

Eastern Senegal

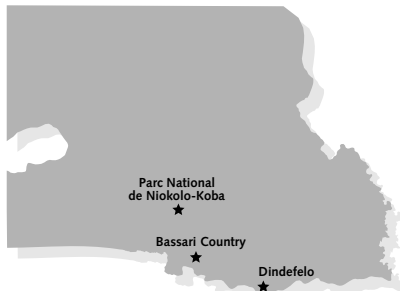


It takes some courage to brave the seemingly endless stretch of potholed tarred road that connects Dakar to Tambacounda in the east, but the road that leads through flat savannah lands specked with shrubs and baobabs takes you to one of Senegal's best-kept secrets – the hilly Bassari lands of the southeast. With its craggy mountain plateaus, tucked-away waterfalls and lush forests, this region forms a striking contrast to the even plains that stretch throughout the rest of the country. And the region differs not only in its landscape, but also in its cultural make-up. Among the hills nestle tiny Bassari, Bédik and Fula villages – remote hamlets that adhere strongly to traditional lifestyles and are best visited with a knowledgeable guide. These communities are particularly known for their stunning initiation ceremonies, and with a bit of luck and a good local introduction, you might be lucky enough to watch this colourful display of masked dances.

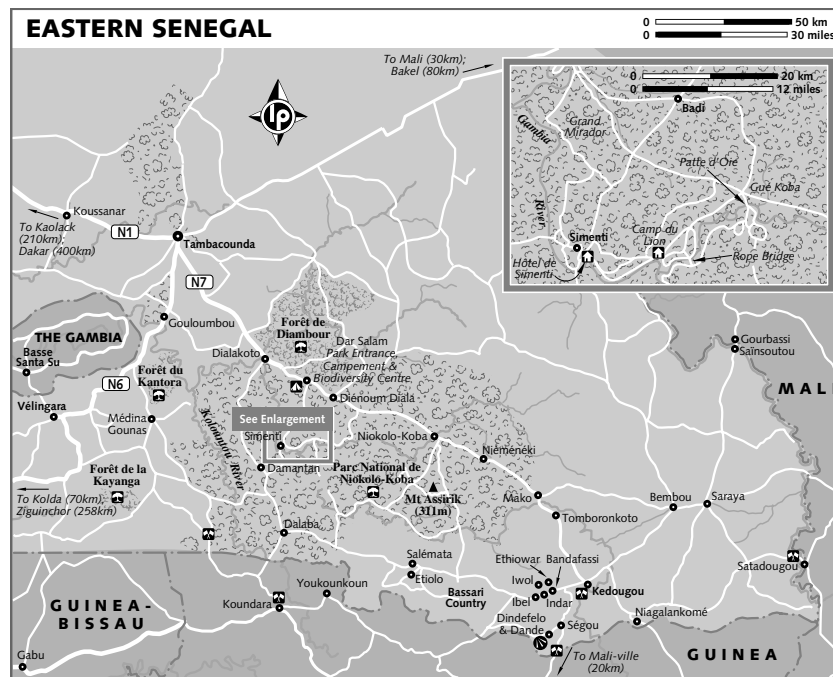
Eastern Senegal is also home to Senegal's main wildlife reserve, the gigantic Parc National de Niokolo-Koba. It's one of the few parks in West Africa featuring lions, elephants and plenty of other large mammals, though your chances of spotting them are rather slim. You're almost more likely to come across a dozing lion on an early-morning drive through the park than on an organised tour. Bird-watchers are bound to find a trip here rewarding – there are enough spectacular species to see that even reluctant birders will soon be wielding binoculars and scanning treetops for shimmering tail feathers.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Go lion-spotting in the **Parc National de Niokolo-Koba** (p223), Senegal's largest protected reserve
- Cool off under the deep drop of the **Dindefelo** (p227) waterfall
- Go for solitary hikes around the forests of the **Bassari country** (p227) and visit tiny, half-hidden Bédik villages



■ POPULATION: 800,000



TAMBACOUNDA

The eastern town of Tambacounda, or 'Tamba', as the locals affectionately call it, is all about dust, sand, sizzling temperatures and lines of traffic heading out in every direction of the country. Tamba is a major junction of routes leading eastwards to Mali, south to Guinea, west to Dakar and Gambia, and southwest to Ziguinchor. The hectic heat of the permanent loading and unloading of taxis, coming and going of people, the shouting and deal-making, joyful greeting and tearful leaving is worth taking in for a day or so. Apart from that, there's little to see here, unless you've got a penchant for old, colonial railway stations, and once-grand villas and their expansive gardens.

