

# West-Central Senegal

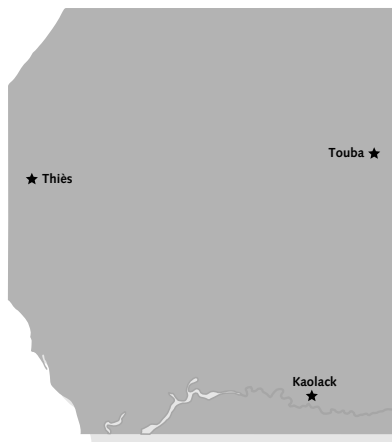


The route from Dakar to Touba may not exactly be the road to paradise, but it's a straight journey to Senegal's religious and economic core. Past the urban sprawl of Thiès, home to a world-famous tapestry factory, lie the triplet towns of Diourbel, Mbaké and Touba – the heartland of Senegal's Mouride brotherhood. The towns themselves seem fairly unremarkable, with the grand exception of the giant mosque of Touba and its smaller but more beautiful counterpart in Diourbel. But don't let this deceive you: spiritual strength and monetary power form an invincible alliance here that quietly contributes to most of the gradual changes in Senegal's culture, prosperity and politics. Travel here during Grand Magal, the annual religious pilgrimage – provided you can find a seat in a bush taxi; a staggering two million people are Touba bound during the event – and the sheer number and devotion of followers will give you more than just a glimpse of the importance this religious region has nationwide.

If this axis provides for Senegal's economic and religious needs, Kaolack to the south is the city that gets the country moving. Lifted by the accelerated ambience of several *gares routières* (bus and taxi stations), this busy urban centre is the hub that links all four corners of the country. It's the place for the latest news from remote corners and a good base for more remote destinations. Its spectacular round market, one of the largest covered markets in the whole of Africa, heaves with shimmering fabrics, sweet-scented incense, clothes, food and other wares carried here from The Gambia, Mali and Mauritania.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- See the fruits of religious devotion and raw capitalism working hand in hand in **Touba** (p196), the centre of the Mouride Muslim brotherhood
- Weave your way around the world-famous tapestry factory in **Thiès** (opposite)
- Sip sweet tea with the vendors in the covered market at **Kaolack** (p197) – the second-largest in Africa



