

# Destination West Africa

West Africa has cachet and soul in equal measure. Home to the signature African landscapes of our imaginations and inhabited by an astonishing diversity of peoples who still hold fast to their traditions, this is Africa as it used to be.

Here, elephants share the desert sands with indigo-clad Tuareg nomads, while the otherworldly animist traditions of the Dogon cling to the cliff faces. Elsewhere, extraordinarily rich musical traditions animate an already epic landscape, from the peoples along the shore of Niger River which labours through the Sahel like an evocation of a fairytale, to the melancholy soundtrack of Cape Verde in the shadow of its austerely beautiful volcanos. Or perhaps you'll best understand West Africa's allure amid the verdant rainforests of Cameroon, contemplating an Atlantic sunset alongside swaying palm trees, or with the red Sahel dust beneath your feet.

West Africa is in-your-face, full-volume Lagos, or the silent steps of a camel caravan silhouetted against a blood-red Saharan sunset. It's a smile of friendship from some of the world's poorest people. It's a beat, a rhythm, an idea of Africa that has somehow survived the ravages of time.

Good news about Africa can be hard to find, but West Africa has much to be proud of. Peace has returned to Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone and in a region where military rule was once the norm, Guinea and Mauritania now look like the odd ones out. In Mali, the Tuareg rebellion that began in 2006 seems to have almost run its course, while Benin has won plaudits for its press freedom and general economic progress. Senegal and Cape Verde rarely make the news, but continue to exhibit the stability and good governance which are their trademark. Ghana has been the star performer with another successful democratic transition in the 2008 elections, and its citizens riding a wave of optimism thanks to the discovery of offshore oil.

Of course, it's not all good news. Nigeria, that behemoth of disappointed hopes and seemingly perpetual unrest, continues to lumber and lurch, forward and back. In Niger and Mauritania, vast tracts of the Saharan north remain off-limits, home to bandits and rebels, while the assassination of Guinea-Bissau's president in March 2009 was the latest grim news to emerge from this beleaguered former Portuguese colony. And the rumblings of discontent can be heard in Cameroon, Burkina Faso and The Gambia where one-man rule has come at the cost of shrinking political freedoms. Togo is still emerging from just such a scenario.

According to the UN's annual Human Development Index, which is based on economic and quality-of-life indicators, West Africa is the poorest region on earth. In the 177-country study, Sierra Leone is the worst place on earth in which to live. Rounding out the bottom five are Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Niger and Mali. Five other West African countries appear in the bottom 20 and not one West African country appears in the 100 most-developed countries in the world. Only Cape Verde, which has climbed to a creditable 102nd despite negligible natural resources, bucks the trend.

Environmental degradation is another massive issue for the region. The Sahel in particular is facing a host of big-ticket environmental issues. So precarious is the outlook that one senior UN official described the region as the world's 'ground zero' for climate change.

For all the problems facing the region, however, West Africa has never lost the spring in its step. Dive in. Return the smiles. Dance to the music. But above all, immerse yourself in a journey that will change your life forever.

## FAST FACTS

Number of West African countries: 17

Most common unit of currency: Euro (€)

Estimated total population: 297.7 million (half of whom are Nigerians)

Number of Unesco World Heritage-listed sites: 24

Longest/shortest life expectancy at birth: Cape Verde (71)/Sierra Leone (41.8)

Highest/lowest adult literacy rates: Cape Verde (81.2%)/Burkina Faso (23.6%)

Highest/lowest per capita annual incomes: Cape Verde (US\$1940)/Liberia (US\$167)

West Africa's highest point: Mount Cameroon (4095m)

Length of Niger River (Africa's third-longest): 4100km

The Sahara covers more than half of: Mali, Mauritania and Niger

# Getting Started

Welcome to one of the least-known corners of the earth. In many cases, half-remembered fragments represent the sum total of Western knowledge about West Africa: the shadowy presence of Timbuktu, the sculpted perfection of a Saharan sand dune, the memory of a song by Youssou N'Dour. This lack of knowledge, this sense of entering into a realm remote from the world's consciousness, is what makes planning a trip to the region all the more rewarding. By visiting West Africa, you're embarking on a major expedition that requires careful planning and, for many travellers, setting out into the unknown. Addressing both elements – the practical and the stuff of dreams – should occupy most of your pre-departure planning.

For all but French-speaking travellers, finding good information on West Africa can be a challenge. What follows in this chapter is a distillation of the most useful and inspiring resources to help in your preparation, from the travel literature that captures the region's unmistakable whiff of the exotic to a host of unique festivals that can act as your route planner to the region. The region's world-renowned music, which will provide a stirring soundtrack for your visit, deserves a chapter of its own: see p57.

How you get around the region is an important question to consider before you touch down in Dakar, Bamako or Accra. Most travellers use buses, bush taxis and trains; although slower than travelling with a private vehicle, and you probably won't reach as many places, it's cheap and a great way to experience local life. If you've never travelled in Africa before, you may want to consider an organised tour (p838). For a range of possible itineraries to whet your appetite, see p20.

