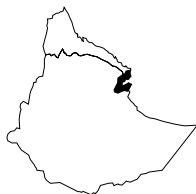


Transitting Through Djibouti



Djibouti might be one of the tiniest, youngest and least-known nations in Africa; it could also well be the most talented or, depending on your perspective, the most opportunistic. While Eritrea and Ethiopia, its larger and more powerful neighbours, are embroiled in what seems to be a never-ending border dispute, Djibouti stands out as a haven of stability and neutrality. The country's leaders cleverly maintain good relations with their unruly neighbours. Djibouti's port is now Ethiopia's main hub for imports and exports.

As long as the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea remains closed, Djibouti is the obvious transit point for those travellers who want to visit the two countries in a single trip. It is well connected to both, whether by air or by land. But, you would miss out if you limited your experience of Djibouti to a few hours or even a full day waiting for a connecting flight, train or bus. Djibouti is much more than a stopping point on the road to Eritrea or Ethiopia. Why not settle in for a few days and enjoy its dishevelled nightlife, culinary delights and well-organised infrastructure? Or visit its surreal hinterland? Sure, Djibouti will put a dent in your wallet but if you need to recharge the batteries before (or after) a serious overland trip of Eritrea or Ethiopia, this is the place.

PRACTICALITIES

- Djibouti uses the metric system and distances are in kilometres.
- Electricity in Djibouti is 220V. European two-prong plugs are mainly used.
- Local newspapers are published weekly in French. They include *La Nation* and *Réalité*.
- TV programmes are in Somali, Afar, Arab and French.

DJIBOUTI CITY

Djibouti City is not your average African capital. Coming from Eritrea or eastern Ethiopia, many travellers are surprised to discover that it is an active and fairly cosmopolitan city that tries hard to be recognised as the little Dubai in the Red Sea. Traditionally robbed Afar tribesmen, stalwart French legionnaires (and the odd GI), sensuous Somali glamour kittens and frazzled businessmen with the latest mobile phones stuck to their ear all jostle side by side.

While it's not exactly a diamond in the rough, it boasts good infrastructure but doesn't come cheap – be prepared for a financial shock. If you're into clubbing, Djibouti City offers a couple of lively options right in the centre. For more on things to do in Djibouti, see the boxed text, p288.

INFORMATION Embassies & Consulates

Djiboutian diplomatic representation abroad is scarce, but there are embassies in Ethiopia and Eritrea (see p260 and p359). In countries without representation, travellers should head for the French embassy, which acts for Djibouti in the issuing of visas.

Most foreign embassies in Djibouti City are located on Plateau du Serpent, north of the city centre.

Canada (☎ /fax 355950; Place Lagarde)

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

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

France (☎ 350963; www.ambafrance-dj.or; ave F. d'Esperey)

USA (☎ 353995; www.djibouti.usembassy.gov; Plateau du Serpent)

Internet Access

There's a slew of Internet outlets in the centre. The following ones offer the best connections.

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

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

Medical Services

CHA Bouffard (☎ 351351; Boulaos district) The best equipped hospital, south of the city.

Pôle Médical (☎ 352724; ☎ Sat-Thu) A well-equipped clinic run by French doctors who can speak English. It's off Place du 27 Juin 1977.

Money

At the time of writing the two ATMs in Djibouti City were not functioning and there were no plans to fix them up. Your best bet is to rely on cash. If you're short of funds, the BCIMR is an agent for **Western Union** (☎ 358885; Place Lagarde; ☎ 8.15am-12.30pm & 4-6pm Sun-Thu).

BCIMR Place Lagarde (☎ 358885; ☎ 7.30-11.45am Sun-Thu); Plateau du Serpent (☎ 353143; ave F. d'Esperey; ☎ 7.45-11.45am & 4-5.30pm Sun-Thu) Doesn't accept travellers cheques but can do cash advances on credit cards (Visa only). For cash transactions, a flat fee of DFr500 is charged. The ave F. d'Esperey branch is less crowded.

There are also two authorised bureaux de change around Place Lagarde and one at the airport.

