

Mauritania

For many travellers Mauritania is a revelation, a place of such natural beauty that it can substantially change your way of thinking. Spiritual seekers swear by the humungous sand dunes, giddily deep canyons and eye-popping plateaus of the Adrar or the Tagânt. History buffs rave about the World Heritage-listed caravan towns of Chinguetti, Ouadâne and Qualâta, all testifying to former flourishing civilisations. Sure, there may be similar landscapes in other parts of West Africa, but few are on the same scale or as overpowering as those in Mauritania. But wait! There's more to Mauritania than grandiose sand fields, millenarian cities and enchanting oases. The country is blessed with a wild stretch of coastline, with Parc National du Banc d'Arguin ranking as one of the best bird-watching venues in the world.

Culturally, Mauritania is a place apart. The population is almost equally divided between Moors of Arab descent and Black Africans. It's a Muslim country with a Black African twist. Although it's a transition between the North African Arab world and Black Africa, it doesn't really belong to either. This striking combination is part of its appeal.

A lot to love, a whole lot to see and do. Mauritania is much more than a gentle introduction to sub-Saharan Africa – it's a magnetic playland for mystical types.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1,030,700 sq km
- **Capital** Nouakchott
- **Country code** ☎ 222
- **Famous for** Sand storms; bird-watching; *zrig* (camel milk)
- **Languages** Hassaniya, French, Fula, Soninké and Wolof
- **Money** ouguiya (UM); US\$1 = UM270; €1 = UM320
- **Population** 3 million
- **Visa** In advance €25, at Moroccan border €20



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Chinguetti** (p565) Get up at the crack of dawn to catch a glorious sunrise from the labyrinthine lanes of the old city.
- **4WD tours or camel trips** (p562) Experience the magic of the Sahara and sleep beneath the star-studded skies at the saffron dunes in the Adrar region.
- **Banc d'Arguin** (p561) Pack on your binoculars and observe vast flocks of birds from a traditional pirogue.
- **Oualâta** (p570) Admire the elaborate decorative paintings that grace traditional houses in one of Mauritania's best-kept secrets.
- **Iron-ore train** (p576) Hop on the world's longest train, and be ready for the most epic journey in your life!

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** For most travellers the lure of the desert is irresistible. **Atâr** (p562) is the best launching pad for exploring the mystifying Adrar region – a good combination of fantastic landscapes and stunning architecture. Spend two days exploring the ancient, earth-toned desert towns of **Chinguetti** (p565) and **Ouadâne** (p567), and another three days trekking in the nearby incomprehensible dune-fields. Then laze a couple of days away in an idyllic *palmeraie* (palm grove) – **Terjît** (p565) is an enchanting spot blessed with refreshing pools.
- **Two Weeks** Follow the one-week itinerary and, once you've had your fill of sand dunes, forge west to the Atlantic coast. From Atâr, take a bush taxi to Choûm where you'll hop on the iron-ore train that will bring you to **Nouâdhibou** (p559) the next day – an exciting, albeit arduous, ride. Seafood lovers will have a feast in Nouâdhibou. Consider taking a three-day tour to **Parc National du Banc d'Arguin** (p561), one of the best bird-watching areas in West Africa. Journey on to **Nouakchott** (p553), Mauritania's sprawling capital, with its striking melange of chaotic markets and modern buildings.
- **Three Weeks** Follow the two-week plan and then head to the far-flung corners of eastern Mauritania – it's a long drive but your patience will be amply rewarded. From Nouakchott, strike northeast to **Tidjikja** (p569), the gateway to the Tagânt area.

HOW MUCH?

- **Cup of tea in a nomad's tent** free
- **Taxi ride in Nouakchott** UM300
- **Camel ride in the desert** about UM6000 per day
- **Bush taxi fare Nouakchott–Nouâdhibou** UM5600
- **Auberge room** about UM2000 per person

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L of petrol** UM209
- **1L of bottled water** UM250
- **Bottled beer** UM400
- **Souvenir T-shirt** UM600
- **Plate of couscous** UM600

Get a decent eyeful of the panoramic Tagânt plateau before backtracking to the Route de l'Espoir and veer due east to rough-around-the-edges **Néma** (p570), not far from Mali. Striking north, it's an easy ride to **Oualâta** (p570), one of the most spellbinding desert towns in Mauritania.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

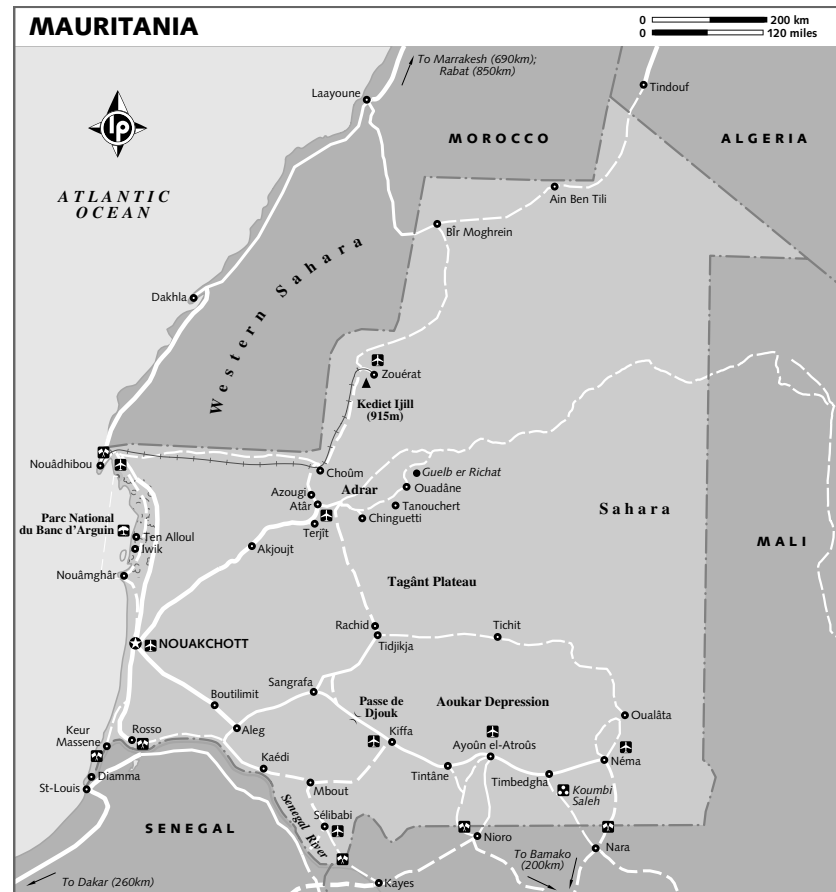
In the Sahara region of the country, annual rainfall is usually less than 100mm. In the south, rainfall increases to about 600mm per year, mostly occurring during the short rainy season from July to September.

The most pleasant time to visit Mauritania is from November to March. Daytime temperatures hover in the mid-20°Cs with great regularity and the sky is invariably blue. Note that it can get quite cool at night, especially in the desert.

The heat is searing from April to October, especially from June to August when the *rifi* (hot winds) from the north send temperatures soaring to 45°C and above. However, along the coast, the *alizé* (trade winds) blow from the ocean, causing average highs to be 5°C lower.

HISTORY

From the 3rd century AD, the Berbers established trading routes all over the Western Sahara, including Mauritania. By the



9th and 10th centuries the gold trade, as well as slavery, had given rise to the first great empire in West Africa, the Soninké Empire of Ghana (the capital of which is believed to have been at Koumbi Saleh in southeastern Mauritania).

After the spread of Islam in the 7th century, the Almoravids established their capital in Marrakesh (Morocco), from where they ruled the whole of northwest Africa, as well as southern Spain. In 1076 they pushed south and, with the assistance of Mauritanian Berber leaders, destroyed the Empire of Ghana. That victory led to the spread of Islam throughout Mauritania and the Western Sahara. The Mauritanian part of the empire was subjugated by Arabs

in 1674, after which virtually all Berbers adopted Hassaniya, the language of their conquerors.

The Colonial Period

As colonialism spread throughout Africa, France stationed troops in Mauritania to protect the rest of French West Africa from raids by neighbours and ambitious European powers, but did nothing to develop the area. They also used the region as a place of exile for political prisoners.

In 1814 the Treaty of Paris gave France the right to explore and control the Mauritanian coast, but it wasn't until 1904 that, having played one faction off against another, the French managed to make Mauritania a

colonial territory; it took the French another 30 years to subjugate the Moors in the north.

Mauritania was a political backwater in the lead up to independence, with her politicians resisting the anticolonial trend sweeping West Africa, siding instead with the French. In 1956, when an independent Morocco began claiming much of Mauritania as part of a 'greater Morocco', Mauritania's first political party, the Union Progressiste Mauritanienne (UPM), was formed and in 1957 won most of the seats in the territorial assembly elections.

Independence & Ould Daddah

When full independence came in 1960, Mokhtar Ould Daddah became the new president. The Moors declared Mauritania an Islamic republic and hastily set about building a new capital at Nouakchott.

During the late 1960s, Ould Daddah alienated the (mainly Black African) southerners by making both Hassaniya and French the country's official languages and by compelling all schoolchildren to study in Hassaniya. The government also joined the Arab League in a provocative assertion of the country's non-African aspirations. Mauritania withdrew from the franc zone and substituted the ouguiya for the CFA, and any opposition was brutally suppressed.

The issue of Western Sahara finally topped the government. In 1975 Mauritania entered into an agreement with Morocco and Spain to divide the former Spanish colony: Mauritania would take a slab of desert in the south and Morocco would get the mineral-rich northern two-thirds. But the Polisario Front launched a guerrilla war to oust both Morocco and Mauritania and many towns in northern Mauritania came under attack; iron-ore exports plummeted.

A bloodless coup took place in Mauritania in 1978, bringing in a new military government that renounced all territorial claims to the Western Sahara. For more details on the Western Sahara, see p838.

Ould Taya & the 1980s

After a series of coups, the new government, ruled by a committee of high-ranking military officers, finally settled on the present ruler Colonel Maaouya Sid'Ahmed Ould Taya as leader in 1984.

Ould Taya immediately set about restructuring the economy, with an emphasis on agricultural development, fishing and tentative moves towards democratisation. However, it is for the persecution of Black Africans that Ould Taya's early years of power will be remembered. In 1987 he jailed various prominent southerners and the subsequent rioting in Nouakchott and Nouâdhibou was partly quelled through the introduction of strict Islamic law. Later that year, the government dismissed some 500 Tukolor soldiers from the army and soon after, the jailed author of an anti-racist manifesto died in prison. Ethnic tensions culminated in bloody riots between the Moors and Blacks Africans in 1989. More than 70,000 Black Africans were expelled to Senegal, a country most had never known.

Elections, Repression & Reforms

An unrepentant Taya spent the early 1990s continuing the persecution of Black Mauritians. By now, Mauritania had become an international pariah and Taya's closest ally became Iraq, which he supported during the 1991 Gulf War.

As a result of criticism, Taya attempted to moderate his approach, pushing through a new constitution that permitted opposition political parties. In early 1992, in the country's first presidential elections, Taya was re-elected with 63% of the vote, but electoral fraud was massive and the hotly contested election results won him little international respect. Opposition parties consequently boycotted the general elections later in the year.

Bread riots in 1995, stemming from a new tax on bread, led to the arrest of Taya's principal political opponents, Ould Daddah and Hamdi Ould Mouknass – another sign that the crossover to a civilian government had yet to materialise.

In late 2000 electoral reforms were introduced under which political parties were to receive funds according to their electoral performance. Such changes will remain largely cosmetic as long as the harassment and arrest of opposition figures continues. To no-one's surprise, in October 2001 the ruling Parti Républicain Démocratique et Social (PRDS) won 64 out of the 81 National Assembly seats in elections.

Mauritania Today

In June 2003 there was an attempted coup and two days of violent riots in the capital. Rebels were led by disaffected army leaders. It's thought that the war in Iraq partly provoked the uprising – the government had arrested numerous suspected Islamic extremists a couple of months before, and this served as a trigger. To everybody's surprise (and relief), Ould Taya's repressive regime came to an end in August 2005 when the president was toppled in a bloodless coup. This marked a symbolic turning point in the country.

Today, there are signs of hope and improvement. The new government, led by Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, is intent on putting the country back on its feet and on stamping out corruption. Vall has engaged in a 'transition period' that should end with a presidential election scheduled in 2007. The government maintains a moderate stance on the international stage, maintaining close ties to the West, including France and the USA, while introducing a couple of token measures to appease Islamic movements, such as temporary crackdowns on sales of alcohol in clubs or restaurants. But what could really give a new impetus to the country is the oil boom that began in 2006 with the exploitation of offshore fields off Nouakchott. This bonanza could foster growth and impact positively on the country, one of the poorest in the world. Unsurprisingly, Mauritania has become the focus of much international attention in a few years and other oil fields await exploration.

