

Guinea

Imagine you're travelling on smooth highway then get tempted by a tiny, dusty turn-off into rugged terrain, where spectacular surprises lurk behind every corner.

Guinea is that turn-off. This is a country blessed with amazing landscapes, from the craggy mountain plateau of Fouta Djallon to wide Sahelian lands and thick forests. Overland drivers are drawn here by rugged tracks, and the challenge of steering their vehicles over rocks, laterite and washed-out paths. Nature lovers can lose themselves on long hikes past the steep waterfalls, proud hills and tiny villages of the Fouta. And for music fans, the country is something of a pilgrimage site – this is where West Africa's 1960s sounds were created.

There's virtually no tourist infrastructure and creature comforts are scarce. Instead, you get to explore paths that few tourists travel.

For most Guineans, life has been tough since the country defiantly broke from France and ventured out on a difficult post-independence journey. Yet, despite the hard times, the country's diverse people have largely stood together through the decades, rather than turning on each other. In conversations and encounters you will catch glimpses of that strong stance, and hear about the nation's troubles as well as its hopes.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 245,855 sq km
- **Capital** Conakry
- **Country code** ☎ 224
- **Famous for** Bauxite; Radical independence; Circus & Acrobatics School; Les Ballets Africains
- **Languages** French, Malinké, Pulaar (Fula) and Susu
- **Money** Guinean franc (GF); US\$1 = GF4920; €1 = GF6654
- **Population** 9.5 million
- **Visa** Required in advance



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Iles de Los** (p410) Beautiful palm-fringed strands on which to sip fresh coconut juice.
- **Fouta Djallon** (p413) Trekking and swimming in the waterfalls of the majestic mountain plateaus.
- **Bossou** (p425) Chimpanzees to come face to face with.
- **Conakry** (p401) The capital's dubious dives for getting drunk on some of West Africa's best live music.
- **Forêt Classée de Ziama** (p423) Elephants in the virgin rainforest.

ITINERARIES

- **One week** Spend a couple of days in Conakry (p401), taking in the Iles de Los (p410) on a day trip. Then head to Fouta Djallon (p413), trekking to craggy mountains and steep waterfalls.
- **Two weeks** Add a leisurely trip through the towns, hills, palm groves and villages of Lower Guinea (p410) to the one-week itinerary, stopping at Bel Air and Sobané (p411) for another stretch of beach lazing. Take a detour to Faranah (p420) to explore the Parc National du Haut Niger (p420) and hike to the source of the River Niger. Alternatively, just stay in Fouta Djallon (p413) and strike out on an extended village-to-village trek (see p414).
- **One month** This is enough time to venture through all four of the country's regions, allowing you to reach remote villages, and maybe even the mighty Mt Nimba in Guinée Forestière (p425).

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Guinea is one of the wettest countries in West Africa. Rainfall along the coast averages 4300mm a year, half of which falls in July and August, while the central mountainous region receives about 2000mm between May and October, although sometimes starting as early as March. Temperatures average 30°C along the coast, where it is always humid, and can fall to 6°C and below at night in the highland areas in December and January (see Climate Charts p810).

The best time to visit is November and December, when the rains have swollen rivers and waterfalls, and the landscape is green. Visits during the rainy season can be tough as

HOW MUCH?

- **Handmade leather sandals** GF40,000
- **100km bush taxi ride** GF25,000
- **4WD hire per day** GF600,000
- **Two pagnes (about 2m) of hand-woven indigo cloth** GF40,000
- **Night at a music show** GF5000

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L of petrol** GF4800
- **1.5L of bottled water** GF3500
- **Bottle of Skol** GF4000
- **Souvenir T-shirt** GF40,000
- **Plate of rice and sauce** GF5000

many roads become inaccessible (especially in the Forest Region), and the capital Conakry turns into a giant mud bath.

HISTORY

The Age of Empires & Colonisation

Most of the sociocultural make-up that defines Guinea to this day was established from the 13th century onwards, the age of West Africa's empires (p27). Following the fall of the Empire of Ghana, Susu and Malinké people migrated increasingly to the region, pushing some of the earlier, clan-based inhabitants, such as the Koniagui, Baga and Landuma, into new regions.

The legendary clashes of the Susu sorcerer king Soumaoro Kanté and Sunjata Keita, founder of the 13th-century Empire of Mali, took place on Guinean soil. The Empire's historical capital Niani is in Upper Guinea, though a visit here betrays little of its glorious past. The major migrations caused by the rise and fall of Mali established the 'cultural zones' of the Susu (Lower Guinea) and Malinké (Upper Guinea) lands that persist today. In between the two is the Fouta Djallon plateau, whose culture and history is defined by a very different course. Throughout the 17th century the area absorbed increasing Muslim Fula populations from Macina (in present-day Mali) and Fouta Toro (present-day Senegal), who increasingly took to converting the diverse ethnic groups resident in the area, and finally launched the first jihad