells the story of the Songhai and Tuareg people, and the prehistoric sites in the surrounding region.

The **Tomb of the Askia** (admission CFA1000; ☎ Sat-Thu), north of town, was built in 1495 by Askia Muhammad Touré, whose remains lie within. It's an amazing building and a classic of Sudanese (Sahelian) architecture, with its combination of mud-brick, wooden struts and a tapering tower. It may be possible to climb the 10m-high tomb for good views of the city and river.

The **Grand Marché** and **port** are interesting and well worth checking out, especially on Sunday (market day), but it's always busy.

Five blocks east of the water tower, the **Maison des Artisans** (☎ 8am-dusk) has 60 artisan-owned shops and is a great place to browse.

Sleeping

Advanced booking of accommodation (which is mostly far from central Gao) is a good idea between November and February.

Hôtel le Bel Air (☎ 282 0540; mattress on roof CFA4000, d with fan/air-con CFA12,500/17,500; ☎) A relatively new place that hasn't yet begun the long descent into decline, Bel Air is busy and bustling, and the good rooms are accompanied by an African ambience in the public areas. The rooms in the annex are especially good.

Sahara Passion (☎ /fax 282 0187; spassion@malinet.m; s/d with fan CFA10,000/12,500, with air-con CFA17,000/22,000; ☎) Off Rue 381 southeast of the town centre, Sahara Passion is nicely done and is Gao's most switched-on place. The courtyard is lovely, the restaurant is one of Gao's best (meals CFA1500 to CFA3000), although it's heavy on the oil, and this is one of the best places to organise your desert expedition. The only drawback is that they're often booked out weeks in advance during high tourist season.

Camping Euro (☎ 608 7827; nr Algerian Consulate, Aljanabandia; d/ste with fan CFA7500/10,000) Since we were in Gao, we've learned of this new and super-clean *campement*-style place, where English is spoken. It's winning good reviews from travellers.

Hôtel Atlantide (☎ 282 0130; d with fan/air-con CFA10,000/17,500) Around since the 1930s, this

once-grand colonial place has a past more glorious than its present. Renovations are promised but little seems to change each time we come, so not everything works and it's very frayed around the edges. Then again, it's central, clean and the decaying elegance does have a certain ramshackle charm.

Camping Bangu (☎ 619 7675; cnr Rues 227 & Tiemoko Fadiala Sangare, Sosso-Kiara; dm CFA3000-5000) has simple dorm accommodation, while **Camping Yarga** (☎ 624 2047; off Route de Bac; r CFA5000), 4km south of central Gao, is similar and has a low-key, laid-back atmosphere. **Village Tizi-Mizi** (☎ 282 0194; d with fan CFA7500-12,500, with air-con CFA17,500; ☹), 4km along Route de l'Aéroport, is a step up in quality and a pleasant place to stay, although some rooms are overpriced; there's also a good bar.

Hôtel Restaurant Bon Séjour (☎ 282 0338; mattress on roof CFA1500, d with fan & shared bathroom CFA10,000, with air-con & shared/private bathroom CFA15,000/17,500; ☹) No style or comfort awards here, but this ageing place, opposite the water tower, is one of the few places close to the centre, and the rooms are tidy if unremarkable. The food (meals CFA1500 to CFA2500) is pretty good, and it sells beer.

Eating

While here, it's definitely worth seeking out the local Songhaï specialty, *wigila*, sun-dried dumplings which you dunk into a meat sauce made with cinnamon and spices. To eat this in a restaurant, you'll need to order it in the morning so you can have it for dinner.

La Source du Nord (☎ 7am-10pm; salads CFA500-1000, mains CFA750-1750) You can try *wigila* in this place, opposite the Shell petrol station in central Gao, and they also do a good braised *capitaine* (CFA1500).

Restaurant de l'Amitié (☎ 8-4am; cnr Rues 234 & 213, Sosso-Kiara; meals CFA500-3000) Does rice (CFA500) and steak and chicken dishes for CFA1000 and CFA2000 respectively. Both the Amitié and La Source du Nord are good, and they move up a gear come tourist season.

Le Petit Restaurant (3rd paved road, Sosso Koirra; ☎ 6am-8pm; meals CFA500) This is a very popular place with tourists and expats, who come for the cheap and hearty lentils, liver, couscous and macaroni. Oumar, the kindly Algerian owner, is another drawcard.

Pâtisserie Le Taubon (Chateau, Secteur 2; ☎ 5pm-2am; pastries CFA250-300, meals CFA1500-3000) A good range of snacks and lights meals are avail-

able here, including meat pockets (CFA300), chicken burgers (CFA2000) and *nêmes* (shredded beef in an egg roll; CFA500). It's on the road to the airport.

Restaurant Koundji do a la Belle (Rue 107, Saneye; meals CFA500-3500) Serves up the standard fare of brochette and rice and sauce, plus some other Malian specialties by prior arrangement.

Of the hotel restaurants, **Hôtel Restaurant Bon Séjour** (☎ 282 0338) is the best, followed by **Sahara Passion** (☎/fax 2820187; off Rue 381) and **Hôtel Le Bel Air** (☎ 282 0540).

Around the Grand Marché you can get coffee and bread in the mornings, and street food in the evenings (check out the excellent local sausages). Rotisseries are found all over Gao – **Bellah Rôtisserie** (Ave des Askias; meals from CFA500) is worth a try.

Drinking

Club Koukia (admission CFA1500; ☎ 8-4am), behind Hôtel Atlantide, is a popular bar-cum-nightclub where a Castel will set you back CFA500.

Restaurant de l'Amitié and La Source du Nord are as much bars as restaurants during the tourist season.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Apart from international flights operated by Point Afrique (see p543), **CAM** (☎ 282 0960; Hôtel Atlantide) offer Gao's only plane connection with the outside world, with one flight per week to Bamako (CFA120,900) via Mopti (CFA85,200) and Timbuktu (CFA42,140).

BOAT

Pinasses go most Wednesdays to Ansongo (market day on Thursday), but the rapids at Labbe inhibit direct pinasse traffic to Niger. Apart from the **Comanav ferry** (☎ 282 0466; p545) there's no regular transport upstream to Timbuktu; chartering your own private pinasse is possible, but expensive (from CFA300,000).

BUS

Gao lies on the north bank of the Niger River, but the long bitumen road from Bamako terminates on the southern side; a ferry makes the crossing. A new bridge is under construction, however, which will be great news for those who arrive on a bus at night and will no longer have to wait until dawn for the ferry to start running.

Departures to Bamako (CFA16,000, 16 to 20 hours) via Sévaré (CFA7000, eight hours) and Ségou (CFA14,000, 12 hours) leave early in the morning (usually 5am) and mid-afternoon. The office of **Binke** (☎ 282 0558) is off Ave des Askia. **Bani** (☎ 282 0424) buses leave from Place de l'Indépendance.

A Binke truck-bus leaves for Kidal (CFA7500, eight hours) once a week, and returns the following day. There's also an occasional truck/4WD to Timbuktu (CFA12,500 to CFA15,000, 12 hours) from the *gare routière*. For information on SNTV's truck-buses to Niamey in Niger, see p544. Land Rovers for Ansongo (CFA2700), and occasionally Ménaka (CFA8000), leave when full from Place de l'Indépendance.

Getting Around

There are no *bâchés* for getting around the sprawl of Gao, which usually means a hot, dusty walk. **Tiobou Maïga** (☎ 282 0424) runs two of Gao's few regular taxis.