THE CULTURE National Psyche

Mauritanian society is changing fast – with tourism development in the heart of the desert, Internet and mobile phones playing a crucial role in the last decade. You'll be surprised to see two parallel societies: the modern, Western-leaning society of Nouakchott and the main tourist areas, and the traditional society of the smaller towns and villages. But despite the profound social changes, the extended family, clan or tribe, remains the cornerstone of society, especially with the Moors. Deeply rooted traditional loyalties remain of the utmost importance.

As in many Muslim countries, religion continues to mark the important events of

THE HARATIN & THE BIDAN

The Moors have one of the most stratified caste systems in Africa. The system is based on lineage, occupation and access to power, but colour has become an increasingly popular determinant of status. At the top are the upper classes, the typically light-skinned Bidan Moors descended from warriors and men of letters. Below them are commoners, mostly of Berber-Negroid stock. The lowest castes traditionally consisted of four groups: the Haratin Moors, artisans and griots who have very few rights, and slaves, who have none at all. The Haratin do most of the menial work.

Only in 1980, when there were an estimated 100,000 Haratin slaves in Mauritania, did the government finally declare slavery illegal. International human rights agencies continue to express concern that pockets of slavery still exist in the country.

life. The 1991 constitution legalised political parties but prohibited them from being opposed to Islam. Although slavery was declared illegal in 1980, the caste system (see above) still impregnates society's mentality.

Daily Life

The iconic image of nomadic Moors sipping a cup of tea under a tent in the desert belongs to the past. Over the past three decades, drought has resulted in a mass exodus of traditionally nomadic Moors from the desert to Nouakchott. This doesn't mean that they have abandoned their cultural habits. Moors living in cities often feel the need to leave their concrete houses in Nouakchott for a couple of days spent under tents in the desert.

The men characteristically wear *draa* (long light-blue robes). Many have the name Ould (son of), eg Ahmed Ould Mohamed. For women it's Mint (daughter of). Women are in a fairly disadvantaged position. Only a third as many women as men are literate and few are involved in commercial activities other than selling food and crafts. Female genital mutilation and the forced feeding of young brides are still practised in rural communities. However, Mauritanian women have the right to divorce and exert it routinely.

TEA, ANYONE?

Elaborate greetings are traditional in Moorish society. Social activities revolve around tea, which is invariably strong and sweet. It's almost obligatory to accept the first three glasses, but declining the fourth is not impolite.

Population

Of Mauritania's estimated three million inhabitants, about 60% are Moors of Arab and Berber descent. Moors of purely Arab descent, called 'Bidan', account for 40%.

The other major group is Black Africans, ethnically split into two groups. The Haratin, or Black Moors, the descendants of people enslaved by the Moors, have assimilated the Moorish culture and speak Hassaniya, an Arabic dialect. Culturally, they have little affinity with Black Mauritians living in the south along the Senegal River, the 'Soudaniens'. The Soudaniens constitute 40% of the population and are mostly Fula (also known as Peul) or the closely related Tukulor. These groups speak Pulaar (Fula). There are Soninké and Wolof minorities.

RELIGION

Over 99% of the population are Sunni Muslims. Islamic fundamentalists are growing in number but remain a minority.

ARTS

Mauritania has a strong tradition of arts and craftwork, especially silverwork. Most prized are wooden chests with silver inlay, but there are also silver daggers, silver and amber jewellery, earth-tone rugs of camel and goat hair from Boutilimit, hand-painted Kiffa beads, hand-dyed leatherwork including colourful leather cushions and leather pipe pouches, camel saddles and sandals.

The traditional music of Mauritania is mostly Arabic in origin, although along its southern border there are influences from the Wolof, Tukulor and Bambara. One of the most popular Mauritanian musicians in Mauritania is Malouma. She has modernised the Moorish traditional music, blending it with more contemporary rhythms. She has created what is called the 'Saharan blues' and is to Mauritania what Cesária Évora is to Cape Verde.

There's superb traditional architecture in the ancient Saharan towns in the Adrar as well as in Oualâta. The adobe houses in Oualâta are enhanced with elaborate paintings.

ENVIRONMENT**The Land**

Mauritania is about twice the size of France. About 75%, including Nouakchott, is desert, with huge expanses of flat plains broken by occasional ridges, rocky plateaus and sand dunes. Moreover, the desert is expanding southward. One of the highest plateau areas (over 500m) is the Adrar, 450km northeast of Nouakchott, with its towns of Chinguetti and Ouadâne. These plateaus are often rich in iron ore, and there are especially large deposits at Zouérat about 200km north of Chinguetti. The highest peak is Kediet Ijill (915m) near Zouérat. Mauritania has some 700km of shoreline, including the Banc d'Arguin. The south is mostly flat scrubland.

Wildlife

In the desert regions, the camel is the most common animal that visitors will come across. Giraffes and lions have long gone – victims of desertification and the bullet. One endangered species that you might see if you're lucky is the monk seal, off Cape Blanc near Nouâdhibou (see p560).

Mauritania is a paradise for twitchers. Between Nouâdhibou and Nouakchott is Parc National du Banc d'Arguin, where hundreds of thousands of birds migrate from Europe in the winter. It is one of the world's major bird-breeding grounds and is on Unesco's list of World Heritage sites.

Environmental Issues

Pollution, desertification, overgrazing – put them together and you have a glimpse of Mauritania's urgent environmental threats. Nearly 75% of Mauritania's land surface is desert or near-desert and this is increasing. Wood has become so scarce that most cooking is now done on kerosene stoves. Negligent garbage disposal is also a critical issue, but tourism development has fostered a growing awareness in the Adrar region.

Overfishing is another concern, with hundreds of tonnes of fish caught every day off the Mauritanian coastline.

FOOD & DRINK

The desert cuisine of the Moors is rather unmemorable and lacks variety. Dishes are generally bland and limited to rice, mutton, goat, camel or dried fish. *Zrig* (unsweetened, curdled goat or camel milk) often accompanies meals served in private homes. Mauritanian couscous, similar to the Moroccan variety, is delicious. A real treat is to attend a *méchui*, (traditional nomad's feast), where an entire lamb is roasted over a fire and stuffed with cooked rice.

Mauritania's Atlantic coastline is an abundant source of seafood, and this has influenced local cuisine, especially in Nouakchott and Nouâdhibou. Fruit is pretty hard to find, except in the capital.

The cuisine of southern Mauritania, essentially Senegalese, will appeal more to your taste buds, with much more variety, spices and vegetables. Two of the most popular dishes are rice with fish and Senegalese *mafé* (a peanut-based stew).

The restaurant scene is pretty dull, except in Nouakchott, where you'll find a good range of eateries serving a great variety of dishes.

There's not a lot of choice when it comes to beverages. Soft drinks and bottled water are available everywhere. Mauritanian tea is also ubiquitous. In principle, alcohol is available at some hotels and restaurants in Nouakchott and Nouâdhibou.

NOUAKCHOTT**pop 800,000***

First impressions of Nouakchott are certainly not edifying. Hastily constructed in 1960 this sprawling city lacks charisma. Don't expect majestic monuments or cultural landmarks. Its location is discombobulating: it's unusually built 5km inland from the coast and, reflecting the desert origins of Mauritania's dominant Moors, its orientation is more towards the desert than the Atlantic. The shambolic suburbs are unbelievably filthy – piles of rubbish litter the streets.

It's not all that bad, however, with its phenomenal fish market (one of the most active in West Africa) and eye-catching mosques, it's also colourful and exotic. And you'll feel at ease wandering the streets: Nouakchott is laid-back and amazingly safe compared with

many African capitals. It also has modern amenities, a couple of hip restaurants and comfortable hotels in which to pamper yourself – bliss after the rigours of the desert.

ORIENTATION

The main streets are Ave Abdel Nasser running east to west and Ave du Général de Gaulle running north to south. The nicest district is to the north while to the south, near where Ave Abdel Nasser and Ave du Général de Gaulle cross, is the Grand Marché and, 2km further south, the Cinquième Quartier, a major shanty town with a busy market. The ocean is 5km west along Ave Abdel Nasser, while Le Ksar district (old town) and airport are 3km northeast of the centre.

Maps

Nouakchott – Centre-Ville (about UM1500) is the only available street map. It is on sale at Librairie Vents du Sud (see below) and at some hotels, including the El Amane.

INFORMATION**Bookshops**

Librairie Vents du Sud (☎ 525 26 84; Ave Kennedy; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat) Has postcards, foreign newspapers, magazines and books, although little in English.

Internet Access

There is no shortage of Internet cafés in Nouakchott but don't expect ultra-fast connections. Among the most convenient ones are the following:

Confort Cybercafé (Off Ave du Général de Gaulle; per hr UM300; ☎ 8am-midnight)

Internet (Off Ave du Général de Gaulle; per hr UM200; ☎ 8am-midnight Sat-Thu, 9am-noon Fri) It isn't sign-posted.

Netland (☎ 525 13 14; Ave du Palais des Congrès; per hr UM500; ☎ 8am-midnight Mon-Thu, 8am-noon & 4pm-midnight Fri, noon-midnight Sat & Sun) Has the best connection.

Medical Services

Cabinet Médical Fabienne Sherif (☎ 525 15 71) Recommended by expats. Charges around UM6000 for a consultation.

Money

There are bureaux de change on Ave du Général de Gaulle and on Ave du Gamal Nasser, as well as in the Marché Capitale. Banks are also an option but they keep

NOUAKCHOTT

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	A	B	C	D	
INFORMATION					
American Embassy.....	1 B4	Mosquée Marocaine.....	19 A6	Pizza Lina.....	43 A3
Asfaar.....	2 B4	Musée National.....	20 B5	Restaurant El-Bahdja.....	44 A4
BMCI Bank.....	3 D6	SLEEPING		Rimal.....	45 D6
BNM Bank.....	4 D6	Auberge La Bienvenue.....	21 B4	Snack Irak.....	46 D6
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Main Post Office.....	11 B5	L'Escale des Sables.....	29 D4	Cinquième Marché.....	51 A6
Moroccan Embassy.....	12 B4	Maison d'hôtes Jeloua.....	30 B3	Marché Capitale.....	52 C6
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		Le Méditerranéen.....	38 B4	Transport to Kiffa & Néma	
		Le Petit Café.....	39 A4	(4WD's).....	62 B6
		Le Prince.....	40 C6	Transport to Kiffa & Néma	
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		Phénicia.....	42 D6	Transport to Tidjikja.....	64 B5
				Tunis Air.....	65 C5

shorter hours than bureaux de change. They change only cash. At the time of writing, bank rates were slightly lower than those offered by bureaux de change.

The BNP bank has officially announced the construction of an ATM when this book went to print, and other banks should follow. However, it's wise not to rely on this option. Inquire at the reception of your hotel when you get there.

There are no cash advances on credit cards either. If you need a money transfer, your best is to head to a Moneygram or a Western Union office.

BMCI (Ave Abdel Nasser; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Thu, 8-11am Fri) BMCI is an agent for Western Union.

BNM (Rue Alioune; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Thu, 8-11am Fri) BNM is an agent for Moneygram.

Post

Main post office (Ave Abdel Nasser; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Thu, to noon Fri)

Telephone

There are heaps of private telephone offices in the centre where local and long-distance calls can be made.

Travel Agencies

For purchasing domestic or international air tickets, these places come recommended:

Asfaar (☎ 529 04 06; fax 525 80 37; Ave du Général de Gaulle; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon Fri)

Regional Air - Rega Tours (☎ 524 04 22, 632 87 35; fax 524 04 25; Ave du Général de Gaulle; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon Fri)

Visa Extensions

Visa extensions can be obtained at the **Sûreté** (Ave Abdel Nasser; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Thu).

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Nouakchott is a relatively safe city, especially compared with other capital cities in the region. It's a late-night city, with many people walking around even at 11pm. Even at those hours walking is generally safe for men, but avoid the beach at night.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Musée National

Anyone with an interest in Moorish culture shouldn't leave Nouakchott without a visit to the **Musée National** (admission UM300; ☎ 8am-3.30pm Mon-Fri). On the first level is

a prehistoric gallery with archaeological exhibits while the second level is taken up with more recent ethnographic displays from Moorish society. Admission is officially UM300, but you may be charged UM500. The building is labelled as the Ministry of Culture.

Mosques

Dominating the city's skyline, the **Grande Mosquée** (Rue Mamadou Konaté), better known as the Mosquée Saudique, is right in the centre. It's not exactly a model of architectural magnificence but it's worth a couple of pictures for its slender minarets.

South of Ave Abdel Nasser, towards the Cinquième Quartier, looms the large **Mosquée Marocaine** (Moroccan Mosque; Rue de la Mosquée Marocaine), another precious landmark in this bustling area. On the road to the airport, the **Friday Mosque** (Ave Abdel Nasser) is notable for its blindingly white façade. Visitors aren't allowed inside during prayer times.

Port de Pêche

An absolute must-see, the fish market, or Port de Pêche, is by far Nouakchott's star attraction. It's incredibly lively and extremely colourful. You'll see hundreds of teams of men, mostly Wolof and Fula, dragging in heavy hand-knotted fishing nets. Small boys hurry back and forth with trays of fish, which they sort, gut, fillet and lay out on large trestles to dry. The best time is between 4pm and 6pm, when the fishing boats return. It's a fantastic experience and not to be missed. It's pretty safe as long as you're vigilant and sensible (wear a money belt).

