

# Guinea-Bissau

History hasn't been kind to Guinea-Bissau. Decades of Portuguese colonisation, a long, painful liberation struggle and cycles of civil war have locked this pretty nation in grinding poverty. And when peace finally seemed to last, the country plunged yet again into turmoil and gained an unwholesome reputation as West Africa's key entry port for hard drugs.

It's a pretty chaotic country, and yet you will still bring back holiday stories of endless white beaches, thick rainforest and, most of all, talk about the country's disarmingly friendly people.

Like a microcosm of Africa, this tiny nation hands you a spectacular variety of landscapes, cultures and small town scenes, all within easy reach of the capital, Bissau. The jewel in the nation's crown is the labyrinth of tropical islands that makes up the Arquipélago dos Bijagós. With its vast, deserted sand strands and clear waters quivering with fish, it's a dream destination for sports fishermen and sea-and-sun lovers. This protected ecosystem is home to turtles, hundreds of bird species and rare saltwater hippos. Similar preservation efforts have so far saved the last vestiges of rainforest and its thriving populations of monkeys, chimps and buffalos.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 36,120 sq km
- **ATMs** There are none; come with cash
- **Borders** Guinea (Kandika); Senegal (São Domingos, Salikénié, Pirada)
- **Budget** From US\$50 to US\$80
- **Capital** Bissau
- **Languages** Portuguese, Crioulo
- **Money** West African CFA franc; US\$1 = CFA463, €1 = CFA656
- **Population** 1.4 million
- **Seasons** Dry and mild (late November to February), hot and humid (March to May, November), hot and rainy (June to October)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 245; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC
- **Visa** All visitors except citizens of Ecowas (Economic Community of West African States) nations require a visa. Visas need to be arranged before arrival and cost US\$60 for 45 days



**HOW MUCH?**

- **Small souvenir mask** US\$4.50
- **Taxi ride through Bissau** US\$1.10
- **Wi-fi in Bissau's better restaurants** free
- **Woven indigo cotton cloth (40cm by 80cm)** US\$13.20
- **Main course in Western-style restaurant** US\$11

**LONELY PLANET INDEX**

- **1L petrol** US\$1.20
- **1L bottled water** US\$2.20
- **Bottle of Guinean Pampa beer** US\$2.20
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$5.50
- **Omelette sandwich from street vendor** US\$1.30

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- **João Vieira** (p383) Sip fresh coconut juice on the island's endless, palm-fringed sand strands.
- **Orango Islands National Park** (p382) Stalk rare saltwater hippos after visiting the tombs of Bijagós' kings and queens.
- **Bissau** (p379) Squeeze through the narrow alleyways of Bissau Velho.
- **Varela** (p383) Bounce your car over mighty potholes to get to this beautiful, isolated beach.
- **Parque Nacional do Catanzes** (p384) Follow buffalo, chimp and elephant trails through dense rainforests.

**CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO**

The rainy season lasts from June to October. Conditions are especially humid in the months before the rains (April and May), when average maximum daytime temperatures rise to 34°C and rarely fall below 30°C.

The best time to visit is from late November to February, when conditions are dry and relatively cool.

**ITINERARIES**

- **One Week** Spend a day or two in the relaxing capital Bissau (p379), before heading to Ilha de Bubaque in the Arquipélago dos Bijagós (p382).

- **Two Weeks** During a second week, consider further explorations of the Bijagós, such as trips to hippo-inhabited Orango (p382) and paradisaical João Vieira (p383). Alternatively, head south, cruising the lagoons of Parque Natural da Lagoa de Cafatada (p384) and chimp spotting in the Cantanzes rainforest (p384).

**HISTORY**

In around 1200, when a group of Malinké was led to present-day Guinea-Bissau by a general of Sunjata Keita, the region became an outpost of the Empire of Mali. In 1537, it transformed into a state of its own right – the Kaabu Empire. Gabù became the capital of this small kingdom. See also p29.

**European Arrival & Colonisation**

Portuguese navigators first reached the area around 1450, and established lucrative routes for trading slaves and goods. With the abolition of the slave trade in the 19th century, the Portuguese extended their influence beyond the coast towards the interior in order to continue extracting wealth.

Portuguese Guinea descended into one of the most repressive and exploitative colonial regimes in Africa, particularly accentuated when right-wing dictator António Salazar came to power in Portugal in 1926.

**War of Liberation**

By the early 1960s African colonies were rapidly winning independence, but Salazar refused to relinquish those under his control. The result: one of Africa's longest, bloodiest wars of liberation.

The father of independence was Amílcar Cabral, who in 1956 helped found the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC). In 1961 the PAIGC started arming and mobilising peasants, and controlled half of the country within five years. Cabral was assassinated in 1973, but independence had become inevitable. When Salazar's regime fell in 1974, the new Portuguese government quickly recognised the fledgling nation.

**Independence**

Once in power, the PAIGC government faced staggering problems of poverty, lack of education and economic decline. The socialist