



Mali

📍 223 / POP 14.5 MILLION

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Fast Facts

- ➔ **Area** 1,240,140 sq km
- ➔ **Capital** Bamako
- ➔ **Currency** West African franc (CFA)
- ➔ **Languages** French, Bambara, Fulfulde, Tamashek, Dogon and Songhai

Introduction

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, its landscapes, monuments and stories are off-limits, sealed from tourists by a conflict that is threatening the very culture of Mali.

The heart of the nation is Bamako, where Ngoni and Kora musicians play to dancing crowds 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 march across the *hamada* (dry, dusty scrubland).

And in the northeast, the writings of ancient African civilisations remain locked in the beautiful libraries of Timbuktu, until a new dawn comes for Mali, and they – and it – can be rediscovered by travellers.

Top Sights

- ➔ **Dogon Country** A fairytale of rose-coloured villages, big blue skies, sacred crocodiles and sandstone cliffs.
- ➔ **Djenné** The world's most captivating mudbrick mosque.
- ➔ **Bamako** The sounds of live music, sprawling markets and motorbikes purring along the banks of the Niger River.
- ➔ **Timbuktu** Ancient libraries, monuments and texts of wisdom on philosophy and astronomy.
- ➔ **Segou** Acacia trees, shea butter, pottery and waterside *griots* (praise singers).
- ➔ **Niger River** The life-blood of Mali and Africa's third-longest river, it bends and twists its way to 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 Touré (commonly referred to as ATT), who was deposed 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 a 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. Seven hundred thousand civilians were forced to flee in 2012 and early 2013, winding up in refugee camps in neighbouring countries as, at the request of the Malian government, French forces and Regional West African Ecowas (Economic Community of West African States) troops launched air raids and ground attacks, successfully and quickly pushing back the Islamists from many of their strongholds. French forces began to draw down in April 2013, and in July of that year they handed over control of military operations to a UN force. At the same time presidential elections were held and won by Ibrahim Bou-bacar Keïta, but none of this did anything to curtail the instability in the north, and as the French departed, violence increased and Tuareg and rebel groups retook some northern towns.

By mid-2015 the government signed peace agreements with a number of rebel Tuareg groups in exchange for a degree of regional autonomy and the dropping of arrest warrants that had been issued for their leaders. Although this helped to partially improve the security situation in the north, it has done little to halt attacks by Islamic militants on government forces and public places.

The continuing instability is deeply felt by most Malians: many businesses have closed, tourism revenue has dropped dramatically and important sites in Gao and Timbuktu have been destroyed. Sadly, many people feel

that it is not only Mali's future that is under threat but also its long-celebrated culture and history.

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, 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 Songhaï. 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. During 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 & Conflict

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 Keïta. In 1968, Keïta was overthrown by army officers led by Moussa Traoré. Elections were held in 1979 with Traoré declared the winner.

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 are the largest ethnic group in the northern regions of Mali and have long complained of a feeling of marginalisation from the political and economic mainstream. In 1990 this frustration boiled over and the Tuareg rebellion began. The follow-