

Northern Senegal



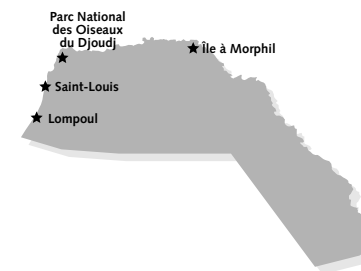
Senegal's long northern border is defined by the Senegal River, flowing in a great arc westwards from the Futa Jallon highlands in Guinea, through Mali and continuing for some 600km between Senegal and Mauritania. The river and its adjoining creeks and floodplains are a lifeline, but only a short distance away the landscape is dry and vegetation is sparse. North of the river, the deserts of Mauritania mark the southern edge of the Sahara. To the south, the barely accessible Ferlo Plains, home to cattle-herding Fula, stretch into central Senegal.

The river region is the homeland of the Tukolor people, a branch of the Fula, who established here the 16th-century Fouta Toro kingdom, which expanded in the mid-19th century into a vast Muslim empire under the leadership of El Hajj Omar Tall. An immediate sense of history seems to pervade the region. The vast open spaces dotted with the beautiful *banco* (mudbrick) houses of small Tukolor villages seem to be steeped in ancient times, and a chain of 18th-century French forts and the stunning Sudanese architecture of Omarian mosques tell the story of colonial battles. Few travellers come here, making the river route a lonely yet utterly rewarding stretch to follow.

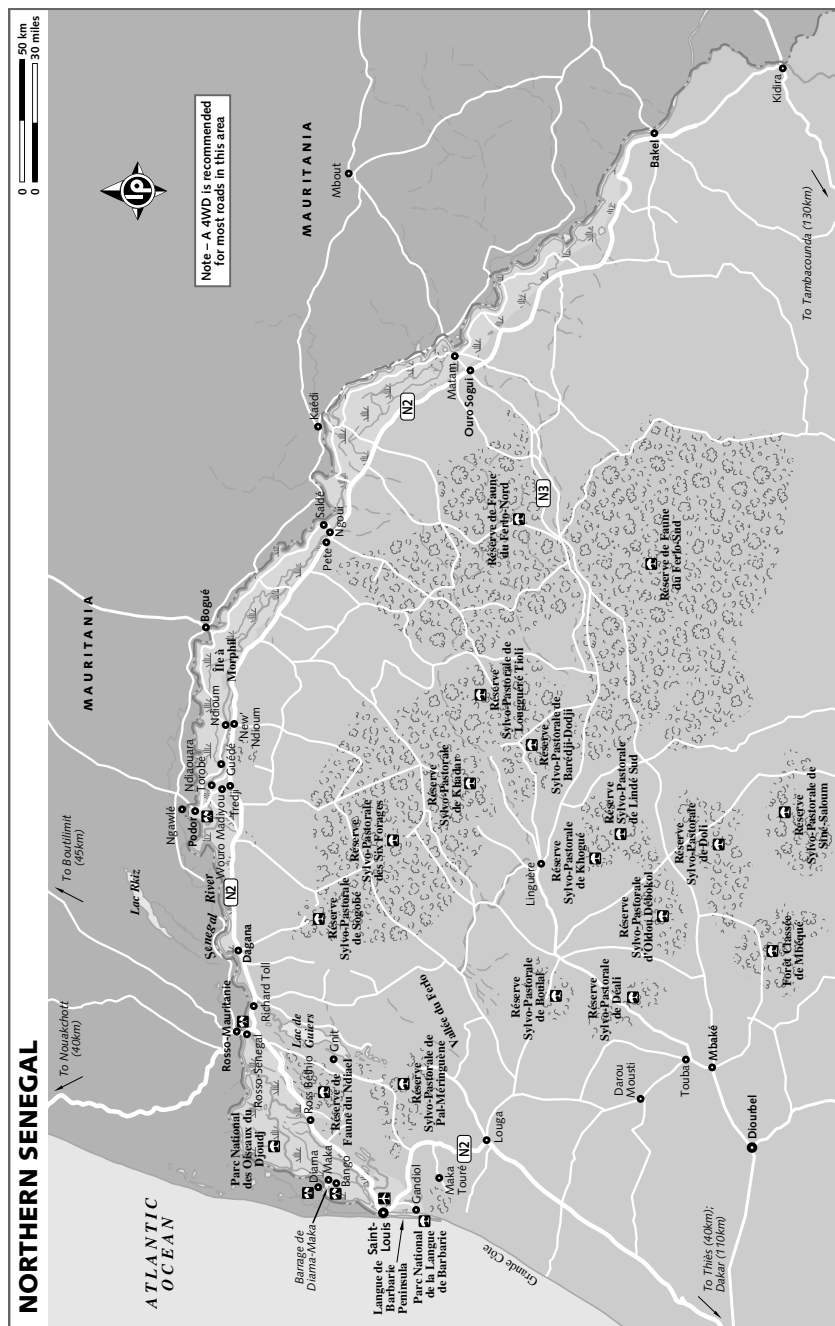
In contrast the gateway to the region, the historic city of Saint-Louis, is a fixed point on most tourist itineraries – and for good reason. This first French settlement in West Africa features stunning 19th-century architecture and a relaxed and friendly ambience that few other places can match. Podor to its northeast is the place to hear Fula music, perhaps during Baaba Maal's Festival du Fleuve.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Soak up history on a stroll through the colonial old town of **Saint-Louis** (p207), with live jazz as background music
- Spot pelicans in flight, as well as hundreds of other species of birds, at the **Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj** (p214)
- Follow the historic river route to **île à Morphil** (p218), passing ancient French forts and stunning Sudanese-style mosques
- Get into the desert spirit at the vast dunes of **Lompoul** (p214)



■ POPULATION: 2 MILLION



SAINT-LOUIS & AROUND

The Senegal River flows westwards towards the Atlantic Ocean, but currents and winds have pushed sand across its mouth for thousands of years, changing its course. Now the final section of the river runs south, separated from the ocean by a long narrow peninsula – the Langue de Barbarie. The original city of Saint-Louis was founded in the 17th century on a strategic island near the river's mouth, although it has expanded to cover a much larger area today.

Saint-Louis makes a good base from which to explore northwest Senegal, and several wildlife reserves lie within an easy day's travel – including Parc National de la Langue de Barbarie, at the southern tip of the eponymous peninsula, and Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj, the world-famous bird sanctuary.

SAINT-LOUIS

pop 147,100

When you consider the enormous impact the French had on this continent it's fascinating to think that the place where it all began has barely changed for more than a century.

History

Founded in 1659 by Louis Caullier on the easily accessible, inundation-proof Île de N'Dar, Saint-Louis was the first French settlement in Africa. By the 1790s, the town named after the French King Louis XIV was a busy port and centre for the trade of goods and slaves, and was home to a racially diverse population of 10,000. Most notable among the residents at this time were the *signares* – women of mixed race who married wealthy European merchants temporarily based in the city, and thereby earned aristocratic status and great wealth.

By 1885, when the town was connected to the growing urban centre of Dakar by rail (the current train station dates only from 1908), Saint-Louis was at its bustling height. Its symmetrical road system had long been created, and most of the town's characteristic colourful buildings with their shady patios, wrought-iron balconies and large magazine doors had already been built.

With the creation of l'Afrique Occidentale Française (French West Africa) in

1895, Saint-Louis became the capital of the French colonial empire, spanning today's Senegal, Sudan, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. When capital status was conferred on Dakar in 1902, Saint-Louis' prestige faded. It remained capital of Senegal and Mauritania until 1958, when all Senegalese administration was moved to Dakar (Nouakchott became the Mauritanian capital in 1960).

Over the years Saint-Louis expanded beyond the confines of the island, covering part of the mainland (Sor) and the Langue de Barbarie Peninsula, where most of the Senegalese inhabitants lived. Yet the island itself barely changed in the 20th century. This policy of neglect led unwittingly to the conservation of the classic architecture, and the island was named a Unesco World Heritage site in 2000. Still, today only a handful of the old buildings have been privately restored to their former magnificence. Others are being gradually worn down by the hands of time, and a stroll through the ancient city can sometimes feel like a walk through an abandoned film set (Saint-Louis has indeed been the site of several French and American cinema productions).

