

Djibouti

TRAVEL GUIDE

Tripomatic



Overview

Djibouti is a small desert country on the Horn of Africa, at the meeting point of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Its borders touch Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. Most people live in the capital, Djibouti City, a busy port city with a strong French influence. **Do not travel to the Djibouti-Eritrea border area.** Read the safety section before you plan trips to the north.

The country is small, but its landscapes are extreme. Lake Assal lies about 155 m below sea level, the lowest point in Africa, and its shore is white with salt. Near the Ethiopian border, Lake Abbe is known for tall limestone chimneys that release steam, and for flamingos. At sea, whale sharks visit the Gulf of Tadjoura each winter. Djibouti suits adventurous travellers who can handle **intense heat**, basic facilities outside the capital and fairly high prices.

Money & payments

The Djibouti franc is pegged to the US dollar, so prices are stable and easy to convert.

Currency

CURRENCY	1 DJF	1 DJF
DJF	**0.005098 EUR**	**0.005684 USD**
	1 EUR = 196.14 DJF	1 USD = 175.92 DJF

Cash preferred

- **Cash**: Djibouti is mainly a cash economy. Cards work in large hotels, some supermarkets and a few restaurants in Djibouti City. Outside the capital, you need cash for everything.
- **US dollars**: bring clean US dollar notes. They are useful for a visa on arrival and are easy to exchange. Many vendors and banks refuse old or damaged notes.
- **ATMs**: cash machines are in Djibouti City, mainly at banks and large hotels. Outside the capital they are rare, so withdraw enough before a trip inland.
- **Costs**: Djibouti is expensive for the region. Hotels, imported food and organised trips to the lakes cost much more than in neighbouring countries.

Typical costs

Rough prices in touristic areas, per person

Hotel (double room, per night) mid-range hotel in Djibouti City, double room	15,000 – 35,000 DJF €76 – €178
Dinner (mid-range restaurant) mid-range restaurant, per person	4,000 – 9,000 DJF €20 – €46
Inexpensive meal simple local restaurant	800 – 2,500 DJF €4 – €13
Local beer hotel or restaurant bar	800 – 1,500 DJF €4 – €8
Coffee	200 – 700 DJF €1 – €4
Water 1.5 l bottle from a shop	100 – 300 DJF €1 – €2

Tipping

Tipping is not a strong tradition, but it is welcome in places that serve foreign visitors. In hotels and upmarket restaurants, 5–10 % is a kind gesture if no service charge is added. In simple local restaurants, leaving small change is enough. Taxi drivers do not expect a tip, but agree the fare before you get in. Drivers and guides on desert trips and boat trips usually expect a tip at the end.

Restaurant 5–10 % in hotels and upmarket restaurants	Optional
Taxi agree the fare before you get in	Not customary
Tour guide for drivers and guides on desert or boat trips	Expected
Hotel small tip for porters	Optional
Bar	Not customary

Electricity

Djibouti uses European two-pin plugs at 220 V, so most European chargers work without an adapter. Power cuts can happen, especially in the hot season, so a power bank is useful.

ELECTRICITY



Type C

ELECTRICITY



Type E

220 V · 50 Hz

Language

French and Arabic are the official languages. French is the main language of government, business, signs and menus. In daily life, most people speak Somali or Afar, and Arabic is widely understood.

English is spoken in some large hotels, dive centres and tour agencies, but not widely elsewhere. A few words of French make everyday life much easier. Greeting people in Somali or Afar is always appreciated.

Useful phrases

FR

Hello	Bonjour bohn-ZHOOR
Thank you	Merci mehr-SEE
Please	S'il vous plaît seel voo PLEH
Yes	Oui wee
No	Non nohn
Excuse me	Excusez-moi ex-kew-zay MWAH
How much?	C'est combien ? say kohm-BYEN
Goodbye	Au revoir oh ruh-VWAHR

AR

Hello	السلام عليكم as-salaamu alaykum
Thank you	شكراً shukran
Please	من فضلك min fadlak
Yes	نعم na'am
No	لا laa
How much?	بكم؟ bikam?
Goodbye	مع السلامة ma'a as-salaama

SO

Hello	Iska warran is-ka WAR-ran
Thank you	Mahadsanid ma-had-SA-nid
Yes	Haa haa
No	Maya MA-ya
How much?	Waa imisa? waa i-MI-sa
Goodbye	Nabad gelyo NA-bad GEL-yo

Staying connected

Djibouti Telecom is the only mobile network operator. You can buy a prepaid SIM card at its shops in Djibouti City. Coverage is good in the capital and along the main roads, but it is weak or absent in remote desert areas such as the lake regions. Mobile data and hotel internet are slower and more expensive than in most countries.

