

Djibouti

Small in size, big in ambitions. Djibouti may be one of the tiniest, youngest and least-known nations in Africa, but it could also well be the most talented or, depending on your perspective, the most opportunistic. While its larger, more powerful neighbours are embroiled in a never-ending border dispute, Djibouti stands out as a haven of stability and neutrality.

Sadly, for the few travellers who venture here (except, maybe, for the French, who colonised the country and are more acquainted with its assets), Djibouti is usually nothing more than a transit point on the road to Eritrea or Ethiopia. But, you would miss out if you limited your experience of Djibouti to a few hours waiting for a connecting plane, train or bus. Why not settle in for a while and enjoy its dishevelled nightlife, luscious cuisine and well-organised infrastructure? Or immerse yourself in its eerie lunar landscapes, such as the other-worldly Lac Abbé or the vast salt lake, Lac Assal. Djibouti is also a great place for a few days' strenuous activity, with hiking, diving, snorkelling with whale sharks (whisper it softly) and even windsurfing on wheels (yes!) readily available. For such a tiny speck of land, there's a startling variety of adventure options. But if you need to recharge the batteries, you could simply laze on a pale-sand beach in the Gulf of Tadjoura. True, Djibouti will put a dent in your wallet, but if you have a penchant for bizarre or secretive places, be sure to squeeze it into your African odyssey. It could hold you captive longer than expected.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 23,000 sq km
- **ATMs** Two in Djibouti City (but they were not functioning at the time of research)
- **Borders** Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somaliland open
- **Budget** US\$50 to US\$100 a day
- **Capital** Djibouti City
- **Languages** Arabic, French, Afar, Somali
- **Money** Djibouti Franc (DFr); US\$1 = DFr176
- **Population** Approximately 704,000
- **Seasons** Hot (May–September), cool (mid-October to mid-April), wet (October–April)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 253; international access code 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +3
- **Visa** US\$35 to US\$60 for 30 days; obtainable at the airport for most Western nationals



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Djibouti City** (p623) Explore the alleyways of the Marché Central, full of pungent odours and bright colours, and test-drive the dance floors.
- **Moucha Island** (p627) Forget the hardships and take some time out on a white-sand beach.
- **Bay of Ghoubbet** (p625) Impress your firends left back home: 'What did you do in Djibouti?' 'I snorkelled with a whale shark!'
- **Lac Assal** (p627) Descend to the lowest point on the African continent at 150m below sea level.
- **Lac Abbé** (p629) Question reality while wandering flabbergasted in a Martian landscape, where *Planet of the Apes* was filmed.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The climate is hot, and from May until September you'll swelter under average daily temperatures of about 40°C. At the peak of the hot season, the thermometer can hit 45°C and the humidity is correspondingly high. The cooler season (including occasional rain) runs from mid-October to mid-April, when temperatures average 25°C. This is the ideal time to visit Djibouti, when the stifling heat is over. It's appreciably milder in the Goda Mountains year round.

HOW MUCH?

- **Internet connection** US\$1.75 per hour
- **One night with full board in a campement** US\$46
- **Djibouti City–Tadjoura by dhow** US\$2.90
- **Full diving package to Les Sept Frères islands** US\$460
- **Bunch of qat** Depends on quality!

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$0.90
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.85
- **Bottle of Heineken** US\$5.20
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$5.75
- **Fruit juice** US\$1.70

ITINERARIES

- **One week** Base yourself in Djibouti City (p623) and take a two- to three-day tour to explore Lac Assal (p627) and Lac Abbé (p629). Back in the capital, enjoy its culinary delights and spend late nights in the bars and clubs. Be sure to take a snorkelling trip to the Bay of Ghoubbet (p625) or a diving trip to the Gulf of Tadjoura (p625).
- **Two weeks** Decompress after all that sight-seeing with a few days of lounging on the beaches at Tadjoura (p628) or Moucha Island (p627). It's also worth taking a few days upcountry to explore the Goda Mountains (p628). Then head east to charmingly lethargic Obock (p629) before dhowing it back to Djibouti City.
- **One month** One month? The chances are that you've become *qat*-addicted!

HISTORY

From Aksum to Islam

Around the 1st century AD, Djibouti made up part of the powerful Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum, which included modern-day Eritrea and even stretched across the Red Sea to parts of southern Arabia. It was during the Aksumite era, in the 4th century AD, that Christianity first appeared in the region.

As the empire of Aksum gradually fell into decline, a new influence arose that would forever supersede the Christian religion in Djibouti: Islam. It was introduced to the region around AD 825 by Arab traders from Southern Arabia.

European Ambitions

In the second half of the 19th century, European powers competed to grab new colonies in Africa. The French, seeking to counter the British presence in Yemen on the other side of the Bab al-Mandab Strait, made agreements with the Afar sultans of Obock and Tadjoura that gave them the right to settle. In 1888, construction of Djibouti City began on the southern shore of the Gulf of Tadjoura. French Somaliland (present-day Djibouti) began to take shape.

France and the emperor of Ethiopia then signed a pact designating Djibouti as the 'official outlet of Ethiopian commerce'. This led to the construction of the Addis Ababa–Djibouti City railway, which was of vital commercial importance until recently.

Throwing Off the French Yoke

As early as 1949 there were a number of anticolonial demonstrations that were led by the Issa Somalis, who were in favour of the reunification of the territories of Italian, British and French Somaliland. Meanwhile, the Afars were in favour of continued French rule.

