

Niger

With the Ténéré Desert boasting some of the Sahara's most beautiful dunes, the stark splendour of the Air Mountains being one of West Africa's most spectacular sights, and the intriguing ancient trans-Saharan trade-route towns of Agadez and Zinder playing home to magnificent mazes of mud-brick architecture and fascinating locals, the international appeal of Niger as a destination is undeniable.

Odd then, that the first question friends ask prospective travellers is 'Why Niger?'. Simply stated, press regarding Niger's plight with localised food shortages dominates headlines and paints the entire nation in the same poor light. Watching the news in 2005, you'd have been forgiven for thinking locusts and drought had destroyed the entire nation's food supply. In reality, crop production was only 10% lower than average, locust damage was limited to grasses used to feed livestock, and food was still available in most markets. The main problem was that nomadic herders lost much of their livestock (their only income) and couldn't afford the rising costs of food, putting 3.6 million of them at risk of starvation. There's no denying that Niger is one of the world's poorest countries, but taking your tourist dollars elsewhere because of that is only contributing to the problem.

The lucky ones who do visit Niger will witness its enduring physical beauty and meet a vibrant mix of people, who must be some of the planet's most stoic and resilient citizens. Whether you travel by bush taxi, 4WD or camel, you'll never forget your time in Niger.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1,267,000 sq km
- **Capital** Niamey
- **Country code** ☎ 227
- **Famous for** Air Mountains, Ténéré Desert; Cure Salée Festival
- **Languages** French, Hausa, Djerma, Fulfulde, Tamashek, Kanouri, Toubou and Gourmanchéma
- **Money** West African CFA Franc; US\$1 = CFA544.89; €1 = CFA655.96
- **Population** 12.8 million
- **Visa** Required by almost everyone except West African citizens. Obtained easily in Algeria, Benin, Chad, Mali and Nigeria.



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Air Mountains** (p608) Make tracks with camel companions through red sands and blue rocks in these mystical mountains, or buckle up and tackle the **Ténéré** (p609).
- **Agadez** (p604) Spiral up and squeeze out onto the spiky summit of the majestic mud mosque here, to captivating views over the surrounding Sahara.
- **Zinder** (p601) Backtrack through the banco houses of the Birni Quartier and soak up the Hausa history.
- **Ayorou** (p594) Savour Sunday market smells, before boarding a boat bound for bellowing hippos on a serene section of the Niger River.
- **Kouré** (p593) Walk in sublime silence with the gregarious giraffes nearby, the last wild herd of the gorgeous animals in West Africa.
- **Plateau du Djado** (p610) Dive in the deep end with a 4WD expedition to this remote spot, and visit the mystical honey-combed ruins of Djado's medieval citadel.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** While it's possible to make a whistle-stop tour of Niamey, Zinder and Agadez within a week (even using public transport), you're better off saving your backside and staying local. With a pleasant riverside location, some interesting sights and an array of fine restaurants, **Niamey** (p584) makes a great base for a few days. Possible excursions include the Sunday markets of **Ayorou** (p594) and **Filingué** (p595), and wandering with the giraffes near **Kouré** (p593). Round out the week with three to four days visiting **Parc Régional du W** (p596) in the south. Alternatively, base yourself in intriguing **Agadez** (p604) for a taste of the astounding **Air Mountains** (p608).
- **Two Weeks** Combine the two one-week itineraries above with a day or two discovering the old quarters and Hausa architecture in **Zinder** (p601). If the Sahara beckons and your wallet is bulging, bypass Niamey and delve deeper into the Air Mountains and **Ténéré Desert** (p608) on a 4WD expedition.
- **One Month** Toss out our advice so far, join a **camel caravan** (p610) and see the Sahara

HOW MUCH?

- **Cold packet of streetside yogurt** CFA125
- **Croix d'Agadez (historically stylised silver cross)** CFA1000
- **Simple Tuareg grigri (amulet)** CFA2000
- **Tuareg turban** CFA1500
- **Moto-taxi across any town** CFA150

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L of petrol** CFA583
- **1L of bottled water** CFA300
- **Bottle of Bière Niger** CFA500
- **Souvenir T-Shirt** CFA1500
- **Grilled beef brochettes** CFA100

how it should be seen. Or relax and explore Niger's towns at will – enjoy.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

December to February is the best time to visit, as temperatures are at their coolest and rainfall is nonexistent. The only drawbacks are the harmattan winds, which can reduce visibility to less than 1km and spoil photographic opportunities, and surprisingly cold evening temperatures in the desert.

The hottest part of the year is March to June, with April daytime temperatures reaching 45°C (113°F) or more, especially in the north, and heat so intense that rain evaporates before reaching the ground. Desert travel isn't feasible at these times.

Rains dampen the south between late May and September, with August being the wettest time. The south's annual rainfall is usually 550mm, while the north is lucky to receive 150mm.

Niamey's climatic chart is found on p813.

HISTORY

Early History

Some 6000 years ago, Niger's vast northern plateaus were verdant grasslands supporting hunters, herders and abundant wildlife. Around 2500 BC the Sahara began swallowing this region and its rivers whole, driving the population south. Little remains of this lush past, besides the splendid images

captured in the Neolithic rock art of the Air Mountains (see the boxed text, p609). By the 1st millennium BC, the migrating peoples had learnt metalwork skills, developed complex social organisations and forms of trade.

Great West African Empires

Lying at the crossroads of the lucrative trans-Saharan trade route (in gold, salt and slaves), Niger's arid landscape once supported some of West Africa's great empires. One was the Kanem-Bornu Empire, which flourished around Lake Chad between the 10th and 13th centuries AD. It survived the arrival of Islam during the 10th and 11th centuries, and remained a significant force until the 1800s. Between the 14th and 15th centuries, western Niger was controlled by the Islamic Empire of Mali before falling to the powerful Empire of Songhaï in the early 1500s, which subsequently controlled much of central Niger until the late 16th Century.

Also playing important roles before the arrival of Europeans were the Tuareg, who

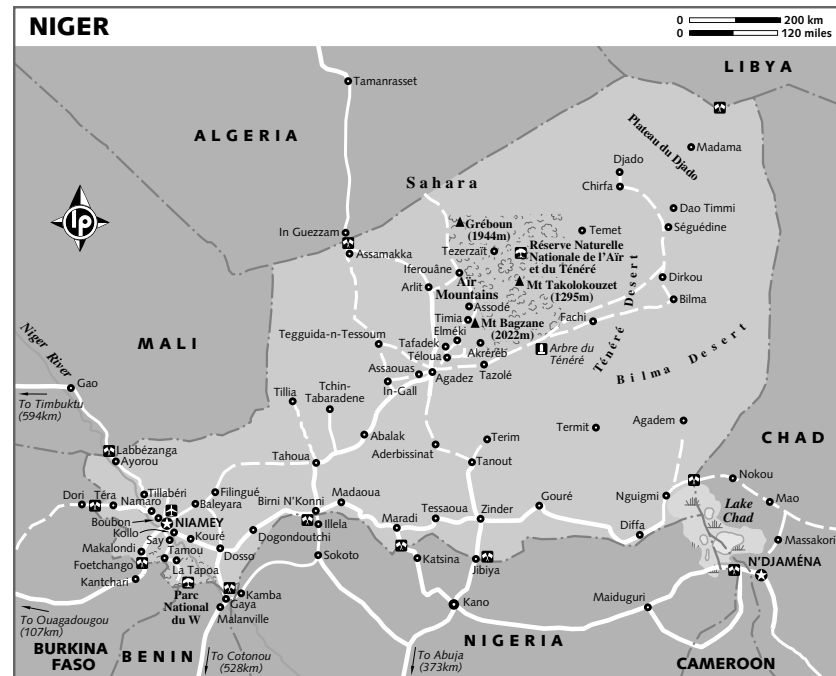
migrated south into the Air Mountains during the 11th century, and the Hausa and Kanouri peoples, who founded the mighty Damagaram state around Zinder having fled Nigeria in the 1600s.

Late Precolonial Niger

Although abolished in most of West Africa by the 1850s, the slave trade was still going strong in Niger and Chad. With 12,000 soldiers, the Sultan of Zinder had little trouble attacking villages in his own kingdom, capturing inhabitants and selling them as slaves to support his 300 wives and numerous children.

Agadez, once a great gold-trading centre, was hit as trade shifted from the Sahara to the Portuguese-controlled coastal ports; its population shrinking from 30,000 in 1450 to less than 3000 by the early 20th century.

As trade in gold declined, the value of salt rose. Mined at remote oases in the desert, salt deposits were the prerogative of the Tuareg nomads, and it was so rare that it was often traded ounce for ounce for gold. Salt sustained the huge trans-Saharan camel



caravans, and, as recently as 1906, a 20,000-camel caravan left Agadez to collect salt at Bilma, an oasis 610km to the east.

Colonial Era

The French strolled into the picture late in the 19th century and met stronger-than-expected local resistance. Decidedly unamused, they quickly dispatched the punitive Voulet-Chanoine expedition, which laid waste to much of southern Niger in 1898–99. The Birni N’Konni massacre is one of the most shameful episodes in French colonial history. Although Tuareg revolts in the north continued, culminating in the siege of Agadez in 1916–17, French control over the territory was assured.

French rule wasn’t kind to Niger. The colonial administration selectively cultivated the power of traditional chiefs, whose abuses were almost encouraged as a means of de facto control. The imposition of the French franc (in which taxes were paid) drove many agricultural workers to seek work in the cities. The enforced shift from subsistence farming to cash crops further cemented French dominance, reorienting trade away from traditional trans-Saharan routes towards European-controlled coastal markets. Fallow periods, which previously preserved a fragile ecological balance, were replaced with high-density farming, the effects of which still contribute to the ongoing march of the Sahara.

Niger received less investment than other French colonies – by independence in 1960, the French had built 1032km of paved roads in West Africa, only 14km of them Nigerien.

Independence

In 1958 Charles de Gaulle offered France’s 12 West African colonies a choice between self-government in a French union or immediate independence. Hundreds of thousands of votes conveniently disappeared, enabling the French to claim that Niger wished to remain within its sphere of influence.

Djibo Bakari and the radical Sawaba party campaigned for complete independence, and the infuriated government banned the party, exiling Bakari. This left Hamani Diori, leader of the Parti Progressiste Nigérien (PPN), as the only presidential candidate when independence arrived in 1960.

Diori’s repressive one-party state maintained close French ties. Diori survived several unsuccessful coups before the great Sahel drought of 1968–74, when foodstocks were discovered in several ministerial homes. This was the final straw and Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountché overthrew Diori in a bloody coup. Kountché, then president, established a military ruling council.

Post-Independence Period

Kountché and Niger hit the proverbial jackpot in 1968 when uranium was discovered near Arlit. Between 1974 and 1979 uranium prices quintupled, permitting some ambitious projects, including the ‘uranium highway’ to Agadez and Arlit. Yet not everyone was smiling: the cost of living rose dramatically and the poorest were worse off.

In the early 1980s government revenue from uranium plummeted, halting the construction boom. Tragedy then struck with the drought of 1983. For the first time in recorded history the Niger River stopped flowing. Kountché’s reputation for honesty helped him weather the unrest, which included a third unsuccessful coup, but in 1987 he died from brain cancer, and was replaced by his chosen successor, Ali Saïbou.

Saïbou immediately embarked on a process of constitution-making. In 1989 he formed a new political organisation called the Mouvement National pour une Société de Développement (MNSD), simultaneously enforcing Kountché’s ban on political parties. He then stood as the sole candidate for presidential election (all in the name of national unity of course!) and surprisingly, he won.

Nigeriens were keenly aware of the political changes sweeping West Africa and mass student demonstrations and worker strikes were held in 1990, protesting about Saïbou’s fictitious democracy. After security forces killed several demonstrators at Niamey University, public outcry forced a reluctant Saïbou to convene a national conference in 1991. The resulting interim government ruled until the first multiparty elections in 1993, which made Mahamane Ousmane the country’s first Hausa head of state.

His democratic reign was short-lived. A military junta, led by Colonel Ibrahim Bare Mainassara, staged a successful coup in January 1996. Elections held in July were won by Mainassara – hardly surprising considering

TUAREG REBELLION

Being a minority in Niger has put the Tuareg at a serious disadvantage when it comes to getting their fair share of the respective national budgets, and they have been marginalised politically and economically. Their difficulties were compounded by the droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, which decimated livestock and altered the lives of these traditionally nomadic herders. Meanwhile, increasing desertification and population growth thrust them into conflict with other pastoral groups such as the Arabs and Fulani.

In 1992 the Nigerien Tuareg raided a police post at Tchintabaradene, an action reflecting their frustration over the lack of assistance given to Tuaregs recently returned from Algeria and the misappropriation of funds promised them following Saïbou’s accession. They also sought the right for Tuareg children to learn Tamashek in schools. Brutal government reprisals followed, sparking a protracted conflict in which hundreds of rebels, police and civilians were killed.

The Tuareg demanded a federal country, with an autonomous Tuareg region in the north. During the conflict, the government banned travel in Niger’s north and closed its main border with Algeria, halting the tourist flow across one of the Sahara’s oldest routes and stifling tourism.

In early 1994, the Tuareg Front de Libération de l’Air et l’Azouack (FLAA) and Front de Libération Tamouist (FLT) reached an uneasy truce. A peace accord was signed in 1995 after the government and the Organisation de la Résistance Armée (ORA), representing the Tuareg groups, met in Ouagadougou. Although peace was signed with the last rebel group in 1998, discontent still simmers among the Tuareg today. Their biggest frustration is still the complete lack of government funding and education in Tuareg regions.

he’d dissolved the independent election commission and confined his main opponents to house arrest.

In 1999, during widespread strikes and economic stagnation, the commander of the presidential guard assassinated Mainassara. The prime minister described the death, without any apparent irony, as ‘an unfortunate accident’. The coup leader, Major Daoud Mallam Wanke, quickly re-established democracy and peaceful elections were held in late 1999. Mamadou Tandja was elected with over 59% of the vote. In the 113-seat national assembly (with only one female MP), Mamadou forged a coalition majority with supporters of former President Ousmane.

Niger Today

To state the obvious, Niger is truly struggling. Even before the devastating food crisis of 2005, Niger ranked last on the UN’s Human Development Index, a statistic based on life-expectancy, infant mortality, health and education. Sadly, Niger also ranked last on the UN’s Human Poverty Index and Gender-Related Development Index.

The one bright spot in recent years is the impressive transition from military to democratic rule. On July 24 2004 the first-ever successful municipal elections were held to select members of 265 local councils. A

part of the ongoing decentralisation process, these councils will assume many administrative powers from the government. The municipal elections were followed by the second presidential elections in November 2004. Mamadou was re-elected president with 65% of the vote and his coalition party took 88 of the National Assembly’s 113 seats.

THE CULTURE The National Psyche

Although arguably the poorest people in the world, Nigeriens are a proud bunch, quick with welcoming smiles and occasional spontaneous acts of generosity. Similarly refreshing is their willingness to stay and work to improve their nation, unlike citizens of some African countries, who admit they’d jump at the first chance to emigrate.

Although over 90% of the population is devoutly Muslim, the government is steadfastly secular and Islam takes on a more relaxed public persona here than in other countries with similar demographics. Women don’t cover their faces, alcohol is quietly consumed by many and some Tuareg, recognising the harsh dictates of desert life, even ignore the annual Ramadan fast. The area around Maradi is the exception, with Muslims calling for Islamic conservatism and the imposition of Islamic Sharia law.

Slavery has long been part of Niger's culture and remarkably it was only outlawed in May 2003. However, human rights groups believe at least 43,000 Nigeriens still live in subjugation. Besides temporarily imprisoning those leading the fight against slavery, the government strictly denies the problem exists, claiming members of the lowest caste are simply mistaken for slaves.

Daily Life

Above all, Islam plays the greatest role in Nigeriens' daily life, shaping beliefs and thoughts. Yet little of this is visible to the visitor. The one exception is at *salat* (prayer), when the country grinds to a halt at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and night-fall – buses and bush taxis will break their journeys to partake.

Religion aside, survival occupies the vast majority of Nigeriens' days. About 90% of the population make their tenuous living from agriculture and livestock, with the majority living on less than US\$1 per day. Having numerous children to help with the burdening workload is a necessity for many families, a fact contributing to the rising population. For the majority of children, their youth is spent working and not studying – only 35% of boys and 21% of girls attend primary school, which leads to staggering adult ill-

literacy rates (only 7% of women and 21% of men are literate) and sentences further generations to a life in the fields.

Family life is further complicated by widespread polygamy and, more recently, urbanisation drawing men away from their families to seek work. The 2005 food crisis highlighted this phenomenon, when aid workers found numerous wives and children starving because their granaries, while stocked with sorghum and millet, were locked by long-absent fathers and husbands. Traditionally in polygamist families the head of the household controls the family produce, while his wives must each fend for themselves and their children using only a small plot of land received at marriage.

The Tuareg, meanwhile, are effectively monogamous, and women enjoy greater independence, owning their own livestock and spending the income on themselves, while men must provide for the home.

Population

With a growth rate of around 3%, Niger's population has grown from 6.6 million in 1985 to 12.8 million in 2006, and is expected to reach a staggering 21.4 million in 2025. An astounding 49% of the population is less than 15 years of age. Currently, 23% of the population lives in urban areas,

though this number is steadily rising and is expected to reach 35% by 2025.

More than 90% of the population lives in the south, mostly in the southwest. The south's population is dominated by the Hausa, who make up 56% of the country's populace, and the Songhai-Djerma, who are centred on the Niger River and comprise 22% of Niger's population. The next-largest groups are the traditionally nomadic Fulani (8.5%) and Tuareg (8%), both found in Niger's north, and the Kanuri (4.3%), located between Zinder and Chad. The remaining 1.2% is made up of the Gourmantché in the south and the Toubou and Arabs in the north.

SPORT

Traditional wrestling, which intriguingly incorporates numerous Nigerien cultural elements like the use of prayers, poems and the wearing of grigri (charms), is overwhelmingly popular. Unfortunately it only occurs several times a year.

Camel racing is a favourite Tuareg sport. The usual routine involves a champion riding off into the desert with a woman's indigo scarf. Competitors ride in hot pursuit and whomever successfully grabs the scarf, wins. During the race, women decked out in their best silver jewellery cheer on the riders, singing and clapping to the sound of drums.

RELIGION

Over 90% of the population is Muslim and a small percentage of urban dwellers are Christian. A few rural communities still practice traditional animist religions.

Due to the strong influence of Nigeria's Islamic community in southern Niger, there's a minority of Muslims in areas like Maradi calling for Islamic conservatism and the imposition of Islamic Sharia law.

ARTS

The best-known artisans must be the Tuareg silversmiths, who produce a wide range of necklaces, striking square amulets and ornamental silver daggers, complete with leather hilts. In a Muslim country, the most unusual items are the stylised silver crosses, each with intricate filigree designs, that represent towns and regions boasting significant Tuareg populations. The most famous cross is the *Croix d'Agadez*. Tuareg see the

crosses as powerful talismans that protect against ill-fortune and the evil eye.

The leatherwork of the *artisans du cuir*, found in Zinder, is also particularly well regarded. They produce traditional items such as saddle-bags, cushions and tasselled pouches (which hang from mens' necks and carry tobacco or money), along with attractive modern items like sandals, backpacks and briefcases.

