

Algeria

You raise a few eyebrows when you say you're travelling to Algeria. Though the country, ravaged by civil war in the early 1990s, is taking tentative steps towards tourism, it is still a destination mainly for the adventurous and the patient. Yet there is so much to see here: vast parts of the Sahara desert remain unexplored; the Neolithic cave paintings of Tassili N'Ajjer and the volcanic peaks of the Hoggar mountains are Unesco listed; tribal culture is very much alive; the mysterious and ultrareligious towns of the M'zab region offer a peek into life as it was lived hundreds of years ago; and the Tuareg capital, Tamanrasset, is a forest of veiled 'blue men' driving jeeps and drinking mint tea. To the north, the Mediterranean coast is almost completely undeveloped, and the capital, Algiers, is a bombastic mixture of traditional and modern Algeria. Refreshingly, the day-to-day hassle common to many Arab countries is conspicuously absent.

Many Algerians and the country's intrepid explorers like the lack of visitors: the difficult transport and next to no tourist infrastructure make it almost impossible for Algeria to turn into a holiday magnet like its neighbour, Tunisia. Chances of this happening are low, because Algeria's economy doesn't depend on tourism and the continuing reports of militant attacks in certain areas, though seldom reported in Western media, mean that it will be a long time before Algeria is swamped by visitors. So, if you have lots of time, patience and a healthy but cautious sense of adventure, take advantage of this dusty gem and explore Algeria.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 2.3 million sq km
- **ATMs** None
- **Borders** Niger and Tunisia open; Morocco closed; Mali, Mauritania and Libya crossings not advised
- **Budget** US\$35 to US\$40 per day
- **Capital** Algiers
- **Languages** Arabic, Berber, French
- **Money** Algerian dinar (DA); US\$1 = DA71
- **Population** 32.9 million
- **Seasons** In the north: wet (October to March), dry (June to September); in the south: hot (March to October), cool (November to February)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 213; international access code 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +1
- **Visa** US\$40 to US\$50 for one month



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Algiers** (p73) See modern and traditional Algeria meet in the country's fascinating capital.
- **Tamanrasset** (p76) Get lost among the Blue Men – the Tuaregs – and explore Saharan culture.
- **Assekrem** (p77) Watch the sun set beyond a sea of mountains, and absorb Algeria's most breathtaking view.
- **Timimoun** (p76) Explore beautiful desert architecture and sigh over the sand dunes on the edges of town.
- **Ghardaïa** (p75) Bargain for a technicolour carpet, before peeking inside the ancient Muslim town, Beni Isguen.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Algeria has a Mediterranean climate along the coast, with mild, wet winters, and hot, dry summers. The coastal area is best visited in spring and summer months. The Sahara desert has famously ferocious summer temperatures, so visiting this part of Algeria is best done between late autumn and early spring (November to April). Despite daytime temperatures seldom falling below 25°C, desert nights can be cold even in the height of summer. Rainfall ranges from more than 1000mm per year in the northern mountains, to zero in the Sahara. Some places go decades without a drop.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Fly to Tamanrasset (p76) and go on a desert expedition trip, walking alongside camels and sleeping under the

HOW MUCH?

- **Cup of tea** US\$0.50
- **Newspaper** US\$0.80
- **Antique tin box** US\$4
- **Lamb couscous** US\$1.50
- **Tuareg shawl** US\$5

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.50
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.50
- **Bottle of Algad Power Beer** From US\$5
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$4
- **Kebab** US\$1.50

WARNING

Despite an increase in interest in Algeria as a travellers' destination, parts of the country remain unsafe. You should avoid travelling to the northwest, and the desert and mountain regions of the southeast, in particular. We did on-the-ground research in some parts of the south, east and the country's capital, but as we were not able to do on-the-ground research in the entire country, some information in this chapter might not be reliable. Please check the situation before travelling to Algeria.

stars for five days. Stopping over in Algiers (p73) on your way back gives you the perfect opportunity to explore the capital for a couple of days.

- **Two Weeks** As for the one-week itinerary, but continue onto Ghardaïa (p75) from Algiers. Take in the beauties of this old-fashioned town over two days, with its market, colourful carpets and the daily *souq* (market), and don't miss spending a day inside the ancient town of Beni Isguen (p75), where people have been living according to strict Muslim laws for centuries. Get a bus to Timimoun (p76) and spend a couple of days relaxing, wandering around town, and watching the sand dunes, before catching a bus, then plane back to Algiers.

HISTORY

The modern state of Algeria is a relatively recent creation. The name was coined by the Ottoman Turks in the 16th century to describe the territory controlled by the regency of Algiers – initially a Turkish colony. The regency broke free of the Ottoman Empire and founded a military republic of unusual stability. This endured almost 300 years until spurious diplomatic problems prompted the French to invade in the 19th century.

The Barbary Coast

Before the arrival of the French, Algeria was known to Europeans as the Barbary (a corruption of Berber) Coast, whose notorious pirates preyed on Christian shipping. The dreaded Khayr al-Din, going under the chilling pseudonym of Barbarossa, was the first regent of Algiers during this period, and at one point

