

# West Africa Directory

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This chapter provides a general overview of the essential things you need to know about West Africa, covering, in alphabetical order, everything from accommodation to women travellers. Each individual country chapter also has a directory which includes more specific information about these headings as they relate to each country. Please consult both when searching for information.

### ACCOMMODATION

In all the countries covered in this book, there's almost always some sort of accommodation available in most mid-sized and larger towns, although quality and price vary widely. For details of accommodation in each country, see the Directory section of

each country chapter, while for details on the costs of travelling in the region, see p18.

Throughout this book, accommodation is divided into budget, midrange and top-end places. Within each category, listings are ordered according to the author's preference, with the best places listed first.

Although costs vary considerably across the region, expect to pay from US\$5 a night for a bed in a basic dorm up to US\$15 for a simple but relatively comfortable budget double. In the midrange category, such is the variety on offer that you could pay anywhere from US\$15 a night up to US\$70 for a double. Top-end hotels start at US\$80 for a double and often go for considerably more.

In general, Mali and Senegal are the most expensive countries, while neither Nigeria nor Niger offer outstanding value for money when it comes to accommodation. Togo is one of the region's cheapest countries. In some countries, including Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso and Nigeria, establishments charge a government tourist tax on top of the price they'll quote you. Sometimes (such as in Burkina Faso) this is a one-off payment regardless of the number of nights you stay, while in Nigeria or Mali it's a nightly surcharge added on to the quoted price.

In many parts of West Africa, particularly in the Sahel during the hot season, people often sleep outside their hut or on the flat roof of their house, as it's much cooler. In some hotels this is also possible, and carrying a mattress onto the roof – where you'll have some breeze and views of the stars – is usually allowed if you ask.

One other thing to note is that in Guinea, Sierra Leone and some other countries, a man and a woman may share a single room

#### BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com). You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

with no questions asked, but a same-sex couple, regardless of whether they are a 'couple', usually cannot.

### Campements

Most towns and villages in Francophone countries have a *campement*. This can be translated as an 'inn', 'lodge', 'hostel' or even 'motel', but its primary purpose is not as a camp site in the traditional sense (ie a place for tents); however some *campements* do provide areas where you can pitch a tent and have access to shower facilities. *Campements* offer cheap and simple accommodation that is far less elaborate than hotels, containing the bare necessities and little else, but others are very good quality, with prices on a par with midrange hotels. Either way, they're often the best (and sometimes only) option in small towns. They're the sort of places where 4WDs fill the compound, and overlanders with their vehicles mingle with backpackers who've just arrived on the latest bush taxi.

In trekking areas such as Mali's Dogon Country (p513), it has become established practice for visitors to sleep on the roof of the *campements* in each village, as it is usually preferable to the stifling rooms that some offer.

### Camping

There are few dedicated camp sites in West Africa, and those that do exist cater mainly for overlanders in their own vehicle. However, some hotels and *campements* allow camping, or provide an area where tents can be pitched. Grassy knolls on which to pitch your tent are rare – you often have to force pegs through hard-packed gravel. Camping in the wild is a risky business in most countries as theft can be a problem, but if you do decide to camp, always seek permission from the local village chief before setting up.

### Hotels

Most hotels charge for a bed only, with all meals extra. If breakfast is included it's usually on a par with the standard of accommodation: a full buffet in the more-expensive places, instant coffee and bread further down the scale. Hotels are often called *auberges*.

Independent travellers on tight budgets are fairly well catered for, although there are almost no backpacker lodges. Most of what's on offer is basic, devoid of any discernible

character, and ranges from the recently swept to downright grubby. The showers and toilets are usually shared and often bear the traces of the previous inhabitants; a broken window may provide fresh air. Many hotels in this price range double as brotels.

Midrange hotels tend to be at their best in the capitals or major towns where you're likely to find at least one place with lovingly maintained rooms, private bathrooms, splashes of local colour, satellite TV and even a swimming pool. Most midrange places, however, fall somewhat short of this ideal and, though fine, will hardly have you rushing back to your room at the end of the day. Most offer a choice between a fan and air-con.

At the luxury end of the scale, West Africa has very few top-end hotels outside the capitals, and offers little in the way of exclusive wildlife lodges or tented camps as found in East or Southern Africa.

### Missions

If you're travelling on a tight budget, mission accommodation can be a good alternative to cheap and nasty budget hotels, although rooms are usually reserved for mission or aid workers and are open to others only on a space-available basis. Usually called *missions catholique*, they're invariably clean, safe and good value, although these are not places to stagger home drunk at 4am – travellers will be allowed to stay at many missions only for as long as they respect the rules.

### Resorts

You'll find European-style resorts all along the West African coast, but the best facilities are at those which cater to Europeans looking for a two-week beach holiday without really having to look Africa in the eye. These are especially popular in Senegal. The Gambia and, to a lesser extent, Cape Verde where you'll find all-inclusive packages of meals, accommodation and airport transfers. Although it's occasionally possible to get a room by simply walking in off the street, most rooms (and the best deals) are reserved for those who book the whole package through a travel agency in Europe.

### ACTIVITIES

West Africa has plenty of opportunities for getting active, although infrastructure (eg detailed topographical maps, well-marked

#### GETTING ACTIVE – WEST AFRICA'S TOP TEN ACTIVITIES

- Trekking Mali's **Dogon Country** (p513) through fascinating villages that cling to the Falaise de Bandiagara.
- Hiking in Guinea's **Fouta Djallon Highlands** (p418) in the off-road spirit of Graham Greene.
- Heading for the hills of the **Mandara Mountains** (p211) of northern Cameroon on foot.
- Climbing **Mt Cameroon** (p192), West Africa's highest peak, and accessible for experienced climbers and amateurs alike.
- Huffing and puffing all the way to the top of Cape Verde's **Mt Fogo** (see p246), an active volcano.
- Scaling the weird-and-wonderful landscapes around **Hombori** (p533) in Mali.
- Exploring the **Air Mountains** (p608) or **Ténéré Desert** (p609) of northern Niger by camel or in the relative comfort of a 4WD.
- Losing yourself in the deepest Sahara as you range north to **Araouane** (p528) or the salt mines of **Taoudenni** (p525) by camel or 4WD.
- Kicking back on a long, slow boat trip up the **Niger River** (see p510) from Mopti to Timbuktu.
- Cycling through the otherworldly **Sindou Peaks** (p158) in southwestern Burkina Faso.

trails and gear rental outlets) are usually non-existent. Guides are aplenty, but few have expertise (eg climbing) to do more than point you in the right direction. For this reason, you'll generally have to be pretty self-sufficient, or expect to pay high prices (eg to rent a 4WD for desert expeditions) to get your expedition underway.

### Cycling

In several parts of West Africa (in particular, tourist areas such as the Gambian coast), bicycles can be hired by the hour, day or week, and can be a good way to tour a town or area. Your choice may range from a new, imported mountain bike (*vélo tout terrain* in French or VTT) to ancient, single gear, steel roadsters. Choice of bicycles is more limited but generally available in Banfora (p155) in Burkina Faso's southwest for off-road expeditions into the surrounding areas.

Away from tourist areas, it's almost always possible to find locals willing to rent their bicycles for the day; good places to inquire include the market or your hotel. Costs range from US\$1 to US\$10 per day, depending on the bicycle and the area. Remember to always check the roadworthiness of your bicycle, especially if you're heading off-road.

For information on cycling in West Africa and on bringing your own bicycle to the region, see p843.

### Desert Expeditions

The Sahara offers a vast desert world to explore. You'll obviously cover far more territory if you rent a 4WD, but remember that costs are expensive and more than a few days are probably beyond the means of most solo travellers. This is especially true when you factor in high fuel costs and the requirement for most expeditions that you take a minimum of two 4WDs (in case one breaks down). Seeking out other travellers to share costs for longer expeditions is a good idea.

Another option is to travel by camel, which is more economical, environmentally friendly and allows you to experience the desert (and get to know your desert companions) at a more leisurely pace. One such trip involves joining one of the epic salt caravans, which travel between Timbuktu (Tombouctou) and the salt mines of Taoudenni in Mali; for more information, see p525.

The most rewarding former Saharan caravan towns, which serve as gateways to the Sahara's incomparable sand dune, oasis and desert-massif scenery, include Atâr (p562) in Mauritania for 4WD excursions to Chinguetti and beyond; Timbuktu (p521); and Agadez (p604), for camel and 4WD tours of the Air Mountains and Ténéré Desert. Each of these towns is well set up with vehicles and guides just dying to take you out into another world.

## Fishing

There is reportedly some excellent deep-sea sport fishing off the West African coast, including off Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Mauritania, Senegal and Sierra Leone. Expect costs to start at well over US\$100 a day per person. Good places to start your inquiries are top-end hotels and local boat clubs. See the Activities sections of the Directories in each individual country chapter.

## Football (Soccer)

Football is Africa's most popular sport. If you want to play, the universities and municipal stadiums are by far the best places to find a good-quality game, but in most towns are patches of ground where matches are played most evenings (in coastal areas, the beach is used). The ball may be just a bundle of rags, and each goal a couple of sticks, not necessarily opposite each other. You may have to deal with puddles, ditches and the odd goat or donkey wandering across the pitch, but the game itself will be taken seriously and can be exhilaratingly fun, fast and furious. Foreigners are usually warmly welcomed and joining in a game is one of the best ways to meet people. If you bring along your own ball (deflated for travelling) you'll be a big hit.

For more information on football in West Africa, see p43.

## Hiking

West Africa has many interesting possibilities for hiking, but the set-up in this region is very different from that in East or Southern Africa. There are few wilderness areas with good walking infrastructure, such as detailed maps, marked trails or trail accommodation. Much of the hiking is also through populated areas, where paths pass through fields and villages.

All of which means that as long as you don't mind roughing it, hiking can be a great way to interact with the locals; on foot you can meet on more equal terms rather than staring at each other through the windows of a bush taxi. As there's very little formal organisation, expect to arrange everything yourself. Plan on being self-sufficient (bring a good water filter/purifier) and be prepared to adapt your plans. Hiring a local guide (either for the entire expedition or to lead you from village to village) is usually a good idea. In some places, because of the distances

involved (or just to take a break from walking), it may also be necessary to use donkeys, hitching or public transport to get around.

Among the better hiking destinations are northern and northwestern Cameroon (p220), Cape Verde (p250), the Fouta Djallon area of Guinea (p432), along the famous Bandiagara Escarpment in Mali (p539) and in the fascinating hill country around Kpalimé in Togo (see p790). For some of the best of these hiking areas, see p809, as well as the individual country chapters.

## River Journeys

There's something special about passing your days floating down one of Africa's great rivers. When the destination is Timbuktu, the trip could take on the stuff of legend. Indeed, the most memorable of river journeys is between Mopti and Timbuktu in Mali (p510), although a host of other pirogue, *pinasse* (larger motorised boats, carrying cargo and anything from 10 to 100 passengers) and public ferry journeys are possible between Bamako and Gao. One thing to remember, however, is that water levels are usually only high enough to make major river trips between July or August and December.

Elsewhere, shorter trips are possible in Niger in Niamey (p588), Boubon (p593) and most of the Niger River towns between Niamey and the Malian border. Boat journeys are possible on Lake Volta, Ghana (p372), and in Gambia (p327) and Senegal (p744). Travelling by boat is a wonderful way to island hop and is especially enjoyable in Cape Verde (p253) and Guinea-Bissau (p461).

## Rock Climbing

West Africa has little climbing. While expats living in, say, Guinea or Ghana may find some outcrops suitable for one-pitch routes or bouldering, as a visitor it's not really worth lugging rock-climbing equipment around West Africa. Other well-known 'climbing' destinations such as Mt Cameroon (p192) and Mt Fogo (p246) are actually strenuous hikes that involve no technical climbing.

The main exception is the area of Hombori in Mali, where some spectacular rock formations stand high above the desert and attract a small but growing number of serious rock climbers from Europe; see p533. Another area with some rock-climbing potential is the Falaise de Bandiagara (p513), in

### WEST AFRICA'S TOP BEACHES

- The beaches around Freetown (p760), Sierra Leone.
- Kokrobite (p354) and Gomoa Fetteh (p356), Ghana.
- Sassandra (p275), Côte d'Ivoire.
- Kribi (p217), Cameroon.
- Cap Skiring (p732), Senegal's Casamance region.
- Nearly anywhere in Cape Verde (p250).
- Guinea-Bissau's Arquipélago dos Bijagós (p450).

Mali. The famous French climber Catherine Destiville established some routes here (and featured prominently in a TV film, *Solo in Mali*, about climbing in Dogon Country) some years ago, and groups from Europe occasionally follow her footsteps (and handholds). The Mandara Mountains (p211) of northern Cameroon are another possibility.

## Swimming & Water Sports

All along the coast of West Africa, you have a choice of beaches where swimming is an attraction. Some beaches are very touristy, whereas others may be inhabited by local fishing communities or be completely deserted. For the potential dangers of swimming at many West African beaches, see p817.

A safer, if less adventurous, option may be to use a *piscine* (swimming pool) – major hotels often have pools that nonguests can use for a small fee.

There are sailing clubs in cities along the coast, but they rarely have boats for hire. Your other option is to hire a small boat at a tourist area such as The Gambia's Atlantic Coast (p303) or Senegal's Petite Côte (p701). Day tripping on large crewed yachts are available in Dakar, where you'll also find sailboards, scuba diving and kayaking. Sailboarding is possible elsewhere in Senegal (p738), The Gambia, Freetown, Sierra Leone (p768), Abidjan and Sassandra in Côte d'Ivoire (p284), and Lomé and Lake Togo in Togo (p802).

## BOOKS

Our selection of the best books about West Africa are found on p19, while other suggestions are littered throughout the chapters

on the region's history (p30), culture (p39), arts and craftwork (p67), music (p58) and people (p73). Some other good books about the region are listed here.

*Travels in West Africa*, by Mary Kingsley, was written in the late 19th century and, despite the title, is mostly confined to Cameroon and Gabon. It captures the spirit of the age, as the author describes encounters with wild places and wild people, all the while gathering fish specimens and facing every calamity with flamboyance, good humour and typically Victorian fortitude.

*Impossible Journey: Two Against the Sahara*, by Michael Asher, is an enthralling account of a west-to-east camel crossing of the Sahara, starting in Mauritania and passing through Mali and Niger before ending at the Nile.

*Anatomy of Restlessness*, by Bruce Chatwin, is a collection of writings which includes discussion of Chatwin's most recurring theme, the clash between nomads and settled civilisations, as well as a section on his 1970 visit to Timbuktu. This theme is also explored in his famous book *The Songlines*, which includes brief descriptions of Mauritania's nomadic *Namadi* people. Chatwin's bewitching *Photographs & Notebooks* contains an intriguingly eclectic collection of pictures and observations from his travels, mainly in Mauritania, Mali and Benin.

For a more unusual kind of travel book, try *The Ends of the Earth* by Robert Kaplan. The author visits areas frequently seen as cultural, political and ecological devastation zones, including West Africa, analysing what he sees (Liberian refugee camps, the breakdown of society in Sierra Leone, the massive growth of urban poverty along the coastal strip from Lomé to Abidjan) and about which he cannot help but be darkly pessimistic.

*Designing West Africa: Prelude to 21st Century Calamity*, by Peter Schwab, is a trenchant critique of the mistakes made in the postcolonial period; it has extensive sections on Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Liberia, Guinea, and Ghana.

Lonely Planet also publishes a guide to *The Gambia & Senegal*.

## CHILDREN

Your children have a big advantage over the rest of us – having yet to acquire the stereotypes about Africa to which the rest

### TEN WEST AFRICA BOOKS FOR KIDS

Start searching for children's books on West Africa and you'll quickly discover a whole library of everything from folk tales to simply told histories that you never knew existed. Aimed at children learning about the diverse peoples of region, the *Heritage Library of African Peoples: West Africa* is an excellent series. Otherwise, here are some of our favourites:

- *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears: A West African Tale* by Verna Aardema (suitable 4 to 8 years)
- *Anansi Does the Impossible!* by Verna Aardema (suitable 4 to 8 years)
- *The Adventures of Spider: West African Folktales* by Joyce Cooper Arkhurst (suitable 4 to 10 years)
- *The Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories* by Harold Courlander (suitable 9 to 12 years)
- *The Singing Man* by Angela Shelf Medearis (suitable 3 to 8 years)
- *The Hunterman and the Crocodile* by Baba Wague Diakite (suitable 4 to 7 years)
- *The Three Birds from Olongo* by Agbo Folarin (suitable 4 to 8 years)
- *Ancient West African Kingdoms: Ghana, Mali and Songhai* by Mary Quigley (suitable 9 to 12 years)
- *Mansa Musa: The Lion of Mali* by Khephra Burns (suitable 8 to 12 years)
- *Sundiata: The Lion King of Mali* by David Wisniewski (suitable 4 to 8 years)

of us are exposed, their first impression of the continent is likely to be the warmth and friendliness of the people. Indeed, many West Africans have grown up in large families and children help break the ice and open doors to closer contact with local people who are generally very friendly, helpful and protective towards children. The result is that travelling with children in West Africa adds a whole new dimension to your journey. Apart from anything else, because foreign children are an unusual sight, they're a great conversation starter.

### Practicalities

In West African countries with a mainstream tourism industry (eg Senegal and The Gambia), some package-tour hotels cater for families with children, and in large cities, top-end hotels usually have rooms with three or four beds for only slightly more than a double. Alternatively, arranging an extra bed or mattress so that children can share a standard adult double is generally easy and inexpensive.

As for hotels, you'll almost certainly want something with a private bathroom and hot water, thereby precluding most budget accommodation.

That said, there are very few child-oriented facilities in the region. In nontourist hotels there are generally no discounts for children. Likewise, on public transport, if you want a seat it has to be paid for. Most young local

children travel for free on buses, but spend the whole journey on their parent's lap.

In addition to the length and discomfort involved in road journeys, possible concerns include the scarcity of medical facilities, especially outside major cities, and the difficulty of finding clean, decent bathrooms outside of midrange and top-end hotels. Canned baby foods, disposable nappies, wipes and other items are available in some capitals, but not everywhere, and they are expensive. It's best to avoid feeding your children street food. Powdered milk and sometimes also baby cereal (usually with sugar in it) are relatively widely available, even in smaller towns.

There are other factors to bear in mind when travelling with kids. The rainy season may mean that temperatures are lower, but the risks of malaria and other mosquito-borne diseases are higher. At all times, bring mosquito nets along for your children and ensure that they sleep under them. Bring child-friendly mosquito repellent and long-sleeved shirts and trousers.

We received the following letter from a Canadian family who travelled for six weeks in Senegal, Guinea and Guinea-Bissau with a one-year-old:

'In West Africa, travelling with a baby was not too difficult, even though life is different. People constantly wanted to touch him, and even though this

bothered us on occasion, it was not serious. Most of the time we enjoyed the contact. We learned to travel light, and went with one 50L backpack and a baby carrier which also carried another 10L of luggage. Clothes could be washed every day, and dried while wearing them.

We used small chlorine pills to clean water that was not bottled – apparently iodine may be harmful to children.

In every capital we found nappies at grocery stores selling imported items. Sometimes the quality was poor so we secured them with strong sticky tape.

Baby cereal and powdered milk were available in most towns, even small villages, and prices were similar to those at home.

In Senegal our baby got a rash caused by the heat and humidity. This was not dangerous, and with soothing powder it was gone in two days.'

*Gino Bergeron, Julie Morin  
& 'little Thomas'*

For more information and hints on travelling with children, Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* is highly recommended.

### Sights & Activities

Regional highlights that appeal to adults (markets, mosques, mud-brick architecture, endless desert wilderness) often don't have such an attraction for children. Additionally, distances (and waiting times) can be long, especially on public transport. It's a good idea to have a supply of distractions, as well as some food, as what's available en route is often not suitable.

The specific highlights kids are sure to enjoy include the otherworldly villages and festivals of the Dogon Country (Mali; p513) and the Tamberma Valley (Togo; p799), the chance to tell their friends that they've been to Timbuktu (p521), the stilt villages of Ganvié (p102), a trip down the Niger River (p510) and the beaches, castles and markets all along the West African coast

### CLIMATE CHARTS

For more information on the climate in the region, see p18 and the charts on p814.

### COURSES

For a region so diverse in languages, music and arts, West Africa has few courses where you can learn more. In Benin, there are Fon language courses in Cotonou (p98), while you can improve either your French- or Hausa-language skills in Niamey (p588). Lomé has a Prannic healing school (p781), while musicians should head for Klouto (p791) where there are classes in singing, drumming and traditional medicine. For all of Mali's rich musical heritage, only Motel Savanne (p502) in Ségou promises occasional drumming instruction.

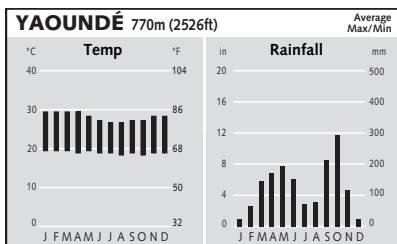
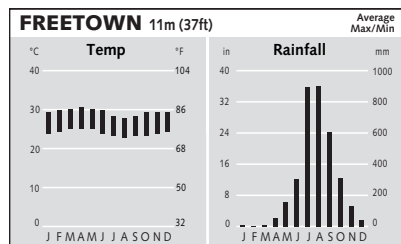
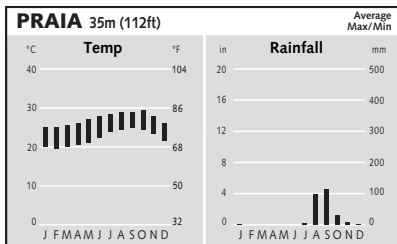
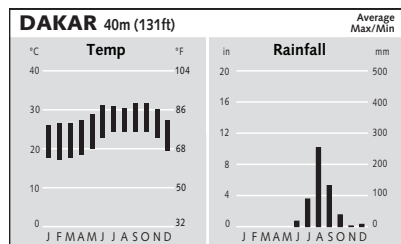
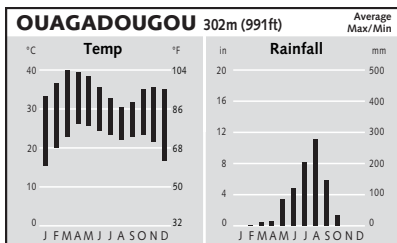
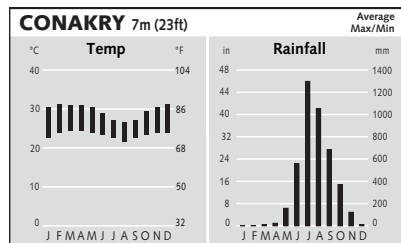
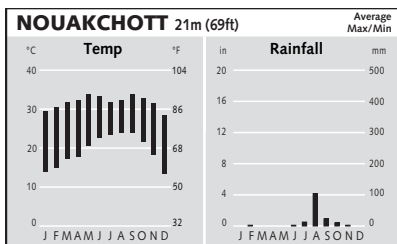
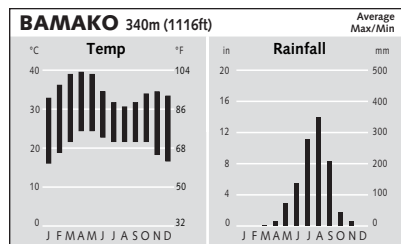
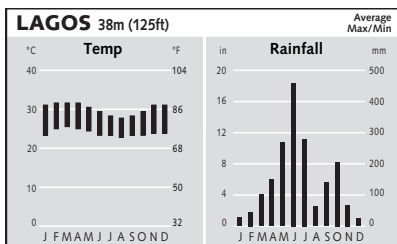
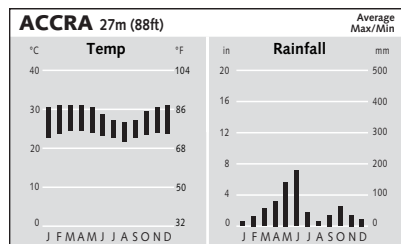
In Boké (p432) in Guinea and Latrikunda in The Gambia, the highly recommended **Batafon Arts** ([www.batafonarts.co.uk](http://www.batafonarts.co.uk)) run dance and percussion courses and can also arrange accommodation. For more information see p840.