Take a taxi to get there (around UM500 from the centre).

Beaches

Fancy a dip? The nearest beach to Nouakchott is 5km west of the centre. OK, it ain't the Bahamas, but it can be fun for a couple of hours. There's no shade, so bring sunscreen. Beware of undertows.

SLEEPING Budget

Auberge du Sahara (☎ 670 43 83; www.auberge-sahara.com in French; tent per person UM1500, dm UM2000, d UM4000;) On the road to Nou-âdhibou. Your cordial hosts, Sidi, Hermann and Katia will go the extra yards. Dorms

and rooms are plain but functional and shared bathrooms are kept in good nick. The other pluses are the outdoor areas, a kitchen for guests' use and the rooftop terrace where guests can relax and share their African experiences. Clearly a solid choice for discerning travellers, albeit a bit out of the action – you'll need a taxi to get to the centre.

JMC (☎ 641 76 24, 667 28 32; jmc_organisation@yahoo.fr; off Ave du Général de Gaulle; r UM5000-10,000; P) A godsend for savvy travellers, this *maison d'hôtes* (B&B) behind the Novotel has lots of personality. The rooms are exceedingly neat (some with private bathrooms) and are arranged around a courtyard. Other pluses include an art gallery that houses African crafts, a communal room where to unwind and a mellow atmosphere.

Auberge Menata (☎ 636 94 50; off Ave du Général de Gaulle; tent per person UM1500, dm UM2000, d UM4000; P) This welcoming auberge is a good place to park your grungy backpack, with cheap but well-tended rooms. Auberge Menata and its shady garden are in a quiet street away from Ave du Général de Gaulle's hub-bub. The friendly owner has a wealth of information about the country. Meals are available on request (about UM1200) and there's secure parking.

Auberge La Bienvenue (☎ /fax 525 14 21; ☎ 676 78 71; Ave du Général de Gaulle; s UM10,000-12,000, d 12,000-14,000; ☺) An honest-to-goodness guesthouse, with only eight salubrious rooms, which ensures intimacy. All have private bathrooms. Although it's on the main drag, it's surprisingly peaceful and there's a pleasant leafy garden at the front. Meals are available on request (about UM1500). A good pick.

Auberge La Dune (☎ /fax 525 62 74; Ave Kennedy; dm UM2500-3500, s UM4000-7000, d 8000-9000; P) They're a friendly bunch here, and although the accommodation is nothing to write home about it's still a popular haunt for frugal overlanders. There's a mixed bag of bare rooms, some with private bathrooms, some with air-con – ask to see a few. Precious perks include an on-site restaurant, Internet access, secure parking and a laundry service.

Midrange

Maison d'hôtes Jeloua (☎ 636 94 50, 643 27 30, 525 09 14; maison.jeloua@voila.fr; r UM8000-10,000; P) The newest kid on the block, this

tidy *maison d'hôtes* (B&B) is run by helpful Olivia, who also owns Auberge Menata. It's housed in an imposing villa located in a tranquil neighbourhood. The seven rooms are well-appointed and relatively neat. The cheaper ones have shared bathroom.

L'Éscale des Sables (☎ 525 23 75; www.escale-des-sables.com; Ksar District; d incl breakfast UM20,000-27,000; P) Find heaven in this B&B-style nest in the Ksar district. Rooms are seductively cosy and a healthy size and the communal areas are embellished with various artistic touches. The atmospheric garden is a great place to chill out after a long day sightseeing. Fancy a dip? There's a small pool to cool off in when it's sweltering. You can order (expensive) meals (about UM5000). The only downside is that it's a flick out of the action, near the airport, but taxis are within easy reach.

Hôtel Mouna (☎ 524 13 30; fax 524 11 20; Ave du Général de Gaulle; s/d incl breakfast UM21,500/24,800; P) A mere skip and jump from the Novotel, this modernish abode is nothing flash, but it's calm, tidy and well managed. Rooms are spacious and come equipped with the requisite amenities, including satellite TV and air-con. Credit cards are accepted.

Hôtel El Amane (☎ 525 21 78; www.toptechology.mr/elamane; Ave Abdel Nasser; s UM13,000, d 15,000-17,000; ☺) Don't expect a whole lotta lovin' when you're checking in or out – just a central location and an airy patio out back. This old-timer is an OK runner-up if the rest are full, although the décor could do with a serious update – especially the dull corridors. The real draw is the restaurant (see opposite).

Top End

Heave a sigh (of relief): all these hotels accept credit cards.

Hôtel Mercure Marhaba (☎ 529 50 50; www.mercure.com; Ave Abdel Nasser; r UM33,000-37,000, ste UM58,000; P) After a much-needed renovation, the Mercure has regained some of its appeal. Think good-sized, well-appointed rooms and bathrooms in good working order but no extravaganza. Extras include a pool.

Novotel (☎ 525 74 00; www.novotel.com; Ave du Général de Gaulle; s UM45,000-58,000, d UM47,000-60,000, ste UM62,000-83,000; P) Feeling posh? Head straight to the Novotel. You can't miss the blinding orange and yellow façade of this four-star monolith on the

main drag. Inside it feels pretty slick and the rooms come with all mod-cons. This is where foreign officials bunk down when in town.

Hôtel Halima (☎ 525 79 20; fax 525 79 22; Rue de l'Hôtel Halima; s/d UM26,500/29,500, ste UM49,000; P) If the prices of the Novotel or the Mercure make you flinch, opt for the well-run Halima. Sure, it doesn't claim the glitz of its competitors but for the price it's a good bet in this bracket, with well-organised rooms, good facilities and a tough-to-beat location.

EATING

Unless otherwise stated, all restaurants are open for lunch and dinner every day. In principle, alcohol is available at higher-end places.

Restaurants

Restaurant El-Bahdja (☎ 630 53 83; off Route des Ambassades; mains UM1500-3000) One of Nouakchott's best choices, this cosy eatery wins plaudits for its excellent Moroccan-inspired menu at very reasonable prices. You can't really go wrong – everything's pretty good – but if you want a recommendation, go for a *tajine* (Moroccan stew featuring meat or poultry simmered with vegetables and olives).

Café-Restau Bruxelles (☎ 621 63 80; Route de Nouâdhibou; mains UM1500-2500) A laid-back restaurant with outdoor seating and a neat interior, this is a lovely place to eat. It's run by amiable Alex, a Belgian, and his Mauritanian wife. Expect savoury dishes that are well presented, including *brochettes de poisson* (fish kebabs), rump steak, a good range of crunchy salads and hearty omelettes. Make sure to leave room for the tasty pancakes. It's a bit far from the centre, on the road to Nouâdhibou, but it's well worth the taxi ride.

Pizza Lina (☎ 525 86 62; Route des Ambassades; mains UM1500-3500) Not far from the stadium, Pizza Lina has been flying the flag for tasty pizzas served bubbling hot from the oven for some years. The meat and fish dishes are also excellent, or you could order a scrummy plate of pasta. There's a pleasant modern dining room but the terrace is also agreeable.

Le Jardin (☎ 636 76 60; off Rue de l'Ambassade du Sénégal; mains UM3000-4000) It's the setting that's the pull here, with a mellow open-air terrace and a couple of elegant dining rooms. This upscale outlet is patronised by expats

and the local glitterati who want to dine in style. A full meal fetches about UM6000. The menu features meat and fish dishes, including beef Orloff, lamb skewers and African threadfin with coconut sauce.

La Palmeraie Pâtisserie Restaurant (☎ 642 02 12; Rue Alioune; mains UM1500-2500) This snazzy-but-not-sooty venue is a contender for the title of best restaurant in Nouakchott. Whatever your own verdict, you'll eat in genteel surroundings. The outdoor seating is particularly inviting. Signature dishes include *filet de dorade* (sea bream fillet) or *lotte grillée* (grilled monkfish). It's also recommended for breakfast (about UM1800).

Le Bambou (☎ 634 27 72; Ave du Général de Gaulle; mains UM1000-1500) If you fancy a change from European or African food, head to this humble Asian restaurant. The setting is positively old-fashioned and the dining quarters couldn't be more cramped, but there's a pleasant garden. Dig into staples such as Chinese soups, meat or fish dishes at puny prices.

Phénicia (☎ 525 25 75; Rue Mamadou Konaté; mains UM1000) You'll find no cheaper place for a sit-down meal in the centre. The setting is wonderfully modest with old paintings hanging on peeling walls. It's certainly not gourmet food but it's filling, with omelettes, steaks and sandwiches.

El Amane (☎ 525 21 78; Ave Abdel Nasser; ☺ closed lunch/Sat) French expats swear by this restaurant. Sure, the airy patio is refreshing and the char-grilled meat expertly cooked, but we found the reputation somewhat exaggerated.

Le Méditerranéen (☎ 660 96 65; off Ave du Général de Gaulle; mains UM2000-3000; ☺ closed Sun & lunch Fri) Another reputable French (Corsican, to be accurate) restaurant, housed in a stylish villa. The camel kebab was average – fish dishes are reportedly better.

Club B (☎ 529 29 78; off Rue de l'Ambassade du Sénégal; ☺ closed Sun) Another place well worth bookmarking if you want to dine in style. It's housed in a posh building off the main drag, a stone's throw from the Senegalese embassy – you can't miss the orange façade.

Rimal (☎ 525 48 32; Ave Abdel Nasser; mains about UM1000; ☺ closed lunch Sun) It's not expensive, it's utterly without frills and the food is never going to win any Michelin awards, but we found the rustic look – bare tables, plastic tablecloths, peeling walls – suggestive and the time-warped ambience strangely

seductive. Stick to the classics such as omelettes or fried fish.

La Salamandre (☎ 524 26 80; off Route des Ambassades; mains UM1600-4000; ☒ Mon-Sat) Just off Route des Ambassades, La Salamandre enjoys a deserved reputation for lip-smacking French cooking. Here you can warm yourself with *salade périgourdine* (salad), shrimps, beef dishes and *côte d'agneau grillée* (grilled lamb). The sleek setting, with lashings of bright colours splashed all over the walls, is another draw.

Quick Eats

There are many fast-food establishments on Rue Alioune between Ave Kennedy and Ave du Général de Gaulle. Open until 11pm or later, most have a Lebanese bent. Pick of the bunch is **Le Prince** (Rue Alioune; mains UM500-1300). Plonk yourself on a wobbly chair in the room at the back and tuck into a plate of well-prepared shwarma. A few doors down to Le Prince, **Snack Irak** (Rue Alioune) is another long-running favourite.

Near the French embassy, **Le Petit Café** (☎ 525 90 88; Route des Ambassades; mains UM1000-2000) is a smart fast-food joint with good snacks at moderate prices.

Self-Catering

On Ave Kennedy and Rue Alioune are shops with tinned goods and drinks and stalls stacked with fresh fruit.

Pâtisserie Les Princes (Rue Kennedy) One of the capital's most sweet-smelling bakeries. Stock up on baguettes and cakes of all shapes and sizes.

Tata (Ave du Général de Gaulle) A well-stocked supermarket, it has imported cheeses, vegetables and numerous tinned goods.

Bana Blanc (Ave du Général de Gaulle) Another recommended store.

DRINKING

The top-end hotels, as well as most European-style restaurants, usually serve alcohol. La Salamandre with its spiffy setting, and Le Jardin with its open-air terrace and cosy interior, were the flavour of the month when we visited.

ENTERTAINMENT

Don't expect all-night carousing; Nouakchott is not Dakar. If you want to find dance partners, two places to seek out are **Modern**

KTV (Ave du Palais des Congrès) and **VIP Club** (☎ 636 76 60; off Rue de l'Ambassade du Sénégal), with regular live musicians and Senegalese DJs. Thursday, Friday and Saturday are the liveliest nights. Admission costs about UM1500. La Salamandre is also worth checking out.

SHOPPING

Marché Capitale (also called Grand Marché) offers a bit of everything. Potential souvenirs include brass teapots, silver jewellery, traditional wooden boxes with silver inlay, pipes, leather bags, sandals, cushions, beads and grigri. You'll find dress material, colourful Soninké tie-dyed material, Senegalese batiks and the inexpensive, crinkly *malaifa* (fabric) that Moor women use as veils.

Cinquième Marché is good for browsing and people-watching, and has good vegetables, household wares and tailors.

If you're after hand-woven carpets, head to **MATIS** (☎ 525 50 83; Ave Abdel Nasser, Ksar District; ☒ 8am-4pm Mon-Thu & Sun), a short hop from the airport.

For wooden boxes with silver inlay, daggers and jewellery, check the **artisans' shops** northeast of the corner of Ave Kennedy and Route des Ambassades. Also check the **Centre Artisanal** (or silver market), south on the highway to Rosso – it's beyond the roundabout intersection for Boutilimit and on your right.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Nouakchott's airport is on the eastern outskirts, about 2.5km from the centre. It has very few facilities. If you want to change money to pay for the taxi ride, ask at the shops, but the rates offered are bad. There's talk of extending and renovating the airport in the forthcoming years.

For details of international and domestic flights to/from Nouakchott, see p574 and p575.

