

VITAL STATISTICS

NAME: Dakar
DATE OF BIRTH: 1857; the French established Dakar at the site of a fishing village, and in 1895 it became French West Africa's administrative centre
ADDRESS: Senegal (map 1, T14)
HEIGHT: 40m
SIZE: 547 sq km
POPULATION: 1.1 million

Relentless and complex, Dakar is like a giant termite nest, tough on the outside and teeming with life on the inside.

ANATOMY

A massive square called place de l'Indépendance (usually simply called the 'Place') is the city's heart. From here, major streets stem outwards, including ave Léopold Senghor (which passes the Palais Présidentiel) and ave Pompidou, the main street, which leads west to Marché Sandaga. To the south is the historical heart of the city, Plateau, where ministries and larger hotels are located. The main train station, Gare Routière Pompiers, is to the north in the city's commercial quarter.

PEOPLE

Around 90% of Senegal's population is Muslim, including the West African ethnic groups Wolof and Mandinka. The Fula, or Peul, and the Diola are animists by tradition, while many of the Sérère are Catholics. French is the official

language, but Wolof the principal African tongue. The Fula speak Pulaar (or Fula), while the Sérère speak Sérér. Arabic expressions are also widely used. Like many African tribes, Senegal's main indigenous group, the Wolof, has a highly stratified society. At the top are traditional noble and warrior families, followed by the farmers, traders and persons of caste – blacksmiths, leather workers, woodworkers, weavers and *griots*. *Griots* are the lowest of the castes but are highly respected, as they are in charge of passing on the oral traditions. Many descendants of former slaves still work as tenant farmers for the masters of old. Few people would make a big decision without consulting their town's *marabout* (holy man), thought to link Senegalese Islam's disciples and Allah.

BEST TIME

Dakar is arid and hot, except during the rainy season, which lasts roughly July to November and brings sweltering temperatures, though ocean breezes do lessen the intensity. The best time to visit is January to April, when it's warm enough to sunbathe and with pleasant, balmy evenings – but also higher prices.

A PERFECT DAY

Quaffing tasty pastries at Pâtisserie Laetitia, then bargaining at downtown's Marché Kermel before admiring the landmark minaret of the Grande Mosquée, and finishing the day with a beachside beer and a view at Plage N'Gor.

STRENGTHS

- A glimpse of the African urban future
- Palais Présidentiel
- Marché Kermel
- Delicious *poisson yassa* (fish grilled with a sauce made from onions, lemon and mustard)
- IFAN Museum of African Arts
- Grande Mosquée
- Simple corner stalls selling bread with butter, chocolate spread, mayonnaise and sardines
- Senegalese beer (especially Gazelle and Flag)
- Saying '*non, merci!*' three times to get rid of hustlers
- Mbalax music

WEAKNESSES

- Muggings and pickpockets in broad daylight
- Scams
- Petty theft
- Aggressive street hawkers
- Massive visible disparity between rich and poor

GOLD STAR

For the lively, imaginative displays at the IFAN Museum of African

Arts, which provide an overview of regional styles from across West Africa and include masks, traditional dress, beautiful fabrics, carvings, drums and tools.

STARRING ROLE IN...

- *Badou Boy* (1970)
- *Touki Bouki* (1973)
- *Sélbe: One Among Many* (1983)
- *Topics of West African History* by Adu Boahen
- *The Belly of the Atlantic* by Fatou Diome

IMPORT

- Western pop, rock and soul
- Progress, including women's rights
- A sophisticated international crowd

EXPORT

- Mbalax music
- Agricultural and fish processing
- Singer Youssou N'Dour
- Phosphates
- Touré Kunda
- Petroleum

SEE the works of Senegal's best photographers, painters and sculptors in a garden gallery at Village des Arts.

EAT tasty, cheap and filling *fajayas* (street snacks similar to samosas) at Chawarma Donald.

DRINK budget-priced beer at Bar Gorée, opposite the Gorée ferry wharf, filled with salty patrons and a lively, downmarket vibe.

DO visit the fishing village of Soumbédioune, west of the city centre, especially at dusk to witness pirogues (colourful local boats) beach themselves.

WATCH traditional Senegalese wrestling matches (*les luttés* in French) at the Stade Iba Mar Diop.

BUY beautiful West African fabrics at Marché Sandaga.

AFTER DARK hit Club Thioissane, a steamy, crowded nightclub in La Médina owned by international

music star Youssou N'Dour (who sometimes makes an appearance).

URBAN TALE

Once translators and diplomats to the royal courts, Dakar's modern-day griots are akin to singing historians and genealogists, invited to the most important social events such as weddings and naming ceremonies and lavishly paid to recite epics and family histories – the equivalent, perhaps, of a librarian, a gossipy grandmother and a busking folk singer rolled into one.

01 Sunshine, sand and surf on Dakar's city beaches

02 Carved African masks for sale

03 Traditional wrestling takes place at Demba Diop Stadium

04 The striking winged roof of Dakar's Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar

Dakar

 // Senegal