## WHEN TO GO

Tourist seasons vary across the region, although high season generally runs from October or November through to March or April, with low season running from May to September. Exceptions include the beach resorts of Cape Verde, The Gambia and Senegal which are often packed to the rafters during the European summer.

The best time to visit West Africa is during the drier and generally cooler months of November to February, although the dusty harmattan winds of the Sahel, which can reduce visibility and cause respiratory complaints, often begin in January and blow on and off through to May. Any time up to April is also dry; from then on it gets progressively hotter and more humid and May can be unbearably hot in the Sahel. Hotels along the coasts of Senegal and The Gambia are packed with European sunbathers on package tours from December to March. The Dogon Country, Timbuktu and Djenné in Mali can be very crowded, especially in December and January.

Unless you've no other option, the rain, heat and humidity of the rainy season, from May/June to September/October, is best avoided. The wettest areas are Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia, where annual rainfall often tops 4000mm and the humidity can be unbearable anywhere along the coast during this period. In all areas, rainy periods get shorter and rainfall decreases as you move further north and away from the ocean; in the Sahel, rain falls for a few hours per day, keeping the skies clear of dust and temperatures down. In a region where most minor roads are dirt, many roads can become impassable after heavy rains. Many wildlife reserves also close from June to November.

Another consideration for planning when to go are the major festivals that enliven travel in the region. Our pick of the festivals worth changing your

See p810 for climate charts for major regional centres.

**DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...**

- sealable plastic bags – to protect your belongings from moisture and dust
- the requisite vaccinations (p851) and proof of yellow fever vaccination (most countries won't let you in without it)
- travel insurance (p816) – accidents do happen
- one smart set of clothes – advisable for visa applications, crossing borders or if you're invited to somebody's house
- basic medical kit (see p851)
- mosquito net and repellent
- light sleeping bag (for cold desert nights) or a sleeping sheet (for less-than-clean hotels)
- sunglasses, hat and sunscreen (as essential in the Sahara as on the beach)
- torch (flashlight) and spare batteries – electricity can be a stop-start affair
- sturdy water bottle, water purifier and filter
- universal washbasin plug and length of cord for drying clothes
- sanitary towels or tampons
- condoms
- an emergency stash of toilet paper
- photocopies of your important documents (and leave a copy somewhere safe back home)
- English-language books – they're rarely available in West Africa
- a Frisbee or small (size-three) football – a great way to meet local kids
- contact-lens-cleaning-and-soaking solutions and a pair of prescription glasses as a back-up
- patience – most transport does leave eventually

itinerary for are covered in the boxed text on p19. For a wider selection, you'll find the major festivals in each country in the Directory for each individual country chapter. Region-wide holidays, such as Ramadan and other major Islamic holidays (see p815) are also worth keeping an eye on, especially in the Sahel countries where everything can grind to a halt for a few days.

**COSTS & MONEY**

Just because West Africa is one of the poorest regions on earth doesn't mean that travelling here is cheap. Petrol can cost the same as it does in the West, with obvious implications for the cost of transport. For everything else, expect to pay between 50% and 75% of what you'd pay back home; Mali and Senegal are particularly expensive. Exceptions to the generally high prices include local food and beer. When crafting an overall budget for your trip, remember to include visa fees and the cost of hiring local guides.

If you're staying in the most basic accommodation (from US\$5 a night), eating only local food (as little as US\$2 a day), getting around on local transport (around US\$3 per 100km), taking no tours and buying few souvenirs you can count on spending a minimum of US\$15 per day, although US\$20 to US\$25 is more manageable. Those looking for more comfort (midrange hotels can range from US\$20 to US\$75 per night) and preferring to eat in reasonable restaurants (from US\$4 to US\$15 for a sit-down meal) could get by on US\$35, but US\$60 is a more reasonable budget. At the upper end, the sky's the limit. Top-end hotels start at around US\$80 and can be three times that, organised tours are scarcely cheaper than taking a tour in Europe and car rental averages at least US\$100 per day and sometimes more, plus petrol.

For advice on local accommodation costs, see the Accommodation section in each individual country's Directory.

## TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

In West Africa, where the global inequities of wealth distribution are so pronounced, it's particularly important to ensure that your travel enjoyment is not at the expense of locals and their environment.

At one level, the impact of tourism can be positive: it can provide an incentive for locals to preserve environments and wildlife by generating employment, while enabling them to maintain their traditional lifestyles. However, the negative impacts of tourism can be substantial and contribute to the gradual erosion of traditional life. Please try to keep your impact as low as possible by considering the following tips

- Try to give people a balanced perspective of life in developed countries and point out the strong points of local culture (eg strong family ties, openness to outsiders).
- Make yourself aware of the human-rights situation, history and current affairs in the countries you travel through.
- Try not to waste water. Switch off lights and air-conditioning when you go out.
- When visiting historical sites, consider the irreparable damage you inflict upon them by taking home unattached artefacts (eg pottery shards or arrowheads).
- Many precious cultural objects are sold to tourists – you should only buy newly carved pieces to preserve West Africa's history and stimulate the carving industry.
- Question any so-called eco-tourism operators for specifics about what they're really doing to protect the environment and the people who live there.
- Support local enterprise. Use locally owned hotels and restaurants and support trade and craft workers by buying locally made souvenirs.
- Resist the local tendency of indifference to littering.

