

# Guinea-Bissau

History has not been kind to Guinea-Bissau. Decades of Portuguese colonisation, a long, painful liberation struggle and cycles of civil war have locked this pretty nation in grinding poverty. And when it seemed finally that peace would last, Guinea-Bissau gained an unwholesome reputation as West Africa's key entry port for hard drugs.

But the fact that you rarely hear good news from Guinea-Bissau doesn't mean that there is none – it simply doesn't make it to the news screens. The stories you will bring back from your trip are more likely to paint pictures of endless white beaches, thick rainforest and, most of all, the country's disarmingly friendly people.

Like a microcosm of Africa, this tiny nation contains a spectacular variety of landscapes, cultures and small-town scenes, all within easy reach from the capital, Bissau. The jewel in its crown is the labyrinth of tropical islands that makes up the Arquipélago dos Bijagós. With vast deserted sand strands and clear waters quivering with fish, these islands are a dream destination for sports fishers and sea-and-sun lovers. The fragile ecosystem is home to turtles, hundreds of bird species and rare saltwater hippos, and is protected as a Unesco Biosphere Reserve. Similar preservation efforts have so far saved the last vestiges of humid tropical rainforest and its thriving populations of monkeys, chimps and buffaloes, in the south of the country. All this natural beauty would have transformed a more stable country into a travelling hotspot. In Guinea-Bissau, you'll be one of very few visitors and get to enjoy stunning landscapes and culture far off the tourist trails.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 36,120 sq km
- **Capital** Bissau
- **Country code** ☎ 245
- **Famous for** Cashews, island paradise, chimpanzees
- **Languages** Portuguese, Crioulo
- **Money** West African CFA franc; US\$1 = CFA493; €1 = CFA656
- **Population** 1,416,000
- **Visa** All visitors except citizens of Ecowas nations require a visa; they need to be arranged before arrival



**HOW MUCH?**

- **Small souvenir mask** CFA2000
- **Taxi ride through Bissau** CFA500
- **Wi-fi in Bissau's better restaurants** free
- **Woven indigo cotton cloth (40cm x 80cm)** CFA6000
- **Main course in Western-style restaurant** CFA5000

**LONELY PLANET INDEX**

- **1L of petrol** CFA550
- **1L of bottled water** CFA1000
- **Bottle of Guinean Pampa beer** CFA1000
- **Souvenir T-shirt** CFA2500
- **Omelette sandwich from street vendor** CFA600

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- **João Vieira** (p446) Fresh coconut juice on the island's endless, palm-framed sand strands.
- **Orango** (p446) Rare saltwater hippos and the tombs of the kings and queens of Bijagós.
- **Bolama** (p443) Witness the crumbling colonial grandeur of the antique Portuguese capital.
- **Bissau** (p438) The narrow alleyways of Bissau Velho.
- **Parque Nacional do Cantanhez** (p450) Follow buffalo, chimp and elephant trails through dense rainforests.

**ITINERARIES**

- **One Week** Most travellers with only a week to spare spend a day or two in the capital Bissau (p437), which has few 'sights' but a pleasant, relaxing feel. This could be combined with a few days visiting the country's major attraction, the Arquipélago dos Bijagós (p442), southwest of Bissau. The island of Bubaque (p443) is the easiest to reach, with good beaches and a range of places to stay.
- **Two Weeks** If you have a second week to spare, consider further explorations of the Bijagós. Head to Orango (p446), with

its rare saltwater hippos, or the turtle colonies of João Vieira (p446). Relax on the white beaches of tiny islands, such as Kere (p446), before heading back to Bissau, taking in the ghost town on Bolama (p443) island on the way.

- **Three Weeks** A third week is best spent in the south, where you can travel the narrow creeks and lagoons of Parque Natural das Lagoas de Cufada (p450) and go chimp and elephant spotting in the Cantanhez rainforest (p450).

**CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO**

The rainy season is from June to October; it rains almost twice as much along the coast as inland. Conditions are especially humid in the months before the rains (April and May), when average maximum daytime temperatures rise to 34°C.

The best time to visit is from late November to February, when conditions are dry and relatively cool. February/early March is also Carnival time in Bissau, although smaller festivals take place in many towns to celebrate the end of the harvest in November and December.

See also Climate Charts p810.

**HISTORY**

A group of Manding people arrived in present-day Guinea-Bissau in around 1200, led by a general of Sunjata Keita, the legendary founder of the Empire of Mali. The region thus became an outpost of the empire, before transforming into the Kaabu kingdom, a state in its own right, in 1537. Gabú in eastern Guinea-Bissau was the capital of this small kingdom. See also p27.

**WARNING**

Only days before this book went to press, former president João 'Nino' Vieira and his chief of staff were assassinated by military – just a few months after elections had raised cautious hopes of lasting stability. The murders resurrected fear of a resurgence of civil war, and have brought into sharp focus the fragility of peace in this country plagued by corruption, military rivalries, poverty and drug smuggling. Always check the latest advice from governments, other travellers and local residents before venturing to Guinea-Bissau.