Safety & emergencies

Most visits to Djibouti City and the main tourist sites are trouble-free, but some areas and risks need care.

- **Eritrea border**: **do not travel to the Djibouti-Eritrea border area.** Also avoid the area within about 16 km (10 miles) of the border in the Tadjoura and Obock regions. This affects the far north of Tadjourah Region and Obock.
- **Landmines**: border areas with Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia may contain landmines. Stay on used roads and tracks, and travel with an experienced local driver.
- **Terrorism**: there is a high threat of terrorism. Possible targets include hotels, transport hubs and crowded places. Stay alert in public places.
- **Crime**: petty theft happens in Djibouti City. Do not walk alone at night, and keep your camera and passport out of sight.
- **Photography**: **do not photograph** ports, airports, military sites, bridges, government buildings or police. Always ask before you photograph people. Police can take your camera or arrest you.
- **Heat**: from June to September, temperatures often reach 40 °C or more. Heatstroke is a real risk. Carry plenty of water, and avoid the midday sun.
- **Roads**: many drivers chew qat, and driving standards are poor. Avoid travel outside cities after dark.

Emergency numbers

POLICE	AMBULANCE	FIRE BRIGADE
17	18	18

Health

Do not drink tap water. Bottled water is sold everywhere; buy plenty, because the heat causes fast dehydration. Medical facilities are limited, even in Djibouti City. Get travel insurance that covers medical evacuation.

- **Mosquitoes**: malaria is present, and antimalarial tablets are recommended even for short stays. Dengue and Zika also occur. Use insect repellent and cover up at dusk.
- **Fresh water**: do not swim in lakes or rivers inland, because of the risk of schistosomiasis (a parasite). Sea swimming is fine.
- **Yellow fever**: you need a vaccination certificate only if you arrive from a country with a risk of yellow fever.
- **Pharmacies**: there are several in Djibouti City, but outside the capital they are rare. Bring enough of any regular medicine.
- **Vaccinations**: see a travel health clinic at least 8 weeks before your trip.

Visas & entry

Most visitors need a visa to enter Djibouti. The simplest option is the official Djibouti eVisa portal: apply online before you travel. Some nationalities, including UK citizens, can also buy a tourist visa on arrival, paid in cash in US dollars.

- **Passport**: it must be valid for at least 6 months after your arrival date.
- **Onward travel**: you must show proof of an onward or return journey.
- **Overland**: if you arrive by train or road from Ethiopia, get your eVisa or visa before you travel.
- **Yellow fever**: bring a vaccination certificate if you arrive from a country with a risk of yellow fever.

> Visa and entry requirements change frequently. Verify current requirements with the official immigration authority or your country's embassy before travel.

Etiquette

Djibouti is a Muslim country with conservative customs, although Djibouti City is relaxed by regional standards.

- **Dress**: wear loose clothes that cover shoulders and knees in towns and villages. Swimwear is fine on beaches and at resorts, but not in town. Women should cover their hair when they visit a mosque.
- **Ramadan**: during the holy month, do not eat, drink or smoke in public during daylight hours. Many restaurants close during the day, and offices work shorter hours. Ramadan moves about 11 days earlier each year.
- **Qat**: chewing *qat* (khat), a mildly stimulating leaf imported daily from Ethiopia, is legal and a big part of social life. In the afternoon, many men gather to chew it and talk, and activity in towns slows down. Qat is illegal in many other countries, so do not take it home.
- **Alcohol**: it is sold in hotels, some restaurants and bars. Public drunkenness is a crime and can bring a prison sentence.
- **Photography**: always ask before you photograph people, especially women.
- **Greetings**: greet people before you ask a question. Use your right hand to give, take and eat.
- **Relationships**: public displays of affection are frowned upon, and same-sex couples can attract the attention of police under laws on "good morals".

Holidays & opening hours

On public holidays, government offices, banks and most shops close. Islamic holidays, such as Eid al-Fitr at the end of Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, follow the lunar calendar and move about 11 days earlier each year. Independence Day on 27 June brings celebrations and parades in Djibouti City.

Friday is the main day of rest, and many offices and shops close. Most shops open in the morning, close for a long break at midday during the hottest hours, and open again in the late afternoon. In the afternoon, many locals chew qat, and business slows down.

Public holidays

Jan 1	New Year's Day
May 1	Labour Day
Jun 27	Independence Day

Getting around

Public transport outside Djibouti City is limited. Most visitors see the lakes and the north on organised trips with a 4x4 and a driver.

