

Central African Republic

If it's the 'real' Africa you're looking for, Central African Republic (CAR) may be it. A country of staggering rare natural beauty, with some of the world's most amazing wildlife, it nonetheless remains underdeveloped, fragmented and poverty-stricken. It's a country, like so many in Africa, that could and should be very prosperous; it's just that pesky 'government-that-doesn't-care-about-its-people' factor that gets in the way. The country has important mineral deposits and great natural resources, yet precious little of the wealth generated seeps down to the population. For centuries CAR has endured rapacity from invaders and then its own leaders. Sadly this is ongoing. So, why would the people of such a historically plundered nation be open, friendly and generous? As we said, that's the real Africa for you.

Travelling here is a backpacking bungee jump. At the time of writing most of the country was not considered stable or safe enough to travel through. Look at the neighbours: to the east CAR borders on the troubled Darfur region of Sudan, to the north Chad is often in turmoil, to the south things are far from placid in Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Only to the west is Cameroon a region of relative stability. Apart from business and government callers to the capital, a handful of lucky visitors search for gorillas and elephants in the Dzanga-Sangha National Park, in the little finger of land in the southeast corner of the CAR. Whatever you do check the situation with your embassy before attempting to visit.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 624,980 sq km
- **ATMs** None
- **Borders** Cameroon, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Chad
- **Budget** US\$15 to US\$50 per day
- **Capital** Bangui
- **Languages** French (official) plus Sango (national), Arabic and tribal languages
- **Money** Central African franc (CFA); US\$1 = CFA498
- **Population** 4.3 million
- **Seasons** Wet (May to November; dry (November to April, a bit longer in the south)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 236; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +1
- **Visa** US\$65 for 30 days; required by most and must be obtained in advance



HISTORY

CAR was home to one of humanity's earliest civilisations. Thousands of years ago there was an advanced culture whose artisans and work found a ready market from nations far afield. They were extensively settled and relatively sophisticated even before ancient Egypt's time in the sun. However, beginning in the middle of the last millennium the slave trade gradually decimated this well-organised society. Tens of thousands were dragged westward to the Americas, while Arab conquerors from the north completed the devastation. As recently as the 19th century, 20,000 slaves were sold each year on the Egyptian market.

Colonial Days

France launched into CAR in the 1880s, finding a shattered society rich in agricultural potential. It divided the country into 17 parts and offered them to European companies in exchange for a fixed annual payment plus 15% of agricultural profits. Vast cotton, coffee and tobacco plantations were established and worked by an often brutally conscripted local population. Resistance to the French was there from the outset and continued until the late 1920s. This resistance was finally broken as a combined result of French military action, famine and severe epidemics of smallpox.

The first signs of nationalism began to spring up after WWII via Barthleméy Boganda's Mouvement d'Evolution Sociale de l'Afrique Noire. In 1960, one year after Boganda was killed in a mysterious plane crash, his party forced the French to grant independence. CAR has been an unhappy mess ever since.

Forty Years of Chaos

The leadership was taken over by David Dacko, who became the country's first president. Dacko's rule quickly became repressive and dictatorial and in 1966 he was overthrown by an army commander and close relative, Jean-Bédél Bokassa, kicking off 13 years of one of the most sordid, brutal and notorious regimes Africa has ever experienced. All opposition was soon snuffed out and offenders were publicly clubbed to death – often with Bokassa's personal involvement.

France, wanting the uranium deposits at Bakouma and the abundant big-game hunting grounds near the Sudan border (personally sponsored by the former French president,

WARNING

While things have improved in Bangui (although care should still be taken), the situation in other parts of the country, particularly in the north, continues to be unpredictable and potentially very dangerous. Hold-ups and robberies on the roads are common. Our on-the-ground research in this country has been very limited, so information in this chapter may not be reliable. Check the situation before travelling to CAR.