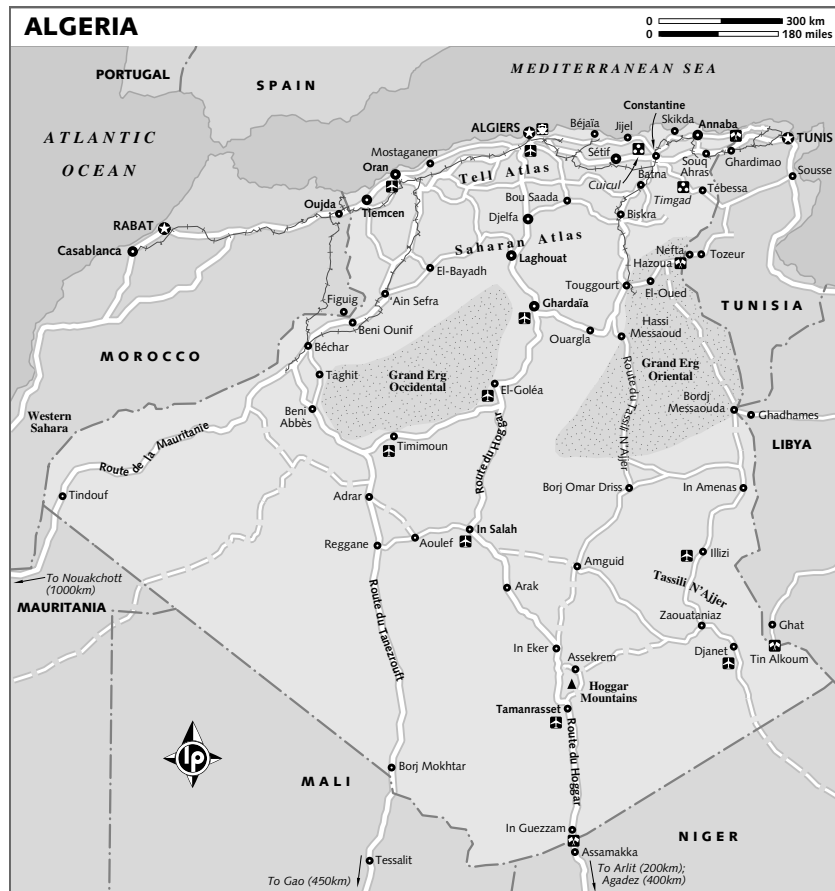
held no fewer than 25,000 Christian captives in the city. Piracy sent shivers down many a spine until the US Navy defeated a Barbary fleet off Algiers in 1815. Despite this, the feared pirates were not entirely beaten until the French attacked Algiers in 1830 and forced the ruling *dey* (commander or governor) to capitulate. It took another 41 years for French domination of the country to be complete.

The main opposition came from Emir Abdelkader, the great hero of Algeria's nationalist movement. Abdelkader was a *sherif* (a descendant of the Prophet, not a Wild West figure) who ruled western and central inland Algeria. His forces resisted the French for almost six years before they were defeated near Oujda in 1844. Abdelkader himself finally sur-

rendered in 1846 and spent the rest of his life in exile. He died in Damascus in 1883.

French Rule

The French colonial authorities set about changing the face of Algeria by eliminating anything that was previously thought of as Algerian: local culture was destroyed, mosques were converted into churches and the old medinas were pulled down and replaced with streets laid out in neat grids. The greatest symbol of the change was the conversion of the Great Mosque of Algiers to the Cathedral of St Philippe. The French also distributed large parts of prime farming land to European settlers (known as *pieds-noirs*) – Italian, Maltese and Spanish as well as French.



Algeria's war of independence, led by the newly formed Front de Libération Nationale (FLN; National Liberation Front), began on 31 October 1954 in Batna, east of Algiers. The fighting lasted seven years, with terror campaigns led by both native Algerians and *piéd-noir* settlers, costing at least a million Algerian lives. The French president, Charles de Gaulle, aware of the impossibility of continued French rule, agreed to a referendum on independence in March 1962. The result was a resounding six million in favour and only 16,000 against. Independence was declared on 5 July 1962.

Socialism & Democracy

FLN candidate Ahmed ben Bella, who robbed a bank to fund a revolutionary group, became Algeria's first president. He pledged to create a 'revolutionary Arab-Islamic state based on the principles of socialism and collective leadership at home and anti-imperialism abroad'. He was quickly overthrown in 1965 by former colleague Colonel Houari Boumédiénne, who effectively returned the country to military rule.

Boumédiénne's emphasis on industrial development at the expense of the agricultural sector was to have a major impact in later years, when the country became heavily dependent on food imports and migrant workers. Boumédiénne died in December 1978 and the FLN replaced him with Colonel Chadli Benjedid, who was re-elected in 1984 and 1989.

There was very little political change under Boumédiénne and Chadli. The FLN was the sole political party, pursuing basically secular, socialist policies. There was little evidence of opposition until October 1988, when thousands of people took to the streets in protest against government austerity measures and food shortages. The army was called in to restore order, and between 160 and 600 people were killed.

The government reacted by pledging to relax the FLN monopoly on political power and work towards a multiparty system. The extent of the opposition became clear at local government elections held in early 1990, which produced landslide victories for previously outlawed fundamentalist Front Islamique du Salut (FIS; Islamic Salvation Front).

The initial round of Algeria's first multiparty parliamentary elections, held in De-

cember 1991, produced another landslide win for the FIS. The FLN was left looking like a political irrelevance, taking only 15 of the 231 seats. Chadli's apparent acceptance of this prompted the army to step in, replacing the president with a five-person Haut Conseil d'Etat (HCE; High Council of State) headed by Mohammed Boudiaf, a former leader of the Algerian revolution. The second round of elections was cancelled, and FIS leaders Abbas Madani and Ali Belhadj were arrested while others fled into exile.

Civil War

Boudiaf lasted six months before he was assassinated amid signs of a growing guerrilla offensive led by the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA; Armed Islamic Group). He was replaced by former FLN hardliner Ali Kafi, who oversaw the country's rapid descent into civil war before he was replaced by a retired general, Liamine Zéroual, in January 1994. Zéroual attempted to defuse the situation by holding fresh elections in 1995, but Islamic parties were barred from the poll and Zéroual's sweeping victory came amid widespread claims of fraud.

Hopes for peace went unfulfilled; instead, the war became even more brutal, with Amnesty International accusing both sides of massacres and war atrocities. The GIA, angered by French aid to the government, extended the war to French soil with a series of bombings and hijackings.

Eventually, government security forces began to gain the upper hand, and at the beginning of 1999 Zéroual announced that he would be stepping down. New elections held in April that year resulted in a controversial victory for the establishment candidate Abdelaziz Bouteflika, a former foreign minister, who was elected unopposed after the rest of the candidates in the field claimed fraud and withdrew.