Orientation & Information

The town has two main streets: Blvd Demba Diop runs east-west, parallel with the train tracks, while Av Léopold Senghor runs north-south. The latter has shops, an Internet café, a well-stocked pharmacy and a SGBS bank, which can exchange cash and give advances on credit cards. In the north

of town, there's the busy market, a great place to rummage for Malian batiks, and the post office.

The Syndicat d'Initiative isn't particularly active here, but it does have a local representative at **Hôtel Niji** (☎ 981 1250; nijihotel@sentoo.sn; quartier abattoirs), near the pharmacy, who can help out with information about the region. Staff at the **Headquarters of Parc National de Niokolo-Koba** (☎ 981 1097; ☎ 7.30am-5pm) can help with inquiries about the park, and they also have 4WDs for hire.

Sleeping

Most places also run tours to the Parc National de Niokolo-Koba (see p224).

Bloc Gadeç (☎ 531 8931; d, q per person CFA3000) Not bad at all for a budget place, this friendly little hostel in the centre of town near the *gare routière* (bus and bush-taxi station) has spacious, clean rooms with shared toilets.

Hôtel Keur Khoudia (☎/fax 981 1102; Blvd Demba Diop; s/d CFA11,700/16,000; 📶) With spotless bungalows at decent prices and helpful management, this popular hotel is an excellent choice for those travelling on a budget.

(which includes areas in neighbouring Guinea) has improved the situation slightly. Several NGOs are also working directly with the surrounding populations to help conserve the resources found in the park, such as ronier palms and bamboo.

Information

Dar Salam is the main park entrance for tourists on the main road between Tambacounda and Kedougou. The Dar Salam Biodiversity Centre, which does a lot of educational work with the local population, houses a small exhibition and is a good source of information. About an hour's drive south of Dar Salam lies Simenti, the park's main focus, where many animals are concentrated. There's also a park office, visitors centre and the large Hôtel de Simenti.

Details about track conditions and other aspects of the park can be obtained from the park **headquarters** (☎ 981 1097; 🕒 7.30am-5pm) in Tambacounda, on the road to Kidira. A glossy visitor guide (in French; CFA6000), including a park map and illustrations of some of the wildlife you might see, is also available at the park entrance.

WHEN TO GO

Parc National de Niokolo-Koba is officially open from 15 December to 30 April – the park centres, biodiversity centre, even Hotel Simenti, are closed for the rest of the year – though you can visit at any time. During the rains, and until late November, most park tracks are impassable without a 4WD. In December and January conditions are pleasantly cool, but the best viewing time for wildlife is during the hot season (April to May) when the vegetation has withered and animals congregate at water holes. The park gates are open from 7am to 6pm daily.

ACCESS

You must have a vehicle to enter the park, as walking is not allowed except near accommodation sites or in the company of a park ranger. Travellers without a car can visit the park using public transport or *sept-place* taxis or on an organised tour. All tracks, except those between the park gate and the Simenti area, require a 4WD, even in the dry season.

FEES & GUIDES

The entrance fee (adults/children under 10 CFA2000/free, vehicle CFA5000) gives you access for 24 hours. Trained, approved and English-speaking guides can be hired at the gate or in Simenti (CFA6000 per day).

Tours

Four or five-day all-inclusive tours from Dakar to Niokolo-Koba range from about CFA150,000 to CFA200,000 per person, with a minimum of four to six people (see p294).

Several of Tambacounda's hotels, including Hôtels Niji, Asta Kébé and Keur Khoudia can arrange 4WD tours (CFA70,000 to CFA90,000). Rates usually include fuel, a driver/guide and park admission for the car, but you pay separately for your park fees, food and accommodation.

