

Mali

Mali is the jewel in West Africa's crown, a destination that has all the right ingredients.

The country occupies the heart of a territory that once supported Africa's greatest empires and is rich with historical resonance. This history bequeathed to Mali some of its most dramatic attractions – the legendary city of Timbuktu, whose name has never lost its allure for travellers, and the gloriously improbable mosque at Djenné are simply two among many.

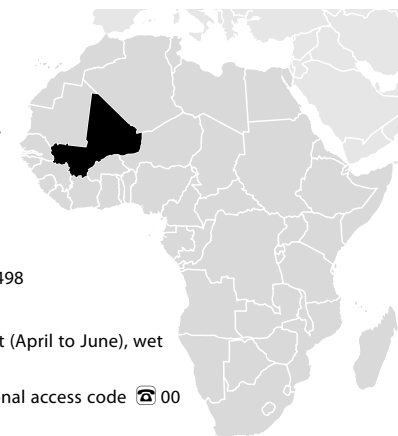
Mali's history has always been a story of its deserts and rivers. The lucrative trade routes of the Sahara once made the region among the world's richest, and the Niger, one of the grand old rivers of Africa, is still the lifeblood of the country; to journey along its waters (preferably on a slow boat to Timbuktu) is one of the continent's great adventures.

Not far from the riverbank, the extraordinary Falaise de Bandiagara rises up from the plains, and shelters one of West Africa's most intriguing peoples – the Dogon, whose villages and complex cultural rituals still cling to the edge of rocky cliffs. If you can visit one place in Mali, go to the Dogon Country: it's utterly unforgettable.

But all of Mali is alive with a fascinating cultural mix of peoples, from the nomadic Tuareg people of the Sahara to the Niger fishing societies of the Bozo. As a result, everywhere you go there are fascinating ceremonies, world-famous musical traditions with strong roots in the local soil, and traditional cultures as accessible to travellers as any you'll find in Africa.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1,240,140 sq km
- **ATMs** None that work
- **Borders** Algeria, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal
- **Budget** US\$25 per day
- **Capital** Bamako
- **Languages** French, Bambara
- **Money** West African CFA franc; US\$1 = CFA498
- **Population** 10.6 million
- **Seasons** Hot (October to February), very hot (April to June), wet (July to August)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 223; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC
- **Visa** Renewable five-day visa available at border for CFA15,000 or one-month visas at any Malian embassy



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Dogon Country** (p410) Trek down the Falaise de Bandiagara and through the timeless villages.
- **Djenné** (p402) Haggle with locals on market day (Monday) beneath the shadow of the incomparable mosque – the largest mud building in the world.
- **Niger River** (p404) Take a slow boat up the river and into the culturally rich inland delta.
- **Timbuktu** (p406) Discover the legendary city, and stand amid the solitude of the Sahara watching a salt caravan arrive.
- **Bamako** (p395) Dance to the infectious rhythms of the country's world-famous musicians.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Mali is wettest between July and August, although the rainy season – when torrential downpours and thunderstorms are preceded by strong winds – runs from June to September. It's hottest between April and June, when temperatures frequently exceed 40°C. September and October are also extremely hot, and Timbuktu in particular can be unpleasant. From November through January, the best time to visit, the *alíze* wind blows cooler air from the northeast, keeping daytime temperatures in the 30s – Malians refer to this period as the cold season! From January to June, the hot and dusty harmattan blows, irritating throats, and on some days reducing visibility to a few hundred metres. River trips are usually only possible until December, after which a lack of rain sees water levels drop.

ITINERARIES

- **Two Weeks** Organise your time so that you don't miss Djenné's Monday market (p402), where the great mud-mosque is a stunning backdrop. Continue northeast to the lively port town of Mopti (p403), an excellent base for Niger River boat trips (p404), especially to the legendary city of Timbuktu (p406), and forays into Dogon Country (p410) – three days is a minimum for the latter. Try also to pass through Bamako (p395) on a Friday or Saturday, when the Malian capital rocks.
- **One Month** A one-month itinerary could include extra days in Djenné (p402), which is lovely and quiet once the clamour of the market subsides, as well

HOW MUCH?

- **Bamako–Mopti bus ride** US\$1.45
- **Mopti–Timbuktu on Comanav ferry (1st class)** US\$89
- **Sunset camel ride into the Sahara** US\$18
- **Internet connection** US\$1.80–2.70 per hour
- **Guide to Dogon Country** US\$17–27

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.17
- **1L of bottled water** US\$1.35
- **Bottle of Castel beer** small/large US\$0.90/1.80
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$15
- **Portion of riz arachide (rice with peanut sauce)** US\$0.90

as up to 10 days of outstanding Dogon Country trekking (p412). Your boat journey to Timbuktu could even continue beyond, to the fascinating and remote outpost of Gao (p409) – a handy staging post on the road to Niger – while a longer Saharan camel trek (p406) from Timbuktu is another option for lovers of the desert.

HISTORY

Rock paintings and carvings in the Gao and Timbuktu regions suggest that northern Mali has been inhabited since 50,000 BC, when the Sahara was fertile grassland across which roamed an abundance of wildlife. By 5000 BC farming was taking place, and the use of iron began around 500 BC. By 300 BC, large organised settlements had developed, most notably at Djenné.

By the 6th century AD, the lucrative trans-Saharan trade in gold, salt and slaves had begun, facilitating the rise of Mali's three great empires. The Empire of Ghana covered much of what is now Mali and Senegal until the 11th century. It was followed by the great Empire of Mali, which in the 14th century stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to present-day Nigeria. During the Empire of Mali's golden age, Timbuktu was developed

as a great centre of commerce and Islamic culture. The Songhai Empire, with its capital at Gao, came next, but this empire was destroyed by a Moroccan mercenary army in the late 16th century.

By the end of the 19th century, Mali was part of French West Africa. Remnants of this colonial era that are still visible today include the huge Office du Niger irrigation scheme near Ségou, and the 1200km Dakar–Bamako train line, the longest rail span in West Africa; both were built with forced labour. Such vast infrastructure projects notwithstanding, Mali remained the poor neighbour of Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. France's chief interest was in 'developing' Mali as a source of cheap labour and cash crops (rice and cotton) for export.

Independence

Mali became independent in 1960 (for a few months it was federated with Senegal). Its first president, Modibo Keita, embarked on an unsuccessful period of one-party state socialism. Ambitious planning schemes went awry, the economy wilted, and Keita was, somewhat humiliatingly, forced to ask the French to support the Malian franc. Eventually, in 1968, Keita was overthrown by a group of army officers led by Moussa Traoré.

During the Cold War, Mali was firmly in the Soviet camp. Continual food shortages were exacerbated by droughts (which did devastate the northern regions in 1968–74 and again in 1980–85), but were largely due to government mismanagement and government instability.



From 1970 to 1990 there were five coup attempts, and the early 1980s were characterised by strikes, often violently suppressed.

But it was not all bad news: thanks to market liberalisation (and adequate rainfall), in 1987 Mali produced its first grain surplus.

The Tuareg uprising began in 1990, and later that year a peaceful pro-democracy demonstration drew 30,000 people onto the streets of Bamako. Following strikes and further demonstrations, on 17 March 1991, security forces met students and other demonstrators with machine-gun fire. Three days of rioting followed, during which 150 people were killed. The army, led by General Amadou Toumani Touré (General ATT as he was known), took control. Moussa Traoré was arrested, and around 60 senior government figures were executed.

Touré established an interim transitional government and gained considerable respect from Malians and the outside world when he resigned a year later, keeping his promise to hold multiparty elections.

Alpha Oumar Konaré (a scientist and writer) was elected president in June 1992. Though a widely respected and capable leader who oversaw considerable political and economic liberalisation, Konaré had to deal with a 50% devaluation of the CFA during the 1990s (which resulted in rioting and protest) and an attempted coup. In sharp contrast to many African leaders, Konaré stood down in 2002, as the new constitution he'd helped draft dictated; he is now Chairman of the African Union. The former general, Amadou Touré, was rewarded for his patience and elected as president in April 2002.

Mali Today

On many fronts Mali is a model West African democracy, one in which the overall health of the system has proven more enduring than the ambitions of individual leaders. It has become Africa's third-largest gold producer, which offers hope for a more prosperous future and the prospect of a long-overdue diversification of the economy – agriculture currently accounts for almost half of Mali's GDP, and cotton provides 40% of exports.

Malian-style democracy may have fostered stability and peace, and received international acclaim, but Mali remains one of the poorest countries on earth – almost one-third of Malians are malnourished, 90% of the population

lives on less than US\$2 a day, and adult literacy is just 19%. The locust invasion and drought of 2004 served as a reminder that Mali is still as dependent on international-aid money as it is on good rains. Widespread corruption also remains a problem and, for all the international momentum for debt relief in Africa, more government money in Mali is still spent on debt-servicing than on education.

CULTURE

Malians are open and tolerant. Ethnic identity is still important, but where once there was enmity, in most cases a *cousinage* or 'joking cousins' relationship now exists. People from different groups commonly tease and poke fun at ethnic stereotypes and past deeds, to everyone's enjoyment. The only exception is the Tuareg, who remain a people apart.

In Mali, personal relationships are important, friendships are things of great value, families are the glue that holds everything together, and hospitality and generosity seem to increase in inverse proportion to a person's means. Malians worry about the dire state of the country and a perceived loss of tradition, rail against corruption and long for a better life, but deep down they're a remarkably optimistic people who love to dance. They love it even more if you dance with them.

Malians struggle to hold fast to old ways of living, while embracing modern culture. This conflict is particularly acute because Mali is officially the fourth-poorest country in the world, and for most Malians daily life is a struggle. In this context, the role played by music in Malian life cannot be overestimated. Not only has Mali's music proven to be a reassuring bastion of traditional rhythms and a bulwark against the encroachment of the modern world, it has also provided a refuge and diversion from difficult economic circumstances, showcased the strength of traditional Malian culture, and highlighted the country's ability to take the modern world by storm. It is little wonder, therefore, that music accompanies everything in Malian life, providing the soundtrack for everything from important rites of passage to the obligatory dancing on a Saturday night.

PEOPLE

About 80% of Malians are tied to the land, directly or indirectly, so it's hardly surprising that most of the population live in Mali's fer-

tile south. The vast northern desert and semi-desert (60% of Mali) contain just 10% of the population. Concentrated in the centre and south of the country, the Bambara are Mali's largest ethnic group (33% of the population) and they hold much political power. Together with the Soninké and Malinké (who dominate western Mali) they make up 50% of Mali's population. Other groups include the Fulani (17%), Sénoufo (12%), Dogon (7%), Songhai (6%), Tuareg (6%) and the Bozo fisher people of the Niger River.

Between 80% and 90% of Malians are Muslim, and 2% are Christian. The remainder retains animist beliefs, which often blur with Islamic and Christian practices, especially in rural areas.

ARTS

Mali's cultural diversity affords it a wealth of great music. Best known are the *griots* (also called *jalis*), a hereditary caste of musicians who fulfil many important functions in Malian society. After independence, Malian cultural and artistic traditions were encouraged, and several state-sponsored 'orchestras' were founded. The legendary Rail Band de Bamako was one of the greatest, and one of its ex-members, the charismatic Salif Keita, has become perhaps the brightest in Mali's pantheon of stars. Other giants of the Malian music scene include the late Ali Farka Touré, Toumani Diabaté, Ballake Sissoko, Tinariwen and Amadou, and Mariam, whose collaboration with Manu Chao was the sound of the 2005 summer across Europe. Mali's wealth of talented female singers includes the hugely popular Oumou Sangaré, whose songs deal with contemporary social issues such as polygamy and arranged marriages, Rokia Traoré and Kandia Kouyaté.

Woodcarvings made by the Bambara people are noted for their angular forms, while Bambara masks are usually bold and solid. Masks are decorated with cowrie shells, and human and animal features are incorporated into the design; they're often used in secret-society ceremonies. The best known (and frequently used as a symbol of West Africa) is the *chiwara*, a headpiece carved in the form of an antelope, and used in ritualistic dances. The Bambara also produce striking *bogolan*, or mud cloth, and the Dogon are also renowned for their use of masks in important ceremonies.

ENVIRONMENT

Northern Mali is consumed by the Sahara, the south consists of relatively flat and well-watered agricultural land, the west is a hilly and well-wooded extension of the Futa Djalon highlands of Guinea, the central band is semi-arid scrub savannah (the Sahel), and the Niger Inland Delta is a maze of channels, swamps and lakes. The Niger River, the country's lifeline, flows 1626km through the country.

Mali has four national parks and reserves, but its wildlife has been devastated by centuries of human encroachment and the parks are not easily accessible.

Mali's most urgent environmental issues are deforestation, overgrazing and desertification, which threaten much of the country.

FOOD & DRINK

Food in Mali is generally similar to that found in Senegal, with *poulet yassa* (chicken in an onion and lemon sauce), *riz yollof* (rice with vegetables and/or meat) and *riz arachide* (rice with peanut sauce) featuring on many menus. All along the Niger River, restaurants also serve grilled or fried *capitaine* (Nile perch). Many tourist restaurants cater to more Western tastes. In Gao, look out for *wigila*, a local speciality of sun-dried dumplings dipped in a spice-laden meat sauce.

