



Niger

Introduction

Official Name: Republic of Niger

Nationality: Nigerien

Area: 1.28 million square kilometers (494,210 square miles)

Languages: French (official), Hausa, Djerma

Currency: Communauté Financière Africaine franc (XOF)

Location: West Africa; bordered by Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Libya, Mali, and Nigeria

Statistical Information

Population	14.9 million
0-14 years	46.9 percent
15-64 years	50.6 percent
65+ years	2.4 percent
Birth rate	50 births/1,000
Death rate	21 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate	7 children/woman
Pop. growth rate	3.3 percent
Life expectancy	44 years
Literacy	28.7 percent
HIV/AIDS rate	1.2 percent
Below poverty line	63 percent
Ethnic groups	55 percent Hausa 21 percent Djerma Songhai 9.3 percent Tuareg 8.5 percent Peuhl 4.7 percent Kanouri 1.2 percent other
Religion	80 percent Muslim 20 percent other (indigenous, Christian)

Economy

Niger is one of the world's poorest countries, ranking near the bottom on the United Nations Development Fund index of human development. Its economy depends mainly on subsistence farming and livestock, supplemented by some of the world's largest uranium deposits. The economy's dependence on agriculture makes it extremely vulnerable to the droughts common in sub-Saharan regions. In addition to

droughts, a locust infestation in 2005 and a high population growth rate have contributed to Niger's extremely poor economy.

Government

Capital: Niamey

Niger is a republic; the country gained its independence from France on August 3, 1960. The head of state is the president, popularly elected for a five-year term, who appoints his own 26-member cabinet. The legislative branch is comprised of the one-house, 113-seat National Assembly, whose members are also elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms. Niger is divided into eight administrative regions: Agadez, Diffa, Dosso, Maradi, Niamey (capital district), Tahoua, Tillabéri, and Zinder.

Climate

Sunny, dry, and dusty, Niger is one of the hottest countries in the world. The hottest part of the year is from March to June, when temperatures can exceed 40°C (104°F) in the shade. From June to September is the rainy season. Temperatures remain high, but humidity levels hover around 80 percent, a strong contrast to the otherwise dry heat of the region. The amount of rainfall varies by region, but levels fall sharply in more northern latitudes. Temperatures are warm in September and October, during the harvest, and November ushers in the winter season, which lasts until February. Temperatures drop considerably in the winter, particularly at night. This time of year is the period of the *harmattan*, the dry, dusty winds that come from the north and east, off the Sahara Desert. The heavy amounts of dust in the air during the harmattan can severely limit visibility and even block the sun for a few days at a time. The harmattan is considered a natural hazard and can result in flight delays or cancellations, as well as respiratory problems.

Environmental Concerns

Deforestation and desertification are pressing concerns, though Niger has made progress in increasing vegetative cover. Wildlife populations (elephant, hippopotamus, giraffe, lion) are threatened by poaching.

History

Ancient Niger was an important economic crossroads, part of great ancient African kingdoms which extended far beyond its modern-day borders. The Songhai Empire, which flourished between the 15th and 16th centuries, encompassed part of Niger, as did the Kanem-Bournou Empire in the 16th century. There were also a number of smaller Hausa kingdoms, each able to retain its independence despite attacks from the larger and better-organized Songhai and Bournou empires.

The area's first contact with the West came in the 19th century, in the form of European explorers searching for the source of the Niger River. In 1900, Niger became a military territory. Ethnic groups resisted the occupation, and France put down many revolts, most notably the Tuareg revolt in the Air region from 1916 to 1919. In 1922, France made Niger one of its colonies. After the establishment of the Fifth French Republic in 1958, Niger became an autonomous republic within the French community. Two years later France granted Niger full independence.

The newly independent country became a single-party regime under President Hamani Diori. Drought and political corruption led to a military coup d'état which overthrew Diori in 1974. The constitution was suspended under the new military government, headed by Colonel Seyni Koutché. Koutché ruled until his death in 1987. Former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces Ali Saibou was elected to be his successor. Saibou liberalized some of Niger's laws and policies and released political prisoners, but his efforts to control political reform were not enough. At the end of 1990, Saibou's government acquiesced to union and student demands for a multi-party system. A new constitution was adopted and a transition government set up in 1991 to manage the affairs of state until a new leader could be elected. In 1993, Mahamane Ousmane was elected to the office of president in a free and fair election, but political infighting opened the door for a coup in 1996. Colonel Ibrahim Baré took power, heading a brutal government which frequently violated civil liberties in an attempt to put down opposition. Baré was assassinated in 1999, and a new constitution was drafted, creating a French-style semi-presidential system of government.