Bush Taxi

There are specific garages for Mauritania's various regions. For Nouâdhibou (about UM5600, six hours), the Garage Nouâdhibou is close to Cinquième Marché; for Rosso (about UM2000, 3½ hours), the Garage Rosso is almost 10km south of the centre; for Atâr (UM3500, six hours), the Garage Atâr is on the road to Atâr,

about 3km north of the airport; for Kiffa (UM4300, ten hours), Ayoûn el-Atroûs (UM6000, 14 hours) and Néma (UM7500, up to two days), 4WDs leave from an open area at the corner of Rue de l'Indépendance and Rue de la Mosquée Marocaine, and 504 bush taxis from a parking lot close to the airport. For Tidjikja (UM5000, ten hours), infrequent bush taxis leave from a small shop on Rue Ely Ould Mohamed (ask for 'boutique 245').

GETTING AROUND

To/From the Airport

The airport is in the Ksar district. The standard taxi fare to the centre is about UM1000. It's cheaper to hail a taxi from the highway nearby (UM300).

Car

If you want to hire a car with driver, try **Europcar** (☎ 525 11 36; fax 525 22 85; Ave du Général de Gaulle); or **National Tour Car** (☎ 525 97 34; fax 529 93 45; Rue Ghary), on the road to the airport.

The best place to start looking for 4WDs for hire is on the north side of Ave Abdel Nasser, about 50m west of the intersection with Ave Kennedy. The cheapest Toyota Corolla/Hilux (4WD) costs UM15,000/21,000 per day with driver. Costs quickly escalate once you add petrol.

Taxi

Green-and-yellow taxis are plentiful. It costs UM300 for a ride within the centre, and about UM700 to Port de Pêche.

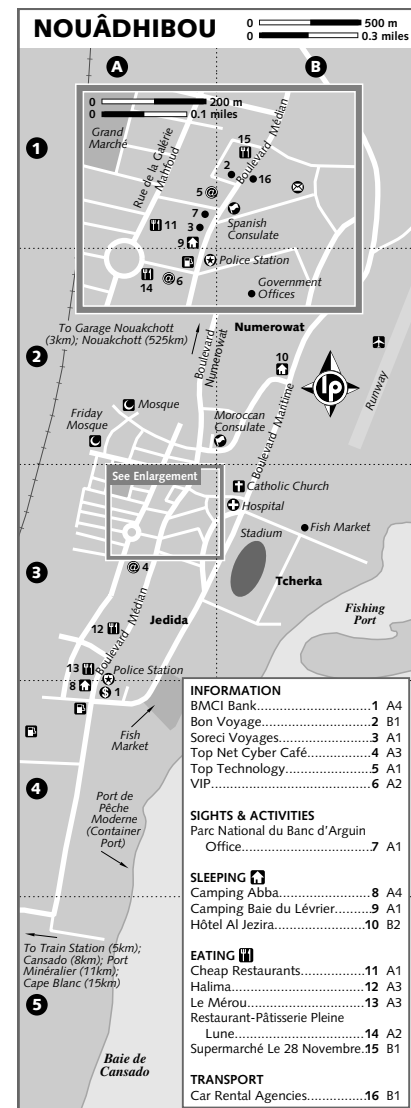
THE ATLANTIC COAST

Wild coast meets Saharan dunes. This description should be enough to lure you here. This coastline, mostly occupied by Parc National du Banc d'Arguin – one of the world's greatest birdlife-viewing venues – is a rapturous place for tranquillity seekers, nature lovers and bird-watchers alike.

NOUÂDHIBOU

pop 80,000

For Nouâdhibou, the good old days seem to have gone. With the new tar road connecting the Moroccan border to Nouakchott, most travellers give Nouâdhibou a wide berth and dash to the capital or to the



Adrar region. Sure, there is little of specific interest to travellers, but it is a good base if you plan to visit Banc d'Arguin.

This unimposing city is on the Baie du Lévrier, in the middle of a narrow 35km-long peninsula. The sea on both sides is chilled by the Canary current, and it has one of the world's highest densities of fish. As a result,

THE LAST MONK SEALS ON EARTH

The *phoque moine* (monk seals) near the lighthouse at Cape Blanc are a major attraction, although your chances of seeing them these days are pretty slim. Resembling elephant seals, these grey-skinned animals have been hunted since the 15th century for their valuable skins and oil. The protected colony here of roughly 100 seals is reportedly the last one on earth.

Nouâdhibou is famous for its fishing and ships come here from all over the world.

Orientation

The city's main street, running north-south, is Blvd Médian. At the southern edge of town is the Port de Pêche Moderne (the container port) and 8km further south is Cansado. Port Minéralier, 3km further, is where the train line ends and ore is loaded onto ships, while 4km beyond is Cape Blanc, the southern tip of the peninsula.

Information

If they have not done it at the border, overland travellers with vehicles must buy insurance at any insurance company in town. The process is hassle-free.

For purchasing air tickets, head to **Soreci Voyages** (☎ 574 63 25; Blvd Médian) or **Bon Voyage** (☎ 574 61 80; Blvd Médian).

There are several bureaux de change along Blvd Médian. Rates here are slightly lower than in Nouakchott. **BMCI** (Blvd Médian; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) has a branch here. The post office is east off Blvd Médian. Most Internet outlets also double as telephone offices and Nouâdhibou has a number, including the following:

Cybercafé VIP (off Blvd Médian; per hr UM200; ☎ 8am-11pm Sat-Thu, 8-11am & 3-11pm Fri).

Top Net Cyber Café (☎ 574 91 88; Blvd Médian; per hr UM200; ☎ 8am-11pm Sat & Mon-Thu, 8am-1pm & 3-11pm Fri, 3-11pm Sun)

Top Technology (☎ 574 56 43; Blvd Médian; per hr UM200; ☎ 8am-midnight Sat-Thu, 2pm-midnight Fri)

Sleeping

Camping Baie du Lévrier (☎ 574 65 36, 650 43 56 mobile; Blvd Médian; s/d UM3000/5000; ☎) This highly recommended place is excellent value with a family feel. Ali, your hospitable host, is

a good source of local information. Accommodation is in clean four-bed rooms, there's a tent for relaxing and a kitchen.

Camping Abba (☎ 574 98 96; fax 574 98 87; Blvd Médian; tent per person UM1500, s/d UM2200/3400; ☎) Another good haunt for overlanders. It has simple rooms – some with private bathrooms – and an inviting communal room with notice board.

Hôtel Al Jezira (☎ 574 53 17; fax 574 54 99; Blvd Maritime; s/d incl breakfast UM13,000/15,000; ☎) A clean, dependable midrange option north of the centre, with good amenities. With its incongruous carpet on the floor, it's almost cosy. The rooms are a tad sombre, but the surroundings are nice.

Eating

In the centre, you'll find a slew of very cheap restaurants along Rue de la Galerie Mahfoud. They are nothing fancy, but they serve filling fare at unbeatable prices (around UM300 for a meal).

Restaurant-Pâtisserie Pleine Lune (☎ 574 98 60; off Blvd Médian; mains UM1000-1500) A mandatory stop for carb-lovers, right in the heart of town, this cute pastry shop also serves snacks and various mains. Scoff a plate of grilled fish or brochettes and finish off your meal with a delectable croissant, and you can walk away happy and buzzing for UM1500. It's also a good spot for breakfast.

Le Mérou (☎ 574 59 80; Blvd Médian; mains UM1500-2500) Make a beeline for this much-lauded restaurant on the main drag. Ignore the bland décor and focus on the eclectic range of tasty dishes, most of them with a Chinese bent. The octopus salad is divine.

Halima (☎ 574 54 28; Blvd Médian; mains UM1500-3000; ☎ closed lunch Fri) A serious competitor to the Mérou, Halima is a mix of stunning seafood and oddly kitsch interior design. Still, the food should do the talking and by any standards it screams. Feast on ultra-fresh fish dishes, lobster and shrimps. Bookings are essential.

Supermarché Le 28 Novembre (☎ 574 58 63; Blvd Médian; ☎ closed afternoon Fri) This well-stocked supermarket has the best selection of products in town.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Air Mauritanie (☎ 574 54 50) has four weekly flights to/from Nouakchott (UM16,000/

32,000 one way/return). For details of international flights, see p574.

BUSH TAXI

Bush taxis ply daily between Nouâdhibou and Nouakchott. Since the opening of the tar road linking the two cities late in 2005, the ride is straightforward. The fare is UM5600 (six hours). Vehicles (Mercedes and Land Rovers) leave Nouâdhibou from the Garage Nouakchott, 5km north of the market.

CAR

There's a number of car rental offices on the main drag, but the owners of the camps and hotels can also arrange this for you.

TRAIN

The 'train station' is about 5km south of town, 3km before Cansado. There's a tiny building near the tracks where you can buy tickets. The iron-ore train with a passenger car leaves around 2.30pm daily, arriving in Choûm (UM1000, or UM3000 for a 'berth') around 2am, where 4WDs for Atâr will be waiting. It reaches Zouérat (UM1200) at around 7am. For more details, see p576.

Getting Around

Chartered green-and-yellow taxis charge UM500 from the airport to the centre (less if you share). Within the centre, it costs about UM200.

PARC NATIONAL DU BANC D'ARGUIN

Twitchers, rejoice! This must-see park (admission per person per day UM1200) is an important stopover and breeding ground for multitudes of birds migrating between Europe and Southern Africa. Over two million broad-billed sandpipers (*limicoles*) have been recorded here in the winter. Other species include pink flamingos (*flamant rose*), white pelicans (*pélican blanc*), grey pelicans, royal terns (*sternes royales*), gull-billed terns (*spatula blanche*), black terns (*sterne bridée*), white-breasted cormorants, spoonbills and several species of herons, egrets and waders.

The park extends 200km north from Cape Timiris (155km north of Nouakchott). Most birds are found on sand islands in the shallow ocean. The best viewing time is December and January, which is also the mating season. The best way to see them is by tra-

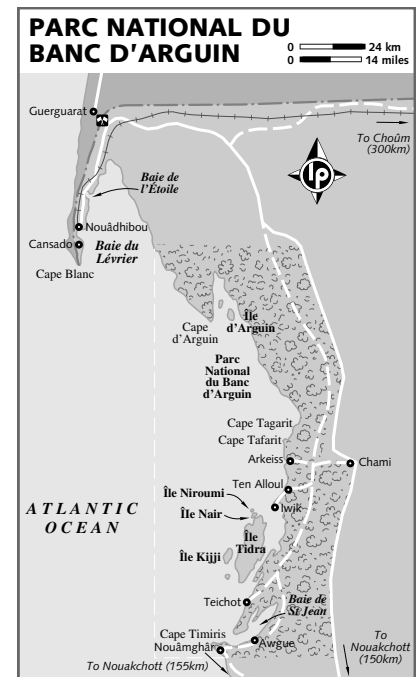
ditional fishing boat, called a *lanche* – a recommended, ecofriendly excursion. The main island, 30km long, is **Tidra**, and just to the west of the northern tip are two tiny islands, **Niroumi** and **Nair**. The principal launching point is **Iwik**, a fishing village on the mainland 6km northeast of Tidra. You can find boats here; they cost UM15,000 (plus UM3000 for the guide) whether you stay out all day or only a few hours.

After, you could head to **Cape Tagarit**, 40km north of Tidra. The view from the cape is magnificent and the water is crystal clear.

Park permits (UM1200) are issued either at the entrance gates or in Nouâdhibou at the **park office** (Park office in Nouâdhibou, ☎ 574 67 44; Blvd Médian; ☎ office 8am-4pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon Fri).

Sleeping & Eating

Inside the park there are official camp sites equipped with traditional tents at Arkeiss, Ten Alloul, Iwik and Nouâmghâr. It costs UM3000 for a small tent (up to two people), UM6000 for a larger one (up to seven people). Meals can also be ordered (about UM1000).



Getting There & Away

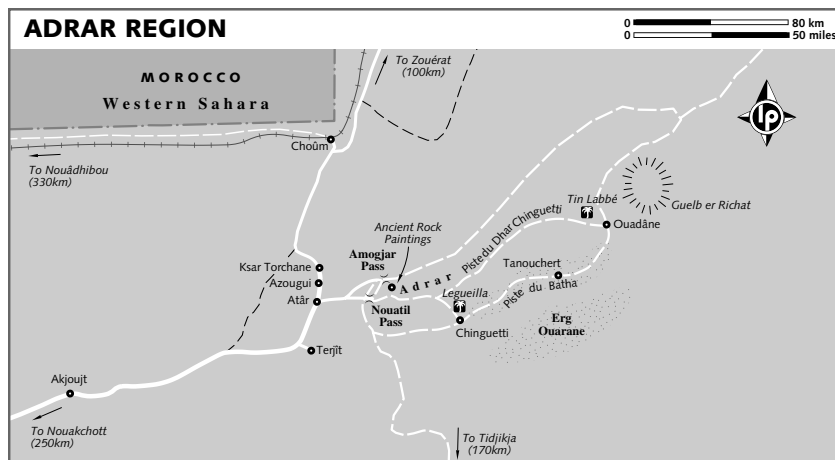
Your best bet to visit the park is to hire a 4WD with a knowledgeable driver, either in Nouakchott or in Nouâdhibou. Consider taking three days. Contact any travel or car rental agency for more information.