UK-based organisation **Tourism Concern** (☎ 020-7133 3800; [www.tourismconcern.org.uk](http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk); Stapleton House, 277-281 Holloway Rd, London N7 8HN) is primarily concerned with tourism and its impact upon local cultures and the environment. It has a range of publications and contacts for community organisations, as well as further advice on minimising the impact of your travels.

### WEST AFRICA'S WORLD HERITAGE SITES

**Benin** Royal palaces of Abomey (p112)

**Cameroon** Réserve de Biosphère du Dja (p215)

**Côte d'Ivoire** Parc National de Taï (p278) and Parc National de la Comoé (p264)

**The Gambia** James Island (p314)

**Ghana** Coastal forts and castles (see the boxed text, p354) and Ashanti traditional buildings in Kumasi (p369)

**Guinea** Nimba Mountains (see the boxed text, p425)

**Mali** Djenné old town (p499), Timbuktu (p516), Tomb of the Askia (Gao; p526) and Falaise de Bandiagara (Dogon Country; p507)

**Mauritania** Parc National du Banc d'Arguin (p556) and the *ksour* (fortified areas, or old quarters) of Ouadâne (p562), Chinguetti (p561), Tichit (p564) and Oualâta (p566)

**Niger** Réserve Naturelle Nationale de l'Air et du Ténéré (p578) and Parc Regional du W (p592)

**Nigeria** Osun Sacred Forest & Groves (p634) and Sukur Cultural Landscape

**Senegal** Île de Gorée (p693), Saint Louis (p707), Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj (p712), Parc National de Niokolo-Koba (p716) and the Stone Circles of Senegambia

**Togo** Koutammakou, the Land of the Batammariba (p795)

To see our list of businesses and activities committed to environmentally, socially, culturally or economically sustainable travel, turn to p910.

For advice on how to handle requests for gifts from everyone from beggars to slick-fingered policemen, see the boxed text, p37. Tips for travelling in Islamic areas are covered in the box on p43, for eating etiquette on p53 and for meeting locals on p40.

## TRAVEL LITERATURE

The following inspirational titles all range across more than one West African country. For travel literature about individual countries, please see the Directory section of each country chapter.

*The Lost Kingdoms of Africa*, by Jeffrey Taylor, is a highly readable account of a modern journey through the Sahel, especially northern Nigeria, Niger and Mali; it was published in the US as *Angry Wind*.

*The Shadow of the Sun*, by Ryszard Kapuściński, is a masterpiece by one of Africa's most insightful observers with Africans always taking centre stage. Ghana, Nigeria, Mauritania, Senegal, Liberia, Cameroon and Mali all make an appearance.

*Journey Without Maps*, by Graham Greene, is a wonderful narrative by one of the 20th century's best writers as he travelled through the forests of Liberia and Sierra Leone in 1935.

*Travels in the White Man's Grave*, by Donald MacIntosh, is a little-known classic by a writer who spent much of his working life in the forests of Liberia, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon.

*Travels in the Interior of Africa*, by Mungo Park, recounts the troubled expeditions of one of Europe's most intrepid early-19th-century explorers; it's a fascinating window onto West Africa on the cusp of colonialism.

*To Timbuktu*, by Mark Jenkins, follows in the paddle-strokes of Mungo Park down the Niger River from its source on the Sierra Leone-Guinea border into Mali. It's great writing, if a little testosterone-fuelled in parts.

*Sahara Unveiled*, by William Langewiesche, takes you from Algiers to Dakar via the Sahara Desert. The prose can be as spare as the desert itself, which makes it a classic of Saharan travel literature.

*French Lessons in Africa*, by Peter Biddlecombe, skips lightly through the region, but it's one of few travel narratives to bring such a breadth of West African countries to an English-speaking audience.

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## INTERNET RESOURCES

For specific country overviews and hundreds of useful links, head to Lonely Planet's website ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)), including the Thorn Tree, Lonely Planet's online forum.

Background information on West Africa can also be found at the following websites:

**Africa Centre** ([www.africacentre.org](http://www.africacentre.org)) US-based portal that's good for African events in the states with a handful of useful links.

**African Studies Center** ([www.africa.upenn.edu/Home\\_Page/Country.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Home_Page/Country.html)) Extensive links from the University of Pennsylvania's Africa program.

**Ecowas** ([www.ecowas.info/index.htm](http://www.ecowas.info/index.htm)) The official site of the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) with a few useful links.

**Norwegian Council for Africa** ([www.afrika.no](http://www.afrika.no)) A comprehensive site with extensive information and links for each country, chat forums and more.

**Sahara Overland** ([www.sahara-overland.com](http://www.sahara-overland.com)) The best practical guide for travellers to the Sahara, with useful forums, route information and book reviews.