The Nigerien electorate approved the new constitution in July of 1999, and presidential elections were held in October and November of 1999, resulting in the election of Mamadou Tandja to the presidency. Tandja won reelection in 2004, in an election that international observers called generally free and fair.

In February 2007, a previously unknown resistance group emerged in northern Niger. Known as the Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice (MNJ), the group, composed primarily of militant Tuaregs, has attacked military and other facilities and laid land mines in the north, creating political instability which has both damaged Niger's tourism industry and deterred foreign investments in mining and oil. The MNJ has issued demands to the Nigerien government, but the government refuses to negotiate until the group disarms.

Ethnic Groups

Niger is a country where people from diverse origins have lived together for thousands of years. Each group retains its individuality, with distinct lifestyles, physical features, customs, dress, and language. There are several major ethnic groups, most easily classified into 1) nomadic populations, which inhabit the northern desert regions of Niger, and 2) settled populations, which occupy the southern part of the country.

Nomadic populations

Tuareg—In historical times, the Tuaregs were fearsome warriors and raiders. Their social structure is based on classes: *bords*, *marabouts* (Muslim priests), and artisans. Their society is matriarchal; most women are literate and play musical instruments. They value corpulence, and jewelry is an important feature of their dress. Women are held in high esteem, are consulted on important issues, and play a large role in social life. Marriage is monogamous, but divorce does exist within Tuareg society. Traditionally, Tuaregs live in tents and wear flowing clothing with a veil over the face for adults. Their main diet is milk, dates, and millet. Tuaregs make their living raising livestock: camels and goats in the northern desert regions, sheep and cattle in the southern savannah. Traditionally, Tuaregs covered considerable distances with their herds, but mining in the north and the reduction of grazing lands due to drought is slowly pushing the Tuaregs to lead a settled life.

Fulani—The Fulani have long-standing customs and traditions like the Tuaregs, but over time they have been influenced by neighboring populations, leading to variations within the larger Fulani ethnic group. One of these groups, referred to as Bororodjis or Bororo Fulani, are all nomadic herders who spend the entire year in search of good grazing lands within the Dakoro-Tanout region. Physical beauty is extremely important to the Bororo Fulani. They pay great attention to bodily care and spend considerable amounts of time enhancing the attractiveness of their faces. They place a high importance on jewelry and will often weave jewels or coins into intricate hairstyles. Although they wear a large amount of jewelry, the rest of their clothing is relatively scanty, unlike the Tuaregs, who are covered from head to toe. Many Fulani have retained their ancestral paganism, with only superficial influences from Islam. In the Bororo Fulani conception of marriage, a young Bororo must first seduce his wife then kidnap her from her family. The couple then leave on a nomadic journey which takes them all over, possibly even out of the country. They will settle once the wife decides she is tired of traveling, usually once she becomes a mother. Every year the Bororos hold a traditional festival known as the Guérewol, which is the occasion for many engagements and kidnappings of wives.

Settled populations

Songhai and Zarma—These two groups have different histories but are generally considered to form one single people in modern times. Today they are mainly farmers or small-scale livestock producers. One of the most notable features of their ethnic group is the tolerant form of Islam which they practice, which is laced with remnants of their animistic tribal religion. Their traditional housing is a round house made entirely of straw.

Hausa—The Hausa are the largest ethnic group in Niger, comprising a little over half of the population. Although there are many smaller groups within the Hausa, they share a common language, Hausa, which can be written in Arabic or Roman characters. The Hausa are traditionally farmers and traders, but some have a reputation as leather and textile craftsmen.

Kanouri—The Kanouri (Kanuri) ethnic group is actually an amalgamation of several smaller ethnic groups, including the Manga, Mobeurs, Kanembous, Boudouma, and Dagara. The Kanouris were historically involved in salt processing and trade, and today work as farmers, fishermen or herders. In central Niger, they are known as Beri-Beris.

Toubou—The Toubous (Tubu), many of whom live in eastern Niger, form a small minority of the population. Although they are generally black-skinned, they probably come from mixed origins. Toubous like adventure and expedition, arms and exploits. They have a strong sense of independence. The Kecherda (Teda) group of Toubous leads a semi-nomadic existence as herders and hunters, while the Wandallas (Dazega) are settled farmers.

Culture

Although Niger is comprised of numerous different ethnic groups, each with its own culture, there are general cultural similarities, particularly within the settled populations.

