



your
Experience
magazine

September 2011

**Birdwatching
with the best
in The Gambia
and Senegal**

**Grand Coast
Adventure**
Discover Dakar
and beyond

Cape Verde
Showing its
diversity

The Gambia, Senegal & The Islands of Cape Verde

Welcome to
Your Experience,
 The magazine for travellers
 to West Africa produced
 by people passionate about
 the region.

What's Your Experience?

Since the last edition we've had a lot of response to our 'What's Your Experience?' feature and are very pleased to include Miriam Shott's piece about her unforgettable experience on page 6. Miriam will receive a £100 holiday voucher for her efforts which can be used against any holiday with Serenity Holidays.



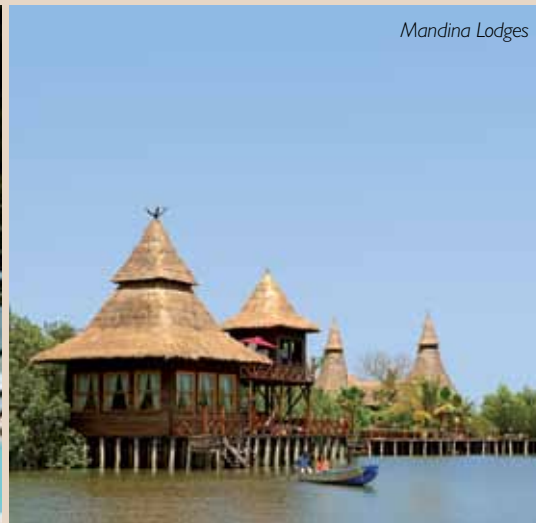
The Gambia on Channel 4's 'Holiday Hijack'...

The Gambia was recently featured on the Channel 4 programme, Holiday Hijack, in which four 'unsuspecting' holidaymakers were taken from their luxurious holiday accommodation, and shown the realities of everyday life in the country. The response to the programme has been overwhelmingly positive, with customers looking for ways to engage

with this other side of The Gambia, to find ways to support the local economy and to find out more about sustainable tourism. If you would like more information on the hotels featured (Coco Ocean and Mandina Lodges) or our community based excursions, including the popular 'Home cooking with Ida', please go to Gambia.co.uk



Coco Ocean Resort & Spa



Mandina Lodges

Gambia Cruise and Stay

Following on from the success of the Rivers of West Africa cruise which we started offering from Dakar in Senegal last winter, we have now also arranged a shorter 5 night option starting in The Gambia. This 5 night cruise, which can be combined with a stay in any Gambia hotel is a great way to travel the region witnessing the majesty of the River Gambia, the riverbank scenery and wildlife, with the opportunity to join a range of optional excursions inland – all from the comfort of a 23 cabin mega yacht. For further information on the boat, facilities on board and the itinerary visit Gambia.co.uk/cruise



Reopening of the Lamantin Beach Hotel

The 5★ Lamantin Beach Hotel in Saly, Senegal has always led the way amongst its neighbouring hotels, providing excellent standards of service and comfort. After a major refurbishment it will reopen at the end of the year and is set to be bigger and better than ever complete with a new Beach Club with its own à la carte restaurant overlooking the beach, fitness centre and floodlit tennis courts. To find out more go online or call our team of travel experts.

Fly in style

Once again we're pleased to offer the only direct upgraded flights to Banjul. Premium Class is available each Friday throughout winter from Gatwick plus Tuesdays from Gatwick between Christmas and February, as well as over Easter. On other flights we have upgraded legroom seats.

Email news and offers

To make sure you get all the latest news and offers from The Gambia Experience, The Cape Verde Experience and The Senegal Experience sign up to our monthly enews via our websites.

Winter 2011/12 brochures available now

To order your copy go online or call...

The Gambia & Senegal

Gambia.co.uk
 0845 330 4567

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View photographs of The Gambia and share yours via our Flickr group

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Miriam Shott

is a Gambia Experience client who describes her emotional journey to the country to meet the family of her childhood pen friend.



Derek James

Head of Features for Norwich Evening News, Eastern Daily Press and Let's Talk! magazine. His love for The Gambia makes him a regular visitor.



Ron Toft

is a freelance journalist and photographer with more than 40 years' experience specialising in wildlife and ecotourism features. He is also a keen birdwatcher.



