

Algeria

You raise a few eyebrows when you say you're travelling to Algeria. Though the country, ravaged by civil war in the early 1990s, is taking tentative steps towards tourism, it is still a destination mainly for the adventurous and the patient. Yet there is so much to see here: vast parts of the Sahara desert remain unexplored; the Neolithic cave paintings of Tassili N'Ajjer and the volcanic peaks of the Hoggar mountains are Unesco listed; tribal culture is very much alive; the mysterious and ultrareligious towns of the M'zab region offer a peek into life as it was lived hundreds of years ago; and the Tuareg capital, Tamanrasset, is a forest of veiled 'blue men' driving jeeps and drinking mint tea. To the north, the Mediterranean coast is almost completely undeveloped, and the capital, Algiers, is a bombastic mixture of traditional and modern Algeria. Refreshingly, the day-to-day hassle common to many Arab countries is conspicuously absent.

Many Algerians and the country's intrepid explorers like the lack of visitors: the difficult transport and next to no tourist infrastructure make it almost impossible for Algeria to turn into a holiday magnet like its neighbour, Tunisia. Chances of this happening are low, because Algeria's economy doesn't depend on tourism and the continuing reports of militant attacks in certain areas, though seldom reported in Western media, mean that it will be a long time before Algeria is swamped by visitors. So, if you have lots of time, patience and a healthy but cautious sense of adventure, take advantage of this dusty gem and explore Algeria.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 2.3 million sq km
- **ATMs** None
- **Borders** Niger and Tunisia open; Morocco closed; Mali, Mauritania and Libya crossings not advised
- **Budget** US\$35 to US\$40 per day
- **Capital** Algiers
- **Languages** Arabic, Berber, French
- **Money** Algerian dinar (DA); US\$1 = DA71
- **Population** 32.9 million
- **Seasons** In the north: wet (October to March), dry (June to September); in the south: hot (March to October), cool (November to February)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 213; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +1
- **Visa** US\$40 to US\$50 for one month



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Algiers** (p73) See modern and traditional Algeria meet in the country's fascinating capital.
- **Tamanrasset** (p76) Get lost among the Blue Men – the Tuaregs – and explore Saharan culture.
- **Assekrem** (p77) Watch the sun set beyond a sea of mountains, and absorb Algeria's most breathtaking view.
- **Timimoun** (p76) Explore beautiful desert architecture and sigh over the sand dunes on the edges of town.
- **Ghardaïa** (p75) Bargain for a technicolour carpet, before peeking inside the ancient Muslim town, Beni Isguen.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Algeria has a Mediterranean climate along the coast, with mild, wet winters, and hot, dry summers. The coastal area is best visited in spring and summer months. The Sahara desert has famously ferocious summer temperatures, so visiting this part of Algeria is best done between late autumn and early spring (November to April). Despite daytime temperatures seldom falling below 25°C, desert nights can be cold even in the height of summer. Rainfall ranges from more than 1000mm per year in the northern mountains, to zero in the Sahara. Some places go decades without a drop.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Fly to Tamanrasset (p76) and go on a desert expedition trip, walking alongside camels and sleeping under the

HOW MUCH?

- **Cup of tea** US\$0.50
- **Newspaper** US\$0.80
- **Antique tin box** US\$4
- **Lamb couscous** US\$1.50
- **Tuareg shawl** US\$5

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.50
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.50
- **Bottle of Algad Power Beer** From US\$5
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$4
- **Kebab** US\$1.50

WARNING

Despite an increase in interest in Algeria as a travellers' destination, parts of the country remain unsafe. You should avoid travelling to the northwest, and the desert and mountain regions of the southeast, in particular. We did on-the-ground research in some parts of the south, east and the country's capital, but as we were not able to do on-the-ground research in the entire country, some information in this chapter might not be reliable. Please check the situation before travelling to Algeria.

stars for five days. Stopping over in Algiers (p73) on your way back gives you the perfect opportunity to explore the capital for a couple of days.

