



## **Life in Niamey 2023-24 School Year**

Welcome to AISN and to Niamey, two of the loveliest places in West Africa! There is much to like about both the school and the city, though it takes a bit of knowledge to survive in both. This guide is here to help you smoothly adjust to your new home and to help you discover the hidden resources of the city.

### **Money**

Niamey is overwhelmingly a cash-only city. You will not be able to use your credit/debit cards anywhere other than the bank and a few stores or hotels. That said, ATMs are prevalent, and will accept VISA or MasterCard, depending on which bank services that ATM. The nearest ATM to the school is at the Total gas station at the Gadafawa traffic circle (round point). It is an Ecobank ATM that accepts VISA transactions, but it is not unusual for ATMs to be out of cash. It is also a cultural norm to count large transactions or amounts when it is received.

The currency is the Central African Franc or, CFA. 600 CFA is roughly equal to 1 USD. The currency is tied to the Euro so exchange rates to the USD fluctuates. Though you will find yourself carrying much cash on you as you go about the city, theft is rare. Still, use proper caution.

The amount of money that one requires for daily life in Niamey differs according to one's tastes and indulgences, but anyone other than the most frugal should expect to spend no less than 700 USD per month, not counting major expenditures.

## **Language**

English will not get you far in Niamey. French is ubiquitous. If you do not speak French, language tutors are cheap and plentiful, though make sure you hire based on trusted references, as the quality of tutors will differ greatly. 5000 CFA or more per hour is a standard price.

After French the next most-spoken language is Zarma, a local tongue known to be on the easier side to learn. Next is Hausa, and also spoken are Fulfulde, Tamasheq and Gourmanche. Each is quite different and only recommended to the most dedicated linguist.

## **Communication**

The school provides faculty members with a sim card and pays an amount each month to keep credit on your phone. You can use this sim card as your personal phone number here in Niamey but you must make sure it always has credit for security purposes.

There are two major telecom services in the city: Airtel and Zamani. Airtel internet is said to be “faster”, though that might change at any moment as there is still much room for improvement and neither service is 100% reliable. Aside from the few times that it goes down, though, Airtel’s network is fast enough to stream YouTube and Netflix and other video services at top resolution.

Both phone time and internet data can be purchased for phones by buying individual cards for 200 – 10000 CFA. The cards have a scratch code on the back that is entered into the phone through a USSD code and are sold throughout the city. Though the instructions for how to enter the code are written on the card itself, you might want to have someone run you through it the first time. You might choose to carry an extra phone card with you, in case one day you unexpectedly run out of phone time.

Though these prices will vary depending on bulk purchasing and temporary sales promotions, you can expect to pay approximately 100 CFA for 1 minute of phone service and 1000 CFA for 1 GB of data. If you are able to hotspot your phone, it can serve as your home WiFi system as well. Most people in Niamey communicate through the phone app: “What’s App” because phone calls are free and use little bandwidth.

There are two main Facebook groups that serve the Niamey expat community: “Share” and “Communauté des expatriés de Niamey”. The latter is French language by default, though users will respond in English if you initiate the conversation in English. “Share” is more for the missionary community and “Communauté” is more for the NGO folk. In both cases you must ask to join, since for security reasons membership is restricted to expatriate residents of Niamey. Fortunately, the moderators respond quickly.

AISN uses a separate internet service called Liptinfor. The service is reasonably fast and generally reliable, though it is priced outside the range of personal home use.

ADSL is available for school accommodations and the cost is 50% shared by the school. The services cost about \$140.00 per month with half of that paid by the school. The service offers unlimited data at speeds of 1Mbps. Though speeds can fluctuate there is no limit on the amount of data you can use.

### **Transportation**

Getting around can be tough for those without a car, but for those who buy a car, keeping it in good condition on desert roads will also be a challenge. Be warned that almost every vehicle has a standard transmission, and those with automatic transmissions are priced more prohibitively. Though other companies are present, the vast majority of vehicles are Toyotas.

The nearest garage to the school is “Hama’s”. The people there are honest and reliable, and they regularly service both school and embassy vehicles. For gas, “Total” stations are the cleanest and most reliable. They are also prevalent throughout Niamey.

For those who choose not to drive, there are the options of using a moto (moped) or a bicycle. Both carry their safety risks, but both navigate traffic jams and road hazards, such as potholes or police barricades, easily.