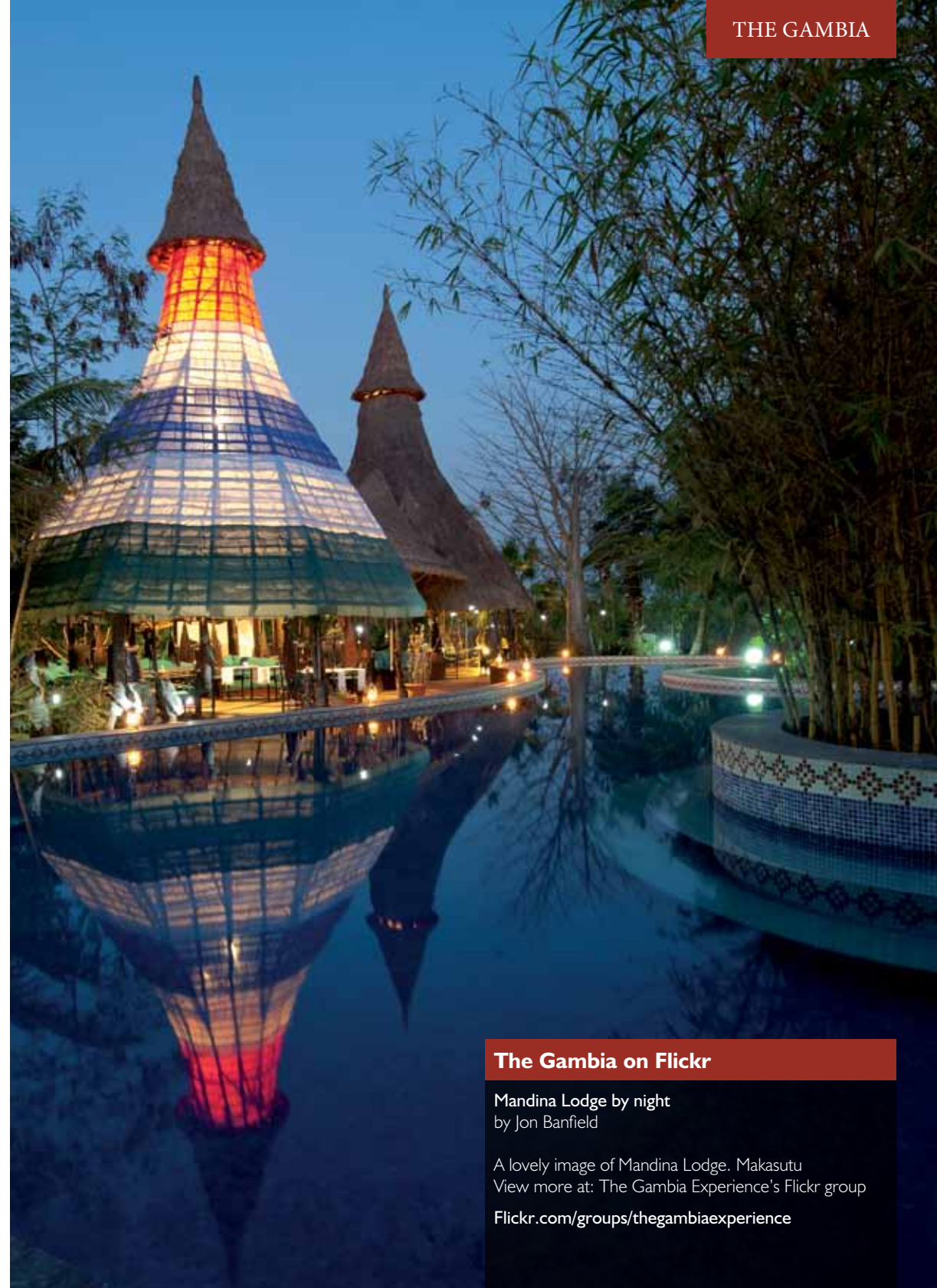
Jane Labous

is a freelance travel journalist who suffers from a constant craving for adventure. Having lived there as a student, Senegal is very close to her heart.



Jon Taylor

our Senior Contracts Manager, looks at the impact of tourism on the Islands of Cape Verde over the past 5 years.



The Gambia on Flickr

Mandina Lodge by night
by Jon Banfield

A lovely image of Mandina Lodge. Makasutu
View more at: The Gambia Experience's Flickr group

[Flickr.com/groups/thegambiaexperience](https://www.flickr.com/groups/thegambiaexperience)



Miriam Shott shares her heart warming account of her relationship with a Gambian family over the past 33 years and the positive effect it's had on her and her family.

My experience



In 1978 as an 11 year old at school in Leeds, my class was asked by a teacher, who had travelled to The Gambia, if any of us would like a penfriend. I immediately said yes as I loved writing and was also hungry for knowledge on different cultures and people of the world.

I was given the name of my new penfriend - Nfansu Trawally from the village of Mandinari, and I was interested in finding out about his life as an 11 year old in The Gambia, although I hadn't heard of the country before.

I wrote to him explaining my interests, hobbies and way of life and was always excited to receive his replies, on thin blue air-mail paper, and to find out about his way of life which in some ways was similar to mine and also diverse.

We wrote a few times over a couple of years, but after a while he stopped writing and explained that he didn't always have enough money for paper, pens and for the cost of sending the letters.

