

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 mudbrick architecture and fascinating locals, the international appeal of Niger as a destination is undeniable.

Odd then, that friends often ask prospective travellers 'Why Niger?'. Press regarding Niger's problems with localised food shortages dominates headlines and paints the entire nation in the same poor light. Some news reports would have you believe that locusts and drought regularly destroy Niger's entire food supply. In reality, crop production rarely falls more than 10% lower than average. In one reported 'famine' food was still available in most markets; the problem was that nomadic herders lost much of their livestock (their only income) due to locusts eating their livestock's food supplies. This meant herders couldn't afford the available food, putting millions at risk of starvation. Niger is undoubtedly one of the world's poorest countries, but taking your tourist dollars elsewhere only exacerbates the problem.

The lucky ones who do visit will witness enduring physical beauty and meet a vibrant mix of people, some of the planet's most stoic and resilient citizens. Whether you squeeze into bush taxis with locals and travel between colourful villages, slide into a 4WD and tackle the Ténéré or lope into the Air aboard a camel, you'll never forget your time in Niger.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1,267,000 sq km
- **ATMs** Nonexistent
- **Borders** Algeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Nigeria, Chad; land crossing into Libya is forbidden, though entry from Libya is possible
- **Budget** US\$15 to US\$100 a day
- **Capital** Niamey
- **Languages** French, Hausa, Djerma, Fulfulde, Tamashek
- **Money** West African CFA franc; €1 = CFA656, US\$1 = CFA498
- **Population** 12.5 million
- **Seasons** Hot and dry (September-May), wet (June-August)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 227; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 1
- **Visa** US\$35 to €50; obtained in Algeria, Benin, Chad, Mali and Nigeria



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Air Mountains** (p448) Make tracks with camel companions through red sands and blue rocks in these mystical mountains.
- **Ténéré Desert** (p448) Dive into the deep end with an expedition to this sublime section of the Sahara.
- **Agadez** (p445) Spiral up to the spiky summit of its majestic mud mosque to dramatic desert panoramas.
- **Zinder** (p444) Backtrack through the *banco* (mud brick) houses of the Birni Quartier and soak up the Hausa history.
- **Kouré** (p442) Walk in sublime silence with West Africa's last wild herd of gorgeous giraffes.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

December to February, the coolest and driest period, is the best time to visit. Temperatures can soar beyond 45°C (113°F) from March through to June, making desert travel unfeasible. Rains dampen the south from late May through September.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** While whistle-stop tours of Niamey, Zinder and Agadez are possible (using public transport), you're better off staying local and enjoying Niamey (p437). Possible trips include wandering with the giraffes near Kouré (p442) and exploring the renowned Parc Régional du W (p442). Alternatively, base yourself in intriguing Agadez (p445) for a taste of the astounding Air Mountains (p448).
- **Two Weeks** In addition to the one-week itinerary, add a day for the old quarters and Hausa architecture in Zinder (p444). If the Sahara beckons, bypass Niamey and delve deeper into the Air and Ténéré Desert (p448).
- **One Month** Toss out our advice above, join a camel caravan (p448) and see the Sahara, old school.

HISTORY

Before the Sahara started swallowing Niger around 2500 BC, it supported verdant grasslands, abundant wildlife and populations thriving on hunting and herding. Long after the desert pushed those populations south, Niger became a fixture on the trans-Saharan trade route. Between the 10th and 18th centuries, West African empires, such as the

HOW MUCH?

- **Streetside yogurt** US\$0.25
- **Croix d'Agadez (stylised silver cross)** US\$2
- **Simple Tuareg grigri (amulet)** US\$4
- **Tuareg turban** US\$3
- **Moto (motorcycle-taxi) across town** US\$0.30

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.20
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.60
- **Bottle of Bière Niger** US\$1
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$3
- **Grilled beef brochettes** US\$0.20

Kanem-Borno, Mali and Songhaï, flourished here, trafficking gold, salt and slaves.

The French strolled in late in the 1800s, meeting stronger-than-expected resistance. Decidedly unamused, they dispatched the punitive Voulet-Chanoine expedition, destroying much of southern Niger in 1898–99. Although Tuareg revolts continued, culminating in Agadez's siege in 1916–17, the French had control.

French rule wasn't kind. They cultivated traditional chiefs' power, whose abuses were encouraged as a means of control, and the enforced shift from subsistence farming to high-density cash crops compounded the Sahara's ongoing migration.

In 1958 France offered its West African colonies self-government in a French union or immediate independence. Countless votes conveniently disappeared, enabling France to claim that Niger wished to remain within its sphere of influence.

Maintaining close French ties, Niger's first president, Hamani Diori, ran a repressive one-party state. After surviving several coups, he was overthrown by Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountché after food stocks were discovered in ministerial homes during the Sahel drought of 1968–74. Kountché established a military ruling council.

Kountché hit the jackpot in 1968 when uranium was discovered near Arlit. Mining incomes soon ballooned, leading to ambitious projects, including the 'uranium highway' to

Agadez and Arlit. Yet not everyone was smiling: inflation skyrocketed and the poorest suffered more than ever.

The 1980s were unkind to all: uranium prices collapsed, the great 1983 drought killed thousands, and one-party politics hindered democracy. By the 1990s, Nigerians were aware of political changes sweeping West Africa and mass demonstrations erupted, eventually forcing the government into multiparty elections in 1993. However, a military junta overthrew the elected president, Mahamane Ousmane, in 1996.

Niger Today

In 1999, during widespread strikes and economic stagnation, president Mainassara (1996 coup leader) was assassinated and democracy re-established. Peaceful elections in 1999 and 2004 witnessed victory for Mamadou Tandja.

Niger is truly struggling, ranking last on the UN's Human Development Index, based on life expectancy, infant mortality and education. Sadly, Niger also ranks last on the UN's Human Poverty Index and Gender-Related Development Index.

The one bright light is the ongoing transition from military to democratic rule. Niger's government is undergoing decentralisation, handing many administrative powers to newly elected municipal councils.

CULTURE

Arguably the world's poorest people, Nigerians are also proud and quick with welcoming smiles and occasional spontaneous acts of generosity. Similarly refreshing is their willingness to work to improve Niger, unlike many Africans who'd admittedly jump at the chance to emigrate.

Despite most Nigerians being devoutly Muslim, the government is steadfastly secular and Islam adopts a more relaxed aura than in nations with similar demographics. Women don't cover their faces, alcohol is quietly consumed and some Tuareg, recognising desert life's harshness, ignore Ramadan's fast.

While Islam plays the greatest role in daily life, shaping beliefs and thoughts, little is visible to visitors. The biggest exceptions are *salat* (prayer), when Niger grinds to a halt – buses even break journeys to partake.

Religion aside, survival occupies most people's days. Around 90% make their tenuous living from agriculture and livestock, many surviving on US\$1 or less per day. Producing numerous children to help with burdening workloads is a necessity for many, a fact contributing to population growth. The fact of children being obliged to work has led to staggering adult illiteracy rates.

PEOPLE

Amazingly, Niger's population has almost doubled since 1985. Currently, 23% of Nigerians live in urban areas, though that figure is rising.

More than 90% of Nigerians live in the south, which is dominated by Hausa and Songhai-Djerma, making up 56% and 22% of Niger's populace respectively. The next largest groups are nomadic Fulani (8.5%) and Tuareg (8%), both in Niger's north, and Kanuri (4.3%), located between Zinder and Chad.