Beautifully unique to Niger are the vibrant Djerma blankets, or *kountas*, produced from patterns of bright cotton strips.

Although most Nigerien music remains traditional, there are some artists breaking moulds. Quickly gaining an international reputation is Mamar Kasse, a nine-piece band playing what the BBC call 'the most infectiously breezy, life-affirming slice of Afropop you're likely to hear'.

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

Niger is West Africa's second-largest country and is landlocked 650km from the sea. The Niger River, Africa's third-longest river, flows through 300km of the country's southwest.

It's debatable whether Niger's most remarkable landscapes are the Air Mountains' dark volcanic formations, which rise more than 2000m and culminate in the Bagzane peaks, or the Ténéré Desert's spectacularly sweeping sand dunes.

Wildlife

In desert regions, camels are the most common animal visitors will see, but gazelle herds still exist in remote areas (dorcas gazelle being the most common) and nocturnal fennecs (small foxes with large ears) are occasionally glimpsed. If you spot a Saharan cheetah, buy a lottery ticket the minute you get home because you're one lucky...

Besides Kouré's graceful giraffes (p594) and the hippos bobbing in the Niger River, there are few other animals of note that you'll bump into. That is of course, only if you don't delve into Parc Régional du W (p596).

National Parks

Niger hosts one of West Africa's better national parks, Parc Régional du W (p596). Its dry savanna environment straddles the Niger River and welcomes everything from

SUFFER THE CHILDREN...

Niger's statistics are suitably dire for what is arguably the world's poorest country. The indicators are particularly horrifying for children under five: the infant mortality rate is 131 per 1000 live births; 40% are stunted; 16% are badly malnourished; 40% are underweight; and one-fourth of Niger's children die before they reach the age of five. Studies in villages around Niamey have revealed that micronutrient deficiencies in pregnant women and school children are rife – 60% are anaemic (iron deficient) and iodine deficient. Vitamin A deficiency – the cause of xerophthalmia (night blindness) – is also widespread.

Further facts highlight the desperate situation – maternal mortality is one in 62, compared with one in 11,000 in developed countries; each woman has, on average, 7.9 children; only 16% of the births are aided by trained health workers (and only in Niamey); in rural areas there is little or no prenatal or postnatal care; some 40% of women have given birth by the age of 17; and only 7% of those most at risk for HIV use contraception.

The problems are compounded by the drought cycle that regularly ravages the region. Urban migration has also decimated rural communities and led to dislocated populations of urban poor living without adequate infrastructure on city fringes.

Meagre government resources, drained by the country's crippling foreign debt, have failed to cope. Hopefully the massive international debt-relief packages announced in 2005 will allow the government to start providing basic medicines and preventative health programs. Currently, the failure to take preventative measures against diseases such as measles, meningitis and malaria claims the majority of children.

elephants, hippos and antelopes to lions, leopards and cheetahs.

The astounding Air Mountains (p608) and western section of the Ténéré Desert (p609) have also been designated as the Réserve Naturelle Nationale de l'Air et du Ténéré.

Environmental Issues

Today, two-thirds of Niger is desert and the rest is Sahel (the semidesert zone south of the Sahara). Desertification, Niger's greatest environmental problem, is primarily due to overgrazing and deforestation. Adding to the woes is the abundant quartz-rich sand, which is unsuitable for high-yield crops and prevents anchoring of topsoil, causing erosion.

Community-based projects continue, with limited success, to facilitate reforestation by encouraging villagers to build windbreaks and establish nurseries. Irrigation projects in the north have also brought life back to once-barren soil, with the village of Azad now among those supplying Agadez with fruit.

To help rebuild livestock herds (after they were decimated by the droughts in the early 1990s) and generate income, one aid scheme 'loans' young goats to farmers to tend until the animals mature and reproduce. The animals' offspring are then 'repaid' to the aid scheme. However, it's a fragile balancing act to prevent herds from growing beyond the land's carrying capacity.

FOOD & DRINK

Niger's traditional food is not much to get excited about. Dates, yogurt, rice and mutton are standard northern fare among the Tuareg, while rice with sauce is the most common southern dish. Standard fare at restaurants is grilled fish or chicken with chips, or beef brochettes and rice. Couscous and ragoût are also popular. Niamey boasts Niger's best restaurants, with Chinese, French, Italian and even Japanese selections. Outside the capital vegetarian options are fairly limited.

Tapwater in the cities is generally safe, as are the bags of chilled water sold by children. If they don't float your boat, bottled water and soft drinks are everywhere. Sitting for a cup of Tuareg tea is as rewarding as it's thirst quenching.

To put a little wobble in your step, try the local Bière Niger. For a serious wobble dive into some palm wine.

NIAMEY

pop 795,000

Set on the Niger River's lush shores and home to culinary delights unparalleled elsewhere in Niger, Niamey can be a breath of fresh air for those arriving from the Sahel's wilds and a laid-back place to recharge the batteries. Conversely, it can feel like the end of the earth – in summer the dust never settles and, as the capital of one of the world's poorest countries it can be a desperate place, where Africa's pain is everywhere on show.

Since becoming the capital, Niamey has experienced fantastic growth – from around 2000 people in the 1930s to almost 800,000 today. Although smart government buildings do rise from town's centre (a reminder of uranium's past sky-high prices), Niamey still has a traditional African ambience that gives the city its charm.

Dive into the markets, peruse the national museum, take a pirogue along the river or simply enjoy a riverside drink at sunset and watch silhouettes of loping, laden camels crossing Kennedy Bridge.

ORIENTATION

Niamey is quite spread out, which means a bit more walking than in other Sahel capitals. The street pattern can be confusing, but thankfully street signs now aid navigation.

Crisscrossing through the hub of town like spokes on a wheel – and home to numerous restaurants, bars and banking facilities – are Rue du Président Heinrich Lubké, Ave de la Mairie and Rue du Commerce.

One of Niamey's major thoroughfares is Ave de l'Amitié/Route de l'Aéroport, which links Kennedy Bridge with the airport and the Niger's only highway heading east across the country. Another is Blvd de l'Indépendance, which heads northwest out of town towards Tillabéri, Ayorou and Mali. Cutting through the town centre, and linking the aforementioned thoroughfares, is the Rue de la Copro and Blvd de la Liberté.

INFORMATION

Cultural Centres

American Cultural Centre (☎ 73 31 79; Rue de la Tapoa; ☹ 8am–4.30pm Mon–Fri) A comfortable place to catch US TV news and newspapers. They also screen movies at 4.30pm on Wednesday and Friday.

Centre Culturel Franco-Nigérien (☎ 73 48 34; www.ccf.n.eg; Rue du Musée; ☹ 9am–12.30pm & 3.30pm–6.30pm Wed–Sat, 3.30–6.30pm Tue & 9am–noon Sun) Besides the library there's a busy schedule of lectures, exhibits, dance and theatre. It also screens excellent films on various days at 8.30pm (CFA500), and offers Internet access.

Centre Culturel Oumarou Ganda (☎ 74 09 03; Ave de l'Islam; ☹ hours vary) Often closed, this centre sponsors a variety of African cultural activities that include traditional wrestling, dancing, local films, concerts and art exhibitions.

Internet Access

Cyber @ Bebito (Blvd de l'Indépendance; per hr CFA500; ☹ 8am–midnight) A handy option for those staying in west Niamey.

Cyber Etoile (Rue de Souvenir; per hr CFA600; ☹ 9am–10pm Mon–Sat & 3–10pm Sun) Located within the Immeuble Sonara II complex.

Centre Culturel Franco-Nigérien (Rue du Musée) Although closed during our visit, it's usually a good surfing option.

Photo-adc (off Rond-point Maourey; per hr CFA1000; ☹ 8am–9.30pm Mon–Sat & 10am–7pm Sun; ☹) Town's fastest connections. Using USB they burn images to CD (per session CFA1500).

Pl@net Cyber Cafe (Blvd de Mali Béro; per hr CFA500; ☹ 8am–midnight) Cheap, fast and handy for those staying in Niamey's northeast. Bring water – it gets rather toasty in here.

Laundry

Most accommodation options happily transform stinky cardboard-stiff items into the clothes you remember and love. Prices start from CFA100 per T-shirt and CFA200 for trousers.

Media

The widely available local French-language newsheet *Le Sahel* offers little real news, but details events taking place in town.

Medical Services

Clinique Alissa (☎ 72 57 66; Ave du Président Kalt Casten; ☹ 24hr) A convenient, efficient and quality clinic with laboratory and emergency services.

Clinique de Gamkalé (☎ 73 20 33; Corniche de Gamkalé; ☹ 8.30am–12.30pm & 3.30–6.30pm Mon–Fri, 8.30am–12.30pm Sat) Consultations cost CFA11,000. Emergency services are open 24 hours.

Nouvelle Poly-Clinic Pro-Santé (☎ 72 26 50; Ave du Général de Gaulle; ☹ 24hr) A respected local clinic. Consultations cost between CFA3000 and CFA5000.

Pharmacie El Nasr (☎ 73 47 72; Rue du Président Heinrich Lubké)

Pharmacie du Grand Marché (☎ 73 40 78; Blvd de la Liberté)

Tafadeck (☎ 73 20 34; Rue du Président Heinrich Lubké) Behind the tooth-shaped entrance sits Niamey's best dentist.

Money

BIA-Niger (Rue du Commerce) The best option for painlessly changing travellers cheques (1.6% commission), euros, US dollars and pounds sterling. Visa cash advances cost CFA10,000 per transaction. Western Union transfers are also available.

Eco Bank (Blvd de la Liberté; ☹ 8.30am–3.30 Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat, 9am–3pm Sun) There's a painful CFA10,000 commission for changing a US\$100 travellers cheque, but changing cash is free. There's also a branch in Hôtel Gaweye (Ave Mitterrand) which offers credit card advances (2% commission).

Hôtel Gaweye (Ave Mitterrand; ☹ 24hr) The hotel's front desk will change cash and travellers cheques for a hefty 5% commission.

Post

Grande Poste (Rue de la Grande Poste) Home to Niamey's poste restante service.

Plateau Poste (Place de la République) Simply stamps and franks here.

Telephone & Fax

Dozens of private telecentres now dot Niamey's streets. International calls cost CFA150 for each 10-second block. Some charge nothing for incoming calls.

Grande Poste (Rue de la Grande Poste) A three-minute call to Europe costs about CFA5000 (the minimum charge). Subsequent minutes cost CFA1600. There's a handy and free 'fax restante' service – have faxes sent to ☎ 73 44 70.

Photo-adc (off Rond-point Maourey; ☹ 8am–9.30pm Mon–Sat & 10am–7pm Sun) Offer cheap international calls of variable quality over the Internet. A call to a landline in Europe is CFA200 per minute.

Tourist Information

ONT (☎ 73 24 47; Rue de Président Heinrich Lubké; ☹ 8am–noon & 3.30–6.30pm Mon–Fri) Besides dusty brochures, you'll get little help here.

Travel Agencies

Niger-Car Voyages (☎ 73 23 31; nicarvoy@intnet.ne; Ave de l'Afrique) The best, albeit most expensive, agency in Niamey for tours. Their tours include Filingué and Baleyara, Ayorou, pirogue journeys, the giraffes at Kouré and Parc Régional du W. Prices plummet if there's six or more of you.

NIAMEY

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SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

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Point-Afrique (☎ 73 40 26; www.point-afrique.com; Rue du Sahel) This charter airline now also offers reasonably priced packaged trips from Agadez into the Ténére and Air Mountains.

Satguru Travels and Tours Service (☎ 73 69 31; stts-nim@inetnet.ne; Rue de la Copro) Looking for air tickets? Look no further.

Visa Extensions

Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire (☎ 73 37 43, ext 249; Rue de Président Heinrich Lubké). Niger visa extensions available, for further details see p615.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Thanks to Niger's bleak economy, crime levels have increased. That said, the difference between crime in Niamey and Nairobi (Nairobi) is still vast. In the day, market pickpockets are your only worry. At night, as you would in most big cities, avoid carrying valuables openly and don't walk down dark and deserted streets. One area to avoid after dark is Kennedy Bridge and its surrounds, as there have been reported muggings. Seeing the ancient monster croc at Niamey's museum should be enough to keep you out of the Niger River! If that doesn't dissuade you, know that hippos kill more humans than any other wild animal in Africa.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Markets

GRANDE MARCHÉ
Wade through the chaos that is the exterior of the **Grand Marché** (Blvd de la Liberté; ☎ 8am-6pm) and dive into the labyrinth of narrow lanes shaded by a kaleidoscope of tattered sheets. Although it's hard to ignore the heady aroma of spices, piles of colourful clothes, boisterous vendors and steady torrent of local shoppers, if you manage to find a good hiding spot the market is a wonderful place to observe Nigeriens interacting – peace amid the pandemonium. And when you jump back into the stream of shoppers, remember the trade-off for the lack of elbow room is the bustling African ambience!

PETIT MARCHÉ

The **Petit Marché** (Ave de la Mairie; ☎ 8am-6pm) is right in the centre of town and also merits a visit. Shoppers can go mad, squeezing fruit and veg to their hearts content in this market. Watch where your wallet is when you're ogling the wares, as pickpockets are rife.

Musée National du Niger

This sprawling museum (☎ 73 43 21; Rue du Musée; admission CFA1000, camera/video fee CFA1000/5000; ☎ 9am-noon & 3.30-5.30pm Tue-Sun) is one of West Africa's standouts. Numerous themed pavilions, each tipping their hat to Hausa architecture, give visitors a peek into Niger's history. The Pablo Toucet pavilion displays the dress of Niger's different ethnic groups – a quick way to train the eye for differentiating these groups as you travel in Niger. While common sense and science dictate that there are no 2m-tall, 15m-long crocodiles wandering the earth today, one jaw-dropping glimpse of the Boubou Hana pavilion's 100 million-year-old *Sarcosuchus imperator*, or 'Super Croc', and you'll be second guessing everything – chilling indeed! Oddly, similarly aged dinosaur skeletons (with comparably sized teeth) in the Palaeontology/Prehistory pavilion don't elicit any similar irrational fears, only thoughts of these past creatures' majesty. Nearby, anchored in concrete, is the infamous Arbre de Ténééré (see p610).

At the museum's **artisans' centre** (☎ 8am-6.30pm Tue-Sun), you can watch the creative process and purchase silver, leather and other items direct from artists.

The least appealing aspect of the museum is the depressing **zoo** (☎ 8am-6.30pm Tue-Sun), where lethargic and neurotic animals are kept in appallingly cramped conditions.

Grande Mosquée

Rising above eastern Niamey is this impressive **mosque** (Ave de l'Islam), with its massive minaret and bulbous green dome. Everything from the elaborately carved exterior wooden doors to the interior's 16 ornate pillars and grand tiled dome were financed by CFA500 million of Libyan money. If you linger outside, someone will offer you a short tour (CFA2000 is fair). The view and breeze atop the minaret are well worth the dizzying 171 steps to get there.

Pirogue Trips

There's no better way to experience the Niger River than from aboard a peaceful pirogue skimming its surface at sunset. Although numerous 'guides' in town offer just such a trip, your cheapest option is to visit the piroguers themselves, on the riverfront between Palais du Congrès and La Flottile restaurant. After negotiating, four-passenger

NIAMEY'S 'ALMOST' OLYMPIC POOL

Why is the Piscine Olympique D'Etat in Niamey known as the 'almost' Olympic pool? Well, it turns out the builders humorously and infamously forgot to take into account the width of the tiles, thus making the pool's length about a centimetre short of the compulsory 50m! Today the pool sits dejected and drained of its liquid assets... sadly another Olympic dream falls short.

punted pirogues should cost about CFA2000 per person per hour – triple that if you want a motorised boat. If negotiating isn't your bag, **Niger-Car Voyages** (☎ 73 23 31; Ave de l'Afrique; ☎ 7.30am-noon & 3.30-6pm) runs hour-long trips for CFA5000 per person.

For more adventure, and some hippo action, you can hire a pirogue in Boubou for the two-hour trip downstream to Niamey (see p593 for more details).

Swimming

Beat the midday heat with some underwater action at **Hôtel Gaweye** (Ave Mitterrand; admission CFA2500), Niamey's best pool, complete with deck chairs to go with river views. **Grand Hôtel** (Rond-point Grand Hôtel; admission CFA2000) is a close second, while the tiny pool at **Home-land Hotel** (☎ 72 32 82; off Ave du Général de Gaulle; admission CFA2000) and the streetside pool at **Hôtel Ténééré** (Blvd de la Liberté; admission CFA1500) are a very distant third and fourth respectively.

Bat Colony

Unless you're new to town, you'll have seen the huge fruit bats (looking like flying dogs) soaring in the sky each evening. To get a closer look at these massive bats in the daylight, head towards Place de la République along Ave de la Mairie – you'll find thousands of them hanging, snoozing and squeaking in the trees lining the compound of Banque Centrale de l'Afrique de l'Ouest. At sunset it's a hive of activity. Guano anyone?

COURSES

The **Centre Culturel Franco-Nigérien** (☎ 73 48 34; www.ccfn.ne; Rue du Musée) occasionally offers short-term language courses. If no courses are running, it's still the best place to find tutors for your burgeoning French and Hausa skills.

TOURS

Although there are no organised tours of the city itself, Niamey is the best place to arrange tours of Filingué (p595), Baleyara (p595), Ayrou (p594), the giraffes at Kouré (p593) and Parc Régional du W (p596). **Niger-Car Voyages** (☎ 73 23 31; Ave de l'Afrique) offer these tours, as do countless local 'guides' (they'll find you). Prices are steep and range from CFA40,000 to CFA90,000 per day (one to six people).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Of Niger's many festivals, the only one centred in Niamey is Hangandi. See the boxed text on below for more weighty details.

SLEEPING

Vacancies come at a premium in Niamey, especially at budget options, so make reservations early.

Budget

Chez Tatayi (☎ 74 12 81; www.tatayi.com; Ave de l'Entente; dm CFA5000, s/d with shared bathroom from CFA12,000/15,000; ☎ ☎) This peaceful haven near the Wadata Autogare has everything in spades. Behind the shady garden veranda are spotless rooms, a small stash of books (albeit in French), board games and free drinking water. Guests can even use the fridge. Shared bathrooms (the one in the dorm is amusingly quirky) and pesky mosquitos are the only downsides, though each and every bed has its own mozzie net. For air-con add CFA4000.

Village Chinoise (☎ 72 33 98; Blvd du Zarmaganda; tw with shared bathroom CFA5000-7000; ☎ ☎) These bare-bones rooms are clean enough and the more expensive options have air-con. Bathrooms (get ready for some porcelain jockey action – no toilet seats) are shared between two rooms. It's nestled north of Stade Général Seyni Kountché.

SUPERSIZE ME!

During rare years of bountiful harvests, Niamey's Djerma population celebrate with the renowned Hangandi festival. Although the festivities are good fun, it's really the reputation of the festival's beauty contest that keeps on growing and growing, much like its competitors. For this is no ordinary beauty contest. You see, in the eye of the Djerma beholder, the larger a woman is the more magnificent she becomes. So in the months leading up to Hangandi, beautiful Djerma women who've been chosen to compete (some plucked right off buses!) train by ingesting as much millet, milk and water as they possibly can. The festival culminates with the heaviest, and thus most gorgeous, woman being crowned at the Palais du Congrès. Her reward? Much public admiration and...more food!