Street food is usually excellent and widely available. Look out for beef brochettes, fried fish, corn on the cob, fried bananas, egg sandwiches, sweet potato chips, and plates of rice and sauce.

Soft drinks are omnipresent, but local drinks, such as ginger juice or red *bissap* or *djablani* juice (which is brewed from hibiscus petals then chilled), and orange squash are sometimes available (but are not always sterile).

Although Mali is predominantly Muslim, most towns have at least one bar or hotel where you can buy Castel, Malian lager. Flag, from Senegal, is also available in Bamako and Mopti.

BAMAKO

pop 1.3 million

If you're looking for a tranquil stay, you should probably look elsewhere. But if you like your markets colourful, clamorous and spilling into the surrounding streets, appreciate energy that illuminates the night and

hanker for the opportunity to befriend open and friendly locals, Bamako might just get under your skin. With great restaurants, hotels and nightlife, the best museum in the region and a soundtrack provided by some of Africa's best music stars, Bamako has plenty of reasons to linger.

ORIENTATION

Bamako's city centre is on the north bank of the Niger River, focused on the triangle formed by Ave Kassa Keita, Blvd du Peuple and the train tracks. The Quinzambougou and Hippodrome districts, northeast of the centre, are great places to find hotels, restaurants and nightclubs.

INFORMATION

Cultural Centres

Centre Culturel Français (Map p398; ☎ 222 4019; www.ccfbamako.org; Ave de l'Indépendance; ⌚ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Wed, Fri & Sat, 1.30-5.30pm Thu) Pick up the bi-monthly programme of concerts and events.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 15)

Police (☎ 17)

Internet Access

Ikatel (Map p397; Route de Koulikoro; per hr US\$1.80; ⌚ 8am-11pm Mon-Fri, 9am-11pm Sat & Sun) The fastest connections in town.

Smint Cyber Café (Map p398; Place OMVS; per hr US\$0.90; ⌚ 7.30am-10pm)

Medical Services

Clinique Pasteur (☎ 229 1010; ⌚ 24 hr) West of town, this is Mali's best hospital for African diseases, emergencies and other consultations.

Pharmacie Officine Coura (Map p398; Ave de la Nation)

Money

Banque de Développement du Mali (BDM; Map p398) With branches on Ave Modibo Keita and Rue de la Cathédrale, BDM can exchange cash and travellers cheques, and offers cash advances on Visa card.

Post

Main post office (Map p398; Rue Karamoko Diaby)

Tourist Information

Office Malien du Tourisme et de l'Hôtellerie

(Omatho; Map p398; ☎ 223 6450; www.tourisme.gov.ml; Rue Mohammed V)

Travel Agencies

Several agencies deal with international and domestic flights; for air tickets consult the following:

ESF (Map p398; ☎ 222 5144; esf@cefib.com; Place du Souvenir) Long-standing and reliable.

TAM Voyages (Map p398; ☎ 221 9210; www.tamvoyage.com; Sq Lumumba)

For tours around Mali and further afield, the following companies are recommended, and can arrange English-speaking guides:

TAM Voyages (Map p398; ☎ 221 9210; www.tamvoyage.com; Sq Lumumba)

Tara Africa Tours (☎ 228 7091; www.tara-africatours.com; Baco Djicoroni ACI)

Toguna Adventure Tours (☎ 229 7853; togunaadventure@afribone.net.ml; ACI2000)

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Bamako is largely safe, although, like any city, it has its share of pickpockets and bag-snatchers, so take the normal security precautions and never carry valuables. At Bamako train station, the trains themselves and Rue Baba Diarra are popular haunts for thieves, especially at night. The streets around Sq Lumumba (especially close to the river) should be avoided after dark.

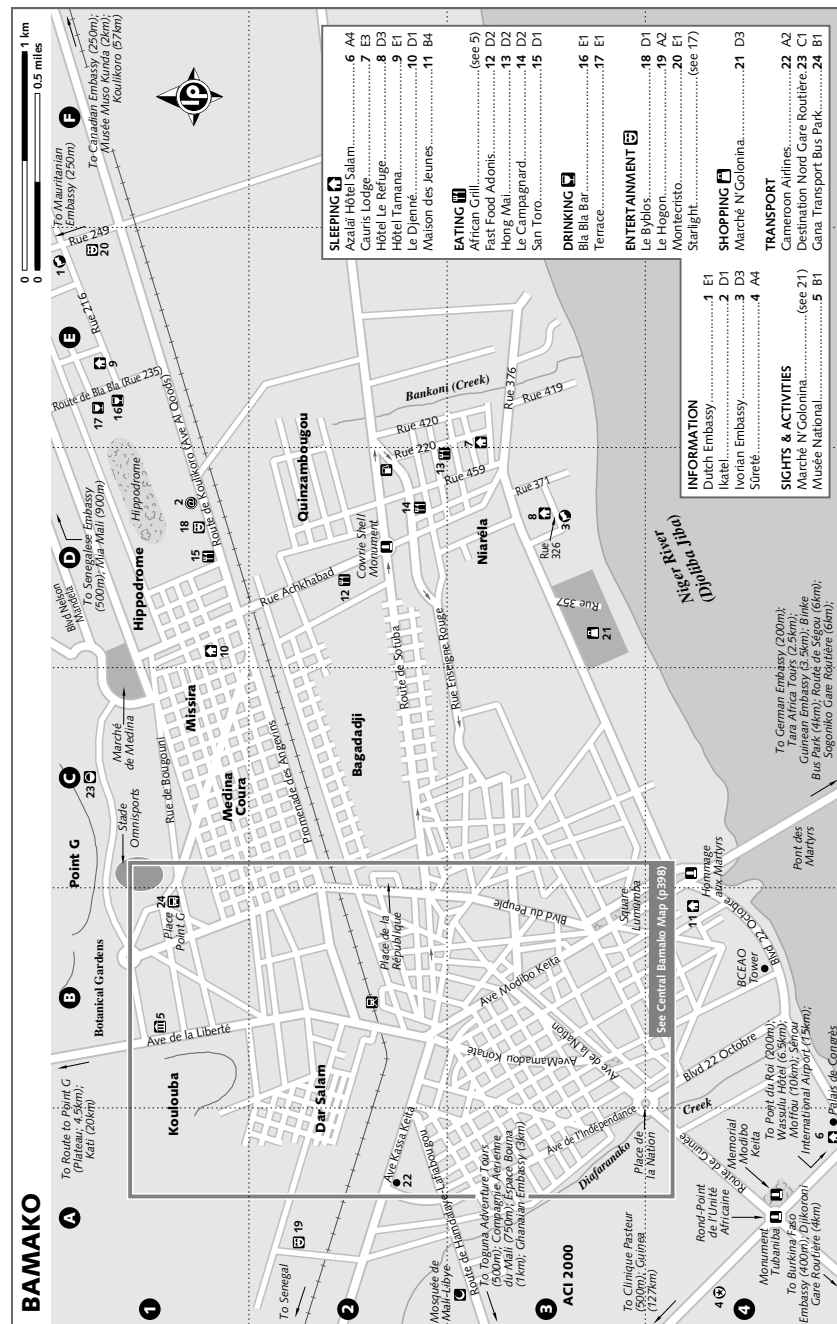
SIGHTS

The **Musée National** (Map p397; Ave de la Liberté; admission US\$4.50, guide US\$5.40; ⌚ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) is an exceptionally good museum, showcasing a stunning collection of masks, statues, textiles, archaeological artefacts and a fine model of the Djenné mosque. Since the renovations in 2003, it's beautifully presented and well-labelled, and the tranquil grounds, excellent bookshop and good restaurant make it an excellent place to spend an afternoon. French- and English-speaking guides can be arranged.

East of town, the **Musée Muso Kunda** (Rue 161, Korofina Nord; admission free; ⌚ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) is a homage to Mali's women, with displays of traditional clothing and everyday household objects.

Located in the town centre, the **Musée de Bamako** (Map p398; Place de la Liberté, admission US\$0.90; ⌚ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) has some ethnographic exhibits and enlarged postcards of colonial Bamako.

The mother of all Bamako markets is the **Grand Marché** (Map p398), a claustrophobic



CENTRAL BAMAKO

INFORMATION	DRINKING	Air France	26 D5
BDM.....1 C4	Appaloosa.....(see 18)	Air Mauritanie.....(see 26)	
BDM.....2 C5		Air Sénégal International.....27 C4	
Centre Culturel Français.....3 B5	ENTERTAINMENT 🎪	Ethiopian Airlines.....(see 26)	
ESF.....4 C4	Buffet de la Gare.....24 C2	Ghana Airways.....(see 11)	
French Embassy.....5 D3	Centre Culturel Français.....(see 3)	MAE Office.....28 B5	
Main Post Office.....6 C3	SHOPPING 🛍️	Point Afrique.....29 C5	
Nigerien Consulate.....7 B4	Maison des Artisans.....25 D3	Royal Air Maroc.....30 D5	
Office Malien du Tourisme et de l'Hotellerie.....8 D4	TRANSPORT	Sotrama to Sogoniko Gare Routière.....31 C3	
Pharmacie Officine Coura.....9 B5	Afriqiyah Airways.....(see 30)	Sotrama to Sogoniko Gare Routière.....32 D5	
Smint Cyber Café.....10 B5	Air Burkina.....(see 30)	Station Office.....33 C2	
TAM Voyages.....11 D5		Taxi Rank.....34 D3	
US Embassy.....12 C3			
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES (see 25)			
Fetish Stalls.....13 D3			
Grand Marché.....14 B3			
SLEEPING 🛏️			
L'Auberge Lafia.....15 B5			
Mission Catholique.....16 B4			
EATING 🍴			
African Grill.....17 B5			
Appaloosa.....18 C5			
Café Restaurant la Casa.....19 B4			
Food Stalls.....20 C3			
Food Stalls.....21 B3			
Pâtisserie le Royaume des Gourmands.....22 C4			
Soukthohai.....23 C5			

warren of streets overtaken by traders of food, clothing and household goods. For those who've just arrived in Africa it can be a bit overwhelming, but it's an essential part of the Bamako experience.

The **fetish stalls** (Map p398; Blvd du Peuple), near the Maison des Artisans, are also not for the faint-hearted, offering up a stomach-turning

array of bones, skins, dried chameleons and rotting monkey heads.

Marché de N'Golonina (Map p397), between Niarela and the city centre, is another fascinating local market to visit.

On the escarpment north of the city, **Point G** is great for a panoramic view of Bamako. Take a shared taxi from Place Point G (US\$0.40).

GUIDES IN MALI

No matter where you go in Mali, guides will sidle up and offer tours of the country, for which you pay a daily fee. They're persistent, regaling you with horror tales of thieves and the difficulty of travelling solo, which are simply not true.

If you don't want one, you certainly don't need a constant companion or intermediary to enjoy Mali. That said, in many places, such as Djenné or Timbuktu, a knowledgeable and informative local guide, hired on the spot for a few hours, can greatly enhance your visit. Guides are also highly recommended in the Dogon Country.

It used to be that every young Malian male could drop everything and become your guide, although would-be guides now have to take a comprehensive, one-year course organised by Mali's Ministry of Tourism, including written and oral exams. All accredited guides, who have completed the course and passed the exams, must now carry cards, which indicate whether they are accredited to guide nationally (blue) or only in their local district (yellow).

SLEEPING

Mission Catholique (Map p398; Foyer d'Accueil Bamako Coura; ☎ 222 7761; Rue Ousamane Bagayoko; per person US\$7.20; 🕒 reception 7am-1pm & 4-10pm Mon-Sat, 5-10pm Sun) Nun-run and set up for visiting church people, the Mission Catholique lets out the remainder (mattresses in the courtyard, dorms or private rooms) to travellers. It's a study in simplicity, but it's also clean, calm, secure and a haven from hassles in one of Bamako's busiest areas.

Maison des Jeunes (Map p397; ☎ 222 2320; maisjeunes@yahoo.fr; off Sq Lumumba; dm with fan US\$3.60, d with air-con & shared bathroom US\$10.80; 🕒) The recently spruced-up Maison des Jeunes is fine budget value. Rooms are as simple as they come. Check the bed sheets for cleanliness in the larger dorms.

L'Auberge Lafia (Map p398; ☎ 636 6894; bocoume@yahoo.fr; Rue 367, Bamako Coura; dm US\$7.20, d with fan US\$12.60) As far as Bamako cheapies go, the simple, bare and generally clean rooms with mosquito nets are pretty good value, and ranged around a bare courtyard.

Hôtel Tamana (Map p397; ☎ 221 3715; www.hoteltamana.com; Rue 216, Hippodrome; d with/without bathroom incl breakfast US\$45/42; 🕒) This charming hotel out by the Hippodrome is easily our favourite in Bamako. The rooms have character, the staff are among Bamako's friendliest, the bathrooms are immaculate and the ambience of the leafy courtyard is wonderful to retreat into after a long Bamako day.

Cauris Lodge (Map p397; ☎ 679 1438; hotelcauris.lodge@yahoo.fr; Rue 220, Niarela; s/d US\$36/45; 🕒) Cauris Lodge is another good deal. The seven rooms are simple and all come with mosquito nets. African art abounds in the lobby, and the *pailote* bar is one of Bamako's more intimate.