Bureau de change (☎ 821970; international airport; ☎ 7.30am-1pm & 4pm-last departure Sat-Thu, 4pm-last

FAST FACTS

- ATMs: two in Djibouti City but they were not functioning at the time of writing
- Best season: October to March
- Borders: Eritrea and Ethiopia open
- Capital: Djibouti City
- Languages: Arabic, French, Afar, Somali
- Money: Djibouti Franc (DFr); US\$1 = DFr175.19
- Telephone: country code ☎ 253; international access code ☎ 00
- Time: GMT/UTC + 3h

departure Fri) At the airport (cash only) but the rates are slightly inferior to the ones offered in the centre.

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

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

Post & Telephone

The most convenient places to make an international or a local call are the various

telephone outlets scattered around the city centre.

Main post office (blvd de la République; ☹ 7am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu) North of the centre.

Tourist Information

Tourist office (☎ 352800; www.office-tourisme.dj in French; rue de Foucauld; ☹ 7am-1pm Sat-Thu, 4-6pm Sat, Mon & Wed) To the southeastern side of Place du 27 Juin 1977. Sells a map of the country for DFr300 and gives a free photocopy of a map of the city.

SLEEPING

Grit your teeth: the choice of budget accommodation is limited.

Hotel Ali Sabieh (☎ 353264; ave Georges Clemenceau; s DFr9400-10,500, d DFr12,700; 🏠) One of

DJIBOUTI VISAS

All visitors, including nationals of France, need visas. Tourist visas cost from US\$30 to US\$60 and are usually valid for one month. Visas can be obtained at the nearest Djibouti embassy (including Addis Ababa and Asmara if you're in the Horn) or, where there is none, from the French embassy. Note that travellers from most Western countries can also obtain tourist visas on arrival at the airport: leave your passport at the Immigration Office and you get it stamped the next day or, if you're really lucky, within a couple of hours. It costs DFr3000 for 10 days and DFr5000 for one month.

this converted villa boasts a mixed bag of rooms, so ask to see a few. If you're a light sleeper, be prepared to be lulled by the call to prayer emanating from the nearby mosque.

Hotel Horseed (☎ 352316; blvd du Général de Gaulle; s/d with shared bathroom DFr5000/7500; 🏠) The Horseed won't feature in the pages of the *Condé Nast Traveller* and its location is not the most prepossessing, but the prices are competitive and the rooms presentable. Air-con is extra (DFr500).

EATING & DRINKING

The city is endowed with a smattering of restaurants that will please most palates – a testimony to the French presence. OK, it doesn't come cheap, especially if you come from Ethiopia, but at least it's worth every mouthful. Splurge! There's also a smattering of watering holes off Place du 27 Juin 1977.

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

La Table de Julien (☎ 357355; ave F. d'Esperey; mains DFr1900-2500; ☹ lunch Sat-Thu, dinner Mon-Sat) Opposite the railway station, this terribly French venue was the flavour of the month when we visited. Creative dishes like *filet de daurade au sel du lac Assal* (sea bream

the most reliable options in town. Top marks go to the clean-smelling rooms, the back-friendly mattresses and the immaculate bathrooms. Another plus is its position, right in the thick of things.

Bed & Breakfast La Maison Blanche (☎ 869935, 352176; Le Heron district; incl breakfast DFr12,000-15,000; ☹ Aug; 🏠 🚗 🚲) La Maison Blanche is seventh heaven if you need to pamper yourself after a tiring overland trip. Picture this: a gleaming white villa that used to be an ambassador's residence, two generous rooms with all mod cons, bathrooms so scrupulously clean you could eat off the floor, a secluded garden and a nifty pool in which to cool off. It's a tad out of the action but minibuses to the centre are within easy reach.

Menelik Hotel (☎ 351177; Place du 27 Juin 1977; s/d DFr11,000/15,200; 🏠) The Menelik has a certain 'could be anywhere' sensibility in its décor and standards, but its very central location is a gem, with all the bars, restaurants and clubs at your tiptoes. Amenities are solid, and the bathrooms are exceedingly clean. Credit cards (Visa only) are accepted but you'll pay a painful 10% commission.

Hotel de France (☎ 813781; blvd du Général de Gaulle; d DFr6500-8500; 🏠) A short stagger from Place Lagarde, this is a reassuring choice for budgeteers with no surprises (good or bad) up its sleeves. Rooms are generous and comfortable, if a little anonymous. Handy if you want to be close to the clubs, bars and restaurants in the centre.