Camping Touristique (☎ 75 44 89; Blvd des Sy et Mamar; camping per person CFA2500, plus per vehicle CFA1000; ☎) This dusty site in western Niamey is the only option for campers. While it's a long walk (or CFA200 in a shared taxi) to town, it may be a very short walk to take a dip – during our visit a new complex being built next door was rumoured to have a cool pool.

The following two quality options are available only to volunteers and NGO employees:

AFVP Rest House (☎ 75 30 69; off Ave des Zarmakoye; dm CFA4000; ☎)

Mission Catholique (☎ 73 32 03; Ave du Gountou Yena; d with fan/air-con CFA7000/10,000; ☎ ☎)

Midrange

Hôtel Terminus (☎ 73 26 92; hotermi@intnet.ne; Rue du Sahel; r/ste CFA32,000/45,000; ☎ ☎ ☎) Just south of town centre, clean comfy bungalows here host large sunny rooms, with TVs and gargantuan bathrooms. There's a pleasant restaurant and separate bar whose TV is trained to follow French footy. It's popular with tour groups.

Hôtel les Rôniers (☎ 72 31 38; Rue Tondibia; s/tw CFA22,500/25,500; ☎ ☎) Bright rooms, with cool tiled floors and oddly contemporary bathrooms, are found beneath the thatched conical roofs of Rôniers' great traditional cottages. The garden is lovely, the restaurant's great and the swimming pool is rather hip. The only setback is its location, 7km west of town (CFA1000 by taxi).

Hôtel du Sahel (☎ 73 24 31; fax 73 20 98; Rue du Sahel; s/d CFA25,500/28,500; ☎ ☎) Le Sahel has comfortable and clean rooms, though at this price we'd hope all toilets had seats. The odd numbered rooms have great river views and don't cost a penny more. Renovations were underway when we visited (perhaps

new toilet seats!), and some new bungalows were being built. The terrace overlooking the river is great at sunset. Unfortunately it's a 15-minute walk from town through an area noted for robberies.

Hôtel Maourey (☎ 73 28 50; Rond-point Maourey; s/tw/ste CFA25,000/30,000/35,000; 🍷) Although perfectly set in the heart of town, rooms are on the dark side and some are musty thanks to the old carpeting – check out a few.

Hôtel Ténére (☎ 73 20 20; hotenere@intnet.ne; Blvd de la Liberté; s/d CFA30,250/37,550; 🍷 🍷) A large section of this place was being gutted by renovations during our visit, so hopefully the shabby rooms with ripe carpets and dog-eared bathrooms will now be a thing of the past. Rooms new and old contain satellite TVs and fridges.

Top End

Grand Hôtel (☎ 73 26 41; www.grandhotelniger.com; Rond-point du Grand Hôtel; s/d/ste from CFA49,500/59,500/60,000; 🍷 🍷 🍷) While Hôtel Gaweye's socks fall down and its prices rise, Grand Hôtel continues to provide attentive service, value for money and top-notch rooms that boast satellite TVs and lovely river views. The swimming pool is great and the terrace is perfect for a meal, a beer or just taking in the sunset.

Homeland Hotel (☎ 72 32 82; homeland@intnet.ne; off Ave du Général de Gaulle; r/ste CFA45,500/75,500; 🍷 🍷) Opened in 2004, Homeland has moderately-sized, spotless rooms with gleaming tile floors, colourful throw rugs, satellite TVs and modern bathrooms. All that it's missing is a riverside location.

Hôtel Gaweye (☎ 72 27 10; gaweye@intnet.ne; Ave Mitterrand; r with city/river view CFA85,000/90,000, ste from CFA119,000; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Built next to the Palais du Congrès during the uranium boom, this towering riverside complex was long the jewel of Niamey's hotels. While it's still comfortable, the rising prices, slipping standards and indifferent service have made it a bit of a sad joke these days. It accepts Amex and Diners Club, but adds a surcharge of 5%.

EATING

Whether wielding chop sticks in a fresh sashimi and sushi feeding frenzy, using your hands to devour a delicious pizza or using your pearly whites to pluck smoking meat off streetside brochettes, you and your stomach will enjoy your time in Niamey.

African & Middle Eastern

Byblos (Blvd de l'Indépendance; meals CFA2500-5000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This great Lebanese restaurant, with thatched garden pavilions and open-air ambience, has some of the best tabbouleh and hummus in Niger. It's on the pricey side, but its large set meals for two people (CFA10,000) are decent value.

La Flottile (Corniche de Yantala; meals CFA2500-3800; 🍷 lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) The shady garden confines of this friendly restaurant, west of Palais du Congrès, are a perfect place to indulge in some of the Niger River's tastiest fish. The *capitaine* (Nile perch) is excellent. It's not safe to walk here after sunset, so organise a taxi.

Maquis 2000 (cnr St 19 & St 26; meals CFA2500-5800; 🍷 lunch Sun, dinner daily) This Ivorian-style open-air restaurant has a varied menu including *brochette de capitaine*, *crevette grillé* (grilled prawns) and, if you're game, *agouti braisé* (grilled grasscutter rat).

Restaurant Kara Noreyui (Rue du Festival; meals CFA700-1500; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This tiny eatery serves up some decent Senegalese dishes and is popular with locals.

Le Djinkounmé (Ave du Fleuve Niger; meals CFA1000-4000; 🍷 lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) A welcoming place for a simple, yet memorable, African meal.

Asian

Le Dragon d'Or (Rue de Grand Hôtel; meals CFA1700-5400; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Slurp delicious Vietnamese *pho* (a noodle soup with coriander, bean sprouts and beef), sharpen your teeth on frog legs, or work your chopstick magic on tasty stir-fried chicken with cashew nuts and fresh ginger. The Saturday night buffet (CFA8000) is also superb.

Bada Restaurant (Ave du Général de Gaulle; meals CFA3000-15,000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Put your chop sticks in the kung fu position and go to battle with everything from tempura vegetables and roasted eel to fresh sashimi and sushi. When we arrived, three of Niamey's temporary Japanese contingent were leaving, oh so happy and full as eggs.

Le Shanghai (Blvd de Mali Bero; meals CFA1700-5400; 🍷 lunch & dinner) While Le Shanghai's Chinese and Vietnamese cuisine is of a similarly high standard to that of Le Dragon d'Or, it lacks the same garden ambience.

Chez Chin (Blvd de l'Indépendance; meals CFA2000-6500; 🍷 lunch & dinner) With options like tender chicken in sesame paste and steaming

dumplings, this is a great choice for Chinese cuisine.

La Colline Parfumé (Blvd de l'Indépendance; meals CFA1500-3250; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This diminutive place serves up a mix of Asian fare, ranging from flavourful beef curries to spring rolls and ginger chicken.

European

Le Pilier (Rue de la Tapoa; meals CFA3000-6500; 🍷 lunch & dinner Wed-Mon; 🍷) Hands down, this is the place for fine Italian fare. Enjoy a plethora of pastas, ranging from various raviolis to lasagne and even gnocchi dripping in gorgonzola. Dine in their air-con equipped lounge, within the vibrant courtyard terrace, or downstairs in the Taverne (evenings only), which serves great pizza.

Hôtel les Rôniers (Rue Tondibia; meals CFA2100-4100; 🍷 dinner) This hotel's lovely pebble-floored garden dining area is as memorable as their fresh fish, fine French fare and Moroccan sausages.

Le Pizzeria (Rue du Commerce; pizzas from CFA3000; 🍷 dinner; 🍷) The pizzas are excellent – a bit pricey, but they're much larger than what you'll get elsewhere. It's in the heart of town and is a good place to line the stomach before dancing the night away.

Chocolat Raffine (Rue NB 29; meals CFA1200-3000; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This café's menu is laden with French treats like *croque monsieur*, *crêpes* and *chocolat mousse*. While most hit their mark, others remind you that you're in Niamey and not Paris. It's often closed for short periods during the day.

La Cascade (Rue NB 29; meals CFA1800-4500; 🍷 lunch Tue-Sun, dinner daily; 🍷) With friendly service and great Italian, French and Lebanese fare, this restaurant is justifiably popular with expats, travellers and well-to-do locals. We'll let you decide which is cheesier, the delicious pizza or the artificial waterfall...

Le Diamangou (Corniche de Gamkalé; meals CFA2200-3000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Put aside your fear and grumbling insides to walk the plank out to this established boat restaurant. The views can't be beat, and the lemon chicken and other fare aren't bad either. Like La Flottile, this place isn't in the safest neck of the woods, so arrange a taxi after sunset.

Grand Hôtel (Rond-point du Grand Hôtel; buffet CFA7000; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🍷) For a fabulous midday feast this hotel's renowned buffet can't be beat.

Quick Eats

The best place for really cheap food on the go is around the Petit Marché, where street stalls and basic eating houses serve *riz sauce* (rice with meat or chicken) for around CFA500. Until 9am they also serve up Nescafé, bread and fried-egg sandwiches for less than CFA500. The food stalls on Rond-point Yantala are similar.

In the late evening along the disco strip of Rue du Commerce, there are some great *suya* stalls (*suya* is Hausa for brochette) opposite the nightclubs; brochettes go for CFA100 a pop.

Restaurant Baobab (Ave de Maourey; meals CFA600-2500; 🍷 lunch & dinner) A short walk from the Grand Marché, this Senegalese place is perfect for a pre- or post-shopping feed. It's usually packed with locals, so share a table and practice your French.

Les Delices (Blvd de l'Indépendance; pastries from CFA350; 🍷 6am-midnight) This is Niamey's top patisserie. Sink your teeth into a fresh *pain au chocolat* (heavenly), croissant or baguette.

La Cloche (Ave Luebké; meals CFA1000-3000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) When it's late and taste is secondary to hunger, the shwarmas do the trick nicely.

Guiguinya (Ave de l'Entente; meals CFA1000-2000; 🍷 dinner) While more of a nightclub than a restaurant, there's always a free chair under the stars out the back for a decent dining session.

Self-Catering

Score (Ave Luebké) Next to the Petit Marché, Score is large and loaded with French groceries like Bonne Maman jam. It also sells the cheapest chilled bottled water in town (1.5L for CFA350).

Supermarket Haddad (☎ 73 61 60; Rue de Commerce) Try to not leave nose marks on this well-stocked supermarket's cheese case, home to Edam, Brie and even Gouda with cumin seeds. Mmmmmmm...cheese!

Petit Marché (Ave de la Mairie) The best bang for your buck in the produce department. It's also more of an experience than wandering the aisles with a shopping cart!

DRINKING

Grand Hôtel (Rond-point du Grand Hôtel) Few places can beat this hotel's poolside terrace for a sunset beer – the river views are tremendous.

Hôtel du Sahel (Rue du Sahel) While lacking the posh feel of the Grand Hôtel, this hotel's

riverside terrace is another great spot for a wobbly pop (beer).

Hôtel Gaweye (Ave Mitterrand; ☎) Take a cold beverage by the riverside pool or while watching some African football on the large TV in their plush air-con-blessed bar.

Galaxy (Rue du Sahel) For a more African experience, head to this bar perched on the river behind the Piscine Olympique D'Etat (Olympic swimming pool).

Maquis Konning (nr St 24 & St 19) This open-air bar has a great vibe and is a top spot to meet locals.

ENTERTAINMENT

Nightclubs

Guiguinya (Ave de l'Entente; no cover) Belting out African and European beats, this massive place is usually packed with locals (and the odd prostitute). Tear it up beneath the strobing red lights or stick your feet in the sand and chill out under the stars and trees in the courtyard.

2005 (Ave Luebké; cover CFA1500 Wed, CFA2500 Fri & Sat) Reverberating with Western and African tunes, this lively club was the best place to cut loose on the dance floor when we were in town.

La Cloche (Ave Luebké; no cover) If you can get over the number of prostitutes and the glowing Christmas light-interior, this club (next to 2005) can be fun. There's a pool table and the music ranges from Arabic to Western.

100% Night Club (Ave de la Mairie; cover CFA1000; ☎ weekends only) This new club is trying to emulate the success of 2005 and its popularity is growing steadily.

Hi-Fi Club (Rue du Commerce; cover CFA3000 Fri & Sat) This place, which throws some reggae into the mix, can be hit or miss – have a peek inside before paying the cover.

Cinemas

You only options for cinematic distraction are the **Centre Culturel Franco-Nigérien** (Rue du Musée; admission CFA500; ☎ 8.30pm, days vary), which screens excellent French, American and African films, and the **American Cultural Center** (Rue de la Tapoa; admission free; ☎ 4.30pm Wed & Fri), which plays Hollywood flicks.

Sport

You may be lucky enough to take in a traditional wrestling match at the **Stade de la Lutte Traditionelle** (Blvd de Mali Bero) or the **Centre Cul-**

turel Oumara Ganda (☎ 74 09 03; Ave de l'Islam). We say lucky because they're quite the spectacle and only happen a handful of times a year. So keep your ear to the ground and you may just get – you guessed it – lucky!

SHOPPING

Art & Craftwork

If you're patient and peruse the nether regions of the **Grand Marché** (Blvd de la Liberté) you'll find a fine selection of goods, including Tuareg and Hausa leatherwork, silver jewelry, *batiks* and tie-dyed cloth. Look out for *les couvertures Djerma* (known locally as a *kountas*) – large, bright strips of cotton sewn together into a blanket, which are truly spectacular and unique to Niger. The largest and most extraordinary *kountas* shouldn't cost more than CFA10,000 to CFA15,000 – as always, friendly negotiations are in order!

Also recommended is the museum's **artisans' centre** (Rue du Musée; ☎ closed Mon) and **Co-opérative des Métiers d'Arts** (Rue du Musée), which is just up the road. The **artisan stalls** (Rue de Président Heinrich Lübke) south of Petit Marché are bursting with wares, but their starting prices are ridiculous.

The hand-painted pottery found at the informal **pottery market** (Ave de la Mairie) is bulky but beautiful.

Music

Original and bootlegged CDs of local and Western music can be bought at the **Grand Marché** (Blvd de la Liberté) or from stalls along Ave Luebké adjacent to the Petit Marché.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

For details of international flights to/from Niamey, see p616.

Bus

The government run bus company **SNTV** (☎ 73 30 20; sntv@intnet.ne; Ave de Gamkalé; ☎ 8.30-11.45am & 3.30-5.45pm) is still the most reliable transportation in Niger, but private companies are not far behind. Despite it being slightly more expensive than **EHGM** (☎ 74 37 16; Blvd de Mali Béro), and **Air Transport** (off Ave du Canada), which serve the same routes, SNTV is usually sold out first. Best to book at least a day in advance. All companies' buses leave between 4am and 6am. One way fares from Niamey on SNTV include the following.

Destination	Fare (CFA)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Agadez	14,310	12	Tue, Thu-Sun
Arlit	17,500	15	Tue, Thu-Sun
Birni N'Konni	6600	6	daily
Dogondoutchi	4860	4	daily
Dosso	2440	2	daily
Gaya	5950	5	daily
Maradi	9565	9	daily
Tahoua	8750	8	Tue, Thu-Sun
Zinder	12,650	12	daily

Bush Taxi

The **Wadata Autogare** (Ave du Kourfeyé) is Niamey's main transport hub for bush taxis and several vehicles leave for each destination daily. The following is a list of one-way fares for Peugeots, there estimated durations and the level of patience required for each journey.

Destination	Fare (CFA)	Duration (hr)	Patience of...
Agadez	15,100	16½	Mahatma Gandhi
Baleiyara	2000	1¼	John McEnroe
Birni N'Konni	5500	7½	David Blaine
Dogondoutchi	4400	4½	Bill Bryson
Dosso	2100	2½	Paris Hilton
Filingué	3250	2	Russel Crowe
Gaya	5000	5	Michael Palin
Maradi	9000	11	Mother Teresa
Tahoua	8000	10	The Pope
Zinder	12,400	14	Shackleton's men

Minibuses are generally more plentiful but are even slower (requiring one more level of patience than exactly the same trip in a Peugeot!). Minibuses service Agadez (CFA11,800), Birni N'Konni (CFA4400), Dogondoutchi (CFA3300), Gaya (CFA4000), Maradi (CFA8000), Tahoua (CFA7600) and Zinder (CFA11,800).

Minibuses to Ayrouou (CFA3000, four hours) via Tillabéri (CFA1900, two hours) leave from **Katoko Marché** (Blvd de l'Indépendance).

For details of getting to Burkina Faso, Benin, Mali and Nigeria, see p616.

Car

Niger-Car Voyages (☎ 73 23 31; Ave de l'Afrique) hires Toyota Corollas for a whopping CFA60,000 per day. This includes insurance, 200 free

kilometres, an obligatory chauffeur and tax. Petrol is extra (ouch!).

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

A private taxi from the airport to the city centre (12km) costs between CFA5000 and CFA10,000, depending on your bargaining powers and the time of day; going the other way costs about CFA2500. During daylight hours you could also walk from the terminal to the nearby highway and catch a shared taxi to town (CFA200).

Taxi

Taxis are abundant until about 10pm and most are shared. Share taxis simply head in the direction requested by the first passenger and troll for subsequent passengers en route. To catch one, simply hold out your arm and blurt your destination when the taxi slows. If it's going your way, you get the nod and you're only out CFA200. If not, you get the dreaded head shake and a face full of dust as it zooms on. Yes, the unofficial theme song of Niamey's shared taxis is *Are You Gonna Go My Way?* by Lenny Kravitz.

A taxi to yourself (*déplacement*) costs about CFA1000 for a trip across town.

AROUND NIAMEY

BOUBON

Although the best time to come to Boubon, 25km northwest of Niamey, is during its marvellous **Wednesday market** (keep an eye out for local pottery), its glorious riverside location means there's no wrong time to visit. Hire a pirogue for an enjoyable short excursion (around CFA5000) or pay about double that for an adventurous two-hour cruise down to Niamey's outskirts – the latter option almost guarantees you some up-close hippo action. There's no restaurant or hotel in Boubon, but accommodation and food are available at **Le Campement Touristique Boubon** (☎ 73 24 27; r CFA6000), on a nearby island, easily accessed by pirogue.

KOURÉ

About 60km east of Niamey, West Africa's last remaining **giraffe herd** (see p594) quietly munch acacia trees and patrol the baking soils around the village of Kouré. The elegant

WEST AFRICA'S LAST GIRAFFES

Don't let the gregarious giraffe herd wandering around Kouré fool you – most animal populations facing extinction are not so friendly or easy to find. Over the past few decades this herd has shrunk in size from more than 3000 giraffes down to an anaemic 50 in 1996. The threat to their existence has come from the destruction of their habitat through desertification and deforestation, as well as disease, poaching, road accidents and farmers killing them to protect their crops. It also didn't help that from April to August 1996, soldiers shot around a dozen of them while trying to carry out a presidential order to capture giraffes for presentation as gifts to friendly foreign leaders. In the late 1990s, the government of Niger and international conservation groups finally launched a campaign to save what were the last wild giraffes left in West Africa. Although the giraffe population today stands at around 150, vigilance and continued conservation efforts must continue to ensure these gorgeous and graceful giraffes live on another day.

long-necked beasts are rather tame and we spent 30 magical minutes walking in their midst. Even if you don't have a vehicle, it's an easy half-day trip from the capital in a taxi (good natured negotiations should cut the taxi price to around CFA30,000). The turn-off to the giraffes is well-marked with signs on the main highway, and there's a booth nearby where you can pick up your compulsory guide (around CFA2000) and entry ticket (CFA2000). Depending on the season, the giraffes can be right around the corner, or deep in the bush some 20km away.