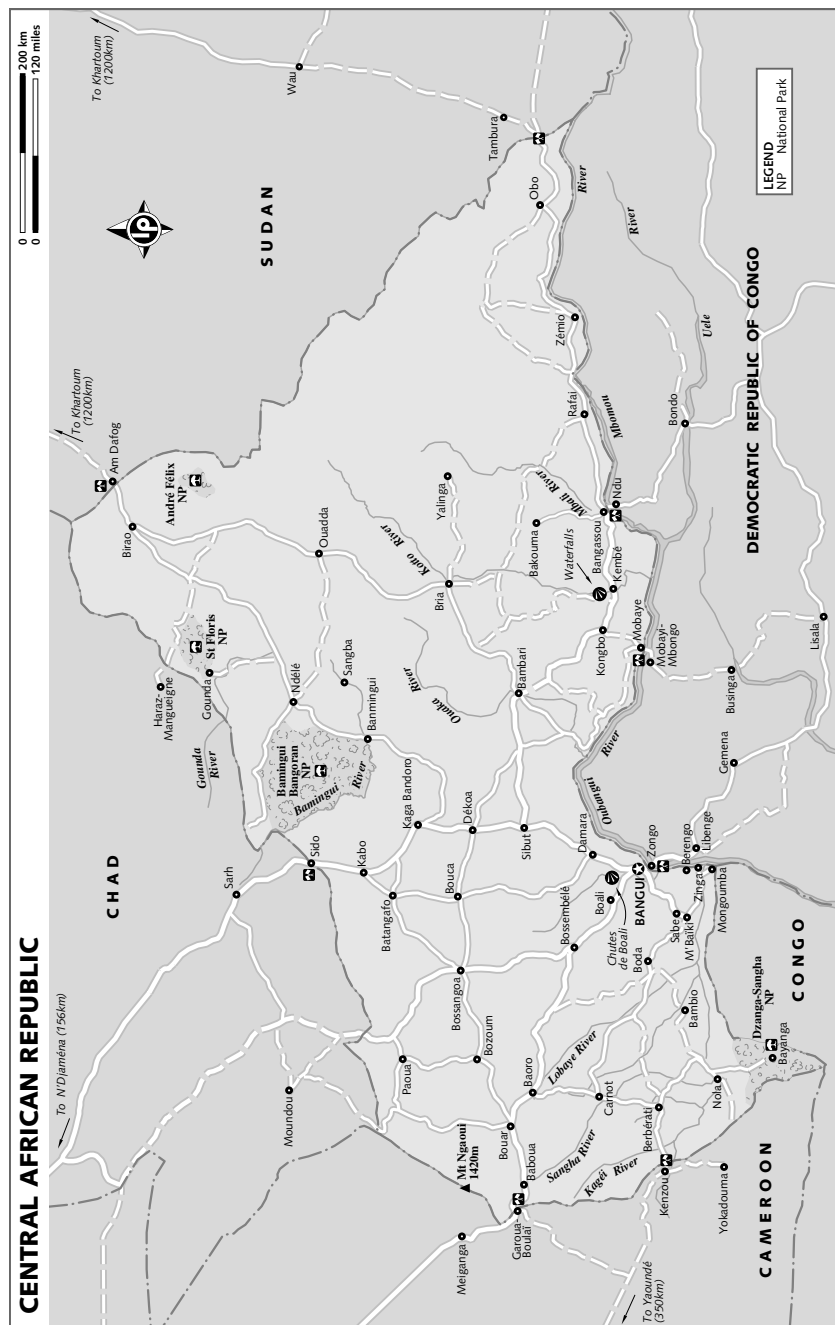
Giscard d'Estaing), supported Bokassa and bailed out his floundering economy.

Using the country's mineral resources as carrots, Bokassa also negotiated loans from South Africa and private US banks. He then squandered virtually all this money on prestigious projects, many of them never completed. His final and most foolish fantasy was to have himself crowned 'emperor' of a renamed Central African Empire. Despite the worldwide derision provoked by the 1977 coronation, France picked up most of the tab of more than US\$20 million – equivalent to CAR's annual earnings.

