

# Mauritania

If West Africa is a playground for overlanders, then Mauritania often seems to be little more than a 'drive-through' country – less a destination in itself than somewhere to transit between the better-known attractions of Marrakesh, Dakar or Bamako. That's a shame because Mauritania has some tremendous secrets to reveal to those travellers prepared to stop and take a closer look.

Culturally, Mauritania is a place apart. The population is almost equally divided between Moors of Arab-Berber descent and black Africans. It's a Muslim country with a black African twist. It's a transition between the North African Arab world and black Africa, it doesn't really belong to either. This striking cultural combination is part of its appeal.

Just as striking is some of the grandest scenery the entire continent has to offer. The Adrar region offers up epic sand dunes, eye-popping plateaus, green oases and even the biggest monolith this side of central Australia. The Tagânt has similar charms, and both hide ancient (and World Heritage-listed) caravan towns – Chinguetti, Ouadâne and Oualâta. The World Heritage feast continues along the coast at Parc National du Banc d'Arguin, which attracts millions of migratory birds and is renowned as one of the best birdwatching sites on earth.

If you just breeze through and stop at the (admittedly, uninspiring) capital, Nouakchott, you'll miss out on a truly incredible country. No one in Mauritania is in a rush, and you shouldn't be either.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1,030,700 sq km
- **ATMs** None
- **Borders** Morocco, Mali, Senegal open; Algeria unadvisable
- **Budget** US\$30 per day
- **Capital** Nouakchott
- **Languages** Arabic (Hassaniyya), French, Pulaar (Fula), Soninke and Wolof
- **Money** Ouguiya (UM); US\$1 = UM260, €1 = UM378
- **Population** 3 million
- **Seasons** Very hot (April to October), hot (November to March)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 222; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC
- **Visa** In advance US\$50 to US\$65, at Moroccan border US\$30



**HOW MUCH?**

- **Cup of tea in a nomad's tent** Free
- **Taxi ride in Nouakchott** US\$0.76
- **Camel ride in the desert** About US\$23 per day
- **Bush taxi fare (Nouakchott to Nouâdhibou)** US\$17.15
- **Auberge room** US\$7.60 per person

**LONELY PLANET INDEX**

- **1L of petrol** US\$0.90
- **1L of bottled water** US\$0.76
- **Bottled beer** US\$3.80
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$2.30
- **Plate of mafé (peanut-based stew with rice)** US\$1.15

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- **Chinguetti** (p436) Wake up at the crack of dawn in order to catch a glorious sunrise from the labyrinthine lanes of the old city.
- **4WD tours or camel trips** (p435) Experience the magic of the Sahara and sleep beneath the star-studded skies at the saffron dunes in the Adrar region.
- **Banc d'Arguin** (p434) Pack your binoculars and observe vast flocks of birds from a traditional *pirogue*.
- **Oualâta** (p438) Admire the elaborate decorative paintings that grace traditional houses in one of Mauritania's best-kept secrets.
- **Iron-ore train** (p440) Hop on one of the world's longest trains and be ready for the most epic journey of your life!

**CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO**

It's unsurprisingly dry in the Sahara region of the country, where annual rainfall doesn't exceed 100mm. In the south, rainfall increases to about 600mm per year, mostly occurring during the short rainy season from July to September.

The most pleasant time to visit Mauritania is from November to March, when daytime temperatures hover around the mid-20°C mark. Note that it can get quite cool at night, especially in the desert.

**ITINERARIES**

- **One Week** Head straight to Nouakchott's fish market (p431) and spend a couple of days sampling the luscious cuisine of the capital. Then push on to Atâr (p435) and take either a 4WD tour or a camel trip to the grandiose dunefields around the city.
- **Two Weeks** Spend a couple of days trekking in the Adrar, explore the ancient desert towns of Chinguetti (p436) and Oualâta (p437) and revitalise yourself in an idyllic palm-filled oasis. Then forge west to the Atlantic Coast and observe vast flocks of birds at Parc National du Banc d'Arguin (p434). Journey on to Nouakchott (p431) and its melange of chaotic markets and modern buildings.

**HISTORY**

From the 3rd century AD, the Berbers established trading routes all over the Western Sahara, including Mauritania. In the 11th century, the Marrakesh-based Islamic Almoravids pushed south and, with the assistance of Mauritanian Berber leaders, destroyed the Empire of Ghana, which covered much of present-day Mauritania. That victory led to the spread of Islam throughout Mauritania and the Western Sahara. The descendants of the Almoravids were finally subjugated by Arabs in 1674.

As colonialism spread throughout Africa in the 19th century, France stationed troops in Mauritania, but it was not until 1904 that, having played one Moorish faction off against another, the French finally managed to make Mauritania a colonial territory. Independence was fairly easily achieved in 1960 because the French wanted to prevent the country from being absorbed by newly independent Morocco. Mokhtar Ould Daddah became Mauritania's first president.

Ould Daddah took a hard line, especially against the (mainly black African) southerners, who were treated like second-class citizens and compelled to fit the Moors' mould. Any opposition was brutally suppressed.

The issue of Western Sahara (Spanish Sahara) finally toppled the government. In 1975 the very sandy Spanish Sahara (a Spanish colony) was divided between Morocco and Mauritania. But the Polisario Front launched a guerrilla war to oust both beneficiaries from the area. Mauritania was incapable, militarily