**The Africa Guide** ([www.africaguide.com](http://www.africaguide.com)) An all-purpose, all-Africa site with everything from extensive background information to NGOs and travel links.

### FAVOURITE FESTIVALS & EVENTS

- Festival in the Desert (p521; early January; Mali) Exceptional music festival amid Saharan sand dunes
- Voodoo Festival (p109; 10 January; Benin) Much merriment and voodoo celebration in Ouidah
- Festival Sur Le Niger (p494; late January–early February; Mali) Performances along the Niger riverbank in Ségou by Mali's leading musicians
- Grand Magal in Touba (p705; 48 days after Islamic New Year; Senegal) Spiritually charged annual pilgrimage that draws over two million followers of the Mouride Sufi brotherhood
- Carnival (p440; February; Guinea-Bissau) Latin-style street festival in Bissau with masks, parties and parades
- Fêtes des Masques (p284; February; Côte d'Ivoire) Man hosts West Africa's most important mask festival
- Fespaco (see the boxed text, p135; February–March in odd years; Burkina Faso) Africa's world-renowned film festival, held in Ouagadougou
- Argungu Fishing Festival (see the boxed text, p658; February–March) A fantastic fishing and culture festival on the banks of the Sokoto River in Nigeria's north
- Mardi Gras (see the boxed text, p239; 40 days before Easter; Cape Verde) Spectacular carnival-type celebration with street parades, especially in Mindelo
- Saint-Louis International Jazz Festival (p708; May; Senegal) West Africa's premier jazz festival that attracts big-name African and international artists
- Dak'Art Biennale (p734; May/June every even year; Senegal) West Africa's premier arts festival is held in Dakar
- Fetu Afahye Festival (p354; first Saturday in September; Ghana) Colourful carnival, dances and sacrifices to the gods
- La Cure Salée (see the boxed text, p604; usually first half of September; Niger) World-famous annual celebration by Fula herders featuring a male beauty contest and camel races, near In-Gall
- Igwe Festival (Ewere Festival; p635; first half of December; Nigeria) Colourful seven-day festival with traditional dances, mock battle and procession to the palace to reaffirm loyalty to the *oba* (king) in Benin City
- Festival Kora & Cordes (p405; December; Guinea) A terrific music festival in Conakry with acoustic music groups from all over Guinea
- Cattle Crossing (see the boxed text, p497; December or January; Mali) Spectacular annual festival of Fula cattle herders around Mali's Inland Delta, especially Diarafabé
- Kano Durbar (p655; during Tabaski, 69 days after Ramadan; Nigeria) Colourful cavalry processions and high ceremony to honour West Africa's most important Islamic festival

**Travel Africa** ([www.travelafricamag.com](http://www.travelafricamag.com)) The best print magazine on Africa; articles on West Africa are scattered amid the mainly East and Southern African subject matter.

**West Africa Review** ([www.westafricareview.com](http://www.westafricareview.com)) A scholarly journal with in-depth articles on West African countries and region-wide issues.

For good news sites on the region, try **AllAfrica.com** ([www.allafrica.com](http://www.allafrica.com)), **Reuters Africa** (<http://af.reuters.com>), **Afrol News** ([www.afrol.com](http://www.afrol.com)), **BBC** ([www.bbcnews.com/africa](http://www.bbcnews.com/africa)), **IRINNews** ([www.irinnews.org/IRIN-Africa.aspx](http://www.irinnews.org/IRIN-Africa.aspx)), **West Africa News** ([www.westafricanews.com](http://www.westafricanews.com)) and **Media Foundation for West Africa** ([www.mediafound.org](http://www.mediafound.org)). In French, try **Jeune Afrique** ([www.jeuneafrique.com](http://www.jeuneafrique.com), in French), **APA** ([www.apanews.net](http://www.apanews.net)), **Afrik** ([www.afrik.com](http://www.afrik.com), in French) and **Afrique Index** ([www.afriqueindex.com](http://www.afriqueindex.com), in French). For country-specific websites, see the individual country chapters.

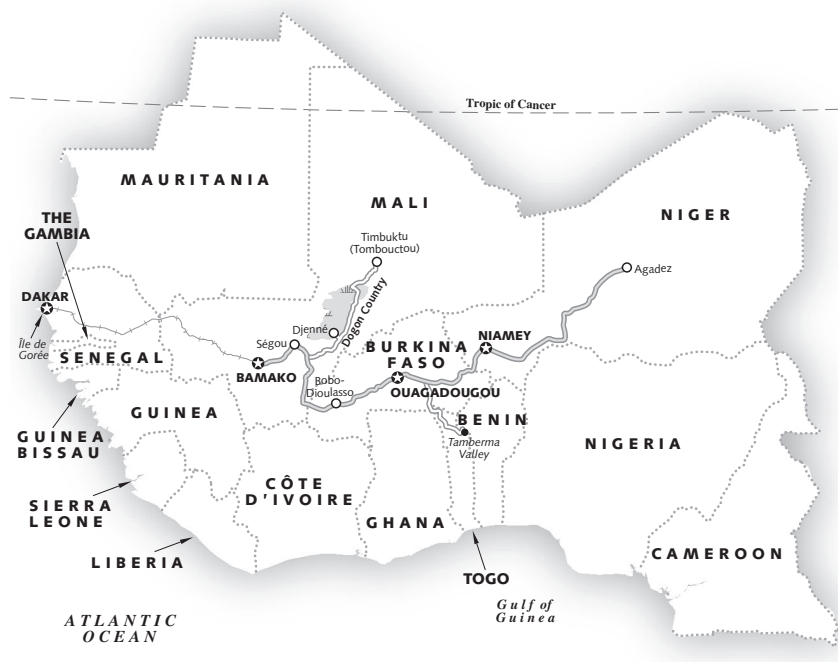
# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

