

Djibouti

Small in size, big in ambitions. Djibouti may be one of the tiniest, youngest and least-known nations in Africa, but it could also well be the most talented or, depending on your perspective, the most opportunistic. While its larger, more powerful neighbours are embroiled in a never-ending border dispute, Djibouti stands out as a haven of stability and neutrality.

Sadly, for the few travellers who venture here (except, maybe, for the French, who colonised the country and are more acquainted with its assets), Djibouti is usually nothing more than a transit point on the road to Eritrea or Ethiopia. But, you would miss out if you limited your experience of Djibouti to a few hours waiting for a connecting plane, train or bus. Why not settle in for a while and enjoy its dishevelled nightlife, luscious cuisine and well-organised infrastructure? Or immerse yourself in its eerie lunar landscapes, such as the other-worldly Lac Abbé or the vast salt lake, Lac Assal. Djibouti is also a great place for a few days' strenuous activity, with hiking, diving, snorkelling with whale sharks (whisper it softly) and even windsurfing on wheels (yes!) readily available. For such a tiny speck of land, there's a startling variety of adventure options. But if you need to recharge the batteries, you could simply laze on a pale-sand beach in the Gulf of Tadjoura. True, Djibouti will put a dent in your wallet, but if you have a penchant for bizarre or secretive places, be sure to squeeze it into your African odyssey. It could hold you captive longer than expected.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 23,000 sq km
- **ATMs** Two in Djibouti City (but they were not functioning at the time of research)
- **Borders** Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somaliland open
- **Budget** US\$50 to US\$100 a day
- **Capital** Djibouti City
- **Languages** Arabic, French, Afar, Somali
- **Money** Djibouti Franc (DFr); US\$1 = DFr176
- **Population** Approximately 704,000
- **Seasons** Hot (May–September), cool (mid-October to mid-April), wet (October–April)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 253; international access code 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +3
- **Visa** US\$35 to US\$60 for 30 days; obtainable at the airport for most Western nationals



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Djibouti City** (p623) Explore the alleyways of the Marché Central, full of pungent odours and bright colours, and test-drive the dance floors.
- **Moucha Island** (p627) Forget the hardships and take some time out on a white-sand beach.
- **Bay of Ghoubbet** (p625) Impress your firends left back home: 'What did you do in Djibouti?' 'I snorkelled with a whale shark!'
- **Lac Assal** (p627) Descend to the lowest point on the African continent at 150m below sea level.
- **Lac Abbé** (p629) Question reality while wandering flabbergasted in a Martian landscape, where *Planet of the Apes* was filmed.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The climate is hot, and from May until September you'll swelter under average daily temperatures of about 40°C. At the peak of the hot season, the thermometer can hit 45°C and the humidity is correspondingly high. The cooler season (including occasional rain) runs from mid-October to mid-April, when temperatures average 25°C. This is the ideal time to visit Djibouti, when the stifling heat is over. It's appreciably milder in the Goda Mountains year round.

HOW MUCH?

- **Internet connection** US\$1.75 per hour
- **One night with full board in a campement** US\$46
- **Djibouti City–Tadjoura by dhow** US\$2.90
- **Full diving package to Les Sept Frères islands** US\$460
- **Bunch of qat** Depends on quality!

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$0.90
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.85
- **Bottle of Heineken** US\$5.20
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$5.75
- **Fruit juice** US\$1.70

ITINERARIES

- **One week** Base yourself in Djibouti City (p623) and take a two- to three-day tour to explore Lac Assal (p627) and Lac Abbé (p629). Back in the capital, enjoy its culinary delights and spend late nights in the bars and clubs. Be sure to take a snorkelling trip to the Bay of Ghoubbet (p625) or a diving trip to the Gulf of Tadjoura (p625).
- **Two weeks** Decompress after all that sight-seeing with a few days of lounging on the beaches at Tadjoura (p628) or Moucha Island (p627). It's also worth taking a few days upcountry to explore the Goda Mountains (p628). Then head east to charmingly lethargic Obock (p629) before dhowing it back to Djibouti City.
- **One month** One month? The chances are that you've become *qat*-addicted!

HISTORY

From Aksum to Islam

Around the 1st century AD, Djibouti made up part of the powerful Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum, which included modern-day Eritrea and even stretched across the Red Sea to parts of southern Arabia. It was during the Aksumite era, in the 4th century AD, that Christianity first appeared in the region.

As the empire of Aksum gradually fell into decline, a new influence arose that would forever supersede the Christian religion in Djibouti: Islam. It was introduced to the region around AD 825 by Arab traders from Southern Arabia.

European Ambitions

In the second half of the 19th century, European powers competed to grab new colonies in Africa. The French, seeking to counter the British presence in Yemen on the other side of the Bab al-Mandab Strait, made agreements with the Afar sultans of Obock and Tadjoura that gave them the right to settle. In 1888, construction of Djibouti City began on the southern shore of the Gulf of Tadjoura. French Somaliland (present-day Djibouti) began to take shape.

France and the emperor of Ethiopia then signed a pact designating Djibouti as the 'official outlet of Ethiopian commerce'. This led to the construction of the Addis Ababa–Djibouti City railway, which was of vital commercial importance until recently.

Throwing Off the French Yoke

As early as 1949 there were a number of anticolonial demonstrations that were led by the Issa Somalis, who were in favour of the reunification of the territories of Italian, British and French Somaliland. Meanwhile, the Afars were in favour of continued French rule.

Major riots ensued, especially after the 1967 referendum, which produced a vote in favour of continued French rule – a vote achieved partly as a result of the arrest of opposition leaders and the massive expulsion of ethnic Somalis. After the referendum, the colony's name was changed from French Somaliland to the French Territory of the Afars and Issas.

On June 1977, the colony finally won its sovereignty from France. The country became the Republic of Djibouti.

Small Country, Adroit Leaders

Despite continuous clan rivalries between the two main ethnic groups, Afars and Issas, who have been jostling for power since the 1970s, Djibouti has learnt to exploit its strategic position.

When the Gulf War broke out in 1990, the country's president, Hassan Gouled Aptidon, while appearing to oppose the military build-up in the Gulf, simultaneously allowed France to increase its military presence in the country, as well as granting the Americans and Italians access to the naval port. And he