Bouteflika moved quickly to establish his legitimacy by calling a referendum on a plan to offer amnesty to the rebels. War-weary Algerians responded overwhelmingly with a 98% 'yes' vote, and by the end of 1999 many groups had responded and laid down their weapons. However, elements within the GIA remained defiant, and were suspected of assassinating FIS leader Abdelkader Hachani in October 1999 in an attempt to derail the peace process.

Algeria Today

Since 1999 little has changed in this standoff – GIA splinter groups continue their campaign against the government, and the army continues its own campaign against the rebels, amid accusations of brutality, executions and failure to prevent massacres. Added to this has been violent unrest among the Berber people, which led to an appeasement package from the government in 2001, when Berber was proclaimed the country's official language, alongside Arabic.

Relations with France have improved considerably in recent years; 2003 was celebrated as the Year of Algeria in France, and President Jacques Chirac made his first official visit to the country. Many Algerians boycotted the festivities in Paris, calling it a whitewash of history and resenting any suggestion of renewed French influence after so many years of abuse.

Parliamentary elections in May 2002, won by Ali Benflis of the FLN, were marred by violence and low voter turnout, and did little to strengthen people's faith in Algerian democracy. Four parties boycotted the vote, including two of the major Berber parties. To cap all the political problems, northern Algeria was rocked by a severe earthquake in May 2003, which killed more than 2000 people.

In April 2004, Abdelaziz Bouteflika secured a landslide election victory and promised to seek a 'true national reconciliation' during his second term. The military – traditionally a key player in Algerian politics – pledged neutrality during the poll. January 2005 saw the government make a deal with Berber leaders, promising more investment in the Kabylie region and enhanced recognition of Tamazight dialect. A referendum for reconciliation was held in September 2005, with voters supporting the government's plans to give amnesty to many of those involved in the 1990s conflict, and a six-month period of amnesty began in March 2006. According to the reconciliation plan, fugitive militants who surrendered were to be pardoned, except for the most serious of crimes, and some jailed Islamic militants were set free during the first part of the year. Despite the 'yes' vote at the referendum, many relatives of the victims killed in the civil war are asking for those involved in the killings to be tried at the national courts and for war crimes to be investigated. There is remaining criticism of the country's repressive attitudes

towards the media (journalists can still be jailed for insulting the president), militant attacks continue to happen every year (though in diminishing numbers; an estimated number of deaths is 500 a year).

CULTURE

An estimated 99% of Algeria's population are Sunni Muslims; the majority are ethnically Arab–Berber and live in the north of the country. Berber traditions are best preserved in the Kabylie region east of Algiers, where people speak the local Berber (Tamazight) dialect as their first language, Arabic as their second and French as their third. After sustained protests and rioting, Berber was finally recognised as an official language in 2002. The Tuareg people of the Sahara are also Berbers, but speak their own tribal language, Tamashek.

The most interesting traditional crafts are those of the southern Saharan Tuareg, who are known for their intricate leatherwork and silver jewellery. In the north of Algeria, as in Morocco, carpets are big business, but because there's less tourist custom the selling process is much less pressured.

Music is a big part of life here too, and few road journeys are complete without a constant accompaniment of distinctive wailing vocals. Algeria's contribution to world music culture is rai, a genre that started out as subversive underground protest pop and has now spread around the Arab world. A notable rai star is the excellent Cheb Mami. Egyptian pop is also massively popular.

As very few people depend on tourism for their income, the constant Moroccan-style street hassle you might expect to find in Algeria is very rare – anyone who does accost you will usually be genuinely interested in where you come from and what you're doing. Invitations to tea can be regarded with far less suspicion than elsewhere!

ENVIRONMENT

Algeria is Africa's second-largest country after Sudan. About 85% of the country is taken up by the Sahara, and the mountainous Tell region in the north makes up the balance.

The Tell consists of two main mountain ranges: the Tell Atlas, which runs right along the north coast into Tunisia, and the Saharan Atlas, about 100km to the south. The area between the two ranges is known as the High Plateaus. The Sahara covers a great range

of landscapes, from the classic S-dunes of the great ergs (sand seas) to the rock-strewn peaks of the Hoggar Mountains in the far south.

ALGIERS

☎ 021 / pop 3.5 million

Algiers (Al-Jazair) is a mix of tradition and modernism that reflects Algeria's colonial past in its wide boulevards and elegant white and blue French houses, but keeps its traditional heart hidden deep inside the maze of the medina that sits on the hill above the port. It's a city of steps and labyrinthine uphill streets, with fezzed old men watching the changing world go by, as youngsters stroll, comfortable with their modern attire and lifestyle. Algiers is safer than it's given credit for, with a serious police presence inside the *périphérique* (ring road). Most points of interest are found in the medina and wandering around this part of the city is a lovely experience, but you should exercise caution if you're alone and completely avoid it at night. Though most people spend just enough time in Algiers to organise their forward journey, it's a fascinating city for a couple of days of exploration.

ORIENTATION

The harbour is an obvious landmark; four main streets run parallel to the waterfront, changing names every 500m or so. The medina lies between Blvd de la Victoire and Rue Ahmed Bouzrina.

The area around the airport is one of the less safe parts of Algiers, as it lies in the suburbs outside the ring road; there are regular buses into town (US\$0.50) but it's better to take a private taxi (US\$8). Don't let pushy locals 'share' it with you.

INFORMATION

There are banks all over the city centre, but none have international ATMs so travellers cheques are the best way to go. Internet access is available in the larger hotels and in several small offices around town. For medical emergencies, call ☎ 115. You'll need good French and/or Arabic to get medical help here.

Fire ☎ 14

Main post office (Pl Grande Poste) At the southern end of Rue Larbi ben M'Hidi.

ONAT (Office National Algérien du Tourisme; ☎ 74 44 48; www.onat-dz.com; 126b Rue Didouche Mourad) Has several branches in Algiers.