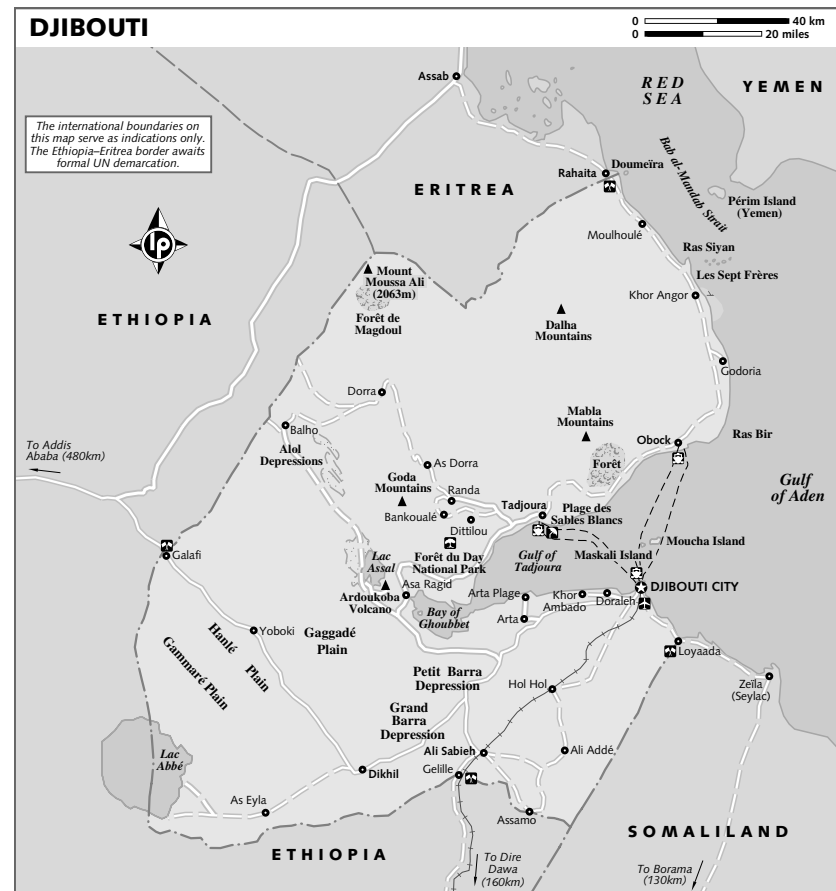
Major riots ensued, especially after the 1967 referendum, which produced a vote in favour of continued French rule – a vote achieved partly as a result of the arrest of opposition leaders and the massive expulsion of ethnic Somalis. After the referendum, the colony's name was changed from French Somaliland to the French Territory of the Afars and Issas.

On June 1977, the colony finally won its sovereignty from France. The country became the Republic of Djibouti.

Small Country, Adroit Leaders

Despite continuous clan rivalries between the two main ethnic groups, Afars and Issas, who have been jostling for power since the 1970s, Djibouti has learnt to exploit its strategic position.

When the Gulf War broke out in 1990, the country's president, Hassan Gouled Aptidon, while appearing to oppose the military build-up in the Gulf, simultaneously allowed France to increase its military presence in the country, as well as granting the Americans and Italians access to the naval port. And he



skilfully managed to retain the support of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for the modernisation of Djibouti port. During the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the 1990s, Djibouti port proved to be strategic when Ethiopia diverted its foreign trade through it (which it still does).

During the Second Gulf War in 2003, Djibouti continued to play an ambivalent role, allowing a US presence in the country – to the great displeasure of France.

Djibouti Today

The geographical position of the country, sandwiched between three stronger nations, and its strategic value as a port, is as important as ever. Djibouti continues to play the French and the American cards simultaneously, while maintaining good relations with Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somaliland, which are all considered as 'partners'.

In 2006, the first phase of the Doraleh Project, which consists of a large-capacity oil terminal about 8km east of the current seaport, was completed. Next stages include the creation of a container terminal and a large free zone. Thanks to this megaproject, partly financed by Dubai Port International, Djibouti aims to be the 'Dubai of East Africa'.

The year 2007 marked a symbolic turning point in the history of Djibouti as the country celebrated its 30th year as an independent nation.

CULTURE

Djiboutians are charming, respectful and very hospitable people. This has its origins in the traditionally nomadic culture of the two main ethnic groups, the Afars and Issas. Despite an increasing tendency towards a more sedentary lifestyle, most Djiboutians living in towns retain strong links with their nomadic past.

One of the most striking features in Djibouti is the overwhelming presence of *qat*. The life of most Djiboutian males seems to revolve entirely around the consumption of this mild narcotic. Every day, *qat* consumers meet their circle of friends in the *mabraz* (*qat* den) to *brouter* (graze). Here, a minimum of five hours is spent reclining on cushions, smoking cigarettes and sipping tea, while 'grazing' on the leaves. *Qat* is said to be the reason behind numerous divorces. Only 10% of women are thought to consume the plant regularly.

PEOPLE

Of Djibouti's estimated 704,000 inhabitants, about 46% are Afars and 45% are Issas. Both groups are Muslims. The rest of the population is divided between Arabs and Europeans. The south is predominantly Issa, while the north is mostly Afar. Ethnic tensions between Afars and Issas have always dogged Djibouti. These tensions came to a head in 1991, when Afar rebels launched a civil war in the north. A peace accord was brokered in 1994, but ethnic hostility has not completely waned.

ARTS & CRAFTS

Dance is arguably the highest form of culture in Djibouti, along with oral literature and poetry. Some dances celebrate major life events, such as birth, marriage or circumcision.

If you are looking for handicrafts, the traditional Afar and Somali knife and the very attractive Afar woven straw mats (known in Afar as *fiddima*) are among the finest products.

ENVIRONMENT

Djibouti's 23,000 sq km can be divided into three geographic regions: the coastal plains which feature white, sandy beaches; the volcanic plateaus in the southern and central parts of the country; and the mountain ranges in the north, where the altitude reaches over 2000m above sea level. Essentially the country is a vast wasteland, with the exception of pockets of forest and dense vegetation to the north.

Livestock rearing is the most important type of agriculture. As demand for scarce grazing land mounts, the forests of the north are increasingly coming under threat, including the fragile Forêt du Day National Park, the country's only national park.

FOOD & DRINK

For sheer choice and quality of food, Djibouti ranks among the best places in Africa. Djibouti City is endowed with a plethora of tasty restaurants that will please most palates – a testimony to French presence. You'll find excellent seafood, rice, pasta, local meat dishes, such as stuffed kid or lamb, and other treats imported from France. In the countryside, choice is obviously more limited, with goat meat and rice as the main staples. Alcohol is widely available.