Marriage—While first marriages were historically arranged by the parents, this is less often the case today, though family plays an important role in the marriage process. Polygamy is practiced in parts of Niger; according to Islamic law, a man is allowed up to four wives. Polygamy is more prevalent among the settled peoples, and also depends upon the economic ability of the man to provide for more than one wife. Nearly everyone in Niger marries, except in cases of severe disability. Divorce and remarriage are fairly common.

Food—Common foods in Niger include millet, sorghum, couscous, pasta, peanuts, and beans. Rice is a status food, usually only served on special occasions. Meat may be grilled and served apart from dishes or in a sauce. Pork, however, is taboo throughout Niger in accordance with Islamic law.

Education—In most rural areas, girls are discouraged by their families from pursuing an education beyond primary school, which ends around the time a girl reaches puberty. At the one university, the University of Niamey, a large majority of the students are male.

Etiquette—Greetings are of the utmost importance in Nigerien society. Greetings are often formal and elaborate, and it is considered rude to approach someone with a question or

statement without a preliminary greeting. Indirect expression is ideal; it is considered rude to overtly refuse to do something or to strongly contradict someone. Physical space is generally maintained, but close friends of the same sex can often be seen walking arm-in-arm down the street.

Housing—In Niamey and other large cities, Westerners and well-to-do Nigeriens may live in concrete villas with running water, electricity, and air-conditioning. Poorer city families and rural families live in houses of adobe mud. Nomadic peoples live in tents or in adobe houses.

Dress

Local culture and Islamic tradition mandate conservative dress for both men and women, although foreigners are generally exempt. There have been reports of groups of men attacking women who appear to be African and are not dressed in accordance with Islamic law. In general, shorts above the knee are not worn by either gender, and modest dress is encouraged.

Travel/Transportation

Road safety in Niger is always an issue. Road systems are minimal and poorly maintained. Within major cities, roads are hazardous due to poor driving, excessive speed, poor to non-existent road surfaces, and poorly maintained vehicles. Additional hazards are posed by the large volume of mopeds, bicycles, farm animals, donkey carts, and unwary pedestrians. Foreigners driving in Nigerien cities should exercise great caution and always be alert for people, animals, and other non-motorized traffic which may clog the roadway. Taxis are available for a fixed rate in Niamey and other large cities, although they are generally in poor condition and do not meet basic U.S. road safety standards.

Travelers have several options when it comes to inter-city or rural travel. Bush taxis are available for a negotiable rate, but tend to be overloaded, uncomfortable, poorly maintained, and driven by reckless drivers seeking to save time and money. The national bus company (SNTV) operates coaches on inter-city routes and is generally reliable, experiencing no major accidents since its reorganization in 2001. There are several private bus companies which operate inter-city routes, such as Air Transport, Rimbo, and Garba Messagé, but there has been some concern regarding the youth of their drivers and the speed at which private buses tend to travel Nigerien roads.

Travel outside Niamey or other major cities generally requires the use of a four-wheel-drive vehicle, which creates an additional security risk since these vehicles, especially Toyota Land Cruisers, are high-theft items. Traveling at night outside a major city is especially hazardous and should be avoided. When traveling outside a major city, it is a good idea to hire a reliable licensed guide, carry a satellite phone, and travel with at least two vehicles containing GPS units.

Travelers should apply for an international driving permit (IDP) if they intend to drive in Niger. An IDP is a document which allows a motorist to operate a vehicle in another nation when accompanied by a valid driver's license from their own country. An IDP is not a license in and of itself; it is only valid when accompanied by a valid American or Canadian driver's license.

You can apply for an IDP in the United States or Canada before you travel. The American Automobile Association (AAA) and the American Automobile Touring Alliance are the only organizations in the U.S. authorized by the State Department to issue IDPs. The Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) is authorized to issue IDPs to Canadian citizens. The cost of an IDP is under \$20, but the application will need to be accompanied by two passport-sized photos.

Illness/Injury

Although Niger does have some well-trained doctors, hospitals in Niamey struggle with inadequate supplies and antiquated equipment. Outside Niamey, hospitals and healthcare are either completely inadequate or nonexistent.

The U.S. State Department recommends that all travelers to Niger check with their insurance company to see if their insurance will cover emergency repatriation (evacuation to the United States in case of medical emergency).

To help avoid illness while in Niger, use insect spray frequently and cover your skin to avoid mosquito bites. If possible, cover your sleeping area with chemically treated mosquito netting. This will reduce your risk of contracting malaria.