■ POPULATION: 1.3 MILLION

## THIÈS

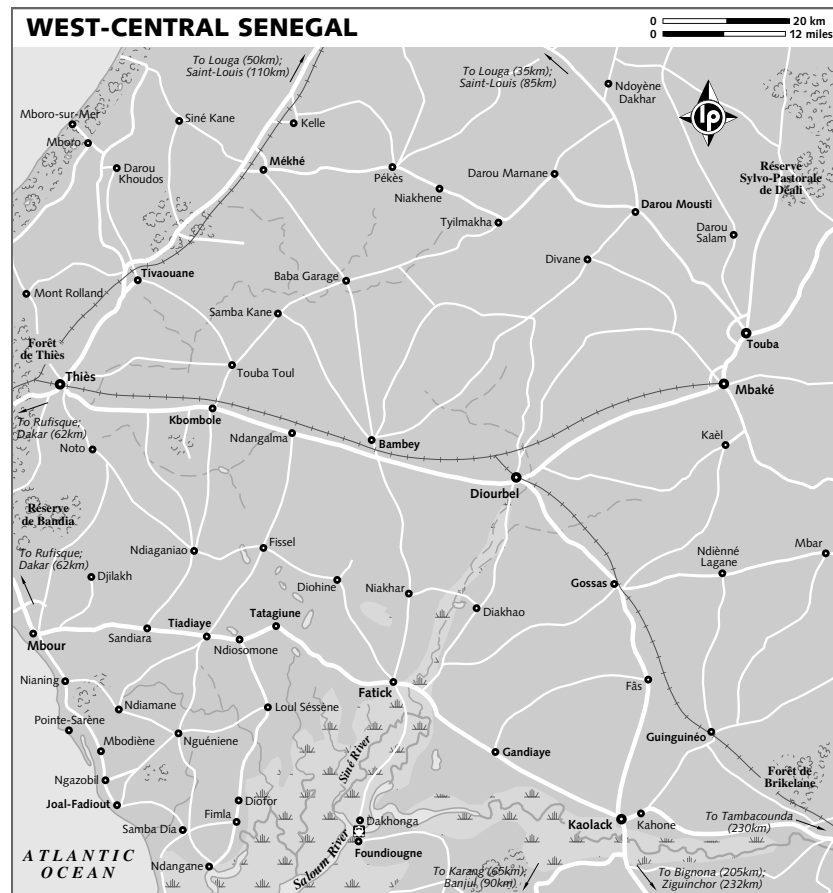
pop 1,360,000

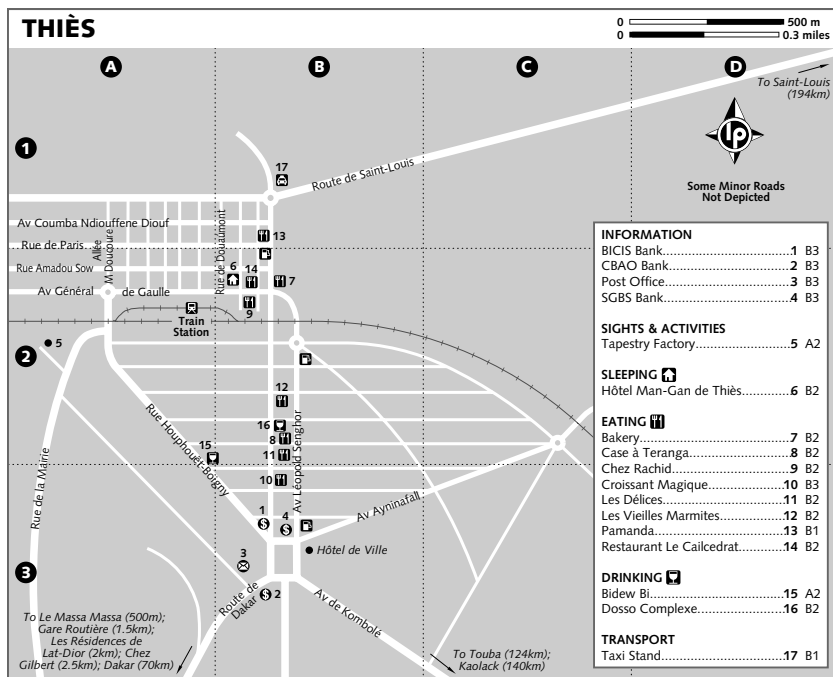
Thiès is a place that barely featured in the collective imagination of Senegal until it became the heated focus of a major political scandal in 2006. The phrase '*chantiers de Thiès*' (building sites of Thiès) was on everyone's lips then, referring to the alleged embezzlement of a huge sum of money that had been earmarked for the beautification and modernisation of Senegal's third-largest city. Even though most of the building money is thought to have disappeared in private Swiss bank accounts, vast construction efforts are still apparent in and around town – just check the modern bypass, the street lights and various proudly erected office blocks.

Despite all these efforts, Thiès remains of marginal interest to travellers, and the modern bypass is the only thing most people see of this slow-moving town. But it's worth stepping off the bush taxi for a day or two if only for a surprisingly good string of restaurants and nightclubs, and its world-famous tapestry factory.

## Orientation & Information

The main artery of town is Av Léopold Senghor, where you find a string of good restaurants. It leads north to the train station, and another small cluster of restaurants and bars. But recently its southern end is turning into a more animated centre – you find the town hall here and several banks. And with





Thiès' current speed of development, you can expect more new restaurants, bars and clubs at the southern end of the town centre.

There are several *télécentres*, cybercafés and a post office in the centre of town.