From Dakar to Agadez (around 4800km) can be reasonably done in six weeks (a week in Senegal, two to three weeks in Mali, a week in Burkina Faso and another week for Niger) using public transport. Two months would, be ideal.

### THROUGH THE HEART OF THE SAHEL Six to Eight Weeks / Dakar to Agadez

If you're wondering why Africa gets under the skin, begin in cosmopolitan **Dakar** (p676), leaving time for an offshore excursion to tranquil **Île de Gorée** (p693). Jump aboard the train to **Bamako** (p482) with its world-class nightlife and unmistakably African feel. Travelling northeast, pause in **Djenné** (p497) for its beautiful mud-brick mosque and clamorous Monday market, en route to the **Dogon Country** (p507) with its outstanding trekking and intriguing cultural traditions. No trip to West Africa is complete without an excursion to **Timbuktu** (Tombouctou; p516) on the Sahara's fringe. Timbuktu is on the road to nowhere so retrace your steps to the lovely, riverside town of **Ségou** (p493). From there make for Burkina Faso and **Bobo-Dioulasso** (p149), an infectiously languid town, then continue on to gloriously named **Ouagadougou** (p136) with a vibrant arts scene. After a detour to Togo's otherworldly **Tamberma Valley** (p795), head for Niger's riverbank capital, **Niamey** (p579), then on to **Agadez** (p599), an evocative former caravan town of the Sahara.

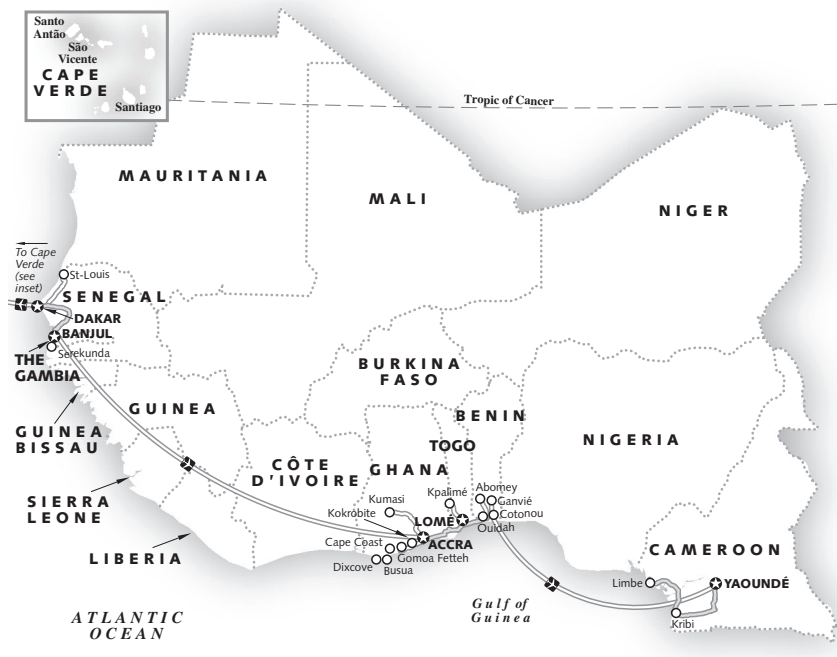


## ATLANTIC ODYSSEY

Six Weeks / Dakar to Limbe

From the arid coastlines of the northwest to the palm-fringed tropics of Cameroon, West Africa's coastline has it all. Senegal's capital **Dakar** (p676), with its African sophistication and role as regional air hub, serves both as a starting point and a base for the first part of your journey. To the north, **Saint-Louis** (p707) is like stepping back into pre-colonial Africa. From Dakar, fly to the Cape Verde Islands with their soulful musical soundtrack, unspoiled beaches, mountainous interior and laid-back locals; **Santiago** (p234), **São Vicente** (p238), and **Santo Antão** (p241) are particularly beautiful. Returning to Dakar, head south to The Gambia which may be small, but its beaches, especially those around **Serekunda** (p298), make a good (English-speaking) rest stop for taking time out from the African road. From **Banjul** (p294), consider flying to agreeable **Accra** (p335) in Ghana, from where excursions to the old **coastal forts** (see the boxed text, p354), **Cape Coast Castle** (p352) and stunning beaches at **Kokrobite** (p348) and **Busua** (p369) never disappoint. Don't fail to detour north to **Kumasi** (p369) in the Ashanti heartland. There's plenty of onward transport to the fascinating markets and fine museum of **Lomé** (p776) and don't miss an inland hiking detour around **Kpalimé** (see the boxed text, p786). Not far away is Benin, with **Ouidah** (p107), the evocative former slaving port and home of voodoo, the history-rich town of **Abomey** (p111) and the stilt-villages of **Ganvié** (p104). **Cotonou** (p97) has all the steamy appeal of the tropics; from here fly to **Yaoundé** (p178) in Cameroon, which has a distinctive Central African feel. **Kribi** (p216) and **Limbe** (p187) are places to laze on the sand and consider just how far you've travelled.

