

Africa

Country Coverage

At the time of research very few travellers were heading the countries listed below, so we're providing historical and cultural information rather than reviews and listings. A good source of information for on-the-ground travel in these countries is Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree on-line travel forum www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree.

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West Africa





Guinea

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Fast Facts

- **Capital** Conakry
- **Population** 10.8 million
- **Languages** French, Malinke, Pulaar (Fula) and Susu
- **Area** 245,857 sq km
- **Currency** Guinean franc (GFr)
- **Visa requirements** 90-day visa and yellow-fever certificate required
- **Tourist information**
www.ontguinee.org

Rugged Landscapes & Vibrant Beats

Imagine you're travelling on smooth highway, and then get tempted by a tiny, dusty turn-off into rugged terrain, where surprising beauty and treacherous vistas define the route. Guinea is that turn-off. This is a country blessed with amazing landscapes; from the mountain plateau Fouta Djallon to wide Sahelian lands and thick forests.

Overland drivers are drawn here by rugged tracks, and the challenge of steering their vehicles over rocks and washed-out paths. Nature lovers can lose themselves on long hikes past plunging waterfalls, proud hills and tiny villages, or track elephants through virgin rainforest. While Guinea is not famed for its beaches, those it does have are stunning, and often deserted.

Guinea Top Sights

- **Îles de Los** Stretch out on palm-fringed strands, sipping fresh coconut juice
- **Fouta Djallon** Ramble through the mountains and swim in the waterfalls of this majestic mountain plateau
- **Bossou** Come face to face with chattering chimps
- **Conakry** Hop through the capital's dubious dives, getting drunk on some of West Africa's best live music
- **Forêt Classée de Ziama** Track elephants in the virgin rainforest
- **Parc National du Haut Niger** Look for chimps and buffaloes in one of West Africa's last tropical dry-forest ecosystems
- **Kankan** Squeeze through narrow market streets and visit the beautiful Grand Mosquée in this lively university town

UNDERSTAND GUINEA

Guinea Today

Following the death in 2008 of president Lansana Conté, an army contingent under Captain Moussa Dadis Camara took power in a coup d'état. 'Dadis' promised that he'd quickly clean up the Guinean house, organise elections and return to the army barracks. His initial measures, such as cracking down on Guinean drug rings (Guinea is one of West Africa's hubs of the cocaine trade), and announcing anti-corruption measures and new mining deals (Guinea is hugely rich in natural resources, owning 30% of the world's bauxite resources), gained him many followers.

However, his announcement in 2009 that he would consider standing in the upcoming elections, and increasing violence committed by members of the army, provoked furi-

ous reactions. On 28 September 2009, army elements quashed a large demonstration with extreme violence. A UN commission denounced the events as a crime against humanity, and it is thought that over 150 people were killed. Two months later, 'Dadis' was shot (but not killed) following a dispute with his aide-de-camp Toumba Diakite.

After meeting in Ouagadougou in January 2010, 'Dadis', his vice-president Sekouba Konaté and Blaise Compaoré, president of Burkina Faso, produced a formal statement of 12 principles promising a return of Guinea to civilian rule within six months. A provisional government supervised the transition to civilian rule at the end of 2010.

After half a century in opposition, Alpha Conde, from the Malinke ethnic group, was declared winner in Guinea's first democratic election since independence from France in 1958. However, the vote kindled ethnic tensions. Conde's defeated rival, Cellou Dalein Diallo, is a member of the Fula ethnic group,



i COUNTRY COVERAGE

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to which 40% of Guineans belong. Diallo has consistently accused the president of marginalising his constituents, including many Fula.

Conde's Conakry residence suffered an armed attack in July 2011. The building was partially destroyed, but Conde was unharmed.

Travel here can be difficult. Guinea is not as set up for tourism as some other countries in the region, and beyond the capital creature comforts are scarce. Taxis and buses are poorly maintained and unreliable, and for overlanders, rugged tracks, steep laterite and washed-out paths can be a challenge.