Police ☎ 17

Telephone office (cnr Rue Asselah Hocine & Blvd Colonel Amirouche) A block from the post office, towards the harbour.

SIGHTS

Magnificent **Turkish palaces** are hidden inside the predominantly French-built medina. Most are concentrated around the Ketchaoua Mosque on Rue Hadj Omar; the finest is the **Dar Hassan Pacha** palace (no admission to the interior).

The distinctive abstract monstrosity dominating the skyline south of the centre is the **Martyrs' Monument**, opened in 1982 on the 20th anniversary of Algeria's independence. The views over the city here are the best you'll get, and there's also a convenient shopping centre nearby.

SLEEPING & EATING

Cheap accommodation can be found on Pl Port Said on the edge of the medina, but few foreign visitors stay in the area because of its seediness and the likelihood of cockroaches strolling around the beds.

Hôtel el-Aurassi (☎ 74 82 52; www.el-aurassi.com; 2 Ave du Frantz Fanon; s/d US\$120/130; ☎ ☎ ☎) Overlooking the city, this atmospheric 1970s hotel has three restaurants offering good French-Algerian cuisine, a massive pool and tennis courts. The large rooms have terraces, many with fabulous sea views.

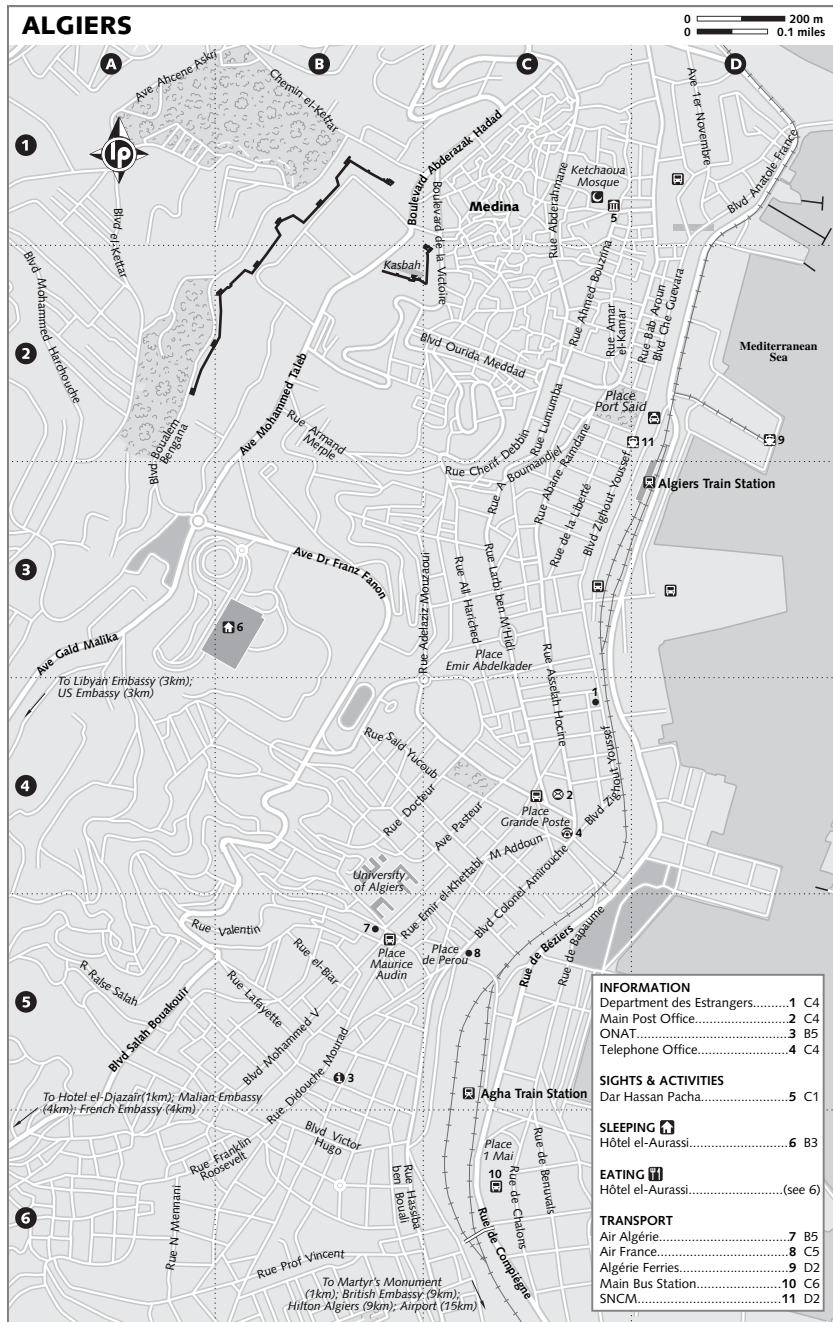
Hôtel el-Djazair (☎ 23 09 33/37; www.hoteleldjazair.dz; 24 Ave Souidani Boudjemma; s/d US\$120/135; ☎ ☎ ☎) This classic old five-star hotel has fantastic amenities and service to match. There are four restaurants, a bar, a nightclub, a pool and sports facilities on site. The location is excellent (it's sandwiched between El-Khalifa Bank and the British Embassy).

In the city centre, Algerian snacks can be found on the streets between Pl Emir Abdelkader and Pl Port Said.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Air Algérie (☎ 74 24 28; www.airalgerie.dz; 1 Pl Maurice Audin) and **Air France** (☎ 73 16 10; www.airfrance.com; Immeuble Maurétania, Pl de Perou) cover destinations throughout the country. Useful but pricey routes include Tamanrasset (US\$420 return, 2½ hours, daily), Ghardaïa (US\$150 return,



one hour, daily), In Salah (US\$300 return), Oran (US\$150 return, one hour, daily), Constantine (US\$120 return, one hour, daily), Annaba (50 minutes, daily) and Tlemcen (US\$150 return, one hour, daily).