Nigerians are predominantly Muslim (over 90%), with small percentages of Christian urban dwellers. Several rural populations still practise traditional animist religions. Due to the strong influence of Nigeria's Islamic community, some Muslims around Maradi call for sharia law.

ARTS & CRAFTS

The best-known artisans are Tuareg silversmiths, who produce necklaces, striking amulets, ornamental silver daggers and stylised silver crosses, each with intricate filigree designs representing areas boasting Tuareg populations. The most famous cross is the *Croix d'Agadez*. To Tuareg, crosses are powerful talismans protecting against ill fortune.

Leatherwork by *artisans du cuir* is well regarded, particularly in Zinder, where traditional items – saddlebags, cushions and tasselled pouches – rank alongside attractive modernities like sandals and briefcases.

Beautifully unique to Niger are vibrant *kountas* (Djerma blankets), produced from bright cotton strips.

ENVIRONMENT

Two-thirds of Niger is desert, with one-third being Sahel (semidesert zone south of the Sahara). Notable features include the Niger River (Africa's third-longest), which flows 300km through Niger's southwest; the Air Mountains, the dark volcanic formations

of which rise over 2000m; and the Ténére Desert's spectacularly sweeping sand dunes.

Desertification, Niger's greatest environmental problem, is primarily caused by overgrazing and deforestation. Quartz-rich soil also prevents topsoil anchoring, causing erosion.

The southwest's dry savanna woodland hosts one of West Africa's better wildlife parks, Parc Régional du W.

FOOD & DRINK

Dates, yogurt, rice and mutton are standard Tuareg fare, while *riz sauce* (rice with sauce) is omnipresent in Niger's south. Standard restaurant dishes include grilled fish, chicken, and beef brochettes. Couscous and ragout are also popular. Outside Niamey vegetarian options diminish.

Sitting for a cup of Tuareg tea is rewarding and thirst quenching. For a wobble in your step, try Bière Niger. For a serious stagger, down some palm wine.

NIAMEY

pop 795,000

On the Niger River's lush shores and home to culinary delights unparalleled elsewhere in Niger, Niamey refreshes those arriving from the Sahel's wilds. Conversely, it can be a desperate place with summer dust never settling and the pain of the world's poorest country on show.

Dive into markets, peruse the museum, take a pirogue along the river or simply enjoy a sunset riverside drink as silhouettes of loping, laden camels cross Kennedy Bridge.

ORIENTATION

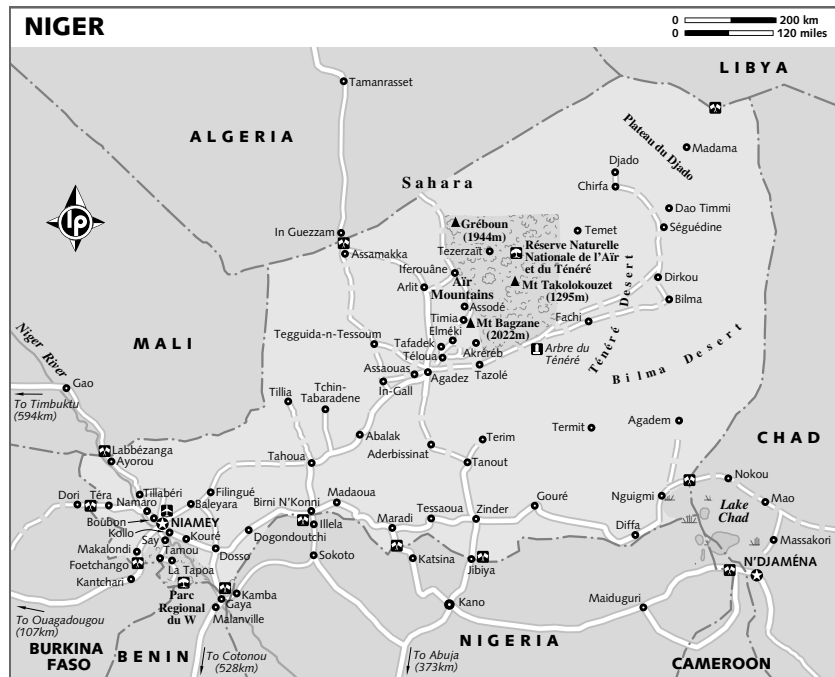
Niamey is fairly spread out, which means more walking than other Sahel capitals. The layout is rather confusing, but signs now aid navigation. Crisscrossing through the town's hub, like a wheel's spokes – hosting restaurants, bars and banking facilities – are Rue du Président Heinrich Lubké, Ave de la Mairie and Rue du Commerce.

INFORMATION

Cultural Centres

American Cultural Center (☎ 73 31 79; Rue de la Tapoa; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) US TV news and newspapers.

Centre Culturel Franco-Nigérien (☎ 73 48 34; Rue du Musée; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Wed-Sat,



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0 1 km
0 0.5 miles

0 1 km
0 0.5 miles

Internet Access

Cyber@Bebito (Blvd de l'Indépendance; per hr CFA500; ☎ 8am-midnight)

Photo-adv (per hr CFA1000; ☎ 8am-9.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-7pm Sun; ☎) Off Rond-point Maoureux.

Pl@net Cyber Cafe (Blvd de Mali Béro; per hr CFA500; ☎ 8am-midnight)

Medical Services

Clinique Alissa (☎ 72 57 66; Ave du Président Kalt Casten; ☎ 24hr)

Nouvelle Poly-Clinic Pro-Santé (☎ 72 26 50; Ave du Général de Gaulle; ☎ 24hr)

Tafadeck (☎ 73 20 34; Rue du Président Heinrich Lubké) Niamey's best dentist.

Money

BIA-Niger (Rue du Commerce) Change travellers cheques (1.6% commission) and cash. Visa cash advances cost CFA10,000.

Eco Bank (Blvd de la Liberté) Charges extortionate commissions on travellers cheques. Branch at Hôtel Gaweye (Ave Mitterrand) offers credit card advances (2% commission).

Post

Grande Poste (Rue de la Grande Poste) Decent poste restante service.

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

Telephone & Fax

Private telecentres abound (CFA900 per minute for international calls).

Grande Poste (Rue de la Grande Poste) Standard rates (see p450).

Photo-adv (☎ 8am-9.30pm Mon-Sat & 10am-7pm Sun) Fuzzy international calls (CFA200 per minute) via internet. It's off Rond-point Maoureux.

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.

Travel Agencies

Niger-Car Voyages (☎ 73 23 31; nicarvoy@intnet.net; Ave de l'Afrique) The best, albeit most expensive, agency for local tours and car rentals.

Point-Afrique (Point-Air Niger; ☎ 73 40 26; www.point-afrique.com; Rue du Sahel) This airline offers affordable package trips to northern Niger.

3.30-6.30pm Tue, 9am-noon Sun) Library, lectures, exhibits, dance and theatre.

To Airpoint (10km), Kouré (28km), Maradi (657km), Agadez (953km)

Satguru Travels & Tours Service (☎ 73 69 31; sts-nim@intnet.ne; Rue de la Copro) Need air tickets? Look no further.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

While violent incidents are generally rare in Niamey, do exercise caution along Corniche de Yantala and Corniche de Gamkalé – always take a taxi after dark. The Grand and Petit Marchés are prime pickpocket grounds.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Wade through labyrinthine lanes shaded by kaleidoscopes of tattered sheets in the **Grand Marché** (Blvd de la Liberté; ☎ 8am-6pm), inhaling spices and heady aromas all the way. Great for observing Nigerians interacting – peace amid the pandemonium. At the **Petit Marché** (Ave de la Mairie; ☎ 8am-6pm), let your hands do the walking (squeeze fruit to your heart's content).