Orientation

The city of Saint-Louis straddles part of the Langue de Barbarie Peninsula, Île de N'Dar and the mainland. From the mainland you reach the island via the 500m-long Pont Faidherbe; two smaller bridges – the almost-derelect Pont Mustapha Malick Gaye and the safer Pont Geôle – link the island to the peninsula. The island was formerly the European quarter, with many grand old houses, a few of which still retain their gracious wrought-iron balconies, while others are gradually crumbling to pieces. The peninsula was the African quarter, previously inhabited by freed slaves; today it's a thriving fishing community called Guet N'Dar.

MAPS

The map *Saint-Louis et la Région du Fleuve Senegal* (CFA3000) a cross between a cartoon and an aerial photograph, is available in bookshops and hotels. It was slightly outdated at the time of writing, though an update may have been published. The leaflet, *Saint-Louis de Senegal – Ville d'Art et d'Histoire* is very useful, containing a map outlining historic buildings.



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Information

The website www.saintlouisdusenegal.com contains also plenty of useful information and has links to all major hotels and restaurants.

CULTURAL CENTRES

L'Institut Culturel et Linguistique Jean Mermoz (☎ 938 2626; www.ccfsl.sn; Av Jean Mermoz; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Mon-Fri) It has a library and café, publishes a regular guide to events in Saint-Louis, and hosts films, concerts and art exhibitions.

EMERGENCY

Saint-Louis Hospital (☎ 961 1059; Blvd Abdoulaye Mar Diop) Has an Accident & Emergency department.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Café (Rue du Général de Gaulle; per hr CFA500; ☎ 8am-11pm) Decent terminals and several phone booths.
Sentoo Office (Blvd Abdoulaye Mar Diop; per hr CFA500; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-8pm)

MONEY

Both BICIS and CBAO change money, and theoretically travellers cheques (though some travellers have reported difficulties), and have ATMs (Visa only). Receptions at the larger hotels will also change cash, though they might accept euros only.

BICIS (☎ 961 1053; Rue de France; ☎ 7.45am-12.15pm & 1.40-3.45pm Mon-Thu, 7.45am-1pm & 2.40-3.45pm Fri)

Bureau de Change (Rue Calipha Ababacar Sy; ☎ 7.30am-1pm & 2.30-7.30pm)

CBAO (☎ 964 1454; ☎ 8.15am-5.15pm) Sor branch, near the old *gare routière*.

CBAO (Rue Calipha Ababacar Sy; ☎ 8.15am-5.15pm Mon-Fri) Also has a Western Union office.

POST

Post office (Rue du Général de Gaulle) The Art Deco-style building opposite the Hôtel de la Poste.

TELEPHONE

You can make phone calls from any hotel. There's a large **télécentre** (☎ 8am-midnight) on Rue du Général de Gaulle, and numerous others on the island and across the bridge in Sor.

TOURIST INFORMATION

National Park Office (Quai Henri Jay; ☎ 8am-1.30pm & 3-7pm) Can help with information on the national parks of the region, though you might have to show some persistence to get staff to part with leaflets and printouts.

Syndicat d'Initiative (☎ 961 2455; sltourisme@sentoo.sn; Governance; ☎ 9am-noon & 2.30-5pm) This tourist office opposite Pont Faidherbe is a haven of information, and publishes an excellent range of booklets, brochures and maps. Staff will be able to advise you on activities around town, including tours in horse-drawn carts and excursions to the nearby nature reserves. The centre is also particularly involved in developing tourism in the region of Podor.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Sahel Découverte Bassari (☎ 961 5689, 961 4263; www.saheldecouverte.com; Av Blaise Diagne) This is the mogul of Saint-Louis' travel agencies, with roots in the region as deep as a baobab. It really knows the area, and offers a range of insightful tours in and around Saint-Louis (see p208).

Saint-Louis JV (Jeunesse Voyages; ☎ 961 5152; www.saintlouisjv.com; Av Blaise Diagne) A much smaller operation with an interesting range of tours.

Sights

Originally built to cross the Danube, the Gustave Eiffel-designed **Pont Faidherbe** (Map p204), linking the mainland and island, was transferred to Saint-Louis in 1897. The bridge is a grand piece of 19th-century engineering – 507m long with a section that once rotated for ships to steam up the Senegal River. The public saw it open in 2005 when the bridge was parted to facilitate the return of the *Bou el Mogdad*.

Right opposite the bridge, your view is blocked by a building usually referred to as **Governance**. It's built on the ruins of the 18th-century colonial fort, and a tour around the backrooms of the Syndicat d'Initiative still grants a glimpse of the ancient walls. In the back of the building, you can also visit the **Musée de l'Aéropostale** (☎ 961 2455; admission CFA1000; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm) showing displays about the colonial airmail service that played an important historical role in the development of Saint-Louis. This is the place to read up on the life and achievements of famous pilot Jean Mermoz, who spent plenty of nights in the **Hôtel de la Poste** (☎ 961 1118; www.hotel-poste.com; Rue du Général de Gaulle) diagonally opposite the governance. The hotel is the oldest in town and has been beautifully restored. It was the place all the daring postal pilots used to stay in when they were delivering their precious mail from France.

Place Faidherbe (Map p204), with its statue of the famous French colonial governor, is in front of the **Governor's Palace**

(Map p204). It's flanked north and south by the 1837 **Rognât Casernes** (Map p204) as well as by other essentially intact 19th-century houses. This central space is where Saint-Louis splits into its southern part (Sindoné) and northern part (Lodo); the former was the old Christian town, the latter was home to the town's Muslim population.

In the south, next to the governor's palace you find the **Cathedral** (Map p204), an 1828 building with a neoclassical facade that is one of the oldest operating churches in Senegal. The Maghreb-style building of the **Grand Mosque** (Map p204; Av Jean Mermoz) in the north was constructed in 1847 on order of the colonial administration to appease the growing Muslim population. The oddity of an attached clock tower betrays the designers' religious affiliation.

The island has plenty of other historical buildings, most of them in a semiruinous state, yet still recognisable with their typical balconies and two-storey layout surrounding a small courtyard (see the Saint-Louis walking tour opposite).

At the southern tip of the island is **museum** (☎ 961 1050; Quai Henri Jay; admission CFA500; 🕒 9am–noon & 3–6pm), contains some fascinating old photos of Saint-Louis and other exhibits relating to northern Senegal. It also houses a contemporary art gallery. **Galerie Mame Thiouth** (☎ 961 3611; Av Blaise Diagne; 🕒 8am–7pm) tends to have the more interesting contemporary exhibitions, and they are beautifully displayed under the arched ceilings of a carefully restored house.

The mainland parts of Saint-Louis have less to offer in historical architecture, but more in contemporary life. **Guet N'Dar** (Map p204), with its lighthouse and the beach, is a fantastically busy fishing town, where you can watch some 200 pirogues being launched into the sea every morning. The boats return in the late afternoon – surfing spectacularly on the waves – to unload their fish on the sand. A line of trucks waits to transport most of the catch to Dakar, while some fish are instantly gutted, dried and smoked by local women.

At the southern end of Guet N'Dar is the **Muslim cemetery** (Map p204) where each fisherman's grave is covered with a fishing net, and the **Hydrobase** (Map p213) from where Jean Mermoz took off on his numerous flights.

Activities

ADVENTURE SPORTS

Saint-Louis Quad (Map p213; ☎ 538 5165; www.saintlouisquad.com; Gandiol) organises beach buggy tours around the area. Its offices are in Gandiol, but if you call, staff can meet you elsewhere. For wind-and-kite surfing, contact **Vent Tropical** (Map p213; ☎ 575 7600; info@vent-tropical.com) in Bangou.

SWIMMING

Several hotels and bars have swimming pools that nonguests can use for a bite at the bar or a small fee. The most central one is the pool at Flamingo (p212). Beach-bound travellers should head straight for the Hydrobase on Langue de Barbarie. Swimming is usually possible, but always ask about conditions as currents can sometimes get strong.