Sahara Passion (☎/fax 820187; spassion@bluewin.ch) is your best bet for 4WD hire (CFA70,000 per day).

AROUND GAO

Before setting out into the desert north of Gao, check with the local Bureau of Tourism, or police in town, as to the security situation. Although infrequent, there have been reports of banditry.

There's a huge cattle market at Djébock on Monday (transport from Gao CFA750) and the archaeological remains of ancient Gao lie at Sané (though there's not much to see). The Tilemsi Valley is beautiful and Neolithic rock paintings and carvings can be seen in the Adrar des Ifôghas, a remote desert massif around Kidal (where the landscape is stunning). Stone tablets inscribed with historic and Quranic texts have been found near remote Ménaka. Just when you thought you'd reached the end of the road, there's Andéramboukane. This small border town hosts the **Festival of Andéramboukane** (January), one of the most important Tuareg festivals. Talk to the Bureau of Tourism Visitor Centre in Gao about how to get here.

The **Réserve d'Ansongo-Ménaka** is next to the Niger River and is extremely isolated. Much of the wildlife has gone but with considerable luck you may see red-fronted gazelles or manatees, and the Niger River

still contains hippos. Access (via Ansongo) is difficult. You'll require a well-equipped 4WD and an informed guide.

HOMBORI

Hombori is a large village, on the main road between Mopti and Gao. The older, more picturesque quarter, climbs the hill to the south. Elephants pass close to Hombori in February and March (p534), and Hombori stands in the heart of some spectacular scenery and good climbing country.

Anyone wanting to climb here should contact a Spanish climber called **Salvador Campillo** (salva@maindefatma.com; http://empresas.ideo.es/mascarell/maindefatma/pag/catal.html), who lives in the area for part of the year and arranges climbing tours.

Sights & Activities

A series of magnificent sandstone butresses, or mesas, punctuate the semidesert landscape in this area – some people call the 80km stretch of road between Hombori and Douentza Mali's monument valley. The rock formations and sheer cliffs of the Gandamia Plateau (with great trekking potential) are truly beautiful.

The huge towers of rock culminate north of town with Hombori Tondo, which rises from the plains to 1155m (the highest point in Mali). To reach the wide summit plateau you'll need some climbing ability and equipment, but La Clé de Hombori ('Key to Hombori'), a separate jagged spire at the southwestern end of the massif, can be climbed without ropes in about four hours.

About 13km south of town is La Main de Fatima (The Hand of Fatima) whose narrow, finger-like towers reach up 600m from the plains and provide world-class technical rock climbing. Several routes have been established, most of very high and demanding standard (British grades around E4, French grades around 7A).

A spectacular walking trail passes left (south) of Fatima's northern-most digit to a wonderful campsite, before descending to Garmi Tondo, a picturesque, stone-built village (with a water pump) close to the Gao-Bamako road and where all visitors to the rock should pay a CFA1500 tourist tax.

A 45-minute walk north of Hombori is an impressive dune system, Hondo Miyo. It's a great place to watch the sunset.

DESERT ELEPHANTS

Perhaps because the Sahel seems unable to produce enough food even for people and their livestock, it comes as a surprise to most visitors to learn that Mali is home to large herds of migratory elephants. Mali's elephants have longer legs and shorter tusks than their East African cousins and inhabit the Gourma region between the Niger River and the border with Burkina Faso. During the rainy season they fatten themselves up in the relatively lush southern area, and around November to January, as the vegetation withers, they move north to a chain of reliable water holes and survive on relatively little food for the duration of the dry season.

The easiest place to see them is near Gossi, where they drink at the large lake. They move south again in June, a welcome sign for local people of coming rain, often passing near the town of Boni. This annual 1000km circuit is the longest elephant migration in Africa.

For centuries the elephants have coexisted with Fula pastoralists, happy to share their water sources and have the elephants fertilise their lands. Nomadic pastoralists even trail the elephants in order to find the best pasture and water sources. But conditions in the Sahel have become very hard for farmers recently and as the population grows, so pressure on the land increases.

Seeing the elephants requires 4WD transport and a good local guide. For tour operators who can arrange such expeditions, see p546.

Sleeping & Eating

Campement Hôtel Mangou Bagni (camping or mattress on roof CFA3000, s/d CFA4000/6000) The atmosphere makes this a simple, but really quite nice, place to stay and eat. Otherwise there's another very simple *campement* on the main road just west of Hombori's two surprisingly good Senegalese restaurants.

Getting There & Away

Hombori lies along the Sévaré to Gao road, and all transport between these two towns passes through Hombori (by bus CFA3500 either way, five to nine hours).

AROUND HOMBORI

Boni lies halfway between Hombori and Douentza, in a wide pass 5km south of the main road. It's a beautiful setting and on Thursday there's a huge cattle market.

Douentza, though an unappealing town, is home to a Sunday market and is the launching point for treks into northern Dogon Country. Douentza's best place to stay, **Campement de Douentza** (☎ 245 2052, 633 0301; beds around CFA10,000), is run by the endearingly eccentric Frenchman Jérôme Hurpoil, and is the first choice for arranging expeditions to the Dogon Country. Members of the **guide association** (☎ 245 2002) hang out at **Auberge Gourma** (☎ 245 2031; CFA3000 per person), a basic place to stay. Guides here can advise about exploring the nearby **Réserve de Douentza** (and provide 4WD hire; expect to pay around CFA50,000 per day plus petrol).

THE SOUTH

Southern Mali sees relatively few tourists, other than those making their way between the attractions along the Niger River and Burkina Faso away to the south. There's not a whole to see, but you will experience a side to Mali entirely different from the tourist Mali that you encounter further north.

SIKASSO

pop 144,786

Agreeable, if unexciting, Sikasso stands at the heart of a relatively lush region which is known as the 'market garden of Mali'. Physical evidence of Sikasso's fascinating history has eroded over time, although the mud-brick *tata* (town wall), that fell to French cannons in 1898 is still visible in places. Sikasso was the last Malian town to resist French colonialism, and King Babemba Traore chose to kill himself rather than surrender. The beautiful Palais du Dernier Roi still stands on the western side of town and in the centre is the Mamelon, a small hill that was sacred to the KénéDougou kings, and on which a French colonial tower now stands.

Information

Bank of Africa (off Ave Mamadou) Changes euro cash.

Hospital (☎ 262 0001; Ave du Gouverneur Jacques Fousset)

Pharmacie du Souvenir (☎ 262 0119; Blvd Coffet)

Sleeping & Eating

Zanga Hôtel (☎ 262 0431; s/d with fan CFA12,500/17,000, with air-con & bathroom CFA21,500/24,500; ☺) Zanga, 100m north of the *gare routière*, is fairly flash (by Sikasso standards), has a pool and is easily the best place to stay in town. The rooms are fine, if uninspiring, but the cheaper ones with fans are not brilliant and are overpriced.

Hôtel Lotio (☎ 262 1001; Blvd Coffet; s/d from CFA6000/8000) If you're coming from Burkina Faso, basic rooms here can be a depressing introduction to Mali, but it's a friendly place and the rooms have fans.

Hôtel Mamelon (☎ 262 0044; Ave Mamadou Konate; d with bathroom CFA8000-16,000) Some of the air-con at this once-lovely hotel seems to date from the colonial era, but it somehow keeps working. Like most people we encountered in Sikasso, the owners are a friendly lot.