### CUSTOMS

Except in CFA-zone countries, the import and export of local currency is either prohibited or severely restricted – typically limited to about US\$10 – although enforcement of this regulation is fairly lax. As part of their fiscal control, some countries use currency declaration forms. More commonly, control consists simply of asking how much currency you have. Or, you may occasionally be asked to open your wallet or show the contents of your pockets – wallets bulging with cash is likely to prompt underpaid and ever-hopeful airport agents (ie police and customs officials) to suddenly discover (ie invent) fictitious currency regulations which you've just violated by a sum roughly equivalent to the amount you have in your wallet.

To avoid a scenario like this, it's worth doing a bit of advance planning before getting to the airport. Divide your money and store it in several places so it's not all in one lump, and try to look as savvy as possible when going through customs checks. Responding creatively to questions is also helpful, for example explaining that you relied on a credit card for the majority of your expenses (be prepared to show a card), or (if it's true) explaining that you're just in transit and thus don't have much money with you.

For specific customs regulations of West African countries, see the Customs section of the Directory in each individual country chapter.



## PRESERVING WEST AFRICA'S HERITAGE

After the plundering of African artefacts by colonial officials and, later, by private collectors, most West African countries prohibit the export of antiquities (from tribal masks to archaeological finds). In Mali, Nigeria and Ghana in particular – countries with a rich tradition of highly prized and beautiful artworks and handicrafts – you must obtain an export permit from the Department of Antiquities or from the national museum in Bamako, Lagos or Accra if you want to take anything older than 100 years old out of the country. Even then, expect to explain why you're taking Africa's heritage off the continent and to pay very high export duties.

Very little art purchased by nonexperts fits this description. Most art that is 'very old' in the words of many a trader is actually recently made, but traders realise that tourists prefer dusty, more authentic-looking pieces than shiny, new mass-produced 'art'. In such cases, it's more a matter of being hassled by customs than doing something illegal. To avoid difficulties later, if the piece looks old, it might be worth having it checked before you purchase.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

It's difficult to make generalisations about the personal-safety situation in West Africa. While there may be considerable risk in some areas, other places are completely safe. The danger of robbery with violence is much more prevalent in cities and towns than in rural or wilderness areas, where it's relatively rare. Most cities have their dangerous streets and beaches, but towns can differ; there's more of a danger in places frequented by wealthy foreigners than in those off the usual tourist track.

The Sahel countries are among the safer places in the world, but Dakar has become much worse in recently and many travellers have had bags snatched and pockets picked, sometimes violently (see p687). In cities such as Banjul (The Gambia), Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), Niamey (Niger) and Bamako (Mali), attacks are not unknown, but violence is rare. Travellers have, on occasion, been pushed to the ground and had daypacks or cameras stolen, but they haven't been knifed

or otherwise injured. (In these cities, it's very rare to hear of thieves carrying guns.)

In some of the southern cities, the picture is different. The places with the worst safety records are Lagos (Nigeria) and Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire). In countries recovering from civil war (eg Sierra Leone and Liberia) another danger is that of harassment and violence by rebel groups or former combatants, especially in rural areas. More specific details are given in the individual country chapters.

## Safety Tips

The warnings in the previous section are not designed to put you off travelling in West Africa, but they should make you more aware of the dangers. Some simple precautions will hopefully ensure that you have a trouble-free trip. Remember, many thousands of travellers enjoy travel throughout this region and have no problems. The recommendations listed here are particularly relevant to cities, although some may apply to other places (especially those which get lots of tourists) as well.

- Carry as little as possible. Thieves will be less interested if you're not carrying a daypack, camera and personal stereo. Consider leaving them in your room. Even passports, travellers cheques and credit cards can be left behind if the hotel has a reliable safe or security box. Never take valuables to beaches, which are often hotspots for thieves. If your hotel isn't too secure, though, then you will have to carry your valuables with you. Work out which is the safest option on a case-by-case basis. (Note that in many countries you're required to carry your passport at all times – although you're very unlikely to be stopped in the street by police and asked for it.)
- Be discreet. Don't wear jewellery or watches. Use a separate wallet for day-to-day purchases, and keep the bulk of your cash out of sight, hidden in a pouch under loose-fitting clothing.
- Try not to look lost. Walk purposefully and confidently, and don't obviously refer to this guidebook or a map. Photocopy or tear out the pages you need, or duck into a shop or café to have a look at the map and get your bearings.
- Avoid back streets and risky areas at night. Take a taxi. A dollar or two for the fare might save you a lot of pain and trouble.

- Avoid getting in taxis with two or more men inside – especially at night and especially if you're female – even (or especially) if the driver says they are his 'friends'.
- Consider hiring somebody locally to accompany you when walking around a risky area. It's usually not too difficult to find someone who wouldn't mind earning a few dollars for warding off potential molesters – ask at your hotel for a reliable recommendation.
- If possible, keep your backpack or suitcase locked whenever you leave it anywhere, whether it be the roof of a bush taxi or your hotel room.

### Scams

The main annoyance you'll come across in West Africa are the various hustlers, touts and con men who prey on tourists. Most tourists succumb at some stage (these guys are either good or numbingly persistent). If this sounds daunting, remember that scams are only likely to be tried in tourist areas and that on most occasions, especially in remote or rural areas, you're more likely to come across genuine hospitality.

### A NICE WELCOME

You may be invited to stay in someone's house in exchange for a meal and drinks, but your new friend's appetite for food and beer may make this an expensive deal. More seriously, while you are dining, someone else will be back at the house going through your bag. This scam is only likely to be tried in tourist areas and would-be dance and drumming teachers are among the decoys.

### DUD CASSETTES

Street sellers walk around with boxes of cassettes by local musicians. You browse, you choose, you pay. And then when you get back to your hotel and open the box, it's got a cheap blank tape inside. Or the tape itself is missing, or the music is by a completely different artist. Tapes sealed in cellophane are normally fine, but look at, or try to listen to, tapes before buying them.

### POLICE & THIEVES

If you're unwise enough to sample local narcotics, don't be surprised if dealers are in cahoots with the local police, who then come to your hotel or stop you in the street and find

you 'in possession'. We've received reports of travellers being stung by con men claiming to know somebody living in Bamako/Dakar/Conakry (or wherever you are) from Sydney/Washington/Manchester/Berlin (or wherever you're from). They're having a party tonight and there'll be music, beer and good times. By the time you arrive, other local guests are already there, and you're assured the Aussie/American/Brit/German you've come to meet will be here soon. In the meantime how about smoking some grass? You decline, but some of the other guests light up, at which point, enter the police stage left.

### REMEMBER ME?

A popular trick in the tourist areas is for local lads to approach you in the street pretending to be a hotel employee or 'son of the owner'. There's been a mix-up at the shop. Can you lend him some money? You can take it off the hotel bill later. He'll know your name and room number, and even give you a receipt. But, surprise, surprise, back at the hotel they've never heard of him.

### SMOKESCREENS

Some travellers warn of hustlers who begin talking to you, meeting any resistance with a loud and obscene argument and an apparent potential for violence. Don't rise to it. If necessary, go into a shop or restaurant and ask for help. Your 'assailant' will soon be chased off.

### SOCK SELLERS

A youth approaches you in the street with socks for sale. You say no, but he follows, whereupon his buddy approaches from the other side and also tries to persuade you to buy the socks. He bends down to show you how well the socks would go with your outfit. Irritated and distracted, you bend down to fend him off and, whoosh, the other guy relieves you of your wallet. The solution? Be firm, walk purposefully, and never buy socks in the street.

### SPIKED DRINKS

It doesn't happen frequently, but often enough that you need to watch out: don't accept drinks from newly found acquaintances on buses or trains, or you may soon find yourself asleep, while your 'acquaintance' runs off with your wallet.

### LATEST TRAVEL ADVICE

Lonely Planet's website ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) contains information on what's new, the latest safety reports, and reports from other travellers recounting their experiences while on the road. Most governments have travel advisory services detailing terrorism updates, potential pitfalls and areas to avoid. Some of these include the following:

**Australian Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade** (☎ 02-6261 1111; [www.dfat.gov.au](http://www.dfat.gov.au))

**Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs & International Trade** (☎ 1-800-267-6788; [www.voyage.gc.ca/dest/consular\\_home-en.asp](http://www.voyage.gc.ca/dest/consular_home-en.asp))

**New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade** (☎ 04-439 8000; [www.mft.govt.nz/travel/](http://www.mft.govt.nz/travel/))

**UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office** (☎ 0870-6060290; [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk))

**US Department of State** (☎ 202-647-4000; [www.travel.state.gov/travel\\_warnings.html](http://www.travel.state.gov/travel_warnings.html))

### Security

To keep your money, passport and tickets safe from pickpockets, secure a pouch under your clothes. Your money should be divided into several stashes and stored in various places on your body. If your hotel seems trustworthy, you can leave some in the hotel safe, preferably in some sort of lockable pouch or at least in a signature-sealed envelope so that any tampering will be clear. When walking about town, keep a small amount of cash, including ready change and small bills, separate from your other money, so that you don't need to pull out large wads of bills for paying taxi fares or making purchases. This may be useful as a decoy to give to any assailant if you happen to be robbed, while the remainder of your valuables remain hidden.

### Swimming Safety

Although West Africa's beaches can seem inviting, remember that you know nothing about local swimming conditions. In many places along the West African Coast, the beaches can slope steeply and the waves can create a vicious undertow. Never plunge into the ocean without first seeking reliable local advice.

### DISABLED TRAVELLERS

West Africa has few facilities for the disabled. This, combined with weak infrastructure in the region, can make travel difficult, although it's not impossible. Few hotels have lifts (and those that do are generally expensive), streets may be either badly potholed or else unpaved, footpaths are few and far between, and ramps and other things to ease access are often nonexistent. While accommodation at many budget hotels is

on the ground floor, bathroom access can be difficult, and doors are not always wide enough for wheelchairs. Fortunately, these facts are counterbalanced by the fact that West Africans are usually very accommodating and willing to offer whatever assistance they can, as long as they understand what you need.

As for transport, most taxis in the region are small sedans, and buses are not wheelchair equipped. Minibuses and larger 4WD vehicles can usually be arranged through car-rental agencies in major towns and cities, although this will be pricey.

In general, travel and access will probably be easiest in places with relatively good tourism infrastructure, such as some of the coastal areas of Senegal and The Gambia or, to a lesser extent, Mali. As far as we are aware, there are no facilities in the region specifically aimed at blind travellers.

Organisations that disseminate information, advice and assistance on world travel for the mobility impaired include the following:

**Access-able Travel Source** (☎ 303-232 2979; [www.access-able.com](http://www.access-able.com); PO Box 1796, Wheat Ridge, CO 80034, USA)

**Accessible Travel & Leisure** (☎ 01452-729 739; [www.accessibletravel.co.uk](http://www.accessibletravel.co.uk); Avionics House, Naas Lane, Gloucester GL2 2SN, UK) Claims to be the biggest UK holiday company dealing with travel for the disabled and encourages people with a disability to travel independently.

**Holiday Care** (☎ 0845-124 9971; [www.holidaycare.org.uk](http://www.holidaycare.org.uk); 2nd fl, Imperial Buildings, Victoria Rd, Horley, Surrey RH6 7PZ, UK)

**Mobility International USA** (☎ 541-343 1284; [www.miusa.org](http://www.miusa.org); PO Box 10767, Eugene, OR 97440, USA)

**National Information Communication Awareness Network** (☎ 02-6285 3713; [www.nican.com.au](http://www.nican.com.au); PO Box 407, Curtin ACT 2605, Australia)

**Royal Association for Disability & Rehabilitation** (RADAR; ☎ 020-7250 3222; www.radar.org.uk; Unit 12, 250 City Rd, London EC1V 8AF, UK) Publishes a useful guide called *Holidays & Travel Abroad: A Guide for Disabled People*.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

It's important to realise what your own embassy can and can't do to help if you get into trouble.

Generally speaking, embassy staff have mastered the sympathetic look but remain representatives of governments who aren't in the least sympathetic in emergencies if the trouble is remotely your own fault. Remember that you are bound by the laws of the country you are in and this is very much the approach your embassy will take. Your embassy will not be sympathetic if you end up in jail after committing a crime locally, even if such actions are legal in your own country.

In genuine emergencies you might get some assistance, but only if other channels have been exhausted. For example, if you need to get home urgently, a free ticket home is unlikely as the embassy would expect you to have insurance. If you have all your money and documents stolen, it might assist with getting a new passport, but a loan for onward travel will be out of the question.

Some embassies used to keep letters for travellers or have a small reading room with newspapers and magazines from home, but few provide these services any more.

See the individual country chapters for addresses and contact details of embassies and consulates. Note that in some parts of Africa, countries are represented by an 'honorary consul' who is not a full-time diplomat but usually an expatriate with limited (and rarely visa- or passport-issuing) duties. If your country does not have an embassy in a particular country, another embassy will likely be designated to look after your interests (eg Canadian embassies often have an 'Australian interests' section).

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexuality is illegal in 13 out of the 17 countries covered in this book; the exceptions are Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Niger, while Guinea-Bissau has no laws that explicitly ban homosexuality.

Regardless of the legality, however, all countries covered in this book are conservative in their attitudes towards gays and les-

bians, and gay sexual relationships are taboo and rare to the point of nonexistence (homosexual activity does occur, especially among younger men). In most places, discretion is key and public displays of affection should be avoided, advice which applies to homosexual and heterosexual couples as a means of showing sensitivity to local feelings.

In the hotels of some countries (eg Guinea and Sierra Leone), same-sex couples, regardless of whether they are indeed a 'couple', will most likely be refused permission to share a room.

An excellent website to get the low-down on local laws and attitudes to homosexuality is the South African-based **Behind the Mask** (www.mask.org.za) which has detailed information on each country. **Global Gayz** (www.globalgayz.com) is another good resource with some information for (mainly Anglophone) West African countries.

A US-based tour company offering specialist tours for gay men and women, including to West Africa, is **David Tours** (☎ 949-723 0699; www.davidtours.com; 310 Dahlia Pl, Suite A, Corona del Mar, CA 92625-2821, USA).

## HOLIDAYS

A highlight of any trip to West Africa is witnessing one of the many ceremonies that are an integral part of traditional culture in the region. Events such as naming ceremonies, weddings and circumcisions take place everywhere, and if you're lucky, you may be invited to take part. You'll also see village festivals, where people celebrate the end of a harvest, give thanks to a deity or honour their ancestors. While some of the larger ones attract people from across the region, all these ceremonies usually involve singing, dancing (often masked), music and other festivities, and are fascinating to watch.

For specific information on holidays celebrated in each country, see the Holidays section of the Directory in each country chapter.

## Islamic Holidays

Important Islamic holidays, when much of West Africa's commercial life grinds to a halt, include the following:

**Tabaski** Also called Eid al-Kebir; commemorates Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son on God's command, and the last-minute substitution of a ram. It also coincides with the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca, and is the most

important Muslim event, marked in most countries by great feasts with roasted sheep and a two-day public holiday.

**Eid al-Fitr** The second major Islamic holiday, it marks the end of Ramadan, the annual fasting month when Muslims do not eat or drink during daylight hours, but break their fast after sundown. Throughout Ramadan, offices usually grind to a halt in the afternoon.

**Eid al-Moulid** Celebrates the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed. It occurs about three months after Tabaski.

Since the Islamic calendar is based on 12 lunar months totalling 354 or 355 days, these holidays are always about 11 days earlier than the previous year. The exact dates depend on the moon and are announced for certain only about a day in advance. Estimated dates for these events are:

Event	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Ramadan begins	24 Sep	13 Sep	2 Sep	22 Aug	11 Aug
Eid al-Fitr	23 Oct	12 Oct	1 Oct	20 Sep	9 Sep
Tabaski	30 Dec	19 Dec	8 Dec	28 Nov	17 Nov
Eid al-Moulid	10 Apr	31 Mar	20 Mar	9 Mar	27 Feb

## Public Holidays

In addition to the Islamic ceremonies, there are many public holidays – either government or religious – when businesses are

### TABASKI

Two weeks before Tabaski, sheep prices steeply rise, as every family is expected to provide one during the celebrations. Those who cannot afford a sheep are socially embarrassed and most will do anything to scrape up the money. One-third of the slaughtered animal is supposed to be given to the poor, one-third to friends, and one-third is left for the family. If you can manage to get an invitation to a Tabaski meal (it usually takes place after prayers at the mosque), you'll be participating in Muslim West Africa's most important and festive day of the year. It's celebrated with particular colour (and cavalry processions) in Kano, Nigeria (p659), but is also a festive time in Senegal and Mali. Here and elsewhere during Tabaski (and during Eid al-Fitr and the other Islamic holidays), you'll see entire families dressed in their finest clothes, strolling in the streets or visiting the mosque.

closed. Public holidays vary from country to country, but some – including Christmas and New Year's Day – are observed throughout the region. Government holidays are often marked with parades, dancing and other events, while the Christian religious holidays invariably centre around beautiful church services and singing.

See the Directory in individual country chapters for country-specific listings.

## INSURANCE

A travel insurance policy to cover theft and loss is recommended, and some sort of medical insurance is essential. Always check the small print when shopping around. Some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities', which can include scuba diving, motorcycling and even trekking, and a locally acquired motorcycle licence may not be valid under some policies. Also, some policies offer lower and higher medical-expense options, with the higher ones chiefly for countries such as the USA, which have extremely high medical costs.

Hospitals in Africa are not free, and the good ones are not cheap. If your policy requires you to pay on the spot and claim later, make sure you keep all documentation. Some policies ask you to call collect (reverse charges) to a centre in your home country where an immediate assessment of your problem is made.

Check in particular that the policy covers an emergency flight home, as emergency air evacuations can be extremely expensive. Worldwide cover to travellers from over 44 countries is available online at [www.lonelyplanet.com/travel\\_services](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services).

For further information on health insurance see p852, and for car insurance, see p837.

## INTERNET ACCESS

You'll find Internet cafés in all capital cities, although the situation elsewhere varies enormously from country to country. Costs are usually inexpensive, but the general rule is that you pay more for less – hi-tech places with the latest computers and fast connections generally cost around US\$2 an hour while cheap places in out-of-the-way towns, with painfully slow connections, sometimes charge by the minute and have been known to charge six times that price.

**FRENCH KEYBOARDS** *Amy Karafin*

Many Internet cafés in Francophone West Africa have 'French' keyboards, which can slow you down when typing if you're not used to them. Happily, though, some are loaded with English-language settings. To 'Anglicise' a keyboard, look for a 'Fr' icon on the bottom right of the screen, and scroll up to click on 'En'.

For things like burning photo CDs, you're unlikely to find much beyond the capital cities. For more information on travelling with a portable computer, see [www.teleadapt.com](http://www.teleadapt.com).

Unless you're using a free, web-based email address, such as **Yahoo** ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)), **Hotmail** ([www.hotmail.com](http://www.hotmail.com)) or **Google** ([www.gmail.com](http://www.gmail.com)), you'll need to plan in order to be able to access your Internet mail account. You'll need: your incoming (POP or IMAP) mail server name, your account name and password. Your ISP or network supervisor will be able to give you these. Armed with this information, you can access your Internet mail account from any web-connected machine in the world, provided it runs some kind of software (remember that Netscape and Internet Explorer both have mail modules). It pays to become familiar with the process for doing this before you leave home.

For everything else, such as wireless or connecting your own laptop to a local server, West Africa is still at the early stages of its Internet revolution. Expect that to change, but in the meantime, such services are few and far between and only in upper midrange and top-end hotels in some capital cities.

**LAUNDRY**

Outside of top-end hotels, laundry is washed by hand, often with brushes or on cement or rocks, which will cause your clothes to wear quickly if you spend much time in the region. Everything is always impeccably pressed (included in the price). Places charge per piece. At budget hotels, it may be as low as US\$0.10 or US\$0.20 per piece, and rates are sometimes negotiable. Rates are higher at top-end and midrange hotels, sometimes several dollars per piece. In the rainy season it may take longer to get your clothes back, as drying time depends on the sun.

Dry-cleaning services are limited to major cities. In most West African countries, it's a good idea to wash your own 'smalls' (socks and underwear) as it's considered impolite in many places if you ask someone else to do this.

**MAPS**

The Michelin map *Africa: North and West* (sheet No 953, formerly No 153, scale 1:4,000,000) is one of the best and most detailed, and something of a classic. It's lent its name to the **153 Club** ([www.the153club.org](http://www.the153club.org)) whose members have driven across the Sahara and West Africa. Whether you join the club or not, the map – together with this guide – is something no overland driver should be without. Even so, expect a few discrepancies between the map and reality, especially regarding road information, as old tracks get upgraded and once-smooth highways become potholed disasters. The map excludes the southernmost portion of Cameroon.

Other maps include the Bartholemew *Africa West* (1:3,500,000), which lacks the route accuracy of the Michelin but has the advantage of contour shading. Another option is the similar map put out by RV Reise- und Verkehrsverlag in Germany (which also excludes southern Cameroon).

Maps of individual countries are described in detail in the relevant chapters, but worth noting are the maps produced by the Institut Géographique National (IGN). The *Pays et Villes du Monde* series (1:1,000,000) and the more recent *IGN Carte Touristique* (1:2,000,000) have country maps, which are excellent and available for most countries in West Africa. For good topographical detail, IGN also produces the *Carte Internationale du Monde* sheets (1:1,000,000), which are devoted to West Africa; the only problem is that they were surveyed in the 1960s and don't seem to have been updated since.

**MONEY**

For travel in West Africa, it's best to come with a combination of cash (euros in Francophone countries, while US dollars and, to a lesser extent, UK pounds are often preferred elsewhere), travellers cheques and credit/debit card (Visa only in almost all countries).