Another option is to hire a taxi. Often expats will forge a relationship with a taxi driver who proves himself reliable. The driver will give the passenger a phone number to call whenever they need to get somewhere, and the driver will respond, saying whether or not he can provide the ride. Sometimes the driver will need 15 – 20 minutes in order to make a pickup because he will be in the middle of completing another fare. If you have the phone numbers of two separate taxi drivers, that should be sufficient to get around Niamey. In a heavily-trafficked area one might simply flag down a taxi. The drivers can be trusted, though use proper, everyday caution when riding with someone you do not personally know.

Taxi rides come in two types: hiring the taxi for yourself (what we are all used to), and riding with a group of strangers (what Nigeriens are used to). If you flag a taxi, you might find it already carrying other passengers. You will tell the driver where you need to go, and if it is on the same route as the other passengers, he will allow you to come aboard. If, however, he is not going near your destination, he will simply leave. Do not be offended! This is just the way it works. The cost for these rides is very cheap, often 500 CFA. Empty taxis will gladly allow you to ride alone, but the price will rise steeply. A 30 minute drive may cost around 8000 CFA.

## **Traffic**

Niamey is spread out along the Niger River. Though the city extends north, you will find little reason to go past Tillabery Road. Almost all of your travels will be east-west.

There are two main roads that go east-west. One abuts the front entrance to AINS. It is called Rue des Ambassades (Embassy Road) and it goes as far as Kennedy Bridge, downtown, at which point it terminates at an overpass. Rue des Ambassades also abuts the president's house, but for several kilometers the road is blocked by police barriers, and anyone not on official business is forced to detour around. It is annoying, but it won't change anytime soon.

The other main road is Tillabery. Tillabery runs slightly north of the school and goes as far as the both east-west city bounds. It will even take you to the airport! Careful - Tillabery can get a little hectic during busy times.

The north-south road that you will want to get used to is the one that passes the restaurant "La Cabane" and the supermarket "Baaklini". This road goes from the main Orange store (on Mali Bero road) all the way past Tillabery until it hits Rue des Ambassades. It is one that most take to cut through the city to Kennedy Bridge.

Kennedy Bridge is the bridge that you will use to cross the river. One other bridge exists, but it is on the far side of the city. The city is planning a new bridge, but don't get your hopes up. It will be a long time before it is done, if they ever finish. Kennedy Bridge is by the overpass, downtown.

Though traffic is constant at all times, it is busiest between 4:30 and 6:30 on weekdays. Still, it never takes *that* long to get anywhere in Niamey.

## **Seasons**

If you arrive in August you might be under the misconception that Niamey is frequently flooded by torrential rain. Don't get used to it! Come mid-September the rain will vanish entirely until the next rain season the following June. March sees a minute sprinkle called "mango rains," but they are rarely more than a few scattered drops. Otherwise, Niamey is sunny everyday.

Being so close to the equator, sunrise happens reliably at 6:30 AM, and sunset at 7 PM, with little variation. Also because Niamey is so close to the equator, the sun rises and sets quickly. One might be surprised to be enveloped in total darkness mere minutes after seeing a bright, sunlit sky.

There are three seasons in Niger. The rain season starts in June (just as the school year ends) and lasts until September. During this period, heavy rains are common and expected, and humidity keeps the temperature at approximately 29 degrees Celsius. October is a hot month, but quickly yields to the November cool. Come January, mornings will be as cold as 5 degrees, with a 25 degree midday. Both the rain and cool seasons are quite pleasant.

March sees the beginning of the hot season, when temperatures will clear 40 degrees daily. It is unpleasant, unwelcome and will tire your patience. Keep strong, and be thankful for whenever you are near a working AC! Drink much; drink often. Dehydration is easy, commonplace and extremely dangerous. Unfortunately, the hot season also sees the most power outages. It is not uncommon for power to be cut for hours or days. Also be aware of fluctuating power levels that may damage your appliances. Yes, the power is *supposed* to be between 200 and 240 VAC, but some residents have measured it as high as 270 VAC at times.

### **Animals and Pests**

Few of Niger's local fauna are to be feared. Even the evergreen mosquito vanishes during the early months of the year, returning for the rainy season. Aside from those malaria-machines, few animals pose a threat.

Tortoises are common institutional pets, and AISN houses two. These gentle beasts might become ornery enough to nip at you, but not likely. Really, they are safe around kids of all ages. Lizards and geckos are widespread in any aged structure, including the school buildings. They are silent and harmless (and eat lots of bugs and other garbage), so they are generally welcome, though they annoyingly stick their feces to the walls, often inconsiderately out of mop reach. Termites pose more of a threat, and if you see a brown dirt trail crawling up a wall (often elongating several feet in a single day) you can be assured that termites have worked their way into your structure. Not much can be done, though, aside from cleaning the trail, so expect to be invaded by these nuisances regularly.