Bldv Coffet has several cheap eateries serving good filling meals (heavy on the rice) for around CFA500 to CFA1500. **La Vieille Marmite** (Bldv Coffet) and **Restaurant Kenedougou** (Bldv Coffet) provide good Malian fare and the enormous Sunday market is a real bonus for street-food fans.

Getting There & Away

The *gare routière* is a 15-minute walk (CFA200 in a shared taxi) from the town centre. There are daily buses to Bamako (CFA4500, three hours), Mopti (CFA6000, five hours) and Ségou (CFA4500, three hours).

AROUND SIKASSO

Riddled with chambers and tunnels, the fascinating Grottes de Missirikoro, a lump of limestone roughly 12km southwest of Sikasso, is important to local animists and Muslims. A taxi tour from Sikasso costs around CFA8000.

The beautiful waterfalls, Les Chutes de Farako, lie about 27km east of Sikasso, and are easily accessible from the Route de Burkina Faso.

THE WEST

Western Mali is hard work – transport is infrequent or nonexistent, tourist infrastructure likewise and most of the sights are few and very far between. The region's appeal lies, however, in these very facts. This is Mali largely untrammelled by tourists and

the modern world and losing yourself here is about deep African immersion.

NATIONAL PARKS

Mali's western national parks are difficult to reach, but will be worthwhile for those who long to escape Mali's tourist crowds.

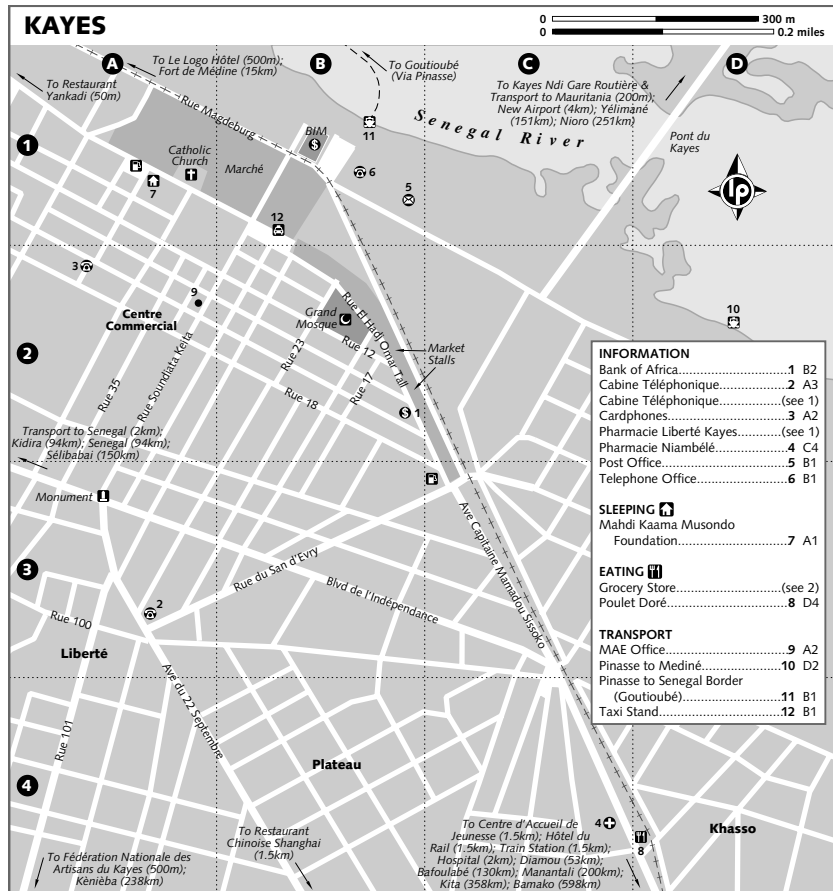
Bordering the lake formed by Manantali dam, west of Kita, **Parc National du Bafing** protects a number of primate species, including chimpanzees, which are the focus of a small NGO project. Access is from Kounjdan, 45km from Manantali on the route to Kéniéba. From Kounjdan, take the road south to Makandougou; the road is terrible and you may have to walk the 25km from Kounjdan. Once there, ask for Famakan Dembele, a forestry worker. Manantali makes a good base for exploring the region. There are several places to stay and good connections to Mahina (for the Kayes-Bamako train).

The vast Parc National de la Boucle du Baoulé once contained many of the species that you'd see on a Kenyan safari. However, most of the large herbivores have been hunted out, their demise in turn signalling the end for many large carnivores. Northwest of Bamako, the park lies between two large bends on the Baoulé River and is mostly wooden savanna with pockets of riverine forest. Bird-watching is reported to be good, but you'll see few animals. The park is probably of more interest to archaeologists than zoologists, as over 200 archaeological sites have been found here. Access to the park is best via Négala, a small village 60km northwest of Bamako. You'll need a 4WD and to be completely self-sufficient. For more information contact the **Office du Parc National de la Boucle du Baoulé** (Map p492; ☎ 222 2498), which is next to Bamako's botanical gardens.

KAYES

pop 97,464

You wouldn't come here just to see Kayes (pronounced Kai), but as the principal settlement in the west of Mali, it can be a reasonable place to break up the long journey between Bamako and Dakar. Kayes is hot and dusty, and was the first place the French settled in Mali (several colonial buildings remain). There's a thriving, chaotic market, the town is largely hassle-free and a number of interesting excursions are possible.



Information

There are telephone call centres (*cabines téléphonique*) including on Ave du 22 Septembre and Rue 14.

Bank of Africa (Rue 14) Changes euro cash.

Hospital (☎ 252 1232) Is 2km south of town.

Pharmacie Liberté Kayes (Rue 14)

Pharmacies Niambélé (Ave du Capitaine Mamadou Sissoko)

Sleeping & Eating

Centre d'Accueil de Jeunesse (camping or mattress on roof CFA3000, s/d CFA5000/7500) This hostel-style place is a real late-night, let's-just-crash sort of spot, with a bar.

Hôtel du Rail (☎ 252 1233; d with air-con CFA18,000-28,000; 🚻) Opposite the train station, Kayes'

Rail Hotel is typical of such places across West Africa – always people coming and going, a lovely old colonial building, and interiors that fade noticeably with each passing year. The food here is good (three-course menu CFA6000), while the garden's an ideal place to wait for trains.

Mahdi Kaama Musundo Foundation (beds CFA6000) This foundation for the promotion of Soninke language and culture, is not really a hotel, but is an imaginative choice nonetheless. The rooms are simple and there's an atmosphere of quiet scholarship; not surprisingly the staff are a mine of information on local culture. It's next to the petrol station and opposite the market in the centre of town.

Le Logo Hôtel (☎ 252 1381; Rue 139 Légal Ségou; s/d with air-con & breakfast CFA12,500/17,500; 🚻) Although not really convenient for much other than the riverbank, Le Logo, off Rue Madgeburg, is a friendly place with good food (meals CFA1500 to CFA4000) and a decent bar.

There are several cheap food stalls near the train station and in the market. Of the sit-down options (all open for lunch and dinner daily), **Restaurant Yankadi** (Rue 122; meals CFA250-700), near the junction with Rue Madgeburg, serves filling meals; **Poulet Doré** (Ave du Capitaine Mamadou Sissoko) does great roast chicken (whole chicken CFA3000); and **Restaurant Chinois Shanghai** (meals CFA1250-3750), at the southern end of Ave du 22 Septembre, offers authentic Chinese cuisine, freshly prepared in front of your eyes (the portions are tasty, but a little small).