There were serious riots and violent demonstrations in Conakry in late 2012 and early 2013. Muggings at gunpoint are increasingly common across the country.

History

Guinea was part of the Empire of Mali, which covered a large part of western Africa between the 13th and 15th centuries; the empire's capital, Niani, is in eastern Guinea. From the mid-1400s Portuguese and other European traders settled Guinea's coastal region, and the country eventually became a French colony in 1891.

The end of French West Africa began with Guinea. In 1958, Sekou Touré was the only West African leader to reject a French offer of membership in a commonwealth, and instead demanded total independence. French reaction was swift: financial and technical aid was cut off, and there was a massive flight of capital.

Sekou Touré called his new form of state a 'communocracy', a blend of Africanist and communist models. It didn't work; the economy went into a downward spiral, and his growing paranoia triggered a reign of terror.

'Conspiracies' were being sensed everywhere; thousands of supposed dissidents were imprisoned and executed. By the end of the 1960s over 250,000 Guineans lived in exile.

Towards the end of his presidency Touré changed many of his policies and tried to liberalise the economy. He died in March 1984.

Days after Touré's death, a military coup was staged by a group of colonels, including the barely known, barely educated Lansana Conté, who became president. He introduced austerity measures, and in 1991 bowed to pressure to introduce a multiparty political system. Initial hopes for a new era of freedom and prosperity were quickly dashed. Conté claimed victory in three highly disputed elections, and there were incidents of obstruction and imprisonment of opposition leaders. In 2007 demonstrations were violently quashed, though a few concessions (such as the nomination of a prime minister) were made. Severely ill and barely able to govern, Conté stayed in power until his death in December 2008.

Music & Culture

Overshadowed on the international stage by neighbouring Mali and Senegal, Guinea still packs a punch when it comes to musical tradition.

Sekou Touré's form of communism may have been an economic disaster, but the government's emphasis on nationalist *authenticité* in the arts, and state patronage of artistic institutions, was a bonus. Musicians were funded and allowed time to perfect their art, paving the way for the sound most commonly associated with Guinean music – that of the great dance orchestras of the 1960s and '70s. They, in turn, were strongly influenced by the traditions of the Mande *griots* (West Africa's hereditary praise singers).

The first orchestra to leap to fame was the Syli National Orchestra, whose guitarist, 'Grand' Papa Diabaté, became one of the greatest stars of Guinea's music scene. They perfected the Guinean rumba, a fusion of traditional songs and Latin music. Bembeya Jazz would achieve even greater recognition, thanks, in part, to their guitarist, Sékou 'Diamond Fingers' Diabaté, one of the most talented musicians of his generation.

Legendary South African singer and activist Miriam Makeba lived in exile in Guinea from the late 1960s until the early 1980s,

recording with and performing alongside some of the top local musicians.

In the early 1980s, Guinea's dire economic situation had worsened and large orchestras became difficult to fund, forcing many artists to Abidjan, where 90% of all Guinean releases were recorded. The centre of the pop world soon shifted to Paris, where acclaimed Guinean vocalist and kora player Mory Kanté was based.

Alongside Kanté and Sekouba Diabaté, who joined Bembeya Jazz at the age of 19 before going solo in the 1990s, popular musicians today include Ba Cissoko (a band whose sound has been described as 'West Africa meets Jimi Hendrix'), and kora player and vocalist Djeli Moussa Diawara. Guinea also has a vibrant hip-hop scene, with many young artists using their music to lash out at Guinea's poor living conditions and political corruption. The best-known name in Guinean hip-hop is Bill de Sam.

Dance is also popular in Guinea. The dance group Les Ballets Africains today remains the 'prototype' of West African ballet troupes, while Circus Baobab mixes trapeze shows and acrobatics with their dance shows.

Camara Laye, author of *L'Enfant Noir*, is the country's best-known writer.

To pick up some typical arts and crafts, try the indigo and mud-cloth cooperatives in many towns.