**Dakar to Limbe (around 2500km by land, plus flights) should take about six weeks (one week in Senegal, two in Cape Verde, two travelling from Ghana to Benin and a further week in Cameroon).**



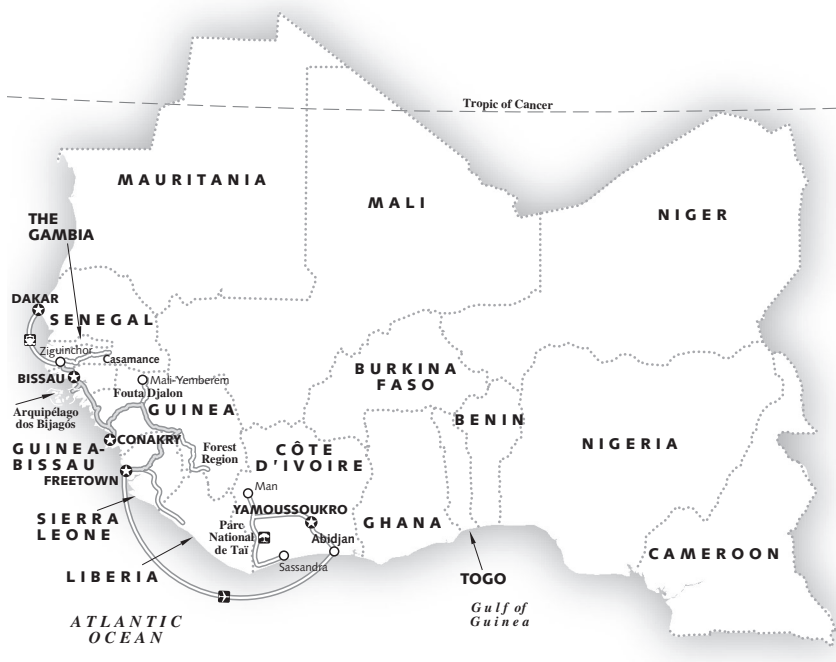


## ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

### UNKNOWN WEST AFRICA **One Month to Forever / Dakar to Sassandra**

The westernmost extremity of Africa's bulge has, until recently, been off-limits to travellers. But while peace has come, the same can't be said for tourists – you could have these destinations all to yourself. Begin in **Dakar** (p676) and catch the ferry to **Ziguinchor** (p721), capital of **Casamance** (p719), home to fine beaches, labyrinthine river systems and lush forests. Guinea-Bissau is distinguished by the architectural remnants of Portugal's colonial occupation, some of West Africa's friendliest people, and a village-like capital, **Bissau** (p437). The **Arquipélago dos Bijagós** (p442) is isolated, rich in wildlife and like nowhere else on the coast. Continuing south, the excellent **Parque Nacional do Catanzes** (p450) is worth a detour. Across the border into Guinea, **Conakry** (p401), with good nightlife, is your gateway to the country's lush and beautiful interior; the stunning **Fouta Djalon highlands** (p413) offers good trekking and **Mali-Yemberem** (p418) is stunning. Head into the forests of Guinea's **Forest Region** (p423). Sierra Leone is another country on the up, with stunning beaches and **Freetown** (p746), the oddly beautiful capital that seems to contain all the country's optimism and drive. The truly adventurous may want to dip into **Liberia** (p454), but consider flying to **Abidjan** (p265), the still-sophisticated one-time 'Paris of Africa'. Head for **Yamoussoukro** (p279) and its improbable basilica, then, if the interior's safe, on to **Man** (p280) in the heart of Dan country. En route to the coast, stop off in the **Parc National de Taï** (p278) as you head for **Sassandra** (p277), a glorious fishing village with great beaches.

Getting as far as Freetown involves around 3300km of dodgy roads and infrequent transport – count on anywhere between a month and forever. Transport is generally better in Côte d'Ivoire, where you'll cover an extra 1000km.