Bus

The main intercity bus station is south of Pl Grande Poste on Rue de Compiègne. There are daily buses to Ghardaïa (US\$15, eight hours) and El-Oued (US\$18, 14 hours).

Train

The train station is on the lower level of the waterfront. Surviving services include Oran (US\$9, six hours, three daily) and Annaba (US\$14, 14 hours, two daily).

GETTING AROUND

The four major city bus stations are at Pl des Martyrs, Pl Grande Poste, Pl Maurice Audin and Pl 1 Mai.

There are private taxis everywhere; prices are negotiable. It costs US\$8 to get to the city centre from the airport, and around US\$3 across town.

NORTHERN ALGERIA

The northern region is still largely unsafe for travellers. If safety advice changes by the time of your visit, make tracks to **Djemila**, a tiny mountain town in the stunning area around Sétif; **Oran**, the modern but fascinating port town made famous by Albert Camus; **Batna**, a charming town in an area known for its Roman ruins; and **Tlemcen**, the beautifully preserved gateway city for Morocco and former capital of the central Maghreb region.

CENTRAL ALGERIA

Here you'll find the mysterious M'zab region, where life remains frozen in time, and the Souf, resting in the Grand Erg Oriental close to the Tunisian border. The M'zab region is home to a conservative Muslim sect known as the Ibadites, which broke from mainstream Islam some 900 years ago, and is, some say, a country unto itself. In the river valley of the Oued M'Zab, is Ghardaïa, a cluster of five towns – Ghardaïa, Melika, Beni Isguen, Bou Noura and El-Ateuf.

GHARDAÏA

029 / pop 340,000

Ghardaïa is a town whose sand-coloured houses stand on a curious heap, with a single minaret sticking out on top like a one-year birthday cake.

The area is famous for its **carpets** and for the massive daily **souq** in the old town. The most curious and culturally unique town is **Beni Isguen** (admission US\$1), 3km from central Ghardaïa, a fascinating place where Islam is so rigorously enforced that local women, who are draped in white shawls from head to toe, are allowed to have only one eye showing (they apparently alternate the eye to keep their vision from weakening). Men and women lead completely segregated lives, and each gender has its own council. Foreigners are not allowed to enter without a guide, and not at all on Fridays. It's also forbidden to wear shorts, take photos or smoke.

One sleeping option is the **Hotel el-Djanoub** (88 56 31; Quartier Bouhraoua; s/d US\$40/55;), a slightly characterless place with long hospital-like corridors and comfortable rooms (the two swimming pools are major pluses). Camping is possible near the river.

Air Algérie flies from Ghardaïa to Algiers (US\$150, one hour, daily) and Tamanrasset (US\$300, 2½ hours, once a week).

Regular buses run to Algiers (US\$15, eight hours, daily) via Djelfa, and Reggane (US\$4, daily) via Timimoun and Adrar.

EL-OUED

032 / pop 678,000

Tagged the 'Town of a Thousand Domes', El-Oued is the major town of the Souf region in the Grand Erg Oriental. Along with Touggourt it is the main port of call for people heading to or from Tunisia. Most of the buildings have **domes**, built to alleviate the summer heat.

The town is also famous for its **carpets**, which often bear the traditional cross of the Souf. The daily **souq** in the old part of town is at its most animated on Friday.

SOUTHERN ALGERIA

This is Algeria's tourism trump card and the area that has taken in most visitors over the years. The Saharan 'capital' Tamanrasset, home to a large Tuareg population, is a collection of mud houses, international banks and

the famously veiled 'blue men'. Around here are **Illizi**, a busy desert outpost on the fringes of the Tassili N'Ajjer; **Djanet**, home to some of the best prehistoric rock art in the Sahara; and **Beni Abbès**, a spring-watered town on an escarpment overlooking an oasis in the west of the country. This is also the area from which most desert trekking expeditions start.

Once the security situation in the north improves and stabilises, overland companies might resume using the superb trans-Sahara route via Béchar and Adrar, which skirts the Grand Erg Occidental and passes through some of the most dramatic scenery in North Africa.

EL-GOLÉA

☎ 029 / pop 30,000

On the eastern edge of the Grand Erg Occidental, this little oasis town spouts the sweetest natural water in the whole of the Sahara – it's bottled and sold across the country.

To get here, you'll have to fly to Ghardaïa or In Salah and get a bus from there. There are regular buses to Ghardaïa, Timimoun and In Salah (US\$3, four hours, daily).

TIMIMOUN

☎ 049 / pop 27,000

Timimoun is a storybook Saharan oasis town. Its palmeraie counts over 400,000 palm trees and there are views of an ancient salt lake and distant dunes from the edge of an escarpment upon which the town is built. The architecture is a magnificent terracotta colour, with smooth shapes and soft lines curving around the windows.

A handy highlight that doubles as accommodation is **Hotel Gourara** (☎ 90 26 27; s/d US\$23/30; ☎), which was constructed in the 1950s by the legendary French architect Fernand Pouillon, who built practical structures whilst respecting local building traditions. The Gourara is an ochre-coloured, slightly dilapidated building, with two swimming pools glittering amid palm trees. There are stunning oasis views from its terrace, especially at sunset, when sighing over the romantic atmosphere is obligatory. The hotel is a 15-minute walk down the main street from the central market towards the palmeraie.

Close to Timimoun is **Tasfaoud village**, a small oasis with a 13th-century Almohad castle and a fascinating desert irrigation system that's a gravitation point for all the village houses.

To get here, you'll have to fly to Ghardaïa and get a bus from there. Daily buses go to Béchar (US\$2, 9½ hours) and Ghardaïa (US\$7, 11 hours).

IN SALAH

☎ 029 / pop 34,000

In Salah, the main town between El-Goléa and Tamanrasset, is a laid-back place with a welcoming feel. Its main curiosity is the inescapable salty water – even the local soft drinks are made from it!

The main feature here is the **creeping sand dune**, which has effectively cut the town in two. Scramble to the top for views over both sides.