When it comes to eating out, proper restaurants are rare outside Conakry, though most towns have a couple of basic eating houses serving *riz gras* (rice fried in oil and tomato paste and served with fried fish, meat or vegetables) or simple chicken and chips. In Fouta Djallon, creamy sauces made from meat and potato leaves (*haako putte*) or manioc leaves (*haako bantara*) are common.

Guinea's main ethnic groups are the Fula (about 40% of the population), Malinke (about 30%) and Susu (about 20%). Fifteen other groups, living mostly in the forest region, constitute the rest of the population. Susu predominantly inhabit the coastal region; Fula, the Fouta Djallon; and Malinke, the north and centre. The total population is about 9.8 million. About 85% of the population is Muslim (the Fouta Djallon being a centre of Islam), 8% are Christian and the remainder follow traditional animist religions (especially in the forest region and the Basse Côte).



Niger

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Fast Facts

- ➔ **Capital** Niamey
- ➔ **Population** 16.3 million
- ➔ **Languages** French, Hausa, Djerma, Fulfulde, Tamashek
- ➔ **Area** 1,267,000 sq km
- ➔ **Currency** CFA franc
- ➔ **Visa requirements** A tourist visa is required, valid for three months
- ➔ **Tourist information**
www.friendsofniger.org

Haunting Desertscares & Ancient Cities

Niger only seems to make the news for negative reasons: its recent coup, the Tuareg Rebellion, a devastating famine. But visit this desert republic and you'll find a warm and generous Muslim population and superb tout-free travel through ancient caravan cities at the edge of the Sahara.

To the north, the stark splendour of the Air Mountains hides Neolithic rock art and stunning oasis towns. Within the expansive dunes of the Ténéré Desert you'll find dinosaur graveyards and deserted medieval settlements. Head south and the ancient trans-Saharan trade-route town of Agadez and the sultanate of Zinder are home to magnificent mazes of mudbrick architecture. For nature lovers, there's the fantastically diverse Parc Régional du W and herds of wild giraffes at Kouré.

The security situation meant that much of Niger was off limits to travellers at the time of writing. Attacks against foreigners have occurred across the Sahel, and the threat of kidnapping remains high.

Niger Top Sights

- ➔ **Agadez** Spiral up to the spiky summit of a majestic mud mosque for incredible views over the Sahara and beyond
- ➔ **Kouré** Wander in wonder with West Africa's last wild herd of giraffes
- ➔ **Zinder** Explore the Birni Quartier and soak up the brutal history at the sultan's palace in this fascinating Hausa city
- ➔ **Parc Régional du W** Come face to face with lions, crocodiles, monkeys and elephants in this incredibly diverse national park
- ➔ **Ténéré Desert** Dive into the deep end with an expedition to this sublime section of the Sahara
- ➔ **Air Mountains** Make tracks with camels through red sands and blue rocks in these mystical mountains

UNDERSTAND NIGER

Niger Today

A series of unpleasant events have defined Niger to the outside world in recent years. In 2007 the Tuareg in the north of the country began a rebellion against Niger's government, whom it accused of hoarding proceeds from the region's enormous mineral wealth and failing to meet conditions of previous ceasefires, in a conflict that has reignited at regular intervals since the early 20th century.

A year later Niger again made headlines around the world for less-than-positive reasons when in a landmark case an Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) court found Niger guilty of failing to protect a young woman from the continued practice of slavery in the country. According to anti-

slavery organisations, thousands of people still live in subjugation.

There have been several high-profile kidnappings of tourists and foreign workers over the past few years by gunmen linked to al-Qaeda factions operating in the Sahel and Sahara zone – in April and September 2010 near Arlit, and in January 2011 near Niamey. The Islamist takeover of northern Mali in 2012 created a security vacuum and opened up a safe haven for extremists and organised-crime groups in the Sahara desert. Tens of thousands of refugees flooded into the country.

The country's main export, uranium, is prone to price fluctuations and the industry has been hurt by the threat of terrorism and kidnapping. Niger began producing and refining oil in 2011 following a US\$5 billion joint-venture deal with China.



