

Mauritania

If West Africa is a playground for overlanders, then Mauritania often seems to be little more than a 'drive-through' country – less a destination in itself than somewhere to transit between the better-known attractions of Marrakesh, Dakar or Bamako. That's a shame because Mauritania has some tremendous secrets to reveal to those travellers prepared to stop and take a closer look,

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

Just as striking is some of the grandest scenery the entire continent has to offer. The Adrar region offers up epic sand dunes, eye-popping plateaus, green oases and even the biggest monolith this side of central Australia. The Tagânt has similar charms, and both hide ancient (and World Heritage-listed) caravan towns – Chinguetti, Ouadâne and Oualâta. The World Heritage feast continues along the coast at Parc National du Banc d'Arguin, which attracts millions of migratory birds and is renowned as one of the best bird-watching sites on earth.

If you just breeze through, and stop at the (admittedly uninspiring) capital Nouakchott, you'll miss out on a truly incredible country. No one in Mauritania is in a rush, and you shouldn't be either.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1,030,700 sq km
- **Capital** Nouakchott
- **Country code** ☎ 222
- **Famous for** Desert landscapes; bird-watching; *zrig* (camel milk)
- **Languages** Hassaniya, French, Fula, Soninké and Wolof
- **Money** Ouguiya (UM); US\$1 = UM264; €1 = UM351
- **Population** 3.36 million
- **Visa** In advance €35–45, at Moroccan border €20



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Chinguetti** (p561) Glorious sunrises from the labyrinthine lanes of the old city.
- **4WD tours or camel trips** (p558) The magic of the Sahara, sleeping beneath the star-studded skies at the saffron dunes in the Adrar region.
- **Banc d'Arguin** (p556) Vast flocks of birds to view from a traditional pirogue.
- **Oualâta** (p566) Admire the elaborate decorative paintings that grace traditional houses in one of Mauritania's best-kept secrets.
- **Iron-ore train** (p555) The world's longest train, and the most epic journey of your life!

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** For most travellers the lure of the desert is irresistible. **Atâr** (p557) 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** (p561) and **Ouadâne** (p562), then laze some time away in the idyllic oasis *palmerie* (palm grove) of **Terjit** (p560). Finish things off camping at the awesome monolith of **Ben Amira** (p560) with its unlikely sculpture park, before returning to Atâr.
- **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** (p554) 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** (p556), one of the best bird-watching areas in West Africa. Journey on to **Nouakchott** (p548), Mauritania's sprawling capital, with its striking mélange 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** (p564). Stop en route at the crocodile-filled oasis of **Matmata** (p564). Get a

HOW MUCH?

- **Cup of tea in a nomad's tent** free
- **Taxi ride in Nouakchott** UM200
- **Camel ride in the desert** about UM6000 per day
- **Bush taxi fare Nouakchott–Nouâdhibou** UM4500
- **Auberge room** about UM2000 per person

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L of petrol** UM240
- **1L of bottled water** UM200
- **Bottled beer** UM1000
- **Souvenir T-shirt** UM600
- **Plate of mafé (rice & fish)** UM300

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** (p566), not far from Mali. Striking north, it's an easy ride to **Oualâta** (p566), 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. See also Climate Charts, p810.

HISTORY

From the 3rd century AD, the Berbers established trading routes all over the