As I was reaching teenage years, my life became busy with exams and college, and although I didn't hear from Nfansu again, I often thought of him and his family throughout my life, especially as I got older and had a family of my own. Then out of the blue, about 8 years ago a letter from

The Gambia arrived at my childhood address where my mother still lived! It was from Nfansu's younger brother Nuha, who explained that Nfansu had died and when looking through some of his belongings, had found my letters from 20 years previous. I began to write to Nuha who explained that Nfansu had 5 children and had often talked about me when they were children. I was humbled, there wasn't a dry eye in my house!

We continued to write to each other for about a year and then the P.O. box address wasn't valid and we lost touch, which was frustrating for me. Nuha had also explained that his village didn't have a postman, so letters couldn't be delivered with any certainty.

“This was probably the most emotional point, as his eldest son informed me that his father had told him about me, when he was a child, and shown him photos and letters I'd sent years before.”

Life continued mundanely for me, until one day I felt a strong urge to get away from England, but didn't want to go anywhere that my family suggested as a typical holiday destination, and didn't think I could afford anywhere really.

I got an overwhelming feeling to go to The Gambia and decided that, as Nfansu had said as a child he wished I

would visit his family, that this is what I would do. I arranged a visit through The Gambia Experience, by myself - something that my family and friends could not believe, as I'd suffered from agoraphobia and didn't go out anywhere really, let alone to a different continent!

I felt totally driven and passionate about going, and felt that Nfansu's spirit was urging me to go, although I did occasionally think "Am I mad?".

Everything went to plan with the travel arrangements, I stayed at a fantastic hotel (the Laico Atlantic) and on my second day in The Gambia, I got a tourist taxi and asked to go Mandinari Village, which took about an hour.

As I arrived in the village, I felt that Nfansu's spirit would help me to find his family, and as we reached the end of the road into Mandinari, I asked a couple of people if they knew where the Trawally family lived. They pointed to a house a couple of metres away, and a group of children surrounded the taxi.

They confirmed that it was the right house and the women in the compound told me to come in after I'd explained who I was and showed them a letter which I'd received as an 11 year old, from Nfansu.

Nuha, the younger brother returned to the house from visiting town and immediately broke out into a massive

welcoming smile, whilst I filled up with emotion! His mother hugged me and told me, through him, that she had always remembered me; time to fill up again!

I was taken to see Nfansu's family and this was probably the most emotional point, as his eldest son informed me that his father had told him about me, when he was a child, and shown him photos and letters I'd sent years before.

Nfansu's spirit was ever present and ensured that this was the best Gambian Experience!

It was an emotional, memorable occasion and I returned to The Gambia again, a year later, with some of my family, who agreed that this has had a positive effect on me and them, to the extent that we want to return regularly and eventually stay there, with our adopted family. We love the people, the culture, the mentality and the food and feel that this is our ancestral home.

*Opposite from left to right: Nfansu and Nuha's mother, Laico Atlantic Hotel, Nfansu's wife and children with Nuha and Miriam
This page: Miriam's daughter (in pink) with the children*



Journalist Derek James stays at our newest properties and tells us how they make a real difference from the beach resorts.

Discover the Unique Collection



Most of us have heard all the old slogans over and over again - "It's the smiling coast." "The tiny country with the big heart." You know the kind of thing.

The world has changed since holidaymakers first started arriving at this former British colony on the West Coast of Africa, the nearest place from the UK for hot winter sunshine. In those days many would be happy to lie in the sun all day, spend a day on the Roots trip and then take a coach into the bush one night for a spot of drumming and dancing. And that, apart from a dollop of good-natured banter on the beach, was as close to local life as they got.

Nowadays travellers are asking for more. They want tour operators to offer a package with a difference and that is just what The Gambia Experience is doing.

While hotel bosses in many other countries have opted for bigger, bolder and brasher 5* all-inclusive properties with little charm or character, The Gambia Experience is offering a real opportunity to sample a slice of African life at an affordable price in unique surroundings.

The company, which now plays a leading role in the life of this fascinating country, is always on the look out for

new and different places to tempt their customers, both Gambia "virgins" and repeaters, and this season they have hit the jackpot. I got the opportunity to visit two, very different, new resorts and visit an old friend during a visit in June and they illustrate just why this country is leading the way when it comes to offering holidays tempting the most experienced travellers.

Sitanunku Lodge

If you want to get away from it all, then this is the place. Up until now most tourists have turned their backs on the great River Gambia but, thanks to this enchanting lodge, that is changing. This is the first place to stay on the North Bank and it is a gem.

“The people from the nearby village who look after you will soon become your friends - and they will make sure you have the holiday of a lifetime.”

If you are looking for bright lights and happy hours you will be disappointed. If you are looking for a unique river resort which offers something completely different and a real taste of African life then go for it.

Leave Gatwick in the morning and by early evening you are relaxing in one

of the five en-suite lodges with stunning river views. It's almost like having your own property.

While the river and all that it offers, including some fantastic fishing, is a big attraction, the people from the



nearby village who look after you, will soon become your friends - and they will make sure you have the holiday of a lifetime. They will also take you on guided walks and are proud to show you where they live.