- **By train**: the electric Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway links Djibouti with Ethiopia. Passenger trains run several times a week and stop overnight in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia. Djibouti's station is at Nagad, outside the city, so take a taxi. Buy tickets at the station at least one day ahead.
- **By 4x4**: sites such as Lake Assal, Lake Ghoubet and Lake Abbe are reached by road and desert tracks. Hire a 4x4 with an experienced driver through a local agency.
- **By boat**: boats leave from Djibouti City for Moucha Island and for whale shark trips in the Gulf of Tadjoura. Boats and ferries also cross the gulf to Tadjoura and Obock.
- **By minibus**: shared minibuses connect Djibouti City with the main towns. They leave when full and are very cheap, but crowded and hot.
- **In Djibouti City**: taxis are cheap and easy to find. They have no meters, so agree the fare before you get in.

Driving

Driving yourself is possible, but most visitors hire a car with a local driver. Desert tracks and border areas need local knowledge.

- **Roads**: main roads around Djibouti City are paved. Elsewhere, many roads are unpaved or in poor condition. Tracks to Lake Abbe need a 4x4.
- **Trucks**: the road to Ethiopia carries heavy truck traffic to and from the port. Overtake with great care.
- **Hazards**: many drivers chew qat, which leads to fast and unsafe driving. Watch for goats and camels on the road. **Do not drive after dark** outside the city.
- **Remote travel**: carry extra fuel, water and a spare tyre. For remote areas, travel with a second vehicle. Stay on used tracks near the borders, because of the risk of landmines.
- **Checkpoints**: police and army checkpoints are common. Keep your passport and car papers ready.
- **Fuel**: stations are mostly in Djibouti City and the main towns, and they take cash. Petrol is sold as *Super* and diesel as *Gasoil*.
- **Electric vehicles**: there is almost no public charging, so an electric car is not practical.

PETROL
Super, Essence

DIESEL
Gasoil

Drive on the right

No motorway vignette needed

Food & drink

Djiboutian food mixes Somali, Afar, Yemeni, Ethiopian, Indian and French influences. Breakfast is often *lahoh*, a spongy pancake, with sweet tea. Lunch is the main meal, served early in the afternoon before the hottest hours. Dinner is eaten late. The best-known dish is *skoudehkaris*, spiced rice with lamb or goat. Also try *fah-fah*, a spicy goat soup, and Yemeni-style fish, baked whole in a clay oven and served with flatbread.

Street snacks include *sambusa*, fried pastries with meat or lentils. For a sweet treat, try *halwo*, a sticky jelly sweet with cardamom. Sweet spiced tea is drunk all day, and fresh fruit juices are popular. In Djibouti City, you can also find French bakeries and cafés. Most local eateries are simple, and many close during daylight hours in Ramadan.

What to eat & drink

BREAKFAST

Lahoh · lahoh / canjeero
Spongy sourdough pancake, often eaten with honey, sugar or sauce.

DINNER

Yemeni-style fish · poisson yéménite
Whole fish split, spiced and baked in a hot clay oven, served with flatbread.

SNACKS & STREET FOOD

Sambusa
Fried pastry triangles filled with spiced meat or lentils; very popular during Ramadan.

SWEETS & DESSERTS

Halwo · halwo
Sticky, jelly-like sweet flavoured with cardamom, served at celebrations.

DRINKS

Spiced tea · shaah
Sweet black tea with cardamom and other spices, often with milk.

SIGNATURE DISHES

Skoudehkaris · skoudehkaris
Spiced rice cooked with lamb or goat, tomato and cardamom; often called the national dish.

Fah-fah · fah-fah
Spicy goat-meat soup with vegetables, eaten with flatbread.

Djibouti – Plan Your Trip
Turn the places from this guide into a real itinerary, with smart routing, time estimates, and everything you need for a perfect trip.
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Where to explore

The capital

- Djibouti City is the starting point for almost every trip. It has most of the hotels and restaurants, a lively central market and the railway to Ethiopia.

Lakes and volcanic landscapes

- Lake Assal is a turquoise salt lake about 155 m below sea level, surrounded by black lava and white salt. It is a popular day trip from the capital.
- Lake Ghoubet is a deep bay at the western end of the Gulf of Tadjoura, next to volcanic fields, on the way to Lake Assal.
- Lake Abbe, on the Ethiopian border, has tall limestone chimneys and flamingos. Most visitors stay overnight at a simple camp to see the chimneys at sunrise.

The sea

- The Gulf of Tadjoura is famous for whale sharks, which gather here roughly from November to February.
- Moucha Island, a short boat ride from the capital, has beaches and coral reefs for snorkelling and diving.

The north

- Tadjourah Region includes the old white town of Tadjoura on the gulf and the cooler Goda Mountains, home to the Day Forest, a rare juniper forest. Do not travel near the Eritrean border in the far north of the region.
- Obock is a quiet coastal area facing Yemen, reached by ferry or road. Do not travel near the Eritrean border.

DATA SOURCES

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