The sprawling **Musée National du Niger** (☎ 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 delve into Niger's present and past. While common sense and science dictate 2m-tall, 15m-long crocodiles no longer wander earth, one jaw-dropping glimpse of the fossilised *Sarcosuchus imperator*, 'Super Croc', and you'll second guess everything! Avoid the appalling zoo.

There's no better way to experience the Niger River than from a peaceful **pirogue** skimming its surface at sunset. You can even take a day or two and explore villages up river. Although 'guides' wandering town offer these trips, go directly to the piroguers on the riverfront

SUPERSIZE ME!

During years of bountiful harvests, Niamey's Djerma population celebrate Hangandi. Although festivities are enjoyable, it's the beauty contest's reputation that keeps on growing and growing, much like its competitors. You see, in the eye of the Djerma, the larger the better. Prior to Hangandi, Djerma women who've been chosen to compete (some plucked off buses!) train by ingesting as much as possible. Everything culminates with the most gorgeous (read massive) woman being crowned at the Palais du Congrès. Her reward? More food!

near La Flottile restaurant. Four-passenger pirogues should cost CFA2000 per person per hour – triple that for a motor. **Niger-Car Voyages** (☎ 73 23 31; nicarvoy@intnet.ne; Ave de l'Afrique) also arranges trips.

Beat the heat with some underwater action at **Hôtel Gaweye** (Ave Mitterrand; admission CFA2500) or **Grand Hôtel** (Rond-point du Grand Hôtel; admission CFA2000).

COURSES

Centre Culturel Franco-Nigérien (☎ 73 48 34; Rue du Musée) occasionally offers language courses. Otherwise, enquire about tutors for your burgeoning French and Hausa skills.

SLEEPING

Vacancies are rare, so book ahead.

Budget

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 a campers-only option.

Chez Tatayi (☎ 74 12 81; www.tatayi.com; Ave de l'Entente; dm CFA5000, s/d without bathroom from CFA12,000/15,000; ☎) This pleasant, peaceful haven near Wadata Autogare has a shady garden veranda, spotless rooms, stashes of books, board games and free drinking water. Shared bathrooms and mosquitos (nets are provided) are the only downsides. Air-con adds CFA4000.

The following options are only for NGO employees/volunteers:

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 & Top End

Hôtel les Rôniers (☎ 72 31 38; Rue Tondibia; s/tw CFA22,500/25,500; ☎) Bright rooms, cool tile floors and contemporary bathrooms are found beneath the cottages' thatched roofs. The garden's lovely, the restaurant's great and the pool's rather hip. It's 7km west of town (CFA1000 by taxi).

Hôtel du Sahel (☎ 73 24 31; fax 73 20 98; Rue du Sahel; s/d CFA25,550/28,500; ☎) Rooms are comfortable and clean, though some toilets lack seats. Odd-numbered rooms boast river views. Renovations were underway when we visited (new toilet seats?!). Don't walk here from town after dark.

Hôtel Terminus (☎ 73 26 92; hotermi@intnet.ne; Rue du Sahel; r/ste CFA32,000/45,000; ☎ ☎) Clean, comfy bungalows host large sunny rooms, with TVs and gargantuan bathrooms. There's a pleasant restaurant and a footy-trained TV.

Grand Hôtel (☎ 73 26 41; www.grandhotelniger.com; Rond-point du Grand Hôtel; s/d/ste from CFA49,500/59,500/60,000; ☎ ☎) Attentive service, value for money and top-notch rooms with satellite TVs and lovely river views.

EATING

Until 9am street stalls near Petit Marché serve fried-egg sandwiches. After that, it's *riz sauce*. Late-night *suya* stalls on Rue du Commerce's hawk braised brochettes (CFA100; *suya* is Hausa for brochette).

Les Delices (Blvd de l'Indépendance; pastries from CFA350; ☎ 6am-midnight) Wrap your lips around fresh *pain au chocolat* (chocolate wrapped in pastry – heavenly), croissants or baguettes at Niamey's top patisserie.

La Cloche (Ave Luebké; meals CFA1000-3000; ☎) noon-midnight) When taste is secondary to late-night hunger, the *shwarmas* work nicely.

Le Dragon d'Or (Rue de Grand Hôtel; meals CFA1700-5400; ☎) lunch & dinner) Slurp delicious Vietnamese soups, sharpen your teeth on frog legs, or work chopstick magic on tasty chicken with cashew nuts and fresh ginger.

La Flottile (Corniche de Yantala; meals CFA2500-3800; ☎) lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Indulge in fresh fish in this shady garden restaurant. The *capitaine* (Nile perch) is excellent. For safety, organise a taxi after sunset.

Byblos (Blvd de l'Indépendance; meals CFA2500-5000; ☎) lunch & dinner) This open-air Lebanese restaurant serves Niger's best tabouleh and hummus.

Le Pilier (Rue de la Tapoa; meals CFA3000-6500; ☎) lunch & dinner Wed-Mon; ☎) Hands down, *the* place for Italian. Enjoy plentiful pastas, from ravioli to gnocchi dripping in Gorgonzola.

Bada Restaurant (Ave du Général de Gaulle; meals CFA3000-15,000; ☎) lunch & dinner) Put chopsticks in the kung-fu position and battle *tempura* vegetables, roasted eel, fresh sashimi and sushi.

Other enticing options:

Chocolat Raffine (Rue NB 29; meals CFA1200-3000;

☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner)

La Cascade (Rue NB 29; meals CFA1800-4500; ☎) lunch

Tue-Sun, dinner daily; ☎)

Le Pizzeria (Rue du Commerce; pizzas from CFA3000;

☎) dinner; ☎)

Score (Ave Luebké) and **Supermarket Haddad** (☎ 73 61 60; Rue de Commerce) are well-stocked supermarkets. You may spot our nose-prints on the cheese displays.

DRINKING

Grand Hôtel (Rond-point du Grand Hôtel) Few places in town can beat the Grand Hôtel'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).

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).

ENTERTAINMENT

2005 (Ave Luebké; cover Wed CFA1500, Fri & Sat CFA2500) Reverberating with Western and African tunes, this was *it* when we visited.

Nearby **La Cloche** (Ave Luebké; no cover), **100% Night Club** (Ave de la Mairie; cover CFA1000) and **Hi-Fi Club** (Rue du Commerce; cover weekends CFA3000) heave on weekends. Another great option, further east, is **Guiguinya** (Ave de l'Entente; no cover).

Centre Culturel Franco-Nigérien (Rue du Musée; admission CFA500; ☎ 8.30pm, days vary) and the **American Cultural Center** (Rue de la Tapoa; admission free; ☎ 4.30pm Wed & Fri) offer cinematic distraction.

SHOPPING

Peruse the nether regions of the Grand Marché (opposite) for leatherwork, silver jewellery and *les couvertures Djerma* (also known locally as *kountas*). *Kountas* are large, bright strips of cotton sewn together into a large blanket, which are truly spectacular and unique to Niger. The museum's **artisans' centre** (Rue du Musée; ☎ closed Mon) and **Co-opérative des Métiers d'Arts** (Rue du Musée) are also good.