History

Before the Sahara started swallowing Niger around 2500 BC, it supported verdant grasslands, abundant wildlife and populations thriving on hunting and herding. Long after the desert pushed those populations southward, Niger became a fixture on the trans-Saharan trade route. Between the 10th and 18th centuries, West African empires, such as the Kanem-Borno, Mali and Songhai, flourished in Niger, trafficking gold, salt and slaves.

The French strolled in late in the 1800s, meeting stronger-than-expected resistance. Decidedly unamused, they dispatched the punitive Voulet-Chanoine expedition, destroying much of southern Niger in 1898–99. Although Tuareg revolts continued, culminating in Agadez's siege in 1916–17, the French had control.

French rule wasn't kind. They cultivated the power of traditional chiefs, whose abuses were encouraged as a means of control, and the enforced shift from subsistence farming to high-density cash crops compounded the Sahara's ongoing migration.

In 1958 France offered its West African colonies self-government in a French union or immediate independence. Countless votes disappeared, enabling France to claim that Niger wished to remain within its sphere of influence.

Maintaining close French ties, Niger's first president, Hamani Diori, ran a repressive one-party state. After surviving several coups, he was overthrown by Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountché after food stocks were discovered in ministerial homes during the Sahel drought of 1968–74. Kountché established a military ruling council.

Kountché hit the jackpot in 1968 when uranium was discovered near the town of Arlit. Mining incomes soon ballooned, leading to ambitious projects, including the 'uranium highway' between Agadez and Arlit. Yet not everyone was smiling: inflation skyrocketed and the poorest suffered more than ever.

The 1980s were unkind to all: uranium prices collapsed, the great 1983 drought killed thousands, and one-party politics hindered democracy. By the 1990s, Nigeriens were aware of political changes sweeping West Africa and mass demonstrations erupted, eventually forcing the government into multiparty elections in 1993. However, a military junta overthrew the elected president, Mahamane Ousmane, in 1996.

COUNTRY COVERAGE

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In 1999, during widespread strikes and economic stagnation, president Mainassara (a 1996 coup leader) was assassinated and democracy re-established. Peaceful elections in 1999 and 2004 witnessed victory for Mamadou Tandja.

In 2009 Mamadou Tandja won a referendum allowing him to change the constitution to allow him to run for a third term. In the presidential elections that year Tandja won by a large margin, though Ecowas did not accept the result and suspended Niger's membership. The tables were turned on Tandja in February 2010 when a military coup in Niamey led to his arrest. A year-long military junta ended when veteran opposition leader Mahamadou Issoufou was declared winner of a presidential poll in March 2011.

Culture

Niger boasts the highest birth rate in the world: women have a staggering average of eight children each. The population is predicted to reach 21.4 million by 2025.

More than 90% of Nigeriens live in the south, which is dominated by Hausa and Songhai-Djerma, making up 56% and 23% of Niger's populace respectively. The next largest groups are nomadic Fulani (8.5%) and Tuareg (8%), both in Niger's north, and Kanuri (4.3%), located between Zinder and Chad.

Nigeriens are predominantly Muslim (over 90%), with small percentages of Christian urban dwellers. Several rural populations still practise traditional animist religions. Due to the strong influence of Nigeria's Islamic community, some Muslims around the border town of Maradi call for sharia law.

Despite most Nigeriens being devoutly Muslim, the government is steadfastly

secular and Islam adopts a more relaxed aura than in nations with similar demographics. Women don't cover their faces, alcohol is quietly consumed and some Tuareg, recognising the harshness of desert life, ignore Ramadan's fast.

While Islam plays the greatest role in daily life, shaping beliefs and thoughts, little is visible to visitors. The biggest exceptions are *salat* (prayer), when Niger grinds to a halt – buses even break journeys to partake.

Religion aside, survival occupies most people's days. Around 90% make their tenuous living from agriculture and livestock, many surviving on US\$1 or less per day. Producing numerous children to help with burdening workloads is a necessity for many, a fact contributing to population growth. The fact of children being obliged to work has led to staggering adult illiteracy rates.