Le Djenné (Map p397; ☎ 221 3082; djenneart@afribone.net.ml; off Route de Koulikoro; small d US\$38, larger s/d US\$54/63; 🕒) Local and West African artists were given free rein to decorate this place – think masks, statues, African colour schemes and architectural flourishes that are rooted strongly in local culture. Some rooms are a bit dark, but all are highly original.

Hôtel Le Refuge (Map p397; ☎ 221 0144; lerefuge@arc.net.ml; Rue 326, Niarela Sud; s/d US\$50/69; 🕒) This tranquil Lebanese-run hotel comes warmly recommended by travellers and by us. Rooms are cool, well-equipped, modern and spotless, the bar is good, the restaurant excellent and every room has satellite TV. There's also a small swimming pool.

Azalai Hôtel Salam (Map p397; ☎ 222 1200; www.azalaihôtels.com; next to Pont du Roi; d/ste from US\$135/225; 🕒) One of Bamako's premier hotels, the Salam is a classy place, from the marble-lined lobby to the warmly furnished rooms, which are enormous, luxurious and equipped with everything to ensure a comfortable stay – satellite TV, internet connection, minibar and safe.

EATING

Café Restaurant la Casa (Map p398; Rue Ousamane Bagayoko; meals US\$1.35-1.80) In Bamako Coura, this is a fine, relaxed backpacker hang-out opposite the Mission Catholique; the spaghetti, couscous and ragout dishes contain the freshest ingredients, but if you want meat you'll need to order in advance.

Pâtisserie le Royaume des Gourmands (Map p398; Ave Modibo Keita; meals US\$1.80-5.40; 🕒 7am-11pm) This air-con haven amid busy Bamako is the best patisserie in town, with good croissants, coffee and fresh orange juice served with a smile.

San Toro (Map p397; Route de Koulikoro; mains US\$8; ☺ lunch & dinner) The décor here is charmingly African and the specialties are quality Malian dishes, which can take a while to appear, but are always worth the wait. The *poulet au coco* (coconut chicken) is especially good. There's no alcohol, but there are tasty fruit juices. In the evenings from around 8pm, there's live *kora* music.

African Grill (Map p398; Place OMVS; mains US\$7.20-9; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) African Grill is a wonderful place to sample African specialties like *foutou* (sticky yam or plantain paste), *kedjenou* (slowly simmered chicken or fish with peppers and tomatoes) and *poulet yassa*. There's a different *plat du jour* every day, a delightful oasis of a dining area, friendly service, and a steady stream of regulars. It also does sandwiches (CFA1500) and has a branch restaurant in the Musée National (Map p397).

Appaloosa (Map p398; Rue 311, Quartier du Fleuve; mains US\$6.30-11.70; ☺ lunch & dinner) This is where Tex Mex meets Beirut with the merest nod to Bamako. There are many highlights, including Lebanese *mezze*, steaks and pizzas.

Le Compagnard (Map p397; off Route de Sotuba, mains US\$7.55-11.25; ☺ 6am-11pm) Top marks for this place. High-quality French cooking, French wines and a switched-on ambience ensure plenty of regular customers among the expat community. The salad bar (US\$7) is a nice touch, and the wood-fired pizzas are as good as you'll find in Bamako.

Soukthothai (Map p398; ☎ 222 2448; Rue 311, Quartier du Fleuve; mains US\$8-13.50; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, dinner Sat) Craving a *pad thai*? It's only CFA6000 away. You won't find more authentic Thai cuisine in Africa, and expats swear by this place as one of Bamako's best restaurants.

In the Niaréla district, **Fast Food Adonis** (Map p397; Rue Achkhabad; meals US\$5) offers good food, while **Hong Mai** (Map p397; Rue 220, Niaréla) does cheap and quick Vietnamese food.

Snacks like *brochettes* (grilled pieces of meat on a stick) and chips are cooked on small barbecues all around town. At the *sotrama* ranks near the Cinéma Vox, as well as west of Place de la Liberté across from Carrefour des Jeunes, there are food stalls (Map p398) serving cheap rice and sauce.

DRINKING

Bla Bla Bar (Map p397; Route de Bla Bla, Hippodrome; small beers US\$1.80) This is Mali's most sophisticated bar, and though regulars lament that it has lost

something since being glassed in and blasted with air-con, it's still filled with the bold and the beautiful at weekends.

Terrace (Map p397; Route de Bla Bla, Hippodrome; small beers US\$1.80; ☺ 8pm-late) Almost next door to Bla Bla Bar, Terrace attracts a similar clientele.

Appaloosa (Map p398; Rue 311, Quartier du Fleuve; beers US\$2.70-5.40) This place is all about an evening frisson as long-legged, blond-haired hostesses (who don't expect to pay for their drinks) rub shoulders (and other parts of the anatomy) with rich Malian men and world-weary expats. Classily seedy, Appaloosa is, for all its faults, a Bamako institution. Make of it what you will.

If Bla Bla Bar and Terrace are too highbrow for you, there are plenty of earthy bars with an exclusively African clientele and outdoor tables in the vicinity.

ENTERTAINMENT

Live Music

Bamako has some of the best live music in the world. The problem is that they tend to change venues almost as soon as advertising banners go up, so either ring around, ask a savvy taxi driver, or pay a visit to check who's on the bill.

Buffet de la Gare (Map p398; ☎ 228 7373; off Rue Baba Diarra) This is where the legendary Super Rail Band made its name.

Centre Culturel Français (Map p398; ☎ 222 4019; www.ccfbamako.org) Big-name concerts almost monthly.

Éspace Bouna (☎ 229 5468; Rue 360, ACI200) Agreeable garden venue that sometimes hosts Toumani Diabaté, Djelimady Tounkara and the Super Rail Band; admission is US\$4.50 if someone famous is playing.

Le Hogon (Map p397; off Ave Kassa Keita) Toumani Diabaté was playing here (US\$2.70) when we were in Bamako. **Moffou** This place is 10km southwest of Pont du Roi, and only worth visiting if the owner, Salif Keita, is playing.

Wassulu Hôtel (☎ 228 7373; Route de l'Aéroport; for nonguests US\$4.50) When she's not in Paris, Oumou Sangare plays here at 9pm on Saturdays.

Nightclubs

Bamako is a city that comes into its own after dark, and on weekends it's a party town. Clubs don't get going before midnight and close around 6am. Cover charges (US\$9) usually include a drink, and after that drinks cost US\$1.80 to US\$5.40.

Le Byblos (Map p397; Route de Koulikoro, Hippodrome) **Montecristo** (Map p397; Rue 249, off Route de Koulikoro, Hippodrome)

Starlight (Map p397; Route de Bla Bla, Hippodrome)

SHOPPING

Mia Mali (☎ 221 2442; www.miamali.com; 1528 Blvd Nelson Mandela; ☺ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat) Far and away the most innovative and stylish boutique in Mali, Mia Mali has eminently reasonable prices, and its commitment to working with over 175 artisans deserves to be supported.

Maison des Artisans (Map p398; Blvd du Peuple) Leather goods and woodcarvings are made and sold here, and there are several jewellers offering gold and silver objects that are sold by weight (watch out for gold-plated brass).

Although you can find handicrafts in most of Bamako's markets, the Marché N'Golonina (Map p397) has the best selection.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Bamako's Ségou International Airport also serves a number of domestic routes that are shared between **MAE** (Map p398; ☎ 223 1465; Ave de la Nation) and **CAM** (☎ 229 9100; Ave Cheick Zayed, Hamdallaye).

Bamako to	Fare (US\$ one way)	Departures	Airline
Gao	217	Saturday	CAM
Kayes	104	4 weekly	MAE, CAM
Mopti	105	3 weekly	MAE, CAM
Timbuktu	163	3 weekly	MAE, CAM

Boat

The big boats leave from Koulikoro, some 50km downstream of Bamako. For details on the Niger River boat service see p148.

Bus

Long-distance transport for destinations south of the Niger River leaves from the Sogoniko *gare routière*, 6km south of the city centre. Also handy for Koulikoro, Timbuktu and Kangaba is the **Gana Transport** (Map p397; ☎ 221 0978) bus park at Place Point G.

Destinations include Bandiagara (US\$17, 11 hours), Gao (US\$29, 16 to 20 hours), Mopti (US\$14.40, 10 hours), Ségou (US\$5.40, three hours) and Timbuktu (US\$31, 24 to 30 hours).

Train

Tickets can be bought in advance from the **station office** (Map p398; ☎ 222 8110). There's a service from Bamako to Kayes (2nd/1st class US\$12.50/21, 10 to 14 hours) on Sunday,

Monday and Friday, returning the following day. There is also a Wednesday-morning service, which runs to Dakar via Kayes (2nd/1st/ couchette class US\$21/29/40).

GETTING AROUND

The official rate from the airport to the city centre by private taxi is US\$13.50, although it should cost US\$9 going the other way.

The battered green *Sotramas* run from central Bamako to the *gares routières* and the outer suburbs for between US\$0.15 and US\$0.30.

The longest journey (such as Sogoniko *gare routière* to Hippodrome) in a private taxi should never cost more than CFA2000.

NIGER RIVER ROUTE

For most visitors, a journey through Mali means following the course of the great Niger River as it winds its way through the southern skirt of the Sahara. You can go mostly by road, or sometimes by boat on the river itself, branching off at key points to see such wonders as the Dogon Country. The places in this section are listed from west to east.

SÉGOU

pop 92,500

There's something about Ségou; while Mopti is an example of clamorous river-based comings and goings, Ségou, strung out lazily along the riverbank 230km east of Bamako, has a languid slow-paced charm, and there's an unmistakable sense that it remains a village in disguise. With its wide avenues, faded colonial buildings and nearby river excursions, it's a wonderful place to slow down and rest from life on the African road.

Information

BDM (Blvd de l'Indépendance) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

Cybercafé Sotelma (Blvd de l'Indépendance; per hr US\$1.80; ☺ 8am-9pm)

Quai des Arts (Quai Ousmane Djiri; ☺ 8.30am-1.30pm & 2.30-6pm Tue-Sun) A private tourist office

Sights & Activities

Ségou's tree-lined streets are home to plenty of former colonial buildings bearing traces of decaying colonial elegance. From the small but interesting **pottery market** on the riverbank,

it's a pleasant stroll to the **Quai Ousmane Djiri** area, which is slowly being developed with replica traditional buildings.

From the waterfront, *pirogues* can take you on excursions to a number of nearby sites on the river. Trips cost from US\$27 per boat. The historic and beautiful mud-built village of **Ségou Koro** lies 9km upstream, just off the main Bamako road. Introduce yourself to the chief, who collects the US\$4.50 tourist tax. A taxi to/from Ségou costs at least US\$18.

Since 2005, Ségou has hosted the **Festival Sur le Niger** (☎ 232 1804; www.festivalsegou.org) in the first week of February, when the riverbank comes alive with exhibitions, dance, theatre and puppet performances, storytelling and craft displays.

Sleeping

Hôtel le Djoliba (☎ 232 1572; www.segou-hotel-djoliba.com; cnr Rue 21 & Blvd El Hadj Omar Tall; dm US\$7.30, s/d with fan & shared bathroom US\$18/31, with air-con & satellite TV US\$36/45; 📶) This is our choice for the best hotel in town, combining a great location, just back from the riverbank, with large and pleasant rooms and great service.

Motel Savane (☎ 232 0974; savane@motelsavane.com; off Blvd de l'Indépendance; d with fan/air-con US\$18/33, bungalows US\$36-47; 📶) A pleasant 10-minute walk from the riverbank, Motel Savane has spacious, sparkling rooms with splashes of colour and character. It's wonderfully quiet and has a shady garden area, and it sometimes offers drumming classes.

Both **L'Auberge** (☎ 232 1731; www.promali.org/aub-ind; Rue 21; s/d/ste US\$42/45/63; 📶 🚿), next to the riverbank, and **Hôtel de l'Indépendance** (☎ 232 1733; hotelindependance@cefib.com; Route de Mopti; s/d with fan US\$22/29, with air-con US\$33/40; 📶 🚿 🚿), on the road to Mopti south of town, have excellent rooms, swimming pools and good service.

Eating & Drinking

Soleil de Minuit (cnr Rue 21 & Blvd El Hadj Omar Tall; mains US\$3-4; 🍷 6am-midnight) Highly regarded by travellers for its fresh ingredients and laid-back atmosphere, this place is warmly recommended. The *capitaine a la Bamakoise* (fried Nile perch with bananas and tomato sauce; CFA4000) is a highlight.

Bar-Restaurant La Paillote (Quai Ousmane Djiri; pizza & pasta dishes from US\$8; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Excellent Italian cooking by the Italian chefs right on the banks of the Niger – what more could you want? The pizzas are outstanding, but there's

also ravioli, gnocchi, cannelloni and a different *plat du jour* daily. It also has traditional live music on Friday and Saturday nights.

There are a couple of cheap restaurants at the *gare routière*, and **Snack Bar Golfe** (Route de Mopti) is good for a quick sit-down meal.

Away from the centre, **Lavazza** (📶 9pm-late Thu-Sat) is an intimate garden venue where traditional and modern live music can be heard.