Throughout the regional chapters and in countries where inflation is high, prices are quoted in US dollars. For a full list of ex-

change rates, see the table inside the front cover of this book.

**ATMs**

ATMs exist in a few capitals and, occasionally, other large cities in West Africa. In theory, they accept credit and debit cards from banks with reciprocal agreements. In almost all cases, Visa is the only credit/debit card accepted with MasterCard rarely possible. And then, there are the machines themselves. While in a few countries you'll meet with success, there are enough problems – including finding a machine inoperable, or losing your card – that it's best to regard them only as an emergency standby. The main exceptions to this are Côte d'Ivoire, where you may need to rely on ATMs (see p287 for details) and Burkina Faso (p167), where ATMs abound.

Whenever you do use an ATM, expect to be slugged with prohibitive bank fees from your bank back home (€15 is not unusual for a CFA200,000 transaction). For this reason, always take out the maximum the ATM allows.

**Black Market**

In some countries, artificially low fixed exchange rates create a demand for unofficial hard currency, so you can get more local money by changing on the so-called 'black market'. In CFA-zone countries, this is not a consideration because local currency is easily converted and the rate is pegged to the euro. In some other countries, banks and forex bureaux offer floating rates, so any black market has also disappeared, although you may be offered from 5% to 10% more than bank rates by shady characters on the street, who often hang out around markets or outside banks and post offices. Unofficial moneychangers are also tolerated by the authorities in many border areas, where there are rarely banks.

Although you may have no choice at a border crossing, the general rule throughout West Africa is to only change money on the street when absolutely necessary. The chances of getting ripped off are high, and even if the moneychanger is honest, you don't know who's watching from the other side of the street. Even at borders, be alert, as changers are notorious for pulling all sorts of stunts with bad rates and folded notes.

Try to anticipate your needs and change enough in advance to cover yourself on

weekends and during non-banking hours. If you do get stuck outside banking hours, you can try changing money at top-end hotels or tour companies, although rates are likely to be poor. Airport exchange bureaux are often open longer hours and on weekends. Another option, and much better than changing on the street, is to ask discreetly at a shop selling imported items. 'The banks are closed, do you know anyone who can help me...?' is a better approach than 'Do you want to change money?'

In countries with a real black market (eg Guinea and Nigeria), where you can get considerably more for your money, don't forget that this is morally questionable and against the law. What's more, dealers often work with corrupt policemen and can trap you in a set-up where you may be 'arrested', shaken down and eventually lose all your money.

**Cash & Travellers Cheques**

The best strategy is to take a mixture of cash and travellers cheques, although both have their downsides. Cash is king in terms of convenience and always easiest to change, but cannot be replaced if lost or stolen. Travellers cheques are refundable if lost or stolen, but in some countries (ie Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea-Bissau), they're either difficult to exchange, attract high exchange commissions, or both. Throughout the region, most banks outside of the capital city simply won't accept travellers cheques.

Well-known brands of travellers cheques are better as they're more likely to be recognised by bank staff. Amex, followed by Visa and Thomas Cook/MasterCard, are the most widely accepted, and some banks will take only one of these three. Wherever you are in the region, most banks require you to show your original purchase receipts in order to change travellers cheques, so it's essential to bring these. Carry them with you (separately from your cheques), but also leave a copy at home, as well as elsewhere in your luggage in case the original receipts or the cheques themselves are stolen.

For both cash and travellers cheques, take a mixture of high and low denominations. Rates are better for high denominations but you may need some small amounts if you're about to leave the region, or a certain country, and only need to change a small amount. Also, a supply of small denomination cash



## 17 COUNTRIES, 10 CURRENCIES

The difficulties of juggling the currencies of the 17 countries in this book is ameliorated by the fact that eight countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo) use the West African CFA (Communauté Financière Africaine) franc which can be used (or exchanged for local currency) in some other countries, such as The Gambia, Guinea and Ghana.

The CFA is fixed against (and supported by) the euro at a rate of 655.967:1, making it a 'hard' currency. One result of this arrangement is that most banks change euros into CFA without charging a fee or commission. At hotels and forex bureaus, expect rates of 650 or lower, and plan on paying commissions when changing euro (or any other currency) travellers cheques into CFA.

In recent years, the political leaders of The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria and Sierra Leone – the majority of West Africa's non-CFA block – have spoken of moving towards their own common currency, to be known as the 'eco', which would later merge with the CFA and thereby create a single currency throughout most of West Africa. Progress towards that goal remains slow, however. In the meantime, countries outside the CFA zone each have their own individual currencies.

Cameroon, as well as neighbouring Central African countries, uses the Central African CFA franc, which is linked to the euro at almost the same rate as the West African CFA franc, and with the West African CFA at a rate of one to one. However, you can't make payments with Central African CFA in the West African CFA zone or vice versa.

notes (eg US\$1 and US\$5 and the euro equivalent) can come in handy for cases when change is unavailable.

In addition to your main travel funds, carry an additional stash of cash – perhaps about US\$300 or the euro equivalent – with you, preferably kept separate from the rest of your cash and travellers cheques. This will serve as a contingency fund for emergencies.

Note that the USA changed the design of the US\$100 bill in the mid-1990s and old-style US\$100 notes are not accepted at places that don't have a light machine for checking watermarks.

### Changing Money

In CFA-zone countries, the best currency to travel with is definitely the euro. Other major international currencies such as the US dollar and the UK pound can be changed in capital cities and tourist areas, but at less-favourable rates. In the non-CFA countries, the best currency to travel with is US dollars, with euros, UK pounds and other major currencies accepted in larger cities.

The main places to change money are banks and forex bureaus. Where they exist, forex bureaus are often more efficient than banks, usually offer slightly higher rates and are open longer hours, though many don't accept travellers cheques. Charges and commissions vary, with some banks and forex bureaus charging a flat fee, and others a percentage commission; some charge both

a fee and a commission. The bank or forex bureau with the higher commission may also offer a higher exchange rate though, so you could still be better off.

Towards the end of your trip, ensure that you're not left with large amounts of local currency. Apart from export restrictions, exchanging CFA francs in countries outside the region is nearly impossible, except for France. In most countries in the CFA zone, it's relatively easy to change remaining CFA into euros, but difficult to change CFA to dollars. On leaving non-CFA countries, it's usually not possible to reconvert local currency into foreign currency, except in The Gambia, where it's relatively straightforward, although rates are low. Try and come to an arrangement with other travellers if you think you're going to be caught with a surfeit of local cash.

Also, note that if you're travelling between the West African and Central African CFA zones (eg from Niger to Cameroon), it's easy to change CFA notes of one zone for those of the other at banks, but more difficult to change coins.

### Credit Cards

You can rarely use a credit card to pay for items, and such occasions are limited to top-end hotels and restaurants, car-rental companies and occasionally air tickets; an extra commission is often attached, usually ranging from 3% to 15%. You can use your

Visa card (rarely MasterCard) to withdraw cash at some banks, especially in countries that use CFA. However, as with ATMs and except as noted in the country chapters, it's best not to count on this as computer breakdowns and other problems can leave you stranded. Where credit-card advances are possible, the process is sometimes straightforward with minimal hassle, but usually it's time consuming – sometimes taking up to a day or more. It can also be expensive if extra commissions are charged, and the maximum withdrawal amount is often restricted.

Watching a person put your card through the electronic credit card machine (as opposed to letting them do it out of sight) is a good idea to ensure you don't receive unwanted bills back home.

An advantage of debit cards is that there's no bill to pay (assuming you have the money in your account), so they're more suited for longer travels. However, unless the card carries the Visa logo it's unlikely to be accepted by many car-rental agencies and by some banks and ATMs. As well as the risk being higher if the card is stolen, debit cards are not very practical in much of West Africa.

### International Transfers

International money transfers may have the attraction of saving you from carrying large amounts of money and can be useful for topping up your funds, but these advantages may be outweighed by the fact that the process is generally expensive and time consuming – it's generally best used only as a last resort. Transfers usually take at least three to four days, and sometimes several weeks to clear, and occasionally there are hassles such as the local agent (banks or, in some countries, post offices) denying receiving your money. If you do need to transfer money, ask your forwarding bank to send you separate confirmation with full details, including the routing or transfer number, account and branch numbers, and address and telephone contacts. With this, you can then go to the recipient bank with proof that your money has been sent.

Most countries will only give you cash in local currency. Check the regulations in advance to avoid winding up with large sums of unconvertible currency.

Western Union Money Transfer has representatives in many West African coun-

tries, and is a good starting point, although its local partners are not always particularly efficient.

### Tippling

There are few clear rules on tipping in West Africa. In general, only the wealthy (ie well-to-do locals and nearly all foreign visitors) are expected to tip. Anyone staying in a fancy hotel would be expected to tip porters and other staff, but there would not be the same expectation from a backpacker in a cheap hotel.

Everyone – locals and foreigners – is expected to tip 10% at the better restaurants, although service is sometimes included in the bill. At more basic restaurants and eating houses no tips are expected. There's a grey area between these two classes of restaurants, where tipping is rarely expected from locals, but may be expected of foreigners. Even wealthier West Africans will sometimes tip at smaller restaurants – not so much because it's expected, but as a show of status.

Locals seldom tip in privately hired taxis, but some drivers expect well-heeled travellers to tip about 10%, especially if you have hired the vehicle for a lengthy trip. On most short trips, however, loose change is normally appreciated. In shared taxis around cities tipping is almost unheard of. If you rent a car with driver, a tip is always expected, usually about 10% of the total rental cost, and more if it is a multiday rental or if your driver has been exceptionally good.

### PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

You'll find plenty of subjects in West Africa for photography (with a video or camera), but if this is a primary reason for your visit try to avoid the harmattan season, which is at its height in many areas of the region from late December to February (see p18 for more details).

### Film & Equipment

Film in West Africa is imported and expensive (at least US\$6/14 for 24/36 exposures). Outside capital cities, only standard print film (not slide or large format) is available. Also, even if the expiry date is still good, film may have been damaged by the heat. It's best to bring all you need with you.

The sunlight in West Africa is frequently very intense, so most people find 100 ISO

perfectly adequate, with possibly 200 ISO or 400 ISO for long-lens shots or visits to coastal areas in the rainy season.

Useful photographic accessories might include a small flash, a cable or remote shutter release, filters and a cleaning kit (essential if you're going to be in the desert or in the Sahel during the harmattan). Also, remember to take spare batteries.

Finally, some airports have X-ray machines for checking baggage that may not be safe for film. Even so-called film-safe models affect high-speed film (1000 ISO and higher), especially if the film goes through several checks, so you may want to use a protective lead bag – they're fairly inexpensive. Alternatively, carry your film in your pocket or small plastic container, and have it checked manually by customs officials.

For video cameras, you may find tapes in capitals and other large towns, but qualities and formats vary. While travelling, you can recharge batteries in hotels as you go along, so take the necessary charger, plugs (see the Practicalities box in the Directory section of each country chapter) and transformer for the country you are visiting.

For digital camera equipment and accessories, you may find batteries etc in the better photo shops in major capital cities in the region, but you're better off being self-sufficient and bringing everything you need with you from home.

## Hints

### CAMERA CARE

Factors that can spoil your camera or film include heat, humidity, very fine sand, saltwater and sunlight. Take appropriate precautions.

### EXPOSURE

When photographing animals or people, take light readings on the subject and not the brilliant African background or your shots will turn out underexposed.

### PHOTOGRAPHING PEOPLE

Ask permission before photographing people, and respect their wishes. While some West Africans may like being photographed, others don't. They may be superstitious about your camera, suspicious of your motives, or simply interested in whatever economic advantage they can gain from your desire to

photograph them and demand a fee. Other locals maintain their pride and never want to be photographed, money or not.

Given that cameras are a relative luxury in most of the region, some people may agree to be photographed in exchange for receiving a copy. If you don't carry a Polaroid camera, take their address and make it clear that you'll post the photo. Your promise will be taken seriously. Never say you'll send a photo and then not do it. If you know you won't be able to come through on a promise, just say that so many people ask you for photos that it's impossible to send one to everyone. A digital camera has the advantage of being able to show the subject his or her image.

Video photographers should follow the same rules, as most locals find them even more annoying and offensive than still cameras. The bottom line is always ask permission first, whether you have a still camera or a video camera.

### PHOTOGRAPHY BOOKS

For more advice, Lonely Planet's *Travel Photography: A Guide to Taking Better Pictures* by Richard P'Anson is an excellent resource, full of helpful tips for photography while on the road. For more specific advice, Lonely Planet also publishes *Landscape Photography* by Peter Eastway and *People Photography* by Michael Coyne.

### RESTRICTIONS

Avoid taking pictures of bridges, dams, airports, military equipment, government buildings and anything else that could be considered strategic. You may be arrested or have your film and camera confiscated. Some countries – usually those with precarious military governments – are particularly sensitive. If in doubt, ask first.

### SACRED SITES

Some local people may be offended if you take pictures of their place of worship or a natural feature with religious significance. In some instances, dress may be important. In mosques, for instance, wearing long trousers and removing your shoes may make it more likely that your hosts won't object.

### TIMING

The best times to take photographs on sunny days are the first two hours after

sunrise and the last two before sunset. This takes advantage of the colour-enhancing rays cast by a low sun. Filters (eg ultraviolet, polarising or 'skylight') can also help produce good results; ask for advice in a good camera shop.

### WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

For wildlife shots, a good lightweight 35mm SLR camera with a lens between 210mm and 300mm should do the trick. Videos with zoom facility may be able to get closer. If your subject is nothing but a speck in the distance, try to resist wasting film, but keep the camera ready.

## POST

Postal services are moderately reliable in most West African capitals and cities. In rural areas, though, service can range from slow to nonexistent. For details on rates and prices, see the Directory in individual country chapters.

Letters sent from a major capital take about a week to 10 days to reach most of Europe, and at least two weeks to reach North America or Australasia – although it's sometimes much longer. For more speed and certainty, a few countries have 'express' services, but the main alternative (though expensive) is a courier service. DHL, for example, has offices in most West African capitals.

If you're only going to be in West Africa for a few weeks, it's unlikely it'll be worth arranging for mail to be sent to you, if only because in such a short time frame the margin of error is small. However, if you're planning on spending months travelling through the region, there are a couple of ways that you can receive mail.

The most common way to receive mail is the poste restante service offered by post offices, where letters are held for your collection. Although some smaller post offices may offer this service, using the main post office in a capital or large city is strongly advised. Letters should be addressed clearly to you, with your family name in capitals and underlined, at Poste Restante, General Post Office (English-speaking countries) or PTT (Francophone countries), then the town and country where you want to collect the mail.

To collect your mail, you generally need to show your passport or other identification. Letters sometimes take a few weeks to

work their way through the system, so have them sent to a place where you're going to be for a while, or will be passing through more than once. Some poste restante services levy a nominal charge when you collect mail, and many limit the length of time they will hold letters (usually one month).

Some hotels and tour companies operate mail-holding services, and Amex customers can have mail sent to company branches.

## SHOPPING

A major feature of travel in West Africa is the range of art and craftwork found in the region. This includes masks, statues and other woodcarvings, textiles with a fantastic variety of colours and patterns, glass beads and jewellery made from gold and silver, as well as a fascinating assortment of pots, urns, stools, weapons, musical instruments and more.

Whether you're a serious collector or looking for a souvenir from your trip, you'll find plenty to choose from, and prices are more reasonable than they are at home. Of course, many of the items you'll see in shops and markets are made expressly for the tourist trade, although they are often copies of traditional items. Even contemporary pieces of art are usually based on traditional designs.

Making items for sale is not new to West Africa: among the oldest 'tourist' art in sub-Saharan Africa was that produced by the Sapi people of Sierra Leone in the 15th century – they sold ivory salt pots and trumpets to the Portuguese traders.

See p67 for more details of the types of art and craftwork available. As well as these, other items commonly seen in West Africa are baskets and pottery with intricate designs, which are almost always produced by women. Leatherwork, with colourful incised patterns, mostly made from goat hide, are created in the Sahel and Sahara region.

Cassettes of local music are also a good buy. However, remember that the trade in pirated music is devastating for often struggling musicians who receive no royalties from the tape you buy for a pittance. For more details see p58, as well as the Shopping sections of individual town entries.

## Bargaining

In many West African countries, bargaining over prices is a way of life. Visitors often have difficulty with this idea, as they're used to

things having a fixed value, whereas in West Africa, commodities are considered to be worth whatever their seller can get for them. It really is no different to the concept of an auction and should be treated as one more intriguing aspect of travel in the region.

### BASICS

In markets selling items such as fruit and vegetables, traders will sometimes put their price higher when they see you, a wealthy foreigner. If you pay this – whether out of ignorance or guilt about how much you have compared with most locals – you may be considered foolish, but you'll be doing fellow travellers a disservice by creating the impression that all foreigners are willing to pay any price. You may also harm the local economy: by paying these high prices you put some items out of the locals' reach. And who can blame the traders – why sell something to a local when foreigners will pay twice as much? So, in cases such as this, you may need to bargain over the price.

Having said that, many traders will quote you the same price that locals pay, particularly away from cities or tourist areas, so it's important not to go around expecting everybody to charge high prices. It's also wise to keep things in perspective and not haggle over a few cents. After the first few days in a country (when you'll inevitably pay over the odds a few times) you'll soon get to learn the standard prices for basic items. Remember though that prices can change depending on where you buy. For example, a soft drink in a city may be one-third the price you'll pay in a remote rural area, where transport costs have to be paid. Conversely, fruit and vegetables are cheaper in the areas where they're actually grown.

### SOUVENIRS

At craft stalls, where items are specifically for tourists, it's a completely different story, and bargaining is very much expected. The trader's aim is to identify the highest price you're willing to pay. Your aim is to find the price below which the vendor will not sell. People have all sorts of formulae for working out what this should be, but there are no hard-and-fast rules. Some traders may initially ask a price four (or more) times higher than what they're prepared to accept, although it's usually lower than this. Decide what you want to pay or what others have told you they've

paid; your first offer should be about half this. At this stage, the vendor may laugh or feign outrage, while you plead abject poverty. The trader's price then starts to drop from the original quote to a more realistic level. When it does, you begin making better offers until you arrive at a mutually agreeable price.

And that's the crux – mutually agreeable. Travellers often moan about how they were 'overcharged' by souvenir traders. But, when things have no fixed price, nobody really gets overcharged. If you don't like the price, then don't pay it.

The best results when bargaining come from a friendly and spirited exchange. Better still, take the time to sit with the trader, drink tea with him, ask about his family or get him to explain the history of the piece you're wanting to buy. Bargaining is so much more fun for both sides if you take the time to get to know who you're dealing with. It won't necessarily mean that you make a purchase but you could just make a new friend and, at the very least, you'll counter the impression that all tourists arrive loaded up with cash and little time to engage with locals.

There's never any point in losing your temper. If the effort seems a waste of time, politely take your leave. Sometimes traders will call you back if they think their stubbornness may be counterproductive. Very few will pass up the chance of making a sale, however thin the profit.

If traders won't come down to a price you feel is fair (or if you can't afford the asking price), it either means they really aren't making a profit, or that if you don't pay their prices, they know somebody else will.

### Bringing Items Home

When you buy a new woodcarving you may find it has cracked by the time you get home. New wood must be dried slowly. Wrapping the carvings in plastic bags with a small water tray enclosed is one technique. If you see tiny bore marks with white powder, it means the powder-post beetle (often confused with termites) is having a fiesta. There are three remedies – zap the beasts in a microwave, stick the piece in the freezer for a week, or drench it with lighter fluid. You could try fumigating items. Be warned that if you have wooden objects with insect damage, the items may be seized by customs on your return home

(Australia is very strict on this) and you will have to pay to have them fumigated.

If you buy textiles, note that some dyes, including indigo, may not be colour-fast. Soaking cloth in vinegar or very salty water may stop the dye running, but this method should only be used on cloth of one colour. Adinkra cloth is not meant to be washed.

For advice on preserving West Africa's heritage by not purchasing antiquities, and thereby avoiding the ire of customs officials, see p815.

### SOLO TRAVELLERS

Travelling on your own is a great way to make new friends – the opportunity to meet locals is greatly enhanced if you're not part of a large group – and to ensure that you have the freedom to follow your own itinerary. The downside is that hotel rooms cost more for individual travellers (a single room is rarely half the price of a double room). If you don't speak the local language, you may also find yourself frustrated in having little more than broken conversations with locals, and in countries where few tourists are found (eg Guinea), you may end up feeling pretty isolated. If you want to travel in Francophone countries and think you may end up pining for a new travel buddy, head for those countries with more well-worn travellers paths (eg Mali, Senegal or Burkina Faso).

### TELEPHONE & FAX

Telephone and fax connections to places outside West Africa are reasonably good, as the transmission is via satellite, though it's generally much easier and less expensive to call in the other direction – from the USA, Europe or Australasia to West Africa. Calls between African countries, however, are often relayed on land lines or through Europe, which means the reception is frequently bad – assuming you can get a call through in the first place. Things are improving, but slowly.

Costs for international calls and faxes to Europe, the USA or Australasia start at about US\$3 to US\$4 per minute, with a few countries offering slightly reduced rates at night and on weekends.

Dial-direct or 'home-direct' numbers are available from a few countries. With these, you dial an operator in your home country, who can reverse the charges, or to charge the call to a phone-company charge card or your

home number. These home-direct numbers are toll free, but if you are using a phone booth you may need a coin or phonecard to be connect. Check with your phone company for access numbers and a listing of countries where they have home-direct numbers.

Country codes for dialling West African countries are given inside the front cover of this book.

### Fax

Most cities and large towns have public telephone offices at the post office where you can make international calls and send faxes. There are also private telecommunications centres in major towns and cities throughout the region. Sending a fax from a hotel is much more expensive.

### Mobile Phones

People in West Africa love their mobile (cell) phones and they are becoming common in larger cities, where they can be easily and inexpensively rented or purchased. In capitals and larger towns, street vendors sell mobile phone top-up cards for a mobile phone you've rented or bought locally, although these are only valid once you've purchased a SIM card from a local carrier. Mobiles are also becoming increasingly popular with hotels and businesses since land lines are often unreliable. Although coverage is being constantly extended, you're unlikely to get a signal outside larger towns. See the Directory in individual country chapters for details on the situation in the country you'll be visiting.

In some countries (eg Mali), usage has reached a point where companies offer night-time deals for calling internationally from your mobile, which can work out cheaper than using fixed lines.

A European or North American mobile phone will probably have reception in most West African countries, whereby your carrier's local partner will allow you to receive and send text messages, as well as phone calls, although the latter can be extremely expensive. Remember that if someone calls your mobile phone while you're in West Africa, you may pay the bulk of the charge.

### Phonecards

In many West African countries you can buy phonecards at post offices or phone offices, or at shops near cardphones. These usually

make international calls slightly cheaper, but the cards are generally only sold during regular business hours so you may need to plan ahead. At some airports and top-end hotels in the major capitals, telephones may accept credit cards, but at high rates.

