

# West Africa Directory

## CONTENTS

Accommodation	804
Activities	805
Business Hours	808
Children	809
Climate Charts	810
Courses	810
Customs Regulations	812
Dangers & Annoyances	812
Embassies & Consulates	814
Food	815
Gay & Lesbian Travellers	815
Holidays	815
Public Holidays	816
Insurance	816
Internet Access	817
Laundry	817
Maps	817
Money	818
Photography & Video	821
Post	821
Shopping	822
Solo Travellers	823
Telephone & Fax	824
Time	825
Toilets	825
Tourist Information	825
Travellers with Disabilities	825
Visas	826
Women Travellers	826

This chapter provides a general overview of the essential things you need to know about West Africa, covering, in alphabetical order, everything from accommodation to women travellers. Each individual country chapter also has a directory that includes more specific information about these headings as they relate to each country. Please consult both when searching for information.

## ACCOMMODATION

In the countries covered in this book, there's almost always some sort of accommodation available in midsized and larger towns, although quality and price vary widely. For details of accommodation in each country, see individual country chapters. For general

## BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com). You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

advice on the costs of travelling in the region, see p16.

Throughout this book, accommodation is divided into budget, midrange and top-end places. Within each category, listings are ordered according to price, from the cheapest to most expensive. The prices we give are for rooms with a bathroom; exceptions are noted in specific listings.

In general, Mali and Senegal are the most expensive countries, while neither Nigeria nor Niger offer outstanding value for money when it comes to accommodation. Togo is one of the region's cheapest countries. In some countries, including Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso and Nigeria, establishments charge a government tourist tax on top of the price they'll quote you. Sometimes (such as in Burkina Faso) this is a one-off payment regardless of the number of nights you stay, while in Nigeria or Mali it's a nightly surcharge added on to the quoted price.

In many parts of West Africa, particularly in the Sahel during the hot season, people often sleep outside their hut or on the flat roof of their house as it's much cooler. In some hotels this is also possible, and carrying a mattress onto the roof – where you'll have some breeze and views of the stars – is usually allowed if you ask.

One other thing to note is that in Guinea, Sierra Leone and some other countries, a man and a woman may share a room with no questions asked, but a same-sex couple, regardless of whether they are a couple, usually cannot.

## B&Bs

Burkina Faso is leading the way with smaller, more intimate alternatives to in with a range of excellent B&Bs. Prices are usually cheaper

than hotels; they are the sort of places where the warmth and personality of the owners (often a French-Burkinabé couple) is a big drawcard. They're also known as *chambres d'hôtes* or *maisons d'hôtes*. The innovation is catching on, with a handful of similar places appearing in Mali and Mauritania.

### Campements

Most towns and many villages in Francophone countries have a *campement* whose primary purpose is not as a camp site in the traditional sense (ie a place for tents), although some do provide areas where you can pitch a tent and have access to shower facilities. *Campements* offer cheap and simple accommodation that is far less elaborate than a hotel, containing the bare necessities, shared facilities and little else, but some are very good quality, with prices on a par with midrange hotels. Either way, they're often the best (and sometimes only) option in small towns. They're the sort of places where 4WDs fill the compound, and overlanders with their vehicles mingle with backpackers who've just arrived on the latest bush taxi.

In trekking areas such as Mali's Dogon Country (p507), it is established practice for visitors to sleep on the roof of the *campements* in each village, as it's usually preferable to the stifling rooms.

### Camping

There are few dedicated camp sites in West Africa, and those that do exist cater mainly for overlanders in their own vehicle. However, some hotels and *campements* allow camping or provide an area where tents can be pitched. Grassy knolls on which to pitch your tent are rare – you often have to force pegs through hard-packed gravel. Camping in the wild is a risky business in most countries as theft can be a problem; if you do decide to camp, always seek permission from the local village chief before setting up.

### Hotels

Most hotels charge for a bed only, with all meals extra. If breakfast is included it's usually on a par with the standard of accommodation: a full buffet in more-expensive places, instant coffee and bread further down the scale. Hotels are often called *auberges*.

Independent travellers on tight budgets are fairly well catered for, although there are almost no backpacker lodges. Although you will come

across some gems, most of what's on offer is basic, devoid of any discernible character, and ranges from the recently swept to downright grubby. The showers and toilets are usually shared and often of the squat variety. Some hotels in this price range double as brothels.

Midrange hotels tend to be at their best in the capitals or major towns where you're likely to find at least one place with lovingly maintained rooms, private bathrooms, splashes of local colour, satellite TV and even a swimming pool. Most midrange places, however, fall somewhat short of this ideal and, though fine, will hardly have you rushing back to your room at the end of the day. Most offer a choice between a fan and air-con.

At the luxury end of the scale, West Africa has very few top-end hotels outside the capitals and offers little in the way of exclusive wildlife lodges or tented camps as found in East or Southern Africa.

### Missions

If you're travelling on a tight budget, mission accommodation can be a good alternative to cheap and nasty budget hotels, although rooms are usually reserved for mission or aid workers and are open to others only on a space-available basis. Usually called *missions catholique*, they're invariably clean, safe and good value, although these are not places to stagger home drunk at 4am – at many missions travellers are only allowed to stay if they respect the rules.

### Resorts

You'll find European-style resorts all along the West African coast, but the best facilities are at those that cater to Europeans looking for a two-week beach holiday without really having to look Africa in the eye. These are especially popular in Senegal, The Gambia and, to a lesser extent, Cape Verde, where you'll find all-inclusive packages of meals, accommodation and airport transfers. Although it's occasionally possible to get a room by simply walking in off the street, most rooms (and the best deals) are reserved for those who book the whole package through a travel agency in Europe.

### ACTIVITIES

If the region's natural beauty stirs not just your soul but also your body into action, West Africa has some world-class activities to get involved in. Desert expeditions, diving