Festivals & Events

The annual **Saint-Louis International Jazz Festival** (below) is an event of international renown that regularly attracts jazz greats from around the world. It takes place in early May, and lasts for about a week. Its

SAINT-LOUIS JAZZ

Jazz is a big thing here – and it's not just the shared name with St Louis, Missouri in the USA, where blues and jazz originated. Way back in the 1940s jazz bands from Saint-Louis (Senegal) were playing in Paris and elsewhere in Europe. Worldwide interest was revived in the early 1990s when the Saint-Louis Jazz Festival was first held, with mainly local bands performing. Now renamed the Saint-Louis International Jazz Festival, this annual event is held the second weekend of May, and attracts performers and audiences from all over the world. At most other times, the stages of the city's many concert venues and jazz bars remain empty. For more background, have a look at *St-Louis Jazz*, a book by Hervé Lenormond (French text, published by Éditions Joca Seria, Nantes, France), which outlines the history of jazz in Senegal and has some wonderful photos of musicians from Africa, America and Europe performing in Saint-Louis.

Programmes and dates can be checked on www.saintlouisjazz.com (in French), or with the Syndicat d'Initiative.

fringe events take place all over town, some around Place Faïdherbe, others in the bars of the inner city. The main events usually happen at the Quai des Arts (see p212) or on an open-air stage on Place Faïdherbe.

If you pass through town in October, you might see the impressive **Regatta of Guet-N'Dar**, a lively boat race that passes through the river arm between Saint-Louis and Guet-N'Dar. The entire population of Guet-N'Dar participates – women sing to encourage the packed pirogues to go faster, sellers shout to encourage buyers and the young fishermen paddle in unison to win the race. Seeing the huge number of colourfully painted boats chasing one another along the river and back is an extraordinary sight. You can find out the race dates from the Syndicat d'Initiative.

Les Fanals, historic processions with decorated lanterns (not the handheld kind, but lanterns so big they resemble carnival floats), are a tradition unique to Saint-Louis. They were initiated by the *signares* and have their roots in the lanternlit marches to midnight Mass. Today, the Fanals are held around Christmas, and sometimes during the jazz festival, to evoke Saint-Louisian history and reaffirm the town's identity.

Walking Tour

A leisurely walk around the chequered pattern of straight streets and colourfully painted buildings of Saint-Louis feels like a voyage back in time. The town's colonial past is present in the dusty corners and leafy patios of its dignified 19th-century houses; some worn down, others restored to new shine. The colonial features of Saint-Louis are imbued with an utterly contemporary and cosmopolitan spirit by the town's arts scene, its vibrant jazz clubs and the hum of working life in the fishing village of Guet N'Dar.

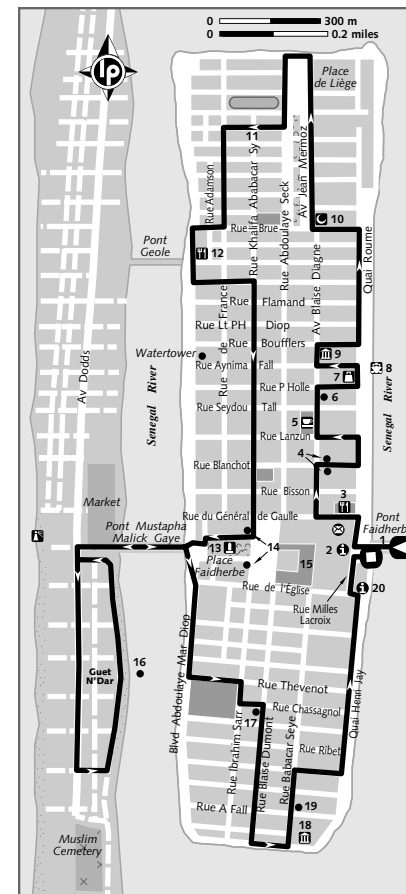
Saint-Louis' preferred postcard image, the elegant iron construction of **Pont Faïdherbe** (1; p205) is the best starting point for a trip around town. Opposite, you see the majestic building of the **Governance** (2; p205), and diagonally opposite, the **Hôtel de la Poste** (3; p211), whose cosy café nods nostalgically to the days of the Aéropostale, the colonial airmail service and its hero Jean Mermoz.

Pass the hotel and turn into Av Blaise Diagne, Saint-Louis' pulsating artery, where tiny arts shops, galleries and restaurants

breathe new life into ancient buildings. Around the corner, the mighty warehouses **Maurel** and **Prom** (4) are patiently waiting for new commerce to arrive, perhaps in the form of a smart hotel, such as the **Hôtel de la Résidence** (5; p211), whose restaurant houses a carefully assembled collection of Saint-Louis memorabilia, or **La Maison Rose** (6; p210), where the musty scent of old stairways and

WALK FACTS

Start Pont Faïdherbe
Finish Pont Faïdherbe
Distance 6km to 7km
Duration half a day



antique furniture hangs over a proud collection of contemporary art.

Along Quai Roume, a proud line of restored warehouses such as **Keur Fall** (7; p212) looks out onto the river, as does the 'grand-mother' of all Senegalese boats – the historic **Bou El Mogdad** (8; opposite).

Back on Rue Blaise Diagne, arts fans must take a stroll around the **Galerie Mame Thiouth** (9; p206) before heading back to the Quai for a riverside promenade.

Continuing northwards, the **Grand Mosque** (10; p206) announces the old Muslim quarters (both with the call to prayer and the ringing of bells), and a short walk along the neem tree-lined Av Jean Mermoz takes you to the island's northern point, where you look out onto colourful pirogues and just about glimpse Île Bop Thior – the island where many of the Saint-Louisian bricks were made.

Past the football field, invariably taken over by youths aspiring to Europe's major leagues, a right turn takes you through a scattering of **army quarters** (11), housed by old military buildings. Another block further west, you hit the western shore. Opposite the Pont Geôle, the pretty hotel **Sunu Keur** (12; p210), yet another charming Saint-Louisian facade, is a good place for a drink or a bite to eat, before setting off for a promenade along the animated Rue Calipha Ababacar Sy. Float through the atmosphere of busy normality all the way to **Place Faidherbe** (13; p205), where **Rognât Casernes** (14; p206) and the **Governor's Palace** (15; p205) replace popular vibrancy with military pomp.

The 1856 Pont Mustapha Malick Gaye takes you from the island onto the Langue de Barbarie Peninsula. The scent of history stays behind as you plunge headfirst into the colourful vitality of the Guet N'Dar. Children play in the sandy streets, and the women cook the fish their husbands have brought home. Dozens of **pirogues** (16) roll in on the eastern shore, unloading their daily catch, and fish are gutted and smoked along the rows of wooden stalls that line the coastal road.

Crossing the bridge to return to the island, turn south (right) for a tour around the ancient Christian quarters of the island's southern tip. Opposite the hospital, the **Ancienne Maison des Soeurs de Saint-Joseph-de-Cluny** (17) with its unique, heart-shaped staircase is in a sad state of neglect.

Walk south down Rue Blaise Dumont, then east around the southern tip of the island and turn left (north) up Rue Babacar Seye. You'll pass the **museum** (18; p206) and the **Lycée Ameth Fall** (19). Built in 1840 on the site of the old Christian cemetery, the Lycée has housed a hospital and a college. Today, the laughter of school children rings from its leafy courtyard. Walking back towards Pont Faidherbe, don't miss the pretty building of the **National Park Office** (20), one of the town's oldest houses.

Tours

There are plenty of excellent organised tours on offer in around Saint-Louis. The leading tour operator is **Sahel Découverte Bassari** (☎ 961 5689, 961 4263; www.saheldecouverte.com; Av Blaise Diagne). Its proudest offer is the luxury cruise in the historic ship *Bou El Mogdad* (six-day cruise CFA275,500 or €420; see also opposite), upriver from Saint-Louis to Podor, with various stops at villages and the Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj. The company's tours to the dunes of Lompoul (one/two days CFA25,000/35,000) are also recommended.

The **Syndicat d'Initiative** (☎ 961 2455; sitourisme@sentoo.sn; Governance) also has a range of excellent tours; its two-day trips tracing the river valley from Saint-Louis over Podor to Bakel are particularly good (two days including accommodation CFA60,000). **Saint-Louis JV** (☎ 961 5152; www.saintlouisjv.com; Rue Abdoulaye Seck) has a more modest catalogue, with excellent trips around the Fouta Toro.