## TIME

Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo are on GMT/UTC. Cape Verde is one hour behind. Benin, Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria are one hour ahead. None of the West African countries in this book observe daylight saving.

For a comprehensive guide to time zones in the region, see pp902–3.

## TOILETS

There are two main types of toilet: Western sit-down, with a bowl and seat; and African squat, with a hole in the ground. Standards vary tremendously, from pristine to those that leave little to the imagination as to the health or otherwise of the previous occupant.

In rural areas, squat toilets are built over a deep hole in the ground. These are called 'long drops', and the waste matter just fades away naturally, as long as the hole isn't filled with too much other rubbish (such as paper or synthetic materials, including tampons).

Some Western toilets aren't plumbed in, but just balanced over a long drop, although the lack of running water makes such mechanisms one of the least successful forms of cross-cultural exchange. In our experience, a non-contact hole in the ground is better than a filthy bowl to hover over any day.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

With just a handful of exceptions, West Africa's tourism authorities are not geared up for tourism, and there are few tourist offices abroad. Some countries run small tourist offices at their embassies, which may be helpful for getting moderately useful brochures or general travel information.

Once in West Africa, some countries have Ministry of Tourism information offices, but apart from offering a few old brochures they're unlikely to be of much assistance. Notable exceptions, where a town or city may have a genuinely useful tourist office, are listed in individual country chapters.

You'll usually have more success inquiring with staff at tour companies or hotels.

## VISAS

This section contains general information about visas – for country-specific visa information, see the Directory sections of individual country chapters.

The general rule for West Africa is to get your visas before leaving home. They are rarely issued at land borders and only occasionally at airports. Also, if you're flying from outside Africa, many airlines won't let you on board without a visa anyway.

Visa agencies are worth considering if you need visas to several countries before you leave, or if there's no relevant embassy in your country. For longer trips or more flexibility, it's possible to get most of your visas in the region as you go, although this requires some advance planning and careful checking of the location of embassies for the countries in question – most West African countries have insufficient resources to maintain expensive embassies in many countries.

Visa fees average between US\$20 and US\$50, with prices depending on where you apply and your nationality. Multi-entry visas cost more than single-entry visas. Check the visa's validity length and its start date when deciding where to make your application. When applying for a visa, you may have to show proof that you intend to leave the country (eg an air ticket) or that you have enough funds to support yourself during your visit.

Most visa applications require between two and four identical passport photos, either black and white or colour. Inexpensive photo shops are found throughout the region, and rural areas often have a village photographer who can do the job for you.

## WOMEN TRAVELLERS

When travelling in West Africa – solo or with other women – you're unlikely to encounter any more difficulties than you would elsewhere in the world. The female authors of this book have travelled for extended periods (including solo travel) and/or lived in West Africa without incident and most did their research for this book travelling alone.

For more information on the situation for women travellers in specific countries, see the Women Travellers section in the Directory of the relevant country chapter.

## Hints

Although women will undoubtedly attract more attention than men, more often than not you'll meet only warmth and hospitality, and find that you receive kindness and special treatment that you wouldn't be shown if you were a man. While you're likely to hear some horror stories (often of dubious accuracy) from expats who may be appalled at the idea of solo female travel, it's worth remembering that the incidence of rape or other real harm is extremely rare.

With that in mind, it's important to not let these concerns ruin your trip. Remember that some sections of the region, such as parts of the Sahel, are wonderfully hassle free. You'll also have the opportunity to meet local women, something which few male travellers have the chance to do on the same terms. Good places to try include tourist offices, government departments or even your hotel, where at least some of the staff are likely to be formally educated young to middle-aged women. In rural areas, starting points include female teachers at a local school, or staff at a health centre where language barriers are less likely to be a problem.

That said, it's inevitable that you'll attract some attention. Here are a few tips:

- Dress modestly. This is the most successful strategy for minimising unwanted attention. Wear trousers or a long skirt, and a conservative top with a sleeve. Tucking your hair under a cap or tying it back, especially if it's blonde, sometimes helps.
- Use common sense, trust your instincts and take the usual precautions when out. For example, if possible, avoid going out alone in the evenings, particularly on foot. Avoid isolated areas, roadways and beaches during both day and evening hours, and be cautious on beaches, many of which can become isolated very quickly. Throughout the region, hitching alone is not recommended.
- Don't worry about being rude, and don't feel the need to explain yourself. If you try to start explaining why you don't want to meet for a drink/go to a nightclub/get married on the spot, it may be interpreted as flirting. The more you try to explain, the more you'll see your hopeful suitor's eyes light up with that pleased, knowing look – 'ah, she's just playing hard to get, but really, she wants me...'

## 'C'EST MADAME? OU BIEN, MADEMOISELLE?'

Women travelling on their own through Francophone West Africa will undoubtedly hear these words: *ad nauseam* (translated, the phrase means 'are you married or not?'). Sometimes, for example, when you're filling out forms or registering at a hotel, it's not ill-intentioned. But all too often, it's a leering soldier or border official who's a little too eager for company. Although there's not much you can do to prevent the question, having at least a fictitious husband – ideally one who will be arriving imminently at that very place – can help in avoiding further advances. If you're travelling with a male companion, a good way to avoid unwanted interest is to introduce him as your husband. If you're questioned as to why your husband/children aren't with you, just explain that you'll be meeting them later.

- Ignore hissing, calls of '*chérie*', or whatever – if you respond, it may be interpreted as a lead on.
- Wear a wedding ring or carry photos of 'your' children, which will make you appear less 'available'.
- Avoid direct eye contact with local men; dark sunglasses help. There are, however, times when a cold glare is an effective riposte to an unwanted suitor.
- On public transport, sit next to a woman if possible.
- If you need help (eg directions), ask a woman first. That said, local women are less likely than men to have had an education that included learning in English. You'll find this to be a major drawback in getting to meet and talk with them.
- Going to the nearest public place, such as the lobby of a hotel, usually works in getting rid of any hangers-on. If they still persist however, asking the receptionist to call the police usually frightens them off.

## Tampons & Sanitary Pads

Tampons (imported from Europe) are available from pharmacies or large supermarkets in capitals throughout West Africa, and occasionally in other large towns. Elsewhere, the only choice is likely to be sanitary pads so you may want to bring an emergency supply.

# Transport in West Africa

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## GETTING THERE & AWAY

This chapter tells you how to reach West Africa by air, land and sea from other parts of the world, and outlines the routes for onward travel from the region. For details of travel once you are in the region between one country and its neighbours see the Getting There & Away section in the relevant country chapter. Flights, tours and rail tickets can be booked online at [www.lonelyplanet.com/travel\\_services](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services).

### ENTRY REQUIREMENTS Entering West Africa

Entering West Africa is generally hassle-free, provided you have all your documents in order. For details of the visa requirements for each country covered in this guide, see the Directory section of each individual country chapter.

### AIR

Many major European airlines fly to West Africa, with Air France undoubtedly the airline with the greatest coverage. Of the

### THINGS CHANGE

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. International air fares are volatile, schedules change, special deals come and go, and rules are amended. Airlines and governments seem to take a perverse pleasure in making fare structures and regulations as complicated as possible. In addition, the travel industry is highly competitive and agents' prices vary considerably.

Fares quoted in this book are approximate and based on the rates advertised by travel agents at the time of going to press. Airlines and travel agents mentioned in this chapter do not necessarily constitute a recommendation.

Ensure that you get quotes and advice from as many airlines and travel agents as possible – and make sure you understand how fares and tickets work – before you part with your hard-earned cash. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

African airlines, Royal Air Maroc and Air Sénégal International in particular have good connections throughout the region while Point Afrique has revolutionised travel to West Africa with its extensive network connecting Paris, Marseilles and Mulhouse with cities and towns across the region.

### Airports & Airlines

International airports with the greatest number of incoming flights (and the best onward connections) include Dakar (Senegal), Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), Accra (Ghana), Bamako (Mali), Lagos (Nigeria) and Douala (Cameroon). There are also international airports at Cotonou (Benin); Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso); Yaoundé and Garoua (Cameroon); Conakry (Guinea); Monrovia (Liberia); Mopti and Gao (Mali); Nouakchott, Nouâdhibou and Atâr (Mauritania); Niamey and Agadéz

(Niger); Kano and Port Harcourt (Nigeria); Praia and Sal (Cape Verde); Banjul (Gambia); and Bissau (Guinea-Bissau).

Airlines flying to and from West Africa:  
**Afriqiyah** (8U; [www.afriqiyah.aero](http://www.afriqiyah.aero)) Hub: Tripoli.  
**Air Algérie** (AH; [www.airalgerie.dz](http://www.airalgerie.dz)) Hub: Algiers.  
**Air Burkina** (2J; [www.air-burkina.com](http://www.air-burkina.com)) Hub: Ouagadougou.  
**Air France** (AF; [www.airfrance.com](http://www.airfrance.com)) Hub: Paris Charles De Gaulle.  
**Air Gabon** Hub: Libreville.  
**Air Guinée** (2U; [www.mirinet.com/airguinee](http://www.mirinet.com/airguinee)) Hub: Conakry.  
**Air Ivoire** (VU; [www.airivoire.com](http://www.airivoire.com)) Hub: Abidjan.  
**Air Luxor** (LK; [www.airluxor.com](http://www.airluxor.com)) Hub: Lisbon.  
**Air Mali** (XG) Hub: Bamako.  
**Air Mauritanie** (MR; [www.airmauritanie.mr](http://www.airmauritanie.mr)) Hub: Nouakchott.  
**Air Sénégal International** (V7; [www.air-senegal-international.com](http://www.air-senegal-international.com)) Hub: Dakar.  
**Alitalia** (AZ; [www.alitalia.com](http://www.alitalia.com)) Hub: Rome.  
**American Airlines** (AA; [www.aa.com](http://www.aa.com)) Hub: New York.

### DON'T FORGET...

There are a few essential things that you must have when you arrive at your first West African border:

- valid entry visa, unless you are entering a country where the visa is available on arrival;
- your up-to-date international vaccination booklet (*livre jeune*) which contains proof of yellow fever vaccination;
- enough empty pages in your passport as African officials love stamps (for visas, entry and exit stamps, and registration with police within some countries) – so make sure you have at least two pages per country;
- a passport that expires at least six months after your trip ends – it's not mandatory in all cases but some officials will cause problems if your passport is about to run out;
- the patience of a saint as African bureaucracy can be epic in its obsession with minutiae;
- an awareness that some African officials will assure you that your perfectly valid visa has expired – unless it has, they're just asking for a bribe.

**British Airways** (BA; [www.britishairways.com](http://www.britishairways.com)) Hub: London Heathrow.  
**Cameroon Airlines** (UY; [www.cameroon-airlines.com](http://www.cameroon-airlines.com)) Hub: Douala.  
**EgyptAir** (MS; [www.egyptair.com.eg](http://www.egyptair.com.eg)) Hub: Cairo.  
**Emirates** (EK; [www.emirates.com](http://www.emirates.com)) Hub: Dubai.  
**Ethiopian Airlines** (ET; [www.flyethiopian.com/et/](http://www.flyethiopian.com/et/)) Hub: Addis Ababa.  
**Ghana Airways** (GH; [www.ghana-airways.com](http://www.ghana-airways.com)) Hub: Accra.  
**Ghana International Airlines** (GO; [www.fly-ghana.com](http://www.fly-ghana.com)) Hub: Accra.  
**Go-Voyages** ([www.govoyages.com](http://www.govoyages.com)) Hub: Paris.  
**Iberia** (IB; [www.iberia.com](http://www.iberia.com)) Hub: Madrid.  
**Interair** (D6; [www.interair.co.za](http://www.interair.co.za)) Hub: Johannesburg.  
**Kenya Airways** (KQ; [www.kenya-airways.com](http://www.kenya-airways.com)) Hub: Nairobi.  
**KLM-Royal Dutch Airlines** (KL; [www.klm.com](http://www.klm.com)) Hub: Amsterdam.  
**Lufthansa Airlines** (LH; [www.lufthansa.com](http://www.lufthansa.com)) Hub: Frankfurt.  
**Middle East Airlines** (ME; [www.me.com.lb](http://www.me.com.lb)) Hub: Rafic Hariri International Airport, Beirut.  
**Point Afrique** ([www.point-afrique.com](http://www.point-afrique.com)) Hub: Paris.  
**Royal Air Maroc** (AT; [www.royalairmaroc.com](http://www.royalairmaroc.com)) Hub: Casablanca.  
**Slok Air** (S0; [www.slokairinternational.com](http://www.slokairinternational.com)) Hub: Banjul.  
**SN Brussels** (SN; [www.flysnn.com](http://www.flysnn.com)) Hub: Brussels.  
**South African Airways** (SA; [www.flysa.com](http://www.flysa.com)) Hub: Johannesburg.  
**Swiss International Airlines** (LX; [www.swiss.com](http://www.swiss.com)) Hub: Zurich.  
**TACV** (VR; [www.tacv.cv](http://www.tacv.cv))  
**TAP Air Portugal** (TP; [www.flytap.com](http://www.flytap.com)) Hub: Lisbon.  
**Toumai Air Tchad** Hub: N'Djaména.  
**Tunis Air** (TU; [www.tunisair.com.tr](http://www.tunisair.com.tr)) Hub: Tunis.  
**Virgin Nigeria** (VK; [www.virginigeria.com](http://www.virginigeria.com)) Hub: Lagos.  
**West Coast Airways** (WCG) Hub: Accra.

### Tickets

Buying cheap air tickets in West Africa isn't easy. Usually the best deal you can get is an airline's official excursion fare and there is no discount on single tickets unless you qualify for a 'youth' or 'student' rate, with sometimes significant discounts for people under 26 (sometimes 23) or in full-time education. Cheaper tickets are easier to come by from travel agents in cities which handle plenty of international traffic (eg Dakar or Abidjan). If you're stuck in Bissau or Monrovia, however, you won't have much choice about fares or airlines.

Charter flights (eg Point Afrique or Go-Voyages) are generally direct and cheaper

### A FEW THINGS ABOUT POINT AFRIQUE

Point Afrique is one of the best things to happen to West African tourism in ages. Their flights are generally cheaper than the established carriers, they can take you places that no other airlines can (from Gao to Agadez and plenty of other desert oases or West African capitals) and they don't penalise you for entering West Africa at one place and leaving from another. Their low prices have also prompted other airlines to lower their fares.

There are some things to remember if you're travelling with Point Afrique. For a start, they're a charter company that leases planes from other airlines (at the time of writing, these included Air Méditerranée and Axis Airways). Because they have neither the government backing nor profit margins of national carriers, they operate their flights only if there are enough passengers to make it viable. While flights are rarely cancelled, they may be combined with other routes – for example, one of our Agadez–Paris flights flew via Tamanrasset, Marseilles and required a change of plane.

Point Afrique is way down the pecking order when it comes to airport berths, which means they may be unable to confirm your details (departure airport or time) until 15 days before your departure, a factor which needs to be taken into consideration if you're booking onward flights.

Prices are also something to watch out for as the prices quoted on their website do not include airport taxes. The taxes for each airport are listed on Point Afrique's website and must be added to the quoted price (which still usually falls far below the fares of other carriers).

than scheduled flights, so they're well worth considering. Some charter flights come as part of a package that includes accommodation and other services, but most charter companies sell 'flight only' tickets, which can be good deals.

Once you have your ticket, keep a note of the number, flight numbers, dates, times and other details, and keep the information somewhere separate from your money and valuables. The easiest thing to do is to take a few photocopies – carry one with you and leave another at home. If the ticket is lost or stolen, this will help you get a replacement.

It's sensible to buy travel insurance early. If you get it the week before you fly, you may find, for example, that you're not covered for delays to your flight caused by industrial action. For more details see p819.

A few hours surfing the Web can help give you an idea of what you can expect in the way of good fares as well as be a useful source of information on routes and timetables. Remember that most online flight reservation services need credit-card details and, as many are US-based, they may only deliver to North American addresses.

Following are a few online booking services that may be useful.

**American Express Travel** (www.itn.net)

**Atrapalo** (www.atrapalo.com)

**Cheap Tickets** (www.cheaptickets.com)

**Despegar** (www.despegar.es)

**ebookers** (www.ebookers.com)

**Expedia.com** (www.expedia.com)

**Lowestfare.com** (www.lowestfare.com)

**Orbitz** (www.orbitz.com)

**STA Travel** (www.sta.com)

**Travelocity** (www.travelocity.com)

**Travel.com.au** (www.travel.com.au)

For airline websites, see p830. There's also a full list of recommended travel agencies in the sections which follow. See p840 for more information on tours.

### Travellers with Special Needs

If you have special needs of any sort – you're broken a leg, you're vegetarian, travelling in a wheelchair, taking the baby, terrified of flying – you should let the airline know as soon as possible so that they can make arrangements.

Airports in West Africa can be pretty basic and services such as escorts, ramps, lifts, accessible toilets and reachable phones are generally scarce and basic. Deaf travellers can ask for airport and in-flight announcements to be written down for them.

Children under two travel for 10% of the standard fare (or free, on some airlines), as long as they don't occupy a seat. They don't get a baggage allowance either. 'Sky-cots' should be provided by the airline if requested in advance; these will take a child weighing up to about 10kg. Children between two and 12 can usually occupy a seat for half to two-thirds of the full fare, and

do get a baggage allowance. Pushchairs can usually be taken as hand luggage.

### Africa

#### EAST OR SOUTH AFRICA

For travellers going to/from East or Southern Africa, the hubs are Nairobi (Kenya), Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), and Johannesburg (South Africa), all of which have direct connections to West Africa – generally Accra or Abidjan, and sometimes to Lagos and Bamako.

Airlines to try include South African Airways (which has connections from Johannesburg to Abidjan, Accra and Lagos), Ethiopian Airlines, Ghana Airways, Cameroon Airlines, Kenya Airways (with flights from Nairobi to Abidjan, Lagos and Douala), Virgin Nigeria Airways (between Lagos and Johannesburg) and Interair (which flies between Johannesburg and Bamako).

Expect to pay anywhere from US\$700 upwards between Nairobi and Abidjan (Douala to Nairobi is US\$950), about US\$600 for a return excursion fare between Johannesburg and Accra, and US\$550 one way between Johannesburg and Lagos. Depending on which airline you use, you may fly a somewhat circuitous route (eg, Johannesburg to Abidjan via Addis Ababa on Ethiopian Airlines). Also keep in mind that flying across Africa – and particularly between East and West Africa – can be slow and subject to delays and cancellations. If you have connecting flights, allow yourself plenty of time.

**STA** (☎ 0861 781 781; www.statravel.co.za) has several branches in South Africa, and is a good place to start for arranging discounted fares. In Nairobi, try **Let's Go Travel** (☎ 20-4447151; www.lets-go-travel.net).

#### CENTRAL AFRICA

Toumaï Air Tchad offers a weekly flight between Niamey and N'Djaména (Chad, US\$685) and one between Douala and Brazzaville (Congo). Air Gabon has five weekly flights between Douala and Libreville (Gabon). Flights with Afriqiyah go via N'Djaména, while Cameroon Air has weekly flights to Bangui (Central African Republic).

#### NORTH AFRICA

The best connections from North Africa are on Royal Air Maroc, which has flights from Casablanca (Morocco) to Abidjan, Bamako,

Conakry, Dakar, Douala and Nouakchott. The best deals are into Dakar, with return fares from Casablanca for around US\$525. Tunis Air also flies from Tunis to Dakar via Nouakchott. Air Algérie flies between Algiers and Nouakchott, Ouagadougou, Niamey and Agadez among other West African cities. Egypt Air flies into Kano from Cairo. An interesting alternative is Afriqiyah, which flies to West African airports from Europe with a stop in Tripoli (Libya).

### Australasia & the Middle East

There are flights on Qantas and South African Airways from Perth and Sydney to Johannesburg, from where you can connect to several West African destinations, including Accra, Abidjan, Douala and Lagos. Plan on paying around A\$2350/NZ\$3500 for the full routing. It's also possible to fly via Europe.

More exotic alternatives include flying with Emirates to Dubai from where there are onward connections to Lagos and Accra (around A\$2300) or with Egypt Air via Cairo to Accra, Abidjan or Lagos (from A\$2350).

Both **STA Travel** (☎ 1300 733 035; www.statravel.com.au) and **Flight Centre** (☎ 133 133; www.flightcentre.com.au) have offices throughout Australia. For online bookings, try www.travel.com.au.

In New Zealand, both **Flight Centre** (☎ 0800 243 544; www.flightcentre.co.nz) and **STA Travel** (☎ 0508 782 872; www.statravel.co.nz) have branches throughout the country. The site www.travel.co.nz is recommended for online bookings.

For more options check the ads in travel magazines and weekend newspapers, including the Saturday issues of the *Sydney Morning Herald* or the *Age* in Australia, and the *New Zealand Herald* in New Zealand.

### Continental Europe

You can fly from any European capital to any capital city in West Africa, but some routes are more popular and frequent (and usually cheaper) than others.

Charter airlines such as Point Afrique offer the best deals with flights from Paris, Marseilles and Mulhouse to West African capitals (Cotonou, Ouagadougou, Niamey and Bamako) and a host of smaller towns, such as Mopti and Gao (Mali), Atâr (Mauritania) and Agadez (Niger). One-way fares start from around €175, although most are

closer to €220 plus tax. Go-Voyages also flies to Agadez from Paris.

European travel agencies offer an abundance of charter flights to The Gambia, Senegal and, to a lesser extent, Cape Verde. These start at around €500 but are all-inclusive deals that include accommodation and only work for short, specific periods unless you can get a flight-only package. As such, they're not the best if you're planning to remain in West Africa for a while or visiting a number of countries not covered by the package.

For more established carriers, Paris is a good hub (see opposite). Return fares on scheduled flights from France to several West African capitals start from €675. Air France has four weekly flights between Paris and Port Harcourt (Nigeria).

It's also worth looking at flights from other cities. From Madrid, for example, you can get a return flight on Iberia (or Air Sénégal International) to Dakar for about €640 or a return Madrid-Casablanca-Bamako flight with Iberia or Royal Air Maroc for around €660.

From Brussels, SN Brussels Airlines flies to Dakar, Conakry, Banjul, Freetown and Monrovia from €750, while TAP Air Portugal connects Lisbon with Sal (Cape Verde) and Bissau (Guinea-Bissau). From Frankfurt, Lufthansa operates three weekly flights to Lagos, while KLM offers twice weekly flights between Amsterdam and Kano (Nigeria).

Another interesting option is to fly to Las Palmas in the Canary Islands, from where you can get flights on Air Mauritanie to Nouakchott and Nouâdhibou.

If you don't mind travelling via Tripoli, Afriqiyah Airways flies from Brussels, Paris and Geneva to Kano, Niamey, Bamako, Ouagadougou, Abidjan, Accra, Lomé, Cotonou, Lagos and Douala. There are also plans to fly to Dakar. Fares vary, but start from around €650 return.