All these banks have withdrawal facilities: **BICIS** (☎ 951 8339; Place de France; ☹ 7.45am-12.15pm & 1.40-3.45pm)

**CBAO** (☎ 952 0505; Rue Nationale 2)

**SGBS** (☎ 951 8225; Av Léopold Sédar Senghor)

## Sights

The tiny **Musée de Thiès** (☎ 951 1520; admission CFA500; ☹ 9am-6pm) is surprisingly interesting. It's housed in a building within a fort that was built as the French garrison in 1864 and, once you've found the staff to unlock the museum building, you'll find a fascinating history of Senegal's railways. The city's major attraction, however, is the world-renowned **Tapestry Factory** (see the boxed text, opposite).

## Sleeping

**Chez Gilbert** (☎ 546 7438; Rte de Dakar; r CFA10,000, with air-con CFA15,000; ☹ ☹) One of the cheapest places in town, this simple auberge, 2.5km

along the Rte to Dakar, has basic, clean rooms in an airy setting and camping space out the back.

**Hôtel Man-Gan de Thiès** (☎ 951 1526; fax 951 2532; Rue Amadou Sow; s/d CFA15,000/18,000; ☹ ☹) Not a bad option – this place has a pleasant garden courtyard and clean rooms.

**Le Massa Massa** (☎ 952 1244; Cité Malick Sy; r CFA12,600, with air-con CFA20,600; ☹ ☹) Hidden in a side street off the Rte to Dakar, a 20-minute walk from town, this place is a gem – the perfect combination of simple and tasteful. It's run by a charming Belgian couple and, best of all, has one of the best restaurants in town, serving fine French and Belgian cuisine (dishes around CFA4000).

**Les Résidences de Lat-Dior** (☎ 952 0777; residence latdior@hotmail.com; s/d CFA27,600/35,200; ☹ ☹ ☹) Thiès' multistar place is an all-singing all-dancing hotel with a fitness centre, wi-fi access and even its own mosque. It's 2km from the town centre, on the Rte de Dakar.

## Eating

What Thiès might lack in soul, it wholly makes up with its restaurant scene – there's

## TAPESTRIES OF THIÈS

The factory of the **Manufactures Sénégalaises des Arts Décoratifs** (☎ /fax 951 1131; admission CFA1000; ☹ exhibition room 8am-12.30pm daily & 3-6.30pm Mon-Fri), off Rue de la Mairie, was one of many artistic endeavours inspired by President Senghor during the 1960s. Today the factory is run as a cooperative, with designs for the brightly coloured, cotton tapestries chosen from paintings submitted by Senegalese artists.

All of the weaving is done on manual looms, and two weavers complete about 1 sq metre per month. Only eight tapestries are made of each design. Most find their way around the world as gifts from the government to foreign dignitaries; there's a huge tapestry hanging in Atlanta airport and another in Buckingham Palace. Others are for sale, but at CFA500,000 per square metre, most of us will be content to admire them in the exhibition room.

a string of good-quality eateries here, serving a good range of food from Lebanese *shwarmas* to three-course French meals.

**Restaurant Le Caillédredat** (☎ 951 1130; Av Général de Gaulle; meals CFA1500-4000; ☹ 7am-midnight) This place leads the route upmarket, with excellent *kofta* and Middle Eastern dishes in pleasant surroundings.

**Les Vieilles Marmites** (☎ 951 4440; dishes around CFA3000; ☹ 11am-2pm & 6pm-midnight) Proof of the quality of its French and Senegalese food, this excellent restaurant off Av Léopold Senghor has been popular for years – the packed tables are proof of the quality of its food.

**Case à Teranga** (☎ 611 5125; Escal; meals CFA1000-5000) Though slightly more expensive, this restaurant's delicious choice of West Indian, Indian and French cuisine is worth paying for. Come on weekend nights and you can enjoy live music with your meals; come for a weekday lunch and the forthcoming owner Véronique will personally go to the *shwarma* place down the road and get you simple snacks to go with your beer.

