

Niger

Niger is perhaps West Africa's most unfairly ignored country, and this is just the reason you should head here rather than one to give it a wide berth. True, Niger only seems to make the news for its Tuareg Rebellion, its uranium mines, famine and – incredibly in 2008 – for its ongoing slavery problem, but if you make the effort to visit this desert republic, you'll find a warm and generous Muslim population and some superb tout-free West African travel through ancient caravan cities at the edge of the Sahara.

Sadly, at the time of writing the country's greatest attractions, the Ténéré Desert and the Air Mountains in the north, were out of bounds due to the ongoing Tuareg Rebellion against the government in Niamey, but the fascinating trans-Saharan trade-route town of Agadez was still accessible, as well as a bevy of attractions in the peaceful south: the ancient sultanate of Zinder, the fantastic Parc Regional du W, West Africa's last herd of wild giraffe at Kouré and the impossibly romantic Sunday market of Ayorou. Add to this the laidback but cosmopolitan capital of Niamey and a trip down the mighty Niger River in a dugout pirogue (traditional canoe), and you've got yourself a West African adventure that can cheerfully rival any other in this book.

FAST FACTS

- ▮ **Area** 1,267,000 sq km
- ▮ **Capital** Niamey
- ▮ **Country code** ☎ 227
- ▮ **Famous for** Slavery; *not* supplying uranium to Saddam; Cure Salée Festival
- ▮ **Languages** French, Hausa, Djerma, Fulfulde, Tamashek, Kanouri, Toubou and Gourmanchéma
- ▮ **Money** West African CFA Franc; US\$1 = CFA493; €1 = CFA656
- ▮ **Population** 13.3 million
- ▮ **Visa** Required by almost everyone except West African citizens. Obtained easily in Algeria, Benin, Chad, Mali and Nigeria. Niger is covered by the Visa Entente.



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Agadez** (p599) The view from the summit of the spiky mud mosque over the surrounding ancient caravan town and the Sahara beyond is majestic.
- **Ayorou** (p589) The colours and aromas at the country's most exciting market are worth savouring, before a pirogue trip to see hippos in the Niger River.
- **Kouré** (p589) A visit to the gregarious giraffes, the last wild herd of these beautiful animals in the Sahel region, is unforgettable.
- **Zinder** (p596) The *banco* (clay or mud) houses of the Birni Quartier are well worth getting lost in, not to mention the sultan's palace with its brutal history.
- **Parc Régional du W** (p592) Lions, monkeys, elephants and crocodiles can all be seen in one of West Africa's best and most diverse national parks.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Base yourself in Niamey and make a series of day trips to Ayorou (p589), Filingué (p590) and to the giraffes near Kouré (p589) before spending two nights in the wonderful Parc Régional du W (p592) in the south.
- **Two Weeks** After spending the first week in and around Niamey, travel up north to Agadez (p599) where you can see this glorious old Sahel city confident that few other tourists will be around, and then

head south to Zinder (p596) where you can wander around the Birni Quartier and visit the sultan's palace before returning to Niamey, breaking the journey overnight in either Maradi (p595) or Birni N'Konni (p593)

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

October to February is the best time to visit, as temperatures are at their coolest and rainfall is nonexistent. From December the harmattan winds come into play, which can reduce visibility to less than 1km and spoil photographic opportunities.

The hottest part of the year is March to June, with April daytime temperatures reaching 45°C (113°F) or more, especially in the north, and heat so intense that rain evaporates before reaching the ground.

Rains dampen the south between late May and September, with August being the wettest time. The south's annual rainfall is usually 550mm, while the north is lucky to receive 150mm.

HISTORY

Early History

Some 6000 years ago, Niger's vast northern plateaus were verdant grasslands supporting hunters, herders and abundant wildlife. Around 2500 BC the Sahara began swallowing this region and its rivers whole, driving the population south. Little remains of this lush past, besides the splendid images captured in the Neolithic rock art of the Air Mountains. By the 1st millennium BC, the migrating peoples had learnt metalwork skills and developed complex social organisations and forms of trade.

Great West African Empires

Lying at the crossroads of the lucrative trans-Saharan trade route (in gold, salt and slaves), Niger's arid landscape once supported some of West Africa's great empires. One was the Kanem-Borno Empire, which flourished around Lake Chad between the 10th and 13th centuries AD. It survived the arrival of Islam during the 10th and 11th centuries, and remained a significant force until the 1800s. Between the 14th and 15th centuries, western Niger was controlled by the Islamic Empire of Mali before falling to the powerful Empire of Songhai in the early 1500s, which subsequently controlled much of central Niger until the late 16th century.

HOW MUCH?

- ▮ **Sachet of purified water** CFA50
- ▮ **Croix d'Agadez** (historically stylised silver cross) CFA1500
- ▮ **Simple Tuareg grigri (amulet)** CFA2000
- ▮ **Street snack (beignet)** CFA25
- ▮ **Moto-taxi across any town** CFA250

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- ▮ **1L of petrol** CFA670
- ▮ **1L of bottled water** CFA500
- ▮ **Bottle of Bière Niger** CFA500
- ▮ **Souvenir T-shirt** CFA1500
- ▮ **Grilled beef brochettes** CFA100