Getting There & Away

Many buses leave from the *gare routière*, 3km east of town on Route de Mopti. Somatra has a separate bus park nearby, and Binke Transport and Bani are based along or just off Route de Mopti. Numerous buses to Bamako (US\$5.40, almost hourly), Mopti and Sévaré (US\$11), and Sikasso (US\$8) pass through Ségou daily. A few buses head up to Gao (US\$25).

Comanav (☎ 232 0204) also has an office in Ségou; see p418 for details of boat services.

DJENNÉ

pop 22,382

One of the premier sites in West Africa, World Heritage-listed Djenné, which sits on an island in the Bani River, is worth as much time as you can give it. Its incomparable **mosque** – the largest mud-built structure in the world – is like a fairytale apparition. It provides Djenné with a backdrop to its huge, lively and colourful **Monday market** that has barely changed since the days when Saharan camel caravans brought salt across the sands to the gates of Djenné.

On a stroll through the dusty streets you'll pass a few **madrassas** (schools where young children learn the Qur'an); there are more *madrassas* in Djenné than in any other town in Mali, which serves as a reminder of its days as a renowned centre of Islamic scholarship. With the help of a guide, you can also see the beautiful **house of the traditional chief**.

About 3km from Djenné, the low-slung ruin of **Jenné-Jeno** dates back to about 300 BC and is one of the oldest archaeological sites in West Africa.

Djenné is famous for *bogolan*, or mud-cloth. Although the cloth is on sale all across town, the most famous female artisan is **Pama Sinatoa** (☎ 242 0610; almaydiaka@yahoo.fr), whose workshop is near the town entrance.

Visitors to Djenné must pay a US\$1.70 tourist tax per person at the Djenné turn-off,

soon after leaving the Bamako–Mopti road. There are no banks in Djenné.

Guides (around US\$5.40 per person) are not essential in Djenné, but can add immeasurably to your experience.

Sleeping & Eating

Chez Baba (☎ 242 0598; camp sites US\$4.50, dm US\$6.30) The large, open courtyard here resembles an old caravanserai or travellers' inn, but it also has all the comings and goings (guides and salesmen especially) of a bus station. The rooms with mattresses on the floor are swept clean, but the shared toilets are dire.

Le Campement (☎ 242 0497; mattress on roof US\$7.20, s/d with fan from US\$17/23, with air-con & private bathroom US\$33/36, meals US\$3.60; 📶) This sprawling, central place is Djenné's tourism centre, with a large and pleasant open-air restaurant, and clean and tidy rooms that have the bare essentials.

Auberge le Maafir (☎ 242 0541; sinintadiawoye@yahoo.fr; d with fan/air-con incl breakfast US\$33/42; 📶) More intimate than the Campement, this pleasant place has attractively furnished rooms with some traditional design work (such as terracotta basins), but maintenance is not what it could be. The courtyard is pleasant and the views from the rooftop are good.

There are a number of stalls serving food near the market in the early evening, while **Restaurant le Fleuve** (dishes US\$1.35-3.60) offers simple Malian dishes.

Getting There & Away

When the Bani River is high enough (usually from July to December), it's possible to arrive by public *pinasse* (US\$7.20) from Mopti.

Transport to Djenné is easiest from Mopti's *bâché gare*. *Bâchés* (pick-ups; US\$3.60) and

Peugeot taxis (US\$4.50) leave from here most mornings, and return in the afternoon. The journey takes about two hours.

Transport from elsewhere, such as Ségou (US\$9), arrives Monday morning and leaves in the afternoon.

MOPTI

pop 109,456

In Mopti, tourism is a contact sport, with more guides, *pinasse* owners and touts per square metre than anywhere else in Mali. That said, clamour is central to Mopti's charm – its port is Mali's most lively and interesting – and you'll have to pass through here if you want to take a *pinasse* trip to Timbuktu. It's also a major staging post for journeys into the Dogon Country, and has reasonable transport connections to Djenné. If it all gets too much, stay in Sévaré 12km away, which has great hotels and better transport options, and just come into Mopti when you have to.

Information

Action Mopti Internet (off Ave de l'Indépendance, Old Town; per hr US\$2.70; 📶 8am-1pm & 4-8pm Mon-Sat) Super-fast satellite connections.

AGTM (☎ 679 3916) Local guides association.

Bureau Régional du Tourisme (☎ 243 0506; moptitourisme@hotmail.com; Blvd l'Indépendance)

Comissariat de Police (Route de Sévaré)

Librairie & Cybercafé de la Venise (Ave de l'Indépendance; per hr US\$1.80; 📶 8am-1pm & 4-8pm Mon-sat) Central but slow.

Post office (Rue 68; 📶 8am-12.30pm & 1-4pm) Poste restante.

Satimbé Travel (☎ 243 0791; www.satimbetravel.com; Ave de l'Indépendance) An excellent tour company.

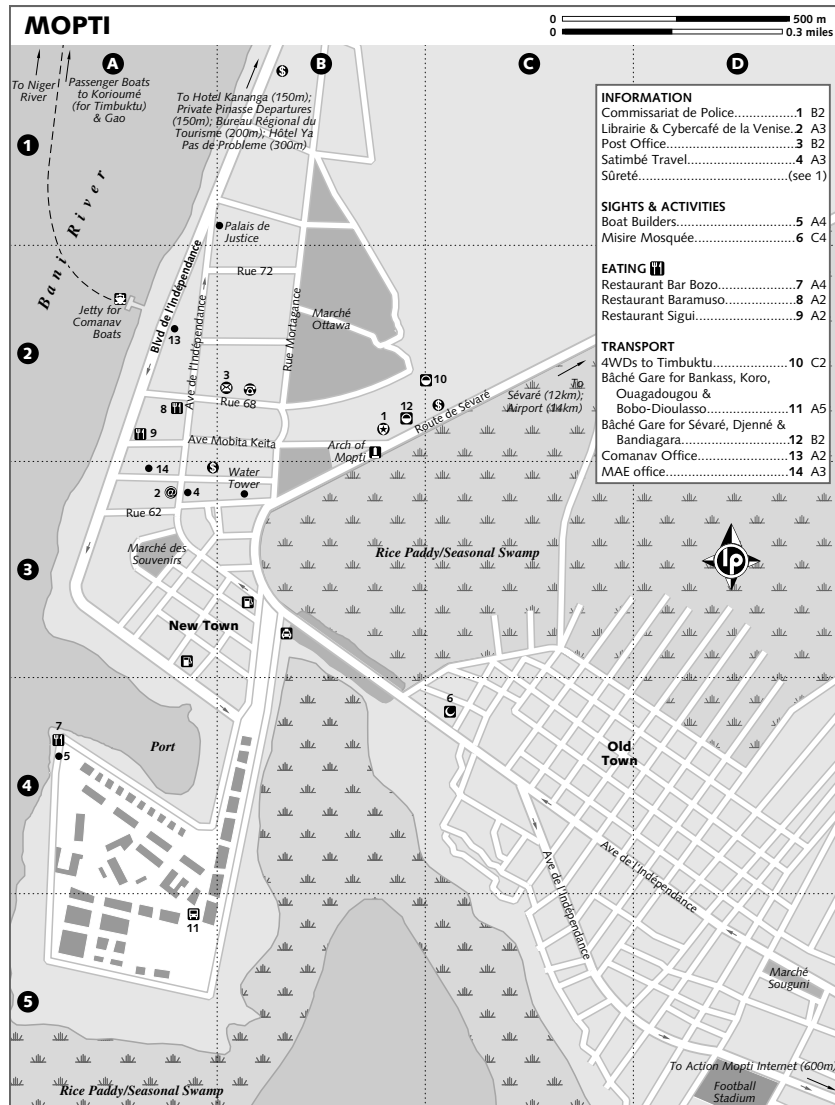
Sûreté (Route de Sévaré; 📶 8.30am-2pm & 5-8pm

THE MOSQUE AT DJENNÉ

Djenné's elegant mosque was constructed in 1907, though it's based on the design of an older Grande Mosquée that once stood on the site. Famous throughout the world, the Grande Mosquée was first built in 1280, after Koi Konboro – the 26th king of Djenné – converted to Islam. It remained intact until the early 19th century when the fundamentalist Islamic warrior-king, Cheikou Amadou, let it fall to ruin. The modern form – a classic of Sahel-style (or Sudanese) mud-brick architecture – is faithful to the original design.

The wooden spars that jut out from the walls not only form part of the structure, but also support the ladders and planks used during the annual repairs to the mud-render. Overseen by specialist masons, this work takes place at the end of every rainy season, when up to 4000 people volunteer to help.

Excellent views of the mosque are to be had from the roofs of surrounding houses (usually for CFA500 to CFA1000) or the Petit Marché. Non-Muslim visitors cannot go inside.



Mon-Thu, 8.30am-12.30pm Fri) One-month visa extensions cost CFA5000 and take about 15 minutes to process.

Sights & Activities

Mopti's port is Mali's busiest and most evocative. Here you'll see slabs of salt from Timbuktu, plus dried fish, firewood, pottery, goats, chickens and a wonderful cast

of characters. **Boat-building** happens next to Restaurant Bar Bozo.

The classic Sahel-style **Misire Mosquée** (Grand Mosquée; Ave de l'Indépendance), built in 1933, towers over the old part of town.

Boat trips on the Niger are possible between July/August and December when water levels are high. Sunset *pirogue* trips cost between

US\$27 and US\$45 depending on the type of boat and distance travelled.

A two-night/three-day journey between Mopti and Korioumé (the port for Timbuktu) by private motorised *pinasse* is the best way to appreciate the Niger, taking you slowly through the villages of the Niger's Inland Delta. To charter a boat to Timbuktu that comfortably seats 10 people, you won't get much change out of US\$800; petrol is included but food is not (count on US\$27 per person for the three days). Buy your food in advance. Arranging a trip directly through a boat owner may get you cheaper rates, but negotiations can be difficult. You could also travel in stages up the river by slower (and cheaper) public *pinasse*.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel Ya Pas de Probleme (☎ 243 0246; www.yapasdeprobleme.com; off Blvd de l'Indépendance; mattress on roof with mosquito net US\$6.30, dm US\$8, s/d with fan from US\$18/25, with air-con & private bathroom US\$40/45; 🍷) A delightful French- and Dogon-run place, Ya Pas de Probleme has beautifully decorated rooms and an intimate, homely atmosphere. It also represents top value across a range of budgets. Olivier, Jean-Marie and Ousman are wonderful hosts, and the restaurant is terrific.

Hôtel Kanaga (☎ 243 0500; kanaga@bambara.com; Blvd de l'Indépendance; d US\$95; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This former Sofitel is the classiest place in town, with stylish rooms that come with satellite TV and superb bathrooms. The swimming pool and restaurant are both excellent.

Restaurant Baramuso (Rue 68; meals from US\$0.90) is the place for a wonderful cheap lunch in the centre of town, while **Restaurant Bar Bozo** (meals US\$3.25-5.40; 🍷 lunch & dinner) is superbly located at the mouth of Mopti harbour; service and food at the latter is average. **Restaurant Sigui** (Blvd de l'Indépendance; meals US\$4.50-5.75; 🍷 lunch & dinner) gets the thumbs-up from travellers for its hybrid of European, Asian and Malian dishes, with a few vegetarian options thrown in.

Getting There & Away

AIR

CAM (☎ 243 1261) and **MAE** (☎ 679 4979; off Ave de l'Indépendance) each have at least two flights a week to Timbuktu (US\$78) and Bamako (US\$104). CAM also has one flight per week to Gao (US\$153, via Timbuktu). A private taxi from Mopti to the airport in Sévaré costs at least US\$10.80.

BOAT

For details on travelling by *pirogue*, and public or private *pinasse*, see opposite. Ferry services from Mopti are covered on p418.

BUS & BUSH TAXI

Although some buses continue as far as (and originate in) Mopti, Sévaré is now the main transport hub for the region; see below for details. *Bâchés* (US\$0.40) and Peugeot taxis (US\$0.50) cover the 12km between Mopti and Sévaré between 7am and 8pm daily.

To Timbuktu (US\$27, 12 hours on a good day), 4WDs leave most days from behind the *bâché gare*. It's a hard journey.

SÉVARÉ

This bustling little town has not a single sight worth seeing, but it's much more relaxed than neighbouring Mopti, and has terrific places to stay and ample transport connections. Bandiagara and the Dogon Country are just 63km away.

BNDA (Route de Mopti) charges 2% commission on travellers cheques and cash.

Mankan Te Bed & Breakfast (☎ 242 0193; www.mankan-te.de; off Route de Bamako; s US\$27-34, d US\$30-37; 🍷) is an outstanding accommodation option. The intimate Mankan Te has lovingly maintained rooms with splashes of colour, super-clean bathrooms and is run by the redoubtable Jutta, the owner and a fount of practical knowledge on the region. Jutta also operates the excellent **Mankan Te Restaurant** (Route de Bamako; mains US\$3.60-9, 3-course meals US\$7.20-16; 🍷 lunch & dinner).

One of the best places to stay in Mali is **Mac's Refuge** (☎ 242 0621; malimacs@yahoo.com; Rue 124; camp sites from US\$8, s/d with fan from US\$22/33, with air-con US\$38/45; 🍷 🍷). Rooms are individually styled to reflect the culture of Mali's many ethnic groups, and the food is legendary (there's a banquet meal of a different cuisine at 7pm every night for CFA5000). Add a small pool, bicycle hire (US\$1.80 per day), a small reference library and Mac's talents as a qualified masseur (US\$27 per hour) and you'll soon see why it's so popular.