Recommended agencies in continental Europe include the following:

**Airfair** (☎ 020 620 5121; www.airfair.nl; The Netherlands)  
**Barcelo Viajes** (☎ 902 116 226; www.barceloviajes.com; Spain)

**Connections** (☎ 02-550 01 00; www.connections.be; Belgium) Offices throughout the country.

**CTS Viaggi** (☎ 06 462 0431; www.cts.it; Italy)

**Expedia** (www.expedia.de; Germany)

**Nouvelles Frontières** (☎ 0825 000 747; www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr; France) Also in Belgium, Switzerland.

**STA Travel** (☎ 01805 456 422; www.statravel.de; Germany) Also has offices in other countries.

**Voyageurs du Monde** (☎ 0892 688 363; www.vdm.com; France)

If you didn't come to West Africa on a return ticket, you can buy flights to any major European airport from most West African capital cities. The best places to try are Dakar and Abidjan, followed by Accra and possibly Bamako. Fares average from about US\$750 but can be higher. For good places to buy tickets, see the individual country chapters.

### North America

The most reliable flights are those with Royal Air Maroc, which flies from New York to Abidjan, Bamako, Conakry, Dakar and Nouakchott, via Casablanca. Return prices range from US\$1200 to US\$1450. Air Sénégal International also has direct flights between New York and Dakar for a similar price. You may also find some flights between New York and Accra (Ghana Airways or American Airlines), while Continental Airlines have had a Newark-Lagos service planned since late 2004, but it has been repeatedly delayed by US air traffic authority restrictions.

From Canada, there are no direct flights to West Africa. You'll need to go via New York, or via London or another European capital.

Most travellers go via Europe – usually London or Paris. Fares on these tickets (from the east coast) start at about US\$1000, with most closer to US\$1300. If you can find a good deal on the transatlantic leg of the trip, it can be cheaper to buy one ticket to London, and then a separate, discounted ticket onwards from there.

**Council Travel** (☎ 800-226 8624; www.ciee.org; 205 E 42 St, New York, NY 10017), America's largest student travel organisation, has around 60 offices in the USA. Call the head office for the office nearest you or visit its website.

**STA Travel** (☎ 800-777 0112; www.statravel.com) has offices in many major US cities; call the tollfree 800 number for office locations or visit its website. **Pan Express Travel** (www.panexpresstravel.com) is also worth trying.

**Travel CUTS** (☎ 800-667 2887; www.travelcuts.com) is Canada's national student travel agency and has offices in all major cities.

Some of the companies listed on p840 also sell flights.

### STARTING YOUR JOURNEY IN PARIS

To an extent far greater than other colonial powers in Africa, France retains strong links with its former colonies. One of the benefits of this is that Paris has the best transport links (both in terms of coverage and price) to West Africa and is, therefore, the best starting point for your West African journey. Starting your journey in Paris can also have the advantage of allowing you to pick up hard-to-get visas as most Francophone West African countries who have few embassies around the world, certainly have one in Paris. And besides, there are worse places to wait for your passport to be returned or for your flight to leave.

In addition to the Internet, good places to start your search include the weekend editions of major newspapers such as the *New York Times* on the east coast, the *Los Angeles Times* or *San Francisco Examiner-Chronicle* on the west coast, the *Globe & Mail*, *Toronto Star* and *Vancouver Sun* in Canada, or in travel magazines for travel agents' advertisements.

### UK

Numerous airlines fly between Britain and West Africa, with the majority of flights connecting Anglophone countries, especially Ghana and Nigeria with British Airways, Ghana Airways, Ghana International Airways and KLM-Royal Dutch Airlines. If you want to avoid Lagos, British Airways flies into Abuja five times a week.

For connections to Francophone countries, Afriqiyah (via Tripoli), Cameroon Airlines, Ethiopian Airlines (via Addis Ababa) and Royal Air Maroc (via Casablanca) are often better, while TAP Air Portugal (via Lisbon) is good for Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau.

Scheduled return flights from London to Dakar start at about UK£475, while London to Accra costs from UK£450 to UK£600 and London to Lagos about UK£500. With luck, you may occasionally find specials to any of these places from around UK£400. Low-season return fares between London and Abidjan or Bamako are around UK£450 to UK£575. During popular periods (such as peak tourist seasons or at busy holiday

times such as Christmas or the end of Ramadan), prices may rise by another UK£75 to UK£100.

Cheaper fares are available to Banjul on charter flights catering for package tourists. Flights go mostly from London, but there are also departures from regional airports. The leading charter flight and tour operator is the **Gambia Experience** (☎ 0845-3334567; www.gambia.co.uk). You can buy flight tickets directly from the operators or from many high street travel agents. Flight-only fares start at around UK£325 to UK£375, but some agents offer special deals that include accommodation – often in reasonable hotels – for only a little extra. Even if you don't stay in the hotel all the time, it can still be worth taking this offer; the airport transfers and first- or last-night bed can be very useful. You may also find charter flights heading to Ghana.

There are many travel agents competing for your business. London is usually the best place to buy a ticket, although there are specialist travel agents outside the capital. It's worth checking the ads in weekend newspapers or travel magazines, or in *Time Out*, but the following places are a starting point for discounted tickets. (Some of the agencies listed on p840 also sell tickets.)

**Africa Travel Centre** (☎ 0845 450 1520; www.africatravel.co.uk; 21 Leigh St, London WC1H 9EW)

**STA Travel** (☎ 020-7361 6142, 7581 4132; www.statravel.co.uk) Has offices throughout the country.

**Traifinders** (☎ 020-7938 3939; www.traifinders.co.uk) Has offices across the UK.

### LAND Border Crossings

If you're travelling independently overland to West Africa – whether cycling, driving your own car or taking public transport – you can approach the region from three main directions: from the north, across the Sahara; from the south and southeast, through the countries bordering southern and eastern Cameroon; or from the east, through Chad.

If you're coming from the north, the main border-crossing point into West Africa is just north of Nouâdhibou, via Morocco and the Western Sahara. There are also crossings at Bordj-Mokhtar and at Assamakka, where the trans-Saharan routes through Algeria enter Mali and Niger, respectively. For more information, see p838.

If you come into West Africa from the south or southeast, the main border-crossing points are at Garoua-Boulaï or Kenzou (for the Central African Republic); at Kousséri, Bongor or Léré (for Chad); Moloundou, in Cameroon's far southeastern corner (for Congo); Kye Ossi (for Gabon); and Ebebiyin or Campo (for Equatorial Guinea). For more information, see p839.

Your final option is to come into West Africa from the east. In addition to the route from N'djaména (Chad) to Kousséri (Cameroon), from where you can then continue to Nigeria, or else head south into Cameroon, it's also possible to take the 'long way around', crossing the border on the northern side of Lake Chad, on the route to Nguigmi (Niger). For more information, see p838.

More details on the various border crossings are given in the Getting There & Away sections of the relevant country chapters.

### Car & Motorcycle

Driving your own car or motorbike to West Africa (and then around the region and possibly onwards to East or Southern Africa) is a vast subject beyond the scope of this book. Some recommended manuals covering this subject are listed following. These cover matters such as equipment, carnets, insurance, recommended routes, driving techniques, maintenance, repairs, navigation and survival. However, they are usually thin on practical information about places to eat and sleep (mainly because most overlanders use their vehicle as a mobile hotel) and on general background information about the country, including history, economy etc.

- *Adventure Motorcycling Handbook*, by Chris Scott, covers all parts of the world where tar roads end. It contains stacks of good information on the Sahara and West Africa, all combined with humour and personal insights.
- *Africa by Road*, by Bob Swain & Paula Snyder, is recommended once you're across the desert although it's many years out of date for the more practical information and on road conditions. Much of the no-nonsense detail on everything from paperwork and supplies to driving techniques still holds.
- *Sahara Overland*, by Chris Scott, is the finest, most recent and most comprehen-

sive book on all aspects of Saharan travel by two or four wheels, with information on established and newer routes (including those in Mauritania, Mali and Niger), and more than 100 maps. Chris Scott's highly recommended website, [www.sahara-overland.com](http://www.sahara-overland.com), has updates of the book, as well as letters from travellers and extensive related information.

- *The Sahara Handbook*, by Simon Glen, is an outdated but useful manual if you're coming to West Africa overland in your own vehicle. It concentrates on the Algerian routes (rather than the generally used Western Sahara route), it also includes coverage of the northern Sahel.

Anyone who is planning to take their own vehicle with them needs to check in advance what spare parts and petrol are likely to be available (see opposite). A number of documents are also required:

**Carnet** See opposite.

**Green card** Issued by insurers. Insurance for some countries is only obtainable at the border. Check with your insurance company or automobile association before leaving home. See opposite for further advice.

**International Driving Permit (IDP)** Although most foreign licences are acceptable in West African countries, an IDP issued by your local automobile association is highly recommended. For more information, see below.

**Vehicle registration documents** In addition to carrying all ownership papers, check with your insurer whether you're covered for the countries you intend to visit and whether third-party cover is included.

The documentation required when bringing your own vehicle to West Africa is covered in considerable detail in the specialist manuals listed on left. For some more tips on driving in the region in general, see p847.

### DRIVING LICENCE

To drive a car or motorbike in West Africa you will need a driving licence and, ideally, an International Driving Permit (IDP). If you intend to hire a car, you will need your driving licence and an IDP. IDPs are easy and cheap to get in your home country – they're usually issued by major motoring associations, such as the AA in Britain – and are useful if you're driving in countries where your own licence may not be recognised (officially or unofficially). They have the added advantage

### CARNETS

A *carnet de passage* is like a passport for your car, a booklet that is stamped on arrival and departure from a country to ensure that you export the vehicle again after you've imported it. It's usually issued by an automobile association in the country where the vehicle is registered. Most countries of West Africa require a carnet although rules change frequently.

The sting in the tail with a carnet is that you usually have to lodge a deposit to secure it. If you default on the carnet – that is, you don't have an export stamp to match the import one – then the country in question can claim your deposit, which can be up to 300% of the new value of the vehicle. You can get around this problem with bank guarantees or carnet insurance, but you still have to fork out in the end if you default.

Should the worst occur and your vehicle is irretrievably damaged in an accident or catastrophic breakdown, you'll have to argue it out with customs officials. Having a vehicle stolen can be even worse, as you may be suspected of having sold it.

The carnet may need to specify any pricey spare parts that you're planning to carry, such as a gearbox, which is designed to prevent any spare part importation rackets. Contact your local automobile association for details about necessary documentation at least three months in advance.

of being written in several languages, with a photo and many stamps, and so look more impressive when presented to car-rental clerks or policemen at road blocks.

### FUEL & SPARE PARTS

The quality, availability and price of fuel (petrol and diesel – called *essence* and *gasoil*, respectively, in the Francophone countries, *gasolina* and *diesel*, or sometimes *gasóleo*, in Lusophone countries) varies depending on where you are, and between rural and urban areas. Where taxation, subsidies or currency rates make petrol cheaper in one country than its neighbour, you'll inevitably find traders who've carried large drums across the border and sell 'black market' fuel at the roadside. However, watch out for fuel sold in plastic bags or small containers along the roadside. While sometimes it's fine, it's often diluted with water or kerosene.

African mechanics are masters of ingenuity, using endlessly recycled parts to coax life out of ageing machines that would have long ago been consigned to the scrap heap in the West. That said, they're often unable to help with newer-model vehicles – for these, either bring your own spare parts, or check with your manufacturer for a list of accredited parts suppliers in West Africa. Be warned, however, there may be very few of the latter and in some cases none at all.

### INSURANCE

Insurance is compulsory in most West African countries, and is highly advisable.

Given the large number of minor accidents, not to mention major ones, fully comprehensive insurance (as opposed to third party) is strongly advised, both for your own and any rental vehicle. Car-hire companies customarily supply insurance, but check carefully the cover and conditions.

Make certain that you're covered for off-piste travel, as well as travel between countries (if you're planning cross-border excursions). A locally acquired motorcycle licence is not valid under some policies.

In the event of an accident, make sure you submit the accident report as soon as possible to the insurance company or, if hiring, the car-hire company.

### SHIPPING A VEHICLE

If you want to travel in West Africa using your own car or motorbike, but don't fancy the Sahara crossing, another option is to ship it. The usual way of doing this is to load the car onto a ship in Europe and take it off again at either Dakar or Banjul (although Abidjan and Tema, in Ghana, are other options).

Costs start from US\$500, but US\$1000 is generally closer to the mark depending on the size of the vehicle and the final destination. Apart from cost, your biggest problem is likely to be security – many drivers report theft of items from the inside and outside (such as lights and mirrors) of their car. Vehicles are usually left unlocked for the crossing and when in storage at the destination port, so chain or lock all equipment into fixed boxes inside the vehicle. Getting a vehicle out



of port is frequently a nightmare, requiring visits to several different offices where stamps must be obtained and mysterious fees paid at every turn. You could consider using an official handling agent or an unofficial 'fixer' to take your vehicle through all this.

### From Chad

If you're entering West Africa from Chad, the most arduous, if adventurous, route goes via Nguigmi in Niger. Unless you have your own vehicle, finding public transport on the Chadian side of the border can require extreme patience. From Nguigmi, weekly Land-cruisers make the dusty day-long journey from Nguigmi to Mao in Chad. From Mao you may have to wait several days before you find something to get you to N'Djaména. For more information, see p617.

Between Cameroon and Chad, the main border crossing is between Maroua (Cameroon) and Kousséri, although the actual border is at Nguelé. Corrupt officials abound here. For more adventure, try the crossings further south to the towns of Bongor or Léré; the former requires a pirogue (dugout canoe) across the Logone River. For details see p225.

There are no official border crossings between Nigeria and Chad although the countries do share a short border. For transiting through Cameroon without the need for a visa, see p671).

### From the North – Crossing the Sahara

Three main routes cross the Sahara to West Africa: the Route du Hoggar (through Algeria and Niger); Route du Tanezrouft (through Algeria and Mali); and the Western Sahara Route (through Morocco and Western Sahara into Mauritania). A fourth option crosses between Libya and Niger via Bilma. For most of the past decade, the Tanezrouft and Hoggar routes have been unused by travellers due to the security situation in the region. The Hoggar route has begun to open up again, although the Western Sahara route remains the most popular overland way to travel to West Africa. With any of these routes, you'll need to get a thorough update on the security situation before setting off. Anybody planning to travel in the Sahara should check out the excellent website put together by Chris Scott, [www.sahara-overland.com](http://www.sahara-overland.com), as well as get some of the books recommended. Be

sure to bring sufficient food, water and warm clothes for the journey.

### ROUTE DU HOGGAR

The Route du Hoggar through Algeria and Niger is sealed, except for the 600km section between Tamanrasset ('Tam') and Arlit, although the road is in poor condition on many sections. The fabulous Hoggar Mountains and Air Mountains are worthy diversions, and the route passes several magnificent outcrops of wind-eroded rocks, while Agadez, at the end of the route, is one of the most interesting desert towns in West Africa.

The Route du Hoggar was passable as this book went to print, with access via Tunisia or from northern Algeria. The crossing is quite trouble-free, although if you don't have your own vehicle it involves hitching a ride in trucks or with travellers in their vehicles between Tamanrasset and Arlit, from where there are buses to Agadez. Few travellers make the journey in reverse, due in large part to the difficulty of getting an Algerian visa in Niger – Algerian visas and arrangements with an Algerian travel agency must have been made prior to reaching the border.

Travel in southern Algeria is increasingly popular, and northern Niger has stabilised somewhat. That said, a group of more than 30 Western tourists were kidnapped in the Algerian Sahara in 2003 and not released until months later in Mali; one woman died while held hostage. The situation remains fragile, and you should check out security issues and the route's current status before proceeding, especially if you plan on heading away from the main road into more remote areas. Banditry still occurs – a French tourist was killed near Agadez in November 2005 – but the stories are usually widely publicised in Agadez and, to a lesser extent, Tamanrasset, so keep your ear to the ground. Also, check in with the police before setting out, and where possible, avoid travelling at night.

### ROUTE DU TANEZROUFT

The Route du Tanezrouft runs through Algeria and Mali, via Adrar and the border at Bordj-Mokhtar, ending in Gao. It's technically easier than the Route du Hoggar. The dirt section is more than 1300km long and has a reputation for being a trail of unrelenting monotony, although some travellers find that the sheer size and re-

moteness of the desert is better appreciated here. Much of this is, however, theoretical because although the situation has stabilised somewhat in the region, the route is still considered dangerous and cannot be recommended. Help, should you need it, is likely to be a long time coming.

### WESTERN SAHARA ROUTE

Travel through Morocco is straightforward (see Lonely Planet's *Morocco* guide). About 500km south of Agadir you enter the disputed territory of Western Sahara, where the main road continues along the coast to Dakhla, from where it's another 460km to Nouâdhibou in Mauritania. In Dakhla, there are a few cheap hotels and a camp site (which also has some rooms) where all the overlanders stay. This is also the best place to find other travellers to team up with, or to look for a lift. If you're hitching, there's a thriving trade in second-hand cars being driven from Europe (especially France) to sell in West Africa, and these drivers are sometimes happy to pick up travellers, although sharing costs is expected. Use some care when finding a lift; hitchers are not always allowed in Mauritanian vehicles, and there have been occasional scams where hitchers with local drivers have been abandoned in the desert unless they pay a large 'fee'. Apart from hitching, there's no public transport along this route.

Until recently, all travel south of Dakhla needed to be done in a military convoy. Now, the convoy has been disbanded and it's possible to continue independently, though it's still advisable for vehicles (especially 2WDs) to go in a group. It's also now legal for travellers to go south to north, although most traffic continues to be in the other direction.

The road is now entirely sealed to Nouakchott, except for the 3km no-man's-land that separates the two border posts. In the border areas in particular, the area is littered with landmines, so stay on the main track. Coming from Morocco, you can buy the Mauritanian visa at the border (€20). Expect to pay about €20 for 'taxes'. Crossing the border is straightforward, although the currency declaration forms (which are officially no longer necessary) are sometimes asked for by officials and, of course, if you can't present it, they will expect a small bribe. There are searches for alcohol at the Mauritanian bor-

der, and heavy fines if you are caught with it. After Mauritanian border formalities it's approximately 100km further to Nouâdhibou.

For more details on this route, see p575.

### From the South & Southeast

There are two main crossing points between Cameroon and the Central African Republic (CAR), but roads which are dire at the best of times are catastrophic in the rainy season. The standard route is via Garoua-Boulai, which straddles the border. Buses and trucks go to Bangui, taking two days with an overnight in Bouar. An equally rough alternative is to go to Batouri further south and cross via Kenzou to Berbérati. For information on routes into CAR, see (p225)

The overland route to Congo is an epic journey traversing long, rutted tracks (which are almost impassable in the rainy season) through dense rainforest. The route goes via Yokadouma, Moloundou and on to the border crossing at Sokambo on the Ngoko River. After crossing the river, there's onward transport to Pokola, where you must register with the Congolese police, and Brazzaville. For more details, see p225.

The main border crossings into Equatorial Guinea and Gabon are a few kilometres from each other, accessible from the Cameroonian town of Amban. In Amban the road splits, the easterly route heading for Bitam and Libreville (Gabon) and the westerly route heading for Ebebiyin and Bata (Equatorial Guinea). There's also a border crossing into Equatorial Guinea on the coast near Campo, but it's frequently closed and should not be relied on. See p225 for more detailed information.

### SEA

For most people, reaching West Africa by sea is not a viable consideration. The days of working your passage on commercial boats are long gone, although a few lucky travellers do manage to hitch rides on private yachts sailing from Spain, Morocco or the Canary Islands to Senegal, The Gambia and beyond.

Alternatively, several cargo shipping companies run from Europe to West Africa, with comfortable officer-style cabins available to the public. The main operator is **Grimaldi Freighter Cruises** (☎ 081-496 203; [www.grimaldi-freightercruises.com](http://www.grimaldi-freightercruises.com); Via Marchese Campodisola

13, 80133 Naples, Italy), which has boats from Tilbury (London), Antwerp and elsewhere in Europe to Abidjan, Dakar, Douala, Cotonou, Tema (Ghana) and Lagos (though not all stops on all sailings), and one route from Antwerp to Brazil via Dakar.

Prices vary depending on the quality of the ship and on the cabin (inside cabins are cheaper), but expect to pay from US\$1250 per person one way between Europe and Dakar in a double cabin. A typical voyage from London takes about eight days to Dakar and 13 days to Abidjan. There's a full list of Europe-wide ticket agents on the Grimaldi website, while in the UK you could also contact **Strand Voyages** (☎ 020-7766 8220; www.strandtravel.co.uk; 1 Adam St, London WC2N 6AB).

Also worth checking out in the USA is **Freighter Travel** (www.freightertour.com) which has routes operated by other lines.

For further information, *Travel by Cargo Ship*, a handy book by Hugo Verlomme, and *Cargo Ship Cruising*, by Robert Kane, are both worth seeking out, although they're almost a decade old.

There are no organised passenger services by boat between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea or Gabon, although ad hoc transport can sometimes be arranged to Malabo from Limbe; for further details see p226.

## TOURS

Two main sorts of tour are available. On an overland tour, you go from Europe to West Africa by land, visiting several countries along the way. Most are anywhere between two and six months long. On an inclusive tour you fly to your destination and spend two to three weeks in a single country. Between these two types is the option of joining an overland tour for a short section (usually three to five weeks), flying out and back at either end. In addition to the tours listed here, some of the specialist travel agents listed on p833 can be of assistance.

### Inclusive Tours

This type of tour includes your international flight, transport around the country, food, accommodation, excursions, local guide and so on. They are usually around two to three weeks long, and ideal if you want to visit West Africa, but lack the time or inclination for long-distance overland trucks or to organise things yourself.

The number of inclusive tour companies operating in West Africa is much smaller than in East or Southern Africa, but there's still a fair selection. As with flights and overland tours, a good place to look is the advertisements in the weekend newspapers and travel magazines. Several companies are listed following, but this list is not exhaustive.

### AUSTRALASIA & CANADA

**Fresh Tracks** (☎ 800-690 4859; www.freshtracks.com) Canadian company.

**Peregrine Adventures** (☎ 03-9662 2700; www.peregrineadventures.com) Australian company offering tours to Mali.

### FRANCE & SPAIN

**Explorator** (☎ 01 53 45 85 85; www.explorator.fr) Destinations include the Sahara region, Senegal, The Gambia and Mali.

**Montañas del Mundo** (☎ 96 373 0067; www.montanasdelmundo.es) Valencia-based company.

**Nouvelles Frontières** (☎ 0825 000 744; www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr) Branches in France and French-speaking countries offering a wide range of mainstream holidays and adventurous tours to Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso.

**Point Afrique** (☎ 01 44 88 58 39; www.point-afrique.com) Excellent tours across the region where no-one else goes and cheap charter flights.

**Terres d'Aventure** (☎ 0825 847 800; www.terdav.com) Adventurous trips in West Africa and the Sahara region, including Senegal and Mauritania.