Lebanese fast-food joints – good ones – loom large on the local restaurant scene. **Chez Rachid** (☎ 951 1878; Av Général de Gaulle; ☹ noon-midnight) does good *shwarmas* for CFA850. The **Croissant Magique** (☎ 951 1878; dishes around 2000) is popular, though pizzas are better at

**Pamanda** (☎ 952 1550; Rue de Paris; dishes CFA1000-5000; ☹ 9am-2am). **Les Délices** (☎ 951 7516; Av Léopold Senghor; ☹ 7.30am-2am) has the added attraction of a tea house that serves good ice creams and coffee on a pretty terrace space.

There's a good bakery off Av Général de Gaulle in the route towards the main taxi stand for breakfast stuff, and several small shops for groceries and other items.

## Drinking & Entertainment

The town's liveliest places are the mighty entertainment complex **Bidew Bi** (☎ 639 8554; Rue Houphouët-Boigny, Escal; ☹ 7pm-4am), which comprises a busy nightclub and stylish bar, and its rival **Dosso Complexe** (☎ 951 2640; www.dossonight.com; ☹ Tue-Sun; ☹), where families and romance-seeking couples come for weekend lunches around the pool, and party animals for a night out in such style that even Dakar's city folks have been known to dance here on weekends. (admission CFA2500). It's off Av Léopold Senghor.

## Getting There & Away

### BUSH TAXI & MINIBUS

Bush taxis and minibuses leave from the *gare routière* on the southern outskirts, 3km/1.5km from the northern/southern centre. There are frequent *sept-place* taxis also from the *gare routière* to Dakar (CFA1200, one hour, 70km), Kaolack (CFA1900, two hours, 140km) and Saint-Louis (CFA2600, four hours, 196km).

### TRAIN

The train station and ticket office is on Av Général de Gaulle. The express trains en route to Bamako (Mali) normally come through Thiès every Wednesday and Saturday morning. Thiès–Tambacounda is around CFA10,000/6000 in 1st/2nd class. Thiès to Tambacounda, Kayes (Mali) or Bamako is about CFA6000 in 2nd class. Thiès–Bamako is CFA30,000/20,000 in 1st/2nd class.

Tickets are hard to get in Thiès because most people travel from Dakar and few get off in Thiès so the train is often full. For more details see p283.

A commuter train runs less frequently than it should to Dakar (CFA800) via Rufisque (CFA400) every morning, in theory around 7am Monday to Saturday. The train service is hardly reliable, with frequent derailments and delays.

## Getting Around

Any taxi trip around town should cost CFA400, including the *gare routière*–centre trip. A taxi stand is in the north of town.

## DIOURBEL

pop 98,000

The steaming hot, sand-blown town of Diourbel (jur-bell) is of enormous significance to the Mourides as it was home to Cheikh Amadou Bamba (opposite), the founder of the Mouride Sufi brotherhood from 1912 until his death in 1927. The colonial government held him here under house arrest, and forbade him to enter the holy city of Touba, 48km to the northeast.

The Bamba family still lives in the town, in a palatial compound that is said to have walls 313m long (313 is the number of prophets in the Quran and a mystical number for Muslims). Nearby is the town's main mosque, built between 1919 and 1925; it's smaller, neater and more aesthetically pleasing than the vast structure at Touba.

You are allowed to visit the mosque outside prayer times (prayers take 10 to 15 minutes). Ask someone to find you the *responsable* (a sort of caretaker figure) and he'll show you around. A small fee for his trouble is appropriate. Remember to take your shoes off at the gate. Men should wear long trousers and women, a long skirt and a scarf to cover their head and shoulders.

The small, simple *campement Keur Déthié Caty* (☎ 9715190; P 🚻) is the only place to stay in town, unless you knock on the doors of the locals. There are a few cheap restaurants on the main street and around the *gare routière*.

## Getting There & Away

Plenty of traffic runs through Diourbel on its way to Dakar or Touba. Two bus stations are a 10-minute walk apart, one serving Thiès and Dakar, the other Touba and Kaolack. *Sept-place* taxis go to Dakar (CFA1720, three hours, 146km), Thiès (CFA900, 80 minutes, 76km) and Touba (CFA700, one hour, 50km).

