

Mali

Mali is West Africa's heart and soul, a country as rich in historical significance as it is blessed by an extraordinary array of sights and cultures.

Mali's natural wonders range from the Sahara in the north to the fertile greenery of the south, with the Niger River cutting a swath through the centre. The Niger, one of the grand old rivers of Africa, still provides the country's lifeblood.

Not far from the riverbank, the extraordinary Falaise de Bandiagara shelters one of West Africa's most intriguing peoples, the Dogon, whose villages still cling to the rocky cliffs and whose complex cultural rituals are among Africa's most intriguing.

Some of Africa's greatest empires also bequeathed to Mali some of its most dramatic attractions: the legendary city of Timbuktu and the glorious mudbrick mosque at Djenné are two among many. Even in places where the landscape seems too barren to support life, you find Mali's famous elephants sharing the Sahel with Tuareg and Fulani nomads.

There's almost as much to hear in Mali as there is to see: Mali's two major music festivals – in the Sahara near Timbuktu and on the shores of the Niger in Ségou – are worth planning your trip around.

It all adds up to a simple equation – if you visit just one country in West Africa, make it Mali.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1,240,140 sq km
- **ATMs** Visa-enabled ATMs in most major towns
- **Borders** Algeria, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal
- **Budget** US\$35 to US\$50 per day
- **Capital** Bamako
- **Languages** French, Bambara, Fula, Tamashek, Dogon and Songhai
- **Money** West African CFA franc; US\$1 = CFA458.57, €1 = CFA656
- **Population** 13.1 million
- **Seasons** Hot (October to February), very hot (April to June), wet (July to August)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 223; international access code 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC
- **Visa** Renewable five-day visa available at border for CFA15,000; one-month visas, at any Malian embassy



HOW MUCH?

- **Bamako–Mopti bus ride** US\$17
- **4WD rental with driver** US\$102 to US\$114 per day, plus petrol
- **Sunset camel ride into Sahara** From US\$17
- **Internet access** US\$1.40 to US\$3.40 per hour
- **Guide in Dogon Country** US\$28.40 to US\$51 per day

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.20
- **1.5L bottled water** US\$1.15
- **Small bottle of Castel beer** US\$1.15
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$11.35 to US\$13.60
- **Portion of riz arachide** US\$1.15

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Dogon Country** (p412) West Africa as it used to be, with timeless villages clinging to the Falaise de Bandiagara.
- **Djenné** (p408) Stunning mudbrick town with a fairy-tale mosque overlooking a clamorous Monday market.
- **Niger River** (p412) One of Africa's epic rivers, lined with fascinating villages, picturesque mosques and Mali's culturally diverse ethnic groups.
- **Timbuktu** (p416) City of Saharan legend and the gateway to the desert.
- **Bamako** (p406) West Africa's live music capital, with weekend performances by Mali's musical superstars.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit Mali is from November to January, with generally fine weather, moderate temperatures and sufficient water levels on the Niger River to allow boat trips. January is also when Mali's two world-famous music festivals – the Festival in the Desert (p418) and the Festival sur le Niger (p407) – take place. January is Mali's tourist high season, so accommodation can be at a premium. Mali is wettest between July and August, although the rainy season runs from June to September. It's hottest between April and June, when temperatures frequently exceed 40°C; September and

October are also hot. From January to June, the dusty harmattan is common, irritating throats and reducing visibility.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Stay Friday night in Bamako for a taste of Mali's live-music scene (p406) and spend Monday at Djenné's weekly market (p409). Otherwise, we recommend a three-day trek in Dogon Country (p412), with one night in the lively port town of Mopti (p409) en route.
- **Two Weeks** An extra week will allow you a night in languid Ségou (p407) and another in Teriya Bugu (p408). From Mopti, you could also take a three-day slow-boat journey (see the boxed text, p412) up the Niger River to Timbuktu (p416), from where short desert excursions are possible.

HISTORY**The 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 (see p409), 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.

Later the Bambara Empire of Ségou rose briefly to control huge swathes of Mali, before having its power usurped by two waves of Fula-led Islamic jihadists, the second originating from the Tukolor Empire of northern Senegal. The Tukolor were still around when 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