

Casamance



Every September when the tropical downpours have subsided to the occasional bolt of lightning in the distance, the king of Oussouye is honoured with a week of spectacular wrestling matches and dances. In his brilliant red robes, sceptre clutched, he cuts a stately figure. As a baldachin provides shade, he observes hundreds of youngsters from across the Casamance compete with skill, speed and the spiritual support of their protective charms. Dust whirls up and the urging cheers from the crowds rise to a deafening noise. Oussouye's monarch is an animist leader, political chief and skilled fetishist, an adviser and sovereign revered across the entire region. As you witness the devotion displayed and the spectacle unfold, you know that you're far – very far – from Dakar, with its highways, skyscrapers and Wolof society.

Not only the unique Diola culture but even the lands conspire to impress on you the region's distinctive qualities. For once your eyes feast on abundant greenery, pushed to magnificent heights by fertile soils and the waters of the Casamance River. Small islands all along its course invite for a spell of soul searching in complete isolation. Bird calls ring from the thick mangroves that line the river and, in the far west, the land greets the sea with wide, powdery beaches.

People travel to the Casamance and never leave – discrete, lush and welcoming, the region is quick to cast its spell on you. But the Casamance's distinctiveness has also had serious consequences. For decades the region has been troubled by simmering separatist sentiments that have at times flared up in civil war. Though conflicts have largely been quelled, Senegal's most fertile zone remains slightly unstable and, while it's perfectly possible to spend the holiday of your life here, you're advised to listen to the local people and heed their advice before setting off on those tempting tours through remote villages and palm-shaded islands.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Swim by day and party by night at **Cap Skiring** (p246), home to the best beaches in Senegal
- Cycle over sandy paths and kayak through the creeks at **Oussouye** (p249)
- Learn the art of cooking *thiéboundienne* (rice and fish), then treat yourself to a dolphin tour at **Cachouane** (p249)
- Follow the seductive call of the wattle-eye all the way to the manatee sanctuary at **Pointe St George** (p244)
- Sip sundowners between the roots of a giant kapok tree on historical **Île de Karabane** (p245)



TO GO OR NOT TO GO

Separatist conflicts officially ended in 2004, yet occasional clashes continue to occur, though they are more commonly caused by street robbers with access to arms than motivated by any real secessionist sentiment.

The vast majority of tourists visit the Casamance without experiencing any problems, but some caution is still advisable. The biggest concern is the sporadic occurrence of road ambushes, mainly along the Ziguinchor–Bignona artery. They are most likely to happen at night or in the early hours of the morning – if you stick to daytime travel, you're very unlikely to get caught up in anything. The route from Ziguinchor to Cap Skiring was considered completely safe at the time of research and all major roads are manned by military, stationed in order to dissuade the robbers.

Check your embassy for travel advice before setting out and, if you're already in Casamance, ask your hotel about the latest situation and the safety of a particular destination. Casamance residents, especially those working in the tourist industry, are always the ones who are best informed and are a reliable source of advice.

HISTORY

The Diola people of Casamance have a long history of resisting the rule of outsiders. It's a sentiment that underlined their outright rejection of slavery, their refusal to accept France's colonial administration and enduring secessionist wars.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the French colonial authorities controlled their colonies through local chiefs and frequently installed leaders from other ethnic groups to administer Diola territories. This increased the resentment that colonisation itself had provoked and Diola resistance against foreign interference remained strong into the 1930s.

The last Diola rebellion against the French was led in 1943 by a traditional priestess from Kabrousse called Aline Sitoé Diatta. Forced into exile in Timbuktu (Mali) by the French after the uprising was quelled, she died far from home and is today revered as the greatest heroine of the Casamance.

The conflicts that have plagued the region for the last 20 years originated from a proindependence demonstration held in Ziguinchor in 1982, after which the leaders of the Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de la Casamance (MFDC) were arrested and jailed. As the government clamped down on separatist sentiments with increasing severity, the north–south divide only increased and the secessionist movement gained in strength.

Throughout the '90s periods of civil war alternated with fragile ceasefire agreements, causing destruction and a rising death toll among civilians. When the disappearance of four French tourists in 1995 was blamed on the MFDC, their leader, Father Diamacoune

Senghor, accused the army of trying to turn international opinion against the rebels. Peace talks continued but, following the government's refusal to consider independence for Casamance, a group of hardliners broke away from the MFDC and resumed fighting.

Against a background of ongoing clashes, causing the death of over 500 people in the late 1990s, Father Diamacoune urged his supporters to continue to pursue reconciliation with the government. Several peace deals were made and broken, until the final one in 2004 suddenly promised success. Violence still erupts occasionally, though these acts can rarely be attributed to the concerted action of separatists, but rather to street robbers and bandits who profit from a politically charged situation and the availability of firearms in the region since the years of conflict.

INFORMATION

The web portals www.casamance.net and www.voyagerencasamance.com contain a wealth of information, from political news to events calendars and hotel bookings.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

There are airports at Ziguinchor and Cap Skiring. Until its bankruptcy in 2009, Air Sénégal International used to have regular flights. Check whether another carrier has resumed them.

Boat

Cheaper than planes and far more comfortable than *sept-place* taxis, boats are a great way of travelling between Dakar and Ziguinchor.