The only hotel is the upmarket state-run **Hôtel Tidikelt** (☎ 37 03 93) near the bus station.

The bus station is on the main Tamanrasset to El-Goléa road, which passes about 1km east of town. Daily buses go to Tamanrasset (US\$15, 12 to 20 hours) and El-Goléa (US\$3, four hours).

Air Algérie flies here four times weekly (US\$300, 3½ hours). You can fly to Tamanrasset from here (US\$300, three hours, three times a week).

TAMANRASSET

☎ 029 / pop 62,500

Tamanrasset is set at the foot of Algeria's most gorgeous landscape: the Hoggar Mountains. It's a major centre for Algeria's Saharan tourism and the last town on the route south to Niger. Tamanrasset is the 'capital' of the Tuaregs, with the veiled men and tattooed women going about their daily business amid low mud houses. Try to make it here for the **Tuareg Music Festival**, which is held in various venues in the desert from 28 to 31 December.

Tamanrasset is a surprisingly busy place with plenty of modern amenities, including several banks, two Air Algérie offices, innumerable travel agencies and an ONAT branch. The travel agencies and ONAT organise tours to Assekrem (opposite). Almost everything can be found on the main street, Ave Emir Abdelkader.

Slightly unreliable internet access is available at **Tamtamet** (per hr US\$1.50), across the small square in the centre of town. The consulates of Mali and Niger are next to each other on Rue Fougani, towards the southern end of town.

There are some good camping grounds and a hotel or two in Tamanrasset. **Camping**

4x4 (☎ 34 22 58; agence4x4tam@hotmail.com; camping per person US\$5, car/truck US\$1/2, s/d US\$12/22), near the village of Adriane, is popular with foreigners. It's a peaceful, decent place with basic facilities.

Gîte Saharien (☎ 34 46 71; Ave Emir Abdelkader; camping per person US\$8, s US\$20) is an excellent campsite and B&B, with palm and orange trees shading the traditional Tuareg tents. Gîte Saharien also offers simple, gravel-floored rooms and delicious food that you can munch by the fireplace in the winter. It's about 3.5km out of town, at the base of Hadrian mountain. The place is run by the Taghant agency, which also provides car and camel excursions, airport transfers and official invitations (for pre-trip visa applications).

Most restaurants in town offer whole grilled chickens for around US\$6. **Restaurant La Couronne** (Ave Emir Abdelkader; mains around US\$9) is one of the few places with good couscous. The unimpressive **Hôtel Tahat** (☎ 34 42 72; Ave Emir Abdelkader) has the only bar in town.

Air Algérie flies between Tamanrasset and the major northern towns – Algiers (US\$300, 2½ hours, daily), Oran and Constantine – as well as El-Goléa, Djanet, Illizi, Ghardaïa (US\$300, 2½ hours, once a week) and In Salah (US\$300, three hours, three times a week). The French company **Point-Afrique** (www.point-afrique.com in French) also has very convenient weekly flights to Paris and Marseille.

The bus station is on the road to the north of town. By bus it can take 12 to 20 hours to In Salah (US\$15). There are infrequent buses to In Guezzam (US\$18, 23 hours, weekly), near the border with Niger; regular 4WDs that leave when they're full also cover this route (US\$20, nine hours).

ASSEKREM

Watching the sun set and rise across the sea of mountains from Assekrem, in the Hoggar range, is an unmissable Algerian experience. Assekrem is about 80km northeast of Tamanrasset and hard to get to without your own vehicle. The many travel agencies in Tamanrasset operate tours to Assekrem, with some good deals available for groups. Overnight trips run by ONAT are decent value at US\$90 per vehicle, but there isn't much service. If you're without a vehicle, you could hitch a lift with another tourist group. There is a basic **refuge** (per person incl dinner & breakfast US\$20) at the top, where you can join in some fun card games or checkers with the Tuaregs. Take warm clothes; it gets chilly at night.

ALGERIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Hotels in Algeria tend to be either expensive state-run tourist hotels with good facilities or cheap, tatty places intended for local visitors. There are some excellent campsites in the south, particularly in Tamanrasset. For travellers on a budget, there are branches of HI-affiliated youth hostels (facilities are minimal) in most towns.

BUSINESS HOURS

Most businesses in Algeria keep standard opening hours (p1102), but everything closes on Friday for the Islamic weekend.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Although safety has significantly increased, a number of measures still have to be observed

PRACTICALITIES

- *El Khabar* (www.elkhabar.com), private, Arabic-language daily; *Le Quotidien d'Oran* (www.quotidien-oran.com), *El Watan* (www.elwatan.com), *Liberté* (www.liberte-algerie.com), *La Tribune* (www.latribune-online.com) are private, French-language dailies; *French El Moudjahid* (www.elmoudjahid-dz.com) and Arabic *Ech Chaab* (www.ech-chaab.com) are state-run.
- Algerian Radio (www.algerian-radio.dz) is operated by state-run Radio-Television Algerienne, and runs national Arabic, Berber and French networks and local stations; BBC World Service is available on shortwave (15485kHz and 12095kHz).
- Enterprise Nationale de Television (ENTV) is the state-run TV station; BRTV is the Berber station, transmitted via satellite from France.
- Electricity is 220V, with two-pin, European-style wall plugs.
- Algeria uses the metric system.

when travelling in Algeria. Foreigners are not usually targets of violence, but the indiscriminate nature of bomb attacks on public places, such as markets and bus and train stations, makes caution extremely advisable. The northern part of the country is still unsafe and travel to this area is not advised. Driving alone in the desert has been made illegal after the 2003 kidnappings, and a number of checkpoints exist in the desert in order to ensure people only travel in groups.

The best way to get around is to travel by air or with a group, though air fares are quite expensive and a group of unarmed men did try to hijack a domestic Air Algérie flight in January 2003.