If you want to cross the park with your own 4WD, the trip from Nouakchott to Nouâdhibou (525km) takes at least two days. The first 155km from Nouakchott north to Cape Timiris is along the beach and passable only during low tide. Thereafter you enter the worst section, dunes for 300km. There are poles every 5km between Nouâmghâr, the fishing village at Cape Timiris, and just before the railway track in the north, but they won't keep you from getting lost if you don't have a guide. The last 70km southwest along the railway tracks is flat and easy but don't stray from the track, as mines abound.

For safety reasons (it's easy to get lost) go with at least one other vehicle and a guide (typically UM50,000 for three days); in Nouâdhibou, ask at your hotel. Make sure you take sufficient food, water and warm clothes.

THE ADRAR

North of the country, the Adrar is the jewel in Mauritania's crown with exceptional natural wonders and distinctive cultural sights. No doubt you'll be stunned by the visual splendour of what you'll encounter.



The Adrar has it all: there are the ancient Saharan towns of Chinguetti and Ouadâne, mighty sand dunes that look sculpted by an artist, mellow oases where to unwind under a *khaima* (Moorish tent) and grandiose basaltic plateaus. For desert lovers, the Adrar is a must. Camel rides, trekking routes and even hot-air ballooning are on offer.

Don't expect to have the whole place to yourself, though. With regular flights direct from France during the European winter, the Adrar is no longer a sleeping beauty. Be prepared to come across groups of frazzled French executives in search of peace and harmony.

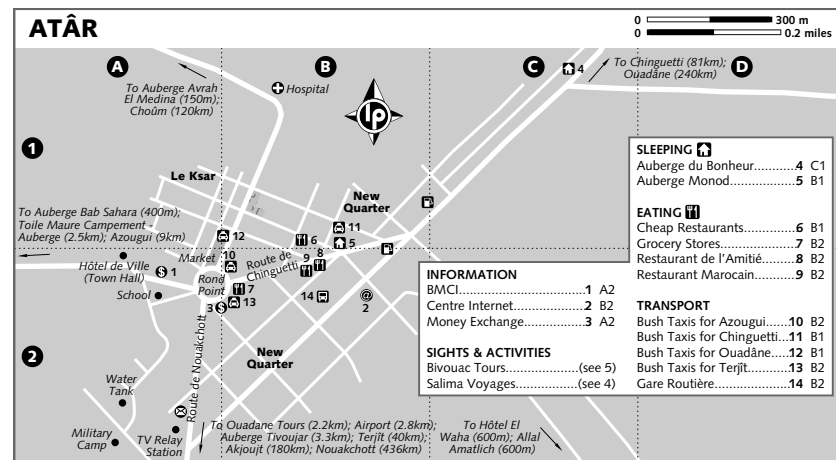
ATÂR

pop 25,000

Atâr is the major northern commercial centre and an obvious transit point for travellers. It probably won't leave you awestruck but it is an excellent place in which to organise camel or 4WD forays in the Adrar.

With the arrival of regular flights direct from France, the town has become quite a competitive place and, unlike the rest of Mauritania, you're likely to encounter your fair share of touts and hustlers.

A large *rond-point* (roundabout) marks the centre of Atâr and the market is just north of it. You'll find several bureaux de change, banks (US dollars and euros) including the **BMCI** (☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Thu, 8-11am Fri) and telephone offices on or around the main drag. The small mazelike Ksar



district, west of the market, is a good place to explore. It's the old residential quarter, with narrow winding streets, brick walls and carved doorways.

Atâr had only one Internet café at the time of writing. **Centre Internet** (per hr UM200; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-11pm) is not far from the garage.

Activities

At last count, more than 20 agencies were attempting to arrange **camel rides** or **4WD tours** from Atâr. The most popular 4WD trip is a five-day circuit called 'tour de l'Adrar' (round the Adrar), taking in Chinguetti, Ouadâne, Tanouchert, Terjît and various other fine spots. But you can arrange custom itineraries.

The main costs are the vehicle and driver, so trips are a lot cheaper if you're in a group. Four people is ideal. Count on paying up to UM21,000 per day for a Toyota Hilux plus petrol. Add about UM3000 per day per person for food.

Most travel agencies also organise custom camel rides in the Adrar but it's probably better to start your trip in either Chinguetti (p565) or Ouadâne (p567) where the most scenic dunes are almost on your doorstep. Prices start at UM12,000 per day with food and lodging.

The following agencies have been around for a few years and have good credentials: **Allal Amatlich** (☎ 546 47 18; 647 88 68) Near Hôtel El Waha.

Bab Sahara (☎ 647 39 66) At Auberge Bab Sahara.

Bivouac Tours (☎ 546 45 95) At Auberge Monod.

Ouadane Tours (☎ 646 93 82, 634 72 73) Near the airport.

Salima Voyages (☎ 546 46 11) At Auberge du Bonheur.

Tivoujar (☎ 678 13 42, 625 51 82; www.vuedenhaut.com) At Auberge Tivoujar.

Sleeping

These days Atâr has 20-plus places to stay but we were not overly impressed by the aesthetics of the infrastructures. If you're after a romantic hideaway, Atâr is certainly not the place. Most places serve meals.

Auberge Bab Sahara (☎ 647 39 66; justus_buma@yahoo.com; tent per person UM1500, stone hut UM7000; ☎) Off Route de Azougui, this longstanding backpacker haunt is well run by a Dutch/German couple, Justus and Cora, long-term residents of Atâr. *Tikits* (traditional stone huts) and tents are nothing thrilling but tidy enough and the courtyard is a pleasant place to mooch around. Justus can arrange alternative tours into the desert. It costs UM300 to park your car. Meals are available on request (about UM2000). It's a flick out of the action but it's quiet.

Auberge du Bonheur (☎ 546 45 37; fax 546 43 47; tent or hut per person UM1700, r UM6000; ☎) Those wanting a reliable base could do worse than checking in at this welcoming outfit, a five-minute stroll from the centre. The owners have a reputable travel agency and are used to dealing with tourists. Facilities include five rooms with air-con (bathrooms

are shared), a large tent in the courtyard, several poky stone or palm huts and a well-scrubbed ablution block.

Auberge Avrah El Medina (☎ 671 26 05; dm per person UM1500) Tucked in a side street not far from the hospital, this is a sensible choice for budget travellers, with acceptable small-ish dorms arranged around a plant-filled courtyard.

Toile Maure Campement – Auberge (☎ 546 40 85, 632 98 19; tent per person incl breakfast UM3500) Opened in November 2005, this well-kept campement with lots of personality is a good surprise. The five traditional tents are arranged around a soothing courtyard and the ablution block is in good working order. It's a 3km walk from the middle of town but the setting and tranquillity are hard to rival. Give the owner a call on arrival and he will pick you up.

Auberge Monod (☎ 546 42 36; Route de Chinguetti; s/d UM7000/8000; ♿) The rooms here are not exactly suitable for a honeymoon but are serviceable enough, with spacious bathrooms. The main selling point is its spiffing location, a short stagger from the market.

Hôtel El Waha (☎ 546 42 49; fax 546 42 73; Route de l'Aéroport; s/d UM9000/10,000, ste UM17,000; ♿) In a peaceful neighbourhood, this is a reassuring choice with 26 clean-smelling, well-equipped *tikits* scattered around a well-tended garden. Forget about the meals here as at UM4000, it's a joke.

Auberge Tivoujar (☎ 678 13 42, 625 51 82; www.vuedenhaut.com; tent/tikit per person with half-board UM5500/7000; ♿) Opened in January 2006, this professionally run venture is the closest that Atâr comes to having a top-end hotel. It's popular with tour groups, so don't expect much privacy. It boasts excellent amenities, including wheelchair-accessible *tikits* and scrupulously clean bathrooms. The only drawback is the location, about 4km from the centre on the road to Nouakchott.

Eating

From the roundabout head east on the Chinguetti road for a block, then turn left. Most cheap restaurants are along this road. They are run by Wolof and Fula and serve basically the same fare, including spaghetti, rice, fish and Senegalese *mafé* for about UM300.

Restaurant de l'Amitié (☎ 610 71 50; Route de Chinguetti; set menu UM2500; ⓧ closed May-Aug) The

French lady who runs this neat place does her best to bring a touch of culinary sophistication to down-at-heel Atâr, with *croquettes de poisson* (fish croquettes), *omelettes aux pommes de terre* (potato omelettes) and *crêpes* (pancakes). The outdoor seating at the rear is welcoming. You can also start your day here with a copious breakfast (about UM1000).

Restaurant Marocain (Route de Chinguetti; mains UM500-700) Next door to Restaurant de l'Amitié, this cheap and cheerful eatery rustles up some good couscous as well as various nibbles.

There is a concentration of grocery stores in the streets leading out from the main roundabout, and most are pretty well stocked.

Getting There & Away

AIR

From October to April **Point Afrique** (www.point-afrique.com) has a weekly flight from Paris to Atâr via Marseilles. Return fares start at around €440.

BUSH TAXI

The main *gare routière*, in the heart of town, is where you can get vehicles for Choûm (UM2000, two hours) and Nouakchott (UM3500, six hours).

Battered 4WDs headed for Chinguetti (UM2000, two hours) leave from near a shop located a block north of Auberge Monod (ask for directions). For Ouadâne (UM2500, four hours), they leave from a street north of the roundabout (ask for 'boutique Sonimex'). For both towns, services are infrequent – usually one in the morning and one in the afternoon, more during the Guetna season. For Azougui (UM1000) and Terjît (UM1000), infrequent 4WDs leave from near the roundabout.

CAR

For details of the route from Atâr, see p567. If you wish to take the Amogjar Pass (it's easier and more spectacular coming the other way), the turn-off to the left is 10km out of Atâr.

AZOUGUI

A good side trip from Atâr is to Azougui, 10km northwest. This charming oasis town makes for an excellent retreat if you need some hush.

It was from here in the 11th century that the Berber Almoravids launched their attacks on the capital of the Empire of Ghana, Koumbi Saleh, leading to the spread of Islam throughout West Africa. It was once an oasis of 20,000 palms, and one of the premier cities in the region, before the rise of Chinguetti and Ouadâne.

Auberge Oued Tillige (☎ 546 43 43; r, tents or tikits per person UM2000) is an excellent, quiet alternative to staying in Atâr and has wonderful views down the valley. It's pretty well maintained and there are whitewashed huts with blue doors, tents or the traditional *tikits* in which to sleep. The catch? There's no shade. Breakfast/meals cost UM600/2000.

Another worthy option is **Auberge de la Medina – Chez Khassem** (☎ 654 77 84, 649 40 03 in Atâr; tents or tikits per person UM1500), a more recent auberge further up, on the edge of the dunes. It's similar in standards to Auberge Oued Tillige and there's a homely, hospitable feel. You can get breakfasts/meals for UM600/1500.

A smarter auberge comprising several classy stone huts was being built at the entrance of Azougui when we visited. Ask around when you get there.

The easiest way to get to Azougui is by taxi (about UM3000). With plenty of time you could also wait for a bush taxi near the roundabout in Atâr (about UM1000).

TERJÎT

Shade, shade, shade. Be sure to make a bee-line for Terjît, an unusually verdant oasis, about 40km south of Atâr as the crow flies. This surprisingly lush place at the end of a narrow canyon is wonderful – you'll think you're in the tropics. What's special here is a natural pool in which you can swim – bliss after the aridity of the desert. You pay UM1000 to enter the site. A tip: avoid Terjît at weekends in season, as it's usually packed with tour groups.

The main spring has been taken over by **Auberge Oasis de Terjît** (☎ 644 89 67, 546 50 20 in Atâr; tents or huts per person UM1500), where a mattress in a tent by the trickling stream is on offer. A meal costs about UM1500. Facilities are sometimes dysfunctional.

The only other place to stay is the **Auberge des Caravanes** (r or tikits per person UM1500; ♿), at the entrance of the village. The setting is less enticing but it's an honest-to-goodness

THE GUETNA SEASON

'You would be nuts to travel in the Adrar in summer.' Don't pay attention to this hackneyed cliché. Sure, from June to August the heat is muffling, with temperatures reaching 45°C, but this is the much-awaited Guetna season. The Guetna refers to the harvest of dates in the palm groves. In spite of the heat, it's a very festive season and all oases get very lively. During the Guetna, many Mauritians from the cities return to their tribes and take part to the harvest. There's a congenial, mellow atmosphere, with much socialising, tea and *zrig* (unsweetened, curdled goat or camel milk) drinking, playing games and dancing. Moreover, there are virtually no tourists – the perfect occasion to sample Mauritanian hospitality at its best.

place, with six uncluttered yet clean *tikits*, four rooms and well-maintained shared bathrooms. There's also a protected area for parking. Add UM4500 per day for meals.