Such excess, together with a massacre of schoolchildren in Bangui, made Bokassa an embarrassment to his backers. In 1979, France abruptly cut off aid to the 'empire' and, while Bokassa was in Libya seeking still more funds, flew in former president David Dacko together with loads of French paratroopers.

Despite Bokassa's reputation, Dacko proved equally unpopular and was overthrown in 1981 and replaced by André Kolingba, who in 1986 created a one-party state. All opposition groups were banned and their supporters jailed, harassed or forced to flee the country. At this point the unstoppable Bokassa popped up again but was promptly convicted of treason, murder and, for good measure, cannibalism, and sentenced to death. This was changed to life imprisonment and he was confined to a folly he had constructed at Berengo.

Kolingba's 12 years of absolute rule ended when he was defeated in presidential elections in 1993 and Ange-Félix Patassé became the country's leader of the first real civilian government. Patassé immediately stacked the government with fellow tribesmen, which prompted a 1996 army mutiny, led by officers



from a southern tribe. The capital became a war zone although the Bangui Accords, a regionally brokered peace deal between Patassé and the rebels, was signed in 1997 and backed up by an 800-strong African peacekeeping force. Elections were held in 1998 and won by Patassé, who was then re-elected in 1999 amid claims of vote rigging.

CAR Today

In late 2002, the former army chief-of-staff, General François Bozizé, led ex-soldiers in an unsuccessful coup attempt. Civil war resumed and Bozizé soon gained control of areas in the north and south and even, at times, part of the capital. People were forced to flee their homes, villages and even the country. Tens of thousands fled over CAR's five borders as life became unbearable: women and young girls were raped by fighters allied to the government from the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and towns held captive by government or rebel forces were cut off from outside supplies. Less than six months later Patassé made the familiar African mistake of popping out of the shop, on this occasion on a state visit to Niger. Bozizé promptly marched into Bangui and Patassé, having survived seven previous coup attempts, scooted off to exile in Cameroon.

Patassé was deservedly hated: soldiers and government workers had not been paid for months and the Congolese rebel group employed as enforcers had spent most of their time raping and looting. The euphoria was short lived as Bozizé's men also seemed to enjoy a little looting and the new ruler had imported his own unpopular support team, in this case Arabic-speakers from neighbouring Chad. The French backing Patassé once enjoyed had been replaced by Libyan backing, in exchange for a lucrative monopoly on the country's diamond and gold production, but in turn that was replaced by the support of Central African Economic & Monetary Community (CEMAC) peacekeepers who quickly departed.

Bozizé made the familiar promise to hold elections but the second part of his promise, not to stand himself, was conveniently forgotten. Despite opposition from another former coup leader, André Kolbinga, the election in 2005 was won by Bozizé with, it appears, only a moderate amount of vote fixing and intimidation. Since then the safety situation in Bangui has improved (it's now merely bad,

not awful), but the government still does not control all of the country and the economy remains close to bankrupt. Relations with neighbouring Chad may mean that the CAR is used by the Sudanese government to attack rebels in Darfur.

CULTURE

CAR's 4.3 million people comprise many tribes, ethnic groups and languages. Subsistence agriculture and forestry are the backbone of CAR and more than 70% of the population lives a rural existence. The main agricultural products are cotton, coffee, tobacco, tapioca, yams, millet, corn, bananas and timber. The average worker's annual income is US\$310.

The national psyche has taken a battering due to ongoing political instability in the countryside and protracted moves by governments and rebels to force people from their homes (an act that perpetuates the poverty). Life is tough and so, like all humans, the people of CAR are glad for a release. They like to drink banana and palm wine or beer and dance the mambo, *gbadoumba* and *lououdou*. Understandably, they also look to the afterlife – religion is paramount here, being evenly split between Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and indigenous beliefs. Ancient animistic convictions strongly influence Christianity here.