DJIBOUTI CITY

POP 400,000

Arriving from Eritrea, Ethiopia or the Middle East, it usually comes as a surprise to many travellers to discover that Djibouti City is an active and fairly cosmopolitan city that tries hard to be recognised as the little Dubai on the Red Sea. Traditionally robed Afar tribesmen, unashamed *qat*-chewing men, stalwart French legionnaires (and the odd GI), sensuous Somali glamour kittens and frazzled businessmen with the latest mobile phones stuck to their ear all jostle side by side. This boisterous, sweltering cocktail of African, Arab and European influences is simply mind-boggling.

Djibouti City boasts good infrastructure but can be shockingly expensive – be warned.

ORIENTATION

Djibouti City is small enough to explore on foot. The centre comprises the European Quarter to the north and the African Quarter to the south. There are no street numbers and not all streets have names.

Northwest of town, a causeway known as L'Escale leads to a small marina, which is the point of departure for trips to Tadjoura and Obock. Northeast of town is the Plateau du Serpent, where many of the foreign embassies can be found.

The train station is about 1km north of the centre, while Djibouti-Ambouli Airport is 5km south of town.

INFORMATION

Internet Access

Cyber Cafe Filga Informatique (Rue de Paris; per hr DFr300; ☎ 7am-12.30pm & 4-10pm Sat-Thu, 4-10pm Fri)

Easy Internet (Rue de Londres; per hr DFr400; ☎ 7.30am-1pm & 4-11pm Sat-Thu, 4-11pm Fri)

Medical Services

CHA Bouffard (☎ 351351; Boulaos district) The best-equipped hospital.

Pôle Médical (☎ 352724; ☎ Sat-Thu) Two European doctors keep this surgery off Pl du 27 Juin 1977. They can speak English.

Money

There are only two ATMs in Djibouti City (both at the BCIMR branches listed following), but they were not functioning at the time of research.

BCIMR Pl Lagarde (☎ 358885; Rue Marchard; ☎ 7.30-11.45am Sun-Thu); Plateau du Serpent (☎ 353143; Ave F d'Esperey; ☎ 7.45-11.45am & 4-5.30pm Sun-Thu) Doesn't accept travellers cheques but can do cash advances on credit cards (Visa only). For cash transactions, a flat fee of FD500 is charged.

Bureaux de Change (☎ 821970; ☎ 7.30am-1pm & 4pm until last departure Sat-Thu, 4pm until last departure Fri) At the international airport; cash only, but the rates are slightly inferior to those offered in the centre.

Dilip Corporation (☎ 352857; Pl du 27 Juin 1977; ☎ 8am-noon & 4-7.30pm Sat-Thu) Authorised bureaux de change. Changes cash (no commission) and does cash advances on Visa and MasterCard, but doesn't accept travellers cheques.

Mehta (☎ 353719; Pl du 27 Juin 1977; ☎ 7.30am-7.30pm Sun-Thu) Authorised bureaux de change. Next door to Dilip (same family), Mehta also changes cash (no commission) and usually accepts travellers cheques, but charges a whopping 6% commission. It can also do cash advances on Visa and MasterCard, but the rates are inferior to the ones offered by BCIMR.

Post

Main post office (Blvd de la République; ☎ 7am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu)

Telephone

The most convenient places to make international or local calls are the various telephone outlets scattered around the city centre.

Tourist Information

Tourist office (☎ 352800; www.office-tourisme.dj in French; Rue de Foucauld; ☎ 7am-1pm Sat-Thu, 4-6pm Sat, Mon & Wed)

SIGHTS

Start your visit with an early morning walk around the European Quarter. With its white-washed houses and Moorish arcades sheltering Parisian-style cafés and shops, it is a strange mix of the Arab and the European. To the south lies the shambolic Pl Mahmoud Harbi, dominated by the minaret of the great **Hamoudi mosque**. The chaotic **Marché Central** (Central Market), which extends from Pl Mahmoud Harbi eastward along and below Blvd de Bender, is a must. It's a criss-cross of alleyways where stalls and shops are lined cheek by jowl.

If you want a guided tour, contact **Daoud Aboubaker** (☎ 830804, 870935; daoudaboubaker@yahoo.fr). He's very competent and his English is OK. It costs DFr2500 for a two- to three-hour walk.

DJIBOUTI CITY

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ACTIVITIES

There is excellent **diving** in the Gulf of Tadjoura, including the Moucha and Maskali Islands. It costs about DFr15,000 for two dives at Moucha Island, including boat transfer. Longer diving trips to Les Sept Frères Archipelago are also available from DFr80,000 for three days/two nights.

A once-in-a-lifetime experience **snorkelling** with whale sharks is possible in the Bay of Ghoubbet from October to January. This spot is one of only a few places in the world where these giant yet gentle creatures appear regularly in near-shore waters, easily accessible to observers.

Reliable operators include **Dolphin Excursions** (☎ 350313; dolphinexcursions@hotmail.com; Blvd de la République) and Centre de Plongée du Lagon Bleu on Moucha Island, which is represented through **ATTA/Globe Travel** (☎ 353036, 250297; atta@intnet.dj; off Place Lagarde).

SLEEPING

If you're coming from, say, Ethiopia or Eritrea, be prepared to grit your teeth. A decent single for less than US\$30? Dream on, darlings.

Budget

Hôtel Horseed (☎ 352316; Blvd du Général de Gaulle; s/d with shared bathroom DFr5000/7500; Its location is not the most prepossessing, but the rooms are presentable, if a bit ragged around the edges, and the shared bathrooms seem to see the occasional mop. Air-con is extra (DFr500).

Auberge Sable Blanc (☎ 351163; s/d DFr6000/7000; Another acceptable haunt for the impecunious. Not far from Blvd de la République, this converted villa boasts a mixed bag of rooms, so ask to see a few before committing. There's a mosque nearby – earplug alert!

Hôtel de France (☎ 813781; Blvd du Général de Gaulle; r DFr6500-8500; The Hôtel de France is good budget-hotel fodder; rooms come with stout bedding, TV, fan and air-con. It's a stone's throw from the European Quarter – handy if you want to spend your nights carousing at the nearby clubs.

Midrange & Top End

Hotel Ali Sabieh (☎ 353264; Ave Georges Clémeanceu; s DFr9500-10,500, d DFr12,700; A major player in the centre, the Ali Sabieh earns its stripes with clinically clean, if a bit small, rooms, well-sprung mattresses and salubrious bathrooms. Another plus is its position,

QAT, ANYONE?