At night, life centres around the open-air bar and restaurant where fresh fish is cooked to order. It is a magical place - day and night - and a wonderful way to explore the mighty River Gambia, one of the great African waterways.

Try it for three nights and see what you think. If you love Africa, I am sure you will fall in love with Sitanunku.

Omakan Hotel

The majority of hotels overlook a beach which is fine if that is what you are looking for. But there are people who would much prefer to step inland and spend some time in real Africa.

Until recently it has been difficult to find a hotel at the heart of a village community. One which gives you a real taste and smell of West African life. Now, for the first time, The Gambia Experience is opening the gates of the stunning Omakan Hotel where Peter from Belgium

and his wonderful staff will be waiting to greet you - and this will be a holiday like no other. If you are looking for a holiday with style and panache then opt for Omakan. It is a palace of a place.

For a start you don't feel like a tourist but a family friend staying in one of just 15 beautiful rooms clustered around a picturesque swimming pool. You will be staying a couple of miles from the coast but all around you are the sights and sounds of real Africa where the welcome is as warm as the weather. And the charming staff are only too pleased and proud to show you their land, their customs and traditions. The hotel also offers a direct transfer from the airport so they will be looking after your every need from the moment you touch down.

Even if you are an experienced traveller in Africa I think you will be impressed at what the Omakan has to offer. For the first-time visitor, looking for a holiday in stylish surroundings, it is a great way to get to know The Gambia.

And as for those smiles - they really are genuine.

This Page: Omakan Hotel, opposite page: Sitanunku Lodge

Journalist Ron Toft discovers an incredible array of over 180 species of colourful and exotic birds in The Gambia and Senegal with the help of his new friends Malick and Carlos.

A spectacular array of birds

Birdwatching in The Gambia

The Gambia is one of the nearest and most accessible of all African countries for UK-based bird-loving tourists who want to sample some of this continent's diverse avian delights but spend less than seven hours aboard a plane.

Getting there is not a problem, thanks to the regular, direct service offered by The Gambia Experience. But how does the first-time or infrequent visitor know where to go and what to see without wasting valuable time?

When I last visited The Gambia, shortly before Christmas 2010, I had just three days to see some of the special birds that make their home in this ultra-friendly, English-speaking country. Thanks to The Gambia Experience, I was placed in the capable hands of professional bird guide Malick Suso - a Lenny Henry sort of guy who never stops smiling. I knew that Malick came highly recommended. In fact, TV wildlife presenter Chris Packham often uses him when birding in The Gambia. According to Chris, Malick is "one hell of a birder," and has been "a fantastic asset to every trip I've made there." I would wholeheartedly agree.

Malick's knowledge of birds is nothing short of breathtaking. He can see more with his battered pair of binoculars, only one eyepiece of which works, than I can with the two eyepieces of my new, top-of-the-range bins. What's more, he can pick up the slightest tweet, warble or whistle and instantly identify the bird making the sound. Within just a few hours, I was in awe of the man.

Malick, who not only works for The Gambia Experience but also offers a range of birding packages himself, has been watching birds since he left school. He was 'trained' by his uncle - one of The Gambia's foremost authorities on birds. Malick, who says he is "deeply concerned for the environmental welfare" of his country but recognises

"that conservation needs to generate an income for the local communities to be sustainable."

My birdwatching experience began before I had even left the airport in Banjul. While waiting for the coach to transport me to The Kairaba Hotel, I spotted cattle egrets, hornbills and several long-tailed/heavy-billed birds called piapiacs. The early bird, it is said, catches the worm, and that is certainly the case as far as birdwatching is concerned. If you want to see lots of birds, especially normally elusive ones, you need to rise early before other people are about. That meant, in The Gambia at least, rising at 5am to be ready for a 6am departure.

I was taken to six birdwatching hotspots during the three days: Abuko Nature Reserve, Kotu Stream, Tanji Bird Reserve, Brufut Woods, Makasutu River and associated jungle, and Kachikally Crocodile Pool and nearby rice fields. We went out in the morning for several hours, returning for lunch. After resting, swimming or shopping (I did yet more birdwatching in the hotel grounds), we gathered again in late afternoon for another two or three hours with Malick.

The number and range of birds we spotted was truly incredible - everything from vultures, herons, egrets, ibises, plovers, sandpipers and truly stunning rollers to various kingfishers (including the giant), iridescent sunbirds, gorgeous bee-eaters, well-hidden owls, shrikes, orioles, bulbuls, flycatchers, waxbills, firefinches, barbets, terns and cuckoos. My favourite birds? Probably the African harrier-hawk, Senegal coucal and yellow-crowned gonolek.

At the end of three days, I felt I had known Malick for years and very much regretted having to leave. I wasn't going home, though - simply across the Gambia River and into neighbouring Senegal for another birdwatching experience.