Below is a selection of tours run by most operators:

Broussarde (bush tour; around CFA20,000)

La Réserve de Guembeul (around CFA7000; 3hr)

Lac de Guiers (around CFA60,000; 1 day)

Mauritania (around CFA50,000; 1 day)

Parc National de la Langue de Barbarie (around CFA20,000)

Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj (around CFA25,000; 1 day)

Saint-Louis (around CFA5000-6000; 2-3hr) Guided tours are either done on foot or by horse-drawn cart.

We've found most of these tours to be excellent value; they include accommodation (if they are overnight trips), transport and entry fees. Some include also meals. Prices quoted are for a minimum of four people; independent travellers may be able to join a larger group.

THE BOU EL MOGDAD – SENEGAL'S CLASSIC CRUISE SHIP

It's hard to estimate how much the presence of the historic cruise liner *Bou El Mogdad* means to the communities living along the Senegal River. But the moved expressions on the faces of those who watched its glorious return in 2005 tell a story of fond reminiscence. Built in the 1950s, the boat chugged regularly up and down the river, connecting villages and facilitating trade. With the construction of the Maka Diama Dam in the mid-'80s it left the northern waters, but it didn't leave the mind of Jean-Jacques Bancal, head of Sahel Découverte Bassari travel agency, who had grown up in the region. He decided to bring the vessel back home. In November 2005, the boat returned in its former glory, and for the first time in decades, the classic Pont Faidherbe was creaked open, while onlookers watched with bated breath and sweaty palms, fearing for Saint-Louis' symbolic iron construction. Now back where it belongs, the boat does a leisurely cruise tour to the ancient town of Podor with stops at some of the river's most beautiful villages. See www.saheldecouverte.com and www.compagniedufleuve.com for details on the cruise.

FISHING & BOAT TOURS

Several hotels and *campements* (inns) offer fishing tours; the best-known, the **Saint-Louis Fishing Club** (☎ 961 1118; www.hotel-poste.com), is run by the Hôtel de la Poste. It offers surf-casting (full day CFA15,000) and angling (full day CFA120,000) excursions. Half-day tours are also available. The **Ranch de Bango** (Map p213; ☎ 961 1981; www.ranchdebango.com), 7km from Saint-Louis, is also good. **Catamaran Saint Louis** (☎ 561 2765; catamaransaintlouis@yahoo.fr) offers one-day catamaran trips around the Langue de Barbarie (adults/children under eight CFA25,000/10,000) and other excursions leaving from Pont Faidherbe; phone to arrange a trip and staff'll pick you up at your hotel.

Sleeping

Saint-Louis offers accommodation for all budgets, of all types, and in any surrounding. You can either stay on the island in walking distance to all bars, restaurants and the town's historic architecture or move to the busy mainland for a touch of local ambience. The hotels on Langue de Barbarie Peninsula are clustered around Hydrobase, and all have easy access to the beach.

BUDGET

Mainland

Gîte Walo (☎ 961 4407; dem.mathieu@voila.fr; d from CFA10,000) You're bound to pass this place if heading for the centre of Saint-Louis on the way from Dakar, and might as well stop here. It offers an amazing bundle of little niceties for the amount you pay: a wide terrace, shaded courtyard and spacious, spotless rooms. You pay extra for a private bathroom.

Island

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 961 2409; pisdiallo@yahoo.fr; Rue Abdoulaye Seck; dm/d CFA5500/10,000) Yes, it's possible: a spotless, cheap, mosquito-netted, ventilated place to spend the night sleeping comfortably, having spent the evening chatting to the friendly host.

Café des Arts (☎ 961 6078; Rue de France; dm/d CFA4500/9000) Rooms are basic, but the family atmosphere of this colourful little place more than makes up for it. An excellent option for those on a peanut budget.

Auberge de la Vallée (☎ 961 4722; Av Blaise Diagne; dm/d CFA5000/10,000) An unspectacular place in the heart of the city, this isn't too bad for the price you pay, though it would be better if it were a touch cleaner.

Auberge l'Harmattan (☎ 961 8253; aubergeharmattan@yahoo.fr; Rue Abdoulaye Seck; d/tr CFA15,000/20,000; 🚻) What started as a restaurant has expanded into this auberge (small hotel). Rooms in the historic building are enormous, but suffer slightly from neglect. The patio is a fine place to relax.

Langue de Barbarie

Hotel Dior (Map p213; ☎ 961 3118; fax 961 5784; www.hotel-dior.com; s CFA12,600-18,100, d CFA18,700-24,200) This is a good-value option at the Hydrobase. You can also camp here (per person CFA2500) and there are even tents for hire (fee and daily charge per person CFA3500).

MIDRANGE

Mainland

Hôtel Mame Coumba Bang (Map p213; ☎ 961 1850; www.hotelcoumba.com; s/d CFA28,000/35,000; 🚻) It's named after a water spirit and calls itself 'lover's wood' – the large swimming

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

La Louisiane (☎ 961 4221; www.aubergelaouisiane.com; Point Nord; d/tr CFA18,400/24,300) This isn't Saint-Louis' prettiest place, nor its most prestigious address. But this peaceful little auberge doesn't have to fight for attention among the hotel royalty of Saint-Louis. With three top ingredients – simple, spacious rooms, a prime location overlooking the river and friendly management – it has carved out a solid reputation of its own: that of offering excellent value for money for travellers on slightly tighter budgets.

pool and the tranquil riverside garden explain the choice of names. It's 7km from town just off the road to Dakar. If you're really brave and ready to rise early, you can hike to Langue de Barbarie from here. Taxis from town charge from CFA500 to CFA1500 for the trip here.

Island

Sunu Keur (☎ 961 8800; chaffoisjeanjacques@yahoo.fr; Quai Giraud; s/d from CFA15,000/20,000) This calm guesthouse has beautifully decorated rooms overlooking the river in a carefully restored colonial building. The homely ambience is thrown in at no extra cost.

Hôtel de la Tour (☎ 961 6767; fax 961 6767; Rue Blanchot; s/d incl breakfast CFA20,100/28,200; ☎) This relatively new place consists of a maze of rooms that hide behind a humble entrance. Absolutely spotless, it tries its best to be up-market, but is a little soulless. The oval TV lounge is pretty, though.

Hôtel Pointe Sud (☎ 961 5878; hotelpointesud@yahoo.fr; Rue Ibrahim Sarr; d CFA28,000) This southern place has a polite living-room charm. Studios and suites have cooking facilities, and the rooftop bar-restaurant is the perfect place for breakfast (CFA2500).

Langue de Barbarie

All of the following hotels are based on the Hydrobase on Lange de Barbarie. Taxis from Saint-Louis charge CFA500 to take you there.

Hôtel Cap Saint-Louis (Map p213; ☎ 961 3909; www.hotelpcapsaintlouis.com; s with/without bathroom CFA12,600/10,400, d with/without bathroom CFA32,200/14,800; ☎ ☎ ☎) What looks like another resort-type hotel is in fact a very *sympa* (and-

child-friendly) place run by four brothers. It's tastefully done up, sits right on the sea, and has one of the best swimming pools around. If you can afford it, forget about the cheap rooms and head straight for the sublime huts on the seafront. Large groups or families can rent five-bed bungalows (CFA43,400), where the privacy is so perfect you'll forget you're in a hotel.

Hôtel l'Oasis (Map p213; ☎ /fax 961 4232; http://hoteloasis.free.fr; s/d CFA15,000/21,000; ☎ ☎) This simple and pretty place has long been a favourite with travellers – small, unpretentious huts are decked out in busy African prints and spotless bungalows house up to three people, though that leaves little breathing space.

Hôtel Mermoz (Map p213; ☎ 961 3668; www.hotelmermoz.com; s/d/tr from CFA13,000/18,000/23,000; ☎ ☎) This has more character than many of the large hotels. Huts and bungalows are spaced out in a large, sandy garden, and all buildings are connected by meandering, wheelchair-accessible paths. Larger rooms with bathroom and air-con cost about twice the minimum rate. It has free bikes for guest use, offers a range of seaside excursions and sports, and you can go horse riding at CFA5000 per hour. Stressed-out parents: there's a baby-sitting service available, and children don't pay if they share a room with their parents.

Résid Hôtel Diamarek (Map p213; ☎ 961 5781; www.hoteldiamarek.com; d from CFA22,000) It's another resort hotel clone, but a pretty one. Spacious, spotless bungalows sit in a sandy garden right next to the beach. Rates climb steeply over Christmas.