Auberge Sable Blanc (☎ 351163; s/d DFr6000/7000; 🏠) Another good haunt for penny-pinchers. Close to blvd de la République,

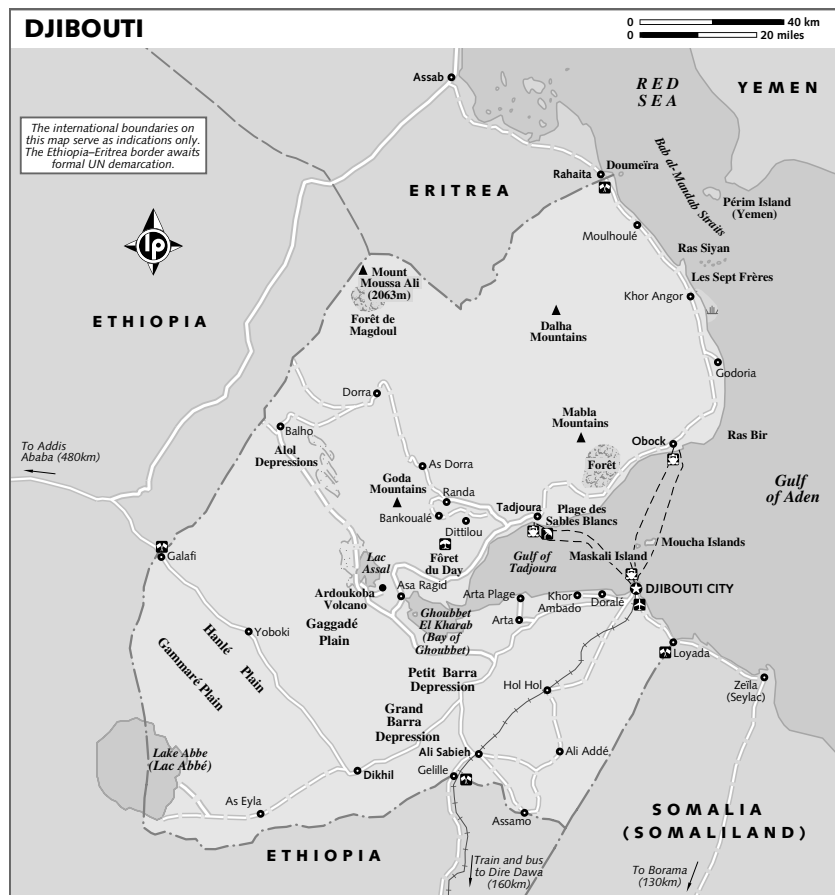
VISAS FOR ONWARD TRAVEL

Eritrea

Visas are valid for three months and cost DFr7200 or US\$40. You need one photo. Visa applications can be received every morning from 8.30am to 10.30am except Friday, but visas are delivered on Wednesday and Sunday mornings only. Note that a same-day service is also possible (DFr9000 or US\$50) if you apply early morning.

Ethiopia

Visas are valid for three months and cost DFr3600 (DFr12,600 for US nationals). You need to supply one photo. They are issued within 24 hours. Open 7.30am to 1.30pm Sunday to Thursday and 9am to 1pm Saturday.



KILLING TIME IN DJIBOUTI

If you are in transit for a couple of days, here are some suggestions on how to make the most of your stay:

- Stroll in the alleyways of the chaotic Marché Central in **Djibouti City**.
- Snorkel with whale sharks (from October to January) in the **Bay of Ghoubbet**. Contact **Dolphin Excursion** (☎ 350313; dolphinexcursions@hotmail.com) or **Le Lagon Bleu** (☎ 353036, 250297; atta@intnet.dj).
- Dive Moucha and Maskali Islands in the **Gulf of Tadjoura**. Contact **Dolphin Excursion** (☎ 350313; dolphinexcursions@hotmail.com) or **Le Lagon Bleu** (☎ 353036, 250297; atta@intnet.dj).
- Take a tour to **Lake Assal**, the lowest point on the African continent (153m below sea level). Contact **AECVETA** (☎ 354695; www.aecveta.com) or **Dankali Expeditions** (☎ 350313; dolphinexcursions@hotmail.com).
- Forget the hardships and flake out on a porcelain-sand beach at **Plage des Sables Blancs**. Contact **Agence Le Goubet** (☎ 354520).
- Windsurf on wheels across **Grand Barra**, a great salty plain. Contact **AECVETA** (☎ 354695; www.aecveta.com).
- Immerse yourself in the Martian landscape of **Lake Abbé**, where *Planet of the Apes* was filmed. Contact **AECVETA** (☎ 354695; www.aecveta.com) or **Dankali Expeditions** (☎ 350313; dolphinexcursions@hotmail.com).

cooked with salt from Lake Assal) as well as the restaurant's signature dessert, *fondant au chocolat* (chocolate cake), will have you gushing superlatives. Wash it all down with a glass of well-chosen wine.