3 day birdwatching tours with Malick £195pp*

26th Nov 2011, 14th Jan 2012, 10th Mar 2012
ideally for customers staying in hotels in the Kotu area

12th Nov 2011, 21st Jan 2012, 17th Mar 2012
ideally for customers staying in hotels in the Kololi area

10th Dec 2011, 25th Feb 2012
ideally for customers staying in hotels in the Cape Point/Bakau areas
*in addition to your holiday package price

Discover more about The Gambia

To find out more about the country and holidays or to order a copy of The Gambia Experience brochure visit: Gambia.co.uk or telephone 0845 330 4567

Read more personal experiences and submit yours at Thegambiablog.co.uk

View more images and upload yours to Flickr.com/groups/thegambiaexperience

clockwise from top left: cattle egret (Ron Toft), Malick Suso, goliath heron (Ron Toft), gonolack overleaf: glossy starling

Birdwatching in Senegal

After three days' birdwatching with ace guide Malick Suso in The Gambia, I crossed the Gambia River heading for neighbouring Senegal.

As soon as we docked, my driver efficiently negotiated his way through the crowded streets of the bustling port community of Barra. Before long we were out in the countryside. The border crossing, south of Karang, was heaving with people - some negotiating their way across the frontier and some just plying their trade. My driver took my passport and disappeared into a nondescript building. Shortly after he appeared at the doorway and beckoned me to follow him. Had I done something wrong? Was there a problem with my paperwork? No, I simply had to be there in person while the formalities were conducted. Finally, we were on our way.

After what must have been an hour or so, I arrived at my destination: Hotel Keur Saloum in Toubakouta within the 180,000- hectare Sine Saloum Delta. Later that day I met my birdwatching guide, Carlos, who admitted his English wasn't as good as his French and Spanish.



Senegal is primarily a French-speaking country, and as I don't speak more than a few words of this language, I was always struggling to make myself understood with the catering and bar staff in the hotel (a point to remember if you are planning a trip there yourself).

Keen not to waste any time (I had less than three days in Senegal), I immediately jumped at the chance of a late afternoon boat trip along the local bolongs (creeks). Hotel Keur Saloum is beautifully situated on the edge of one

such bolong and has its own jetty. For the next two and a half hours, we powered along, stopping whenever Carlos spotted something interesting.

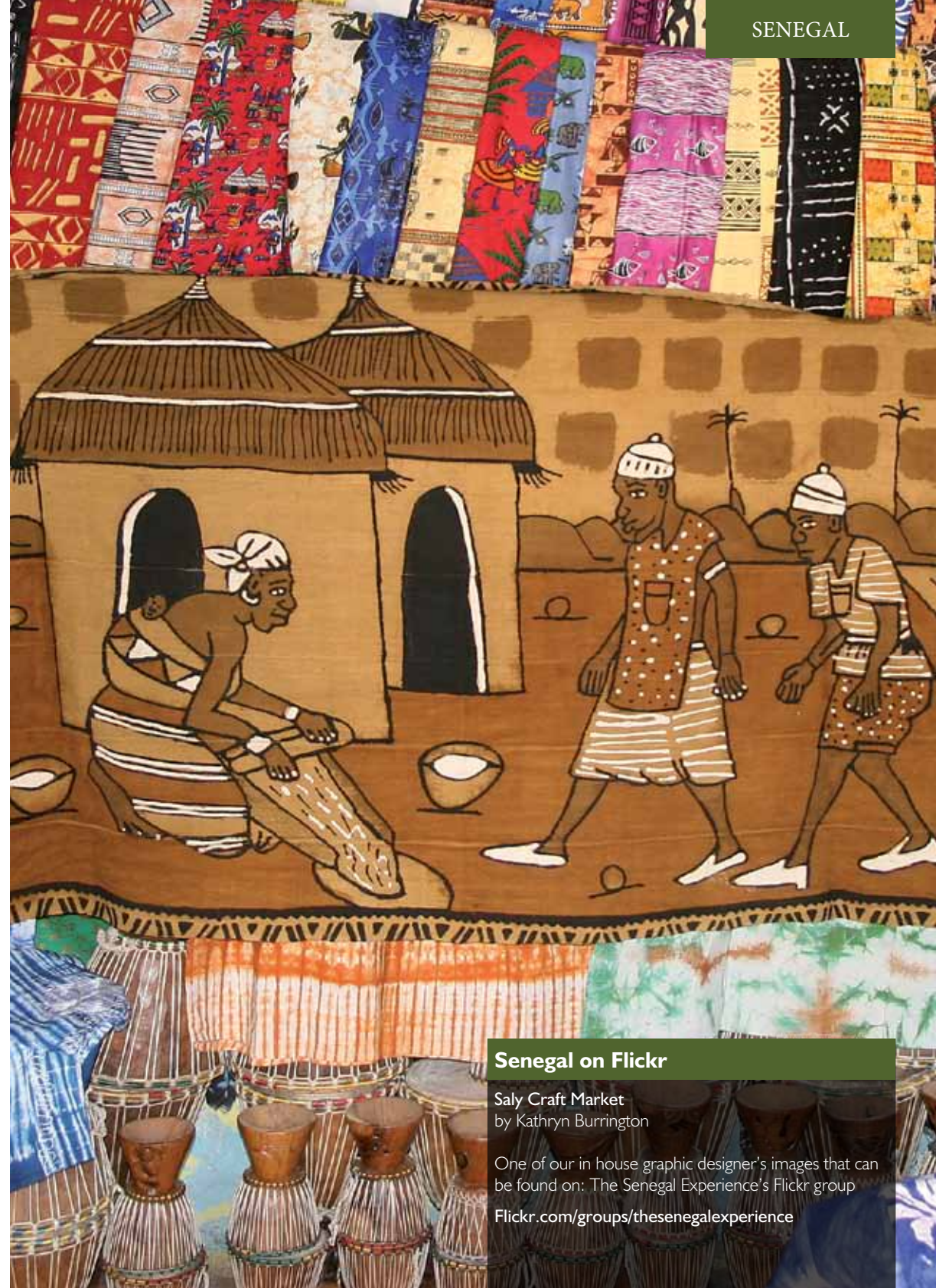
Among the many birds we spotted on the wing or lurking in waterside vegetation were ospreys, black kites (these are very common in the area), western reef herons, pied and blue-breasted kingfishers, Senegal parrots and yellow-crowned gonolek. The highlight of the boat trip was witnessing hundreds of mainly cattle egrets and western reef herons flying in to roost on a tiny island. Among the birds were also a few long-tailed cormorants and pink-backed pelicans. The noise was overwhelming and a fishy smell pervaded the air, but I wouldn't have missed the experience for anything.

