

Mauritania

222 / POP 4 MILLION

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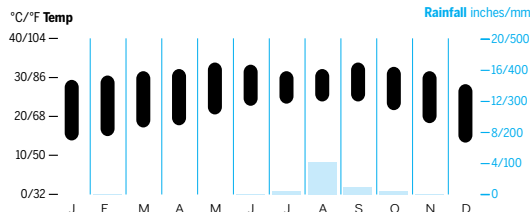
Why Go?

Driving through the vast, sun-bleached landscape of Mauritania, you'd be forgiven for expecting to see a tricked-out post-apocalyptic hot rod from *Mad Max: Fury Road* on the horizon. Instead, a solitary, turbaned figure tending a herd of goats tells the story of survival amid millennial-old geological forces. Mauritania, with one of the world's lowest population densities, is almost equally divided between Moors of Arab-Berber descent and black Africans, a striking cultural combination that is part of its appeal.

There's no doubt that Mauritania has some of the continent's grandest scenery. The Saharan Adrar region, with its World Heritage-listed caravan towns, is currently off-limits for security reasons, but the desert is a constant presence elsewhere, pushing hard up against the Atlantic Coast. Millions of migratory birds winter along the coast at Parc National du Banc d'Arguin, and the expanding capital Nouakchott is where modernity takes root in the desert.

When to Go

Nouakchott



Nov–Mar Pleasantly warm for visiting the desert, although nights can be surprisingly cold.

Jul–Sep Short rainy season throughout the south; Nouakchott prone to flooding after downpours.

Mid-Jun–Aug Mauritians from the coast head to oases towns to celebrate the date harvest.

NOUAKCHOTT

📍 222 / POP 1 MILLION

Sixty years old, youthful by most standards, Nouakchott mushroomed quickly from a small village to the country's capital and largest city. Near, but not on the coast, building continues apace, even where roads are non-existent. Certainly, they're a strange sight: massive, gated homes plunked down in the desert. The city is unassuming and seemingly unplanned, as if on an overnight caravan stop it was left to grow by accident. Most travellers use it as a staging post before the Adrar, Banc d'Arguin or the next international border.

Nouakchott is sleepily idiosyncratic and you could do worse than spend an afternoon at the gloriously frantic fish market (one of the busiest in West Africa), treat yourself to a comfy hotel or feast in a good restaurant. Laid-back and safe – bliss after the rigours of the desert – the city is chock-a-block with international organisations and geared less to travellers, more to business people.

👁 Sights

Major landmarks in the centre include the **Grande Mosquée** (Mosquée Saudique; Rue Mamadou Konaté) and the large **Mosquée Marocaine** (Rue de la Mosquée Marocaine), which towers over a bustling market area.

Port de Pêche (Fish Market) is Nouakchott's star attraction. Lively and colourful, you'll see hundreds of teams of mostly Wolof and Fula men dragging in heavy fishing nets. Small boys hurry back and forth with trays of fish, which they sort, gut, fillet and lay out on large trestles to dry. The best time to visit is late afternoon, when the fishing boats return. Before or after, it's no less an impressive sight with the pirogues crammed like sardines on the beach.

There are two decent beaches around 5km north of the centre, **Plage Pichot** and **Plage Sultan**. Both offered covered alfresco dining areas and tents with pillows and mattresses for overnighting; Les Sultanes is recommended. These are popular with the small expat community on weekends; otherwise, you might have the place to yourself. Beware of undertows.

🛏 Sleeping

★ **Maison d'Hôtes Jeloua** GUESTHOUSE \$
(📍 222 3636 9450; www.escales-mauritanie.com; r UM10,000-16,000; 🍷🍷🍷) This is a lovely and deservedly popular *maison d'hôtes* (B&B), with a leafy garden, highly recom-

mended restaurant and a homey and friendly vibe. The somewhat challenging-to-find location is the only downside. The neighbourhood streets, for lack of a better term, are wide sandy lots or narrow alleys.

Les Sultanes

TENTED CAMP \$

(📍 222 4969 4140; tent UM7000) With a powdery sand beach uninterrupted as far as the eye can see, this small compound with a shady restaurant (mains UM3000) and handful of semi-permanent tent sites is as close to a beach resort as you'll get in Mauritania.

Auberge Diaguili

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

(📍 222 4646 0003; www.diaguili.com; r incl breakfast UM18,000; 🍷🍷) Owners Nadia and Pascal have created a friendly and warm environment, especially good for long-term stays. Rooms are simply furnished; there's a shared kitchen and tastefully designed lounge area.

Al Khaima City Center

HOTEL \$\$

(📍 222 4524 2222; www.akcc.mr; 10 Rue Mamadou Konaté; r from UM25,000; 🍷🍷🍷) A downtown high-rise of solid value, the Al Khaima has small rooms that are surprisingly stylish, with boutique design elements and comfortable bedding. It's surprising because of the utilitarian lower lobby and lower floors, which include a bank, travel agency, electronics store and other offices. The 10th-floor cafe has unbeatable views of the city from the outdoor terrace.

Hôtel Monotel Dar el Barka

HOTEL \$\$\$

(📍 222 4524 2333; www.monotel-mr.com; Zone des Ambassades; r from UM51,000; 🍷🍷🍷) A large, low-slung complex with tight security near the French embassy, Dar el Barka is one of the more popular business-class hotels in the city. Sundays are especially crowded with expats enjoying the leafy central patio and pool area, and the all-you-can-eat buffet. Conferences, meetings and weddings are common, however room furnishings are a little old-fashioned.

Azalai Hôtel Marhaba

HOTEL \$\$\$

(📍 222 4529 5051; www.azlaihotels.com; Ave Abdal Nasser; r/stc UM42,000/50,000; 🍷🍷🍷) The newest luxury business-class hotel to open in downtown Nouakchott, the Azlai is part of a chain of hotels throughout West Africa. More than US\$8 million was invested in upgrading what was once a Mercure hotel into a sparkling oasis with a top-flight restaurant and boutique-style rooms.