## TOUBA

pop 452,000

Seeing the combined forces of religion, the economy and politics at work is fascinating anywhere. In Touba, their triple strength overwhelms with its complexity and sheer

impact. The black market, one of Senegal's biggest markets, with all its en masse trading and a whole range of undercover activity, sits next to the country's biggest mosque and most important spiritual focus – that's the most obvious sign of this impact. Dubbed the Holy City, Touba is the sacred focus of the Mouride Sufi brotherhood (see p45), the place where their spiritual leader, Cheikh Amadou Bamba, lived, worked and died. He is buried in the grand mosque of Touba, an awe-inspiring building whose minaret dominates the town and much of its surrounding plains.

The construction of the mosque started in 1936 under Bamba's son, who became caliph (brotherhood leader) on his father's death. It houses an impressive Quranic library containing the complete works of Cheikh Amadou Bamba and many of his students. Take a close look at the building and you'll notice the architectural signs of various phases of construction, ranging from vast concrete columns to detailed plaster decorations. Since its foundation, the structure has been constantly enlarged, improved and refined, and this process continues today.

And it's not only the mosque that is swelling in size. The whole of Touba is under permanent construction, with new houses, streets and entire neighbourhoods extending the city's sprawl in ever-larger circles. If you consider that the entire town literally belongs totally to the descendants of Cheikh Amadou Bamba, you'll begin to get an inkling of the brotherhood's immense wealth, all generated from donations of followers, wise investment and, most importantly, ownership of large parts of Senegal's groundnut economy.

Not surprisingly, then, this is a place of pilgrimage for believers and merchants alike, a place whose monument to Mouridism, the grand mosque, attracts as many visitors as does its huge market, a monument to ruthless capitalism (with a healthy dose of illegal

The best time (or the worst, depending on your inclination) is the time of the **Grand Magal**, a pilgrimage that takes place 48 days after the Islamic New Year (for details see the boxed text Islamic Holidays, p46). This celebrates Bamba's return from exile in 1907 after having been banished for 20 years by the French authorities and over the years has turned into a mass event, by now attracting two million or more followers. It's

## BAMBA – A SENEGALESE ICON

Cheikh Amadou Bamba, the founder of the Mouride brotherhood (1887), is without doubt Senegal's most iconic religious figure. His veiled portrait looks down earnestly on the population from thousands of paintings spread across walls, shop signs, cars, stickers and even T-shirts. Born in 1950 as a relative of the powerful Wolof leader Lat Dior, and member of the wealthy Mbacke clan, he initially renounced his noble heritage and chose a path of religious devotion. His preachings attracted an increasingly large following, the most famous disciple being the eccentric Cheikh Ibra Fall, leader of the Baye Fall, an offshoot of the Mouridiya (the local name of the Mouride brotherhood). Both branches emphasise the importance of physical labour as a path to spiritual salvation. This initially fitted in neatly with the French administration's attempts to improve its territory's economic output, but Bamba's anticolonial stance and the colonialists' fear of his growing Islamic power base led them to exile the charismatic leader in 1895. Bamba returned to Senegal in 1907 and, despite his continued anticolonial rhetoric, entered into hushed negotiations with the French.

Long after his death, the influence of Bamba and his teachings keeps growing, the ever-increasing masses of people descending on Touba for the Magal being proof of the immense popularity the Mouridiya enjoys.

an impressive sight, to put it mildly, but not one without risks. Be early if you want to find a place in a taxi there – you'll be fighting for your *car rapide* seat with half the population – and keep your wits about you once there. Crowds, even devoted ones, tend to attract a sizable clientele of criminals, and you don't want to fall prey to them. There are no places to stay in Touba, but on the day of the Magal local residents open their homes for visitors, and you'll find a bed and plate of food anywhere in town. Donations of money are of course welcome, and sometimes expected. Just think what you would normally have paid for the service, and give the same amount.