**TOP END
Island**

La Maison Rose (☎ 938 2222; www.lamaisonrose.net; Av Blaise Diagne; s/d from CFA45,000/55,000, ste from CFA77,500) As far as uniqueness and style go, this palatial address beats them all. The house is one of Saint-Louis' most famous old buildings, and one of the few that has been decorated with love and taste. Every room and suite is unique, though all exude old-time comfort. The classic furniture and wonderful art works are all part of the extensive collections of the daughter of Senegal's former president, who owns the place.

Hotel Sindone (☎ 961 4244; www.hotelsindone.com; Quai Henri Jay; s/d from CFA26,500/29,300; ☎) A faint

rose-'n'-fluffy honeymoon feel scents the air of this stylish and airy hotel on the island's south side. Half the rooms have stunning views over the river, for which you'll pay about CFA3000 extra.

Hôtel de la Résidence (☎ 961 1260; hotresid@sentoo.sn; Av Blaise Diagne; s/d CFA27,600/34,200; ☎) This is one of Saint-Louis' oldest hotels, and the owners (an established Saint-Louisian family who've been here at least as long as the hotel) have done a great job of evoking that sense of history. Every item and picture in the patio-style restaurant has a meaningful link to Saint-Louis' colourful past (ask and you'll get the explanations). Rooms are pretty and comfortable, and the restaurant is one of the town's very best. Bikes are available for hire, and parents rejoice – there's even a baby-sitting service. Book ahead, as the place is usually packed.

Hôtel de la Poste (☎ 961 1118; www.hotel-poste.com; Rue du Général de Gaulle; s/d/tr CFA30,000/36,000/43,000; ☎) Another Saint-Louis classic; from the 1850s, Saint-Louis' oldest hotel was the historical point of call for the pilots of the colonial air-mail service. Celebrated pilot Jean Mermoz used to stay in room 219 – and the numerous images on the wall won't let you forget that. The hotel's Safari Bar is full of colonial flashbacks, balding animal heads and all. Up to you to decide if historical surroundings are something worth spending your hard-earned cash on.

Eating

There's a growing choice of good restaurants in Saint-Louis. Most hotels also do food – the Hôtel de Résidence leads the pack with a menu that leaves you spoilt for choice.

BUDGET

La Linguère (☎ 961 3949; Av Blaise Diagne; meals around CFA2000) The shabby interior of the place doesn't do the food served here any justice at all. It's one of the best places in town for generous platters of Senegalese food – *the yassa poulet* (grilled chicken in an onion-and-lemon sauce) is almost unbeatable.

Pointe Nord (☎ 961 4221; Av Jean Mermoz; dishes from CFA1500; ☎ 11am-9pm) This humble eatery on the northern tip of the island gets often overlooked. But that's just due to location, rather than food; you can eat an amazing grilled fish here for a fraction of the cost the more established restaurants charge.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

La Signare (☎ 961 1932; Av Blaise Diagne; meals CFA7000; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) Considered one of the best restaurants in Saint-Louis, La Signare offers a truly top-notch *menu du jour* (fixed-price menu) in a beautifully decorated old-style building. This is a Saint-Louis classic, a restaurant that has kept a reputation for top-notch French and international cuisine for almost 20 years. You have a choice of enjoying the outdoor ambience of the pretty patio, or dining between the arched stone walls of this beautifully restored old Saint-Louis building. Go for the grill-food dishes – this reviewer's favourite on the varied menu.

For fast food, try one of the *shwarma* (grilled meat and salad in pita bread) joints on and near Av Blaise Diagne. They all serve pretty standard fare, but it does the job.

Self-caterers will save money and have more fun shopping in the market just north of Pont Mustapha Malick Gaye in Guet N'Dar. For European goods and French wine, head for the **Libre-Service** (Av Blaise Diagne) or the **Ecomarché** (Av Blaise Diagne).

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Aux Délices du Fleuve (☎ 961 4251; Quai Roume; pastries around CFA500; ☎ lunch & dinner) Saint-Louis' famous patisserie serves delicious pastries, ice creams and milky coffees.

La Saigonaise (☎ 961 6481; Rue Abdoulaye Seck; mains CFA5000; ☎ noon-midnight) For a taste of Asia, this Vietnamese restaurant at the north end of Rue Abdoulaye Seck complements its great location (looking to Mauritania) with traditional and very tasty Saigonaise fare (the owner and the chef are from Saigon). Prices are a little hefty.

Coup de Torchon (☎ 518 5408; Ave Blaise Diagne; meals CFA3500-5000; ☎ 11am-1am) This friendly little restaurant is the perfect place to spend long evenings chatting over huge plates of food. It has live music on Thursdays.

Also recommended:

Fleuve Plus (☎ 961 4152; Rue Blaise Diagne; meals around CFA1500-2000; ☎ lunch & dinner)
Bou El Mogdad (☎ 961 3611; Quai Rome; meals around CFA3000-5000; ☎ lunch & dinner)
Restaurant Galaxie (☎ 961 2468; Rue Abdoulaye Seck; meals around CFA2000-4000; ☎ lunch & dinner)

Drinking & Entertainment

Saint-Louis has a fine selection of bars, pubs and live-music clubs.

Le Laser (☎ 961 5398; www.casinolaser.com; admission from CFA2000; 🕒 7pm-3am Wed-Sun) For a taste of how Senegal's bright young things let their hair down, head here, part of the Saint-Louis Casino complex on the Quai Roume.

Marco Jazz (☎ 654 2442; Quai Roume) A little north of Pont Faidherbe, this intimate venue is where big jazz names tend to give impromptu concerts during the jazz festival.

La Chaumière (☎ 961 1980, Pointe à Pitre, Guet N'Dar) In Guet N'Dar, this is the nightclub that attracts the most stylish local crowd. It's a place where you'll see more sweat and less make-up. Admission varies.

Flamingo (☎ 961 1118; Quai de Roume) Part of the Hôtel de la Poste empire, this classy restaurant turns into an upmarket bar at night, and frequently has good live bands playing on a small stage near the swimming pool.

Quai des Arts & VIP Nightclub (☎ 961 5656; Av Jean Mermoz) This is where the main action happens during the jazz festival. The rest of the year the place stays fairly calm, though the nightclub attracts a stylish crowd.

Also recommended:

L'Embuscade (☎ 961 7741; Rue Blanchot) Popular beer and tapas place.

Iguane Café (☎ 558 0879; Rue Abdoulaye Seck) Cuba-themed bar.

Le Papayer (Map p213; ☎ 961 8687; Carrefour de l'Hydrobase; 🕒 noon-midnight) The best club on the Langue de Barbarie.

Shopping

Sono Mondiale (☎ 577 3076; Rue Flamand; 🕒 8.30am-1pm & 3-8.30pm) This brilliant little shop has a better selection than some of the music shops in Dakar. It has a good variety of African (and not only Senegalese) music on offer – both on CD and cassette – and, oddly, a quirky vinyl collection of old salsa.

Ateliers d'Art (Rue Flamand) In the same building as Sono Mondiale, this is a great place to rummage for fabrics. You can even watch the weavers working on the gigantic, patterned cotton-rugs on sale here – and seeing the work that's involved in making them almost makes you willing to pay the steep prices charged for them.

Keur Fall (☎ 961 6238; keurfall@yahoo.fr; Quai Rome; 🕒 9am-1pm & 3-8pm) On a nicely brushed-up ground floor of one of the old buildings,

Keur Fall sells a wide range of pretty children's and adult clothes, shoes and toys – all made by women in a nearby village and sold under fairtrade conditions.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Saint-Louis has its own airport, 7km out of town (Map p213); a hire taxi from there into Saint-Louis costs around CFA5000. Air Sénégal operates a regular flight from Saint-Louis, which connects to Paris and Dakar every Wednesday. You can book directly, or through Sahel Découverte Bassari (p205). **Air Saint Louis** (☎ 644 8629; www.airsaintlouis.com) can fly you from Dakar at your request.

TAXI

The *gare routière* (bus and bush-taxi station) sits on the mainland at 4.5km from town, south of the Pont Faidherbe. A taxi from here to the city centre on the island costs CFA500. The fare to or from Dakar is CFA3500 by seven-seat *sept-place* taxi.

