

Mali

If you only visit one country in West Africa, make it Mali. This is a country as rich in historical significance as it is blessed by an extraordinary array of sights, not to mention being home to many of West Africa's major cultural groups.

Mali's natural wonders range from the deserts of the north to the fertile greenery of the south, with the Niger River weaving a path through the heart of the country. The lucrative trade routes of the Sahara once made the region the world's richest, and the Niger, one of the grand old rivers of Africa, still provides Mali's lifeblood. To journey along it (preferably on a slow boat) is one great journey.

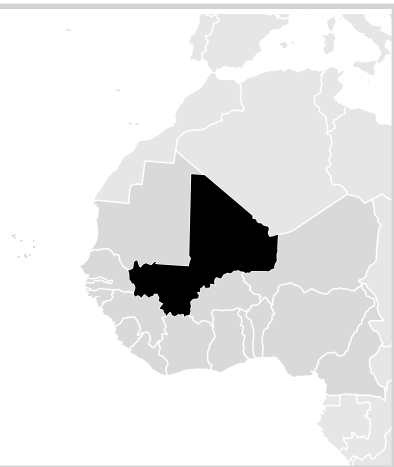
Not far from the riverbank, the extraordinary Falaise de Bandiagara rises from the plains. It shelters one of West Africa's most intriguing peoples, the Dogon, whose villages and complex cultural rituals still cling to the rocky cliffs. A visit here is utterly unforgettable.

Some of Africa's greatest empires also rose from the Niger's hinterland and bequeathed to Mali some of its most dramatic attractions: the legendary city of Timbuktu – whose name has never lost its remote allure – and the gloriously improbable mosque at Djenné are merely two among many. Even in places where the landscape seems too barren to support life, you find Mali's famous elephants sharing the Sahelian soil with Tuareg and Fulani nomads.

There's almost as much to hear in Mali as there is to see, with a musical soundtrack provided by some of Africa's most celebrated stars. Whether you dive in to Bamako's wonderful live music scene or time your arrival to coincide with the country's two world-famous music festivals, Mali's diverse rhythms will soon have you on your feet.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1,240,140 sq km
- **Capital** Bamako
- **Country code** ☎ 223
- **Famous for** Timbuktu, Dogon Country, Festival in the Desert and the best in West African music
- **Languages** French, Bambara, Fula, Tamashek, Dogon, Bozo and Songhai
- **Money** West African CFA franc; US\$1 = CFA493; €1 = CFA656
- **Population** 13.1 million
- **Visa** Renewable five-day visa available at border (CFA15,000) or one-month visas at any Malian embassy



HOW MUCH?

- **Bamako-Mopti bus ride** CFA7500
- **4WD rental with driver** CFA45,000–50,000 per day, plus petrol
- **Sunset camel ride into Sahara** from CFA7500
- **Internet connection** CFA600–1500 per hour
- **Guide to Dogon Country** CFA12,500–22,500 per day

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L of petrol** CFA530
- **1.5L of bottled water** CFA500
- **Bottle of Castel beer** small/large CFA500/1000
- **Souvenir T-shirt** CFA5000–6000
- **Portion of riz arachide (rice with peanut sauce)** CFA500

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Dogon Country** (p507) West Africa as it used to be, with timeless villages clinging to the Falaise de Bandiagara.
- **Djenné** (p497) Stunning mudbrick town with a fairytale mosque overlooking a clamorous Monday market.
- **Niger River** (see the boxed text, p504) One of Africa's epic rivers lined with fascinating villages, picturesque mosques and Mali's diverse cultures.
- **Timbuktu** (p516) City of Saharan legend and the gateway to the desert.
- **Réserve de Douentza** (p530) Home to the Sahel's last elephants and one of Africa's great wildlife-watching experiences.
- **Bamako** (p490) West Africa's live-music capital with weekend performances by Mali's musical superstars.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Stay Friday night in Bamako for a taste of Mali's live-music scene (p490) and make sure your Monday is spent at Djenné's weekly market (p498). Otherwise, we recommend a three-day trek in Dogon Country (p507), with one night in the lively port town of Mopti (p501) en route.

- **Two Weeks** An extra week will allow you to break up the long journey northeast by pausing for a couple of nights in languid Ségou (p493). From Mopti, you could also take a three-day slow-boat journey (see the boxed text, p504) up the Niger River to Timbuktu (p516) from where short desert excursions are possible.
- **One Month** In a one-month itinerary you could include an extra day in Djenné (p497) to enjoy its quiet postmarket charm, as well as a longer, one-week trek in the Dogon Country (p512). A couple of days in the Réserve de Douentza (p530) in search of Mali's elephants is a must, and factor in a half-day trek around La Main de Fatima (p530). Other possibilities include a visit to the remote outpost of Gao (p524), a longer Saharan camel trek (p521) from Timbuktu if the security situation allows, and a couple of nights in Teriya Bugu (p497) on your way back to Bamako.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit Mali is from November to January, when you can expect generally fine weather, moderate temperatures and sufficient water levels on the Niger River to allow river trips. This is, however, Mali's tourist high season, so accommodation can be at a premium. Mali is wettest between July and August, although the rainy season runs from June to September. It's hottest between April and June, when temperatures frequently exceed 40°C. September and October are also extremely hot and Timbuktu in particular can be unpleasant. From January to June, the hot and dusty harmattan blows, irritating throats and reducing visibility. See also Climate Charts, p810.

Mali's most famous cultural event is the outstanding Festival in the Desert (p521) held in early January amid the sand dunes near Timbuktu. Fast catching up for quality and popularity is Ségou's Festival sur le Niger (p494), held late January to early February.

HISTORY**The Early Empires**

Rock paintings and carvings in the Sahara suggest that northern Mali has been inhabited since 10,000 BC, when the Sahara was fertile and rich in wildlife. By 5000 BC farming was taking place, and the use of iron began around 500 BC. By 300 BC, large organised settlements had developed, most notably at