During the next couple of days, Carlos took me to a variety of places off the beaten track - not reserves or recognised birdwatching areas but localities he knew from experience would turn up the avian goodies. And he wasn't wrong. I was blown away by the number and variety of different birds I saw - many of them new to me. 'Lifers' included Bruce's green pigeon (I never did find out who Bruce was), northern anteater chat, Abyssinian and rufous-crowned rollers, lesser blue-eared glossy starling, cardinal woodpecker, a variety of delightful sunbirds, little swift, grey kestrel, mosque swallow, grasshopper buzzard and brown snake eagle.

My favourite moment was late one afternoon when we drove across a vast, golden brown savannah landscape that was actually farmland. As the sun slipped down the western sky, all manner of birds of prey took to the wing: martial eagle, marsh, montagus and pallid harriers and black-shouldered kites. It was difficult deciding which birds to look at first. Almost overlooked in the raptor rapture was what Carlos was pretty sure was a white-bellied bustard.

During my six full days in The Gambia and Senegal, I saw around 180 bird species. If you like big birds, colourful birds, exotic birds, Senegal and The Gambia certainly take some beating.

Articles written by Ron Toft, wildlife editor of TheTravelEditor.com



Senegal on Flickr

Saly Craft Market
by Kathryn Burrington

One of our in house graphic designer's images that can be found on: The Senegal Experience's Flickr group

[Flickr.com/groups/thesenegalexperience](https://www.flickr.com/groups/thesenegalexperience)

Freelance travel writer Jane Labous travels back to Senegal in West Africa and discovers that while its capital city is bounding forward - its traditional teranga welcome hasn't changed.

Sweet Senegal



The first thing I notice as we take a taxi from Dakar airport into the city is the lack of car horns. There's an eerie silence; just the metallic hum of the driver's radio and the limpid stillness of the African dusk as we pull onto a roundabout (a roundabout!) and drive along the new highway that runs along the once dust road lining the corniche. It's a surprise, for the African roads I'm used to are a cacophonous, often terrifying riot of noise and unruliness. Ten years ago I lived in Dakar for a year, and what was once a hair-raising ride through an array of decrepid cars, motorbikes, scooters, carts and pedestrians, with a background of indiscriminate hooting, is now, um, not unlike driving along a country road in Surrey... "Hooting is as important as the brakes in Africa!" agrees the taxi driver cheerfully when I comment on this unusual phenomenon. "But Dakar drivers are learning..."

There are other things afoot in Dakar, West Africa's most developed, most forward-thinking city. It may still have its street hawkers and its chaos, but it's now a thoroughly modern metropolis with a vibrant cultural scene and, in a city always well-known for its beautiful, exceptionally chic women, fashionistas galore.

Indeed, the Senegalese are a truly beautiful race. Wandering, we find ourselves gasping at the mere sight of these long-legged, gleaming-skinned, finely-boned creatures crossing the road. Meanwhile, the city's distinctive yellow and blue minibuses which have formed Dakar's intercity

bus service for years still trundle along streets crowded with boys selling oranges from wheelbarrows; women roasting sweetcorn on oil stoves and outdoor hairdressers. It's just that all around, modern apartments are springing up and adverts celebrate mobile networks, sports centres (from wrestling to running, weight lifting and football, Senegalese men love to work out) – and cigarettes.