You'll find local music CDs at stalls on Ave Luebké, near the Petit Marché.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

For airlines operating from Niamey, see p451.

Bus

The government-run **SNTV** (Ave de Gamkalé) is most reliable, though **EHGM** (Blvd de Mali Béro) and **Air Transport** (off Ave du Canada), serving similar

routes, aren't bad. All buses leave between 4am and 6am. One-way SNTV fares include:

Destination	Fare (CFA)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Agadez	14,310	12	Tue, Thu-Sun
Arlit	17,500	15	Tue, Thu-Sun
Dosso	2440	2	daily
Maradi	9565	9	daily
Tahoua	8750	8	Tue, Thu-Sun
Zinder	12,650	12	daily

Bush Taxi

The following is a list of one-way fares for Peugeot from **Wadata Autogare** (Ave du Kourfeye), their estimated durations and level of patience required.

Destination	Fare (CFA)	Duration (hr)	Patience of...
Agadez	15,100	16½	Mahatma Gandhi
Birni N'Konni	5500	7½	David Blaine
Dosso	2100	2½	John McEnroe
Gaya	5000	5	Michael Palin
Maradi	9000	11	Mother Teresa
Tahoua	8000	10	The Pope
Zinder	12,400	14	Shackleton's men

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The airport is about 13km southeast of the city. A taxi from the airport costs CFA5000 to CFA10,000; coming from town costs about CFA2500.

Taxi

Abundant until 10pm, most taxis are shared. Shared taxis head towards the first passenger's destination trolling for subsequent passengers. To catch one, hold out your arm and blurt your destination when it slows. Going your way? *Voilà!* You're there for CFA200. If not? Expect a face full of dust. Yes, their theme song is 'Are You Gonna Go My Way?' by Lenny Kravitz.

A *déplacement* (private hire) costs CFA1000 for a cross-town trip.

AROUND NIAMEY

About 60km east, West Africa's last remaining **giraffe herd** quietly munch acacia trees, patrolling the baking soils around **Kouré**. The elegant long-necked beasts are rather relaxed

and we spent 30 magical minutes walking in their midst.

Without a vehicle, it's an easy half-day trip by taxi (around CFA30,000). You'll need CFA4000 for admission and compulsory guide (available at the booth near the highway).

SOUTHWEST NIGER

PARC REGIONAL DU W

What this excellent **park** (adult/child CFA3500/2000; ☹ Dec – late-May) lacks in animal numbers, it compensates with its wildlife diversity. Antelopes, buffalos, elephants, hippos, lions, crocodiles, hyenas, warthogs and over 300 species of migratory bird call this dry savanna woodland home. The 9120-sq-km park rests on the Niger River's banks, straddling Niger, Benin and Burkina Faso.

The best wildlife viewing is March to May, when migratory birds arrive and animals congregate around shrinking water supplies. The park's entrance at La Tapoa has park maps, guidebooks (CFA5000) and obligatory guides (CFA5000 per day).

Campers, hope the unreliable **camp site** (camping CFA2500) near the Relais de la Tapoa lodge is open, as camping inside the park is prohibited.

The comfortable 35-room riverside **Relais de la Tapoa** (☎ bookings 73 40 26; pa@intnet.net; s/d CFA17,500/27,000, with air-con CFA20,000/31,500; ☹ Dec – late-May; ♀ ♀) in Tapoa village is the only official park accommodation. Rates include two daily meals.

From Niamey, it is about a three-hour conversation-stopping washboard drive (145km) via Say and Tamou. Niger-Car Voyages (p439) runs two-day tours (CFA70,000 to CFA140,000 per person depending on numbers). It's pointless coming independently without a vehicle.

DOSSO

pop 50,000

Once home to Djermaakoye, Djerma's most important religious leader, Dosso is now merely a staging post for those heading south to Benin and southwest to Nigeria.

If stuck, **Auberge Au Zenith** (☎ 50 38 80; Route de Niamey; d with shared toilet CFA6300-12,600; ♀) has Dosso's tidiest rooms. Although all have private showers, the cement-floored rooms are dark and the shared squat toilets are smelly.

Plentiful bush taxis head to Niamey (CFA2100, 2½ hours), Dogondoutchi (CFA2000, 2½ hours) and Gaya (CFA2000, three hours).

BIRNI N'KONNI

pop 50,000

About 420km east of Niamey, Birni N'Konni (or 'Konni') sits at the junction for Zinder and Agadez. It's also an important border town with Nigeria. There's little to see, but it's a convenient place to break your journey.

At **Relais-Camping Touristique** (☎ 64 06 00; Route de Niamey; camping per person CFA1500, plus per vehicle CFA1000, d CFA10,000-12,500; ♀) large, Spartan rondavels dwarf their sizable beds. It's clean, friendly and has a decent restaurant.

East of town and the cream of Konni's crop, the bright rooms at **Le Motel** (☎ 64 06 50; Route de Niamey; d CFA22,500-37,500; ♀) sport TVs, modern bathrooms and comfortable beds. Its restaurant is also tops.

Between SNTV, EHGM, RTV and Air Transport (all on Route de Niamey), there are daily buses to Maradi (CFA4500, three hours), Zinder (CFA6300, six hours), Niamey (CFA6600, six hours), Tahoua (CFA2000, 1½ hours) and Agadez (CFA7750, 5½ hours). Northbound and eastbound buses depart around 10am; westbound around 1pm.

Bush taxis leave the *autogare* (bus or transport station) for Dogondoutchi (CFA1600, two hours), Maradi (CFA2600, four hours) and Tahoua (CFA1300, 1½ hours).

TAHOUA

pop 82,600

This friendly Hausa town, about 130km north of Konni, is Niger's fifth-largest city. If you're riding bush taxi you'll stop here. Besides the vibrant Sunday market at the **Grand Marché** (Route de Maternite; ☹ sunrise to sunset), peruse the **Centre Artisanal** (Route de l'Artisanal; ☹ 9am-6pm) for leather products.

If you bet rooms at **Hôtel de l'Amitié** (☎ 88 33 95; Route de Maternite; d CFA10,300-12,300; ♀) have toilet seats, air-con and sunshine, you'll hit the trifecta! Look for wooden giraffes out front.

Near Centre Artisanal, **Restaurant Milana** (Route d'Arène; meals CFA800-3500; ☹ breakfast, lunch & dinner) outshines all. Italian cravings are seriously satisfied here. There are also **food stalls** (sandwiches CFA250) opposite the SNTV office.

Between SNTV, EHGM, RTV and Air Transport, daily midday buses serve Agadez

(CFA6845, 4½ hours) and Niamey (CFA8880, 7½ hours). Frequent minibuses serve Konni (CFA1300, 1½ hours).

SOUTHEAST NIGER

MARADI

pop 179,000

Maradi, Niger's third-largest city, remains the administrative capital and commercial centre for agriculture. The proximity to Nigeria means staunchly conservative Islam reigns. Although not the most engaging place, it warrants a day stop.

As you might imagine, sinking into Maradi's **Grande Marché** (BRJ Rue 1; ☹ sunrise to sunset) 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.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel Larewa (☎ 53 01 44; d with fan/air-con from CFA5500/10,600; ♀) Maradi's best budget value is north of town, east of EHGM. The western complex's rooms, with showers and shared toilets, outshine the eastern complex's more expensive options.