NORTH OF NIAMEY

Sunday rules the roost north of Niamey. It's the day Baleyara, Filingué, Tillabéri and Ayorou burst into colourful life with their weekly markets. Tillabéri and Ayorou have the added attraction of resting on the verdant path paved by the chocolate waters of the Niger River. Each of these villages can theoretically be visited as a day trip from Niamey using bush taxis, though you'd be better off to hire a car to visit Ayorou.

TILLABÉRI

pop 19,200

Unless you have a keen interest in rice production or are here for the **Sunday market**, there's little more than **pirogue trips** on the Niger's waters to hold you in Tillabéri (also spelt Tillabéry). The village's only hotel has also long since closed. For the adventurous and patient, a passenger boat runs up to Ayorou on Friday (CFA8000; eight to 12 hours). Regular bush taxis run to Niamey's Katoko Marché (CFA1900, two hours).

AYOROU

Ayorou, on the Niger's banks just 24km south of the Mali frontier, is renowned in for its multifaceted **Sunday market**. Head to the livestock portion, near the communications tower on town's east, and witness camels, cattle, mules, sheep and goats overrunning the place, along with their fascinating nomadic Bella, Fulani and Tuareg owners. It's especially frenetic between November and April. The market's western section near the river is more subdued, but just as intoxicating. Songhai-Djerma and Mauritanian Moors gather here between the crooked acacia supports and beneath the woven mat roofs to sell everything from fruit and veg to traditional medicines and slabs of Saharan salt. Keep an eye out for colourful *Kountas* (Djerma blankets) and *sourgindis* (millet mats) as they are much cheaper here than in Niamey. The market warms up around noon, so if you arrive early watch cattle swimming across the Niger. Although guides and pirogues can be persistent around town, it's not a bad idea to hire a guide (CFA4000 per day) as they'll arrange photo permissions.

With the obvious beauty of the river, and hippos lurking nearby, a **pirogue trip** is a no-brainer. If your negotiations don't budge the boat owner's asking price of CFA5000 per person for a two-hour trip, you can always head 11km north to the village of Firgoun, where prices are much cheaper.

Sleeping & Eating

The only official option is **L'Hôtel Amenokal** (☎ 71 14 24; abdoulkatia@yahoo.fr; s/tw from CFA8000/10,000; 🚽), which has old rooms with cement floors, stained walls and sporadic running water in the bathrooms. Rooms with

air-con cost CFA4000 more per night, though prices are negotiable considering the rooms, the lack of electricity before 2pm and the absence of water in the pool. There's also a restaurant (set meals CFA5000) and anaemic bar on the premises.

Getting There & Away

There are several daily bush taxis between Niamey's Katoko Marché and Ayorou (CFA3000; four hours). Passenger boats run south to Tillabéri Sunday evening or early Monday morning (CFA8000, eight to 12 hours). Larger boats run north to Gao, Mali (CFA14,000, two days).

FILINGUÉ

pop 12,100

The 185km trip northeast to Filingué from Niamey is picturesque, with ochre mesas back-dropping endless traditional villages. For a petite village, Filingué offers up a surprisingly dynamic **Sunday market**. Wander town looking for traditional architecture, or head up the small hill for a bird's-eye view of the action and a glimpse of the parched valley, Dallol Bosso.

If you come on a Sunday, don't fail to stop in **Baleyara** (meaning 'where the Bella meet'), halfway between Niamey and Filingué. Its **Sunday market**, heavenly shaded by a canopy of trees, is equally pleasing – the animal bartering, which takes place on the town side of the market, is particularly worth seeing.

In Filingué, the rudimentary **Kourfey Bar Restaurant** (☎ 77 10 58; d with shared toilets CFA3000) is your only sleeping option. The cement rooms are a cell-like, but they are pretty clean and have fans and private showers. It's on your left as you enter town from Niamey – look for the sign across from the fort-like Red Cross building.

Regular Peugeot taxis run to Niamey's Wadata Autogare (CFA2000, two hours) along good tarmac roads. Oddly, the trip here from Niamey is CFA3250.

THE SOUTH

Seeing that it embraces the borders of Burkina Faso, Benin, Nigeria and Chad, it would be a safe bet to assume southern Niger is a diverse region. Delve into Park Regional du W (one of West Africa's better

wildlife parks), have fun saying Dogond-outchi while deep in its raucous Friday market, absorb the influx of Islam in Maradi, or just get lost wandering the myriad of alleys in Zinder's Birni Quartier – it's all up to you. A reasonable tarmac road links the entire region from west to east and makes transportation relatively painless. For details on getting into Burkina Faso, Benin, Nigeria and Chad, see p616.

DOSSO

pop 50,000

Named after 'Do-So' a Djerma spirit, Dosso is the first major settlement along the main southern road, 136km southeast of Niamey. Dosso was once an important Islamic centre and home to Djermaakoye, Djerma's most important religious leader. Being at the crossroads of Niamey, Zinder, Benin and Nigeria, Dosso is an important trading centre and its **Grand Marché** is worth peeking at.

The **Musée Regional de Dosso** (☎ 65 03 21; Route de Niamey; admission CFA500; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) is now looking rather dishevelled, with most cabinets laying empty – the only collecting going on these days is of the dust variety. More interesting is the attached **Centre Artisanal** (admission free), which offers guests the chance to see artists in action.

Sleeping & Eating

Auberge Au Zenith (☎ 50 38 80; Route de Niamey; d with shared toilet CFA6300-12,600; 🚽) The cement floored rooms are dark, but they're the tidiest in town and also have their own shower. Unfortunately the shared squat toilets are on the stinky side. There's also an attached **restaurant** (meals CFA400-1000; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) and bar, which can make it a little loud on weekends. It's about a 15-minute walk north from the *gare routière*.

Hôtel Djerma (☎ 65 02 06; Route de Gaya; d CFA12,500-16,500; 🚽) This aged, and occasionally unfriendly, hotel hides behind an old petrol station just south of the *gare routière*. While air-con is a pleasant option in all rooms, the glowing green lightbulbs and crude bathrooms aren't so endearing.

Restaurant des Arts (Route de Niamey; meals CFA500-1000; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Art it isn't, but the museum's restaurant has some of the town's best food.

Mamakli Club (meals CFA500-1500; ☎ lunch & dinner) This new garden restaurant hidden north of

the Grand Marché, with decent meals, a bar, dance floor and swimming pool (CFA500) is a glorious revelation indeed.

Cheap street food can be found along the main road, particularly at the *gare routière*. Also, at night, the road running out from opposite Hôtel Djerma is alive with gas lanterns, diesel fumes and good street food.

Getting There & Away

There are always plenty of bush taxis to Niamey (CFA2100, 2½ hours), Gaya (CFA2000, three hours) and Dogondoutchi (CFA2000, 2½ hours).

GAYA

pop 33,300

Gaya is the only border town for Benin, and one of four for Nigeria – there's no reason to linger here. You'll find a **BIA-Niger** (Route de Dosso) directly across from the autogare on the main drag, though it only changes euros and US dollars.

Hotel Hamdallah (off Route de Dosso; ☎ 68 04 68; s/d CFA12,500/13,500; 🍷) This is the best place to stay, but it's hard to find in the shadows off the main road.

Hotel Dendi (Gaya Hwy; ☎ 68 03 40; d CFA6500-10,000; 🍷) The Dendi is easier to locate, as it sits on the main drag about a 15-minute walk south from the autogare, and it gives you the option of fan or air-con. It's friendly, but shabbier than Hamdallah.

You can dine at your hotel or try **Station Bar** (Route de Dosso; meals CFA1000-2000; 🍷 lunch & dinner), which sits opposite Hotel Dendi. During the occasional evening, bugs have another reason to dance on the lights here, namely a local musician strumming in the courtyard.

Several minibuses/Peugeot taxis make daily runs to Niamey (CFA4100/4500, 5½/ five hours) via Dosso (CFA2000/2200, 2½/ three hours). For information on getting to Benin and Nigeria, see p616.

PARC REGIONAL DU W

What this excellent **national park** (adult/child CFA3500/2000; 🍷 Dec-late May) lacks in animal numbers, it makes up for in spades with the diversity of its wildlife. Antelopes, buffalos, elephants, hippos, lions, leopards, cheetahs, baboons, Nile crocodiles, hyenas, jackals, warthogs and over 300 species of migratory bird call this unique

environment home. The park rests on the west bank of the Niger River and is an area of dry savanna woodland, a transition zone between the Sahel and moister savannas to the south. The 'W' (pronounced du-blay-vay) in the name comes from the double bend in the Niger River at the park's northern border. The park is a massive 9120 sq km and straddles Niger, Benin and Burkina Faso. Niger's portion is 2200 sq km.

The best wildlife-viewing is March to May, when the migratory birds arrive and when the environment becomes incredibly barren, forcing animals to congregate around water holes. A favoured haunt of the elephants is the river near the Relais de la Tapoa (the lodge).

The entrance to the park is at La Tapoa, 145km south of Niamey, where a map and park guidebook (CFA5000) are available. Your obligatory guide should set you back CFA5000 per day.

Sleeping & Eating

Relais de la Tapoa (bookings ☎ 73 40 26; pa@intnet.ne; s/d CFA17,500/27,000, with air-con CFA20,000/31,500; 🍷 Dec-late May; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This comfortable 35-room lodge is located next to the river in the village of Tapoa. The lodge is the only official park accommodation. Rates include half-board (bed, breakfast and dinner or lunch). There's also a bar and swimming pool.

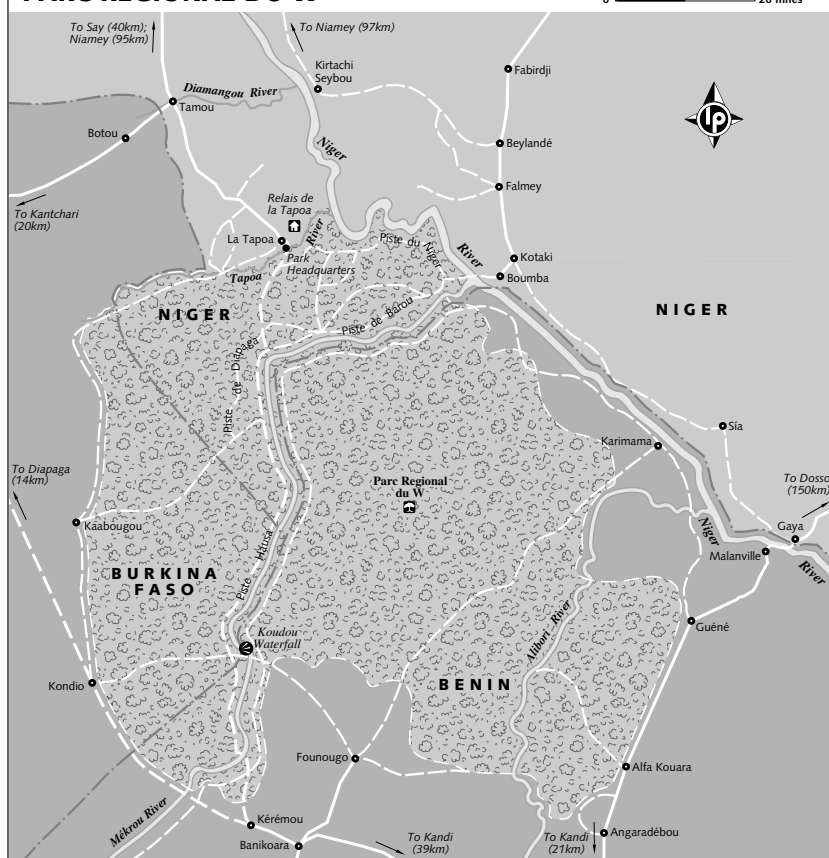
Campers have to keep their fingers crossed that the unreliable **camp site** (camping CFA2500) near the lodge is open, as camping inside the park or in one of the adjoining protected reserves is prohibited. Enquire at the lodge for more information.

Getting There & Away

Simply put, there's no point reaching the park independently without a vehicle. From Niamey by car, take the conversation-stopping washboard road 50km south to Say, and then 55km further to Tamou at the border with Burkina Faso, then 40km further south to La Tapoa.

Niger-Car Voyages (p585) runs two-day tours to the park for CFA140,000 per person for two people, or CFA70,000 per person if there are six or more people. The price includes accommodation, transport, admission to the park and food.

PARC REGIONAL DU W



DOGONDOUTCHI

pop 32,200

'Douchi' is a tiny village on the highway, about halfway between Dosso and Birni N'Konni. Everything but its **Friday market**, which swallows the *gare routière* whole, is outdone by the dramatic landscapes surrounding town. The ochre outcrops and rusty bluffs stand starkly out against the sky's blue backdrop and make for some interesting short hikes.

The well-signposted **Hôtel Magama** (☎ 65 03 48; s with shared bathroom CFA4300, d CFA9000-13,800; 🍷 🍷) has pleasant rooms and all but the small single have air-con and private bathrooms. Rooms are found in a basic block of bungalows and a series of missile silo-

looking structures. Larger two-bedroom 'family' rooms (CFA17,000 to CFA20,000) and meals are also available.

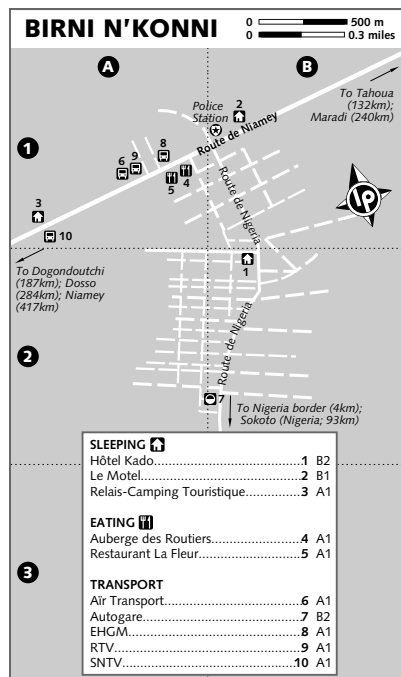
One of the shacks backing onto the *gare routière* has amazingly ice-cold yogurt for sale (CFA125) – look for the large fridges and enjoy!

Bush taxis depart every few hours for Dosso (CFA2000, 2½ hours) and Birni N'Konni (CFA1500, two hours).

BIRNI N'KONNI

pop 50,000

About 420km east of Niamey, Birni N'Konni (or simply 'Konni') is one of four major border crossings with Nigeria. There's very little to see, but it makes a convenient place



to break up a long journey. Moneychangers are everywhere.

Sleeping & Eating

Le Motel (☎ 64 06 50; Route de Niamey; d CFA22,500-37,500; P) This new comer just east of town is easily the cream of Konni's crop. Bright rooms sport TVs, modern bathrooms and comfortable beds. Its restaurant (meals CFA1000-4000; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) is also a step above the rest.

Relais-Camping Touristique (☎ 64 06 00; Route de Niamey; camping per person CFA1500, plus CFA1000 per vehicle, d CFA10,000-12,500; P) The spartan bungalows are large enough to make the sizeable double beds look lost inside. It's clean, friendly and its has a decent restaurant (meals CFA750-2750; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner). There's even some shade in the dusty yard for tents.

Hôtel Kado (☎ 64 03 64; Route de Nigeria; d with fan/air-con CFA6800/9800; P) This place is reasonable, though you'll see through the sheets, hover over the porcelain (no toilet seats) and have to kill the odd scurrying roach.

Besides eating at your hotel, you're limited to **Restaurant La Fleur** (Route de Niamey; meals CFA400-

1000; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) and **Auberge des Routiers** (Route de Niamey; meals CFA400-700; ☺ lunch & dinner), both very basic local eateries.

Getting There & Away

SNTV (Route de Niamey) have daily buses to Maradi (CFA4500, three hours), Zinder (CFA6300, six hours) and Niamey (CFA6600, six hours), while buses to Tahoua (CFA2000, 1½ hours) and Agadez (CFA7750, 5½ hours) only run Tuesday and Thursday to Sunday. **EHGM** (Route de Niamey), **RTV** (Route de Niamey) and **Air Transport** (Route de Niamey) also serve the same routes. Most northbound and eastbound buses arrive around 10am. Westbound buses pull in around 1pm.

Bush taxis regularly leave the **autogare** (Route de Nigeria) for Dogondoutchi (CFA1600, two hours), Maradi (CFA2600, four hours) and Tahoua (CFA1300, 1½ hours).

For transport to Nigeria, see p617.

TAHOUA

pop 82,600

This friendly Hausa town, about 130km north of Konni, is the country's fifth-largest. Although it's a slight detour off the Niamey to Agadez road, if you're riding public transport you'll undoubtedly end up stopping here. Besides enjoying the vibrant market day (Sunday) at the **Grand Marché** (Route de Maternite), it's worthwhile visiting the **Centre Artisanal** (Route de l'Artisanal; ☺ 9am-6pm) on the town's northwest edge. The leather bags in the Cooperative Handicapie are particularly lovely – don't forget prices are negotiable!

Information

BIA-Niger (Route de l'Artisanal) Change travellers cheques (1.6% commission) and cash.

Pharmacie Populaire (☎ 61 05 43; Route de l'Artisanal)

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel de L'Amitié (☎ 88 33 95; Route de Maternite; d CFA10,300-12,300; P) If you bet the rooms here have toilet seats, air-con and a little bright sunshine, you'll hit the trifecta! Yes, this is Tahoua's best place to sleep. It's on the main drag, 400m east of the SNTV bus station – look for the wooden giraffes outside. There's also a friendly bar and reasonable restaurant (meals CFA1000-2000; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner).

Hôtel les Bungalows (☎ 61 05 53; Jardin Publique; d with fan/air-con CFA7500/9500; P) We're guessing

the five empty cans of 'Rambo Insecticide' sitting at reception can't be a good omen. However, if you have a mozzie net, flip flops for insect killing action and don't mind riding porcelain (no toilet seats), this place will do for a night's kip – bargaining wouldn't hurt.

Restaurant Milana (Route d'Arène; meals CFA800-3500; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Just up the hill from the Centre Artisanal, this Italian eatery is *the* place to eat in Tahoua. Whether you're craving ravioli, lasagne, gnocchi, tagliatelle or aubergine on your pizza, you'll be seriously satisfied.

There are plenty of **food stalls** (sandwiches CFA250) opposite the entrance to the SNTV bus station.

Getting There & Around

SNTV (☎ 61 00 06; Route de Maternite) buses stop here en route to Agadez (CFA6845, 4½ hours) daily except Monday and Wednesday, around noon. Southbound buses to Niamey (CFA8880, 7½ hours) arrive at a similar time on Wednesday and Friday through to Monday. EHGM, RTV and Air Transport have similar services on a daily basis.

