

Guinea

Imagine you're travelling on smooth highway, 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 craggy 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, steep laterite and washed-out paths. Nature lovers can lose themselves on long hikes past the plunging waterfalls, proud hills and tiny villages of the Fouta. And for music fans, the country is something of a pilgrimage site – this is where West Africa's 1960s sounds were created.

There's virtually no tourist infrastructure and creature comforts are scarce. Instead, you get to explore paths that few tourists travel.

For most Guineans, life has been tough ever since the country defiantly broke from France and ventured out on a difficult post-independence journey. Despite the hard times, the country's diverse people have largely stood together through the decades, rather than turning on each other. In conversations and encounters you will catch glimpses of that strong stance and hear about the nation's troubles as well as its hopes.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 245,855 sq km
- **ATMs** There's one in Conakry
- **Borders** Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Senegal, Sierra Leone
- **Budget** US\$30 to US\$60
- **Capital** Conakry
- **Languages** French, Malinke, Pulaar (Fula) and Susu
- **Money** Guinean franc (GFr); US\$1 = GFr4950, €1 = GFr7083
- **Population** 9.8 million
- **Seasons** Dry season (November to April), rainy (May to October)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 224; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC (no daylight saving)
- **Visa** Required in advance



HOW MUCH?

- **Handmade leather sandals** US\$8
- **100km bush taxi ride** US\$5
- **4WD hire per day** US\$120
- **Two metres of hand-woven indigo cloth** US\$8
- **Music show** US\$1

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1
- **1.5L bottled water** US\$0.70
- **Bottle of Skol** US\$0.80
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$8
- **Plate of rice and sauce** US\$1

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Îles de Los** (p370) Stretch out on palm-fringed strands, sipping fresh coconut juice.
- **Fouta Djallon** (p371) Ramble through the mountains and swim in the waterfalls of this majestic mountain plateau.
- **Bossou** (p373) Come face to face with chattering chimps.
- **Conakry** (p369) Hop through the capital's dubious dives, getting drunk on some of West Africa's best live music.
- **Forêt Classée de Ziama** (p372) Track elephants in the virgin rainforest.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Spend a couple of days in Conakry (p365), taking in the Îles de Los (p370), then go trekking in Fouta Djallon (p371).
- **Two Weeks** Add a leisurely trip through Lower Guinea (p370) to the itinerary. Alternatively, just stay in Fouta Djallon (p371) for more extended village-to-village treks (see the boxed text, p371).

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Guinea is one of the wettest countries in West Africa – Conakry receives over 4300mm of rain a year, half of it in July and August. Temperatures average 30°C along the coast, where it is always humid, and can fall to 6°C and below at night in the Fouta Djallon in December and January.

The best time to visit is November and December, after the rains and before the dusty harmattan winds, though the Fouta Djallon is at its greenest and best during the rainy season.

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 situated 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 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.

In the Grip of the Military

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.