Shopping

The excellent market is busy on Saturday. **Fédération Nationale des Artisans du Kayes** (☎ 252 2445), beside the stadium, puts you in touch with local artisans producing excellent textiles.

Getting There & Away

The best route to Bamako is currently via Bafoulabé, Manantali and Kita (the first quarter is pretty rough).

For cross-border transport to Senegal and Mauritania, see p543.

AIR

CAM (☎ 672 7676) and **MAE** (☎ 252 1582; Rue Soundiata Keita) each have up to four weekly flights between Kayes and Bamako (CFA57,850). As few tourists come this way, seats fill up fast with Malians on business. The new airport is north of the Senegal River, on the road to Yélimané.

BOAT

Pinasses to the Senegal border at Goutioubé (CFA3000) leave mid-afternoon. Some go on to Bakel (CFA11,000).

BUSH TAXI

Transport leaves daily from Kayes *Ndi gare routière*, on the north side of the river, to Nioro (CFA7500 to CFA9000) and Yélimané (CFA5000). Old 4WDs go to Sélibabai (CFA10,000) in Mauritania, directly from Kayes Ndi.

TRAIN

There's a service from Kayes to Bamako (2nd/1st class CFA6960/11,670, 10 to 14 hours) on Monday, Tuesday and Saturday (it travels the other way the previous day). You can take the weekly international service from Dakar to Bamako (2nd/1st/couchette class CFA11,480/16,190/22,190), although getting tickets can be difficult. For more details on services to Senegal, see p546.

AROUND KAYES

The **Fort de Médine**, about 15km upstream from Kayes, was part of a chain of defence posts built along the Senegal River in French colonial times. The crumbling buildings hold a real sense of history and the old train station is particularly beautiful. You may be able to stay with a local family; ask either of the guides at Fort de Médine or at the mayor's office just beside it.

The Chutes de Felou are a set of rapids and waterfalls about 2km south from Médine.

Pinasses to Médine (CFA1000) leave from opposite the Total petrol station in Kayes around 6.30am and 1.30pm daily, and return around 8am the following morning. Pirogues to Médine (CFA750) leave around 3pm and return to Kayes the following morning. A taxi there and back costs around CFA12,500.

YÉLIMANÉ

The new dirt road between Yélimané and Kayes makes the interesting journey to this little Sahelian town easy. The compact hill-top centre of Yélimané is worth exploring, but the real attractions are out of town.

After the wet, dozens of lily-covered seasonal lakes and flooded forests appear along the course of the Kolinbiné River, providing feeding grounds for migratory and endemic water birds.

Mare de Goumboko is the closest lake to Yélimané (10km west), while Mares de Garé, Lebé and Toya are harder to get to. The former two are best reached via Komolo (signposted from the Kayes road around 45km west of Yélimané). Mare de Toya is reached via Yaguine (22km west of Yélimané). You are advised to seek out the chief of both villages and take a guide to see you safely along the often-confusing 4WD tracks.

Maison de l'Amitié (☎ 252 2251; beds CFA2000) offers good, cheap accommodation. It's just north of the market.

DIAMOU

This tiny rail-side town has nothing to offer travellers, but the surrounding landscape is stunning. The Senegal River flows through a cluster of large sandstone mesas, creating potentially great trekking country. One good objective is the Chutes de Gouina, a 200m-wide, 10m-high set of waterfalls located about 24km upstream from Diamou.

The road between Bafoulabé (a small town at the junction of Bafing and Bakoy Rivers) and Kayes provides a direct route to the falls, but there's no regular transport. Follow the old bitumen road 6km out of Diamou to a junction just past the defunct cement factory. Turn right onto the dirt road (signposted to 'Gouina and Bafoulabé') and after 18km, just after passing the ruins of a French Mission, you'll see the spray of the falls through the scrub.

Back in Diamou, Bar Le Khasso (across the tracks from the station) offers very simple accommodation, should you miss the train.

Trains between Bamako and Kayes stop here. There's little road transport to Kayes.

KÉNIÉBA

This neglected town may be something of a dog's breakfast, but the surrounding escarpments and hills are dramatic and picturesque. Unusually for Mali, there's also a fair amount of wildlife in the region, so if you go walking (and you really should) your chances of actually seeing some are not bad. Just make sure that if you're with a guide they don't try to kill it.

The town was once the centre of a gold-producing area (see p486) and is the starting point for little-used routes into Guinea and Senegal.

The **Casa Ronde** (s/d CFA3000/4500) *campement* provides the only basic, grubby and rather depressing accommodation, but the simple food is OK. Restaurant Wassa, located beside Pharmacie Abdoul Wahab and just up from the Total petrol station, has better grub.

Getting There & Away

There's usually one vehicle per day for Kayes (CFA7500) and other surrounding towns, with regular departures chalked up

on a board in the square next to the mayor's office.

There are also cross-border options for Guinea (p544) and Senegal (p544).

MALI DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Mali has some outstanding hotels, although compared to other West African countries you pay a lot more for quality.

Everywhere, budget hotels (up to CFA8000/10,000 for a single/double) vary from basic and depressing to simple and tidy, but rarely have any character. Sleeping on flat roofs (mattresses are usually provided) is the cheapest accommodation option in Mali; prices range from CFA1000 in the Dogon Country (where it can be the only budget option) to CFA3000. Some hotels have dorms (CFA3000 to CFA4000); the best of these are in Ségou, Sévaré, Mopti and Bandiagara. Elsewhere, the best you can hope for is a *campement*, which are simple and range around a courtyard.

The standard of midrange hotels (from CFA10,000/12,000 for a single/double up to CFA33,000/40,000) is generally quite high across the country. Bamako, Ségou, Sévaré, Bandiagara and, to a lesser extent, Mopti have the best hotels, while tourist hotspots like Djenné and Timbuktu have good hotels, but few that stand out.

In Bamako there are dozens of top-end hotels (above CFA35,000/42,000 for a single/double and up to CFA75,000 for a

PRACTICALITIES

- Electricity supply is 220V, and two-pin Western European-style plugs are used.
- Local daily French-language newspapers include *Le Soir* and *Le Mali*; *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde* are available in Bamako, and *International Herald Tribune*, and *Newsweek* appear at just a few Bamako outlets.
- The BBC World Service is on 88.9FM in Bamako; elsewhere check www.bbc.co.uk/cgi-bin/worldservice.
- Mali uses the metric system for weights and measures.

double) to choose from, but the only other quality top-end place is in Mopti.

Some places add CFA500 per person tourist tax to room costs, and this has been included in the prices in this chapter.

ACTIVITIES

Mali is one of the most active destinations in West Africa. Possibilities include exceptional trekking in Dogon Country (p513); evocative desert expeditions by camel or 4WD in the Sahara north of Timbuktu (p525), or Gao (p533); river journeys up the Niger between Mopti and Timbuktu (p510); and world-class rock climbing near Hombori (p533).

BOOKS

Ségu, by Maryse Condé, is an epic generational tale of a late 18th-century family living in the Niger River trading town of Ségou.

In Griot Time: An American Guitarist in Mali, by Banning Eyre, is a great read, offering up-close pen portraits of many of Mali's world-renowned artists and a meditation on the role of music in modern Malian society.