## Getting There & Away

To reach Touba from Dakar (165km, 2.5 hours) costs CFA3200 in a *sept-place* taxi and CFA1500 by Ndiaga Ndiaye. Seeing that you're going to the heartland of the Mourides, you might as well go by *car mouride* (bus service financed by the Mouridiya; CFA1500). A day trip to Touba is possible, but you'd do the place more justice by going to Mbaké, staying there for two nights and visiting Touba for the day.

## MBAKÉ

pop 40,000

This unremarkable town makes a good base from which to visit Touba. The **Campement Touristique le Baol** (☎ 976 5505; fax 976 7254; s/d CFA11,600/13,000; 🚻) has spartan rooms with

private bathrooms in a homely setting. The English-speaking staff can arrange guides to Touba and other religious sites in the region (inquire about costs). The *campement* has local meals, or you can head for the market where you'll find a few *gargottes* (simple eateries) and *dibiteries* (grilled-meat stalls). There's an SGBS bank past the turn-off to Touba, which is about 10km away.

## KAOLACK

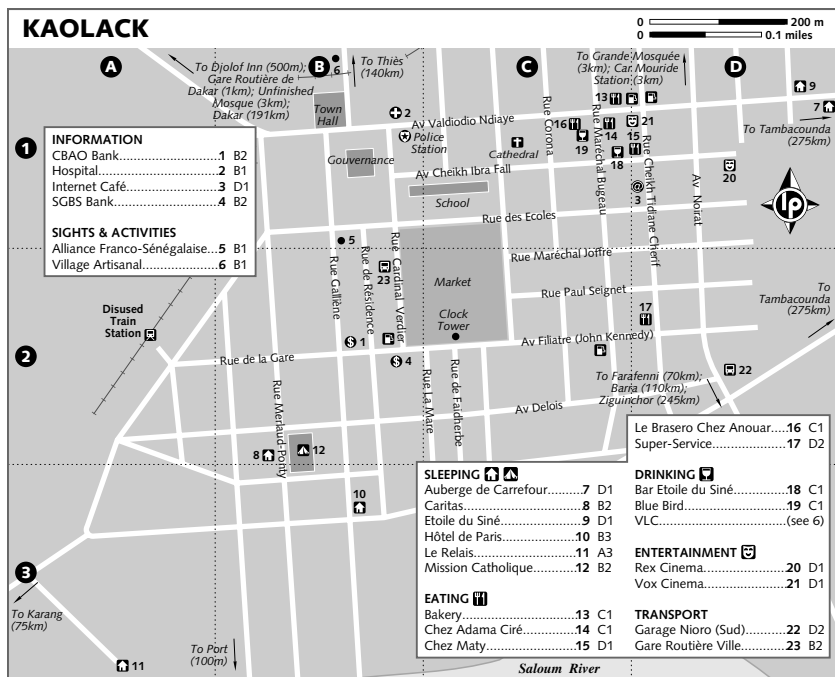
pop 179,000

The city of Kaolack sees a lot of visitors that pass through, but only few that stay. Well, they're all making a mistake. Kaolack isn't attractive or picturesque, has neither a thriving tourist industry nor stunning natural surroundings. But as a quieter place, cosmopolitan, fairly hassle-free and a little rugged, it's got a unique urban charm that lies somewhere between the frenzied drive of Dakar and the steady pulse of Tambacounda. Plus, its central position and excellent transport connections make it a great base for exploring pretty much the entire country.

## Information

Banks include CBAO and SGBS, both of which have Visa-welcoming ATMs. There are many places to connect to the Net; the Internet Café on Rue Cheikh Tidiane Cherif has a fairly speedy service for only CFA150 per hour. Kaolack also has a relatively well-equipped and -staffed **hospital** (☎ 941 1029; Ave Valdiodio Ndiaye).





