

Central African Republic

If you're looking for the 'real' Africa, Central African Republic (CAR) may be it. It's a country with some stunning landscapes and amazing wildlife in the Dzanga-Sangha Reserve, though it's also one of the most impoverished and least developed countries on the continent. It's that pesky 'government-that-doesn't-care-about-its-people' factor keeping it down. For centuries CAR has endured rapacity from invaders and then its own leaders. So, why would the people of such a historically plundered nation be so open and friendly? And why will their conversations with you be far more full of hope than despair? As we said, that's the real Africa for you.

Travelling here is a backpacking bungee jump. Only a handful of independent visitors get CAR bragging rights each year, and they have to earn them. Although CAR is landlocked, difficult and dangerous border crossings make it something of an island, and flights are expensive and rare. And if you do come here, you won't get to visit very much of the country due to long-standing insecurity. But you're sure to love what you can see, so the effort is more than rewarded for those intrepid souls who take the challenge.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 622,984 sq km
- **ATMs** Coming soon
- **Borders** Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, formerly Zaïre), Sudan
- **Budget** US\$25 per day minimum
- **Capital** Bangui
- **Languages** French (official), Sango (national)
- **Money** Central African franc; US\$1 = CFA463, €1 = CFA656
- **Population** 4.5 million
- **Seasons** Wet (May to November), dry (November to April)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 236; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +1
- **Visa** CFA30,000 for 30 days; best obtained in advance



HOW MUCH?

- **Internet per hour** US\$1.65
- **Cup of coffee** US\$1 to US\$2
- **4WD hire per day** US\$210
- **Small malachite necklace** US\$5.50
- **Plate of fish and cassava** US\$3.25

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.65
- **1.5L bottled water** US\$1
- **500mL bottle of '33' beer** US\$1
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$8
- **Grand Café baguette** US\$0.20

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The rainy season runs from May to October in the south (it's shorter by a month on each end in the north), with July to September the wettest months. Roads get bad at this time, but the waterfalls are at their scenic peaks. Temperatures change little over the year, though December to March, with many days over 30°C, is the hottest time.

HISTORY

Although stone tools provide evidence of inhabitation from 6000 BC, the most notable ancients resided around present-day Bouar some 2500 years ago. Little is known about them, though it must have been a highly organised civilisation because it left behind about 70 groups of megaliths, some weighing three or four tonnes. The present cultures most likely arrived in the 15th century, probably fleeing Arab slave traders, but by the 18th century they, too, were sending their captives across the Sahara to markets in Egypt or down the Congo River to the Atlantic Ocean. This

WARNING

While southwestern CAR is generally secure, the rest of the country remains largely lawless and potentially very dangerous since fighting continues between the government and various rebels. Highway robbery is common. Check the situation before travelling here.

industry, which didn't completely end until 1912, decimated entire cultures and largely depopulated the eastern half of the country.

Colonial Days

France launched into CAR in 1885, finding a shattered society rich in agricultural potential and under the rule of Sudanese-born Sultan Rabah. France killed Rabah in 1900 and soon after consolidated its control of the country, which it divided into 17 parts and offered them to European companies in exchange for a fixed annual payment plus 15% of agricultural profits. Vast cotton, coffee and tobacco plantations were established and worked by an often brutally conscripted local population. They resisted for decades, but opposition was eventually broken through a combination of French military action, famine and severe smallpox epidemics.

The first signs of nationalism sprang up after WWII via Barthélemy Boganda's Mouvement d'Evolution Sociale de l'Afrique Noire. In 1960, a year after Boganda was killed in a suspicious plane crash, his party forced the French to grant independence.

Forty Years of Chaos

The leadership was taken over by David Dacko, who became the country's first president. Dacko's rule quickly became repressive and dictatorial and in 1966 he was overthrown by an army commander and close relative, Jean-Bédél Bokassa, kicking off 13 years of one of the most brutal regimes Africa has ever experienced. In one instance Bokassa reportedly ordered the killing (some claim he participated) of schoolchildren who protested against expensive mandatory school uniforms made by a company owned by his wife.

France, coveting the uranium deposits at Bakouma and the abundant big-game hunting grounds near the Sudan border (personally sponsored by the former French president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing), supported Bokassa and bailed out his floundering economy. Using the country's mineral resources as carrots, Bokassa also negotiated loans from South Africa and private US banks. He then squandered virtually all this money. His final fantasy was to have himself crowned 'emperor' of a renamed Central African Empire in 1977. Despite the worldwide derision, France helped to fund much of his coronation's price tag of more than US\$20 million.