The Cruellest Journey: Six Hundred Miles to Timbuktu, by Kira Salak, is one of the best books on Mali recently. Follow the author as, inspired by Mungo Park, she paddles up the Niger to Timbuktu where she exposes the continued existence of slavery in Mali.

Dogon – Africa's People of the Cliffs, by Stephenie Hollyman and Walter van Beek, is a beautifully photographed study of the Dogon, with informative anthropological text – it'll look nice on your coffee table but it's not for your backpack.

Men of Salt: Across the Sahara with the Caravan of White Gold, by Michael Benanav, is a highly readable account of an epic modern-day journey to the remote salt mines of Taoudenni, with plenty of fascinating anecdotes and historical detail.

Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta, by Sebastian Schutyser, is a beautifully presented collection of black-and-white photographs of Mali's weird-and-wonderful mosques – it's a great souvenir of your visit.

BUSINESS HOURS

Banks open between 8am and noon, then 3pm to 5pm Monday to Friday, plus 8am til noon Saturday. Bars normally serve from

noon until late, while nightclubs hop between 10pm and the wee hours. You should be able to grab a bite in most restaurants between noon and 3pm, then 6.30pm to 11pm. Shops and businesses generally open from 8am to noon and 3pm to 5pm Monday until Friday, and 8am til noon on Saturday.

CHILDREN

Mali's a terrific destination for children. While there are few sights or activities dedicated to kids, the improbable houses of the Dogon Country (p513), the sandcastle-like Djenné mosque (p506), the fascinating river-side villages of the Niger (p510) and a Tuareg encampment amid the sand close to the legendary city of Timbuktu (p525) will be experiences your children will never forget.

COURSES

For French classes, enquire at the **Centre Culturel Français** (Map p494; ☎ 222 4019; www.ccf.bamako.org) in Bamako, where they sometimes offer courses.

Sadly, courses in Mali's musical instruments and traditions are extremely rare. In Bamako try the **Carrefour des Jeunes** (Map p494; Ave Kassa Keita) or **Maison des Jeunes** (Map p492; ☎ 222 2320; maisjeunes@yahoo.fr; off Sq Lumumba), while **Motel Savane** (☎ 232 0974; savane@motelsavane.com; off Blvd de l'Indépendance) in Ségou sometimes has drumming classes.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Crime is not a big problem in Mali, although in Bamako you should be careful about walking around at night in some areas (see p493 for more details). People travelling by train should take extra care, as the train stations in Kayes and Bamako are targeted by thieves who enjoy the chaotic scenes when the train pulls in. Be vigilant on the trains themselves, especially between Kati and Bamako, and before arriving at Kayes. Carry a torch (flashlight), keep nothing in your pockets, watch (and lock) your bags at all times, and be extra vigilant when embarking and disembarking.

Always check the local security situation if you're heading out into the desert north of Gao, as banditry has been reported.

The main annoyance for visitors are the young men who lurk outside hotels in Bamako, Mopti, Djenné, Ségou, Timbuktu and the gateway towns to the Dogon

Country offering their services as guides (see the boxed text, p491).

Some travellers have also reported respiratory complaints coming from dust-laden air, which can be a particular problem during the harmattan season from January to May.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Malian Embassies & Consulates

All embassies issue visas and in West Africa, Mali has embassies in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Niger. For details, see the relevant country chapters. In Paris, note that it is the Consulate-General which issues visas, not the embassy. Other Malian embassies or consulates include the following:

Belgium (☎ 02-345 7432; ambassade.mali@skynet.be; 487 Ave Molière, Brussels 1060)

Canada (☎ 613-232 1501, 232 3264; www.ambamali.canada.org/english/a1.html; 50 Ave Goulburn, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 8C8)

France Consulat Général (☎ 01-48 07 85 85; www.consulat-mali-france.org; fax 45 48 55 34; 64 Rue Pelleport, Paris 75020); Embassy (☎ 01-45 48 58 43; fax 01 45 48 55 34; 89 Rue du Cherche Midi, Paris 75006)

Germany (☎ 030-319 9883; fax 319 9884; Kurfürstendamm 72, 10709 Berlin)

Italy (☎ 06-4425 4068; amb.malirome@tiscalinet.it; Via Antonia Boston 2, Rome)

USA (☎ 202-332 2249; www.maliembassy.us; 2130 R St NW, Washington, DC 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in Mali

The following are all embassies in Bamako:

Burkina Faso (☎ 229 3171; off Route de Guinée; ☎ 7.30am-12.30pm & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

Canada (☎ 221 2236; www.bamako.gc.ca; Route de Koulikoro) Opposite Luna Parc; also assists Australian and UK nationals.

Côte d'Ivoire (Map p492; ☎ 221 2289; Rue 220; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-4pm Mon-Fri) Near Marché N'Golonina, above TAM Voyages.

France (Map p494; ☎ 221 2951, 221 3141; Sq Lumumba) Consulate; assists Austrian, Belgian, Spanish, Greek, Italian and Portuguese nationals.

Germany (☎ 222 3715; Badalabougou Est) South of Pont des Martyrs.

Ghana (☎ 229 6083; ACI2000; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-12.30pm Fri)

Guinea (☎ 221 0806; Rue 37, off Ave de l'OUA, Faso-Kanu; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-12.30pm Fri)

Mauritania (☎ 221 4815; Rue 213, off Route de Koulikoro, Hippodrome; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri)

Netherlands (Map p492; ☎ 221 5611; bam@minbuza.ml; Rue 437, off Route de Koulikoro, Hippodrome)

Niger (☎ 601 9239, 698 7828; Ave Mamadou Konaté; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Senegal (☎ 221 8273; fax 221 1780; Rue 287, off Blvd Nelson Mandela, Hippodrome; ☎ 7.30am-1pm & 1.30-4pm Mon-Fri)

USA (Map p494; ☎ 222 5470; www.usa.org.ml; cnr Rue de Rochester & Rue Mohammed V)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

In addition to mask ceremonies in Dogon villages (April to May; p517), Bozo fishing celebrations (February), marionette festivals in Diarabougou (November; p501) and Markala (p504), and the great cattle crossings of the Fulani (December to January; p504), the following are worth checking out:

Biennal (Bamako; September in even years) A sport and cultural festival with live music groups from around Mali.

Festival in the Desert (www.festival-au-desert.org; January; Essakane, near Timbuktu; p62)

Festival of Andéramboukane (January; Andéramboukane on Mali-Niger border; p533)

Festival Sur Le Niger (February; Ségou; p502)

HOLIDAYS

Public holidays include:

New Year's Day 1 January

Army Day 20 January

For the Martyrs of the 1991 Revolution 26 March

Easter March/April

Labour Day 1 May

African Unity Day 25 May

Independence Day 22 September

Christmas Day 25 December

For a table of Islamic holiday dates, see p818.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is widely available in Bamako and there are fast connections in Mopti, Bandiagara and, to a lesser extent, Ségou. Elsewhere you'll find at least one Internet café in most towns (including Timbuktu), but connections can be slow. Access usually costs between CFA1000 and CFA1500 per hour.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Afribone Mali (www.afribone.com) General French-language information on Mali.

Dogon-Lobi (www.dogon-lobi.ch/index_1024.htm)

Great photo site with an exceptional list of links to sites about Malian architecture and society.

Journée Nationale des Communes (www.journee-nationale-communes.org) Dry government website (in French) with some interesting statistics by region.

Mali Pages (www.malipages.com.com) Yellow pages listings for Mali.