Maradi Guest House (☎ 41 07 31; s/d/tw from CFA31,500/33,600/42,000; ♀ ♀) Brilliantly massive, some rooms at this guesthouse host king-size rod-iron canopy beds and verdant balconies. Well-signposted 2km southeast from town, reservations here are essential. The restaurant (meals CFA1700 to CFA5000; open breakfast, lunch and dinner) silences tummy pangs for pizza, lasagne, hamburgers and even ice cream.

Boulangerie Pâtisserie Mai-Rey (BRJ Rue 1; pastries CFA250; ☹ from 5.30am) A scant yet good snacking selection.

Restaurant Marthaba (43 SGI Rue 10; meals CFA500-1000; ☹ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A sleepy outdoor place for local dishes like *riz sauce*.

At night there's delicious grilled chicken at **street stalls** (BRJ Rue 13) around Jardin Publique.

Getting There & Around

SNTV (81 BRJ Rue 1) has daily buses to Zinder (CFA4500, three hours) and Niamey

(CFA9565, nine hours). **RTV** (BRJ Rue 8) and **EHGM** (Route de Niamey) have similar services. **EHGM** serves Diffa (CFA9700, 11 hours, Wednesday and Saturday). All eastbound buses depart around 4pm; westbound around 9am.

Bush taxis depart the *gare routière* (bus station) for Zinder (CFA2750, four hours) and Konni (CFA2800, 4½ hours).

ZINDER

pop 205,500

With celebrated traditional Hausa houses, labyrinthine old-quarter alleys, an infamous prison within the Palais du Sultan, and classic French fort, Zinder wears its history on its sleeve. What a history it is, growing 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.

Information

BIA-Niger (Ave des Banques) Changes travellers cheques (1.6% commission) and cash.

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

Cybercafé Kandarga (Rue du Marché; per hr CFA1500)

Sights

Few things beat losing your bearings (and a few hours) within the Birni Quartier's innumerable crooked alleys. The old *banco* (mudbrick) houses actually represent some of Africa's best Hausa architecture. Linger outside the 19th-century **Palais du Sultan** (Place de la Grande Mosquée, Birni Quartier) to score a guide; ask about the infamous *chambre des scorpions* (a tip of CFA2000 should suffice).

The jaded **Musée Régional de Zinder** (Ave de la République; admission CFA1000, camera CFA1000; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-6pm) has, nevertheless, a lively English-speaking (ahem!) curator who adds to the experience, like telling you the dusty sword actually lopped off someone's head!

The **Grand Marché** (Blvd de l'Hippodrome; ☎ dawn to dusk), one of Niger's liveliest, warrants a walk-about (especially Thursday) through the leathers

of Niger's best *artisans du cuir*. More leather-work resides at **Coopérative du Village Artisanal** (Ave de Maradi; ☎ 8am-6.30pm), 2km west of town.

Sleeping

Hôtel Malem Kalkadanu (☎ 50 07 74; Ave de la République; s without bathroom CFA3100-6100) This rambling place has crude but clean rooms, ranging from dark cells to larger options with fans, windows and private showers. It's decent value.

Auberge Mourna (☎ 99 03 06; s/d/tw from CFA14,500/18,500/18,500; ☎) Leaps and bounds ahead, this place off Rue du Marché has smart, spotless, bright rooms boasting TVs, air-con and modern bathrooms. Book ahead!

Hôtel Damagaram (☎ 51 00 69; Ave des Banques; s/d/tw CFA16,500/20,000/20,000; ☎) A long drop in quality, Damagaram's teeny-weeny (useless) mosquito nets would be funny if mossies weren't living in the loos.

Eating & Drinking

Restaurant El Ali (meals CFA500-2000; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Devour African favourites beneath the *paillotes* (thatched shelters). It's east of Birni Quartier and lacks signs; ask for directions.

Hôtel Damagaram (Ave des Banques; meals CFA1000-3000; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) An atmospheric courtyard for an evening meal or beverage. There's couscous, brochettes and Chinese dishes such as ginger chicken.

Restaurant Mourna (meals CFA2000-3200; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This tiny terrace off Rue du Marché serves up delicious meals, such as *fillet de capitaine à la Basquaise* (Basque-style Nile perch), Cantonese rice and beef curry. Delay salivating over the crepes and chocolate mousse until assured they have some.

The best **street food** (Ave de la République; brochettes CFA100, roast pigeons/chickens CFA900/1500; ☎ dinner) is in front of Hôtel Central.

For a local night out, hit the rough-and-ready Bar le Carrefour (known as L'Escalier), north of the Catholic Mission.

Getting There & Away

SNTV (Ave des Banques) serves 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**, found north of Auberge Mourna, also serves Niamey, Agadez and Diffa. **Air Transport** (Blvd de l'Hippodrome) and **RTV** (off Ave de la République) serve Niamey daily.

Minibuses/Peugeots depart the *gare routière* in the centre of town for Diffa (CFA6000/6500, nine/eight hours) and Maradi (CFA2500/3000, 4½/3½ hours).

Minibuses/Peugeots depart for Agadez (CFA7000/8000, nine/eight hours) from **Agadez autogare** (Ave de la République), 1km northeast of town.

DIFFA

pop 30,600

This diminutive, dusty stop for overlanders visiting Chad has a BIA-Niger (euros only), petrol station and market to stockpile essentials (prices soar further east).

Hôtel le Tal (☎ 56 39 57; d with fan/air-con CFA7500/13,500; ☎), off Route de Nguigmi behind the petrol station, is overpriced, but friendly and cleanish.

SNTV serves Nguigmi (CFA1800, four hours, Monday and Friday) and Zinder (CFA6200, seven hours, Wednesday and Sunday). **EHGM** serves Zinder (Saturday). Bush taxis access Nguigmi (CFA2500, four hours).

NORTHERN NIGER

AGADEZ

pop 95,100

While some great ancient trading Sahara towns, like Timbuktu, try to survive on international mystique, Agadez thrives as the gateway to truly spectacular desert and mountain scenery.

Nonetheless, Agadez itself is Niger's most fascinating city and deserves your attention. When standing in the famous Grand Mosquée's porcupine shadow, or weaving through the sandy streets and distinctive mudbrick architecture, it's easy to imagine Agadez at its zenith four centuries ago.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Agadez.com (Route de l'Aéroport; per hr CFA2000)

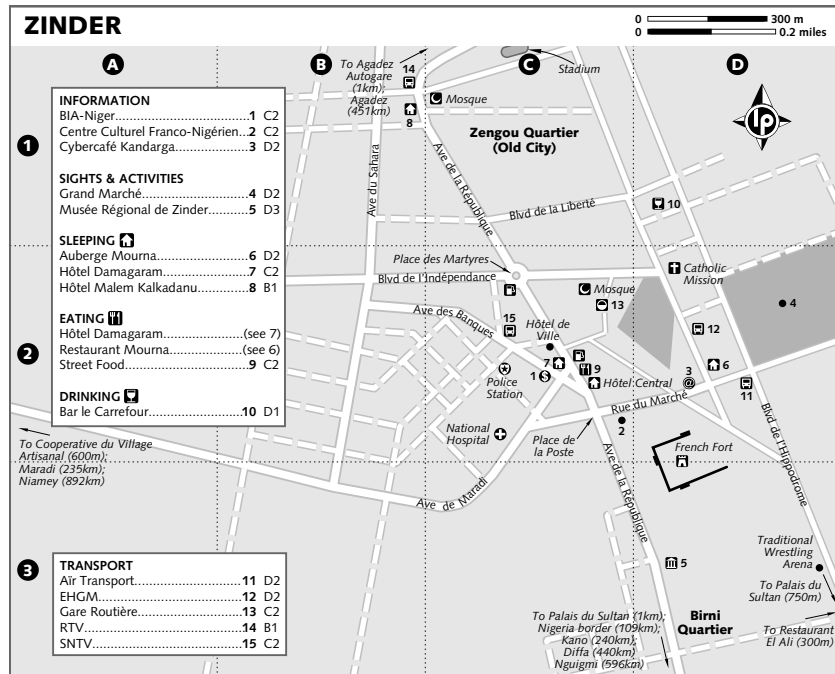
MEDICAL SERVICES

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

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

MONEY

BIA-Niger (Route de Bilma) Changes travellers cheques (1.6% commission) and cash.