Niger's best-known artisans are Tuareg silversmiths, who produce necklaces, striking amulets, ornamental silver daggers and stylised silver crosses, each with intricate filigree designs representing areas boasting Tuareg populations. The most famous cross is the *croix d'Agadez*. To Tuareg, crosses are powerful talismans protecting against ill fortune.

Leatherwork by *artisans du cuir* is well regarded, particularly in Zinder, where traditional items – such as saddlebags, cushions and tasselled pouches – rank alongside attractive modernities like sandals and briefcases.

Beautifully unique to Niger are vibrant *kountas* (Djerma blankets), produced from bright cotton strips.

Food & Drink

Dates, yoghurt, rice and mutton are standard Tuareg fare, while *riz sauce* (rice with sauce) is omnipresent in Niger's south. Standard restaurant dishes include grilled fish (particularly capitaine, or Nile perch), chicken, and beef *brochettes* (kebabs). Couscous and ragout are also popular. Outside Niamey vegetarian options diminish.

Sitting for a cup of Tuareg tea is rewarding and thirst-quenching. For a wobble in your step, try Bière Niger. For a serious stagger, down some palm wine.

Environment

Three-quarters of Niger is desert, with the Sahara advancing 10km a year. The remaining quarter is Sahel, the semidesert zone south of the Sahara. Notable features include the Niger River (Africa's third-longest), which flows 300km through Niger's southwest; the Air Mountains, the dark volcanic formations of which rise over 2000m; and the Ténéré Desert's spectacularly sweeping sand dunes.

Desertification, Niger's greatest environmental problem, is primarily caused by overgrazing and deforestation. Quartz-rich soil also prevents topsoil from anchoring, causing erosion.

The southwest's dry savannah woodland hosts one of West Africa's better wildlife parks, Parc Régional du W.



Mali

📖 223 / POP 14.5 MILLION

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Fast Facts

- ➔ **Capital** Bamako
- ➔ **Population** 15 million
- ➔ **Area** 1,240,140 sq km
- ➔ **Languages** French, Bambara, Fulfulde, Tamashek, Dogon and Songhai
- ➔ **Money** West African CFA franc; US\$1 = CFA504.29. €1 = CFA656
- ➔ **Seasons** Hot (October to February), very hot (April to June), wet (July to August)
- ➔ **Tourist Information** www.le-mali.com/omatho/index.htm
- ➔ **Visa** One- to three-month visas available at Mali embassies; short-stay and transit visas may be issued at borders depending on security situation.

Rugged Land of Sahelian Sands & Lush Forests

Like an exquisite sandcastle formed in a harsh desert landscape, Mali is blessed by an extraordinary amount of beauty, wonders, talents and knowledge.

Yet for now, it's landscapes, monuments, mosques and music bars are off-limits, sealed from tourists by a conflict that is threatening the culture of this remarkable country.

The beating heart of Mali is Bamako, where Ngoni and Kora musicians play to crowds of dancing Malians from all ethnicities, while in the Dogon country, villages still cling to the cliffs as they did in ancient times.

Further west, Fula women strap silver jewellery to their ears and their belongings to donkeys, forming caravans worthy of beauty pageants as they make their way across the *hamada* (dry, dusty scrubland).

And in the northeast, the writings of ancient African civilizations remain locked in the beautiful libraries of Timbuktu.