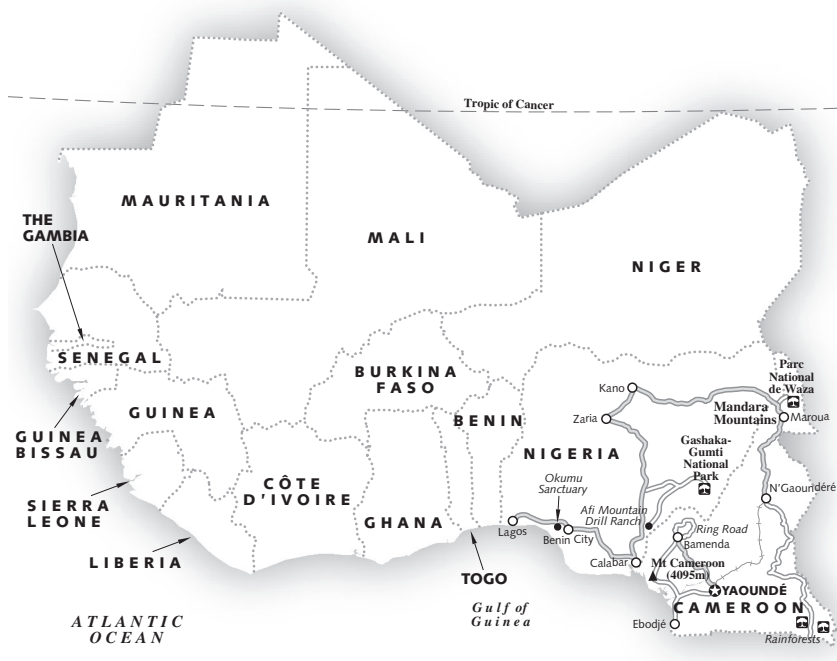
## NIGERIA & CAMEROON

Two Months / Lagos to Ring Road

Nigeria is one of those destinations that suffers from bad press, although it must be said that most of the horror stories are told by those who've never set foot in the country. **Lagos** (p622) may be in-your-face, high volume and logistically confronting, but it's also Africa's most energetic city, awash with pulsating nightlife, clamorous markets and a terrific museum. **Osun Sacred Forest** (p634) in Okumu Sanctuary, and the Oba's Palace in **Benin City** (p636) are worthwhile stopovers as you head across the south en route to **Calabar** (p639), which is likeable for its old colonial buildings, fish market and lovely setting. Close to Calabar, don't miss **Afi Mountain Drill Ranch** (p643), the focus of an outstanding primate project, and then continue northeast to the remote but terrific **Gashaka-Gumti National Park** (p649) for some of Nigeria's best wildlife-watching. On your way north, stop off in **Zaria** (p651), then on to **Kano** (p653), West Africa's oldest city and one of the Sahel's most significant cultural centres.

The long journey east takes you across the border to **Maroua** (p208), a pleasant base for exploring the weird-and-wonderful landscapes of the **Mandara Mountains** (p210) and **Parc National de Waza** (p212). From **N'Gaoundéré** (p205), you can either head deep into the utterly untouristed rainforests (p213) of the southeast, which offer a verdant taste of Central Africa, or take the train through the country's heart, all the way to **Yaoundé** (p178). After longish detours to see the sea turtles at **Ebodjé** (p219), and to climb **Mt Cameroon** (p191), West Africa's highest peak, head for **Bamenda** (p195), your gateway to the villages of the **Ring Road** (p197), a deeply traditional area of Cameroon that feels untouched by time.

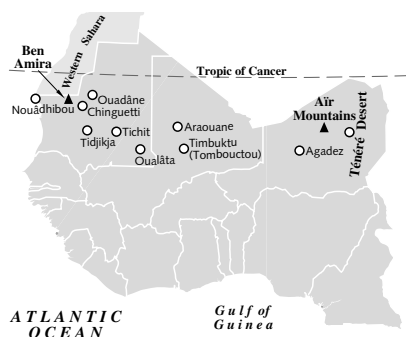
This route will see you covering at least 5500km (much more if you detour down into Cameroon's remote southeast) and will take a minimum of two months by public transport.



## TAILORED TRIPS

### INTO THE SAHARA

The sculpted perfection of seas of sand dunes. The timeless serenity of former caravan towns. The solitude of a vast land without horizons. If you're drawn by the call of these unmistakable signposts of the world's largest desert, this itinerary is for you, although you'll either need your own or a rented 4WD. There's only one problem: at the time of writing, much of the Sahara is in rebellion (see the boxed texts, p525 and p606) and some destinations may be off-limits. Check the latest travel advice before setting out.



The safest route for crossing the Sahara is via its easternmost extremity, entering West Africa from the Western Sahara (p836). **Nouâdhibou** (p554) in Mauritania is a jumping-off point for the dramatic landform of **Ben Amira** (see the boxed text, p560), and for the wonderful oasis towns of **Chinguetti** (p561), surrounded by sand dunes, and **Ouadâne** (p562) with its stone-ruin sense of abandonment. Mauritania's **Tidjikja** (p564),

**Tichit** (p564) and **Oualâta** (p566) all have beautifully painted houses deep in the desert. In Mali, **Timbuktu** (Tombouctou; p516), perhaps the greatest of all desert cities, is a gateway to lonely **Araouane** (p524). Evocative **Agadez** (p599) in Niger enables you to explore the other-worldly **Air Mountains** (p603), a desert home of the Tuareg, and the exquisitely remote **Ténéré Desert** (p603), which is known as the 'desert beyond the desert'.