Expeditions into the Sahara pose a whole host of other problems, from fuel shortages to sandstorms and bandits (see Sun, Sand & Safety, p80). Make sure you are adequately briefed and prepared well before departure.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Algerian Embassies & Consulates

Algeria has diplomatic representation in the following neighbouring countries: Morocco (p192), Niger (p449) and Tunisia (p239).

Elsewhere, Algerian embassies and consulates include the following:

Australia (☎ 02-6286 7355; fax 02-6286 7037; www.algeriaemb.org.au; 9 Terrigal Cres, O'Malley, ACT 2606)

Canada (Wilbrod St ☎ 613-789 8505/0282; www.ambalgot.com; 500 Wilbrod St, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N2; Daly Ave ☎ 613-789 5823/9592; fax 613-789 7022; 435 Daly Ave, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6H3) Embassy is on Wilbrod St, consulate on Daly Ave.

France (☎ 01 53 93 20 20; fax 01 42 25 10 25; 50 rue de Lisbonne, 75008 Paris)

Netherlands (☎ 070 3522 954; Van Stolklaan 173, 2585 JS Den Haag)

UK (☎ 020-7221 7800; www.algerianembassy.org.uk; 54 Holland Park, London W11 3RS)

USA (☎ 202-265 2800; www.algeria-us.org; 2118 Kalorama Rd, NW, Washington, DC 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in Algeria

Countries with diplomatic representation in Algiers include the following:

Canada (☎ 91 49 51; 18 Mustapha Khalef St, Ben Akmoum) Also provides consular assistance to Australians.

France (☎ 69 24 88; 25 Chemin Gadrrouche, Hydra)

Germany (☎ 74 19 41; 165 Chemin Sfindja)

Italy (☎ 92 23 30; 18 Rue Mohamed Ouidir Amellal)

Libya (☎ 92 15 02; 15 Chemin Cheikh Bachir el-Ibrahimi, El-Biar)

Mali (☎ 69 13 51; Cité DNC/ANP, Villa No 15, Hydra)

Mauritania (☎ 93 71 06; 30 Rue du Vercors)

Morocco (☎ 60 74 08; 8 Rue des Cèdres, Parc de la Reine)

Niger (☎ 78 89 21; 54 Rue du Vercors)

Spain (☎ 92 27 13; 46 Bis Rue Med Chabane)

Tunisia (☎ 69 13 88; 11 Rue du Bois de Bologne)

UK (☎ 23 00 68; fax 23 0067; 7th floor, Hotel Hilton International Alger, Pins Maritimes, Palais des Expositions, 16130 El Mohammadia)

US (☎ 69 14 25; 4 Chemin Cheikh Bachir el-Ibrahimi, El-Biar)

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexual sex is illegal for both men and women in Algeria, and incurs a maximum penalty of three years in jail and a stiff fine. You're unlikely to have any problems as a tourist, but discretion is advised.

HOLIDAYS

Algeria observes Islamic holidays (p1106) as well as the following national holidays:

Labour Day 1 May

Revolutionary Readjustment (1965) 19 June

Independence Day 5 July

National Day (Revolution Day) 1 November

INTERNET ACCESS

Access is widely available, though connections vary. Prices are reasonable (around US\$1.50 per hour).

MONEY

Some Algerians, especially in rural areas, might give prices in centimes rather than dinars (there are 100 centimes in a DA1). To confuse matters further, they might also drop the thousands, so a quote of '130' means 130,000 centimes (ie DA1300).

Changing foreign currency is no problem at banks and larger hotels. Travellers cheques might be accepted in Algiers; credit cards can be used only in the international chain hotels where they still use the old fraud-friendly slip system. You'll need dinar for day-to-day expenses, although tourist-oriented businesses (hotels, airlines, tour companies etc) might accept US dollars.

POST & TELEPHONE

The postal system in Algeria is very slow, so it's advisable to send mail from a major town.

International phone calls can be made from any of the public Taxiphone offices found in most towns.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist offices can be found in many southern towns and are generally pretty helpful. The state-run travel agency, **ONAT** (Office National Algérien du Tourisme; ☎ 021-74 44 48; www.onat-dz.com; 126b Rue Didouche Mourad), organises excursions and is handy for lone travellers wanting to join a tour.

VISAS

Everyone except Moroccan and Tunisian nationals needs a visa to enter Algeria. Nationals of Israel, Malawi and Taiwan are not allowed into the country, and if you have a stamp in your passport from any of these countries your application might be rejected.

If you're getting an Algerian visa before leaving home, you need a letter from your employer or university to say you'll be coming back after your holiday and an 'invitation' to visit the country from an Algerian contact or tourist agency (the latter is available from several travel agencies in Tamanrasset). Applications lodged in Europe might also require three photos. Getting a visa en route is usually pretty straightforward in Niger, Chad and Mali.

Costs of a 30-day visa are around US\$45. Some embassies ask for photocopies of your passport.

Visa Extensions

Visa extensions can be obtained from the **Department des Etrangers** (Blvd Zighout Youssef 19A, Algiers), but are not easy to obtain.

Visas for Onward Travel

Visas for the following countries are available from embassies in Algiers (see opposite) or consulates in Tamanrasset.

Mali One-month visas cost US\$36 and are usually issued in 24 hours. You'll need two photos.

Niger One-month visas are issued the same day, costing between US\$35 and US\$0. Three photos and three application forms are required.

TRANSPORT IN ALGERIA

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Air Algérie (☎ 021-74 24 28; www.airalgerie.dz; 1 Pl Maurice Audin, Algiers) serves destinations throughout North and West Africa, including Tripoli (Libya), Casablanca (Morocco), Dakar (Senegal) and Bamako (Mali). It also flies daily to

France, three times a week to London, two or three times weekly to Dubai and two to five times weekly to Germany. **Air France** (☎ 021-73 16 10; Immeuble Maurétania, Pl de Perou, Algiers) mainly serves Europe. Most travel agents sell tickets for both companies.