Bats emerge by the thousands at night to feed on the insect population. The sight of flocks of these rodents is a bit unnerving, so thankfully they restrict their meals to creatures far smaller than they.

Livestock of all sorts abound free-range in Niamey, including cows, donkeys, sheep, goats, chickens and camels, when they are not carrying a load, that is.

Hippos live in the river, but are seen rarely, and they never enter the city. One might hire a boat to tour the river, looking for them, though the integrity of the boat tends to be more unnerving than the sight of the Greek river-horse.

The keen observer might spot a chameleon, especially on school grounds. These slow-moving, color-shifters have eyes that move independently of each other and cleft feet that may grip a branch like two wide toes.

## **Shopping**

Niamey's lack of shopping options may be one of the biggest complaints against the city, but it all depends on your perspective. Imported goods are widely available but availability is inconsistent. If there is something you like buy in bulk because it may be a while before you see it again.. There are a few trustworthy supermarkets that are frequented by the expat community.

Buying from street vendors or in market areas will necessitate a discussion about what price you will pay. Locals are all too willing to rip off the "blancs"! Expect that they will raise the price 30-80% beyond what you are actually expected to pay, meaning a 60 000 CFA price may be easily bartered down to 30 000.

### Here are the stores that you will likely rely upon:

Marina Market – A full-sized grocery store with many excellent food purchasing options. Best sausages in the city!

Skor – Located centrally downtown, this smaller grocery store has all the standard food fare and some well-priced kitchen appliances

Baaklini's – A favorite among expats, Baaklini has many imported goods that cannot be bought elsewhere.

White Shack / Cobra's – Run by an expat, this hard-to-spot grocery store has an extensive wine selection.

Chic – Import goods. If you desperately need some Captain Crunch or Chef Boyardee, chances are you'll be able to buy it here...though you won't like the price.

JB's – located within a 10-minute walk of the school, this corner store serves Koura Kano's immediate amenity needs. The fruit stand outside is handy, too.

### Some non-food stores:

Wadata Market – Actually not a store, but an entire artisan area for tourists. Paintings, leatherwork, clothing, decorative knives, this place is worth going to just to walk around. If something does, in fact, catch your eye, be prepared to haggle.

Batimat – Your go-to hardware store

Prisma – Good for computer and electronic wares

Orca – The city's IKEA. Expensive, but good homewares

Tout Pour La Femme – A low-scale department store with an extensive toy section. Oddities abound

### **Activities**

Though it might not initially appear so, there is much to do in Niamey, and many opportunities for recreation. Some of these options are now limited until the security situation improves outside the city.

Most famous is the Kouré Giraffe Reserve where several hundred West African giraffes roam free. Visitors are allowed to approach the giraffes, which are generally docile and accommodating. The park is approximately one hour's drive east of Niamey.

Another outside natural retreat is Park W, a reserve that crosses into both Benin and Nigeria. The park opens in October and closes for the rainy season in May. There are two hotels in the park: a standard hotel with all the standard amenities slightly outside of the park, and a second that is an Ecolodge with cabins located on an island in the middle of the park. If you stay at the hotel on the island the proprietor will cook a pleasant dinner for you, though beware that power comes from a generator that is turned on only after dark, and you will not be able to leave the island until morning.

If you plan to visit Parc W book early. Weekends fill up quickly during the open season, and neither hotel is particularly big.

Just outside of Niamey are the dunes, several mountains of sand that rise on the south side of the river. No reservation is necessary, only directions! The dunes are fun for camping out and

watching the sun set. Bring a guitar, load up a cooler and invite some friends. Then count all the stars you can while the night sky is unobstructed by the city lights.

Inside the city, entertainment tends to come in one-off events. Some are annual recurrences, such as the Harvest Festival, the Christmas Bazaar and the Marine Ball. Others might be planned by some of the cultural organizations in the city. Chief among these is CCFN, the French cultural center. Anyone looking to stay active needs to keep aware of the center's monthly schedule of events, which range all sorts of events, from BMX demonstrations to jazz performances to fashion shows. CCFN also hosts regular movie nights (in French!) and many clubs, including chess and language groups, meet there regularly.