ENVIRONMENT

CAR, roughly the same size as France, is landlocked and almost smack bang in the middle of Africa. It has virgin rainforests and some of the most pristine national parks in the world. The Dzanga-Sangha National Park is home to the Aka people (Pygmies; singular is MoAka, plural is BaAka), flowering tropical plants, beautiful butterflies, and some of the highest densities of lowland gorillas and forest elephants in Africa.

The country is one immense plateau varying in height between 600m and 700m, with scattered hills in the northeast and southwest. The closest thing to a real mountain is Mt Ngaoui, which at 1420m is the highest point in the country. Otherwise, the sweeping savannah grasslands are interspersed with lots of rivers. CAR has long had a reputation as one of the last great wildlife refuges, but increased poaching has diminished this standing in recent years. Logging forests has also threatened animals and BaAka, and opened the forests to even more poaching.

Despite the enormous tourism potential and ample natural resources, CAR is one of the least developed countries on the continent.

The climate is tropical with hot, dry winters and mild to hot, wet summers. Natural hazards to the environment include hot, dry dusty winds affecting the northern areas, and flooding in the rainy season.

BANGUI

pop 670,000

Bangui, the capital of CAR, is set beside the Oubangui River – the most important river in the country. It therefore follows that the city is the biggest trading port. Although petty thievery remains a problem, the situation is not as bad as it used to be except, perhaps, at Kilomètre 5, the transport hub.

The French founded Bangui in 1880 (naming it after the nearby rapids) and then constructed the city – à la France – with wide, shaded boulevards and a central market area from where everything radiated. These days, this area is considered the old town, but all public transport and activity still converges here.

ORIENTATION

You can take a public or private taxi from the airport – both are more expensive at night. All major avenues radiate from the Pl de la République, the centre of the capital. It's a desolate urban space as many of the buildings were shelled or torched during the long civil war.

The heart of the African quarter is the unmarked K-Cinq intersection (Kilomètre 5) west of town (known variously and confusingly as Km 5, Kilo 5, Kam Cinq, or PK5 – pronounced 'payka sink'). It has the largest market and lots of bars and nightclubs. K-Cinq and Ave du Lt Koudoukou, which leads off it, are the city's liveliest areas for locals but also the most dangerous. Muggers (sometimes drunk) are on the streets here day and night so don't venture out alone.

INFORMATION

Check commissions before changing money. The UBAC bank used to be better than the BIAO bank.

Hospita Caumuomier (☎ 61 0600) The main hospital.

Maison de la Presse (☎ 61 4284) A good stock of French books and magazines and a small range of international media.

Martin Luther King Centre (Ave David Dacko) Next to the US embassy, this centre had an air-con library with magazines, newspapers and CNN, but the embassy itself was closed from 2002 to 2005 and has only partially reopened.

Ministère de l'Environnement et du Tourisme (☎ 61 7921; BP 830, Ave Boganda)

Post office (Ave des Martyrs) Near the Socatel building. The mail service is very slow, although poste restante is efficient (the post office charges a small fee per letter but only keeps them for a limited period). You can send faxes and telexes from here.

Socatel (☎ 61 4268; BP 939 Ave des Martyrs, Bangui) You can make phone calls from here.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The **Musée de Boganda** (Rue de l'Industrie) is well organised with helpful guides. There's an interesting collection of local musical instruments that you can try out, and good displays on the BaAka and their culture.

Bangui has many markets. **Marché Central** in the centre of town is normally bustling, but is open mornings only. Avoid the market at K-Cinq; there are more thieves here than goods for sale. For artisan goods, head for the **Centre Artisanal**. You'll find ebony carvings, porcupine-quill bracelets, leather goods, batiks, appliqué, African costumes, malachite, grass dolls, wood-carvings and masks. Many of the artefacts are common to the whole Congo basin.

If it's still open, the **Perroni Gallery** is beside the port. Cyr Perroni came to CAR from Martinique over 40 years ago and has trained many of the artisans whose works are sold at the Centre Artisanal. Perroni's paintings are, however, very expensive.