Minibuses frequently leave for Konni (CFA1300, 1½ hours) from the autogare, which sits just east of Place Tassaoungoum on Route de Maternite.

Although banditry has decreased on the road to Agadez, it's still best to drive this section during daylight hours.

Motos patrol Tahoua's streets are charge no more than CFA150 for a cross-town trip.

MARADI

pop 179,000

Maradi, the country's third-largest city, remains the administrative capital and commercial centre for agriculture. Its proximity to northern Nigeria has fostered staunchly conservative Islamic views and many Muslims here are calling for the introduction of Islamic Sharia law. It's not the most engaging place for visitors, but there's enough here to warrant stopping for a day.

Orientation

Maradi's streets and most doorways have now been numbered in a system that baffles locals and visitors alike. For your help, we've left some of the more commonly understood old names on the map – happy hunting!

Information

For changing naira (for Nigeria), try the *gare routière* 200m north of Sonibank.

BIA-Niger (1 SGI Rue 2) Change euros, US dollars and occasionally travellers cheques.

Microsoft Windows (BRJ Rue 1; per hr CFA6000) Internet prices drop to CFA4500 per hour on Saturday.

Pharmacie Populaire (39 SGI Rue 2)

Post office (off BRJ Rue 1)

Regional Hospital (☎ 41 02 20; off Rue de l'Hôpital)

Sareli Informatique (97 BRJ Rue 1; per hr CFA7500) A slightly faster option than MS Windows.

Sights

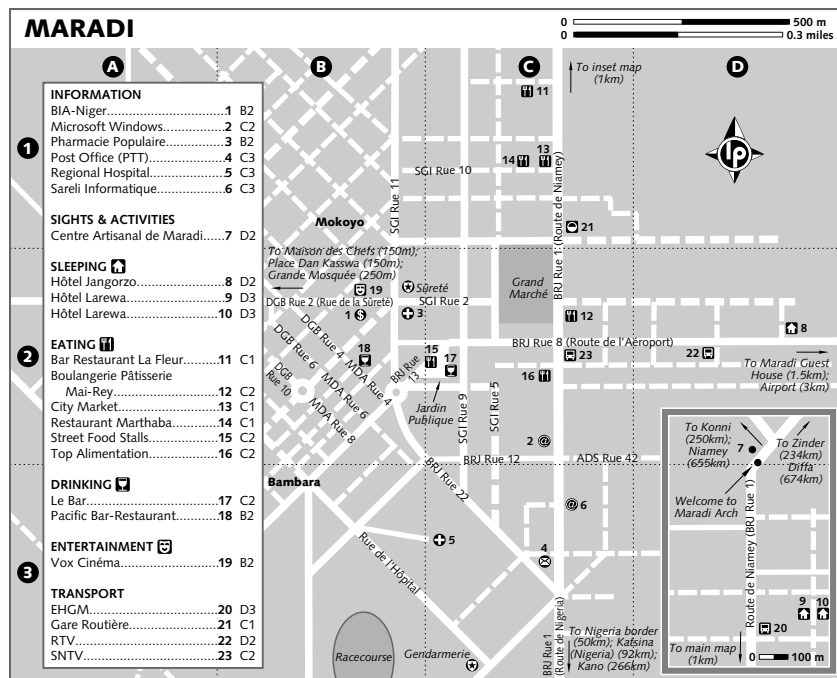
As you might imagine, sinking into Maradi's **Grand Marché** (BRJ Rue 1) on market days (Monday and Friday) is a pleasurable assault on the senses. Vending of an entirely different variety goes on at the **Centre Artisanal de Maradi** (☎ 41 01 02; BRJ Rue 1; ☺ 8am-10pm), 2km north of town. It's worth a stop – wander the workshops, witness the workmanship and wonder where to start the negotiations.

We could tell you that walking east to Place Dan Kasswa will reward you with the sight of a lifetime, the magnificent **Maison des Chefs** (Place Dan Kasswa), but we won't because we'd be lying! Although it's rather unimpressive, it does possess traditional geometric designs and is a fine example of Hausa architecture. Nearby is the **Grande Mosquée** (Place Dan Kasswa), where you'll see children on the sidewalk studying the Qur'an and writing sections of it onto small wooden tablets.

Sleeping

Maradi Guest House (☎ 41 07 31; s/d/tw from CFA31,500/33,600/42,000; P) This new place is pricey, but worth every penny. The rooms are brilliant and massive, some even boasting king-size rod-iron canopy beds and verdant balconies. It's well-signposted and is 2km southeast from town centre. Prices stated include a 5% tax. Reservations are essential.

Hôtel Larewa (☎ 53 01 44; d with fan/air-con from CFA5500/10,600; P) Larewa is Maradi's best budget value and is found east of the EHGM station, north of town. Rooms are now in two complexes on opposite sides of the lane. The western side's rooms, with showers and shared toilets (don't cringe – they're clean and most have seats), are brighter and slightly less expensive than the eastern side's rooms, which have private bathrooms.



Hôtel Jangorzo (☎ 41 01 40; BRJ Rue 8; s with shared toilet CFA6000, s/d CFA16,500/18,500; 📺) With sheets entirely too short, ensuring your toes play with the holey mattresses (lovely!), and bathrooms breeding mosquitos, all you're clearly paying for is this sloppy hotel's great location. The sight of mossies sailing on a log in the small singles' shared toilet (ughh!) continues to haunt us.

Eating

Maradi Guest House (meals CFA1700-5000; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📺) If your tummy has a pang for pizza, lasagne, hamburgers, wine or even chocolate ice cream, this hotel's bright dining room is a serious stomach silencer.

Restaurant Marhaba (43 SGI Rue 10; meals CFA500-1000; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This sleepy outdoor place isn't bad for local dishes like *riz sauce* (rice with meat or chicken). This is provided the staff can find the cook!

Boulangerie Pâtisserie Mai-Rey (BRJ Rue 1; pastries CFA250) The selection and service here is fairly meagre, but it's still good for a snack, especially during Ramadan when it's one of the few places open during the day.

At night you can also find delicious grilled chicken and other snacks at **street stalls** (BRJ Rue 13) around the Jardin Publique.

For self-caterers, **Top Alimentation** (6 BRJ Rue 1) and **City Market** (57 BRJ Rue 1) are two of the better stocked supermarkets, and they're both open late.

Drinking

Thanks to the zeal of Islamic heavies, nightlife and alcohol are rather limited.

Pacific Bar-Restaurant (57 DGB Rue 4) This defiantly hedonistic place, west of Jardin Publique, is still the most popular place in town – though that isn't saying much. Live bands occasional strike up after 10pm.

Le Bar (BRJ Rue 13) Within the confines of the Jardin Publique, this can be an atmospheric place to take a beer or two.

More subdued drinking venues are the **Hôtel Jangorzo** and **Maradi Guest House**.

Entertainment

Test your French or lip-reading skills at the diminutive **Vox Cinéma** (DGB Rue 2; CFA150), which shows French-dubbed versions of

European and Hollywood films each night at 8.30pm.

Getting There & Around

SNTV (81 BRJ Rue 1) has daily buses to Zinder (CFA4500, three hours) and also Niamey (CFA9565, nine hours). **RTV** (☎ 41 06 15; BRJ Rue 8) and **EHGM** (☎ 41 13 40; Route de Niamey) have similar services. On Wednesday and Saturday EHGM serves Diffa (CFA9700, 11 hours). All eastbound buses depart around 4pm, while westbound services leave about 9am.

Minibuses and Peugeots regularly depart the *gare routière* for Zinder (costing CFA2500/3000 and taking 4½/3½ hours respectively) and Konni (CFA3100/2500, five/four hours).

For transport to Nigeria, see p617.

A *moto* trip from the town centre out to the Centre Artisanal or EHGM costs about CFA150. Most trips within town are CFA100.

ZINDER

pop 205,500

With its celebrated traditional Hausa houses, labyrinthine alleys of the old quarters, vestiges of Birni's old fortifications, an infamous prison within the Palais du Sultan and the classic French fort, Zinder clearly wears its history on its sleeve. And what a history it is. Zinder grew from a small resting spot for camels on the old trans-Saharan route, to a refuge for the Hausa and Kanouri people fleeing bloody 17th-century conflicts with the Fulani and Tuareg, before becoming the capital of the mighty Damagaram state, which thrived on everything from agriculture to the slave trade. The late 1890s brought the French, much blood letting, and Zinder's quarter-century reign as Niger's capital. While its economy is now in decline, thanks to a new highway routing most Nigerian goods through Maradi, Zinder is still the most fascinating place in southern Niger and a vibrant place to spend a few days.

Information

For Nigerian naira, look for moneychangers around the *gare routière*. Moneychangers in Kano give better rates for US dollars.

BIA-Niger (Ave des Banques) Change travellers cheques (1.6% commission), euros and US dollars.

Centre Culturel Franco-Nigérien (☎ 51 05 26; Rue du Marché) French-language library and art gallery.

Cybercafé Kandarga (Rue du Marché; per hr CFA1500) Zinder's only reliable Internet.

Hôtel Damagaram (Ave des Banques) Changes euros and US dollars outside bank hours.

National Hospital (☎ 51 00 50; Ave De Maradi)

Pharmacie Populaire (Ave des Banques)

Post office (Ave de la République)

Sights

BIRNI QUARTIER

There are few things in Zinder as enjoyable as losing your bearings (and a few hours), within the innumerable narrow alleys of Birni, the old fortified quarter, south of the fort. The maze of old *banco* (mud brick) houses, some with colourfully painted geometric designs in relief, represents some of the best traditional Hausa architecture in existence – you won't even see such a well preserved selection in Nigeria. Amazingly, a delicate sliver of Birni's massive original fortified *muraille* (tall wall) still stands at the southern section of the quarter.

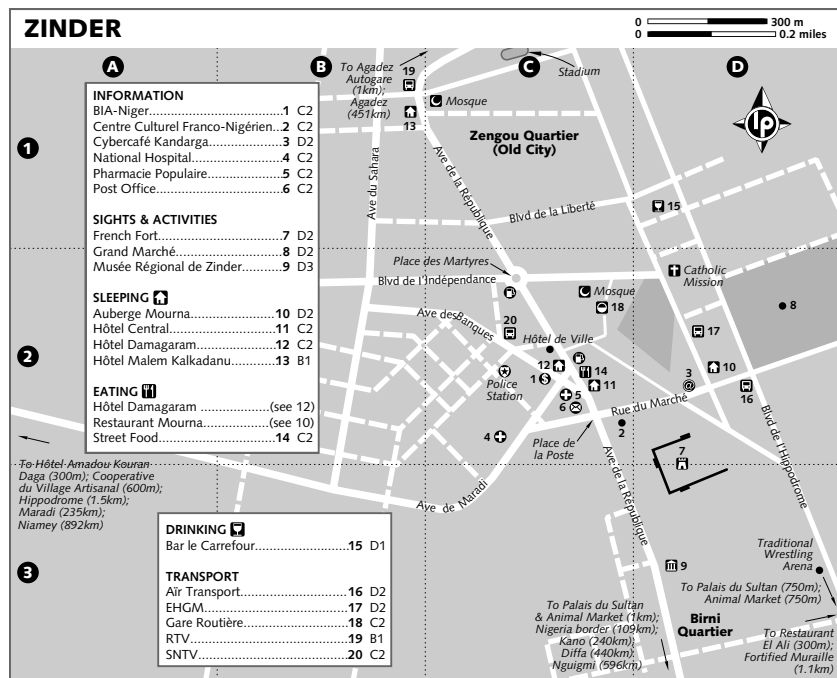
PALAIS DU SULTAN

Originally constructed in the mid-19th century, the **Palais du Sultan** (Place de la Grande Mosquée, Birni Quartier) is now home to the 23rd sultan, Elhadj Mamadou Moustapha, along with his three wives and some of his 23 children – you'll see some of his guards out the front in their bright red and green garb. The original door still hangs in the entrance and is covered with countless

SULTANGATE

In mid-2002 'Sultangate' rocked Niger and when the smoke cleared the 22nd Sultan of Zinder, Elhadj Aboubacar Sanda, was in jail and a former policeman was chosen to become the next sultan. So what did number 22, who made his living importing petrol and cars do wrong? Nothing, according to him and most of the nation's traditional chiefs (who elected him in the early 1980s). But Niger's government thought different and charged him with plotting a coup, cocaine trafficking, receiving stolen cars, involvement with killings and abductions, using counterfeit money, and worst of all, bringing immorality into Zinder!

And what does one get for such heinous crimes? Two years in prison!



metal plates, each tacked on by a different chief over the years as a sign of support for the sitting sultan. Behind the door is a courtyard that once contained a small prison for slaves. One of the cells, known as the *chambre des scorpions* was scented with butter to lure the venomous creatures! If you linger outside the palace, you'll usually be offered a tour. A tip of CFA2000 should suffice.

MUSÉE RÉGIONAL DE ZINDER

This **museum** (☎ 59 61 35; Ave de la République; admission CFA1000, camera CFA1000; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-6pm), has seen better days and seems to be more of a work in progress. However, the English-speaking (slight exaggeration) curator is wonderful and adds much to the experience, like telling you that the dusty, boring looking sword in the corner was actually used to lop off the head of a traitor to the sultan a century earlier!

ZENGOU QUARTIER

Although the Zengou Quartier predates the Birni Quartier, most of its present-day

buildings are much younger, and cement structures outnumber classic *banco* homes. However, life within the quarter remains the same and a visit is still worthwhile.

OTHER SIGHTS

The **Grand Marché** (Blvd de l'Hippodrome; ☎ dawn to dusk) is one of the liveliest in Niger – the big day is Thursday. Look for leather goods as Niger's best *artisans du cuir* are here. If you strike out, or just want to see goods being made, visit the **Cooperative du Village Artisanal** (Ave de Maradi; ☎ 8am-6.30pm), about 2km west of town. Thursday also brings the big **animal market** to Zinder's outskirts, near the **Palais du Sultan**. For something a bit less worthy, the horse races 3km west of town at the **Hippodrome** (Ave de Maradi; ☎ 4pm Sat & Sun) are a hotbed of healthy secular gambling. There's also a charming and stereotypical **French fort** that you'll see rising from a pile of massive rounded boulders just south of town centre. Sadly, it and its surroundings, looking much like a giant's abandoned game of marbles, is currently used by the Nigerien military and is off-limits.

Sleeping

Auberge Mourna (☎ 99 03 06; off Rue du Marché; s/d/tw from CFA14,500/18,500/18,500; ☎ ☎) This mid-range place is leaps and bounds ahead of the competition. The smart, spotless and bright rooms all have TVs, air-con and modern bathrooms. The town's best restaurant is also on the terrace. There are only seven rooms, so reservations are crucial.

Hôtel Damagaram (☎ 51 00 69; Ave des Banques; s/d/tw from CFA16,500/20,000/20,000; ☎ ☎) A serious step up in cleanliness from Hôtel Central, but a long drop in quality and comfort from Auberge Mourna. The teeny-weeny mosquito nets hanging over the gargantuan beds would be funny if mossies weren't living in the lloo.

Hôtel Amadou Kouran Daga (☎ 51 07 42; Ave de Maradi; s/tw from CFA13,500/18,500; ☎ ☎) Another shadow of Auberge Mourna, though its rooms are larger, brighter and less dog-eared than Damagaram. Unfortunately it's almost 2km west of town.

Hôtel Malem Kalkadanu (☎ 50 07 74; Ave de la République; s with shared bathroom CFA3100-6100; ☎ ☎) West of the Zengou Quartier, this rambling budget place has crude but clean rooms, ranging from dark cells with no fans to larger options with fans, windows and private showers. Rooms surround a cute courtyard and the terrace gives you a glimpse over town. It's good value and now has a small restaurant.

Hôtel Central (☎ 51 20 47; Ave de la République; s/tw CFA6600/8500, s/d with air-con CFA9500/12,500; ☎ ☎) Murdered cockroaches, victims of brutal flip-flop attacks, still hang from the walls of this budget place – police still have to dust for prints, so don't touch anything! Central yes. Pleasant no. The large rooms do boast clean bed sheets, but the bathrooms are grotty.

Eating & Drinking

Restaurant Mourna (off Rue du Marché; meals CFA2000-3200; ☎ ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This tiny, quiet Chinese-styled terrace serves up delicious meals, like *fillet de capitaine à la Basquaise* (Basque-style Nile perch), Cantonese rice and beef curry. Hold off salivating over the crêpes and chocolate mousse on the dessert menu until you've confirmed they them.

Restaurant El Ali (meals CFA500-2000; ☎ ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) All your African favourites (especially rice and couscous with sauce) can be tasted underneath the pleasantly down-at-heel *paillotes* (thatched sun shelters). Fol-

low Blvd de l'Hippodrome south and take the first left after the wrestling arena. There are no signs, but locals will point it out.

Hôtel Damagaram (Ave des Banques; meals CFA1000-3000; ☎ ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) The hotel's glowing garden courtyard is an atmospheric place for a meal or beverage in the evening. There are the usual suspects, like couscous and brochettes (CFA100), as well as Chinese dishes such as ginger chicken. A small Flag beer is a steep CFA650.

Some of the best **street food** (Ave de la République; brochettes CFA100, roast pigeons/chickens CFA900/1500; ☎ ☎) dinner) can be found in the square in front of Hôtel Central. There are several supermarkets around town for self-caterers, particularly between Place des Martyres and Hôtel Central.

For a local night out, hit the rough and ready **Bar le Carrefour** (beer from CFA400), known locally as L'Escalier, which sits north of the Catholic Mission.

Getting There & Away

SNTV (☎ 51 04 68; Ave des Banques) buses run to Niamey (CFA12,650, 12 hours, daily), Agadez (CFA7700, 7½ hours, Monday and Thursday) and Nguigmi (CFA7900, 10 hours, Monday and Friday) via Diffa (CFA6200, seven hours). **EHGM** (☎ 51 00 97) also serves Niamey (CFA11,700, 6.30am daily), Agadez (CFA7200, 6.30am Tuesday and Saturday) and Diffa (CFA6000, Saturday). **Air Transport** (☎ 51 02 47; Blvd de l'Hippodrome) and **RTV** (☎ 51 04 16; off Ave de la République) only have daily services to Niamey (CFA12,500).

Minibuses/Peugeot depart the *gare routière* daily for Diffa (CFA6000/6500, nine/eight hours) and Maradi (CFA2500/3000, 4½/3½ hours).

Minibuses/Peugeot for Agadez (CFA7000/8000, nine/eight hours) depart daily from the Agadez autogare, which is 1km northeast of town on Ave de la République.

For transport to Nigeria, see p617.

Getting Around

Motos are everywhere, providing a fast and cheap way to get across town (CFA150).

DIFFA

pop 30,600

This diminutive and dusty town is only of interest to those travelling overland between Niger and Chad because it's the last

place in Niger with decent facilities. Along the main drag you'll spot a Pharmacie Populaire, a **BIA-Niger** (☎ 54 03 06) that changes cash (euros only) and a petrol station serving *essence* and *gasoil* out of the barrel. For recent arrivals from Chad, there's a branch of Société Nigerienne d'Assurances et de Reassurances that sells vehicle insurance.

Hôtel le Tal (☎ 56 39 57; off Route de Nguigmi; d with fan/air-con CFA7500/13,500; 🏠), behind the petrol station, is your only sleeping option. It's friendly and clean enough, but seriously overpriced.