To get here by private car, drive 40km south of Atâr on the road to Nouakchott, then turn left at the checkpoint and follow a sandy track for 11km. The trip takes 1½ hours. By public transport, take anything headed towards Nouakchott and hitch a ride from the checkpoint. There's also a bush taxi that leaves every morning from near the roundabout in Atâr (UM1000) but this option is not really convenient.

CHINGUETTI

pop 4000

One of the more attractive of the ancient caravan towns in the Sahara, Chinguetti will appeal to spiritual seekers. The seventh-holiest city of Islam, it's shrouded with a palpable historic aura. The heavenly backdrop is another draw. You'll discover an outlandish landscape of mighty sand dunes upon which the light plays a daily show.

Once famous for its Islamic scholars, it was the ancient capital of the Moors, and some of the buildings date from the 13th century. In its heyday, Chinguetti had 12 mosques, 25 *madrassas* (Quranic schools) and was home to 20,000 people. Epic *azalais* (caravans) of 30,000 camels laden with salt once travelled between Chinguetti and

Morocco, St Louis in Senegal (each 30 days), Nioro in Mali (45 days) and Timbuktu (55 days).

The highlight of any visit is a wander through the labyrinthine lanes of Le Ksar (the old town). The modern town, which has a delightfully sleepy market (remarkable for how little produce is available), is separated from the old town by a broad, flat wadi where palm trees grow. Chinguetti is a place where the streets have no name and there is only generator-powered electricity.

Sights & Activities

LE KSAR

The old quarter's structures are mostly stone and most are in ruins and unoccupied. The principal attraction is the 16th-century stone mosque (no entry to non-Muslims). Also of great interest are the five old libraries, which house the fragile-as-dust ancient Islamic manuscripts of Chinguetti. In these libraries are the stories of Chinguetti's golden age. The libraries include the **Bibliothèque Ehel Hamoni** (admission UM300), **Bibliothèque Moulaye** (admission UM300), **Bibliothèque Habbot** (admission UM300), and **Fondation Ahmed al Mahmoud** (admission UM300) and each has an attached **museum** (admission UM200) containing items from the old caravans. None of the libraries keep regular opening hours and your best bet is to ask at your hotel for the man with the key.

CAMEL TREKKING & 4WD EXPEDITIONS

The picture-postcard sand dunes around Chinguetti are the single most definitive image of Mauritania for many people. Each year, thousands of Europeans come here to experience the magic of the desert.

The best way to see this fascinating region is by camel. Numerous *méharées* (camel trips) are available. Plan on at least a full day's ride as you'll see little of the dunes in half a day. Possible trips include to the oases of Abeir (3km), Tendewalle (5km), Legueilla (12km) or a four-day return trip to Tanouchert (45km). With more time you could go as far as Ouadâne (five to six days), Terjît (six days) and even Tidjikja (13 to 15 days) in the Tagânt (see p569). Prices are reasonable – standard costs start from UM8000 per person per day for the camel, food and guide. Any reputable travel agency in Atâr (see p562) or auberge owner

can arrange camel rides. You don't really have to haggle much, because everyone charges more or less the same price.

If you don't want to sweat it out, you can hire a 4WD and driver. It costs from UM17,000 (Toyota Hilux) to UM31,000 (Toyota GX) per day, petrol not included.

HOT-AIR BALLOONING

Fancy quietly sailing through desert skies at dawn? In the mood for jaw-dropping views? Well, don't miss the chance to try going up in a hot-air balloon in the Adrar. Auberge Tivoujar, a reputable outfit based in Atâr (see p562), can organise departures from Atâr or Chinguetti. It's not cheap (about €160 per person) but looking down on the dune fields and rock formations from the air is bound to be one of the highlights of your trip.

Sleeping & Eating

All the places listed below have terraces on the roof overlooking town, all have shared shower and toilet unless stated otherwise. Breakfast and meals are available on request (about UM2000 per meal).

Le Maure Bleu (☎ 540 01 54, 546 51 30; www.mau.rebleu.com; Old Town; r or stone hut s/d UM5200/8400, tent per person UM2500) One of Adrar's most appealing places to stay. This French-run peach of a place has oodles of rustic charm and features well-arranged rooms and *tikits*, as well as *khaimas* (nomad's tents) for shoe-stringers. The soothing courtyard is a great place to unwind over a cup of tea. Meals (about UM2500) come in for warm praise, however, breakfast is included in the price. Rejoice: the shared bathrooms are sparkling clean. Avoid staying here at weekends in season – it can fill up with French tour groups, in which case privacy is at a premium.

Auberge des Caravanes (☎ 540 00 22; fax 546 42 72; New Town; r per person UM1500) With its eye-catching, traditional architecture, it's hard to miss this well-run place right in the centre of town. It's popular with tour groups and is thus a good place to meet other travellers, but it feels a wee bit impersonal. There's an equally pleasant extension at the western end of the old town.

Auberge Abweir (☎ 540 01 24; New Town; stone hut or tent per person UM2500) Next door to Auberge des Caravanes, this welcoming place will appeal to a more sedate crowd, with a

bunch of simple yet well-organised stone huts and small tents set around a plant-filled courtyard. The well-scrubbed ablution block is an added bonus.

L'Eden de Chinguetti (☎ 540 00 14; New Town; r per person UM5500) 'Eden' might be pushing it a bit, but at least it's neat, well-tended and embellished with well-chosen knick-knacks. The owner, Mahmoud, is a local character and a mine of information. There are only eight rooms, with proper beds (read: not mattresses on the floor), which ensures intimacy. The ablution block was clean to boot when we visited. It's on the road to Atâr, not far from Auberge La Rose des Sables.

Auberge La Rose des Sables (☎ 540 01 48; New Town; stone hut or tent per person UM1500) Stumbling distance from Auberge Abweir, this auberge is run by the amiable Cheikh Ould Amar. It is a touch more run-down than its competitors but still fits the bill for shoestringers, with adequate stone huts arranged in a compact compound.

Les Mille et Une Nuits (Le Ksar; stone huts UM3000) Not your average auberge, Les Mille et Une Nuits is run by Leila, a Mauritanian lady, whose family owns the Bibliothèque Habbot. It's a very neat place, close to Le Maure Bleu, with impeccable bathrooms, well-designed stone huts, a manicured courtyard dappled in sunshine and some feminine touches. Recommended.

Dar Sahra (☎ 630 18 74, 540 02 44; Le Ksar; d incl breakfast €60; ☺) The newest kid on the block, this ultracharming, riad-like *maison d'hôtes* (guesthouse) smack-bang in the old town exudes bucket-loads of personality, thanks to its cushy setting, professional service and tastefully decorated rooms. An excellent base if you want to kick back in style.

If you want to get away from it all, you can base yourself at **Jardin d'Eden** (☎ 540 00 14; stone hut per person UM1500) or at **Le Jardin du Bien Être** (stone hut per person UM1500), both located in a secluded oasis about 4km from Chinguetti, on the way to Ouadâne. Facilities are basic but the setting is really enchanting, with lots of shade and greenery.

Getting There & Away

CAR & BUSH TAXI

There is at least one vehicle a day to/from Atâr (UM2000, about two hours). They leave from just behind the market; you'll need to ask around as the driver often goes

off looking for his full complement of passengers. There are no bush taxis between Chinguetti and Ouadâne – you'll have to go back to Atâr.

For those with their own vehicles, there are two routes to Atâr. The faster route (81km, two hours) is via the Nouatil Pass and the lunar-like Adrar plateau; while the other (91km, three to four hours) leads up to the Amogjar Pass, which is slow going but offers spectacular views. If you're coming from Chinguetti, the turn-off for the Amogjar Pass is at the signpost to the faintly discernible Neolithic rock paintings.

There are also two routes to Ouadâne – via the plateau or, more picturesque, across the sand dunes to the east of town.

TANOUCHERT

Don't miss this gem of an oasis, approximately halfway between Chinguetti and Ouadâne. This is your typical oasis, nestled around a freshwater source, complete with palm trees and surrounded by superb dune fields, miles from anywhere. You wanted an escape hatch? This is the one!

Another attraction is the welcoming **Auberge Chez Chighaly Ould Bigue – Oasis Tanouchert** (tents or tikits per person with half-board UM4200). Chighaly, your amiable host, is a local figure and will welcome you wholeheartedly in his unsophisticated but tidy auberge. The perfect *griot*, he is a pleasure to listen to if you can understand French. **Auberge Amoure Tanouchert** (tents or tikits per person with half-board UM4200) is another enchanting place to stay, with seven nicely laid-out *tikits* and a small garden.

Various camel rides can be organised in the area. Tanouchert is off the beaten track and you'll need to hire a 4WD with driver to get there. If you do a camel trek from Chinguetti to Ouadâne, you'll probably spend a night in Tanouchert.

OUADÂNE

Gosh, the first glimpse of Ouadâne from the dirt track is arresting. The old quarter that stretches on top of the hill is one of the most enchanting semi-ghost towns of the Sahara. Pity about the telecom tower that was installed in 2005 – it *does* mar the great vista.

Ouadâne was founded in 1147 by Berbers, and sits on the edge of the Adrar plateau, 120km northeast of Chinguetti. For 400

years, it was a prosperous caravan centre and a transit point for dates, salt and gold. It was the last stopover for caravans heading to Oualâta in the southeastern corner of the country. The decline began in the late 16th century when the powerful Moroccan prince Ahmed el Mansour gained control of this trans-Saharan route and diminished Oudadâne's commercial role.

Sights

LE KSAR AL KIALI

As you arrive across the sands or plateau from Atâr or Chinguetti, the stone houses of **Le Ksar al Kiali** (old quarter) seem to tumble down the cliff like an apparition, and they change colour depending on the time of day. From the base of the town, the lush gardens of the oasis stretch out before the desert again takes hold. The top of the hill is dominated by the minaret of the **new mosque**, which is a mere 200 years old, while at the western end at the base of the town is the 14th-century **old mosque**. At the height of Oudadâne's power, the two mosques were connected by the **Street of 40 Scholars (savant)** and houses along either side were only allowed to be occupied by Oudadâne's considerable intelligentsia. In between, the crumbling structures seem to have been piled up higgledy-piggledy by some giant child playing with building blocks. From a distance, they can seem to blend to form a massive stone wall. Only 20 to 30 families still live in the old town.

Like Chinguetti, Oudadâne was a place of scholarship and is home to over 3000 manuscripts held in 23, mostly private, libraries. At the time of research, some of them were open to the public (about UM500 each). There's also a **small museum** (UM500) housing various artefacts from the ancient caravans.

The knowledgeable, French-speaking guide Mohamed Lemine Kettab (UM1000) can really enhance your visit. He will probably have found you long before you start looking for him.

Sleeping & Eating

All places can prepare meals for their guests (about UM2000 for lunch or dinner). Try the *ksour*, a local delicacy. It's a thick pancake made of wheat. You dip it into a sauce and it makes a great accompaniment.

Auberge Mayateg (tents or tikits per person UM1700) This is one of the few places to stay atop the rocky bluff and is an easy walk to the top of the old town. It won't win any style awards but it's salubrious enough and there's a homely feel.

The following places are down on the plateau.

Auberge Warane 1 (☎ 546 46 04 in Atâr; r or tents per person UM1600) The first place you'll encounter coming from Atâr. The rooms are a bit bunker-like but serviceable enough.

Auberge Vask – Chez Zaida (☎ 681 76 69; tikits or tents per person UM1500) This mellow auberge is run by Zaida, a congenial lady who goes out of her way to make your stay a happy one. There are five *tikits* and a couple of nomad's tents – it's nothing particularly glam but perfectly adequate for thrifty travellers.

Auberge El Ghalaouya (tents or tikits per person UM1500) Almost a carbon copy of the Vask, with pleasant stone huts and tents, as well as a clean ablution block.

Auberge Agoueidir – Chez Isselmou (☎ 525 07 91; Nouakchott; tikits or tents per person UM1700, d UM4000) If you want decent facilities without blowing a fortune, this is the place to go. It features orderly rooms (with proper beds) adorned with modest artistic touches, as well as a number of tents and *tikits*. Top marks go to the shared bathrooms with toilets that are clean enough to sit on and the well-tended sand-floored courtyard. It is at the entrance to town coming over the dunes from Chinguetti.

Ignore the incongruous Hôtel Oumou Maabed at the entrance of Oudadâne. It's a botched attempt at creating a luxurious establishment.

Getting There & Away

Finding transport to Oudadâne is not easy. Atâr is a much better place to look than Chinguetti, as vehicles go between Atâr and Oudadâne every few days (every day, if you're lucky), but next to never from Chinguetti. The trip (UM2500) normally takes about four hours.

If driving you have two alternatives: the southerly Piste du Batha, which passes through sand dunes and definitely requires a guide, and the northerly Piste du Dhar Chinguetti along the plateau, which is in very good condition. The latter departs the Atâr–Chinguetti road 18km before Chinguetti.

AROUND OUADÂNE

The **Guelb er Richat** crater is 40km to the northeast. En route, stop at **Tin Labbé** (7km), a unique settlement where the large boulders prevalent in this area have been incorporated into the villagers' homes.