Sleeping & Eating

Dar Salam Campement (☎ 981 2575; Dar Salam; d/tr CFA7000/8000, camping per tent CFA3500) At the park entrance, this *campement* has clean bungalows with private bathroom and a good restaurant (dishes cost CFA3500). Camping is permitted, but there are no facilities. You need to be fully self-sufficient and that includes having your own wheels.

Hôtel de Simenti (☎ 982 3650; Simenti; s/d CFA15,000/20,000; 🍴) This concrete monstrosity may not look in touch with its surroundings, but it sits in a prime spot in the park overlooking the river. The busiest animal sites are close to here, and you can see many animals drinking and grazing from a nearby hide.

Camp du Lion (r CFA7000, camping CFA3500) This tiny *campement* about 10km east of Simenti has simple huts in a beautiful spot beside the Gambia River. It can be reached in an ordinary car and has a 4WD for excursions (half-day per person CFA6000). You can also walk to the nearby *pointe de vue* (look-out), where hippos and other animals drink on the opposite bank of the river.

Getting There & Away

You're best off hiring a taxi (around CFA35,000 to CFA40,000 per day) or 4WD (around CFA60,000 to CFA70,000 per day) in Tamba. There's also an official transfer between Hôtel Keur Khoudia in Tamba and Hôtel de Simenti (CFA60,000).

If you do rely on public transport, take a Kedougou minibus from Tamba (CFA4500)

and get off at the Dar Salam park entrance. From there, you can call Hôtel de Simenti and they'll pick you up (CFA25,000). If you have a lot of time you can wait for a passing park vehicle, but those are few and far between.

Getting Around

Without wheels, Simenti is the best base for walking tours in the immediate surroundings. From the visitors centre, a path leads for a few hundred metres to a hide overlooking a water hole-grazing area (depending on the season). It's likely you'll see as many animals here as from the back of a 4WD.

The visitors centre or Hôtel Simenti can organise your guide. They both also offer pirogue tours (per person CFA3500).

LOCAL TAXI & FOUR-WHEEL-DRIVE HIRE

You can hire *sept-place* taxis at Tamba's main *gare routière* in town (CFA35,000 to CFA50,000). Make sure the car's condition is good enough to get you into the park, and remember to allow for all the other costs involved (admission, guides etc). The driver should pay for his own food and accommodation (the *campement* doesn't charge drivers).

A well-maintained *sept-place* taxi is likely to get you the necessary clearance for Simenti, the Camp du Lion and the main central area. If the rains have recently finished, it's a good idea to call in at the park headquarters to ensure the track to Simenti is passable without a 4WD.

You can hire 4WDs at the park headquarters in Tamba (CFA70,000 per day, including fuel); with **Malaw Diouf** (☎ 539 6840; Hôtel Asta Kébé; per day CFA40,000-50,000) at or through most other hotels. Staff at the Hôtel de Simenti recommend **Mr Timeri** (☎ 981 1348, 646 4152).

BASSARI COUNTRY

The far southeast corner of Senegal is often called Bassari country after the largest tribal group, whose traditional way of life gives this region its particular character. This is the only place in Senegal where you can go mountain climbing. The striking landscape, with its cragged mountain paths, forests, plateaus and steep waterfalls has much in common with the adjacent Futa Jallon region in neighbouring Guinea.

It's perfect for extended hiking tours along solitary paths that pass through bushland and occasionally a tiny village. It's advisable to walk with an experienced guide who knows the area and local people well. Bring some small gifts of money, tea, coffee and kola nuts, as a gesture of appreciation for being allowed to visit the local villages.

Specialist tour companies in Dakar arrange extended hiking trips here (see p149) and ever-growing numbers of adventurous travellers have started to come this way.

Kedougou

Kedougou is the largest town in southeast Senegal, though this seems hard to believe when you walk along the red, dusty roads lined by lush greenery and traditional huts.

The colourful market is famous for its indigo fabrics, imported from Guinea. Other facilities include a petrol station, *télécentres* (privately owned telephone bureaus), a Western Union office and Internet access (a whopping CFA1500 per hour) at the Kedougou Multi-Service.