That said, don't under-estimate the African heat and the African, well, chaos – for it is still at large. One sight a day is generally enough, with plentiful stops for water, lunch, a cold Coke and snacks. For some reason the combination of 30-plus degree heat, a dusty city and lots of people will always have you craving the stillness of your hotel and a dip in the pool by mid-afternoon.

Most tourists visit Île de Gorée, an island just off the coast and reached by a ferry from the city port. Its colonial prettiness – all palms and pastel-painted houses - sits unsettlingly with its history. Gorée was West Africa's main slave trading post during the 18th and 19th centuries and the Maison Des Esclaves is a preserved Dutch colonial house dating from 1776, where slaves were kept in chains on the ground floor while the owners lived in luxury upstairs. The door leading directly out to sea, where the slaves were loaded onto boats and sent across the Atlantic to South America, is particularly disturbing. But Dakar is a city that must be delved into to be appreciated. Some of the best musicians in Africa – guys like Cheikh Lo, Pape Diouf, Pape et Cheikh or Toure Kunde,



who pack out places like the Royal Albert Hall in London – play impromptu gigs at hidden bars. You'll find the music swings until six in the morning as ebullient audiences dance Mbalax to the beat of the drum. Dakarites know how to party and if you want to see a good time in this city, it's best to join them.

So we do. Sunset is long gone when we head out to Just 4 U, easily missed if you're not looking for it, hidden behind a shabby wall in the Point E district. Inside, trendy Dakarites sip Coke and chat around plastic tables laid out beneath the palms. The band saunters on stage unhurriedly at about quarter past 11, the bass guitarist drawing on a cigarette. It's an inauspicious start but when they get going this place reverberates with colourful counter-rhythms and incredible improvisations, all a background to soulful Wolof lyrics.

When the drummer hoists his tama, the talking drum, onto his shoulder and taps out a rolling beat – question answer, question answer – the crowd claps and cheers and rocks. A man in a long purple boubou gets up and dances the Mbalax as the talking drum rolls on. It's a strange, beautiful dance, chaotic and graceful all at the same time, derived from a mixture of traditional Sabar Senegalese dancing and more modern styles. In the days to come we see it many times – the suggestive, comical swirl of the dancer's buttocks (known mystifyingly as the "electric fan"); the almost robotic movements of knees and legs to match the beat of the drum and the jekati - a move in which

the dancer moves his upper arms, bent at the elbows, in parallel motion from left to right to the beat of the drum.

It's not the only music we see in Dakar. When he's in town, Youssou N'Dour, he of the Neneh Cherry duet Seven Seconds and a big big star in West Africa, plays live on Saturday nights at his club Thiossane. His gigs draw heaving crowds of excited fans who dance until the early hours. We go, we dance, we cheer, we sweat to the fast-driving, interweaving sound of Youssou's traditional sabar drummers. It is one of the best concerts I've ever seen in my life.

Jane travelled with The Senegal Experience and the above is an extract from her feature as published in Real Travel magazine (Aug 11 issue). To read the remainder of her Dakar & Touring feature, please visit Senegal.co.uk/press

opposite page: Jane and Dakar fishing community courtesy of Jane Labous, slave statue on Gorée Island above: Youssou N'Dour (centre) courtesy of Davide Gastoli Photography

Discover more about Senegal

To find out more about the country and holidays or to order a brochure visit:
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[Flickr.com/groups/thesenegalexperience](https://www.flickr.com/groups/thesenegalexperience)

Jon Taylor, our Senior Contracts Manager, looks at the impact of tourism on the Islands of Cape Verde.

Islands in the sun



There is something truly satisfying about heading for a winter sun destination such as the Cape Verde Islands, as you invariably shiver through the worst of the weather to catch your flight in the morning, safe in the knowledge that there'll be a wall of heat waiting to hit you as you disembark the aircraft the same afternoon. It feels good to be there before you've even reached the bottom of the steps.

I have been visiting the islands regularly for the past 5 years, contracting the hotels that are offered in our programme. Looking back to those early days, when this underdeveloped country witnessed something of a boom in tourism and development, it is good to see that some things have really changed for the better and others, mercifully, have not changed at all.

On my first visit I was pleased to scotch the rumour on day one that Cape Verde was to become "the new Canary Islands". On seeing the local people and witnessing their customs and way of life, their food and their music, I could see there was a distinct national identity and local heritage that would always be preserved here.