The Saint-Louis-Richard Toll trip by *sept-place* taxi costs CFA1600. A *sept-place* taxi to Gandiol, from where boats to the Parc National de la Langue de Barbarie leave, costs CFA500.

TRAIN

There is a train station just south of Pont Faidherbe, but despite being World Heritage listed, it's closed and in serious need of repair. Train services between Saint-Louis and Dakar have been suspended.

Getting Around

BICYCLE

Saint-Louis and its surroundings are good biking areas. **Le Routard** (☎ 608 9444; Quai de Roume) opposite the Flamingo hires VTs (Vélo Tout Terrain or mountain bikes) for CFA5000 per day. Most are in good condition, and child seats are available. Otherwise, several hotels have also bikes for hire.

TAXI

Taxi prices in Saint-Louis are fixed (CFA350 at the time of writing), so there's no need to negotiate for trips around the city. Prices to any destination in the surroundings depend on your negotiating skills. You can either hire private taxis at the *gare routière*, or stop any driver in town and negotiate.

AROUND SAINT-LOUIS

Bango

pop around 2000

Bango is a tiny village north of Saint-Louis, mainly known to travellers for being home to the popular **Ranch de Bango** (Map p213; ☎ 961 1981; www.ranchdebango.com; s/d/tr CFA30,600/32,200/35,800; 🕒 🚗 🚚). This spacious *campement* sits where the town's urban atmosphere has given way to village tranquillity. Accommodation is in tastefully decorated bungalows set in a large, tropical garden. Activities on offer include pirogue river excursions and fishing.

Based on the Île Thiolette near Bango and the airport, **Vent Tropical** (Map p213; ☎ 575 7600; info@vent-tropical.com) is the best address for windsurfing, kite-surfing and kayak tours.

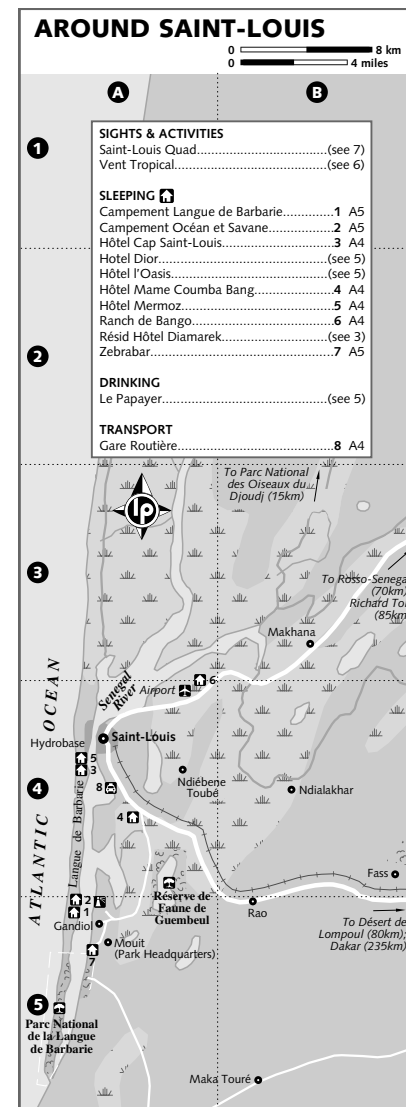
Gandiol & Mouit

pop around 2300

Gandiol is a small village on the mainland, about 18km south of Saint-Louis. During the rainy season large areas of the surrounding flat landscape are covered by shallow seawater lagoons. In the dry season, the waters recede to leave pans of white mud and salt.

The lighthouse just before Gandiol is the place you want to remember; from there, pirogues cross to the two *campements* on the southern end of the Langue de Barbarie, and it is also the starting point for organised boat tours of the Parc National de la Langue de Barbarie (some boats also leave from the village). If you stay in Saint-Louis, you're probably best off relying on tours of the park organised by the Syndicat d'Initiative (p205) or Sahel Découverte Bassari (p205) – it's quite a trek out here by taxi, and negotiating boats and taxis yourself is unlikely to get you a better rate than the official ones offered.

About 2km south of Gandiol is the smaller village of Mouit, where you will find the national park headquarters. Another 500m further, on the edge of the river, is **Zebrabar** (Map p213; ☎ 638 1862; www.come.to/zebrabar; camping per person CFA2500, s CFA4000-15,000, d CFA7000-18,000), an excellent *campement* in a secluded spot – perfect for excursions into Parc National de la Langue de Barbarie. Accommodation is available in simple huts (and even the cut-off cabin of an old truck) and spacious bungalows. The *campement* sits on a large lot and is a great place to stay



with children – there's a miniplayground and plenty of space for little explorers, and the friendly Swiss couple that runs the place makes families feel very welcome indeed. Zebrabar also has kayaks and canoes for hire (free for overnight guests) and can arrange canoe tours and bird-watching excursions with the local fishermen (CFA2500 per

person). If you make contact before arrival, they can collect you from Saint-Louis, and drop you off in town for city visits or on departure.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Hiring a taxi from Saint-Louis to Mouit and Zebrabar should cost you around CFA3000. If you have a lot of time, you can also rely on the bush taxis that run a few times each day from Saint-Louis to Gandiol (CFA500). Sometimes this taxi continues to Mouit (CFA700), otherwise you'll have to walk the last 2km from Gandiol to Mouit and 2.5km to Zebrabar.

If you're driving, turn off the tar road where it swings a sharp right (west) just before Mouit.

Parc National de la Langue de Barbarie

Some 25km south of Saint-Louis, the **Parc National de la Langue de Barbarie** (Map p213; admission CFA2000; pirogue for 1 or 2 people CFA7500, each extra person CFA2500; ☎ 7am-7pm). It includes the far southern tip of the Langue de Barbarie Peninsula, the estuary of the Senegal River (which contains two small islands) and a section of the mainland on the other side of the estuary. The park covers a total area of 2000 hectares, and is home to numerous sea birds and waders – notably flamingos, pelicans, cormorants, herons, egrets and ducks. From November to April bird numbers are swelled by the arrival of migrants from Europe.

You can walk on the sandy peninsula of the Langue, but to explore the whole park and bird-watch you'll need to take a pirogue, which can cruise slowly past the mud flats, inlets and islands where they feed, roost and nest.

If you come to the park independently, you must first go to the park office at Mouit to pay your entrance fee. Pirogues can be hired at the river.

SLEEPING & EATING

In a wonderful position at the southern end of the Langue de Barbarie, about 20km from the Saint-Louis and across the river from Gandiol, are two *campements*. The first, **Campement Langue de Barbarie** (Map p213; ☎ 961 1118; s/d CFA10,000/15,000, half board CFA27,000) is by Hôtel de la Poste. Most people take the half-board option, otherwise breakfast is CFA2000 and meals à la carte cost CFA5000.

Relaxed **Campement Océan et Savane** (Map p213; ☎ 637 4790; r per person CFA6600, half/full board CFA15,200/21,200) is run by Hôtel de la Résidence and has plenty of character. You can stay in low-roofed Mauritanian-style bungalows or, if you want more comfort, in pretty log cabins that house one to five people (CFA30,000) and sit on stilts on the river. The place has electricity, warm water, and a fine restaurant under a huge Mauritanian tent that alone is worth a visit (meals cost CFA6000).

Both places offer boat transfers and opportunities for fishing and windsurfing, kayaking and bird-watching. You can either make a reservation through the appropriate hotel in Saint-Louis, or get directly in touch with the *campement*.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A taxi from Saint-Louis to the park entrance costs around CFA7000. Once there the usual approach is by pirogue from the mainland, normally from the lighthouse north of Gandiol or Mouit. Organised tours (p208) from Saint-Louis are an option.

Désert de Lompoul

West of Kébémér, Lompoul surprises with the kind of landscape more commonly associated with Mauritania or northern Mali. Huge sand dunes stretch from the coast far into the country's interior.

The enterprising Tourisme Plus Afrique (TPA) agency has established an impressive *campement* in the heart of the dunes. **Le Lodge de Lompoul** (☎ 644 9194; 957 1256; www.lesenegal.info; s/d half board CFA21,000/37,000) offers accommodation in desert-suited Mauritanian tents, with large, comfortable, mosquito net-sheltered mattresses and outdoor toilets. As with all TPA camps, all activities including camel tours, picnics in the dunes and pick-up from Lompoul village are included.