THE TAGÂNT

No area in Mauritania possesses a more mystical pull than the Tagânt region. There's magic in the land, an irresistible force that tugs on those who dream about empty spaces and wild expanses. Compared with the Adrar, the Tagânt is much less touristy and remains virtually untouched.

This does not mean that it is not accessible. There's a picturesque, sealed road that branches off the Route de l'Espoir to Tidjikja, the main gateway. You could also cross the entire region from Chinguetti to the north down to Oualâta to the south via Tichit – allow at least six days by 4WD or three weeks by camel.

Whatever the option, the sense of adventure is ever palpable.

TIDJIKJA

pop 6000

Tidjikja is the capital of the Tagânt region and a major stopover for those who cross the Tagânt from Chinguetti down to Nema. Founded in 1680 and now surrounded by sand dunes, the town supports one of the country's more important palm groves (which dates from the 18th century), a busy market, a couple of eye-catching mosques, numerous shops and Fort Coppolani (an old French military fort used in subduing the Moors).

A good side trip can be made to Rachid, 35km north on the track to Atâr. High up a cliff, it's one of the most picturesque spots in Mauritania and was once used as a site for launching attacks on passing caravans.

Sleeping & Eating

Auberge des Caravanes de Tidjikja (☎ 569 92 25; r with full board UM7000, tikits s/d 9000/10,000; 🍴) Part of a small chain of homely auberges across Mauritania's desert region, this reputable place is good value. In addition to plain rooms, a dozen comfortable *tikits* (some with air-con and private bathrooms) were

under construction when we visited. It's in the new quarter of town on your left as you arrive from Nouakchott.

Auberge Phare du Désert (☎ 563 29 99; tikits UM5000-7000) Almost a carbon copy of Auberge des Caravanes, if a bit more intimate.

For food, there are also some small grocery shops and the market.

Getting There & Away

A good, sealed road connects Nouakchott with Tidjikja. Occasional bush taxis leave from near a shop on Rue Ely Ould Mohamed in Nouakchott (look for 'boutique 245'). It costs UM6000.

It's possible to drive from Tidjikja to Atâr (470km). A guide is essential and attempting it with only one vehicle is inadvisable. Allow at least two days. There's petrol in Tidjikja.

TICHIT

If you're adventurous and want to see a ghost town in the making, head for the isolated, ancient town of Tichit, 255km east of Tidjikja. Driving here, you'll pass through a barren landscape – the trees are bare, the scrub is twisted, and the ground is littered with the bleached bones of camels and goats. You should report to the police when you arrive.

The town once furnished water and precious supplies to desert caravans and boasted over 6000 people and 1500 houses. Today, fewer than 300 houses remain and only about half are inhabited. The main mosque is impressive, as are the old houses, which are made of local stone of different hues. They have decorative motifs on the exterior and solid, ornate doors with wooden latches.

A guide is essential and you'll need your own transport. The tracks frequently disappear and there are few landmarks, so you'll need enough petrol for a return trip, including unplanned detours. Bring some food.

THE SOUTH

The south is mostly flat scrubland, with no great vistas and few remarkable towns. It pales into comparison with the north or the Atlantic coast, which offer more spectacular landscapes. Most travellers with their

own 4WDs head straight from Nouakchott to Ayoûn el-Atroûs or Néma and then journey on to Mali, or head to Rosso and on to Senegal.

But there's Oualâta. This uniquely unforgettable town is definitely worth the effort to get there and should be on every savvy traveller's itinerary.

ROSSO

pop 30,000

Rosso is a the main Mauritanian–Senegalese border crossing. It's a grubby, haphazard town with a slightly sinister feel. Most travellers breeze through, as there aren't really any worthwhile sights or attractions here. For more details, see p574.

Mercedes bush taxis from Nouakchott cost UM2000. The trip takes at least three hours. The onward trip to Dakar costs CFA5500 by Peugeot taxi. From Rosso, you can also take a Peugeot bush taxi to Diamma/Keur Masséne (UM500) to the west and cross the border there.

THE ROAD TO MALI

Good news for overlanders: the Route de l'Espoir (Road to Hope) from Nouakchott to Néma (around 1100km) is now entirely tarred. There's not really much to see on the way, so you can cover this monotonous stretch in two days. For more details on reaching this area by public transport, see p558.

The first major town on the road to the Malian border is **Kiffa** (population 30,000), an important regional trading centre and crossroads. Much of the activity of this vibrant place centres on the active market. The best places to stay are **Hôtel Emel** (☎ 563 26 37; fax 563 26 38; s/d UM7000/10,000; 🍽️), 7km west of the centre, with fusty but spacious and well-equipped bungalows, and the more recent **Auberge Le Phare du Désert** (☎ 563 28 88; tikits UM10,000; 🍽️), a nicely laid-out auberge, also on the outskirts of Kiffa. Meals are available at both places, but don't expect the Ritz.

You could also break up your journey at lively **Ayoûn el-Atroûs**, which is a good place to spend your last ouguiyas before crossing into Mali (see p574). For accommodation, try the unpretentious **Hôtel Ayoûn** (☎ 515 14 62; s/d UM5000/8000; 🍽️), which is in the centre (rooms come with bathroom),

or **Auberge Saada Tenzah** (☎ 515 13 37, 641 10 52; r UM5000-8000), about 3km east of the centre on the road to Néma. The beds in both places probably keep local chiropractors in business.

The tarred road ends at **Néma**, where you can already feel the flavour of neighbouring Mali. Néma doesn't have much to detain you but it's the main jumping-off point for Oualâta and the southern gateway to the Tagânt. At the time of research, there was talk of launching direct flights from Nouakchott to Néma (to serve the Tagânt) – if this happens, this little town could develop quickly. You'll find several petrol pumps, a BMCI branch (euros only), a couple of modest stores and a police station at which you can get your passport stamped. You can base yourself at **Complexe Touristique N'Gady** (☎ 513 09 00; fax 513 09 70; bungalows s/d UM7000/9000, r 12,000/15,000; 🍽️ 🍷), a few kilometres west of the centre. It's not ultracharming but convenient enough for a night or two.

OUALÂTA

It's a darn gruelling ride to get to Oualâta but you'll instantly fall in love with this middle-of-nowhere community – at least we did. Possibly one of Mauritania's best-kept secrets, Oualâta, about 100km north of Néma, is another ancient Saharan town high on atmosphere and personality. It lacks facilities but it's hard not to be touched by the end-of-the-world, forgotten-city feeling that emanates from this poignant place. Dating from 1224, it used to be the last resting point for caravans heading to Timbuktu.

A hint: get there before it becomes too touristy. At the time of research, there was talk of re-opening the airport in nearby Néma, which would translate into an influx of tourists. Some say Oualâta could be the 'Chinguetti of the southeast' in the forthcoming years.

Sights & Activities

Entering the town you'll be struck by the red **mud-brick houses** adorned with decorative paintings on the exterior and interior. Many houses were restored with the help of a Spanish organisation. The women paint geometric designs with dyes, typically red or indigo, making use of all materials

found in the region. If you're lucky, you may get invited inside one of them. A small donation is recommended (about UM500). There's also a small **museum** (UM500) and a **library**, which houses ancient Islamic manuscripts. If you're in for some souvenirs, Oualâta women are renowned for their original and fanciful clay carvings. Try to meet Izzi, near Auberge Gamni – her works are really appealing.

The knowledgeable, French-speaking guide Sidi Ould De (UM2000) can enhance your visit. He is usually hanging around when tourists arrive in town.

If you have plenty of time, you could easily spend several days pottering about in the town and the area – watching nomads bring vast herds of goats or camels down the hills to the river and enjoying the natural splendour. There are also several rock paintings and **archaeological sites** in the vicinity. Various **camel trips** can also be organised (ask your hosts).

Eating & Sleeping

Fear not: although you're miles from anywhere, you'll find about six guesthouses to rest your weary limbs. Nothing flash, but they are exceedingly atmospheric, with traditional murals. Bathrooms are shared. They all serve meals (about UM1800 for lunch or dinner, UM800 for breakfast). Try the local delicacy, **pigeon farci aux dattes** (pigeon stuffed with dates).

Auberge Tayib/Gamni – Auberge de l'Hôtel de Ville (r per person UM3000) is a great place with a very homely feel, as is the more basic but still welcoming **Auberge de l'Amitié** (r per person UM1500), not far from the old mosque. Moulaye Ahmed De, the chirpy owner, is used to dealing with travellers and will do his best to ensure a memorable stay. A notch up from these two, **Auberge Ksar Walata** (r per person UM5000) is tucked away in a lane in the old city. It features a lovely patio and attractive rooms.

Getting There & Away

There are two dirt tracks between Néma and Oualâta (approximately 110km). Land Rovers ply between the two towns (UM2000, 2½ hours) on an infrequent basis – usually every other day, sometimes more if there are enough people. Ask around in Néma market.

MAURITANIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

In general, you can expect to spend less than US\$15 per person in places we list as budget options; US\$15 to US\$50 in those we list as midrange; and more than US\$50 in those we list as top end. Finding budget accommodation is easy in cities and major towns. There's also a sprinkle of air-conditioned hotels meeting international standards in Nouakchott and, to a lesser extent, Nouâdhibou and Atâr. In the desert, you'll find numerous basic auberges or *campements*. They consist of a series of *tikits* or *khaimas* that come equipped with mattresses on the floor.

The last couple of years has seen a gradual improvement in the choice on offer, with a growing number of tasteful, mid-range *maisons d'hôtes*.

ACTIVITIES

Camel rides and 4WD expeditions in the desert are the most popular activities. Numerous tour companies can arrange custom trips in the desert (p563).

Alternatively, if bird-watching gets you in a flap, head for the Parc National du Banc d'Arguin (p561), along the Atlantic coast – this area is rated as one of the world's greatest birdlife-viewing venues.

BUSINESS HOURS

Although it's a Muslim country, for business purposes Mauritania adheres to the Monday to Friday working week. However, Friday is the main prayer day, so many

PRACTICALITIES

- Mauritania uses the metric system for weights and measures.
- Electrical current is 220V AC, 50Hz and most electrical plugs are of the European two-pin type.
- Mauritania's only TV station is TVM, with programmes in Arabic and French, but top-end hotels have satellite TV.
- For the news (in French), pick up *Le Calame* or *Horizons*.

businesses have an extended lunch break on Friday afternoon.

Many shops are open every day. Government offices, post offices and banks are usually open from 8am to 4pm Monday to Thursday and from 8am to 1pm on Friday.

CHILDREN

On the whole, Mauritania is a friendly and welcoming place for children. Possible activities might include camel riding and short hikes in the desert.

CUSTOMS

It is illegal to bring any alcohol into the country and heavy fines are levied. There are no longer currency declaration forms and there is no restriction on the amount of foreign currency you can bring in. Local currency cannot be imported or exported.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Don't get paranoid in Mauritania – it remains one of the safest countries in Africa.

A word of warning though. There are thousands of land mines buried along the Mauritanian side of the border with the Western Sahara, even as close as a few kilometres from Nouâdhibou.

There have been isolated incidents of bandits attacking single cars travelling overland to Mali, especially on off-the-beaten tracks around Néma, so keep to the main roads.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Mauritanian Embassies & Consulates

In West Africa, Mauritania has embassies in Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Mali, Nigeria and Senegal, and a consulate in Niger. For more details, see the relevant country chapter.

Elsewhere, Mauritania has embassies and consulates in the following countries:

Belgium (☎ 02-672 47 47; Colombialaan 6, Brussels 1000)

Canada (☎ 613-237 3283; 121 Sherwood Drive, Ottawa K1Y 3V1)

France (☎ 01-45 48 23 88; 89 Rue du Cherche-Midi, 75006 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-20 65 88 30; Axel Springer Strasse 54, 10117 Berlin)

Morocco (☎ 07-75 68 28 or 65 66 78; 1 Rue de Normandie, Souissi, Rabat)

Spain (☎ 91-575 7007; Velasquez 90, 28224 Madrid)

UK (☎ 020-7478 9323; 8 Carlos Palace, Mayfair, London W1K 3AS)

USA (☎ 202-232 5700; www.ambarim-dc.org; 2129 Leroy Place NW, Washington, DC 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in Mauritania

The following countries are represented in Nouakchott:

France (☎ 525 23 37; Rue Ahmed Ould Mohamed)

Germany (☎ 525 17 29; Rue Abdallaye)

Mali (☎ 525 40 81, 525 40 78; Tevragh Zeina)

Morocco (☎ 525 14 11; Ave du Général de Gaulle)

Senegal (☎ 525 72 90; Rue de l'Ambassade du Sénégal)

USA (☎ 525 26 60; fax 525 15 92; Rue Abdallaye)

HOLIDAYS

Public holidays include:

New Year's Day 1 January

National Reunification Day 26 February

Workers' Day 1 May

African Liberation Day 25 May

Army Day 10 July

Independence Day 28 November

Anniversary of the 1984 Coup 12 December

Mauritania also celebrates the usual Islamic holidays – see p818 for a table of estimated dates of these holidays.

INTERNET ACCESS

Mauritania has joined the Internet revolution with cybercafés in (at the time of writing) Nouakchott, Nouâdhibou, Atâr and Ayoûn-el-Atroûs.