- **Two Weeks** As for the one-week itinerary, but continue onto Ghardaïa (p75) from Algiers. Take in the beauties of this old-fashioned town over two days, with its market, colourful carpets and the daily *souq* (market), and don't miss spending a day inside the ancient town of Beni Isguen (p75), where people have been living according to strict Muslim laws for centuries. Get a bus to Timimoun (p76) and spend a couple of days relaxing, wandering around town, and watching the sand dunes, before catching a bus, then plane back to Algiers.

HISTORY

The modern state of Algeria is a relatively recent creation. The name was coined by the Ottoman Turks in the 16th century to describe the territory controlled by the regency of Algiers – initially a Turkish colony. The regency broke free of the Ottoman Empire and founded a military republic of unusual stability. This endured almost 300 years until spurious diplomatic problems prompted the French to invade in the 19th century.

The Barbary Coast

Before the arrival of the French, Algeria was known to Europeans as the Barbary (a corruption of Berber) Coast, whose notorious pirates preyed on Christian shipping. The dreaded Khayr al-Din, going under the chilling pseudonym of Barbarossa, was the first regent of Algiers during this period, and at one point

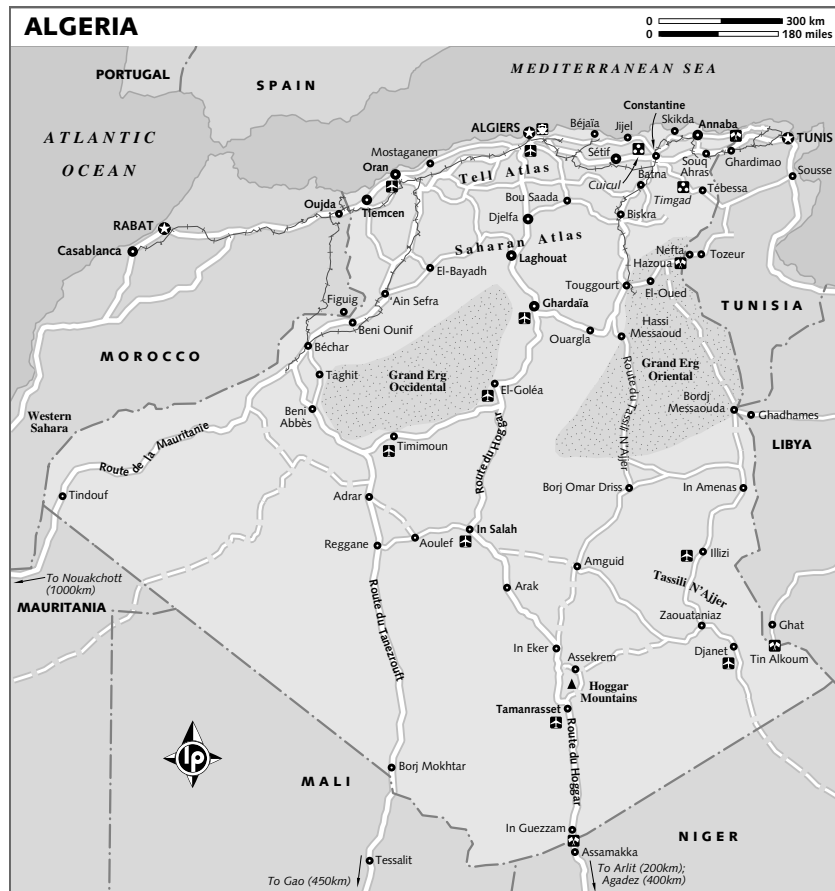
held no fewer than 25,000 Christian captives in the city. Piracy sent shivers down many a spine until the US Navy defeated a Barbary fleet off Algiers in 1815. Despite this, the feared pirates were not entirely beaten until the French attacked Algiers in 1830 and forced the ruling *dey* (commander or governor) to capitulate. It took another 41 years for French domination of the country to be complete.

The main opposition came from Emir Abdelkader, the great hero of Algeria's nationalist movement. Abdelkader was a *sherif* (a descendant of the Prophet, not a Wild West figure) who ruled western and central inland Algeria. His forces resisted the French for almost six years before they were defeated near Oujda in 1844. Abdelkader himself finally sur-

rendered in 1846 and spent the rest of his life in exile. He died in Damascus in 1883.