Alimentation de Dioubo in the town centre is a well-stocked grocery and a popular gathering ground in the evening for Kedougou's youth. English-speaking 'Darryl' who runs the place is also a mine of local information.

SLEEPING

These places all arrange tours in the surrounding area or to Parc National de Niokolo-Koba and have cars for hire. Note that in most *campements* prices double for air-con rooms.

Campement Bantamba (Chez Moulaye; ☎ 558 0154; s/d CFA8300; 🍴 📶) Set in a large garden by the river on the edge of town, this youth-run *campement* feels wonderfully remote; the restaurant is also good, and has a well-deserved reputation for serving up the best spaghetti Bolognese.

Chez Diao (☎ 985 1124; d CFA5400; 📶) This relaxed, leafy place in the centre of Kedougou has clean bungalows with shared toilets. Breakfast costs CFA1000 and meals, usually a choice of chicken and chips or Senegalese food (CFA3000) are available to non-guests too.

Le Nieriko (☎ 985 1459; d/tr CFA8600/12,600; 🍴 📶) On the edge of town, Le Nieriko has well-kept bungalows in a spacious garden

setting, and satellite TV in the lounge for the bored.

Le Bedik (☎ 985 1000; s/d/tr with breakfast 22,200/27,000/36,600; P) ☼ ☼ ☼ Kedougou's most up-market accommodation, this place has comfortable, TV-equipped bungalows, a tennis court and friendly management.

Other options:

Campement Dioulaba (☎ 985 1278; d CFA9000; ☼) In the centre of town, opposite Chez Diaio and with similar facilities.

Campement Moïse (☎ 985 1139; d/tr CFA6000/9600; ☼) Another typical Kedougou *campement* with thatched-roof huts, basic rooms and shared bathrooms.

Relais de Kedougou (☎ 985 1062; lereais@sentoos.sn; s/d from CFA11,600/14,200; P) ☼ ☼ ☼ A hunter's favourite, opposite Le Bedik. The restaurant has great river views.

EATING & DRINKING

All the *campements* serve food, though most only do so on request. Otherwise it's down to the cheap eateries around the market, such as **Keur Niasse** (meals around CFA1500; ☼ 10am-10pm), near Campement Diaio. The most up-market restaurant is **Nieta** (meals around CFA1000-2500; ☼ 11am-2.30pm & 7pm-11pm), on the route to Tamba, with simple meals and drinks in a spacious, pretty round hut.

For an evening drink, try the **Tour de Babel** (admission around CFA1000; ☼ 9pm-2am) or **Black & White** (admission around CFA1000; ☼ 8pm-2am), both lively bar-nightclubs. 'Grown folks' are said to prefer the dance floors of La Popotte at the military camp.

GETTING AROUND

Almost all *campements* have one or more 4WDs with a driver for hire (CFA40,000 to CFA50,000 per day), and some rent bicycles (CFA3000), which are good for town trips, but often too clapped-out for trips into the hills.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There's plenty of traffic between Tamba and Kedougou (*sept-place* taxi CFA4800, Ndiaga Ndiagye CFA3500, four hours). There's no regular public transport to Mali, but intrepid overland drivers occasionally go this way. Complete all your exit formalities in Kedougou, as the border post on the route to Kéniéba is unreliable.

In contrast Guinea is well served by public transport (*sept-place* taxi to Labe CFA15,000; minibus CFA12,000, 24 to 48 hours). Taxis

supposedly leave every day, but the best day to set off is Friday.

Around Kedougou

Kedougou is a pretty town, but mainly it's the starting point for visits to the hills of Bassari country. The best way to explore Kedougou's stunning surroundings is a combination of driving (a 4WD) and hiking – best done in the company of a good guide (see opposite).

THE KEDOUGOU–SALÉMATA ROUTE

The washed-out westbound road from Kedougou towards Salémata is lined with small roadside villages, typically inhabited by Fula and Bassari people and other tribal groups up in the mountains, and accessible by tiny mountain paths. These are the hamlets of the Bédik, seminomadic people who adhere strongly to traditional lifestyles and are keen to preserve their relative isolation.