Around 1pm, don't miss the arrival of *qat*, a fascinating slice of local life. Suddenly, a cacophony of car horns and shouting breaks out, heralding the marvellous news: *qat*, the nation's daily 'hit', has arrived, fresh from Ethiopia. After which a heavy torpor descends on the town and all activity ceases for the afternoon.

During your stay in Djibouti, it's not a bad idea to give it a go. Don't expect to be stoned, however, and take anti-diarrheal tablets, just in case. Frankly said, if you just want to get tipsy, believe us: nothing beats a fresh beer in a bar on Pl du 27 Juin 1977.

right in the thick of things. If hunger beckons, there's a pizza outlet on the ground floor.

Menelik Hotel (☎ 351177; Pl du 27 Juin 1977; s/d incl breakfast DFr11,000/15,200; A reassuring choice with no surprises up its sleeves, the cube-shaped Menelik is right in the heart of the action. Credit cards (Visa only) are accepted but you'll cough up a painful 10% commission.

Bed & Breakfast La Maison Blanche (☎ 869935, 352176; Le Heron district; r incl breakfast DFr12,000-15,000; No more agonising plumbing, no more saggy mattresses, no more dated furniture. After weeks of overland travel, this scintillating white villa that used to be an ambassador's residence is all the therapy you need. There are two generously sized rooms with sleek furnishings, bathrooms so scrupulously clean you could eat off the floor, a secluded garden and a nifty pool. It's a bit of a trek from the centre but minibuses are within easy reach. The only downside is the resident dog, which will stick to you like a leech. It's closed in August.

Résidence Hôtel Bellevue (☎ 358088; bellevue@intnet.dj; Blvd Cheikh Osman; s DFr15,000-17,000, d DFr17,000-19,000; A reliable place to hunker down in if your wallet is bulging. What it lacks in style is made up for by an ace location and sparklingly clean self-contained rooms with the usual mod-cons. Prices are negotiable at weekends.

Résidence de l'Europe (☎ 355080; fax 356108; Pl du 27 Juin 1977; s/d DFr17,500/19,500; Despite its Moorish-esque façade, this joint rates zero on our charm meter (which is a shame at this price), but gets high marks for cleanliness

and general agreeability. Some rooms have plenty of space to really strew your stuff around. Visa cards are accepted but there's a small commission.

Hotel La Siesta (☎ 350666; Plateau du Serpent; r incl breakfast DFr18,000; 🍴 📺 📶) The layout of this ambitious newcomer is drably institutional, but the hotel scores high on amenities and there's not a speck of dirt to be found. The atmosphere is relaxing, whether you potter about the pool or grab an oh-so-refreshing beer in the bar.

EATING

This is your chance to relish French cuisine in polished surrounds, scoff really fresh local seafood, savour tasty meat dishes and treat yourself to French wines or baguettes. OK, it doesn't come cheap, especially if you've come from Ethiopia, but at least it's worth every mouthful.

Budget

For those on a rock-bottom budget, the stalls and shops around Pl Mahmoud Harbi are groaning with colourful vegetables, fruits and spices at unbeatable prices.

Shawarma (Ave F d'Esperey; shwarma DFr300-500; 🍴 dinner) If money really matters, this cheap and cheerful eatery (no sign), a mere skip from the railway station, is the ideal pit stop. Fork out DFr500 for a *shwarma* (kebablike dish) and you'll leave patting your tummy contentedly.

Le Paradis – Chez Darar (☎ 842303; mains DFr800-1200; 🍴 lunch & dinner) A good place to line the stomach without breaking the bank, this eatery serves simple fish and meat dishes. It has a large outdoor seating area, midway between the post office and the railway station, near a mosque. No alcohol is served.

Pizzeria Ali Sabieh (☎ 353264; Ave Georges Clémenceau; mains DFr1000-2000; 🍴 evenings) Feast on palate-blowing Italian specialities in this cheery trattoria-like venue. The menu roves from faultlessly cooked pizzas to spaghetti and penne. Yum.

Restaurant Saba (☎ 354244; Ave Maréchal Lyautey; mains DFr1000-2500; 🍴 lunch Sat-Thu, dinner daily) Close to the railway station, this unpretentious joint gets kudos for its wide-ranging menu and mouth-watering fruit juices. Try shark fillet, crab or shrimps. Despite the simplicity of the setting, this place feels surprisingly cosy.

Midrange

Chez Marco (☎ 828087; mains DFr1600-2600; 🍴 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Hmm, will it be *filet de boeuf sauce roquefort* (fillet of beef with roquefort cheese sauce) or *escalope de poulet au citron vert* (chicken breast in lime sauce)? This French outpost serves delectable fare with a Mediterranean twist in a welcoming, light-toned interior. It's off Pl du 27 Juin 1977.

Restaurant Ougoul (☎ 353652; Ave Georges Clémenceau; mains DFr1600-3200; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Nosh on freshly prepared fish and seafood dishes in this Djibouti classic, slap bang in the centre of town.

La Table de Julien (☎ 357355; Ave F d'Esperey; mains DFr1900-2500; 🍴 lunch Sat-Thu, dinner Mon-Sat) *Ooh la la*, this terribly French venue opposite the railway station was the flavour of the month when we visited. Creative dishes such as *filet de daurade au sel du lac Assal* (sea bream cooked with salt from Lac Assal) will have you gushing superlatives. *Bon appétit!*

Restaurant L'Historil (☎ 354767; Pl du 27 Juin 1977; mains DFr1900-2500; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Subdued lighting, sleek surrounds, a soothing blue colour scheme and a tantalising array of fish dishes have made this restaurant one of the most popular in town for a fancy meal.

Mukbasa – 7 Freres (☎ 351188; Ave 13; fish dishes DFr2000; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This popular joint in the African Quarter is famous for one thing and one thing only: *poisson yemenite* (oven-baked fish). It's served with a chapati-like bread and a devilish *mokbasa* (purée of honey and either dates or banana).

DRINKING

In the mood for a bibulous evening? Pl du 27 Juin 1977 is the main hot spot, with a smattering of pleasant bars, including the relaxed **Brasserie L'Historil** (☎ 354767; Pl du 27 Juin 1977; 🍴 7am-11pm). A beer will set you back about DFr900 (ouch!). Try also **Cafe Mask** (Pl du 27 Juin 1977; 🍴 8am-11pm) or the very Western **Planet Hollywood** (☎ 358014; Pl du 27 Juin 1977; 🍴 8am-11pm).