SLEEPING

There are no inexpensive hotels in Bangui, but there's a camp site near the centre of the African quarter (ie the unmarked K-Cinq intersection west of town). It's a rough part of town, with the largest (and most threatening) market and lots of bars. Ave du Lt Koudoukou is also pretty action-filled and both these areas have the cheapest accommodation. But be on your guard because as with all 'lively' traveller-magnets, these areas also attract the dodgiest of locals. So don't venture out on your own – particularly at night.

EATING & DRINKING

For cheap but tasty food, check out the stalls along the river southwest of the port for fish or beef brochettes, and the stalls beside the

taxi rank at the K-Cinq intersection – just don't risk the latter after dark. Other areas worth a look include Ave des Martyrs and Ave de la France.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bangui M'Poko International Airport is located 7km southeast of Bangui; for information on flights, see p536.

Transport for all towns except M'Baïki sets out from the *gare routière* (bus station) around 6am. M'Baïki services depart from a lane beside Le Punch Coco. All vehicles then cruise up and down Ave de l'Indépendance looking for passengers. Once a vehicle has picked up as many passengers as possible, it heads for the control post at Kilomètre 12, which is the best place for catching a ride given all transport must wait there to complete formalities. Destinations from here include M'Baïki, Bossembélé, Sibut, Bossangoa, Bambari, Bouar, Berbérati, Sido, Bangassou and Garoua-Boulai.

GETTING AROUND

There are cheap shared taxis and minibuses along all the main arteries. A private taxi costs US\$2, even to the airport. It costs more after dark.

AROUND BANGUI

CHUTES DE BOALI

These waterfalls are 70km northwest of Bangui and tumble 50m – 1m higher than Niagara! They're spectacular in the rainy season (summer), but no more than a trickle when it's dry. There is a small entry fee.

To get here, from Bangui take a minibus or shared taxi to Kilomètre 12, then a taxi or pick-up to the turn-off to the falls. From here it's a 5km walk to the chutes.

M'BAÏKI

Some 105km southwest of Bangui and surrounded by rainforest, M'Baïki is in a timber-, coffee- and tobacco-growing area. It's also the stopping-off point for visiting nearby BaAka encampments.

One bus and several pick-ups leave Bangui each day from K-Cinq. At **Berengo** you'll pass another folly that Bokassa built on his tribal lands. This now functions as a rural development centre and chicken farm. About

10km northeast of M'Baïki you'll find the village of **Sabe**, which is famous for its ebony sculptures.

AROUND CAR

The following towns are all regular stops on the routes from Bangui to either Yaoundé (Cameroon) or N'Djaména (Chad). They are reasonably set up for transit travellers, with basic accommodation options and a few eateries.

Bossembélé is the second-largest town on the route between Cameroon and Bangui, but there isn't much to do here. Further northwest, **Bouar** is a more frequent stopping place for travellers. The area is dotted with megalithic stone monuments and was also the site of a large French military base. Theft is a problem here.

Going north towards N'Djaména, **Sibut** marks the end of the sealed road and straggles around the junction where roads lead towards the Chad border and east to Bambari and Bangassou. **Kaga Bandoro**, about 120km further north, is also a regular stopover town for bus travellers.

DZANGA-SANGHA NATIONAL PARK

This national park, in the triangle of south-western CAR separating Cameroon from Congo, is probably the one corner of the country still attracting visitors. Bayanga is the main village near the park, on the banks of the Sangha River, and although a handful of intrepid visitors may come to Bayanga by road, negotiating countless checkpoints along the way, or even by river, most visitors probably arrive in chartered aircraft. Gorillas, elephants and Aka people are all found in this remote corner of Africa.

