

RIGHT The Bijagós are not a conventional beach-vacation destination.
BELOW With wildlife like the goliath heron, the islands are a World Heritage Biosphere Reserve.

Tranquil Haven in a Troubled Land



FAR OFF THE BEATEN PATH

HOW TO GET THERE
You can fly into Bissau, the capital, from Lisbon on TAP (www.tapt.com) and from Dakar, Senegal, on TACV (866-539-8228; www.tacv.com). Prices vary widely, but a recent Web search found the lowest round-trip fare in December from Newark to Lisbon to Bissau on TAP to be \$2,195. Delta (www.delta.com) flies direct to Dakar from Kennedy International on Wednesdays and Saturdays; in a recent search, the lowest fare in December was \$1,167. TACV flies between Dakar and Bissau four days a week, charging about \$395 round trip.

United States citizens must have a valid visa to visit Guinea-Bissau. For information, contact the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau to the United Nations in New York; (917) 284-7771.

WHERE TO STAY

In Bubaque, an air-conditioned room for two at the **Kasa Africana** (245-658-1667; www.kasa-africana.com), all meals included, is \$12 euros, about \$171 at the euro. Kasa Africana has four rooms, but three bungalows are under con-

struction. There is Wi-Fi and satellite television service.

Simpler rooms, often without air-conditioning, and closer to Bubaque village, can be had at **Chez Dora** (245-692-5836), for around 15 to 39 euros, and even more inexpensively at **Chez Raoul** (245-610-0149). Both are uphill from the port at Bubaque, running right at Cine Kraké.

In Bissau, the **Residencial Coimbra** is centrally located (Caixa Amilcar Cabral; 245-213-467; www.residencialcoimbra.com). Rooms run \$130 to \$180 a night. Both are uphills from the port at Bubaque, running right at Cine Kraké.

The Bijagós, with their rich, abundant and untroubled flora and fauna, are classified a United Nations World Heritage Biosphere Reserve: apart from the remarkable hippos, there are 155 species of fish, making the islands a premier though rarely frequented destination for adventurous sport fishermen; and there are dolphins, manatees, crocodiles, monkeys and striped antelopes. Of the world's eight species of tortoise, the World Heritage Center says, five are found there.

The islands are one of the most important nesting places for migratory birds on the continent, with some 96 species. The perils of navigating the narrow channels between the islands, which are loaded with sandbars, have protected the Bijagós from the giant fishing boats that ply the African coast.

This is not a place for a conventional beach vacation. Being there, finally reaching the Bijagós after overcoming the hurdles, translates into a feeling of removal you cannot get by jetting down to the Caribbean.

For all the pleasure of lying on the white sand and not seeing a soul as minutes and hours pass, an even greater pleasure is in being somewhere where you are just as strange to the inhabitants as they are to you. The usual relationship of tourist to native — that mix of wariness, guile and hostility — doesn't exist.

That the accommodation ranges from spartan to simple but comfortable (no

BEFORE YOU GO
A hitch for travelers is that credit cards are not accepted in Guinea-Bissau, and I found no cash machine in Bissau that took American debit cards to get West African CFA francs, the local currency (there are about 450 francs to the dollar). Some banks will change dollars or, preferably, euros to CFA francs.

The Kasa Africana and the Residential Coimbra will accept wire transfers; otherwise come armed with much cash, or be prepared to make wire transfers to Western Union offices in Bissau.

Travel to Guinea-Bissau, like almost anywhere in Africa, requires a full panoply of vaccinations. It's also advisable to take along anti-malarial medication. You should consult your doctor before going.

ADAM NOSSITER

is the West Africa bureau chief for The New York Times.



FROM NEAR
RIGHT Life on Bubaque: a young fisherman at the end of the day; a hotel worker by a bungalow; carrying a harvest of red palm oil kernels.



Luxury helps. The usual large distance between Westerner and West African isn't grossly amplified by obvious outcroppings of privilege.

And even when you are on Bubaque, the small difficulties and discomforts — for instance, the bumpy half-hour drive past goats and market-ladies, in one of the island's few vehicles, to the magnificent main beach at the hamlet of Bruce, or the muddy disorder of Bubaque village itself — are a reminder that while these islands can receive visitors (anthropologists have long favored them because of their isolation), they have hardly been deconstructed for the sake of tourists.

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for decay, ruins, moldering colonial architecture, a first-hand glimpse of West Africa's social and political troubles, and excellent Portuguese restaurants, you won't regret spending a night or two in Bissau, principal city of one of the world's poorest countries.

And the people couldn't be more welcoming, in a sad way. A Bissau-Guinean lawyer I met downtown used the word "delinquescence" to sum up both his city and the state of the Bissauan polity. What used to be Portuguese Guinea, a small and forgotten corner of the region, stands out from its former French neighbors because it is not evidently twisted into knots over its ongoing relationship with the former colonial power. Instead, it feels like it is melting away, but agreeably so.

Sights in Bissau are unconventional, but rewarding in the insights they give visitors to this crumbling society: the presidential palace, shelled in the civil war, its bombed-in roof never repaired; papaya trees growing out of shattered buildings downtown; layers of mold on the stucco of the old Portuguese port buildings; the bullet holes on the walls of the villa where the late president

outdoor cafe contemplating these ruins, and sipping a glass of vinho verde. All of the continent's problems are there in front of you, as well as its charms.

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