Many tourists fly into Algeria by flying to Tamanrasset – either nonstop direct from Europe or with a change of planes at Algiers.

Land

LIBYA

The main crossing points into Libya are at Bordj Messaouda and Tin Alkoum (between Djanet and Ghat). However, at the time of research it was not advisable to use these routes.

MALI & MAURITANIA

Algeria's southwestern borders are frequently closed, and there is very little transport along these routes. The road to Mauritania also passes near the disputed territory of Western Sahara, which is best avoided.

MOROCCO

The border with Morocco has been closed for some time due to ongoing political disputes.

NIGER

The border between Algeria and Niger slices through the emptiness of the central Sahara, with just one official crossing point between the sandy outposts of In Guezzam and Assamakka, on the main overland route from Tamanrasset to Agadez (the Route du Hoggar). Driving through the desert alone is now illegal but, surprisingly, there's plenty of traffic (mainly local trucks and 4WDs, plus a few brave travellers in their own vehicles), so backpackers can find lifts, although you'll probably have to pay and do the trip in stages. If you're very lucky you might get one lift all the way.

From Tamanrasset, trucks and battered old 4WDs run to the Algeria border post at In Guezzam (US\$18, nine to 12 hours plus waiting time), where you can complete most formalities. From here you can hitch on a truck to the lonely checkpoint on the actual border and then to the chaotic Niger border post at Assamakka. Lifts on trucks between the border posts will cost about US\$3, but as it's mostly private vehicles they can ask for whatever they want. From Assamakka, numerous trucks and 4WDs head to Arlit (about US\$6) and Agadez (US\$9).

The road is sealed as far as Tamanrasset, a sandy track from there to Arlit, then tarmac to Agadez and beyond. Note that a 'tourist tax' of CFA1000 (US\$2) is payable at the Niger border post. Make sure you have some CFA francs or you'll have to pay DA1000 (US\$15) instead.

TUNISIA

There are numerous border-crossing points between Tunisia and Algeria, but the main one is just outside Hazoua on the route between El-Oued and Tozeur. This is used by *louages* (shared taxis), travellers driving their own vehicle and the odd overland truck.

Sea

At the time of research, Algiers was the only advisable entry port for travellers. The ferry terminal is near the main train station. The French company **SNCM** (☎ 021-73 65 69; 28 Blvd Zighout Youssef, Algiers) operates ferry services between Marseille and Algiers once or twice a week. **Algérie Ferries** (☎ 021-42 30 48; Gare Maritime, Algiers) serves Algiers, Annaba, Béjaia and Oran from Marseille via Alicante (Spain). Tickets between Algiers and Marseille (the most common route) cost around US\$160/240 for a seat/cabin. The voyage takes about 21 hours.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Air Algérie (☎ 021-74 24 28; www.airalgerie.dz; 1 Pl Maurice Audin, Algiers) offers extensive domestic services. Popular domestic routes are from Algiers to Tamanrasset and Ghardaïa (see p73).

Bus

Long-distance buses are run by various regional companies, mainly in the north but also as far south as Tamanrasset. Tickets can

be in great demand on less frequently serviced routes, such as from In Salah to Tamanrasset, so you should book in advance. Fares include the following: In Salah to Tamanrasset (US\$15), Algiers to Ghardaïa (US\$8), Adrar to In Salah (US\$1), El-Goléa to In Salah (US\$3) and Adrar to Timimoun (US\$1).

Car & Motorcycle

Driving around the Sahara by yourself is illegal, since 2003 and the kidnapping of tourists. You can rent a car in Algiers and drive along the coast, though locals recommend renting a driver as well, for safety.

Hitching

Independent travel in all parts of Algeria is risky because of the current political situation. However, the Sahara has long been a popular region for adventurers in their own vehicles, so backpackers have traditionally hitched rides. A great deal of patience is often required before securing a lift, especially now, as there are relatively few visitors. Most tourist vehicles are already full of passengers and kit, so drivers might be unwilling to take an extra load. You might be lucky, however, and meet a loner who's happy to offer a spare seat in return for help digging when the car gets stuck in the sand and possibly a contribution towards fuel.

The main route across the Sahara is the Route du Hoggar, which runs from Ghardaïa via El-Goléa and In Salah to Tamanrasset (and then on to the border and Arlit in Niger). The road is tar all the way to Tamanrasset. Other less-used roads include the eastern Route du Tassili N'Ajjer, which runs from Hassi Messaoud to Tamanrasset across the Grand Erg Oriental, and the Route du Tanezrouft, which

runs from Adrar to Borj Mokhtar near the Mali border. The latter two routes include sections of sandy track (known as *piste* in all the Sahara countries).

Local Transport

Trucks and 4WDs carrying paying passengers are more common than buses as means of transport in the south. Prices for 4WD transport are negotiable, but you should figure on around US\$20 for a full day's driving (eg Tamanrasset to In Guezzam).

Louages (shared taxis) operate only in the north of the country. They run when full and are more expensive than buses.

Train

The northern train line connects Oran, Algiers, Constantine and Annaba. Additional lines run south from Oran to Béchar and from Constantine to Touggourt. Many services, including to Tlemcen (for Morocco) and Tunis (Tunisia), were suspended at the time of research.

SUN, SAND & SAFETY

In February 2003, the dangers of desert driving were dramatically illustrated when no fewer than 32 people disappeared in the Sahara. Several separate expeditions, mostly German and Swiss, vanished in different parts of southeast Algeria. Speculation was rife about their fate: one Algerian source even claimed they were being held illegally in a military facility and the searches were 'nothing but a sordid show aimed at impressing the media'. By March, however, it had become apparent that the travellers were in the hands of an extreme Islamist group, the Salafist.

In May, 17 of the hostages were released unharmed and eventually the remaining party was tracked down to Mali, having crossed the southern Saharan border. They were successfully rescued after long negotiations.

In light of these events, independent travel in the desert areas is not permitted, and Algerian authorities now have checkpoints throughout the desert to ensure people only travel in groups.

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