If heading east, the market near the autogare is a good place to stock up on essentials – if you haven't already – as you'll find some pretty imaginative prices further down the road.

SNTV has buses departing in the late afternoon for Nguigmi (CFA1800, four hours, Monday and Friday) and in the early morning for Zinder (CFA6200, seven hours, Wednesday and Sunday). EHGM also services Zinder (CFA6000, Saturday).

Bush taxis run the potholed highway to Nguigmi (CFA2500, four hours).

NGUIGMI

pop 17,400

Nguigmi is a small town at the end of the sealed road, some 45km from the Chad border. It's the last Niger settlement of any size and it's where you must get your passport stamped. The town has no hotels or eateries, but there's a lively market area to the south of town where you can buy brochettes.

There are a few bush taxis between Nguigmi and Diffa (CFA2500, four hours). For transport to/from Chad, see p617.

THE NORTH

With the ever-so-sublime Air Mountains, the Sahara sea's most graceful and gargantuan dunes, remote oases and the ancient trans-Saharan trading town of Agadez, northern Niger is the highlight of any trip to this African nation.

AGADEVZ

pop 95,100

While some of the Sahara's great ancient trading towns, like Timbuktu, try to survive on international mystique alone, Agadez

thrives by being the gateway to some of the most spectacular desert and mountain scenery in all of Africa.

That said, Agadez itself is still the most fascinating of Niger's cities and should not be ignored. When standing in the porcupine shadow of the famous Grand Mosquée, or weaving through the sandy streets and distinctive mud-brick architecture, it's not hard to imagine what it was like at its zenith some four centuries ago. Back then its population of 30,000 flourished off the caravans (*azalai*) plying between Gao (Mali) and Tripoli (Libya), some as large as 20,000 camels, laden with gold, salt and slaves.

The recent arrival of charter flights from Europe has had a big impact on Agadez. The remote, slightly depressed outpost has been turned into a buzzing hub of activity. Don't worry, it hasn't lost any of its charm. And there's plenty of space in the Sahara for a few hundred visitors a week!

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Agadez.com (Route de l'Aéroport; per hr CFA2000; ☎ 8am-10.30pm; 🏠) Agadez's only Internet option. Burn images to CD using USB connection.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital (☎ 44 00 84, 44 01 42; off Route de l'Aéroport; 24hr)

Medical Clinic (☎ 96 34 74; Route de l'Aéroport; ☎ 7.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm)

Pharmacie de l'Air (Route de l'Aéroport)

MONEY

BIA-Niger (Route de Bilma) Changes travellers cheques (1.6% commission), euros and US dollars. Availability of Visa cash advances is sporadic.

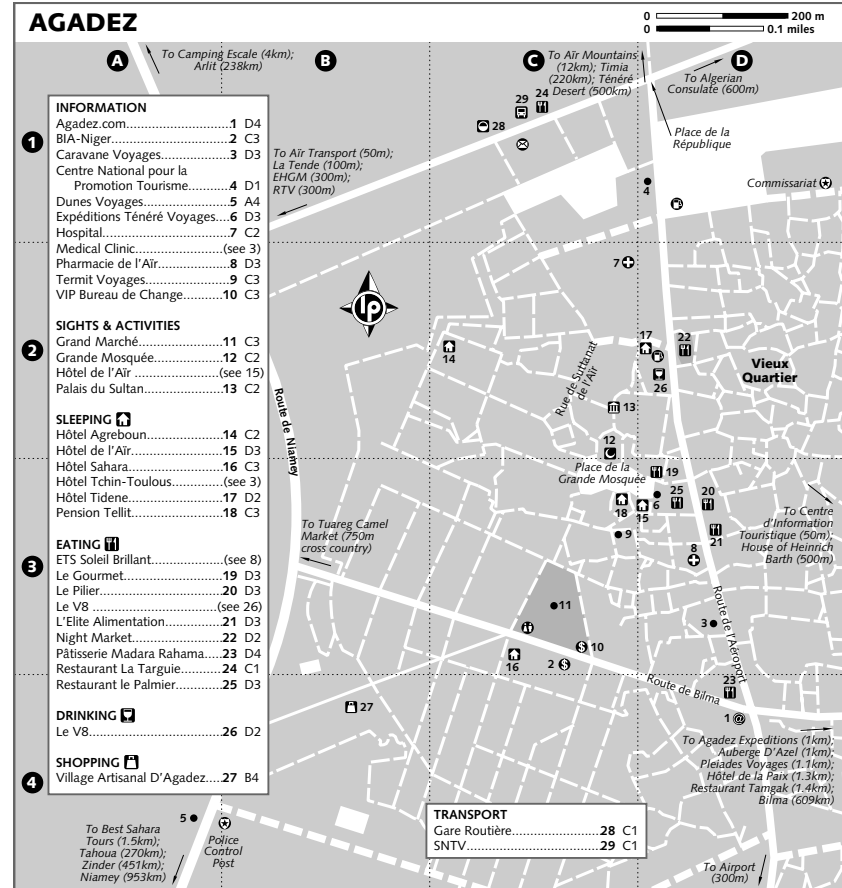
VIP Bureau de Change (Route de Bilma; ☎ 8am-11.30pm) Changes most currencies.

TELEPHONE

There are numerous private offices along Route de l'Aéroport offering international telephone services over the nation's burgeoning mobile network. Calls to most nations cost CFA150 for each 10-second block. Conveniently, most offices charge nothing for incoming calls.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Centre d'Information Touristique (☎ 98 78 81; Vieux Quartier; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Fri-Tue)



The product of a failed attempt to unify Agadez's tourist operators. There's helpful information, but you'll have to put up with some pressure sales for guides/desert trips. **Centre National pour la Promotion Tourisme** (☎ 44 00 36; Route de l'Aéroport; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri) Basically a government version of Centre d'Information Touristique – a dash of help to go with a spoonful of self-promotion.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

There are more than 70 travel agencies in Agadez, all specialising in tours of the Air Mountains and Ténéré Desert. Agencies that we recommend, or which have been recommended to us, include the following: **Agadez Expéditions** (☎ /fax 44 01 70; www.agadez-tourisme.com; Route de Bilma) Based at Auberge D'Azél,

this is arguably the most professional and most expensive agency in Agadez. Their prices get you new 4WDs, comfy tents, tables and Akly Joulia-Boileau, the experienced and enthusiastic leader.

Best Sahara Tours (☎ 97 86 66; www.best-sahara-tours.com; Route de Niamey) Boasting experience in Libya, Mali, Chad and Niger, this reasonably priced option is enthusiastically recommended by travellers who've used it.

Caravane Voyages (☎ 44 04 59; caravanevoyages@hotmail.com; Route de l'Aéroport) Based at Hôtel Tchén-Toulous, Caravane offers some decent prices for camel safaris to go with its 4WD options.

Dunes Voyages (☎ 44 05 83; www.dunes-voyages.com; Route de Niamey) A top-notch European-run outfit with high quality service and prices to match.

Expéditions Ténéré Voyages (☎ 98 32 60; www.expeditionsteneré.com; Place de la Grande Mosquée)

An experienced agency, located near the Grande Mosquée, that works primarily with French tour groups.

Moussa Touboulou (☎ 28 86 93; inquire at Hôtel Agreboun) This independent guide comes highly recommended and offers cheap prices for both camel treks (per day CFA30,000) and 4WD expeditions (per day CFA80,000).

Pleiades Voyages (☎ 44 05 41; www.pleiades-agadez.com; Route de Bilma) Another experienced agency with loads of Ténéré and Air options.

Termit Voyages (☎ 42 02 47; http://niger.tribu.ch; off Place de la Grande Mosquée) This agency also specialises in trips south to the Zinder region.

Sights & Activities

GRANDE MOSQUÉE

With a slim figure that would make most Egyptian pyramids green with envy, the ochre Grande Mosquée climbs spectacularly into the blue skies over Agadez. Although dating back to 1515, it was totally rebuilt in 1844. Its classic Sahel/Sudanic-style architecture was described by Bruce Chatwin as 'bristling with wooden spires like the vertebra of some defunct fauna'. Squeezing out of the ever-narrowing staircase to astounding views over Agadez, the Sahara and Air Mountains will take your breath away – well, all that's left of it after the constricting 27m climb! A smile and CFA1000 *cadeau* for the guardian is all that's required to make this magical experience happen.

MARKETS

The **Grand Marché** (Route de Bilma; ☎ dawn to dusk) is the most animated place in town. The variety of people, many dressed in traditional desert costumes, is at least as interesting as what's for sale. You can find a wide range of art and craftwork here, including rugs and Tuareg leatherwork.

The **Tuareg camel market** (☎ dawn to dusk) on Agadez's western outskirts is as colourful as the Grande Marché, but even more odoriferous. Slobbering camels are joined by sheep, donkeys, goats, massive cattle and dozens of fascinating nomadic Tuareg traders. Photographs here usually require the market chief's permission, oh, and about CFA2500. Sunrise and sunset are the best times to visit.

VIEUX QUARTIER

This enchanting maze of small crooked alleys, tiny artisan shops, and fascinating mud-brick architecture of Tuareg and Hausa inspiration is as good a time machine

as we've ever experienced – yes, hours just happily disappear within the Vieux Quartier. Some *banco* homes date back over 150 years, while others boast beautiful façades and the odd cattle horn! Definitely visit the **House of Heinrich Barth** (admission CFA1000; ☎ 8am-7pm), which now houses some of the great Saharan explorer's belongings. He stayed here briefly in 1850 and was one of the first Europeans to witness the dramatic departure of the salt caravans from Agadez, describing it as 'a whole nation in motion'.

OTHER SIGHTS

Visible just north of the Grande Mosquée is the impressive **Palais du Sultan** (dosed to visitors), the current home of the city's traditional ruler. The residence of a previous Sultan, dating back to the late 19th century, also stands near the mosque and now houses **Hôtel de l'Air** (Place de la Grande Mosquée). Have a peek behind its 1m-thick walls into the large dining hall, where the Sultan's guests were entertained and where Tuareg rebels are believed to have been hung by the French in 1917.

Tours

Sitting on the doorstep of the inspiring Air Mountains and the Ténéré Desert (p608), Agadez is the spot to organise extraordinary expeditions, whether by 4WD or camel. See p605 for information on Agadez's travel agencies.

Festivals & Events

Islamic holidays are the best time to be in Agadez, especially Tabaski. Following the feast, you can see one of the desert's great spectacles – the 'cavalcade', a furious camel race through the crowded narrow streets to the square in front of the Palais du Sultan. Similar races take place during Eid al-Fitr. See p818 for more Islamic holiday details.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Hôtel Agreboun (☎ 98 63 32; s/tw/tr with shared toilet CFA5000/7000/12,000; Ⓟ) It's hard to beat this budget-friendly hotel, on the western edge of town. Rooms are rather rudimentary and bunker-like, but they're cheap, clean and surround two very pleasant courtyards for sitting out the day's heat.

Hôtel Sahara (☎ 98 61 15; r with fan/air-con CFA7000/15,000; Ⓟ) The long black-lit corri-

dor will stop most of you in your tracks. The brave will discover crumbling walls, no running water and dingy looking beds. Yes, this is a last resort.

Camping Escal (☎ 89 67 06; Route de Arlit; camping per person CFA2000, plus vehicle CFA1500) Perfect for overlanders, this sleepy campground 4km west of town has fresh well-water, simple bathrooms and leafy shade. Although the friendly family who run it are never far away, it's too deserted to leave any valuables out when you're in town. Campers without their own vehicles should head for La Tende.

MIDRANGE

The following hotels levy a tax of CFA300 to CFA500 per person per night. Prices below don't include this tax.

Pension Tellit (☎ 44 02 31; Place de la Grande Mosquée; tw CFA18,000-32,000, ste CFA36,000; Ⓟ) Whether sitting on the rooftop terrace taking in the Grande Mosquée, or snoozing on your oh-so-comfortable bed, you'll love this place. Throw in charming traditional décor, hot-water showers and remote controlled air-con and you're laughing. The delicious suite (room No 4) boasts a mosque view. With only five rooms, reservations are essential.

Hôtel Tidene (☎ 44 04 06; off Route de l'Aéroport; s/tw CFA9500/15,000, tw with air-con CFA20,300; Ⓟ) Tidene is another good choice, with tidy traditional rooms spread around several courtyards. Its only drawback are the small non-air-con equipped single rooms, which seem to trap the day's heat and bake at night.

La Tende (☎ 44 00 75; off Route de Niamey; s/tw with shared bathroom CFA10,000/12,500, s/tw CFA21,000/25,000; Ⓟ) This pretty place on the western fringe of town offers great value. Take a small, bright and clean room with a fan, or a larger one with air-con and private bathrooms. It's also possible to camp (CFA2000) or hire a simple Tuareg tent (CFA3000). If it lacks anything, it's the traditional charm of Tellit and Tidene.

Hôtel de l'Air (☎ 96 91 23; Place de la Grande Mosquée; tw CFA10,000-15,000; Ⓟ) You'd think that rooms in a hotel which was formerly a Sultan's palace would ooze historical ambience and cost a mint, but you'd be wrong on both accounts. Prices for these uninspired cement-floored rooms depend on whether you want a private bathroom, hot water and air-con.

Hôtel Tchîn-Toulous (☎ 44 04 59; caravanevoyages@hotmail.com; Route de l'Aéroport; s/tw with shared bathroom

CFA10,000/15,000, s/tw CFA15,000/20,000; Ⓟ) With pebble floors and Tuareg beds this place takes the quirky cake. Most of the cheaper rooms here are small and airless, but No 11 and 12 up on the terrace are exceptions.

Hôtel de la Paix (☎ /fax 44 02 34; Route de Bilma; s/tw/d CFA21,000/25,000/35,000; Ⓟ) Although this modern hotel is comfortable, clean and has many facilities, it doesn't even register a blip on the traditional charm radar.

TOP END

Auberge D'Azél (☎ 44 01 70; www.agadez-tourisme.com; Route de Bilma; tw/d CFA33,000/44,000; Ⓟ) Thanks to striking domed brick ceilings and archways, massive rod-iron canopy beds, comfortable sitting areas, sparkling modern bathrooms and first-class service, Auberge D'Azél is Agadez's top hotel. The Tuareg/French couple, Akly and Céline, are delightful hosts. It's about 1km east of town.

Eating

Le Pilier (Route de l'Aéroport; meals CFA2000-4000; ☎ lunch & dinner) Savour *capitaine au grill* (grilled Nile perch), *côtelettes d'agneaux panées* (lamb chops fried in bread crumbs) or a range of fine Italian fare, all within the superb traditional architecture of this amazing eatery.

Auberge D'Azél (Route de Bilma; meals CFA3500-5500; ☎ lunch & dinner) The food here is fantastic – the *mouton targui* (Tuareg mutton) is particularly divine – though prices are a little steep. With a lovely terrace, leafy courtyard and two charming dining rooms, picking a place to sit is as tricky as choosing your meal!

Restaurant Tamgak (Route de Bilma; meals CFA2000-2700; ☎ lunch & dinner) While Le Pilier and Auberge D'Azél are aimed squarely at Westerners, Tamgak serves more of a local crowd. The food is quite good and you can snack on popcorn while you wait for your meal.

Restaurant le Palmier (Route de l'Aéroport; meals CFA1500-3800; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is the perfect place to start the day with an omelette and coffee. Remember you're on the verge on the Sahara – seriously lower your expectations before diving into the Thai rice. The Tunisian couscous is closer to the mark.

Le V8 (Route de l'Aéroport; meals CFA800-4000; ☎ lunch & dinner) Although more a bar than a restaurant, they serve up tasty local dishes and even pizzas here. The *riz sauce* does a

good job of shutting your hungry tummy's cakehole.

Le Gourmet (Place de la Grande Mosquée; meals CFA500-1500; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Known for its heaped servings, high benches and low tables, Le Gourmet is a simple place for a simple meal. The *steak garni* is still a cut above the rest, but the spaghetti can be rather greasy.

Restaurant La Targuie (meals CFA800-1500; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Conveniently located next to SNTV, La Targuie serves up rice pilaff, *mouton targui* and some spicy omelettes. Snacking and watching English-language movies makes bus delays a little more enjoyable.

Pâtisserie Madara Rahama (Route de l'Aéroport; pastries from CFA250) Although you have to get your timing right to find pastries (around 10.30am), there's usually refreshing yogurt (CFA125) in the fridge.

The **night market** (Route de l'Aéroport; ☺ dinner) is great for ambience and a hearty selection of stews, *igname* (pounded yams baked in a doughy bread-like mix), brochettes and spaghetti ensure you'll be stuffed for under CFA400. The daring can try goat's head.

Besides perusing the Grand Marché, self-caterers can visit **ETS Soleil Brillant** (Route de l'Aéroport) and **L'Elite Alimentation** (Route de l'Aéroport).

Drinking

Options for evening drinks are pretty limited. The best when we were in town was the recently reopened **Le V8** (Route de l'Aéroport; beer from CFA550), which had a friendly crowd to go with its atmospheric courtyard under the stars. Your only other real choice is to head to the sterile bar at **Hôtel de la Paix** (Route de Bilma; beer from CFA900).

Shopping

For buying jewellery and seeing silversmiths at work, check out the **Village Artisanal D'Agadez** (off Route de Niamey; ☺ 8am-6pm) in the town's southwest. Within the Vieux Quartier you'll also find silversmiths, leatherworkers producing Tuareg *samaras* (sandals), *coussins* (cushions) and magnificent *selles de chameau* (camel saddles), and bronzesmiths making a variety of objects, including jewellery. There are also loads of small Tuareg boutiques around Place du Grande Mosquée. Bargaining is always required.

If you're after a Tuareg turban expect to pay CFA500 per metre in the market (indigo costs more); 3m should suffice.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Point-Afrique and Go-Voyages have weekly charter flights between Paris/Marseilles and Agadez during high season (October through April). See p616 for more.

BUS

SNTV (☎ 29 61 80) serves Arlit (CFA3400, three hours, 4.30pm Thursday to Tuesday), Niamey (CFA15,100, 12 hours, 7am Wednesday, Friday to Monday) and Zinder (CFA7700, 7½ hours, 7am Tuesday and Saturday). Similar services to Arlit and Niamey are provided by **EHGM** (Route de Niamey), **Air Transport** (off Route de Niamey) and **RTV** (Route de Niamey). EHGM also has a Saturday service to Zinder.

BUSH TAXI

Bush taxis leave from the *gare routière* on the north side of town. At least one Minibus/Peugot leaves daily for Arlit (CFA2600/3000, four/3½ hours), and Zinder (CFA7000/8000, nine/eight hours). If you're even thinking about Niamey in a bush taxi, head straight for the hospital's psychiatric department.

Getting Around

As with most Niger towns, *motos* are ideal for getting across town quickly (CFA150).

AÏR MOUNTAINS & TÉNÉRÉ DESERT

Who would have ever thought that rock, wind and sand could produce such magic?

Aïr Mountains

Simply put, the Aïr Mountains are among the most spectacular sights in West Africa. Dark volcanic masses dramatically rise from the Saharan surrounds and culminate in grand peaks, the highest being Mt Bagzane (2022m), 145km from Agadez. In some areas marvellous deep-blue marble outcrops poke from rich red sands – just amazing. Lurking within this range – which covers an area the size of Switzerland – are some fascinating prehistoric sites (see opposite for more).