On Sal, the town of Santa Maria had always seemed ripe for development – permanent sun and stunning beaches being the basic ingredients - and the projects of the past have now become the new hotels, boutiques and apartments in the way they were envisaged on the plans I was shown at the time, providing work for the local people, improving the infrastructure and giving the

economy a significant boost. The beachfront footpath has been extended and lit to serve the dozen or so hotels along the south coast strip. There is nothing intimidating by being out and about here so I would suggest that everyone could save themselves a taxi fare or two, at least at the start of the evening. The centre of town, while witnessing considerable regeneration, has remained unaltered physically - the churches, the craft market, the traditional pensãos, and the local institutions such as Americo's restaurant, Chez Pastis, the Barracuda beach bar and the Relax café are all still there, reassuringly. More bars and boutiques have opened to satisfy the increase in demand, along with some obvious touches that are aimed at the tourists such as a supermarket, cashpoints and a superb Italian ice cream parlour, no bad thing at all.

Elsewhere Boa Vista has gone from strength to strength. I have seen this largely uninhabited island, with just an airstrip and a portacabin for a terminal, transform itself into a sought-after destination with a new international airport, beachfront hotels and an immaculate road to the main town Sal Rei. The all-inclusive hotel concept has caught on here, though I hope that other, smaller hotels will be allowed to flourish as well. There is room enough for both.

São Vicente has enjoyed a similar boost to the other islands, however, if you are a tourist who enjoys seeing places in the raw I would say that a visit to the bustling town of Mindelo is as authentic and unaffected as it gets in Cape Verde.

I have visited the fertile island of Santiago a couple of times, most recently last winter. This is a place that deserves a look because of its lack of tourism. Praia, being the country's capital, has different priorities from, say, Santa Maria on Sal, and so adds to the diversity of the country. Beyond the city I was able to take a rewarding circular drive of the island, through plantations and villages, seeing houses perched on mountain sides and slowing to allow livestock to move out of the road (very much in their own time), stopping for lunch at the beach resort of Tarrafal on the island's northern tip. This is somewhere that might yet become a place to stay - it has been earmarked for development - and I would encourage anyone visiting Santiago to find the time to go there, but for now Tarrafel remains undiscovered by most. Heading back down the east coast you enjoy spectacular views of the Atlantic hitting the shore, before the end of a memorable, and inexpensive, day out.

If places are a reflection of the people that live there then Cape Verde is no different. Local people have not

allowed the advent of international tourism to affect them adversely. You can see that it has brought them opportunity and a certain level of prosperity, yet the people I work with remain as friendly and accommodating as ever, all adding to the appeal of this destination.

The local value of "No Stress" is as much in evidence today as ever it was appearing everywhere from on t-shirts to restaurant menus, reflecting the slower pace of life that seems to pervade the country. Perhaps this, above all else, is the quality that comes with a visit to Cape Verde whichever island you choose, offering a welcome change from the busy lives led at home. You just hope it stays with you long after your plane has touched down beneath the grey skies of the British winter.

*opposite page: Santa Maria beach, all-inclusive Royal Decameron Hotel on Boa Vista
below: Mindelo, Santiago resident*



New five star hotel on the Cape Verdean island of Sal, Meliá Tortuga Beach and Spa Hotel is a great hit with dance troupe Diversity.

Newest & most luxurious hotel!



Guests at the official opening of Cape Verde's newest and most luxurious all-inclusive resort included The Cape Verde Prime Minister, singer Sophie Ellis-Bextor, dance group Diversity, Cape Verdean legend Tito Paris and DJ Danny Rampling – oh and our MD Chris Rowles!

Facilities at this 5* resort include 2 freshwater pools, 4 restaurants, 4 bars, gymnasium and spa. We anticipate it being a hit with families as there's a children's pool, mini club and 3 & 4 bedroom villas with private gardens and plunge pools.

The boys from Diversity were all very impressed with the hotel. Ashley Banjo, choreographer and member of Diversity told our Managing Director:

"I couldn't believe how wonderful the Tortuga Beach resort was, it certainly lives up to its 5 star rating. The accommodation and catering were excellent and the staff were so friendly and

made sure we had everything we needed. It's our dream job to be spending the weekend in such a luxurious resort though we still have to work out everyday so we took advantage of the hotel's gym which was modern and well equipped and then rewarded ourselves by relaxing by the pool.

We were all hugely impressed by the way the local town had kept its amazing character and vibrant colours and we've all agreed that we would love to return to the island in the near future!"

Ashley Banjo, choreographer and member of Diversity.

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What's your experience?

Perhaps you have worked with a charity in The Gambia; or you are one of the many people who have been travelling to The Gambia for years; you may have honeymooned in Senegal or been hiking in Cape Verde. Whatever your experience, however long ago it was, if you fancy yourself as a bit of a travel writer please send your articles (of either 350 or 700 words) to: Your Experience, Serenity Holidays, Atlantic House, 3600 Parkway, Solent Business Park, Fareham, Hampshire, PO15 7AN or email experience@serenityholidays.co.uk

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This edition of 'Your Experience' features on page 6 an article by Gambia Experience customer, Miriam Shott. Any article chosen to feature in our magazine will receive a £100 holiday voucher valid against any holiday with Serenity Holidays.



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