French Rule

The French colonial authorities set about changing the face of Algeria by eliminating anything that was previously thought of as Algerian: local culture was destroyed, mosques were converted into churches and the old medinas were pulled down and replaced with streets laid out in neat grids. The greatest symbol of the change was the conversion of the Great Mosque of Algiers to the Cathedral of St Philippe. The French also distributed large parts of prime farming land to European settlers (known as *pieds-noirs*) – Italian, Maltese and Spanish as well as French.



Algeria's war of independence, led by the newly formed Front de Libération Nationale (FLN; National Liberation Front), began on 31 October 1954 in Batna, east of Algiers. The fighting lasted seven years, with terror campaigns led by both native Algerians and *piéd-noir* settlers, costing at least a million Algerian lives. The French president, Charles de Gaulle, aware of the impossibility of continued French rule, agreed to a referendum on independence in March 1962. The result was a resounding six million in favour and only 16,000 against. Independence was declared on 5 July 1962.

Socialism & Democracy

FLN candidate Ahmed ben Bella, who robbed a bank to fund a revolutionary group, became Algeria's first president. He pledged to create a 'revolutionary Arab-Islamic state based on the principles of socialism and collective leadership at home and anti-imperialism abroad'. He was quickly overthrown in 1965 by former colleague Colonel Houari Boumédiénne, who effectively returned the country to military rule.

Boumédiénne's emphasis on industrial development at the expense of the agricultural sector was to have a major impact in later years, when the country became heavily dependent on food imports and migrant workers. Boumédiénne died in December 1978 and the FLN replaced him with Colonel Chadli Benjedid, who was re-elected in 1984 and 1989.

There was very little political change under Boumédiénne and Chadli. The FLN was the sole political party, pursuing basically secular, socialist policies. There was little evidence of opposition until October 1988, when thousands of people took to the streets in protest against government austerity measures and food shortages. The army was called in to restore order, and between 160 and 600 people were killed.

The government reacted by pledging to relax the FLN monopoly on political power and work towards a multiparty system. The extent of the opposition became clear at local government elections held in early 1990, which produced landslide victories for previously outlawed fundamentalist Front Islamique du Salut (FIS; Islamic Salvation Front).

The initial round of Algeria's first multiparty parliamentary elections, held in De-

cember 1991, produced another landslide win for the FIS. The FLN was left looking like a political irrelevance, taking only 15 of the 231 seats. Chadli's apparent acceptance of this prompted the army to step in, replacing the president with a five-person Haut Conseil d'Etat (HCE; High Council of State) headed by Mohammed Boudiaf, a former leader of the Algerian revolution. The second round of elections was cancelled, and FIS leaders Abbas Madani and Ali Belhadj were arrested while others fled into exile.

Civil War

Boudiaf lasted six months before he was assassinated amid signs of a growing guerrilla offensive led by the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA; Armed Islamic Group). He was replaced by former FLN hardliner Ali Kafi, who oversaw the country's rapid descent into civil war before he was replaced by a retired general, Liamine Zéroual, in January 1994. Zéroual attempted to defuse the situation by holding fresh elections in 1995, but Islamic parties were barred from the poll and Zéroual's sweeping victory came amid widespread claims of fraud.

Hopes for peace went unfulfilled; instead, the war became even more brutal, with Amnesty International accusing both sides of massacres and war atrocities. The GIA, angered by French aid to the government, extended the war to French soil with a series of bombings and hijackings.

Eventually, government security forces began to gain the upper hand, and at the beginning of 1999 Zéroual announced that he would be stepping down. New elections held in April that year resulted in a controversial victory for the establishment candidate Abdelaziz Bouteflika, a former foreign minister, who was elected unopposed after the rest of the candidates in the field claimed fraud and withdrew.

Bouteflika moved quickly to establish his legitimacy by calling a referendum on a plan to offer amnesty to the rebels. War-weary Algerians responded overwhelmingly with a 98% 'yes' vote, and by the end of 1999 many groups had responded and laid down their weapons. However, elements within the GIA remained defiant, and were suspected of assassinating FIS leader Abdelkader Hachani in October 1999 in an attempt to derail the peace process.