The quality of the connections varies – some are painfully slow, others reasonable, none are superfast. The normal cost of one hour's surfing is UM200.

LANGUAGE

Arabic is the official language, but French is still spoken in all government sectors and is widely used in business. The everyday language of the Moor majority is a Berber-Arabic dialect called Hassaniya. In the south, other languages are spoken, including Fula (Pulaar), Wolof and Soninké. See p861 for a list of useful phrases in French, Hassaniya, Fula and Wolof.

MONEY

The unit of currency is the ouguiya (UM). Euros and US dollars are the cash to carry and wads of cash it must be, as travellers cheques and credit cards are pretty useless.

At the time of writing there was no ATM in Mauritania. Many banks in Nouakchott

transfer money via Western Union. No banks give cash advances on credit cards.

There is no longer a huge difference between the black-market rate and those offered by bureaux de change and banks. There are banks and bureaux de change in most cities. The Banque Mauritanienne pour le Commerce International (BMCI) and Banque Nationale de Mauritanie (BNM) are your best bet. Rates outside Nouakchott are slightly lower than in the capital.

Credit cards are accepted only at top-end hotels in Nouakchott.

TELEPHONE

You can make international calls and send faxes at post offices. The innumerable privately run phone shops in the major cities and towns cost about the same and are open late.

There are no telephone area codes.

VISAS

Visas are required for all, except nationals of Arab League countries and some African countries, although check that these exceptions haven't changed. The standard visa is valid for three months and good for a stay of one month from the date of entry.

In most places, Mauritanian embassies require an onward air ticket (or at least an itinerary). This is the case at most embassies in Europe as well as Morocco. It is common practice for an overland traveller to buy an airline ticket in Rabat for the purpose of obtaining a visa and to sell (or refund) the ticket once the visa is issued. The visa will indicate that it's valid for entry at Nouakchott airport but border officials routinely ignore this. Visas can cost anywhere from US\$20 to US\$120.

In countries where Mauritania has no diplomatic representation, including Australia and many countries in West Africa, French embassies will issue visas with a minimum of fuss for around US\$30.

Visa Extensions

Visa extensions can be obtained at the **Sûreté** (Ave Abdel Nasser, Nouakchott; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Thu). It costs UM5000 for one month.

Visas for Onward Travel

In Mauritania you can get visas for the following neighbouring countries.

MALI

Visas are issued the same day (UM6500) and are valid for one month. You need two photos and a photocopy of the information pages of your passport.

MOROCCO

Single-/double-entry visas cost UM5800/8700 and are issued in 48 hours. You need two photos and photocopies of your passport and air ticket.

SENEGAL

One-month visas (UM1500) are issued in 24 hours. You need to supply four photos.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Mauritania is a conservative Muslim country but by no means the most extreme in this regard. It is not unusual to find women working in public offices and driving; most wear a headscarf rather than a veil covering the face. The best way to meet local women is to hope for an invitation home from a family or to spend some time talking with stallholders, most of whom are women, in local markets.

Women travellers can be subjected to sexual harassment, especially when alone or with other women, although most women encounter no problems. It's a good idea for women to dress modestly. Cover the upper legs and arms and avoid shorts or skimpy T-shirts.

TRANSPORT IN MAURITANIA

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Most people from Western Europe or further abroad will fly to Mauritania, most probably to Nouakchott or Atâr. However, if you're doing a grand tour across West Africa, road border posts are open between Mauritania and neighbouring countries.

Entering Mauritania

Your passport must be valid for at least six months beyond your intended departure from Mauritania and stamped with a valid visa (see left). For travellers coming overland from Morocco, visas can also be issued at the border. You must also have proof of your vaccination against yellow fever.

Travellers arriving with the charter flight from Paris to Atâr from October to April don't need to bother about the visa; it's included in the price and is routinely issued upon arrival at Atâr airport.

Air

Nouakchott, Nouâdhibou and Atâr have international airports. Nouakchott's airport handles most traffic.

Mauritania's national carrier is Air Mauritanie. It has offices in Nouakchott, Nouâdhibou, Kiffa and Ayoûn-el-Atrouïs. The following airlines also fly to/from Mauritania:

Air Algérie (AH; ☎ 525 20 59; www.airalgerie.dz; cnr Ave du Général de Gaulle & Ave Abdel Nasser) Hub: Algiers.

Air France (AF; ☎ 525 18 08, 525 39 16; www.airfrance.com; Ave Kennedy) Hub: Paris.

Air Mauritanie (MR; ☎ 525 22 16, 525 80 98; www.airmauritanie.mr; Ave Abdel Nasser) Hub: Nouakchott.

Air Sénégal International (V7; ☎ 525 05 84; www.air-senegal-international.com; Ave du Général de Gaulle) Hub: Dakar.

Point Afrique (BIE; ☎ 00 33 4 75 97 20 40 in France; www.point-afrique.com) Hub: Paris.

Royal Air Maroc (AT; ☎ 525 35 64, 525 30 94; www.royalairmaroc.com; Ave Abdel Nasser) Hub: Casablanca.

Tunis Air (TU; ☎ 525 87 63; www.tunisair.com.tr; Ave Kennedy) Hub: Tunis.

For details on travelling from Australia, New Zealand, Europe and the USA please see p830.

AFRICA

Air Mauritanie and Air Sénégal both operate between Dakar and Nouakchott. There are also twice weekly Air Mauritanie flights to Bamako in Mali. Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire and Cotonou in Benin are also served by Air Mauritanie, via Bamako and via Abidjan respectively.

For other Saharan or sub-Saharan countries, you'll have to change in Dakar or Abidjan.

Mauritania is well connected to North Africa. Air Mauritanie and Royal Air Maroc operate between Casablanca and Nouakchott five times a week, while Tunis Air connects Tunis with Nouakchott (three times a week). Air Algérie flies to Algiers.

Land

If driving into Mauritania, see opposite.

MALI

At the time of research, the most straightforward route to Mali was from Ayoûn el-Atrouïs to Niôro. You can also cross at Néma, Timbedgha (both connecting with Nara in Mali), Tintâne and Kiffa (both connecting with Niôro in Mali).

If crossing into Mali, have your passport stamped by police at the first town you reach after crossing the border. You must also clear customs, which is done in Néma or Ayoûn el-Atrouïs.

From Nouakchott, you can catch bush taxis to Néma (about UM7500, two days) and Ayoûn el-Atrouïs (about UM6000, 15 hours). From these places you can catch transport into Mali.

There are two routes between Niôro and Ayoûn el-Atrouïs if you're travelling by car. The trip is roughly 230km and usually takes less than a day.

Petrol is available in Niôro, Nara, Néma, Ayoûn el-Atrouïs and Kiffa.

MOROCCO

The trans-Sahara route via Mauritania is now a very popular route from North Africa into sub-Saharan Africa.

The only border crossing between Morocco and Mauritania is north of Nouâdhibou. Crossing this border is straightforward; there is no longer any need to travel with a military escort from Dakhla (Morocco) and the road is now entirely tarred to Nouakchott, except for the 3km no-man's-land that separates the two border posts. Coming from Morocco, you can buy the Mauritanian visa at the border (€20). Expect to pay about €20 for various 'taxes' on top of the visa price. Although there are no longer currency declaration forms, some customs officials still ask for it and, of course, if you can't present it, they will expect a small bribe. See also p838.

Note that there's no public transport between Morocco and Mauritania.

SENEGAL

The main border crossing for Senegal is at Rosso but it's also possible to cross at Diamma (Keur Masséne), west of Rosso.

When crossing into Senegal at Rosso, note that immigration is only open on the Mauritanian side from 8am to noon and 3pm to 6pm. The border crossing here is

notorious for its hassles. Be prepared for some confrontation with customs officials who usually ask for 'exit taxes'. It's even worse for vehicle owners.

From Dakar to Nouakchott by public transport usually takes from 11 to 13 hours depending on the wait at the border. Most minibuses and bush taxis leave Dakar before 10am to be sure of arriving in Rosso well before the border closing time (6pm). At Rosso, most travellers without vehicles cross by pirogue (five minutes; UM200/CFA500) as the ferry crosses only four times daily. If you want to avoid the hassles at Rosso, you can take a bush taxi from Rosso to Diamma (Keur Masséne) and cross at Diamma. The border at Diamma is open 24 hours and the hassles are reportedly less problematic (although you'll probably be asked for an 'extra hours tax' if you cross at night).

With your own vehicle, you can either cross the Senegal River at Rosso, which takes only ten minutes by *bac* (ferry), or use the bridge at Diamma (open 24 hours). At Rosso, the ferry departs from the Mauritanian side at 9.30am, 11.15am, 3.30pm and 5pm, and from the Senegalese side some 45 minutes later. It costs UM4000 for a 4WD. During the dry season, most travellers with a car tend to opt for Diamma.

GETTING AROUND

Air

AIRLINES IN MAURITANIA

Air Mauritanie flies from Nouakchott to Nouâdhibou (UM16,000/32,000 one way/return, four times per week), Kiffa (UM13,000/25,000, once per week), Ayoûn el-Atrouïs (UM14,500/28,000, once per week), Selibaby (UM16,000/31,000, twice per week) and Zouérat (UM17,500/34,200, once per week).

At the time of writing, there was talk of scheduling flights to Néma.

Bush Taxi

Mercedes taxis (Mercedes 190), Peugeot taxis (Peugeot 504s), Land Rovers and minibuses, in descending order of cost, are the four types of public transport. Overcharging is rare except with the baggage fee, which requires bargaining. Bush taxis go to all the major towns daily, but finding one for small villages is challenging.

Mercedes or Peugeot bush taxis are uncomfortable because you're crammed in four to a row, so consider paying for two seats to avoid the misery. The front two seats are less cramped but they're also more expensive. Note that a *taxi course* is a taxi that you have all to yourself.

Car & Motorcycle

BRING YOUR OWN VEHICLE

You don't need a *carnet de passage en douane* in Mauritania (see p837 for more information). Mauritanian officials enter details of the car in your passport, which is then checked on departure from the country. An International Driving Permit (IDP) is not required.

FUEL & SPARE PARTS

Petrol was UM209 per litre at the time of writing, slightly more in the Adrar and along the Route de l'Espoir. There are petrol stations in most cities, including Tidjikja and Néma.

HIRE

If you don't have a vehicle and you want more freedom than a tour can offer (most companies won't run tours for less than four people), consider renting a 4WD and driver. The standard Toyota Hilux usually costs around UM21,000 per day for the vehicle, plus petrol.

INSURANCE

Many European car-insurance companies will only issue policies for as far south as Morocco; in Mauritania you must buy a Mauritanian policy purchased at Nouâdhibou (and sometimes directly at the Moroccan border) or at Nouakchott. Expect to pay around US\$20 for ten days.

ROAD CONDITIONS

Roads are being steadily upgraded. A major improvement in late 2005 was the opening of a new tarred road connecting Nouakchott with Nouâdhibou, bypassing the Parc National du Banc d'Arguin. The Route de l'Espoir from Nouakchott to Néma (around 1100km) is also entirely tarred, as is the road from Nouakchott to Tidjikja.

The road to Atâr is excellent, so driving there from Nouakchott is now six hours nonstop. The unsealed road from Atâr to

AN EPIC JOURNEY ON THE IRON-ORE TRAIN

We will never forget the experience – neither will you. The Zouérat to Nouâdhibou train is the longest in the world – typically 2.3km long. When it arrives at the ‘station’ in Nouâdhibou, a decrepit building in the open desert, a seemingly endless number of ore wagons pass before the passenger carriage at the rear appears. Then the stampede to get on board begins. The lucky ones find a place on one of the two long benches; the rest stand or sit on the floor, or perch on the roof for free. There are also a dozen of ‘berths’ that are so worn out that you can see the springs. The atmosphere can be quite jovial, with people playing cards on the floor. In the late afternoon, many men find space on the floor to pray and at dusk when the cabin becomes totally dark, chanting begins. On board, a man sells tea and cheap snacks. Take enough clothes to keep warm, as it can get cold at night.

Choûm (about two hours) is reasonably good but requires a 4WD. You’ll also need a 4WD to Chinguetti and Ouadâne, whichever road you take – the one that goes along the northern plateau is much better but less scenic than the sandy southern route.

Expect police checkpoints at the entrance and exit of each town.

Tours

There are numerous travel agencies in Nouakchott that offer tours around the country but it’s not a bad idea to arrange a tour with a more regional-focussed company – eg in Atâr for the Adrar or the Tagânt. Travel is usually by 4WD. Stand-

ard tours include an eight-day tour to Atâr, Chinguetti, Ouadâne, Guelb er Richat and Terjît, the Tagânt plateau, or five-day excursions to the Banc d’Arguin. If there are at least four travellers, prices should average around UM20,000 per person per day.

Train

The Nouâdhibou–Zouérat train is a great adventure (see above). It’s an iron-ore train with no passenger terminals, but it has become a passenger train for lack of better alternatives. The trip takes 16 to 18 hours, but most travellers get off at Choûm, 12 hours from Nouâdhibou. You can also put your car on board.