Styled like a Dogon village, **Hôtel Ambedjele** (☎ 242 1031; www.ambedjelehotel.com; off Route de Mopti; s/d US\$61/72; mains US\$3.60-8; 🍷 🍷) is a charming, Spanish-run place with expansive gardens, a rock pool for swimming, and bungalows shaped like a Dogon granary. The restaurant is one of the best in Mali.

Buses to Bamako (US\$15.30, seven to 10 hours), Ségou (US\$9, four to six hours), Gao (US\$13, nine to 13 hours) and Hombori (US\$8, four hours) leave from the **gare routière** (Route de Bandiagara) or stop along the main Bamako–Gao highway at the main crossroads in the centre of town.

Occasional minibuses go to Bandiagara (US\$3.15) and Bankass (US\$5.40). *Bâchés* head to/from Mopti (US\$0.40) between 7am and 8pm from close to the post office.

TIMBUKTU (TOMBOUCTOU)

pop 32,460

Timbuktu, that most rhythmical of African names, has for centuries been synonymous with Africa's mysterious inaccessibility, with an end-of-the-earth allure that some travellers just have to reach. It's also the name we all knew as kids, but never really knew where it was.

More than just a name, Timbuktu's fame derived from its strategic location, at once on the edge of the Sahara and at the top of the 'Niger bend', from its role as the fabulously wealthy terminus of a camel-caravan route that has linked West Africa and the Mediterranean since medieval times, and from the vast universities of Islamic scholarship that flourished under the aegis of some of Africa's richest empires.

Timbuktu is a shadow of its former self, existing as a sprawl of low, often shabby, flat-roofed buildings that only hint at former grandeur, while all the time the streets fill up with sand blown in from the desert. And yet, still the travellers come.

Information

Every visitor to Timbuktu must pay a US\$9 tourist tax; it includes entry to the Dyingerey Ber Mosque and Ethnological Museum. The fee is collected at the Bureau Régional du Tourisme (where they can also put a 'Tombouctou' stamp in your passport).

BDR (Route de Korioumé) South of town, it changes cash euros.

BDM (Route de Korioumé) Also south of town, does cash advances on Visa.

Bureau Régional du Tourisme (☎ 292 2086; Blvd Askia Mohamed; ☎ 7.30am–4pm) Has a list of recommended guides.

Post office (Route de Korioumé) Sells postcards and stamps – for that all-important postmark.

TCP (Route de Korioumé; per hr US\$1.80; ☎ 7.30am–1pm & 4–7pm Mon–Fri, 7.30am–1pm Sat) Slow internet connections.

Sights

Timbuktu has three of the oldest mosques in West Africa. The oldest, dating from the early 14th century, is **Dyingerey Ber Mosque** (admission incl as part of town tourism tax US\$9), a wonderful example of the Sudanic style of mud, straw and wood architecture. The interior is a forest of 100 sturdy pillars, and there is a series of interconnecting rooms. From the separate women's section, stairs lead up onto the roof for good views over the town.

Sidi Yahya Mosque, north of Place de l'Indépendance, is named after one of the city's saints (it's said that 333 saints have lived in Timbuktu) and was constructed in 1400.

Built (reportedly by a woman) a century later than Sidi Yahya was the **Sankoré Mosque**, north-east of the Grand Marché. It also functioned as a university, and by the 16th century was one of the largest schools of Arabic learning in the Muslim world, with some 25,000 students.

The **Ethnological Museum** (admission incl as part of town tourism tax US\$9; ☎ 8am–5pm) surrounds the well of Bouctou, where Timbuktu was founded, and has a variety of clothing, photographs, musical instruments, jewellery and games.

An amazing collection of (at last count) 23,000 priceless manuscripts and books from Timbuktu's golden age are kept at the **Centre de Recherches Historiques Ahmed Baba** (Cedrhah; ☎ 292 1081; cedrhah@tombouctou.org.ml; Rue de Chemnitz; admission US\$1.80). The centre is the focus of a South African-funded project to protect, translate and catalogue the manuscripts, while a new centre is being built opposite the Sankoré Mosque to house up to 300,000 manuscripts from the surrounding area.

The crumbling **houses** of such 19th-century explorers as Gordon Laing (the first European to reach Timbuktu, but he was murdered on his journey home), René Caillié (the first to visit Timbuktu and return home in 1828) and Heinrich Barth are littered around the town.

The **Maison des Artisans**, where local artisans produce and sell their wares, is in the centre of town.

For camel treks into the Sahara, **Aberhamane Alpha Maïga** (☎ 292 1681, 602 3406; alpha@timbuktu-touristguide.com; Hotel Hendria Khan), **Azalai Voyages** (☎ 292 1199; azalaivoyages@nomade.fr; Hôtel Bouctou) and **Azima Ag Mohamed Ali** (☎ 602 3547) are all recommended. A sunset camel trip to a nearby Tuareg encampment will cost US\$18 per person per camel (US\$36 if you stay overnight). For longer journeys into the Sahara,

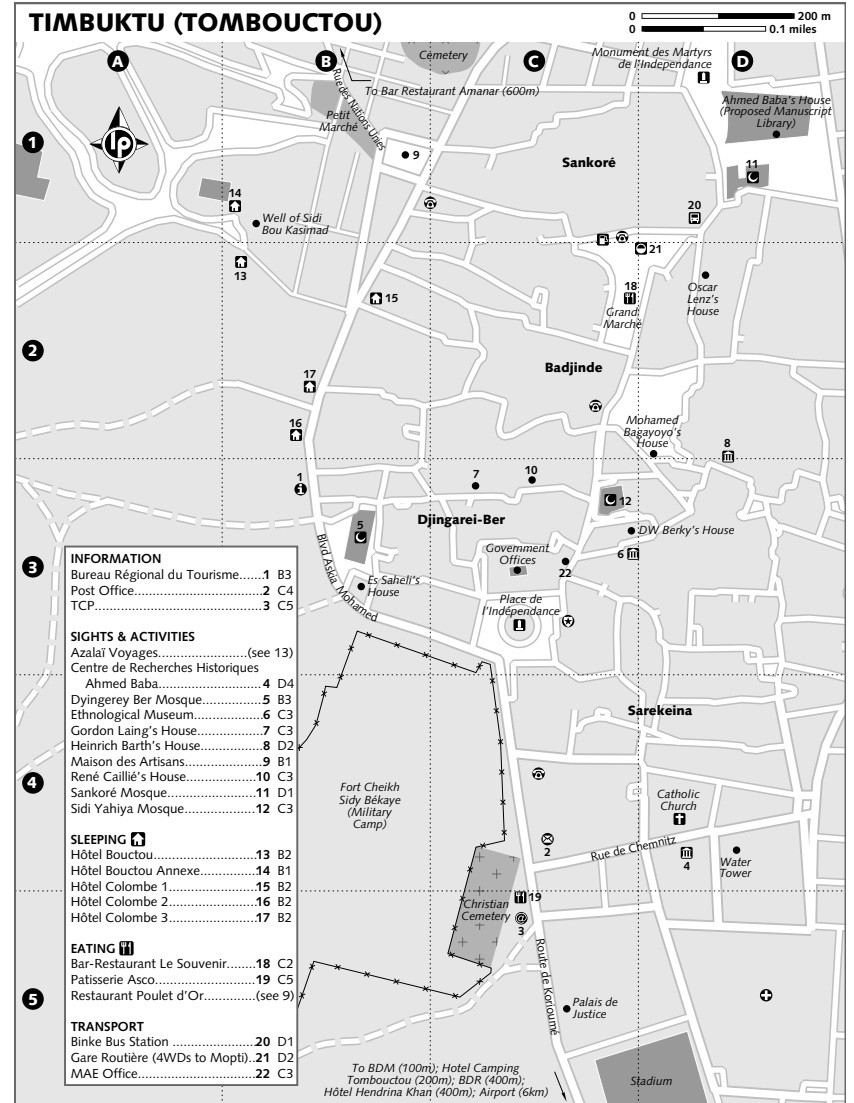
prices start at US\$36 per day by camel, or US\$170 per day in a 4WD, including guide, driver and food. Bargain hard.

Every year in early January, Essakane, 50km from Timbuktu, hosts the outstanding **Festival in the Desert**, which attracts a host of Mali's best musicians (especially Tuareg groups) and the occasional international group.

Sleeping

For a place that's so popular with tourists, Timbuktu lacks outstanding accommodation.

Hotel Camping Tombouctou (☎ 292 1433; Route de Korioumé; camp sites US\$4.50, dm US\$6.30, s/d US\$13.50/18) This place is simplicity itself, but the rooms have cool, thick walls, mosquito nets and fans, and there's a nice communal area. The



long walk into town can be punishing in the afternoon.

Hôtel Bouctou (☎ /fax 292 1012; dm, camp site or mattress on roof US\$11, s/d with fan from US\$23/27, with air-con US\$35/41; 🏠) Arrive here at noon when things are quiet and you might find the place deserted, save for the staff sleeping in the restaurant. By sunset, it swarms with tourists, guides and other hangers-on, but the rooms are large and spacious with tiled floors. The rooms in the annexe across the sandy road are slightly newer and quieter, although a touch more simple than those in the main building.

Hôtel Hendrina Khan (☎ 292 1681; www.tomboctou.com; off Route de Korioumé; s/d from US\$35/43; 🏠) The Hendrina Khan probably has the best rooms in town (the excellent bathrooms clinch it) and it's a very well-run place. The rooms have satellite TV and fridge, and are spacious and tiled. The only drawback is the long walk into town.

Hôtel Colombe 1 (☎ 292 1435; Blvd Askia Mohamed; s/d from US\$35/42; 🏠) If you like to be in the centre, Hôtel Colombe 1 is an excellent choice, with enormous rooms and a terrace overlooking the street on which meals and drinks are served. Service can be woeful, however, and the bathrooms need an overhaul. The same owners also run the nearby **Hôtel Colombe 2** (☎ 292 2132; 🏠) and **Hôtel Colombe 3** (☎ 292 2554; 🏠).

Eating

Never just turn up in a Timbuktu restaurant hoping to be fed. Ordering in advance is almost always necessary.

Bar Restaurant Amanar (meals US\$2.70-6.50; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Our favourite restaurant in Timbuktu, Amanar has a mellow atmosphere with a soundtrack of Malian blues, chilled and friendly waiters, and a small, intimate garden. It does all the travellers' staples, but the soups are outstanding. The bar gets lively on weekends.

Other good places to eat include: **Restaurant Poulet d'Or** (Maison des Artisans; meals US\$1.80-4.50; 🍷 lunch & dinner); **Pâtisserie Asco** (Route de Korioumé; meals US\$5.40; 🍷 6am-midnight), where the croissants are dense and stodgy, but the local specialties (Tuareg, Songhai and Arab) are excellent; and, on the roof of the Grand Marché, the pleasant **Bar-Restaurant Le Souvenir** (🍷 7am-midnight), which does couscous for US\$3.60/2.70 with/without meat.

Getting There & Away

Leaving Timbuktu can be harder than getting here, so start planning and negotiating your departure early.

AIR

Both **CAM** (☎ 292 1345) and **MAE** (☎ 602 3929; Place de l'Indépendance) have at least two weekly flights between Timbuktu's flash new **airport** (☎ 292 1320), 6km south of town off Route de Korioumé, and Bamako (US\$163) via Mopti (US\$78). There's also one weekly flight to Gao (US\$76).

BOAT

Between late July and late November, the large Comanav passenger boats stop at Korioumé, Timbuktu's port – for details on prices, see p418. **Azalai Voyages** (☎ 292 1199; azalaivoyages@nomade.fr) can reserve a ticket for a small fee.

Alternatively, you can travel between Mopti and Korioumé by public or private *pinasse*; for details see p404.

LAND

In the dry season, battered 4WDs run from Mopti to Timbuktu (US\$23 for a seat or US\$108 for the car to yourself) almost every day. Twelve hours is the minimum trip duration, but it can take double that. A few days a week, there's a Binke truck-bus (dry season only) to Douentza (US\$18, eight hours), from where a Binke bus waits to carry passengers on to Mopti and Bamako. Gana Transport also runs a weekly dry-season service between Timbuktu's *gare routière* and Bamako (US\$35, 24 hours).

Getting Around

A private taxi/*bâché* to Korioumé from central Timbuktu costs US\$10.80/0.90.

HOMBORI

Hombori is a large village on the main road between Mopti and Gao. The older, more picturesque quarter climbs the hill to the south. Improbably, hardy elephants pass close to Hombori in February and March.

A series of magnificent sandstone buttresses, or mesas, punctuate the semidesert landscape in this area – some people call the 80km stretch of road between Hombori and Douentza Mali's monument valley. The rock formations and sheer cliffs of the Gandamia Plateau (with great trekking potential) are especially beautiful.

The huge towers of rock culminate north of town with **Hombori Tondo**, which rises from the plains to 1155m (Mali's highest point). To reach the wide summit plateau you'll need some climbing ability and equipment, but **La Clé de Hombori** (Key to Hombori), a separate jagged spire at the southwestern end of the massif, can be climbed without ropes in about four hours.