Bayanga has a number of small guest-houses offering simple accommodation, but the fly-in groups will probably stay at the riverside Doli Lodge (*doli* means elephant), which has rooms with luxuries such as private bathrooms and running water. The lodge is only open when a group, usually bringing their own supplies with them, turns up. Two Americans have been living in Bayanga for many years: Louis Sarno has spent 20 years with the BaAka while Andrea Turkalo has spent 15 years tracking a herd of elephants in the park.

VISITING DZANGA-SANGHA *Tony Wheeler*

I flew to Bayanga in a Dash 8 chartered by a South African company for a predominantly American tour group. Although we'd flown out of Port Gentil in Gabon, we had to stop at Yaoundé in Cameroon to refuel as no fuel was available in Bayanga for our return flight. From Yaoundé all the way to Bayanga the view below was of continuous jungle. Half the village seemed to have turned out to greet us when we landed on a very primitive-looking grass airstrip. Aircraft only turn up about once a month, so having our Dash 8 sitting there for a few days was quite an event.

To transport our party from the village into the national park required a small fleet of 4WDs, which had been driven here from the coast of Cameroon, 1500km away. One of the drivers told me that after they'd crossed the border into CAR they'd had to negotiate their way through 27 police checkpoints along the road to Bayanga. The last group through had been three months earlier.

'We're walking through the jungle in the Congo River basin, following a Pygmy tracker, looking for gorillas,' Maureen said to me the next day. 'How good is that?'

Only two or three visitors a day get to join the trackers following a troop of lowland gorillas from the Bai Hokou gorilla camp. We'd drawn the short straws and spent an amazing day, kicking off with a 28km (1½-hour) drive in one of the world's most beat-up Land Rovers. It wasn't that old and it may not have driven to the moon, but it clearly had been to hell and back again, and the trip to Bai Hokou was definitely on that route. We bounced through water-filled potholes, angled off deep ridges and for most of the distance virtually pushed through the encroaching jungle, occasionally snagging vines and trailing them behind us.

From the camp it was a couple of hours' walk to where the gorilla trackers had traced the troop and settled down to observe them. Our first sighting was of four gorillas perched high up in what looked like far too small a tree. Occasionally they'd nonchalantly swing out to what looked like much too flimsy a branch to support a hulking primate's weight.

Descending from the tree they then sat at ground level, observing us while we observed them. They moved off and we followed, leading to our encounter with the troop's leader, the impressive silverback Makumba. Lowland gorillas are smaller than the mountain variety more regularly encountered by visitors to East Africa, but when Makumba, the leader of a troop of 13 lowland gorillas, sat impassively, just across a small clearing from our group, he looked quite big enough. There were more sightings in the forest before we moved back to the camp and then set out again

to visit with a troop of mangabey monkeys. As it turned out we had been very lucky, the next day's visitors spent the whole day trekking through the jungle without ever seeing a gorilla.

The next day we drove out of Bayanga to a series of Aka villages to collect a group to go hunting. There were far more would-be-hunters than we could accommodate. I rode in the back of one of the pick-ups with a bunch of the hunters and Louis Sarno, an American and author of *Song from the Forest: My Life Among the Ba-Benjelle Pygmies*, who came to the area 20 years ago to study the music and stayed. It was a very noisy ride into the jungle, songs ricocheting back and forth between the pick-ups.

'They're belittling the men's genitals,' translated Louis as the women in our truck belted out a hunting song.

'And they're replying in kind,' he continued as another chorus sailed back from the truck ahead.

At our hunting spot the BaAka strung out their hunting nets within minutes. A series of 20m-long nets encircled an area where they thought there might be an animal and then the Pygmies shouted and yelled to drive their prey into the net. Soon a 'woo-ah' announced a blue duiker sighting and a rising chorus of 'woo-ahs' peaked as the tiny antelope was entangled in a net and despatched with a whack to the head. The nets were quickly moved to another location and a second blue duiker was caught with equal speed, but a third one escaped and that was it for the morning; nothing else turned up.