Mali Top Sights

- ➔ **Dogon Country** Rose-coloured villages, big blue skies, sacred crocodiles and sandstone cliffs
- ➔ **Djenné** Stunning mud-brick town with a fairy-tale mosque overlooking a clamorous Monday market
- ➔ **Bamako** Spicy grilled fish, live music, sprawling markets and motorbikes purring along the banks of the Niger river
- ➔ **Timbuktu** Few places in the world hold a pursuit of knowledge so dear, with its ancient libraries, monuments and never-digitized texts on philosophy and astronomy
- ➔ **Segou** Acacia trees, shea butter, pottery and waterside griots
- ➔ **Niger River** Africa's third-longest river, bending and twisting on its way to the ancient Sahelian trading kingdoms

UNDERSTAND MALI

Mali Today

Mali's fall from grace in 2012 came as a surprise to many, although not to close watchers of former President Amadou Toumani Toure (commonly referred to as ATT) who was ousted in a coup in April 2012. A band of mutinous soldiers ousted the president and his cabinet in the run-up to elections in which ATT was not planning to stand, claiming the leader was not adequately supporting the under-equipped Malian army against an Tuareg rebellion in the northeast of the country.

Somewhat ironically, the coup only worsened the situation in the northeast, allowing Islamist groups to gain hold of the region. They in turn pushed out the Tuareg groups and went on to install sharia law in the ancient towns of Gao and Timbuktu,

destroying ancient monuments, tombs and remnants of history. 700,000 civilians were forced to flee in 2012 and early 2013, winding up in refugee camps in neighbouring countries as French forces and Regional West African Ecowas (Economic Community of West African States) troops launched air raids and ground attacks, successfully pushing back the Islamists from many of their strongholds. French forces began to draw down in April 2013, but the majority of the displaced had not returned home at the time of research, and Jihadi attacks continued.

Visiting Mali was dangerous and strongly unrecommended at the time of research. Although there is some semblance of normality in the capital, Bamako, the risk of kidnapping and violence remains. Venturing further north or east than Mopti and Ségou should be done with extreme caution.



The instability is deeply felt by most Malians; many businesses have closed, tourism revenue has dropped dramatically; with the destruction of important sites in Gao and Timbuktu, many sadly feel that it is not only Mali's future that is under threat but its long-celebrated culture and history.

History

Early Empires

Rock art in the Sahara suggests that northern Mali has been inhabited since 10,000 BC, when the Sahara was fertile and rich in wildlife. By 300 BC, large organised settlements had developed, most notably near Djenné, one of West Africa's oldest cities. By the 6th century AD, the lucrative trans-Saharan trade in gold, salt and slaves had begun, facilitating the rise of West Africa's great empires.

From the 8th to the 16th centuries, Mali formed the centrepiece of the great empires of West African antiquity, most notably the empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai. The arrival of European ships along the West African coast from the 15th century, however, broke the monopoly on power of the Sahel kingdoms.

The French arrived in Mali during the mid-19th century. Throughout the French colonial era, Mali was the scene of a handful of major infrastructure projects, including the 1200km Dakar–Bamako train line, which was built with forced labour to enable the export of cheap cash crops, such as

rice and cotton. But Mali remained the poor neighbour of Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire.

Independence

Mali became independent in 1960 (for a few months it was federated with Senegal), under the one-party rule of Mali's first president, Modibo Keita. In 1968, Keita was overthrown by army officers led by Moussa Traoré.

During the Cold War, Mali was firmly in the Soviet camp; food shortages were constant, especially during the devastating droughts of 1968–74 and 1980–85. One bright spot came in 1987 when Mali produced its first grain surplus.

The Tuareg rebellion began in 1990, and the following year a peaceful prodemocracy demonstration drew machine-gun fire from security forces. Three days of rioting followed, during which 150 people were killed. The unrest finally provoked the army, led by General Amadou Toumani Touré (General ATT as he was known), to seize control.

Touré established an interim transitional government and gained considerable respect when he resigned a year later, keeping his promise to hold multiparty elections. But he was rewarded for his patience and elected president in April 2002.

The Tuareg rebellion gained ground in 2007 and was bolstered in 2011 and 2012 by an influx of weapons and unemployed fighters following the Libyan civil war. Islamist fighters, including those linked to Al Qaeda, gained footing in the northeast soon after, ousting the main Mouvement pour le Libération d'Azawad (MNLA) Tuareg group and forcing 400,000 civilians to flee the region after harsh sharia law was imposed and ancient monuments destroyed. A transitional government, headed by Dioncounda Traoré, was installed, but deemed too weak to handle the crisis alone. French forces and later ECOWAS troops launched air and ground offensives in an attempt to push back the Islamists in January 2013.