About 13km south of town is **La Main de Fatima** (The Hand of Fatima), which has narrow, finger-like towers that reach up 600m from the plains and provide world-class, technical rock climbing. A spectacular walking trail passes left (south) of Fatima's northern-most digit to a wonderful camp site, before descending to **Garmi Tondo**, a picturesque, stone-built village close to the Gao–Bamako road where all visitors to the rock should pay a US\$2.70 tourist tax.

A 45-minute walk north of Hombori is an impressive dune system, **Hondo Miyo**. It's a great place to watch the sunset.

Anyone wanting to climb here should contact a Spanish climber called **Salvador Campillo** (salva@maindefatma.com; http://empresas.iddeo.es/mascarell/maindefatma/pag/catal.html) who lives in the area for part of the year and arranges climbing tours.

Campement Hôtel Mangou Bagni (camp sites or mattress on roof CFA3000, s/d CFA4000/6000) is a simple, but really quite nice, place to stay and eat. On the main road, Hombori has two surprisingly good Senegalese restaurants.

Hombori lies along the Sévaré–Gao road, and all transport between these two towns passes through Hombori (by bus US\$6.30 either way, up to nine hours).

GAO

pop 38,190

Gao, the former capital of the Songhai Empire, is one of the most important towns of Mali's illustrious past. Like Timbuktu, however, Gao can feel like the end of the earth, a cluster of nomadic settlements pushed onto the Niger River's shores by the Sahara Desert that dominates to the north. Expeditions into the desert are a highlight of a visit here, as is the lively port. Apart from anything else, to say that you've been 350km past Timbuktu earns pretty big traveller-cachet points.

Information

Association Askia Guide (☎ 282 0130) Guides for exploring local sites and the Sahara.

BDM (Ave des Askia) Changes euro cash and sometimes provides cash advances on Visa cards.

Clif de Gao (Route de l'Aéroport; per hr US\$1.80; 🍷 8-11am & 4-9pm Mon-Thu & Sat, 6-9pm Fri, 8-11am Sun)
Gao Bureau of Tourism Visitor Centre (Omaha Visitors' Centre; ☎ 282 1182, 605 1559; Place de l'Indépendance; 🍷 7.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, by appointment Sat & Sun) The best tourist office in Mali.

Sights & Activities

Gao's premier tourist attraction is a sunset trip to **La Dune Rose** ('The Pink Dune', known locally as 'Koïma'), a wonderful sand dune on the eastern bank of the Niger, visible from town. From September to February, when water levels allow, consider hiring a *piroque* (from US\$27 for three hours) to head upstream to **Quema** and **Hondo** where there are more stunning dunes; you're almost guaranteed **hippo sightings** at Tacharan.

Musée du Sahel (Rue 224, Sosso-Kiora; admission US\$1.80; 🍷 8am-noon & 3-6pm Tue-Sun) is a wonderful museum that tells the story of the Songhai and Tuareg people.

The **Tomb of the Askia** (admission US\$1.80; 🍷 Sat-Thu), north of town, was built in 1495 by Askia Muhammad Touré, ruler of the Songhai Empire and whose remains lie within. Recognised by Unesco, its combination of mud brick, wooden struts and a tapering tower are austere but beautiful.

The **Grand Marché** and **port** are interesting and well worth checking out, especially on Sunday (market day), but it's always busy.

Five blocks east of the water tower, the **Maison des Artisans** (🍷 8am-dusk) has 60 artisan-owned shops and is a great place to browse.

Sleeping

Camping Euro (☎ 608 7827; near Algerian Consulate, Al-janabandia; d/ste with fan US\$13.50/18) Since we were in Gao, we've learned of this new and super-clean *campement*-style place, where English is spoken. It's winning good reviews from travellers.

Hôtel Atlantide (☎ 282 0130; d with fan/air-con US\$18/32) Around since the 1930s, renovations are always promised here but little seems to change each time we come. Then again, it's central, clean and the decaying elegance does have a certain ramshackle charm.

Hôtel le Bel Air (☎ 282 0540; mattress on roof US\$7.20, d with fan/air-con US\$23/32; 🏠) A relatively new place that hasn't yet begun the long descent into decline, Bel Air is busy and bustling, and the good rooms are accompanied by an African ambience in the public areas.

Sahara Passion (☎ 282 0187; spassion@malinet.ml; s/d from US\$18/23; 🍽️) Off Rue 381 southeast of the town centre, Sahara Passion is nicely done and is Gao's most switched-on place. The courtyard is lovely, and the restaurant is one of Gao's best (meals US\$2.70 to US\$5.40). This is also one of the best places to organise your desert expedition. Book ahead.

Eating & Drinking

Around the Grand Marché you can get coffee and bread in the mornings, and street food in the evenings (check out the excellent local sausages). While in Gao, it's worth seeking out the local Songhaï specialty, *wigila*, sun-dried dumplings that you dunk in a meat sauce made with cinnamon and spices.

La Source du Nord (salads US\$0.90-1.80, mains US\$1.35-3.15; 🍽️ 7am-10pm) In central Gao, opposite the Shell petrol, you can try *wigila* and it also does a good braised *capitaine* (US\$2.70).

Restaurant de l'Amitié (cnr Rues 234 & 213, Sosso-Kiora; meals US\$0.90-5.40; 🍽️ 8am-4am) This restaurant is another good option.

Le Petit Restaurant (3rd paved road, Sosso Koïra; meals US\$0.90; 🍽️ 6am-8pm) Very popular with tourists and expats, La Petite Restaurant serves cheap and hearty lentils, liver, couscous and macaroni. Oumar, the kindly Algerian owner, is another drawcard.

Bellah Rôtisserie (Ave des Askias; meals from US\$0.90) Rotisseries are found all over Gao, but this one in particular is worth a try.

Club Koukia (admission CFA1500; 🍽️ 8am-4am) Behind Hôtel Atlantide, Club Koukia is a popular bar-cum-nightclub where a Castel will set you back US\$0.90.

Getting There & Away

Apart from international flights operated by Point Afrique (see p417), **CAM** (☎ 282 0960; Hôtel Atlantide) offers Gao's only plane connection with the outside world, with one flight per week to Bamako (US\$217) via Mopti (US\$153) and Timbuktu (US\$76).

Apart from the **Comanav ferry** (☎ 282 0466) p418, there's no regular transport upstream to Timbuktu; chartering your own private *pinasse* is possible, but expensive (from US\$540).

Binke (☎ 282 0558) and **Bani** (☎ 282 0424) buses leave for Bamako (US\$29, 16 to 20 hours), via Sévaré (US\$13, eight hours) and Ségou (US\$26, 12 hours), leave early in the morning (usually 5am) and mid-afternoon. There's also

an occasional truck/4WD to Timbuktu (up to US\$27, 12 hours) from the *gare routière*.

DOGON COUNTRY (PAYS DOGON)

Mali's stand-out highlight is exploring the homeland of the fascinating Dogon people, arrayed above and below the huge Falaise de Bandiagara, which extends some 150km through the Sahel to the east of Mopti. The landscape is stunning, and the Dogon are noted for their complex and elaborate culture, art forms and unique houses and granaries – some clinging to the bare rock face of the escarpment.

DOGON GATEWAYS

Bandiagara pop 6853

This small, dusty town lies 63km east of Sévaré, and about 20km from the edge of the Falaise de Bandiagara. Once a major administrative centre, tourism is now the main show in town, as it basks in the reflected glow of the smaller and more beautiful Dogon towns and villages closer to the escarpment. The attention of numerous would-be guides as soon as you arrive can be quite intimidating.

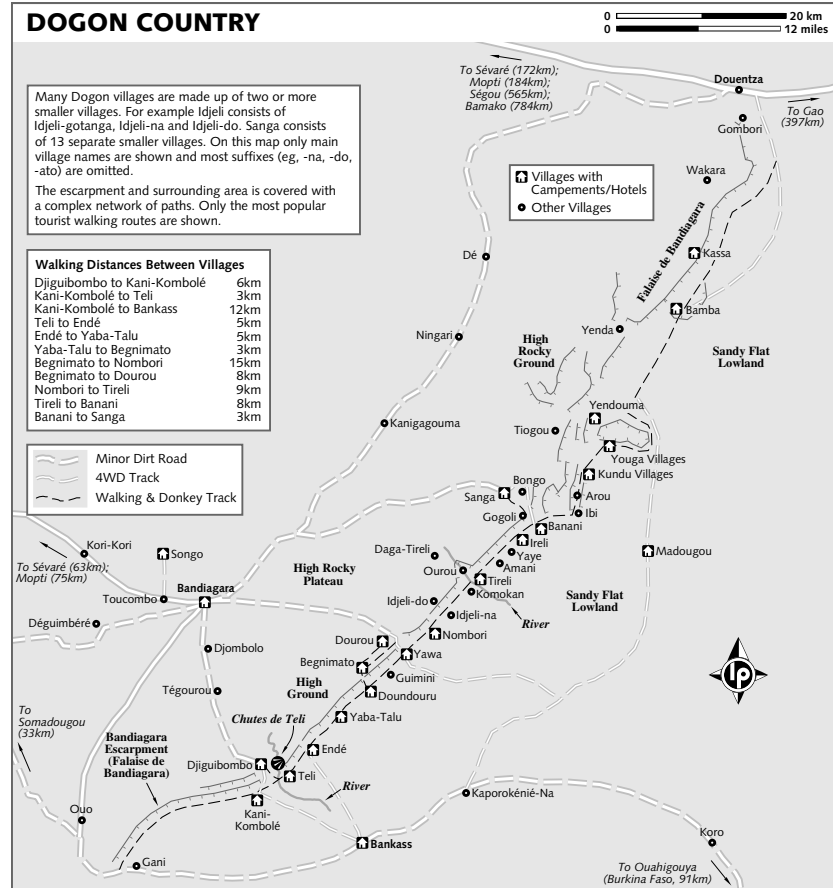
Cybercafé Clic (Route de Djiuibombo; per hr US\$2.70; 🍽️ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) gives you one last chance to check your email, while the **Guide association** (☎ 244 2128) and **Mission Culturelle** (☎/fax 244 2263) can recommend guides.

Auberge Kansaye (☎ 625 0762; kansayebouba@yahoo.fr; dm from US\$5.40) has a chilled ambience and basic rooms by the riverbank, while **Le Kambari** (Cheval Blanc; ☎ 244 2388; chevalblancmali@yahoo.fr; s/d from US\$32/36; 🍽️ 🍷) and **Hôtel de la Falaise** (☎ 244 2128; napopapa2003@yahoo.fr; mattress from US\$2.70, s/d from US\$25/29; 🍽️) offer high levels of comfort and the best restaurants.

Most transport leaves Bandiagara around 7am or 5pm. There's a lot going to Sévaré/Mopti (around US\$2.70), but getting to Bankass (US\$1.80) or Koro (minibus/bush taxi US\$3.60/4.50) means a longer wait. You might also find the odd minibus heading to Sanga (US\$2.70).

Sanga

Sanga (also written 'Sangha'), 44km east of Bandiagara and close to the top of the escarpment, is one of the largest Dogon villages in



the region. It's a fascinating place to explore with a guide. Of particular interest is the Ogol Da section, which is full of temples, fetishes and shrines. However, it is a favourite of tour groups and has become quite touristy in recent years.

Hôtel Femme Dogon (mattress on roof US\$5.40, d US\$13.50) and **Campement-Hôtel Guinna** (s/d with bathroom & fan US\$27/32, meals US\$1.80-9) are some of the more comfortable places to stay in the Dogon Country; after a week's trekking, the garden at the latter is lovely, the food is good, and the hot showers and cold beer fantastic.

Apart from the occasional minibus to Bandiagara (US\$2.70), there's no regular public transport to Sanga. Chartering a taxi costs at

least US\$27, or getting a moped to drop you off costs US\$13.50 (including petrol).

Bankass

Bankass is 64km south of Bandiagara, along the dirt road to Burkina Faso. The Falaise de Bandiagara is about 12km away, which makes it a good gateway to southern Dogon Country.

Campement & Hôtel Hogon (camp sites/mattress on roof US\$3.60, r US\$9.90, mains US\$4.50-6.30) is the best place to stay, although it's pretty run-down and basic. The best assets are the guys who run it – friendly and helpful with everything from finding guides to transport to Burkina Faso.

There are daily Peugeot taxis and minibuses to Bandiagara (US\$1.80) and Mopti (US\$4.50, two hours).

DOGON CULTURE

The Dogon believe that the earth, moon and sun were created by a divine male being called Amma. The earth was formed in the shape of a woman, and by her Amma fathered twin snake-like creatures called the Nommo, which Dogon believe are present in streams and pools. Later, Amma made two humans – a man and a woman – who were circumcised by the Nommo and then gave birth to eight children, who are regarded as the ancestors of all Dogon.

Amma is also credited with creating the stars. A major feature of Dogon cosmology is the star known in Western countries as Sirius, or the Dog Star, which was also held to be auspicious by the ancient Egyptians. The Dogon are able to predict Sirius' periodic appearance at a certain point above the skyline, and have long regarded it as three separate stars – two close together and a third invisible. The movements of these stars dictate the timing of the major Sigui festival, which takes place about every 60 years. Although modern astronomers knew Sirius to be two stars, it was only in 1995 that powerful radio telescopes detected a third body of super-dense matter in the same area.