Mali Photos (www.maliphotos.de) Excellent photos of Mali and good information about Mopti/Sévaré.

OMATHO (www.omatho.com) Government-tourist office site which is surprisingly packed with information, from full listings of tour operators to upcoming events.

MAPS

The French **IGN** (www.ign.fr) produces the excellent *Mali* (1:2,000,000), but it's not available in Mali itself. They also sell the *Carte Internationale du Monde* series (1:1,000,000), which is outdated for roads but the best in the business for physical geography. Michelin's 953 *Africa North and West* (1:4,000,000) is large scale, but shows Mali's minor roads accurately.

Institute Géographique du Mali (☎ 220 2840), off Ave de l'OUA, Badalabougou Est in Bamako, holds basic country and town maps (CFA10,000) plus 1:200,000 topographical maps (CFA5000).

MONEY

The unit of currency is the West African CFA franc.

Cash & Travellers Cheques

Most of Mali's banks change foreign cash. Outside Bamako you may have difficulty with travellers cheques, and when banks do change them commission rates vary wildly. Bank of Africa, Ecobank and Banque Internationale du Mali (BIM) usually charge around 2%.

Changing money in a bank (even cash) can take up to an hour, but some Western-orientated businesses, such as supermarkets and big expensive cafés, will happily change cash and sometimes travellers cheques. Moneychangers also deal openly outside the banks and at the airport. Most offer good rates with no commission and the process is quick. However, rip-offs do happen.

Euros are the best to carry. US dollars are OK, but commissions are quite often higher and nonbank exchange rates grim.

Western Union (for international money transfers; see p820 for details) are found in most banks and post offices.

Credit Cards

At the time of writing, only Banque de Développement du Mali (BDM) was offering cash advances for Visa cards. Banque Internationale pour le Commerce et l'Industrie du Mali (Bicim) used to provide Visa cash advances and there were rumours that they may do so again. There were no functioning ATMs, but Visa card is accepted in a few hotels, restaurants and businesses in Bamako. No bank gives out CFAs against your MasterCard.

POST

Letter and parcel post from Mali's cities is reasonably reliable, but letters can still take weeks to arrive. Parcels do go missing, but usually only items sent from overseas. Anything of real value should be sent by **DHL** (Map p494; ☎ 222 6376; Ave Ruault, Bamako).

A postcard to Europe/North America costs CFA395/405 and a letter CFA485/515.

Poste restante is available at all major post offices. Some charge CFA500 per letter upon collection.

TELEPHONE

Sotelma, the national telephone company, has installed cardphones and phonecards are sold by vendors throughout Mali. Local calls cost CFA100 per minute, national calls CFA300 to CFA500, calls to Europe CFA1875 and to the USA CFA3050. However tariffs are reduced significantly after 5.30pm. Most towns have privately owned *télécentres* or *cabines téléphonique*, which allow easy telephone and fax communication.

Mobile Phones

Maliens love their mobile (cell) phones, and costs are coming down and coverage is expanding. **Malitel** (www.malitel.com.ml) and **Ikatel** (www.ikatel.net) are the main providers; both websites have maps showing each company's coverage within Mali. Local SIM cards can be a good investment if you plan on spending a prolonged period in the country, and occasional offers usually work out cheaper for international calls than calling from a fixed line. Most GSM mobiles from European and other Western countries work in Mali.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Mali's **Office Malien du Tourisme et de Hôtellerie** (Omatho; www.omatho.com) is something of a mixed bag, but is improving all the time. Their

website is excellent, and some local offices (Gao is a stand-out example) have really got their act together in recent years. The recent Omatho-driven system of accrediting guides is a huge improvement on the past and the Omatho offices in Bamako, Timbuktu, Gao and Mopti can provide lists of accredited guides. Despite such improvements, in many towns there's no real reason to visit the Omatho office (often called Bureau Régional du Tourisme), where you won't find much more than the odd brochure.

VISAS

Visas are required by everyone. If there's no Malian embassy in your home country, it's possible to get your visa on arrival at the border. It costs CFA15,000 and you'll need to bring passport photos for the purpose. The visa is valid for an initial period of five days and must then be extended at a police station (no charge), whereafter it will be valid for one month. However, we would still advise you to get your visa in advance (either in Paris, Brussels, Washington DC or while you're travelling through West Africa), because travellers who arrive without visas routinely report hassles from border officials keen to make a little extra money on the side.

The Malian embassy in Brussels charges €30 for a one-month visa, while the Consulate-General in Paris charges €28 for a 30-day single-entry visa, and €51 for the three-month multiple-entry variety; application forms for the latter can be downloaded at www.consulat-mali-france.org/services/texte/frame_base.htm.

The Malian embassy in the USA (www.maliembassy.us) requires payment in cashier's check or money order only (if paying by post), two copies of the application form, two photos, a yellow-fever vaccination certificate and printed flight itinerary; they sometimes also request a hotel reservation. Costs are US\$80/110 for single-/multiple-entry three-month visas.

At Malian embassies in West Africa, you'll usually pay CFA20,000 for a one-month single-entry visa.

Visa Extensions

One-month visa extensions cost CFA5000, require two photos and are only available at the *Sûreté Nationale* buildings in Bamako and Mopti. There's a fine of CFA15,000 per day for

every day you overstay, and border officials will delight in extracting this from you.

In Bamako, these are processed in 48 to 72 hours at the *Sûreté Nationale building* (Map p492), 200m northeast of Rond-point de l'Unité Africaine.

In Mopti, these are possible (after a 15-minute wait) at a small office (☎ 243 0020) next to the police station.

Visas for Onward Travel

There is no Togolese embassy in Mali (see p804 for advice on getting Togolese visas), but you can get the following visas for neighbouring countries.

BURKINA FASO

Single-/multiple-entry three-month visas cost CFA25,000/30,000 and require three identical photos. If you leave your passport at the embassy in the morning you can pick it up in the afternoon.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

In theory the embassy will issue visas (CFA30,000, two photos) in three days, but the security situation in Côte d'Ivoire means that rules and the state of mind of embassy officials change often.

GHANA

If you give the Ghanaian embassy CFA12,000 and four photos, they'll issue you with a one-month, single-entry visa in 48 hours (remember they close on Friday afternoon). Nine-month multiple-entry visas cost CFA30,000.

GUINEA

The embassy issues visas in 24 hours and requires two photos, but fees are high – for most nationalities it's CFA46,500/60,000/76,500 for one-month/two-month/multiple-entry visas, but US, UK, Canadian and Australian citizens pay CFA60,000/80,000 for single-/multiple-entry visas.

MAURITANIA

The embassy will issue visas (CFA16,000) in 48 hours. Three photos are required.

NIGER

The Niger consulate issues one-month visas for CFA20,000, asks for three photos, and takes two to three days to do so.

SENEGAL

One-/three-month Senegalese visas cost CFA3000/7000, require two photos and take two days to issue.

TRANSPORT IN MALI

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Entering Mali

Be scrupulous in ensuring that you have *all* your papers in order (visa, yellow-fever vaccination) whenever you enter (or leave) the country, because Malian border officials are renowned for finding inconsistencies, whether real or invented. If your papers are in order, be patient, point out the entry stamp and visa duration, and resist requests to pay to clear up any 'misunderstandings'. Getting your visa on arrival can involve inflated visa prices (ie bribes) but will more often result in an hour or two extra of waiting.