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Arts & Culture

For the majority of Malians, life continues as usual, although the impact of the conflict weighs heavily on their minds. For those who eke out a living working in shops or businesses, the emphasis is on earning

AND THE BANDS PLAYED ON

The backdrop of the events of 2012 shook artists and musicians as well as politicians, interrupting album recordings and forcing Tuareg musicians to leave the country. The famous *ngoni* player Bassekou Kouyate, who also served as a griot to ousted President ATT was in the middle of recording an album when the coup hit. He finished the record, but the mark of the coup on it – and perhaps his future sales – is indelible.

Tinariwen, an intoxicating Tuareg group of former rebels from Kidal, were caught up in the crisis multiple times in 2012, with some of their members going missing and turning up in refugee camps in neighboring countries. Sadly the Festival in the Desert, usually held in January and organized by Tuareg musicians, has become another victim of the crisis. Amano Ag Issa, who recently toured the world with his Tuareg group Tartit, fled the country in the wake of the 2012 Tuareg rebellion. 'I was living quietly in my country, until the day that shook all our lives. Everything changed!' he told us. 'My Tuareg people were attacked and killed for no reason. That's what made me leave Mali. I had to go, we really didn't have much choice but to leave our homeland,' he said.

Fortunately, music is harder to destroy than the threatened ancient monuments and libraries of Timbuktu but the crisis has certainly silenced some musicians, restricting access to funding, electricity and inspiration. In the northeast, sharia law has meant that live bands and dancing venues have been silenced.

Outside of Mali, the music plays on, including bluesy stuff such as that from the late Ali Farka Touré. Other much-loved blues performers include many from Ali Farka's stable, among them Afel Bocoum, Ali Farka's son Vieux Farka Touré, Baba Salah and Lobi Traoré. Some scholars believe that the roots of American blues lie with the Malian slaves who worked on US plantations.

The breadth and depth of Mali's musical soundtrack is attributable not just to centuries of tradition but also to the policies of Mali's postindependence government. As elsewhere in West Africa, Mali's musicians were promoted as the cultural standard-bearers of the newly independent country and numerous state-sponsored 'orchestras' were founded. The legendary Rail Band de Bamako (actual employees of the Mali Railway Corporation) was one of the greatest, and one of its ex-members, the charismatic Salif Keita, has become a superstar in his own right. We have yet to see what kind of sounds the next, tense chapter in Mali's history will produce.

enough to take care of their (large) families on a day-to-day basis. But many have placed long-term plans on hold, as they simply can't predict what the future will bring.

In the northeast of the country, life has changed drastically. The imposition of sharia law has meant that many bars and restaurants have been closed. The majority of Malians are Muslim, but the strain of Islam that is followed is moderate and liberal – many enjoy dancing, drinking and being social butterflies. Now women must cover their heads, couples are stoned to death for having sex outside of marriage and live music is banned. For those who have not fled from the towns of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu, life has become fairly miserable. For those in refugee camps in neighbouring countries, it's worse still.

Malians hold fast to tradition and politeness is respected. Malians find it rude to ask questions or stop someone in the street

without first asking after their health and their families.

People

Mali's population is growing by almost 3% per year, which means that the number of Malians doubles every 20 years; 48% of Malians are under 15 years of age.

Concentrated in the centre and south of the country, the Bambara are Mali's largest ethnic group (33% of the population). Fulani (17%) pastoralists are found wherever there is grazing land for their livestock, particularly in the Niger inland delta. The lighter-skinned Tuareg (6%), traditionally nomadic pastoralists and traders, inhabit the fringes of the Sahara.

Between 80% and 90% of Malians are Muslim, and 2% are Christian. Animist beliefs often overlap with Islamic and Christian practices, especially in rural areas.

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