## Sights & Activities

City life literally revolves around the town's large market, a huge conglomeration of rickety stalls, oriental arches and tiny arcades, all presided over by a grand entrance and even grander clock tower, and grouped around a wide patio. It's apparently the second-biggest covered market in Africa after Marrakech, and sells anything from hair products and lengths of cloth to fruits, electrical items and handmade shoes. If you still need to buy the obligatory Senegalese woodcarving, head for the *village artisanal* on the route to Thiès.

Kaolack's famous **Grande Mosquée**, a Moroccan-style building, is in the north of town about 3.5km from the town centre. Its construction was financed by members of the Baye Niass brotherhood, an interesting *confrérie* whose vision finds plenty of support among the Senegalese youth. Near Kaolack's Gare Routière de Dakar, you'll see another *mosque*, a curious modern construction that was built by the illustrious Senegalese millionaire Ndiouga Kébé as part of an ambitious 'future city' project

that never quite left the drawing board. Not even the mosque has been completed, and it's never been used for prayer, but it is admittedly an impressive sight.

The **Alliance Franco-Sénégalaise** (☎ 941 1061; Rue Gallienne) is also absolutely worth a visit, either to admire its fantastic decor of colourfully painted walls adorned with mosaic designs, to take in one of the frequent exhibitions and events, or just have a tranquil cup of coffee.

## Sleeping

**Le Relais** (☎ 941 1000; fax 941 1002; Plage de Kundam; s/d CFA22,000/27,000; 🚗 🚚 🚛) Southwest of town and right on the river, this stylish place surprises after many unglamorous options. Spacious rooms have TV, phone and even an Internet connection.

**Djolof Inn** (Rte to Dakar; r CFA10,000; 🚗 🚚 🚛) Just out of town, this is the friendliest, most welcoming of the cheapest. Rooms are basic but impeccable, and for only CFA500, you get a filling, fried-egg breakfast.

**Auberge de Carrefour** (☎ 941 9000; Av Valdiodio Ndiaye; s/d CFA8500/13,000) This clean auberge is

## MARCHÉ TOUBA

That travelling salesmen, middlemen and beggars vie for space at the Touba market should be no surprise – the town's role as a spiritual centre does not disguise the fact that it has long been one of the biggest cogs in Senegal's political and economic machinery. Though part of Senegal, Touba has unofficially retained its autonomy. Senegalese police are rarely seen, and the Mourides run their own welfare services. They also enjoy extensive trading relations with other towns and cities within Senegal and abroad. In New York police reckon 90% of the street merchants illegally peddling watches, handbags and the like are Mourides, and current estimates are that every month more than US\$1 million is repatriated from small businesses offshore.

There are no tax collectors in Touba as its revenues come from the donations of followers, and no-one is sure exactly how much is bought, sold or bartered within the city, or how much of Senegal's economy is built on Touba's 'shadow' economy. What is certain is that Touba's economic contribution is sizable, and its market is the cheapest place in the country to buy just about anything, from the latest hi-fi gear and jewellery to computers and Russian arms. As you wander through the streets around the mosque, the most obvious sign of the city's prosperity is that every space is being used to display goods for sale. And between the shops and stalls roam salesmen peddling everything from fruit and fake Rolexes to Bamba icons and skin-whitening creams.

a decent choice for shoestring travellers. Rooms are spacious and well maintained, and management is friendly and so enthusiastic, they might just turn you into a Kaolack fan.

**Caritas** (☎ 941 2030; Rue Merlaud-Ponty; s/d CFA10,000/15,000; 🚗 🚚 🚛) Opposite the mission, this is more upmarket with luxuries such as bathrooms and doors that actually close.

**Mission Catholique** (☎ 941 2526; Rue Merlaud-Ponty; dm CFA2000, s CFA5000) Staying here must be hilarious if you're 16 and travelling with your clique – the place is packed with youngsters. For anyone else it's just cheap; a bed is about the only luxury the bare rooms hold.