Besides the Neolithic art and general jaw-dropping scenery, some specific highlights of Aïr include a dip in the thermal

hot springs at **Tafadek** (a slight detour off the main route north, some 60km from Agadez), and the oasis of **Timia**, which sits about 110km north of Elméki and 225km north of Agadez. The village of Timia, with its Tuareg residents, mud-brick homes, verdant gardens and wavering palms, is a sight indeed, as is the nearby waterfall during the rains. Almost 30km north of Timia are the intriguing vestiges of the former Tuareg capital, **Assodé**, founded around 1000AD – have a wander.

About 150km further north, or 160km east from Arlit, is the beautiful oasis of **Iferouâne**. Its sheer beauty makes Iferouâne a great place to stop, and there are also some interesting prehistoric rock paintings in the area. In 2000 Iferouâne hosted the unique **Festival de l'Aïr** to celebrate and preserve Tuareg culture, and it has taken place

every December since – inquire at Agadez's travel agencies for more details.

Hôtel Tellit (☎ satellite phone 0088216244722, in Agadez ☎ 44 02 31; r with shared bathroom CFA16,000-20,000; ☺ Jan-Apr) is run by the same owners as the Pension Tellit in Agadez and is of a similarly high standard. There's also now a nearby **campsite** (camping CFA8000) that has traditional Tuareg tents.

Northeast of Iferouâne, on the eastern boundary of the Aïr, the sand dunes at **Temet** are also well worth the journey.

Ténéré Desert

The Ténéré, east of the Aïr Mountains, is the one of the world's most legendary deserts and plays home to some of the Sahara's most extraordinarily beautiful sand dunes. Other areas are rather harsh and bleak, monotonous miles of flat hard sand,

ROCK ART OF THE AÏR

The Aïr Mountains are a treasure trove of Neolithic art. These enthralling images capture the lush region and some of its inhabitants – such as elephants, giraffes and rhinos – before the spreading Sahara started engulfing the area some 4500 years ago. Amazingly, few visitors are aware that they are visiting one of the world's most remote open-air galleries.

The art predominantly consists of petroglyphs, or carvings created with a sharp stone, a method known as 'pecking'. Another stone was sometimes used to bang the sharp stone like a pick. The outline was usually completed first, often by scratching and, occasionally, the rock face was smoothed first as a form of preparation. Upon completion, some of the lines were ground smooth. After metal was introduced to the Sahara around 1200 BC, a metal spike may have been used.

It's thought that the oldest rock art in the Aïr dates back to 6000 BC. The majority of the carvings date from the Pastoral Period (5500–2000 BC), a period characterised by depictions of domesticated cattle and dominant human figures, and the later Horse or Camel Periods (1000 BC to the arrival of Islam). This latter period of rock art is also known as the Libyan Warrior Tradition and typically features chariots and human figures represented by two triangles.

The most common subjects depicted in the Aïr are people, horses, cows, camels, giraffes, ostriches, gazelles, elephants and rhinos. The best sites are at Iwelene, Arakaou, Tanakom and Anakom, all of which are at the mouths of wadis running into the Ténéré. In the northern Aïr, there are some fine sites around Iferouâne while, to the west, Dabous is especially rich in carvings. Perhaps the most famous carving is the 5.4m-high giraffe at Dabous, discovered in 1999 and some 500km from the nearest similar work. A moulding of the giraffe is now on display at Agadez airport and in 2000 the site was listed by Unesco as one of the world's most threatened monuments.

If you're fortunate enough to see some of the art, remember a few simple rules. Whatever you do, please leave the carvings as you find them. Throughout the Sahara, travellers have chipped away sections of the rock wall or thrown water on the paintings to enhance the light for taking photographs, causing irreparable damage to these ancient sites.

If you want to learn more about Saharan rock art or about efforts being undertaken to preserve rock art across Africa, contact the **Trust for African Rock Art** (TARA; ☎ 254-20-884467; www.tara.org.uk). In addition to a wealth of historical information, it also has a nine-point Recommended Code of Conduct for viewing the art. A superb resource is also *African Rock Art* by David Coulson and Alec Campbell.

THE TUAREG'S FIRST BOARDING SCHOOL

In 2005, after a few years of intensive fundraising, a unique boarding school for the children of Tuareg nomads opened in the remote area of Tezerzait, on the fringes of the Air and Ténéré, about 100km northeast of Ifrouane. Centre de Éducation et de Santé de Tezerzait (CEST) is the first school in the entire region and gives hope to many families hoping to improve their lives. It was the brainchild of the region's Kel Teddeley Tuareg tribe, who were fed up with being ignored by the central government, and of an energetic Canadian tourist. The school is placed near an oasis often visited by the nomadic herders, meaning that parents still see their children regularly. Besides hiring a teacher, the school has also hired two respected grandmothers to look after the children, giving much-needed reassurance to parents.

If you'd like to help support this important and novel school, contact Jacqueline Lanouette (jacquelinelanouette@yahoo.com; 483 B Grande Côte, Rosemere, Quebec, Canada J7A 1M1).

but, much like the Air Mountains hide their Neolithic artwork, the Ténéré holds its fair share of sublime secrets too – massive dinosaur graveyards and evocative, deserted medieval settlements.

If you head east from Agadez towards Bilma, you'll come to Tazolé after 100km. To the south is one of the Ténéré's **dinosaur cemeteries**, believed to be one of the globe's most important. Its fossils are spread over a belt 150km long. Continually covered and uncovered by the sand, they are silent witness to the fact that the whole Sahara Desert was once green and fertile. You may see fossils of a number of species, maybe even the Super Croc (see p588 for more on this monster).

Another 179km east and you'll pass the *Mad Max*-looking metal **Monument to the Arbre du Ténéré**, the only tree to have been marked on Michelin's Africa map (see boxed text, below).

Some 171km further east is the salt-producing oasis of **Fachi** and, 610km from Agadez, **Bilma** – which is truly the end of the earth. This town satisfies every thought

AFRICA'S LUCKIEST AND UNLUCKIEST TREE

Why does the Arbre du Ténéré deserve such a title? Well, it was lucky to have been the last surviving acacia of the once-great Saharan forests – standing alone in the desert's core, some 400km from its nearest relative. Unlucky? Sitting in a sea of sand and open space, what were the odds of a collision with a truck? Oh to have been a fly on the wall when the Libyan truck driver explained the accident to his boss back in 1973!

you ever had of an exotic oasis in the middle of a forbidding desert. It's fortified and surrounded by palm trees and irrigated gardens – everywhere are piles of salt destined for the market towns of southern Niger and northern Nigeria. You'll see how it is purified and poured into moulds made from large palm trunks, giving the salt its loaf-like form (in contrast, for example, to the door-like slabs from Mali).

Amis du Kawar et Fils des Oasis (☎ 73 55 45; mattress CFA3000) is a new, fairly basic, encampment we've recently been made aware of in Bilma. Meals cost CFA500 and the owner can apparently organise tours of the salt mines. There is a weekly SNTN bus which travels with a military escort from Agadez as far as Dirkou (30 hours), from where there are taxi brousses to Bilma (a further 15 hours).

If you go north to the **Plateau du Djado**, about 1000km from Agadez via Bilma, you'll see some of the prehistoric cave paintings of antelopes, giraffes and rhinos for which the area is noted – not to mention deserted old towns, medieval *ksars* atop rocky crags and forbidding mountain scenery. The honey-combed vestiges of Djado's citadel are truly stunning.

Getting There & Away

Exploring the Air Mountains or Ténéré Desert without an official guide and *feuille de route* issued from a licensed travel agency is now illegal in Niger. Information about Agadez and Niamey travel agencies (where trips can be arranged) can be found on p605 and p585 respectively.

The list of potential routes to the Air Mountains and/or Ténéré Desert is as vast as the Sahara itself, but standard excursions

include the following: an eight-day circuit of the Air Mountains (including the dunes at Temet); a tour of the Air and Ténéré (eight to 12 days); or a circuit of the Air/ Ténéré and the ghost towns of the Plateau du Djado (14 to 15 days). An extra week will enable you to explore all of the above plus the heart of the Ténéré and the dinosaur fossils at Termit. While they cover less distance and involve a lot of walking, camel safaris are an amazing way to see parts of the region.

If you have your own 4WD, expect to pay at least CFA15,000 per day for a compulsory guide, or at least CFA20,000 for a driver/guide. However, many agencies are now hesitant to grant the mandatory *feuille de route* (official itinerary) to those travelling in their own vehicles. Also note that if you plan on visiting the Plateau du Djado or remote areas of the Ténéré, agencies won't grant you a *feuille de route* unless you're travelling in a pair of 4WDs. This may mean that you have to hire a second 4WD to accompany you.

Though significantly decreased, banditry can still be problem in these regions, as was illustrated by the murder of a French tourist in late 2005. Always check the latest before heading out.

ARLIT

pop 90,700

Uranium was discovered here in 1965. Six years later, Somair, the uranium mining company, created Arlit, Niger's most northern major town. Since the original boom, Arlit's prosperity has risen and fallen with the price of uranium. With oil prices shooting skyward and several major governments leaning towards nuclear power, Arlit's future may be getting even brighter.

Very few travellers would bother passing through Arlit were it not for the fact that it's the first town of any size in Niger if crossing the Sahara from Tamanrasset (Algeria).

Hôtel l'Auberge la Caravane (☎ 89 29 49; d fan/air-con CFA5000/12,000; 🍽️) is just west of town centre and a short walk from the SNTV station. The rooms are spartan and all but six have shared, slightly stinky toilets. It's the best Arlit has to offer.

The only other option is the **Tamesna Club** (d CFA5000), which has large but rather dingy rooms above its loud bar.

The best place to eat is **Restaurant Le Train** (meals CFA1000-2000; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner), which serves the usual stuff and is on the road entering town from Agadez. There's also a string of street stalls selling brochettes in front of the Tamesna Club.

SNTV buses run south to Agadez (CFA3000, three hours, 4am) and Niamey (CFA17,500, 15 hours, daily except Tuesday and Thursday). RTV, Air Transport and EHGM all have similar services.

NIGER DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Budget places are relatively expensive in Niger, with the cheapest single rooms ranging from CFA3000 (not surprised to see a cockroach) to CFA8000 (mildly surprised to see a cockroach) – yes, quality is a little on the low side. Camping (typically CFA2000 per person) is possible in Niamey, Birni N'Konni, Agadez and Parc Regional du W.

Midrange hotels aren't cheap either, but they usually offer more cleanliness and your own bathroom. Prices in smaller towns start from CFA11,000 for a double room with fan, and another CFA5000 if you want air-con. Expect to pay up to double that in Niamey and Agadez.

Niamey and Agadez have upmarket hotels, where rooms cost between CFA30,000 and CFA95,000.

PRACTICALITIES

- The only local newssheet is the anaemic French-language *Le Sahel*, which is available from a few roadside stalls and bookshops in Niamey.
- Besides some local music stations in Niamey, the government-run La Voix du Sahel is the only national radio station.
- Télé-Sahel, which broadcasts news and French-language films, is the only non-satellite TV channel available. Some of the TVs in Niamey's hotels and restaurants pick up French-based programs.
- Electricity supply is 220V and plugs are of the European two-round-pin variety.
- The metric system is used in Niger.

ACTIVITIES

Coasting in a pirogue through hippos and the Niger River's moist environments, and lumbering through the Sahara's beautifully barren expanse with a camel train are two activities that are as different as they are rewarding.

BOOKS

In *Eaters of the Dry Season: Circular Labor Migration in the West African Sahel*, David Rain uses his extensive research around Maradi to attack the stereotype that the nomads of the Sahel are unfortunate, powerless victims of drought, and proves them to be a resourceful and intelligent people.

Kathleen Hill's semi-autobiographical novel *Still Waters in Niger* tells of an Irish-American returning to Niger after a 17-year absence to visit her daughter, who's working as an aid worker. While the story is fictional, the lyrical descriptions of Zinder and its surrounds are beautifully true to life.

While rather limited in its scope, *Riding the Demon: On the Road in West Africa* by Peter Chilson, is an interesting attempt at painting a portrait of Niger using information gleaned during the author's time in and around bush taxis.

Nomads of Niger by Carol Beckwith is a gorgeous picture book depicting the lives of the Wodaabé people. Despite being published in 1983, Marion Van Offelen's text and Carol's pictures still captivate most readers.

BUSINESS HOURS

Typical business hours are from 8am to noon and 3pm to 6pm Monday to Friday, and from 8am to noon Saturday, though large markets bustle daily between 8am to 6pm. Government offices are open from 8.30am to 12.15pm and 3.30pm to 6pm Monday to Friday. Banking hours are from 8am to 11.30am and 3.45pm to 5pm Monday to Friday, and from 8.30am to noon on Saturday. Simple local eateries open around 6am and don't shut the doors until 10pm, while fancier options serve breakfast from 7am to 10am, lunch from noon to 2pm and dinner between 6pm and 11pm.

COURSES

Courses to improve your French or budding Hausa skills are available in Niamey (p588).

CUSTOMS

The thoroughness of searches by customs officials varies, though foreign travellers are rarely targeted for a total going-over. Ignore requests for 'special taxes'. There's no limit on the import or export of foreign currencies.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Despite travel in the far north of Niger being more strictly regulated these days, banditry can be a problem. On 2 December 2005, a French tourist was killed 60km north of Agadez when bandits fired on his vehicle after it failed to stop at their roadblock. Although it was the first such attack in northern Niger for over a year, it's always wise to check the latest before setting out.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Nigerien Embassies

In West Africa, Niger has embassies in Benin, Nigeria and Mali. Niger does not have diplomatic representation in the UK. For details see the relevant country chapter. Embassies elsewhere include the following:

Algeria (☎ 213-788921; 54 Rue du Vercors)

Belgium (☎ 02-648 6140; 78 Ave Franklin-Roosevelt, Brussels 1050)

Canada (☎ 613-232 4291; 38 Blackburn Ave, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 8A3)

Chad (off Ave Gourang, N'Djaména)

France (☎ 01-45 04 80 60; www.ambassadeniger.org; 154 Rue de Longchamp, 75016 Paris)

USA (☎ 227-483 4224; www.nigerembassyusa.org; 2204 R St NW, Washington, DC 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in Niger

All embassies and consulates are in Niamey unless stated. There's no UK diplomatic representation in Niger.

Algeria Agadez (☎ 44 01 17; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat); Niamey (☎ 75 30 97; Blvd de la République; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri) Embassy 6km west of city centre.

Benin (☎ 72 28 60; Rue des Dallois; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Canada (☎ 75 36 86; niamy@international.gc.ca; off Blvd Mali Bero)

Chad (☎ 75 34 64; Ave de Présidence; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon Fri)

Denmark (☎ 72 39 48; Ave du Général de Gaulle)

France Consulate (☎ 72 27 22; fax 73 40 12; Place Nelson Mandela; ☎ 8am-12.30pm Mon-Fri); Embassy (☎ 75 27 86; Rue des Ambassades).

Germany (☎ 72 35 10; Ave du Général de Gaulle; ☎ 9am-noon Mon-Fri)

Mali (☎ 75 42 90; consmali@intnet.ne; off Blvd des Sy et Mamar; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Thu, 8am-12.30pm & 3-5.30pm Fri)

Nigeria (☎ 73 24 10; Rue des Ambassades; ☎ 10am-1pm Mon-Fri).

USA (☎ 72 26 61; usemb@intnet.ne; Rue des Ambassades; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The largest festival in all of Niger is the annual **Cure Salée** (Salt Cure) celebration held by the nomadic Fula and Tuareg peoples during September. While each group of herders has its own Cure Salée, the Wodaabé's celebration is renowned throughout all of West Africa (see the boxed text, below).

LA CURE SALÉE

One of the most famous annual celebrations in West Africa is the Cure Salée (Salt Cure). It's held in the vicinity of In-Gall, particularly around Tegguidda-n-Tessoum.

Each group of herders has its own Cure Salée, but that of the Wodaabé people is famous throughout Africa. The festival lasts a week, usually during the first half of September, and the main event happens over two days.

The Wodaabé are a unique sect of nomadic Fulani herders. When the Fulani migrated to West Africa centuries ago, possibly from the Upper Nile, many converted to Islam. For the Fulani who remained nomads, cattle retained their pre-eminent position. Valuing their freedom, they despised their settled neighbours and resisted outside influences. Many called themselves 'Wodaabé', meaning 'people of the taboo' – those who adhere to the traditional code of the Fulani, particularly modesty. The sedentary Fulani called them 'Bororo', a name derived from their cattle and insinuating something like 'those who live in the bush and do not wash'.

Wodaabé men have long, elegant, feminine features, and believe they have been blessed with great beauty. To a married couple, it's important to have beautiful children. Men who are not good-looking have, on occasion, shared their wives with more handsome men to gain more attractive children. Wodaabé women have the same elegant features and enjoy sexual freedom before marriage.

During the year, the nomadic Wodaabé are dispersed, tending to their animals. As the animals need salt to remain healthy, the nomads bring their animals to graze in the area around In-Gall (known for its high salt content) at the height of the rainy season, when the grass can support large herds. During the Cure Salée, you'll see men on camels trying to keep their herds in order and camel racing. The event serves, above all, as a social gathering – a time for wooing the opposite sex, marriage and seeing old friends.

For the Wodaabé, the Cure Salée is the time for their Gerewol festival. To win the attention of eligible women, single men participate in a 'beauty contest'. The main event is the Yaake, which is a late-afternoon performance when the men dance, displaying their beauty, charisma and charm. In preparation they'll spend long hours decorating themselves in front of small hand mirrors. They then form a long line, dressed to the hilt with blackened lips (to make the teeth seem whiter), lightened faces, white streaks down their foreheads and noses, star-like figures painted on their faces, braided hair, elaborate headwear, anklets, all kinds of jewellery, beads and shiny objects. Tall, lean bodies, long slender noses, white even teeth, and white eyes are what the women are looking for.

After taking special stimulating drinks, the men dance for hours. Their charm is revealed in their dancing. Eventually, the women, dressed less elaborately, timidly make their choices. If a marriage proposal results, the man takes a calabash full of milk to the woman's parents. If they accept, he then brings them the bride price, three cattle, which are slaughtered for the festivities that follow.

Rivalry between suitors can be fierce, and to show their virility the young men take part in the *Soro*, an event where they stand smiling while others try to knock them over with huge sticks. At the end of the festival, the men remove their jewellery, except for a simple talisman.

In 2005 the government tried to organise some separate Cure Salée events specifically for tourists (complete with admission fees), but this just seemed to confuse matters and the festival was rather disjointed.

A beauty contest of a very different variety occurs at Niamey's **Hangandi festival** (p589).

Another interesting celebration is the Festival de l'Air (p609) in Iferouane each December. It was started in 2000 to celebrate and preserve traditional Tuareg culture and to promote tourism in the far north.

The Muslim holiday of **Tabaski** (see p606) in Agadez is an event indeed, with the 'cavalcade' camel race passing through town's crooked and crowded streets.

The months of July and August are also rich ones for festivals in the Sahara, with a large feast being held in a different village almost every week. For information about these remote festivities you'll have to keep your ear to the ground in Agadez.