In the afternoon we drove to Bai Dzanga, an hour's drive and a half-hour's walk. Bai Dzanga is a clearing in the jungle with waterholes and mineral deposits, which elephants love. There were more than 50 elephants there, doing all the usual elephant things. From an observation stand to one side of the clearing they're watched over by Andrea Turkalo, an elephant observer who has been keeping watch over this herd for 15 years.

Their interactions quickly convince you that elephants are far more than big grey creatures. A very small baby elephant was frightened by a bull trumpeting and immediately its mother stood beside it, draping a comforting trunk over the baby. Two adolescents got into some sort of dispute and older elephants came over to sort things out and offer advice. A big bull marched over to the prime mineral deposit and other elephants quickly vacated the depression, deferring to the boss pachyderm.

CAR DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Bangui doesn't have any cheap hotel rooms, but does have cheap dorm-style accommodation and a camping ground in the centre of the city. Hotels outside the capital are cheap.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Thieves, armed rebels and the police are sinister enough to their own people, but particularly target foreigners. And if they don't get you, the chloroquine-resistant malaria might. AIDS is a serious problem, with at least 14% of the population afflicted. Oh, and swimming is not safe anywhere because of bilharzia.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

CAR Embassies & Consulates

CAR has diplomatic representation in the following countries, among others:

Cameroon (☎ 220 5155; Rue 1863, Bastos, Yaoundé)

Chad (☎ 523206; Rue 1036, N'Djaména)

Congo (☎ 81 4721; Rue Fourneau, Brazzaville)

Democratic Republic of Congo (☎ 33 571; Ave Pumbu 11, Gombé, Kinshasa)

Germany (☎ 49-228 23 35 64; Botschaftskanzlei, Johannitersträxe 19, D-53113 Bonn)

France (☎ 01 42 24 42 56; 30, Rue des Perchamps, 75116, Paris)

Sudan (☎ 0922815860; off Medani Rd, El-Maamoura)

USA (☎ 202-483-7800; 1618 22nd St NW, Washington, DC, 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in CAR

The following countries have diplomatic representation in Bangui:

Cameroon (☎ 61 1857; BP 935, Rue du Languedoc)

Chad (☎ 61 4677; BP 461, Ave Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, near Pl de la République)

Congo (☎ 61 1877; Ave Boganda)

Democratic Republic of Congo (☎ 61 8240; BP 1414, Rue Gamal Abdel Nasser)

France (☎ 61 3005; BP 884, Blvd Général de Gaulle)

Nigeria (☎ 61 0744; BP 1010, Ave des Martyrs)

Sudan (☎ 61 4097; BP 1351, Ave de la France)

USA (☎ 61 0200; BP 924, Ave David Dacko)

HOLIDAYS

As well as religious holidays listed on p1106, public holidays in CAR are:

New Year's Day 1 January

Anniversary of the Death of Barthélemy Boganda 29 March

Labour Day 1 May

National Day for Prayer 30 June

Independence Day 13 August

Assumption 15 August

All Saints Day 1 November

National Day 1 December

MONEY

The unit of currency is the Central African franc (CFA), made up of 100 centimes (these notes are also legal tender in Chad and Cam-

eroon). The import and export of local currency is limited to US\$125. There are no restrictions on the import of foreign currencies.

There are no ATMs in CAR and credit cards are generally not accepted. You can only exchange money in Bangui and Berbérati (banking hours are 7am to 11.30am Monday to Friday). Take travellers cheques in euros to avoid additional exchange-rate charges. Even so, commission charges can be very high and the exchange rates very low – up to 25% below the current internationally accepted rate.

TELEPHONE

There are no area codes in CAR. Telephone numbers were supposed to change from six-digit numbers to seven-digit numbers in 2005, but it didn't happen.

VISAS

Visas are required by most visitors and cost around US\$65 for 30 days. Where there is no

CAR embassy, visas can generally be obtained from the French embassy, but for certain nationalities (including Australians, New Zealanders and the Irish) the embassy may have no authority to issue visas, or may first have to radio Bangui for approval. This takes time.

