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Africa's smiling coast

If you fancy a spot of winter sun, why not head for The Gambia, just six hours away on the west African coast? Simon Galloway did and he loved it

Life's a beach: Meeting the locals in Tanji fishing village. Below, a baboon at Makasutu Nature Reserve



The Gambia may only be half the size of Wales but boy does it have a lot to offer – from sun-drenched white sandy beaches to the stunning 1,000-acre Makasutu Culture Forest.

Only a six-hour flight from Bristol and with no time difference, The Gambia, located midway between the Tropic of Cancer and the equator, enjoys virtually uninterrupted sunshine and high daytime temperatures with almost no rainfall from November to June.

My Gambian adventure began as we travelled the short distance from Banjul airport to our hotel.

Gazing out of the bus window I saw stalls selling fresh melons, shacks with old men fixing bicycles and small children waving.

From that moment I was hooked on the street life going on before me.

How could these people be so happy when they appear to have so little? The answer is simple.

This is The Gambia – known as “the smiling coast of Africa”.

After resting overnight at the luxurious Coco Resort and Spa, I was ready to take the 45-minute journey south to the award-winning Makasutu Cultural Forest set on a beautiful tributary of the River Gambia.

Makasutu, known as “sacred deep forest” in the local Mandinka dialect, is home to wild Guinea baboons and countless birds. It was conserved by two Englishmen, James English and Lawrence Williams, back in 1992.

As we take a slow canoe ride along the river, passing pied kingfishers and fiddler crabs nesting in the



Class of their own: Pupils at work in the Wellingara Lower Basic School

mangroves, we find ourselves at the stunning Mandina River Lodges, just as evening draws in.

We settle down to sample some beautiful local food and to enjoy an evening of local tribal partying that includes stilt-walkers and fire-eaters.

Next up was a home cooking workshop with Ida Njie at her home in Brufut. We changed into traditional Gambian dress and headed to Tanji fishing village for some local produce.

What followed next at Tanji will stick in my mind for a long time.

As I stepped on to the beach, my senses were hit for six. Fish were everywhere – the smell almost overwhelming.

In what appeared to be a conveyor-belt production line, men were landing fish, there were fish in

wheelbarrows, fish being gutted and fish being de-scaled. A few yards up from the beach, we walked past endless stalls selling fish, vegetables, nuts and other fresh produce.

Ida took the lead and bought food for our lunch before heading back to her house to prepare the meal.

On the menu was benachin – rice cooked with fish, vegetables and tomatoes. Ida demonstrated the traditional way to eat the dish – with hands – and we all tucked in. We finished with attaya (green tea).

Mucki, our tour guide from West African Tours, had told us of his love of football and informed us that his local team, Blackpool, were playing in a local cup final that afternoon.

The match between Blackpool and Chimo United turned out to be a

FactFile

- Simon Galloway travelled to The Gambia as a guest of The Gambia Experience, the UK's only specialist and biggest tour operator to there (www.gambia.co.uk; 08453 302087).
- Seven nights' bed and breakfast in a junior suite at the Coco Ocean Resort & Spa costs £1,014 per person.
- Seven nights bed and breakfast in a beach club villa costs £1,350 per person. Prices include return flights from Bristol International Airport, in-flight meals, hotel transfers and taxes.



● All clients receive a complimentary foot massage as part of their booking.

fast-paced game in a rundown ground with two old concrete stands and a pretty good synthetic pitch.

A visit to Wellingara Lower Basic School in the district of Kombo was the highlight of the trip.

As we pulled into the school playground, we were greeted by hundreds of children running out of the two-storey concrete building.

After what seemed like a thousand handshakes, we went to the head teacher's offices where he explained that the school has more than 1,600 children but is constantly struggling to buy essentials such as books.

I stepped in to the classroom and was faced with a sea of smiling children. They burst into song –

Wind The Bobbin Up in perfect English – which is widely spoken, along with the tribal languages like Mandinka, Wolof, Fula and Jola.

After our school experience, we took a thrilling 4x4 off-road trip across some pretty bumpy tracks.

We stopped at various points so Mucki could point out some of the birdlife, including small red-throated bee-eaters and huge hooded vultures circling high above.

Our 4x4 then pulled up on a picture perfect beach. The white sand was so hot I had to hop to my hammock, while the others enjoyed a dip in the warm Atlantic Ocean.

I was left thinking I can't wait to sample Gambia again.