Most people get here by organised tour from Saint-Louis (see p208). If you're in your own car or hire taxi, take the route from Saint-Louis to Dakar, turn off at Kébémér and follow the smooth road to Lompoul village, from where *campement* staff can pick you up in 4WDs.

Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj

On a great bend in the Senegal River, this 16,000-hectare **park** (☎ 968 8708; admission CFA2000, plus pirogue CFA3500; ☎ 7am-dusk) is 60km north

of Saint-Louis. It incorporates a stretch of the main river with its numerous channels, creeks, lakes, ponds, marshes, reed beds and mud flats, as well as surrounding areas of woodland savannah. This, along with the fact that it's one of the first places with permanent water south of the Sahara, means that a great many bird species are attracted here, making it the third-most important bird sanctuary worldwide (see below for bird-watching tips). It is a Unesco World Heritage site, and the wetlands have been listed as a Ramsar (the international wetland conservation convention) site.

Even if you're not a keen ornithologist, it's hard to escape the impact of seeing vast colonies of pelicans and flamingos in such stunning surroundings. Experienced bird-watchers will recognise many of the European species, and the sheer numbers that assemble here are impressive indeed. Around three million birds pass through the park annually, and more than 350 separate species have been recorded here.

There are also a few mammals and reptiles in the park, most notably populations of warthogs and mongooses, serpents and crocodiles (you're unlikely to spot the latter though). Other mammals include jackals, hyenas, monkeys and gazelles.

Trips around the park are best done by pirogue. The park is officially open from 1 November to 30 April, though the best time for bird-watching is from December to January. During those months you'll be greeted by vast colonies of birds before you've even entered your boat.

SLEEPING

Hôtel du Djoudj (☎ 963 8702; fax 963 8703; huts d/tr CFA15,000/20,000, d/tr CFA27,000/34,500; ☎ rooms only 1 Nov-31 May; ☎) This friendly, grand place sits near the park headquarters and main entrance. Rooms are comfortable and staff could hardly be friendlier or more helpful. The swimming pool is open to nonguests who eat at the hotel. You can arrange boat rides around the park (adults/children over two CFA3500/2500) and hire bicycles (half/full day CFA3000/6000).

Station Biologique (☎ 968 8708; dpnsbpnod@sentoo.sn; full board per person CFA15,000) Situated at the park headquarters and main entrance, this low-key camp with clean rooms is mainly intended for research groups and students, though tourists can be accommodated if spaces are available. Camping is allowed.

Campement le Njagabaar (☎ 963 8708; s/d CFA10,000/13,000) In the village, close to the park entrance, this *campement* is a decent alternative for those who find the rates at the Hôtel du Djoudj a little too steep. It only has a handful of rooms though, and might well get filled up during the main tourist season.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There's no public transport to Djoudj, so you have to negotiate your own private taxi. Expect to pay around CFA20,000. You're likely to be better off on an organised tour (see p208). If you're driving from Saint-Louis, take the paved highway towards Rosso for about 25km. Near Ross-Béthio you'll see a sign pointing to the park, from where it's another 25km along a dirt road.

TWITCHER TIPS: TOURING THE PARC NATIONAL DES OISEAUX DU DJOUDJ

The Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj is a protected and internationally renowned bird sanctuary, and bird-watchers flock to the protected area to observe spur-winged geese, purple herons, egrets, spoonbills, jaçanas, cormorants, harriers and a multitude of European migrants that settle here during November to April. The park is most famous for its impressive flocks of pelicans and flamingos, and all tours offered by agencies, hotels and guides focus on these birds.

Tours usually leave Saint-Louis at 7am to reach the park by 8.30am. They start with a two-hour boat ride through the creeks, the highlight and sole purpose of which is to get a view of the enormous pelican colony. After lunch you drive to see flamingo flocks on the lake's edge.

You'll be able to spot other species, no doubt, but if it's the rarer varieties you're after, a tourist trip might not be satisfying. Keep bird-watchers are better off coming with their own guide or contacting the **Station Biologique** (☎ 542 4472; dpnsbpnod@sentoo.sn) and explaining their interest to park director Ablaye Diop or the head of the station, Assane Ndoye, who should be able to put you in touch with a trained ornithological guide, and will have up-to-date research findings about the park.

SENEGAL RIVER ROUTE

From Saint-Louis, the urban heart of French expansion, the route along the valley of the Senegal River reveals the French conquest of the interior, as well the signs of its opposition – a string of mid-19th-century forts in Dagana, Podor, Matam and Bakel, some in near-complete ruins, others in the early stages of restoration.

The French fortifications were military and administrative centres, around which busy trading towns developed. But their primary purpose was to serve as battle stations in the clashes with the army of El Hajj Omar Tall, who put up fierce resistance to the colonial efforts.

Tall had plenty to defend. His Islamic empire reached across West Africa to Timbuktu (in today's Mali) at its height. Omarian mosques in the river region (notably in Alwar) date from the second half of the 18th century, and still seem to oppose the French forts in a silent, architectural battle.

Where other areas in Senegal lure visitors with lush vegetation and rich wildlife, the hot and arid north is all about history and cultural pride. One of the most fascinating things to do here is to visit the small, sand-blown Tukulor villages spread across the Fouta Toro region. Smooth, earthen *banco* houses seem to rise naturally from the soil, and would blend almost completely with their desert surroundings were it not for the local Tukulor custom of decorating the outer walls in bold stripes of red, brown and yellow.

ROSSO-SENEGAL

pop around 10,000

The fly-blown frontier town of Rosso-Senegal is around 100km northeast of Saint-Louis on the Senegal River, where a ferry crosses to Rosso-Mauritania. In January 2006, it was announced that a bridge is to be constructed to replace the ferry service, yet so far the twice daily boat is the main connection between the two countries. It's also about the only reason you might want to visit Rosso.

If you get stuck, your only choice of accommodation is **Auberge du Walo** (d CFA10,000), 2km from the ferry. Basic double huts come with bathroom, and the restaurant can prepare meals on order.

The journey from Rosso-Senegal to Dakar costs CFA5100 by *sept-place* taxi, to Saint-Louis the fare is CFA1900. A local bush taxi to Richard Toll costs CFA500. For information on crossing the border see p286.

RICHARD TOLL

pop around 70,000

About 20km by road from Rosso is the town of Richard Toll, once a colonial administrative centre. It was home to an agricultural experiment by the French, who tested the tropical adaptability of European plants (hence the name Richard Toll, meaning 'Richard's Garden'). Today, it's the centre of Senegal's sugar industry. You'll pass great cane plantations as you come into town from the west, and, if you're tempted, might be able to arrange a visit to the local sugarcane factory.

The CBAO and BCIS banks have branches here; both are equipped with Visa-friendly ATMs. There's also a Western Union office and several Internet cafés (CFA300 per hour) All of these places are located in the centre, along the main road.

Thanks to the agricultural activity of the area, the region around Richard Toll is irrigated and is a welcoming spot of green amid arid lands. Tours around town in *calèches* (horse-drawn cart), which function as taxis here, are an entertaining way of taking in the ambience.

If you stay overnight, an evening stroll to the **Château de Baron Roger** (see the boxed text, opposite) at the eastern end of town, across the bridge, whiles away an hour or two.

Richard Toll is reasonably well served for accommodation. The cheapest and most basic option is the **Auberge de la Cité** (☎ 641 7581; r CFA10,600) on the main road near the entry to town. The **Hotel la Taouey** (☎ 531 4010; s/d CFA13,600/16,800; 📶 🚰) on the river, north of the main street, is slightly better. Rooms are adequate, though a little bare; the management is very helpful; and the bar a great place for a peaceful drink. The **Gîte d'Étape** (☎ /fax 963 3240; s/d CFA25,400/28,800; 📶 🚰), down a dirt road opposite the *gare* (station), is surprisingly well appointed.

For food, **Hotel la Taouey** (meals around CFA3000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) is your best option – call in advance; Gîte d'Étape disappoints for what you pay. Otherwise, it's down to the *gargottes* (local eating houses) along the main road.