**Voyages en Afrique** (☎ 0892 239 494; www.vdm.com) Worldwide tour company with tours across West Africa, including Mali, Guinea, Senegal and Mauritania.

### UK

**Batafon Arts** (☎ 01273-605791; www.batafonarts.co.uk) Dance and percussion courses/tours in Guinea and The Gambia.

**Explore Worldwide** (☎ 0870-333 4001; www.explore.co.uk; 1 Frederick St, Aldershot GU11 1LQ) Well-established company offering a wide range of adventurous and active tours and treks.

**Gambia Experience** (☎ 0845-3334567; www.gambia.co.uk) Leading operator of package holidays to The Gambia, with some options in Senegal, plus a selection of specialist birding, fishing and cultural tours; sells excellent-value charter flights.

**Guerba** (☎ 01373-826611; www.guerba.com) Offers tours to Mali and Niger.

**Karamba Experience** (☎ 01263-735097; www.karamba.co.uk) Holidays in Senegal, The Gambia and Ghana concentrating on learning to play drums and other African instruments.

**Limosa Holidays** (☎ 01263-578143; www.limosaholidays.co.uk) Specialist birding trips, including The Gambia, Cape Verde and Senegal.

**Naturetrek** (☎ 01962-733051; www.naturetrek.co.uk) Bird and wildlife specialists offering tours in Mali and The Gambia.

**Tim Best Travel** (☎ 020-7591 0300; www.timbesttravel.co.uk) Recommended and experienced company that can take you to Niger and Mali (including the Festival in the Desert in January).

**Wildwings** (☎ 0117-965 8333; www.wildwings.co.uk; 577-579 Fishponds Rd, Bristol BS16 3AF) Birding and wildlife specialists; expeditions and tours worldwide, including Cameroon and The Gambia.

### USA

**Access Africa** (☎ 212-368 6561; www.accessafrica.com) Tours to most countries in the region, including Mali, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal.

**Adventure Center** (☎ 510-654 1879; www.adventurecenter.com) Multicountry tours, as well as those tailored to Mali, Mauritania, The Gambia, Senegal and Ghana.

**Africa Desk** (☎ 301-591 0923; www.africadesk.com) Tours to many countries in the region.

**Born Free Safaris** (☎ 800-372 3274; www.bornfree-safaris.com) Tours to Ghana, Senegal, The Gambia, Mali and Benin.

**Mountain Travel-Sobek** (☎ 510-549 6000; www.mtsobek.com) Two- to three-week tours in Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo and Benin.

**Museum for African Art** (☎ 718-784 7700; www.africanart.org) Cultural tours.

**Specter Travel** (☎ 617-351 0111; www.spectortravel.com) An Africa specialist, with tours to Mali, The Gambia, Senegal, Cameroon and elsewhere in the region.

**Turtle Tours** (☎ 888-299 1439; www.turtletraveltours.com) Tours for individuals and small groups in Mauritania, Mali and Niger and other countries in the region.

**Wilderness Travel** (☎ 800-368 2794; www.wildernesstravel.com) Trips to Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Ghana.

### Overland Tours

For these trips, you travel in an 'overland truck' with about 15 to 28 other people, a couple of drivers/leaders, plus tents and other equipment. Food is bought along the way and the group cooks and eats together. Most of the hassles (such as border crossings) are taken care of by the leader. Disadvantages include a fixed itinerary and the possibility of spending a long time with other people in relatively close confines. Having said that, overland truck tours are extremely popular.

The overland-tour market is dominated by British companies, although passengers

come from many parts of the world. Most tours start in London and travel to West Africa via Europe and Morocco. Tours can be 'slow' or 'fast', depending on the number of places visited along the way. For those with limited time, most overland companies arrange shorter trips – for example London to Banjul or Dakar. For those with more time, there's also the option to do the West Africa trip as part of a longer trans-Africa trip to or from Nairobi or Harare. Most overland companies can arrange your flights to join and leave the tour.

Among the UK-based overland tour companies offering trips in West Africa are the following:

**Dragoman** (☎ 0870-4994475; www.dragoman.co.uk)

**Oasis Overland** (☎ 01963-363400; www.oasisoverland.com)

## GETTING AROUND

This chapter outlines the various ways of travelling around West Africa. For more details see the Getting There & Away and Getting Around sections of the Directory in each individual country chapter.

### AIR

West Africa is an enormous area, and if your time is limited, a few flights around the region can considerably widen your options. For those who are on tight schedules, flying can save hours or days, even within a country.

Although the airports in capital cities are large and cavernous (and occasionally even modern), some smaller West African airports are little more than single-shed terminals. At all of them, don't be surprised if you spend half a day at check-in (bring a good book).

### Airlines in West Africa

There's not always a lot of choice for getting around West Africa by air, with only two or three airlines operating between most major cities. Regional airlines that enjoy the most extensive networks are Air Sénégal International and, to a lesser extent, Air Burkina. Air Mauritania and Cameroon Airlines also fly to a number of airports but their safety record is not what it could be. Ghana Airways is notorious for cancellations and delays.

Reputable travel agents throughout the region (see the individual country chapters) can sometimes also find tickets for international airlines (especially Afriqiyah and Air France) as they hop between West African cities as part of their intercontinental routes. Point Afriko is also talking of starting a cut-price Bamako–Dakar route, although this was yet to begin at the time of writing.

For a full list of airlines that fly to West Africa, see p830. Of these, Afriqiyah, Air Burkina, Air Ivoire, Cameroon Airlines, Ghana Airways, Air Sénégal International and Virgin Nigeria all operate flights within West Africa, whether within individual countries or between the countries of the region.

Other airlines that also operate 'domestic' West African services (again, either within or between West African countries) include the following:

**Aero** (AJ; ☎ 496 1340 in Nigeria; www.acn.aero)  
Hub: Lagos. Domestic Nigerian airline.

**Air CM** (☎ 01 53 41 00 50 in France; www.aircm.com)  
Has a twice weekly connection between Paris and the Cap and plenty of good package deals.

**Air Niamey** Hub: Niamey.

**Air Saint Louis** (☎ 644 8629; www.airstaintlouis.com)  
Hub: Dakar. Flights from Dakar to Saint-Louis.

**Antrak** (☎ 769458 in Ghana; www.antrak-gh.net)  
Hub: Accra. Domestic Ghanaian airline that also flies to Ouagadougou and Lagos.

**Bellview** (B3; www.flybellviewair.com)  
Hub: Lagos. Domestic Nigerian airline that also flies to Cotonou, Accra, Freetown, Banjul, Abidjan and Dakar.

**Benin Golf Air** (A8; www.beningolfair.com)  
Hub: Cotonou.

**Chanchangi Airlines** (3U; www.chanchangi-airlines.com)  
Hub: Lagos. Domestic Nigerian Airline.

**Hôtel Kalissai** (☎ 994 8600; www.kalissai.com)  
Arranges flights from the aerodrome in Abéné to Dakar

**Senegalair Avion Taxis** (☎ 821 3425) Flies mainly to Simenti in Parc National du Niokolo-Koba, though they can also arrange flights elsewhere.

**Slok Air** (S0; www.slokaairinternational.com) Hub: Banjul. Gambian airline that connects Banjul with Dakar, Freetown, Monrovia, Accra, Conakry, Abidjan & Cotonou.

**Sophia Airlines** (☎ 34-713434 in Côte d'Ivoire) Hub: Abidjan. Domestic Ivorian airline.

**Sosoliso** (S0; www.sosoliso.airline.com) Hub: Lagos. Domestic Nigerian Airline.

Air safety is a major concern in West Africa and a spate of accidents (especially in Nigeria) means that you should always be wary of the region's local airlines, particularly the smaller operators. For more details on the air safety record of individual airlines, see www.airsafe.com/index.html.

## Tickets

Because of the long distances, fares within West Africa are not cheap. Flying from Dakar (Senegal) to Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), for example, is equivalent to flying halfway across the USA. Some sample one-way fares are: Dakar to Bamako in Mali (about 500km) US\$157; Banjul (The Gambia) to Accra in Ghana (about 1000km) US\$355; and Abidjan to Douala (about 1500km) US\$415. Return fares are usually double the one-way fares, though less expensive excursion fares are occasionally available, as are youth or student fares. For comprehensive information on flying from specific West African cities, see the Transport sections in the individual country chapters.

Once you've bought your ticket, reconfirm your reservation several times at least, especially if the airline you're flying with has a less-than-stellar reputation for reliability. After the flight, if you checked luggage, hold on to your baggage claim ticket until you've exited the baggage claim area at your destination, as you'll often be required to show it.

## BICYCLE

While cycling isn't exactly common in West Africa, there is a small but steady number of travellers who visit the region on bicycle. As long as you have sufficient time, and a willingness to rough things, cycling is an excellent way to get to know West Africa, as you'll often stay in small towns and villages, interact more with the local people without vehicle windows and other barriers

between you, and eat West African food more frequently.

Because of the distances involved, you'll need to plan your food and water needs in advance, and pay careful attention to choosing a route in order to avoid long stretches of semidesert, areas with no villages or heavily travelled roads. In general, cycling is best well away from urban areas, and in the early morning and late afternoon hours. When calculating your daily distances, plan on taking a break during the hottest midday period, and don't count on covering as much territory each day as you might in a northern European climate. Countries that are particularly good for cycling include southern Senegal, The Gambia, southern Ghana, Togo and Benin; in all, distances between major points of interest are fairly manageable.

Mountain bikes are most suitable for cycling in West Africa, and will give you the greatest flexibility in setting your route. While heavy, single-speed bicycles can be rented in many towns (and occasionally mountain bikes), they're not good for anything other than short local rides, so you should plan on bringing your own bicycle into the country if you will be riding extended distances. To rent a bike locally, ask staff at hotels, or inquire at bicycle repair stands (every town market has one).

Apart from water, your main concern is likely to be motorists. Cyclists are regarded as 2nd-class citizens in West Africa, even more than they are in Western countries, so make sure you know what's coming up behind you and be prepared to take evasive action onto the verge, as local cyclists are often forced to do. A small rear-view mirror is well worth considering, especially if you'll be cycling in urban areas or along heavily travelled roads.

In the region, the best time to cycle is in the cooler, dry period from mid-October to February. Even so, you'll need to work out a way to carry at least 4L of water, and you'll also need to carry a water filter and purifier. If you get tired, or simply want to cut out the boring bits, bikes can easily be carried on bush taxis, though you'll likely want to carry some rags to wrap around the gearing for protection. You'll need to pay a luggage fee for this, but it shouldn't be more than one-third to one-half the price of the journey.

Wherever you go, be prepared to be met with great local curiosity (as well as much

## CHECKING IN

In many West African cities, check-in procedures are as much of an adventure as the flight itself. Conakry wins our vote as the airport with the most disorganised and chaotic check-in procedures, but every traveller probably has their own 'favourites'. Lagos is another notorious one. The fun starts from the moment you enter the airport. Underpaid security personnel, in an effort to subsidise their meagre incomes, often view the baggage check procedures as a chance to elicit bribes from tourists. After searching your bag, they will ask what you might have for them or, alternatively, try to convince you that you've violated some regulation. Be compliant with requests to open your baggage, be friendly and respectful, smile a lot, and you should soon be on your way. Also remember that, in some cases, officials may search your bag out of genuine curiosity so put your dirty underwear on top and watch their interest evaporate.

After getting past the initial baggage check, you'll need to join the fray by the check-in counter. While some places have lines, many don't – just a sweaty mass of people, all waving their tickets and talking loudly to a rather beleaguered-looking check-in clerk. Although everyone with a confirmed ticket usually gets on the flight, confirmed passengers are 'bumped' just frequently enough to cause many people, locals and foreigners alike, to panic and lose all sense and civility when it seems there may not be enough seats to go around. The West African answer to this situation is the 'fixer' – enterprising locals who make their living by getting people smoothly checked in and through other formalities such as customs and airport tax. Sometimes they practically see you into your seat – all for fees ranging from a dollar or two up to about US\$10. If you don't have a confirmed booking, the fee may be more, as some money has to go to the boarding pass clerk.

Without the services of a fixer, the best strategy for avoiding the chaotic scene is to arrive early at the airport – ideally at the start of the official reporting time or earlier. This way, you also have a better chance of getting a confirmed seat if too many 'confirmed' tickets have been sold.

Once you have your boarding pass in hand, there's usually a second luggage inspection as you pass from the check-in terminal to the waiting area. Then it's just a matter of waiting. Have a good book with you, or a pen and paper for catching up on correspondence, and perhaps a few pieces of fruit. Don't schedule any other critical plans for the day (especially connecting flights), and try to calm any frustration you may feel by remembering that by West African standards you're one of a privileged few who have the financial resources to even contemplate flying – and that your journey would be several days to several weeks longer via bush taxi, and much more uncomfortable.

goodwill). As in most places in the world, don't leave your bike unattended for any lengthy period of time unless it's locked, and try to secure the main removable pieces. Taking your bike into your hotel room, should you decide to take a break from camping, is generally no problem (and is a good idea). If you're camping near settlements in rural areas, ask the village headman each night where you can stay. Even if you don't have a tent, he'll find you somewhere to sleep.

You'll need to carry sufficient spares, and be proficient at repairs. In particular, punctures will be frequent. Take at least four spare inner tubes, some tyre repair material and a spare tyre. Consider the number of tube patches you might need, square it, and pack those too. Some people don't like them, but we've found inner-tube protectors indispensable for minimising punctures.

A highly recommended contact is **Bicycle Africa** (☎ /fax 1-206-767-0848; www.ibike.org/bikeafrica; 4887 Columbia Drive South, Seattle, WA98108-1919, USA), which is part of the International Bicycle Fund, a low-budget, socially conscious organisation that arranges tours in some West African countries, provides fact sheets and posts letters from travellers who've travelled by bike in the area. Another useful resource is the **Cyclists' Touring Club** (CTC; ☎ 01483-417 217; www.ctc.org.uk), a UK-based organisation which offers good tips and information sheets on cycling in different parts of the world.

### Transporting your Bicycle

If you're planning to bring your bike with you on the plane to West Africa, some airlines ask that you partially dismantle it and put the pieces in a large bag or box. Bike boxes are available at some airports. Otherwise, you can arrange one in advance with your local bicycle shop. To fit it in the box, you'll usually need to take off (or turn) the handlebars, pedals and seat, and will need to deflate the tyres. Some airlines don't charge, while others (including many charter airlines) may levy an extra fee – usually about US\$50 – because bike boxes are not standard size. Some airlines are willing to take your bike 'as is' – you can just wheel it to the check-in desk – although here, too, you'll still need to partially deflate the tyres, and usually also tie the handlebars into the frame. Check with the airline in advance about what their regulations are. If you don't want to be bothered

with transport, and have plenty of time, you can also cycle to West Africa from Europe, coming down through Morocco and Mauritania, but this is a major undertaking.

### BOAT

At several points along the West African coast you can travel by boat, either on a large passenger vessel or by local canoe. Some of the local canoe trips are definitely of the informal variety, and many are dangerous. Countries where ferries provide an important means of coastal transport include Sierra Leone (p771), Liberia (p481) and Guinea-Bissau (p461).

There are two ferries a week between Limbe (Cameroon) and Calabar (Nigeria). Decidedly dodgy speed boats also make the trip, see p671). Other places where you can cross international borders by boat are by barge from Guinea to Mali (p437), from Kamsar (Guinea) to Bissau (p437) and, once it resumes services, by ferry between Conakry (Guinea) and Freetown (Sierra Leone; p771).

On most major rivers in the region, pirogues, *pinasses* (larger motorised boats, carrying cargo and anything from 10 to 100 passengers) and/or public ferries serve towns and villages along the way, and can be an excellent way to see the country. Some involve a simple river crossing, others can be a longer expedition where you sleep by the riverbank. One of the most popular boat trips for travellers is along the Niger River in Mali, especially between Mopti and Timbuktu. For more information on Niger River trips, see p510 and p545. Other riverboat options exist, for example along the Gambia and Senegal rivers. Remember that many such journeys are only possible at certain times of the year (usually August to December) when water levels are still high enough after the rains.

Whether you're renting a pirogue or *pinasse*, or taking a public ferry, make sure what food and water is included in the price you pay and it's always worth taking more just in case. On some journeys, you'll often be able to buy snacks and fruit along the way. Also bring something to protect yourself from the sun, as few boats have any shade, and something to waterproof your gear. Avoid getting on boats that are overloaded, or setting off when the weather is bad, especially on sea routes in coastal areas.

### BUS

Long-distance buses (sometimes called a 'big bus' or *grand car*, to distinguish it from a minibus) vary in size – from 35 to 70 seats – and services vary between countries and areas. On the main routes buses are good quality, with a reliable service and fixed departure times (although arrival times may be more fluid depending on anything from checkpoints and breakdowns to the number of towns they stop in along the way).

On quiet roads in rural areas, buses may be decrepit, and may frequently breakdown and regularly stop. These buses have no timetable, and usually go when full or when the driver feels like it. They are usually very overcrowded. In contrast, with some of the better lines on major routes, where the one-person-per-seat rule is usually respected. Generally, bus fares are cheaper than bush taxi fares for a comparable route and are usually quicker.

You may arrange a long ride by bus (or bush taxi), and find yourself transferring to another vehicle somewhere along the way. There's no need to pay more – your driver pays your fare directly to the driver of the next vehicle – but unfortunately it can mean long waits while the arrangements are made.

### Reservations

On some main-route buses, you can reserve in advance, which is advisable. In some countries you book a place but not a specific seat. Just before the bus leaves, names get called out in the order that tickets were bought, and you get on and choose the seat you want. Seats to the front tend to be better ventilated and more comfortable. If you suffer from motion sickness, try to get a seat towards the front or in the middle. Whichever end of the bus you sit in, it's worth trying to get a seat on the side that will be away from direct sunlight for most of the journey.

### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

For advice on the necessary documentation and insurance that you'll need if you're bringing your own vehicle to West Africa, general information on shipping your vehicle to West Africa and the availability of fuel and spare parts in the region, see p836.

### Hire

There are car rental agencies in most capital cities and tourist areas. Most international

companies (Hertz, Avis, etc) are represented, plus smaller independent operators, but renting is invariably expensive – you can easily spend in one day what you'd pay for a week's rental in Europe or the USA. If the small operators charge less, it's usually because the vehicles are older and sometimes not well maintained. But it can simply be because their costs are lower and they can do a better deal, so if you have the time, check around for bargains. You will need to put down a large deposit (credit cards are usually, but not always good for this).

It's very unlikely you'll be allowed to take a rental car across a border, but if you are (for example from The Gambia into Senegal), make sure the paperwork is valid. If you're uncertain about driving, most companies provide a chauffeur at very little extra cost, and with many, a chauffeur is mandatory. In many cases it's cheaper to go with a chauffeur as you will pay less for insurance. It's also prudent, as getting stuck on your own is no fun and chauffeurs generally know the intricacies of checkpoint etiquette.

In tourist areas, such as The Gambia and Senegal, and in some parts of Mali and Burkina Faso, it's possible to hire mopeds and motorbikes. In most other countries there is no formal rental available, but if you want to hire a motorbike (and know how to ride one) you can arrange something by asking at an auto parts shop or repair yard, or by asking at the reception of your hotel. You can often be put in touch with someone who doesn't mind earning some extra cash by renting out their wheels for a day or two. Remember, though, that matters such as insurance will be easily overlooked, which is fine until you have an accident and find yourself liable for all bills. Also, if you do this, be sure to check out the motorbike in advance to see that it's in acceptable mechanical condition.

### Road Rules

The most important thing to be aware of is that throughout West Africa traffic drives on the right – as in continental Europe and the USA – even in countries that have a British colonial heritage (such as The Gambia).

### HITCHING

In many countries, as you venture further into rural areas, the frequency of buses or bush taxis drops – sometimes to nothing. Then the

Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire)	3140	3860	2420	1270	960	1880	4070	680	2150	4190	3930	2570	3830	1250	3330	
Accra (Ghana)	2650	2100	3760	4410	4160	4350	1740	4670	4120	1620	1620	3610	2090	5240	2860	5120
Bamako (Mali)	1160	1710														
Banjul (The Gambia)	2490	3210	1340													
Bissau (Guinea-Bissau)	2180	2900	1460	310												
Conakry (Guinea)	1700	2260	920	1230	980											
Cotonou (Benin)	910	360	2020	3360	3110	2610										
Dakar (Senegal)	2790	3350	1420	300	585	1530	3360									
Freetown (Sierra Leone)	1590	2090	1210	1440	1190	320	2440	1740								
Lagos (Nigeria)	1030	480	2140	3480	3230	2730	120	3560	2560							
Lomé (Togo)	760	200	1870	3220	2970	2460	160	3290	2290	280						
Monrovia (Liberia)	1020	1920	1040	1860	1610	740	1870	2160	570	1990	1720					
Niamey (Niger)	1570	1390	1410	2790	2880	2320	1040	2740	2900	1160	1190	2330				
Nouakchott (Mauritania)	2800	3360	1650	870	1180	2100	3670	570	2320	3790	3560	2730	3090			
Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso)	1070	970	900	2240	2360	1820	1120	2240	2400	1240	1240	1830	500	2550		
Praia (Cape Verde)	3140	3860	2420	1270	960	1880	4070	680	2150	4190	3930	2570	3830	1250	3330	
Yaoundé (Cameroon)	2650	2100	3760	4410	4160	4350	1740	4670	4120	1620	1620	3610	2090	5240	2860	5120
Freetown (Sierra Leone)																
Dakar (Senegal)																
Cotonou (Benin)																
Conakry (Guinea)																
Bissau (Guinea-Bissau)																
Banjul (The Gambia)																
Bamako (Mali)																
Accra (Ghana)																
Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire)																

### CAR HIRE, CHICKENS & OTHER HAZARDS OF THE ROAD

If you've never driven in a developing country before, hiring a self-drive car is not something to be undertaken lightly. Road conditions outside the capital are bad and, apart from potholes and the inevitable chickens, dangers include people and cows and other animals moving into your path. Keep in mind that many locals have not driven themselves, and are thus not aware of braking distances and similar concepts. Smaller roads are not sealed, so you need to be able to drive on dirt (and sometimes on sand). One of the biggest hazards is overtaking blind or on curves. Moderate your speed accordingly, and when going around curves or blind spots, be prepared to react to oncoming vehicles in your lane. If you see some branches in the road, it's usually a sign that there is a problem or a stopped vehicle in the road ahead, so you'll need to go slow.

There are very few signposts, so you should take a map and be able to read it. Remember, however, that roads get washed away in the rainy seasons and what looks like a fine piece of tarmac on paper may not correspond with reality. Also, outside capital cities, phones are few and far between, should you need to contact your rental company in case of a breakdown, and cellular telephone networks often don't reach rural areas.