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

TELEPHONE

Numerous private offices along Route de l'Aéroport offer international calls (CFA900 per minute).

TOURIST INFORMATION

Centre d'Information Touristique (☎ 98 78 81; Vieux Quartier; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Fri-Tue) A mixture of helpful information and 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) Much like Centre d'Information Touristique.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Recommended agents specialising in Air Mountains and Ténéré tours include:

Agadez Expéditions (☎ /fax 44 01 70; www.agadez-tourisme.com; Route de Bilma)

Best Sahara Tours (☎ 97 86 66; www.best-sahara-tours.com; Route de Niamey)

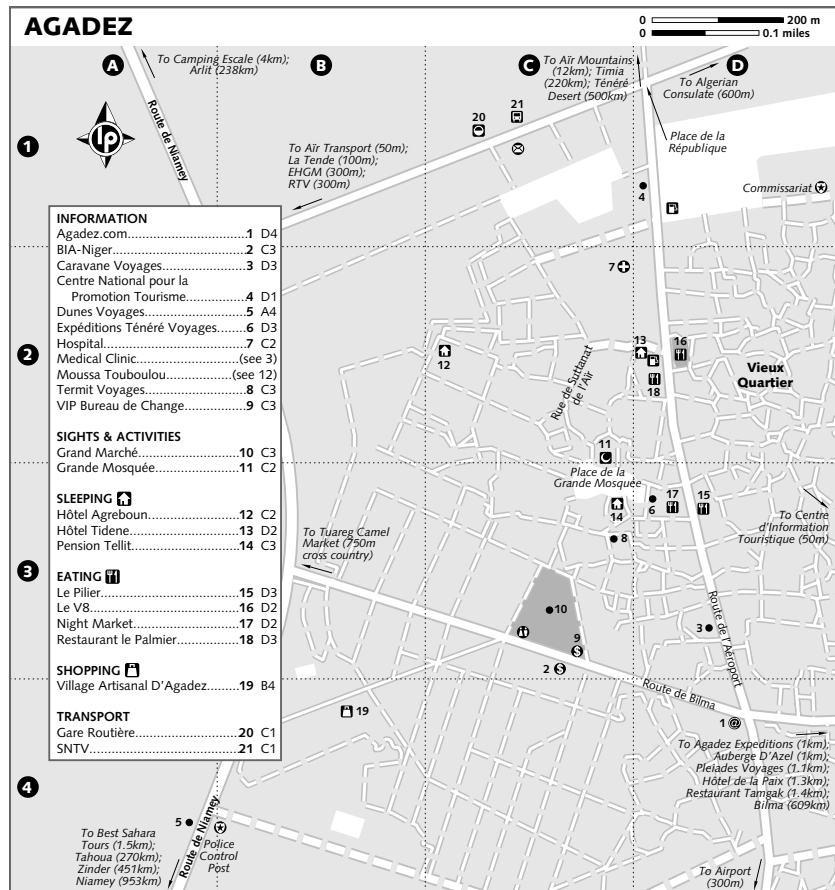
Caravane Voyages (☎ 44 04 59; caravanevoyages@hotmail.com; Route de l'Aéroport)

Dunes Voyages (☎ 44 05 83; www.dunes-voyages.com; Route de Niamey)

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

Moussa Touboulou (☎ 28 86 93) Inquire at Hôtel Agreboun.

Pleiades Voyages (☎ 44 05 41; www.pleiades-agadez.com; Route de Bilma)



Termit Voyages (☎ 42 02 47; http://niger.tribu.ch) Off Place de la Grande Mosquée.

Sights & Activities

With a slim figure that makes Egyptian pyramids green with envy, the ochre **Grande Mosquée** (Place de la Grande Mosquée) climbs spectacularly into the skies. Dating back to 1515, it was rebuilt in 1844. Squeezing out of the ever-narrowing staircase to astounding views will take your breath away – well, what's remaining after the climb! A smile and CFA1000 *cadeau* (literally 'gift') to the guard will see you up.

The **Grand Marché** (Route de Bilma; ☎ dawn to dusk) is Agadez's hub, with the traditionally dressed locals as interesting as what's for sale. The **Tuareg camel market** (☎ dawn to dusk) on Agadez's western outskirts is equally colourful, if more odoriferous. Visit at sunrise or sunset.

The enchanting maze of small crooked alleys and fascinating mudbrick architecture of Tuareg and Hausa inspiration in the **Vieux Quartier** is a bona fide time machine – hours happily disappear here.

Festivals & Events

The Muslim holiday of **Tabaski** is an event indeed, with the 'cavalcade' camel race passing through the town's streets. See Holidays on p1106 for more on this.

Sleeping BUDGET

Camping Escala (☎ 89 67 06; Route de Arlit; camping per person CFA2000, plus vehicle CFA1500) This sleepy campground 4km west of town has fresh well-water, simple bathrooms and leafy shade.

Hôtel Agreboun (☎ 98 63 32; s/tw/tr with shared bathroom CFA5000/7000/12,000) While rudimentary and bunkerlike, it's cheap, clean and has pleasant courtyards. It's hidden up some alleys northwest of the Grande Mosquée and west of Hôtel Tidene.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

The following hotels levy a tax of CFA300 to CFA500 per person per night (not included in the prices given here).

Hôtel Tidene (☎ 44 04 06; off Route de l'Aéroport; s/tw CFA9500/15,000, tw with air-con CFA20,300; ☎) Good choice, with tidy traditional rooms spread around courtyards.

La Tende (☎ 44 00 75; s/tw CFA21,000/25,000, with-out bathroom CFA10,000/12,500; ☎) Though lacking

character, there are small, bright, clean rooms with fans, or larger air-con ones with bathrooms. Camping costs CFA2000 per person. It's off Route de Niamey.

Pension Tellit (☎ 44 02 31; Place de la Grande Mosquée; tw CFA18,000-32,000, ste CFA36,000; ☎) Take in the Grande Mosquée from the terrace, or snooze on your oh-so-comfortable bed. Add charming traditional décor and remote controlled air-con and you're laughing. Book ahead.

Auberge D'Azal (☎ 44 01 70; www.agadez-tourisme.com; Route de Bilma; tw/d CFA33,000/44,000; ☎) Niger's best accommodation can be found at Auberge D'Azal. Striking domed brick ceilings, massive rod-iron canopy beds, comfortable sitting areas, sparkling modern bathrooms and first-class service.

Eating & Drinking

Le V8 (Route de l'Aéroport; meals CFA800-4000; ☎ lunch & dinner) Although an atmospheric bar, it prepares lovely local dishes and pizzas too. The *riz sauce* satisfyingly shuts your hungry tummy's cakehole.