If all you want is an energy bolt, **Cafeteria Bienvenue** (Rue de Paris; 🍴 6am-9pm) and **Chez Mahad** (Rue de Madrid; 🍴 7.30am-noon Sat-Thu, 7.30-11am & 4-9pm Fri) serve ultrafresh fruit juices (from DFr150).

ENTERTAINMENT

If you want to tear it up on the dance floor amid stalwart legionnaires in their knee-length shorts and Somali or Ethiopian

cuties, this is your chance! It's more sleazy disco than übertrendy lounges, but it can be lots of fun.

Most clubs are on and around Rue d'Ethiopie, in the European Quarter. They are at their liveliest on Thursday and Friday nights. Entrance is free, but a beer costs a whopping DFr1000. Check out the following places:

Ambassador (Rue de Marseille)

Club Hermes (Rue de Foucauld)

La Galette Bretonne (Rue d'Ethiopie)

Scotch Club (Rue Clochette)

VIP (Pl du 27 Juin 1977)

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Airlines with offices in Djibouti City:

Air France (☎ 351010; www.airfrance.com; Pl du 27 Juin 1977)

Daallo Airlines (☎ 353401; www.daallo.com; Rue de Paris)

Djibouti Airlines (☎ 351006; www.djiboutiairlines.com; Pl Lagarde)

Eritrean Airlines (www.ertra.com) The agent for Eritrean Airlines is ATTA/Globe Travel (p631).

Ethiopian Airlines (☎ 351007; www.flyethiopian.com; Rue de Marseille)

Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) The agent for Kenya Airways is ATTA/Globe Travel (p631).

Yemenia Yemen Airways (☎ 356579; www.yemenia.com; Rue Marchand)

For details of international flights to and from Djibouti City, see p632.

Boat

A ferry did ply the Djibouti–Tadjoura and Djibouti–Obok routes three times a week, but services were indefinitely suspended at the time of research.

Your best bet is to rely on the speedboats and dhows that carry the precious *qat* and other commodities to Tadjoura and Obok. All boats leave from L'Escale. See p629 and p629 for more information.

Car

Vehicle rental is extortionate in Djibouti, but you can reduce the costs by joining up with other travellers to hire a car. For most off-road areas you will need to have a 4WD. For rentals, try **Marill** (☎ 351150; Rue Marchand). Expect to pay up to DFr21,000 per day for a 4WD.

Local Transport

Minibuses leave from various departure points south of town. They connect Djibouti City to Ali Sabieh, Dikhil, Tadjoura, Yoboki and the Ethiopian border. There is no fixed schedule. Most buses leave early in the morning and only when they are full. Most journeys cost from DFr500 to DFr1000, depending on distance.

Train

The Djibouti–Ethiopia train departs three times a week and runs as far as Dire Dawa (DFr3900 in 1st class). You can take it and get off at Ali Sabieh (about DFr1500). Tickets can be bought 24 hours in advance at the railway station (morning only).

GETTING AROUND

The central hub for city minibuses (DFr50) is on Pl Mahmoud Harbi. Taxis aren't metered; DFr500 is a fair price for a journey within the town.

A taxi ride to or from the airport costs about DFr1000 (after bargaining).

AROUND DJIBOUTI

MOUCHA & MASKALI ISLANDS

It ain't the Bahamas, but these two islands close to Djibouti City are a welcome respite from the hustle and bustle of the capital, with good, uncrowded beaches and warm waters. The **Lagon Bleu Village** (☎ 816177, 353036; Moucha Island; 🍴) is a good place to take up a Robinson Crusoe lifestyle without sacrificing comfort, with 10 well-equipped bungalows, a good restaurant and a diving centre. As an indication of prices, a two-day/one-night full-board package, including transfers to and from Djibouti City, costs DFr18,000/7000 per adult/child. Day trips are also possible from DFr7500/4000 (including lunch). For bookings, contact **ATTA/Globe Travel** (☎ 353036, 250297; attaintnet.dj; off Place Lagarde) in Djibouti City.

LAC ASSAL

Wow! Just over 100km west of the capital lies one of the most spectacular natural phenomena in Africa: Lac Assal. Situated 150m below sea level, this crater lake is encircled by dark, dormant volcanoes. It represents the lowest point on the African continent. The aquamarine water is ringed by a huge salt field, 60m

in depth. The salt field has been mined by the Afar nomads for centuries, and they can still be seen loading up their camels for the long trek south to Ethiopia.

There's no public transport to Lac Assal. Most visitors come with tours (see p631) or hire their own vehicles from the capital. A tour should set you back about DFr13,000.

GODA MOUNTAINS

If you need an escape hatch, look no further. Northwest of the Gulf of Tadjoura, the Goda Mountains rise to a height of 1750m and are a spectacular natural oddity. This area shelters one of the rare speckles of green on Djibouti's parched map, like a giant oasis – a real relief after the scorched desert landscapes. It sometimes rains here and it's often misty. A real shock for some visitors, who find it inconceivable that the tiny settlements of **Dittilou**, **Bankoulé** or **Randa** belong to the same country as the one they left on the burning plain just one hour before.

The Goda Mountains shelter Djibouti's only national park, **Forêt du Day National Park**, which boasts good potential for hiking.

Sleeping & Eating

This area is favoured by expats in search of cool air, and there's no shortage of traditional accommodation. Showers and toilets are communal. The prices quoted here include guided walks.

Campement Touristique de Dittilou (☎ 810488, 361071; Dittilou; full board DFr8000) If you want to get away from it all, this is the place. The *das* (traditional huts) are set against a lush and totally quiet landscape, at the edge of Forêt du Day National Park. It's a good base for hiking – don't miss the waterfall of Toha (a three to four hour return visit).

Campement Touristique de Bankoulé (☎ 814115; Bankoulé; full board DFr8000) Another ideal camp in a scenic location – it overlooks a lush valley and there's an Afar village nearby, where you can stock up on local handicrafts. Huts 5 and 6 boast the best views. The ablation block is well scrubbed. Good hiking possibilities, too.