Throughout the region, driving at night is unsafe; try to avoid doing so. If you do need to drive in the dark, be particularly alert for vehicles stopped in the roadway with no lights or hazard warnings. Basic mechanical knowledge – at the very least being able to change a wheel – is very useful. It's almost always best to take a local chauffeur along. In addition to having mechanical knowledge, and (usually) knowledge of the route, they can often be helpful as translators.

only way around is to ride on local trucks, as the locals do. A 'fare' is payable to the driver, so in cases like this the line between hitching and public transport is blurred – but if it's the only way to get around, you don't have a choice anyway. Usually you'll be riding on top of the cargo – it may be cotton or rice in sacks, which are quite comfy, but it might be logs or oil drums, which aren't.

If you want to hitch because there's no public transport leaving imminently from the *gare routière*, you'll normally have to go well beyond the town limits, as bush taxi drivers may take umbrage at other vehicles 'stealing' their customers. Even so, you'll probably still have to pay for your lift – but at least you'll get moving more quickly.

Hitching in the Western sense (ie because you don't want to get the bus, or more specifically because you don't want to pay) is also possible, but may take a long time. The only people giving free lifts are likely to be foreign expatriates, volunteer aid workers, or the occasional well-off local (very few West Africans own a car).

Most people with space in their car want payment – usually on a par with what a bus would have cost. The most common vehicles for lifts of this sort are driven by locals working for international agencies, government bodies or aid and relief organisations; all over West Africa you'll see smart Land Cruisers

with words and badges on the doors (eg Unesco, Ministry of Energy or MSF), never more than a few years old, always going too fast, and always full of people. But if you've been waiting all day and one of these stops for you, you'll probably get in, however uncomfortable you may feel about it.

That said, as in any other part of the world, hitching or accepting lifts is never entirely safe, and we don't recommend it. Travellers who decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk. If you're planning to travel this way, take advice from other hitchers (locals or travellers) first. Hitching in pairs is obviously safer, and hitching through less salubrious suburbs, especially at night, is asking for trouble. Throughout most of the region, women should avoid hitching alone.

### LOCAL TRANSPORT

The most common forms of public transport in West Africa are bus (*car* in some Francophone countries) and bush taxi (*taxi brousse*). Buses may be run by state-owned or private companies, but bush taxis are always private, although the driver is rarely the owner of the vehicle. Vehicles are usually located at bus and bush taxi parks, called *gare routière* or sometimes *autogare* in Francophone countries, 'garage', 'lorry park' or 'motor park'

## ROAD SAFETY

Road safety (together with malaria) is probably your biggest safety risk in West Africa. Bush taxi drivers, in particular, race along at hair-raising speeds and overtake blind to reach their destination before another car can get in front of them in the queue for the return journey. Drivers can be sleepy from a long day, and drink-driving is a problem. Travelling early in the morning is one step you can take to cut the risk, as drivers are fresher and roads less travelled. Avoid night travel at all costs. If you are in a vehicle and feel unsafe, if it's a heavily travelled route, you can take your chances and get out at a major station to switch to another car (though don't expect a refund, and the second vehicle may not be much better). You can complain about dangerous driving, but this usually doesn't have any effect and, unless things are really out of control, you'll seldom get support from the others. Saying that you're feeling sick seems to get better results. Drivers are often quite considerate to ill or infirm passengers and, in any case, seem to care more about keeping vomit off their seats than about dying under the wheels of an oncoming lorry. You might be able to rally other passengers to your side this way as well. Most locals take a stoic approach to the situation, with many viewing accidents as a matter of the will of God or Allah. (This explains slogans such as 'Allahu Akhbar' painted on vehicles – probably in the belief that a bit of extra help from above might see the vehicle through the day's runs.) Drivers seem to discredit the idea that accidents are in any way related to vehicle speed or condition, or to wild driving practices.

in English-speaking countries and *paragem* in Portuguese-speaking countries. The *gare routière* or motor park is usually (though not always) in the centre of town, near the market. Most large cities have several *gares routières*, one for each main direction or destination and may be located on the road out of town headed in that direction.

In some countries, buses are common for intercity routes and bush taxis are hard to find; in other countries it's the reverse. Either way, travel generally costs between US\$1 and US\$2 per 100km, although fares depend on the quality of the vehicle and the route. On routes between countries (eg between Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso and Bamako in Mali), costs can be more because drivers have to pay additional fees (official and unofficial) to cross the border. You can save a bit of money by taking one vehicle to the border and then another on the other side, but this can considerably prolong the trip.

In many countries, transport fares are fixed by the government, so the only way the bush taxi drivers can earn a bit more is to charge for luggage. Local people accept this, so travellers should too, unless of course it is unreasonable. The fee for a medium-sized rucksack is around 10% of the fare. Small bags will be less, and are often not charged at all. If you think you're being overcharged, ask other passengers, out of earshot of the driver. Once you know the proper rate, bargaining will be easy and the price should soon fall.

## Bus

Within some capital cities, you may find well-developed city bus and minibus networks connecting the city centre and suburbs. In most other cities, it's minibuses only.

## Bush Taxi

A bush taxi is effectively a small bus. Almost without exception, bush taxis leave when full of passengers, not according to any timetable that a non-African would recognise. As soon as one car leaves, the next one starts to fill. Depending on the popularity of the route, the car may take half an hour or several days to fill. Either way, drivers jealously guard their car's place in the queue.

Early customers can choose where to sit. Latecomers get no choice and are assigned to the least comfortable seats – usually at the back, where the seating is cramped and stuffy, seat springs work their way into any orifice and window-winders jam into knees. If you have a choice, the best seats are those in the front, near the window. Some travellers prefer the very front, though you're first in line if there's a collision. Better is the row behind the driver, near a window (ideally one that works), and preferably on the side with more shade during the journey.

If a bush taxi looks like it's going to get uncomfortably full you can always buy two seats for yourself – it's simply double the price. Likewise, if you want to charter the whole car, take the price of one seat and

multiply it by the number available. Occasionally you may also need to add a bit more for luggage, although in our experience this is rarely requested for charters.

If a group of passengers has been waiting a long time, and there are only two or three seats to fill, they may club together and pay extra so as to get moving. If you do this, don't expect a discount because you're saving the driver the hassle of looking for other passengers – time ain't money in Africa. If you pick up someone along the way, however, the fare they pay goes to the passengers who bought the seats, not to the driver.

The best time by far to catch bush taxis is early morning; after that, you may have difficulty finding vehicles on many routes. Sometimes, however, departures are determined by market days, in which case afternoon may be best.

There are three main types of bush taxi in West Africa, as follows.

## MINIBUS

Some routes are served by minibuses (*minicars*) – usually seating about 12 to 20 passengers. In some countries these are just large bush taxis, while in others they fill a category between bus and bush taxi. They're typically about 25% cheaper than Peugeot 504s, and sometimes more comfortable, depending on how full they are. They're also slower and tend to stop more, and police checks at roadblocks take longer to negotiate because there are more passengers to search.

## PEUGEOT TAXI

Peugeot 504s, assembled in Nigeria or imported from Europe, are used all over West Africa and are also called *cinq-cent-quatre*, Peugeot taxi, *sept place* and *brake*. With three rows of seats, they're built to take the driver plus seven passengers. In some countries this limit is observed. In others it's flagrantly flaunted. All 504s in Mali, for example, take the driver plus nine passengers. In Guinea you might be jammed in with at least a dozen adults, plus children and bags, with more luggage and a couple of extra passengers riding on the roof. That these cars do hundreds of thousands of kilometres on some of the worst roads in the world is a credit to the manufacturer and the ingenuity of local mechanics.

While some drivers are safe and considerate, others verge on insanity. Some cars are

relatively new (there are quite a few Peugeot 505s, the later model, around these days) and well maintained, with comfortable seats. Others are very old, reduced to nothing more than chassis, body and engine: there's more weld than original metal, tyres are bald, most upholstery is missing, and little extras like windows, door handles and even exhaust pipes fell by the roadside long ago.

## PICK-UP

With wooden seats down the sides, covered pick-ups (*bâchés*) are definitely 2nd class, but are sometimes the only kind of bush taxi available. They take around 16 passengers but are invariably stuffed with people and baggage, plus a few chickens, and your feet may be higher than your waist from resting on a sack of millet. Up on the roof go more bags, bunches of bananas, extra passengers and goats (also live). *Bâché* rides are often very slow, and police checks at roadblocks are interminable as drivers or passengers frequently lack vital papers. The ride is guaranteed to be unpleasant unless you adopt an African attitude, which means each time your head hits the roof as the vehicle descends into yet another big pothole, you roar with laughter. There's nothing like local humour to change an otherwise miserable trip into a tolerable, even enjoyable, experience.

## TOUTS AT THE GARE ROUTIÈRE

At most *gares routières* (motor parks), bush taxis leave on a fill-up-and-go basis, but problems arise when you get more than one vehicle covering the same route. This is when a tout (sometimes called a *cotiman*) can earn money by persuading you to take 'his' car. Most will tell you anything to get you on board: 'this one is very fast', 'this minibus is leaving now', 'this bus is a good cheap price' etc. Another trick involves putting your bags on the roof rack as a 'deposit' against you taking another car (which means you shouldn't give up your bags until you're sure you'll go with them).

Don't think that you're being targeted because you're a wealthy foreigner – the touts hassle everybody. In the end, it's always somewhat of a gamble, but the vehicle that has the most passengers will usually be the one to depart first.

## Taxi MOTORCYCLE TAXI

In some countries, motorcycle taxis (*mototaxis* or *motos*) are used. While they're often cheaper than shared taxis and handy for zipping around, safety can be an issue. If you have a choice, it's usually better to pay slightly more and go with a regular shared taxi.

## PRIVATE TAXI

Only in the bigger cities, such as Dakar, Abidjan and Ouagadougou, do taxis have meters (*compteurs*). Otherwise, bargaining is required or you'll be given the legally fixed rate. In any case, determine the fare before getting into the taxi. The fare from most airports into town is fixed, but some drivers (in Dakar, for example) will try to charge at least double these. In places like Bamako, it costs up to 50% more to go into town from the airport than it takes to go the other way. The price always includes luggage unless you have a particularly bulky item. Also, fares invariably go up at night, and sometimes even in rainy weather.

As an alternative to hiring a car, consider using a taxi by the day. It will probably cost you less (anywhere from about US\$20 to US\$50 per day), and if the car breaks down it will be the driver's problem. You can either hire a city taxi or a bush taxi (although in most places, you'll find that city taxis won't have the necessary paperwork for long-distance routes), or alternatively, ask around at your hotel and arrange something privately. Whatever vehicle you go with, make sure it's mechanically sound before agreeing to anything. Even if you know nothing about cars, just looking at the bodywork or listening to the engine will give you an idea. Also, don't forget to check the tyres. If they're completely bald, or badly out of alignment, it's probably better to look for another vehicle. If you're going on a longer trip, it's also worth checking that there's a spare (and the tools to change it). Hiring a car for a short test run in town is a good way to check out both vehicle and driver before finalising arrangements for a longer trip.

The price you pay will have to be worth the driver taking it out of public service for the day. If you want a deal including petrol, he'll reduce the speed to a slow trot and complain every time you take a detour. A fixed daily rate for the car, while you pay extra for

fuel, is easier to arrange. Finding a car with a working petrol gauge may be tricky, but you can work on the theory that the tank will be empty when you start, and if you allow for 10km per litre on reasonable roads (more on bad roads) you should be OK.

## SHARED TAXI

Many cities have shared taxis, which will stop and pick up more passengers even if they already have somebody inside. Some run on fixed routes, and are effectively a bus, only quicker and more comfortable. Others go wherever the first passenger wants to go, and other people will only be picked up if they're going in the same direction. They normally shout the name of the suburb or a landmark they're heading for as the taxi goes past. In some places, it's common for the waiting passengers to call out the name of their destination or point in the desired direction as the taxi passes by. Once you've got the hang of the shared taxi system, it's quick, safe and inexpensive, and an excellent way to get around cities – and also a good way to experience local life. It's also one of West Africa's great bargains, as fares seldom exceed US\$0.30. It's always worth checking the fare before you get in the car, though, as they're not always fixed, and meters don't apply to shared trips. If you're the first person in the taxi, make it clear that you're expecting the driver to pick up others and that you don't want a private hire (*déplacement, depo*, 'charter' or 'town trip') all to yourself.

## TOURS

Compared with most areas of the world, West Africa has few tour operators. There are exceptions – such as heavily touristed areas like Mali, Senegal and Agadez in Niger – but not many. Tour companies are usually based in the capital cities, and typically offer excursions for groups (rather than individuals) from one-day to one-week trips, or longer. Good West African companies who organise tours beyond the borders of their own country include the following:

### BENIN

**CPN Les Papillons** (☎ 22 54 07 13; cpnlespapillons@yahoo.com)

**La Train d'Ebene** (☎ 21 31 38 62) Two- and seven-day tours are available in restored colonial railroad cars.

### BURKINA FASO

**L'Agence Tourisme** (☎ 50 31 84 43; www.agence-tourisme.com)

**Meycom Voyages** (☎ 50 33 09 83; meycm@fasonet.bf)

### CAMEROON

**Safar Tours** (☎ 222 8703; www.safartours.com)

### CÔTE D'IVOIRE

**Net Voyages Côte d'Ivoire** (☎ 20-336121, info@voyager-en-afrique.com; Immeuble Borija, Ave Nogués, Le Plateau)

**Osmosis Akan** (☎ 07-801518, osmosisak@yahoo.fr; Immeuble Singer Porte S 11, Le Plateau)

**Prestige Voyages** (☎ 22-417673, prestigevoyages@yahoo.fr; Rue Des Jardins, Centre Commercial Louis Panis, Les Deux Plateaux)

### MALI

**TAM Voyages** (☎ 221 9210; www.tamvoyage.com)

**Toguna Adventure Tours** (☎ /fax 2297853; togunaadventure@afribone.net.ml)

### MAURITANIA

**Allal Amatlich** (☎ 546 47 18; 647 88 68)

**Bab Sahara** (☎ 647 39 66)

**Bivouac Tours** (☎ 546 45 95)

**Oudane Tours** (☎ 646 93 82, 634 72 73)

**Salima Voyages** (☎ 546 46 11).

**Tivoujar** (☎ 678 13 42, 625 51 82; www.vuedenhaut.com)

### SIERRA LEONE

**Facts Finding Tours** (☎ 076-903675, factsfinding@yahoo.com; Lumley Beach Rd, Freetown) The knowledgeable Kenneth Gbengba leads personalized bird- and wildlife-watching tours across the country.

**IPC Travel** (☎ 221481; ipc@sierratel.sl, 22 Siaka Stevens St) IPC offers several excellent city, peninsula and island tours and will be heading out to the provinces soon.

### TOGO

**Henry Loïc** (☎ 927 52 03; africato@hotmail.com) This enthusiastic French biologist and off-roader offers 4WD 'raids' of the surrounding countryside and countries (€45 per person per day, or €150 for four people per day).

There are also plenty of hotels or guides who offer less professional tours that may be little more than a man with an underutilised car. On most tours, the larger the group, the lower the cost per person. Information on local tour operators is given in the individual country chapters. Companies offering tours to West Africa are listed on p840.

## WEST AFRICA'S TOP THREE TRAIN RIDES

Taking the train in Africa is like the ultimate road movie with the colours, smells and improbabilities of life writ large. More than a form of transport, West African trains are like moving cities, a stage for street performers, marketplaces, and prayer halls. And like most forms of transport in West Africa, you'll have plenty of time to contemplate the experience, whether waiting on a platform for your train to appear a mere 12 hours after its scheduled arrival or stopped on remote rails in the middle of nowhere for no apparent reason. But for all their faults (and there are many) the trains work and are an essential part of the West African experience. Our three favourites:

- Zouérat to Nouadhibou, Mauritania (see p576) – one of the great train experiences of the world on the longest train in the world.
- Dakar to Bamako (p743 and p546) – another of Africa's great epics, at once endlessly fascinating and interminable (up to 40 hours).
- Yaoundé to N'Gaoundéré, Cameroon (p228) – like crossing a continent, from the arid north to the steamy south, with glorious rainforests en route.

## TRAIN

There are railways in Mauritania (p576), Senegal, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin, Nigeria and Cameroon. Most services run only within the country of operation, but there are international services, notably between Dakar and Bamako. At the time of writing, passenger services between Ouagadougou and Abidjan were suspended due to the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire.

Some trains are relatively comfortable, with 1st-class coaches, which may be air-conditioned. Some also have sleeping compartments, with two or four bunks. Other services are 2nd or 3rd class only, and conditions can be uncomfortable, with no lights, no toilets and no glass in the windows (no fun on long night journeys). Some trains have a restaurant on board, but you can usually buy things to eat and drink at every station along the way.

# Health

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As long as you stay up-to-date with your vaccinations and take basic preventive measures, you'd have to be pretty unlucky to succumb to most of the health hazards covered in this chapter. Africa certainly has an impressive selection of tropical diseases on offer, but you're more likely to get a bout of diarrhoea (in fact, you should bank on it), a cold or an infected mosquito bite than an exotic disease such as sleeping sickness. When it comes to injuries (as opposed to illness), the most likely reason for needing medical help in Africa is as a result of road accidents – vehicles are rarely well-maintained, the roads are potholed and poorly lit, and drink driving is common.

## BEFORE YOU GO

A little planning before departure, particularly for pre-existing illnesses, will save you a lot of trouble later. Before a long trip get a check-up from your dentist and from your doctor if you have any regular medication or chronic illness, eg high blood pressure and asthma. You should also organise spare contact lenses and glasses (and take your optical prescription with you), get a first aid and medical kit together, and arrange necessary vaccinations.

It's tempting to leave it all to the last minute – don't! Many vaccines don't take effect until two weeks after you've been immunised, so visit a doctor four to eight weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (otherwise known as the yellow booklet), which will list all the vaccinations you've received. This is mandatory for the African countries that require proof of yellow fever vaccination upon entry, but it's a good idea to carry it anyway wherever you travel.

Travellers can register with the **International Association for Medical Advice to Travellers** (IAMAT; [www.iamat.org](http://www.iamat.org)). Its website can help travellers find a doctor who has recognised training. Those heading off to very remote areas might like to do a first-aid course (contact the Red Cross or St John's Ambulance) or attend a remote medicine first aid course, such as that offered by the **Royal Geographical Society** ([www.wildernessmedicaltraining.co.uk](http://www.wildernessmedicaltraining.co.uk)).

If you are bringing medications with you, carry them in their original containers, clearly labelled. A signed and dated letter from your physician describing all medical conditions and medications, including generic names, is also a good idea. If carrying syringes or needles be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity.

How do you go about getting the best possible medical help? It's difficult to say – it really depends on the severity of your illness or injury and the availability of local help. If malaria is suspected, seek medical help as soon as possible or begin self-medicating if you are off the beaten track (see p856).

## INSURANCE

Find out in advance whether your insurance plan will make payments to providers or will reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures (in many countries doctors expect payment in cash). It's vital to ensure that your travel insurance will cover the emergency transport required to get you to a hospital in a major city, to better facilities elsewhere in Africa, or all the way home by air and with a medical attendant if necessary. Not all insurance covers this, so check the contract carefully. If you need medical help,

your insurance company might be able to help locate the nearest hospital or clinic, or you can ask at your hotel. In an emergency, contact your embassy or consulate.

The **African Medical and Research Foundation** (Amref; [www.amref.org](http://www.amref.org)) provides an air evacuation service in medical emergencies in some African countries, as well as air ambulance transfers between medical facilities. Money paid by members for this service goes into providing grass-roots medical assistance for local people.

## RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

The **World Health Organization** ([www.who.int/en/](http://www.who.int/en/)) recommends that all travellers be covered for diphtheria, tetanus, measles, mumps, rubella and polio, as well as for hepatitis B, regardless of their destination. Planning to travel is a great time to ensure that all routine vaccination cover is complete. The consequences of these diseases can be severe, and outbreaks of them do occur.

According to the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** ([www.cdc.gov/](http://www.cdc.gov/)), the following vaccinations are recommended for all parts of Africa: hepatitis A, hepatitis B, meningococcal meningitis, rabies and typhoid, and boosters for tetanus, diphtheria and measles. Yellow fever is not necessarily recommended for all parts of Africa, although the certificate is an entry requirement for many countries (see p858).

## MEDICAL CHECKLIST

It is a very good idea to carry a medical and first aid kit with you, to help yourself in the case of minor illness or injury. Following is a list of items you should consider packing.

- Acetaminophen (paracetamol) or aspirin
- Acetazolamide (Diamox) for altitude sickness (prescription only)
- Adhesive or paper tape
- Antibacterial ointment (prescription only) for cuts and abrasions (eg Bactroban)
- Antibiotics (prescription only), eg ciprofloxacin (Ciproxin) or norfloxacin (Utinor)
- Antidiarrhoeal drugs (eg loperamide)
- Antihistamines (for hayfever and allergic reactions)
- Antiinflammatory drugs (eg ibuprofen)
- Antimalaria pills
- Bandages, gauze, gauze rolls

- DEET-containing insect repellent for the skin
- Iodine tablets (for water purification)
- Oral rehydration salts
- Permethrin-containing insect spray for clothing, tents, and bed nets
- Pocket knife
- Scissors, safety pins, tweezers
- Sterile needles, syringes and fluids if travelling to remote areas
- Steroid cream or hydrocortisone cream (for allergic rashes)
- Sun block
- Syringes and sterile needles
- Thermometer

If you are travelling through a malarial area – particularly an area where falciparum malaria predominates – consider taking a self-diagnostic kit that can identify malaria in the blood from a finger prick.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel health advice on the Internet. For further information, the **Lonely Planet website** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) is a good place to start. The **World Health Organization** ([www.who.int/en/](http://www.who.int/en/)) publishes a superb book called *International Travel and Health*, which is revised annually and is available online at no cost. Other websites of general interest are **MD Travel Health** ([www.mdtravelhealth.com](http://www.mdtravelhealth.com)) which provides complete travel health recommendations for every country, updated daily, also at no cost; the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** ([www.cdc.gov/](http://www.cdc.gov/)) and **Fit for Travel** ([www.fitfortravel.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.fitfortravel.scot.nhs.uk)), which has up-to-date information about outbreaks and is very user-friendly.

It's also a good idea to consult your government's travel health website before departure, if one is available:

**Australia** ([www.dfat.gov.au/travel/](http://www.dfat.gov.au/travel/))

**Canada** ([www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/index.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/index.html))

**UK** ([www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice/index.htm](http://www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice/index.htm))

**USA** ([www.cdc.gov/travel/](http://www.cdc.gov/travel/))

## FURTHER READING

*A Comprehensive Guide to Wilderness and Travel Medicine* by Eric A Weiss (1998)

*Healthy Travel* by Jane Wilson-Howarth (1999)

*Healthy Travel Africa* by Isabelle Young (2000)

*How to Stay Healthy Abroad* by Richard Dawood (2002)

*Travel in Health* by Graham Fry (1994)

*Travel with Children* by Cathy Lanigan (2004)



## IN TRANSIT

### DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Blood clots can form in the legs during flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. This formation of clots is known as deep vein thrombosis (DVT), and the longer the flight, the greater the risk. Although most blood clots are reabsorbed uneventfully, some might break off and travel through the blood vessels to the lungs, where they could cause life-threatening complications.