PODOR & ÎLE À MORPHIL

The ancient town of Podor (population around 7500), once the heart of the ancient kingdom of Tekroul, has been a busy trading centre since the first encounters between Arabs and the Tukulor of Fouta Toro. It's home to an ancient fort, first built in 1744, then reconstructed by Louis Faidherbe in 1854, who hoped to turn Podor into another strategic northern settlement inland from Saint-Louis. A chain of colonial warehouses along the riverfront also bears witness to the era. When we visited, restoration works had just begun at the ancient fort, which should turn the large ruin into quite an impressive sight. There are also plans for a museum here.

Podor is the gateway to excursions to the historic sites of the Île à Morphil (population around 6000, p218) and Wouro Madiyou, home to the unique, mosaic-ornamented brick mausoleum of Cheikh Ahmadou Madiyou (a celebrated contemporary of El Hajj Omar Tall). Only a short drive from Podor, the inhabitants of picturesque *banco* villages such as Ngawlé might invite you for couscous and milk if you arrive showing due respect – ask to greet the head of the village first, explaining what brought you. Learning (and using) a couple of basic Fula greetings will earn you lots of kudos.

Festivals & Events

The Festival du Fleuve is the brainchild of famous singer Baaba Maal, who created it to draw attention to the rich musical heritage and contemporary creations of his home region, the Fouta Toro. Launched in 2006, it's held annually in early March.

Sleeping & Eating

All the places listed below are in Podor.

Maison de la Femme (☎ 965 1234; r 5000) Mme Diop, Mme Barry and the women's collective who run this tiny guesthouse will make you feel truly at home and help you around the region. It's *the* place to stay in town. Ask locals for directions here.

Gîte d'Étape (☎ 965 1642; d incl breakfast CFA6600) Opposite the *gare routière*, this is the only 'proper' guesthouse in Podor. It's owned by the famous musician Baaba Maal who hails from Podor, but unfortunately is not as refined as his singing. The restaurant serves excellent Senegalese food (meals around

LA FOLIE DE BARON ROGER

The crumbling facade of the imposing Château de Baron Roger gives a glimpse into the most ambitious periods of French colonialism. Baron Jacques Roger was the governor of Senegal from 1822 to 1827, and built this private palace as his weekend retreat on the banks of the Taouey River, some 100km upstream from the busy colonial capital Saint-Louis. The symmetrical construction was once surrounded by an ornamental park (it's now more like a jungle), which was created by Claude Richard – the man who is responsible for the town's name. When Richard wasn't looking after the introduction of the groundnut to the region, he devoted some time to growing European ornamental plants around the governor's royal home.

The chateau was later inhabited by Baron Roger's successor, Louis Faidherbe, and was at some stage used as a monastery and school. Today it stands as a ruin, and a monument to colonial aspiration.

CFA 3000; you have to order in advance), and the staff is fantastic.

Catholic Mission (Av El Hajj Omar Tall; r CFA5000) The mission has a couple of dusty rooms for stranded tourists. Bring a few beers or a good bottle of red wine, and the talkative Père Moïss will bless you with his kindness.

If it's nightlife you're after, you're in the wrong place. But for a cold beer and some local contact try the bar-disco Monaco Fleuve right on the river behind the Catholic Mission, or head for the Gîte d'Étape.

Getting There & Away

Sept-place taxis travel fairly regularly between Podor and Saint-Louis (CFA3000, four hours, 262km) sometimes continuing all the way to Dakar (CFA3500). If you're heading west, a *sept-place* taxi to Ouro Sogui (CFA4500, five hours, 222km) is best; a minibus costs CFA2500 but takes twice as long. Hiring a taxi from Saint-Louis to Podor can cost up to CFA40,000.

MATAM & OURO SOGUI

The 230km from Podor to Ouro Sogui lead through the dry, flat lands of Fouta Toro, where acacia trees are about the only

vegetation. Matam is another 11km drive from Ouro Sogui along a causeway lined either side with plains and marshes. Matam (population around 11,000) is the administrative centre, yet it has strongly declined in importance and several of its ancient buildings have been gnawed on by frequent flooding, while Ouro Sogui (population around 9000) has grown from an insignificant village into a busy trading centre and transport hub for the Ferlo plains.

Ouro Sogui has two banks with ATMs (don't rely too much on them), a hospital, post office and an aerodrome. Matam has a waterfront lined with several colonial warehouses – testimony of busy days gone by.

In Ouro Sogui, the cheapest accommodation is the **Auberge Sogui** (☎ 966 1198; s/d CFA8500/10,000; 🚻) opposite the market, which has just-passable rooms, though the shared bathrooms are grubby. Don't confuse this with the **Hotel Auberge Sogui** (☎ 966 1536; cobasse@hotmail.com; s/d/tr CFA15,000/18,000/21,000; 🚻), a huge white monolith that's not as grand as first impressions make you believe. Your best choice here is the **Oasis du Fouta** (☎ 966 1294; seftop@hotmail.com; s/d incl breakfast CFA13,500/15,000; 🚻 📺), which has comfortable rooms with TV, an Internet café and a staff that tries to accommodate your every excursion wish, from pirogue journeys to trips into the mountains where El Hajj Omar Tall once battled French forces.

Food outside your hotel is pretty much limited to the cheap eateries and *dibiteries* (grilled-meat stalls) spread across town. The best of these is probably Le Teddungal, where grilled lamb skewers only cost a handful of CFA.

Ouro Sogui's *gare routière* is on the northern side of town, on the road towards Matam. Battered *sept-place* taxis run to Dakar (CFA10,500) and Bakel (CFA2000, two hours, 148km).

On the map of Senegal a road leads from Ouro Sogui southwards across the Ferlo plains to Linguère. At the time of research, this was still one of the country's worst roads, only feasible to take on in a sturdy 4WD. Roadwork along this tired stretch of dusty track was announced, and might well be underway by the time you visit.

BAKEL

pop around 9800

Peacefully perched among a scattering of rocky hills, Bakel is a picturesque spot. Any traveller persistent enough to follow the northern road to this tucked-away village is rewarded with the sight of the most beautiful place along the River Senegal.

Like all the northern towns it's hot, dry and sandy, but it's prettier than most. Its colonial architecture blossomed from the profits of the rubber and peanut trade and is still intact. Its 1854 **fort**, another ambitious Faidherbe endeavour, is well maintained and now houses the local government.

Bakel's second obligatory sight is the **Pavillon René Caillé**, once temporary home to the famous French explorer. It sits on top of a hill from where you get great views over Bakel's old town.

Sleeping & Eating

Bakel sits off any tourist trail, which means that no-one has endeavoured to place any decent sort of accommodation here.

Hôtel Islam (r per person CFA10,000; 🚻) About 500m east of the *gare routière*, this barely held-together place is about your only choice. It has spartan rooms, and not very inviting shared toilets.

For food, it's a trip to the market for fresh produce, or ready-made sandwiches and skewered meat at the *gargottes* next door.

Getting There & Away

If you come from Ouro Sogui on a vehicle bound for Kidira you might be dropped off at the junction 5km south of Bakel, from where local bush taxis shuttle into town. A minibus goes daily (except Fridays) from Bakel to

Tambacounda (CFA3500, four hours, 184km) via Kidira (CFA1500, one hour, 60km). Be there early, or you won't get a seat.

KIDIRA

pop around 6000

The main crossing point between Senegal and Mali is the border town of Kidira, where the main road and the railway between Dakar and Bamako cross the Falene River into Mali. Crossing here is quite a task whether you come by train, which is unreliable, or by road, which has been severely washed out on the Malian side. For more details see p286.

ÎLE À MORPHIL

Between the main Senegal River and a major channel that runs parallel to it for over 100km, Île à Morphil is a long, thin island with Podor at its western end. About 2km after the bridge on the road into town, a dirt road turns off right (east), and a signpost indicates distances to a string of villages along Île à Morphil, all the way to Saldé at its eastern end. From Saldé a ferry crosses over to Ngoui on the mainland, from where you can reach Pete, on the main road.

This is one of the most fascinating areas of the north, with small routes that wind through the dry land and around beautiful banco villages. Guédé, the ancient capital of Fouta Toro, is found here; it has a refined Omarian mosque. The oldest mosque in the area is further east in Alwar, the birthplace of El Hajj Omar Tall. It's amazing to think that the historic leader used to pray in this 18th-century building.

When visiting any of the tiny villages, remember to show respect to the local residents and, if possible, pay a visit to the *chef de village* (village chief).

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