Also recommended:

**Etoile du Siné** (☎ 941 4458; Av Valdiodio Ndiaye; s/d from CFA6500/9500) A less-than-spotless low-budget option.

**Hôtel de Paris** (☎ 941 1019; fax 941 1017; Rue Gallienne; s/d CFA24,000/30,000; 🚗 🚚 🚛) Has a worn-out charm, but is slightly overpriced.

## Eating

If good-quality food is important to you, you should probably cook for yourself. The cheap *gargottes* around the *gares routières* are better for people-watching than for their food, and other good options are rare.

**Le Brasero Chez Anouar** (☎ 941 1608; Av Valdiodio Ndiaye; meals about CFA3000; 🚗 🚚 🚛 7am-11pm) This place is close to achieving cult status among travellers. It's a bustling oasis in an urban desert, and the place most cross-country travellers tend to seek out first. The food served is

mainly European cuisine, with a few Senegalese dishes thrown in. It's all about simple, good food – and the friendly atmosphere makes the meals taste even better.

**Chez Maty** (☎ 941 9000; Rue Cheikh Tidiane Cherif; mains around CFA2500; 🚗 🚚 🚛 11am-2pm & 7pm-midnight Mon-Sat) For cheap *shwarmas* or decent meals, this simple but buzzing place is a good choice. It's one of the cheapies with a good standard of cleanliness – and that's always good to know.

**Chez Adama Ciré** (☎ 945 0790; Rue Maréchal Bugeau; meals around CFA750) Luckily the generous platters of Senegalese food served in this run-down motel are more presentable than the rooms – if only slightly.

Self-caterers are fairly well served, with the well-stocked **Super-Service** (Av Filiatre), several other small shops and supermarkets, a giant sprawl of a market selling fresh produce and a **bakery** (Av Valdiodio Ndiaye) that's so good you'll just want to live on bread alone.

## Drinking & Entertainment

**VLC** (Village Artisanal; admission CFA2000; 🚗 🚚 🚛 9pm-3am Thu-Sun) The three letters stand for Village Loisir Club, which is utterly misleading as this is the closest Kaolack gets to urbane entertainment. The music is bass-heavy as it should be, the dance floors crammed. A perfect Saturday night.

**Blue Bird** (☎ 941 5350; Rue Maréchal Bugeau; 🚗 🚚 🚛 8am-3am Mon-Sat, 6pm-2am Sun) This place gets busy on weekends, when a dinner for two

can be followed by dancing in the adjacent raucous nightclub.

**Bar Etoile du Siné** (☎ 936 45 93; Av Cheikh Ibra Fall; 🕒 9am-2am) Just over the road is this boisterous bar, a not-so-spotless but entertaining place. It's one for those who take their drink seriously, not one for lone female guests though.

Film-lovers have a choice between the downtrodden **Rex Cinema** (Av Cheikh Ibra Fall) and the downtrodden **Vox Cinema** (Av Valdiodio Ndiaye). Both show American B-grade movies and the occasional quality film from 9pm every night. Admission is CFA1000.

### Getting There & Away

The town has three *gares routières*: Gare Routière de Dakar, on the northwestern side of town, for western and northern destinations including Dakar; Garage Nioro (Sud), on the southeast side of the city centre, for Ziguinchor, Gambia and Tambacounda; and Gare Routière Ville for local taxis.

You can travel to Dakar by *sept-place* taxi (CFA2600, three hours).

Minibuses and Ndiaga Ndiayes do the journey for a little less money and a lot more time.

A *sept-place* to the Gambian border at Karang is CFA2300 (two hours, 70km) and to Tambacounda CFA5000 (five hours).

If you're brave, you can save money by taking a *car mouride* (CFA1500, about eight hours). They leave from an unmarked place near the Grande Mosquée – ask your way there.

### Getting Around

Kaolack has shared taxis (from the Gare Routière Ville, or just hail them) to take passengers around town (CFA500). They also connect the northern and southern *gares routières* (CFA150).

Otherwise, you can hop on the back of a taxi-*mobylette* (CFA200 to CFA300) or take a horse-drawn *calèche* (cart, CFA300).