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

Restaurant Saba (☎ 354244; ave Maréchal Lyautey; mains DFr1000-2500; ☺ lunch Sat-Thu, dinner daily) Close to the railway station, this unpretentious joint gets kudos for its wide-ranging menu and mouthwatering fruit juices. Try shark fillet, crab or shrimps. Vegetarians will plump for salads (DFr700 to DFr1200). Despite the simplicity of the setting, this place feels surprisingly cosy.

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

Chez Mahad (juices DFr150-300; ☺ 7.30am-noon Sat-Thu, 7.30-11am & 4-9pm Fri) Ultrafresh fruit

juices are the deal in this buzzing bolthole, so put some bounce in your step with a glass of mango mixed with milk or papaya with watermelon. It's off rue de Madrid.

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

AROUND DJIBOUTI

Rather than heading straight to Djibouti City, you can pause in the following towns. You can't really get stuck there; they are fairly well connected to the capital.

DIKHIL

If you're coming on a truck from Ethiopia via Galafi, Dikhil, 118km west of Djibouti, might be a convenient stop to reboot your chakras before continuing on to Djibouti City. **Hôtel-Restaurant La Palmeraie** (☎ 420164; r DFr6000) is the best place to stay. There is also a restaurant attached.

Getting There & Away

There are regular bus services between Dikhil and Djibouti City (DFr600, 2½ hours).

ALI SABIEH

If proceeding from Dire Dawa, either by bus or by train, it's not a bad idea to break up your journey in Ali Sabieh. It's an active yet intimate town with a distinct Somali flavour. If it's your first exposure to Djibouti, you'll find it pretty relaxing and, to a certain extent, photogenic and full of attitude.

You don't have to pay a king's ransom to bunk down at the **Hotel Gogareh** (☎ 825308; s with shared bathroom DFr1000), just off the main square (ask around, because there was no sign when we visited). It features shoe-box-sized yet functional rooms set around a courtyard.

If your purse strings are a little more relaxed, **La Palmeraie d'Ali Sabieh** (☎ 426198; r DFr6000; ☺), on the outskirts of town, has well-appointed rooms, pathogen-free bathrooms and a leaf-dappled courtyard, as well as a decent on-site restaurant.

For a cheap and tasty meal, nothing can beat **Restaurant du Mont Arrey** (☎ 426191; mains DFr1000-2000; ☺ lunch & dinner), with pasta dishes, steaks, couscous and, in the evening, freshly-prepared sandwiches.

Getting There & Away

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

To get to Dire Dawa in Ethiopia, you'll first have to take a bus to Gelille at the Ethiopian border (DFr600) then change to another bus heading to Dire Dawa.

OBOCK

The last significant town before the border with Eritrea, Obock exudes a kind of 'last frontier' feel that is not devoid of charm. Although it doesn't have many facilities, it's an obvious staging post for those who want to travel to Eritrea or those who come from Assab, in Eritrea's south. If you decide to stay, you can lay your head at the basic **Campement de Ras Bir – Ougef** (☎ 816034, 822446; huts with full board DFr8000), about 5km east of the centre. Location is top-notch – it's right on the beach. Accommodation is in traditional huts and the shared bathrooms are rudimentary. About 2km west of the centre, a more upmarket option was under construction when we visited. Ask around.

Getting There & Away

The most convenient way to get to Djibouti City is by speedboat or dhow. They leave daily to L'Escale, a small marina northeast of the centre early in the morning (DFr1500 by speedboat, about 1½ hours; DFr700 by dhow, about three hours). If travelling by road, there are irregular bush taxis that trundle along the dirt road between Tadjoura and Obock (about DFr2000, three hours). From Tadjoura there are morning buses to Djibouti City (about DFr1500, 3½ hours).