Aspects of Dogon religion readily seen by visitors are the *omolo* or fetishes, sacred objects that are dotted around most villages. Most are a simple dome of hard-packed mud, and their function is to protect the village against certain eventualities. To strengthen their power, sacrifices are made to these *omolo* on a regular basis. This usually means pouring millet porridge over them, although sometimes the blood of a chicken is used.

Douentza

Douentza, though an unappealing town, is the launching point for treks into northern Dogon Country. Douentza's best place to stay, **Campement de Douentza** (☎ 245 2052, 633 0301; r per person US\$18), is run by the endearingly eccentric Frenchman Jérôme Hurpoil, and is also the first choice for arranging expeditions to the Dogon Country or elsewhere. Members of the **guide association** (☎ 245 2002) hang out at **Auberge Gourma** (☎ 245 2031; r per person US\$4.50), a basic place to stay.

TREKKING

The best way to see Dogon Country is on foot, trekking along the escarpment for anything from one day to three weeks. Four towns, Bandiagara (p410), Sanga (p410), Bankass (p411) and Douentza (above) provide gateways to Dogon Country. From these towns transport to the actual trailheads must be arranged. The most popular trailheads are Kani-Kombolé, Djiguibombo, Endé, Dourou and Sanga.

November to February is the best time to trek, with daytime temperatures close to 30°C. December and January sees the trails increasingly clogged with tourists. From March to May, it's fiercely hot, though early in the morning it's OK for walking. From June to September is the rainy season, but downpours are short, the air is clear and the waterfalls and flowers are spectacular.

Accommodation & Equipment

Almost every Dogon village has at least one *campement* – a one-storey building encircling a courtyard. Although some have rooms, sleeping on the flat roof under the stars can be a wonderful experience. Evening meals are usually rice with a sauce of vegetables or meat (usually chicken). In the morning, you'll be given tea and bread with jam or processed cheese. Small shops and restaurants catering for tourists have been set up in the most-visited Dogon villages, while beers, bottled water and soft drinks are available almost everywhere.

The general rule is to travel as lightly as possible, because paths are steep or sandy in places. Footwear should be sturdy, but boots are not essential. It's vital to have a sunhat and a water bottle, otherwise heatstroke and serious dehydration are real possibilities. You should always carry at least a litre of water. Avoid carrying 'Western' products that have layers of packaging. Nights are warm, although a lightweight sleeping bag will keep off the pre-dawn chill from November to February. Dogon villages are dark at night, so a torch (flashlight) is useful, and you'll need toilet paper. Wearing shorts for trekking is OK, as they do not offend Dogon culture.

Costs

Visitors to Dogon Country must pay for the privilege. Not only do various fees provide the local people with a much-needed source

of income, they also go a small way towards compensating the Dogon people for the alienating impact of mass tourism. Standard costs include the following:

Breakfast (US\$0.90)

Guide (per day guiding only from US\$16.20, all-inclusive US\$27-36)

Lunch or dinner (with/without meat US\$4.50/2.70)

Porter (per porter per day US\$4.50)

Sleeping in village campement (per person per night US\$1.80-2.70)

Village tourist tax (per person US\$0.90-1.80) Nothing if you're just passing through.

The village tourist tax should allow you to take photos of houses and other buildings (but *not* people, unless you get their permission), and to visit nearby cliff dwellings. If possible, pay this fee directly to the village headman, not to your guide.

Your only other cost is reaching the escarpment. From Bandiagara, a local taxi to any of the local trailheads will cost US\$18 to US\$36. From Bankass to the escarpment at Endé or Kani-Kombolé (12km) by horse and cart is around US\$9 (the track is too sandy for mopeds).

Guides

Guides are not strictly necessary in a practical sense, but in a cultural sense they are vital. Ideally a guide will be your translator, fixer (for accommodation and food) and verbal guidebook, not to mention a window into

the Dogon world. Without one, you'll undoubtedly miss many points of interest, and could genuinely offend the Dogon villagers by unwittingly stumbling across a sacred site. All guides speak French and some also speak English or other European languages.

As a general rule, it's much better to hire your guide at one of the gateway towns than in Mopti or Bamako, although more importantly, your guide to the Dogon Country should be a Dogon.

It's also worth spending an extra day or two asking around for recommendations from other travellers. Other places to ask around include good hotels in Sévaré, Bandiagara and the Bureau Regional du Tourisme in Mopti. The guide associations in Bandiagara and Mopti have lists of accredited guides, and if a guide fails to produce a yellow or blue card (see the Guides in Mali boxed text, p399), this is a warning sign to look elsewhere.

Trekking Routes

ONE TO TWO DAYS

If you're very short of time there are three circular walks from Sanga, aimed at tour groups on tight schedules. The **Petit Tour** (7km) goes to Gogoli, the **Moyen Tour** (10km) goes to Gogoli and Banani, and the **Grand Tour** (15km) goes to Gogoli, Banani and Ireli.

However, spending a night in a Dogon village gives you a much better impression of life on the escarpment than you'll ever get on a one-day trip. From Bandiagara, with a

DOGON MASKS & CEREMONIES

Masks are very important in Dogon culture, and play a significant role in religious ceremonies. The most famous ceremony is the Sigui, performed every 60 years (most recently during the 1960s), which features a large mask and headdress called the *iminana*. During the Sigui, the Dogon perform dances recounting the story of their origin. After the ceremony, the *iminana* is stored in a cave high on the cliffs.

The *iminana* is also used during a major 'funeral' ceremony that takes place every five or so years. According to Dogon tradition, when a person dies their spirit wanders about looking for a new residence. Fearful that the spirit might rest in another mortal, the Dogon bring out the *iminana* and take it to the deceased's house to entice the spirit to reside in the mask. The accompanying ceremony can last up to a week and celebrates the life of the dead person and the part they played in village life.

Other masks used by the Dogon include the bird-like *kanaga*, which protects against vengeance (of a killed animal), and the house-like *sirige*, which represents the house of the *hogon*, who is responsible for passing on Dogon traditions to younger generations. Most Dogon ceremonies where you may see masks take place from April to May. These include Agguet, around May in honour of the ancestors, Ondonfile and Boulo (the rain-welcoming festival), which takes place in the period leading up to the first rains.

lift to Djiguibombo, you can walk down to the plains, spend the night in either Kani-Kombolé, Teli or Endé and return by the same route. You could also do a circular route from Dourou to Nombori.

From Bankass, a short, but rewarding circuit takes you to Kani-Kombolé, through Teli to Endé (spending the night at either) and then back.

THREE TO FIVE DAYS

A good three-day trek from Bandiagara starts with a lift to Djiguibombo. You descend to Teli for the first night and trek northeast to Begnimato (second night). On the third day continue to Yawa, then up the escarpment to Dourou, where you can arrange a lift back to Bandiagara. You can add an extra day by diverting northeast to Nombori. An easier trip from Bandiagara would be Djiguibombo, Teli and Endé, returning by the same route.

An excellent four-day alternative, and one of our favourites, is to start from Bandiagara, catch a lift to Dourou, trek down the escarpment to Nombori (first night), head north-east to Ireli (second night), on to Tireli (third night), then up the escarpment to Sanga.

From Bankass, you can make your way to Teli or Endé and then walk northeast to Begnimato, Yawa or Nombori, and on to Dourou and Bandiagara.

From Sanga, a good four-day route descends first to Banani then heads north to Kundu (first night), Youga (second night) and Yendouma (third night). On the fourth day go up the cliffs to Tiogou and return over the plateau to Sanga.

SIX DAYS OR MORE

If you have plenty of time, any of the routes described above can be extended or combined, and routes from Douentza exploring the north are possible.

SOUTHERN MALI

SIKASSO

pop 144,786

Agreeable, if unexciting, Sikasso stands at the heart of a relatively lush region that is known as the 'market garden of Mali'. Physical evidence of Sikasso's fascinating history has eroded over time, although the mud-brick **tata** (town wall), that fell to French cannons

in 1898, is still visible in places. Sikasso was the last Malian town to resist French colonialism, and King Babemba Traore chose to kill himself rather than surrender. The beautiful **Palais du Dernier Roi** still stands on the western side of town, and in the centre is the **Mamelon**, a small hill that was sacred to the KénéDougou kings, and on which a French colonial tower now stands.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel Mamelon (☎ 262 0044; Ave Mamadou Konate; d with private bathroom US\$14.40-28.80; 🏠) Some of the air-conditioning at this once-lovely hotel seems to date from the colonial era, but it somehow keeps working. Like most people we encountered in Sikasso, the owners are a friendly lot.

Zanga Hôtel (☎ 262 0431; s/d from US\$23/31; 🏠 🚿) Zanga, 100m north of the *gare routière*, is fairly flash (by Sikasso standards), has a pool and is easily the best place to stay in town. The rooms are fine, if uninspiring.

Bldv Coiffet has several cheap eateries serving good filling meals (heavy on the rice) for around US\$0.90 to US\$2.70. **La Vieille Marmite** (Bldv Coiffet) and **Restaurant Kenedougou** (Bldv Coiffet) provide good Malian fare, and the enormous Sunday market is a real bonus for street-food fans.

Getting There & Away

The *gare routière* is a 15-minute walk (US\$0.40 in a shared taxi) from the town centre. There are daily buses to Bamako (US\$8, three hours), Mopti (US\$10.80, five hours) and Ségou (US\$8, three hours).

WESTERN MALI

KAYES

pop 97,464

You wouldn't come here just to see Kayes (pronounced 'Kai'), but as the principal settlement in the west of Mali, it can be a reasonable place to break up the long journey between Bamako and Dakar. Kayes is hot and dusty, and was the first place the French settled in Mali (several colonial buildings remain). There's a thriving, chaotic market, and the town is largely hassle-free.

The **Fort de Médiéne**, about 15km upstream from Kayes, was part of a chain of defence posts built along the Senegal River in French

colonial times. The crumbling buildings hold a real sense of history, and the old train station is particularly beautiful.

Sleeping & Eating

Mahdi Kaama Musundo Foundation (r per person US\$10.80) This foundation for the promotion of Soninke language and culture, is not really a hotel, but it's an imaginative choice nonetheless. The rooms are simple and there's an atmosphere of quiet scholarship; not surprisingly the staff are a mine of information on local culture. It's next to the petrol station and opposite the market in the centre of town.

Hôtel du Rail (☎ 252 1233; d with air-con US\$33-42; 🏠) Opposite the train station, Kayes' Rail Hotel is typical of such places across West Africa – always people coming and going, a lovely old colonial building, and interiors that fade noticeably with each passing year. The food here is good (three-course menu for US\$10.80).

There are several cheap food stalls near the train station and in the market. Of the sit-down options (all open for lunch and dinner daily), **Restaurant Yankadi** (Rue 122; meals CFA250-700), near the junction with Rue Magdeburg, serves filling meals.

Getting There & Away

CAM (☎ 672 7676) and **MAE** (☎ 252 1582; Rue Soundiata Keita) each have up to four flights per week between Kayes and Bamako (US\$104).

There's an unreliable rail service from Kayes to Bamako (2nd/1st class US\$12.50/21, 10 to 14 hours) on Monday, Tuesday and Saturday (it travels in the other direction on Sunday, Monday and Friday).

MALI DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Mali has some outstanding hotels, although compared to other West African countries you pay a lot more for quality. Everywhere, budget hotels (up to US\$15/18 for a single/double) vary from basic and depressing to simple and tidy, but rarely have any character. The standard of midrange hotels (from US\$18/22 for a single/double up to US\$60/72) is generally quite high across the country. In Bamako there are dozens of top-end hotels (up to US\$135 for a double) to choose from.

ACTIVITIES

Mali is one of the most active destinations in West Africa. Possibilities include exceptional trekking in Dogon Country (p412); evocative desert expeditions by camel or 4WD in the Sahara north of Timbuktu (p406), or Gao (p409); river journeys up the Niger between Mopti and Timbuktu (p404); and world-class rock climbing near Hombori (p408).

BUSINESS HOURS

Banks 8am-noon and 3-5pm Mon-Fri, plus 8am-noon Saturday

Bars noon-late

Nightclubs 10pm-late

Restaurants noon-3pm and 6.30-11pm

Shops 8am-noon and 3-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Saturday

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Crime is not a big problem in Mali, although in Bamako you should be careful walking around at night (see p396). People travelling by train should take care, as the train stations in Kayes and Bamako are targeted by thieves, and be vigilant on the trains themselves.

Always check the local security situation if you're heading out into the desert north of Gao, as banditry has been reported.

The main annoyance for visitors are the young men who lurk outside hotels in Bamako, Mopti, Djenné, Ségou, Timbuktu and the gateway towns to the Dogon Country offering their services as guides.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Mali Embassies & Consulates

Mali has embassies in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Niger. For details, see the relevant country chapters. In Paris, note that it is the consulate-general that issues visas, not the embassy.

Belgium (☎ 02-345 7432; ambassade.mali@skynet.be; 487 Ave Molière, Brussels 1060)

Canada (☎ 613-232 1501; www.ambamalicanada.org/english/a1.html; 50 Ave Goulburn, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 8C8)

France (☎ 01-48 07 85 85; www.consulat-mali-france.org; fax 45 48 55 34; 64 Rue Pelleport, Paris 75020) This is the Consulat Général, which issues visas.