Campement Touristique Le Goda (☎ 830804; Randa; full board DFr8000) Nestled on the flank of a valley, about 1.5km from Randa town, at an altitude of 1000m, the Goda is a good spot to decompress. There are traditional huts, a clean-smelling ablation block and a restaurant. It's run by the affable Ermano.

Getting There & Away

The most convenient way to visit the area is on a tour (see p631) or with a rental 4WD. Transport can also be organised by the *campements* if there's a group.

TADJOURA

pop 25,000

If you've found Ali Sabieh very Somali, you'll find Tadjoura very Afar. Originally a small Afar village trading in slaves, the whitewashed town is now a quiet backwater. Poor and rundown, its setting is nevertheless attractive, nestled in the shadow of the green Goda Mountains with the bright blue sea lapping at its doorstep.

Plage des Sables Blancs, 7km east of Tadjoura, with a good string of white sand, is tranquillity incarnate and a lovely place to sun yourself.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel-Restaurant Le Golfe (☎ 424091; hot_rest_legolfe@hotmail.com; bungalows DFr8000; 🍷 🍴) Under French-Djiboutian management, this low-key but well-kept resort is situated in a relaxing waterfront setting, about 1.5km from the town centre. The 22 bungalows are well-organised and there's a good restaurant (seafood, anyone?) and a terrace where you can enjoy a drink at sunset. There's no beach to speak of, but the owners can organise transfers to Plage des Sables Blancs (DFr4000 for two). Or you could laze around the little pool.

Koko Beach Club (☎ 810834, 357817; Ambabo; full board DFr10,000; 🍷) A brave attempt at creating a resort, about 10km west of Tadjoura, on the main road. The pros of staying here include a lovely mountainous backdrop, a pool and well-equipped bungalows. The cons include a far-from-idyllic beach and an overall lack of atmosphere.

Plage des Sables Blancs Campement (☎ 354520; Plage des Sables Blancs; full board DFr10,000) Right on the beach, this is a good place to chill out for a couple of days. Accommodation is simple (beds and mattresses only), but several comfortable bungalows were being constructed when we visited. Transfer can be organised from Djibouti City at weekends (DFr14,000 flat fee, including full board). Contact Agence Le Goubet (see p631).

There's a smattering of cheap and cheerful eateries right by the seafront; a tasty grilled

fish costs a pittance. Our favourites include the following:

Mukbaza La Palmeraie Chez Abdou (☎ 424196; mains DFr500)

Mini-Cafe de Tadjoura (mains DFr500-700)

Restaurant Istanbul (mains DFr500-700) On the jetty.

A new upscale resort, Corto Maltese, about 300m from Le Golfe, was under construction at the time of research.

Getting There & Away

There is a good sealed road from the capital. Regular morning buses ply the route between Djibouti City and Tadjoura (about DFr1500, three hours).

You can also take one of the dhows or speedboats that leave every day sometime between noon and 2pm from L'Escale in Djibouti City (DFr500 to DFr1000, one way).

OBOCK & LES SEPT FRÈRES

The last significant town before the border with Eritrea, Obock exudes a kind of 'last frontier' feel. There is nothing of tangible interest here, but it's an obvious staging post for those who want to travel to Eritrea or for those coming from Assab, in Eritrea's south.

If you decide to stay, you can lay your head at the basic **Campement de Ras Bir – Ougef** (☎ 816034, 822446; huts with full board DFr8000), about 5km east of the centre. Location is top-notch – it's right on the beach. Accommodation is in traditional huts and the shared bathrooms are rudimentary. About 2km west of the centre, a more upmarket option was under construction when we visited. Ask around.

You'll find several basic eateries in the centre.

Just off the coast, at **Les Sept Frères Archipelago**, the Bab al-Mandab Strait separates two worlds, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The archipelago offers superb diving (see p625).

The most convenient way to travel to or from Djibouti City is by speedboat or by dhow. They leave every day to L'Escale early in the morning (DFr1500 by speedboat, about 1½ hours; DFr600 by dhow, about three hours). From L'Escale, they leave sometime between noon and 2pm to bring the much-awaited *qat*. If travelling by road, there are irregular bush taxis that trundle along the dirt road between Tadjoura and Obock (about DFr2000, three hours).

There's also a small plane that flies on a twice-weekly basis between Obock and Djibouti City (DFr3000, 30 minutes).

For transport to Eritrea, see p632.

PETIT BARRA & GRAND BARRA

The 95km road from Djibouti City crosses two spectacular desert plains: the Petit Barra and Grand Barra, the latter being 27km long and 12km wide. Believe it or not, at the eastern end there's a centre where you can **windsurf on wheels** on the great salty plain! Contact **AE-CVETA** (☎ 354695, 810225; www.aecveta.com in French) in Djibouti City. It costs DFr13,000 for a full day, including one night's accommodation, food and transport from Djibouti City (Fridays only; minimum four people).

ALI SABIEH

Ali Sabieh is an active yet intimate town with a distinct Somali flavour. If coming from Djibouti City, you'll find it pretty relaxing and, to a certain extent, photogenic and full of attitude.

You can bunk down at the **Hotel Gogareh** (☎ 825308; s with shared bathroom DFr1000), just off the main square. It features shoe-box-sized yet functional rooms set around a courtyard. If your purse strings are a little more relaxed, **La Palmeraie d'Ali Sabieh** (☎ 426198; r DFr6000; 🍷), on the outskirts of town, has well-appointed rooms, pathogen-free bathrooms and a leaf-dappled courtyard, as well as a decent on-site restaurant. For a cheap and tasty meal, nothing can beat **Restaurant du Mont Arrey** (☎ 426191; mains DFr1000-2000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) right in the centre of town.

There are daily bus services (DFr700) to Djibouti City, mostly in the morning. You can also hop on the train (DFr1500) that runs three times a week from Dire Dawa to Djibouti City via Ali Sabieh.

To Dire Dawa in Ethiopia, you can also take a bus to Gelille at the Ethiopian border (DFr600) then change to another bus heading to Dire Dawa. For more information on transport to Ethiopia, see p632).