Air

Mali's main international airport is *Sénou International Airport* (☎ 220 4626), although Point-Afrique also flies into Mopti and Gao.

Numerous airlines fly into Bamako and those with offices there include the following:

Afriqiyah (Map p494; 8U; ☎ 223 1497; www.afriqiyah.aero; Ave de la Marne) Hub: Tripoli.

Air Algérie (Map p494; AH; ☎ 222 3159; www.air.algerie.dz; Rue de la Cathedral; hub: Algiers)

Air Burkina (Map p494; 2J; ☎ 221 0178; www.air-burkina.com; Ave de la Marne) Hub: Ouagadougou

Air France (Map p494; AF; ☎ 222 2212; www.airfrance.com; Sq Lumumba) Hub: Paris. You can check-in your luggage at the office between 11am and 1pm on the day of departure.

Air Ivoire (Map p494; VU; ☎ 223 9559; www.airivoire.com) Hub: Abidjan.

Air Mauritanie (Map p494; MR; ☎ 223 8740; www.airmauritanie.mr; Sq Lumumba) Hub: Nouakchott.

Air Sénégal International (Map p494; V7; ☎ in Bamako 223 9811; www.air-senegal-international.com; Ave Modibo Keita) Hub: Dakar.

Cameroon Airlines (Map p494; UY; ☎ 222 9400; www.cameroon-airlines.com; cnr Ave Kassa Keita & Ave de l'Indépendance) Hub: Douala.

Ethiopian Airlines (Map p494; ET; ☎ 222 2208; www.flyethiopian.com/et/; Sq Lumumba) Hub: Addis Ababa.

Ghana Airways (Map p494; GH; ☎ 221 9210; www.ghana-airways.com; Sq Lumumba) Hub: Accra.

Interair (Map p494; D6; ☎ 221 9210; www.interair.co.za; cnr Ave Kassa Keita & Ave de l'Indépendance) Hub: Johannesburg.

Point Afrique (Map p494; ☎ 223 5470; www.point-afrique.com; Ave de la Marne) Hub: Paris.

Royal Air Maroc (Map p494; AT; ☎ 221 6105; www.royalairmaroc.com; Ave de la Marne) Hub: Casablanca.

WEST AFRICA

Without a national carrier of its own, Mali relies on the carriers of neighbouring countries for flights to West African capitals.

There are almost-daily flights to Dakar in Senegal (CFA87,000), Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire (CFA118,000), and Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso (CFA109,200). Flights leave three or four times a week to Lagos in Nigeria (CFA257,000), Nouakchott in Mauritania (CFA261,000), Accra in Ghana (CFA211,000), plus there's at least one weekly flight to Conakry in Guinea (CFA109,000) and Banjul in Gambia (CFA67,000). Air Sénégal International has arguably the biggest network, which includes three weekly flights to Niamey (CFA165,000) and a service to Lomé (CFA187,000). Air Burkina and Air Mauritanie also do more than just fly home. For other regional capitals, you'll need to change in Dakar, Ouagadougou or Abidjan.

At the time of writing Bamako, Point Afrique were hoping to start a cut-price Ouagadougou–Bamako–Dakar service. If they do, expect prices on these routes to drop.

Land

You can cross into Burkina Faso easily just south of Kouri (southwest of Koutiala) or along dirt roads east of Sikasso (to Koloko) or via Koro (east of Dogon Country).

Kourémalé is the main border crossing for Guinea, but some traffic takes the back roads via the border crossings at Bougouni, Sélingué or Kéniéba. The best way to drop into Côte d'Ivoire is along the bitumen road at Zégoua south of Sikasso.

The crossing to/from Senegal is at Kidira, west of Kayes. The main access points to Mauritania are north of Niore or Nara, but it's possible to travel direct to Sélibabai from Kayes.

The Tanezrouft trans-Saharan route through Algeria is effectively closed to travellers. Go via Niger, crossing the border at Labbézanza, southeast of Gao.

BURKINA FASO

Numerous buses leave Bamako's Sogoniko *gare routière* daily for Ouagadougou (CFA15,000, 20 hours) via Bobo-Dioulasso (CFA11,500, 15 hours). Note that most buses travel via Ségou and Sikasso, rather than via the more direct route. Buses also go to Bobo-Dioulasso from Mopti (CFA9000). A daily bus links Koro with Ouahigouya (CFA2500, up to four hours) from where there's onward transport to Ouagadougou.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Travel to Côte d'Ivoire was unsafe at the time of writing and the volume of cross-border transport has dropped off. However, there are still daily buses to Abidjan (CFA22,500, 36 to 48 hours) from Bamako. Transport for Côte d'Ivoire also leave from Sikasso.

GUINEA

Peugeot taxis or minibuses run most days from Bamako's Djikoroni *gare routière* to the border at Kourmalé (CFA3500, three hours) and then on to Siguiri (CFA6000). There's occasionally transport to Kankan (CFA8500) and Kissidougou (CFA14,500), while a once-weekly bus continues all the way to Conakry (CFA25,000).

From Kéniéba, there's only intermittent cross-border traffic (usually a motorcycle or two) to Labé in Guinea via the border town of Kali

MAURITANIA

Battered 4WDs and trucks are the usual transport. There are daily departures from Kayes to Sélibabai (CFA12,000, eight hours) and from Niore to Ayoün el-Atroués (CFA17,500). The latter option gets you onto the paved road leading to Nouakchott. All these routes are sandy in the October to May dry season, best travelled between November and February before the harmattan, and extremely difficult in the wet season from June to October.

NIGER

SNTV (☎ 282 0395) depart for Niamey (CFA8600, 16 to 24 hours) on Wednesday and Saturday at 5.30am from their office east of the centre of Gao; coming the other way costs CFA11,500. The road between Ansongo and Gao is terrible. All passport formalities must be completed at the main police station in Gao the day before depart-

ure/upon arrival. If you want to split your journey and spend time in Ansongo make this clear to immigration officials.

There are also weekly slow boats that run between Gao and Ayorou (CFA14,000, two days).

SENEGAL

Most travellers fly or take the train between Bamako and Dakar, although the road between Kidira and Dakar has improved in recent years.

The train service is one of Africa's great epics, although traveller opinion is divided; one reader described the journey as 'a mystical experience', while another saw it as 'more a chore than an adventure'. In theory the train departs Bamako for Dakar (2nd/1st/couche class CFA25,500/34,620/53,145) at 9.15am Wednesday, and from Dakar at 10am. It could take forever but, if not, around 50 hours, and could conceivably depart any day of the week. You should take care as theft is frequent (see p539 for further details)

There's regular road transport from Kayes (Blvd de l'Indépendance, about 2km west of the town centre) to Diboli (CFA3000, two hours); some transport continues over the bridge to Kidira in Senegal, from where there's transport to Tambacounda. Alternatively, there's an overnight bus direct to Dakar from Kayes (CFA15,000, 24 hours) twice a week.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Mali's domestic air industry has undergone massive change in recent years, with a number of airlines falling by the wayside (though fortunately not from the sky). There are now two domestic carriers:

Compagnie Aérienne du Mali (CAM; ☎ 229 9100; o.nubukpo@cam-mali.com; Immeuble Tomota, Ave Cheick Zayed, Hamdallaye, Bamako) The newer operator, usually cheaper.