Visa Extensions

Because you pay the full price of a new visa, getting a visa extension is an expensive hassle. The immigration office is about 1km up the hill to the north of the Presidential Palace in Bangui. Ask for directions at the army post behind the palace.

Visas for Onward Travel

Visas for some neighbouring countries might be obtained in Bangui. See p534 for embassy and consulate information.

Cameroon Visas are required by all and must be bought prior to arrival in the country. Visas are issued at the Cameroonian embassy in Bangui and cost around US\$60.

Chad Everybody except nationals of some central and west African countries needs a visa to visit Chad. Visas are not available at the airport or borders, and must be arranged in advance. Costs for 30-day visas can be as high as US\$100 for some nationalities.

Congo All visitors to Congo need a visa. You can buy a 15-day, multiple-entry visa on arrival for approximately US\$70, but you must have your yellow fever certificate with you. A one-month visa costs US\$120 if bought at an embassy; visa applications in Bangui can be issued the same day or by the next day.

Democratic Republic of Congo All visitors to the DRC need a visa. If flying into Kinshasa it is essential to get a visa beforehand. These cost approximately US\$75 for a one-month, single-entry visa, or US\$135 for a 60-day, multiple-entry tourist visa. If crossing by land you can often get a visa at the border within 24 hours.

Sudan Everyone except Egyptians need a visa (most people pay US\$160, and if there is evidence of travel to Israel you will be denied). See p211 for more detail.

DEPARTURE TAX

Airport departure tax is US\$19.

Land

The usual routes across the borders with CAR's neighbours are well-worn paths, but check with embassies and other reliable sources about the status of the crossings before you go, as the borders are all very prone to opening and closing. At the time of research the borders with Cameroon and the DRC were likely to be open but the border with Congo (Brazzaville) was closed. The borders with Sudan and Chad were no-go zones.

CAMEROON

The most popular crossing point is just east of the town of Garoua-Boulai. Trucks and buses run from Bangui to Garoua-Boulai, overnights in Bouar. From Garoua-Boulai, minibuses go to N'Gaoundal, and trains go from there to Yaoundé.

CHAD

Instability in Chad makes these border crossings particularly questionable. The main crossing is found at Sido, on the route to Sarh. Trucks may trundle from Bangui to Kaga Bandoro, but from there only occasional trucks and minibuses go to Kabo (where there's a checkpoint) and on to the border. Once over the border, pick-ups go from Sido and Maro to Sarh.

CONGO

A riverboat managed by **Socatraf** (☎ 61 4315; Rue Parent Bangui, Bangui) steams between Bangui and Brazzaville every two or three weeks from late May to early December. The cabins are basic and the journey takes about seven days. Alternatively, you can jump aboard one of the barges serving this route. They take twice as long, but are far less crowded; they depart every week, and the fare is around US\$25.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

The main border crossing between CAR and the DRC is over the Oubangui River from Bangui to Zongo. This (and the other border crossing at Mobaye) is usually closed to foreigners.

SUDAN

Routes into Sudan were only ever an option for hardy travellers (or is that foolhardy?), however the turmoil in Sudan's western Darfur region has firmly closed the door for everyone. The usual route ran from Bangui to Juba, via Obo, while the tough route from Bangui to Nyala via Birao in the northeastern corner of CAR used to take at least two weeks travel as traffic was rare and the roads appalling.

GETTING AROUND

Overcrowded 24-seater minibuses connect Bangui with all major towns. Trucks and pick-ups are also a popular way to travel; their prices are similar to minibus fares. Some main roads are sealed, but pockmarked with wheel-swallowing holes. During the dry season, the dirt roads to major towns and the Cameroon and Chad borders are OK, but when the rains begin they become very muddy and can be closed for days.

TRANSPORT IN CAR

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

There are weekly flights to Bangui from Paris with Air France and from Khartoum with Sudan Airways. There may also be connections from Cameroon, Benin, Gabon or Nigeria.

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