LAC ABBÉ

Don't know what the word 'epiphany' means? Well, this is best defined by the feeling you'll get when Lac Abbé comes into view – a revelation. The scenery is sensational: the plain is dotted with hundreds of limestone chimneys, some standing as high as 50m, belching out

puffs of steam. It is often described as 'a slice of moon on the crust of earth', and for good reason. *Planet of the Apes* was filmed here, and it's no wonder.

Though desolate, it is not uninhabited. Numerous mineral-rich hot springs feed the farms of local nomads who graze their camels and goats here. The banks of the lake are also where flamingos gather at dawn.

The **Campement Touristique d'Asbole** (☎ 357244, 822291; full board DFr8000) is set in the most surreal landscape you've ever imagined. It is on a plateau near Lac Abbé and overlooks the big chimneys. As in all *campements*, accommodation is rudimentary, but who cares? You'll be hypnotised by the scenery anyway. Prices include a guided walk to the chimneys.

To get there, you'll need to rent a 4WD with driver or take a tour from the capital (see opposite). The Campement Touristique d'Asbole can organise transfers if you can find a group of people.

DJIBOUTI DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Djibouti's accommodation is limited: there are no formal camping grounds or hostels, and most hotels are in the capital, with few options outside. Hotel categories are limited in range; most of them fit into the upper echelon and are expensive.

A rather popular option that is developing around the major attractions in the hinterland is the *campements touristiques*. These are privately owned traditional huts with shared showers and toilets. It's a good budget option, but there's no public transport to get there.

ACTIVITIES

The most prominent activities in Djibouti are diving and snorkelling (see p625). Most snorkelling and diving takes place off the islands of Maskali and Moucha in the Gulf of Tadjoura, the Bay of Ghoubbet and Les Sept Frères islands. Trips to Les Sept Frères islands are expensive because of the distance and are usually organised in the way of live-aboards.

Hiking is also popular in the Forêt du Day National Park. **La Caravane de Sel** (☎ 810488; caravane@intnet.dj; Rue de Londres, Djibouti City) also organises treks along the ancient salt route, led by the Afar nomads – recommended. **ATTA/Globe Travel** (☎ 353036, 250297; attaintnet.dj;

PRACTICALITIES

- Djibouti uses the metric system for weights, measures and road distances.
- Djibouti uses the 220V system, with two round-pin plugs.
- Local newspapers include *La Nation* and *Le Renouveau*, all published weekly in French.
- TV programmes are in Somali, Afar, Arab and French.
- The main national radio station is Radio Djibouti.

off Place Lagarde, Djibouti City) has treks in southern Djibouti, led by Somali nomads.

In the windy plain of Grand Barra you can windsurf on wheels (see p629).

BUSINESS HOURS

Most government offices, shops and institutions are open from 7.30am to 1.30pm Sunday to Thursday. Private businesses reopen from 4pm to 6pm. Friday is the weekly holiday for offices and most shops, and Saturday and Sunday are normal working days.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Djibouti is a relatively safe country, and serious crime or hostility aimed specifically at travellers is very rare. However, the usual big-city precautions apply.

Djibouti's security services are known for being sensitive and active. There is no reason why travellers should attract the attention of the police, but if it happens, remain polite and calm, it's usually pretty harmless.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES Djiboutian Embassies & Consulates

Djiboutian diplomatic representation abroad is scarce, but there are embassies in the neighbouring countries of Ethiopia (see p673) and Eritrea (see p648). In countries without representation, travellers should head for the French embassy, which acts for Djibouti in the issuing of visas. Elsewhere, Djiboutian embassies and consulates include the following:
Egypt (☎ 333 6435; 15 Dr Muhammad Abdel Said St, Dokki, Cairo)
France (☎ 01 47 27 49 22; rue Emile Menier, 75016 Paris)

USA (☎ 202-331 0270; Ste 515, 1156 15th St NW, Washington DC, 20005)

Yemen (☎ 415 985; 84Amman St, 06 As-Safiya al-Gharbiya)

Embassies & Consulates in Djibouti

Countries with diplomatic representation in Djibouti City include the following. All embassies are closed on Friday.

Canada (☎ /fax 355950; Pl Lagarde)

Eritrea (☎ 354961; fax 250212; Plateau du Serpent)

Ethiopia (☎ 350718; fax 354803; Ave F d'Esperey)

France (☎ 350963; www.ambafrance-dj.org; Ave F d'Esperey)

Somaliland (☎ 355526; Plateau du Serpent)

USA (☎ 353995; http://djibouti.usembassy.gov; Plateau du Serpent)

HOLIDAYS

As well as religious holidays listed in the Africa Directory (p1106), these are the principal public holidays in Djibouti:

New Year's Day 1 January

Labour Day 1 May

Independence Day 27 June

Christmas Day 25 December

MAPS

The best map is the 1:200,000 map published in 1992 by the French Institut Géographique National (IGN).

MONEY

There are several banks and a couple of authorised bureaux de change in the capital. Outside the capital, banking facilities are scarce.

There are only two ATMs in Djibouti City but they were not functioning at the time of writing. Cash advances on credit cards are possible.

TELEPHONE

There are no area codes in Djibouti. International and local calls are best made from the post office or from one of the phone shops in the city centre. Mobile phones are also widespread.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The only tourist office in the country is to be found in Djibouti City. Travel agencies are also reliable sources of travel information (see Tours following).

Information for travellers is hard to come by outside the country. In Europe, the most

knowledgeable organisation is the **Association Djibouti Espace Nomade** (ADEN; ☎ /fax 01 48 51 71 56; aden@club-internet.fr; 64 Rue des Meuniers, 93100 Montreuil-sous-Bois, France).