There's also a small plane that flies on a twice-weekly basis between Obock and Djibouti City (DFr2000, 30 minutes).

TRANSPORT IN DJIBOUTI**GETTING THERE & AWAY
Entering Djibouti**

Djibouti has one international gateway for arrival by air, **Ambouli Airport** (☎ 341646), about 5km south of Djibouti City. There are also several land borders with neighbouring Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somaliland.

Disembarkation at the airport is usually simple, with only the usual arrival form to fill in. You might be asked for an address or contact in the country; in this case, mention a hotel in Djibouti City. Crossing at land borders is relatively easy too, but be sure to have your passport stamped with an entry/exit stamp if you enter/leave the country.

PASSPORT

To enter Djibouti you must have a valid passport and a visa.

Air**AIRPORTS & AIRLINES**

The only airport handling international traffic is Ambouli Airport. All airlines flying to/from Djibouti have an office or a representative in Djibouti City. They are closed on Friday.

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

Daallo (☎ 353401; www.daallo.com; rue de Paris)
Djibouti Airlines (☎ 351006; www.djiboutiairlines.com; Place Lagarde)

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

Globe Travel (☎ 250297, 353036; Place Lagarde) Agent for Eritrean Airlines and Kenya Airways.

DEPARTURE TAX

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

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

TICKETS**Eritrea**

The only airline connecting Djibouti with Eritrea is Eritrean Airlines, Eritrea's national airline. It has a twice-weekly flight between Djibouti and Asmara (US\$290 return, one hour).

Ethiopia

Ethiopian Airlines connects Djibouti and Addis Ababa four times a week (US\$195/280 one way/return). Djibouti Airlines has three weekly flights to/from Dire Dawa (DFr15,000/22,000 one way/return) and one weekly flight to/from Addis Ababa (DFr25,000/36,000 one way/return).

Land**ERITREA**

Travel overland to Eritrea is possible, but it might be time-consuming and there's the risk of getting stuck either in Obock (Djibouti) or in Assab (Eritrea) for a few days – consider yourself warned. The main cause of headaches for travellers is the lack of reliable transportation scheduled between Assab and Obock. Traffic is limited to shared taxis (usually Land Cruisers) from Obock to Moulhoulé, the last town before the border. Then other taxis ply the route from Moulhoulé to Assab in Eritrea. It's about four hours from Obock to the border (DFr2000) and from the border to Assab another 3½ hours (Nfa300). At the time of writing there were about two weekly services, but there's no fixed schedule and taxis leave when they have enough customers.

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

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

ETHIOPIA**Bus**

There is a daily service between Dire Dawa and Djibouti City – a strenuous 10- to 12-hour ride on a gravel road. You'll take your first bus to the border town of Gelille, then another bus to Djibouti City; see p274.

From Djibouti City, buses leave at dawn from ave 26. The company is called **SPB** (☎ 826573, 828838). Buy your ticket at least a day in advance to be sure of getting a seat.

Hitching

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country, and we don't recommend it. Still, if you want to enter Djibouti from Ethiopia via the border town of Galafi, the only option is to hitch a lift (front seats only) with one of the legions of trucks that ply the route between Addis Ababa and Djibouti City via Awash, Gewane, Logiya and Dikhil (about three days). Prices are negotiable. This option is best avoided by women.

Train

Passengers can hop on the old Addis Ababa–Djibouti City train at Dire Dawa. The leg costs about Birr80 in '1st' class. The train leaves three times a week. From Djibouti City to Dire Dawa (via Ali Sabieh), it'll cost you DFr3900 in 1st class, minimum duration 13 hours. You're well advised to buy your ticket one day in advance at the **railway station** (☎ 358070; ave F. d'Esperey; ☎ 7am-noon Tue, Thu & Sat).

See p274 for more information.

GETTING AROUND

The road network links all major villages in the country with the capital. The Route de l'Unité, a good sealed road, covers the 174km from the capital around the Gulf de Tadjoura. From Tadjoura to Obock and on to Moulhoulé at the Eritrean border, there's a gravel road only passable by 4WDs.

There is pretty limited public transport. See the Getting There & Away section of Dikhil (p288), Ali Sabieh (p289) and Obock (p289) for details on the most useful routes.

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