The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain of the foot, ankle or calf, usually but not always on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it could cause chest pain and breathing difficulty. Travellers with any of these symptoms should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent the development of DVT on flights you should walk about the cabin, perform isometric compressions of the leg muscles (ie contract the leg muscles while sitting), drink plenty of fluids, and avoid alcohol.

### JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

If you're crossing more than five time zones you could suffer jet lag, resulting in insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag drink plenty of fluids (nonalcoholic) and eat light meals. Upon arrival, get exposure to natural sunlight and readjust your schedule (for meals, sleep, etc) as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating motion sickness. The main side effect of these drugs is drowsiness. A herbal alternative is ginger (in the form of ginger tea, biscuits or crystallized ginger), which works like a charm for some people.

## IN WEST AFRICA

### AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE

Health care in Africa is varied: it can be excellent in the major cities, which generally have well-trained doctors and nurses, but it is often patchy off the beaten track. Medicine and even sterile dressings and intravenous fluids might need to be purchased from a local pharmacy by patients or their rela-

tives. The standard of dental care is equally variable, and there is an increased risk of hepatitis B and HIV transmission via poorly sterilised equipment. By and large, public hospitals in Africa offer the cheapest service, but will have the least up-to-date equipment and medications; mission hospitals (where donations are the usual form of payment) often have more reasonable facilities; and private hospitals and clinics are more expensive but tend to have more advanced drugs and equipment and better trained medical staff.

Most drugs can be purchased over the counter in Africa, without a prescription. Many drugs for sale in Africa might be ineffective: they might be counterfeit or might not have been stored under the right conditions. The most common examples of counterfeit drugs are malaria tablets and expensive antibiotics, such as ciprofloxacin. Most drugs are available in capitals, but remote villages will be lucky to have a couple of paracetamol tablets. It is recommended that all drugs for chronic diseases be brought from home. Also, the availability and efficacy of condoms cannot be relied on – bring contraception. Condoms bought in Africa might not be of the same quality as in Europe or Australia, and they might not have been correctly stored.

There is a high risk of contracting HIV from infected blood if you receive a blood transfusion in Africa. The **BloodCare Foundation** ([www.bloodcare.org.uk](http://www.bloodcare.org.uk)) is a useful source of safe, screened blood, which can be transported to any part of the world within 24 hours.

The cost of health care might seem cheap compared to first world countries, but good care and drugs might be not be available. Evacuation to good medical care (within Africa or to your own country) can be very expensive. Unfortunately, adequate health care is available only to very few Africans.

### INFECTIOUS DISEASES

It's a formidable list but, as we say, a few precautions go a long way...

#### Cholera

Although small outbreaks can occur, cholera is usually only a problem during natural or artificial disasters. Travellers are rarely affected. It is caused by a bacteria and spread via contaminated drinking water. The main symptom is profuse watery diarrhoea, which causes debilitation if fluids are not replaced

quickly. An oral cholera vaccine is available in the USA, but it is not particularly effective. Most cases of cholera could be avoided by making sure you drink clean water and by avoiding potentially contaminated food. Treatment is by fluid replacement (orally or via a drip), but sometimes antibiotics are needed. Self-treatment is not advised.

#### Dengue Fever

Found in Senegal, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and some parts of East and Southern Africa, dengue fever (also called 'breakbone fever') is spread through the bite of the mosquito. It causes a feverish illness with headache and muscle pains similar to those experienced with a bad, prolonged attack of influenza. There might be a rash. Self-treatment: paracetamol and rest.

#### Diphtheria

Spread through close respiratory contact, diphtheria is found in all of Africa. It usually causes a temperature and a severe sore throat. Sometimes a membrane forms across the throat, and a tracheostomy is needed to prevent suffocation. Vaccination is recommended for those likely to be in close contact with the local population in infected areas. More important for long stays than for short-term trips, the vaccine is given as an injection alone or with tetanus, and lasts 10 years.

#### Filariasis

Tiny worms migrating in the lymphatic system cause filariasis. It is found in most of West, Central, East and Southern Africa, and in Sudan in North Africa. A bite from an infected mosquito spreads the infection. Symptoms include itching and swelling of the legs and/or genitalia. Treatment is available.

#### Hepatitis A

Found in all of Africa, Hepatitis A is spread through contaminated food (particularly shellfish) and water. It causes jaundice and is rarely fatal, but can cause prolonged lethargy and delayed recovery. If you've had hepatitis A, you shouldn't drink alcohol for up to six months after, but once you've recovered, there won't be any long-term problems. The first symptoms include dark urine and a yellow colour to the whites of the eyes. Sometimes a fever and abdominal pain might occur. Hepatitis A vaccine (Avaxim, VAQTA, Havrix) is

given as an injection: a single dose will give protection for a year, and a booster after a year gives 10-year protection. Hepatitis A and typhoid vaccines can also be given as a single dose vaccine (Hepatyrix or Viatim).

#### Hepatitis B

Spread through infected blood, contaminated needles and sexual intercourse, Hepatitis B is found in Africa. It can be spread from an infected mother to the baby in childbirth. It affects the liver, causing jaundice and occasionally liver failure. Most people recover completely, but some might be chronic carriers of the virus, which can lead eventually to cirrhosis or liver cancer. Those visiting high-risk areas for long periods or with increased social or occupational risk should be immunised. Many countries now give Hepatitis B as part of the routine childhood vaccination. It is given singly or can be given at the same time as Hepatitis A (Hepatyrix).

A course of vaccinations will give protection for at least five years. It can be given over four weeks or six months.

#### HIV

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the virus that causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), is a huge problem in Africa, but is most acutely felt in sub-Saharan Africa. The virus is spread through infected blood and blood products, by sexual intercourse with an infected partner and from an infected mother to her baby during childbirth and breastfeeding. It can be spread through 'blood to blood' contacts, such as with contaminated instruments during medical, dental, acupuncture and other body-piercing procedures, and through sharing used intravenous needles. At present there is no cure; medication that might keep the disease under control is available, but these drugs are too expensive for the overwhelming majority of Africans, and are not readily available for travellers either. If you think you might have been infected with HIV, a blood test is necessary; a three-month gap after exposure and before testing is required to allow antibodies to appear in the blood.

#### Leptospirosis

This is found in West and Southern Africa; in Chad, Congo and Democratic Republic of the Congo in Central Africa; in Algeria,

Morocco and Sudan in North Africa; and in Ethiopia and Somalia in East Africa. It is spread through the excreta of infected rodents, especially rats. It can cause hepatitis and renal failure, which might be fatal. It is unusual for travellers to be affected unless living in poor sanitary conditions. It causes a fever and sometimes jaundice.

## Malaria

One million children die annually from malaria in Africa. The risk of malarial transmission at altitudes higher than 2000m is rare. The disease is caused by a parasite in the bloodstream spread via the bite of the female *Anopheles* mosquito. There are several types of malaria; falciparum malaria being the most dangerous type and the predominant form in Africa. Infection rates vary with season and climate, so check out the situation before departure. Unlike most other diseases regularly encountered by travellers, there is no vaccination against malaria (yet). However, several different drugs are used to prevent malaria, and new ones are in the pipeline. Up-to-date advice from a travel health clinic is essential as some medication is more suitable for some travellers than others. The pattern of drug-resistant malaria is changing rapidly, so what was advised several years ago might no longer be the case.

Malaria can present in several ways. The early stages include headache, fever, general aches and pains, and malaise, which could be mistaken for flu. Other symptoms include

abdominal pain, diarrhoea and a cough. Anyone who gets a fever in a malarial area should assume infection until a blood test proves negative, even if you have been taking anti-malarial medication. If not treated, the next stage could develop within 24 hours, particularly if falciparum malaria is the parasite: jaundice, then reduced consciousness and coma (known as cerebral malaria) followed by death. Treatment in hospital is essential, and the death rate can still be as high as 10% even in the best intensive-care facilities.

Many travellers are under the impression that malaria is a mild illness, treatment is always easy and successful, and taking anti-malarial drugs causes more illness through side effects than actually getting malaria. In Africa, this is unfortunately not true. Side effects of the medication depend on the drug being taken. Doxycycline can cause heartburn and indigestion; mefloquine (Larium) can cause anxiety attacks, insomnia, nightmares and (rarely) severe psychiatric disorders; chloroquine can cause nausea and hair loss; and proguanil can cause mouth ulcers. These side effects are not universal, and can be minimized by taking medication correctly, eg with food. Also, some people should not take a particular anti-malarial drug, eg people with epilepsy should avoid mefloquine, and doxycycline should not be taken by pregnant women or children younger than 12.

If you decide that you really do not wish to take anti-malarial drugs, you must understand the risks, and be obsessive about avoiding mosquito bites. Use nets and insect repellent, and report any fever or flulike symptoms to a doctor as soon as possible. Some people advocate homeopathic preparations against malaria, such as Demal200, but as yet there is no conclusive evidence that this is effective, and many homeopaths do not recommend their use.

People of all ages can contract malaria, and falciparum causes the most severe illness. Repeated infections might result eventually in less serious illness. Malaria in pregnancy frequently results in miscarriage or premature labour. Adults who have survived childhood malaria have developed immunity and usually only develop mild cases of malaria; most Western travellers have no immunity at all. Immunity wanes after 18 months of nonexposure, so even if you have had malaria in the past and used

## THE ANTIMALARIAL A TO D

**A** – Awareness of the risk. No medication is totally effective, but protection of up to 95% is achievable with most drugs, as long as other measures have been taken.

**B** – Bites – avoid at all costs. Sleep in a screened room, use a mosquito spray or coils, sleep under a permethrin-impregnated net. Cover up at night with long trousers and long sleeves, preferably with permethrin-treated clothing. Apply appropriate repellent to all areas of exposed skin in the evenings.

**C** – Chemical prevention (ie anti-malarial drugs) is usually needed in malarial areas. Expert advice is needed as resistance patterns can change, and new drugs are in development. Not all anti-malarial drugs are suitable for everyone. Most anti-malarial drugs need to be started at least a week in advance and continued for four weeks after the last possible exposure to malaria.

**D** – Diagnosis. If you have a fever or flulike illness within a year of travel to a malarial area, malaria is a possibility, and immediate medical attention is necessary.

to live in a malaria-prone area, you might no longer be immune.

If you are planning a journey in a malarial area, particularly where falciparum malaria predominates, consider taking standby treatment. Standby treatment should be seen as emergency treatment aimed at saving the patient's life and not as routine self-medication. It should be used only if you will be far from medical facilities and have been advised about the symptoms of malaria and how to use the medication. Medical advice should be sought as soon as possible to confirm whether the treatment has been successful. The type of standby treatment used will depend on local conditions, such as drug resistance, and on what anti-malarial drugs were being used before standby treatment. This is worthwhile because you want to avoid contracting a particularly serious form such as cerebral malaria, which affects the brain and central nervous system and can be fatal in 24 hours. Self-diagnostic kits, which can identify malaria in the blood from a finger prick, are also available in the West (see p853).

The risks from malaria to both mother and foetus during pregnancy are considerable. Unless good medical care can be guaranteed, travel throughout Africa when

pregnant – particularly to malarial areas – should be discouraged unless essential.

## Meningococcal Meningitis

Meningococcal infection is spread through close respiratory contact and is more likely in crowded situations, such as dormitories, buses and clubs. Infection is uncommon in travellers. Vaccination is recommended for long stays and is especially important towards the end of the dry season, which varies across the continent (see p18). Symptoms include a fever, severe headache, neck stiffness and a red rash. Immediate medical treatment is necessary.

The ACWY vaccine is recommended for all travellers in sub-Saharan Africa. This vaccine is different from the meningococcal meningitis C vaccine given to children and adolescents in some countries; it is safe to be given both types of vaccine.

## Onchocerciasis

Also known as 'river blindness', this is caused by the larvae of a tiny worm, which is spread by the bite of a small fly. The earliest sign of infection is intensely itchy, red, sore eyes. Travellers are rarely severely affected. Treatment in a specialised clinic is curative.

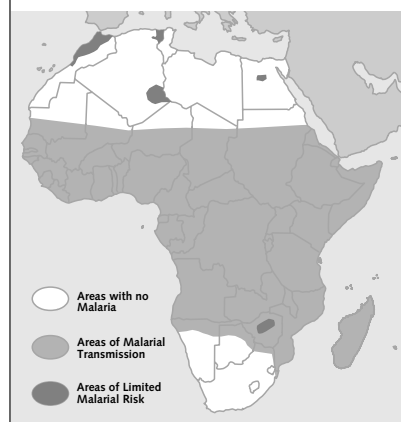
## Poliomyelitis

Generally spread through contaminated food and water. It is one of the vaccines given in childhood and should be boosted every 10 years, either orally (a drop on the tongue) or as an injection. Polio can be carried asymptotically (ie showing no symptoms) and could cause a transient fever. In rare cases it causes weakness or paralysis of one or more muscles, which might be permanent. The World Health Organization (WHO) state that Nigeria and Niger are polio hotspots following recent outbreaks.

## Rabies

Rabies is spread by receiving the bites or licks of an infected animal on broken skin. It's fatal once the clinical symptoms start (which might be up to several months after the injury), so postbite vaccination should be given as soon as possible. Postbite vaccination (whether or not you've been vaccinated before the bite) prevents the virus from spreading to the central nervous system. Animal handlers should

## Malarial Risk in Africa



be vaccinated, as should those travelling to remote areas where a source of postbite vaccine is not available within 24 hours. Three preventive injections are needed in a month. If you have not been vaccinated you will need a course of five injections starting 24 hours or as soon as possible after the injury. If you have been vaccinated, you will need fewer postbite injections, and have more time to seek medical aid.

### Schistosomiasis

Also called bilharzia, this disease is spread by flukes that are carried by a species of freshwater snail. The flukes are carried inside the snail, which then sheds them into slow-moving or still water. The parasites penetrate human skin during paddling or swimming and then migrate to the bladder or bowel. They are passed out via stool or urine and can contaminate fresh water, where the cycle starts again. Avoid paddling or swimming in suspect freshwater lakes or slow-running rivers. There may be no symptoms or there may be a transient fever and rash, and advanced cases can have blood in the stool or in the urine. A blood test can detect antibodies if you have been exposed, and treatment is then possible in travel or infectious disease clinics. If not treated the infection can cause kidney failure or permanent bowel damage. It isn't possible for you to infect others.

### Tuberculosis (TB)

TB is spread through close respiratory contact and occasionally through infected milk or milk products. BCG (Bacille Calmette-Guérin) vaccination is recommended for those likely to be mixing closely with the local population, although it gives only moderate protection against TB. It is more important for long stays than for short-term stays. Inoculation with the BCG vaccine is not available in all countries. It is given routinely to many children in developing countries. The vaccination causes a small permanent scar at the site of injection, and is usually given in a specialised chest clinic. It is a live vaccine and should not be given to pregnant women or immunocompromised individuals.

TB can be asymptomatic, only being picked up on a routine chest X-ray. Alternatively, it can cause a cough, weight loss or fever, sometimes months or even years after exposure.

### Typhoid

This is spread through food or water contaminated by infected human faeces. The first symptom is usually a fever or a pink rash on the abdomen. Sometimes septicaemia (blood poisoning) can occur. A typhoid vaccine (typhim Vi, typherix) will give protection for three years. In some countries, the oral vaccine Vivotif is also available. Antibiotics are usually given as treatment, and death is rare unless septicaemia occurs.

### Trypanosomiasis

Spread via the bite of the tsetse fly, trypanosomiasis, also called 'sleeping sickness', causes a headache, fever and eventually coma. There is an effective treatment.

### Yellow Fever

Travellers should carry a certificate as evidence of vaccination if they have recently been in an infected country, to avoid any possible difficulties with immigration. For a full list of these countries visit the **World Health Organization website** ([www.who.int/en/](http://www.who.int/en/)) or the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website** ([www.cdc.gov/travel/](http://www.cdc.gov/travel/)). There is always the possibility that a traveller without a legally required, up-to-date certificate will be vaccinated and detained in isolation at the port of arrival for up to 10 days or possibly repatriated.

Yellow fever is spread by infected mosquitoes. Symptoms range from a flulike illness to severe hepatitis (liver inflammation) jaundice and death. The yellow fever vaccin-



### MANDATORY YELLOW FEVER VACCINATION

- North Africa – Not mandatory for any of North Africa, but Algeria, Libya and Tunisia require evidence of yellow fever vaccination if entering from an infected country. It is recommended for travellers to Sudan, and might be given to unvaccinated travellers leaving the country.
- Central Africa – Mandatory in Central African Republic (CAR), Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, and recommended in Chad.
- West Africa – Mandatory in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Sao Tome & Principe and Togo, and recommended for The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone.
- East Africa – Mandatory in Rwanda; it is advised for Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania and Uganda.
- Southern Africa – Not mandatory for entry into any countries of Southern Africa, although it is necessary if entering from an infected country.

ation must be given at a designated clinic and is valid for 10 years. It is a live vaccine and must not be given to immunocompromised or pregnant travellers.

### TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

It's not inevitable that you will get diarrhoea while travelling in Africa, but it's certainly likely. Diarrhoea is the most common travel-related illness – figures suggest that at least half of all travellers to Africa will get diarrhoea at some stage. Sometimes dietary changes, such as increased spices or oils, are the cause. To help prevent diarrhoea, avoid tap water unless you're sure it's safe to drink (see p860). You should only eat cooked or peeled fresh fruits or vegetables, and be wary of dairy products that might contain unpasteurised milk. Although freshly cooked food can often be a safe option, plates or serving utensils might be dirty, so you should be very selective when eating food from street vendors (make sure that cooked food is piping hot all the way through). If you develop

diarrhoea, be sure to drink plenty of fluids, preferably an oral rehydration solution containing water, and some salt and sugar. A few loose stools don't require treatment but, if you start having more than four or five a day, you should start taking an antibiotic (often a quinoline drug, such as ciprofloxacin or norfloxacin) and an antidiarrhoeal agent (such as loperamide) if you are not within easy reach of a toilet. If diarrhoea is bloody, persists for over 72 hours or is accompanied by fever, shaking chills or severe abdominal pain, you should seek medical attention.

### Amoebic Dysentery

Contracted by eating contaminated food and water, amoebic dysentery causes blood and mucus in the faeces. It can be relatively mild and tends to come on gradually, but seek medical advice if you think you have the illness as it won't clear up without treatment (which is with specific antibiotics).

### Giardiasis

Like amoebic dysentery, this caused by ingesting contaminated food or water. The illness appears a week or more after you have been exposed to the parasite. Giardiasis might cause only a short-lived bout of traveller's diarrhoea, but it can cause persistent diarrhoea. Seek medical advice if you suspect you have giardiasis, but if you are in a remote area you could start a course of antibiotics.

### ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS Heat Exhaustion

This condition occurs following heavy sweating and excessive fluid loss with inadequate replacement of fluids and salt, and is common in hot climates when taking exercise before full acclimatisation. Symptoms include headache, dizziness and tiredness. Dehydration is happening by the time you feel thirsty – aim to drink sufficient water to produce pale, diluted urine. Treatment: fluid replacement with water and/or fruit juice, and cooling by cold water and fans. The treatment of the salt-loss component consists of consuming salty fluids as in soup, and adding a bit more salt to food than usual.

### Heatstroke

Heat exhaustion is a precursor to the much more serious heatstroke. In this case there is damage to the sweating mechanism, with an

excessive rise in body temperature; irrational and hyperactive behaviour; and eventually loss of consciousness and death. Rapid cooling by spraying the body with water and fanning is best. Emergency fluid and electrolyte replacement is required by intravenous drip.

### Insect Bites & Stings

Mosquitoes might not always carry malaria or dengue fever, but they (and other insects) can cause irritation and infected bites. To avoid these, take the same precautions as you would for avoiding malaria (see p856). Use DEET-based insect repellents. Excellent clothing treatments are also available; mosquitos that land on treated clothing will die.

Bee and wasp stings cause real problems only to those who have a severe allergy to the stings (anaphylaxis.) If you are one of these people, carry an 'epipen' – an adrenaline (epinephrine) injection, which you can give yourself. This could save your life.

Sandflies are found around the beaches. They usually only cause a nasty itchy bite but can carry a rare skin disorder called cutaneous leishmaniasis. Prevention of bites with DEET-based repellents is sensible.

Scorpions are frequently found in arid or dry climates. They can cause a painful bite that is sometimes life-threatening. If bitten by a scorpion, take a painkiller. Medical treatment should be sought if collapse occurs.

Bed bugs are found in hostels and cheap hotels and lead to itchy, lumpy bites. Spraying the mattress with crawling insect killer after changing bedding will get rid of them.

Scabies are also found in cheap accommodation. These tiny mites live in the skin, often between the fingers and they cause an intensely itchy rash. The itch is easily treated with malathion and permethrin lotion from a pharmacy; other members of the household also need treating to avoid spreading scabies, even if they do not show any symptoms.

### Snake Bites

Avoid getting bitten! Don't walk barefoot, or stick your hand into holes or cracks. However, 50% of those bitten by venomous snakes are not actually injected with poison. If bitten by a snake, do not panic. Immobilise the bitten limb with a splint (such as a stick) and apply a bandage over the site, with firm pressure (similar to bandaging a sprain). Do not apply a tourniquet, or cut or suck the

bite. Get medical help as soon as possible so antivenom can be given if needed.

### Water

Never drink tap water unless it has been boiled, filtered or chemically disinfected (eg, with iodine tablets). Never drink from streams, rivers and lakes. It's best to avoid drinking from pumps and wells – some do bring pure water to the surface, but the presence of animals can contaminate supplies.

### TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

At least 80% of the African population relies on traditional medicine, often because conventional Western-style medicine is too expensive, because of prevailing cultural attitudes and beliefs, or simply because in some cases it works. It might also be because there's no other choice: a World Health Organization survey found that although there was only one medical doctor for every 50,000 people in Mozambique, there was a traditional healer for every 200 people.

Although some African remedies seem to work on malaria, sickle cell anaemia, high blood pressure and some AIDS symptoms, most African healers learn their art by apprenticeship, so education (and consequently application of knowledge) is inconsistent and unregulated. Conventionally trained physicians in South Africa, for example, angrily describe how their AIDS patients die of kidney failure because a *sangoma* (traditional healer) has given them an enema containing an essence made from powerful roots. Likewise, when traditional healers administer 'injections' with porcupine quills, knives or dirty razor blades, diseases are often spread or created rather than cured.

Rather than attempting to stamp out traditional practices, or pretend they aren't happening, a positive step taken by some African countries is the regulation of traditional medicine by creating healers' associations and offering courses on such topics as sanitary practices. It remains unlikely in the short term that even a basic level of conventional Western-style medicine will be made available to all the people of Africa (even though the cost of doing so is less than the annual military budget of some Western countries). Traditional medicine, on the other hand, will almost certainly continue to be practised widely throughout the continent.

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