TOURS

Note that Djibouti is not properly geared up for independent tourism. The only way of getting to some of the country's principal attractions is by taking a tour. They're expensive (from DFr12,000 per person), but the price includes food and accommodation. Besides, when there's no public transport, taking a tour is usually cheaper than hiring a 4WD. Try to be part of an existing group – the more people, the less you pay. The following companies, all based in Djibouti City, organise tours:

AECVETA (☎ 354695, 810225; www.aecveta.com in French)

Agence Le Goubet (☎ 354520; Blvd Cheik Osman)

ATTA/Globe Travel (☎ 353036, 250297; attaintnet.dj; off Place Lagarde, Djibouti City)

Dankali Expeditions (☎ 350313; dolphinexcursions@hotmail.com; Blvd de la République)

VISAS

All visitors, including French nationals, need visas. Tourist visas cost from US\$35 to US\$60 and are usually valid for one month. Visas can be obtained at the nearest Djibouti embassy (including Addis Ababa and Asmara if you're in the Horn) or, when there is none, from the French embassy. Note that travellers from most Western countries can also obtain tourist visas on arrival at the airport: leave your passport with the immigration officer and you get it stamped the next day or, if you're really lucky, within a couple of hours. It costs DFr3000 for 10 days and DFr5000 for one month.

Visas for Onward Travel

Visas for the following are available from embassies in Djibouti City (see opposite):

Eritrea Visas are valid for one month and cost DFr7200 (US\$40). You need one photo. Visa applications can be received at the embassy every morning from 8.30am to 10.30am except Friday, but visas are delivered on Wednesday and Sunday mornings only. A same-day service is also possible if you apply early morning; it costs DFr9000 (US\$50).

Ethiopia Visas are valid for three months and cost DFr3600 (US\$20) or DFr12,600 (US\$70) for US nationals. You need to supply one photo. The embassy is open from 7.30am to 1.30pm Sunday to Thursday and 9am to 1pm Saturday. Visas are issued within 24 hours.

Somaliland The first pages of your passport are faxed to Hargeisa from the Somaliland Liaison Office. Once the answer is favourable, you get a visa, which you will pay for when entering the country at Hargeisa airport (no visas were granted for overland travel at the time of research); it costs DFr5200 (US\$30). The whole process takes about three days.

TRANSPORT IN DJIBOUTI

GETTING THERE & AWAY Air

Djibouti has one international gateway for arrival by air, **Djibouti-Ambouli Airport** (☎ 341646), about 5km south of Djibouti City.

Air France flies to Paris (France). Djibouti Airlines has flights to Dire Dawa (Ethiopia), Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) and Hargeisa (Somaliland). Yemenia Yemen Airways flies to Sana'a (Yemen) and Paris (via Sana'a). Eritrean Airlines operates flights to Asmara (Eritrea) and Dubai. Daallo Airlines flies to Dubai, Jeddah (Saudi Arabia), Nairobi (Kenya), Paris and London, and has flights to Hargeisa (Somaliland), Burcao (Somaliland), Bossasso (Puntland) and Mogadishu (Somalia). Kenya Airways flies to Nairobi (Kenya).

All airlines flying to and from Djibouti have an office or a representative in Djibouti City (see p627).

Land ERITREA

Overland travel to Eritrea is possible but there's no reliable transportation scheduled between Assab and Obock. Traffic is limited to shared taxis (usually 4WD Land Cruisers) from Obock to Moulhoulé, the last town before the border. Then other taxis ply the route from Moulhoulé to Assab in Eritrea. It's about four hours from Obock to the border (DFr2000) and from the border to Assab another 3½ hours (Nfa300). At the time of research there were about two weekly services, but there's no fixed schedule and taxis leave only when they have enough customers.

Note that there's no formal immigration office on the Djiboutian side (but there is talk of setting one up). If you can't get your passport stamped at the border, don't forget to do it either at the police office in Obock or at the office of the **Police de l'Air et des Frontières**

DEPARTURE TAX

The airport departure tax is DFr3000 for neighbouring countries and DFr5000 for further-flung destinations. In some cases it's included in the cost of your ticket; check with your airline while in Djibouti.

(☎ 350289; ☎ 24hr) inside the port area in Djibouti City. When leaving Djibouti City for Eritrea, it's also best to go first to the Police de l'Air et des Frontières and ask for an exit stamp – unless they send you to the police office in Obock.

ETHIOPIA

There is a daily service between Djibouti City and Dire Dawa – an arduous 10- to 12-hour ride on a gravel road. You'll take your first bus to the border town of Gelille, then another bus to Dire Dawa. Buses leave at dawn from Ave 26. The company is called **SPB** (☎ 826573, 828838).

If you want to enter Djibouti from Ethiopia via the border town of Galafi, the only option is to hitch a lift with one of the legions of trucks that ply the route between Addis Ababa and Djibouti City via Awash, Gewane, Logiya and Dikhil (about three days). Prices are negotiable. This option is best avoided by women, but it's the best option for those driving, as it's entirely sealed.

Passengers can hop on the old Djibouti City–Addis Ababa train and get off at Dire Dawa. The train leaves three times a week. From Djibouti City to Dire Dawa (via Ali Sabieh), the minimum journey duration is 13 hours. Buy your ticket one day in advance at the **railway station** (☎ 358070; Ave F d'Esperey; ☎ 7am–noon Tue, Thu & Sat). Take note that this train is notoriously dilapidated and unreliable.

SOMALILAND

Battered 4WD Land Cruisers headed for Hargeisa leave from Ave 26. In principle, there are daily services, all leaving in the afternoon (DFr5000, front seat). It's a gruelling ride that can take up to 20 hours. Good luck!

Sea YEMEN

Yes, it's possible to cross the Red Sea to Mokha (Yemen)! Rudimentary dhows leave from Djibouti City port but there's no fixed

schedule – they usually run on a twice-weekly basis, more if there's enough demand. It costs DFr5000 and the crossing takes about 20 hours. Don't forget to get your passport stamped at the **Police de l'Air et des Frontières Office** (☎ 350289; ☎ 24hr), inside the port area in Djibouti City.

GETTING AROUND

The road network links all major villages in the country with the capital. The Route de l'Unité, a good sealed road, covers the 174km from the capital around the Gulf de Tadjoura. From Tadjoura to Obock and on to Moul-

houlé at the Eritrean border, there's a gravel road only passable by 4WDs.

There is public transport but it's pretty limited. By bus you can go to Ali Sabieh and Dikhil in the south, Tadjoura in the north, and to Galafi at the Ethiopian border.

Obock and Tadjoura are accessible by speedboat or dhow from Djibouti City. The train linking Djibouti City to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia makes several stops en route. Ali Sabieh is of most interest to travellers.

There's also a small plane that flies on a twice-weekly basis between Obock and Djibouti City.

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