HOLIDAYS

With over 90% of the population being Muslim, Islamic holidays dominate the calendar (see p818 for dates and details). Other public holidays include the following:

New Year's Day 1 January

Easter March/April

Labour Day 1 May

Independence Day 3 August

Settlers' Day 5 September

Republic Day 18 December

Christmas Day 25 December

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet is readily available in Niamey, with only a few options in Maradi, Zinder and Agadez. Prices range from CFA500 per hour in Niamey, to CFA6000 per hour in Maradi.

LANGUAGE

French is the official language. The principal African languages are Hausa, spoken mainly in the south, and Djermana (also spelt Zarma), spoken mostly in the west, including around Niamey. Other languages include Gourmanchéma in the south and Fulfulde, Tamashek, Toubou and Kanuri, the languages of the northern nomadic and seminomadic herders. See p879 for useful phrases in French, Hausa, Fulfulde and Tamashek.

MONEY

The unit of currency is the West African CFA franc.

Carrying cash or travellers cheques in euros is best, though you'll rarely have trouble with

US dollar equivalents. The most convenient bank to change cash (no commission) or travellers cheques (1.6% commission) are the branches of Banque Internationale pour l'Afrique – Niger (BIA-Niger) in Niamey, Maradi, Tahoua, Zinder and Agadez. The branches of Ecobank can also be helpful, but they tend to have higher commission charges (especially for travellers cheques).

There are currently no ATMs in Niger and credit-card advances (Visa and MasterCard) are only a real option in the capital. Some of the top-end hotels, airline offices and travel agencies in Niamey also accept credit cards.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

A photo or video permit is not required, but you should avoid taking pictures of government buildings, military sites, bridges (especially Kennedy Bridge in Niamey) and people bathing in the river. For more details see p823.

POST

Postal services outside the capital are slow and unreliable, so you should send everything from Niamey. As an example of rates, a postcard or 10g letter to Europe or North America costs CFA525/550 respectively.

TELEPHONE

Throughout Niger you'll find private telecentres offering international calls for about CFA750 per minute. The quality is generally pretty good and most places will let you receive calls for free. A three-minute (the minimum) call to Europe from most post offices costs about CFA5000. Subsequent minutes cost CFA1600.

Niger's new mobile phone network now covers most major cities, but people have only had mixed success setting up their foreign phones.

VISAS

Visas are required by everyone who isn't a West African citizen. Requirements change all the time, however, so check with a Nigerien embassy.

Getting a visa outside West Africa is generally straightforward. You usually have to provide three photos, proof of yellow-fever vaccination (and cholera vaccination if entering from a country with a recent out-

break), a recent bank statement proving you have at least US\$500, and a copy of your airline ticket proving onward travel (although this can usually be a ticket for departing some months later from another African country). Your passport must also be valid for at least six months after your planned exit date from Niger. You can find up-to-date information and printable visa application forms from the websites of Niger's embassies in Paris (www.ambassadeniger.org) and Washington DC (www.nigerembassyusa.org). If applying in person, embassies usually process visas within 24 hours. Costs vary depending where you apply. For instance, a one-/three-month tourist visa in Washington DC costs US\$34.58/88.94, while a one-month tourist visa in Paris is €50. See p612 for a list of Nigerien embassies outside of West Africa.

If you're travelling overland you'll find Niger visa information for the following countries on the following pages: Benin (p123), Mali (p542) and Nigeria (p669).

Visas are also available in Chad at the **Niger Consulate** (off Ave Gourang, N'Djaména). A one-month visa costs US\$35, while a two-month option is US\$70. Both require two photos and can be processed the same day. There's no Niger representation in Burkina Faso, but there is a **Niger Consulate** (☎ 213-788921; 54 Rue du Vercors) in Algiers. They issue one-month visas costing US\$60 or €50. The service is same-day and you'll need three photos.

Some visitors entering from a country without any Nigerien diplomatic representation (eg Burkina Faso) have been known to get their passport stamped at the border and then get the full visa issued in Niamey. That said, if you don't want to risk getting turned back or having to pay a substantial bribe, you're better off arriving with a visa resting peacefully in your passport.

Visa Extensions

For a one- to three-month visa extension, take two photos, your passport and CFA20,000 to the **Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire** (☎ 73 37 43, ext 249; Rue du Président Heinrich Lübke, Niamey; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri). Extensions are typically processed the same day.

Visas for Onward Travel

In Niger, you can get visas for the following neighbouring countries.

ALGERIA

While the Algerian embassy in Niamey only issue visas to Niger residents, the consulate in Agadez told us they'd issue tourist visas if you have a letter from an Algerian travel agency (stating your plans with the agency), a photocopy of your vehicle's *carte grise* and three colour photos.

BENIN

Transit visas cost CFA10,000, three-month single-entry tourist visas are CFA15,000 and three-month multiple-entry visas go for CFA20,000. You'll need to bring two photos and the process takes two working days. You can also get a transit visa (CFA4000) at the border in Malanville, but it's good only for 48 hours (though you can renew it in Cotonou).

BURKINA FASO, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, GABON, SENEGAL & TOGO

The French consulate grants three-month visas for these countries. Each visa costs CFA23,000 and requires one photo and a photocopy of your passport. The service usually takes 24 hours.

CHAD

For a single-entry one-month visa you'll need two photos, CFA15,000 and a pleasant demeanour (to try and avoid being one of the people refused a visa for little or no reason). Visas are usually ready the same day.

MALI

A one-month single-entry visa costs CFA20,000, requires one photo and are issued in 24 hours.

NIGERIA

Although the embassy previously didn't issue visas to non-Niger residents, they seemed to have changed their tone and now offer same-day visa services. You'll need two photos and somewhere between CFA21,000 and CFA27,400, depending on your country of origin. Note that visas can only be obtained on Tuesday and Thursday between 10am and 1pm.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Whether in a group or alone, woman rarely face any different trouble than men when travelling in Niger. Solo travellers will face

more than their fare share of suitors, but their advances are typically harmless and can be easily rebuked. Remember that dress is taken very seriously in Muslim countries and shorts or singlets are not advised as they show a lack of sensitivity. For more general information and advice, see p828.

TRANSPORT IN NIGER

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Entering Niger

Despite needing to provide a yellow-fever vaccination certificate to obtain a visa, you'll still need to show it when entering the country. Proof of cholera vaccination is also occasionally asked for if you're entering Niger from a country with a recent outbreak. While all those arriving by plane must have obtained their visa ahead of time, rare travellers have managed to enter overland without a visa (if arriving from a country without Nigerien diplomatic representation). However, this is rare and never a smooth process – it's always best to have a visa prior to arrival.

If you have your ducks in a row, arriving by air or overland on public transport is pretty routine. Those in their own vehicles usually face more scrutiny and officials usually do their best to find/create problems with your *carnet* , international drivers licence or insurance papers.

Air

Airlines with offices in Niamey include the following:

Air Algérie (AH; ☎ 73 32 14; www.airalgerie.dz; Rue du Gaweye) Hub: Algiers.

Air Burkina (2J; ☎ 73 70 67; www.air-burkina.com; Rue du Commerce) Hub: Ouagadougou.

Air France (AF; ☎ 73 31 21; www.airfrance.com; Rue du Souvenir) Hub: Charles de Gaulle, Paris.

Air Sénégal International (V7; www.air-senegal-international.com) Hub: Dakar. Contact the Royal Air Maroc office for information.

Nigeravia (☎ 73 35 90; www.nigeravia.com; Rue du Président Heinrich Lübke)

Point-Afrique (☎ 73 40 26; www.point_afrique.com; Rue du Sahel) Hub: Paris. Also known as Point-Air Niger.

Royal Air Maroc (AT; ☎ 73 28 85; www.royalairmaroc.com; Rue du Gaweye) Hub: Casablanca.

Toumaï Air Tchad (☎ 73 04 05; Rue du Gaweye) Hub: N'Djaména.

AFRICA

Several airlines fly in and out of Niamey and together they serve many of West Africa's major cities. Prices at each airline fluctuate wildly and can range from a low of CFA135,000 for a short hop to Ouagadougou, to CFA380,000 for a flight to N'Djaména or Casablanca.

Airlines serving Niamey and their African destinations include the following:

Afriqiyah Airways (8U; www.afriqiyah.aero) Hub: Tripoli. Links Niamey with Cotonou and Ouagadougou with weekly flights.

Air Burkina (2J; www.air-burkina.com) Hub: Ouagadougou. Weekly flights to Abidjan and Ouagadougou.

Air Ivoire (VU; www.airivoire.com) Hub: Abidjan. One flight a week to Abidjan.

Air Sénégal International (V7; www.air-senegal-international.com) Hub: Dakar. Connects Niamey with Dakar and Bamako with Monday, Wednesday and Friday flights.

Royal Air Maroc (AT; www.royalairmaroc.com) Hub: Casablanca. Flies between Niamey and Casablanca each Monday and Friday.

Toumaï Air Tchad (☎ 73 04 05) Hub: N'Djaména. Friday flights serve N'Djaména.

EUROPE & THE USA

There's less choice when flying to Europe or the USA from Niger, however there are two charter companies providing great value.

Airlines serving Niger and their international destinations include the following:

Air Algérie (AH; www.airalgerie.dz) Hub: Algiers. Have reasonable one-way fares to Paris, Marseilles and Lyon from Niamey.

Air France (AF; www.airfrance.com) Hub: Charles de Gaulle, Paris. Two weekly flights between Niamey and Paris. One-way fares are extortionate while return fares are more reasonable.

Go-Voyages (www.govoyages.com) Hub: Paris. This charter company has cheap flights to Agadez from Paris/Marseilles during high season (October to April).

Point Afrique (www.point-afrique.com) Hub: Paris. Offering the best value from Europe, this charter company has year-round weekly flights from Paris/Marseilles to Niamey. Between October and April they also serve Agadez.

Royal Air Maroc (AT; www.royalairmaroc.com) Hub: Casablanca. Has regular flights via Casablanca to Paris and New York.

Land

ALGERIA

The classic crossing from Assamakka (Niger) to In Guezzem (Algeria) is open, though only a trickle of overlanders pass

this way thanks to the increased bureaucracy resulting from bandits and the area's past instability. Algerian visas and arrangements with an Algerian travel agency must be made prior to reaching the border. The same can be said for heading south, as no vehicles can travel in this region of Niger without a licensed guide and *feuille de route* (official itinerary) – both are available through Nigerien travel agencies.

BENIN

The Gaya/Malanville border is now open 24 hours a day and few travellers have problems here. The road connecting Niamey and Cotonou is sealed all the way and **SNTV** (☎ 73 30 20; sntv@intnet.ne; Ave de Gamkalé, Niamey) runs daily buses between the two cities (CFA20,000, 13 to 15 hours). **EHGM** (☎ 74 37 16; Blvd de Mali Béro, Niamey) runs similar services four days a week for CFA18,700.

Bush taxis don't cross the border, so if you'll have to use a *moto* (CFA500) to link Gaya and Malanville. See the Gaya (p596) and Malanville (p120) sections for further transportation information.

BURKINA FASO

The main crossing linking Niger and Burkina Faso is Foetchango, southwest of Niamey. It's pretty straightforward and now remains open around the clock. SNTV buses cover the 500km between Niamey and Ouagadougou (CFA10,000, nine to 11 hours, Tuesday to Sunday).

Minibuses leave Niamey's *gare routière* , which is 1km west of Kennedy Bridge, for Makalondi (CFA2100, 1¼ hours), Kantchari (CFA3100, two hours) and Ouagadougou (CFA8100, 10 to 12 hours). Note that times to Kantchari and Ouagadougou don't include border festivities at Foetchango. Despite what drivers tell you, Peugeot taxis don't cross the border and you must change at Kantchari.

An alternative crossing for those with their own vehicles is the northwestern route via Téra. It involves a short but enjoyable ferry crossing (CFA1000) at Farié (62km northwest of Niamey).

Remember that there's an hour's time difference between Niger and Burkina Faso.

CHAD

There's no scheduled public transport travelling across this border, but there are a

couple of Landcruisers that make the dusty day-long journey from Nguigmi to Mao, Chad (CFA15,000) each week. From Mao you may have to wait several days before you find something to get you to N'Djaména.

Don't forget to get your passport stamped in Nguigmi and Mao, and remember that, in Chad, they use Central African CFA francs.

LIBYA

Currently the Libyan border is only open to traffic entering Niger. To enter you must be travelling with a licensed guide and have a *feuille de route* (official itinerary) – both are available through Nigerien travel agencies in Agadez (p605).

MALI

SNTV has a bus (actually a truck with a cabin on the back) that goes between Niamey and Gao on Monday and Thursday (CFA11,500, up to 30 hours). The road from Niamey to Ayorou is sealed; from the border at Labbézanga it's sandy to Gao. From July to September, the route is muddy and the journey has been described by one reader as 'a horrific journey of hassles, bureaucracy, time-wasting and general lunacy'. Take plenty of water.

It's also possible to take a slow-boat from Ayorou to Gao (CFA14,000, two days) on Monday. There's no shade, so a hat, or better yet an umbrella, is as crucial as a large supply of water.

NIGERIA

There are four border crossings between Niger and Nigeria: Gaya/Kamba, Birni N'Konni/Illela, Maradi/Katsina and Zinder/Jibiya. With Nigerian authorities having about five standard checks (customs, immigration, luggage, drugs and bribe), few travellers have a painless and timely crossing.

The quickest option from Niamey is the Gaya/Kamba crossing. Several minibuses/Peugeots make daily runs from Niamey to Gaya (CFA4100/4500, 4½/5½ hours), from where you can hop on a *moto* or grab a shared taxi to the Nigerian border (CFA100). From there you can get another *moto* to Kamba (200N).

Crossing at Birni N'Konni/Illela is also straightforward. Take a *moto* from Birni N'Konni to the border (CFA100), where you'll find minibuses/Peugeots running to/from Sokoto (300N/350N, 1½ hours).

BUSH TAXI TRAVEL TIMES

In *A Brief History of Time*, author Steven Hawking stated he was warned that his book's sales would be halved for each formula he included. Nonetheless, his inclusion of $E=mc^2$ didn't hurt sales, so we'll follow the famous physicist's lead and enlighten you with the Bush Taxi Time Formula: $T=(cb/2ns)t$.

If maths isn't your thing, don't worry, we've done our best to estimate bush taxi durations throughout this chapter. However, if you're a maths whiz and want to know the exact length of your upcoming journey, our formula is for you!

The formula is comprised of the following variables: (c) is the number of windshield cracks; (b) is the number of bald tyres; (n) is the number of tools in the car; (s) is the number of spare tyres; (t) is this chapter's estimated duration of journey; and (T) is what you're after – your journey's exact duration!

So, if you have six cracks in the windshield, three bald tyres, six tools in the boot, one spare tyre, and an estimated travel time of two hours, your journey time will be precisely three hours. You'll note that if there are no tools or no spare tyres, the formula results in an error (that dividing by zero demon). This only tells you one thing: without a spare tyre or tools there is no telling how long your journey will take!

If, after you're happy with the maths and settled in your seat, the taxi requires a push to get started, throw out the watch and accept the fact that your journey will be a not-so-brief history of time!

Peugeots link Maradi with the Nigerian towns of Katsina (CFA1200, 1½ hours) and Kano (CFA3000, four hours).

Zinder is also connected to Kano via the Jibya crossing. Several Peugeots (CFA3000, 3½ hours) ply this route each day.

None of the transportation times mentioned above include border procedures/hold-ups.

GETTING AROUND

Air

There are no scheduled flights within Niger. If you're short on time and flush with cash, **Nigeravia** (☎ 73 35 90; www.nigeravia.com; Rue du Président Heinrich Lübke) has a 10-seater plane for charter.

Bus

With decent tarmac roads stretching the breadth of the country, bus transport in Niger is fairly comprehensive, reliable and efficient. With more experienced drivers than its private counterparts (EHGM, RTV and Air Transport), the government company, SNTV, is still the most popular – despite its slightly higher price tag.

All companies have reserved seating, so there shouldn't be anyone in the aisles, though private companies bend this rule. It's best to book your ticket early to ensure a seat.

Each company's buses leave from their respective offices in each town, not from the autogares.

Bush Taxi

Bush taxis are cheaper and leave more frequently than buses, although they're always very crowded and can take twice as long for the same journey (exact durations of bush taxi journeys can be calculated using the boxed text above).

There are two types of bush taxi: Peugeot 504 seven-seater station wagons, which carry 10 people; and Japanese minibuses, which carry about 18 people. The Peugeots are preferable because they fill faster and stop less, though the most comfortable option is to pay about 10% more for the front window seat of a minibus (ask for cabin and point to the window). To get the same amount of room in a Peugeot you'd have to pay double.

Bush taxis cover all but the most remote villages, although there's next to no public transport in the Sahara. In rural areas you'll find converted trucks and pick-ups called *fula-fulas*, which are cheap, slow and terribly uncomfortable.

Car & Motorcycle

BRINGING YOUR OWN VEHICLE

While most information regarding bringing your own vehicle into West Africa is

on p836, there's one very important thing unique to Niger: private vehicles are not allowed to drive north from Agadez or north from Nguigmi without a licensed Nigerian guide and *feuille de route* (official itinerary) – both available through Nigerian travel agencies in Agadez (p605). If you want to visit very remote areas, like the Plateau du Djado, you'll even have to hire a second vehicle to escort you.

HIRE

There are a few car-rental agencies in Niamey, the most reliable being Niger-Car Voyages (p585).

INSURANCE

To legally drive your vehicle in Niger, you must possess third-party insurance. This regulation is rigorously checked at roadside stops throughout the country and at the borders. While there's nowhere to buy insurance immediately upon entering Niger, officials will let you proceed to the first town that sells it. Société Nigérienne d'Assurances de Réassurances has offices in Niamey, Diffa, Maradi, Zinder and Birni N'Konni. Their insurance costs less than CFA2500 per day.

ROAD CONDITIONS.

Most main roads in Niger are tarmac and are in generally good condition, although some sections, like that between Zinder and Gouré, are rather cratered and dire indeed. Thanks to being engulfed by the desert, the

Zinder–Agadez road is the only major road that isn't passable with a 2WD.

ROAD HAZARDS

Although buses no longer feel the need to take on armed soldiers between Tahoua and Agadez, you still shouldn't drive this section of road at night, due to the risk of banditry.

ROAD RULES

Driving is done on the right side of the road in Niger. Private cars must pay a toll (*péage*) to use the main routes. You buy a ticket before travelling from a checkpoint on the edge of each town, either for a whole trip, eg Niamey to Agadez (CFA1000), or in sections, eg Niamey to Tahoua (CFA500), then Tahoua to Agadez (CFA500). If you don't have a ticket when it's asked for at a checkpoint, you're fined on the spot.

As a courtesy while driving on the highway, you should always switch on your left-turn signal when you see a vehicle coming in the opposite direction. Don't turn it off until the vehicle has safely past you. This routine is to simply let the approaching driver know that you've seen them and that it's safe to pass on your left.

Tours

Your only choice in order to visit Parc Régional du W, or to dive into the desert areas around Agadez, may be to take an organised tour. Tours to Parc Régional du W are discussed on p589, while desert tours are found on p606.

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