Germany (☎ 030-319 9883; fax 319 9884; Kurfürstendamm 72, 10709 Berlin)

Italy (☎ 06-4425 4068; amb.malirome@tiscalinet.it; Via Antonia Boston 2, Rome)

USA (☎ 202-332 2249; www.maliembassy.us; 2130 R St NW, Washington, DC 20008)

PRACTICALITIES

- Electricity supply is 220V and plugs are of the European two-round-pin variety.
- Local daily French-language newspapers include *Le Soir* and *Le Malien*; *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde* are available in Bamako, and *International Herald Tribune* and *Newsweek* at just a few Bamako outlets.
- BBC World Service is broadcast on 88.9 FM in Bamako. Elsewhere check **BBC** (www.bbc.co.uk/cgi-bin/worldservice).
- Mali uses the metric system.

Embassies & Consulates in Mali

The following are all embassies in Bamako: **Burkina Faso** (☎ 229 3171; off Route de Guinea)

Canada (☎ 221 2236; www.bamako.gc.ca; Route de Koulikoro) Opposite Luna Parc; also assists Australian and UK nationals.

Côte d'Ivoire (Map p397; ☎ 221 2289; Rue 220) Near Marché N'Golonina.

France (Map p398; ☎ 221 2951, 221 3141; Sq Lumumba) Consulate; assists Austrian, Belgian, Spanish, Greek, Italian and Portuguese nationals.

Germany (☎ 222 3715; Badalabougou Est)

Ghana (☎ 229 6083; ACI2000)

Guinea (☎ 221 0806; Rue 37, off Ave de l'OUA, Faso-Kanu)

Mauritania (☎ 221 4815; Rue 213, off Route de Koulikoro, Hippodrome)

Netherlands (Map p397; ☎ 221 5611; bam@minbuza.nl; Rue 437, off Route de Koulikoro, Hippodrome)

Niger (Map p398; ☎ 601 9239, 698 7828; Ave Mamadou Konaté)

Senegal (☎ 221 8273; fax 221 1780; Rue 287, off Blvd Nelson Mandela, Hippodrome)

USA (Map p398; ☎ 222 5470; www.usa.org.ml; cnr Rue de Rochester & Rue Mohammed V)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

In addition to mask ceremonies in Dogon villages (see the Dogon Masks & Ceremonies boxed text, p413), Bozo fishing celebrations (February) and the great cattle crossings of the Fulani (December to January), the following festivals are worth checking out:

Festival in the Desert (January; www.festival-au-desert.org) Held in Essakane, near Timbuktu. See p406.

Festival Sur Le Niger (February) In Ségou, see p402

Biennial (September in even years) A sport and cultural festival in Bamako, with live music groups from around Mali.

HOLIDAYS

Public holidays include the following:

New Year's Day 1 January

Army Day 20 January

For the Martyrs of the 1991 Revolution 26 March

Easter March/April

Labour Day 1 May

African Unity Day 25 May

Independence Day 22 September

Christmas Day 25 December

For a table of Islamic holiday dates, turn to p1106.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is widely available in Bamako. There are fast connections in Mopti, Bandiagara and, to a lesser extent, Ségou. Elsewhere you'll find at least one internet café in most towns (including Timbuktu), although connections can be very slow. Connections usually cost US\$1.80 per hour, and can go up to US\$2.70.

MAPS

The French **IGN** (www.ign.fr) produces the excellent *Mali* (1:2,000,000), but it's not available in Mali itself. It also sells the *Carte Internationale du Monde* series (1:1,000,000), which is outdated for roads but is still the best in the business for physical geography. Michelin's 953 *Africa North and West* (1:4,000,000) is a large-scale map, but shows Mali's minor roads accurately.

MONEY

The unit of currency is the West African CFA franc.

Most of Mali's banks change foreign cash. Outside Bamako you may have difficulty with travellers cheques, and when banks do change them commission rates vary wildly. Bank of Africa, Ecobank and Banque Internationale du Mali (BIM) usually charge around 2%.

Euros are the best currency to carry. US dollars are OK, but commissions are quite often higher and nonbank exchange rates are grim.

At the time of writing, only Banque de Développement du Mali (BDM) was offering cash advances for Visa cards. There were also no functioning ATMs, but Visa card is accepted in a few ritzy hotels, restaurants and businesses in Bamako.

POST

Letter and parcel post from Mali's cities is reasonably reliable, but letters can still take weeks to arrive. Parcels do go missing, but usually only items sent from overseas. Anything of real value should be sent by **DHL** (☎ 222 6376; Ave Ruault, Bamako).

Poste restante is available at all major post offices. Some charge US\$0.90 per letter upon collection.

TELEPHONE

Sotelma, the national telephone company, has installed card phones, and phonecards are sold by vendors throughout Mali. Local calls cost US\$0.20 per minute, national calls US\$0.55 to US\$0.90, calls to Europe US\$3.40 and to the USA US\$5.50. Tariffs are reduced significantly after 5.30pm.

Malitel (www.malitel.com.ml) and **Ikatel** (www.ikatel.net) are the main mobile-phone providers; both websites have maps showing each company's coverage within Mali. Local SIM cards can be a good investment if you plan on spending a prolonged period in the country.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Mali's **Office Malien du Tourisme et de Hôtellerie** (Omatho; www.omatho.com) is a mixed bag, but is improving all the time. The website is excellent, and some local offices (Gao is a stand-out example) have really got their act together in recent years. The recent Omatho-driven system of accrediting guides (see the Guides in Mali boxed text, p399) is a huge improvement, and the Omatho offices in Bamako, Timbuktu, Gao and Mopti can provide lists of accredited guides.

VISAS

Visas are required by everyone. If there's no Malian embassy in your home country, it's possible to get your visa on arrival at the border. It costs US\$27 and you'll need to bring passport photos. The visa is valid for an initial period of five days and must then be extended at a police station (no charge), whereafter it is valid for one month. However, we would still advise you to get your visa in advance, because travellers who arrive without visas routinely report hassles from border officials keen to make a little extra money on the side.

At Malian embassies in West Africa, you'll usually pay US\$36 for a one-month single-entry visa.

Visa Extensions

One-month visa extensions cost US\$9 per month, require two photos and are only available at the Sûreté buildings in Bamako and Mopti. There's a fine of US\$27 per day for every day you overstay, and border officials will delight in extracting this from you.

Visas for Onward Travel

You can get visas for the following neighbouring countries in Bamako (see opposite for address details):

Burkina Faso Three-month visa US\$45; three photos; same day.

Côte d'Ivoire One-month visas US\$54; two photos; three days.

Ghana One-month visa US\$22; four photos; 48 hours.

Guinea One-month visa US\$84-145, depending on nationality; two photos; 24 hours.

Mauritania One-month visa US\$29; three photos; 48 hours.

Niger One-month visa US\$36; three photos; two-three days.

Senegal One-/three-month visas US\$5.40/12.60; two photos; two days.

TRANSPORT IN MALI

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Mali's main international airport is **Sénoú International Airport** (☎ 220 4626), although Point-Afrique also flies into Mopti and Gao.

Numerous airlines fly into Bamako and those with offices there include the following:

Afriqiyah (8U; Map p398; ☎ 223 1497; www.afriqiyah.aero; Ave de la Marne)

Air Burkina (2J; Map p398; ☎ 221 0178; www.air-burkina.com; Ave de la Marne)

Air France (AF; Map p398; ☎ 222 2212; www.airfrance.com; Sq Lumumba)

Air Mauritanie (MR; Map p398; ☎ 223 8740; www.air-mauritanie.mr; Sq Lumumba)

Air Sénégal (V7; Map p398; ☎ in Bamako 223 9811; www.air-senegal-international.com; Ave Modibo Keita)

Cameroon Airlines (UY; Map p397; ☎ 222 9400; www.cameroon-airlines.com; cnr Ave Kassa Keita & Ave de l'Indépendance)

Ethiopian Airlines (ET; Map p398; ☎ 222 2208; www.flyethiopian.com/et/; Sq Lumumba)

Ghana Airways (GH; Map p398; ☎ 221 9210; www.ghana-airways.com; Sq Lumumba)

Interair (D6; ☎ 221 9210; www.interair.co.za; cnr Ave Kassa Keita & Ave de l'Indépendance)

Point-Afrique (Map p398; ☎ 223 5470; www.point-afrique.com; Ave de la Marne)

Royal Air Maroc (AT; Map p398; ☎ 221 6105; www.royalairmaroc.com; Ave de la Marne)

Point-Afrique flies from Paris to Marseilles to Mopti, Gao and Bamako, usually for much less than longer-established airlines.

Within West Africa, expect to pay around US\$157 from Bamako to Dakar, or US\$196 to Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), for example.

Land

BURKINA FASO

Numerous buses leave Bamako's Sogoniko *gare routière* daily for Ouagadougou (US\$27, 20 hours) via Bobo-Dioulasso (US\$21, 15 hours). A daily bus links Koro with Ouahigouya (US\$4.50, up to four hours), from where there's onward transport to Ouagadougou.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Travel to Côte d'Ivoire was unsafe at the time of writing and the volume of cross-border transport has dropped off to a trickle. However, there are still daily buses to Abidjan (US\$41, 36 to 48 hours). Transport for Côte d'Ivoire also leaves from Sikasso.

GUINEA

Peugeot taxis or minibuses run most days from Bamako's Djikoroni *gare routière* to the border at Kourémalé (US\$6.30, three hours) and then on to Siguiri (US\$10.80). A once-weekly bus continues all the way to Conakry (US\$45).

MAURITANIA

Battered 4WDs and trucks are the usual transport. There are daily departures from Kayes to Sélibabai (US\$22, eight hours), and from Niore to Ayoûn el-Atroûs (US\$32). The latter option gets you onto the paved road leading to Nouakchott.

NIGER

SNTV (☎ 2820395) depart for Niamey (US\$15.50, up to 30 hours) on Wednesday and Saturday at 5.30am from its office east of the centre of Gao; coming the other way costs US\$21.

SENEGAL

The train between Bamako and Dakar is one of Africa's great epics. In theory the train departs Bamako for Dakar (2nd/1st/couchette class US\$46/63/95) at 9.15am Wednesday, and from Dakar at 10am. It could take forever

but, if not, around 50 hours, and could conceivably depart any day of the week.

GETTING AROUND

Air

There are now two domestic carriers:

Compagnie Aérienne du Mali (CAM; ☎ 229 9100; o.nub.ukpo@cam-mali.com; Immeuble Tomota, Ave Cheick Zayed, Hamdallaye, Bamako) The newer operator, usually cheaper.

Mali Air Express (MAE; ☎ 223 1465; sae@cefib.com; Ave de la Nation, Bamako)

Both airlines fly from Bamako to Mopti, Timbuktu and Kayes. CAM also operates a weekly flight to/from Gao that goes via Mopti and Timbuktu. Return fares are only a fraction under double one-way prices.

Boat

Most boat journeys on the Niger River are only possible from August to December when water levels are high. For detailed information on travelling by *pirogue* and public or private *pinasse*, see p404.

Three large passenger boats, operated by the Compagnie Malienne de Navigation (Comanav), ply the Niger River between Koulikoro (50km west of Bamako) and Gao, from August to November/December. In theory, one boat heads downstream from Koulikoro at 10pm Tuesday, arrives in Mopti at 3pm Thursday, in Timbuktu at 7am Saturday, and Gao at midnight Sunday. Another boat heads upstream from Gao at 8pm every Monday, reaching Timbuktu at 6pm on Wednesday, Mopti at 4pm Friday, and Koulikoro at midnight Sunday. In practice, the journey can take twice as long.

The 'luxe' cabins have a bathroom and air-con; 1st-class cabins have two bunk beds, toilet and washbasin; and 2nd-class cabins are four-berth with a washbasin and shared toilets. Third class is an eight-berth cabin and in 4th class you get to fight for a space on deck and don't get meals.

Booze, food and water are all available, but take extra supplies as you may get stranded.

PASSENGER BOAT FARES (US\$)

route	luxe	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Koulikoro to Ségou	79	47	31	19	5
Ségou to Mopti	127	66	48	28	6
Mopti to Koroumé	164	89	63	37	9
Koroumé to Gao	179	104	65	38	10

Bus

The better private bus companies are **Bani** (☎ 220 6081), **Binke** (☎ 220 5683), **Bittar** (☎ 220 1205) and **Somatra** (☎ 220 9932), all of which run regular services between the main towns south of the Niger River.

North of the Niger River the roads can be terrible, and 4WDs, fortified truck-buses and standard trucks are used for public transport.

Bush Taxi

Bush taxis and minibuses are slightly more expensive than buses (you're likely to be charged a US\$0.90 luggage fee), but they become handy on shorter, less-frequented

routes, where they may be the only option anyway. These are usually either Peugeot 504s carrying nine people, or *bâchés* (pick-ups) with about 16 passengers. *Bâchés* are slower, but about 25% cheaper than 504s.

Train

The train is the best way to travel between Bamako and Kayes, although it's never on time and is not without its insecurities (see p401 for details).

Second-class travel is cramped, chaotic and makes the journey seem eternal. For longer trips, 1st class is recommended, and taking a *couchette* is likewise worthwhile for overnight journeys.

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