One of the nearest villages is **Bandafassi**, the capital of Kedougou district. The inhabitants are mainly Fula and Bassari, and the village is renowned for its basket makers. In Indar, a part of Bandafassi, is the wonderfully welcoming *campement* **Chez Léontine** (☎ 554 9915; d CFA6000), with solar-powered lights and delicious meals prepared by the charming owner. It's a great base for hikes up the hill to the Bédik village of **Ethiowar**, from where you get wonderful views over the surrounding savannah.

Ibel, a Fula village, lies another 7km up the road from Bandafassi. Here you'll find the slightly neglected **Campement Baobab** (d CFA6000). Visits are usually combined with a steep hike up to **Iwol**, a stunningly beautiful community stretched out between a giant *fromager* (kapok tree) and a sacred baobab. Plenty of legends are associated with this place, and the local teacher will share them with you for a donation (CFA1000). The local women make beautiful pottery – tiny Bassari statuettes and small incense burners (CFA300 per piece).

Continuing west from Ibel, you reach **Salémata**, 83km west of Kedougou. This is a regional hub, with a health centre, small boutiques and the friendly *campement* **Chez Gilbert** (☎ 985 5009; d/tr CFA8000/9000). In April and May, the entire region surrounding Salémata is plunged into weeklong festivities during the annual initiation ceremonies of the Bassari. Observers are accepted, but

GUIDED WALKS

The company of a clued-up guide is invaluable for exploring the myriad mountain paths of Bassari country. Two of the best guides in the region are Noumou Diallo and Amadou Ba, who are based at **Le Bédik** (☎ 985 1000) hotel; phone reception and ask for them. They come from the area, know the best routes through the hills, and have a good relationship with the villagers, which will make you, the visiting stranger, much more welcome. It remains up to you though to show the proper respect and perhaps present kola nuts, money and small gifts to the *chefs de village* (village chiefs).

They can arrange anything from leisurely day trips to strenuous hikes of several days through the forests, mountains and tiny Bédik and Bassari villages, with the possibility of sleeping either in the homes of locals or in *campements* (hostels). They usually charge CFA10,000 per day; rates for longer excursions need to be negotiated.

keep a respectful distance, so as not to turn a local celebration into a tourist event. Gilbert can invite Bassari dancers to perform some of their spectacular masked and costumed dances outside this season.

The best day to visit is Tuesday, when the *lumo* (weekly market) brings the village to life, and with it a better chance of public transport (minibus from Kedougou CFA2250, four hours), for those who really can't afford a hired 4WD – a good investment, considering the dreadful state of the road.

Don't leave Salémata without taking the 15km trip to **Ethiolo**, either on foot or by car.

The road leads mainly through forest and bushland, and there's a good chance of spotting chimpanzees in the trees (some of the few wild chimps left in Senegal). Ethiolo's brilliant **Campement Chez Balingo** (☎ 985 1401) has accommodation in traditional Bassari stone huts, and is run by the enthusiastic and knowledgeable Balingo, who can take you on exciting tours of Ethiolo's surroundings.

DINDEFELO & DANDE

One of the most popular destinations from Kedougou is Dindefelo, famous for its impressive 100m **waterfall** with a deep, green pool suitable for swimming. It's a 2km hike through lush forest from Dindefelo village to the cascade. The starting point is the **campement villageois** (☎ 658 8707; r per person CFA3000), a great place with accommodation in basic, well-kept huts and tasty Senegalese food. You pay CFA500 waterfall admission at the *campement*; the money goes to the village – just check the solar-powered streetlights. Much less visited is the village of **Dande**, on the hill above Dindefelo, but if you love steep climbs, don't miss out on this spectacular hike. From here, you can visit the source of the waterfall and stand scarily close to the top edge (don't go here without a guide, as the deep drop is hidden by some innocent-looking shrubs). Nearby there's also an impressive natural cave – gigantic, and so smoothly hollowed out as if manmade or shaped by water – a striking sight. Watch out for the beehives in the bushes.

If you rely on public transport, go to Dindefelo on Sunday, the day of the *lumo*. The minibus costs CFA700 and takes two hours, but a hired 4WD really is the better option: the road is no fun, and a punctured minibus wheel much less so. It can eat an entire day.

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