Restaurant le Palmier (Route de l'Aéroport; meals CFA1500-3800; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A perfect place to start the day with an omelette and coffee.

Restaurant Tamgak (Route de Bilma; meals CFA2000-2700; ☎ lunch & dinner) Tamgak serves more local clientele. Snack on popcorn while waiting for tasty Tuareg dishes.

Le Pilier (Route de l'Aéroport; meals CFA2000-4000; ☎ lunch & dinner) Savour *côtelettes d'agneaux panées* (lamb chops fried in breadcrumbs) and fine Italian selections within superb surroundings.

Auberge D'Azal (Route de Bilma; meals CFA3500-5500; ☎ lunch & dinner) Pricey, but fantastic – the *mounton targui* (Tuareg mutton) is divine.

The **night market** (Route de l'Aéroport; ☎ dinner) boasts hearty local selections. The daring can try goat's head.

Shopping

For silver items, visit **Village Artisanal D'Agadez** (☎ 8am-6pm), off Route de Niamey.

Vieux Quartier houses leatherworkers producing Tuareg *samaras* (sandals), *coussins* (cushions) and magnificent *selles de chameau* (camel saddles).

Want a turban? Expect to pay CFA500 per metre in the market (indigo costs more); 3m should suffice.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport sits a few hundred metres south of town and is easily accessed on foot or by *moto* (motorcycle-taxi; CFA150). See p451 for flight details.

BUS

SNTV (☎ 29 61 80), found on the north edge of town near the *gare routière*, serves Arlit (CFA3400, three hours, Thursday to Tuesday), Niamey (CFA15,100, 12 hours, Wednesday, Friday to Monday) and Zinder (CFA7700, 7½ hours, Tuesday and Saturday). **EHGM** (Route de Niamey), **Air Transport** (off Route de Niamey) and **RTV** (Route de Niamey) also serve Niamey and Arlit. EHGM also serves Zinder (Saturday).

BUSH TAXI

Minibuses/Peugeots leave the *gare routière*, on the north edge of town, for Arlit (CFA2600/3000, four/3½ hours) and Zinder (CFA7000/8000, nine/eight hours).

AÏR MOUNTAINS & TÉNÉRÉ DESERT

Among West Africa's most spectacular sights, the Air Mountains' dark volcanic masses dramatically rise from their Saharan surrounds and culminate in grand 2000m peaks. In some areas marvellous deep-blue marble pokes from rich red sands – amazing. Discover fascinating examples of Neolithic rock art, visit thermal hot springs at **Tafadek** or delve into the stunning oasis towns of **Timia** and **Iferouâne**. The **Festival de l'Air**, held in Iferouâne each December, was started in 2000 to celebrate and preserve traditional Tuareg culture. The sublime sand dunes at **Temet**, northeast of Iferouâne, are also unforgettable.

If dunes delight, the Ténéré, which sits east of the Air, must be embraced. It is one of the world's most legendary deserts, laden with the Sahara's most extraordinarily beautiful sand dunes. The Ténéré holds its fair share of sublime secrets too – massive dinosaur graveyards and evocative, deserted medieval settlements like that of Djado.

Getting There & Away

With or without your own 4WD, exploring the Air or Ténéré without a licensed travel agency and *feuille de route* (official itinerary) is illegal. For Agadez and Niamey travel agencies, see p446 and p439 respectively.

A 4WD and three days will provide a sniff of the Air. To taste the Ténéré takes at least a week. While they cover less distance and involve a lot of walking, a **camel caravan** (from CFA30,000 per day) is amazing. 4WD expeditions start at CFA80,000 per day.

Though significantly decreased, banditry still exists (see opposite).

ARLIT

pop 90,700

Few travellers would bother passing through this uranium town were it not Niger's first sizable settlement after crossing the Sahara from Tamanrasset (Algeria).

Hôtel l'Auberge la Caravane (☎ 89 29 49; d with fan/air-con CFA5000/12,000; 🍴) is located west of the town centre, a short walk from SNTV. The rooms are spartan and all but six share smelly toilets.

Restaurant Le Train (meals CFA1000-2000; 🍴) breakfast, lunch & dinner), on the road entering town from Agadez, serves the usuals.

SNTV buses serve Agadez (CFA3000, three hours) and Niamey (CFA17,500, 15 hours, daily except Tuesday and Thursday). RTV, Air Transport and EHGM have similar services.

NIGER DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Cheap single rooms range from CFA3000 (cockroach sighting: unsurprising) to CFA8000 (cockroach sighting: mildly surprising) – quality is low! Camping (typically CFA2000 per person) is possible in Niamey, Birni N'Konni and Agadez.

Midrange hotels offer more cleanliness and private bathrooms. Prices start from CFA11,000 with fan (air-con adds CFA5000), though prices double in Agadez and Niamey.

Upmarket hotels in Niamey and Agadez cost CFA30,000 to CFA95,000.

ACTIVITIES

Whether coasting in a pirogue past hippos and through the Niger River's moist environments or lumbering through the Sahara's beautifully barren expanse with a camel train, Niger's activities are richly rewarding.

BUSINESS HOURS

Typical business hours are 8am to noon and 3pm to 6pm weekdays, and 8am to noon

PRACTICALITIES

- Niger's only local newsheet, available in Niamey, is the anaemic French-language *Le Sahel*.
- Besides Niamey's music stations, 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 nonsatellite programme available. Some TVs in hotels pick up French-based programmes.
- Electricity supply is 220V. Plugs are European two-round-pin variety.
- Niger uses the metric system.

Saturday. Government hours are 8.30am to 12.15pm and 3.30pm to 6pm weekdays. Banking hours are 8am to 11.30am and 3.45pm to 5pm weekdays, and 8.30am to noon 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.

CUSTOMS

The thoroughness of customs officials' searches varies, though travellers rarely receive painstaking searches. Ignore requests for 'special taxes'. There's no limit on movement of foreign currencies.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

While travel in Niger's far north is strictly regulated these days, banditry is still a problem. In 2005 a French tourist was killed 60km north of Agadez having failed to stop for bandits. Always check the latest before leaving.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Nigerian Embassies

Algeria (☎ 021-788921; 54 Rue du Vercors, Algiers)

Belgium (☎ 02 64 861 40; 78 Ave Franklin-Roosevelt, Brussels 1050)

Benin (☎ 21 31 56 65; Rue 651A, Cotonou)

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

Chad (☎ 518813; off Av Gourang, N'Djaména)

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

Mali (☎ 601 9239, 698 7828; Ave Mamadou Konaté, Bamako)

Nigeria Abuja (☎ 413 6206; Pope John Paul II St); Kano (☎ 080 6548 1152; Airport Roundabout); Lagos (☎ 261 2300; 15 Adeola Odeku St, VI)

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.

Algeria Agadez (☎ 44 01 17; 🕒 8am-2.30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat); Niamey (☎ 75 30 97; Blvd de la République) The Agadez branch is 600 northeast of town.

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 (☎ 72 27 22; Place Nelson Mandela; 🕒 8am-12.30pm Mon-Fri) This is the consulate. There's also an embassy at Rue des Ambassades (☎ 75 27 86).

Germany (☎ 72 35 10; Ave du Général de Gaulle)

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

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

USA (☎ 72 26 61; usemb@intnet.ne; Rue des Ambassades)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Niger's largest festival is the annual Cure Salée (see above). July and August abound with Saharan festivities, with different villages holding a feast almost weekly.