Crime

Crime is present in Niger, primarily thefts, robberies, and residential break-ins. Foreigners are particularly vulnerable to attempts of extortion and bribery from corrupt law enforcement officials.

Thefts and petty crimes are common day or night. Use common sense to guard against pickpockets.

Keep wallets and identification in a secure place, and don't leave purses or wallets sitting on tables, benches, or the seat next to you; it is wiser to keep a purse on your lap or a wallet in your pocket. Use caution and avoid carrying large amounts of cash on your person. Travelers to Niger should never walk around at night, even in a city, as streetlights are scarce, affording muggers and thieves ample opportunities to strike. Armed assaults are usually committed at night by groups of two to four persons, one of whom confronts the victim with a knife while the others provide surveillance or a show of force. Travelers should avoid walking in certain areas of Niamey at any time of day, including the Gaweye Hotel, National Museum, and the Kennedy Bridge; these areas are especially prone to muggings.

Carjackings, though less frequent than thefts or muggings, are not unheard of in Niger. Travelers should keep their doors locked and their windows rolled up when stopped at stoplights, and should not leave their cars running when stopping for errands.

The government of Niger is taking steps to address the problem of rising crime rates, but is operating under severely constrained resources.

Safety and Security

U.S. citizens are advised to avoid street demonstrations at all times, as a peaceful demonstration in Niger can quickly turn confrontational and result in violence. In early 2007, demonstrators smashed the windshield of a car belonging to an American citizen who inadvertently drove into the midst of a demonstration. Historically, large numbers of students gather in January and February for demonstrations; travelers should be especially on the alert during these two months to avoid inadvertently becoming part of a demonstration.

Travelers are also strongly discouraged from traveling north of the city of Abalack or overland to Algeria or Libya, and are especially encouraged to avoid the region of Agadez, the center of escalating violence by the MNJ rebel group, due to political insecurities. Official U.S. personnel are prohibited by the U.S. Embassy in Niger from traveling north of Abalack. Several other international organizations have temporarily removed personnel from the area.

Foreigners who elect to travel through northern Niger despite the current security situation must submit a travel plan through the office of the Governor of Agadez. Those who plan to travel in northern Niger are advised to hire a Nigerien tour guide, who can formally coordinate with the Nigerien government.

Entry/Exit Requirements

All visitors to Niger are required to have a passport and visa. More information on visas can be obtained from the Embassy of the Republic of Niger, 2204 R Street NW, Washington DC 20008, or on the web at www.nigerembassyusa.org.

Proof of yellow fever inoculation is also required for entry into Niger.

Immunizations

At this time, the only required immunization is for yellow fever. Travelers should see a doctor four to six weeks before traveling to Niger to allow time for vaccines to take effect and to start taking antimalarial drugs.

As malaria is prevalent in Niger, including a serious and sometimes fatal strain resistant to the antimalarial drug chloroquine, the CDC recommends that travelers to Niger should take one of the following antimalarial drugs: mefloquine, doxycycline, or atovaquone/proguanil. The use of insect repellent while in the country also greatly reduces the risk of contracting malaria. Travelers should purchase antimalarial drugs in the United States rather than overseas, because drugs marketed overseas may not be up to U.S. standards. Halofantrine (Halfan) is widely used overseas to treat malaria. The CDC recommends that travelers do not use this drug because of serious heart-related side effects, including death. Avoid using antimalarial drugs overseas that have not been recommended unless you have been diagnosed with life-threatening malaria and there are no other treatment options available.

Special Circumstances

Do not take pictures near or around military installations, radio or television stations, the presidential residence, airports, or the Kennedy Bridge. Avoid taking pictures of any political or student demonstration.

Photographing private citizens in Niger is allowed, although it is polite to ask permission first.

Tap water throughout Niger is unsafe to drink. Bottled water and other bottled beverages are safe. Be aware that many hotels and restaurants will serve tap water unless a visitor specifically requests bottled water. When in rural areas, boiling water will make it safe to consume. Iodine tablets can also be used to purify tap water.

Electricity

Nigerien outlets are wired at 220V/50Hz, as compared to U.S. 120V/60Hz circuits. A power converter, which converts voltage into a safe level for a particular appliance, is necessary to use an American electrical appliance in Niger. A set of adaptor plugs, which converts American A and B type plugs into other plug types, is also required. Most Nigerien outlets use two-prong plugs with round prongs as opposed to American flat-prong plugs.