Mali Air Express (MAE; map p494; ☎ 223 1465; sae@cefib.com; Ave de la Nation, Bamako)

Both airlines fly from Bamako to Mopti (CFA57,860, three weekly flights), Timbuktu (CFA90,360, three weekly) and Kayes (CFA57,850, four weekly). CAM also operates a weekly flight to/from Gao (CFA120,900) which goes via Mopti and Timbuktu. Return fares are only a fraction

under double one-way prices (eg Bamako-Timbuktu return costs CFA179,720).

Boat

Most boat journeys on the Niger River are only possible from August to December when water levels are high.

For detailed information on travelling by pirogue and public or private pinasse, see p510.

PASSENGER BOAT

Three large passenger boats (the *Kankan Moussa* is the best), operated by the Compagnie Malienne de Navigation (Comanav), ply the Niger River between Koulikoro (50km west of Bamako) and Gao, from August to November or December, stopping at numerous riverside towns including Mopti and Korioumé (for Timbuktu) en route. In theory, one boat heads downstream from Koulikoro at 10pm Tuesday, arrives in Mopti at 3pm Thursday, in Timbuktu at 7am Saturday and Gao on midnight Sunday. Another boat heads upstream from Gao at 8pm every Monday, reaching Timbuktu at 6pm on Wednesday, Mopti at 4pm Friday and Koulikoro at midnight Sunday. In practice, the journey can take twice as long.

Despite the vagaries of the timetable, the journey is a fascinating insight into village life along the Niger, but it's not for everyone. The boats are like floating villages – people and cargo are everywhere, the cabins are sweltering, the toilets flooded and the food, well it ain't cordon bleu – but it's a quintessentially African experience. Getting a group together, hiring a small cabin for everyone's kit and then going 4th class, which means sleeping on the roof (cabins can be hot and stuffy anyway), could be a good idea.

Of course, it's not essential to do the whole trip. The two-day section from Mopti to Korioumé (about 400km) is arguably the

most interesting, although from Koulikoro to Mopti is less crowded.

The 'luxe' cabins have a bathroom and air-con, 1st-class cabins have two bunk beds, toilet and washbasin, and 2nd-class cabins are four-berth with a washbasin and shared toilets. Third class is an eight-berth cabin and in 4th class you get to fight for a space on deck and don't get meals.

Booze, food and water are all available, but it's a good idea to take extra supplies as you may get stranded.

PIROGUE & PUBLIC PINASSE

Pirogues are small canoes, either paddled by hand or fitted with a small outboard motor. They're usually the slowest form of river transport. Pinasses are larger motorised boats, carrying cargo and anything from 10 to 100 passengers. Some are large enough to have an upper deck and a couple of basic cabins; smaller pinasses make do with a reed mat roof to keep off the sun.

Public pinasses are generally faster than the Comanav passenger boat, but they're equally unpredictable and can be extremely crowded and overloaded. To avoid getting seriously stranded, use the various market days (when there's more river transport).

The table below lists some of the bigger markets along the Niger River.

Market day	Town
Monday	Danga, Diafarabé, Ségou
Tuesday	Diré
Wednesday	Gourma-Rharous
Thursday	Mopti, Niafunké, Ténenkou
Friday	Massina
Saturday	Youvarou
Sunday	Gao, Markala, Tonka

PRIVATE PINASSE

The only way to bend flexible river schedules to your itinerary may be to hire a private

PASSENGER BOAT FARES (CFA)

route	luxe	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Koulikoro to Ségou	43,984	25,856	17,139	10,127	2706
Ségou to Mopti	70,397	36,349	26336	15,529	3418
Mopti to Korioumé	90,915	49,110	34,805	20,535	5025
Korioumé to Gao	99,500	57,500	35,750	21,000	5375

pinasse. They come in a range of sizes but expect to pay around CFA450,000 (including petrol) for a boat that comfortably seats 10 people, plus CFA15,000 per person for food. If you can get enough travellers together, per-person costs fall considerably.

Bus

Journey times vary hugely, depending on the gung-ho nature of the driver (most are pretty 'keen'), the fitness of the vehicle, and the time taken at police and customs. As a rough guide, bank on at least 2¼ hours per 150km on sealed roads.

Sadly, no bus company consistently uses high-quality buses. One day you'll be on a seminew bus, only to find yourself the next day on a near-wreck that belongs to the same company. In our experience, the better companies are **Bani** (☎ 220 6081), **Binke** (☎ 220 5683), **Bittar** (☎ 220 1205) and **Somatra** (☎ 220 9932), all of which run regular services between the main towns south of the Niger River. Sample fares from Bamako include Ségou (CFA3000, 235km), Mopti (CFA8000, 640km) and Gao (CFA15,500, 1200km).

At major towns, new passengers are sometimes called by name from a list. Booking a ticket in advance puts you further up the list and thus ensures a good seat.

North of the Niger River, the roads can be terrible and 4WDs, fortified truck-buses and standard trucks are used as public transport.

Bush Taxi

Bush taxis and minibuses, which are slightly pricier than buses (you're likely to be charged a CFA500 luggage fee), are handy on shorter, less frequented routes, where they may be the only option. These are either Peugeot 504s, carrying nine people, or *bâchés* (pick-ups) with about 16 passengers. *Bâchés* are slower, but about 25% cheaper than 504s. General bus and bush taxi stations in Mali are called *gares routières*.

Car & Motorcycle

Self-drive car rental is rare, and not recommended because accident insurance for foreigners can be ineffective (even if you're not at fault) and the correct roadblock/bribe etiquette takes a while to master. However, 4WDs with drivers are easy to arrange through tour operators in all major cities.

Rates begin at CFA50,000 per day for a 4WD with unlimited mileage, plus petrol; but prices can often be double that, and some companies also levy a charge per kilometre.

Tours

Although independent travel through Mali is easy, and is the cheapest way to go, taking a tour will add another dimension to your trip and take out the hassle of guides and long waits for slow transport. Tailor-made tours of Mali are easily arranged in Bamako or other cities, but can be expensive; it's worth enquiring if you can join an existing trip. Local companies which we recommend for tours around Mali include:

Satimbe Travel (☎ 243 0791; www.satimbetravel.com) Excellent Mopti-based company that's especially good for pinasse trips to Timbuktu and other trips; contact Issa Ballo.

TAM Voyages (Map p494; ☎ 221 9210; www.tamvoyage.com; Sq Lumumba) Professional Bamako-based company, with an English-speaking owner and guides; contact Amadou Maiga.

Tara Africa Tours (☎ 228 7091; www.tara-africatours.com; Baco Djicroni ACI, Bamako) Dogon–Dutch-owned and one of Mali's best companies; contact Marja or Amadou.

Toguna Adventure Tours (☎ /fax 2297853; togunaadventure@afribone.net.ml; ACI2000, Bamako) Terrific American-owned company which is professional and prides itself on a personal touch; contact Karen Crabb.

For a list of international tour companies offering tours to Mali and elsewhere in West Africa, see p840.

Even if you don't take a tour for the whole time in Mali, you'll benefit from having a local guide in at least some places, among them river trips on the Niger (p510) the Dogon Country (p515) and the desert around Timbuktu (p525).

Train

The train is the best way to travel through western Mali (ie between Bamako and Kayes) although it's never on time and is not without its insecurities (see p539 for details). For details of prices and schedules, see the relevant sections for Bamako (p500) and Kayes (p537).

Second-class travel is cramped, chaotic and makes the journey seem eternal. For longer trips, 1st class is recommended and taking a couchette is likewise worthwhile for overnight journeys.

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