HOLIDAYS

Islamic holidays dominate (see p1106 for dates and details). Other public holidays:

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, but rare in Maradi, Zinder and Agadez. Hourly prices range from CFA500 (Niamey) to CFA6000 (Maradi).

LA CURE SALÉE

One of West Africa's most famous festivals is the Cure Salée (Salt Cure). Each August or September, the Wodaabé people gather west of Agadez to allow herds to graze in salt-rich pastures and to celebrate Cure Salée. Most enthralling is the Gerewol, where single men participate in a 'beauty contest' to attract eligible women. Beauty is paramount to Wodaabé – some men even share their wives with more handsome men for more attractive children! Participants spend long hours decorating themselves with make-up (blackened lips make their teeth seem whiter). Suitor rivalries are fierce, with some partaking in Soro, an event where they must smile while being beaten with sticks.

MAPS

The best map of Niger remains Michelin's No 741 *Africa North & West*.

MONEY

The unit of currency is the West African CFA franc.

Carrying cash or travellers cheques in euros is best, though US dollar equivalents suffice. The best bank for transactions is BIA-Niger.

There are no ATMs in Niger and credit-card advances are only a costly possibility in Niamey.

POST

Postal services outside Niamey are unreliable, so send everything from the capital. Postcards to Europe/North America cost CFA525/550.

SHOPPING

Have a look at the Arts & Crafts section (p437) to see what will be dotting Niger's markets. Speaking of an Art, bargaining is always called for in Niger.

TELEPHONE

Private telecentres abound, offering international calls for CFA900 per minute. Post offices offer better quality, with three-minute (the minimum) calls costing CFA5000. Subsequent minutes cost CFA1600.

Niger's mobile-phone network covers most major cities, but using foreign phones is problematic.

VISAS

Visas are required by non-West African citizens. Acquiring visas outside Africa is generally straightforward, although you'll need three photos, proof of yellow-fever vaccination, recent bank statements and proof of onward travel. Passports must be valid for six months after your Niger exit date. Visa costs US\$35 to €50.

There's less hassle obtaining visas in Africa. Information for Niger visas in the following countries is found on the following pages: Algeria (p79), Benin (p258), Chad (p549) Mali (p417) and Nigeria (p470).

Some visitors entering from a country without Nigerian diplomatic representation (eg Burkina Faso) have been discretionally issued visas at the border.

Visa Extensions

For a visa extension, take two photos, your passport and CFA20,000 to **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). They're typically processed the same day.

Visas for Onward Travel

ALGERIA

Niamey's Algerian embassy only issues visas to Niger residents. However, Agadez's consulate issues visas if you have an invitation letter from an Algerian travel agency, your vehicle's *carte grise* (green card) and three colour photos.

BENIN

Transit/three-month single-entry/three-month multiple-entry visas cost CFA10,000/CFA15,000/CFA20,000. Two photos are required; the process takes two days. Forty-eight hour transit visas (CFA4000) are available at Malanville, with extensions available in Cotonou.

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

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

CHAD

For a one-month visa you'll need two photos, CFA15,000 and a pleasant demeanour (trust us!). Service takes 24 hours.

MALI

One-month single-entry visas cost CFA20,000, require one photo and are issued in 24 hours.

NIGERIA

Two photos and CFA21,000 to CFA27,400 should land you a visa (though they're fickle). Applications accepted Tuesday and Thursday (10am to 1pm).

TRANSPORT IN NIGER

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Niamey airport is the international hub, though Point-Afrique and Go-Voyages flights now connect Paris/Marseilles to Agadez (October to April). Airlines serving Niger:

Afriqiyah Airways (8U; www.afriqiyah.aero) Hub: Tripoli.
Air Algérie (AH; ☎ 73 32 14; www.airalgerie.dz; Rue du Gawe) 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 Ivoire (VU; www.airivoire.com) Hub: Abidjan.

Air Sénégal International (V7; www.air-senegal-international.com; Rue du Gawe) Hub: Dakar.

Go-Voyages (www.govoyages.com) Hub: Paris.

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

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

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

Land

ALGERIA

The crossing between Arlit and Tamanrasset at Assamakka/In Guezzam is open, though you must travel with licensed travel agencies on both sides (even with private 4WDs).

BENIN

Bush taxis don't cross the Gaya/Malanville border, so use a *moto* (CFA500) or walk between the towns. Once across, local transport abounds.

Easier still, SNTV and EHGM buses connect Niamey and Cotonou (CFA20,000, 14 hours).

BURKINA FASO

The main crossing is Foetchango, southwest of Niamey. Minibuses (CFA8100, 11 hours)

leaving Niamey's *gare routière*, 1km west of Kennedy Bridge, and SNTV buses connect Niamey and Ouagadougou (CFA10,000, nine to 11 hours, Tuesday to Sunday).

Those with vehicles can also cross via Téra, northwest of Niamey.

CHAD

Some landcruisers make weekly journeys from Nguigmi to Mao (CFA15,000). From Mao, daily landcruisers serve N'Djaména.

Get your passport stamped in Nguigmi and Mao (expect an unofficial US\$6 'fee').

LIBYA

This border is only open to traffic entering Niger, though you must be in the company of a licensed Nigerien travel agency.

MALI

SNTV runs a truck between Niamey and Gao Mondays and Thursdays (CFA11,500, up to 30 hours). The Mali road isn't sealed, so conditions can be horrifically muddy from July through September.

A slow boat connects Ayorou to Gao (CFA14,000, two days) on Monday. A hat and plentiful water are crucial. Minibuses to Ayorou from Niamey (CFA3000, four hours) leave from **Katoko Marché** (Blvd de l'Indépendance).

NIGERIA

There are four border crossings to Nigeria: Gaya/Kamba, Birni N'Konni/Illela (which leads south to Sokoto), Maradi/Katsina and Zinder/Jibiya.

From Niamey the Gaya/Kamba crossing is quickest. Minibuses/Peugeot run from Niamey to Gaya (CFA4100/4500, 4½/5½ hours), where *motors* and taxis access the border (CFA100). From there take a *moto* to Kamba (200N).

Motos (CFA100) connect Birni N'Konni to the border, where minibuses/Peugeot run to Sokoto (300N/350N, 1½ hours).

Peugeot link Maradi with Katsina (CFA1200, 1½ hours) and Kano (CFA3000, four hours).

Peugeot (CFA3000, 3½ hours) connect Zinder to Kano via Jibya.

GETTING AROUND Bus

With decent sealed roads stretching the breadth of the country, bus transport is comprehensive, reliable and efficient. Seating is

reserved, so book early. Buses depart their company offices, not from *autogares*.

Bush Taxi

Bush taxis (Peugeot 504s and minibuses) are cheaper and more frequent than buses, though they're crowded and take much longer.

Car & Motorcycle

There are few car-hire agencies in Niamey, the most reliable being Niger-Car Voyages (p439). For your vehicle, you'll need third-party in-

surance (maximum CFA2500 per day), which can be purchased in Niamey, Diffa, Maradi, Zinder and Birni N'Konni.

The Zinder–Agadez road and getting off the beaten path demand 4WDs. Tolls (*péage*) are collected on major routes.

Tours

To dive into the desert areas around Agadez, you must be accompanied by a Niger travel/tour agency (see p446 for Agadez agency details). Niger-Car Voyages (p439) operates Parc Régional du W tours.