One major weekly attraction is the Saturday Niamey Hash. For security reasons the location changes each week and is only ever released on the day of to those on a protected list, but finding a way to this weekly nature hike is never too difficult for the resourceful. The Hash is extraordinarily popular, often seeing more than 100 participants, and the 1000 CFA entry fee includes a free soft drink after the hike is over.

Another weekly event is the Friday happy hour at the School's Rec center, from 6 - 7 PM. Often paired with an activity such as kid's dodgeball, trivia competitions or karaoke, Friday tends to be a popular night at the rec center.

The city also has a zoo, but it is a pitiful sight. The animals subsist in tiny metal cages, covered in trash. Sharing the zoo grounds is the museum, another paltry offering of only five exhibits, none of which cover material that is not widely known to anyone who has lived in Niamey for longer than a few months. The highlights of the museum are the artisan vendors and the dinosaur skeletons that were unearthed in the Sahara.

### **Eating Out**

Niamey has its share of good, excellent and poor eateries, though one might be surprised to see how few advertise their service or even appear as restaurants from the street. Many of these establishments are behind the same bare, sandy walls that enclose all Niamey properties, with perhaps a single sign bearing the name of the establishment just beside the front door. Eating out is cheaper in Niamey than most cities, with a standard bill costing between 5000-8000 CFA per person.



Here is a quick rundown of all the popular restaurants:

Le Pilier – Frequently considered the best in the city, this restaurant is owned and managed by an older Italian émigré who has lived in Niamey all of his adult life. The pasta is superb, and all dishes are to a European standard. Le Pilier also has a café open during lunchtime, and a cool, cavernous, brightly-lit cellar perfect for the hot season.

Cote du Jardin – Run by a Cuban émigré, Cote du Jardin specializes in grilled meats, specifically steaks. Cote du Jardin is a bit pricier than other restaurants, but cooked to a high standard and served in a pleasant backyard garden environment.

La Cabane – The largest restaurant in the city and in a prime location. That said, their menu has a bit of a reputation for being bland and uninspired, that is, everything on the menu except the Lebanese food, which is actually quite nice. Cabane is cheap and reliable, but aside from the Lebanese options, don't expect much.

Amandine – Located centrally downtown, Amandine is a bakery / cafeteria. Very cheap and very casual.

Tagadez – Local food in a comfortable environment, Tagadez is where you might sample genuine Tuareg cuisine without the inconveniences and inconsistencies of a street stand.

Galaxy – Located near to the school, Galaxy opened recently as a bit of a younger folk's spot. The burgers are passable, the bar is good and the donuts are the best in the city.

Namaste – The city's Indian food depot. Not the greatest Indian you might ever eat, but still genuine Indian, and some dishes might impress.

Dragon D'or and La Coronne – The city's two most popular Chinese food spots. Rarely frequented by AINS staff because they are both on the east side of the city.

Fondakaïen – Some of the best pizza in the city, located adjacent to La Cabane.

Cap Banga – Though they only serve fries, brochettes and drinks, Cap Banga is worth a visit if only because of its location in a treehouse, in the middle of the Niger River. During most of the year patrons will need to take a 1-minute ferry ride to the treehouse, but during the hot season the river will dry up so much that walking across the riverbed becomes feasible.

Le Café – More of a nightspot, Le Café often hosts live local music in their pleasant outdoor courtyard

Club Mooky – Owned and operated by AISN alumni, Club Mooky is more for the teenagers, but is still a nice place to get late-night drinks and snacks.

Also be aware that all of the major hotels have worthwhile restaurants and bars. Terminus is particularly known for its buffet and so is the Radisson, Noom and the Bravia.

### **Communities**

The best chances for socializing in Niamey is to make friends among the expat communities. There are three main expat schools in Niamey: AISN, Sahel (the missionary school), and Lycée la Fontaine (the French school). All run social events throughout the school year, though you might have to dig a bit to find out what is happening.

Also in Niamey are many NGO groups, with foreign employees of all shapes and stripes. Most are European, so the conversational language is primarily French, but nearly all have some level of English ability as well. Teachers who are fluent in French have in the past made good friends among the NGO crowd, even if they tend to stay out a little later than educators!

Many American aid workers in Niamey work for some sort of missionary organization. Many are present in the city and tend to have itinerant populations, but among the expats who have lived here the longest, the most, by far, will be found among the missionaries. It is not rare to meet missionaries who have lived in Niger for thirty years.

Finally, there are the government workers. Many of them live near the school and will often extend invitations to the AISN community for formal events. You will also meet many embassy employees at the school Rec Centre, employees from embassies all over the city, not just the American embassy!