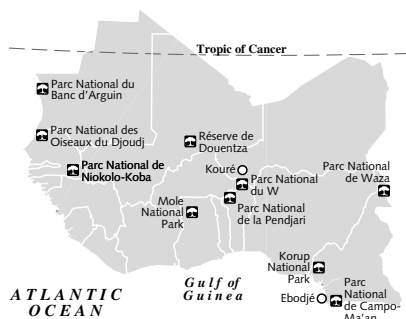
### WEST AFRICAN WILDLIFE

West Africa is an underrated wildlife destination and its little-known national parks host more African mega-fauna than they do tourists. For a more complete list of West Africa's best wildlife reserves, see p85.

Cameroon has some of West Africa's best national parks. In the north, the **Parc National de Waza** (p212), is home to elephants, giraffes and lions, while the southern **Parc National de Campo-Ma'an** (p220) hosts buffalos, elephants, mandrills and a nascent ecotourism project. **Korup National Park** (p194) is also outstanding, while on no account miss the chance to see sea turtles at **Ebodjé** (p219).

Benin's **Parc National de la Pendjari** (p121) is one of West Africa's best parks with lions, leopards, elephants and hippos. The same can be said for the Benin-Niger cross-border **Parc Régional du W** (p592 and p123).

Ghana's **Mole National Park** (p380), with 94 mammal species, including elephants, baboons, and antelopes, is that country's conservation showpiece. The **Réserve de Douentza** (p530) in Mali, home to Africa's northernmost elephants, is one of West Africa's best wildlife-watching experiences, as is tracking down the Sahel's last giraffes at **Kouré** (p589) in Niger. Senegal's World Heritage-listed **Parc National de Niokolo-Koba** (p716) is also terrific. Senegal's **Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj** (p712) and Mauritania's **Parc National du Banc D'Arguin** (p556) are among the best birding sites in the world for migratory species.



## WEST AFRICA'S BEST MARKETS

West Africa's markets are where the peoples of the region meet and trade, where music blaring from speakers competes for attention with aromas fair and foul and where all the colours of Africa will brighten your day.

In Ghana, Kumasi's **Kejetia Market** (p369) is awash with the colours of Ashanti culture, while **Makola Market** (p339) in Accra is a wonderful slice of functioning chaos. In neighbouring Togo, the **Marché des Féticheurs** (p777) in Lomé will appeal if you need a monkey's skull. In Benin, Cotonou's huge **Grand Marché du Dantokpa** (p100) is similarly for those who get turned on by talismans. Lagos' **Balogun Market** (p626) is the best of many in Nigeria's capital. To the north, Kano's **Kurmi Market** (p653) is one of the largest markets in Africa. In Niger, the **Tuareg camel market** (p600) in Agadez is full of Tuareg men in turbans, while **Ayorou's Sunday Market** (p589) and **Gorom-Gorom's Thursday spectacular** (p163) in Burkina Faso are a who's who of the Sahel's ethnic groups. In Mali, Djenné's **Monday market** (p498) has the town's extraordinary mud-built mosque as a backdrop. **Bamako market** (p485), Bobo-Dioulasso's **Grand Marché** (p151) in Burkina Faso, Nouakchott's **Port de Pêche** (p551) in Mauritania, Dakar's **Marché Sandaga** (p691) and the massive market in **Kaolack** (p706), also in Senegal, are all also outstanding.



## IN SLAVERY'S FOOTSTEPS

A visit to the sites where West Africa's slaves left the continent's shores for the last time is one of the region's most poignant experiences.

Ghana is home to the greatest concentration of slavery sites. Accra's **National Museum** (p339) has an evocative exhibition that sets the scene as you head for the many forts and castles where slaves were held in dire conditions and then loaded onto equally dire ships. They're all worth visiting, but **Cape Coast Castle** (p352), Elmina's **St George's Castle** (p357) and **Fort Amsterdam** (p351) are the showpieces. East along the coast, **Ouidah** (p107) in Benin is another emotion-filled reminder of slavery's horrors with a well-marked **Route des Esclaves** (p108) and a moving 'Point of No Return' memorial. **Badagry** (p630), in neighbouring Nigeria, was another major slaving centre with a good museum and coastal monument.

The ports of Senegal were also used by slaving ships, with slaves from the interior brought to the coast. Île de Gorée's **La Maison des Esclaves** (see the boxed text, p692), a grim former holding centre for slaves, is perhaps the most famous. Across the border in The Gambia, **Jufureh** and **Albreda** (p314), of *Roots* fame, and **James Island** (p314) are hugely significant sites. In Guinea is the lesser-known **Îles de Los** (p410) where countless Africans saw their last view of their continent. In Sierra Leone, **Bunce Island** (see the boxed text, p755) was a major shipping port for slaves, while **Freetown** (p746) was originally founded as a refuge for ex-slaves.



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