

Djibouti

Never heard of Djibouti? Don't feel bad – at the crossroads of two continents, it's more famous for its military bases and busy port than for its tourist attractions. It's a shame because this tiny speck of a country packs a big punch; what it lacks in size, it more than makes up for in beauty, especially if you're a fan of geological oddities. Hiking on the salt crust of Lac Assal, the third-lowest point on earth, or wandering amid hundreds of spikelike limestone chimneys belching out puffs of steam around Lac Abbé are just a couple of the many fascinating experiences on offer.

When the awesome landscapes have finished working their magic on you, there's a good mix of land and water activities to keep you buzzing. Diving fiends rave about Les Sept Frères Archipelago, while kitesurfers are thrilled by the optimal year-round conditions in the Gulf of Tadjoura. When it comes to snorkelling alongside whale sharks, the Bay of Ghoubbet is unsurpassable. For those who prefer to keep their feet dry, hiking opportunities abound – from guided walks in the Forêt du Day to memorable multiday hikes led by Afar nomads along ancient salt routes.

Barring Djibouti City, the country is refreshingly void of large-scale development. It's all about ecotravel, with some great sustainable *campements touristiques* in the hinterland – the perfect way to immerse yourself in local culture.

Sure, Djibouti is pricey, but it's worth the splurge.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 23,000 sq km
- **ATMs** A few in Djibouti City (most Visa only)
- **Borders** Eritrea closed; Ethiopia and Somaliland open
- **Budget** US\$50 to US\$120 per day
- **Capital** Djibouti City
- **Languages** Arabic, French, Afar, Somali
- **Money** Djibouti Franc (Dfr); US\$1 = Dfr163, €1 = Dfr238
- **Population** Approximately 900,000
- **Seasons** Hot (May to September), cool (mid-October to mid-April), wet (October to April)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 253; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +3
- **Visa** US\$30 to US\$60 for 30 days; obtainable at the airport for most Western nationals



HOW MUCH?

- **Internet** US\$2.50 per hour
- **One night all-inclusive in a campement** US\$50
- **Day trip to Lake Assal** US\$90
- **Single dive in the Gulf of Tadjoura** US\$43
- **Bunch of qat** Depends on quality!

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$2
- **1.5L bottled water** US\$1.20
- **Bottle of Heineken** US\$4.30
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$12
- **Fruit juice** US\$2.50

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Djibouti City** (p647) Explore the alleyways of the Marché Central – full of pungent odours and bright colours – and test-drive the dance floors.
- **Moucha Island** (p652) Forget the hardships and take some time out on a white-sand beach.
- **Bay of Ghoubbet** (p649) Experience the thrills of snorkelling alongside (harmless) whale sharks.
- **Lac Assal** (p652) Descend to the lowest point on the African continent at 150m below sea level.
- **Lac Abbé** (p652) Wander flabbergasted in a Martian landscape, where *Planet of the Apes* was filmed.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Djibouti's climate is hot – from May until September you'll swelter under average daily temperatures of about 40°C. At the peak of the hot season it can hit 45°C, and the humidity is correspondingly high. The cooler season (including occasional rain) runs from mid-October to mid-April, when temperatures average 25°C. This is the ideal time to visit – when the stifling heat is over. It's appreciably milder in the Goda Mountains year-round.

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Base yourself in Djibouti City (p647) and take a tour to explore Lac

Assal (p652) and Lac Abbé (p652). Back in the capital, enjoy its culinary delights and spend your last night in the bars and clubs.

- **One week** Recharge on a porcelain-sand beach on Moucha Island (p652) or explore the little-known Goda Mountains (p652). In season, be sure to take a whale-watching tour to the Bay of Ghoubbet (p649) or a diving trip to the Gulf of Tadjoura (p649).

HISTORY**From Aksum to Islam**

Around the 1st century AD, Djibouti made up part of the powerful Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum, which included modern-day Eritrea and even stretched across the Red Sea to parts of southern Arabia. It was during the Aksumite era, in the 4th century AD, that Christianity first appeared in the region.

As the empire of Aksum gradually fell into decline, a new influence arose that superseded the Christian religion in Djibouti: Islam. It was introduced to the region around AD 825 by Arab traders from southern Arabia.

European Ambitions

In the second half of the 19th century, European powers competed to grab new colonies in Africa. The French, seeking to counter the British presence in Yemen on the other side of the Bab al-Mandab Strait, made agreements with the Afar sultans of Obock and Tadjoura that gave them the right to settle in these areas. In 1888 construction of Djibouti City began on the southern shore of the Gulf of Tadjoura. French Somaliland (present-day Djibouti) began to take shape.

France and the emperor of landlocked Ethiopia then signed a pact designating Djibouti as the 'official outlet of Ethiopian commerce'. This led to the construction of the Addis Ababa–Djibouti City railway, which was of vital commercial importance until recently. Before the independence of Eritrea, Ethiopia also used the ports of Assab and Massawa.

Throwing Off the French Yoke

As early as 1949 there were a number of anticolonial demonstrations led by the Issa Somalis, who were in favour of the reunification of the territories of Italian, British and